

# **ICE AND FIRE**

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**COLLECTIVE STUDIO BUNDLE 5**

Castetri always brushed his gray bear's fur when he was anxious. He grew up with the beast, and considered him more family than his own brother. The prince used a small wooden stool to reach his back, while Bo seemed to like the grooming, breathing slow and heavily.

The howling wind was all one could hear that high in the mountain, spreading the sparse falling snow. The dwarf was the only one in the stable - every citizen of Snowden sought shelter in Iron-Siller, capital city of Mithramar, since the new self-proclaimed Firelord occupied the fortress of Vanduil, the dwarven arsenal of the peninsula.

The royal family was distraught. His mother, chief councilor of the iron round table, decreed that the tenth battalion should march to Vanduil and recapture it. However, the winter was upon them, making traversing the continent all the more difficult, and the railways to the forge were blocked by the giants, as their scouts soon discovered after being informed of the incident.

And it was a blessing that the council came to know of this occupation - one of the blacksmiths managed to flee in one of the wagons that was scheduled to send tools and weapons to the capitol. Ravens were sent everywhere in the continent to summon the people back to the city, and the High King locked himself in the temples to complete the Three-Day ceremony, as the manuscripts guided. And when he left, he was well and armed to lead the army.

He had a personal motive to hurry, even though he wasn't prone to show emotions. His younger son was one of Vanduil's finest blacksmiths, and even if he wasn't his firstborn, he'd protect his family no matter the costs. The council intervened, however, and sent a strategic detachment to reoccupy what was lost.

As per the blacksmith's reports, it was a monotonous day until, in the middle of nowhere, three fire giants and dozens of Azirs emerged from the magma and began to kill everyone in the forge.

Castetri, who never really cared for the art of war, not when he compared himself to his brother, Karabad, was devastated. He had not heard from his brother for three days before receiving the bad news. The only one who could give him comfort was Bo.

Grooming the beast again, eh? - Odoik asked, barging into the stable, tapping on the heavy war hammer he carried in his belt.

Someone has to do it, right? - Said Castetri, shrugging - Bo doesn't eat fresh food for a couple of days already, you can feel it on his fur.

Yeah... well, we'll continue with the march in an hour. All's ready?

Nothing is, to be honest. - The dwarf answered with a defeated look on his face. Gazing through the glassless window, he could see the stone totems that would signal the beginning of the road.

Checking the lost gaze of his friend, Odoik tried to do small talk.

Blasted giants. If they hadn't blocked the railway, we'd be raining iron on their heads already.

But it was hard to retrieve Castetri once he was submerged in thoughts. It always pained Odoik that he wasn't the kind of guy that could read Castetri and tell him what he wanted to hear, even though he probably was the one closest to the prince save for his brother.

Do you wanna talk about Karabad? - But his question fell on deaf ears, and Castetri just resumed the grooming of the bear, dressing him with his combat armor. "No time to talk about it, I s'pose", Odoik thought.

The prince thought of his furry companion as his right hand in battles, along with his firearm, giving much care to both before battle. He stepped down from the stool and placed it where it was before.

Let's eat something before leaving - Castetri suggested, with a monotone while pointing to the sky - Only She knows when we'll be able to sit down and eat again.

Odoik just nodded and went along with him.



Grmir stared at the magma leaking through the walls in the communal forge, lighting the room. Dancing shadows moved with the rhythm of the molten rock and the long ablaze hair of the giant.

The sight of the magma seduced him, reflected in his eyes.

One thing that he learned as he walked with his brethren was that Giants don't rely on magic, especially when it comes to fighting. It was like this with his forefathers, it was like this with him. However, he and his three brothers were the last fire giants of Mithramar. He was not going to die in honored combat against twenty dwarfs to conquer a farming village. Honorable combat was out of the question now - from hereon it was war, and one man isn't an army. Even though using magic disgusted him, without the elemental's blessings, he would not have reached the surface alive.

Five dwarves sat in silence behind him, patiently. Each word he said was listened carefully, and the Azirs would execute them diligently.

Firelord - one of them called, saluting him - The last few blacksmiths were arrested. All warriors are now dead and deep within the volcano.

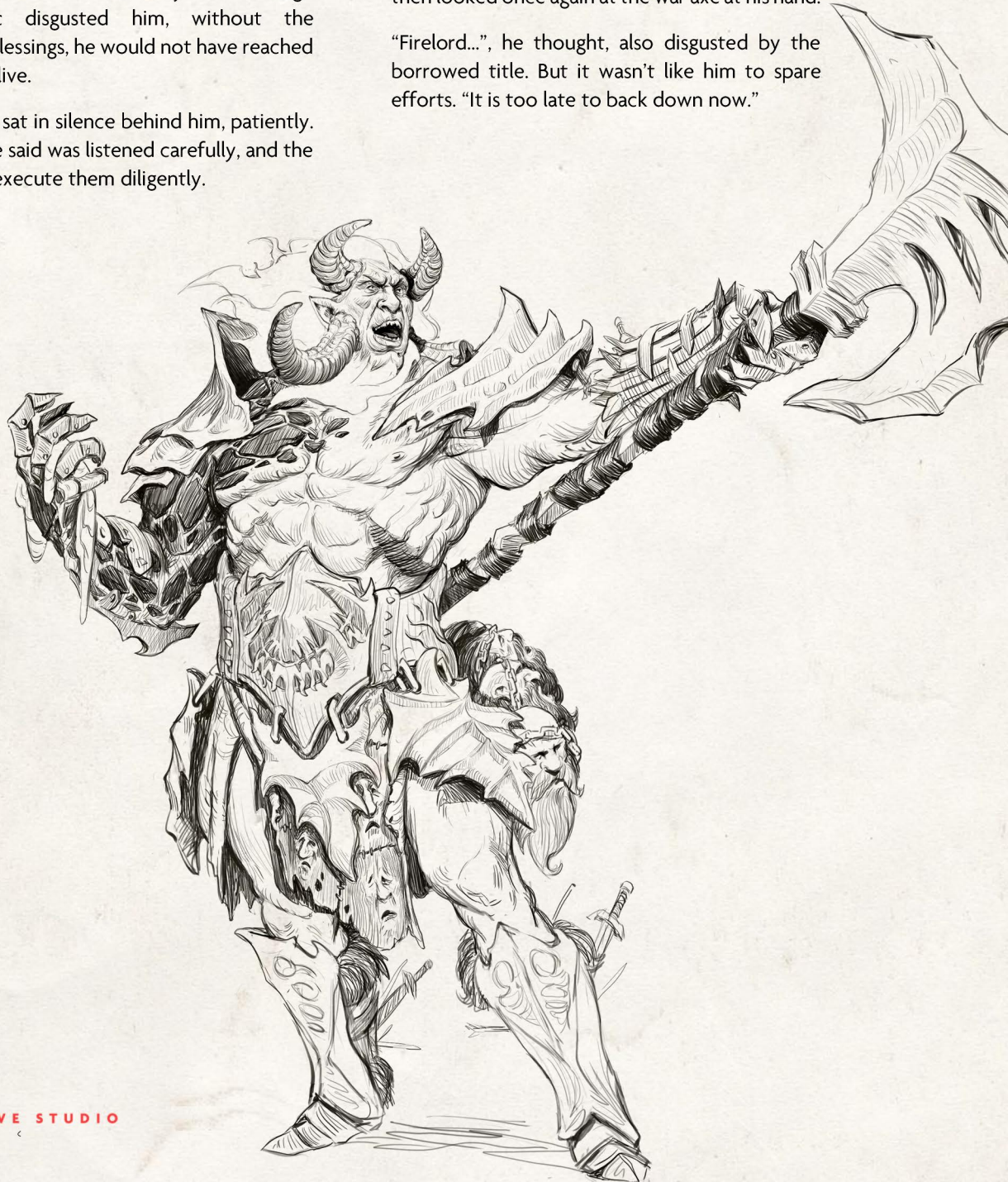
Excellent. And you have scouted the whole fortress?

Besides the main gates and the underground railroad, we found two cave exits that should lead to neighboring trails. The men are at it already.

You can go ahead and put some scouts in these trails so we get notified as soon as possible. I want to be the first to hear when they come.

The Azir ran to give the lord's orders. Grmir gave him a side glance when he left the room, and then looked once again at the war axe at his hand.

"Firelord...", he thought, also disgusted by the borrowed title. But it wasn't like him to spare efforts. "It is too late to back down now."



Once, twice and thrice. Three times Odoik brandished his hammer against the fire dwarf, but his enemy read him like a book. The Azir held his weight against the tower shield he carried, making Odoik lose his balance enough to give him an opening and get punctured by a short spear, falling on the ground to dodge the brunt of the attack.

Fortunately, the Azir had to look away to dodge another attack, giving Odoik the opportunity to get up, still unstable from the last few hits.

They arrived in the south trail, through the mountain's tunnels, to enter Fort Vanduil, where they were sure they wouldn't be aware of the secret passages. However, when they arrived in the main chambers, they were already surrounded by a battalion three times their size.

The fire giant held Castetri in the air grabbing his neck, with his legs pathetically trying to find footing. The dwarf's gaze was full of rage, even though his sweat made it nearly impossible to hold his weight in the giant's arm.

Castetri, even though he was used to the extreme heat of a forge, didn't had much luck with the volcano that forged all his ancestors' weapons.

Last words, your highness? - The giant asked, not being able to forget the last few drops of honor he had. Letting a dying man speak his last words was a common courtesy of the giants.

Curses upon you, Grmir, with the Lady as my witness! - Said the dwarf with a gasping breath - You will never see a good night's rest, never enjoy the bounty of this land, and your weapon will never be sharp!

I accept your curse, Castetri, son of the Iron-Siller King and Regent of Mithramar. Rest in peace.

But before the giant could let his body go on the magma stream, Odoik ran in that direction, his pace heavy due to the injuries, managing to land a heavy blow in the giant's knee, making him bow instantly.

Castetri fell on top of the giant, but quickly tumbled over the side and got up, panting while his hand massaged his neck. Desperate, he took the first weapon he saw lying around in the confusion and ran to Grmir while he had a chance.

Thousands of sparks explored from the head of the giant, just like a hammer striking tempered iron. Odoik joined him to give the coup de grace, and an enormous flame erupted from the giant's body, transforming him into ashes.

Looking around and trying to grasp what was happening, Castetri concluded that the fate of the platoon wasn't good. A few men were fighting in the room, but he saw other Azirs coming from the stairs from adjacent rooms.

Cast, run away - Said Odoik, with a hoarse voice - There's nothing to be had by dying along with us here.

I can't leave you here, Odo - Stuttered Cast, disbelieving what his friend was suggesting.

Odoik tore a piece of his linen shirt and made a makeshift bandage with it to stop the swelling shoulder from bleeding even more.

Hear me out, Cast. We are nothing but fodder here, and we serve the royal family. Listen, Karabad is gone, you can't die here...

His voice was lost in the fray. Castetri didn't know what to make of Odoik's proposition. He hated every moment of being of royal blood.

Go back to the castle! - Shouted Odoik, grabbing his warhammer from the stone floor, and running to join his brothers - Go back, or go find help, but don't die on me today, Cast! Your work here is not over!

Castetri stepped back a bit, a small tear sliding down his face. "Why, brother?", he thought while he ran behind the forges, down the mountain through the path of the cowards.

