

PART FOUR

A SHATTERING EXPLOSION ABOVE ASHLYNN D'ELYSE rattled her teeth, and she thought the sky might come hurtling down upon them. But she did not look up, did not pull her attention away from the task at hand. The Man-O-War shocktrooper standing in front of her, however, was not as focused. His annihilator axe drooped as his helmet tilted toward the heavens. Ashlynn used his split second of inattentiveness to drive Nemesis through his helmet and skull. Now she glanced to the sky as her foe crumpled to the ground.

Two of the Khadoran skyships had crashed into one another, and both were plummeting back to earth, trailing fire, smoke, and bits of debris. A scattering of cheers went up from the Llaeese soldiers locked in desperate battle in the courtyard of the Khadoran barracks, but it was a ragged, fleeting expression.

The Khadorans, too, returned to matters of life and death on the ground, and the melee began anew. The courtyard was filled primarily with Winter Guard, who still poured from the barracks.

Ashlynn, Lieutenant Gastone Crosse, and the Llaelese gun mage Vayne di Brascio had led a small force to the barracks to keep the enemy from swarming Stryker and Magnus' troops as they sought to board or disable the Khadoran skyships. Given the destruction above, it appeared the Cygnarans had accomplished both objectives against at least two of their targets. Delaying the enemy here seemed no longer necessary.

Ashlynn scanned the courtyard, parrying Winter Guard axes and ignoring the occasional bullet as it pelted off her power field. She spied Gastone fighting alongside his black-hulled Nomad, the eerie green glow of his cursed hand cannon casting his warjack's shadow, huge and flickering, across the cobblestones. Vayne di Brascio fought within a knot of Llaelese soldiers, using his magelock and saber to dispatch the enemy and shield his allies.

It was time to leave and salvage what troops they could. She and Gastone would be needed elsewhere against targets more important than a single Khadoran barracks.

She pushed forward toward Gastone, gathering Llaelese troops as she went. She used her armor, power field, and mechanical blade to carve a path through the throng of enemies. She left her Mule, Soldier, behind near the gate, its battle mace clearing what she hoped would be their path to escape.

She reached Gastone as the young warcaster shot another Winter Guard at pointblank range, blasting away most of the woman's head and ripping her soul from her corpse. Ashlynn grimaced, but her protégé's cursed weapon was a problem for another time.

"Lieutenant," she cried. Gastone turned glazed eyes toward her, his hands reloading his weapon deftly and unconsciously. She met his stare. "We need to leave. Now."

She pointed to the sky.

Gastone glanced up and seemed to come back to himself. He grinned and something like relief passed briefly over his features.

"The lord general was successful, I see," he said. "Pity there's still one left."

Ashlynn ignored the slight. "We need to push through to the

gate and get out of this barracks.”

Gastone nodded. “Though that’s a lot of red between here and there.”

Ashlynn couldn’t disagree. The courtyard swarmed with enemies. The Khadoran officers were well aware two high-priority targets were within their grasp. “That’s an order, Lieutenant.”

“Of course, Marshal,” Gastone said and pointed. “But let’s gather up Captain di Brascio first.”

The gun mage stood alone, surrounded by dead Llaeese soldiers, slashing and shooting in a frenzy of steel and smoke.

“Start toward the gate,” Ashlynn said. “Clear a path. I’ll get di Brascio.”

“All right. Let’s go, Cleaver,” Gastone commanded. His Nomad blew an affirmative note and punctuated it by reaching over his master to cut a charging Winter Guard in two. Then the Nomad pushed ahead; Gastone and the remaining Llaeese soldiers fell in behind it.

Ashlynn summoned her magic and enhanced her foot speed and reaction times with her arcane power before sprinting through the closing Khadorans. Winter Guard were rank-and-file soldiers, not trained or equipped to deal with a warcaster in a one-on-one or even ten-to-one combat. So, she sliced a path through them with relative ease, and soon they gave up trying to intercept her. The hulking figures of Man-O-War, however, were a real problem, and the small unit of heavily armored Khadorans in the barracks had locked shields and were barreling toward Vayne di Brascio.

She reached the gun mage’s side just at the shield wall of Man-O-War barreled down on him. She slashed at the lead Khadoran, but Nemesis skittered off his shield. She leapt back to avoid the downward stroke of his annihilator axe and that of his compatriot next to him.

“Marshal, what are you doing?” di Brascio shouted as he reloaded his double-barreled magelock.

“Getting you out of here,” she snarled, parrying another annihilator axe and firing her hand cannon at its owner. The heavy ball snapped the Khadoran’s head back but did not penetrate—he

did not break ranks.

Di Brascio set his back to hers, and then unleashed the double thunder of his magelock. They were surrounded by Khadoran troops. The Winter Guard, bolstered by the presence of the Man-O-War, now made a firing line, and a dozen blunderbusses were leveled in their direction. The Winter Guard were obviously relying on the Man-O-War locked shields and thick armor to repel any errant shots. It was a risk they must have felt worth taking in hopes of killing one of the most important leaders of the Llaeese Resistance.

“Blood and hell,” Ashlynn hissed as she grabbed di Brascio and spun them both around, putting her armor and power field between him and the Winter Guard. The courtyard filled with thunder, and her power field bloomed bright. She staggered and went to her knees as two projectiles made it through and struck her breastplate and pauldrons.

Di Brascio opened up with his magelock at the shield wall of Man-O-War. Where Ashlynn’s shot had failed to penetrate, the ensorcelled slug from di Brascio’s weapon pierced shield, armor, and the man behind it. A Man-O-War fell, creating a hole in their line, and Ashlynn rose to her feet, ignoring the blood pouring down her shoulder where a Winter Guard bullet had pierced the flesh between her armor.

She summoned a spell, knowing it would be her last stand, her last effort before the Khadorans cut or shot her down. But she would die with sword in hand, and that sword would be red with the blood of her enemies. Runes formed around her body, and the world slowed to a sluggish crawl as she glided on wings of arcane might. She fell among the remaining Man-O-War in a heartbeat. Her sword flashed, and an enemy died. The Khadoran next to him brought an annihilator axe up to parry, but he moved like an insect caught in sap. Ashlynn ran him through before he had moved his weapon more than a few inches.

Di Brascio’s magelock sounded again, and Ashlynn could almost see the ball in flight, a glowing ember of death streaking toward and then through another Man-O-War.

It could not last. The world sped up again, roaring to life once more with thunder and screams as the spell dissipated. Ashlynn stood over the bodies of four Man-O-War. Not nearly enough, and the enemy closed in, cold eagerness etched upon their faces. Today, they would bring down a legend, and each one ached to be the hero who delivered the final blow.

They would pay for that privilege in blood, she vowed. Ashlynn raised Nemesis and prepared to charge when the chattering sound of small-arms fire, rapid and en masse, sounded overhead.

Streaks of fire arced across the sky as familiar shapes descended from the heavens. Half the Rocketmen opened fire with their carbines as they descended, spraying the Khadorans below with a hail of bullets. The others dropped gravity bombs, and blooms of fire hurled enemy bodies like broken dolls in all directions.

Utter chaos reigned in the courtyard as the Crucible Guard troops landed. Revived, Ashlynn threw herself into combat once again. Grim hope replaced resigned futility and granted renewed vigor to her sword arm.

It ended swiftly—soon the enemy dead littered the courtyard. Those still living fell to their knees to surrender, the eagerness in their eyes replaced with blind fear.

“Marshal,” someone said, but Ashlynn’s ears rang and her vision blurred. Strength left her limbs, and she toppled forward into the arms of a familiar figure, one whose rocket pack still venting smoke.

“I’ve got you, Marshal. I’ve got you.”

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ASHLYNN OPENED HER EYES AND FOUND HERSELF lying on her stomach on a rough bunk in a plain stone room. She still wore her armor; the weight of it pressed her into the straw mattress. She groaned and rolled into a sitting position. There were more bunks, each holding a wounded Llaelese soldier. Looking around, she realized she was inside the Khadoran barracks where she’d nearly died.

Those administering to the wounded in the barracks noticed

her sitting upright, and a tall woman wearing the kit of a Crucible Guard Rocketman hurried in her direction. Ashlynn had fought beside Captain Elsa Swift more than once during this siege and was glad to see her.

“Marshal, you should be resting,” Elsa said, motioning for one of the medics to join her.

Ashlynn stood and grimaced. The worst pain came from her right shoulder, where the Winter Guard bullet had pierced her power field and armor. She could still move that arm, however, so it might be not be too bad.

“I don’t have time to rest, Captain,” Ashlynn said. She nodded at the medic, a dark-haired man in a Cygnaran uniform. “Patch up the wound on my shoulder.”

“You’ll have to remove that pauldron,” the medic said.

Elsa stepped behind Ashlynn and helped her with the straps. “I’m not going to argue with you, Marshal. If you say you’re fighting fit, then I’ll take you at your word.”

“Good. Now tell me what the hell is going on out there.”

Elsa lifted the pauldron away, and the medic took her place. He probed the wound gently.

“Bullet went through the meat,” he murmured. “Bleeding has stopped, and there’s no damage to the bone.”

Ashlynn grunted a reply, then gritted her teeth as the medic poured coagulant on the wound before setting to work with needle and thread.

“The big news is the Ordic army is on the way,” Elsa said.

Ashlynn’s eyes went wide. “Truly?”

“They’re skirting the Umbrian border and marching up from Midfast,” Elsa said. “Ten thousand shield division.”

“Then we’ve won,” Ashlynn said.

“Well, there are still a lot of Khadoran soldiers both inside and outside the city,” Elsa cautioned. “They’re not likely to retreat anytime soon, and there’s still one of those bloody skyships in the air.”

“There. That should hold,” the medic said and patted Ashlynn’s shoulder. He left to tend the more seriously wounded.

Ashlynn flexed her shoulder; it felt a bit better. “Not much I can do about that. Stryker and Magnus took down two of them, so we’ll have to trust them to take the third.”

Elsa nodded, her face pale. “That last ship is headed for Corvis and the Cygnaran First Army. Irusk might lose Merywyn, but he might wreck Corvis and kill thousands before his forces surrender.”

“That man has a nest of snakes for a soul,” Ashlynn spat. She hated that she could do nothing to stave off such destruction, but there was still much to do here. “Where are Lieutenant Crosse and Captain di Brascio?”

“In the courtyard, waiting for you,” Elsa said and smirked. “They didn’t think you’d rest long, either.”

Ashlynn smiled and picked up Nemesis—someone had thoughtfully leaned it against the bunk within easy reach. She checked to see if her connection remained active with Soldier and was relieved to find the old Mule still operational. “Thank you, Captain. For everything.”

“Happy to help,” Elsa said. “I have reports the east gate is poorly defended. I was going to take my Rocketmen and, uh, *worsen* the situation. Care to join?”

Ashlynn chuckled as she armed herself. “Just try to stop me.”

THE SKY ABOVE MERYWYN TEEMED WITH GIANTS. Major Elizabeth Maddox had never seen such a thing, had never envisioned a battlefield not made of dirt and stone and blood. Now, as she turned her eyes to the heavens and the skyships battling there, she understood war had changed forever.

Only one Khadoran skyship remained. The other two had collided midair—Stryker and Magnus no doubt had some hand in that—and were now little more than smoking wreckage in the river. One Khadoran skyship was still an all-but-insurmountable problem—the guns bristling from the bottom of its hull could reduce an army or a city to slag. The gargantuan ship flew south, away from Merywyn, with the Cygnaran Cloudpiercer in pursuit.

Maddox wrenched her gaze from the sky; she had more pressing concerns on the ground, primarily the high walls of Merywyn and the swarming mass of Khadoran troops before them. The army of Cygnaran soldiers she commanded occupied the middle of a great line of allied soldiers and machines that, while strong and capable,

were grossly outnumbered. The towering forms of the Crucible Guard Vulcans and the presence of their heavy infantry evened the odds somewhat, but success hinged on the arrival of Lord General Duggan and the First Army from Corvis.

Maddox's power field suddenly flared around her as another artillery barrage screamed over the city walls, and one of its shells slammed into the ground ahead, reducing a Llaesele Vanguard warjack to deadly shrapnel. A Storm Knight beside her—she thought his name had been Evans—caught a piece of super-heated armor plating in the face and went down in a spray of blood.

“Storm Knights,” Maddox called out, wiping Evans' blood from her face, “volley fire!”

She gripped Tempest and unleashed a bolt of voltaic energy. A line of crackling lightning joined a hundred others. Jagged stripes of azure fire lanced into the Khadoran lines, leaving dead soldiers in their wakes.

Maddox touched the cortexes of the warjacks she controlled—two Defenders and a Charger that comprised nearly all the warjacks remaining from Riversmet. She fired the Defenders' cannons, arcing the shells over her troops' heads to land in the center of the Khadoran line. More soldiers died, but the reds had a seemingly inexhaustible supply.

The Khadorans had not brought the bulk of their troops forward, but they had committed some heavy infantry and many of their warjacks, including a pair of Conquests. She watched as one of the Conquests closed with a Crucible Guard Vulcan, and the two monstrous machines came together with a crash that echoed over the battlefield.

The Khadoran troops cleared out around the two battling colossals to avoid being trampled, creating a small hole in their line. Maddox wasn't about to let the opportunity pass.

“Captain Yarbrough,” she shouted at a nearby Storm Knight, “take your company and support that Vulcan. Make that hole bigger.”

Yarbrough nodded. “Yes, ma'am.”

He began shouting orders to the other knights. Some three

hundred Storm Knights pulled away from the Cygnaran line and advanced in a tight wedge toward the Vulcan and the Crucible Guard troops behind it.

“Everyone else,” Maddox shouted as she raised Tempest, “forward!”

She was about to charge when a shrill whistle sounded behind her. Maddox flinched, expecting another artillery barrage, but she turned and instead saw a messenger moving through the ranks. The woman wore the gear of a CRS ranger and blew a whistle as she advanced, announcing her presence and the fact she had an important message.

“Hold!” Maddox cried and Storm Knights encircled her, creating a protective barrier of flesh and steel.

“Major Maddox,” the ranger said breathlessly, her cheeks red from exertion, “I’m Sergeant Connors. I bring news from the south.”

“Is it Lord General Duggan? Has the First Army arrived?” Maddox said, hope blooming in her chest.

Connors shook her head. “I don’t know, ma’am. I came from Northguard not Corvis. I—”

The whining shriek of an artillery round sounded overhead, and Maddox grabbed the ranger and jerked her close. The shell landed thirty yards away; Maddox’s power field lit up from the shockwave and bits of shrapnel, not enough to harm the armored Storm Knights around her but potentially deadly for an unarmored ranger.

Maddox released Connors and gently pushed her away. “Continue.”

“I . . . uh . . . thank you,” the ranger stammered.

“Sergeant,” Maddox waved this off, “we’re in the middle of a bloody war. Now spit it out.”

“Oh. Yes, of course. A large force of Ordic soldiers passed North Guard three days ago,” Connors finally said.

“More Crucible Guard?” Maddox said. That would certainly be helpful. Their soldiers and machines had proved devastatingly effective, even in small numbers.

“No, ma’am,” Connors corrected her. “Ordic regulars, some ten thousand of them.”

Maddox jaw fell open and she shook her head. “Say again, Sergeant.”

“Ordic regulars, Shield Division from Midfast under the command of General Vascar.” Despite the shriek of artillery, the whistling buzz of bullets, and the screams of the dying, Connors smiled.

“Is there more?”

“Yes. King Baird is among them,” Connors said.

Maddox threw back her head and laughed. Alyce di Morray had done more than convince her uncle to give them aid; she’d managed to get the hoary old bandit king out on the field. He wouldn’t take part in the fighting, of course, but his presence would galvanize and inspire his troops. “How far out are they?”

“I passed them two days ago,” Connors said. “They should reach Merywyn in six hours.”

Maddox considered that. General Vascar might have reports of the skyships currently battling above them, but she couldn’t be sure.

“Orders, ma’am?” Connors asked.

“I want you to deliver a message to General Vascar.”

“What message?”

Maddox pointed to the heavens. “Tell him to point his artillery to the skies.”

AURUM LEGATE LUKAS DI MORRAY DUCKED a Man-O-War ice maul, the freezing energy turning the sweat on his brow to frost in an instant. He threw a shoulder into the Khadoran, knocking him backward, and then brought his own maul down in a crushing overhand stroke. Regulus crushed the Man-O-War's helmet and skull, the heat from the thermal injectors fusing steel and shattered flesh into a gory alloy.

The Khadoran mortars had grown silent. They'd done their job—half or more of Lukas' troops lay beneath a mountain of rubble. The only bright spot in his now futile battle was that it allowed Lord General Stryker and Major Magnus to board and scuttle two of the Khadoran skyships. He'd watched two Stormbreakers smash into one another midair and then crash into the Black River. The third continued south, a Cygnaran skyship in pursuit.

He should retreat, but men and women were trapped and dying beneath the rubble behind him. Another cluster of Man-O-War

Demolition Corps emerged from the 'jack foundry ahead, one of them shouting orders to a Juggernaut warjack. Lukas had one Vindicator remaining; the other lay crushed beneath a building. One Vindicator and two-dozen heavy infantry would stand little chance against the enemy.

“Sergeant,” Lukas called out to a nearby assault trooper, “take half your squad and start clearing this rubble. Save as many as you can.”

“Sir?” the soldier replied. “We should retreat.”

“Not yet. I’ll hold them and give you as much time as I can. Now, quick, get to it.”

The assault trooper did as ordered, and soon a dozen others were lifting away rubble and pulling their brothers and sisters from the ruins.

“The rest of you with me,” Lukas called out. He strode forward beside his Vindicator. Fifteen shock troopers fell in line behind him.

Lukas pointed Regulus and thumbed the injection switch on his armor. Alchemical serum flowed into his blood stream, and arcane strength filled his mind and limbs. “Charge!”

As he broke into a sprint, a ragged cry went up around him from the soldiers joining him. The Vindicator blew a harsh whistle of steam, and he directed it to fire its compression cannon as they closed. Alchemical fire exploded around the enemy—not enough to seriously injure them but enough to set them back on their heels as his forces closed the gap.

Lukas batted aside an enemy ice maul, crushed the leg of the Man-O-War wielding it, and pushed through the enemy line. His Vindicator followed, swinging its own maul from side to side, widening the gap. Lukas’ target was the Juggernaut. The Khadoran warjack’s optical relays flashed crimson. It vented smoke and steam like an angry bull and came on like a red avalanche.

Lukas slowed his pace, letting his Vindicator charge ahead, and pushed the excess arcane strength he’d taken from his serum into its first strike. The Vindicator’s maul came down and crashed against the Juggernaut’s hull, staggering it backward. Unlike most

warjacks, which required a skilled 'jack marshal or warcaster to be effective, Khadoran models often contained a natural skill at combat due to age and experience that others lacked. The Juggernaut displayed some of that skill now. The Vindicator leveled another blow, but as its maul came down, the Juggernaut caught the weapon by its haft with its free hand and swung its ice axe in a powerful rising cut.

Lukas felt the Juggernaut's weapon bite into his warjack's right leg. Then an icy chill flowed through his mind as his Vindicator's cortex seized. Frost rimed its hull. Lukas watched in horror as the Juggernaut landed another strike, cleaving through his warjack's left arm. The Juggernaut then smashed its fist into and through the hull above the Vindicator's head, crushing its cortex and snuffing its presence in Lukas' mind like someone had blown out a candle.

The Juggernaut's 'jack marshal, a Man-O-War, barked out orders. Simple instructions: kill the enemy warcaster.

Lukas backpedaled as the Juggernaut advanced, hastily casting a spell to toughen his armor. A largely futile gesture—the Khadoran warjack's weapon would cut him in half, or the 'jack would crush him with blows from its fist.

He ducked the first strike from the ice axe and lashed out with *Regulus*, crushing and melting a bit of the Juggernaut's armored shoulder. The damage was trivial, and the warjack's fist descended on him like a great red comet. His power field burst around him in golden light, but the blow smashed him off his feet and sent him flying. He smashed to the ground on his back, blood and breath driven from his mouth. The serum began to knit his flesh, repairing pulped organs and shattered bones, but it ultimately wouldn't matter: the Juggernaut would destroy him before his serum could put him back together.

Lukas struggled to his feet, leaning on his weapon. Ahead, his assault troopers battled Man-O-War in a futile effort. Three of his men lay dead already. Behind him, Shock Troopers pulled their brethren from the rubble. He had saved some of them only to throw their lives away again.

He spat blood, thumbed his injection switch, all but draining

the serum, and stood to face his fate. The Juggernaut came on with a whistle of steam. If he hadn't known better, Lukas would have thought it sounded gleeful, almost like the 'jack was laughing.

The Juggernaut raised its axe, and its shadow blotted out the sun. Lukas pushed arcane strength into Regulus and readied one final blow before his death. But the Juggernaut's axe did not fall. Instead, a shrill, whining scream filled the air followed by a burst of yellow fire against the Juggernaut's hull. The warjack stumbled back, a smoking hole in the armor plating above its head.

Lukas did not waste the opportunity or even try to locate his mysterious benefactors. He charged, smashing Regulus into the Juggernaut's head driven by all the arcane power he could muster. The warjack went down, its head half-melted, half-smashed, and Lukas leapt atop it to deliver a two-handed blow, crushing the warjack's cortex and snuffing the light from its optic relays.

The clatter of small-arms fire sounded behind him, and he turned to see a line of dwarves, shields locked and carbines braced, advancing over the rubble. They fired as they came, focusing their attacks on the Man-O-War, driving the enemy back and giving Lukas' own troops a chance to rally and form their own line.

A squat warjack—Lukas recognized the Avalancher that had accompanied them up the river—appeared, the towering shape of the ogrun Murgan driving it forward with bellowed orders. Beside the ogrun came the stout form of Captain Corleg Blackheel, his face twisted in a scowl as he, too, shouted orders and curses.

"Drive 'em back, boys!" Blackheel cried out. "Shoot and scoot. Shoot and scoot."

The Khadorans withdrew toward the foundry, and Lukas let them retreat, gathering his soldiers to meet up with their allies.

"Captain Blackheel," Lukas said, approaching the dwarven mercenary captain. "You are a welcome sight."

Blackheel laughed and spat a stream of sourleaf juice that narrowly missed Lukas's left boot. "That's a new one. But it's nice to be wanted."

"You were with Magnus and Stryker, yes? I assume they succeeded in boarding the skyships."

“Aye, I trust you saw the two crash into the river,” Blackheel said. “Lost a third of my gun corps making sure that happened.”

His face darkened, and his scowl deepened. Lukas detected his anger but also a deep, abiding sorrow. Despite whatever shortcomings had seen Captain Corleg Blackheel exiled to a miserable post in the middle of nowhere, he still cared deeply about his soldiers.

The Khadorans, now without a warjack or the numbers on their side, had disappeared inside the foundry, but Lukas knew they still had mortars and possibly other artillery.

“If you’ll assist me, captain, I’d like you to focus your warjack’s cannon on that foundry,” he said.

Blackheel grunted in agreement. “Between the two of us, we have enough guns to bring the place down around their ears.”

He nodded at the Crucible Guard troops still pulling their brethren from the rubble. “Might be you’d also like a little payback.”

Lukas smiled tiredly. “Might be I would.”

LORD GENERAL COLEMAN STRYKER WATCHED the last Stormbreaker grow farther and farther distant, though its mammoth bulk still filled the Cloudpiercer's forward viewport. Around him, Magnus, Harcourt, and a dozen other battle-weary officers watched and waited.

The Cloudpiercer's crew held the mighty ship on course, sending and receiving orders from below, where the skyship's powerful skydrives propelled the ship through the air. Nemo had gone below ten minutes ago, promising he could push the Cygnaran vessel to greater speed. Stryker knew enough about Nemo's particular gifts when it came to mechanical and arcane engineering that he had a suspicion just how the aging warcaster might do what he promised. It worried him. The strain of battle was one thing for a man of Nemo's age; the strain of boosting the arcane power of a colossal skyship was quite another.

"Lord General," one of the pilots called out—he had one end of a message tube pressed to his ear, receiving information

from below. He stood at the main helm, a complicated system of switches and dials showing readouts Stryker barely understood. All he could make out were designators for course and altitude.

“What is it, Captain?” Stryker said.

“General Nemo says to keep present course . . . and to hold on,” the pilot said.

“What the hell does that old—?” Magnus began, and then the ship shuddered. Stryker felt a low, tingling buzz in the back of his skull. A familiar sensation—it indicated the presence of strong magic.

“Grab onto something,” he said as he gripped the edge of a nearby instrument panel. The buzzing in his head grew to a low whine, and the prow of the Cloudpiercer beyond the main view port crackled with streaks of blue voltaic lightning.

One moment the Khadoran skyship was miles distance, well on its way to Corvis and the First Army. The next, Stryker’s stomach lurched into his throat as the world outside became a sickly blur of motion. It ended abruptly, throwing everyone on the bridge forward, some of whom smashed painfully into bulkheads and instrument panels.

“What did he do?” Harcourt asked.

The Stormbreaker filled the view port with its immensity; they were positioned no more than a hundred yards off its starboard side. Its deck swarmed with troops and warjacks, and flashes of light from cannons and small arms fire arced up and into the Cloudpiercer, creating a staccato din as bullets and artillery shells pelted her hull.

“He gave us a chance,” Stryker said. “Magnus, Harcourt, you’re with me. We’re boarding that bloody thing.”

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WARJACKS AND SOLDIERS FILLED THE BELLY of the Cloudpiercer: a small but silent army waiting for the huge bay doors to open up and spill them out onto the deck of the Khadoran skyship. Around them, their own ship shook and bucked as enemy artillery slammed into her. She could not return fire; her only defense was

the troops Stryker would lead into battle.

He could sense the fear around him. The Stormblades and trenchers he commanded were brave without question, but what lay beyond the Cloudpiercer would mean certain death for many of them. He felt the fear in himself, a familiar note of panic he never allowed to gain purchase in his mind. To feel fear was human, to weather it was brave, but to ignore it was foolish. He remembered those words spoken to him over twenty years ago by a young Asheth Magnus as he drilled Stryker on the realities of war. He glanced over at his old mentor—now grizzled and battle worn—and realized that of all the men and women he had served with, he wanted no one else at his side, in this moment, more than Asheth Magnus.

“Ten seconds!” a trencher sergeant called out. She stood next to the controls that would fling wide the bay doors.

Stryker checked his connection to the three warjacks he commanded, a pair of Cyclones and a single Stormwall. He longed for the familiar comfort of Ol’ Rowdy, but the ancient Ironclad was bonded with Lieutenant Harcourt now. Rowdy would keep Harcourt safe and guide him just as much as the young warcaster guided the cantankerous warjack.

Stryker fired up his arcane turbine and triggered the storm accumulator on Quicksilver’s hilt. The voltaic energy of his own weapon followed by that of fifty storm glaives lit the interior of the Cloudpiercer’s hull with flickering sapphire.

“Soldiers of Cygnar,” Stryker said, “may your blades strike quick and true, may your armor shield you from the enemy, and may Morrow’s grace see us both to the other side.”

The bay doors opened, letting in a rush of freezing air and the terrible sounds of gunfire and artillery. The deck of the Stormbreaker loomed ahead. There would be no ramp, no graceful plunge from their ship to the enemy’s. The Cloudpiercer would slam into the enemy skyship and disgorge her troops en masse.

The sky disappeared in a blur of grey and red, and Stryker braced for impact. “Fight to the bridge!”

They made contact with a hollow boom and the grating

screech of tearing steel. They were thrown forward, and Stryker turned that momentum into a charge. “For Cygnar!”

Hundreds of voices joined his own, and they leapt into madness.

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THE KHADORANS WERE MOMENTARILY CAUGHT OFF-GUARD by the Cloudpiercer’s reckless descent, and dozens of them had been crushed beneath the skyship’s hull as it all but melded with the Khadoran vessel. The resulting chaos gave Stryker and his forces enough time to get out of their ship, form a fighting line—Stormblades in front, trenchers in back—and engage the enemy in something resembling an orderly fashion. Beyond that, there was little Stryker could do in terms of battlefield strategy. They plunged into melee against superior numbers and would just have to make the best of it.

Stryker swung Quicksilver with brute ferocity, cutting through the front line of Khadoran troops, comprised mostly of Man-O-War. Behind them, softer targets, assault kommandos and Winter Guard, fired their weapons through momentary gaps in their own front line.

Magnus fought nearby, using a pair of Charger light warjacks to batter and smash aside the enemy.

Stryker ducked an annihilator axe, killed its owner, and then shoved the corpse into another Man-O-War, creating a cleft in the locked shields before him. Bullets from the assault kommandos beyond plowed into his power field but were stopped completely. He motioned for a unit of Stormblades to charge through the breach, and they slashed into the light Khadoran infantry with brutal effectiveness.

Stryker took a moment to survey the battlefield. The deck of the Stormbreaker stretched three hundred yards from their current position. The Cloudpiercer had rammed the prow of the Khadoran vessel. Now between his forces and the bridge of the great ship were hundreds of Khadoran troops and a dozen or so warjacks. The only bright spot was that Irusk did not have any

colossals onboard. Stryker touched the cortex of the Stormwall looming behind his arrayed troops. The towering warjack became a magnet for enemy fire, but its armor was too thick to succumb to small arms. He aimed its cannons into the center of the Khadoran line and fired. The shells burst forty yards away, close enough that he could feel the shockwave, and hammered Man-O-War and Winter Guard to the ground, creating more openings for his own soldiers.

Stryker pushed the Stormwall forward, wanting to bring its twin chain guns to bear. He managed all of these thoughts and commands to his warjacks while continuing to cut down the enemy. It was a skill every warcaster learned; your mind would be split upon the battlefield, half in your own head and half in the mechanical minds of your warjacks.

Stryker skewered an assault kommando who charged him with a lowered bayonet, burning the man's innards with voltaic energy before flicking him off the end of Quicksilver. The bodies were piling up, but the Khadoran forces seemed endless, and his own casualties were mounting.

The ebb and flow of battle took Stryker near the edge of the Stormbreaker's deck. When he glanced over the side of the skyship, he could see the Black River stretching out hundreds of feet below. In the distance, but not distant enough, Corvis loomed and a sprawling mass of Cygnaran soldiers marched north toward Merywyn. The Stormbreaker would bring its guns to bear on them within minutes.

...

MAGNUS SAW THE FUTILITY OF THEIR EFFORTS the moment he stepped off the Cloudpiercer. There were too many Khadorans, too few Cygnarans, and not enough time before the Stormbreaker turned its cannons on the First Army and then Corvis.

Still, he fought.

He battered against the enemy with his warjacks, smashing aside Man-O-War and Winter Guard with blows from the Chargers' hammers and then ripping through any still standing

with Foecleaver. It was like trying to climb out of a sandpit. The moment you made any headway, the sand shifted, and you plummeted to the bottom of the pit again.

The Stormbreaker's control tower and bridge stood hundreds of yards away, but it might as well have been hundreds of miles. They would never reach it before Irusk turned Lord General Duggan's army into a corpse field and then hammered Corvis into slag. He could hear the tinny distant thuds of warjack cannons below, likely Defenders, but they simply didn't have the range to reach the Khadoran skyship or the power to pierce her hull if they did.

Magnus fought on, killing, pushing, letting the battle flow over him in a tide of blood and smoke. His limbs ached, and each time a bullet or Man-O-War axe glanced off his armor, it shook his body with pain.

He had cut a fair distance into the Khadoran line, and Stormblades backfilled his wake, a blue line in a sea of red. They hacked and blasted, but without his direct support or those of his warjacks, they were quickly overwhelmed. Stryker fought twenty or thirty yards away, using the Stormwall to tear holes in the Khadoran line, but the colossal was their greatest asset and thus quickly became the biggest target.

Destroyers and few Decimators plus dozens of Man-O-War shield cannons targeted the Stormwall and launched a combined fusillade against it. The Cygnaran colossal disappeared for a moment beneath a hail of fire and smoke. And when that smoke cleared, the Stormwall toppled backward, its hull a cratered wreck, the delicate mechanika beneath it reduced to melted slag.

The heavy boom of the Stormwall falling shook the deck, and a mighty cheer went up from the Khadorans. Magnus killed a Winter Guard who'd let his guard down for a moment to celebrate, taking grim satisfaction that he'd cut the man's jubilation short by cutting off his head.

The Khadorans pushed back against their foes. The destruction of the Stormwall had galvanized them, and they sensed victory close at hand.

Worse, more enemy joined the battle, rising up from the

bowels of the skyship on powered lifts. More Man-O-War and more warjacks added their metal-shrouded bulk to an already overwhelming force.

They could not win. Magnus knew it, and Stryker must have known it, too. The lord general was a blazing font of voltaic energy, untouchable, but the rank and file around him died in droves as the Khadorans pushed forward, using their growing numbers like a battering ram. It wouldn't be long before they focused enough firepower on Stryker and himself to end the conflict for good.

The deck shuddered again, and Magnus went to a knee. An enterprising Man-O-War nearby charged forward and brought his annihilator axe down to cut his target in half. But Magnus shot his mechanical right arm out, caught the descending blade by its haft, and rammed two feet of Foecleaver's blade through the Khadoran's shield, his breast plate, and his body. Magnus ripped the blade down as he pulled Foecleaver free, spilling blood and entrails on the gore-coated deck.

Another heavy shudder rattled the combined Khadoran and Cygnaran forces, and Magnus cast about, looking for its source on the deck. He thought for a moment the enemy had brought a colossal up from the ship's hold. Then, as another shockwave vibrated through the Stormbreaker, he realized the noise and energy actually came from below them.

Irusk had fired the skyship's guns. The First Army was in range. The Stormbreaker was also a bomber, and when it was closer, it would add to the scorching hell of its cannons by carpet bombing the Cygnarans beneath it.

Magnus summoned his warjacks to him and pushed the two Chargers out front. He gathered as many Stormblades as he could and began fighting toward Stryker's position. Luck was with him—Stryker had also realized what was happening and was hacking through the enemy toward him.

The two warcasters met within a writhing sea of soldiers, the terrible bursts from the Stormbreaker's guns drowning out even the sounds of close combat.

"We can't win here," Magnus shouted. "Irusk is already firing

on the First Army.”

“I know,” Stryker replied, his face ashen beneath a layer of soot and blood. “We just can’t stop them.”

“Not like this, anyway,” Magnus said, but his mind had begun to work through the problem, worrying at it like a dog with a scrap of meat on a bone. It came to him in a flash of insight, dreadful and desperate but possible.

Stryker must have seen the look in his eyes, detected the cunning and often reckless thoughts of his old mentor. “You have something, don’t you?”

“This ship is fully loaded—” He broke off and parried a Winter Guard’s hand axe. The soldier had somehow fought through the screen of Stormblades and warjacks encircling him and Stryker. Magnus almost admired the man’s courage and luck as he broke the Khadoran’s skull with a right cross from his mechanical fist. “Where was I? So, the ship is fully loaded with munitions.”

Another shuddering blast from the Stormbreaker’s cannons jarred them.

Stryker shook his head. “No. We’ll find another way.”

“There is no other way!” Magnus shouted, the first traces of doubt and fear that would soon bloom tenfold working their way into his thoughts. “I’m the only one who can survive long enough to get below and then detonate the munitions there.”

“You don’t know that,” Stryker said as he glanced around, his eyes wide and desperate. The only other warcaster with them was Harcourt. Stryker’s face fell. The lord general would not entrust such a mission to the young warcaster.

“Yes, I do. We both know it.”

The ship shook once more as the Stormbreaker’s cannons unloaded death on the Cygnaran soldiers on the ground. They had no way of determining what kind of damage Irusk had already wrought on the troops, but the longer they waited, the worse it would undoubtedly be.

Something passed over Stryker’s face, an emotion Magnus had not expected. He wouldn’t quite call it sorrow, but the emptiness in the warcaster’s eyes spoke of loss. Stryker stepped close and

grasped Magnus forearm. "You don't have to do this. You don't have to make up—"

"Yes, I do, Coleman," Magnus cut him off. He didn't want to hear what Stryker might say next. He didn't want to hear his sins against his country, against his friends, enumerated. He knew them far too well.

"I could order you not to." Stryker wore a sad smile. "I think you'd actually listen, for once."

Magnus returned the smile. "I would . . . Lord General, but let me have this. Please."

The last word came out shaking, and part of him wanted to blame the pitching, shuddering deck of the Stormbreaker's hull. Yet that would be a lie.

Stryker released Magnus' forearm and stepped back. He raised Quicksilver in a salute, his surprisingly young face shielded by the blade, a face Magnus had watched grow from a gifted child to a man every bit his equal, maybe his superior, on the battlefield. A face he had called protégé, enemy, and now . . . he didn't know. "Friend" seemed such a trivial word to describe what they were.

"May Morrow guide and protect you, Asheth," Stryker said then plunged into battle, disappearing with a hoarse cry and the blazing arc of his voltaic blade.

Magnus drew in a deep breath and summoned his warjacks to his side. The nearest lift, which had brought the most recent Khadoran reinforcements, was fifty yards away through dozens, maybe hundreds, of enemy. He lifted Foecleaver, fired his Chargers' cannons, and fought his way forward.

...

IRUSK WATCHED THE BATTLE UNFOLDING on the deck of the Stormbreaker with a smile on his face. The Cloudpiercer still clung to his vessel's hull, but it had no weapons, and it had vomited its contingent of soldiers onto his skyship's deck in a single desperate gambit. They didn't have enough soldiers, and though Irusk would suffer considerable losses, it would not matter.

"Incendiaries now," Irusk said to the battery commander, a tall

dour-faced Winter Guard kovnik, standing at his station near the bridge's forward viewport.

The kovnik called down to the cannon rooms, shouting orders into the speaking tube for the gunners below to change out the munitions for the huge guns in the Stormbreaker's belly.

Irusk put his hands behind his back and waited patiently for the teeth-rattling thud of the main cannons unleashing hell and fire on the enemy below. He would lose Merywyn. That was a simple fact, and he had also lost two of the Stormbreakers along with their full complements of crew and warjacks. For most leaders, this would be a shattering defeat; Irusk, however, saw only the path ahead, a path strewn with Cygnaran dead that ended in the flaming wreck of Corvis.

"Report," Irusk commanded, pointing at another soldier. This one hovered over one of the vessel's viewing stations, her face pressed into the eyepiece of one of the ship's many periscopes. She had a commanding view of what lay directly beneath the ship.

"The First Army is retreating, Supreme Kommandant." She paused, looked up, a grim smile on her face. "They are leaving many dead soldiers and disabled warjacks behind them."

Irusk fought down a grin. He was not fond of overt displays of emotion, and it was too soon to celebrate. He had lost far too much of late for anything like celebration but satisfaction? Yes, he might indulge in that.

"Keep firing," he said to the battery commander.

The kovnik nodded and continued to shout orders into the tube.

Out on the deck, the battle had ground to a morass of death and blood. Irusk's soldiers had halted the Cygnaran advance, and they were still some distance from the bridge. Stryker and Magnus would fight until the bitter end, throwing everything they had at Irusk's forces, but they would lose, and then they would watch Corvis burn.

"Supreme Kommandant," a deep, grating voice said from behind Irusk.

Irusk turned to see the angular, battle-scarred figure of Assault

Kommander Strakhov. The warcaster's single eye was fixed on something beyond Irusk, something out on the deck.

"What is it, Kommander?" Irusk said.

"Look there," Strakhov said, pointing.

Irusk turned his gaze. At first he saw nothing but an ocean of red armor, his own troops smashing in defiant waves against the enemy. Then he noticed a disturbance on one end of his line, near the starboard edge of the Stormbreaker's deck. Part of the thick mass of Khadorans gave ground and were pushed back . . . by what?

"It's Magnus," Strakhov said. "Him and a handful of warjacks."

"Has he lost his mind?" Irusk wondered aloud. "Where is he going?"

"The lift. It will take him close to the cannon rooms and then the bomb bays." Irusk delivered the news with the detached coldness of a born strategist. He knew what Magnus was doing because it was what he would do.

"He will die before he reaches the lift," Irusk went on, watching soldiers fall away dead or maimed from the whirling destruction of Magnus' blade.

Strakhov said nothing for a moment, then, "He is Asheth Magnus. He should have died a thousand times, on a thousand battlefields, yet there he is, cutting through our troops and making progress toward that lift."

Strakhov's words carried the ring of truth. Magnus hadn't just avoided death—he'd cheated it, more times than could easily be counted.

"Very well. Take some assault kommandos and go below. If he gets to the magazine, kill him," Irusk commanded.

"He would make a valuable prisoner," Strakhov ventured, though Irusk could see by the warcaster's pinched features he wasn't committed to that course of action.

"We take no chances. Kill him."

"As you say. It will be done, Supreme Kommandant."

ONE OF MAGNUS' CHARGERS BURST IN A SURGE of bright light that created a sharp but fleeting pain behind Magnus' right eye. He turned to see the warjack go down beneath the hacking annihilator axes of a dozen Man-O-War. The other warjack remained operational, though it was running low on ammunition. Another knot of Khadoran soldiers attempted to bar his way, and he pushed arcane energy into the Charger's dual cannons and fired. He was too close for something so reckless, but his power field would protect him from the shockwave.

The double cannon discharged, and the way opened before him in a hail of red mist and shattered bodies. The shockwave rocked him back on his feet, and his head spun for a moment, but he could see the lift now—or at least the gaping pit on the deck where the lift would be. No doubt, Irusk and Strakhov had seen his bloody path from the bridge and understood or at least suspected his destination.

Khadoran soldiers began to flow into the hole he'd made, but

he pushed the last dregs of his arcane energy into the Charger, casting a spell that would turn it into an effective battering ram. Runes formed and spun around the warjack as it charged with Magnus following closely behind.

The spell imparted terrible kinetic force to the warjack's body, letting it smash through the Winter Guard and Man-O-War ahead without slowing. Magnus slashed at the downed enemies as he passed, maiming or killing them and keeping the way clear behind him. He'd been lucky to make it so far, but he'd always been lucky where his own mortality was concerned.

Stryker had focused his efforts on keeping the Khadorans from swarming Magnus completely, and he had suffered heavy losses because of it. Magnus knew he needed to make the most of whatever time Stryker had bought him.

Ten yards from the lift shaft, Magnus spied a series of metal rungs on the far side that descended down into the belly of the ship. He had no idea how far of a drop it would be to the bottom, but he had other, more urgent problems. A Juggernaut barreled toward him from the port side of the ship, knocking both Khadoran and Cygnaran soldiers out of the way. No 'jack marshal shouted orders nearby, so Magnus guessed this warjack was controlled by one of the warcasters on the bridge.

He understood with full clarity that if the Juggernaut reached him, he would die, and any hope at saving the thousands of Cygnaran soldiers below and the tens of thousands of innocent lives in Corvis would die with him. Stryker and his warjacks were too far away to help him, so he quickly checked the status of his remaining Charger. It was battered but not overly damaged. He sent it sprinting toward the Juggernaut, unable to bolster its attacks or speed because he needed to conserve his arcane energy for what was to come next.

He slashed through the torso of a Winter Guard who foolishly tried to halt his progress and broke into a loping run. A pair of Man-O-War stood at the edge of the lift shaft—the final obstacle. The Juggernaut loomed on his right. He sent an order to the Charger as it neared the Khadoran warjack. If it had been a

human soldier, it might have balked at his command; even so, despite its mechanical mind, a vague questioning response flowed back through Magnus' connection with it. The warjack complied, however, and right before it reached the charging Juggernaut, it dropped to the ground in a clumsy rolling tackle as artless and ugly as anything Magnus had ever seen. But it was effective. The smaller Cygnaran warjack plowed into the Juggernaut's legs, and the bigger warjack's momentum and staggering weight carried its top half forward while its legs tangled in the Charger's limbs. It crashed down atop the smaller warjack with a deafening crash, loud enough to be heard over the steady fire of the Stormbreaker's cannons.

The Charger's presence in Magnus' mind winked out; the ponderous bulk of the Juggernaut had crushed it flat. But the Khadoran warjack would spend precious minutes getting back to its feet. Time enough.

Magnus raced toward the edge of the shaft, his sword held low like a spear. He hit the first Man-O-War at full speed, driving his blade through the man's shield and into his body. His nearby companion landed an awkward blow against Magnus' right shoulder with his annihilator axe, but it didn't penetrate the armor.

The Man-O-War Magnus had skewered loosed a tinny scream as he toppled over the edge of the lift shaft, and Magnus followed him without hesitation. Darkness opened up beneath them as they fell, the sounds of battle above fading to a distant roar.

They landed hard, Magnus on top of his enemy. His power field flared brighter than he'd ever seen it, and the impact crushed the air from his lungs. His vision greyed, but he refused to let himself black out.

Slowly, he rolled off the corpse of the Man-O-War—the fall with Magnus atop him had crushed him like a snail under a boot heel—and climbed to his knees. He tried to draw a breath, but a hitching pain in his chest doubled him over again.

Gunfire erupted above as Khadoran soldiers crowded around the top of the open lift shaft, pointing rifles and shield cannons down at him.

Magnus heaved himself to his feet and glanced around, bullets lighting up his power field like a swarm of angry bees. He lurched forward, away from the bright square of sunlight shining into the hold from above. He passed from the light and into the deep gloom. Empty warjack hoists hung all around him, mechanical skeletons in the dark. Crates of munitions for warjack weapons littered the space but little else.

Magnus pulled his scattergun and checked the load. His head ached horribly, mostly from the fall, but he also hadn't slept in nearly thirty-six hours. At the very least, he was glad he no longer had to split his focus between his mind and the cortex of a warjack.

The gunfire above died off; he was no longer a viable target. He stumbled through the darkness toward a closed hatch in the towering bulkhead. He had no idea where it might lead or what might be behind it, but he had to get moving. The cannons' magazine would be somewhere below. To punctuate that thought, the skyship shook as its guns loosed another volley at Lord General Duggan's forces on the ground. They'd soon be close enough to bomb the Cygnarans.

He listened as the thunder of the cannons faded. Unlike above, where it had simply been a single mammoth discharge, he now detected individual bursts. The cannons would be operated by multiple crews of gunners, and though they would receive the order to fire at the same time, they wouldn't be truly synched up. It might be his addled wits playing tricks on him, but he could swear that one of those cannon blasts sounded closer.

He drew a breath and made his way to the hatch to spin the wheel at its center, yank the door open, and thrust his scattergun into the narrow corridor beyond. It was empty. Irusk must have every soldier not manning a gun topside.

The corridor stretched thirty yards ahead and then branched to the left and the right. The cannons fired again, and this time he was certain one of them was near. The sound of it reverberated through the metal walls of the corridor to the starboard side of the ship. He broke into a slow jog—all he could muster at this point—and turned left at the junction.

The next corridor went fifteen yards and ended at another hatch. Outside this one stood a formidable Man-O-War in armor Magnus had never seen before. The Khadoran wore a heavily modified suit of the standard Man-O-War armor—heavier, bulkier—and instead of the usual weapon and shield combo, this one gripped a pair of spiked shields, two halves of a solid steel wall. Mounted on the Man-O-War's shoulder was a cannon, the end of its barrel a black eye that swiveled in Magnus' direction.

Magnus was so shocked by this towering metal colossus he all but forgot the scattergun in his hand, but finally training and experience kicked in—he jerked the weapon up and fired. He might just as well have been trying to sink a battleship with a slingshot. The spray of shot from his weapon bounced harmlessly off the Man-O-War's shields, and the Khadoran took one heavy step in his direction.

Magnus flung himself to the ground as fire and thunder roared overhead. His scattergun had been loud, but the cacophony of the Man-O-War's cannon was more like standing next to an exploding grenade. His vision blurred, and his ears rang with a sharp whine.

Magnus climbed to his feet and retreated the way he'd come, ducking around the corner of the junction. The clanking advance of the Man-O-War tanker echoed behind him, slow and inexorable.

He shoved his scattergun back into its holster and took Foeclaver in a two-handed grip. The mechanical blade could shear through warjack armor with ease, and it would carve through the Man-O-War's iron skin as well. He would have to be close and possibly weather a shot from that nasty cannon. In his diminished state—body aching, ears ringing, a dozen minor wounds taking their toll on his physical and mental fortitude—there was more risk here than he liked.

He summoned a spell, a minor enchantment that would add speed and agility to his movement. As the runes formed and faded, his limbs became lighter, buoyant, but he hesitated to feel it would suffice.

The Man-O-War's cannon appeared around the corner, jutting

out before the huge armored soldier. Magnus leaped. He pushed arcane strength into his blow as Foecleaver flashed down, slashing into the cannon barrel and slicing it neatly in half. His momentum, however, carried him directly into the path of the Man-O-War, and he had no time to recover his balance. The spiked shield swung out and down, and Magnus could not avoid it. His power field flashed, and then the shield crashed into his right side, crumpling the pauldron over his shoulder and smashing him to the ground.

Searing pain flowed up his right arm as Magnus dimly registered a broken collarbone or separated shoulder. He switched Foecleaver to his left hand. The Man-O-War loomed over him, its twin shields opening for a double smash. The attack left a small space a few inches wide between the two bulwarks and beyond them the lighter armor of the Khadoran's battle suit.

His spell was still active, so Magnus surprised his foe by springing to his feet and launching a clumsy but accurate underhand cut. Foecleaver passed into the space between the shields, its razor tip digging a furrow into the Man-O-War's breastplate and helmet. Magnus' sword bit into bone before coming free in a splash of gore.

The Man-O-War did not fall over, not even in death. His armor and the two shields he clenched in a death grip held him upright while his blood and brains dripped down the front of his armor.

Magnus slipped past the dead Khadoran. His shoulder throbbed—when he tried to raise his right arm, bone grated on bone. He stifled a scream and instead drew his scattergun, shifting it to his right hand. The mechanical portion of his arm still worked as long as he didn't attempt to raise it above eye level.

More cannon fire sounded from beyond the door ahead, and the gunnery crew within were likely deafened by the sound of their own artillery; otherwise, they might have aided the Man-O-War he'd just slain.

Magnus opened the door, and a crushing wave of heat and noise from within staggered him. He looked in on a room filled with men and women, many moving gigantic cone-shaped objects on carts—artillery shells on a scale Magnus had never even thought

possible. They pushed these munitions toward the center of the room, where a single gunner sat encapsulated by an intricate chair, a system of levers at his side, his head fitted inside a helmet that covered his eyes and connected to the bottom half of a periscope. The chair swiveled as Magnus watched, and the gunner yanked on one of the levers. The room quaked—Magnus felt more than heard the tremendous noise that accompanied it. It vibrated his whole body and ripped the breath from his lungs.

Everyone in the room stopped for a moment, staggered by the great cannon blast. No one even noticed Magnus. When they all could breathe and move again, the Khadorans pushed their munitions to a central bore, a great cannon chamber jutting above the gunner's chair. A pair of Man-O-War stood there, though they had neither shields nor weapons, and Magnus soon understood why. They needed their hands free for another task. The cannon chamber opened, and an empty brass casing the size of tall man fell out and crashed to the floor. The Man-O-War moved it out of the way and went to retrieve the next round from a nearby cart.

Now Magnus acted. He aimed his scattergun as best he could, pushed all the arcane strength he had left into the shot, and fired. The shot shredded a pair of Winter Guard near the gun and tore a hole in one Man-O-War's breastplate.

Three dead in one shot.

Magnus dropped the scattergun as the soldiers in the room turned in his direction. With his injury, he had no way of reloading it. He gripped Foecleaver in his left hand—he was little more than competent with his off-hand—and charged into the chamber.

There were perhaps a dozen Khadorans present at most, Winter Guard by the look of their uniforms. One of them was an officer armed with a saber rather than the standard hand axe. They all abandoned the mammoth artillery shells they were moving and reached for blunderbusses hanging from baldrics or racks on the walls.

Magnus raced toward the first group, cutting with Foecleaver, not caring if his blows were elegant or even particularly fast with his left hand. The mechanical blade slashed through axes and

gun barrels thrust up to parry and then into their owners. Blood spilled, soldiers died, and Magnus moved on.

He couldn't let himself get swarmed. Even light infantry like Winter Guard could pose a threat, given his diminished state. He focused on individuals or groups of two or three, using his spells to bolster his movement or armor to the point where his enemies' attacks were nullified and his own were greatly enhanced. Finally, all that remained was the kovnik, a Man-O-War, and the gunner trying to unhook himself from the snarl of equipment that made up his chair.

The Winter Guard kovnik and the Man-O-War closed on Magnus simultaneously. The Man-O-War had found a three-foot-long spanner and wielded the tool like a great cudgel. He advanced while the Kovnik hung back, waiting for a shot with his blunderbuss.

Magnus gave ground, thrusting Foecleaver up to ward off the first of the Man-O-War's blows. The great spanner smashed into his blade with bone-shaking force, but the weapon was cumbersome, and Magnus let it slide off his sword. He then snapped his wrist around in a short rolling cut. The blow lacked much power, especially made with Magnus' left hand, but the mechanika did the work—Foecleaver chopped down on the Man-O-War's outstretched right arm, severing it at the elbow.

A hollow scream sounded from inside the Man-O-War's helmet as he stumbled away. The kovnik took this opportunity to fire his blunderbuss. Magnus wasn't ready for the shot—it caught him square in the chest. His power field stopped most of it, but enough shot hit his breastplate that it knocked him back and kept him from closing the distance.

The kovnik hastily reloaded his weapon, moving agilely around the room. Another group of cannon blasts sounded from deeper inside the ship, and every second Magnus wasted meant more Cygnaran lives cost. He wasn't about to chase the kovnik around the room or let him get away to warn others, but he had abandoned his scattergun.

Magnus summoned his arcane energies, knowing it would

weaken his power field and make him vulnerable to another shot from the kovnik's blunderbuss. Just the same, he pointed Foeclaver and white runes formed around the body of the kovnik, spinning in concentric rings.

Knowing his peril, the Khadoran stopped and pointed his blunderbuss. As his finger curled around the trigger his eyes snapped wide—Magnus could see the whites even from a dozen paces away—and screamed.

Death was always ugly, and Magnus had become mostly inured to the realities of combat, but his stomach roiled as he watched the kovnik literally cook from the inside, screaming as the arcane energy scorched his innards, blackened his skin, and burst his eyes in their sockets. It ended quickly and mercifully. Magnus had never used the convection spell on a living target, and he hated that he'd been unable to give his foe a cleaner death.

The gunner was the only soldier left in the chamber, and he cowered between racks of artillery shells. Magnus stalked toward him.

"Please, don't kill me," the man begged. As Magnus neared he realized the man was actually little more than a boy, no older than twenty.

Magnus lowered his blade and realized what he must look like—haggard, half his body replaced with mechanika, and splashed with the gore of a dozen enemies. That would work in his favor. "If you want to stay alive, I need information."

"I don't—" the boy began, some kind of loyalty to his countryman overriding his terror for the moment. But Magnus couldn't let that happen.

He squatted down and stared the soldier in the eyes. "You saw what happened to your kovnik, didn't you?"

The boy nodded slowly, his eyes wide and terrified.

"Would you like to experience it as well? Would you like to find out what it's like to be cooked from the inside out?" Magnus felt a pang of guilt at using the grim death of the kovnik in such a way. Ironically, six months ago, he wouldn't have balked at such a tactic.

“What do you want?” the young Khadoran said.

“Where’s the primary magazine?”

The Khadoran swallowed and looked away. His terror was palpable, but he somehow found the strength to say, “I will tell you nothing.”

“Brave lad,” Magnus said and stood.

The Khadoran looked up, finding the strength to meet Magnus’ gaze. He’d seen dozens of brave young men and women like this find their courage before the end, and often that end was tied directly to Magnus’ actions. But not this time. This Khadoran might yet die, but not by his hand. Magnus let his sword dip. “What’s your name, soldier?”

“First Gunner Iosif Darovich,” the boy said, then, “What are you going to do?”

Magnus considered that. There was likely enough artillery in this room that its detonation would set off the munitions in any nearby magazines, including the primary. It would launch a chain reaction that could cripple the entire ship and send it crashing to the earth.

“He’s going to detonate the magazine,” a voice said from behind Magnus, as if speaking his thoughts aloud to him.

He whirled and saw the gaunt, black-armored form of Kommander Strakhov. A pair of assault kommandos accompanied the warcaster, Death Whisper carbines at their shoulders.

Magnus smiled and nodded. “I guess you spotted me from the bridge, and even someone as, uh, rigid in their thinking as you could put two and two together.”

Strakhov showed his teeth, but it wasn’t a smile, more of a predatory snarl. He drew the long knives from his belt and advanced. “You cannot defeat us in combat, Major Magnus.”

“Kommander, know that I told him nothing,” cried First Gunner Iosif Darovich.

Strakhov turned his one eye to the boy, his thin lips turning up in a joyless smile. “Of course, you did.”

“No, I swear, I would never betray—”

Strakhov nodded at one of his kommandos, and the soldier

fired a single shot. The young gunner's head jerked back and sprayed blood across the wall behind him. He slid to the floor.

"He was telling you the truth," Magnus said, his lips curled in disgust. "You honored his bravery with death."

"Honor?" Strakhov gestured around the room. "He watched his comrades die on your sword and did nothing to stop you."

"How could he?" Magnus said, hoping to keep Strakhov talking. "One gunner barely out of diapers against a warcaster?"

He backed up a few paces, trying to get a clear view of the racks of colossal artillery shells to the right of Strakhov while putting the bulk of the cannon's gunnery chair between them.

Strakhov caught the movement and stepped farther into the room. "As much as it pains me to say it, there would have been honor in dying on your sword."

He motioned for his two kommandos to move around the chair, flanking Magnus.

"I think you have idiocy and honor confused, Kommander."

Strakhov barked laughter. "What would you, a traitor, know of honor?"

Magnus said nothing. Strakhov's words stung him, and just like his reticence to kill young Iosef Darovich, the sensation was new to him.

"Come, Magnus, I can offer you a quick death," Strakhov offered. "Or, if you prefer, you can put down your weapon and surrender."

"Oh, you'd like that," Magnus said. "But I have something else in mind."

Strakhov laughed coldly. "I see no detonators. I see no means of setting off the artillery in this room. Your other option is death."

"Well, you're right about my one option," Magnus said. "I brought no detonators or bombs or anything of the like because I never planned to leave this room anyway. I am the detonator."

Strakhov's face fell, and his single eye flew wide. The realization of what was about to happen struck the warcaster just as another fusillade of cannon fire shook the ship.

The spell came to Magnus' mind in a flash of symbols and

power. There had been enough time between his last spell and the end of the battle for his arcane turbine to spin up to full power. He'd need it now for the spell he was about to cast.

Strakhov charged, crossing the room in three giant steps. He raised his knives, but Magnus made no move to stop him. The Khadoran warcaster was too late. Far too late.

The runes formed, the energy built, and Strakhov's cry of despair and fury rose into a piercing wail. The obliteration spell formed in a bright mote of white fire near the racks of artillery shells then expanded with a deafening roar.

Strakhov slammed into Magnus, the world collapsed, and thunder and fire took them both.

...

STRYKER WATCHED LIEUTENANT HARCOURT split a man's skull with his saber, shoot another at point-blank range with his hand cannon, and then smoothly retreat behind Ol' Rowdy to reload. Stryker had fought his way through the press of enemy soldiers to reach the young warcaster, and despite their desperate situation, he was more than a little proud of the warrior Harcourt had become in just a few short months.

"Where is Magnus?" Harcourt shouted as he slammed a cartridge into the breach of his hand cannon.

"He went below," Stryker shouted back. "He's going to . . . buy us some time."

Harcourt must have caught the grave look on Stryker's face, but he simply nodded. "Orders, sir?"

"We're going to hold position. Kill as many as we can until Magnus succeeds or we die in the attempt."

A shattering barrage of cannon fire sounded from beneath the Stormbreaker. Stryker could barely conceive of the casualties Lord General Duggan must have suffered by now. The towers of Corvis loomed closer with each passing second, and it wouldn't be long until Irusk opened fire on the city.

"I'm with you, Lord General," Harcourt said.

Stryker nodded and glanced up at Ol' Rowdy.

“You still hanging in there, old man?” he asked and patted the hull of the big machine.

Rowdy blew a short whistle of steam and then flattened a Man-O-War with his quake hammer. The warjack and the two warcasters with him had created an eye in the storm of battle, and Stryker took a few precious seconds to take stock of their situation. He had lost half his troops at least, half his warjacks, including the Stormwall, and he’d sent his mentor and the best fighting man on the field on a suicide mission. The Khadorans had given some ground, but the bridge and Irusk were unreachable. The Cloudpiercer had stabilized herself by attaching a series of anchors to the Stormbreaker’s hull, and the larger skyship now towed the Cygnaran vessel. It was still an escape route if Magnus succeeded, though he had few illusions he would leave this ship until it plummeted to the ground in a flaming wreck.

Stryker hefted Quicksilver and readied himself to plunge back into the fray. He made contact with the sole warjack he still commanded, a Defender that had grimly and defiantly shrugged off everything the enemy had thrown at it.

The ship shook, and Stryker first thought the Stormbreaker’s cannons had fired again, but the shaking intensified and grew in strength.

“What was th—?” Harcourt began and then the first explosion rocked the ship, and the massive vessel listed sideways. A column of fire shot straight from one of the lift shafts near the rear of the Khadoran forces, incinerating dozens.

The deck continued to tilt. Soldiers and machines were thrown to the ground and began to slide toward the edge of the deck. Stryker slammed Quicksilver straight down into the steel beams at his feet, pushing arcane strength into the blow, using the weapon like a mountaineer might use an ice axe. The cries of battle gave way to the screams of terror from soldiers about to hurtle to their doom. Stryker hung on, wanting to extend his hand to any Cygnaran soldier who tumbled past him. He checked on the position of his Defender and experienced a horrifying moment of vertigo as he saw through its eyes, tumbling out into space and

falling toward the earth. He yanked his perception back, and the warjack's presence disappeared from his mind as it smashed into the ground hundreds of feet below.

Another explosion shredded the deck on the port side, forcing the ship to list back in that direction. Stryker lay still, panting. He had no idea how many of his troops or the enemy's had gone over the side. The Cloudpiercer, miraculously, was unscathed and still moored to the Stormbreaker.

He struggled to his feet and ran to where Harcourt and Rowdy lay perilously close to the edge of the deck. Another explosion bloomed near the bridge, and more fire and shrapnel spewed into the air.

Stryker pulled Harcourt to his feet and watched as Rowdy slowly climbed to his. "Are you all right?"

"I'm not injured, if that's what you're asking," Harcourt said. "Gods above, he did it."

Stryker nodded as another geyser of flame shot from the top of the Stormbreaker's deck. The ship trembled again, and he realized Magnus had set off some kind of chain reaction. He also knew what that meant, and the shock of it struck him harder than he thought it ever might. He'd lost real friends in this war and in the many before it, even held them in his arms as their lives slowly bled away. He'd grieved for them, blamed himself for their deaths, and bore the weight of that responsibility as his own burden. Now he felt something else, a depth of loss he had not expected. Magnus had been a traitor in every sense of the word. He'd taken Cygnaran lives to advance the cause of a usurper, no matter that the son of that usurper now sat on the throne. His death should feel like justice, like the very least he could do to pay for his crimes. Instead, Stryker felt a sense of balance, and, yes, grief, for a man whose final sacrifice had finally acquitted him of all he owed.

"Sir," Harcourt said, "the enemy is retreating."

It was true, and for a moment Stryker breathed a sigh of relief. He might get his soldiers back onto the Cloudpiercer and watch from afar as the Stormbreaker and the backbone of Irusk's

army shattered before him. The cannons had gone silent, and the explosions from whatever Magnus had done ceased. Those two things added up to something disquieting. Magnus had taken out the Stormbreaker's ability to bombard the First Army and Corvis, but the giant vessel remained stubbornly airborne.

Stryker hurried to the edge of the deck and glanced down at the pocked and cratered fields below. Lord General Duggan had retreated, but there were hundreds if not thousands of dead Cygnarans scattered across his vision.

The Stormbreaker still moved at a good clip, as damaged as it was and while pulling the Cloudpiercer behind it. Its course had altered, and Stryker could sense the slight downward angle. The prow of the ship pointed at Corvis. Irusk might not have cannons to bombard the city, but he had a million tons of skyship he could hurl like a great meteor in one final effort to end Cygnaran lives by the thousands.

He now understood why the Khadorans had withdrawn. They'd suffered devastating losses in the explosions, but they now protected the only asset that mattered: Irusk and the bridge. How long would they hold fast before they realized their Supreme Kommandant considered them expendable?

"Harcourt, take everyone and get them on board the Cloudpiercer," Stryker said, grabbing the young warcaster by the shoulder.

"What? I don't understand, sir," Harcourt said, fear suddenly rising in his voice.

"Magnus didn't do enough damage. Irusk is going to ram the ship into Corvis."

Harcourt just stared in silent horror.

"Do it, Lieutenant." Stryker turned to address the hundreds of soldiers around him. "We need to get to that bridge. Thousands of innocent lives depend on it. I need twenty volunteers to follow me. I won't lie to you: if we are successful, you will be lauded as heroes, but we will end this day in Urcaen no matter what happens."

A hundred hands went up, and tears and a flood of emotion

nearly blinded Stryker. “Truly, I am blessed to lead such brave and noble warriors.”

Stryker chose his twenty, all young soldiers with no families or older ones who had already seen their children grow. The choices were grim.

“Sir, maybe we have something aboard the Cloudpiercer . . .” Harcourt began, pleading.

“No, William. I need you to lead now. I need them to follow you onto that ship and for you to save as many as possible. I will see this through.” Stryker took the warcaster’s gauntleted hands in his own. “You have made me proud, and I know you will go on to do great things.”

“Sir, please. Cygnar needs you.”

Stryker shook his head. “It needs strong men and women to lead it. That’s you. Find Major Maddox when this is over and tell her . . .”

He stopped and drew a breath. The sudden realization he’d never see his old friend again, never trade quips with her about their days in the academy, tore at him.

“Sir?” Harcourt said.

Stryker realized all eyes were on him and to show any weakness here could steal the bravery of those who would need it most in the next few minutes. “Find Major Maddox and tell her you are to be her new journeyman. She will teach you far better than I could.”

“I will, sir,” Harcourt said and looked at the ground. But Stryker knew that wouldn’t do.

“Eyes up, Lieutenant,” he said softly. “Pretend, if you have to, but they need to see your bravery.”

Harcourt looked up and nodded. He wiped his eyes with the back of one gauntlet. “Yes, sir. I will.”

“Now go,” Stryker said and pushed Harcourt away.

Harcourt raised his sword, and when he spoke, his voice came steady and powerful. “Soldiers of Cygnar, follow me. Return to the Cloudpiercer.”

Harcourt led the hundreds of soldiers remaining into the belly

of the Cygnaran skyship, and Stryker watched it snap its moorings as it pulled away, bearing Harcourt and the others to safety.

He looked around at the twenty men and women left at his side. He didn't know even know all of their names, but that didn't matter. He knew their hearts, and he knew they would not fail him.

...

"SUPREME KOMMANDANT," a Winter Guard kovnik named Lodeski said to Irusk, his voice quavering. "We have taken significant losses."

The man's fear sickened Irusk.

From his high vantage, Irusk had watched the entire deck of his skyship erupt into flame and shrapnel. Hundreds of his troops had been incinerated and torn to pieces, and his cannons had fallen silent. The last thing he needed to hear from one of his subordinates was that they had suffered heavy losses when the evidence of such was as clear as the charred corpses that littered the Stormbreaker's deck.

"Go below and make sure the engineers keep the ship in the air," Irusk said.

"Supreme Kommandant, the ship is lost, and I—"

Irusk's hand shot out to grip Kovnik Lodeski by the throat. He was a tall, weedy man, pale and limp-haired. How such as he had ever risen to the rank of kovnik was a mystery. "Go below and make sure the ship stays in the air and on course, kovnik, or your wife, your children, your entire family will suffer for your cowardice."

Irusk pushed the man away and waited.

Lodeski rubbed at his throat, his eyes filled with terror and rage, and Irusk wondered for a moment which one would win out. He needn't have even considered it.

"Yes, Supreme Kommandant. It will be done." Lodeski scampered from the bridge, and Irusk forgot about him as he turned to the rest of his officers.

"You, you, and you." He pointed to the senior gunner, the

pilot, and a Man-O-War kovnik. They were all that remained of his senior officers on board. He assumed Strakhov had been killed in the explosions that had disabled the Stormbreaker's cannons. It was a loss—but not an insurmountable one. His own life, as well as those officers who had witnessed what happened today and could corroborate aspects of it when he stood before the empress (or be coached and threatened to lie or exaggerate where necessary), were far more important.

The two men and one woman he had indicated turned to him with a mixture of fear and hope on their faces.

“Come with me to the lifeboat,” Irusk said. The Stormbreaker was equipped with a small dirigible, large enough to hold its senior officers and get them to safety if needed. “The rest of you . . . I thank you for your service. Your empress will hear of your sacrifice.”

Puzzled faces greeted him from a half-dozen men and women. Those puzzled faces turned to horror when he drew his hand cannon and shot the nearest one dead.

“Kovnik,” he said to the Man-O-War. “This ship must stay on course.”

The huge armored soldier nodded and aimed his shield cannon.

“Join me when you have finished here. I will hold the lifeboat for you.” He meant that; what he asked the man to do made him worthy of saving.

The thunder of the shield cannon drowned out the screams of the remaining soldiers. The other officers he'd chosen to save looked on with pale faces, but they would say nothing. Instead, they would live. They understood priorities.

Irusk walked briskly from the bridge, taking one last look at the shattered deck of the Stormbreaker. The Khadoran troops were scattering, their cohesive units coming apart as the soldiers grasped their doom. He would be off the ship before they fully understood their fate. He took solace that their deaths would not be in vain, and a great blow would be struck against the Motherland's enemies.

The last thing he saw before he exited the bridge was Coleman

Stryker leading a small unit of Stormblades toward the bridge.
Irusk smiled. This day was not without its blessings after all.

MAGNUS AWOKE TO THE SCREAMING WIND in his ears and searing pain across his face and arms. He was falling, the bottom of the Stormbreaker dwindling above him as he plummeted toward the Black River. He tried to move his arms and legs and found they were heavier than they should be. The blast had damaged his armor—to what degree, he wasn't certain.

He twisted in midair, turning himself face down so he could see the dark water rushing up to meet him. He'd hit it in ten seconds, maybe less. He had nearly resigned himself to that fate when he spied another figure falling not far below him.

Strakhov's armor and flesh were blackened and smoking. Magnus now understood how he had survived the detonation in the cannon room—he remembered Strakhov grabbing him seconds before his spell went off, and the warcaster's power field plus his own must have shielded him from the blast. Strakhov would have suffered the brunt of the explosion, likely enough so to kill him.

Magnus marveled at the absurdity of it all. He'd been ready to die, to be extinguished in a fiery conflagration of his own making. That had been denied him, and now, hurtling earthward, old survival instincts kicked in. His options were limited. Hitting the Black River without a working arcane turbine would probably kill him on impact. Still, he had one chance, so slim as to be virtually nonexistent.

Fighting a dozen superficial wounds, the not-so superficial injury to his right shoulder, and the staggering weight of his own armor, Magnus put his arms and legs straight out and knifed through the air toward Strakhov. He misjudged his speed and slammed into the warcaster, but he managed to hang on. He had no way of telling if Strakhov were alive, but it didn't matter: the low hum of the Khadoran warcaster's arcane turbine and the trickle of smoke from his armor's stack were enough to know.

He held the warcaster close, facing the Khadoran toward the water. Magnus detected the slightest rise and fall of the warcaster's chest—he still clung to life after all. At least a little longer. If they survived this, the Khadoran would have disfiguring scars for the rest of his life. His face and most of his exposed skin were burned black, and patches of white bone gleamed beneath the charred flesh.

Theoretically, the power fields produced by two suits of warcaster armor, when in close proximity, should overlap and strengthen one another. When they hit the water, Strakhov's power field would activate, but Magnus had no way of knowing if his own had enough power to bolster the Khadoran's. If it did, the combined energy shields might save them. And then again, it might not.

Magnus spied Cygnaran forces near the riverbank. Would they see the two warcasters hit the water? Would they even recognize that the two falling men were not just scattered debris from the disintegrating skyship above them?

Or simply corpses of those already defeated?

None of it mattered because gravity would give him the answer in a few short seconds. Magnus closed his eyes, clung tightly to

Strakhov's body, and prepared himself for the awful impact to come. An infinitesimally short burst of hope surged through him when the tingling sensation of a power field formed around him. It was immediately swallowed and smashed away as breath and sense and vision were crushed from his body, followed instantly by the icy shock of the water.

They plunged into darkness, and somehow Magnus held on to Strakhov. The power field had created a small bubble of air around them as they sank, and Magnus gulped in a deep breath. But then the power field winked out, and the water rushed in.

Magnus and Strakhov hit the mud at the bottom of the river, and there they stayed, mired in a foot of slimy muck, the dim light of the sun some ten feet above them. As the oxygen dwindled in his lungs, Magnus realized it would be the last sunlight he'd ever see.

...

STRYKER EXPECTED MORE RESISTANCE as he and his twenty Stormblades fought their way toward the bridge. Instead of running up against an organized wall of Khadoran troops, they encountered fleeing knots of soldiers more intent on finding a way off the ship than fighting an enemy as doomed as they. Just the same, some of the reds still remembered their call of duty.

Stryker formed his soldiers into a wedge with him at the fore, and they cut through the scant resistance in their path until they were twenty yards or less from the bridge. There stood a line Iron Fang pikemen, their shields emblazoned with black dragons. Stryker knew of this company of veteran soldiers, all drawn from experienced veterans with no family other than their brothers and sisters in arms. There would be no retreat for these warriors.

The Iron Fangs locked shields, leveling their blasting pikes in a bristling hedge. The numbers were even, twenty to a side. Stryker and his Stormblades had only one advantage: they could attack from range.

"Glaive bolts!" Stryker cried, and the Stormblades spread out, their sizzling bursts of voltaic energy flashing into the arrayed

Khadorans. Iron Fang armor was thick, and the combined might of the galvanic assault only dropped two of the veteran soldiers.

The Iron Fangs charged. Stryker quickly summoned a spell to protect his soldiers against the fearsome might of their blasting pikes; an arcane shield formed around the Stormblades, and he knew that though it might save a few of them, blasting pikes were designed to penetrate warjack armor. The Iron Fangs struck, and their weapons detonated with terrible fury. Six Storm Knights went down or were hurled away with gaping holes in their breastplates. Another six were slammed to the ground and struggled to fight their way to their feet as the enemy reversed their spears and stabbed with the spear points on the butts of their weapons.

Stryker found himself engaged with four Iron Fangs at once. Their pikes lanced out, and he batted two away, ducked the others, and then whirled inside the guards of his foes. He smashed one Iron Fang away with a kick to his shield and cut down the man next to him with a short rising cut. Another blasting pike lanced in, and this time Stryker failed to bat it aside. It burst against his power field just above his breastplate. Heat and pressure enveloped him and smashed him backward. He looked down at a smoking dent in his armor—but at least it wasn't a gaping hole. Thank Morrow for small miracles. He leapt forward, slashed through the raised shield and the helmet of the Iron Fang who had struck him. Then the red haze of battle took him, reducing his world to the reach of his sword and the attacks of his enemies.

Stryker fought with only one thought at the forefront of his mind: they were getting closer to Corvis, and each time he swung his blade, the Stormbreaker inched closer to killing tens of thousands. Relying too heavily on his armor and power field, he made great heaving blows with Quicksilver, driving it clean through Iron Fang armor. He took wounds for his recklessness: a deep stab to his right thigh, a blow from a pike haft to the back of his head that blurred his vision and nearly knocked him unconscious. In the end, though, his skill, his might, and his desperation won out. He stood over a field of corpses, both Khadoran and Cygnaran. He was truly the last man standing—

the twenty soldiers he'd taken with him had all given their lives to ensure he lived just a little longer.

He was alone.

Stryker wished he could acknowledge their sacrifice and grieve for their senseless loss, but these were luxuries he no longer could afford. Warily, he hefted Quicksilver and jogged to the base of the bridge complex. As on the last Khadoran skyship he and Harcourt had stormed, the hatch leading up to the bridge deck was shut and barred. Three strong cuts with Quicksilver reduced the door to wreckage, and he pushed his way through into darkness. Stairs led up in a narrow corridor. He bounded up them, heedless of any danger, until he reached the bridge.

He found not a group of hardened soldiers ready to die for their nation and vessel but an abattoir. Not a single living soul remained on the bridge. The pilots, gunners, and mechanical engineers who ran the ship from here had been hacked to death by blows from an annihilator axe or shot to death at close range. He hadn't told Harcourt, but he had one desperate plan to divert the course of the Stormbreaker and possibly save himself in the effort: he'd hoped to force the officers on the bridge to communicate to the engineers below and change the course and speed of the Khadoran vessel.

But Irusk had clearly had other plans, and he'd been thorough.

There would be no way to change the ship's destination now. Even the great wheel had been blown to pieces, leaving only a blackened metal stump where the pilot had once steered the great vessel.

The Stormbreaker was an enduring beast. They had wounded it, but nothing seemed capable of bringing it down. Magnus had destroyed its guns, ripped gaping holes in its hull, and still it remained airborne. Its crew had either died or mutinied, and still it hurtled toward Corvis like an arrow propelled from the bow of a vengeful god. They had bloodied the beast, but there was only one sure way to kill it. He would have to cut out its heart, remove the engine that drove it and kept it aloft, the sky drives in the ship's belly.

He stood surveying the carnage on the bridge and realized he faced an enemy that would do anything for victory, or, in this case, to strike a crippling blow against his enemy even in defeat. Irusk had executed his own soldiers to ensure thousands of innocents would suffer. The man's cruelty, even in the face of crippling loss, was daunting.

Irusk was never one to sacrifice himself, so Stryker surmised he'd probably escaped the ship somehow. He hoped the supreme kommandant would be watching when the last Stormbreaker crashed to earth but failed to strike Corvis. Stryker would inflict one more defeat, one more failure, on Irusk before the end.

...

STRYKER PASSED DOZENS OF KHADORAN SOLDIERS as he descended into the depths of the skyship. None attempted to stop him or even offered any fight. They knew this battle was lost; most ran in the other direction as soon as they saw him. The few who did not run simply met his gaze and waited. The look in their eyes said simply, *My fight is done. Kill me or let me pass.* He let them pass every time. Except once.

A soldier with a mechanical hand hurried toward him carrying what looked like a warjack core. A valuable piece of equipment if he could get it off the ship. The man's prosthetic indicated he had some rank.

Stryker held his sword out and blocked the narrow corridor. "Where are the sky drives?" he asked. He had a rough idea from seeing the outside of the ship, but he did not have time to fruitlessly search for one.

The Khadoran faltered and glanced back behind him.

"If you run, you won't make it five steps before I hit you with a generator bolt. You know who I am."

"Why would I tell you anything?" the man spat in surprisingly good Cygnaran. He clutched the bronze-colored sphere of the warjack cortex to his chest.

"If you hope for any chance of getting off this ship with that, you'll tell me. Otherwise, I'll kill you and wait for the next man

to come along.”

The mechanik grimaced then finally shook his head. “Behind me, twenty yards, you will hear the sound of the arcane turbine. I assume you are familiar with this, yes?”

Stryker stepped aside. “Then go ahead, my brave Khadoran foe. May Menoth protect you from evil.”

The man sneered as he passed. “The only evil on this ship is you.”

Stryker wondered if he'd think that if he'd seen what had happened on the bridge.

He followed the man's instruction, running down the corridor until he heard the telltale buzz of arcane energy thrumming through voltaic conduits. His own armor made just such a sound, barely audible unless in a very quiet room. This was that sound but magnified a thousand times.

The corridor branched off into a wide, open space, the top portion of one of the great half-spheres beneath the ship. The arcane turbine and the sky drive attached to it sat inside a rapidly spinning armillary sphere, a blazing orb of blue-white energy pulsing from and around the sky drive itself. The turbine gathered and increased the power from the armillary sphere, creating an immense sweep of energy that flowed in a closed circuit within the sky drive itself and produced enough power to lift hundreds of tons of soldiers and steel in the air.

The chamber was empty, a cavernous space devoid of enemies. He understood that hundreds of Khadoran would be searching for a way off the ship, but if he were successful, they would never find it.

Catwalks extended from the floor of the room out into the open void where the armillary sphere hung, held aloft by the same energy that granted the Stormbreaker flight. The blurring bands of steel that made up the sphere were a potent armor. Stryker might cut his way through them and then destroy the arcane turbine, but disabling one engine would not force the skyship to the ground fast enough. It would still hit its target. No, he needed to disable more than one engine; he needed to create a blast big

enough to disable all of them.

He walked out onto the nearest catwalk, searching for ways to destroy the sky drive, and despite his knowledge of arcane mechanika, he could see nothing that would let him disable more than just this single engine.

He stopped within a few feet of the sky drive, the armillary sphere driving a coarse wind into his face that smelled of ozone. Arcs of voltaic energy danced around the mechanism. One of those arcs lanced out at him, and he reflexively brought up his sword. The lightning struck Quicksilver's blade, jolting Stryker with its pure force, and his arcane turbine whined louder as it absorbed the energy.

And then he knew what he had to do.

His warcaster armor had gone through a number of iterations, all crafted by the genius of Sebastian Nemo. One suit allowed him to strategically overload his arcane turbine and then channel that power into his armor, increasing his strength tenfold. He had rarely utilized the armor's function for fear of overloading his arcane turbine to the point of meltdown. Had it ever happened, the resulting explosion would have reduced him to atoms along with anyone and anything within twenty feet.

The arcane turbine resting in the sky drive's armillary sphere had a thousand times the power of the one that powered his armor. An overload would produce a blast that would crack the skyship in half.

It was time. Nothing prevented him from doing what must be done. He could feel the Stormbreaker hurtling toward Corvis with every second, and he knew now he could stop it, could save thousands. And he didn't feel fear. The threat of death had been his constant companion for years. Instead, what he felt was something akin to loss. Grief, perhaps. He'd always entertained, foolishly perhaps, the idea of leaving the military, retiring, living a life undictated by war and strife. It was more a fantasy than anything else, one that could be snatched away by a sniper's bullet or an enemy's sword at any moment. But to knowingly choose it, to abandon everything he might have been, was far worse than

fear. He wondered if Magnus had experienced the same sense of loss in his final moments. He smiled. He'd have the chance to ask him in Urcaen soon enough.

Stryker closed his eyes and held Quicksilver in front of him, resting his forehead on the blade. He had an instinct to pray, but he couldn't find the words.

"For Cygnar," he whispered. The words were caught and torn away by the howling wind of the armillary sphere. He stepped forward, raised his sword, and brought it down on the flashing bands of steel. Quicksilver slashed through the metal, and the sphere came apart in a shower of glowing shrapnel. A piece the size of a warjack's arm flashed past his head, and it might have ended everything right there, but Stryker sensed another presence in the room with him. Maybe it was the adrenaline and fatigue clouding his mind, but he sensed a guiding hand in his actions.

The arcane turbine and sky drive hung suspended in the air before him, pulsating blue and white, a mote of power like the eye of an angry god. He took in a breath, pointed Quicksilver, and channeled all his arcane strength into its storm accumulator. A bolt of voltaic energy shot from the sword's tip and into the arcane turbine, but unlike the short bursts he fired at his enemies, this time he pushed a constant stream of energy into the target. A link of galvanic energy flowed from his armor's arcane turbine through his blade and into the sky drive.

The glow around the sky drive intensified, and Stryker's arcane turbine on his back grew hot then searing. He gritted his teeth and pushed more power through Quicksilver, closing his eyes as the pain intensified. He did not relent, even when the skin on his back melted beneath his armor, even when his hair caught fire and the agony leapt to his scalp and face. He became aware he was screaming, but he did not relent.

Morrow, please, let it be soon, was the final thought that passed through his mind as the sky drive overloaded in a mammoth flash of blue-white energy that expanded in a bubble of absolute destructive force.

Coleman Stryker died in the light.

NEMO FOUGHT TO REMAIN CONSCIOUS, fought to keep his failing body upright and mobile for a few more seconds. His armor did most of the work, and he refused the help of the mechanics who tried to support him on his slow shuffle to the bridge.

He'd put everything he had into the Cloudpiercer's engines, pushing them to the brink with every ounce of arcane power he could muster. It had worked, and they'd caught the Stormbreaker, latched onto the deck of the Khadoran vessel in a desperate attempt to stop Irusk from destroying the First Army and Corvis.

He'd lain nearly comatose in the medical bay until he'd felt the ship moving again. The medics had told him he was critically injured, and the grave looks on their faces said more than that. He was beyond recovery. And he knew it.

Nemo had summoned enough strength to order his armor put back on him, and then he'd made his way to the bridge. A black cloud of despair followed him, but as he reached the bridge and saw the Stormbreaker rushing away from them, he thought

for a moment that the darkness was simply the weight of failure crushing down on him.

Then the sky burst open in a gigantic corona of blazing light. Everyone on the bridge shielded their eyes or jerked away from the flash, but not Nemo. He recognized the energy signature. One of the sky drives had overloaded. He watched with something akin to satisfaction as the skyship split in half, its aft section plowing into the river while a hundred yards of its front half smashed into the docks and warehouse on the outskirts of Corvis. There would be many deaths, but nothing like what would have happened if the ship had struck the city center.

Then he saw Lieutenant Harcourt. The young warcaster covered his eyes not to protect them against the flash but to hide the tears that streamed down his face.

Nemo managed to walk the ten steps across the bridge, lift the man's head up, and look him in the eyes.

"Coleman?" Nemo croaked, knowing it was a foolish question. Knowing that brilliant burst of light was more than the destruction of a Khadoran skyship. It was the final blinding crescendo of a life filled with as much pain as glory.

"No," Harcourt said.

That dark cloud settled over Nemo, ripping away what little strength he had. He realized he was falling, plummeting into that blackness, and he went there gratefully.

...

THE DIMNESS RETREATED, THE LIGHT GREW, and Magnus was lifted by some great unseen force. At first he simply thought he'd died, and this was his passage to Urcaen. Then he broke the surface of the river, sucked in a great gulp of air, and coughed water from his lungs.

The coughing and movement drew a deep whistle of steam from the Stormwall that had fished him from the river. It held him as gingerly as possible in one gigantic metal hand, then it trudged toward the shore up to its waist in water.

"Set them down," called out a tall, lithe woman in warcaster

armor, a big magelock rifle propped over one of her shoulders. Magnus recognized Captain Kara Sloan. He hadn't realized she was with the First Army, but he supposed her skill set let her move around a bit. Keen eyed and quick witted, she had likely seen his fall and had acted quickly to retrieve him from the river. He was also quite certain she'd shot at him more than once, back before he'd taken the blue again.

The Stormwall set Magnus on the grassy sward beside the river and then, to his surprise, set the limp body of Kommander Strakhov beside him. Medics rushed in to aid them both, but Magnus waved them away.

"Make sure he lives," he said and pointed at Strakhov.

"You need medical attention, Major," Sloan said, staring down at him, her eyes appraising, judging. She wasn't wrong; he could no longer count his injuries, and his entire body seemed to be crafted of broken bones, pulled muscles, and burned flesh.

"No doubt, Captain," Magnus said, stuffing the pain down, pushing it away, as he'd done a hundred times before. He still couldn't move his right arm, so he held out his left hand, embarrassed that he needed help getting to his feet. What a tired old fool he must look.

Kara Sloan grabbed Magnus' hand, her grip sure and strong, and pulled him upright. He suddenly remembered his warcaster armor was inoperable, and the weight of it nearly dropped him again where he stood.

"Captain, I am grateful for the rescue. But for the moment, tell me the state of the First Army."

"We need to get that armor off you, sir," Sloan said.

"In due time. Report, Captain."

"Yes, sir," she said grudgingly. Unlike the warcasters and officers he'd recently served with, Captain Sloan had not gotten used to the idea of Asheth Magnus wearing the Cygnus and outranking her. "Early casualty reports are one thousand dead and at least that many wounded. That bloody skyship pounded the hell out of us until its cannons went."

Magnus smiled grimly and searched the sky. "Where is the

Stormbreaker?”

Sloan pointed to the east, and Magnus heaved himself to his feet. The skyship was two or three miles distant, following the river and nearing Corvis, trailing smoke and bits of wreckage. He could see the First Army spread out in front of the city, artillery and warjacks firing up at the Stormbreaker.

He opened his mouth to tell Captain Sloan the First should save their ammunition when a bright flash filled the sky over Corvis, a nimbus of voltaic destruction unlike anything he'd ever seen before.

Shouts and screams of awe went up around from the soldiers nearby, and even the normally stoic Sloan mouthed, “Thamar’s Teeth.”

The Stormbreaker cracked like a rotting board broken over a knee. Its back half plunged into the river while the rest of it, almost propelled by the explosion that had broken it open, smashed into the docks on the outskirts of Corvis.

“I don’t understand,” Sloan said. “All our troops were pulled off the Stormbreaker. How did that happen?”

“You ever seen an arcane turbine explode, Captain?” Magnus said, dread realization slowly settling over him like an iron shroud.

Sloan caught the look on Magnus’ face and maybe sensed his horror. She slowly shook her head.

“Looks just like that, but about a thousand times smaller,” he said, trying to control the tremor in his voice. It wasn’t just fatigue anymore. One thought joined the chaos of anger and grief in his mind: Should have been me.

“I don’t understand, sir,” Sloan said. “How?”

Magnus fell to his knees, the weight of his armor, the weight of his decisions, the weight of his life too much to bear any longer. “Stryker.”

THE STREETS OF CASPIA THROGGED WITH PEOPLE. Thousands upon thousands lined its narrow winding avenues, creating a wall of their own in the place known as the city of walls. This was not a gathering to celebrate or to protest any of the events that usually brought the multitudes from their homes. Beneath a canvas of steel-grey clouds, silence reigned in Caspia. The people stood quiet and somber, many with white armbands depicting the Cygnus, the great swan of Cygnar, in black.

All watched as a line of soldiers, led by a hundred storm lances, their electro lances flying the same black Cygnus, moved through the center of the city. Behind them came a hundred Precursor Knights who gave way to the brilliant blue of Stormblades, those who had served closest to the subject of the grim procession.

Lord General Coleman Stryker's coffin was a perfect white box of enameled steel. The Morrowan starburst and the great swan of Cygnar had been etched in silver on its surface—the man's nation and his god—but it was not these things for which he had

sacrificed his life. No, they marched all around him, the men and women who had fought with him, for him, because of him. He had died for them, and their hands would bear him to his final resting place in the Sancteum.

The names of those who bore the warcaster's coffin were a litany of heroes, all of whom had fought beside the leader of the Storm Division. Victoria Haley, Markus Brisbane, Elizabeth Maddox, and Kara Sloan, they all carried their friend and commander. Others were conspicuous only by their absence: Sebastian Nemo and Asheth Magnus, the former struck down and clinging to life in the same conflict that had taken Stryker's. The latter, who had long called himself an enemy to the lord general, had recused himself from the pallbearer honor, despite quiet urging by High Chancellor Leto Raelthorne and even King Julius Raelthorne himself. Magnus had offered the excuse that his injuries prevented him from such duties, but he was excused because the truth was as plain as the wounds he bore: he did not feel worthy.

Other faces, allies and friends, followed behind the pallbearers and their precious cargo. Ashlynn d'Elyse, William Harcourt, and the great hulking form of the ancient warjack Ol' Rowdy. Somehow the Ironclad managed to walk with a somberness as telling and heart-wrenching as any of the tiny humans beside him.

Hundreds more soldiers came next: knights, trenchers, rangers, all taken from units that had served under the lord general's command.

Finally, the funeral procession reached the walls of the Sancteum and passed through. Here, thousands more soldiers and citizens waited outside the towering spires of the Archcourt Cathedral, the seat of Exarch Dargule and the greatest Church of Morrow in the land.

Inside, the pallbearers carried Stryker's coffin through the nave, its pews filled with mourners, and finally to the altar itself, where it was set down gently by the honored few. Those that gathered around it now—Exarch Dargule, High Chancellor Leto Raelthorne, and King Julius Raelthorne—were the highest powers in the land.

The primarch began a prayer, extolling Morrow to shepherd a fallen hero into Urcaen where he would take up the sword again and fight the minions of the Wyrms. This prayer, though appropriate, rang hollow and forced, a perfunctory ritual performed for a man whose heart and mind was more concerned with earthly suffering than any war beyond the mortal realm.

After the prayer, silence fell, and High Chancellor Leto Raelthorne began to speak. The former king spoke plainly, humbly, and truthfully about a young man who had helped put him on the throne, turning away from what he'd been taught about honor and duty to fight for something he believed in, something he knew to be right. These words, and those that followed, found stronger purchase in the hearts and minds of those within the cathedral. They reminded each man and woman of who Coleman Stryker had been—in truth, an imperfect vessel who fought fiercely, even defiantly, for his nation and for those who battled beside him.

Other voices joined Leto's, as those who had known Stryker spoke of his legacy, his impact on their lives. Warcasters, both Cygnaran and those drawn from among its allies, remembered aloud each time he had raised sword or spell in defense of their lives or homes or nations.

Dozens spoke, and more surely desired to, but the grey clouds had begun to darken as night descended on Caspia, and Exarch Dargule began an intonation, a low paean to Morrow, taken up by all present. Voices lifted not in song but in dutiful prayer, and this time, there was an honesty to the words and a deep sadness that soared among the rafters of the great cathedral.

As the prayer closed and the final words were uttered, the sun broke through the clouds. Its bright rays struck the wall of stained glass above the cathedral's nave. There, a depiction of Morrow had been meticulously cast, and as the sun struck the holy image, it threw the god's reflection onto the church floor. Perhaps it was only some meaningless coincidence that Morrow's sword fell upon Stryker's coffin as the primarch ushered his soul into the afterlife, but that bright blade of dazzling azure and white lingered after the sun sank below the clouds, lingered in the darkness that followed,

and some say still lingers on Coleman Stryker's coffin where it rests in the Sancteum among the fallen heroes of Cygnar.

...

THE OFFICE WAS NEW. THE BUILDING WAS NEW. The armor on the stand beneath the Cygnaran flag was new—proper warcaster armor, the Cygnus bright and proud on the deep blue field of the breastplate. The cobbled-together piecemeal affair Magnus had worn for the last two decades was little more than slag and ruin, cut from his body after they'd dragged him from the Black River.

His title was also new. He'd been promoted to general and given command of the Storm Division. When Leto had told him days after the funeral, he'd laughed out loud. He was lauded as a hero for what amounted to luck. He shouldn't have survived, and Stryker shouldn't have died. They all knew the better man had gone to his grave while an old and tired soldier, once labeled a traitor, replaced him.

Magnus sat behind his bare desk, the only old thing in the room. He remained the last of a dying breed. His generation had died off or had accepted a lesser stature in the new Cygnar. Vinter was dead, Nemo barley clung to life and most said he would never wake, and Leto had abdicated his power to the son of his brother, the brother Magnus had supported for twenty years of covert treachery and then outright war. It all seemed so pointless now.

They'd won, he supposed. Irusk had been defeated, his skyships destroyed, Corvis saved. The arrival of Ordic forces and the First Army in Merywyn had routed the remaining Khadoran troops there. Llael had its capital back, but its young queen ruled from Caspia beside a Cygnaran king. There were no celebrations in the street, however. All still wore the black Cygnus, and everyone knew Khador had been bloodied but not beaten.

A knock sounded on the door, and Magnus looked up as a staff sergeant entered and saluted.

"What is it, Holmes?" Magnus said to his chief of staff, another new fixture in his life. Most of the individual soldiers he'd brought with him when he'd rejoined the Cygnaran Army were either

dead or assigned to different divisions. Leto had almost certainly installed men and women in his staff to watch him. Maybe even Sergeant Holmes.

“Lieutenant Harcourt is here to see you, sir,” Sergeant Holmes said.

Magnus frowned. He’d had no appointment with the young warcaster, and Harcourt had been assigned to Major Maddox in order to continue his journeyman training. “Show him in.”

Holmes left, and Harcourt entered. He still looked as if he were swimming in his armor, though, like Magnus, his piecemeal kit had been replaced with a new suit of light warcaster armor. He carried a long cloth-wrapped object in both hands and stopped a few feet from Magnus’ desk.

“How is Major Maddox treating you, Lieutenant?” Magnus asked.

“She’s been good to me, sir,” Harcourt said then glanced down at the bundle in his hands. Magnus realized it was a weapon of some kind—big and bulky. “She, uh, sent me with this. And with new orders.”

Magnus stood, though his knees were suddenly weak. “Show me.”

Harcourt approached and set the bundle on the desk with a soft metallic thump. He unwrapped the cloth and the clean gleam of polished steel and brass shone.

Magnus’ heartbeat galloped, and his throat tightened. He reached out and put his left hand, the one still made of flesh and blood, on Quicksilver’s blade. The big Caspian battle blade had survived virtually unscathed from the devastation that had slain its owner.

“It was found in the wreckage a week ago and sent from Corvis to High Chancellor Leto,” Harcourt said.

Magnus gripped the edge of his desk, suddenly angered that this reminder of what he’d lost had been brought to him, lain before him, forced him once again to relive decisions he would question for the rest of his life. “Why did you bring it here, Lieutenant?”

Harcourt swallowed and frowned. "Major Maddox sent me, sir. I thought you'd be . . . glad to have it."

Magnus shook his head, the anger disappearing in a tidal wave of grief and memory. Not the memories of blood and treachery he and Stryker had shared over the last twenty years, but an older, stronger image, one he'd not let himself indulge in for decades. He began to speak, maybe because at that moment he needed to share his memory or maybe because it was the only thing that would save him from the despair threatening to overwhelm him.

"I taught him to fight, you know," he said, not caring that his voice shook, that his eyes brimmed with tears long denied. "We were traveling from his village to Caspia the first time I put a sword in his hands. A Caspian battle blade, like this one."

Harcourt stood silent, knowing he was a witness and not a participant to the moment.

"This was during a time when the gift was outlawed, you see," Magnus continued, "but I found Stryker just as he found you. I knew his father and his mother, and I had reason to suspect their son would be a warcaster."

Magnus put his hand on the hilt of Quicksilver and lifted the blade from the table. "He complained about how heavy the sword was, that first time, but then I saw him swing it, and I knew he was a warrior born."

"He was the finest man I ever served with, sir," Harcourt said.

The admission brought a smile to Magnus' face. Harcourt had been a professional soldier for a trivial amount of time compared to the lifetime Magnus had served, but he did not doubt the man's sincerity.

"He was a stubborn, headstrong son-of-a-bitch," Magnus said, his smile growing. He wiped at his eyes, not caring that his grief was so evident, so open, and for once, so honest. What else remained to him? "He was also the bravest and most honorable man I ever met. I . . . admired him."

The last he'd never spoken aloud, never let himself even think, but the truth of it struck him as brutally as any sword blow he'd exchanged with Coleman Stryker.

“He was easy to admire,” Harcourt said. “He saw something in me I didn’t even know I possessed. He took that quality or gift, and he made it mine, made it something I could be proud of.”

The young warcaster no longer sounded overwhelmed or naïve; in fact, Magnus had never heard him so confident as he said, “Maybe you gave that to him.”

Magnus shook his head. He wouldn’t let his mind wander down that path too far. He was afraid of where it might lead. “You said something about new orders, Lieutenant. Tell me about that.”

Harcourt cleared his throat and handed Magnus a sealed envelope that bore Leto’s personal seal. He opened it and found a single piece of paper inside. On it, in the former king’s flowing script, were two sentences.

I am reassigning Lieutenant Harcourt to you for the completion of his journeyman training. Second chances in this life are rare, Asheth; don’t let this one slip by.

Second chances, Magnus thought. To do what? “Lieutenant, do you know what this says?”

Harcourt nodded. “Not specifically, but I know my orders. You taught me much in the field, and I look forward to learning more from you.”

“I’ve been down this road, Harcourt,” Magnus said. “Look where it’s gotten us. Look what it cost.”

“Sir, if I may speak freely,” Harcourt said, and something flickered in his eyes, something Magnus had not seen before in the young warcaster, not even when he was fighting for his life. Lieutenant William Harcourt was angry.

The emotion intrigued Magnus. “Speak, Lieutenant.”

Harcourt drew in a breath to steady himself. “I learned about you growing up. How you wanted to overthrow King Leto and install his brother Vinter on the throne. They said you were a traitor and a coward and a murderer.”

“Well, that’s a ringing endorsement, Lieutenant,” Magnus said. None of those labels had bothered him before, not even when he was those things, but hearing from them from Harcourt, this way, stung.

“May I finish, sir?” There was steel in Harcourt’s voice.

“By all means, Lieutenant.”

“And then I served with you, fought beside you, watched you command soldiers and command their respect because they knew, sir. They knew following you meant following a leader, a true Cygnaran. You may have been all those other things people said you were, but you’re also noble, and skilled, and brave, and you would have given your life for Cygnar and the men and women who fought for her. Morrow just had different plans.”

Magnus stood silent, taken by surprise by the young warcaster’s words. The kindness of them and more so the conviction in them. He’d considered himself an agent of change, a necessary evil to bring about a Cygnar that would be better for all. With Julius on the throne, he believed he’d done that, but he had no illusions about the man he’d become to make that possible.

Harcourt did not give him time to dwell further. “I want to become like the man I saw fight in Rynyr and Riversmet and Merywyn. I want to learn from that man. I want to see him pick up that sword”—he pointed at Quicksilver—“and wear it proudly.”

Magnus now realized he still held Quicksilver, and a flood of emotions rolled over him. Did he still have worth in this new world? Did he still have something to give? He shook his head and set Quicksilver back on his desk. “No, this sword doesn’t belong to me.”

“Sir, I disagree,” Harcourt began, but Magnus silenced him with a raised hand.

“I’m not worthy of it,” Magnus said. “Few are.”

He stared at Harcourt, found the young man’s eyes—they were deep blue, Cygnar blue—and held their gaze. “But some day you may be.”

That old self-doubt Magnus had become familiar with over the last months returned to Harcourt’s face. “I don’t know, sir. I don’t even know how to use a Caspian battle blade.”

Magnus smiled, feeling something like hope for the first time in months, maybe years. “That is something I can remedy.”

“Then you’ll take me on as your journeyman?”

“The high chancellor has commanded it,” Magnus replied, “and I am a good soldier. I follow orders. Well, now I do.”

Harcourt saluted, his face alight with joy and maybe that same hope Magnus felt. “Excellent, sir. When do we begin?”

“Go see Sergeant Holmes outside,” Magnus said. “He’ll arrange everything. You’re dismissed until I call for you.”

Harcourt nodded and exited Magnus’ office, closing the door behind him.

Magnus sat back down in his chair, letting the weary weight of age and battle settle over him. This time, it felt more like something earned than something inflicted.

He wrapped Quicksilver back in the blue cloth Harcourt had brought, then he picked up Leto’s letter and read it again. The high chancellor had spoken of second chances, and Magnus found he wanted that but not for himself.

Once, long ago, he had taken a talented young man, a man whose destiny burned as bright and hot as any Magnus had seen. That man had become great in spite of him, in spite of his attempts to tear him down, even to kill him. Harcourt was the second chance Leto had spoken of.

As he folded the high chancellor’s letter and tucked it away, Magnus resolved that Lieutenant William Harcourt would become a great warcaster, a great man because of him.

— ABOUT THE AUTHOR —

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

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