

PART III

ARTIFICER GENERAL SEBASTIAN NEMO watched a hundred men and women scurry around like ants beneath a floating steel behemoth. The bright bursts of welding torches and the brighter glow of arcing galvanic energy cast their shadows in weird, twisting shapes across the ground. They labored over a thing that had never been, a marvel of engineering and mechanical skill. The Cloudpiercer class skyship *S.S. Leto Raelthorne* resembled a warship in Cygnar's navy, though it was considerably larger. It measured three hundred feet from bow to stern, with a beam some eighty feet in length. It boasted four main decks and a top deck large enough to allow a pair of Stormwalls to walk side by side with room to spare. Its shape was elegant, refined, a tapering reverse wedge of blue steel and gleaming brass, a mighty arrowhead poised to pierce the sky.

The sound of its construction was a welcome cacophony, and the music of invention and industry echoed through the gigantic hangar. The skyship's design did not fully belong to Nemo—others had lent their expertise in the mundane details of hull,

armor, and structure—but it had been his skill that had unlocked the skyship's ultimate achievement: Flight.

The huge arcane turbine in the hull of the great ship shunted immense power into the craft's drive cores. These components, when charged, resisted the pull of the earth itself.

“Artificer General?”

Nemo started. He'd been completely absorbed by the prodigious machine before him. “Yes. What is it, Finch?”

Stormchaser Finch was Nemo's blue-armored shadow, a skilled stormsmith and mechanical engineer and a great help to Nemo. These days, she was often the one who did the hands-on work, turning his ideas and theories into workable realities.

“Sir, lift is down twenty percent on sky drive four,” she said, looking down at notes she'd scribbled on the back of her left vambrace.

Nemo smiled behind his mustache. That was a habit she'd picked up from him; his vambraces were often coated in grease pen marks when he worked on a project. “Did you check the galvanic converters? Those drive cores are fussy about their energy. Voltage has to be just right.”

Finch smiled sheepishly. “I'm sorry, sir. I should have checked that first.”

He waved away her self-admonition. “This is cutting edge, Finch. We're all working in the dark a bit. Even me.”

“I'll get right on it,” she said.

“How long before she's armed?” Nemo asked. The growing conflict in Llael weighed heavily on his mind. Reports from Lord General Stryker remained scattered and often incomplete as he seemed to reel from one catastrophe to the next. Unscathed, of course. The skyships would add a dimension to the war that might assure them a swift victory.

Finch breathed in through her nose. This was a subject she was uncomfortable with, he knew.

“Spit it out,” Nemo said.

“We're focusing all our energies getting her off the ground, sir. We've put aside the gun emplacements for the moment.”

Nemo nodded, though the news worried him. When complete, the Cloudpiercer would boast banks of storm emitter arrays and a dozen cannon emplacements, a true battleship of the skies. For the moment, however, it was little more than an oversized floating barge. “I want those gun emplacements pushed up. I’ll get you the manpower.”

“Very good, sir,” Finch said, relief flooding her face. “I’ll get to those galvanic converters now.”

Nemo nodded and let Finch go. He leaned on his tempest accumulator, using the oversized lightning rod like a cane. He wished he hadn’t worn his warcaster armor today. It weighed on him despite the arcane turbine that made it lighter and more maneuverable. He was getting too damn old to walk around in a steel suit. Still, duty demanded it, and he had appearances to keep up. And he certainly couldn’t bring himself to ask for a chair while his mechanics and assistants stood as they worked.

A commotion near the entrance of the hangar drew Nemo’s attention. The huge doors were open, letting in the fading afternoon sun; they’d planned to pull the skyship out of the hangar today once night fell and do a few altitude tests.

Approaching was a short, squat man in ornate plate armor. He looked a bit like a stunted warjack, with wide, bowed legs and a barrel chest. General Galt Langworth was a career soldier and good one at that. He’d risen through the ranks of the First Army through skill and wits, and now commanded the 2nd and 5th Divisions of the First Army here in Corvis. Technically, Nemo was co-commander of the Corvis forces, but he had little time or interest in the day-to-day affairs of soldiering.

An honor guard of ten Stormblades flanked General Langworth. The knights looked out of place moving through the crowd of mechanics and stormsmiths.

“Artificer General,” Langworth greeted him as he neared. He stood nearly six inches shorter than Nemo, though if the difference in height bothered him, he never said such. “I have news from Point Bourne.”

Nemo cocked an eyebrow. Something in Longworth’s voice

troubled him. It was odd enough that he would visit the hangar and not send a messenger. “You have bad news, I suppose.”

Langworth nodded. “I do. We’ve received word from Lord General Duggan, who in turn received a message from Lord General Stryker.”

“Stryker? How? There isn’t a working telegraph in the whole of Llael.”

“He had help from the Golden Crucible. They used their own technology to relay the message.”

Nemo tucked that little bit of information away for later. If the Golden Crucible had a way to rapidly deliver messages without need of a telegraph, it was something worth exploring. “Well, don’t keep me in bloody suspense.”

“Khador has obtained sky drive technology,” Langworth said, his face grave.

If Langworth had struck him in the face, the shock would have been almost as complete as the man’s dire news. They knew Khador was trying to achieve the same technology that powered Cygnar’s own skyship, but by all reports they were years away from any kind of breakthrough.

“That’s absurd,” Nemo said. “We would have known.”

Of course, what he couldn’t bring himself to say out loud was the reports had all come from their spies in Khador; they never thought to look in Llael.

Langworth shook his head. “I’m as baffled as you are, Sebastian, but Stryker believes his intel is good. It’s worse than that, though. He believes Khador has completed or very nearly completed a skyship of its own. He’s marching on Merywyn now, and he’s requested we and Lord General Duggan do the same.”

Nemo’s mouth fell open, and he struggled for words, a wholly alien sensation for him. He steadied himself. The how didn’t matter anymore. “Are you here just to tell me that?”

“No. Stryker asked that we get the Cloudpiercer in the air immediately and head for Merywyn.”

“It’s not armed,” Nemo said.

“But will it fly?”

“Well, yes,” Nemo said, “but . . .”

He shook his head and sighed.

Langworth reached out and put a hand on Nemo’s arm. They weren’t exactly friends, but the general knew what the skyship meant to Nemo. Langworth said, “It can carry troops and warjacks into the city once the siege begins.”

“And it’s a three-hundred-foot flying battering ram if necessary,” Nemo said and rapped the end of his storm accumulator on the ground in frustration.

“I didn’t want to say it,” Langworth said, “but if Khador gets even one armed vessel into the air . . .” He looked at the floating bulk of the Cygnaran skyship. “We both know what ours is capable of. Morrow knows what theirs will do.”

“It’ll be big, armored, and carry more damned guns than a flotilla of battleships,” Nemo said. He looked out at the skyship again. Most of the work had stopped, and men and women were staring at their two generals, worried looks on their faces. “I’ll need all the Stormblades you can spare plus a complement of heavy warjacks and at least one of the Hurricanes.”

“What do you mean ‘I need?’” Langworth said. “You’re not going on that thing. You’ll be flying into the middle of a siege and who knows what else.”

Nemo laughed. “If you think you’re launching the Cloudpiercer without me on board . . .”

He let the nasty thing he was about to say trail off. This wasn’t Langworth’s fault, and taking it out on him wouldn’t help. “Galt, listen to me. No one understands those engines better than me, and no one can pilot that ship to Merywyn.”

Langworth looked away, his mouth working as if he were chewing something tough and unyielding. Finally, he said, “Well, I bloody well can’t order you *not* to go.”

“No you can’t,” Nemo said, offering the general a tired smile. “This isn’t exactly how I envisioned the maiden flight either.”

Langworth stuck out his hand, rough and callused from years of holding pistol and sword. “Good luck, Sebastian. Morrow be with you.”

Nemo clasped Langworth's hand. "Now get me what I need. I plan to have her in the air by tomorrow night."

Langworth nodded and walked away.

Nemo turned back to the skyship and shouted, "Finch, you better check *all* the galvanic relays."

“**HOW DID ORLA GET CAPTURED?**” Lieutenant Gastone Crosse said, keeping his voice low despite the terror bubbling in his belly. A few of the other tavern patrons turned from their drinks for a moment to glance his way, but the Gilded Gorax wasn’t exactly the place people pried into the business of others. It was why he used it as the locale to make contact with the various men and women who made up the resistance forces he commanded in the heart of occupied Merywyn.

Sergeant Havish Orril, who’d delivered the news, blanched. The Llaesele regular looked stiff and uncomfortable out of the uniform he’d grown accustomed to wearing at Greywind Tower. He also looked afraid. Gastone wondered if that had less to do with delivering bad news to an officer and more to do with the ornate double-barreled hand cannon at Gastone’s hip. Soul Reaver and its terrible reputation went hand-in-hand with Gastone’s.

“We made a mistake,” Sergeant Orril said. “Got a little too close to the barracks near the west gate.”

Gastone reached over to the pitcher of cheap wine at his table and poured the sergeant a cup. “Drink this and tell me what happened.”

The man nodded and drained the cup. “They’re on high alert for some reason, milling about like a bunch of angry ants. There ain’t usually no soldiers outside this late. Too drunk or too lazy to patrol properly.”

Gastone nodded. This coincided with Orla’s arrival. He’d gotten word she was in the city, sent straight from Colonel Jarov in Greywind Tower with an important message for him. Lieutenant Orla Viadro had fought side-by-side with him in Merywyn for months; they’d given the reds fits until Jarov recalled her to Greywind and rotated her out with the next batch of soldiers. The colonel kept Gastone supplied with as many fighters as he could spare and smuggle into the city. “Go on.”

“We was walking by the barracks and . . .” He glanced down at Gastone’s hand cannon. “I’m so sorry, sir. I led her straight into those reds.”

Gastone clenched his teeth. Orril was new, and he’d spent most of his soldiering days as a Llaeese regular. Skulking about in disguise as a resistance fighter was foreign to him—he hadn’t yet developed the wariness of a seasoned guerilla. Gastone had sent him to meet Orla for extra security because he’d been the only person available.

“Did she tell you what she carried?” Gastone said.

Orril nodded slowly. “She did, sir. She’s got a message from Lady Ashlynn d’Elyse herself.”

“Blood and hell.” Gastone took a swallow from his own glass and frowned at the sour taste. “Round up everyone you can find and meet me at the warehouse as soon as you can.”

“What are we doing, sir?” Orril asked.

“We’re going on a rescue mission.”

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GASTONE SURVEYED THE SMALL GROUP OF RESISTANCE FIGHTERS at his disposal. They stood around a barrel fire in the middle of an abandoned warehouse near the docks. They were good soldiers—

former Llaeese regulars, disciplined, and well-versed in guerrilla tactics. Well, except Sergeant Orril, but the man's 'jack marshal skills made up for his lack of experience. They didn't look like soldiers, of course; they concealed weapons and armor beneath bulky clothes and voluminous coats. Gastone covered his own light warcaster armor beneath a tattered leather and cloth long coat he'd designed for the purpose.

He had six resistance fighters to break into a Khadoran barracks manned by at least thirty Winter Guard. They'd have surprise on their side but not much else.

Among their few assets was a single warjack, an ancient Nomad Gastone called Cleaver for the clear joy it took in using its gigantic battle blade to cleave human foes in half. They'd painted Cleaver's hull jet-black and only used it when necessary and only at night. Any warjack other than a Khadoran chassis would call down the entire city on them. Cleaver was currently bonded to Gastone, and its mind was a soupy mix of dull anger and an almost child-like eagerness to please its master. Nomads were old machines, centuries old, and they often developed quirks and personalities that were difficult to manage. Cleaver wasn't too bad—better than many of the second-rate warjacks Gastone had worked with in the past.

"We'll catch them at shift change," Gastone said, "hit them hard and fast. We'll use Cleaver to get us in and then hold the entrance while we find Orla."

"I've been in those barracks," Corporal Hammond said; he was a stout, muscular former Khadoran soldier turned Llaeese resistance fighter. He'd been a Man-O-War shocktrooper with a Llaeese wife. When the reds destroyed Elsinberg, Hammond's wife had been living there. After what the Khadorans had done, the choice to join the resistance had been an easy one for Hammond. "They keep the prisoners in cells not too far from the entrance. If we're quick, we can dispatch the guards and grab Orla in minutes."

"Oh, and I thought this was going to be difficult," Gastone said and chuckled. "Okay, let's get this done."

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“GATE, COURTYARD, AND THEN MAIN ENTRANCE,” Hammond said, squatting down next to Gastone in the narrow alley between two buildings. The barracks lay ahead across a quiet street and nestled against the western wall.

“Guards?”

“Three in front of the gate,” Hammond said. “Two Winter Guard and a Man-O-War shocktrooper.”

“Bloody hell,” Orril said from behind them. His eyes were big and white in the dark. One of the other soldiers shushed him.

“Well, they must be expecting something if they brought in that kind of firepower,” Gastone said and smiled. “Shouldn’t be a problem for Cleaver. He’s got a can-opener.”

Hammond shuddered.

“Sorry,” Gastone said, “but he’s not your brother anymore. He’s the enemy.”

Hammond nodded and looked away. “I know. I pledged myself to Llael and all that that means.”

“Good, then get ready. Cleaver and I are going in. I want you and Orril to follow. No gunshots until we’re inside.”

Hammond nodded and relayed Gastone’s orders. Each of the resistance fighters fought with a hand cannon and a short sword; they were equally skilled with either.

Gastone let his mind drift into Cleaver’s cortex. He’d concealed the Nomad in another alley about a hundred feet away. Gastone and the big machine would hit the front gates from two directions and try to dispatch the guards before they could get off a shot.

“Here we go,” Gastone muttered and ran from the alley. He emerged into the middle of the street, roughly twenty yards from the barracks. The Man-O-War stood in front of the high wooden gates, annihilator axe and shield cannon pointing in Gastone’s general direction.

Gastone streaked toward the gate. Cleaver came pounding out of the alley farther down the street, battle blade raised high.

The warjack immediately drew the attention of the Khadorans, and the Winter Guard fumbled for the rifles slung across their backs.

Gastone didn't give them time to fire. He summoned a spell, dark twisting runes forming around his body. Even under these conditions, he didn't like using the dark fire spell, an incantation whispered into his mind by Soul Reaver that fed the cursed weapon's appetites.

Black flames gouted from his outstretched hand and engulfed one of the Winter Guard. He didn't scream—he just fell to the ground, writhing in open-mouthed horror. Gastone felt the man's life force rushing out of his body and into his own. It was a heady, dark pleasure that made him feel powerful and sickened simultaneously. The Winter Guard's life energy remained in Gastone's mind, an echo of pain and terror yet a resource of additional arcane strength.

Cleaver had reached the Man-O-War, and Gastone pushed speed and power through its cortex. The Man-O-War raised his shield to ward off the Nomad's gigantic blade, but it carved through the shield and then the armor behind it, splitting the Khadoran soldier neatly in half. The gout of blood and viscera from the savaged corpse sprayed over the second Winter Guard. He stumbled backward, momentarily blinded, and right onto Gastone's knife. The blade slipped between the man's ribs, found his heart, dropped the man dead as Gastone twisted it and pulled it free.

Across the street, Hammond and Orril broke cover with the rest of the resistance fighters and ran in his direction.

The Khadorans would have barred the barracks gate from the other side, but it wasn't designed to repel a heavy warjack. Gastone ordered Cleaver to move back a few steps and then the Nomad slammed into the gate with one armored shoulder. Wood splintered, and it flew open, revealing a small courtyard and the entrance to the barracks proper, a door far too small to admit anything the size of Cleaver.

The door to the barracks stood open, light spilling into the courtyard as Winter Guard rushed into the night. Gastone and Cleaver went in first, charging into a trio of Khadorans. Cleaver's battle blade flashed, blood splattered, and two men fell dead.

Gastone stabbed the third in the throat, kicked the body away, and pulled Soul Reaver from its holster.

Orril, Hammond, and the rest of Gastone's fighters made the courtyard, and Gastone allowed himself to hope. Their initial rush had gone well—not a single shot fired. There were more enemies below, but for the moment they were alone.

He turned. "Orril, you stay here with Cleaver. He'll follow your commands."

Orril nodded and glanced up at the warjack, its battle blade smeared with crimson, eyes glowing with an ugly eagerness.

"Hammond, you're with me. The rest of you, stay with Sergeant Orril. If we don't come out in ten minutes, you run. Understood?"

Nods all around. Gastone still felt odd giving orders to experienced soldiers. He was by far the youngest person present, and all these men and women had more real combat experience. But Ashlynn d'Elyse had imbued him with their trust, and he worked each day to be worthy of it.

"Let's go, Hammond."

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THEY CAME DOWN A SHORT FLIGHT OF STEPS and into a well-lit hallway. Hammond led, hand cannon and short sword both at the ready. He seemed to know where he was going, and when the corridor branched in two directions, he turned right without hesitation. Gastone lost sight of him for an instant, and then the ear-shattering report of a hand cannon filled the tight space.

Gastone barreled around the corner to find one Winter Guard soldier dead on the ground, most of his skull blown away, and Hammond grappling with another. Gastone rushed forward and plunged his knife into the Winter Guard's back as he yanked him away from Hammond. The former Man-O-War took that opportunity to slam his short sword into the man's heart, and then there were two bodies on the corridor floor.

Hammond took in a shaking breath. "Sorry. He surprised me. The cells are up ahead."

He pointed to a stout steel door at the end of the corridor.

“Well,” Gastone said, “they know we’re coming now.”

“They’ll have holed up in there, waiting,” Hammond said. “Orders?”

“We go in but not completely unprepared.” Gastone summoned him magic, this time a spell Ashlynn had taught him. This magic felt good, natural, wholesome. The runes formed and coalesced around the two of them. “Okay, we’re going through the door, uh, without opening it.”

“What?” Hammond asked.

“Just follow me.” Gastone charged down the corridor. He didn’t slow when he reached the door. He went through it, his spell making his body temporarily intangible. There was a moment of disorientation as he phased through the steel, then he was on the other side in a wide stone chamber, one side given over to barred cells. Half a dozen Winter Guard were kneeling in front of the door, rifles trained. Their eyes widened in shock as Gastone appeared before them like an avenging ghost, and he did not give them a chance to recover. He fired both of Soul Reaver’s barrels, blasting two Winter Guard off their feet. He gritted his teeth against the awful sensation of their life energy pouring into the firearm, into him.

Hammond came in behind him, his hand cannon blazing, and another Winter Guard went down. By then, the remaining three had gathered their wits and discharged their rifles. Gastone threw himself in front of Hammond. Three rifle slugs struck his power field, staggering him, but did not penetrate.

Hammond drove his short sword into the chest of the nearest Khadoran while Gastone reloaded Soul Reaver and took stock of his surroundings. There were four cells, all empty save one. Lieutenant Orla Viadro, a tall, willowy woman with short blonde hair and blue eyes, stood near the bars of the rear cell. She looked unharmed, but she clenched the bars of her cell with white-knuckled strength. He knew she would much rather be holding a pistol or a sword than watching the battle play out before her. He’d gladly put one in her hand if they survived.

With Soul Reaver reloaded, Gastone fired again, killing another Winter Guard and ripping the man's life force away. He shuddered and slammed the weapon back into its holster. He had enough for now, and the terror and pain of his victim's last moments swirled in his brain. He drew his knife and rushed a Winter Guard soldier, who turned his rifle around to use as a club. Gastone ducked a clumsy strike, flipped his knife into an icepick grip, and drove it into and through the top of the enemy's skull. The man went limp and dropped to the ground.

Hammond had finished off his own foe, and the room grew silent.

"Lieutenant, you mind getting me out of here?" Orla asked.

"Sorry, Orla," Gastone said. "Hold on."

He and Hammond checked each Winter Guard corpse for keys, finding them, of course, on the very last body. Gunshots from above rang through the stone corridors, and Gastone paused to check the situation through Cleaver's eyes. The Nomad fought in the courtyard, swinging his battle blade at Winter Guard pouring from the barracks. Gunfire from Orril and the rest of the resistance fighters echoed around him. After a moment, he pulled back to himself, knowing they'd be overrun soon.

Hammond unlocked Orla's cell, and she pulled a knife and a rifle from one of the corpses.

"Where's the message?" Gastone said.

"In my head," Orla said and put a hand on his arm, her face grave. "These dead men didn't know I carried a message. None of them can know what's about to happen."

"Then we'd damn sure better get you out of here," Gastone said and pulled Soul Reaver. The weapon's power flowed up his arm in a tingling wave. It would soon have its due.

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THEY BURST OUT INTO THE COURTYARD into a chaotic firefight. Gastone's troops had taken cover behind Cleaver, but one of them was already down, and Sergeant Orril's right arm hung limp at his side.

There were as many as ten Winter Guard in the courtyard, but Gastone, Hammond, and Orla had a momentary advantage. The Khadorans weren't aware of them, and most had their backs turned.

"Get behind me," Gastone said. "Take out any I miss."

"What are you going to do?" Orla said. It had been months since she'd fought beside him, so she had no idea what additional secrets he'd unlocked with Soul Reaver. Part of him didn't want to show her, but he had no choice now.

He shuddered and let the life energy he'd ripped away from the slain Winter Guard a short while ago pour into Soul Reaver. The runes along the weapon's twin barrels glowed, and time slowed to a sluggish trickle. He fired. Soul Reaver spat flame, and a Khadoran soldier fell dead. He fired again and snuffed out another life. He reloaded with languid ease, the shells almost leaping into the gun of their own accord. He pulled the trigger twice more, and Soul Reaver drained the lives of his enemies.

The power flowed through his mind and limbs, dark and alluring, and he ached for more, ached to let Soul Reaver claim as many victims as it could. Mercifully, he ran out of enemies, and for a moment, for the briefest flicker of a heartbeat, he wanted to keep shooting, no matter what or who his targets might be. He fought the terrible impulse away and slammed Soul Reaver back into its holster.

"Enough!" he hissed and realized belatedly that everyone stared at him, eyes wide, mouths open in shock.

"What did you just do?" Orla asked, her gaze drifting down to Soul Reaver. "It's that damn gun, isn't it?"

"It doesn't matter," he said. "Not right now. We need to get you out of here. The whole city will have heard the gunshots."

She hesitated as if to argue but finally nodded. "Fine. Lead the way."

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THEY HURRIED BACK TO THE WAREHOUSE, the sounds of an angry city close behind them. They'd been quick and efficient—and some of that had to do with Soul Reaver, as much as Gastone hated to

admit it. Because of the cursed gun, he'd only lost a single man.

Orril had taken a slug in the right shoulder, and Hammond was digging it out by the light of another barrel fire. The sergeant gritted his teeth and tried not to cry out.

When Gastone was sure the enemy hadn't followed them, he pulled Orla aside. "Are you hurt?"

"No, I'm not hurt," she replied. "They were trying to figure out what to do with me when you showed up."

"You said you have a message from Ashlynn. I need to know what it is."

Orla nodded. "She's on her way here with Lord General Stryker, what's left of his army, and elements of the Crucible Guard."

"Hold on. They're attacking Merywyn?" Gastone said, shocked. "They don't have the numbers or resources for that kind of move."

"They will when Lord General Duggan comes up with the First Army from Point Bourne," Orla said. "But ultimately, that doesn't matter. They have intelligence that Khador has some kind of super weapon, a kind of—" She shook her head as if she couldn't quite believe what she was saying—"a kind of skyship. Big, lots of guns, like a battle ship that flies."

"No. That's ridiculous."

"I'm only telling you what Jarov told me. And that's directly from Marshal d'Elyse. She needs you to find out where they're keeping this thing."

He shook his head, accepting the absurdity of what she'd said. Orla wouldn't lie to him or exaggerate, and any reaction other than acceptance was wasting time. "Well, they won't be able to hide something like that very well. It shouldn't take long to find. How much time do we have?"

"Three days," Orla said.

"What are they going to do if and when we find this . . . skyship," Gastone said.

"No idea." Orla looked as baffled as he felt, he decided. "I suppose they'll tell us when they get here."

THE RIVER ROLLED BY, and Stryker enjoyed the breeze against his face and the pastoral scenery. It was a momentary reprieve from the smoke, blood, and death they'd left behind them.

He stood on the deck of one of the dwarven barges, the same barges hired by the Khadorans to deliver drive cores for their skyship. The Rhulfolk Captain Vornek Blackheel had been amenable to a new arrangement: Magnus paid him triple his fee to use the barges and his small force of High Shield Gun Corps.

“The army will be reaching Merywyn’s walls soon,” Magnus said, coming up behind Stryker. The aging warcaster looked haggard, and his cobbled-together mechanika armor and weapons still made him look more mercenary than Cygnaran officer.

Stryker nodded. “Did Ashlynn get word to her asset inside the city?”

Marshal d’Elyse had promised she had a man on the inside, one who might be able to find out where the Khadoran housed their skyship.

“Yes, that’s what she says. So, we’re going to do this like Rynyr, then, I suppose?”

“You, Marshal d’Elyse, Aurum Legate di Morray, and I fought well together,” Stryker said. “I think we will again.”

Magnus frowned. “This will go a whole lot easier if Nemo can get our boat in the air.”

Part of the message he’d sent to Point Bourne included an urgent plea to Artificer General Nemo. Get the Cloudpiercer, the Cygnaran skyship still under construction, into the air.

“No argument there,” Stryker said.

Magnus nodded. “Well, what have we got? Two hundred soldiers plus a handful of dwarves on these boats? How are we going to even get into the city? We’re sure as hell not going to breach the walls.”

Up to now, Stryker had kept most of his commanders in the dark to some degree. He couldn’t risk the information getting out and reaching Merywyn ahead of him. Now, with all his principal assets on the barges, he could reveal his plan.

“Ashlynn’s man can get us into the city,” Stryker said. “In fact, we’re supposed to meet him a few miles up the river.”

“So, the siege will serve as a distraction, while we go in—and what? Take out this skyship ourselves?”

“That’s the plan,” Stryker admitted. “A small force of elite fighters should be able to make it through the city while the Khadorans deal with the threat outside their walls.”

“How are we supposed to disable something the size of a battleship?” Magnus asked. “You’d need an army for that.”

“It’s simpler than you think. All we have to do is make sure the skyship can’t get off the ground. Between Lukas di Morray and me, we should be able to disable the arcane turbines on the ships. After that, it’s just tons of inert metal.”

Captain Vornek Blackheel came up from the hold behind them. The stout dwarven officer’s face seemed set in a perpetual frown, but Stryker recognized a capable officer when he saw one. “Your Marshal *Delees* said we need to stop at the river bank up ahead.”

Stryker laughed. “You better not let Marshal d’Elyse hear you pronouncing her name like that.”

The dwarven warrior shook his head. “I’m no fool. She looks like she could kill me and the lot of my boys without breaking a sweat.”

“She could,” Magnus said evenly. “For fun.”

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ASHLYNN D’ELYSE STEPPED OFF THE BARGE and onto the shore, her knees a little shaky, her stomach churning. Boats were certainly not her favorite mode of transportation, but she’d avoided vomiting in front of her soldiers.

Gastone Crosse and a handful of resistance fighters stood a few yards away, and Ashlynn smiled despite her aching head and roiling stomach. It had been a long time since she’d seen Gastone, and he had grown from a brash but skilled thief and criminal to one of the best fighters in the resistance. Her smile faded when she saw his hand on the butt of the double-barreled hand cannon at his hip. The cursed weapon was a heavy burden, and Ashlynn feared it might someday consume her protégé.

“Lady d’Elyse,” Gastone said as they approached one another. His face was still youthful, but dark circles under his eyes and three days of stubble made him look older and wearier than the enthusiastic young man she’d known before. He wore his warcaster armor under a ragged long coat; he looked like he had more in common with Asheth Magnus than a warcaster of Llael.

Ashlynn reached out and took Gastone by the shoulders. “You look well.”

“I look like a walking disaster,” Gastone laughed. “You’ve had me chasing phantoms for three days without sleep.”

This was the Gastone she remembered.

“Did you find any?” Stryker said. He and Magnus had also come ashore, along with the Crucible Guard warcaster Lukas di Morray. Stormblades and Llaelese soldiers continued to disembark from the barge to form a tight perimeter around their leaders.

“Morrow above, it’s Lord General Stryker,” Gastone said. “Do I bow or curtsy?”

Magnus snorted. Ashlynn glared at Gastone but couldn't quite hide her smirk.

"Well, *Lieutenant*," Stryker said, "either one. I don't care as long as you answer my question."

Gastone wasn't in Stryker's chain of command, but Ashlynn was happy to let him put Gastone in his place.

"Sorry, uh, sir," Gastone replied and bowed his head. "It's been a trying few days."

"For all of us," Magnus added. "Now, what did you find?"

Gastone pulled a rolled map from beneath his coat and squatted on the sandy shore. He spread out the map, a crude but accurate representation of Merywyn. They crowded around the young warcaster.

"You see how the Black River goes through the center of the city?" Gastone said and tapped a thick black line. "Well, right here and here, they've dammed it up."

Ashlynn leaned closer. "That is—or rather, *was*—mostly manufacturing for the Llaeese military."

"Right," Gastone said, "and the reds took over that area right quick and converted it for their own use. It's only Khadoran soldiers that go in and out, and it's been that way for years."

"You think the skyship is there?" Lukas di Morray said. "Can you be certain?"

"There's nowhere else that would hold something that big and keep it out of sight of the rest of the city," Gastone said. "They have to be there. If they dammed up and drained the river, they've got a lot of room to work."

"It makes sense," Stryker said. "That's our target. Now, can you get us into the city?"

Gastone rolled up his map and stood. "These two barges?"

Ashlynn nodded. "Yes, about two hundred troops and a half-dozen warjacks."

"It'll be tricky, but there's a tributary off the river that leads to an old smugglers' tunnel at the base of the city wall," Gastone said. "The reds don't know about it, and it'll get you into the center of the city."

“Could we get a larger force in that way?” Magnus asked.

Gastone shook his head. “It’s mostly swamp. Kind of a natural barrier and pretty much impassable for anything like an army.”

“Okay, scratch an easy end to the siege, then,” Magnus sighed.

“Do the Khadorans patrol this tributary?” Ashlynn asked.

Gastone said, “Infrequently, but it’s not impossible we’d run into a gun boat or two.” He glanced back at the barges. “Those don’t look like military barges, so they might not raise immediate suspicion if we do encounter one.”

“You mean it might let us get close enough to destroy a patrol boat before they can sound an alarm,” Stryker said.

“That’s what I’d do,” Gastone said.

“Well, you might get your chance,” Ashlynn said. “Get aboard. We’ll need you to guide us to this tunnel.”

She patted Gastone on one armored shoulder. “It’ll be good to fight alongside you again.”

He blushed and coughed, an odd look on a young man who had grown into a fearsome warrior by all accounts.

“And you, Marshal,” he managed.

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ASHETH MAGNUS TOOK A PULL OF UISKE from Captain Blackheel’s flask and then passed it back to the dwarven warrior. He coughed. “You sure that isn’t cortex cleaning fluid?”

Captain Blackheel shrugged and took a drink. “Knowing my lads, it might be.”

They stood on the bow of one of the Rhulic barges, alone except for a few dwarves out of armor trying their best to look like merchants. Magnus, Lukas di Morray, and half the soldiers they brought with them were on this barge, while Ashlynn, Stryker, and the rest of their forces were on the other.

They’d passed from the wide flowing course of the river into a small tributary choked with cypress trees and tangled roots. Luckily, the barges had shallow drafts and easily negotiated the swamp.

“You know, my lads aren’t the best shots or the most skilled in the Gun Corps,” Captain Blackheel said, a hitch in his voice; he

sounded like a man making a confession. “But they’re tough and loyal and stubborn enough to see a job done.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Magnus said. “This doesn’t have to be your fight, you know.”

“It doesn’t, but we could always use some of that Cygnaran gold.” Blackheel paused and looked away. “And it’ll be good to be in an honest fight. The Searforge keeps us locked away for the most part. The lads haven’t had a good scrap in ages.”

“Well, I can promise you that and then some,” Magnus said. He glanced ahead at the looming walls of Merywyn. Most of the Cygnaran, Llaelese, and Crucible Guard forces they brought from Riversmet would be reaching the city by now. If reports were correct, Lord General Duggan’s First Army would arrive from the south soon as well. Stryker was gambling that a siege of Merywyn would keep the Khadorans distracted long enough for a small team to find and disable the skyship. It was risky, but Magnus couldn’t see a better course of action.

“Aye, we’ve got company,” Captain Blackheel said and pointed to where a black plume of smoke trailed into the sky from around a bend in the tributary.

“Could be a patrol boat,” Magnus said. He looked across to where Ashlynn d’Elyse stood on the bow of the second barge. He pointed ahead, and she nodded.

“I’m going below,” Magnus said. “If it’s a patrol boat, let them see you, let them get close. You’re only a bunch of Rhulic merchants who took a wrong turn.”

Captain Blackheel laughed. “I don’t know about merchants, but we definitely took a wrong turn.”

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ASHLYNN MADE CONTACT WITH SOLDIER. The big Mule was in the hold, surrounded by troops and inert warjacks. She’d had his furnace stoked and now powered him on. The smoke would be thick below but tolerable for a short while. His dull thoughts and instincts bloomed in her mind as his consciousness joined her own.

She hunched down by one of the gunwales and turned her gaze to the other boat as Magnus went below decks. He was without doubt the most recognizable warcaster among them. She and Stryker could hide their warcaster armor to some extent or even remove it. But Magnus' prosthetic limb gave away his identity to anyone who knew what they were looking for.

The Khadoran patrol boat rounded the bend in the tributary, a long low craft with a cannon on a swivel mount on its prow. There were a half-dozen soldiers on board, including a pair of Man-O-War and a Widowmaker sniper.

The slowed as they neared the two barges, and one of the soldiers manned the cannon.

"Ahoy," Captain Blackheel called. "I think we've gotten lost."

"Drop anchor. Now!" one of the Khadoran soldiers shouted. "Prepare to be boarded."

Captain Blackheel held his hands up. "We're just merchants down from Ghord. Got a load of dwarven uiske we're supposed to deliver. We don't want any trouble."

"I said, drop anchor," the soldier repeated, and Captain Blackheel glanced in Ashlynn's direction. It was all the signal she needed.

"Let's go, Soldier," she said, and the double doors to the hold flew open as the Mule came pounding onto the deck, rocking the boat alarmingly.

The patrol boat had its cannon trained on Captain Blackheel's barge, but it was hard to miss a twelve-foot warjack appearing on the deck of a boat. The cannon swung in their direction.

Fire, Ashlynn thought at Soldier, and the Mule's steam lobber discharged with a loud chuffing noise. She guided the projectile, and the shell struck the patrol boat's cannon and detonated, blowing it and a good part of the prow to pieces.

The patrol boat remained afloat, and the two Man-O-War aboard retained enough composure to fire their shield cannons. At such short range, they couldn't miss—two shells slammed into the barge's hull. The explosions flung Ashlynn to the deck. Worse, Soldier lost his footing and tottered over with a resounding crash, smashing partway through the deck.

The sharp sounds of rifle fire sounded from the second barge, and from behind Ashlynn, the sizzling bursts of storm glaive blasts. She climbed to her feet and pulled her hand cannon. She told Soldier to stay where he was; they'd need another heavy warjack to get him upright again anyway.

The deck now swarmed with Stormblades, and the other barge filled with High Shield Gun Corps. Soon the patrol boat and all aboard were torn to pieces by combined rifle and storm glaive fire, and it slowly sank to the bottom of the tributary.

"That probably could have gone better," Stryker said, moving through a group of Stormblades and peering over the side of the barge. "I don't think we're going to sink, at least."

"It also could have gone a lot worse," Ashlynn said and holstered her hand cannon. "Can you help me get Soldier up?"

Stryker nodded and went down into the hold. He came back up with Lieutenant Harcourt and Ol' Rowdy in tow. The Ironclad blew a sharp note of steam on sighting the prone Soldier, whose upper body had crashed through the deck. Soldier responded with a low hooting call of his own. It sounded a little like embarrassment to Ashlynn.

"Get him up," Harcourt said. The young warcaster still moved somewhat gingerly; he'd taken a wound in Riversmet, but he was a valuable resource they couldn't do without.

Ol' Rowdy grasped Soldier beneath his arms and pulled the Mule out of the hole in the deck and back onto his feet. Something akin to relief and gratitude flowed back through the connection Ashlynn shared with the warjack.

Back below decks, Ashlynn thought at the Mule, and both Soldier and Ol' Rowdy descended into the hold.

Thunder sounded in the distance, and Ashlynn realized what she heard were artillery pieces. The siege had begun.

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THE TRIBUTARY NARROWED AS THEY NEARED THE CITY, and the steady explosions of artillery had grown to a cacophonous din. Stryker and Ashlynn stood on the deck of the barge; Gastone was

in the pilothouse, making sure the barges found their way to his hidden entrance.

The trees grew denser and the water shallower, making Stryker worry they would run aground. The walls of Merywyn soared high overhead. The wall proper didn't actually start until some seventy-five feet up a sheer cliff side. No wonder Khador hadn't devoted much in the way of military resources to the area.

Gastone came out of the pilothouse and joined them at the prow. "It's just ahead," he said, pointing to a section of the cliff face obscured by trees.

Stryker squinted. A shadowy outline materialized behind the trees, the suggestion of an opening. As they neared, it became clearer, a dark aperture in the stone wall. There wasn't much clearance between the waterline and the tunnel roof, likely just enough to permit the barges to pass through.

They drifted into darkness, and the sounds of the siege grew distant and muffled. The smell of old, rotten things permeated the tunnel, and Stryker was actually grateful for the stink of burning coal from the two barges.

They traveled in silence for a few minutes, and the tunnel widened, allowing both barges to travel side by side. Gastone held a bull's-eye lantern near the edge of the prow, and he opened and closed the shutter to make a flickering beam of light. Ahead, in the dark, another light flared.

"Okay, my people are waiting for us," Gastone said. "That signal means the passage up to the city is clear."

Stryker nodded, relieved. At least they'd get into the city. After that, the task that lay before him seemed all but impossible. He dare not hope for aid from the First Army or even from Artificer General Nemo. He would most likely have to disable the Khadoran skyship on his own.

A stone landing appeared out of the gloom, and a rickety dock projected out into the dark water. A group of men and women stood on the landing, waiting.

They piloted the barges to the dock and anchored them, and Stryker ordered troops and equipment offloaded. The landing

wasn't big enough to hold their entire force, so they had to offload in stages. At the western end of the landing, another tunnel ascended steeply upward, large enough to permit a heavy warjack to stand upright. Stryker wondered who had used that tunnel and what they had smuggled into Merywyn over the years.

"I need to give you some more information," Gastone said when Stryker, Ashlynn, and Magnus had gathered on the landing. Lukas di Morray joined them as well.

"This sounds like bad news," Magnus said.

Gastone laughed. "It's been nothing but bad news since I got on one of these boats."

He unrolled his map again and set it on the ground next to the bull's-eye lantern. "The siege will definitely draw most of the Khadoran forces to the western side of the city, but it's not exactly a clear shot to where the skyship is."

"What are we are looking at?" Lukas di Morray asked, frowning.

Gastone said, "You've got two major obstacles in the way. First, there's a sizeable barracks here." He pointed to a spot on the map not far from where they would surface in the city. "This is mostly Winter Guard and Man-O-War. They won't be at full capacity, but there'll be enough soldiers here to slow you down."

Ashlynn nodded. "Fine. What's the second problem?"

Gastone tapped the map again, this time farther into the city and closer to the where they suspected Khador kept its skyship. "This is your real problem. It's a 'jack foundry and heavy weapons depot. Normally, it wouldn't be an issue, but with an army knocking at their front door, they'll have every piece of useable equipment in this facility up and running."

The near constant anxiety Stryker had felt since finding out the Khadorans had sky drive technology became a shrill siren in his mind. He shoved the fear and doubt away—it served no purpose. He needed to make a decision quickly that would give them some chance.

"We'll split up," Stryker said. "One third of our forces will hit the barracks, one third will hit the foundry, and the last third goes after the skyship."

“That’ll weaken our chances,” Magnus said, “but I agree. I don’t see another way.”

“I’ll hit the barracks,” Ashlynn said. “I’ll take Soldier and all the Llaelese regulars. We’re light and fast, and we can be on top of the Khadorans before they know what’s hit them.”

“And I’ll attack the foundry,” Lukas di Morray said. Unlike many of the warcasters Stryker knew, the Crucible Guard commander did not wear his warcaster armor unless he was going into battle. He wore it now, a hulking suit of teal-and-gold armor fitted with serum injectors that gave the man his arcane power. He held a mighty two-handed mechanika hammer that looked capable of reducing a heavy warjack to scrap. “I’ve got two Vindicator warjacks and three units of heavy infantry. That should be sufficient to keep their foundry occupied.”

Stryker nodded. They all knew the stakes, and Ashlynn and Lukas had chosen the best courses of action. There was no need for him to give orders or even suggestions. They had become a cohesive force that complemented and supported each other component.

“Magnus, you and I will take Lieutenant Harcourt, the Stormblades, and Ol’ Rowdy and attack the skyship,” Stryker said. He wished he had more warjacks at his disposal, but Major Maddox, who led the Cygnaran contingent of the Merywyn siege, needed them more than he.

“We should take Captain Blackheel and his Gun Corps with us,” Magnus said. He glanced over his shoulder to where the Rhulic officer and his imposing ogrun second were offloading their own equipment, including an Avalancher warjack.

“Not a bad idea,” Stryker said. “That Avalancher will come in handy.”

“Then we agree,” Ashlynn said, and looked at each of them, a strange expression on her face. “We have had our differences, but it has been an honor to fight beside each of you.”

“I owe you three my life,” Lukas di Morray said, “but it has been a privilege to join your cause. *Our* cause.”

“Well, I’ve been fighting a long time,” Magnus said, his voice

full of weariness, possibly regret. “For kings, for coin, for the wrong damn reasons. Maybe these are the right ones.”

Stryker looked at each of them in turn, locking eyes. “It is my truest hope I will see all of you again on the other side of this war.”

“For Llael,” Ashlynn said.

“For Cygnar,” added Stryker.

“For friends and honored allies,” Lukas intoned.

Magnus snorted. “For the hope there’s a damned strong drink at the end of all this.”

THE KHADORAN BARRACKS WERE LARGER THAN ASHLYNN EXPECTED, more fortress than building, with high walls and a stout reinforced wooden gate. Those gates were currently open, and Khadoran soldiers were pouring out into the street in a steady stream of crimson armor. They marched east toward where Stryker and Magnus were likely fighting their way toward the river.

Ashlynn and Gastone had separated from Stryker and the others not far from where the smugglers' tunnel exited in an abandoned building in the industrial district. She led sixty Llaelese soldiers supported by her Mule Soldier and the gun mage Vayne di Brascio. Gastone had another dozen or so fighters and his own warjack, a Nomad with a black hull called Cleaver.

With the siege thundering beyond the walls and the Khadorans filling the streets with troops, Ashlynn pointed her sword as they reached the barracks and ordered the attack. "For Llael!"

They had a few seconds of surprise as the lines of enemy soldiers realized their peril, and she didn't waste them. Soldier fired his

steam lobber into the midst of the Winter Guard and Man-O-War, vaporizing lightly armored Winter Guard and sending a pair of Man-O-War flying. Vayne di Brascio, Gastone, and the Llaelese regulars fired their weapons a heartbeat later, peppering the ranks of Khadorans with bullets.

They killed a dozen enemies in that first volley, and then Ashlynn, Gastone, and their warjacks joined the fray. The Khadorans had fire superiority, but no warjacks and no warcasters. In close, against her and Gastone, the enemy would be at a severe disadvantage.

Ashlynn reached the first group of Winter Guard, jumbled and disorientated from the surprise attack. She skewered a man with her blade Nemesis and shot dead another with her hand cannon. Soldier barreled into a pair of Man-O-War, knocking aside their annihilator axes and hammering their armored bodies into the street.

The shattering boom of Gastone's double hand cannon sounded, and an awful greenish glow rose from the weapon. His Nomad carved into another knot of Winter Guard, cleaving men in half and leaving their dismembered corpses bleeding in its wake.

The Khadorans soon regained some semblance of order. The Man-O-War spread out across the street and locked shields while the Winter Guard pulled back toward the open gate.

"Don't let them close the gate!" Ashlynn cried and summoned her magic. She unleashed a vortex of swirling wind at the Man-O-War, disrupting their shield wall long enough to let Gastone and his Nomad push through.

Vayne di Brascio had seen the danger as well, and he led the Llaelese regulars into the fray, firing his magelock and swinging his mechanika saber.

Ashlynn sidestepped an annihilator axe, grabbed the haft of the weapon, and yanked its owner forward and onto Nemesis' blade. The dying Man-O-War fell away as Soldier batted aside two more, but a third landed a blow on the Mule's right leg. Ashlynn sensed the damage in her mind, and it turned to rage. Foolishly, she ordered Soldier to shoot the Man-O-War at shockingly close

range with his steam lobber. The shell lifted the Khadoran into the air and carried him twenty yards before detonating, sending pieces of him raining down on the street.

“Forward,” Ashlynn cried, and she sensed a slight shift in the battle. Her troops surged ahead, pushing through the Khadorans with bayonets and point-blank rifle shots. Thirty or so Khadorans lay dead in the street, but there were many more inside the barracks.

Ashlynn and Gastone made it through the gates and into a courtyard bordered by a half-dozen squat buildings. A lone Winter Guard kovnik shouted orders near one of the buildings, likely the main barracks, and Winter Guard poured out from it. Bullets rained down from the Khadoran soldiers on the walls above the courtyard, but they stopped when the space filled with Llaeese and Khadoran bodies locked in a swirling melee.

Ashlynn gave herself over to the battle. She flipped her hand cannon up and grabbed it by the barrel, making a crude club, and then waded in. She slashed and smashed, cracking skulls and ripping open armor and flesh with Nemesis. Part of her mind remained with Soldier, and she focused the Mule’s attacks on the Man-O-War joining the combat from another building.

She spied Gastone out of the corner of her eye. The young warcaster was a spinning dervish of destruction. He fired and reloaded his double hand cannon with supernatural speed, the cursed weapon glowing with a fell eldritch light. He’d promised her he’d mastered the weapon, bent it to his will, but the feral grin on his face as he sucked souls from those he killed made her wonder.

She didn’t have time to think on it for long. For the moment, Gastone and Soul Reaper killed for their side, and that was enough. The world became of blur of blood and steel. Men and women screamed and die, some hers and some theirs, and still she fought on. Part of her knew she didn’t need to win here, just hold the troops within the barracks long enough to give Stryker and Magnus a chance. But this didn’t make her want the victory any less.

Sudden burning pain ripped through her left side, as a Man-O-War drove an annihilator through her power field and into her breastplate. The weapon didn’t penetrate the armor, but it didn’t

needed to—the blunt force of the blow cracked ribs. She screamed and spun around to hack at Man-O-War, but his head disappeared in a spray of blood and shrapnel before she could land a blow.

Gastone ran up behind the toppling corpse, Soul Reaver's barrels still smoking. "Are you okay?"

She pushed him away. "I'm fine. Keep going. Keep fighting."

He disappeared back into the melee, and she fought on.

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AURUM LEGATE LUKAS DI MORRAY DREW IN A BREATH, grimaced, and thumbed the release tab on his serum intake regulator. The soft hiss sounded and then alchemical fire shot through his veins. He gritted his teeth. The pain passed, and a heady sense of strength and purpose took its place. The feeling was artificial, a byproduct of the serum, but addictive just the same.

"Sir, target ahead," A storm trooper sergeant marching beside him said and pointed. Like the rest, the heavy infantry officer carried a pneumatic cannon and stout pickaxe.

They were making their way up a wide avenue in the industrial district, tall buildings crowding around them, mostly empty. The screeching whine of artillery plus the muffled bursts of alchemical munitions filled the air as Cygnar, and its allies attacked the walls of the city. Most of the citizens of Merywyn had fled to their homes, and Lukas had passed only a handful on their way here.

The foundry lay at the end of a cul-de-sac that butted up against a low retaining wall beside the black river. Smoke and heat poured from the squat building, and the massive forms of Khadoran heavy warjacks—a pair of Juggernauts and a single Spriggan—moved in their direction. Ranks of Man-O-War demolition corps marched beside the warjacks, their long mechanika ice mauls powerful enough to crack the heaviest armor.

"Form ranks," Lukas shouted. "Storm troopers in back, assault troopers in front."

He had thirty of each. The storm troopers would launch their pneumatic cannons over the heads of the assault troopers until the latter could close with their thermal hammers.

The Crucible Guard soldiers moved into formation, and Lukas was grateful for the wide streets of the industrial district. He gripped Regulus, his mechanical hammer, the heat from its exothermic reaction inducer washing over his gauntlets. He marshaled the final pieces of his small but potent force, two Vindicator warjacks. Their cortexes were virtually new, and their minds were little more than blank slates, ready and eager to accept commands. They were easy to control but generally lacked the fighting instincts of more seasoned warjacks. Each carried a multi-chambered compression cannon that could fire an array of alchemical munitions and a heavy maul for close combat.

The Khadorans had seen them, and Lukas thanked Morrow the enemy currently lacked ranged weaponry. That might change, and field cannons and warjacks equipped with artillery could be lurking inside. The forces arrayed against them would close fast, and the thick Khadoran armor would be difficult to penetrate. He could help with that. Lukas summoned a spell, and as the runes formed, the serum in his blood activated, a pleasant burning as it powered his magic.

He pointed with his right index finger, and a ray of yellow fire struck the lead Juggernaut, suffusing it in light and weakening the structural integrity of its armor.

“Target the Juggernaut,” Lukas called out, and thirty storm troopers fired their pneumatic cannons in unison, a collective chuffing noise like a giant coughing. The projectiles arced out over the heads of the assault troopers and landed in a cluster around the Juggernaut. They burst in bright globes of yellow fire, consuming the warjack completely.

Lukas focused his energy into the Vindicators and targeted the two remaining warjacks with their cannons. He chose a decrepitation munition and fired, adding a swirling haze of acidic green to the storm troopers’ fiery blaze.

When the flames died away, the Juggernaut lay face down, its hull blackened and corroded. The bodies of half a dozen demolition corps troopers lay in a similar state next to the Juggernaut. The shouts of a ’jack marshal rose over the crackling fire, and the

Spriggan, largely unharmed, crashed through the wreckage of the Juggernaut, its lance lowered. Behind it, the second Juggernaut limped along, flanked by a dozen demolition corps troopers. Farther back, in the foundry, a pair of Destroyers emerged, the black maws of their bombard barrels pointed in Lukas' direction.

Lukas pulled more arcane power from his serum and cast a spell. Runes formed around the ranks of assault troopers as the Destroyers' bombards fired. The shells landed in the middle of the Crucible Guard troops, annihilating a handful of them, but Lukas' spell safeguarded the rest from the explosion.

The Spriggan made contact next, slamming into the assault troopers, driving its lance clean through one of the unfortunate soldiers. It rammed its shield into another soldier, flinging him into the side of building, where he left a bright red stain before falling twenty feet to his death.

"Keep firing!" Lukas shouted at the assault troopers. "Give those bloody Destroyers something to think about."

He advanced, gripping Regulus, to the sound of pneumatic cannons firing. He pulled the two Vindicators with him and tried not to focus on the additional Man-O-War demolition corps pouring out of the foundry. It was apparent by their presence that the Khadorans didn't just make warjacks and artillery in this facility.

He pushed through the ranks of assault troopers toward the Spriggan. He ordered his two Vindicators forward to engage the damaged Juggernaut and to provide a screen from incoming bombard fire.

The assault troopers' thermal hammers would have difficulty penetrating the Spriggans armor, and they spread out around it, trying to avoid its terrible lance and the deadly sweep of its combat shield. The shield was the primary issue, and Lukas charged in behind the warjack, spiking his blood with another dose of serum. He transferred that arcane energy immediately into Regulus, wincing as the serum ate away at his flesh like a corrosive. He smashed his hammer into the Spriggan's left arm, behind its shield, crushing armor and the delicate mechanical workings beneath it.

The Spriggan's arm sagged, and it whirled around, swinging its lance like a club. Lukas brought Regulus down in a clumsy parry, but trying to stop a twelve-foot shaft of hardened steel swung by a heavy warjack was an exercise in absurdity. His power field flared; the impact knocked the wind from his lungs and flung him backward. He landed on his back but managed to hold on to his weapon.

A pair of storm troopers helped him to his feet, and he smiled grimly as his assault troopers swarmed the Spriggan. Without its shield, their hammers rose and fell with deadly precision and impact.

Lukas stopped for a moment as his flesh knitted and a broken rib pieced itself back together. The serum both ate his flesh and restored it, a perpetual cycle of agony and renewal.

The Vindicators had closed on the Juggernaut, and Lukas guided their mauls. The Khadoran machine's hull buckled, but it wasn't helpless. It didn't have the guidance of a warcaster, but Khadoran warjacks had enough raw martial instinct that they hardly needed it. Its ice axe licked out, carving into one of the Vindicator cannons, slicing through relays and alchemical feed hoses, spraying combustible liquids in a wide arc.

Lukas poured more of his power into the Vindicators' blows, and the Juggernaut went down, crushed and defeated.

"Ranks!" Lukas shouted, and the assault troopers formed a line in front of him and behind the Vindicators. The demolition corps troopers closed in, more than a dozen of them, swinging their ice mauls in lashing arcs of sapphire energy. Half of them targeted the Vindicators while the other half smashed into the first line of assault troopers. The melee became an ugly press of hammer against hammer. The Crucible Guard soldiers' armor was on par with that of the Man-O-War, but the Khadoran weapons were more powerful and had a longer reach. The freezing impact of the ice maul would take a terrible toll.

"Storm troopers, keep firing!" Lukas shouted, and the Crucible Guard warriors continued to lob their munitions at the two Destroyers. It didn't stop them, and the fiery blast of their bombards flared through the alchemical smoke.

Lukas braced for the impact, but the shells flew high and hit the buildings on either side of the street. He thought they'd been an errant shot until the second volley hit the same spot, and the rubble began to fall.

"Pull back! Pull back!" Lukas cried, but it was too late. Two of the buildings collapsed with a groaning roar, spilling tons of bricks and debris over the storm troopers as they fled the avalanche.

The dust settled, and over half the Crucible Guard troops lay beneath the debris. Their armored limbs poked from the rubble, and some of them weakly grasped at the air, the poor souls below crushed and suffocating.

No other course of action remained but to fight. As the Khadorans began loading mortars they'd brought from the interior of the foundry, Lukas hoped Magnus and Stryker were faring better than he.

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SUPREME KOMMANDANT GURVALDT IRUSK HAD NEVER SEEN anything so glorious as the three Stormbreaker skyships hovering over the drained riverbed. Each was hundreds of feet long, a thick wedge of armor plating topped by a tall T-shaped bridge structure. Beneath each craft bulged five armored half-orbs housing the sky drives that gave the ship lift. Finally, four oversized cannons bristled from the bottom of each vessel, pointing down. He'd designed the Stormbreaker to rain death on everything below it, devastating any city that dared defy the empress.

Hundreds of mechaniks and soldiers swarmed around the huge machines. They loaded munitions and warjacks and made last-minute adjustments to the engines.

Irusk stood beneath a command tent set up on the riverbed so he could oversee the final construction. Distantly, he could hear the siege outside the city, but they were miles from the city walls, in the center of Merywyn. Nothing would reach them here. Strakhov and Kommandant Ivdanovich's forces would hold the Cygnarans and Llaelese at bay for days. Then, the Stormbreakers

would take to the sky and end this conflict forever.

Irusk took a sip of uiske from a glass on a table before him and smiled. It had been a long road to get here, tested by many failures and personal tribulations, but now before him was the key to total victory and the undying esteem of the empress.

He looked to his left as a plume of dust appeared a few hundred yards away. The dust disgorged a group of five Iron Fang Uhlan and a sixth rider, Assault Kommander Strakhov.

The horses neared the tent and reined up. Strakhov dismounted, his scratched and marred warcaster armor adding black smoke to the dust. He'd clearly come directly from battle.

"You needn't risk yourself on the front lines beyond the walls, Kommander," Irusk said.

"I have a duty to my soldiers, Supreme Kommandant, to fight beside them," Strakhov said.

Irusk nodded, knowing the assault kommander sought ways to make up for his own failings, and a man such as he would only find solace in action. "What brings you here, then?"

"The First Army from Point Bourne is nearly upon us," Strakhov said. "And we have reports of an Ordic force moving in from the north."

Irusk chuckled. "Someone convinced old King Baird to finally test his luck against us in open battle."

"We cannot hope to defeat all three of them in open battle."

"Are you blind?" Irusk said, laughing. "Look before you, Kommander. Look at the terror we will soon unleash upon our enemies. Three times the number threatening us could not stand before our Stormbreakers. We will visit destruction upon them from the sky."

Strakhov shook his head. "They are mighty vessels, Supreme Kommandant, but untested. Do you not have—?"

"I have no doubts, Kommander," Irusk said sharply. "This is victory before you. Embrace it."

"I'm sorry, sir," Strakhov said, "but there is more. We've suffered attacks from within. Cygnaran and Llaelese elements have struck one of our main barracks and an important foundry."

This surprised Irusk, and then it angered him. “How? There is no way through the walls.”

“None that we know of, but I believe our enemies received aid from within the city,” Strakhov said. “Furthermore, the reports I have state these attacks are not rank and file. Warcasters commanding warjacks are among them—Ashlynn d’Elyse as well as the Crucible Guard commander Aurum Legate Lukas di Morray.”

Alarm spread through Irusk’s mind. Those names conjured panic, and more so the names Strakhov had not mentioned.

“Show me where this barracks and foundry are,” Irusk said as he walked over to a large table holding a detailed map of Merywyn.

Strakhov pointed out the requested facilities, and their locations were exactly as Irusk feared. They were near the drained riverbed, the most logical places he would draw reinforcements if enemies attacked the Stormbreakers while still on the ground.

“Gather all the troops and warjacks you can. Immediately,” Irusk said.

“Ashlynn d’Elyse and Lukas di Morray are not going anywhere, sir. I could send reinforcements there and destroy them.”

“They are a distraction,” Irusk hissed. “Stryker is coming here.”

Strakhov’s eyes widened, but he nodded. “Yes. It makes sense. It is what I would do.”

“Kovnik!” Irusk shouted at a nearby mechanik, Ivan Drashka. He was a formidable presence, a large, muscular man with a shaved head and a prosthetic arm.

Kovnik Drashka hurried over and saluted. “Supreme Kommandant?”

“I want all three Stormbreakers in the air as soon as possible,” Irusk said.

“We are still loading munitions, sir,” Drashka said. “And it will take some time to heat up the turbines—”

“One hour at the most, Kovnik. No excuses,” Irusk said, his voice an icy razor.

Draskha blanched, an odd look on the hulking battle-scarred man. “I will see it done.”

He saluted again and then sprinted away, his voice carrying over the empty riverbed as he shouted orders.

“I can have a hundred kommandos here in twenty minutes,” Strakhov said, “along with Torch.”

“Do it. Now.” Irusk said turned to one of his attendants. “Bring my armor immediately.”

As Strakhov rode away, Irusk looked out at the Stormbreakers. They no longer seemed like world-breaking machines of war. They seemed vulnerable and their fate tied dangerously to his own.

He did not like that possibility.

...

CAPTAIN EIRA MACKAY HAD NEVER SEEN SO MUCH RED. It unfolded before the turret viewport of her railless interceptor in an undulating sea of armored bodies and towering machines. The Khadorans had been expecting them, and Eira knew they outnumbered her own forces two to one.

Her vision was limited in the turret, but she commanded one of the Vulcans and so could peer through the optic relays of the colossal, using its height to get a sweeping view of the battlefield.

Another Vulcan marched beside hers, this one commanded by Marshal General Baldwin Gearheart. Below it came heavy warjacks, Cygnaran, Crucible Guard, and a few Llaelese models they’d acquired at Greywind Tower. Behind the warjacks Eira and her railless interceptors rolled along in a loose line, and behind them came the thousands of troops they commanded: Storm Knights, Crucible Guard infantry, and Llaelese regulars. Disparate forces drawn together by a single cause.

The distant rolling thunder of artillery from the city sounded. Long-range guns they’d have to weather before they engaged enemy troops.

“Daniels,” she called down to her loader, “load main gun.”

“Load main gun. Aye, Captain,” came the reply. She heard the heavy thunk of Daniels loading an alchemical shell into the cannon.

“Garrison, steady on,” she said to her driver below. “Stay in line with the others.”

The driver also had a narrow viewport with which to guide the Interceptor.

Mackay fired her Interceptor's cannon and then the Vulcan's Aqua Mortuum rockets. Neither of the munitions could reach the walls of Merywyn, but they landed among the enemy troops, killing soldiers and damaging machinery.

Her Interceptor shook as Gearheart's Vulcan unloaded its own munitions, and the rest of the Interceptors fired their cannons. Individual blasts from other warjacks sounded, and she smiled as the front rank of Khadoran soldiers all but disintegrated beneath the storm.

Her joy was short lived as Khadoran artillery came shrieking in. Through her Vulcan's eyes, she saw a railless interceptor blown to pieces, scores of Crucible Guard troops incinerated, and one of the Llaelese warjacks, a Mule, reduced to scrap.

"Daniels, load," she called out, but then the ground shook. She felt rather than saw the artillery shell screaming toward her. A strange almost out-of-body experience took hold of her as she watched through her Vulcan's eyes the shell strike just to the left of her Interceptor and explode. The world spun; the shockwave slammed into her, tossing her around the turret, her power field firing in a protective cocoon around as her Interceptor rolled. She heard Daniels or maybe Garret scream, and then darkness.

When Mackay awoke, the Interceptor had settled, and her head throbbed, but she maintained her connection with the Vulcan and moved it to stand over her wrecked vehicle. She glanced down into the main body of the Interceptor and shuddered. The artillery blast had punched a hole in the front of the vehicle, right above the driver's station. There wasn't much left of Garrison. And Daniels had obviously been tossed around the inside of the Interceptor—without a power field to protect him, the multiple impacts had broken his body.

She grabbed Daniels' identification tags from around his neck and fished Garrison's out of the gore coating the driver's seat. The she took a hand cannon from a rack and kicked open the top hatch. Noise and smoke rolled in, a terrifying amalgamation of

war. She swallowed and dived through the hatch, terror biting at her guts. She didn't fear war, or death, or combat, but facing any of those things outside the protective housing of her Interceptor terrified her. She moved anyway.

She crawled from her Interceptor a few feet from the right tread of her Vulcan. The enormity of the machine was staggering, giving her a momentary surge of agoraphobia. She climbed to her feet and took stock.

Troops were now flowing around Mackay, some casting questioning and concerned glances in her direction.

"Go, go," she cried. "I'm fine!"

She was falling behind, and she couldn't let that happen. She clambered atop the treads on her Vulcan, clinging to one of the access ladders. *Go*, she thought at the huge machine, and it rolled forward, speeding along as artillery shells dropped all around her. She used its height again to get some idea of how the battle unfolded ahead. Their warjacks and heavy infantry had made contact with the Khadorans, though they'd left a wake of bodies behind them. The artillery had taken its toll. The warjacks followed, firing cannons or swinging massive battle weapons at enemy troops or Khadoran warjacks.

Mackay continued to pour her Vulcan's alchemical munitions into the enemy until a lucky artillery shell burst against its chest, slamming it backward and nearly throwing her from her perch. The shell hadn't cracked the colossal's armor, but it wouldn't withstand too many more direct hits.

A larger threat loomed on the horizon. A Conquest, a Khadoran colossal, lumbered in her direction. As it approached, the immense double cannon atop its hull fired, a bright plume of fire and smoke. The cannon shells whistled by, missing her Vulcan's head by mere feet. She returned fire, pushing her guidance into the rockets and scoring a direct hit. The rockets wouldn't crack the armor, but their alchemical payload would corrode it, making it weaker to follow-up attacks.

They were too close for ranged attacks now, so the Conquest charged, one gargantuan fist cocked. Mackay threw herself from

the Vulcan and rolled to her feet, pushing her will into the colossal's ponderous limbs. The two huge machines came together in a teeth-rattling collision as the battle flowed around Mackay in a tide of light and noise.

...

STRYKER RACED ALONG THE RIVERSIDE, a newly constructed dam rising ahead of him. At his back were fifty Stormblades; beside him, Lieutenant Harcourt and the hulking shape of Ol' Rowdy. He and Magnus had separated a mile back. His old mentor took the force of dwarven High Shield Gun Corps and the Avalancher down the twisting streets of Merywyn. They were faster, and Stryker's own force heavier, the gauntleted fist that would punch through, while Magnus kept the bulk of the enemy away.

Ahead, charging toward them, came a force of assault kommandos, a hundred, maybe more. It was a disconcerting sight but far less so than the mammoth shapes jutting over the top of the dam. He couldn't see all of the Khadoran skyship, just what appeared to be towering structures atop gargantuan hulls, three of them, perhaps a bridge or command center. Bright terror gripped him. He had accepted the Khadorans had developed a skyship and even beaten Cygnar to the punch in completing one. Now, faced with the reality they had three completed skyships, his mind clouded with visions of fire raining from the skies, reducing Cygnaran cities to dust and rubble like the great dragons of old. Three of them.

There was no time to dwell on these apocalyptic thoughts, and disabling one or more of the Khadoran vessels was the only way to avoid that terrible fate.

Normally, he would halt his Stormblades, line them up, and let them cut the approaching Khadorans to pieces with bolts of galvanic energy. But there wasn't time. The siege had granted him a small advantage—the enemy outside their gates had drawn away most of the Khadoran troops and warjacks. He had to believe he'd caught Irusk and Strakhov unaware to some degree or else he'd be facing a much larger force.

Stryker cast a spell in the last frantic seconds before he joined

the combat, bolstering the armor of his Stormblades with arcane strength. Runes spun around Harcourt's body as well, likely giving Ol' Rowdy some additional protection. The old warjack would be vital to their cause.

The assault kommandos fired their carbines, but the light weapons failed to do any meaningful damage to Stryker or his troops. His power field and the arcane armor he'd provided the Stormblades repelled the bullets with ease.

Stryker made contact first, swinging Quicksilver in an overhand cut that split the first unfortunate assault kommando from pate to breastbone. He yanked his smoking weapon free, letting bullets and carbine blades bounce off his armor and power field.

Rowdy came next, and his quake hammer cleared a wide swath of enemy, flinging their lifeless bodies into the river.

Irusk, he decided, must be desperate if he was sending assault kommandos into melee with Stormblades. Despite their numbers, their light armor and weapons made them ill-equipped to deal with the thick plate and storm glaives of their foes.

It became a slaughter, a slow grind of blood and the ozone stink of voltaic discharge. Stryker knew the purpose of his enemies was not to defeat him but to slow him, to keep him from reaching the skyships for a while longer. They weren't in the air yet, but Irusk couldn't be far from that goal.

"Push!" Stryker called out. "Cut them down!"

The Stormblades closed ranks behind him, forming a tight wedge with him and Ol' Rowdy as the point, and they slashed and hammered their way through the enemy. They'd moved a good hundred yards down the riverfront, past the dams, and now Stryker could see the Khadoran skyships in all their terrible glory.

Each ship was thirty percent larger than the Cygnaran skyship the Cloudpiercer. Each middeck was an open lattice, and each top deck was a flat expanse that could hold dozens of warjacks. Five armored globes spanned the entirety of each ship and likely housed the craft's sky drives. Finally, four cannons in copulas projected from the bottom of each ship, larger than any gun Stryker had ever seen on the field.

If the skyships became airborne, they would destroy everything he had fought for. He let that terrible thought drive him on, granting panic-induced strength to his blows and carrying him forward.

...

MAGNUS HEARD STRYKER MAKE CONTACT with the assault kommandos as he ran down a narrow Merywyn street. The ring of steel and the sizzling discharge of galvanic energy were unmistakable.

“Sounds like the lord general is living the good life,” Captain Blackheel said beside Magnus. The Rhulic Gun Corps seemed almost giddy with excitement.

“We’re about to join him,” Magnus said and glanced behind him where forty more dwarves chugged alongside and around the squat but still massive form of an Avalancher warjack. Captain Blackheel’s second in command, the huge ogrun Murgan, shouted commands at the machine, guiding it along with a ’jack marshal’s assertive tenor.

They’d gotten ahead of Stryker, and when they returned to the riverfront, Magnus’ breath caught in his throat. The three Khadoran skyships would be one of the most marvelous things he’d ever seen if they weren’t so terrifying. Little that Magnus had encountered on the battlefield frightened him, but the three floating metal monsters in the riverbed dried the spit in his mouth and tore the strength from his limbs.

“By the Fathers,” Captain Blackheel said, “we helped them make those.”

It wasn’t a question, and the dwarf’s tone said everything. He recognized the threat not just to his own life or to those of his allies but to his homeland, to *everyone’s* homeland.

Magnus shook aside his fear and focused. Stryker was in the thick of combat with a mob of assault kommandos, but they had other problems. A small force of Man-O-War was coming up from the riverbed, led by Kommander Strakhov. His personal warjack, Torch, thundered alongside him. That was the immediate problem. Beyond that, Magnus saw Irusk in the riverbed directing soldiers

and machines onto loading ramps and into the skyships. Strakhov was thus only a distraction—a deadly one, but a distraction just the same.

“Captain, I want your guns on those assault kommandos,” Magnus said. “Murgan, you and that Avalancher are with me.”

Captain Blackheel nodded. If he resented Magnus giving him and his dwarves orders, he didn’t show it. “Murgan, do as he says.”

“Where we going?” The big ogrun said, unslinging his shield and shouldering his war cleaver.

“To get reacquainted with Kommander Strakhov.”

•••

STRAKHOV CURSED LOUDLY. The assault kommandos were getting torn to pieces. He’d had no alternative but to send them to intercept Stryker, but it pained him to see brave men and women giving their lives merely to slow the enemy. The Stormbreakers were more important. They knew it, he knew it, but it was a bitter truth.

It was clear they wouldn’t last long, and they would not slow Stryker enough to make a difference. Strakhov had taken the few Man-O-War Irusk was not loading aboard the ships. The supreme kommandant still feared the fight might actually spill *onto* the skyships themselves. Strakhov had rushed to reinforce the assault kommandos and further slow and possibly even defeat Stryker.

He felt confident in doing so. Stryker had spread his small force too thin between attacks on the barracks and foundry. Strakhov pushed his will into Torch, preparing to charge, his sights set on Stryker. They’d met in one-on-one combat in Riversmet, and he ached to resume their duel.

He could feel Torch’s eagerness to engage Ol’ Rowdy as the warjack’s ripsaw screamed to life. They were nearly on top of Stryker when the terrible whine of incoming artillery sounded—and Torch disappeared in blast of flame and smoke.

The damage to the warjack blared into Strakhov’s mind, though it was minimal—the armor scorched, one galvanic relay reduced to fifty percent operating capacity. The shot had come from a side

street off the riverfront, and for a moment Strakhov had trouble registering what he was seeing. Asheth Magnus and an ogrun in archaic armor were charging him with a Rhulic warjack in tow, an Avalancher. Behind them came ranks of dwarven warriors. The High Shield Gun Corps formed a double firing line and began pouring shots into the assault kommandos.

Strakhov shook his head and cursed. He should have known Magnus would be lurking somewhere nearby. Despite the years-long enmity between Stryker and Magnus, they seemed practically joined at the hip during this conflict.

In seconds, Strakhov calculated the odds of a victory. He knew Magnus would hold him in place until Stryker finished with the assault kommandos, and together they would overwhelm him. That, however, would not serve the Motherland's purpose at all.

He retreated.

...

STRYKER WATCHED THE OGRUN MURGAN slam his shield into the back of an assault kommando, likely shattering the man's spine, and then remove the head of another with a swipe of his war cleaver. Magnus joined the fray soon after, cutting a bloody path through the Khadorans to meet Stryker in the middle of what had become little more than an abattoir.

The fight ended abruptly, with the twenty or so assault kommandos remaining throwing down their weapons and retreating. A few of the Stormblades, their blood up, went to follow, but Stryker called them away. The real threat lay below.

Magnus opened his mouth, perhaps to provide a report, but a low, whining hum that built and built until it became a terrible high-pitched scream drowned him out. One of Khadoran skyships, its huge stacks belching black streamers of smoke, rose from the ground, a ponderous leviathan given wings.

The remaining two skyships remained on the ground, their huge bay doors open, still taking on troops and munitions.

"Go, go, go!" Stryker said and pointed Quicksilver. There was no time for any approach but a breakneck charge toward the

nearest skyship. It lay two hundred yards away, down the steep embankment of the dry riverbed.

Stryker and Magnus led the unlikely combined force of Rhulfolk and Stormblades down the slope, skidding and sliding as they descended. Harcourt managed to keep Rowdy on his feet, and somehow, the Avalancher managed to stay upright as well.

They hit the riverbed and ran. Stryker's breath burned in his lungs. One hundred and fifty yards now. The bay doors of another skyship closed, and its engines joined the terrible sonic roar of the first ship.

One left.

One hundred yards, and he spotted a force of Winter Guard, a hundred or more strong, likely recently arrived from deeper in the city, moving to intercept them.

The enemy troops would reach them before they reached the last skyship. Stryker threw his head back and howled in frustration.

"Get to that bloody ship!" Captain Blackheel shouted. The Rhulfolk's face was beet red—running was not exactly part of his combat strategy. "We'll slow those reds for you."

Stryker nodded, hating that there wasn't time to acknowledge the bravery and potential sacrifice of this new ally.

He, Magnus, and the Stormblades broke away from the Gun Corps and ran, the sound of rifle fire and the booming thunder of the Avalancher's cannon fading behind them.

The Khadorans were nearly finished loading, but Stryker wasn't more than twenty yards from the last skyship. A small force of Man-O-War stood at the top of the loading ramp. They'd realized Stryker would reach them before they could take off.

The Man-O-War fired their shield cannons, shredding the ground in front of Stryker and Magnus. Both of their power fields flashed, leaving them rattled but unharmed. A number of Stormblades were not so fortunate.

"Rowdy first!" Stryker shouted to Harcourt, and the Ironclad sprinted ahead, galvanized by Harcourt's arcane strength. The warjack hit the base of the ramp and charged up it like a sentient, mobile battering ram. Direct blasts from Man-O-War shield

cannons blossomed in red and black against Rowdy's hull, but he made the bay door—a huge aperture some thirty feet tall and at least that wide—with his hammer swinging. The Ironclad cleared a path and focused the enemy attacks on him while Stryker, Magnus, and what remained of the Stormblades gained the ramp and then the loading bay beyond.

Stryker's eyes adjusted to the smoky gloom inside the cargo bay, a cavernous space like a vast metal tomb. Inside, there were racks and shelves for cargo, as well as bays for warjacks. These were thankfully empty, but a dozen Man-O-War were trouble enough.

The cargo bay soon filled with smoke and the terrible ringing of steel on steel alongside the pained cries of the dead and dying. All this paled in comparison to the wrenching howl of the sky drives firing up. There was a disorienting moment of weightlessness as the skyship lurched into the sky. Cygnarans and Khadorans stopped fighting for an instant to adjust to the insane suddenness of actual flight.

The bay doors remained open, and the sickening image of the ground disappearing and giving way to the open sky made Stryker queasy. As if a collective moment of holding their breath had passed, battle resumed, and Stryker dove back into melee.

The Man-O-War were formidable, but the presence of Rowdy and three warcasters overmatched them. In minutes, there were only Cygnaran soldiers standing in the loading bay. The remaining Stormblades began to tend to the wounded, and Stryker let them have a moment of reprieve. There would still be heavy fighting to come.

He leaned on Quicksilver, panting. Magnus leaned with one arm against a wall, his face the color of milk, and Harcourt actually sat beneath Rowdy. The warjack blew a low trill of steam and crouched protectively over his new master.

"You all right, Harcourt?" Stryker said. He wouldn't insult Magnus by asking after his condition.

The young warcaster waved away Stryker's question. "Just catching my breath, sir."

He braced himself against Rowdy's quake hammer, and the

warjack gently pulled him to his feet. Stryker couldn't help but feel a wistful moment of longing—Rowdy had been his for many years, and he missed his old battle companion.

"Any idea where the sky drives are?" Magnus said, shaking blood off Foecleaver.

Stryker shook his head. "Not exactly, but did you see those armored spheres as we got close?"

Magnus nodded.

"My guess is those are sky drive housings." Stryker glanced around the bay for exits. There were two: a steam-powered lift meant to ferry soldiers, equipment, and warjacks to the top deck, and a stout metal door set in the west wall.

"That way," Stryker said.

"Can't get Rowdy through there," Magnus pointed out.

Stryker considered. "We'll leave him here along with half the Stormblades. Then we'll use the lift to bring them to the top deck."

"What about us?"

"We're going to find the nearest sky drive and disable it."

"Just one?" Magnus said.

"From the plans I've seen of our own skyship, it requires multiple operational sky drives to get something this big airborne. They'll need every ounce of lift they can get."

"I'm not keen on crashing into the city," Magnus said.

Stryker smiled tiredly. "If we disable one sky drive, it shouldn't make us fall, but it will force the craft to land."

"You sure about that?" Magnus said.

"No," Stryker admitted, "but we can't leave this thing in the air."

"That still leaves two more ships," Harcourt said. "Even if we ground one, two of those things can wreck our army and then Corvis, Point Bourne, Caspia..."

"He's not wrong," Magnus said, and suddenly something grim and cold passed over his face. "Wait. Could you fly this thing?"

"Me? I have no idea. I've seen the designs of our own skyship, but Khador's could easily be completely different," Stryker said.

"No one said you have to fly it *well*," Magnus said. He had a look in his eyes that might be dread or might be something akin

to glee. Stryker couldn't quite tell the difference when it came to Magnus, but he understood what the former mercenary was getting at.

"Maybe," he said.

"We've got a five-hundred-foot flying battering ram," Magnus continued. "How close to combat-ready is our own ship?"

"I have no way of knowing or even if Nemo received our message."

"But there's a chance if it's one of ours against one of theirs. If it's two on one, there's no chance," Magnus said.

The room had gone cold and silent, as each man and woman considered what this decision would ultimately mean. Stryker knew they'd follow him, but he hated to give the order. This didn't matter; he had to give it anyway.

"All right. Everyone, on the lift," he commanded. "We'll fight our way to the bridge."

•••

AS THEY ROSE FROM THE DEPTHS OF THE SKYSHIP into the vast blue void above, Magnus' knees buckled at the sight. The main deck stretched in a flat grey expanse of steel for hundreds of feet, broken only by the rectangular impressions marking the location of lifts from the cargo holds. They were hundreds of feet in the air, all of Merywyn stretched out below them like a detailed map. A huge mass of Khadoran soldiers near the western wall did battle with a much smaller force of Cygnaran and Llaeese. Then, as the vessel shifted, he spied another army, a blue sea of troops approaching from the south, and another force, somewhat smaller, approaching from the north. None of that would matter if they didn't disable the skyships.

The moment the lift stopped, they were under attack. Another force of Man-O-War, this time bolstered by a Destroyer warjack, opened fire on them. The blasts threw Magnus to the deck, his power field absorbing most of the numerous detonations.

Stryker was already charging, Harcourt and Ol' Rowdy not far behind, Stormblades in their wake. Magnus climbed to his feet, trying not to look beyond the deck to the empty sky plummeting

away on either side.

He summoned his magic and cast a Blur spell on the Stormblades before racing to catch up. Rowdy hammered into the Destroyer with his quake hammer, crushing armor and knocking the big warjack back a step. Magnus hurried toward the two warjacks, cutting a Man-O-War down with a swipe of Foecleaver.

Either Rowdy or Harcourt saw him coming, and the Ironclad shifted to the left, giving Magnus a clear line to the Destroyer's right leg. Magnus focused his will, ducked beneath the Destroyer's bombard, and slashed its leg, once, twice, three times. Hydraulic fluid sprayed, and the warjack whirled on its good leg to cleave him with its axe. He flung himself flat to the deck, and the axe passed over his head. Rowdy's quake hammer came whistling down an instant later, crumpling the Destroyer's hull like thin sheet metal and destroying its cortex. It toppled over, eight tons of inert scrap.

Stryker, Harcourt, and the Stormblades were making short work of the Man-O-War, though not without cost. Half a dozen Cygnarans corpses lay among the Khadoran dead.

Above them, the bridge superstructure loomed seventy feet in the air; behind them, the hydraulic whine of another lift rising to the top deck sounded, likely bringing more troops.

"I'll hold off whatever comes up that lift," Magnus said. "I'll buy you as much time as I can."

Stryker nodded. "If I don't see you after this . . ."

"You'll be glad to count yourself lucky," Magnus said and smiled, though he grasped Stryker's forearm for a moment. "Go."

"Harcourt, you're with me," Stryker said. "Stay in contact with Rowdy as long as you can."

They turned and sprinted toward the bridge.

Magnus prepared to stand against the tide.

•••

STRYKER AND HARCOURT REACHED THE ENTRANCE to the bridge structure, one small door in the bottom of the squat pillar of steel. Nothing larger than a man could enter through that door and

even then only one at a time. Storming the bridge would not be easy.

Predictably, the door was locked.

“Stand back,” Stryker said, pointing Quicksilver and loosing a bolt of galvanic energy. Sparks flew, and the door fell inward, revealing narrow metal stairs going up.

Harcourt drew his hand cannon and mechanika sword. Stryker held Quicksilver close to his body; the weapon wasn’t designed for narrow spaces, but he would make do. “I’ll go first.”

“The bridge and command center has to be at the top,” Harcourt said, following behind Stryker as he mounted the stairs.

Stryker moved cautiously up one flight, then another. There were more doors at each landing, but he kept ascending, his legs growing heavy with the effort of climbing in armor.

Stryker bounded up each turn in the stairs, knowing he might run himself onto an enemy blade or catch a hand cannon shot at horrifyingly close range.

It turned out to be the former.

The Man-O-War had been waiting, his annihilator axe braced against the wall. Stryker didn’t see it until he rounded the corner on the next landing up. He managed to twist to the side a fraction before the weapon struck, but it ripped through his power field and scored his armor. The blow knocked the wind from his lungs, and flung him back down the stairs. The Man-O-War followed, hefting his axe like a spear. He clearly intended to use his weight and momentum to skewer Stryker.

The Man-O-War was halfway down the steps when Harcourt’s hand cannon went off. The shot struck the Khadoran soldier’s helmet, but did not penetrate—instead, it knocked the Khadoran onto his back. Leaping over Stryker as the Man-O-War went down, Harcourt took his blade in a two-handed grip and drove it through the Khadoran’s breastplate, twisted, and yanked the weapon free.

Stryker struggled to his feet and came up behind Harcourt.

“You *did* learn a thing or two from Marshal d’Elyse,” he said.

Harcourt turned to him, his face pale, and nodded. “Mostly to shoot them *then* stab them.”

Stryker clapped the young warcaster on the back and continued up the stairs.

They reached the top in short order. Another door.

“They’ll be waiting for us on the other side,” Stryker said, knowing the bridge would be heavily guarded.

Harcourt said, “Spells?”

“Arcane shield,” Stryker said. “Then I want you picking them off with your hand cannon. One of us has to survive long enough to pilot the skyship.”

There didn’t seem to be fear in Harcourt’s eyes, just resigned determination. He knew his duty. It wasn’t fair that such a promising young warcaster would die this way, but Stryker knew there were no words to comfort him.

They each cast their spells, and their power fields glowed as the arcane shield spell added protective energy to them. Stryker nodded at Harcourt and then charged the door.

Gunshots rang out before he could take in his surroundings, but the bullets bounced off his power field. The bridge formed a wide half-circle, instrument panels to one side below huge windows opening up to the sky. There were Winter Guard, a dozen at least, and a pair of Man-O-War flanking what Stryker assumed to be the kapitan of the vessel. He’d hoped it might be Strakhov or Irusk, but the Khadoran warcasters were likely aboard one of the other ships. He could see the two Khadoran skyships ahead, the cannons on their bellies firing down into what must be the Cygnaran army and its allies.

Stryker raised Quicksilver, grateful for the space to swing it. Harcourt’s hand cannon boomed, and a Winter Guard soldier went down. The rest streamed toward Stryker, their intent to mob him. He whirled and cut, Quicksilver slicing through bodies with the rank stench of cooked flesh.

A bolt of blue energy scorched the air, striking one of the Man-O-War and staggering him back a step. The kapitan drew a hand cannon and fired at Stryker, missed, and instead shot one of his own men in the back.

Before Stryker could shout an order, Harcourt joined the melee,

using his hand cannon in his off-hand like a club while swinging his sword in the other. More of Ashlynn d'Elyse's tutelage, Stryker imagined.

There were only three Winter Guard remaining. Stryker left Harcourt to deal with them and focused on the Man-O-War and the kapitan. He parried the Man-O-War's annihilator axe and whirled inside the soldier's reach but did not attack him. Instead, he cut at the kapitan, who was hastily reloading his hand cannon. Quicksilver removed the top of the man's head in a gout of blood, and then Stryker spun again, carving the leg out from under a Man-O-War, crippling him to the ground. Fury and desperation drove him now; all pretense of technique fell away. He slashed at the last Man-O-War with brute force, pushing arcane strength into his blows. His first strike cut the man's annihilator axe in half. The second removed his right arm at the elbow. The last stove in his helmet, splitting the steel down to the gorget. He dropped dead.

Stryker whirled. Harcourt stood over the corpses of his foes, blood running down his face as he staggered toward Stryker.

"Where are you hit?" Stryker said.

"A glancing blow from one of their axes," he said. "Scalp wound. I'm just dizzy."

Stryker wanted to check the wound, but what was the point? None of it would matter soon enough. He turned to the controls and realized with quiet relief they weren't too dissimilar to those he might see on a standard sailing vessel. There was even a wheel, and next to it, controls and levers. He understood enough Khadoran to read the words for altitude and thrust, though if this skyship were like the Cygnaran vessel, those controls would only send messages to the engineers monitoring the sky drives, indicating to reduce or increase power to the drive cores, which would in turn increase or decrease speed and altitude. He could not control the ship itself—only the men operating it.

"Do you understand these?" Harcourt asked.

Stryker peered out the huge windows ahead at the closest airship.

“We’re not doing any precision flying here,” he said and put his hands on the wheel. “I’ll just aim the prow . . .”

He turned the wheel toward the trailing Khadoran skyship. There was less resistance than he expected, and so the ship pitched crazily starboard, throwing both him and Harcourt to the floor.

Stryker shot to his feet and grabbed the wheel again, steadying it before the vessel went farther off-course. This time he proceeded with more caution and finesse and managed to line up the prow, more or less, with his target. He reached for the lever marked thrust and pushed it forward, feeling a slight pang of sympathy for the engineers below who would follow an order, believing it from their kapitan, that would ultimately mean their deaths. Nothing happened for a few seconds, and then the engines howled, and the sound of the wind rushing by became a rising shriek.

“That’s it,” Stryker said, as the Khadoran skyship ahead grew closer. Even if they realized their imminent peril, they wouldn’t be able to maneuver away in time. “William, I just want to say—”

“Sir, look!” Harcourt said and pointed.

Stryker turned to see another skyship coming from the south, a vessel utterly unlike the others. It was more battleship than barge, smaller than the Khadoran vessels, with a wide armored prow than narrowed toward the aft of the ship. Its bridge was low, a seamless part of the upper deck, and behind it giant storm coils filled the sky with blue fire.

Nemo had arrived.

...

RELIEF AND TERROR WASHED OVER MAGNUS as the Cygnaran skyship approached. Its arrival meant Nemo had received Stryker’s message, but the Cloudpiercer sped toward the Khadoran vessel at an obvious attack angle, its deck filled with soldiers and warjacks.

Magnus had other problems, of which he was swiftly reminded as a Winter Guard axe crashed through his power field and bounced off his breastplate. Magnus slashed open the man’s torso and kicked him over the side of deck as he tried to hold in his guts.

They were grossly outnumbered by Khadorans, and enemy reinforcements were arriving from below at a steady clip. That was a problem, but a more serious dilemma was the fact that his friendly blue would not be visible in an ocean of enemy red to the Cygnaran troops aboard the Cloudpiercer. The Cloudpiercer had drifted above the Khadoran ship so its troops could fire down on the enemy. He had to find a way to signal them.

Magnus searched the swirling melee and found Ol' Rowdy in the middle of a tangle of Man-O-War and Winter Guard, swinging his hammer and crushing men flat or knocking them over the side to plummet to their deaths. The big Ironclad, with his battered blue hull and unmissable outline, was as big a flag as Magnus could raise. The warjack was some thirty yards away, and a dozen enemies stood between them. Now he needed to clear space.

"Guard me!" Magnus yelled at a pair of Stormblades, and the two knights stepped in front of him to meet another onslaught of Khadorans. Magnus concentrated and summoned a spell, the drain on his arcane reserves nearly staggering him. The runes formed, and ten yards away the deck of Khadoran ship exploded upward in a spray of steel, shredding the Khadoran soldiers nearest the blast and sending others flying.

He raced forward over the scorched deck, cutting down a severely wounded Winter Guard with Foecleaver. Above, the soldiers on the Cloudpiercer *Raelthorne* began to fire, trenchers and long gunners pouring shot after shot into the tangle of friend and foe.

"Rowdy!" Magnus cried as he neared the Ironclad. The warjack was still bonded to Harcourt, and there was a chance, a small one, the warcaster still lived and was watching through Rowdy's eyes. "Signal the ship."

Rowdy hammered another Winter Guard out of the way and loosed a questioning blast of steam.

"Harcourt, dammit, signal the *Raelthorne*," Magnus shouted, then flinched as a bullet bounced off his power field. The shot had come from above.

Rowdy's eyes flashed, and Magnus felt the subtle tingle of another warcaster's presence. "Harcourt, get him to the edge of the deck."

Ol' Rowdy surged forward, plowing through the remaining Winter Guard and Man-O-War surrounding him like a runaway train. The warjack didn't even bother to use his hammer—he simply smashed the enemy aside or crushed them underfoot.

Magnus ran behind the Ironclad, cutting down any Khadorans quick enough to get out of Ol' Rowdy's way. The warjack reached the edge of the deck, there easily visible to the men aboard the Cloudpiercer, and waved his hammer. Magnus hurriedly cast a spell and fired an arcantrik bolt straight up into the air, a golden streak of energy he hoped would act like a flare.

Gunfire from the Cygnaran vessel ceased, and then it dropped just below the main deck of the Khadoran skyship, a feat of piloting possible only by someone who knew the machine intimately.

"Jump!" came a shout from behind Magnus, and he turned to see Stryker and Harcourt rushing in his direction, their power fields pulsing blue as they deflected enemy blades and bullets. "Everyone, onto the *Raelthorne*!"

"What?" Magnus said, unable to believe what he was hearing. "Isn't there a bloody ramp or—"

Stryker ran past him and leapt from the side of the Khadoran vessel. He hung in the air for a fraction of a second and the slammed into the deck of the Cloudpiercer amid a dozen long gunners.

Harcourt and the dozen or so remaining Stormblades followed him, and then Rowdy made the plunge. Twelve tons of warjack hit the reinforced deck of the Cygnaran vessel with a sound like dropping a mountain on top of a mountain.

Gunshots resumed from the deck of the Cygnaran vessel flashed as long gunners and trenchers dissuaded Khadoran soldiers from following.

Magnus shook his head, fought every screaming instinct in his brain, and jumped.

...

THE TWO KHADORAN SHIPS COLLIDED with an unearthly noise, a shrieking, tearing explosion of shattered metal, splintering wood, and the dull roar of a thousand cannons.

From the *Raelthorne's* bridge, Nemo watched the two vessels plummet from the sky, a blazing tangle of burning metal. They were far enough from the city that the ships crashed harmlessly into the river, sending up a mighty spume of water and steam.

"All my men are accounted for, Artificer General," Stryker said, his voice weary. The warcaster's red hair hung in a tangle, and his dented armor and tired eyes spoke of days and days of combat. "Let's shoot that floating scow out of sky."

Nemo shook his head. "This Cloudpiercer is unarmed."

"What?" Asheth Magnus said. "You launched this thing without a way to deal with *that* thing?"

He stabbed his finger at the hulking shape of the last Khadoran skyship, a few miles distant. If Stryker looked worn out, Magnus looked on the verge of collapse; the man was not much younger than Nemo, though neither age nor fatigue forestalled his outburst.

"There was not time," Nemo said, trying to be patient. "I launched as soon as we received Stryker's message."

"Well, can we ram her?" Stryker said. His face fell. He'd just survived almost certain death, but here he was, ready and willing to undertake the same course of action. He was a soldier to the bitter end.

"It might work, but the *Raelthorne* is much smaller than Irusk's abomination." Part of Nemo undoubtedly wanted to know how in Thamar's breath they'd gotten that much metal off the ground. "We might smash into it, break up, and drop like a stone, without having done any real damage."

"Then what's our play here?" Magnus asked.

"This ship is loaded with as many troops and warjacks as it can carry, including a Hurricane," Nemo said. "The answer is simple: we catch her and board her."

"*Can* we catch her?" Stryker said. "She's already turned toward

Corvis, with a good head start.”

“A pretty damned reasonable question,” Magnus said, “and to make matters worse, I’d lay good money Irusk is aboard that one. He’s lost Merywyn, and you know he means to make us pay for it. He’ll destroy Corvis and most of the First Army on his way there. Out of spite, if nothing else.”

“The *Raelthorne* is faster, undoubtedly,” Nemo said, “but the Khadoran vessel is too far ahead.”

“Would it help if we found some oars and rowed?” Magnus spat.

Nemo hesitated with a flare in his eye, clearly about to respond to Magnus’ sarcasm, but instead he turned to Stryker. “No, we can’t catch the Khadoran vessel, not under the *Raelthorne*’s own power.”

Stryker’s eyes narrowed. “What are you suggesting?”

“I’m not suggesting anything,” Nemo said. “But I am telling you the arcane turbines on this Cloudpiercer are powered by storm chambers.”

Stryker understood immediately, but the concern on his face was not particularly convincing.

“Artificer General . . .” he began. “Sebastian, we’re not talking about supercharging a warjack—”

“Do you not think I understand that, Lord General?” Nemo snapped. “You think I don’t know the price we risk?”

Stryker bowed his head. “My apologies. I spoke out of turn.”

Nemo sighed. Stryker could see his anger evaporate a more terrible emotion cover his features: doubt. “No, my boy, you merely spoke truth, but I don’t see any alternative.”

“Very well, then. I trust you, of course. How can I help?”

“Keep her on course while I go below.” Nemo summoned a weary smile. “Things might get a tad bumpy.”

Magnus laughed, though it was hollow and without mirth. “You’re both out of your minds, but in for a bloody copper, in for a Thamar-beshitted crown.”

Nemo glanced around the bridge—at Stryker, at Magnus, at the officers and soldiers manning their stations. All eyes were

on him, but they knew he had never been one for speeches. Statements of fact were more his domain, even the hardest facts.

“We’ll catch Irusk,” the artificer general said. “We’ll board that ship, and we’ll end this war.”

Just the same, he did not sound confident.

