

STORMBREAK

THE IRON KINGDOMS CHRONICLES

ACTS OF WAR III STORMBREAK

AERYN RUDEL



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PART I

— 1 —

MAJOR ASHETH MAGNUS stared through the spyglass and frowned. “That caravan looks small for my tastes. Horgrum, give it a once-over. Anything look out of place?”

The hulking trollkin sniper unlimbered his rifle and stared through the scope. His keen eyes rarely missed any details. It felt odd to Magnus to see Horgrum without Sergeant Sharp, his spotter and ever-present companion, but the man had been wounded in Rynyr and was still recovering.

The trollkin stared through his scope for a short time and then slung his weapon. “Three wagons. Thirty humans. No warjacks. Vayne di Brascio leads them.”

“Thirty?” This from Lieutenant Brigland. The former seadog and current Cygnaran trencher officer looked like someone had just kicked him in the stones. “Only thirty? They promised at least a hundred.”

“That they did,” Magnus said and glanced behind him. Two squads of rangers hid in the brush along a weedy dirt road running beside the Black River. A small force but swift and quiet. Stryker

couldn't spare any more men than that to meet the caravan from Greywind Tower. Colonel Jarov had promised Llaeselese regulars and all the extra arms and munitions he could spare—a full hundred troops, he'd said. It appeared he'd come through with about a third of that promise.

Magnus raised one hand, palm flat, the signal for the rangers to join him in the road. Twenty men armed with carbines and fighting knives melted out of the brush and fell in behind him.

The caravan—three wagons each drawn by a pair of draft horses—rumbled toward them, loud and obvious, before grinding to halt. A tall, dashing man wearing a purple-lined cloak hopped down from the lead wagon and approached, a wide smile on his handsome face. A magelock pistol and a mechanika saber hung from his hips, tools of the trade for a gun mage of the Amethyst Rose.

“Major Magnus, it is good to see you again,” Vayne di Brascio said. Asheth had fought beside the gun mage before and knew him to be both a skilled warrior and a cunning spy.

Magnus offered his hand. “Good to see you, too, di Brascio. I had hoped to see a lot more with you.”

Di Brascio's face fell. “Yes, I am sorry. Colonel Jarov couldn't spare anyone else.”

“The man knows his business, so he must have some reason. He's in as much danger as we are.”

“In truth, more. Khadoran forces have been attacking everything that leaves the tower, boxing us in. I took great pains to make it here undiscovered.”

“What kind of Khadoran forces?” Magnus felt a sinking feeling in his stomach.

“Assault kommandos led by a man in black armor. They are swift and deadly, striking and then retreating before we can marshal men or warjacks to pursue them.”

“Black armor,” Magnus repeated. “I know that bastard. He's one of Strakhov's men. We ran into him in Rynyr.”

“Then you know the danger. Surely we should move,” di Brascio said.

“You’re coming with us?”

Di Brascio grinned. “I hope that will make up somewhat for not bringing all the men we promised.”

“It does. A little,” Magnus said. He liked the Llaeese gun mage and especially his mercenary sensibilities. The prospect of di Brascio joining them, even if only for a time, pleased him.

“Another gun mage sure as hell couldn’t hurt,” Brigland agreed. “But he’s right, Major—we need to get back to Riversmet.”

Magnus surveyed the group of Llaeese regulars di Brascio had brought along. They were light infantry, untrained in moving quietly. That they hadn’t been attacked along the way to meeting him spoke volumes about Vayne di Brascio’s skill at stealth.

Magnus thought they were taking a risk when he set out from Riversmet with orders to escort one hundred men through terrain that should be relatively safe. With what di Brascio had just told him, it was more than a risk; it was tantamount to a suicide mission.

Magnus sighed and turned to his two best. “All right, then. Horgrum, take one squad of rangers ahead and scout. Brigland, you do the same but follow the caravan.”

The two men acknowledged and set out, taking ten rangers each.

“I assume you and I will remain with the caravan,” di Brascio said.

“I don’t like it, but let’s keep our big guns near the valuables,” Magnus said. He glanced at the lead wagon. “I know it’s asking a lot of a gun mage, but can you drive one of these things?”

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MAGNUS KNEW THEY’D BE ATTACKED. Knew the Khadorans would target the caravan. And worst of all, he knew that he couldn’t prevent it.

It came at dusk, just as they reached a stretch of road hemmed in by forest on both sides. The twitter of the night birds, the low thunder of the Black River now a mile distant, and the steady creaking of their own wagon wheels joined to provide a quiet,

almost lulling susurrus. It screamed ambush, and when the first shot came from the trees to their right, it felt almost anticlimactic.

Magnus' power field pulsed, robbing the bullet of its kinetic energy; it pinged harmlessly off his armor. Another expected moment: shoot the warcaster first.

"Take cover!" di Brascio cried as he leapt from the wagon. More bullets shattered the air. Screams of pain rose from the ranks of Llaeese soldiers marching beside the wagons.

Magnus jumped down, drawing Foecleaver. He slapped the flat of the blade across the rump of the horse nearest him, and it bolted. The animal yoked next to it had no choice but to follow. The wagon hurtled up the road toward the source of the gunfire.

More bullets whizzed by Magnus, some smashing against his power field. But he stood his ground, tracking the wagon. When it drew within twenty yards of the stand of trees where the Khadorans had taken cover, he summoned a spell. Blue runes formed around his outstretched hand as the magic flowed through him.

The obliteration spell erupted in an azure gout of flame beneath the wagon, destroying the vehicle. The blast also freed the horses to race away, just before the munitions in the ruined wagon detonated with a blast three times the size of the spell. The trees near the road were blown to splinters—along with the Khadorans hiding among them.

Another gunshot rang out from the other side of the road. The bullet pierced Magnus' power field and then his right pauldron, impacting the top of his shoulder and spinning him around. He flung himself to the ground and rolled beneath the second wagon. The horses were spooked but well trained; they did not bolt.

A shot penetrating his defenses meant Strakhov's elite were on the field. He'd faced their armor-piercing Death Whisper carbines in Rynyr.

The double roar of di Brascio's magelock sounded followed by more screams, though Magnus couldn't tell if those screams were friend or foe. He struggled out from beneath the wagon as black shapes moved up the road, bright bursts of muzzle flash giving

spilt-second glimpses of the characteristic armor, shields, and masks of the assault kommandos. There would be more behind them, no doubt.

The Llaelese troops stood in a rough firing line before the lead wagon. Magnus took position behind them, drawing his scattergun.

“Steady. Pick your shots,” he said. He summoned another spell, and this time the runes formed around the advancing assault kommandos, limning their armor in a subtle blue glow. “Fire!”

The Llaelese rifles went off, and four kommandos tumbled to the ground. Magnus dropped another with a blast from his own weapon.

More gunshots erupted from behind the wagons, though these had a sharper report than the Khadoran arms. He recognized the Cygnaran ranger carbines, followed by the dull roar of Horgrum’s sniper rifle.

Magnus smiled. The Khadorans thought they were engaging a much smaller force. Three wagons and thirty light infantry. They’d been overeager because of the easy victories they’d won against the troops from Greywind Tower. They hadn’t expected twenty rangers surprising them in the middle of their own ambush.

More carbines blasted, and more assault kommandos fell. They didn’t linger after that wave—the Khadorans made a mad dash for the cover of the trees to the east of the road.

“Let them go. Regroup,” Magnus called out. The sounds of gunfire diminished then faded altogether, leaving only the sounds of crackling flames and the wails of the dying.

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MAGNUS COULDN’T QUITE DETERMINE precisely how many charred bodies lay next to the road. The explosion had blown the Khadorans to pieces, but based on the number of limbs, he thought at least twenty.

“We killed another ten with our ambush,” Brigland said, making a face and toeing one of the charred corpses. “We caught them by surprise, but that won’t happen twice.”

“This is so, and they’ll be back,” di Brascio said.

Magnus dismissed this. “We’re getting closer to Riversmet, and Stryker has patrols all along the roads. Another ten miles, and they won’t risk another attack, I’d wager.” He turned to the gun mage. “More important, how many did we lose?”

Di Brascio shook his head. “Sixteen. And the wagon.”

Too many,” Horgrum said. The trollkin leaned against one of the wagons, cleaning his rifle. “Still, suppose we are fortunate.”

“No. There’s nothing fortunate about it,” Magnus said. “Every man we lose is one more Strakhov doesn’t have to fight, and he’s got enough men to drown us already.” Magnus slammed his scattergun back into its holster. “This isn’t victory. It’s just survival.”

LORD GENERAL COLEMAN STRYKER reined up near the Black River, the weight of his warcaster armor settling on his shoulders as he climbed down from his horse. Ahead in a small inlet of the river, a large group of Stormblades waited.

A tall officer broke off from the thirty or so near the shore and hurried over to him.

“Captain Adkins,” Stryker said. “Can you tell me why you had me ride twenty miles north of Riversmet without a single word of explanation?”

He’d received a message from the captain shortly after dawn, urgently requesting he come alone to a specific point north of the city. He trusted the captain well enough that he’d accepted the request, but riding six hours in full armor had made him irritable.

“Sir, my deepest apologies, but I wanted you to see this first,” Adkins said.

“Okay, I’m here,” Stryker said. “What is it?”

“We’ve detained two Rhulic merchant barges,” Adkins explained.

Stryker stared at the Stormblade captain, surprised and a little

annoyed at the lack of greater detail. Rhulic barges on the Black River weren't unusual—the Resistance had been dealing with a number of mercenary companies, trading for arms and munitions, and part of Adkins' charge was to stop and search these vessels. He'd put the Stormblade captain in charge of scouting the river for Khadoran forces and elements of the Protectorate of Menoth who had established trade with Khadoran forces in Merywyn. Stryker had few men to spare, so he could only give Adkins a hundred or so, plus the three former Khadoran gunboats to perform this duty. Taking in a couple of Rhulic barges hardly qualified as an emergency meriting escalation all the way to the Lord General.

The captain caught Stryker's annoyance. "I know what you're thinking, sir, but these aren't the run-of-the-mill mercenaries we've been dealing with."

That was what it took to pique Stryker's curiosity, and a sense of mild alarm began to buzz in his brain. "You'd best show me."

Adkins led him to a sandy spit of beach near the water. A few yards off shore, three of the Khadoran river craft they'd commandeered after taking Riversmet sat in a line across the river, essentially blocking it, their heavy deck-mounted cannons pointing at a pair of squat vessels.

The other craft were heavy, sitting low in the water. Their decks were lined with soldiers armed with light carbines, short war axes, and huge shields. Stryker had seen and fought alongside the Hammerfall High Shield Gun Corps on occasion; the dwarven warriors were a common sight in mercenary circles.

"What the hell are they doing here?" Stryker asked.

"I don't know, sir, but I thought it best if we detained them until you could tell us how you wanted this handled," Adkins said.

"You did the right thing, Captain," Stryker said. "Tell me what you know."

Adkins sighed, clearly relieved, and then launched into his report. "We stopped them at the blockade as we do all vessels." He pointed to where three strands of exceptionally heavy chain were strung across the water, making an effective barrier. "Both craft are full of Gun Corps, and they refused to let us search their holds."

“You think they’re trading with Khador?” Stryker asked.

“I do, sir. As it stands, they’re angrier than a bunch of hornets at being stopped. They demanded to speak to someone in charge.”

“We need to find out what they’re carrying,” Stryker said.

“Absolutely, sir,” Adkins said, “but they’re getting pretty tense. I’m afraid we might have an incident if we aren’t careful.”

“Thamar’s teeth,” Stryker exclaimed. “The last thing we need is bloody international incident with Rhul.”

“Orders, sir?” Adkins said.

“Let’s give them what they want. Let them speak to someone in charge.”

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THE GUN CORPS CAPTAIN was one of the foulest dwarves Stryker had ever seen. His craggy face was a nest of lines and wrinkles, and chewing bitterleaf had stained his beard yellow all around his mouth. His armor and weapons were old and worn, and he looked like an old pair of boots that had seen neither shine nor use in years.

“We got a contract, and you got no right to stop us,” the dwarven captain said.

Stryker sighed and shook his head. They were standing on the deck of the dwarven vessel, he and Adkins. The Rhulfolk wouldn’t agree to meet on the shore or on one of Cygnar’s ships.

“I’m sure you do, Captain Blackheel,” he said. “But it’s not with us, and it’s not with Llael. If it’s with Khador, then I am within my rights to treat you as enemy combatants.”

Captain Vornek Blackheel squinted then glanced behind him at the only non-dwarven member of his crew, a towering ogrun in full battle armor, who stood leaning on a terrifying war cleaver. The ogrun towered an easy eight feet tall, and though he was grey around his muzzle, his eyes shown with intelligence.

“Lieutenant Murgan,” Captain Blackheel said to him, “is that true?”

The ogrun snorted. “If our contract is with a military or occupying force at war with Cygnar, and if we are delivering arms

or soldiers to that force, then, yes, the lord general is *technically* correct.”

“All right, then,” Stryker said. “Your own lieutenant understands the situation here, as you can see. So, you now must—”

“Pardon me, Lord General,” the ogrun said. “There’s more to it than that. These lands are currently contested by Cygnar, by Llael, and by Khador. You have no sovereignty here, so you are technically blockading a trade route that does not belong to you.”

“All right now, *you* can see,” Captain Blackheel said and spat a wad of bitterleaf an inch from Stryker’s boot, “we got a right to deliver our cargo.”

“Well, that’s not entirely clear, either,” Murgan said, drawing a withering glance from his captain.

“I can’t allow you to continue on if you’re carrying weapons to Khador,” Stryker said bluntly.

“Can’t ‘allow’ us?” Captain Blackheel stuffed another wad of bitterleaf into his mouth. “I got forty guns on these boats that says you can.”

Stryker stiffened. “Is that what you want? I have enough firepower right here on the river to send you to the bottom. I don’t want it to come to that.”

Captain Blackheel glowered at Stryker before he finally shrugged. “I don’t want no fight either. Got no quarrel with you, but I didn’t drag my arse from my post in Hell’s Pass on orders directly from the Searforge Commission to turn back now.”

The ogrun Murgan cleared his throat loudly and shook his head. He clearly felt Captain Blackheel had said too much.

Stryker glanced around, considering, taking in the faces of two crews prepared to clash. There could still be a way around this. “Captain, I have a compromise, if you’ll listen to it.”

The dwarven captain cocked his head and then sighed. “Speak on.”

“Show us what’s in your hold. If it’s nothing that can harm Cygnar or its allies directly, I’ll let you through.”

The captain’s eyes brightened.

“I’ll take that deal,” he said, far too quickly for Stryker’s tastes.

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THE HOLD OF THE DWARVEN VESSEL was sizeable and packed with crates and boxes, all marked with the sigil of Hammerfall, the dwarven fortress from where the majority of the Gun Corps hailed.

“I don’t like this,” Captain Adkins muttered, waving a torch around the hold. A pair of dwarven soldiers had descended into the hold with them, shields and carbines at the ready. Captain Blackheel and his ogrun second had stayed on the deck. “He either doesn’t know what he’s carrying, or he doesn’t think we’ll know.”

Stryker nodded and looked back at their escort. If the two dwarves were listening, they gave no indication they cared about what was being said.

He made his way to one of the largest crates, near the starboard bulkhead. It was nailed shut, but he ripped it open—his warcaster armor provided ample strength for such tasks.

Inside, squat, cylindrical objects gleamed within a nest of straw. They were made of some shining golden metal, each about the size of a small barrel, and marked with Rhulic script. At first glance, they appeared to be mechanical in nature, possibly warjack components, but they weren’t cortexes. He’d seen enough of those to know.

Stryker reached into the crate and picked one up. It was extraordinarily heavy for its size, a hundred pounds at least. Only his warcaster armor allowed him to lift the object from the crate without difficulty.

The subtle tingle of magic crept up Stryker’s arms, and the weight of the cylinder suddenly became much lighter. His eyes widened.

“What is it, sir?” Adkins said.

Stryker put the object back in the crate. “We’re done here.” He turned to the two dwarves. “Take us back your captain.”

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“WON’T LET US LEAVE?” Captain Blackheel said, flecks of bitterleaf splattering Stryker’s breastplate. The ornery captain’s hands crept

to the haft of his axe. “There ain’t nothing in that hold dangerous to you and yours.”

Stryker let his own hand rest on the hilt of Quicksilver, and the faces of the dwarven soldiers surrounding them creased with doubt. They didn’t want a fight. At least not yet. “You don’t know that for certain, do you, Captain? In truth, you have no idea what you’re carrying, do you?”

Captain Blackheel glared at him, his mouth working on the bitterleaf like a cow chewing its cud. His silence said everything.

“I didn’t think so,” Stryker said. “So, you have two options. You can turn around and go back the way you came with my blessing, or you can stay right here because you’ll go no farther until I know *exactly* what it is you’re carrying.”

“You are blockading a common trade route that does not belong to you, Lord General,” Murgan said. “The Searforge Commission will not take kindly to you disrupting their business.”

The towering ogrun was a formidable creature, and though he hadn’t issued a threat, tension hung in the air between them. Stryker had no doubt Captain Blackheel was an able soldier, but the ogrun was more than that—he was a warrior of strength and prowess.

“If what’s in your hold turns out to be a weapon, then I have every right to confiscate it, and you know it,” Stryker said. “If you’d rather summon someone from Rhul to explain to me what it is, then by all means, do so, and maybe we can reach an accord. Until then, we’re finished here.”

The dwarves on the deck took a step forward, and fifteen rifles rose an inch or two in their direction. Stryker knew he could probably kill everyone on the deck, if it came to that. None of them were warcasters, and he had the gunboats and forty Stormblades on the shore.

Captain Blackheel raised a hand. “Stand down, boys. The lord general ain’t afraid of the likes of us.” He turned to Stryker. “I’ll send word back to Hammerfall, but I doubt you’ll like what follows.”

Stryker thought that effectively summed up the entirety of the war, as far as he was concerned.

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ONCE THEY WERE BACK ON SHORE, Stryker pulled Adkins aside. “Captain, you are to tell no one what you saw in that hold. Just keep those boats here. Understood?”

“Of course, sir.” The Stormblade captain hesitated. “What if the Rhulfolk get, uh, impatient?”

“If they try to push through the blockade, destroy both vessels,” Stryker said. “We can’t risk what’s in that hold getting to Khador until we know more about it.”

Adkins drew in a shaky breath and stared into Stryker’s eyes. When he spoke, some of the military deference had disappeared from his tone. “I understand, sir. But you know what those things are, don’t you? You have an idea, at least.”

“No, not really,” Stryker said. It was mostly true. He’d heard rumors from CRS agents he trusted, but that’s all they were: rumors. Stryker trusted Adkins as well, but this could be dangerous information, and he only had what amounted to myths to base his own fears on. “I’ll tell you this much, though. If it’s what I think it is—and I hope to Morrow it’s not—then it should have been left on the bottom of the bloody ocean.”

— 3 —

AURUM LEGATE LUKAS DI MORRAY hurried through the cramped halls of the Crucible Guard compound, passing men and women in gold-and-teal guard uniforms and armor. All saluted or called out a greeting, and he replied with a nod or a smile. He remained a vaunted figure among these warriors and alchemists, and they needed to see him and be seen *by* him. If all went right today, he would soon lead them into battle.

A nervous energy gripped him. He'd arrived in Midfast at the Crucible Guard compound over a week ago, fresh from Riversmet and the terrible weeks he'd spent as a Khadoran prisoner in Rynyr. He now had one goal: to mobilize the Crucible Guard to march on Riversmet and aid the Cygnaran and Llaelese Resistance forces currently holding the city. Though he led that force, he could not make the decision on his own. Others must have a say first, and they would all be in the same room to hear his plea.

He reached the end of a long hall where stood a steel door marked with the radiant crucible of the Crucible Guard. Flanking it were two soldiers who looked out of place in the compound.

They wore the heavy breastplates of Ordic Royal Marines, sabers and pistols at their hips. Each marine's armor bore a bright purple chevron that marked them as king's men.

"Gentlemen," Lukas said to the two marines, "I am expected within."

The marine on the left nodded and opened the door. Beyond lay one of the larger rooms in the compound not given over to laboratories or housing for soldiers. A round table of turned steel dominated the space, and around it were six chairs, five currently occupied.

Lukas stepped into the council chamber and the door shut behind him. Five faces turned toward him. He knew them all. Marshal General Baldwin Gearheart, a fellow warcaster and the one man who occupied a position in the Guard above Lukas' own, stood, his dark eyes twinkling above his mustache, and gestured to one of the empty chairs.

"Please, sit, Aurum Legate," Gearheart said, his voice rich and commanding. "It is good to see you in one piece, old friend."

"Thank you, Marshal General." Lukas nodded at his friend and occasional rival. They often did not see eye to eye on military matters—Gearheart was far too eccentric and reckless for Lukas' tastes—but a deep respect for each other's abilities and accomplishments still existed between them.

To Lukas' right sat Helt Langworth, the leader of the Order of the Golden Crucible's Assembly of Masters. The craggy-faced master alchemist inclined his head in greeting.

Next to Langworth sat the formidable personage of Jean Resson Dagget. As the Commander of the Guard, she was in charge of the compound at Midfast, just as she had been in charge of their old headquarters, Thunderhead Fortress, now in the hands of the Protectorate of Menoth. No one knew more about the rank and file of the Crucible Guard than Dagget, and her words carried much weight.

The final two members of the council were a pair. The first was Creena Torcail, one of the youngest members of the Assembly of Masters, though a potent alchemist in her own right and a shrewd

diplomat. She served as the liaison between the Crucible Guard and their most important patron. That patron was represented by the final member of the council, a large man dressed in a sailor's greatcoat, a broad toothy smile showing through his black beard.

"I am glad to see the Khadorans did not harm you overmuch, Aurum Legate," King Baird Cathor II said. "I am grateful to Cygnar for returning one the Crucible Guard's most important sons to us."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Lukas said. "I am grateful as well, and that is the reason I asked you to join us here today."

"That business in Llael, aye?" Baird said, feigning apathy regarding a situation about which he was both well informed and genuinely concerned. Such was the way of the so-called Bandit King. "No doubt Lord General Stryker is in the middle of it."

"And Asheth Magnus," Creena Torcail said, a grimace on her face.

"Oh, come now, Creena," Gearheart said. "The man is a rogue attempting to mend his ways. We should at least give him the benefit of the doubt, I should say."

"Would that the rogue in our midst do the same," Helt Langworth said and flashed Gearheart a sour frown. The two men had similar goals—the creation and testing of new alchemical weaponry—but they had wildly sometimes savagely different opinions about how best to accomplish those goals.

"I saw firsthand that Major Magnus' mercenary days are behind him," Lukas said. "Alyce and I personally owe him our lives."

"But you did not gather us here to defend the honor of Asheth Magnus," Baird said.

"No, and I will not waste your time, Your Majesty. I will come directly to my point, here. I want to mobilize the Crucible Guard to march on Riversmet and aid the Cygnaran and Resistance forces holding that city."

"You mean join them in defending that city against the Khadoran Army marching in their direction?" Baird said and smirked. "If we are not wasting one another's time."

"We have, of course, gathered intelligence on the growing

conflict in Llael,” Creena Torcail said, her even tone that of a seasoned diplomat. “Plans are underway that will ensure the survival of Ord and our own order.”

“And I would advise you to continue pursuing those plans,” Lukas conceded, “but we must do something right away, and our best course of action is to march on Riversmet, surprise the Khadorans with our involvement, and seal our alliance with Cygnar and the Resistance forces in Llael.”

“You don’t think that somewhat rash? Not that I’ve an opinion one way or the other just yet,” Gearheart said, trying to hide his enthusiasm behind a façade of caution. That might fool the others, but Lukas knew the man too well. He would jump at the chance to lead the Crucible Guard into battle.

“I do not,” Lukas said, playing along. “If we do not aid Riversmet, then the Khadoran Army led by Strakhov will crush them before marching to Merywyn.”

Dagget cleared her throat. “As much as I would not want our friends in Cygnar and the Resistance to suffer such a defeat, is it truly our concern? We do have our own defenses to look to.”

Lukas had expected a more conservative stance from the Commander of the Guard. “As you know, Cygnar’s First Army is moving to assault Merywyn from the south. As things stand, they face a hard battle and a protracted siege that may not be successful. If Lord General Stryker is able to rally what remains of his own forces and gather Resistance support from Greywind Tower, he can add his troops to the First Army.”

“That is no assurance of victory,” Baird countered. “Merywyn is as strong a Khador stronghold as Korsk at this point.”

“I agree, Your Majesty,” Lukas said, “but if the Crucible Guard joins with Lord General Stryker, he may defeat Strakhov and bring a force to Merywyn that could turn the tide of this conflict.”

“That is a powerful ‘if,’ Aurum Legate,” Dagget replied. “We could commit our forces to this cause and lose. That would leave us dangerously vulnerable to a Khadoran reprisal.”

“Yet we are vulnerable right now,” Lukas said. “Can you not see that? If we do nothing, Cygnar and the Resistance will be

defeated, and Khador will be unstoppable.” He turned to Baird. “Your Majesty, where do you imagine the High Kommand will turn its attentions next?”

Baird frowned. Unlike many kings, he did not object to direct, even blunt counsel, but he was not a ruler given to overt action. “I am no fool, Aurum Legate. I see the threat on my doorstep.”

“Then I beg you to throw your support behind my proposal,” Lukas said.

“And what of the Ordic Army and Navy, Your Majesty?” Helt Langworth said. “The Crucible Guard is potent, but we do not command the resources or manpower of a nation.”

Baird chuckled. “Well played, Langworth. You wish to see me commit more than just your own forces to the conflict. This one’s wife”—he gestured at Lukas—“is already nipping at my heels on that score.”

Lukas breathed an audible sigh of relief. He had heard little news of Alyce since they’d left Riversmet. If she’d met with Baird, then she was somewhere in Ord and safe. “I’m not asking that, Your Majesty. Not yet.”

“Marshal Gearheart,” Baird said, “you have been uncharacteristically quiet. What say you? This is your army, after all.”

Excitement and hope surged through Lukas. He had counted on Gearheart’s overwhelming personality, his eagerness for combat, and his desire to see the Crucible Guard perform in the field to aid Lukas’ cause.

Gearheart pretended to gather himself; presumably, he would need to maintain the appearance of a man considering his options. “The aurum legate has a strong argument. Indeed. But allow me to present you with another. Our boys and their gear are largely untested. They are well trained but have seen little combat with our advanced weapons. This conflict in Llael may give us an opportunity to gauge their mettle, and to see our weaponry in action more stimulating than field trials. We can evaluate and make necessary adjustments before they are called on to defend our borders.” The marshal general grinned. “Plus, my boys have

designed something new I'd like to see working up close and personal. Well, not *too* close, if you take my meaning."

"*If* they are called upon to defend our borders," Dagget said, ignoring Gearheart's last statement.

"I think that's a foregone conclusion, Commander," Lukas said. He detected more than Dagget's usual conservative stance here. She sounded afraid, and he could hardly blame her.

Helt Langworth expelled a long, loud breath as if he'd been holding it the entire meeting. "I am forced to agree with Marshal Gearheart . . . to a point. The aurum legate's proposal would provide us an opportunity to season our forces, but we must be cautious."

Baird sat back in his chair. "Outline this caution for me, Langworth."

"I say we commit *some* of our forces to Riversmet—those most able to assist them—and then let the outcome of this battle determine whether we commit more. I think we achieve both the aim of helping our allies and testing the Crucible Guard's combat readiness without overextending ourselves."

Creena Torcail nodded. "A compromise, and not a bad one. It will still be expensive, however."

Lukas suppressed a smile. With Creena, Gearheart, and Langworth supporting him, even cautiously, his goal was near at hand. There were only two more people he had to convince. "Commander Dagget, I understand your reticence. Your loyalty and dedication to the men and women of our order has always been beyond reproach, and what I propose will cost some of them their lives—"

Dagget broke in. "You're not mistaken. Aurum Legate, do not take my hesitation for lack of compassion for our allies. I understand the danger if Riversmet falls." She sighed. "Master Langworth's compromise is one I could support—within reason."

Lukas knew her influence over the rank and file of the Crucible Guard could not be ignored or understated. Her support was crucial. He weighed his words.

"Then we have a course of action," Lukas said. "We have a—"

Baird raised a hand. "Hold on a moment, Aurum Legate. I have heard your counsel, all of it, but I still must consider it."

"Of course, but we have little time, Your Majesty," Lukas said. "Strakhov will march on Riversmet soon."

"I will be quick. I promise," Baird said.

Lukas clenched his teeth and held his tongue in check, despite his sense that Baird was being patronizing. Technically, they did not need the permission of the Ordic king to mobilize the Crucible Guard, but Baird had been a generous patron and protector since the fall of Thunderhead Fortress. All the others, with the exception of Gearheart perhaps, would heed the king's decision.

The fate of Riversmet and all the Iron Kingdoms might rest upon the whim of one man's word.

STRYKER STOOD ON THE OUTER WALL of Riversmet above the Great Gate and the huge bridge beyond. It remained one of the few intact battlements. Engineers and stonemasons, what few they still had, oversaw groups of Riversmet citizens who were making hasty repairs on the walls around it.

It was all for show, really, something to let the people of this beleaguered city feel like they were contributing to their own defense. None of it would matter when the Khadoran Army massing at Rynyr arrived. Despite the attempts Khador had made to occupy and rebuild the city, they'd pound it to ruins and kill thousands if it meant defeating the Cygnaran and Resistance forces inside. He had reports that the Khadoran Army was on the move.

In the cobblestoned courtyard shadowed by the massive gate below Stryker, Lieutenant William Harcourt took instruction from Marshal Ashlynn d'Elyse. The Resistance warcaster had her mechanika rapier Nemesis in hand and was demonstrating a simple lunge. She did not wear her armor, so bandages were

visible beneath a loose muslin shirt. Stryker's own recent wounds pained him beneath his warcaster armor, but, like Ashlynn, people needed to see him on his feet, leading.

"Remember, that sword is mechanika, and when you're wearing your armor, only another warcaster can parry it effectively," she said and flashed Nemesis from a high hanging guard into a brutal rolling cut.

Harcourt mimicked her with his shorter, more utilitarian Cygnaran blade. His cut had power, but his feet were wrong, leaving him off-balance. "Like that?"

Ashlynn grimaced. "No, awful. You look like a clumsy stork."

Stryker chuckled. Harcourt glanced up at him, his face filled with worry and shame, and, Stryker noted, a little annoyance. "Sir, why aren't *you* teaching me the Caspian battleblade? I'm not a bloody fencer, you know."

"No, you definitely aren't," Stryker said, "but the battleblade is a frontline melee weapon, and that will not be your role on the battlefield. You need basic one-handed swordsmanship, and there's no one better at that than Marshal Ashlynn."

"I appreciate the compliment, but you may have saddled me with an impossible task, Coleman," Ashlynn said, glowering, though the hint of a smile played at her lips.

"Well, do the best you can for the lieutenant," Stryker said. She didn't trust him completely—or Cygnar for that matter—but a camaraderie, sometimes strained, had developed between them.

He watched Ashlynn work on Harcourt's form a while longer, pleased to see the young warcaster quickly learn the basic guards. He might not be a world-class swordsman, but he wasn't hopeless.

The clip-clop of steel-shod hooves on cobblestones broke through the quiet moment, and Captain Archer rode into the square. The Storm Lance captain had mostly recovered from her terrible injuries, but her left leg ended at the knee. It had been crushed beneath falling debris during the destruction of Elsinberg, and there had been no way to save the limb. One of the local smiths had fashioned her a suitable prosthetic that allowed her to sit a horse and hold the stirrups. Stryker had permitted her to

return to full duty because he needed her, needed her strength and leadership among the Storm Lances, but he could not help worrying that she might never fully recover her confidence.

“Lord General, Marshal d’Elyse,” Captain Archer greeted them, “forward scouts have spotted Major Magnus en route to Riversmet. He’ll be here within the hour.”

“Does he have the men Colonel Jarov promised?” Stryker asked.

The Storm Lance captain shook her head. “No, sir. Reports say he is leading two wagons and small group of Llaelese soldiers.”

“Casualties?” Ashlynn asked, sheathing her sword.

Archer nodded. “Yes, there are injured men among the Llaelese.”

“When Magnus arrives, inform Major Maddox and send them both to me,” Stryker said. “Marshal d’Elyse, if you’ll join me?”

“You think you could keep me from doing so?” Ashlynn said, but Stryker detected an element of jest in her barb.

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

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THEY GATHERED IN THE MODEST HOME Stryker had rebuilt to serve as his own quarters once he’d confirmed it didn’t belong to anyone still living in Riversmet. He planned to turn it over to the city if the city survived the coming weeks.

The room he favored for his war councils had been outfitted with furniture large enough to accommodate warcaster armor if needed. Major Asheth Magnus, Major Elizabeth Maddox, Marshal Ashlynn d’Elyse, and the Llaelese gun mage Vayne di Brascio occupied that furniture. He’d kept the briefing to his senior officers, leaving out only Colonel Hughs, who was overseeing the placement of what little artillery they had.

“All right, tell me what happened,” Stryker asked Magnus.

“Simple, really,” Magnus answered. “We were ambushed by Khadoran forces led by one of those elite kommandos we ran into in Rynyr.”

He pointed to a bullet hole in his right pauldron, the work of a Death Whisper carbine. “We took some casualties, but I saw them coming, and they paid a heavier price than we did.”

“Glad to hear it,” Stryker said. “But where are the men and munitions Colonel Jarov promised?”

“I’d like to know that as well,” Ashlynn said. “The colonel promised me *personally* that he’d send those troops.”

“I am sorry, my lady,” Vayne di Brascio said. “Colonel Jarov bid me express his own apologies to you.”

“I don’t need apologies, Captain,” Ashlynn said. “I need to know why we don’t have another one hundred soldiers bolstering our ranks.”

Di Brascio spread his hands. “The Khadoran forces have been waging a most effective guerilla campaign against Greywind Tower. It is very difficult to get anything in or out of the fortress without suffering heavy losses. The colonel committed all he believed he could to Riversmet’s defenses.”

“So, you’re saying we’ve gotten all the aid we’re going to get from Greywind Tower,” Major Maddox said, frowning.

“I am afraid this is so,” di Brascio replied.

“Well, that’s my contribution to this disaster of a day,” Magnus said. “No need to thank me. What news of the Khadorans in Rynyr?”

“As much as I enjoy besting you, this time I would rather your news be the worst,” Stryker said with a smile. Since Rynyr, his relationship with his old mentor had become virgin territory for them both. At least he no longer hated the man.

“The lord general has attempted a joke,” Magnus said. “We must be good and truly doomed.”

Everyone in the room chuckled, and Stryker was grateful for the levity. It might make what he had to say easier to swallow.

“I have reports from the CRS that most of the Khadoran forces in Laedry have joined those in Rynyr. They are already on the move, and conservative estimates put the number of troops at twenty thousand, at least, supported by two dozen heavy warjacks, including several Victor-class colossals.”

The room fell silent. Finally, Vayne di Brascio said, “And what are our numbers here?”

“Not more than five thousand battle-ready soldiers, a dozen warjacks, mostly light chassis, and no colossals. We have some

artillery, but not enough to protect a city this size.”

“Do we have any word from Lukas or Alyce di Morray?” Ashlynn asked.

Stryker shook his head. “None. If they are sending aid—and it seems unlikely at this point—there is little chance it would arrive quickly enough to matter. Aid from Colonel Jarov was the only feasible scenario, to be honest.”

“Can we expect any aid from Lord General Duggan of the First Army?” Magnus asked.

“No, Major,” Maddox said. “His focus is on Merywyn, and even if we were able to send troops up the Black River, they would face the same difficulties as Greywind Tower.”

“That’s not all. We have another problem, minor now, but it bears watching,” Stryker said. “Captain Adkins has detained a pair of Rhulic barges carrying strange equipment we think is bound for Khador.”

“Bloody Searforge Commission,” Magnus said. “Playing both sides against the middle, no doubt.”

“The Resistance has been trading with certain factions of Hammerfall for some time. Primarily for arms and munitions,” Ashlynn added, frowning. “We can’t afford to pay what they want for men and machines.”

“Adkins is holding them until an envoy from Rhul explains what they’re carrying,” Stryker continued. He wasn’t ready to share his true fears with his commanders yet, not until those fears were confirmed or, better yet, denied.

“You think it’ll come to a fight?” Magnus asked.

“Not right away, but Rhul isn’t happy about us blockading the river, and if they feel inclined to remove that blockade, the clans certainly have the firepower to do it.”

“That’s the last thing we need,” Maddox said.

“Agreed, but compared to the Khadoran Army closing in, it’s just another a drop in the bucket,” Magnus said. “What are your orders, Lord General?”

The grave look on his face told Stryker that he already knew.

“We must hold Riversmet as long as possible and delay Strakhov

from joining the Khadoran forces in Merywyn. We need to give Lord General Duggan as much time as possible to attack the capital and rally the Resistance forces within.”

Ashlynn said, “There aren’t many there, but some of our best fighters are in Merywyn. They’ll create havoc from within, I can assure you.”

“What of the citizens of Riversmet?” Maddox asked.

“We give them a choice,” Stryker said. “They can stay and help defend the city, or they can make their way south to Merywyn.”

“That’s not much of a choice,” Magnus said.

“I agree, but these are the options before us.”

The room grew quiet again as each of them considered the course that lay ahead. Death would constantly hang like a shroud in their minds, but the thought of failure to king and country or to the cause weighed more heavily on them.

“My orders, then, are simple,” Stryker said. “We stand, and we fight.”

AT TIMES IT SEEMED TO STRYKER that his life was a terrible loop, repeating the same horrible events over and over. It had not been that long ago when he had stared out over the walls of Riversmet at a gigantic Khadoran army, come to destroy everything he had worked for. Now, another army, larger than the first, rumbled like a mechanized red wave toward Riversmet, inexhaustible and implacable.

He had resumed his position atop the Great Gate, a fortress-like structure that protected the largest bridge over the confluence of rivers that gave Riversmet its name. The Khadorans had destroyed the other bridges big enough to support warjacks and large numbers of troops long before Stryker had first liberated the city, and they would have destroyed this one if he didn't stop them.

The last time he and all of Riversmet had faced Khador, the city had been in a much better state. Now its walls were falling, its defenders few, and its citizens assured of nothing but the threat of total destruction. He'd won that first battle due in large part

to Magnus' use of Devil's Gasp to kill thousands of Khadoran troops after they'd entered the city. That still sickened him, but it had led to victory. There would be no diabolical surprise for the Khadorans this time; no, this time, they would grind the city and its people to dust.

He'd spoken to the elders of Riversmet and given them a choice: stay and fight or flee south. Many had chosen to stay, and though he would do his best to protect them, the casualties would be monumental. He admired their courage; Riversmet had been seized by Khador once already, all but leveled when liberated by Cygnar, and here its people were again, on the precipice of more death and destruction. Yet they stayed, no matter the cost.

Part of him wished they had *all* abandoned their home. It would make defending the city easier, but then again *he* wouldn't leave *his* home in the same situation. He would fight. He would stay. No matter the cost.

"So many," Lieutenant William Harcourt said, his face pale. He stood next to Stryker on the forward battlement of the Great Gate.

"We knew it would be," Stryker said. "But we have the Great Gate."

The bridge and the Great Gate were the only way to get anything heavy, like warjacks and artillery, into the city. That they controlled it was one of the few advantages they had. Strakhov shouldn't be able to send infantry and warjacks into the city from multiple directions, but he'd hardly need to. Stryker couldn't meet him in the open—he didn't have the men for that. The Khadoran commander could simply sit back and pound the city to rubble with artillery. It was clear they no longer prioritized taking it intact for their own use. Stryker had seen firsthand what a concentrated Khadoran barrage could do at Elsinberg. They'd reduced the city to ash and gravel and destroyed most of the army he'd commanded.

"And I thought Rynyr was bad," Harcourt said. Below, near the gate, a sharp hiss of steam sounded. Ol' Rowdy had sensed his warcaster's fretful state.

"Rynyr *was* bad. This is worse," Stryker said and then regretted

it. Harcourt blanched and put a hand on the nearest crenellation for support.

“Lieutenant, I’ve seen worse odds and survived. Despite fear, despite hopelessness, we have a duty to Cygnar and to the people of this city. We must hold as long as possible.”

Harcourt nodded and took a shaky breath. “Their guns will be in range soon.”

“Major Magnus will delay them,” Stryker assured him. Magnus would lead some of the Storm Lances and a few of their light warjacks to target the Khadoran artillery. If he could destroy some of it or keep them from targeting the city, even for a few hours, it would buy some time. Ashlynn d’Elyse would hold the interior of the city, using primarily her own troops and warjacks that had survived Rynyr. When the Great Gate fell, Stryker would fall back and join her to make the Khadorans pay in a bloody street-to-street battle. It was a losing proposition any way he looked at it. He’d save as many civilians as he could and hope Strakhov would not waste more men and resources than necessary driving them out.

The bulk of the remaining Cygnaran forces were assembled behind the gate. Storm lances, trencher infantry, and all the heavy warjacks they had left. Maddox commanded there. When the Khadorans breached the city, she would be the one to meet them. Colonel Hughs had installed artillery batteries near intact portions of the outer wall. He didn’t have the range or numbers to do much damage to the Khadorans, but he might slow their advance.

“There’s not much more to see here,” Stryker said. He’d climbed the battlement to get a look at the approaching army, and now, He’d seen more than enough. “Let’s join Maddox below.”

They climbed down, and Stryker sensed the presence of the two Defenders he commanded. The warjacks were two of the five heavies they still had, not counting Rowdy. Maddox commanded a Cyclone and a pair of lighter Chargers, and Magnus had taken the rest of their light warjacks, two Hunters and another Charger. It was a tiny number of warjacks to stand against the dozens Strakhov and his ’jack marshals had at their disposal.

Ranks of trenchers and Stormblades filled the space behind the Great Gate, and they parted to let Stryker and Harcourt through. Stryker offered a quick word of greeting or paused to grasp the forearm of a soldier he'd fought beside in a past battle. He saw fear in the eyes of his troops but resolve as well. They would fight, and they would fight well.

Harcourt greeted the soldiers in a similar fashion, though his manner was more casual. He was new to them, and his rapid promotion after the discovery of his warcaster talent could present problems for some veterans. To Stryker's surprise and pleasure, the soldiers responded to the young warcaster with an easy enthusiasm. Some of them had seen him fight alongside Ol' Rowdy in Rynyr. There, Harcourt had acquitted himself well, and stories like that spread quickly through an army. Bravery in an officer, even a young one, always commanded respect.

"Lord General," Maddox called out from the other side of the square. The warcaster's hulking Cyclone loomed over the ranks of soldiers, and her voice carried with a drill sergeant's authority.

She hurried up to him, her eyes bright with excitement and something else, something he hadn't seen in some time. Hope.

"What is it, Major?" Stryker said.

"Sir, we have some interesting reports coming in from our forward scouts," Maddox said. "The message has been relayed through our scouting network, so the information is a day old at least."

"Noted. Tell me."

"There's another army on the move from the west," she said.

Stryker's guts roiled with nausea. He expected Khadoran forces to come from Laedry, but the possibility that more Khadoran troops might come from cities close to the border, such as Rorchik, remained a terrifyingly distinct possibility.

Maddox sensed his worry and shook her head. "Not Khadoran, sir. Something else."

"What? Who?"

"The reports are . . . strange. They describe warjacks and troops matching no known configuration."

Cygnar had intelligence on both the Retribution of Scyrah and the Convergence of Cyriss, two strange new military forces that had appeared in the Iron Kingdoms in recent years. In Stryker's mind, that meant the identity of the army approaching from the west could be only one thing.

"It's Lukas di Morray," Stryker said. "It has to be."

"Sir, you may be right, but we don't know for sure," Maddox said, her personal hope giving way to an officer's caution. "It could be troops from the Crucible Guard, but with no message from di Morray and no way to know for sure . . ."

"The scouts would have recognized anything else," Stryker said, as much to himself as to her. He felt a distant surge in his chest that seemed like hope. "It's them. Do you have numbers?"

Maddox nodded. "Could be as many as five thousand, though there are many strange machines with them."

"Strakhov may not have the same reports, so we can't let him prepare. We have to hit him hard, tie him up, so he can't commit any of his forces to attacking di Morray when he arrives."

"How do we do that?" Harcourt said.

Stryker pointed to the huge steel-and-wood doors of the Great Gate. "We give him the bridge."

THE ORDERS CAME FROM A STORM LANCE who had almost ridden his horse to death reaching Magnus and his troops from Riversmet. They were still to hit the artillery if they could, the orders stated, but their primary goal now was to draw as many enemy troops back toward the city and the bridge as they could.

Magnus dismissed the Storm Lance and surveyed the threat before him. The Khadoran Army moved in, and their lines were heavy with Man-O-War, likely drawn from Laedry. There were less cavalry than the first time Khador had besieged Riversmet, and the light infantry was composed of large numbers of assault kommandos rather than Winter Guard. Strakhov favored the faster-moving kommandos, and their presence in the army was no surprise. Strakhov had been smart with his forces—he'd put his artillery wagons and troops right in the middle of a large force of Man-O-War. They'd be hard to get to without cutting through some of Khador's toughest warriors.

Magnus had his own troops, a hundred Storm Lances supported by trencher infantry and commandoes arrayed on the

right flank of the Khadoran Army. It was thinnest there, and their best shot at getting to the artillery.

“Captain Archer,” Magnus said. He was afoot and had to look up at the Storm Lance captain. “You’re going to take your lances right into their teeth. Hit them hard and make a hole. I’ll give you some cover with the warjacks and follow after.”

“Yes, sir,” she said.

“Make one run at it then pull back.”

“Sir?” Archer said. “I thought our mission was to do as much damage to the artillery as possible.”

“It was,” he said. “But we might have friends on the way, so we need to make Strakhov think that’s our objective, and then pull back to the city. To the gate.”

She rode down the line of Storm Lances, relaying his orders. Magnus hadn’t served with Archer long—she was one of Stryker’s—but he’d seen her fight and command, and she was formidable in both circumstances.

The Khadorans had seen him and likely divined his intentions. “Brigland,” Magnus said. “You get all that?”

The former sea dog nodded. He’d settled into a role of leadership among the trenchers; they respected his down-to-earth style and his unrelenting ferocity in battle. “I did, sir. We’ve got your back.”

Magnus turned to the trollkin near him. “Horgrum, I want you to blast anything that gets too close to me while I’m cutting through the Man-O-War Archer leaves behind.”

The big trollkin rumbled his assent. “I will destroy any who threaten you.”

“Just the ones who get the drop on me,” Magnus clarified. He took his entire command in with one sweep of his hand. “All right. Let’s go make a mess.”

He raised his arm and let it fall. The Storm Lances started forward, Captain Archer in the lead. Shells from Man-O-War shield cannons blossomed ahead, though well short. They’d soon enough take their toll.

The Storm Lances broke into a gallop, and Magnus started forward, his warjacks surrounding him in a protective shell. He

reached out to one of the pair of Hunters he commanded and targeted a Man-O-War kovnik shouting orders on the right flank. Three hundred yards away, the kovnik took a shell to the breastplate and came apart in a spray of blood and pieces of armor.

“There’s a good start,” Magnus said and broke into a sprint, wincing as the accumulation of old injuries and age sent spasms of pain through his body. These days, it felt like the only thing holding him together was his armor and his unwillingness to stop. He drew Foecleaver from his back and ran through the catalog of spells in his mind. He’d need to get a lot closer for most of them.

He pushed all his warjacks to open fire, lobbing shells from the Charger’s twin cannons and picking his targets—officers, when possible—with the Hunters’ more accurate long-range guns. The Man-O-War line faltered for a few precious seconds under the barrage, just as the Storm Lances made contact, hitting the Khadoran line in a tight wedge. Their electro lances sparked bright blue as they smashed through shields and breastplates, skewering the soldiers behind them.

Magnus targeted the Khadoran troops to the right and left of the Storm Lances with his warjacks’ weapons, keeping the cavalry from getting swamped. It was like spitting into an ocean—there were just too many enemies on the field.

The trenchers behind him fired their weapons as they surged ahead, an orderly shoot-run-shoot pattern that peppered the enemy line with a steady stream of bullets.

Archer and the Storm Lances reached the first set of artillery wagons, and their electro lances lashed them with bolts of galvanic energy.

Magnus didn’t have time to see how much damage Archer had delivered because a line of Man-O-War shields loomed ahead. Behind them rose a pair of towering red shapes, Juggernaut warjacks armed with axes large enough to cut a man in half with a single swipe or reduce a light warjack to scrap and shrapnel.

The warjacks would play hell with Archer’s Storm Lances, so they became Magnus’ immediate target. Runes spun around

his body as he called on his magic and unleashed it. Ahead, the obliteration spell exploded beneath the feet of the nearest Man-O-War, tossing them away like armored rag dolls and creating a path straight to the Juggernauts.

Magnus dared to hope he'd killed the enemy warjack's 'jack marshal in the blast. He took Foecleaver in both hands and pushed his Charger into a headlong rush at the first Juggernaut. The Charger struck the Juggernaut with its battle hammer, just above its tiny head, denting the hull but not doing any major damage. It distracted the huge machine long enough for Magnus to close and slash Foecleaver across the Juggernaut's right arm, cutting through armor and the hydraulic lines giving power to the limb wielding its axe. Sparks flew and fluid gushed, and the warjack's arm fell limp at its side. Magnus ducked beneath a heavy strike from its left fist and then reached out to his two Hunters. Their cannons sounded, and their armor-piercing shells blasted into and through the Juggernaut's hull, knocking it backward.

Magnus caught movement from the corner of his right eye and whirled to face it. A Man-O-War kovnik charged him, his huge axe held high. The veteran Khadoran soldier had gotten close while Magnus dealt with the Juggernauts. He brought Foecleaver around in a desperate parry, wincing as the heavy mechanical axe smashed into and through his parry and then through his power field, knocking him backward and off balance.

The kovnik charged again as a distant yet mighty report sounded. Suddenly, the kovnik's right knee disappeared in a spray of blood and shrapnel. He fell forward on to his shield.

Magnus didn't hesitate. He rushed forward and swung Foecleaver in a low arc, removing the top half of the Khadoran's head.

Magnus stopped, took a ragged breath and saluted, knowing Horgrum would see it.

He refocused. The trenchers had reached the Khadorans, and Brigland formed them into firing lines. They dumped round after round into the enemy. Now the Man-O-War shield cannons took their toll within the ranks of the Cygnaran soldiers, burning and

blasting them. Despite this decimation, they would need to hold a little longer.

Archer wheeled and led her Storm Lances back toward Magnus. Behind her, the flaming wreck of three artillery wagons burned.

Magnus fell back, pulling his warjacks with him. They had critically damaged one of the Juggernauts, but the other remained functional, though much slower than its Cygnaran counterparts. The army defending Riversmet was, on the whole, faster and more mobile, and though they couldn't stand toe-to-toe with the Khadoran front line, they could more effectively utilize hit-and-run tactics.

"Pull them back," Magnus shouted as the Storm Lances thundered past his positions, and he heard Brigland sound the retreat.

They had bloodied Strakhov's nose but had done no real damage; assault kommandos hurried en masse to the right flank to give chase to the fleeing Cygnarans.

"Good," Magnus said aloud. "Let's see how far they'll follow."

“THESE AREN’T SOLDIERS, MARSHAL,” Captain Reece Keller said and swept an arm over the assembled group of Riversmet citizens standing in a ragged clump behind a line of Llaelese soldiers and Steelhead halberdiers gathered in the city’s main square.

Ashlynn was grateful the Steelhead captain had remained in Riversmet along with a few hundred of his troops, but his blunt and often crass assessment of military matters irked her to no end. “I am well aware of that, Captain, but they fight for their home. Would you deny them that opportunity?”

“I must agree,” Captain Vayne di Brascio said, glowering at Keller. The Amethyst Rose gun mage was a Llaelese Resistance fighter who had once fought with Ashlynn’s father. Where she served, he served. His skill and cool-headed leadership were welcome additions to her meager forces.

Keller shook his head. “Only half of them even have firearms. The rest are armed with—” He paused and then pointed to a portly man in ill-fitting shirt of what looked like chainmail. “That man has a butcher’s cleaver.”

“Then keep them behind your line, and hope the fighting doesn’t come to that,” Ashlynn said, knowing it might. Her Mule, Soldier, vented steam and took a step toward Captain Keller, sensing her frustration with the Steelhead captain. “Stand down, Soldier,” she said and patted the Mule’s hull. It raised its mace in a clumsy salute and stepped back.

Keller grinned and saluted the Mule. “My apologies, Soldier.” Then to Ashlynn, he said, “You know I’ll follow your commands, but I have to get my money’s worth first.”

“Yes, an exhausting trait,” she said, “especially in a mercenary.”

The sound of distant thunder rose over the city, and plumes of black smoke rose into the air.

“That’ll be Hughs,” Ashlynn said. “The Khadorans are close enough to the city for artillery.”

“Too bloody close for my comfort,” Keller said.

They stood in the town’s central plaza, surrounded by houses and businesses, most of which were recently rebuilt. The four main streets of Riversmet split off in the cardinal directions, allowing Ashlynn to quickly move troops to any area of the city. Between what remained of the forces she’d commanded at Rynyr and Keller’s Steelheads, she had roughly a thousand troops. Her other assets were the Mule, Soldier, and an ancient Talon warjack they’d found inert and cobwebbed in an old bunker from before Khador’s first invasion. They’d managed to get it working, but connecting to it felt like stepping back in time; its primitive cortex was even more simplistic than Soldier’s, who was two centuries old. Beyond that, she had two hundred men and women from Riversmet, able-bodied but lacking any military training. When the Khadorans entered the city, the enemy would make short work of the conscripts.

From the south, hooves on cobblestones rang through the plaza, and one of the Steelhead cavalry riders reined up near Ashlynn and Keller.

“We’ve got contact near the docks to the south,” he said, his face grim.

Ashlynn had placed Major Cocteau and some of her best troops there. The river was narrowest where the main southern

bridge had once stood; it was the most likely place the Khadorans would attack. Strakhov would not send his entire army against the city in a frontal assault. No, he would look for other ways to attack them.

“Report,” Keller said.

“They brought their own bridges,” the Steelhead horseman said, his eyes wide with amazement.

Wayne di Brascio shook his head. “We should have expected as much from the likes of Strakhov.”

Ashlynn bristled at the comment, though she couldn’t argue with the gun mage’s assessment. They *should* have expected something devious from an enemy who had spent his entire career as a spy and assassin.

“How many enemy troops?” she asked the Steelhead.

“Maybe a thousand,” the Steelhead responded. “Looks like assault kommandos, some of ’em in black armor.”

“Strakhov’s pet Kommandos,” Ashlynn’s hand rose to her breastplate, hovering over the area where she’d been shot in Rynyr by a Death Whisper carbine.

“What are your orders, Marshal?” di Brascio said.

She made her decision. “Keller, stay here and guard the plaza,” Ashlynn said. “I’m taking five hundred men to the docks. We can’t let the Khadorans get farther into the city. Captain di Brascio, you’re with me.”

Keller nodded. “We’ll hold here. Good luck, Marshal.”

...

“I HATE THIS BLOODY BRIDGE,” Stryker said under his breath as he deflected a cut from a Man-O-War annihilator axe, side stepped, and then opened the man from crown to crotch with Quicksilver.

Beside him, Harcourt summoned a spell with one hand and launched an arcane bolt at an uhlan, blasting him from the saddle. “Sorry, sir, I didn’t hear you.”

Stryker opened his mouth to reply, but a blast from a Man-O-War shield cannon crashed against his power field and drove him back a step. One of his Defenders stepped in and pulverized the

Khadoran with its shock hammer.

The bridge swarmed with Khadorans, mostly Man-O-War, but ranks of uhlans and assault kommandos weren't far behind. Strakhov had also committed some of his heavy warjacks to the bridge as soon as Stryker had made it clear he would meet him out on the open.

Strakhov might sense a trap, but he also might not care. He had enough men and machines that any losses he suffered on the bridge would be miniscule compared to Stryker's. At some point there would be no more Cygnarans to fight, and Strakhov could march into the city and take his time mopping up any resistance.

If he knew about the army on the way, the army Stryker had bet everything would be the Crucible Guard, Strakhov would not have committed so many troops. Stryker wondered if the defeat Strakhov had suffered at Rynyr by Stryker's hands had influenced his decision to commit so many troops to the bridge.

Stryker had made himself very visible just in case it motivated his opponent.

He'd rushed his own forces to the halfway point of the bridge, personally leading all that remained of their Stormblades. He had held Maddox, the rest of the Storm Lances, and most of the trenchers in reserve behind the gate for a brutal counterattack if they were driven back into the city.

But it might never reach that point. They wouldn't last much longer.

Stryker stepped back again and pushed his warjacks forward to fill the space in their front line. The Khadoran line opened for a moment and the hulking shape of a warjack came barreling through. Its twin axes and archaic design marked it as a Berserker, an aging warjack chassis that had an infamous reputation for cortex failure followed by catastrophic explosion.

The Berserker's 'jack marshal bellowed orders at the machine as it rushed one of Stryker's Defenders. Stryker fired the warjacks' heavy barrels over the heads of the Stormblades surrounding it, and the shells struck the charging Berserker, blackening its armor and denting its hull. It did not slow.

Galvanic blasts from storm glaives peppered the Berserker, further scorching its armor but failing to do any appreciable damage.

Stryker summoned a spell. Runes formed around his forward Defender, magic flowing along its galvanic relays, quickening its stride and adding terrible power to its limbs. It surged forward, raising its heavy barrel to intercept one of the Berserker's axes. Then it brought its shock hammer down on the Khadoran 'jack's head, flattening it and most of the hull behind it. The Berserker toppled backward, Khadoran troops scattering as it slammed into the bridge, pouring smoke from its damage.

Stryker braced himself for an explosion, but it did not come . . . from the Berserker.

"Incoming!" Harcourt shouted, and the terrible whistling shriek of artillery fire drowned out every other sound. The shell hit some fifty yards behind Stryker's position, detonating with a thunderous roar. The shock wave snatched him up and flung him forward. He slammed into the hull of his Defender and collapsed to the ground, gasping for air.

He struggled to his feet, clinging to the Defender's hull and turned to look behind him. A massive crater pocked the surface of the bridge, and the bodies of Stormblades lay scattered around it, scorched and still.

Harcourt stumbled up to him, his right arm dangling at his side. He'd been closer to the blast, and Ol' Rowdy's dented anterior hull meant the warjack had interposed itself between the warcaster and the exploding shell.

"Victor," Harcourt muttered, grimacing in pain.

The towering shape of a Victor colossal rose over the ranks of Khadoran troops at the other end of the bridge. It was not alone—another twenty-foot monstrosity, the more common Conquest, plodded along behind it. Both colossals were equipped with gargantuan cannons.

"We need to get closer to the Khadorans and see if Strakhov will shell his own men," Stryker said.

Harcourt scowled. "I have a bad suspicion he will."

“You may be right,” Stryker said, grimacing at the thought of even more death, “but at least he won’t be shelling the city.”

MAGNUS WATCHED THE CANNON atop the Victor's hull go off with a bright ball of flame and an ear-rending boom. The shell landed in the middle of the Cygnaran forces on the bridge, sending bright tentacles of flame in all directions. Soldiers and pieces of soldiers went pin wheeling off the bridge to the water below.

"He's going to get blasted to pieces," Archer said. The Storm Lance captain's face was ashen. Stryker would be in the middle of that blast, leading his troops from the front. Magnus had halted their retreat from the Khadoran right flank to regroup and decide where to go next. They'd succeeded in their initial mission, wrecked some of Strakhov's artillery, and had drawn a good portion of his troops back toward the city. Behind them came a tidal wave of Khadoran troops. For the moment, they could outmaneuver them, but Strakhov's army operated like a giant amoeba, extending groping pseudopods to strike at multiple parts of the city at once without sacrificing its overall integrity.

"We've got to give him more time, let him regroup," Magnus said. They were a few hundred yards from the base of the bridge.

Thousands of Khadoran troops had massed there, and the two colossals along with a half a dozen heavy warjacks crowded forward. Strakhov would be close by commanding the Victor and Conquest, no doubt wanting to exact some personal vengeance after being thwarted in Rynyr.

“What do you suggest?” Archer asked.

“Ride straight at them, cut through them, tie them up,” Magnus said. “Anything to keep those colossals focused on us.”

“We’ll be ground to paste,” she said, though he sensed no hesitancy in her voice. She simply stated fact.

“Likely, but what choice do we have? Might as well take as many of those bastards with us as we can. Slow them down, give the First Army a chance to do some damage in Merywyn.”

“This is the way a warrior dies,” Horgrum said, nodding sagely.

“I’d rather not get killed, of course, but I’ll follow your commands to the end, sir,” Brigland said.

Magnus chuckled. “Well, maybe that end will just be you taken prisoner instead.”

“We were talking about dying. No reason to bring up terrible possibilities, sir,” Brigland said and shuddered.

Magnus looked around him, at the men he’d assembled from the dregs of society, mercenaries who had found a place in the Cygnaran Army, outcasts who had found both purpose and dignity. He could do worse than to die with these people.

“Captain Archer,” he said, “lead us in.”

She saluted, her own smile full of grim pride. “Yes, Major.”

...

STRYKER WATCHED CAPTAIN ARCHER’S STORM LANCES slam into the Khadorans near the far side of the bridge. A wave of trenchers followed, and the bright blast of an obliteration spell came next. The eruption of arcane force painted the two Khadoran colossals in azure light and hurled enemy soldiers in all directions.

“Forward!” Stryker cried and waved Quicksilver over his head. The colossals would need to focus on Magnus for the time being, giving his own forces some space to push ahead. A fierce cry

echoed from the Stormblades behind him, and Stryker charged, his two Defenders thundering toward the enemy, shock hammers rising and falling.

Harcourt and Ol' Rowdy ran next to him, the big Ironclad blowing gouts of steam in a shrill war cry of his own.

They hurtled into the Khadoran line in a chaos of hacking blades and bolts of galvanic energy. The battle became a riot of indistinct moments as muscle memory and reflex took over. Form and skill became lost in the brutal hack and slash of melee. Stryker's warcaster armor protected him from most blows, so he let them rain down while he lashed out with blade, fist, and spell, weaving a mosaic of death and fury that left shattered bodies in his wake.

The battle fury took over Harcourt as well, and he fought beneath the sweep of Ol' Rowdy's hammer, killing any Khadoran who made it past the warjack's weapon or fist. Despite his injury, he delivered blows with a workman-like efficiency that even Ashlynn d'Elyse would appreciate.

Stryker's vision split between his warjacks and his own senses, an effort that had become second nature. Sometimes he lost track of whether it was his blade or one of his Defender's shock hammers that took the life of an enemy.

Yet one coherent thought remained through the battle haze.
Hold. Hold. Hold.

The men and women around him fought with the same fury, galvanized by their officers' wrath, and for a moment, the Khadorans fell back, put off guard by the ferocity of the attack. Then that moment passed, and the annihilator axes and shield cannons of the Man-O-War made their presence known.

Stormblades fell dead and dying all around Stryker. There was no pushing back the inexorable tide of armored bodies. He missed a parry of an annihilator axe, and the flat of the blade struck his skull, knocking him to his knees and sending the world into a dizzying spin.

He raised his blade to ward off another Man-O-War axe, but it was a clumsy attempt, and the heavy weapon cut through his

power field and scored a line across his breastplate. The blow crushed the wind from his lungs and knocked him onto his back.

Would this be his death? To die on a bridge he had taken from an enemy only to defend and lose again?

Stryker heaved himself from the ground to die on his feet with a blade in hand.

A distinct and distant rumbling shook the stone bridge. He expected to see the hulking form of a Khadoran warjack thundering toward him. Instead, his Stormblades fell back a step, seemingly confused. He saw the same reaction in the Khadoran line. Hesitation. Uncertainty.

The bridge shook, vibrating with a steady rumble not from anything on the bridge. The fighting lulled and then ground to a halt as both sides hurried to ascertain if their opponents had unleashed some new weapon against them.

The Khadorans fell back some thirty feet, and Stryker took the opportunity to assess the damage they'd done. He'd lost a hundred men, at least, and one of his Defenders was badly damaged. They wouldn't survive another push.

"What is it?" Harcourt asked, limping up next to Stryker. A scarred and dented Ol' Rowdy loomed over his diminutive master.

"I don't know," Stryker said. The reverberations intensified and a sound almost like breathing, slow and rhythmic, joined that distant rumble. It reminded him of a steam engine.

A sudden explosion bloomed near the end of the Khadoran forces, close to the bridge, erupting not in flames but in a geyser of searing liquid. Another followed and then another, and Stryker traced the path of one globule of flammable liquid before it hit the Khadoran troops. It made no sound like incoming artillery would, no shrill whine as a metal shell did when it cut the air. This was silent death—until it hit, and then the screams of dying men and women carried over the battlefield even at this distance.

Squat metallic shapes appeared on the horizon, and the breathing sound intensified. Gouts of flame erupted from the shapes, and they advanced in a way Stryker had never seen. Not walking like a warjack or moving on wheels like other battle

vehicles. They *glided* over the ground with a whoosh of venting steam, like locomotives cut free from the rails.

Stryker felt a surge of hope in his chest. He raised Quicksilver aloft. “Forward, Cygnar! We are not alone!”

...

ASHLYNN PARRIED A CUT from an assault kommando’s gun blade, knocking it askew with Nemesis and then snapping her wrist over in a cut that carved through the enemy’s helmet and skull. The man fell away, but another took his place. Bullets from the kommandos not involved in melee laced the air around her, pinging off her power field or finding a more lethal terminus in the soldiers fighting beside her.

The docks swarmed with combatants, and she and her forces had arrived just as the Khadorans secured a floating bridge spanning the river. It was crudely constructed, though sturdy and wide enough to send three men abreast over it. The Khadorans, knowing their enemy’s deficiencies, had placed two Destroyer warjacks to keep her from swarming the bridge and knocking it into the river. On the other side, the reds were busy putting another bridge into action.

She felt Soldier petitioning her to engage the enemy warjacks. Still, she held him back. The bridge would not support his weight, or the Khadorans would have sent their own heavies across. She instead used his steam lobber to slow the advance of Khadoran troops streaming onto the docks or target the bridge itself. The latter was not an easy target to hit.

“They’re going to overwhelm us, Marshal,” Major Cocteau said as he fired his hand cannon, dropping an assault kommando about to run a Llaeese solder through. The aging Resistance leader fought next to her, braving the front lines without the benefit of warcaster armor.

Ashlynn lunged forward, skewering another kommando and knocking him off the docks where the weight of his kit dragged him beneath the water.

“We’ll hold as long as we’re able,” she shouted but then winced

and the Destroyers let loose their bombards. She grabbed Major Cocteau and hurled him to the ground, throwing herself on top of him. One of the shells detonated within a few yards, blasting the facing off a nearby building. The shockwave hit her power field, rattled her teeth, and flung Llaelese bodies in all directions.

She rolled away and stumbled to her feet, relieved to see Cocteau do the same. Her power field had saved him, though a steady trickle of blood flowed from his right ear.

“Regroup,” she cried as dozens of Khadoran troops surged forward to fill the space left by the Destroyer’s attack. She pushed Soldier forward to meet them, and the Mule swung his battle mace in a wide arc, killing two kommandos and sending the rest reeling back to recover.

Weary Llaelese soldiers joined her to make another ragged line. The short street that led to the waterfront was narrow enough they couldn’t be easily overwhelmed, but it packed them in and made them a prime target for artillery. She concentrated and summoned her magic, limning the closest Khadoran troops in golden light, blinding them with its brilliance. It would keep them from shooting or defending themselves properly for a few moments. Llaelese rifles sounded all around her, and a dozen assault kommandos fell dead.

“Incoming!” Cocteau shouted and leapt in front of her, grunting as something struck him in the shoulder. Her power field flared in front of her face as whatever hit Cocteau struck her as well, though it did not penetrate her arcane defenses. He tumbled backward, and Ashlynn caught him. She spied a pair of black-armored assault kommandos before they melted back into the sea of enemies. She recognized their weapons—Death Whisper carbines.

Ashlynn pulled Cocteau back into the mass of her own troops, and they stepped aside to let her through, closing the gap afterward. She’d been holding the ancient Talon they discovered in reserve, but now she sent it forward to join Soldier.

Cocteau had a bullet hole high on his breastplate. His breath came in bubbling wheezes. She flipped him over and found an

identical hole on his back. That armor-piercing bullet had been meant for her, and he'd slowed it with his own body so her power field would absorb its impact.

"It went straight through, you old fool," she said.

He coughed blood and smiled. "Better me than you, Marshal. I'll survive."

They were desperately short on medics, so she pointed at a pair of burly soldiers. "Get him back to Keller."

"Marshal, no . . ." Cocteau began.

"That is an order," Ashlynn said, "for all three of you."

The two soldiers hauled Cocteau away, and she returned her focus to the battle, assessing it through Soldier's eyes. The Destroyers were moving away from the first bridge, and the Khadorans had deployed another about thirty yards from the first, forcing her to make a decision: split her meager forces to defend both points or focus what she had here. Both were losing propositions.

"Captain di Brascio," she called out, and the Amethyst Rose gun mage rushed to her side. He'd been supporting a squad of Llaelese regulars with his magelock and mechanika saber.

"I am here, Marshal," he said.

"Take two squads and hit that other bridge. Hold them as long as possible."

A grave look came over the gun mage's face. He knew what that order meant, and it was a knife in Ashlynn's heart to give it.

"It will be as you say, Marshal," di Brascio said. As he turned to go, Ashlynn reached out to grasp his hand.

"Thank you, Captain. It's been an honor to fight with you." She swallowed hard, her voice shaking.

Di Brascio took her hand in both of his and gently kissed the back of it.

"The honor has all been mine, Lady d'Elyse," he whispered and then sprinted away, shouting orders. A cluster of soldiers followed him down a side street and disappeared.

A sudden jolt to her mind told Ashlynn her Talon had taken a direct hit from something big. She focused to peer through

its eyes just in time to see another Destroyer bombard shell descending. Then. . . nothing. The Talon's presence disappeared from her awareness.

Soldier still battled, smashing enemy soldiers out of his way. She redirected him toward the first enemy bridge and then raced to join him.

They faced a massive swell of enemy troops. Hundreds had crossed and some had taken cover behind the copious crates and equipment on the docks; others advanced toward her, shields locked, in a mobile firing line.

Ashlynn called on another spell as she reached the closest enemy troops, turning her blade and body into a flashing blur of mechanical death. Eight kommandos fell dead, and she moved on, conserving her arcane energies for another scything attack. The next group of kommandos contained one of the black-armored elites, and she killed him first, cutting his Death Whisper carbine in half before ramming three feet of steel through his body.

She caught the bright muzzle flare of another rifle, and her quicken spell let her see the bullet screaming in at her. She twisted aside, and the slug hit her power field, pierced, and grazed her left thigh instead of putting a hole through her belly. It was a grim reminder that more Death Whisper carbines were on the field. She persevered, letting her soldiers catch up to her for one final push before they were overwhelmed.

The faces of the men and women around her were steadfast, devoted, unwavering. She took a deep breath and raised Nemesis. "For Llael!"

They charged forward, stabbing and firing, her own blade reaping enemies with each step. Bullets struck her armor, failing to pierce it, but more bullets cut down men and women on all sides of her. Still they pressed in, cleaving deep into the enemy.

A terrible screeching noise settled over the battlefield, the awful sound of artillery, rockets, she thought.

And now they bomb us back to the Thousand Cities era, she thought. It's over.

She looked up. Dozens of arcing trails of flame rose high above

the city. As they descended, she realized they weren't rockets at all—they were soldiers in teal-and-gold armor with rockets affixed to their back.

More howled overhead, and as the first wave neared the ground, bright explosions rippled through the Khadoran ranks as the rocket soldiers dropped grenades before they landed.

The chatter of light carbines joined the explosions, and more rocket troops landed in front of the Khadoran bridge, spraying the enemy with bullets.

Behind her, the screeching howl of rockets rose as more soldiers from the sky descended. Some of her soldiers began to turn their weapons on the new arrivals.

"Hold!" she cried. "These are friends!"

The Khadorans had fallen back to deal with the new enemy attacking them from the other side of the river. Ashlynn fell back herself to meet a tall young woman with bright red hair in teal armor armed with a pair of carbines. The radiant crucible insignia of the Crucible Guard stood proud on her breastplate.

"Marshal d'Elyse," she said. "My name is Captain Elsa Swift. We're here to help."

THE RAILLESS LOCOMOTIVES swarmed ahead, unloading their cannons at the Khadoran Army, splattering them with alchemical hellfire.

Warjacks strode in between the strange battle engines, some with chassis Magnus recognized—Vanguards and Toros, though they were equipped with weaponry unlike any he had ever seen before. Heavy infantry followed, men and women encased in steel and bearing huge hammers.

They'd been fighting near the base of the bridge when Magnus called a retreat.

“Pull back,” he shouted. “Pull back toward the”—he realized he had no idea what to call his allies—“our new friends!”

The Khadorans, in disarray from the alchemical shelling, did not give chase, so Magnus led his trenchers in a tight line back toward the Crucible Guard. Captain Archer split her own forces into two lines to flank the infantry, giving them some cover from Khadoran fire.

Magnus reached the line of teal-armored warriors and

machines. One of the big locomotives slowed while the others continued forward, pounding the Khadorans with bright chemical blasts. The slowing locomotive pulled to a stop, and its top hatch opened. A woman's head appeared, smudged with grease and soot, and she climbed out of her vehicle. She wore a dark leather long coat, underneath which shone a breastplate and pauldrons.

"Major Asheth Magnus," she called out and hopped to the ground. "I'm Captain Eira Mackay of the Crucible Guard."

She strode forward and extended her hand, which Magnus took in both of his as he grinned. "Oh, Captain, you are quite a welcome sight."

Captain Mackay smiled. "I'm sorry to dispense with the niceties, but I need you to brief me on . . . this." She waved a hand at the sea of Khadoran soldiers, pulling back and away from the bridge as Strakhov regrouped in the face of a new and unexpected enemy.

"You've given the reds something to think about, so I definitely have time to get you caught up." He turned and saw Captain Archer riding toward him.

"Captain Archer, Captain Eira Mackay of the Crucible Guard," Magnus said.

Archer nodded at the captain. "These are quite some machines, Captain."

"The Railless Interceptors are some of our newest tech," she said and patted the hull of her machine. "Fast over just about any terrain and well equipped to handle just about any battlefield situation."

The nature of the Crucible Guard's technology fascinated Magnus, but they had other priorities.

"Lord General Stryker is holding the Great Gate." He pointed to the huge bridge spanning the river. "It's the only way to get heavy machinery and large numbers of troops into the city."

Blasts of galvanic energy and the thunderous crack of Defender heavy barrels were audible even at this distance, some thousand yards from the battle. Magnus wondered who was dying beneath those sounds—and if it was anyone he knew. "He can't hold for

long, and if Strakhov decides the bridge isn't worth the effort, he'll pull back and pound us to ash with artillery."

Mackay nodded. "We need to take that bridge then. We've reports of more troops entering the city from the south with makeshift bridges."

Magnus grimaced and said, "Marshal Ashlynn d'Elyse is probably up to her eyeballs in that particular problem."

"We've sent her some help. Maybe enough to turn the tide." The captain's eyes narrowed, and her jaw tightened. "Lukas di Morray dispatched me because we're based in Laeryn, but we don't have the manpower or the firepower to defeat Strakhov out in the open. We've set him back on his heels—now we need to fortify the city."

"You've got artillery with you?" Captain Archer asked.

"In a manner of speaking. The Railless Interceptors and our Vindicator warjacks can work in the same capacity, enough to keep Strakhov from getting too close with his own artillery."

"Any chance there are more on the way?" Magnus asked, realizing the Crucible Guard force was smaller than he'd first thought.

Mackay nodded, though cautiously. "Aurum Legate di Morray is leading another force equipped with some of our heaviest assets, including the new Vulcan colossals, but it will take them time to get here."

She paused then added, "Perhaps too much time."

"Then we need to drive straight at the bridge, push the Khadorans out of the way before they regroup, and meet Stryker in the middle," Magnus said. "Easy as falling off a log, right?"

"I concur, Major." Mackay climbed back atop her Interceptor. "Let's be about it."

...

"**I WANT THE WARJACKS IN FRONT,**" Stryker shouted. "Stormblades behind, ranks of five, glaive blasts at anything the 'jacks don't push back."

As he issued his orders, he advanced, jockeying his Defenders

into position. Harcourt had Ol' Rowdy out front as well, and the Ironclad vented steam and swished its hammer back and forth, agitated and eager.

Stryker called out, "We're pushing those bloody reds right into the Crucible Guard. Keep up the pressure!"

A hoarse cry sounded, and Stryker sent his warjacks charging ahead, following at a run. His whole body ached; he was little more than a collection of bruises and cuts beneath his armor, but he had to hold it all together a little longer.

The strange Crucible Guard vehicles were driving straight for the Khadoran flank on the other side of the bridge in a tight wedge, dumping alchemical blasts into the enemy ranks. The Khadorans, however, weren't sitting idle and taking the heat. Both colossals returned fire on this new threat—in fact, they'd already wrecked one of the Crucible Guard vehicles.

The Khadorans on the bridge shoved forward, desperate to gain the city and meet up with their forces attacking from the south. Stryker had reports that Ashlynn fought there alongside more Crucible Guard who had, amazingly, flown in like a hail of rockets. He didn't have time to give this very much thought, though—his warjacks made contact with the Khadoran line, and the battle consumed him.

The 'jacks were met by a line of annihilator axes arrayed like pikes. They pierced and jabbed at the Cygnaran machines. Stryker registered damage on both Defenders as the heavy mechanika axes took their toll, but the deadly sweep of the Destroyers' shock hammers crushed the life from two or three Khadorans for every hit they took in return.

The bridge was just wide enough for the warjacks to fight abreast, and the Stormblades loosed bolts of galvanic energy into the lines of Man-O-War at point-blank range.

"Stay here," Stryker said to Harcourt, who had been gamely running beside him. The young warcaster's face was pale and pinched. The wound he'd suffered caused him considerable pain. He opened his mouth to protest, and it pleased Stryker he wanted to fight on, but there was no reason to risk Harcourt. "Keep

Rowdy in it, but I need someone commanding back here. And that's you."

Stryker didn't give Harcourt a chance to argue and sprinted toward Rowdy, swinging Quicksilver at an assault kommando that had strayed too far from his comrades. He killed the man with a quick stroke, and then looked up at the Ironclad. "You miss me?"

Ol' Rowdy blew a blast of steam that carried a sarcastic note, and the world faded again to battle and blood.

...

MAGNUS SPREAD HIS OWN TROOPS among the Crucible Guards, supporting their heavy assault troopers with his lighter infantry. The trenchers commanded by Lieutenant Brigland laid down a suppressing line of fire. It allowed the Crucible troops to get close enough to smash the enemy with their thermal hammers, devastating weapons that produced a shimmering haze of heat in front of their wielders.

Captain Archer led a wave of Storm Lances ahead of the Railless Interceptors, drawing fire from the Khadoran troops and keeping them from concentrated on the vehicles.

Magnus had placed himself and his warjacks near those of his new allies. The 'jacks could be controlled by Captain Eira Mackay from within her Interceptor—he had a notion she might be a warcaster—or by the barked commands of 'jack marshals running alongside them. He would have preferred a few more heavy 'jacks, of course, especially as there seemed to be only one type among the Crucible Guard forces: a modification of the venerable Ordic Toro with alchemical sprayers attached to each fist. And they'd have to get close to use those. Strakhov had moved a large number of his own heavy warjacks to the bridge, and they would soon face Destroyer bombards and the heavy fire from both colossals.

Captain Archer made contact first. Her Storm Lances cut into the Khadoran line, pushing them back, but half a dozen of the valiant horsemen were killed by annihilator axes or uhlan pikes.

Next came the Interceptors. They ceased firing their alchemical

mortars twenty yards from the enemy to avoid hitting Captain Archer's troops. Then, like the implacable locomotives they resembled, they plowed into the Khadorans as mobile battering rams, crushing men and horses beneath them.

Magnus struck next, guiding his warjacks into melee, focusing his efforts on keeping the Khadorans from focusing theirs on the Interceptors. His Charger and Hunters, better equipped to attack enemies at range, were forced into risky melee, hewing and smashing with hammer and axe.

When the Crucible Guard warjacks joined the fray, scarlet plumes of alchemical liquid sprayed over the enemy, setting them ablaze. The dying screams of these men were hard for Magnus to hear. He had seen death in all its dark shapes on the battlefield, but burning alive was a fate too horrible to contemplate, even if those dying were the enemy.

They'd made a dent in the Khadoran line, driving them back as the wedge of Railless Interceptors pushed toward the bridge. There were still both colossals to deal with, but at least they couldn't use their cannons this close to their own troops. Still, the giant machines hardly needed such measures. The Conquest remained near the bridge while the Victor plunged in, scattering both Cygnaran and Crucible Guard troops out of the way. One titanic fist smashed an Interceptor, crushing it almost flat.

The Victor lifted its arm to destroy another Interceptor, but the Crucible Guard vehicle fired its mortar directly into the huge machine. The alchemical shell burst against the Victor's hull, causing it to miss with its gigantic fist. More of the Interceptors converged on the colossal, slowing their push toward the bridge.

Magnus rerouted his warjacks to aid the Interceptors firing at the Victor, keeping his eye on the Conquest that had not entered melee yet. He knew his light warjacks would be of little effect against the Victor, but he hoped they might draw its attacks to allow the Interceptors to push on. He spied Mackay's vehicle barreling toward the Victor and sprinted alongside it then leapt and grabbed a handhold on its hull. He climbed up and rapped his armored fist on the hatch.

It opened, almost pitching him off the moving machine. “Do you want to die from friendly fire? Just what in the hell are you doing?” Mackay shouted.

“Getting your attention,” he grunted. “Keep your Interceptors moving on the bridge. Don’t focus on the colossal.”

“That’s ridiculous. If I don’t, it’ll smash my Interceptors to pieces.”

“Only if you engage the bloody thing. That’s what Strakhov wants,” Magnus said, pointing. “Push to the bridge. Stryker is pushing from the other direction.”

Blasts of galvanic energy lanced into the Conquest as well as heavy barrel shells from Stryker’s Defenders. That would give Strakhov something to think about, Magnus thought.

Mackay didn’t seem to share his sentiment. “That’s all dandy, but what about the bloody Conquest?”

“When you get close enough, focus all your attacks on it. If we can get it out of the way, we’ll gain the bridge.”

She chewed her lip and ran a veteran’s eyes over the battlefield. She was obviously an able commander, and that left her with one sound decision to make. “If, you say. *If* you can get out of the way. All right. I’ll relay the order. Can you keep that Victor off me while we push on?”

“I’ll do my best,” Magnus said and grinned. He jumped off the Interceptor. The hatch closed.

Mackay must have had some way of communicating with the other Interceptors because they broke off their attack against the Victor almost immediately, streaming around its titanic legs, pushing forward again.

Magnus sighed. All he had to do now was take out a colossal with three light warjacks.

I’ve handled worse, he thought.

THE FIGHTING GREW FIERCER as they neared the other end of the bridge. The Khadorans weren't going to give it up easy, and the Conquest standing guard there would soon use its cannons if they cleared enough Khadoran troops out of the way.

Stryker parried an annihilator axe, pinning the haft with his quillons, and then rolled Quicksilver's point up into a brutal thrust that skewered the Man-O-War behind it. He'd learned a thing or two from working with Ashlynn on swordsmanship. He aimed another barrage from his Defenders' heavy barrels at the Conquest. The shells struck the right side of the colossal's hull, staggering it back a step, and destroying one its smaller field guns.

The Crucible Guard vehicles had evaded the Victor and continued their move toward the bridge. Strakhov's heavy warjacks had destroyed two of them, though the Crucible Guard had concentrated their alchemical mortar fire on a Juggernaut and reduced the warjack to steaming slag.

Now Stryker could see the bright flare of Magnus' obliteration spell and the three tiny blue dots of his light warjacks near the

Victor. Stryker shook his head. Magnus was clearly trying to keep the huge machine from attacking the Crucible Guard so they could reach the bridge.

“Noble,” he muttered. “Noble suicide.”

He ducked another annihilator axe just in time, and the crackle of energy from its mechanical head seared his face. He jerked Quicksilver up to defend himself, but Rowdy’s hammer came down with a thundering impact, crushing the man. The Ironclad blew an irritated blast of steam.

“Sorry, I’ll pay better attention,” Stryker said, wondering if it had been Harcourt or the old warjack acting on its own.

He plunged back into battle.

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THE FIRT MAKESHIFT BRIDGE had sunk—the Crucible Guard troops had blown it to pieces with alchemical grenades—and the Khadorans on the other shore were rerouting to the second bridge. There, Captain di Brascio and more of the rocket troops were holding fast. Ashlynn spied another floating bridge being carried forward by a group of Man-O-War, rushing it over to a different part of the river narrow enough to span.

“We need to stop those Man-O-War,” she said and pointed Nemesis at the enemy troops carrying the floating bridge. Captain Elsa Swift of the Crucible Guard fired a burst from one of her carbines, blasting a charging assault kommando off his feet, and then turned to where Ashlynn pointed.

“I agree, Marshal. And we need to get there fast.” She turned and shouted, “Rocketmen, squads two, three, and five—with me!”

Swift then grinned and held out her hand. “Can I give you a lift?”

Ashlynn realized what she meant and stepped close. The Rocketman captain wrapped both arms around her, and then the ground fell away in a whoosh of fire and noise.

It was like being shot out of a cannon. Ashlynn’s stomach churned as they arced over the warehouses and docks to the place where the Khadorans had positioned the next bridge.

They landed on the wooden docks with a teeth-rattling thud,

and Ashlynn stumbled away, dizzy and momentarily disoriented.

“Sorry,” Swift said, red-faced. “The rockets aren’t really designed to carry two.”

More Rocketmen landed around them and turned their carbines on the Khadorans across the river. The light rifles weren’t potent enough to penetrate Man-O-War armor, but they dropped lighter troops all around them.

“That armor is too tough,” Swift said, “and we can’t reach them with our grenades.”

“Let them get the bridge set up,” Ashlynn said, “and attempt to cross. I’ll hold them off, and then you and your men use your grenades to sink it.”

Swift nodded. “It might work.”

“It had better. I’m running short on ideas.”

The Khadorans put the bridge in the water. It was about eight feet wide, large enough to allow two or three soldiers to walk abreast. The Man-O-War anchored it on the far side, mostly using their heavy armored bodies.

Assault kommandos began to cross, locking their shields to create an impenetrable bulwark. The carbine fire from the Rocketmen pinged off the metal surface without any appreciable effect. More assault kommandos came across the bridge, and, out of dire necessity, Ashlynn rushed to meet them.

She ran through the first off the bridge with Nemesis, fired her hand cannon point-blank into the face of the next, and then lashed out with a brutal kick at the third’s shield, knocking him backward into the water.

Swift appeared beside her amid the chattering fire of her Rocketmen’s carbines. The Crucible Guard captain had no melee weapon, but she used her twin carbines like a pair of short blades to hook her opponent’s weapon or shield, pulling them aside, and then unloading with the second carbine at horrifyingly close range. It made for an effective, if unorthodox, fighting style.

“Gravity bombs!” Swift called out. The Rocketmen behind her lobbed the heavy spherical grenades, meant to be dropped while flying over the enemies’ heads. Some missed, but others landed in

the middle of the bridge and detonated, blasting Khadorans into the water and sending chunks of the bridge flying.

Ashlynn checked in with Soldier. The Mule fought near the site of the first bridge, and through the warjack's optical relays, she spied more Khadorans with yet another bridge moving to the west. Swift had spotted them as well. She held out her hand to Ashlynn and smirked. "Ready for another jump? I might have enough fuel left."

"And what if you don't?" Ashlynn asked, but she reached for Swift's hand without waiting for a reply.

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MAGNUS HAD FOUGHT HEAVY WARJACKS with little more than his blade, magic, and skill before, but taking on a colossal alone was beyond anything he'd even attempted on the battlefield. He rapidly began to understand why he hadn't.

A number of the Crucible Guard heavy assault troopers had stayed behind, as well as three trencher squads, to keep Khadoran troops off him while he dealt with the Victor. Ahead, the Railless Interceptors had reached the bridge and poured alchemical mortar fire into the Conquest. Stryker had pushed through from the other side, and his troops were sending galvanic blasts and heavy barrel fire into the colossal.

The Victor loomed ahead, its twin autocannons blasting the earth around it, shredding Cygnaran and Crucible Guard troops alike. There were fewer Khadorans here—they seemed to be pulling back, massing a hundred yards from the bridge. Strakhov had most certainly spotted him from somewhere in that sea of red-armored bodies and took the opportunity to crush him.

He had one real chance at this—to disable the Victor rather than destroy it. The former was a long shot; the latter, a virtual impossibility. He reached out to his Hunters and targeted the Victor's right leg with their armor-piercing cannons. They both fired, and he focused to guide the trajectory of the shells. They struck the colossal's leg, and it shuddered, but the great machine did not fall.

Magnus rushed forward with Foecleaver, sending his Charger out in front of him as a mobile shield. The Victor's autocannons fired, spraying the light warjack with a hail of bullets. They chewed through its right arm, cutting it completely from its body.

He raced on, rolling under the lumbering sweep of the Victor's right fist. It missed him but sent his Charger flying. The 'jack's presence faded from his mind as it sailed through the air, a twisted mass of wreckage, for all intents and purposes dead before it hit the ground.

He reached the colossal's leg, and slashed into it. Once. Twice. Three times. He drove every ounce of his will into the blows, and the heavy mechanika blade, made to carve through warjacks, cut deep furrows in the pillar-like limb, slashing hydraulic hoses and arcane relays.

Bullets thudded against the Victor's leg from the other side as Khadoran troops attempted to pick Magnus off. The huge limb of their own machine provided ample cover. He made one last hack that produced a geyser of hydraulic fluid and smoke, and then threw himself flat as the Victor's fist again passed overhead.

One of his Hunters disappeared from his mind; it had been cut to pieces by a group of Man-O-War. The Crucible Guard and Cygnaran troops supporting him were fleeing toward the bridge, and Magnus climbed to his feet and broke into a sprint. He had no idea if he'd done enough damage to the Victor's leg to keep it from following.

He raced out from beneath the colossal's shadow, its autocannons ripping up the ground around him. He waited for the awful crushing pressure of its fist descending like a meteor to end him. It didn't. He spared one glance back over his shoulder as he ran. The Victor looked like a man with one foot stuck in mud as it tried to move a leg that would not respond. Yet the cannon on top of its hull was anything but disabled, and it swiveled in his direction.

The thundering boom of the colossal's weapon echoed across the battlefield, and then Magnus was flying, thrown headlong by the shockwave of the shell bursting beside him. His power field

pulsed around him like an arcane cocoon, shielding him from the worst of the impact, but the ground crushed the wind from his lungs.

He stumbled to his feet, unable to draw a breath. He was only a few yards from the bridge. Stryker was running toward him, moving around the shattered wreck of the Conquest. Its smoking hull served as a great steel mountain, all but blocking access to the bridge. Four Crucible Guard Railless Interceptors spanned the bridge, side by side, their alchemical mortars firing at the immobile Victor.

“Come on. Hurry,” Stryker said, as he reached Magnus, extending his hand.

Magnus took it, still trying to breathe, and let Stryker half-carry him. His vision greyed, and he nearly passed out, but they made the bridge, and the world fell silent as if death had deafened them all at last.

