

Fire On The Mountain

Freohir son of Amaron hunkered near the small cooking fire on the mountain top, seeking its warmth while he could. A yawn escaped him; he had awoken with the sunrise. He watched, holding his fingers close to the yellow flames, while his companion, Gelir son of Aervir, forked the last piece of sausage into his mouth and washed it away with a gulp of tea. Having finished his meal, Gelir kicked snow over the fire and turned to Freohir.

With regret, Freohir observed the flames sizzling out. It would be many hours before he could rekindle them and prepare their evening meal. Wood was scarce on the bald summits of the White Mountains, and fuel conservation an unfortunate necessity.

"The mountain is yours," his companion said through a yawn of his own. Those were not the proper words to turn over a watch, but who would object, here on Erelas? Their captains were far away, in Minas Tirith, and as far as Freohir could tell, he and Gelir were the only living souls for many leagues around.

Freohir grunted something in response and, his duty done, Gelir started to clatter down the cliff face, holding precariously onto the guide rope with one hand while keeping his sword out of the way with the other. Freohir followed his descent with something akin to envy. Gelir would be warm and comfortable for the next twelve hours, in the small guardhouse further down the mountain where the beacon wardens slept when off duty.

Well, he really should not complain, Freohir admonished himself. At least he had had the good fortune to draw the day watch. Although the sun did little to warm him, it provided light and he could see far out across the land. To the west of Erelas the Ered Nimrais stretched out in a long row, one snowy peak after another like a ragged set of teeth. To the south, the land was covered with forests. To the north were the plains of Anórien, with the Great River gleaming like a silver belt on the horizon. And to the east... He really did not want to look to the east; because there, beyond Nardol and Minas Tirith and the ruins of Osgiliath lay the realm of Mordor, with Mount Orodruin spewing up flames and smoke, obscuring the sky with black fumes.

Muttering in disgust about the dark land in the east, Freohir pulled a short length of wood from his tunic. He took out his knife and cut a deep gash into the stick. Its surface was already marked with several similar cuts, and he did not need to count them to know he was stuck on this forsaken mountain top for nearly another three weeks.

'Tis a fool's errand, he told himself, not for the first time: guarding beacons that had not been lit since before time remembered. *Pwah!* What use would the fires be, anyway? A call to arms to the Rohirrim? He snorted. They would not come to Gondor's aid, of that he was certain. The old alliances were dead, forged too long ago for anyone to heed them

still. What concern would Gondor's plight be to its northern neighbors?

He glanced toward Nardol in the east, and found the mountain free of fire. The same could be said of Min-Rimmon, the closest beacon hill to the west. It did not come as a surprise to the soldier.

Nay, warding the beacons was a wasted effort. Still, every Gondorian soldier took his turn, once every few years, for a month. He knew that some men enjoyed the solitude, the time away from the pressures of the war or the demands of their officers. But not Freohir. He was alone and cold and miserable.

He grumbled a vile word, and spat in the snow. It was loose and soft. A gust of wind whipped up the snowflakes, making them whirl and chase each other onto the tall pyre.

The wind always seemed to find cracks and openings to blow the snow in and dampen the wood. The pyres needed constant maintenance, for the timber would become waterlogged, or bug-eaten, or old age would simply crumble it to sawdust. Keeping the beacons ready to be lit in an instant was hard work, for wood was heavy, and the summit was not easily reached.

Freohir nudged the pile of wood before pulling out a branch that appeared to be too damp to burn easily. Though he considered his current assignment a useless one, he did have his honor, and he took his work seriously, like any true soldier of Gondor.

Once he was satisfied that the beacon was in perfect form he checked the small oil lamp they kept at hand to light the pyre, should it ever come to that. It was giving off a thin tendril of smoke, which drifted up into the morning air until a sigh of wind dispersed it. When he was content that the lamp had sufficient fuel and was not about to extinguish soon, it was only mid-morning. Many hours would still need to pass until he could start dinner, as night fell and Gelir came up to relieve him.

It was quiet on the mountain. The silence hung heavy in the air. He caught no birdsong, or the buzz of insects. Not even the sounds of trees rustling in the wind could be heard. To banish the silence, Freohir began to whistle a soldier's tune but he stopped after the first few notes. The music sounded unnaturally loud in the still air.

He made another round, looking first east, then west. Nothing moved on either Nardol or Min-Rimmon. The sun had yet to reach its zenith. This was a waste of time.

Freohir paced around in circles, slapping his arms and stamping his feet in an attempt to keep warm. He wondered how his brother fared. Allagor was tending the great beacon on Nardol. 'Twas a strange twist of fate indeed that sent both of Amaron's sons to guard the Beacons of Gondor at the same time. He raised a hand to his brow to cut off the glare of the sunlight and peered once again at the peak of Nardol, many leagues away.

He blinked, and squeezed his eyes tighter. His heart started thudding in his chest. A small point of light reflected on Nardol. And another, farther east, on the peak of Eilenach. While Freohir watched, unsure if his eyes were deceiving him, the small pinpoint of light on Nardol grew and grew, turning from a tiny yellow spark to a fierce flame that cloaked the mountain in a red glow. His heart rate kept pace with the swelling fire, and by the time he was convinced his eyes did not lie, it was beating so fast, Freohir feared it would jump out of his chest.

The inconceivable had happened -- the warning fires of Minas Tirith were being lit.

What terrible fate did the kindling of the Beacons of Gondor presage for his people?

Suddenly he became aware he was being negligent of his duty, tarrying in disbelief. With realization came the end of his paralysis. Freohir sprang into action. Slipping on the snow, mindless of the way it soaked through his breeches as he fell and clambered back to his feet, he scrambled toward the lamp. He noticed his hands were shaking so badly he feared he might drop it into the snow, and he took a calming breath.

At last, panting with excitement and fright, he held the oil lamp to the pile of wood. It took several long, and to Freohir scary seconds but then a small flame licked at the branches. It quickly grew and within minutes the pyre was ablaze, sending a fiery cry for help. So hot burned the flames that Freohir had to step back or be scorched. He felt cold no longer.

One by one the other mountains lit up. Min-Rimmon and Calenhad and Halifirien carried the message further and further north, their flames a desperate cry for help in a war that Gondor could not fight alone.

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