

Today Is a Good Day to Die

It was late in the afternoon when four hundred Sharian warriors, who had gathered upon the call of dawigelar, lined up on the plain at the lake. They sat on horses side by side in long rows. In front of them on a great brown stallion, sat Sorgan. Abarhil was honored to become a part of the dawigelar's retinue, and therefore he could watch the counsel of elders and chiefs who came to bid farewell. In the middle, a short white-haired man stood out whom Abarhil had not seen for the entire duration of his stay in the camp. Abarhil inferred that he was a Sharian brin.

'Well, it's you who will decide my fate,' thought Abarhil as he tried to read the face of the old man. He did not think of brin's blessings for the crusade, but his advice during the initiation ceremony of Nevana. However, brin's face was calm and impenetrable.

First, one of the chiefs who remained here in the camp and took over Sorgan's powers spoke briefly. After him, the brin stepped forward with a short speech.

"Last night I spoke with your Lord, Sharian men. You are about to ride to war to save your own lineage. Know that Astoghár himself is in favor of your crusade. Honor and glory await every one of you, whether you die or prevail. To those who return victorious, will belong the glory and respect of the Sharian people, and those who fall, will be honored with a place at the side of the Supreme Lord. Ride joyfully, wolves, the day of the great hunt has come, and if you fight with honor, you have nothing to lose."

"Rogh i gor!" resounded the battle cry of Sharian warriors in response.

Sorgan spurred his stallion and slowly headed toward the northern tip of the lake. Behind him, the divisions lined up. First, his retinue where Abarhil also rode, followed by the Wolf warriors, and then the rest, according to their families. It was getting dark when they reached the place where Bôghin disposed excess lake water to the North. However, they had to ride several more miles in the dark along the river flow before they arrived at fords where they had to cross the river at night. Bôghin was not very deep here, and it swelled lazily, but inside the riverbed, deep pools were carved, which riders had to avoid while crossing. Even on the other side, Sorgan did not beckon for the others to stop, and amongst the men, a rumor spread that they would ride all night to be at the foot of the mountain where the climbing would begin. And truly, they rode nearly all night, and the full moon and starry sky illuminated their path. Only in the morning, when it began to get cold, Sorgan beckoned for them to stop and dismount. There were a few hours left until the dawn, so he ordered a short break and rest. It made no sense to climb the narrow and steep pass in the dark.



Abarhil unclothed Ghamir, took off his halter, tied him with a leather belt and let him graze. He muffled himself in a cloak, leaned on a saddle and tried to fall asleep.

He had a wild dream about returning to Merélos. He was looking for his parents but could not find them. He was running around a town full of unfamiliar faces, and panic and uneasiness were overwhelming him. Then, he suddenly saw his mother and wanted to call to her, but he found he could not make a sound. Something, some strange force squeezed his throat, so he kept opening his mouth making only quiet crackle. Then he saw his father who smiled at him and told him something, but Abarhil could not understand. His father came closer and kept repeating the same thing but Abarhil could not understand and kept shaking his head. His father caught him by the shoulders, began to shake him and shouted: "Wake up! Come on, wake up already, open your eyes, at last!"

When he opened his eyes, he saw Durghan bent over him who was tugging his arm with a smile.

"For Maghúr's sake, Roghídan, you sleep deeply. I thought I would not wake you up. They are all getting up, we have a busy day ahead!"

Abarhil smiled guiltily and quickly stood up. He shook drops from his cloak, after a small rain that had started in the morning, and began to saddle the horse. Still, however, inside he felt the discomfort from his dream. But the events that followed did not give him enough time to ponder. Trumpet horns calling divisions and loud commands of the chiefs resounded together. The army began to shift in a long procession, as only two riders side by side could climb the pass. In the morning twilight, began the tedious and slow climb up the steep and winding trail. Abarhil climbed only a few horse lengths after Sorgan, who rode at the head. When the dawn broke, he looked back and saw a long, endless snake of Sharian warriors below him. On the horizon, from the fog covering the lake, wooded hilltops peaked on the opposite side of the valley. Durghan, who rode next to him, turned to him.

"A pretty long line, huh? But the worst has not come yet. At the top, we will walk one by one."

And he was right. Around noon, the trail, which they climbed narrowed, and it was so steep in places that it was necessary to dismount. Each rider took his horse in halter and carefully led him down the narrow, rocky trail. To lose one's horse here, meant to go back. The breed of Sharian horses, however, was accustomed to mountainous terrain and climbed with extreme confidence. Later in the afternoon, they climbed into the zone where snow still laid. It got cold quickly and climbing on the frozen, and in places icy, surface required caution. With the increasing altitude, Abarhil felt his forces drain quickly. The air was getting thinner, and he began to feel a pressure in his chest as well as an excruciating headache. When he told Durghan, he only smiled knowingly.

"That way Lóben protects his estate and sends the mountain disease on to intruders. You're not used to it, but don't worry, it will get better when we start to descend."

Abarhil remembered how he had heard something similar as a child from his father who had visited high mountain passes of the Snow Mountains several times. High up in the mountains, people can get sick, but he never thought it could get this bad. At the top of the pass Abarhil arrived exhausted, and he weathered a short break in the mountain saddle, as in a dream. He remembered that at the top there was a huge pile of wood and a hut for several guards who briefly spoke with Sorgan. The place was cramped and as more and more riders were coming, it was necessary to get up soon and continue. On the opposite side of the pass, they passed the next pile. Fortunately, the descent was not as difficult and Abarhil could sit on Ghamir. The descent to the other side of the pass lasted until late at night. Durghan was right, his aching had

passed, however, he arrived at the contemporary camp thoroughly exhausted. With an effort, Abarhil dismounted the stallion, hung a bag with grain on his neck because there was no grass, then he lay down and fell asleep instantly, in spite of the coldness.

When Durghan woke him up the next morning, he felt as if he had only slept for a few moments. His whole body hurt. Fortunately, Durghan woke him up only to eat. Because the last riders came from the pass only a few hours ago, Sorgan decided that they would continue the next day. It was necessary that everyone, people and horses, rested before the possible upcoming battle. The next day, Durghan woke Abarhil up in the dark. After they had a quick breakfast, they began to prepare for the battle. Abarhil saddled Ghamir up and dressed slowly and carefully in bronze armor, a gift from his parents, and a simple leather hat from Durghan, which at least partly protected his head. Leather arm guards protected his forearms. He fastened his sword, and across his back threw a quiver with arrows and his bow. In his hand, he held a long Sharian spear decorated with some colorful feathers of nargil. He only declined a shield. It seemed too clunky, and he felt like it would get in the way.

When they were all ready, they waited for the sun to come up in silence. As soon as it dawned in the East and the first sun ray illuminated the path, Sharians began to descend. The slopes here were not as steep anymore, and they offered plenty of possibilities to walk, so the riders were slowly coming down in four long lines. A long day's march awaited them because they were supposed to arrive at the fortress in the late afternoon. When they descended on the plateau, the whole sun appeared and illuminated the undulating plain with low, scraggly grass. Around noon, Sorgan announced a short break, when the riders ate a bit, and mainly gave water to their horses from the stream running down the pass. Nobody spoke much; they all began to feel overwhelmed about the excitement of the upcoming battle. Abarhil searched out Durghan to try to find out as many details as possible about the enemies.

"Durghan, I think that once we get on horses there won't be time to talk. Could you tell me something about those down there?" and he pointed to the East where he guessed the fortress was. "Sharians know their opponents but I've never met them. I don't know what to expect. I'd like to be a little ready. "

Abarhil was smiling, but in his voice, excitement and doubts were evident. It would be his first battle and his first fight. Except for a few pub skirmishes in his hometown of Merélos and his youthful adventure in Osttar, he had never faced a real enemy. Although the events of the last months had toughened him a lot, they could not compare to a personal experience from a battlefield. Durghan understood and he tried to encourage him.

"First battle? Every enemy is dangerous, but I think that none can compare to a man who killed Hargor, the lord of the lions!"

Abarhil forced a smile. "Thank you, but still I'd like to hear something about their weaknesses and strengths."

"According to messages scouts have brought, we can expect warriors of three nations at the fortress. On one hand, they may be thieves, Katawdos. They fight solely as infantry; they're strong men whose main weapons are short spears and large clubs. They are robbers and fail to fight in an enclosed shape. They're dangerous only when fighting on the ground. More dangerous are the desert people: Orofantars. They are Sharians' natural enemies and they are very good riders."

Abarhil nodded. "I've heard about them. What can one expect from them?"

"They fight mostly on horses, though some of them ride strange animals with a hump similar to the ghoars of our mountains. However, they are bigger and stronger and can be dangerous because our horses do not know those animals and they panic. Their main weapons are long spears, long curved swords, and round shields. They

rarely use bows. Their clenched cavalry can be fatal."

"If I'm not mistaken, the next are Gorwonds?" asked Abarhil.

"Yes," nodded Durghan, "the most dangerous are Gorwonds, death-bearers, the Red Demons. They are of small height, perhaps smaller than Chyrrkans, but they have grown together with their horses. Their main weapons are swords, spears, and especially bows. They are unbeatable as shooters and can shoot and hit even in full gallop. They have mastered shooting backward. When chased by an enemy they can turn around in the saddle and spray the chaser with a shower of arrows. Unlike the Katawdos and Orofantars, they have excellent armor, which protects them in combat. It is because of them that Sharians developed their armors and shields so that we can protect ourselves against their arrows."

That sent shivers down Abarhil's spine and made him silently curse himself that he had refused the offered shield. If confronted with Gorwonds, he had nothing to protect himself. But he kept asking questions.

"And what about the black warriors who were talked about during the counsel?"

Durghan just shrugged.

"I do not know. Sharians never fought them. They live far in the South where Sharians never stray on their expeditions.

They would have talked longer if they had not been interrupted by a quiet command, which spread across a line of riders from one to the other.

"On your horses!"

Within a short while, the entire squad of Sharians was riding again and heading out to the battle. Now, they were moving quietly, because they could come across an enemy patrol any moment. Abarhil stood up in the saddle to overlook the area. It was a breathtaking view of the rolling grassy plains scattered with riders who were, one by one, crossing low grassy knolls. They were knights of mountains and plains, free people who were going to defend their country. Sharians were not proceeding in four rows, but slowly began to sort into three long battle lines. Riders had to hold the reins of their horses short, because they were getting excited about the coming battle. On raised spears, flew colorful feathers of nargils and horsehair. A westerly wind, which blew almost ceaselessly, ruffled long decorated horse manes and tails, as well as the long hair of Wolf Warriors. Abarhil, as well as Ghamir, got excited. The horse was tossing his head, and Abarhil had to hold him very short to keep him from running. He completely forgot about his concerns from before.

When they crossed another knoll, an impressive view opened up before them. The plain fell in all its breadth as far as the eye could see, only to unexpectedly end after less than a mile. It seemed like some ancient God had broken the surface of the Earth in anger. The terrain from the North to the South was formed by a fault, which declined sharply to the steppes and deserts in the East. Sharians called this place Darli Grot, The Great Fault. It was ripped in the middle by a gorge, a deep notch in which a black fortress stood: the Dar Uru Awrakh, the great eastern fortress of Sharians. Even from a distance, Abarhil recognized that the fortress was of a very unusual shape he had never seen before. The walls were almost perfectly round and on one side, outside the circle of walls, three tall towers were connected to the fortress with arched bridges. On the opposite side, a rocky ridge, on which a massive round tower stood, went beyond the walls. It looked like the fortress had a single gate, which was on the side of the walls towards them. On the plains between Sharians and the fortress, however, a large camp was set up, consisting of hundreds of simple small tents among which people were walking. The access to the fortress was already blocked.

Abarhil, who stood close to dawigelar, heard Sorgan curse loudly. "May Durghár take them to his manor! How did they do it so quickly? We did not make it. We will

have to fight our way through."

He instructed his companions, who passed a sign with their spears for Sharians to line up. The battle was imminent. The enemy spotted them, and a frantic bustle broke out in the camp. Durghan, who kept close to Abarhil, gave him an encouraging smile. "I think we are lucky; it looks, from this distance, that there is mainly infantry."

In the meantime, Sorgan spurred his horse and raced along the rows of Sharians. "Wolves, the hunt begins! Rejoice. The day of death has come!"

The whole row of riders began to bluster. They pounded on their shields with the hafts of spears and shouted their battle cry. Horses were rearing and bouncing with anticipation; the mass of men and horses began to move slowly. First, they moved at walking pace, then they broke into a trot, then into a canter, and approximately a quarter of a mile before the enemy camp they lowered their spears and broke into a gallop. Above the attacking wave of riders a battle cry sounded.

"Rogh i gor, hunt and death!"

Abarhil felt empowered by excitement. He felt the body of the stallion as he was throbbed the ground with his strong hooves. In the corner of his eye, he saw inclined riders aiming their long spears ahead. Above, the Sharian battle cry was blustering, composed of hundreds of throats.

The enemy rows were approaching quickly. He was now capable of distinguishing individual figures in a monolithic enemy mass. Yes, there were Katawdos, but he also saw black bodies of fighters from the South. Suddenly, in front of the row of enemies, a line of archers appeared who knelt down and strained their bows. At some unknown signal, the first line of riders began to slow down; riders dragged back their horses' reins, and then suddenly the entire line made a right half-turn to show their enemies the left side, where riders held large oval shields which covered their bodies and partly the horses' bodies too. Abarhil, riding in the second line, with great difficulty forced Ghamir into full gallop. He did not avoid a collision with several riders around him, during which he lost his leather cap. A slow turn carried him out in front of the attacking row.



Ekram was sitting on a horse and looking at the long line of enemy riders, which stood lined up on the horizon. Adeptly, he estimated that there would not be more than five hundred of them, about half of the number he commanded himself. Quickly he glanced at his lines. On the flanks, there was a Nogaimi cavalry, which had managed to slip around the walls of the fortress under the cover of night a few days ago. He was very proud of this trick. He had all the horses' hooves wrapped in rags and, one by one, in pairs or in small groups, two hundred Nogaimi riders had led their horses directly under the walls of the fortress. They had been lucky because it had been a dark night and a night storm had come, so unusual in this area, and its thunders had covered the noise of the horses.

The center of his line-up was created by Katwados and Rutis, who had climbed the sheer, narrow and dangerous trails. Thus he had fulfilled the task he got from Chesay, to trap the defenders inside the fortress. However, neither he nor Chesay had counted on backup arriving via the pass so soon. It was even less pleasant that the moment of surprise they had planned, was not going to happen.

Concerned, he examined his lines. Yes, he had double the men but who could he really count on? Nogaimi cavalry? Sure, they have battle experience. But what about those savages, Katawdos and Rutis? Can their lines withstand the onslaught from the

cavalry? He ordered a section of the Nogaimi riders to dismount and mix with the infantry in the center to reinforce it. Noise and battle cries resounded from the slope. A wave of attackers began to move.

Ekram was looking at the approaching line of riders. They were attacking in an orderly way and held the line. They are experienced warriors, not just sluggers like Katawdos, who were praised for their brutality but also their unwillingness to submit to any command. He nervously examined a long infantry line. He was not sure of the result at all.

"Hold the line! Archers in front!"

The black Ruti archers passed amongst other soldiers on an order of their commanders. The attacking line broke from a canter into a gallop. They were attacking from the slope; the savages could not withstand such an onslaught if they did not stop them with Rutis' arrows.

"Bows ready!" Rutis pulled their long bows.

Ekram began to distinguish individual riders among the solid mass of attackers. "Loose!"

Before the first arrows soared, the riders performed an excellent half turn to the left, and they transformed into a line of lengthwise dashing riders protected by large shields. Most of the arrows harmlessly bounced off their shields. Ekram's gaze was, however, caught by a rider who had departed from a continuous line of attacking warriors. Unprotected by a shield, he galloped along the long line of his men. A madman, thought Ekram, but when he looked at him more carefully, he felt a shiver run down his spine. The rider's fair hair blew around his bare head. In Ekram's mind, a half-forgotten old prophecy of his elderly mother came unbidden.

"Beware, Ekram, the wrath of a man-lion, because should he not stand on your side, you will fall into the shadows for ever."

Ekram, who had never seen a man with fair hair, stared in disbelief at the rider who brazenly and defiantly raced along a long line of his men. He turned to a few archers around him and pointed at the target.

"Shoot him down. For Lathan's sake, put him down!"



From the enemy lines, a cloud of arrows rose and began to fall on Sharian lines. How Abarhil wished, for a moment, he had taken the Sharian shield. He crouched to his horse as much as he could and leaned on his right side to hide behind his stallion's body from dropping arrows. He felt an arrow bounce from his armor, another flew right past his head. Then he realized that Ghamir's pace had lost rhythm. The horse stumbled, and after a couple more steps, hit by several arrows, the stallion fell to the ground. At the last second, Abarhil pulled his legs from the stirrups, and tried to push himself off the horse so as not to end up underneath a falling body. He felt a rough impact catapult him into the air.

'Just don't let me end up beneath one of the horses,' he thought. He flew through the air and felt as if something was lifting him up.

'Nevana?'

A rough impact followed and Abarhil's body tumbled several times. He felt a sharp shock knock the long Sharian spear out of his hand. Suddenly everything went quiet, and he remained shaken lying on his stomach. It took a while before he realized what had happened and for him to begin to perceive his surroundings. The clatter of Sharian horses was fading away in the distance. I cannot be lying here like this, he thought.

Slowly he moved one leg, then the other, and then both arms. It seemed that his legs and arms were fine. He carefully lifted his head. This was painless too. He lifted himself on his elbows and looked around. He was lying in a small hollow where the sharp fall had taken him. He tried to crawl to the edge. He hissed in agony and felt a stabbing pain in his side. It seemed like bruised ribs. So, the fall had not been without consequences after all. He peered out over the edge of the hollow and looked around. On the open plain, dozens of horses and human bodies were lying. So, he was not the only one who had been knocked out by the shower of arrows during the ride. He saw a few Sharian warriors who were picking themselves off the ground with the same difficulty as him. Where were the others? He looked back. A quarter of a mile away, out of the range of arrows, a wavy line of Sharian riders could be seen lining up for the next attack. He turned back. He saw that from the enemy group, a few dozen warriors had been separated and began to approach fallen horses and men. Their intention was clear. Finish off those who had survived falling off a horse. Instinctively, he reached to his waist to check he had not lost his sword. His hand found the head of the hilt. He felt satisfaction. He was not defenseless.

He stood up, knelt on one knee, drew his long sword with one hand and with the other he pulled a quiver which was getting in the way over his head. He put his hand on the ground and leaned on it while lifting himself up on uncertain legs. He took a few insecure steps and felt his strength and security slowly returning. To the left, a few Katawdos came to a lone Sharian warrior. He resisted their onslaught for only a short time before a mighty war club knocked him. A triumphant cry resounded. To the right, a pair of Sharians went back to back, successfully fending off an attack of five Katawdos.

Abarhil climbed from the hollow and set forth towards the fighting group. Along the way, he shouted the Sharian battle cry several times to draw attention to himself. Meanwhile a pair of Sharian warriors managed to knock down one of the opponents, so now they were facing only four enemies who they kept at a safe distance using their long spears. A hefty Katawdo warrior separated from the group and set off towards Abarhil.

He was a head shorter than Abarhil, but his shoulders were almost twice as big. His head was decorated with a hair bun and was carried by a bull-like neck, his hulking long arms clenched a small wooden shield and a massive war club. His face and body were covered in tattoos, which looked horrifying indeed. He moved toward Abarhil, and then he spread his short solid legs and began to twirl his club. Abarhil realized that this would not be an easy rival. He tried to assess him. 'He probably knows nothing about fencing, but his strength will be huge.

I have to force him to lunge in order to uncover him.' He began to walk and fully alert he approached the massive club. He began to go around the opponent from the right where the Katawdo was holding the small shield. He was hoping he would make the attack with the club more difficult. However, the Katawdo surprised him with how swiftly he turned on his short legs. He lifted his hefty arm with the club to attack Abarhil on the side and back with a long half turn. Abarhil, surprised by the unexpected lunge, threw himself forward and by rolling he avoided a deadly wound at the last minute. The club hit the spot where Abarhil had stood seconds ago. After he fell, Abarhil swiftly stood up and grabbed the sword with both hands, determined to use the length of his blade and keep a safe distance from the formidable slammer.

This time, it was him who attacked, and he led with a strong side lunge against the opponent who lifted the small shield to protect himself. Abarhil put a lot of force into the strike, but the effect it had surprised both him and his opponent. The blade cut the wooden shield in two as if it was a toy, and with the broken shield, the Katawdo's arm, from the elbow down, ended up on the ground. He first looked stunned at the crippled

arm, and then painfully cried. Abarhil jumped back and stared at the bloody blade he was holding down in front of him. What blade is it that can do something like this, he thought, but his opponent did not let him think for long. Mad with pain and rage he again set off towards Abarhil, holding the slammer in his good arm above his head and attacking from the top down. Abarhil moved his front leg aside, pulled the back leg in and with a practiced half turn avoided a slash and got to his opponent's back. Then he finished the turn, and the end of the sword detached the man's head from his torso. The body stood for a little while on spread legs, and then it crashed to the ground.

Abarhil shouted victoriously.

His first victory, the first opponent he had knocked down in combat. The victory boosted his confidence, and he lunged against another opponent. It was again a Katawdo warrior, this time armed with a two-handed war axe. He held it in both hands and waved it around. Abarhil lured him to attack like his previous rival, and with the same half turn, he avoided the slash. This time, however, he did not finish his half turn. When the axe fell to the ground, before the warrior could pick it up, Abarhil slashed the handle his opponent held in his hands. Although the handle was ironshod, the great sword cut it in half as if it were a reed stalk. Only a short handle remained in the hands of the surprised opponent, with which he tried to fend off Abarhil's next lunge. In vain. The blade found its target, and it thrust into his chest.

Even the pair of Sharian warriors were successful, because in the meantime, another attacker was hit by a Sharian spear, and the remaining Katawdo turned and fled alone.

Above the field, a loud battle cry sounded again. Abarhil looked back. A long line of Sharian riders above them began to move. Another wave of attack started. It was necessary to find a hiding place before they got swept off by the hooves of their horses. He looked around, and just a few steps behind them were several large rocks among which some thorny bushes grew. No horse could jump over that, they would have to go around. He quickly shouted at his two companions and pointed at the pile of rocks. Immediately, they understood. It was a race against time. They quickly headed off to the rocks, but the mass of horse bodies came down the inclined plain much faster. They had barely managed to hide behind the rocks when a roaring avalanche of horse hooves came over them. This time the Sharians did not dodge, and in spite of the shower of arrows they hit the enemy lines. The lines broke under the pressure of horse bodies. The center of the field turned into a battlefield where hundreds of warriors were fighting each other, man to man. Even Abarhil and his companions chased the attackers to get into the fight. The Sharians may have broken the center of the enemy lines but the way to the fortress was still not open. Their opponents put up a fierce resistance, and both flanks were coming together to reinforce the center and close the way to the fortress. It seemed that not even this attack would be successful, but suddenly unexpected help arrived.

The dawigelar's son, Zerilar, who had been watching the battle from the walls of the fortress, ordered a lunge to the rear of the fighting enemies. One hundred and fifty Sharian riders from the fortress attacked the back of the enemy lines. Only this strike finally broke the resistance. A general stampede began. Katawdos, the black warriors, and even tens of Orofantars who took part in the battle, scattered across the plain. Sharians, although weaker in numbers, for a short time took over the battlefield.

Abarhil managed to catch one of the horses who was running around the battlefield strewn with bodies without a master. He mounted him to go back to the place where Ghamir fell. He did not have to search for long. The stallion lay on his side, and when Abarhil dismounted to pick up his bag, bow and quiver, Ghamir slowly lifted his head and neighed softly.

'He's still alive,' thought Abarhil. He felt his legs getting heavy and a shiver ran down his spine. He slowly knelt down and took the horse's head in his lap. Overwhelmed by sorrow, he was not far from tears. He helplessly stroked the horse's head. Durghan, who in the meantime had been looking for him all over the battlefield, found him like that.

"Astoghár is your guardian, Roghídan. What luck to see you! I saw you falling during the first attack, and yet you are alive! Unhurt? You must be a darling of the gods."

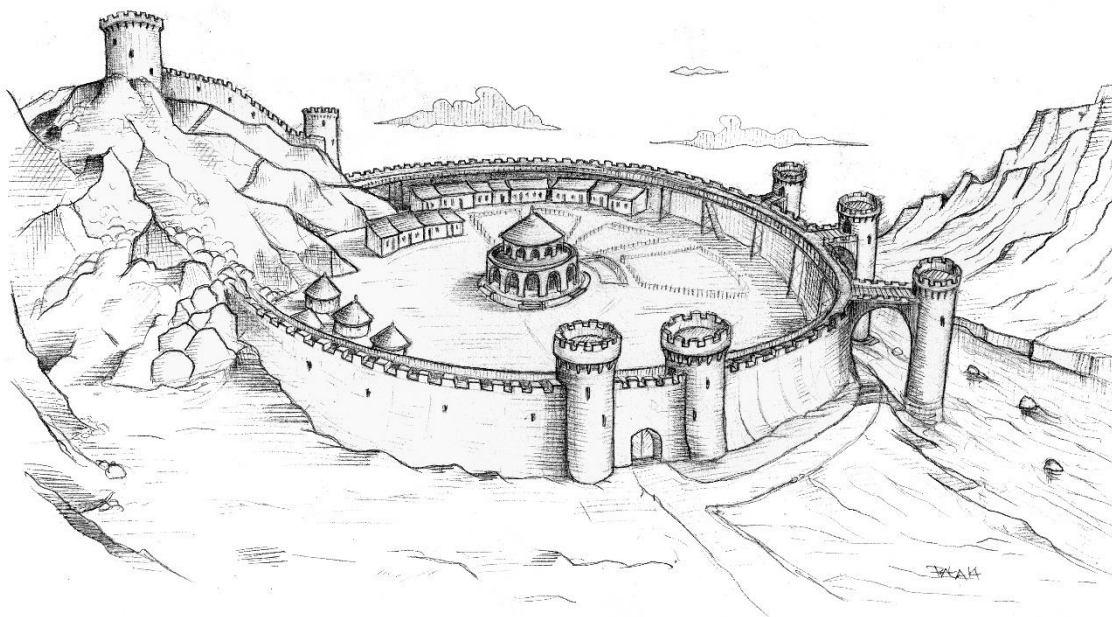
Abarhil raised his head and looking desperate, he replied: "I am but he is already leaving!" and lowered his head back to Ghamir's. Durghan dismounted, came to Abarhil and put his hand on Abarhil's shoulder.

"Do not mourn, Roghídan. He was a warhorse, and he fulfilled his duty. I know, it is hard to lose a friend but we are at war and this day belongs to death. Come!"

He led him aside, and then he went back to the horse, pulled a dagger from a pouch on his chest and with one short movement ended his suffering. He went back to his companion and took him by the arm.

"I am glad I found you. Nevana and my father asked me to keep an eye on you. When you disappeared during the first attack, I had very little hope. Only a few people fall from a horse in full gallop and survive in good health. But now we have to hurry, Roghídan. Sharians are pulling back to the fortress and its gates will close in a few moments! Come!"

They quickly remounted their horses and set off to the fortress. Most of the Sharian riders were already inside and now latecomers and warriors who accompanied their wounded friends were coming too. Both were in the group of Sharian riders who passed through a gate that closed behind them with a loud bang.



When Abarhil rode through the gate, he found himself in the vast space within the walls. Durghan walked him to the pens, where they dismounted the horses and drove them inside. Together they came to some simple round huts near the walls, and in one of them Abarhil could leave his belongings. Then Durghan left him, for he wanted to find his father and brother. Abarhil took this moment of solitude to observe the fortress. Even at very first sight, it was clear that the fortress was huge and built ingeniously, fully using the possibilities of the surrounding nature. Walls circled the fortress that Abarhil estimated to be half a mile in length. The walls, approximately forty feet high, were built of huge stone blocks carved of dark volcanic rocks. It was admirable how seamlessly the mysterious builders had managed to assemble these rocks. It reminded Abarhil of the excellent stonemason's work he had once admired during his first voyage to Osttar. Could it be that this fortress was built by the same hands as the venerable Osttar? But how would seafarers have appeared so far from the sea? Then his thoughts led him to the old town to the north of Nirruch, and Oghlar's story of a dying nation that Chyrrkans had found after their arrival to Anghir.

Within the vast inner area, a strange stone building stood, perhaps an ancient temple. Close by, was a big stone basin, a water reservoir which was, as he found out later, supplied by a sophisticated pipeline taking the water from a wild river that flowed directly by the fortress. Apart from the walls, it was the only trace that had been left by the builders of the fortress.

Sharians customized the vast space inside of the walls. Extensive pens for horses and cattle, which served as a living resource of food, were here.

At the walls of the fortress, stables and big round barns were built, then granaries and a series of round huts where the fortress guards lived. When Abarhil looked at all the wooden buildings, he felt like they did not belong here, as if they were from another world. They seemed so fragile compared to the elaborate stone walls. Two cultures, two worlds that could not have been more different, had met here. A nation from the grassy lands of Anghir which went into a battle dressed in leather and decorated with feathers, and then a nation of ancient mysterious stonemasons, whose art exceeded everything he had known and seen until now.

When he was observing the inside of the fortress, he went up on the massive walls. These were approximately ten feet wide at the bottom and five at the top, of which two feet were taken by battlements, which lined a sidewalk that was one fathom in width. From the walls, he saw that the fortress indeed had only one gate, which was facing west toward Shari Kar pass. On the South, the walls were bordered by the bed of a small river; on the North, the fortress clung to a high cloven wall of a gorge. Because it was a place which enemies could occupy and threaten the defenders from above, there was a wall on the ridge as well, which was ended by a massive round tower on the West. It was called Togiana and it served as a watchtower. When a breathless Abarhil walked up the long steep steps carved into the rock to the tower's gallery, an impressive view of the surrounding land opened up to him.

When viewed from above, it was clear that the fortress was a gateway to a gorge, which connected the plain of Darli Grot with Urughir. The gorge had been eroded by a wild river of Bôggur, which ran down the Shari Kar pass. At this point, the gorge was not wider than a thousand feet. More than half of this width was taken up by the fortress; the rest was taken up by the furrowed and impassable riverbed. Between the wall and the riverbed was a narrow paved road. From the fortress walls, guards could watch over and see any movement on the road. For security to be perfect, the unknown builder had erected three slender towers, which he had connected at the top with

arched bridges. Anyone who intended to go along the road to the West or East had to pass under these bridges, and was at the mercy of the guards of the fortress. After a thorough inspection, Abarhil had to admit that Dar Uru Awrakh was a perfectly thought out architectural work. Not even Minalront, in his native Merélos, was not as seamlessly planned and built.

From a height of several hundred feet he could observe any movement in the enemy camp, so he took the time to at least roughly count the number of tents. From that, he estimated the number of warriors to be less than a thousand. Therefore, they were fighting with more than double the odds. Based on what he had heard several days ago at Sorgan's council, it was less than a fifth of the forces that were pouring in on Anghir like a flood. He walked around the tower and looked at the plains, which could be seen in the East. And indeed, far on the horizon, clouds of dust could be seen whirling by the main host of enemies.

He had been on the tower for quite some time when Sorgan, with several others and his son Zerilar (who looked like a copy of him), came. Likewise, a tall, strong man with sharp features, Abarhil realized that the more Zerilar looked like his father, the more the younger Durghan and Nevana looked like their mother.

Sorgan approached Abarhil: "So, has the winner over hargor already seen the Sharian fortress? What do you think of it?"

Abarhil looked around as if he wanted to see it all one more time. "It's perfect! One word, a masterpiece. I've never seen anything like it."

Zerilar, standing beside his father, nodded with a smile. "Yes, Dar Uru Awrakh is the mightiest fortress in Anghir, it cannot even be compared to the royal castle. But only a few eyes have seen it. Even amongst Sharians, there are just a few. As for the other tribes, none but Sharians have visited the fortress."

"I think it's unconquerable. I cannot imagine an army that could overcome these walls," said Abarhil, and he pointed down towards the wreath of walls.

Roghian, a commander of Wolf Warriors, entered the conversation: "Every fortress is only as strong as its defenders are determined. And the army that will test the strength of these walls, you will shortly see. There, in the East, a vanguard is coming!" He pointed at the growing and darkening cloud above the plains that stretched as far as the eye could see. All of them turned to the East as he spoke and watched the disturbing image.

Sorgan turned to his son. "You know this land. When do you think they will reach the fortress?"

Zerilar shrugged his shoulders. "It is difficult to tell, at this distance, how quickly they are approaching, but I think that the front will arrive at night and the main troops in the morning and during the day."

"How many of them?" asked Abarhil.

Zerilar made a face and shook his head. "How many? Who knows. Certainly enough to keep us here for weeks, and if help is not coming, then maybe forever."

"And how long will our stocks last?"

"For the basic garrison, which is roughly two hundred men, it can last the whole summer, but today, it is almost three times that number. I think we can last two or three months!"

"Two or three months? You are trying to say that we can stay here for a quarter of the year?" Abarhil looked at him disbelievingly.

He had just remembered his home and his parents who were waiting for his return. He never thought this expedition could take so long. Bitterly, he remembered Lominas' words.

"If your friend fulfills his promise and persuades all Erighans to come, it will

certainly take at least a month before the army is ready and arrives at Meri Ochir. Then, they have to cross Shari Kar and it might last up to a week for an army so big. If help comes within two months, we can feel lucky. And for that time, we have to hold the fortress because they will not sit and wait," said Sorgan decisively and inimically, as he looked at the huge cloud which was announcing the arrival of the main troops.

"Let's go and get ready. We have to keep this fortress. What am I saying keep. We have to prevent them from passing a greater number of soldiers along the road to the West. Then, they would have the possibility of occupying Shari Kar and no help would ever arrive."

"How did the vanguard, we fought today, get here?" asked Durghan.

"They surprised us, they came at night, in silence, during a storm, so before our guards could warn the garrison, a part of them managed to pass under the bridges," replied Zerilar regretfully, "It was a big mistake, but we did not expect them."

"And the others? There are almost a thousand of them. I tried to count them," Abarhil added curiously.

"Those came over the Darli Grot walls away from the fortress. There are places where you can climb, but only those who walk can make it. Neither horses nor carriages can pass!"

"So, you can pass on foot? Where Katawdos passed, the others can too, and then they can go up to the pass?" said Sorgan alarmed.

"Yes, the others can pass over Darli Grot, but I do not know how they could get enough stock above the fortress when we occupy the road. And going up to the mountains without stock is not easy, you know that yourselves. Up to Meri Ochir, they cannot find any food. If they get up to Shari Kar, they will soon have to climb down. They cannot last longer than two days with no regular meals."

"Enough said, let's go down. We have to discuss what we can do to not let so much as a mouse into the pass," said Sorgan decisively, and the whole group began the difficult descent. Only guards remained on the tower, to watch the movements of the enemy.

The next day, right after waking up, Abarhil and Durghan set out for the walls and towards Togiana. The gallery of the tower was full of spectators, so it took a while before they progressed to the eastern edge. The view was stunning. A huge enemy camp swelled like a flood in front of the eastern entryway of the gorge, and more and more troops were coming. The gorge was a quarter of a mile long and this small distance kept the two armies from merging. They were both looking blankly at the ocean of enemies.

Durghan spoke first. "No eyes in Anghir have ever seen anything similar. When I saw Dar Uru Awrakh, I was certain that we will keep the fortress, but when I see this flood, I do not really know. What do you think?"

"I don't know," said Abarhil and shrugged his shoulders and looked around concerned. "It is worse than I could have imagined in my wildest dreams. But I am certain of one thing. If this flood pours over Shari Kar, then nobody and nothing will stop it and the free Anghir will perish. The fortress simply must endure!"

Durghan, looking at the enemy camp, nodded with his lips clenched tight. Then, however, his face suddenly changed, and he smiled at Abarhil and said: "Let's not worry. Today the fortress is standing and what comes tomorrow? The Gods will take care of that. Let's go eat."

In the afternoon, guards raised an alarm because a big troop of enemies was approaching along the road. It was a closed infantry troop of several hundred men. Their task was to walk past the fortress and reinforce the western camp. On the sides, walked warriors with big shields that nearly covered their bodies. In the center were Katawdos with smaller round shields raised above their heads. The marching troops

got covered in a shower of arrows. Despite the short distance, it was not easy to hit the tiny spaces between the tightly closed shields. Despite occasional losses, the troop proceeded doggedly. It was only when they got under the bridges that they stopped. A shower of rocks and stones began to fall on their heads. The set broke and the movement turned into a chaotic retreat. That was the right time for the archers on the walls. Abarhil felt like he was back on the training field in his hometown of Merélos. It was impossible to miss. In a short time, almost a hundred dead bodies were lying on the access road to the fortress. This first success improved the mood of all the defenders. If they had enough arrows and rocks, not a soul would come along the road.

In the following days, the defenders fended off several attempts a day from the East. Although the enemy was imaginative and stubborn, one attempt after another smashed against the walls of the well-defended fortress. The warriors from the western camp could not

threaten it because they had no ladders available or siege machines which might have tried to break the gate. Only the main troops had this equipment, but it was impossible for them to transport it through the narrow gorge to the walls of the fortress. Within two weeks, the defenders, therefore, fended off all the attempted assaults, during which the enemy lost hundreds of men. Unlike the enemy, their losses did not exceed twenty men and about the same number were wounded. After a while, the attempts to overcome the walls from the East fell silent, and around the fortress a calm settled, only interrupted by occasional forays that were meant to test the attention of the defenders.



At the end of the third week, an anxious Zerilar announced that guards on Toginai had found that the western camp was gaining riders, and they even saw some beasts of burden. It could only have meant one thing. The enemy had discovered a passage in Darli Grot through which backups had started to flow. This was disturbing. If it was true, the enemy could soon gather enough stock and riders in the western camp and move toward the pass. This would cut off the fortress from the coming help and the resistance of its defenders would have been in vain. They all agreed that it was necessary to find out what was happening in the enemy camp. To send out scouts was, however, extremely risky because the fortress had no other entrance apart from the gate. A few daring men tried to abseil the walls but none came back.

Meanwhile, Abarhil was wandering around the fortress and he kept thinking. Dar Uru Awrakh was a masterpiece of fortress architecture, thought out to the tiniest detail. He could not believe that its creator would not have allowed the garrison to leave the fortress by a means other than the main gate. But no matter how hard he was looking, there was no other exit, no underground corridor, nothing. He told Durghan that he was convinced there must be some other exit. He explained that every castle, every fort in his homeland always has a hidden exit, and there must be one somewhere here, too. Durghan just shrugged his shoulders. When they came to Zerilar, he only shook his head in disbelief. Sharians had been inhabiting this fortress for several generations and no one had ever discovered even a hint of something like this. Abarhil, however, did not back down. Together with Durghan, they went around the walls, exploring every corner of the open space. Abarhil dived into the tank to explore whether there might be some hidden door beneath the surface. He did not discover anything.

At last, only the building in the center of the fortress remained. It was a place Abarhil had only visited once shortly, because Sharians utilized it as the armory and a warehouse. When he entered, he stopped and examined the vast space with wonder.

The inside of the building was circular and covered by a seamless stone arch. If this was in Merélos, it would be one of the world's wonders, thought Abarhil. It would serve as a temple.

"Temple?" he whispered to himself. "Yes, it must be a temple. But where's the space to store prayer objects? That is strange. Something like that must be somewhere here."

However, in the center of the circular space, stood only a stone pedestal, which served as an altar or a sacrificial site. He, therefore, went to see the perimeter walls. He carefully examined every detail. On the wall opposite to the entrance, he finally discovered something. There was a large stone frame which could have been a doorframe had it not been filled by a large stone monolith. He examined the stone edge, clogged by centuries of dust. When he wiped it away, he came across some kind of characters. It looked like an old font. He looked at them carefully.

Yes, it is a font! But where did it come from?

He remembered his teacher who had forced him to read the old Osttar font during their language lessons, which contained characters supposedly preserved from the defunct Dairana. He recalled how he hated those difficult and dull lessons.

"Durghan! I've found something," he called to his mate who walked around the opposite walls. Durghan turned quickly and ran up to Abarhil.

"What? What have you found? "

"Here, look. I think it's a door," said Abarhil and pointed at the stone frame.

"Door?" Durghan said puzzled and disappointed, he looked at Abarhil.

"You can see a door? I can only see a stone wall! You, my friend, did not sleep well?"

Abarhil did not let Durghan ridicule him. "Look at those characters around the perimeter of the frame, it is a font. Old, very old."

Durghan looked at him amazed. "A font? What is that? I do not know what it means. I can see traces. It looks like tiny tracks that a snake or steppe would leave."

Abarhil stopped his research for a while and sheepishly looked at his companion. The same problem he had had with Súrwan, again. How could he explain to these people what a font is?

"You're right, it is like tracks but these tracks have a hidden meaning. In the same way you can tell from the track who walked the path, I can read the font and tell you what the one who created it wanted to say."

Abarhil returned to exploring the characters. The carved characters were still very legible, and so he felt them and tried to remember the forgotten lessons.

"It is a great secret and a great art to keep words in a stone and bring them back again," said Durghan, watching his companion with respect and awe.

"I do not know a brin who could do something like this."

"You're right, brins cannot do that. But it's not as great an art as it looks. Anyone can learn it, you only need hard work, effort, and a good memory, and that's, I am afraid, what I'm lacking. It's been so long."

Abarhil hit the wall in disappointment and turned to his companion. He curiously asked: "And what does the stone say?"

"That I don't know. I haven't seen these characters for some time and I don't remember. I think I cannot read it," said a frustrated Abarhil. Durghan looked at him.

"I think Roghídan is not patient enough. Durghan was with his brother on a hunt in the plains of Urughir last year and they visited the Fanghir desert. Animals we never saw lived there. We too came across unknown tracks we did not understand. Every track is unique and belongs to only one animal but some are similar to another. The track of a damri is very similar to that of a mountain goat. When you know one well, you can guess what the other one you saw means."

Abarhil watched his companion for a while. He was right, he gave up too quickly.

Where do these people get their wisdom? He is so similar to Nerúwan.

"You're right, I will try again but I will need more time and I have to get my things, my journal, and something to write with."

"Roghídan will have as much time as he needs. No one will interrupt him while reading that - how do you call it - font. Hunters, too, need time to read tracks."

Abarhil went back to the hut for his journal. He decided he would redraw some characters and look for similarities with the scriptures he knew. If he had more time, he may be able to remember bits from the lessons of his teacher. He recalled how he had drawn some characters in Osttar, which he had found in the ruins of the ancient lighthouse. Over the winter, he had studied them and made notes. Who knows, they might be useful now. Abarhil spent the next few days in the old temple studying characters. Laboriously, he quarried the knowledge from his memory that had been saved there years ago during his lessons. He found that some characters actually resembled those he had discovered in Osttar, and he remembered some. Although it was hard to believe, it looked as if this fortress had been built by the same nation that had built the ancient lighthouse at fort Kinbarak in Osttar Bay. Then, this fortress had to be built such a long time ago that no records existed apart from myths and legends. The two young men became so addicted to their search that they forgot about the battle happening every day upon the walls of the fortress. The puzzle became even more interesting to Durghan who, thanks to that, understood that words and sentences can be kept in writing. His great point of view and fresh outlook helped Abarhil several times when he thought he had ended up in a dead end. In the end, their effort brought success. Although they did not crack the whole inscription, they understood it enough to be able to tell which character indicated a hidden lock releasing the door.

Opening the door, however, became a new problem because the mechanism, unused for centuries, resisted serving its purpose once again. They tried to push the plate from both sides but it resisted their attempts. It was only when they used a crowbar that the stone plate gave in, and creaking and reluctantly it turned around the center to reveal an area unvisited for ages. They had to wait until the stale air in the room behind the door changed. The space behind the door was small and tight, and there was nothing else except a circular stairway that descended into the underground. Under the temple, they discovered a large hall, which Abarhil estimated to be an area used to store prayer items. Also, they found a number of objects and statuettes, which to them served an unknown purpose. What they were looking for the most, they could not find here either. Even though they searched very carefully in the torchlight, they did not find a clue for another hallway. Disappointed, they were coming back up the stairs when Durghan spotted, on a small rest stop in a flickering light, the same symbol that indicated the key at the upper door. Once again, they got excited. This time, the door only resisted briefly, and before them a view to a dark narrow corridor opened up.

"Durghan, Marghúr is almighty. We've found it, the secret corridor, I'll swear," said Abarhil when they peered into the narrow space. "I just don't know what to expect at the end. And the question remains whether it will be possible to open the other end after all these centuries."

Durghan nodded and said: "I think we should not explore it on our own. It is time we showed our discovery to my father and other chiefs."

When Sorgan with several other chiefs saw their discovery, they both reaped the deserved praise and Abarhil was admired for his knowledge.

"Roghídan, as we can see, you are not only a brave man, which you proved when you fought with hargor, but you also carry a wisdom inside your head that none of our elders can compare to. Let us thank Maghúr that he guided your steps to accompany us. Without you, we would not find this way," said Sorgan with recognition.

Abarhil felt flattered but he carefully objected: "Thank you, dawigelar, your praise makes me happy but we shouldn't celebrate just yet. So far, we have only opened and made it through the entry. No one knows what's further. The corridor could be buried and who knows if we can make it through the exit."

"Sure, you are right, Roghídan, but we have hope, and that is also important. Prepare torches, so we can start searching the corridor as soon as possible."

Shortly after, a dozen men entered the corridor. The group was led by Sorgan himself, followed by Abarhil and Durghan, and then Roghian with a group of Wolf Warriors. Each man carried several torches because no one knew how long the corridor might be. When they had walked a few hundred feet, Abarhil was surprised because the air in the corridor did not smell nearly as bad as in the room below the altar. It seemed as though the corridor was ventilated, which was also testified by the flames of torches that ebbed in the slight draft.

The corridor was built as thoroughly as the fortress because it was carved into a solid bedrock of stone fortress.

'If this goes on', thought Abarhil, 'we'll have one problem solved because there is no risk of filling the corridor.'

After some time, the corridor began to ascend and, at the end, it turned into a spiral staircase.

"It looks like we're climbing through the center of a rock wall up on Togiana, I think,," said Abarhil to his companion during one of their short stops. After some time, they entered a room; which it might be better to call a cave. It was a natural cave which the builders had come across while digging the corridor, and they had modified it. To their surprise, it was not as dark here because a weak beam of light pierced through a crack in the wall. The cave walls were covered by plenty of sleeping bats and the floor was covered in a layer of their dried dung. Torches awakened some of them, and they flew away through the crack in the wall. Sorgan tried to peer out. "From what I can see, it looks like we are only a little bit below Togiana." Then he turned back and asked: "Can anybody see where the corridor continues?"

Because the cave was large, the men split up and one of them soon came back saying he had found the continuation of the corridor. The corridor was ascending very slightly and soon began to descend. Breathing became more difficult, and it was clear that this part of the corridor had no ventilation. No one knew how long they had walked down the corridor when they reached the fork in the road. After a closer examination, they found that both paths were dead ends. Disappointment subdued the group. After a detailed inspection, however, they found that one path ended in the rock, the other was closed with a door similar to those they had found in the temple, and they even found a symbol indicating the opening mechanism. The time to decide whether to open the door or not had come. No one knew what was awaiting them behind, they had no clue what noise the door could make and who it might interrupt. Therefore, Sorgan decided they attempt to open the door at night to reduce the risk of exposure. When it got dark quickly, as was a custom in this land, and Maghúr released countless stars from his corral to light up the dark night sky, a new group of scouts set forth. It was led by Roghian, and with the exception of Abarhil and Durghan, it consisted only of Wolf warriors. Apart from carrying weapons, they had torches and stock. If they actually found an exit and it was hidden enough so they could go through, runners to the Blue Lake were supposed to set forth immediately, as well as spies to find out what the enemy was doing. When they reached the door after a strenuous journey, the moment for the two young men came again. The door resisted only briefly. When Abarhil felt the mechanism loosen, he instructed the others to extinguish all the torches except one. Then he opened the door. The posts screeched only slightly and then they opened up.

First, they felt fresh night air. However, the corridor continued behind the door. Slowly and cautiously they carried on. After only a few dozen steps, they saw an opening ahead and a starry sky behind. Roghian, who followed Abarhil, doused the last torch and put his hand on Abarhil's shoulder. "Roghídan has finished his task, he opened the last door. Now it is Wolves' turn!"

He beckoned to his companions to silently move forward. In a moment, the first one passed the end of the corridor and stepped outside. When he returned, he said loudly: "Come, nobody is here."

When they stepped outside, Abarhil saw that the mouth of the corridor was so perfectly disguised by huge rocks that to an unfamiliar observer it could seem like an entrance into an animal den. Quietly they went up to a nearby hill to look around. They were about half a mile north from the fortress and the enemy camp. In the distance, dim lights of the enemy fire pits twinkled. The way out of the fortress was open. Roghian immediately sent his men to explore the surroundings. He sent them both to the enemy camp, as well as along Darli Grot to see where the enemy had found a new passage. Abarhil expected to part with Durghan who was supposed to go west to the pass with two companions, and from there to the valley to see if the garrison could count on some help. Abarhil was left alone to guard the corridor's entrance until Roghian came back with his spies.

