

THE IRON KINGDOMS CHRONICLES

ACTS OF WAR III STORMBREAK

AERYN RUDEL



PART II

CAPTAIN VORNEK BLACKHEEL STUFFED A WAD OF BITTERLEAF into his mouth and glowered at the Cygnarans on the shore and in the gunboats blockading the river. Their bright armor and clean weapons—not a spot of honest rust on lance or gun barrel—irritated him.

He chewed, spat juice on the deck of his barge, and glanced around at his men. Where the Cygnaran soldiers and knights were paragons of soldierly conduct, his own were filthy, often drunk, and generally lacking in discipline. Idleness made things worse. More than a few leaned against the gunwales, trying to hide the fact they drank *uiske* from their canteens instead of water.

Murgan tromped up behind him, the ogrun's heavy tread rocking the boat a bit.

"No word from Searforge," he said.

"Not surprised. It'll be days, maybe weeks, 'fore they get anyone to us." Vornek spat again. "They'll leave us twisting in the wind here like they always do."

“They are a fair distance away, sir.”

Vornek chuckled sourly. “They could be across the bloody street, and they’d leave us poor dregs waiting until they were good and ready.”

“Our cargo is important,” Murgan said. He always defended the Searforge Commission, a group that had told him he could either retire or serve at Baram Fort, the worst post in all Rhul, after his khorune died in battle. But that was Murgan—loyal to a fault.

“Then why in the name of the Fathers are we the ones delivering it?” The Searforge kept Vornek and his men all but quarantined up near Hell’s Pass. They were technically guarding a lesser-used merchant route, but what they were really doing was being invisible.

Murgan opened his mouth to reply and then closed it with a snap. Vornek nodded.

“That’s what I thought.”

Murgan changed the subject. “The Cygnaran commander, Captain Adkins, has offered a barrel of ale as a token of goodwill. He seems an honorable man.”

“Ale, huh?” Vornek said, and his mouth filled with spit at the mention of the captain’s gift. “That’s . . . kind of him.”

“As I said, he seems an honorable man. He hopes his government and the Searforge Commission can reach a compromise.”

Vornek frowned. The ogrun’s impenetrable logic and optimism was a boon to his command and a pain in the bloody arse when a man wanted to complain a bit. He opened his mouth to reply when a shot rang out over the water.

Vornek whirled, searching for the source of the gunfire. Their barges sat in the middle of the river, a trio of Cygnaran gunboats ahead, blocking them in. The shores were ten yards away to either side, rocky beach for about ten feet that gave way to scrub bush and the occasional copse of trees. The Cygnarans had taken up position near the river. Most were the heavily armored knights called Stormblades armed with mechanika polearms. Vornek had seen them in use, and though potent, they lacked range.

Another shot rang out. This time one of the Cygnaran knights on the beach keeled over, a hole in his breastplate above his heart.

“Who in the Father’s name is shooting?” Vornek said and crouched down, moving closer to the gunwales. The dwarves on his barge were not too drunk to take cover, and most had shields and carbines up. “Is it us?”

Murgan crouched down beside him. The gunwales offered him little protection, but his massive shield filled that role nicely. “No, sir, that wasn’t a report from one of our carbines. Bigger caliber, longer barrel.”

“Sniper.” Vornek peeked up over the rim of his own shield. On the shore, the Cygnarans were pulling back from the water, Captain Adkins and a few of his men providing a screen so the rest could get to safety. A bullet sparked off the Cygnaran officer’s helmet, knocking him down. Vornek initially thought him dead, but he rose to his feet, blood streaming down his face, shouting for his men to pull back to the trees.

“A brave man, that one,” Murgan rumbled. “Maybe we should—”

“I know what you’re thinking, but they’re not shooting at *us*, and until they do, this is none of our affair,” Vornek said. “Remember, they’re the bloody reason we haven’t delivered our cargo.”

The three Cygnaran gunboats swarmed with activity. The men crewing them carried rifles and bayonets—the Cygnaran regulars called trenchers—and they took up firing positions on both sides of their vessels. Each boat also featured a light cannon on its foredeck, but these weren’t manned. As of now, there was nothing to shoot at.

“I want shields and shooters along the gunwales, boys,” Vornek shouted. “No one does a damn thing until I give the order.”

Despite their inebriation, his dwarves knew their business. Soon the barges bristled with carbine rifles behind a screen of Rhulic steel.

It was silent for a moment, and then a rapid burst of gunfire sounded from the tree line above the shore, where the Cygnaran

knights were attempting to take cover. Vornek caught the flash of red armor in the trees and grimaced.

Khador had come to collect their shipment.

Bullets rained down on the knights, dropping two more. They returned fire blindly with bursts of galvanic energy from their glaives. One of the bolts found its mark, and a Khadoran assault kommando rolled down the slope toward the river.

The trenchers on the gunboats fired now, peppering the trees, aiming high to avoid hitting the knights.

The Cygnarans focused their attention on the west side of the river, where the attack seemed to be originating. Vornek had a sick feeling in his guts, and he turned to watch the eastern bank.

The first cannon shot blasted through the din of small arms fire. It hit the Cygnaran gunboat closest to the eastern shore, above the waterline, and detonated, cracking the vessel in half. Cygnaran soldiers, some of them engulfed in flame, jumped into the river as the boat went to the bottom.

The Khadoran gun carriage pulled abreast of the east bank to fire another broadside. More assault kommandos accompanied the Khadoran battlewagon, and they began to fire—not just at the Cygnarans this time.

Bullets hit dwarven shields and bounced away, but one of the assault kommandos, through skill or blind luck, placed his shot perfectly. The Gun Corps soldier, a newer member of Vornek's unit named Torem, pitched backward, a few feet from Vornek, his blood and brains leaking onto the deck.

"Blood and hell," Vornek muttered.

"Return fire, Captain?" Murgan said beside him, his voice slow and measured.

"Might have been an errant shot." A bullet careened off Vornek's own shield, making the lie even more ridiculous.

The gun carriage fired again, the shell streaking over the river and landing among the Cygnaran knights on the other side. Men went flying, charred and in pieces.

"Into the trees!" Captain Adkins shouted, and his knights charged, weathering another fusillade from the assault kommandos.

The crew of the remaining Cygnaran gunboat managed to turn their deck-mounted cannon on the gun carriage and fire. The shot hit true and rocked the vehicle back, but its armor was too thick. The return shot struck the Cygnaran gunboat high, smashing into its deck and obliterating its cannon along with the soldiers manning it.

“Captain,” Murgan said, more urgency in his voice, “it’s only a matter of time before they turn those cannons on us.”

“Why would they do that?” Vornek shouted. “They want their bloody cargo, don’t they?”

“They might know we’re planning on a parley with the Cygnarans,” Murgan said then ducked as a bullet whizzed over his head. “There’s a chance we might have to hand over that cargo to their enemies.”

Vornek spat bitterleaf juice on to the deck. “Bloody reds, bloody blues, all the gods-be-damned same.” He glanced around and saw some of his men looking at him, waiting for him to make a decision, to fight or to sit and wait. Many of them stared at the body of Torem, their eyes alight with something more than a drunken haze. They were angry.

“Blood and hell,” Vornek cursed again. “Murgan, get Valkar up here.”

The ogrun’s eyebrows went up and a thin smile crossed his lips. “Right away, sir.”

He crawled across the deck to a set of wide double doors set into the wooden planking. These led to the hold where Sergeant Valkar worked on the one bit of useful equipment the Searforge had seen fit to give them. Murgan threw open the doors, and half-crawled, half-fell down the steps into the dark, bullets flashing over his head.

“All right, boys!” Vornek yelled once Murgan was below decks. “Light those bloody reds up, double time.”

The two barges were so close together that the dwarves on the other one could hear his orders. He frowned and added, “Try not to hit anything blue.”

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CAPTAIN MARIUS ADKINS CHARGED UP THE RIVERBANK, keeping low, his storm glaive thrust out. A bullet pinged off its wide blade and stopped him midstride. The sniper bullet that had almost killed him moments ago had rattled him more than he thought. More of his men ran by toward the trees and the Khadoran troops there. They had to get in close range to deal with the assault kommandos. Their glaives and heavier armor would make short work of the lighter enemy troops, but the kommandos had cover and numbers on their side.

Adkins pushed forward, running, catching up with one of his sergeants, Terra Dade.

“Get them in a line, sergeant,” Adkins shouted to her. “Assault formation.”

“Yes, sir,” she said and waved her glaive in the air. “Rally. Assault formation!”

Storm Knights closed ranks beside them, forming a ragged line. They were a few yards from the trees, and Adkins could see the Khadoran troops crouched there behind light cover, firing at will.

“Aim for the trees,” Adkins commanded. “Fire!”

Twenty-five bolts of superheated galvanic energy lanced out. There had been no rain in recent months; the woods and underbrush in the area were little more than kindling. A dozen trees caught fire and went up with a whoosh, sending tendrils of flames into the sky.

The gunfire ahead slowed, but now a new volley from behind rang out. Adkins turned to see the Rhulfolk on the barges lined up against the gunwales, bracing their double-barreled carbines over a wall of locked shields. The short, sharp reports of the Rhulic weapons initially filled him with terror, but then he realized they weren't shooting at him or his knights.

An assault kommando broke cover and ran from the trees ahead. Rhulic gunfire cut him down.

“Well, that'll help,” Sergeant Dade said. “Guess they aren't completely without honor.”

Adkins agreed, but the gun carriage on the other side of the river still posed a significant problem. “Get up there and engage those kommandos. Use the smoke as cover.”

The burning trees were blanketing the area in a thick cloud of ash. Adkins made a dismissive gesture. “Don’t give that damn gun carriage any more targets.”

Sergeant Dade saluted and charged off, shouting orders for the other Storm Knights to follow.

The dwarves were pelting the gun carriage with rifle fire, but it was like a swarm of flies trying to chew through a bank vault. Thick armor encased even the horses pulling the vehicle. Adkins doubted a blast from his storm glaive would do more than scorch the plating.

The assault kommandos beside the gun carriage took the brunt of the dwarven assault; they scattered to find cover behind the Khadoran vehicle. Its cannon went off again, missing a Cygnaran gunboat by a few feet and detonating in a geyser of water.

Adkins noted the Khadorans weren’t targeting the dwarven barges with their cannon, but the assault kommandos fired at the Rhulfolk on their decks. The enemy wanted what was in those holds, and he could use that to his advantage.

Adkins ran forward to the edge of the water, waving his storm glaive in the air, trying to get the dwarves’ attention. Bullets plowed into the mud at his feet or whizzed over his head, but he persisted.

Finally, the ogrun lieutenant Murgan spied his antics, pointed to him, and spoke to his captain.

Through pantomime, Adkins tried to relay what it was he wanted, and he shouted, “Move the barges in front of the gunboats!”

Again, the ogrun watched him and finally nodded and pointed his war glaive.

He understood.

The anchor on the nearest barge rose from the water and it drifted forward, bullets pinging from its hull and from the shields of its dwarven crew. The gun carriage got off one more shot that

missed before the barge blocked its line of sight to the nearest gunboat.

Adkins sighed with relief. That would buy them time, though they currently had no way of dealing with the gun carriage or its cannons. Or so he thought.

A plume of black smoke rose from the deck of one of the Rhulic barges, and Adkins thought it had caught fire. Then, to his delight, the towering yet somehow squat form of a Rhulic heavy warjack rose up from the barge's hold. He'd seen the model in action before—its heavy shield and gargantuan cannon marked it as an Avalancher.

“Oh, Morrow, yes,” Adkins breathed.

The tiny form of a Rhulic 'jack marshal was visible behind the Avalancher, yelling orders, but Adkins caught only one word.

“Fire!”

The Avalancher's cannon disgorged smoke and flame, and the heavy shell screamed through the air like a vengeful banshee. It smashed into the gun carriage and exploded, the blast flinging the corpses of assault kommandos in all directions. The warjack fired again, and this time its shell penetrated the gun carriage's armor and burst inside the vehicle. A heartbeat later, it exploded with a deafening rush of noise and heat, leaving nothing more than a burnt crater.

Adkins grinned and raised his fist into the air. Then he turned and ran back up the slope to aid his Storm Knights. They had closed ranks with the Khadorans and were making quick and bloody work of them. He hoped Sergeant Dade had saved a few for him.

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“THANK YOU FOR YOUR ASSISTANCE, CAPTAIN,” the Cygnaran Storm Knight Captain Adkins said.

Vornek sighed and spat. “Well, they were shooting at us, too—” Murgan cleared his throat, and Vornek sighed. “Yes. All right. You're welcome.”

They stood on the beach, where the Cygnarans were seeing to

their dead and wounded. They'd lost at least ten of their knights and a dozen of the trenchers on the gunboats. Khadoran losses were greater, and the Cygnarans had taken prisoners as well. For a half a moment, Vornek felt guilty he'd only lost three men, but they were dwarves he'd served with for ten years, more family than subordinates.

"We've got medical supplies on the barges," he offered.

"We'd take them and gladly," Adkins said. He *did* seem grateful, and as much as Vornek hated to admit it, he was starting to like the human.

"You displayed excellent tactical thinking, Captain, with our barges," Murgan said. "You saved a lot of your men there."

"And almost got my fool head blown off for my effort," Adkins replied and chuckled.

Vornek snorted. "I'd call you a fool if I hadn't done the same bloody thing myself more times than I can count."

"Why did they attack you?" Adkins asked.

"The reds can be a treacherous lot. Murgan here figures they feared we'd cut a better deal with your king and hand over the cargo in our hold, so better you *and* us dead than risk that."

Adkins pulled off his helmet and winced. The bullet had plowed a furrow through his scalp, removing skin and hair in a jagged line. He'd bear that scar for the rest of his life. "Well, would you?"

Vornek laughed and shook his head. "I'm little more than a grunt and a courier, and I'm supposed to wait for my betters to show up."

"I saw you leading your men out there." Adkins walked to the edge of the river. He filled his helmet with water and dumped it over his head, sluicing some of the blood away. "You're not a grunt; you're a capable battle commander."

"That sweet talk won't get you far with me, Captain Adkins," Vornek replied, but he couldn't deny the swell of pride he felt at the man's words. It had been a long time since anyone worthy had praised his skills in battle. "But I might put in a good word for you."

FROM THE BRIDGE, STRYKER WATCHED the Railless Interceptors hammer the immobile Victor with cannon blasts. Huge goutts of alchemical fire burst against the colossal's hull, burning and cratering its armor.

Ol' Rowdy loosed a blast of steam and swished his hammer back and forth. The Ironclad was eager to give his new Crucible Guard allies a hand in taking down the enemy colossal. Harcourt, somewhere behind the lines of Cygnaran and Crucible Guard soldiers, held him in check.

The Interceptors' cannons weren't strong enough to crack the Victor's defenses most of the time, but with its right leg immobile thanks to Magnus' work, they could aim their shots at more vital areas.

"Are you injured?" Stryker said to Magnus. The warcaster leaned against the back of one of the Interceptors holding his side. He'd taken on a colossal one-on-one and survived, but then again, Magnus had a habit of surviving.

"I'll be fine, Lord General," he said. "How are we doing?"

"Better," Stryker said, "but there are still more Khadorans than we could handle out there."

They held the bridge, and that would keep Strakhov from getting his warjacks and heavy machines into the city. Reports of Ashlynn and the strange Crucible Guard rocketmen fighting off an invasion of light infantry with makeshift bridges elsewhere in the city were trickling in.

Stryker opened his mouth to say more, but another volley from the Railless Interceptors drowned him out. He watched with grim satisfaction as the Victor's head disappeared in a cloud of alchemical smoke. Another blast tore open its chest, smashing its cortex to junk. The huge machine tottered and fell over with a crash. A ragged cheer rose up from the Cygnaran and Crucible Guard soldiers on the bridge.

"What are your orders, sir?" Magnus said, pushing himself away from the Interceptor that had been holding him upright. He looked older these days, more worn and weary. Stryker wondered how long he could keep fighting. Even in his late thirties, Stryker felt the years wearing on him on a daily basis, and Magnus was near sixty, his body scarred and ravaged by war and time. He pushed the thought away. Somehow the idea of his old mentor and former enemy unable to fight made him intensely uncomfortable.

"I need to speak to someone in charge of this . . ." Stryker waved his arm around at the Crucible Guard men and machines that had joined his own on the bridge, ". . . force."

"I can arrange that." Magnus rapped the hull of the nearest Railless Interceptor with one gauntlet.

The hatch at the top of the machine popped open, and a woman's head appeared. She wore a pair of goggles with yellow lenses, and dark soot smudged her face. When she climbed out of her machine, Stryker saw she wore light armor that consisted of a breastplate and a reinforced leather skirt. The tingle in the back of his brain told him she was more than just the driver of this Interceptor. She climbed down and pushed her goggles up onto her forehead.

“You must be Lord General Coleman Stryker,” she said and stuck out her hand. “Captain Eira Mackay of the Crucible Guard.”

Stryker shook. “Morrow above, we are glad for your assistance, Captain.”

“I’m glad to give it.” She smiled. “Warcaster to warcaster, it was a treat to see you and Major Magnus in action. You *do* live up to the stories.”

Stryker’s intuition was correct: she was a warcaster. That meant the Crucible Guard warjacks within the ranks of soldiers weren’t ’jack marshaled.

“Thank you, Captain,” he said, a bit embarrassed by the praise. “We’ve given the reds something to think about, but Strakhov isn’t about to quit.”

Magnus joined in. “No, he’s got more men and more artillery than we do. Now that we’ve denied him the bridge, he’ll use the latter and then rush us with former.”

Captain Mackay wiped at the soot on her face and nodded. “Well, we can use my Interceptors to bolster your own artillery batteries, and we can move them around to wherever they’re needed. They’ll keep Strakhov from getting his soldiers and his own batteries too close.”

“Excellent. That helps,” Stryker said. “Any thoughts on dealing with Strakhov’s artillery?”

Captain Mackay considered. “Well, Captain Elsa Swift and her rocketmen are giving the Khadorans all they can handle to the north. If we can free her up, she can use her troops to hit Strakhov’s artillery from the air.”

“I’d say you’ve got all the answers, Captain,” Stryker said. The Crucible Guard warcaster reminded him a bit of Major Maddox, who could also sum up a tactical situation in a matter of seconds. “Major Magnus, hold the bridge with Captain Mackay. I’m going to find Major Maddox and see if we can’t free up some of those rocketmen.”

“We’ll do that, sir,” Magnus said. “Captain Mackay, you and yours ready for another scrap?”

She snorted. “Thought no one would ever ask.”

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WITH A GRUNT, ASHLYNN RIPPED HER SWORD from the chest of another assault kommando. She'd driven Nemesis through the man's shield, pinning it to his body, making the blade more difficult to extract.

They'd come to a lull in the battle, and Ashlynn surveyed the field. They'd kept most of the assault kommandos and their bridges from gaining access to the city, fighting along the docks and piers of Riversmet. Captain Elsa Swift and her fleet of flying soldiers had done most of the heavy lifting there. Their gravity bombs had destroyed the bridges before too many enemy troops could cross.

The harsh scream of rocketman jets sounded as Swift landed on the dock nearby. Behind her, a score of other rocketmen came to ground, many bearing injuries from assault kommando carbine fire.

"They're pulling back," Swift said, jogging up to join Ashlynn. She grimaced. "Morrow, you've been busy."

Ashlynn looked down at her blood-splattered breastplate. Gore matted her hair and had worked its way into every crevice and joint of her armor and body. But it didn't bother her anymore—it was the price of battle. "Turns out, men bleed when you cut them to pieces with a sword, Captain."

Swift swallowed. The captain was no coward, but she did her killing from the air, from a distance. "As I said, they're pulling back."

Ashlynn looked about. They stood on one of the larger docks in the city, industrial buildings and warehouses behind them. It was a large enough area that most of her troops could gather here. She'd had no choice but to spread them out, fighting each Khadoran attempt to bridge the river as it happened. She reached out to Soldier, taking a look through the Mule's eyes. She'd left the warjack behind the last time Captain Swift had carried her aloft. Now she saw and felt that the Mule was standing idly, ignoring the commands of a nearby 'jack marshal, the pulped bodies of Khadoran soldiers at its feet. She smirked and summoned Soldier to her side.

“Agreed. They’re pulling back, but I don’t understand why,” Ashlynn said. “We’ve been racing around trying to stop them, and they’ve got more men and resources.”

Swift checked the magazines on her twin carbines and shrugged. “Captain Mackay and her Railless Interceptors have likely given the reds something to think about at the great bridge. Last time I went up, I saw them take down a colossal.”

Ashlynn’s eyebrows rose. If the Crucible Guard had downed an enemy colossal, that was good news. “I suggest we head back to the center of the city and rejoin my troops there. I’ll leave some soldiers here in case the Khadorans get frisky again. Can you leave a few of your rocketmen as well? They can get to us quicker if we need to reinforce this area.”

“Of course,” Swift said and turned to give orders.

The thudding gait of Soldier coming up the dock was a welcoming sound. The tall straight form of the gun mage Vayne di Brascio beside the big Mule also pleased Ashlynn. He was good in a fight and a capable leader.

“I see the Khadorans have paid the butcher’s bill here,” di Brascio said. “It is the same at the other places they did their best to cross.”

Ashlynn nodded. “Excellent. We’re going to relocate to the city center, meet up with Captain Keller, and reassess how Lord General Stryker and Major Magnus fared. I’m told they also received aid from the Crucible Guard.”

“Flying soldiers,” di Brascio said and shook his head. “I never thought to see such a thing.”

Ashlynn was less awestruck by the Crucible Guard’s technology, but who could deny their usefulness? “Flying, walking, or crawling, we can use all the help we can get.”

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MUCH MORE THAN THE IRREGULAR TROOPS and Captain Keller’s Steelheads she’d left behind awaited Ashlynn in the city square. Stryker, Major Maddox, Captain Archer, and a large number of Stormblades and Storm Lances packed the area. They all bore signs of recent hard fighting.

“Marshal d’Elyse,” Stryker said and moved through the ranks of soldiers toward her. He looked uninjured despite the scars and dents on his armor—tall and dignified, noble even. “We were coming to you, but it seems that isn’t necessary. How do we fare on the docks?”

“We’ve neutralized the current threat,” Ashlynn said, “due in no small part to Captain Elsa Swift.”

She indicated the rocketman captain beside her.

“Lord General,” Swift said, “it is a pleasure to meet you.”

“So, it was *you* I saw streaking over the city, then,” Stryker said. “Impressive.”

Ashlynn was confused by Stryker’s presence. “Why aren’t you at the bridge?”

Stryker cleared his throat. “We’ve secured the bridge for the moment. More Crucible Guard troops hold it, as do their Railless Interceptors. The Khadorans have retreated from the city walls.”

“We saw a similar withdrawal,” Ashlynn said. “What do you think happens now, then?”

“He’s going to hit us with artillery soon, and I want to make that as difficult as possible.” Stryker turned to Captain Swift. “I think you can help us there.”

“Hit the batteries from the air,” she said, nodding. “We can do that, but we’ll need ground support.”

“You’ll have it,” Stryker said.

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STRYKER LED A COLUMN OF STORMBLADES across the Great Bridge, a Defender heavy warjack at his side. He’d begun the battle with two, but one of them had been badly damaged. Behind him came four Railless Interceptors and hundreds of Crucible Guard heavy infantry. Captain Archer rode ahead of him, leading a line of Storm Lances.

It was a small force but a potent one, its members handpicked, its leaders the best he could throw at the massive army ahead. Strakhov had brought his artillery placements up from the rear. Magnus had destroyed some of them, but the Khadoran

commander had enough field guns and mortars remaining to inflict serious damage.

Stryker would do his best to stymie that intent.

They reached the edge of the Great Bridge, passing Major Magnus and the line of Railless Interceptor blockading the entrance. His old mentor tipped him a salute. “Don’t get yourself killed now, Lord General.”

“I don’t plan on fighting any colossals today, Major,” Stryker said and suppressed a grin. He and Magnus had reached a new place in their relationship. No longer enemies but not quite friends. There were too many betrayals and old wounds between them for some changes. But they’d grown comfortable with one another, and, Stryker admitted, he was thankful to have Magnus’ skill and leadership.

Archer’s Storm Lances broke into a gallop ahead of him—the tip of the spear. Overhead, Captain Swift and her rocketmen screamed through the sky. Stryker took a deep breath, ordered his warjacks to charge, and went to war.

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CAPTAIN ELSA SWIFT HAD NEVER SEEN so many soldiers in one place. A sea of red stretched out below her, armored men and machines massed together like some great amoeba. She was no stranger to combat, but the Crucible Guard had never taken part in a battle of this magnitude. She knew it would likely be the first of many.

The wind screamed over her ears, drowning out the howl of her jetpacks. Wings of rocketmen cut through the sky all around her. Their first target was an array of mortars near the front of the Khadoran line. They flared to life as she drew near, sending their lethal payload toward the walls of Riversmet. She pulled a gravity bomb from her belt and gave the hand signal for the rest of her rocketmen to do the same.

She passed Lord General Stryker hundreds of feet below and saw the flashes of galvanic energy as the Cygnaran leader engaged the enemy.

Bullets fired from the ground now whistled through the air, and Swift summoned her courage so she could give the signal to dive.

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THE FIRST WAVE OF GRAVITY BOMBS STRUCK, and Stryker marveled at the accuracy of the rocketmen releasing them. The bombs landed all around Khadoran mortars and detonated, setting off the enemy's own munitions in a bright plume of fire and smoke.

The flying troops had to dip low to deliver their bombs, and that brought them into range of Khadoran rifles. The enemy hit two of the Crucible Guard soldiers. The first simply fell a hundred feet to his death; the other was less fortunate. The enemy bullet punctured or damaged the fuel source for his rockets, and he disappeared in a fireball of scarlet flame.

Yet Stryker had no time to worry about such things. Archer had hit the Khadoran line near the next artillery battery, punching through. Stryker followed after, blasting the hole wider with a shot from his Defender's heavy barrels.

He released a generator blast into the Khadorans, mostly Man-O-War and assault kommandos. It appeared Strakhov commanded few Winter Guard. They were most likely amassing in Merywyn to repel Cygnar's eventual siege on the capital city.

Stryker rushed forward into close combat, swinging Quicksilver in time with the massive hammer of his warjack. He cleaved armor and flesh, sending men and women to Urcaen with each slash of his blade. The Storm Knights to his rear reaped their own harvest of death, but the enemy would soon surround them. The huge black barrels of field guns jutted over the swarming bodies of the Khadorans. The enemy could do little about the Crucible Guard rocketmen, so they focused on Stryker instead.

Time slowed, and Stryker's world dissolved into the heady miasma of blood, pain, and steel.

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MAGNUS STOOD ON THE FORWARD BATTLEMENT, above the Great Gate, with Major Hughs. The grizzled trencher artilleryist had deployed what gun batteries they had on the intact portions of the wall. These had had little effect on the Khadorans, but now they'd added Captain Eira Mackay's Railless Interceptors to the mix. Hughs helped her position them for maximum coverage.

"I don't know how you can call them artillery," Hughs grumbled. "Not even a proper shell to load in the bloody things."

Magnus watched as the three Interceptors on the bridge and four more to the right and left of it launched alchemical blasts into the Khadoran soldiers swarming Stryker. Their aim was impressive, and they scoured enemy troops from the field without a single friendly casualty that Magnus could see.

"Seem to me to be doing fine, Major," Magnus said.

Hughs shrugged. "Aye, maybe, but I'd rather put my trust in blasting powder and shrapnel than those alchemical contraptions."

He squinted, then grabbed a nearby trencher, one of his artillery assistants. "Tell Captain Mackay to move the two western Interceptors up by thirty feet. They're falling a bit short."

The trencher ran off to deliver the message.

Hughs eyed Magnus with a strange look. "Why are you up here with me instead of out there in the thick of things?"

"I'm following orders, Major. Just like you." Magnus resented the question at all because he wondered if Stryker had, in fact, seen his condition and decided to keep him back because of it. While Stryker hadn't said as much, the look in his eyes when he'd pulled Magnus from the field practically said it all. Magnus wanted to believe it was because of the lingering animosity between them, but he couldn't lie to himself. He didn't feel it anymore. Stryker might be letting him rest and recover. He grudgingly admitted he'd be grateful if it were the latter.

Stryker was the one in the thick of things now, fighting toward the next artillery emplacement. Strakhov had surrounded it with Man-O-War shocktroopers. Their shields and armored bodies

would deflect the bombs of the Crucible Guard rocketmen circling above.

“How many more emplacements does Strakhov have?” Magnus asked Hughs.

The old trencher shook his head. “Too damn many. We’re delaying the inevitable. He’s got enough men to soak up whatever damage we do to him and then hit us with enough big guns to wreck most of the city.”

“Remember, delays mean more lives saved, Major,” Magnus said, irritated at Hugh’s cantankerous disregard for the men fighting at dying out there. “Isn’t that the point?”

Hughs laughed out loud. “Imagine that—bloody Asheth Magnus giving me lessons on morality and saving lives.”

He spat. “You may have pulled the wool over the Lord General’s eyes with your heroics on the battlefield—you’ve always been good at killing—but in my book, you’re the same bloody traitor you’ve always been.”

Magnus gritted his teeth. Not all the Cygnaran leaders appreciated his presence, but to hear it so bluntly shook and surprised him.

He opened his mouth to retort, but Hughs walked away, yelling orders at another trencher.

Magnus gripped the battlements and watched the clash below, trying to tell himself Hughs was a bitter old fool. He managed that, but he couldn’t tell himself Hughs was entirely wrong.

“KOMMANDER,” SHEPTA SAID. The black-armored assault kommando had returned from leading the attack on the rivers spanning the city. “We have suffered casualties to the south of the city, and our efforts to bridge the river have failed.”

Assault Kommander Oleg Strakhov could barely hear his aide-de-camp over the din of battle. He’d positioned himself and his personal guard near one of the artillery emplacements—a cluster of six field guns protected by a detachment of Man-O-War shocktroopers. He’d moved the heavy troops here after he’d lost a dozen mortars to the falling bombs of the Crucible Guard rocketmen. The Man-O-War would soak up the blast from further attacks and protect his guns.

He snarled silently at the thought of the Crucible Guard surprising him. He was a man whose stock and trade was information. Lukas di Morray had escaped him, true, but he never thought the man would convince his order to aid the Cygnarans. Still, the Cygnarans had only bought themselves a

little time, nothing more. Strakhov had more men, more guns, more warjacks, and he would not fail Irusk again.

“Pull all the remaining assault kommandos here,” Strakhov said. “We will grind the Cygnarans down.”

Shepta eyed the walls of Riversmet. “We will take many casualties if we continue a frontal assault,” she said.

“Yes, we may, but it will oblige Stryker to come to us and to bring what resources he has out onto the field of battle. If he does not, then I will blow him out of his hole with artillery.”

“As you say, Kommander,” Shepta said then flinched as a blast of alchemical fire landed only twenty yards away, consuming a dozen Man-O-War in green fire. “Sir, you are too close to the front lines. We should pull back.”

Strakhov regarded Shepta with a glare. She was right. He *was* too close to the front. Too close to the alchemical artillery falling from the skies, too close to Lord General Stryker, who was cutting through the Man-O-War protecting the nearest artillery emplacement. He was too close, but that was exactly where Strakhov wanted to be.

Strakhov’s warjack, Torch, felt its master’s displeasure, and the ripsaw on its right arm screamed to life. That more than anything gave Shepta his thoughts on *pulling back*.

“Bring Nev to me,” Strakhov said, naming the other elite kommando, who, along with Shepta, had been his twin shadows since Rynyr. He turned to a Man-O-War kovnik named Vadim. “I want fifty of your best with me right now.”

“Of course, Kommander,” the kovnik said.

“What will you do?” Shepta asked, concern in her voice.

Strakhov drew in a deep breath, fighting the wincing pain it elicited. He still carried injuries from Rynyr. Injuries inflicted by Coleman Stryker. He hadn’t thought the lord general would leave the city so soon, and now that he had, Strakhov would show him his folly.

He drew one of his trench blades and pointed to the spike of blue in his own sea of red. “I wish to speak with Lord General Stryker.”

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STRAKHOV HAD FORGOTTEN THE THRILL of open battle, the pressing chaos from all sides, and it invigorated him. His duties kept his combat role limited to skirmishes and smaller actions where he had the distinct advantage of surprise and stealth. Now, facing an enemy that could see him coming, he reveled in the terror-stricken faces of the Cygnaran soldiers he cut down with blade and carbine.

He, Shepta, and Nev, along with an armored spear of Man-O-War, had cut deep into the side of the Cygnaran offensive. Strakhov moved beneath Torch's shadow, using the warjack's bulk and flamethrower to keep enemies from swarming him.

He needed Stryker to see him, to notice that he might be vulnerable. It would draw the Cygnaran general to him. Strakhov summoned his magic, the bright runes spinning around his body in an unmistakable display. The Quicken spell filled his limbs with shuddering energy.

Ahead, a pair of Stormblades broke through the Man-O-War in front of Strakhov and charged. Nev raised his carbine to shoot them down, but Strakhov slapped it away, and rushed the two knights alone.

His weapons were smaller and shorter but far quicker than the heavy storm glaives of his opponents. He caught the downward stroke of the first glaive on one trench knife, and it slid harmlessly off his smaller blade. He then drove his second into the Stormblade's skull, piercing steel and bone with satisfying ease.

The second Stormblade landed a glancing strike that failed to penetrate Strakhov's power field. He ripped his blade free from the first knight's head and lashed out with a brutal kick that shattered the second Stormblade's knee, dumping him to the ground.

Strakhov took a step back, sheathed his blades, and drew his Death Whisper carbine. He shot the downed knight in the throat and then summoned Torch to his side.

Stryker had seen him, and the ribbon of Cygnaran knights and horsemen shifted in Strakhov's direction. They'd decimated

the Man-O-War guarding the gun emplacement, and the screaming jets of the Crucible Guard rocketmen roared over the battlefield. Strakhov would lose those guns, but he might gain a much larger prize.

“There. Push forward,” he shouted, running to the head of the line of Man-O-War that had been shielding him. Torch lumbered alongside him; Nev and Shepta were close behind.

The rocketmen dropped their bombs, consuming the field guns in fire and shrapnel, but Stryker was close. The warcaster was no more than fifty yards away, fighting his way through Khadoran soldiers to reach Strakhov.

They hit the main concentration of Cygnaran Storm Knights, and Strakhov ordered Torch to wade in. The warjack’s rip saw carved a bloody path through the enemy ranks, and Strakhov followed, letting his Man-O-War keep the rift open with shields and annihilator axes.

Strakhov lost sight of Stryker in the press that followed, but the Defender warjack towering over the battlefield marked the lord general’s position. Torch pulled at the edge of Strakhov’s control, wanting to rush the enemy warjack and tear into it.

Cygnaran soldiers closed in, and it became too tight for firearms. Strakhov, Shepta, and Nev drew their trench knives, and Strakhov bolstered their defenses with another spell. The magic hardened their armor and made them impossible to move against their will.

The three of them fell on the troops closing in, darting in and between Man-O-War, using the heavy infantrymen’s bulky bodies and shields to avoid enemy blades.

Strakhov killed two Storm Knights in seconds, ripping his trench knives into throats and bellies, the enchanted blades tearing through armor and flesh without resistance. Shepta and Nev left bodies in their wakes as well. They were nearly as gifted as Strakhov in close combat, and no mere Stormblade stood a chance against their knives.

They inched forward toward the Defender, and they took such a toll on the enemy that Strakhov feared Stryker would retreat. Then, as if battling through a deep forest onto flat land, they burst

through the Cygnaran lines, and there Stryker stood, not more than a dozen paces away. The warcaster's greatsword hissed as galvanic energy boiled away the blood coating it.

Strakhov smiled, the pain from his injuries—which had plagued him every day since Rynyr—evaporating. Stryker saw him as well and brought his blade down in low guard, knowing he had almost two feet of reach on his enemy.

The battlefield seemed to grow still, each side tense as two of its mightiest combatants faced off. Strakhov moved first, dancing forward in a low charge. He sent Torch after Stryker's Defender and, with a hand motion, sent Shepta and Nev to Stryker's right while he went left. The two elite kommandos would keep any Storm Knights from interfering.

Stryker let him come, obviously relying in his longer blade to be the deciding factor. In Rynyr, Strakhov would not commit to a duel with the Cygnaran warcaster. Now he ached for it, ached for the satisfaction of killing a man who had injured his pride, his flesh, and his standing with Irusk.

Stryker made a quick thrust with Quicksilver, and Strakhov jerked back then reversed direction, leaning forward to smash his right blade into the heavy sword, knocking it askew. He rolled under Stryker's guard, sprang to his feet, and slashed with his left trench knife.

Stryker jerked back, the blade sparking against his power field but missing his body. The lord general pulled his sword up and around into an overhand slash, a massive cut Strakhov had no chance of blocking. But he didn't attempt it. Instead, he sidestepped the blow and danced back out of range.

Torch had mauled Stryker's Defender, ripping into the enemy warjack's cannon arm, but he'd taken a heavy clout from the Defender's hammer as well. Through Torch's optic relays, Strakhov could see they'd destroyed a third of Stryker's men, but the Cygnarans had taken out two of Strakhov's artillery emplacements. Stryker would retreat soon; he'd have to. The lord general could be hotheaded and impetuous, but he wouldn't sacrifice his life needlessly. Strakhov needed to end it here.

He gathered himself to spring forward when he suddenly saw Nev rushing toward him, eyes huge, pointing at something over Strakhov's right shoulder. A terrible sound filled the air, like the shrill whine of incoming artillery, but this was lower, deeper, more buzzing.

Strakhov whirled around, heedless of exposing his back to Stryker, and saw what Nev was pointing at. On the horizon, a trio of gigantic shapes loomed, towering over his army like monoliths of steel and fire. They were square and blocky in shape, their arms ending in huge clamp-like claws. The colossals' heads were small, nestled into mammoth plates of teal-and-gold armor. Their shoulders bloomed with bright fire from multiple rocket pods. Those rockets were making the buzzing noise he'd heard. The first of them landed a hundred yards ahead of him and burst in a plume of liquid fire. The screams of anguish from the Khadoran soldiers there carried over the battlefield like a stab in his ears.

"Kommander, we must pull back!" Nev shouted. "There are more Crucible Guard troops attacking from the rear."

He sounded desperate, terrified, and Strakhov almost let that fear wash over him.

"Retreat," he cried, and that word shook him, cut him, scorched his soul with its finality.

Strakhov pulled Torch back, glancing through the warjack's eyes at the Great Bridge of Riversmet. Thousands of Cygnaran and Resistance troops streamed across it to join their new allies in the attack.

He let Nev and Shepta pull him into the ranks of his soldiers as soon as Torch was by his side again. More rockets exploded around them, liquefying soldiers with acidic fire. The Crucible Guard colossals now unleashed blazing gouts of fire and vitriol into his army, reducing swathes of men to smoking corpses.

Strakhov was numb with the weight of his failure, crushed by it, but he had a duty to the men and women who fought beside him.

The Crucible Guard had hit him in waves, lulling him into believing he had contained their initial attack. Now he would have little choice but to fight and risk annihilation or pull back to

Merywyn in the hope that his enemies would let his troops retreat to lick their own wounds. Both choices held little appeal, and both held their own consequences. If he fought on, he might lose his entire army. If he pulled back to Merywyn, he would have to admit failure to Irusk again.

He could not say which fate he feared more.

STRYKER LEANED ON QUICKSILVER, watching the Khadoran Army retreat from the plains in front of Riversmet. He was bone weary, and the adrenaline spike of combat left a yawning abyss of fatigue in its wake.

He'd given the order to let the Khadorans retreat as soon as it was clear that this was Strakhov's intent. Despite the fact that the Khadoran had risked his life to challenge Stryker to a duel, he'd come to his senses when the Crucible Guard colossals had appeared on the horizon. Stryker would have done the same in his position, no matter how much the thought of retreat tore at him.

The field ahead was strewn with bodies, both Cygnaran and Khadoran. Medics wearing Cygnaran, Llaeese, and Crucible Guard colors wandered through the chorus of plaintive cries of wounded men and women, providing aid where they could and carting the dead and injured away.

"Well, that went better than I expected," Captain Archer said as she reined up next to Stryker. The Storm Lance captain was as battered as he was but still fighting fit.

Stryker chuckled. "I'll say this. The Crucible Guard knows how to make an entrance."

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CLOSE UP, THE THREE CRUCIBLE GUARD COLOSSALS were marvels of mechanika and alchemical engineering. Stryker was surprised to see they didn't walk as other colossals did; instead, they were equipped with heavy armored wheels that carried them across the field at a clip that wouldn't stand out as slow among light warjacks.

Beneath their looming bulk stood ordered ranks of Crucible Guard, soldiers armed with strange long rifles and short cutting swords. There was heavy infantry, too, fitted with stout armor, hand-held cannons, and fearful pickaxes. They were impressive, but more impressive were the two men walking out ahead of them to meet Stryker.

He recognized the first man. Aurum Legate Lukas di Morray was an ally, a friend even. The other man was tall, distinguished, his warcaster armor impeccable, his massive mechanika axe big enough to make the Butcher envious. Experience shown in his lined face, and there was something brash, even rakish, about his expertly combed mustache. He wore a smile that said *this* was his natural environment.

"It is good to see you again, Aurum Legate," Stryker said as he strode forward to grasp the warcaster's hands.

Lukas grinned, and his face glowed with what Stryker hoped was real emotion and not the serum that provided him with his warcaster abilities. "I'm sorry we couldn't get here sooner, but it seems Captain Mackay and Captain Swift helped you weather the storm."

He turned to his companion. "Lord General Stryker, may I present Marshal General Baldwin Gearheart, commander of the Crucible Guard's armed forces."

Stryker offered his hand, and Gearheart shook it, his grip strong and sure. Stryker indicated the colossal. "Thank you, Marshal General. These machines of yours are quite impressive."

Gearheart laughed, his mirth almost childlike. "The Vulcans

are our finest achievement to date. I tell you, Lord General, it was a *joy* to see them in action.”

He glanced over at Lukas and winked. “Finally.”

“Well, Cygnar and I are in your debt, but we have much to discuss,” Stryker said. “Let me introduce you to the city you saved.”

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STRYKER STARED AT THE WEARY, STRAINED FACES around him; some he knew well, others he had just met. They had gathered at one of the inns in Riversmet, the same one where he’d executed the traitor and Khadoran agent Sebastian Harrow.

Two of the new faces were the dark-haired warcaster Captain Eira Mackay and the blonde athletic Captain Elsa Swift, who commanded the rocketmen. He’d seen the latter mostly skimming through the air above his head and raining explosives down on the enemy.

The two Crucible Guard commanders, Aurum Legate Lukas di Morray and General Marshal Baldwin Gearheart, took a table with the two Crucible Guard captains.

The rest of the group consisted of Major Magnus, Major Maddox, Marshal Ashlynn d’Elyse, and the Steelhead Captain Reese Keller. Stryker would have included Lieutenant Harcourt, but the journeyman warcaster had a broken arm and three cracked ribs. He’d recover, but Stryker would rather the young warcaster rest than attend this meeting.

Stryker addressed the group while standing in the middle of the taproom. “Marshal Gearheart, Aurum Legate di Morray, Captain Mackay, and Captain Swift. Let me begin by saying how grateful we are for your timely assistance.”

“I dare not lie, Lord General,” Marshal Gearheart said. “It felt good to get in the mix. The Guard has been quiet too long.”

“Things are likely to get loud again, Marshal. And soon,” Magnus said. He stood at the bar next to Ashlynn and Maddox. He paused to take a long pull from the tankard he held. He then grimaced and looked away. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to dampen

the mood. We prevailed against almost impossible odds today.”

“No, you’re right,” Ashlynn said. “Strakhov has withdrawn because we caught him off guard, and he lost more than he bargained for, but we still have a long road ahead.”

“Agreed,” Major Maddox said. She’d also poured herself a mug of ale from the keg Magnus had found. “He’s retreating to Merywyn, no doubt. That’ll make Lord General Duggan and the First Army’s job a damn sight more difficult.”

Stryker breathed a deep breath. “That’s only half of it. I’ve been keeping something from you, but only because we had an entire Khadoran Army at our doorstep. Now that we don’t, it’s time to discuss the contents of the Rhulic barges I stopped from delivering their cargo to Khador.”

Magnus, Ashlynn, and Maddox all perked up. They’d heard about the blockade but had likely forgotten about it.

“What are you talking about, Stryker?” Ashlynn said, some of the old distrust leaking into her voice.

“I’ll tell you everything, but there are those here who are not part of the Cygnaran military.” He glanced at the table of Crucible Guard leaders. “They are still valuable allies, and this information will affect them as well.”

“There are no loose lips at this table, I assure you,” Lukas di Morray said. “Please. Speak on.”

“You forget I was here, Lord General?” Captain Keller stood up from behind the bar, a flask of something in hand. He took a pull from the flask and grimaced. “Well, *that’s* gone off.”

Stryker shook his head. “I did not forget. Your contract has not ended with Marshal d’Elyse, correct?”

“True.”

“Then this is information you need as well,” Stryker said. “Plus, I’ve fought beside you, and you’re not the soulless mercenary you’d have us all believe you are.”

Keller scratched his head and grinned. “Well, we can’t have that getting out, now can we?”

“So, here it is,” Stryker said. “Cygnar has created technology that has allowed us to achieve flight.”

Captain Swift chuckled. “Not to undermine your secret information, but that’s not exactly revelatory. You’ve seen my rocketmen in action.”

“I have,” Stryker said. “But I’m not talking about flight with rockets or wings. I’m talking about something vastly different, a technology that will allow massive vehicles to take to the air like ships to the sea. Sky ships, if you will.”

The room grew silent.

“If that’s the case, why hasn’t Cygnar used this technology to help Llael?” Ashlynn said.

Magnus set his mug down and frowned. “I’m a bit curious about that myself.”

Stryker knew this was coming, knew it would strain the many fragile alliances he’d forged with the people in this room, but they had to know. “The simple truth is, the sky ships are not ready.”

“I want to believe you, Coleman,” Ashlynn said. “I want to believe Cygnar will use this weapon to defend Llael. Can you promise me that?”

“As much I can promise anything in this conflict,” Stryker said, “but what I’m trying to tell all of you is that Khador might already have this weapon. If they’re further along than we are in its development, it will endanger or even doom the upcoming siege on Merywyn.”

Stryker let that sink in, and it had the desired effect.

“How do you know this, Coleman?” Magnus asked, scowling. He was usually the one in the know, the one with the information no one else had. Stryker tried not to let himself gloat that he’d finally surprised his old mentor.

“We’ve known for some time that Khador might have some understanding of this technology,” Stryker said. “The engineer who created the initial concepts, uh, *defected* and made contact with Kommander Strakhov. He and his plans were recovered, but we don’t know what secrets he shared with the Khadorans before that.”

It felt shameful to admit this to a group of allies. It made Cygnar seem foolish at best and inept at worst.

“And this Rhulic cargo you mentioned,” Marshal Gearheart said. “What is its significance?”

“I examined it. It means Khador has unlocked the sky drive technology, developed it, and reached a point close to or surpassing our own progress.”

“I think I understand the situation, but what do you propose we do about it?” Lukas di Morray asked.

“I need to warn Caspia, and I need them to get our sky ships in the air. It’s the only thing that might keep Khador from possibly launching their own.”

“I thought you said they were not operational?” Ashlynn said.

“No, they fly, but they’re not ready for combat,” Stryker said. “The Khadorans don’t know that, though, and if we can get one of them hovering over Merywyn, it might dissuade them, give us time to hit Merywyn hard.”

“How can we get a message to Caspia?” Magnus said. “There isn’t a working telegraph in a five-hundred-mile radius.”

Stryker considered that. “Captain Swift, how far can your rocketmen travel before they need to refuel?”

She shook her head. “That won’t work. We’re short range. A few miles at best, and with nowhere to refuel, you’d be better off sending a rider.”

Marshal Gearheart leaned over and whispered something to Lukas di Morray. The Aurum Legate’s eyebrows went up, and he coughed, as if Gearheart had surprised him.

“Gentlemen, this is no time for whispered ideas,” Stryker said. “If you have a suggestion, please share it.”

Lukas di Morray cleared his throat. “The Crucible Guard has technology that would allow you to send a message to one of our enclaves in Caspia almost instantaneously.”

A wave of excitement and relief flooded over Stryker. “That is excellent news. Where is it?”

“Well, that is the problem, Lord General,” Marshal Gearheart said. He had that same excited look in his eyes Stryker had seen on the battlefield. “But it’s not an insurmountable one.”

“Will one of you get to the bloody point?” Magnus said.

Lukas di Morray sighed. “The technology is at Thunderhead Fortress, the former headquarters of the Crucible Guard in Leryn.”

Stryker now understood. Leryn was under the control of the Protectorate of Menoth Northern Crusade. “Then we can’t access it. I’m not about to draw the Protectorate into this conflict.”

“I have reports that the fortress is not well guarded and the Protectorate have little knowledge of what lies within,” Gearheart said. “A small determined force could take the fortress, gain access to the Aetheric Relay equipment, and send your message before the Menites knew what hit them.”

“I cannot commit Cygnaran troops to such an endeavor. The Protectorate will see it as an act of war,” Stryker said, frustrated at having a glorious solution at his fingertips yet still out of reach.

“I see more than just Cygnaran leaders here,” Ashlynn said. “I see Llaeese Resistance, I see Crucible Guard, and I see mercenaries.”

Gearheart beamed. “You do, indeed, Marshal d’Elyse.”

“How many men do you think it would take?” Ashlynn asked Gearheart.

“A small force of rocketmen supported by, well, someone such as yourself, Marshal, could breach the fortress, take those inside by surprise, and open the gates. Then, say, five hundred ground troops supported by Captain Mackay’s Interceptors could seize the fortress.”

“That’s not too bad,” Magnus added, brightening. “It would look like the Crucible Guard was taking back their own fortress supported by a bunch of Steelheads. No political entanglements for Cygnar.”

Stryker liked the idea as well. “It could work. Captain Keller, would you and your Steelheads be amenable to this?”

The Steelhead Captain shrugged. “Why not? The pay is the same, right?”

Something like hope kindled within Stryker. “Marshal d’Elyse, will you organize this attack?”

Ashlynn nodded. “I will work with Marshal Gearheart and Aurum Legate di Morray if they’ll have me.”

“Without question, Marshal,” Gearheart said.

“We have technology with us that can receive a message but not send,” Lukas di Morray added. “I will make that available to you.”

“Then we have a solution,” Stryker said, his enthusiasm tempered by Ashlynn’s understandable anger. “We’ll hold here and await word.”

ASHLYNN STARED THROUGH THE SPYGLASS at Thunderhead Fortress. The moon was full, so she could make out most of the south curtain wall and connecting towers, and, more important, the huge gate.

She took the glass away from her eye and turned to Captain Elsa Swift. The rocketman leader, along with fifty of her troops, hunkered down in a small forest about half a mile south of the fortress. The gun mage Vayne di Brascio leaned against a tree nearby, his cloak and hat obscuring his form almost completely.

“Okay, let’s go over this again,” Ashlynn said. “Give me the layout.”

Swift spread out a small hand-drawn map Marshal Gearheart and Lukas di Morray had provided.

“Main gate here,” she said and pointed to the crude map. “Beyond that, the courtyard. It’s good sized with lots of room to maneuver. There’s a workshop here next to the curtain wall that they’re probably using as a barracks.”

Ashlynn squatted down and pointed to a large cluster of

buildings nestled against the west wall. “And this?”

“Living quarters. A mess hall, kitchen, that kind of thing. Most of the fortress is underground. All the workshops and laboratories, anyway.”

“Do we have any idea of the number and type of troops waiting inside?” Vayne di Brascio asked.

“Some,” Swift replied. “We have reports the Protectorate has pulled out a good portion of the forces they had in Leryn, including the soldiers holding the keep. We estimate one company of Temple Flameguard supported by a platoon of Knights Exemplar.”

Ashlynn had experience fighting against and *with* the Protectorate of Menoth when their purposes against Khador aligned. She knew the Flameguard were spear-wielding infantry and the Knights Exemplar skilled swordsmen. “Not much in the way of ranged firepower then, right? That’ll help.”

Swift rolled up her map and put it away. “They’ll swarm us as soon as we land. That Exemplar armor is heavy, and our carbines might not be up to the task. We’ll need you and Captain di Brascio to hold off as many as you can while we work on the gate.”

Ashlynn wished for a warjack or two, but Soldier was waiting farther back in the forest with Captain Eira Mackay, Reece Keller, and five hundred Steelhead cavalry. When the gates opened, they’d come storming in and hopefully overwhelm the Protectorate. “We’ll take the knights. You keep the Flameguard from swamping us initially and then get that gate open.”

“Ad I’ll carry the Marshal,” Swift said as she turned to a burly male rocketman. “Moreland, you take Captain di Brascio.”

The gun mage raised his eyebrows. “It is a full half a mile. Can you truly carry us that far?”

Swift smiled at him in the dark. “We haven’t dropped anyone yet.”

Di Brascio seemed unimpressed. “This is good. I should not like to be the first, if you would.”

Swift chuckled as she twisted a dial on her belt. Her rockets flared to life. The crimson glow of fifty more jets lit up the forest, and it was time to fly.

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ASHLYNN BRACED FOR IMPACT as she and Captain Swift dropped out of the night sky. The courtyard rose up at her with awful speed, and she felt Swift frantically adjusting the dials on her belt to slow their descent.

The ground rushing up to meet them was the least of their problems. Temple Flameguard were pouring out of the cluster of buildings to the west of the courtyard. Their flame spears spilled an awful red light over the hard-packed ground and cobblestones.

Swift's rockets flared bright, slowing their descent enough that the impact went from bone breaking to merely teeth rattling. It was still hard enough to trigger Ashlynn's power field, and it bloomed around her as she drew sword and pistol against the oncoming tide of Protectorate soldiers.

All around her rocketmen landed, and the chatter of their carbines filled the courtyard. The spray of bullets slowed the Flameguard advance, and they locked shields against the onslaught.

The dull roar of Vayne di Brascio's magelock sounded nearby, and a Protectorate soldier went down with a smoking hole through his shield and helmet.

"Get to that gate," Ashlynn yelled at Swift, firing her hand cannon and dropping another Flameguard.

Swift ran toward the massive stone and steel gate, blasting away with both her carbines, cutting the legs out from a pair of Flameguard rushing to intercept her. "Rocketmen squads one and two, on the gates!"

Thirty of the Crucible Guard soldiers broke ranks to join their captain, leaving another twenty or so behind. Ashlynn moved in front of them; Vayne di Brascio moved to join her.

"Let's hold them, Captain," she said.

"This is what we do, yes. An honor to fight beside you again, Marshal d'Elyse," he said and ripped his mechanika saber from its scabbard.

The line of Flameguard advanced slowly, their flame spears leveled, shields locked. Behind them another threat loomed, the

ornate-armored forms of five Knights Exemplar. The Protectorate elites worked their way into the ranks of their lesser brethren, each holding a deadly rune blade.

Ashlynn summoned her magic and unleashed a twisting vortex of wind. It ripped through the Flameguard formation, killing half a dozen men and smashing apart the locked shield wall.

Now she charged, flipping her hand cannon over and gripping it like a club. A handful of Flameguard were isolated in front of their ranks, and she skewered one and brained another with the butt of her hand cannon.

Wayne di Brascio killed a Protectorate soldier with a short slash from his saber, then he and Ashlynn danced back toward the rocketmen. The Crucible Guard soldiers sprayed bullets to discourage the Protectorate soldiers from charging.

Ashlynn glanced over to the gate. It was unclear how the huge entrance opened or closed, but there was a gatehouse nearby. Captain Swift and her rocketmen fought to get there, unloading their carbines at a small unit of Flameguard protecting the building.

She couldn't focus on that. Two of the Knights Exemplar moved to engage her, pushing through the Flameguard as they tried to reform their shield wall. Another knight ran toward Captain di Brascio. Ashlynn knew the Knights Exemplar were terrifying swordsmen; their enchanted relic blades could easily match mechanika weapons.

The two knights came at her in a rush, one striking low, the other high. She parried the high strike and twisted to the side to allow her power field and armor to absorb most of the second blow. They did, but the impact still knocked the wind from her lungs and staggered her a step.

The knights came on relentlessly. Their skill and speed was awe-inspiring. This time, the first one attempted a rising cut, quick and powerful, timed almost perfectly with Ashlynn's own downward stroke. Their blades met, ringing together, and the knight attempted to turn his strike over into a riposte. But Ashlynn was faster. She rolled her wrist, turning a parry into a

lunge, and drove the point of Nemesis through the knight's visor and into his skull.

She parried the second knight's attack with the butt of her hand cannon and stumbled backward, off-balance. Wearying of the duel, she pushed her innate warcaster ability into her next attack. Nemesis flashed with speed and power, smashing through the Exemplar's defenses and cutting into and through his armor at the shoulder, abdomen, and neck. He went down in a spray of arterial blood.

Ashlynn took a quick breath and glanced at Captain di Brascio as he battled his own knight. He parried his foe's relic blade with his saber and then unloaded both barrels of his magelock into the Exemplar's belly, blasting him off his feet. It gave di Brascio the time he needed to reload—he slammed two more shells into his weapon.

Ashlynn snapped her attention back to her own peril. The Flameguard, enraged or emboldened by the death of their holy knights, charged forward in a thicket of burning spear points. Ashlynn knocked the first few away and then rolled backward, summoning her magic again. She could feel her reserves of arcane energy waning, but she had enough for at least one more spell.

The runes formed. Her body filled with an electric tide of strength and fury. She lunged at the line of enemies, cutting and thrusting, using the butt of her hand cannon to yank shields aside and cut down the warriors behind them. Her blade flashed in time with each heartbeat, each killing stroke.

Gunshots from the rocketmen carbines sounded, pouring bullets into the Flameguard line, but they closed in, regardless of the danger. She gasped as the point of a flame spear pierced her power field and scored her side. She killed the man wielding it with a backward thrust of her sword, and she thanked Morrow it was a minor wound.

Another sound rose above the courtyard, over the ring of steel and the crash of gunfire, a slow grinding noise that drew the attention of all who were locked in combat. The huge gates opened and behind them, the thundering hooves of charging Steelheads.

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CAPTAIN EIRA MACKAY SAT ATOP her Railless Interceptor staring through a spyglass. The rocketmen had landed inside the courtyard, and the sounds of battle rolled over the darkened plains between Thunderhead Fortress and the forest.

She'd moved her Interceptors up to the edge of the trees, waiting for Captain Swift and Marshal d'Elyse to throw open the gates. She wished for few more warjacks, but all Riversmet could spare was Ashlynn's Mule, Soldier, and a single Suppressor heavy warjack. Despite that, the five hundred Steelheads behind her should be enough to take the fortress.

"She's stuck in now," Captain Reese Keller said a few feet below where he sat mounted on his warhorse. Mackay took her eye from the spyglass and looked down at him. The Steelhead captain was not an ugly man, but he certainly seemed molded by a lifetime of violence and warfare. Every feature, from his close-cropped hair to the hint of stubble on his jaw, spoke of a hard life of constant movement and campaigning. Yet there was still a cheer to him, a lightness that Mackay had seldom encountered in a mercenary.

"Marshal d'Elyse?" Mackay asked. "Have you fought beside her long?"

"Long enough," Keller said. "I've worked for my share of nobles and aristocrats, but that one"—he chuckled—"she's not afraid to get her hands dirty. Good and dirty. Even a merc like me can appreciate that."

Mackay had never served with the Resistance leader, though every Llaelese man and woman knew of Ashlynn d'Elyse and the price her family had paid when Khador stormed Llael. "She's a great leader. It is an honor fight beside her, I say."

Keller looked up at her and grinned. "I don't know if it's an honor, but by Thamar's teeth, it is fun."

Mackay put her eye back to the spyglass. She was beginning to worry Captain Swift and her rocketmen might not get the gates open before the Protectorate forces inside swarmed them. Then the gates opened a crack, the light of a hundred flames spears

spilling through and onto the ground outside. The gates swung wider, and Mackay saw a sea of combatants inside the courtyard, most of them wearing Protectorate armor and colors. In the center of that morass of enemies was Ashlynn d'Elyse, her blade spinning and sparking against shields and blades.

“Good Morrow,” Mackay breathed. “The gates are open.”

Captain Keller’s voice, deep and clear, rose over the rumble of the Mackay’s Railless Interceptor. “Steelheads, time to get paid!”

...

INSIDER HER INTERCEPTOR, MACKAY had a limited view of the outside world. The narrow viewport allowed her to see only what was right in front of her. She’d learned that using her warjacks as her eyes allowed her to use her Interceptor’s weapons with more accuracy. She peered through the optic relays of the Suppressor warjack moving alongside her vehicle. It gave her a clear picture of the battle ahead.

The gates to Thunderhead Fortress were open, and her breath caught at seeing the former home of her order so close. It had been years since she walked its halls and helped develop new technology in its labs and workshops. It had been her home, but Khador—and now the Protectorate—had taken it from her.

Old anger kindled anew, and she pushed her Interceptor toward the gates, lobbing a blazing bolt of alchemical fire from her cannon. The blast sailed over the heads of the charging Steelheads and the walls of Thunderhead, detonating inside a tightly packed group of Temple Flameguard. The greenish flames of her artillery shot mingled for an instant with the blazing red of the Flameguard’s spears and then consumed them.

Mackay grinned. The Crucible Guard had come home.

...

ASHLYNN SHIELDED HER EYES against the blazing fury of alchemical fire and turned away from the shrieks of agony as that fire consumed its targets.

The blast from the lead Interceptor, likely Captain Mackay’s,

cleared the area around her, but at least a hundred Protectorate troops remained in the courtyard. She looked around for Vayne di Brascio, spotted him fighting a pair of Knights Exemplar, and sprinted forward to help him. As she neared the gun mage, she felt the presence of Soldier in her mind as the warjack came back into her control range.

There you are, she thought and looked through 'jack's eyes. She saw the open gates of Thunderhead and a gathering of rocketmen desperately battling a group of Flameguard. *Get in there.*

She waited until she felt Soldier's battle mace crush a Protectorate shield and the man behind it before leaving the 'jack to its work.

Ashlynn sprinted on to reach Captain di Brascio, who was struggling to match the flashing blades of the two Knights Exemplar. She'd reloaded her hand cannon and stopped for an instant to put a shot into the back of the first knight. He tumbled into his companion, throwing him off balance, and giving Captain di Brascio the opening he needed. The gun mage cut the Menite's head from his shoulders and then began reloading his magelock.

More Flameguard poured out of the buildings to the east, and Ashlynn began to wonder if the Crucible Guard's reports about an "undermanned" fortress were correct.

Then Captain Keller and his Steelheads hit the courtyard in a thundering wave of steel and horseflesh, and it didn't seem to matter. Their long axes reaped a terrible harvest against the Protectorate soldiers, cleaving shields and skulls with appalling ease.

For the first time in an hour of fighting, Ashlynn had no targets, no one she needed to kill. She watched the carnage unfold around her, and as the enemy bodies piled up, she realized they'd won.

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BODIES, MOSTLY PROTECTORATE SOLDIERS, littered the courtyard, and Eira Mackay was grateful their own casualties had been light. Eight rocketmen seemed a small price to retake the fortress where their order had begun.

She walked alongside her Suppressor warjack. Its pyrodraulic

jets had been instrumental in decisively ending the battle. She felt somewhat naked out of her Interceptor, like a snail out of its shell. The protection of that metal cocoon made battle and its aftermath more bearable. She approached Marshal d'Elyse who was conversing with Captain Keller.

"Shut the survivors in that workshop," Ashlynn said and pointed to a low stone building with a stout door. "We'll figure out what to do with them later."

"You want me to interrogate a few?" Keller said.

Mackay laughed. "You ever try and interrogate a zealot, Captain? You'll get more information out of a stone. Besides, I can tell you what needs to happen next."

"Please do," Marshal d'Elyse said. She pushed a ragged clump of gore-matted hair out of her eyes and then tied it back with a bit of string. "You think we have more fighting to do below?"

"Possibly, but I don't expect them to be guarding the Aetheric Relay equipment. They wouldn't know what it's for, and it, well, doesn't look like much."

Ashlynn drew her sword and pistol. "Get yourself a weapon. I'd like you to go with us below, Captain Mackay. Keller, hold things up here, and see if Captain Swift needs any assistance."

"Right away, Marshal," The Steelhead captain said and walked away. Mackay noticed less swagger in his tone when he addressed Marshal d'Elyse. She pulled aside a nearby rocketman.

"Give your carbine, private," she said, and the man handed his weapon over to her. She checked the magazine and pulled back the firing pin. "All right. I'm ready, Marshal."

...

CAPTAIN MACKAY HAD BEEN RIGHT, Ashlynn noted. They found the Aetheric Relay equipment inside an empty workroom on the first level down. Ashlynn had expected additional resistance, but it appeared the Protectorate had thrown everything they had at them in the courtyard.

The machine was not large; it fit on a single worktable, and it looked a bit like a common telegraph. It was obviously more than

that, though. Tubes filled with a yellowish liquid jutted from the top, and copper tubes protruded from its bulk and went up into the ceiling. There was a set of keys, like those on a typewriter, built into its front.

Captain Mackay went to the machine and clicked a few of the keys. A low hum filled the air, and Ashlynn detected the subtle scent of ozone.

“Give me the letter,” Mackay said. “I’ll send it to the Golden Crucible enclave in Caspia.”

Ashlynn handed over the handwritten letter Stryker had given her. Naturally, she’d read it. It was as he said it would be: a desperate plea for the crown to move up the timeline of the assault on Merywyn and a request that the first sky ship be launched, battle ready or not.

Mackay entered the words into the Aetheric Relay and hit one more key. There was a sound like the blast of a warjack steam engine, and then Mackay turned to her and said, “That’s it. Let’s just hope someone is listening.”

“I HAVE NEVR SEEN A RHUL WARRIOR,” Horgrum said and scratched at the stony growths on his chin. “Are they fierce warriors?”

Magnus stifled a laugh. The trollkin sniper was hell and blood with his huge Raevhan Express rifle, but to say he lacked social graces was an understatement. His spotter, Sergeant Sharp, usually corrected him, but the man was still recovering from wounds he received in Rynyr.

“Well, for one, they’re called Rhulfolk or dwarves. And yes, they can be formidable warriors, but we’re not going to fight them, just talk.”

Horgrum nodded. “I understand.”

He paused, and looked behind him at the trail of trenchers and Storm Knights. Additionally, a pair of Hunter warjacks following Magnus down the road along the river. “Maybe I do not understand. We have brought many soldiers.”

“Well, that’s in case the talking turns ugly,” Magnus said and clapped the trollkin on the shoulder.

They were nearing the site of what used to be a blockade and what was now the scene of a recent battle. Some of the trees near the shore were burning, and Magnus saw piles of Khadoran corpses and no few Cygnaran bodies. Two Rhulic barges and a pair of Cygnaran gunboats floated in the river, side by side, as if for mutual protection.

A trio of Stormblades came down the road toward them, and Magnus saw Captain Adkins was among them. The Storm Knight did not wear his helmet; a bandage swathed the top of his head. Streaks of blood had dried on his face.

“Major Magnus,” Adkins said.

Magnus raised his hand to call a halt to the hundred soldiers he’d brought with him. “Are you okay, Captain? Looks like you took a bump on the head.”

“Fine, sir. Khadoran sniper against good Cygnaran steel. The steel won out.”

Horgrum snorted. “You are lucky human snipers are such poor shots.”

“Thank you . . . private,” Adkins said, a quizzical look on his face. He shook his head. “Sorry, sir, but why did you bring so many troops with you?”

“The lord general means to get whatever it is these Rhulfolk are carrying. One way or the other.”

“Sir, I don’t think that will be necessary. Envoys from the Searforge are on the way, and the, uh, Gun Corps captain who fought with us—saved us, really—is a persuasive individual. He supports a contract with Cygnar.”

“Well, then this will be easy, won’t it?” Magnus said. “Now take me to this captain. Horgrum here wants to see a Rhul before his chin stones drop off.”

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ADKINS LED MAGNUS TO THE BEACH, where Rhulic and Cygnaran soldiers mingled. A single ogrun, huge and towering, stood out among the humans and dwarves.

“There, that’s Lieutenant Murgan,” Adkins said, pointing to

the ogrun. “He’s the aide-de-camp of the Rhulic captain I told you about.”

He paused. “And there he is. Captain Vornek.”

“These Rhulfolk are . . . very small,” Horgrum said.

“Don’t let that fool you,” Magnus replied. “They’re strong and nearly as tough as your people.”

Magnus turned to one of the trencher sergeants he’d brought with him. “Get the medics with us to work and watch the road.”

The sergeant saluted and started relaying Magnus’s orders.

Magnus then said, “Introduce me, Adkins. Horgrum, set up in the brush there. I want you and that rifle of yours keeping an eye out.”

Adkins escorted Magnus down to the river to where the dwarven captain sat on a crate, stuffing dried bitterleaf into his mouth. His armor and gear were that of a Gun Corps soldier, but both looked worse for wear. The ogrun standing next to him, grizzled and experienced by the look of him, had more polish, more poise.

“Captain Vornek Blackheel,” Adkins said, “this is Major Asheth Magnus. He has come to talk terms on behalf of Lord General Stryker and the Cygnaran crown.”

“So, you’re Asheth Magnus?” the dwarven captain said. “Heard of you.”

Magnus stared down at the Rhulic soldier and smiled. “Well, I’ve led an eventful life.”

The dwarf spat a stream of bitterleaf juice on the ground. “You’re older and scrawnier than I expected, even with that armor.”

The ogrun cleared his throat loudly and glared at Captain Vornek.

Magnus shook his head, trying not to let the captain get under his skin. “Captain Adkins tells me you saved his men.”

“That’s true,” Vornek said, “though he acquitted himself well. For a human. You got a lot of soldiers with you, Major Magnus.”

“Our apparently mutual enemies attacked us. The lord general thought it wise to bolster our ranks for mutual protection.”

Magnus knew the captain would recognize the lie, but would he call it out?

“So, you want our cargo?” Vornek asked.

“We want to help you fulfill your contract, Captain, now that Khador has violated its terms,” Magnus said. “For the honor and reputation of your illustrious company and also to maintain a favorable relationship with the Cygnaran crown.”

Magnus raised his eyebrows as he delivered the last part. This Captain Vornek Blackheel was no fool; he knew Rhul was playing a dangerous game by treating with both Khador and Cygnar. Magnus had enough troops here to simply take the cargo, but he didn’t want it to come to that, so he needed to give the Searforge Commission a way to give him the cargo and not lose face in the process.

Vornek chuckled and spat. “Honor and reputation, aye? Well, me and mine are a bit short on that, so I’m supposed to wait for envoys from the Searforge to make that decision.”

Magnus nodded. “They entrusted you with this cargo, so I assumed you would have the authority to treat with me.”

The dwarven captain’s face scrunched. Magnus had hit a nerve. “The reds tried to kill us, and my betters at the Searforge Commission didn’t see fit to send us out here with anything more than one rusting Avalancher. That may not give me authority, but it sure as hell gives me the right.”

“Captain,” the ogrun called Murgan said, “perhaps we should wait . . .”

Vornek waved the ogrun’s comment away. “You pay us what the Khadorans were paying, and you can pick those barges clean.”

Magnus stuck out his hand. “Captain, you have a deal.”

“Thank the fathers,” Vornek said as he grasped Magnus’ hand. “Now, let’s find something to bloody drink.”

STRYKER WALKED DOWN THREE ROWS of heavy crates in an old half-burned warehouse, its walls riddled by gunfire. The building was a wreck, but it was out of the way, and he needed secrecy.

“This is all of it?” Stryker turned. Behind him stood Major Magnus, Major Maddox, and the two Crucible Guard leaders, Aurum Legate Lukas di Morray and Marshal General Baldwin Gearheart.

Magnus nodded. “It is, and a lot more than I expected. You want to tell us what the hell is in these crates, sir?”

Stryker raised an eyebrow. “You didn’t look?”

“You ordered me not to,” Magnus said, shrugging.

“When has that ever stopped you?” Stryker smirked and shook his head. “Yes, I’ll show all of you, though this is only a piece of the technology I mentioned.”

“We’re all quite eager to hear why you’re so concerned,” Lukas di Morray said.

“And whether you might share this wondrous technology with

certain allies,” Gearheart added, not bothering to hide his naked eagerness.

Stryker ignored the question for the moment. “Beth, can you give me a hand.”

Other than himself, only Major Maddox was currently wearing warcaster armor.

“Of course,” she said.

Stryker ripped the lid off one of the crates, and the assembled military leaders crowded forward to get a look. Like he’d seen in the hold of the dwarven barge, the crate contained a dozen or so squat metal cylinders, gold in color, with Rhulic script along the side. Each was about the size of a small keg.

“Take one, Major,” he said to Maddox.

She eyed him curiously then reached into one of the crates.

“Thamar’s arse, this is heavy,” she exclaimed as she pulled one out one of the objects.

“It is *now*,” Stryker said. “But focus your arcane energy into it, the same as you do with a warjack.”

“Okay, but I don’t see how . . .” Maddox trailed off. “Wait. It’s lighter. I don’t understand.”

“Keep focusing,” Stryker said. “Give it another few seconds.”

The warehouse was silent. All were intently watching Maddox. The first time Stryker has seen what was about to happen, it had shocked him, even awed him.

Maddox yelped in surprise as the cylinder floated from her grasp. “What in Morrow’s name?”

Stryker grabbed the cylinder and pushed it back to the ground. There was slight resistance but not much. Once he took his hand off the object, it settled and remained on the ground.

“What happened?” Lukas di Morray said, his eyes gleaming with both wariness and fascination. “What are these things?”

“It’s complicated, but I’ll give you the basics. We call this a drive core, and it reacted when Major Maddox used her arcane turbine to push energy into it. When it has absorbed enough arcane energy, it repels gravity in a sense, sort of like pushing two magnets together.”

Marshal Baldwin's eyes were as wide as dinner plates, and he stepped forward to examine the cylinder. "How much lift can these . . . drive cores provide?"

"From a power source the size of an arcane turbine?" Stryker replied. "Not much more than you saw—enough to lift four hundred pounds or so."

"But if one were to add more power," Lukas di Morray said, "you could lift something much larger?"

"Correct," Stryker said. "We call it the skydrive, and we have perfected a way to pass immense amounts of arcane energy through these cores, providing . . . well, providing essentially limitless lift."

"Where in the name of Morrow did Rhul acquire this technology?" Magnus asked. "Last time I checked, they weren't fielding flying warjacks."

"I think what we're seeing here is Khador filling in the blanks," Stryker said. "Strakhov got something from the engineer who defected, but it wasn't enough, so they turned to Rhul to help them complete the process. It's possible Rhul doesn't even really understand the purpose of the drive cores they've manufactured."

"Tell me more of this skydrive, Lord General," Lukas di Morray said. The man's posture had gone from fascinated to wary. Clearly, he understood the implications.

"I'm afraid I cannot go into specifics, Aurum Legate," Stryker responded, knowing he was on shaky ground with an ally he desperately needed, "because I simply don't understand the mechanika involved. That's Artificer General Nemo's area of expertise, not mine."

"Then tell us what you plan to do with this contraption," Marshal Gearheart said. His eyes shone with excitement. There was no concern in this man; all he could see was a new technology he could field in battle.

"As I said earlier, the goal is to produce sky ships that could provide a heretofore unknown advantage against our enemies," Stryker said. "They could also move large numbers of troops and destroy ground targets."

"Enemies?" Lukas di Morray said. "Khador and Cryx I assume,

but you have a young king I hear is somewhat rash.”

He threw a look at Magnus. “With such power, that list of enemies could expand.”

“Julius is a good king,” Magnus said, anger barely concealed in his voice. “He’s not looking for conquest—he’s looking to protect western Immoren. And that includes our allies.”

“And what if your allies do not want this protection?” di Morray said, his cheeks reddening. The situation, Stryker could see, was slipping out of control.

Maddox said, “they have a point. This is dangerous. You know that.”

“Listen to me, everyone, please,” Stryker said. “We have larger problems. More immediate problems.”

“I feel I can see a very large and immediate problem right here,” di Morray said, pointing at the crates of drive cores.

“Yes, I understand what you’re saying,” Stryker said, trying to keep his temper in check. “But please, there is a more dire situation here.”

“Then please, do explain it,” di Morray said.

“We have only recently achieved this level of refinement on our own drive cores,” Stryker said. “If these are going to Khador, then they are ready to use them in the same capacity as we are.”

“But if Khador has built these sky ships, where are they?” Marshal Gearheart asked.

“These drive cores were bound for Merywyn,” Magnus said. “If they’re building some kind of super weapon, the best place to deploy would be in a city they hold that’s close to a strategic enemy position. Corvis.”

Di Morray opened his mouth and then closed it, blinking. “I . . . see what you mean by a more dire situation. How close could they be?”

“I have no way of knowing,” Stryker replied. “That’s why it was of paramount importance I warn Caspia.”

“I have some good news on that front, at least,” Marshal Gearheart said. “We received a message via the Aetheric Relay

from Thunderhead Fortress. They took the fortress with minimal losses and sent your message.”

Stryker sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly. Relief washed over him, both that his message had gone out and that Ashlynn and the Crucible Guard forces with her had survived.

“They cannot hold the fortress for long,” di Morray said. “More troops from Leryn will certainly descend on Thunderhead and attempt to retake it. Captain Mackay will continue to send your message until she gets a response or it is no longer safe to stay in Thunderhead. Whichever comes first, good or ill.”

“What are the chances someone is listening on the other end?” Stryker said, his relief evaporating.

“I cannot say. It is less about getting the message to the Crucible Guard enclave in Caspia and more about hoping whoever receives it understands the urgency.”

“There’s more bad news, Coleman,” Magnus said.

The use of his first name got Stryker’s attention immediately. “Tell me.”

“The dwarven captain in charge of those barges has a bone to pick with the Searforge Commission. He was pretty forthcoming with information about his cargo, its destination . . . and how many times the Khadorans have taken delivery.”

Stryker’s blood ran cold. “How many?”

“Six. All shipments this size or larger.”

“The only reason they would need that many drive cores is if they were building more than one sky ship . . .” Stryker swallowed. “And if they were close to completing one of them.”

“What does this mean for the First Army and Lord General Duggan?” Maddox asked.

“It means Khador could have the power to level Corvis, the First Army, and anything else in their path,” Stryker said.

“But they don’t have it yet,” Marshal Gearheart said.

“No. Irusk would have used it.”

“What are your orders, Lord Commander?” Magnus said, and Stryker could see in his eyes he knew the only course before them.

“We abandon Riversmet and march on Merywyn immediately,”

Stryker said. “We’re jumping the First Army’s timeline, and Lord General Duggan might not be able to mobilize the First Army in time to help us, but we can’t risk Khador getting even one sky ship operational.”

Lukas di Morray shook his head. “We are with you, for now, but when this war is over—may the ascendants will it that we survive—Cygnaar will need to account for this secret.”

Stryker nodded wearily. “If. *If* the ascendants will it that we survive.”

ASSAULT KOMMANDER STRAKHOVE ENTERED MERYWYN as if he were marching to his own execution. He camped his army outside the walls of the city on Irusk's order. There wasn't room to house them inside, but their presence would serve as a further deterrent to Cygnar's First Army in Corvis.

Strakhov had received a personal summons from Irusk hours after he had arrived outside of Llael's capital city. The missive was short and to the point: *Come and come alone.*

Now he rode down the western riverfront, the place all the affluent Llaelese had once called home. Their homes now served as the personal living quarters of Khadoran officers or housed Khadoran soldiers. He saw many of the latter as he rode, and all saluted him. Did he see disgust or loathing in their eyes as he passed or was it the weight of his own failures pressing down on him, suffocating his confidence?

He reached the manor house Irusk had commandeered, and, unsurprisingly, it was the most modest domicile in the area. Irusk

was not a man who cared much for luxury. Like Strakhov, he was more comfortable with the austere living of a soldier than the lavish lifestyle of an aristocrat.

Strakhov dismounted and walked to the front gate of the manor. A pair of Winter Guard soldiers opened it for him, and a short stone pathway led to the front door. Two more soldiers escorted him inside down a short hallway and then to what appeared to be a study. Books lined the walls, and the smell of old paper, leather, and pipe tobacco filled the space.

Irusk—tall, straight, his uniform impeccable—stood in the center of the room. He held two glasses full of clear liquid.

“Kommander Strakhov,” he said. “Thank you for coming so promptly.”

Strakhov took a step into the room, and the door shut behind him. Shame and guilt rose up his throat like bile, and he pushed them down, letting the seething anger behind both emotions consume them utterly.

“We have lost Riversmet, Supreme Kommandant,” he said. “There were unforeseen factors, but I am ready to accept the consequences of my actions.”

Irusk stared him, his face unreadable, and took a pull from one of the glasses.

“This is Rhulic *uiske*,” he said. “The dwarves know their business.”

“Supreme Kommandant, did you not hear what I said?” Strakhov had prepared himself for the storm of Irusk’s anger, not to drink *uiske* with him.

“Yes, yes, I heard you. Now, take this glass and drink.” Irusk let out an irritated sigh.

Strakhov accepted the glass of *uiske* and, as ordered, drained it. It burned fire down his throat and warmed his stomach. He held Irusk’s gaze.

“Losing Riversmet is unfortunate, but we did not expect the Crucible Guard to enter this conflict. They and Ord have long held themselves apart from these wars.”

Irusk went to a nearby table where a crystal bottle rested, big, heavy, and squat, like the Rhulfolk themselves. He poured himself

a liberal measure and then poured Strakhov another two fingers. “Sip it this time. It’s worth it.”

Strakhov felt more confident now—Irusk had recognized the Crucible Guard’s attack as a mitigating factor. “I thought it best to withdraw my army here, bolster Merywyn’s defenses, and not risk possible catastrophic loss.”

“Yes, I will grant you made a difficult decision to bring your army here. It was likely the right one. Riversmet is a bearable loss, but you also failed to recover the Rhulic shipment, and now I have learned it has fallen into Cygnaran hands.”

Strakhov grimaced. “Yes, Supreme Kommandant.”

There seemed little else to say. He knew those drive cores were vital to Project Cloud Crusher, and he had failed to deliver them. This, more than Riversmet, would likely be his undoing.

Irusk drank his *uiske* in silence for a moment, and Strakhov knew the Supreme Kommandant was letting him stew in his displeasure. Then, Irusk said, “That, too, may be a bearable.”

“How is that, Supreme Kommandant?” Strakhov asked, confused and taken off guard. It forced him to admit the full extent of his failure. “If I understand the plans recovered from the Cygnaran traitor, then Project Cloud Crusher has suffered a serious setback.”

Irusk smiled, an altogether unpleasant sign. “Do you think I would be so foolish as to have only one source for such a vital element to our plans?”

“No, Supreme Kommandant,” Strakhov replied. Irusk, he knew, was a man who had plans within plans within plans. Even the unforeseen was often of little consequence to him.

“Good, now drink your *uiske* because I have something to show you. Something that eclipses your failure in Riversmet and will restore your . . . shall we say, fighting spirit.”

...

IRUSK LED STRAKHOV TO A PART OF THE RIVERFRONT heavily patrolled by Winter Guard; in truth, it was saturated with them. The two of them rode in on horseback, escorted by a full platoon of uhlans.

Irusk said nothing as they passed through checkpoint after checkpoint until finally they reached an area of new construction. They'd dammed up the river, creating a massive space of dry riverbed, over a mile long and half that as wide. Inside it men swarmed over the colossal shape of . . . something.

"There," Irusk said, reining up on the edge of the huge space.

Strakhov struggled to find words to express the awe he felt. He'd never seen anything like this. At first he thought it might be a battleship of some kind, a great ironclad sailing vessel. Then he realized it was far larger than anything in the Khadoran fleet, and it had no masts. Its shape was roughly triangular with a bridge or superstructure at one end and a long, low deck, like that of a barge, extending for hundreds of yards. Two colossals, maybe three, could walk along that deck with ease, their arms outstretched, and not come close to spanning its breadth.

Finally, mind-bogglingly, the great craft *floated* some ten feet from the ground. On its bottom were obvious gun emplacement and five curious half-orbs shielded by armor. Strakhov let his gaze travel upward until he saw the top half of these orbs jutting over what would become the deck of the ship or whatever it was. These upper orbs were not solid but strange spheres of rotating bands containing a glowing stone or cylinder.

"This . . . this is *Stormbreaker*?" Strakhov breathed. He understood the technology the Cygnaran traitor had turned over to them, and he thought he understood its application. But this, this massive, marvelous behemoth was beyond anything he'd imagined.

"Yes, the future and final end to this war," Irusk said.

"The shipments from Rhul," Strakhov said. "How have you progressed this far without them?"

Irusk frowned. "As I said, I have another source."

Strakhov struggled to take in everything Irusk was telling him. "Where? Who?"

Irusk pointed to the bottom of the huge ship. "You may notice certain archaic stonework incorporated into the design."

Strakhov squinted and could make out a ring of black stone,

like basalt, seamlessly fitted into the half-spheres on the bottom of the *Stormbreaker*. He'd seen stonework like that before, in the wild, comprising the strange automatons of the Circle Orboros.

"When it will it be ready?" Strakhov asked, excitement now overcoming his awe and his fear of Irusk's wrath. The possibilities of such a weapon were intoxicating.

"This one is a week from completion," Irusk said. "The other two, three days beyond that."

"Other two?"

Irusk smiled, and it was both less terrifying and far more than it had been earlier. "Yes, Kommander. Soon we will command the skies, and then . . . no nation can stand before us."

To Be Continued...

— ABOUT THE AUTHOR —

Aeryn Rudel is a freelance writer and game designer from Seattle, Washington. He is the author of the Acts of War series published by Privateer Press, and his short fiction has appeared in *The Arcanist*, *Factor Four Magazine*, and *Pseudopod*, among others. Aeryn is a notorious dinosaur nerd, a baseball connoisseur, and has mastered the art of fighting with sword-shaped objects (but not actual swords). He occasionally offers dubious advice on the subjects of writing and rejection (mostly rejection) at www.rejectomancy.com or Twitter [@Aeryn_Rudel](https://twitter.com/Aeryn_Rudel).

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