



BASED ON THE AWARD-WINNING



GAME

# DOGS OF WAR

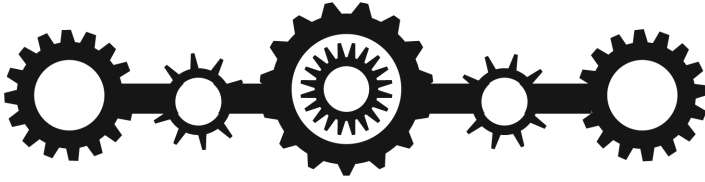


## THE DEVIL'S PAY

A PRELUDE TO DARK CONVERGENCE

BY DAVE GROSS





DOGS OF WAR: VOLUME ONE  
**THE DEVIL'S PAY**

DAVE GROSS

*Illustrated by*  
MATHIAS KOLLROS







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# DOG COMPANY FIGHTING ROSTER

*Late Autumn, 608 AR*

## **Commander**

*Samantha "Sam" MacHorne, Captain*

## **"The Boys"**

*Lister, Lieutenant*

*Reginald "Creepy" Crawley, Sergeant*

*"Bulletproof" Burns, Corporal*

*"No-First-Names" Harrow, Corporal*

*Vernon "Smooth" Pamuk, Corporal*

## **"The Men"**

*Bates, Private*

*Bowie, Private*

*Craig, Private*

*Crowborough, Private*

*Dawson, Private*

*Fleming, Private*

*Fraser, Private*

*Hughes, Private*

*McBride, Private*

*Morris, Private*

*Robinson, Corporal*

*Rose, Private*

*Swire, Private*



## PART ONE

Dawson pelted down Lantern Street yelling, “Crawley! Harrow! Pamuk! Burns! Lieutenant Lister! Devil Dogs!”

He tripped over a legless beggar gripping a pair of wooden blocks to walk on his hands. The man fell to his stumps. Cursing, he shook a muddy block after Dawson. “Watch where you’re going, you good-for-nothing—”

“Sorry!” Dawson plucked a few small coins from his purse and tossed them over his shoulder. They splashed into a puddle beside the beggar.

“Couldn’t be bothered to put them in my pocket?” grumbled the man. He planted himself beside the puddle to fish out the coins.

Dawson ran on, shouting up at the second-floor balconies. “Devil Dogs! Lieutenant Lister! Corporal Pamuk!”

Dawson tried to dodge out of the path of a trollkin vendor, but his shoulder knocked free two of the roast chickens hanging from the staff across her shoulder. They splashed onto the muddy street. “Sorry!”

“Four silverweight.” The trollkin thrust out a hand the size of a shovel. She glared down over her bulging blue chin at Dawson, who stood two inches under six feet tall and looked smaller compared to her.

This time Dawson stopped as he withdrew the payment from his purse. He placed the coins in the trollkin’s pebbled hand before resuming his search.

“Waste of perfectly good food,” grumbled the trollkin. Before she could bend down to retrieve the fallen chickens, the beggar tucked one between his chin and chest, hastening away on his blocks.

“Crawley! Harrow! Pamuk! Burns! Lieutenant Lister! Devil Dogs! Anybody?”

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"Sweetheart, you looking for Smooth Pamuk?" A courtesan leaned over the railing of her balcony. A pair of the street's eponymous lanterns glowed at either end of the railing, advertising her availability.

"Do you know where I can find him?"

"That depends," she said. "Can you pay his tab?"

Dawson weighed his purse in one hand. "How much?"

"Twenty-six royals."

"Twenty-six?!"

She shrugged and turned aside, waving at a man across the street.

"Wait! Wait! I'll be right up."

Dawson barged through the brothel's salon, dodging a scantily clad woman riding on the back of a patron playing the part of a donkey. The man reared and brayed at Dawson as he pushed past.

"Sorry, sorry!"

The over-painted madam looked up from behind a counter on which she counted colored chits, each one painted with a different variation on a common theme of two – sometimes three, or more – entangled bodies. At the sight of Dawson, she laid a cloth over the chits and smiled. Her shoes clacked on the floor as she came around the counter.

"Such a hurry, young fellow? Why don't you have a seat and tell me just what you had in mind—" She spotted the emblem painted on his pauldron. "Devil Dogs! I've been meaning to have a word with your sergeant about Smooth's outstanding— Where do you think you're going?"

"Sorry!" Dawson darted around the madam and ran up the stairs. The courtesan he had seen from the street awaited him in the hallway, her open palm extended.

Dawson counted out twenty-six gold coins into her hand. Her eyebrows rose in surprise, but she pointed down the corridor to the grand suite. Dawson doffed an invisible cap and said, "Thank you kindly."

He ran down the hall and burst through the suite's double doors. Inside, Corporal Pamuk sat in a steaming bathtub. The brown man's body was a



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mass of muscles, almost too much for the tub to contain, yet a pretty young woman sat behind him in the water. She drew a silver straight razor across his scalp. At Dawson's sudden arrival, she looked up. Pamuk hissed. A spot of blood appeared on the shining blade.

"Dammit, private!" said Pamuk, touching the wound. He tasted the blood and scowled. "You'd better have one hell of a good—"

"Emergency meeting, Sir," said Dawson. "Captain said, 'Fetch all the boys double-fast.'"

"But we haven't—"

"She has a contract, Corporal. A paying job."

"Why didn't you say so in the first place? And don't call me 'Corporal.' It's Smooth."

His barber stroked his shaved head and said, "It certainly is."

Smooth rose, splashing the doxy with bathwater. He stood a good eight inches taller than Dawson. Apparently his head was the last part of him to be shaved.

"Don't just stand there, Private—"

"Dawson, Sir! I signed on just last week"

"That's fine, Dawson. Now hand me that towel."

Dawson obliged. When he saw the woman glaring at him from the tub, he fetched another for her while Smooth donned his gear: thick leather pants, heavy boots, steel shoulder plates, elbow and knee guards. At last he snagged his leather jacket. On its back was painted a ferocious horned hound, Dog Company's emblem.

The young woman wiped the razor carefully on a towel before handing it with a flourish to Smooth. He gave her a kiss and slipped the razor into a pocket inside his jacket. "Thanks, doll-face."

Dawson turned to leave through the suite door.

"Not that way," said Smooth. "Here comes the reckoning."

An accelerating clack of footsteps came down the corridor. Dawson winced as he recognized the sound of the madam's hard shoes. He peered out the

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door to see her approaching, shoulders squared, chin tucked, ready for battle.

"It's all right," said Dawson. "I paid your tab."

"Did you bring a handcart?"

"What? No, of course not."

"Then I assure you, you didn't pay my tab." Smooth slammed shut the suite doors. After a moment's consideration, he pushed a vanity in front of them.

"Smooth!" bellowed the madam. She banged on the suite door with the strength of an ogrun berserker, rattling the vanity mirror. "I know you're in there."

Smooth and Dawson went over the windowsill, slid across the eave, and dropped down to the street.

"Where are the others?" asked Smooth.

"I was hoping you could tell me, Corporal," said Dawson. "I mean, Smooth."

Smooth stared and shook his head. "Why did the captain send you, then?" he asked. "All right, follow me."

They ran down Lantern Street, heedless of the muffled shouts of the brothel madam.

Smooth led the way to the Rust Market a few streets away. Cool shadows began to pool at the base of the buildings. Clouds veiled the descending sun.

"Creepy!" shouted Smooth.

Sergeant Crawley glanced up from a table full of pistons. His goggles hung loose around his scrawny neck. The tip of his long cap fell limp upon his shoulder. He returned his attention to a warjack piston, one among many salvaged parts arrayed on scarred tables beneath the dealer's tent. "Whaddaya want, Smooth?"

"Captain MacHorne wants the boys back double-quick," said Dawson.

Crawley looked up, as if noticing Dawson for the first time. "Got any money?"

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"Not much left," said Dawson, shaking his purse. "But the captain has a new contract."

"Well, why didn't you say so in the first place?" Crawley pushed the piston back across the table.

"That's what *I* told him," said Smooth.

"Better fetch the lieutenant," said Crawley. "He's around here somewhere, giving the junk boss an earful."

The three men turned two more corners among the market's confusing array of junk stalls before they heard the evidence of Crawley's report.

Up on a wooden platform, two big men stood nose-to-nose, each trying to knock the other unconscious with harsh language thrown at high volume. Behind them stood two ranks of decommissioned warjacks covered in tarpaulins. Each steel giant was chained to huge stone anchors sunk into the ground. A rusty iron sign nearby read: "Buy & Sell."

Smooth and Crawley winced at the argument and looked at each other before turning to Dawson.

"Deliver your message, Dawson," said Smooth.

Dawson gulped before he approached the two combatants. "Lieutenant Lister, Sir!"

The bald and black-bearded man continued swearing into the face of the red-bearded 'jack dealer. A fat, unlit cigar bobbed with every syllable, threatening to tickle the vendor's nose. "I never agreed to a thirty-five percent markup on the buy-back!"

"You take long enough, prices go up!" bellowed the dealer. "It's no fault of mine you Dogs can't pay your bills."

"You don't know a damned thing about the vicissitudes of contract employment, you grubby little junk picker."

"Lieutenant, Sir!"

"Pipe down, Private. Can't you see I'm in the middle of a delicate negotiation?"

"Captain's orders, Sir! Double-fast assembly, Sir. JOB, Sir!"

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Lister wheeled, turning his back to the vendor, who made a vulgar gesture beneath his chin.

"Well, why didn't you say so in the first place?" He jumped down from the platform, splashing mud on himself and the other Dogs. "Who's missing?"

"Harrow and Burns, Sir!"

Lister waved a vague hand beyond the Rust Market to a row of shops. "Harrow's over there, somewhere."

They split up to peer into storefronts until Sergeant Crawley blew his signal whistle. Thus summoned, they piled into a shop beneath the sign of a brace of pistols.

Inside, a hard-faced man stood across the counter from the proprietor and peered into the fat barrel of a new slug gun. Both his eyes and his short-cropped hair were the color of fresh steel. Between him and the gunsmith sat a game board with most of the pieces set aside, captured.

Dawson stepped forward. Harrow turned and paralyzed him with a glance. Dawson retreated to stand beside Crawley. "If you don't mind, Sergeant, perhaps you could be the one to tell the Corporal—"

"Harrow, job!" barked Lieutenant Lister.

Harrow laid down the gun and walked away without a word to his opponent.

As the men left the shop, Smooth slugged Dawson in the shoulder, just hard enough to leave a bruise. "You see? That's the way to do it."

"Now where's Burns?" asked Crawley.

"Where else?" said Harrow. His voice was the sound of a shell loaded into a chamber.

"There's one," said Smooth. He nodded toward a tavern beneath the sign of a pig whistling under the skirts of a startled lady. "I think I hear his voice."

They walked past a statue of Madruva Dagra. Gas flames licked up from each of her cupped palms. A trio of damp ravens perched on her arms, eyes scanning the street for food.

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As they approached the Whistling Pig, the men heard Burns' off-key rendition of "Blue Rose in Winter." The big man sat on the windowsill, his curly blonde hair thrown back as he belted out the song. His arms were as thick and hard as Smooth's. An audience of mill workers banged their tankards on the tables in rhythm to his song.

"Uh, oh," said Crawley, his reedy voice cracking. "He's doing his special version."

"That's fine," said Smooth. "It's not like we're anywhere near the Khadoran border."

"Tell it to those fellows." Crawley pointed across the crowded tavern.

Two long-mustached mercenaries leaned against the bar. Their insignia had been torn away long ago, but their long coats were unmistakably Khadoran. Nearby, four more burly Khadorans sat at a table, not drinking their beers. Their scowls deepened as they listened to Burns' revised lyrics. In his version of the song, the princess' lover was a clever ogrun tinker.

As Burns came to the part where the princess professes her love in an obscene rhyming couplet, the foreigners' hands moved to the hilts of their swords. As they stepped toward Burns, their countrymen rose from the table to support them.

"Get him out of there," said Lister.

"Yes, Sir!" said Dawson. He ran after Sergeant Crawley, who was already shouldering his way through the crowded doorway. Eager to witness a fight, the patrons made no effort to get out of his way.

Burns appeared oblivious to both the approaching mercenaries and the shouts of his fellow Dogs. As one of the Khadorans drew his sword, Burns snatched up his steel helmet and swung it hard. The man fell back, clutching a nose that now looked like a crushed strawberry.

His partner's hand left his sword and came up with a pistol from inside his coat. As he leveled the weapon at the singer's face, Burns swung his helmet again. The pistol fired. A ricochet struck off the helmet to blast a chunk of the stone out of the hearth before finally shattering bottles behind the bar.

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"No guns!" screamed the bartender before diving for cover.

Burns head-butted the second Khadoran, making the man's nose a match for his companion's.

The patrons cheered. Some stood up to grab the Khadorans' bodyguards. Others threw punches at random targets.

"Stay away from my daughter!" somebody yelled before punching the man beside him.

"You never buy a round!" Another man leaped a table to strangle his drinking mate.

"I don't even know you!" A burly fellow punched a stranger in the gut and looked around, grinning, for another foe.

The tavern erupted into a general brawl as patrons saw the opportunity to address simmering feuds or simply to let off some steam after a day's labor in the mills.

Smooth leaped through the open window behind Burns. He wrapped his massive arms around Burns' waist and pulled him backward. "We don't have time for this."

"What are you doing, Smooth?" bellowed Burns. He poked a finger through the bullet hole in his helmet and frowned in sorrow.

Smooth winced at the blast of beer breath. "We're getting you out of here."

"Job, Corporal!" shouted Dawson, trying to push his way back out of the tavern. "Captain has a job!"

"Oh, all right," said Burns. As Smooth released him, he lurched back toward the brawl. "I just want to make one last point."

As the belligerent Khadorans staggered to their feet, Burns swung his helmet in a wide, horizontal arc, dropping both with a single blow.

Crawley blew a piercing blast from his brass signal whistle. "Dogs, out now!"

"Well, hell," said Burns. "I was just warming up." Cradling his dented helm, he snatched up a stranger's tankard and followed Smooth out the tavern window.

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"That's my beer!" yelled a man holding his unconscious foe by the collar. The tavern keeper pushed his way through the mob of his customers. "You're not going anywhere till you've paid for the rounds you bought."

"How many this time?" asked Crawley.

Burns paused to burp. "Two or three, maybe."

"Nine!" shouted the tavern keep. "You Devil Dogs owe me ninety-six royals, to say nothing of the damages!"

"That tears it," said Lieutenant Lister. "Run for it, Dogs!"

"Stay together," Crawley yelled. "Lead the way, Dawson."

They pounded their way out of the market district and ran toward the Dragon's Tongue River. One bloody-nosed Khadoran pursued them, two of his men at his back. A few streets away, the whistles and shouts of the Tarna Watch joined the hunt.

Turning away from the river walk, Dawson dashed through the crooked alleys of Mill Street, hoping to lose their pursuers in the smut of coal and dye vapor. Bleach stung their eyes, and the mechanical clatter of steam-operated looms overwhelmed the cries of their pursuers.

The Devil Dogs emerged dripping wet and blackened by soot, but no one followed them out of the steamy passage. The sky had grown darker. A cool breeze blew across Tarna from the Dragon's Tongue.

Dawson led the way to the company's rented warehouse. Beside the massive door, one of the men had chalked up the company's horned dog emblem. A drizzle of rain struck up a rising patter on the building's tin roof.

"Good job, Dawson," said Crawley.

Dawson stood a little straighter until Burns added, "Yeah, we'll know who to tap next time we need to run away from a fight."

Harrow slid open the door and the others entered. Dawson began to follow, but Crawley barred his way. "Sorry, Dawson. Briefing's for the 'boys' only. Go join the rest of the men. I'll fill you all in during second briefing."

Dawson didn't know what it took to become one of the 'boys', but it obviously didn't include grunts like him.

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"But I..." Dawson's shoulders slumped. "Yes, Sergeant."

Crawley gave him a smile, but the stained pegs of his teeth were more frightening than comforting. He closed the door.



Captain Samantha 'Sam' MacHorne stood on a low wooden scaffold with one foot on a crate marked "#4 Quality Gear Grease." Leaning an elbow against her knee, she looked down at her boys, the veterans of the Devil Dogs mercenary company. Her long blond hair fell recklessly across her face, except where the goggles on her forehead held it out of her eyes.

Behind her loomed the Nomad-model warjack Gulliver, twelve feet and seven tons of steam-driven mayhem. Its iron chassis resembled a muscle-bound caricature of an armored foot soldier. Instead of fragile human joints and ligaments, it stood on heavy gears and pistons strong enough to drive a river boat. Its massive battle blade and solid targa shield lay against the warehouse wall.

"The Old Man has a job for us," she said. "It's potentially lucrative."

"It's about time," said Lister. The lieutenant sat on the edge of another scaffold, scratching his bald head just beside a Devil Dog tattoo. Behind him stood the Dog's other operative warjack, a Talon named Foyle. Three feet shorter and half the mass of the Nomad, the Talon cradled a massive stun lance in one hand and a broad shield in the other. "It's been a long time since we heard from him. I was starting to think he didn't love us anymore."

"It's nothing like that," said Sam. "You know he likes to match the unit to the job."

The rest of the Dogs sat in a rough semicircle on crates and half-barrels. They leaned forward, looking up to their captain. Only Harrow seemed uninterested. Eyes closed, he sat on the floor with his arms crossed, back against a table loaded with heavy chain nets and pick axes.

"So he needs some 'jacks wrecked," said Crawley.



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"Not exactly."

"Are we joining up with the Swans?" said Smooth.

"No, we're on our own. The Old Man's running his own op nearby. Between Khadoran units testing the borders and the Cryx sneaking through every swamp and hollow, he's got his hands full."

"Cryx." Crawley shuddered as he pronounced the word.

"So which one is it this time?" asked Burns, stifling a beery yawn with his fist. "Reds or deads?"

"Could be both," said Sam. "More likely neither. What we're looking for is something new. The Old Man's heard report of a strange 'jack in the Wythmoor."

"Oh, no," said Burns. "He's sending us on a gobber hunt."

"Stow it, Burns," said Crawley. "That close to the border, isn't that more likely to be somebody test-running new Cygnar tech?"

"New tech the Old Man doesn't already know inside out?" said Sam. "I don't buy it. Maybe somebody else got their hands on Cygnar schematics and made some modifications."

"And now they're ready to test this new 'jack on its own creators. Is that it?" Smooth ran his fingers over his head, frowning when he touched stubble from his unfinished shave.

"That could be, but it doesn't matter. Our job is to go out there, find this thing, and bring it back. The Old Man can decide for himself what it is."

"Outstanding," said Burns. "We don't know what it does or who's controlling it, but we've got to take it down and deliver it. And us with most of our stuff in hock! I don't mind if this is a gobber hunt. I just hope it's not a dragon hunt."

"What are you afraid of, Burns?" asked Smooth. "You're still bulletproof, aren't you?"

Burns put a finger through a hole in his helmet. "Not as much as I was. How're we supposed to do our job with holes in our helmets?"

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"We pull off this job, Burns," said Sam, "you'll have enough to buy ten new suits of armor, all in different colors."

Burns brightened. "Yes'm" he replied smartly. In any other company, it would have just been a slightly informal acknowledgement of her rank. But in Dog Company, *her company*, it was also a contraction of "Yes, Sam." It meant more to her, and the men who used it, than "Yes ma'am" ever could.

"What's the contract structure?" asked Lister.

"Base rate for our time, with a bonus for delivery," said Sam.

The Dogs muttered.

"A very hefty bonus. Now listen, we're not going out there to stretch our legs and collect scale. I aim to find this new 'jack and deliver it. We collect this bonus, we'll have all our big lugs out of hock, plus new gear. And shares will be more than enough to buy Burns his new wardrobe and to get Smooth out of trouble with Madame Jinty."

Smooth cast a baleful eye around the room. The others avoided his gaze or shrugged at his unspoken accusation.

"Where are we supposed to take it? We can't cart a 'jack all the way to Caspia, even on these rigs." Lister pounded the side of one of the three iron-shod wagons parked in the warehouse. The wagon bed shuddered on its spring suspension.

"I know where to send a messenger when we've spied our target," said Sam. She jumped down from the platform, turning to reveal a cute, puppy version of the Devil Dogs' symbol painted on the back of her leather jacket. "Like I said, the Old Man's not far away. We'll arrange the hand-off depending on where we find our target. Is that it for questions?"

When nobody spoke for half a second, Lister said, "Yes'm."

The boys saluted with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Harrow did so without opening his eyes.

"Then we're good to go." Sam nodded at Foyle and jerked a thumb over her shoulder to indicate Gulliver. "Crawley, I want these big lugs loaded along with two weeks' fuel and supplies. Brief the men and put them to

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work before they have time to get drunk. We'll celebrate *after* we collect our bonus. We set out first thing tomorrow."

"Yes'm!" Crawley dispatched the corporals to gather the troops, mechanics, and drivers.

Lister said, "How about the engineers?"

"We can afford two," said Sam. "And I'll need you to handle logistics on your own."

Lister nodded. His eternally unlit cigar dipped as he considered the work ahead of him.

"It'll be easier next time," Sam promised. "After we turn the ledger black."

"I know, Captain. It isn't your fault. We've just had a bad run of luck."

"Maybe it's not my fault," she said. "But it's my responsibility. This is the one that'll put us back on top. I just know it."

Smooth, Burns, and Harrow stepped out into the rain. The warehouse door roared as Burns rolled it shut.

"I'll fetch the mechanics," said Burns. "I saw them in the Rust Market."

"No," said Smooth. "Better no one sees your face near the market for a while. I'll get them. You roust the drivers. Harrow? You'll tell the men?"

Harrow nodded. Smooth went back toward the center of Tarna, while the others walked the other way.

As he rounded the warehouse corner, Harrow paused beside a stack of empty crates. He cleared his throat. Sheepish, Dawson emerged from hiding.

"I was just—" Whatever Dawson was about to say, one look from Harrow stuck the words in his throat.

Harrow stepped close to examine a knothole in the warehouse wall. The peep-hole provided a clear view of the warjacks, wagons, and Captain MacHorne.

"This don't look too good for you, kid," said Burns. He grabbed Dawson and shoved him against the wall. Dawson's feet dangled inches above the

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ground. "What kind of man spies on our briefings? I'm thinking rival company or Khadoran spy. Which is it?"

"Neither!" said Dawson. "I was just curious."

"Curiosity skinned the cat," said Burns. "Or something like that." He glanced back at Harrow, who studied Dawson's face through slitted eyes. "What do you think, Harrow? We Dogs got ourselves a cat or a rat?"

Harrow shook his head. "Bring him," he told Burns before walking off.

Burns dragged Dawson by the arm. Ahead of them, the rain made silhouettes of the buildings. Their peaked roofs turned blue-gray in the dusk.

Dawson tried to keep his feet in line as they marched through the mud. "Where are we going? Sergeant Crawley will miss me at the briefing."

"Old Creepy don't like to be bothered with cleanup details." Burns said.

"Corporal Burns, I'm not a rat!"

At the end of the street, Harrow turned toward a row of boarding houses and cheap inns. At the other end stood the huge stable where the Devil Dogs' drivers kept the draft horses required to transport the warjacks and the seemingly endless supply of coal needed to fuel them. Harrow spoke to a couple of the drivers smoking their pipes under the stable eaves. One of them nodded and hurried inside the boarding house.

Burns shoved Dawson under the overhang and leaned against the wall beside him. "Relax, pup. Spies are trained not to piss themselves under pressure. You're obviously no spy."

"I didn't piss—" Dawson thought better of it and said, "Thanks."

Burns stretched his neck. They stood there for a while as the patter of rain grew louder on the roof above. Soon it was joined by the sound of footsteps running down the boarding house stairs.

"Corporal, what's a dragon hunt?" Dawson asked.

"You know what a gobber hunt is?"

"It's when your friends send you after something that doesn't exist, for a laugh. No matter how hard you look, you can't find it."

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"Something tells me you had some first-hand experience."

"It was years ago. I was only a kid."

"You're still a kid, Dawson. You should hope this is only a gobber hunt. In a dragon hunt, the difference is that you find what you're looking for, all right," said Burns. "Only then you wish you hadn't."



The Devil Dogs spent the first half of the day loading and driving their three great wagons to the Molhado River. They spent the second half crossing it.

The Talon, Foyle, went over without incident, an honor guard of eight Dogs escorting its supine figure on the ferry. Under Sergeant Crawley's direction, and with the help of the drivers, mechanics, and two bespectacled engineers, they levered the warjack up onto the iron-reinforced cart that had made the first crossing. At a signal from the drover, six heavy draft horses drew the wagon away from the riverbank.

Private Dawson watched the proceedings as the ferry returned to the Tarna side of the river. Beside him, Corporal Burns leaned over a hitching fence and spat a wad of brown tobacco on the ground. "If you were any greener, you'd have turned yellow by now."

Dawson's cheeks flushed with anger.

"I'm not calling you yellow, kid. You're green as a leaf. It's autumn. You'd turn yellow. Get it? Anyway, it was plenty gutsy spying on the Captain's briefing."

A relieved smile creased Dawson's smooth face.

"Stupid," said Burns. "But gutsy all the same. Did you notice how mad Harrow seemed?"

"No," said Dawson. "He didn't seem angry at all."

"That's how you know he was really mad. I'm surprised he didn't cut your throat on the spot."

Dawson gulped. "Yes, Corporal."

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"You do it again without an invite, I'll take care of you myself. You wait with the rest of the men, or one day somebody will really take you for a Khadoran informant."

Dawson's face yellowed and greened. "Yes, Corporal. I mean, no, Corporal."

Burns chuckled. "How old are you, kid? Seventeen?"

"Twenty!"

"With that smooth face? Or have you been sneaking out with Lucille?"

"Who?"

"Smooth's lady."

"I'd never even set foot inside the brothel before—"

"The razor, pup."

Dawson winced at the dismissive term for rookies in Dog Company. "Oh, right." Just as the irritation lifted from his face, a cloud of perplexity settled back down. "He named his razor Lucille?"

"He loves that blade. The pups Harrow doesn't kill for spying, Smooth cuts their throats for looking at Lucille the wrong way."

Dawson smiled, looked away, tried and failed to laugh. He swallowed hard and looked again at Burns. "You're kidding, right?"

Burns shrugged. "I know I wouldn't touch that razor if my life depended on it. Anyway, this is your first crossing, innit?"

"Yeah," said Dawson. With another double-take on Burns, he added, "Yes, Corporal."

Burns chuckled again. He stepped back to look Dawson up and down, shaking his head.

Dawson said, "Why didn't we send over the warjacks in their wagons?"

"You haven't figured it out?"

"I said it was my first crossing, didn't I?"

"That you did," said Burns. He inclined his head toward the approaching ferry. "You'll see for yourself soon enough. All right, let's get to it. You stand over there."

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Dawson moved to the spot Burns indicated, about ten feet to the side of the point where the Ferry docked with the riverbank.

"No," said Burns. "A little to the right."

Dawson took a few steps closer to the water's edge.

On the path leading to the dock, Sam guided Gulliver toward the ferry. With every step of the heavy warjack, the earth shuddered. It left a trail of hound-sized divots in its wake. "A little to the left," she said. "All right, crouch low. Step forward, careful."

As Gully settled his full weight on the deck, the ferry tipped to the side, splashing the ferryman. He snatched the sopping-wet cap from his head and wrung it out.

"Gully, step on," said Sam.

Gully moved his other foot onto the ferry. The sudden motion threw an ogrun-sized wave right where Dawson stood, drenching him from head to toe.

After Sam finished guiding Gully into a sitting position on the ferry, she shook her head at Burns, who lay on the ground holding his sides to keep them from splitting from laughter. "I told you to leave the hazing in town, Burns."

"Yes'm," gasped the big man. "I just couldn't resist. This pup is too perfect!"

Sam turned to Dawson. "Don't let Burns get to you," she said. "Despite all appearances, he's a good man in the field. Just think twice before letting him talk you into anything."

"Yes, Captain," said Dawson. He pulled off a boot and poured out a pint of river water. "Thank you, Captain."

Sam nodded at him. "But seriously, don't touch Lucille. If you do, even I can't guarantee your safety."

Only Sam and the boatmen traveled across with Gully. Even so, waves lapped up on deck, washing over their boots. As Dawson saw how heavily a single warjack weighed upon the ferry, understanding dawned on his face. "Ah!"

## THE DEVIL'S PAY

"Yeah," said Burns. "You need a bigger boat to take the 'jack with the wagon. Now come on, kid." Burns boarded one of the skiffs. Wary of another prank, Dawson followed. They and the remaining Devil Dogs reached the far side long before Sam reached the bank with Gully.

The rest was common labor, provided by soldiers, mechanics, engineers, and drivers working side by side. The boys worked with the men until both 'jacks were secured in their wagons for transport. Four draft horses drew the supply cart, six drew Foyle's, and eight drew Gully's. Two riding horses followed the supply wagon, one saddled, one bareback. Dawson watched, brow furrowed, as the drivers removed the saddle from one and brushed him down while saddling the other.

Sam caught him watching. "Sometimes we need to send word in a hurry."

"But we don't have any reinforcements," said Dawson.

"No. But there's always the chance we'll end up in a fight we can't win," said Sam. "When that day comes, I want people to know that the Dogs faced it with courage."

Dawson looked at her, but her face betrayed no sign of mirth.

Except for the mechanics, who rode with their warjacks, those who weren't driving walked before, beside, or behind the wagon train. Even Sam, Lister, and Crawley went on foot.

The soldiers looped their chains around cleats on the wagon sides, their pick axes hanging beneath, leaving both weapons accessible in case of sudden action. They carried their rucksacks on their backs, slug guns cradled in their arms.

Dawson began walking beside Burns. After they crested a gentle hill, he turned to say something only to see Smooth standing in his place. Burns had jogged over to a stand of bushes to lighten his load.

Smooth ran his straight razor up his throat, angling it with care across the ridge of his jaw. He wiped the blade against his leather bracer and smiled at Dawson's wet clothes. "I see you've been anointed."



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Dawson offered a game smile in return. He squinted, seeing hardly any stubble on Smooth's neck. Still, the big man continued to shave. Dawson finally asked, "Aren't we short one cart?"

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, we're supposed to capture a 'jack. Where do we put it if we find it?"

"When" said Smooth. "Don't let the captain hear you say 'if.'"

"But where will we put it?"

"If we're low on fuel, we'll put it in the coal cart. If we have plenty of fuel, we'll fire up Foyle and have him walk until we're low on coal. It's all a matter of balance."

Dawson nodded. "Of course. I don't know why I didn't think of that."

"You're a pup, that's all," said Smooth. He squinted at the shorter man. "You have seen action, though. Right?"

"Of course. I did my service in the Ordic army. I liked it well enough, but the pay..." He rubbed his thumbs across his fingers and showed empty hands.

"So you figured you'd make your fortune with the Devil Dogs?"

"Something like that."

"I bet you've been kicking yourself over that one."

"No! I mean, not really. There's been a lot more drilling than I expected. And a lot more waiting around. But now I can throw a net and hit more often than miss."

"All you got to worry about is: follow your orders. When you don't have any, watch what us boys do. Now that you been anointed, you won't get much more razzing... as long as you keep your eye off peepholes."

Dawson winced. "Does the whole company know about that?"

Smooth grinned and slugged him on the shoulder, just hard enough to bruise.



## THE DEVIL'S PAY

The rain had left the ground soft but not impassable. The Devil Dogs' wagon train followed dirt roads when it could, once crossing a fallow field to reach a trail leading east into the Wythmoor. When he spied the local farmer emerging from a cellar, Lister sent over a runner with a gift from the provisions to assuage any hard feelings

At dusk, the Dogs began setting camp without a word from their sergeant. Crawley saved his breath to harangue the mechanics as they checked and double-checked the warjacks and their wagons. When he set the goggles over his eyes and grimaced to reveal his peg-like teeth through a blast of steam, Dawson finally understood how the man had earned the nickname "Creepy."

Despite their rank and role in Sam's inner circle, the "boys" worked side-by-side with the "men." Dawson found himself clearing mud from the wheels of Foyle's wagon across from Burns. If the big man harbored any remaining suspicions about Dawson's loyalties, he made no sign of it.

Lister conferred with Sam. They took turns peering through a spyglass and scratching marks on a map they lay on the tailgate of the supply wagon.

Smooth supervised the preparation of a meal of salt pork and loaves bought fresh in Tarna that morning. He and another man filled four iron pots with barley, dried vegetables, and diced beef. They left the pots to simmer until morning.

Lister sent out sentries in a picket around the wagons, between which the Dogs settled in around the fires. Burns let them in on his version of "The Roundabout Girl," which somehow he had made even more profane. Dawson hesitated to join in until he heard Sam's voice belting out the most vulgar refrains. After three songs, the captain said, "Sleep tight, my Dogs." Minutes later, the camp was silent but for the crackling of the fire, a shush of autumn breeze, and rhythmic snoring.



## THE DEVIL'S PAY

The next afternoon, Sam halted the wagon train near a village at the edge of the Wythmoor. The clouds had parted just enough to reveal a sliver of blue sky between endless banks of pewter clouds. A lone bar of sunlight draped a golden veil across the heath that lay between the village and the edge of the swamp.

"Harrow, Lister, and you—ah, Dawson. You're with me. The rest of you stay here with the big lugs. Crawley, get these horses watered."

The sergeant repeated Sam's orders for form's sake, but the drivers were already in motion, eager to stretch their legs after sitting for the past two hours.

The soldiers shrugged off their packs. About a third of them stood watch while the rest sat down to rest, shared a smoke, or drank from their leather canteens.

Sam led the way to the village. Beside one of the thatched cottages, a man and his wife secured a rocking chair to the top of a cart already full of furniture and other belongings. They glanced nervously at the Devil Dogs before hurrying inside for another load.

The village headman and a few teenage boys walked out to meet the Dogs. The man greeted Sam with a two-handed shake.

"Why if it isn't Samantha MacHorne. How long has it been?"

"Too long, Wilkie," she said. "I can still taste Rona's shortbread. Melted on our tongues."

"If we'd known you were coming, she'd have made a big batch."

"It was a sudden thing. We won't be staying." She threw a meaningful look toward the couple abandoning their house.

"Not everyone likes living so close to the Wythmoor." Wilkie shrugged, but he also swallowed nervously. "Hunting Cryx, are you??"

Sam nodded at the departing couple as they hitched a pair of donkeys to their wagon. "Something's scaring them off. I take it there's been sign?"

"None that I've seen with my own eyes," said Wilkie. "Every time someone spies a dark shadow in the Wythmoor or smells a foul stench, there's talk of Cryx."

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"That kind of talk isn't enough to send folks packing."

"No, that's so," he said with some reluctance. "A forester came through yesterday. He told a few stories of Cryxlight and lost souls, and maybe he saw something that spooked him. Whatever it was, he ran until he stumbled upon a group of Steelheads."

"Brockers?" asked Sam.

"Aye," said Wilkie. "Him and that great horrible horse of his."

Lister turned his head and spat without dislodging his unlit cigar.

"How many?" said Sam.

Wilkie shrugged. "Enough rifles and halberds that they camped around four fires."

"Where were they?"

"Maybe six miles east by southeast."

"Which way were they headed?" asked Sam.

"The forester couldn't say. They sent him away before they broke camp."

"Is this forester still around?"

Wilkie shook his head.

"Did this forester seem to be in a hurry to move on?"

Again, Wilkie nodded with some reluctance. "If I think too much about it, I start thinking I should move my own family to Tarna."

"And he said the Steelheads were looking for Cryx?"

"He didn't say as much, but he kept hinting there were worse things out there than mercenaries. Along with the campfire tales, some folks got it into their head... Well, you know how it is." Curiosity creased his brow. "What exactly did you say your lot is looking for?"

Sam shrugged. "I'll know that when I see it. Do you know anything else that might help us?"

"Well, King Baird's men rode into the Wythmoor a few months back. They went in with six big wagons like yours, some full of building materials, the others full of enough provisions to last a winter siege. They came back

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less than a week later, wagons empty. Didn't look like they'd come under fire, but they didn't stop to chat."

Sam nodded. "That's good to know. Are you short of any necessities?"

"Now that you mention it..."

After a short, informal barter, Sam sent Dawson back to fetch a few spare tools and one of the company's spare pick axes. Sergeant Crawley quizzed him on what the locals had told Sam. As he approved the release of the company's materiel, he said, "You look confused, Private."

"I understand the captain wants to question the locals, but why barter with them?"

"It creates goodwill," said Crawley. "They're apt to tell us much more than they'd confide to a brute like Stannis Brocker. Besides, look what we get in return."

Sam was headed back toward the wagons with a basket of colorful, late-season vegetables in her arms. Harrow carried a leg of mutton, and Lister hefted a sack of grain over his massive shoulder.

"There's store we didn't need to haul from Tarna," said Crawley. "And look at those fresh peppers!"

After the exchange, the captain ordered the company west. They stopped only after they were well out of sight of the village, Burns said, "To put the minds of all the young girls' fathers to ease."

Sam ordered the fresh food prepared that night. Before releasing them to sleep, she stood before the assembled soldiers. "The bad news is that we may have competition for our prize," she said. "The good news is that it's Stannis Brocker."

"That's good news?" asked Burns.

"He may be a terror on that warbeast he calls a horse, but he doesn't have our talent for taking down a warjack."

"That won't matter if he finds it before we do," said Lister. "He'll bring it back in pieces and whistle all the way to the bank."

"You think he got the same contract we did?" asked Crawley.

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"Of course not," said Sam. "The Old Man came to us for a reason, and he'd never deal with a bastard like Brocker."

"Somebody else could have hired him," said Burns.

The Dogs muttered about Khadoran fingers poking into Ordic territory.

"It doesn't matter," said Sam. "If there's something unusual in the Wythmoor, we're going to be the ones to find it. We move first thing in the morning. See Sergeant Crawley for your assignments. Some of you will be scouting tomorrow."



The Dogs could see barely farther than a stone's throw into the autumn mists, swamp gas, and various foul miasmas surrounding moldering tree stumps. The mingled vapors clung to the boggy ground or hung like spider webs between the trunks of alders.

Here and there the mists pooled into hollows. Elsewhere, dingy yellow stains upon the thick air suggested some hulking beast stared back at the intruding mercenaries.

Sometimes a vague light rose from the ground, its source obscured by haze and distance. When any of the Dogs stepped toward it, a comrade would put a hand on his arm and shake his head.

"Don't follow the Cryxlight," Smooth told Dawson. "Some of them are lost souls. They'll drown you if they can."

The cries of real birds came muffled through the fog, but none of them were songs. Crows creaked out hoarse complaints or warnings. Sparrows twittered their disquiet, rising suddenly from the naked branches of their perches when the Dogs came too near.

The most startling inhabitants of the bog were the sudden stench. Some erupted when a wagon wheel burst a shallow pocket in the muck. Others seemed to drift in a breeze no one could feel, or to filter down from the withered leaves of a dying tree.

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Voices low, Sam and Crawley directed the Dogs to unload Gully and Foyle. The mechanics performed their last-minute inspections while the engineers loaded the fireboxes with coal. Crawley ignited the engines, and after warming the boilers the warjacks huffed into motion.

Gulliver stood erect, raising his monstrous battle blade only to rest it across the “shoulders” of his broad iron chassis. The heavy warjack stepped away from the wagon. In its left hand, its solid targa shield came to rest at its side.

Foyle grasped its stun lance and hefted its own, much larger shield before the lighter warjack stepped forward and stood at attention.

Black smoke rose from the single-stack chimneys of the 'jacks. It vanished almost immediately into the gray soup of the Wythmoor.

The first of the pickets arrived, out of breath. He saluted the captain but reported to Lieutenant Lister. “Sounds of battle, Sir. I tried to get closer, but then I saw green clouds and thought it prudent to return.”

“Damned Cryx,” said Burns.

“Did you see who they’re fighting?” asked Lister.

“Yes, Sir. I saw the outlines of their halberds through the mist. It’s got to be the Steelheads.”

“If they’re fighting Cryx, I say we move on.” Lister turned to Sam. “Let them fight their own battles.”

“Yeah,” said Burns. “No sense risking our lives—or our souls.”

Sam considered the matter. “There’s still the issue of professional courtesy.”

“Courtesy with Brocker?” Lister asked, incredulous.

“Screw Brocker,” said Burns. “He wouldn’t lift a finger to help a Dog.”

“When we want your opinion, Burns—” said Lister.

“No, he’s right,” said Sam. “Stannis Brocker gives mercenaries a bad name. Still, I want to know why he’s here. Maybe it’s true he’s hunting Cryx. Say what you will about Brocker, but he’s brave enough to be that foolish. Still, if he’s after our prize, we need to know.”

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"I don't like it, Sam," said Lister. "Dog Company isn't made for fighting Cryx. The Steelheads have range and speed, rifles and cavalry."

"Unless something's changed, Brocker has no warjacks. If the Cryx have even a single helljack, the Steelheads will be in trouble. They aren't all bastards like Brocker. If nothing else, we don't want dead Steelheads swelling the Cryx ranks, do we?"

Lister shook his head.

"Better them than us," said Burns.

"We'll take a closer look," said Sam. "We move in ready for anything. If it looks like the Steelheads have things well in hand, we'll congratulate them afterward. If we spot helljacks, well, we're just the Dogs to bring them down. Either way, it's a chance to find out why they're here. Understood?"

"Yes'm," said the boys.

"Full gear, ready to fight."

The Dogs already had their heavy nets slung over their shoulders, their slug guns in hand. They moved forward in squads of four. Dawson went with Harrow, Burns, and a scar-faced Ordic army veteran named Morris.

"What's wrong with Brocker?" asked Dawson. "I hear he's one of the best."

"He's worked for Khador so much, he's practically red himself," said Burns.

"But the company charter says we'll never work for Khador. Doesn't that include helping companies who—?"

Harrow silenced them both with a dire glance.

Within fifty yards, they spied brief yellow flashes in the distance. An instant later, they heard the muffled report of rifle fire. Soon the Dogs could make out the cries of human voices, the grind of jack gears, and horrible, belching explosions.

Harrow raised his hand to stop the others, then ran forward, light on his feet. He knelt and touched something on the ground before waving the others up to join him.



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An armored man lay on the ground. His dead eyes stared straight up, the blanched irises the color of sour milk, his skin the color of mold. Dawson's eyes widened as he saw the ragged bottom of the man's cuirass. The rest of his body was gone, only a mess of ravaged guts spilled on the ground.

Burns rapped on the man's steel breastplate and looked at Dawson. "Definitely Steelheads." He grimaced at the devastating wound. "Definitely Cryx."

Dawson nodded, gaping. A moment later, he closed his mouth against the revolting taste of the mutilated body's rising stench.

"Tell the captain." Harrow nodded at Morris, who took off at a run.

Harrow unslung his pick-axe. He began to raise it above the dead man's head but stopped, turning to Dawson. "You haven't done this before," he said. He handed his pick to Dawson. "Finish him."

"But— But he's already dead."

"Make sure he stays that way," said Harrow.

Dawson hesitated, but after one look in Harrow's cold eyes he swung the axe and split the dead man's skull in half. He retched at what he'd done, but he managed not to vomit.

Harrow took back his weapon without another word.

The three remaining Dogs continued their advance. Twice they paused to return the hand signals of the squads to their left and right.

Morris returned at a run. "They're coming through."

A panicked fox darted past Dawson's leg, fleeing the clamor approaching from the rear.

Harrow signaled them to move aside as a sound of giant iron footsteps neared. Saplings splintered beneath the warjacks. The strain and sigh of pistons grew faster with each step. Steam and coal smoke darkened the already misty atmosphere of the Wythmoor.

Foyle emerged from the mist, striding straight toward the battle. Sam followed, the massive Gully at her side. Lister jogged along close behind with a squad of his own.

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Harrow increased the pace. The others strove to keep up, even as they craned their necks for a better look at the obscured battle ahead. The shouts of Steelhead infantry grew louder, first in bloodlust, then in retreat, as the deep voice of their commander ordered a tactical retreat.

The Dogs saw the men running from a pair of hulking figures as big as Gully. In silhouette, their limbs appeared both more graceful and more angular than those of the heavy Nomad. In churning clouds of smoke and steam, their only distinct features were their armaments: the bubbling reservoirs of green venom above their crustacean pincers on one arm, and the obscene bulb of their necrosludge cannons on the other.

“Corruptors,” said Harrow. “You see green hit the man beside you, get away from him double-quick.”

Gaunt mechanithrall foot soldiers pushed forward between the helljacks. Once human, these things were now nightmares of flesh and metal. With every bound, their mechanical joints squealed for thirst of grease. Their fleshless jaws clacked as they raised iron fists above their skulls, poised to smash through armor and the living bodies that would one day join their undead legion.

“Move, move, move!” The voice of the Steelhead commander boomed over all other sounds. The Dogs saw him atop a beast too thick and tall to be a horse, and yet it danced among the retreating infantry with the grace of a thoroughbred. “Move, move... Cover! Cover! Fire!”

Rifle fire punctuated the cacophony. The volley seemed to clear the field of thralls, but a few rushed on, and a few more rose again. Braced for the charge, the halberdiers cut down the fiends before their mechanical fists could reach their skulls.

Behind them came another wave of mechanithralls, this time supported by corpulent figures gripping thin, corroded cannons trailing green vapor.

As if excited by the carnage, the helljacks burped out their vile distillations. One green blob enveloped a tree, melting the wood as it sank down around its trunk. Another landed among a cluster of riflemen. One managed to flee

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before their comrade's body burst in a shower of gore and poison. The other fell, shredded by the shrapnel of his compatriot's shattered bones.

"Rifles retreat!" shouted the commander. "Move, move, move!"

Intent on pursuit, the Cryx followed the retreating Steelheads, moving past the Dogs without seeming to notice their approach. They were intent on the kill.

Sam gave the sign. Lister barked an order. Sergeant Crawley sounded a shrill whistle.

Harrow pointed at the nearest helljack. "Our target."

Foyle went first. The swift Talon intercepted the Corruptor. Just as the helljack began to turn, Foyle thrust its lance straight into the gap between its cowl-shaped armor and its tusked head. Lightning cracked in the dark hollow as the helljack's head jerked in spastic distress.

"Pull it down!" bellowed Burns. He flung his net, trapping the Corruptor's pincer arm against its spiked knee joint. "Damn it! No good."

Dawson, Morris, and Harrow did the same. Together, their nets bound the helljack's legs. The stunned Corruptor teetered.

"Stand back!" yelled Sam.

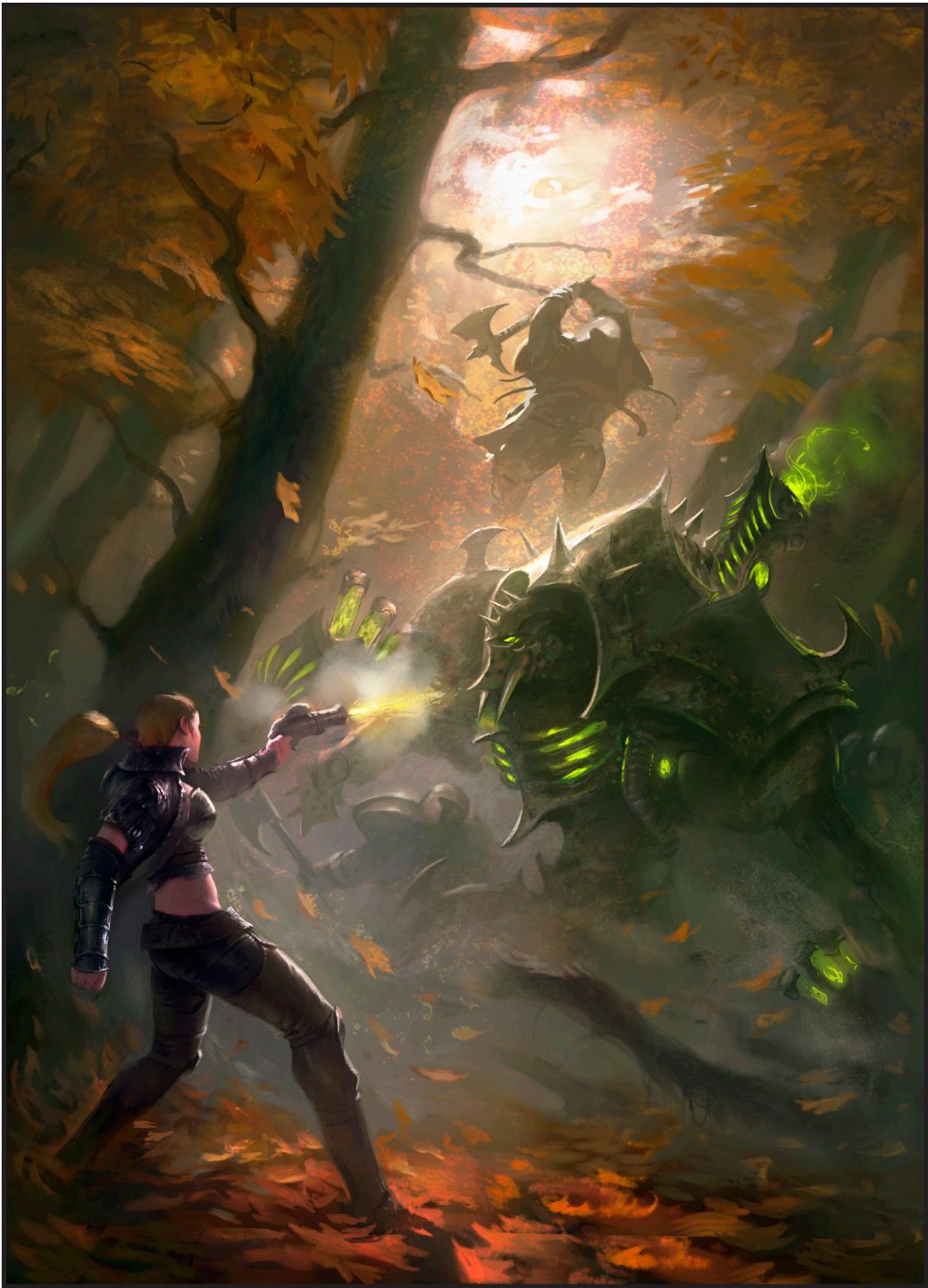
Gully charged in, shoving the tangled helljack off its feet. The Corruptor crashed into the swampy earth, the impact throwing up wet divots of earth and fetid vegetation.

The Nomad swung down its battle blade, shearing through the Corruptor's chassis. Black oil and green venom gushed from the wound.

"Gully, out," yelled Sam. "Boys!"

"Take it apart!" Burns raised his pickaxe and leaped onto the fallen behemoth.

Like beetles over a dead rat, the Devil Dogs swarmed the fallen Corruptor. While two squads covered them with slug guns at the ready, the rest used their picks to pry up armor plating and expose the vulnerable parts beneath. They smashed the gears and cut off the tubes supplying venom to the cannon and the pincer claw's injector.



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Sam drew her sword and thrust it twice into the helljack's chassis. The second time, coruscating energy on the blade showed she had found its cortex. The Corruptor jerked one last time and lay still.

By the time they were done, the second Corruptor had vanished into the mist in pursuit of the retreating Steelheads.

"Keep your eyes peeled for the helljacks' controller," yelled Crawley. "Just because you don't see it doesn't mean it isn't standing right behind you."

"Morrow's teeth, Creepy!" cried Burns. "Quit trying to scare the pups." Burns was the first to look over his shoulder, eyes wide in fear.

"All right," said Sam, pointing her sword. "Same again."

The Devil Dogs ran hard to catch up. Sam led them at an angle to avoid the Steelhead rifles' line of fire. Every thirty yards or so, the Steelheads paused in their retreat.

The Dogs soon caught sight of their mutual foe. The thralls were locked in melee with the halberdiers while the riflemen reloaded and took aim, awaiting the next command to fire.

Crawley's whistle sounded three short blasts. From the Dogs' left flank, a mob of Cryx thralls lumbered out of the mists. These were not the gaunt foot soldiers, but bile thralls. The corpulent figures gurgled and sloshed with every step. Pumps churned inside their once-living bodies, feeding their own corrosive fluids to the noxious cannons locked in their deathless grips.

Sam uttered a curse. "Advance and fire!"

Lieutenant Lister and Sergeant Crawley echoed her command. Some of the newer Devil Dogs blinked to hear the order, but they obeyed it. The veterans had already closed to short range and begun firing.

The shells from their slug guns roared at the bloated undead. Thralls struck by the barrage burst into steaming gobbets, the toxic gasses in their bellies magnifying the force of the explosions.

The Cryx returned fire. Most of their pestilent loads fell behind the Dogs as the mercenaries advanced after each barrage. By the time the bile thralls adjusted for range, the Dogs fired again.

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Crawley spotted for the men around him, directing them to fire on to the thralls that waddled closest. "Don't let them near you, Dogs!"

The remaining thralls also fired, but their target wasn't the Devil Dogs. They turned their weapons toward the warjacks. Sam turned Gully and Foyle to face the Cryx just as a barrage of pulsing bile arced toward them.

"Shields up!" Sam ordered. She leaped behind Gully, taking shelter behind the heavy warjack.

The corrosive loads splashed on Foyle's broad shield and across Gully's plated shoulders. As the pernicious liquid boiled, the warjack's chassis grew red-hot, its extreme edges limned in white.

Sam jumped away, surveying the damage. "Not too bad," she decided. "Gully, Foyle, charge!"

The sight of two warjacks rushing toward them seized the thrall's attention. While the waddling monstrosities struggled to adjust their range, the Devil Dogs blasted them with their slug guns. The instant the shelling ceased, Foyle impaled one while Gully bisected another, spilling the foul contents of their corpulent bodies upon the swampy ground. Within moments, all that was left of the Cryx was a nauseating stench and a seeping field of heavy, green-yellow gas.

"We're not done yet," called Sam. "Lister, get me a casualty report. Crawley, reform on me. Gully, Foyle, about face!"

By the time the warjacks once more faced the retreating battle, Lister reported no serious casualties.

"Right, then," said Sam. "Let's take down that other Corruptor."

As they caught up once more, the remaining helljack had a screaming halberdier in its pincer. With its other arm, it blasted a squad of retreating riflemen with its necrosludge cannon. The viscous shell struck one of the Steelheads bursting the man's body into a cloud of bloody gore and yellow-green corruption. The nearby men screamed as the infernal vapors melted the flesh from their bones.

"Foyle, charge!" called Sam, running beside Gully. The Dogs followed.

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Before the 'jack closed half the distance, the Corruptor held up its wriggling prisoner. The man's mouth opened wide. Instead of a scream, bilious vapor escaped the opening. He shook his head from side to side, arms shaking as they rose into twisted claws. Black energies crackled around his fingers, shriveling the flesh even as they conjured dark magics.

"Move back!" boomed the voice of the Steelhead commander. "That's the work of an iron lich!"

Black flames leaped from the captive's hands, shooting in an arc across the misty battlefield. They fell near a mounted figure, barely visible through the haze. His horse danced away from the necromantic fire, but the evil flames struck a nearby rifleman. The man howled as an ashen specter rose out of his body to fly back toward the source of the spell. His emaciated carcass fell to the ground.

"Oh, Morrow," muttered Burns. "It's a soultaker."

Foyle reached the Corrupter, his stun lance skating off the helljack's smooth breastplate. The Talon reached back for another strike, but the Corruptor turned.

"Dammit," cried Sam. "Gully, charge! Dogs, with me!"

This time she ran ahead of the heavy Nomad, raising her sword as she charged.

The Corruptor dropped its captive's spent carcass and reached for Sam.

Foyle slammed the helljack with his targa shield, but the Cryx 'jack stood fast. It shoved the Talon back with its cannon arm, pincers clacking in anticipation of a deadly embrace.

Just before the helljack reached her, Sam darted to the side and dove through Foyle's legs. Tucking her sword in a deft and practiced move, she tumbled forward to come up from below. The Corruptor turned, but the light warjack raised its lance, parrying to protect its marshal.

Sam thrust her sword upward, the blade crackling with electricity as its point stabbed just beneath the helljack's yellowed tusks.

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An instant later, Gully's battle blade swept down, severing the helljack's necrosludge cannon from its reservoir. The Corruptor struck back by clamping its pincers around the Nomad's sword arm.

With a shout, the Devil Dogs threw their remaining nets. Most hit their mark, binding the Corruptor's legs together and locking its equilibrium to a single point. The helljack tipped. The first of the Devil Dogs leaped upon its body before it hit the ground.

"Mind the venom!" Crawley warned Dawson as the private smashed the glass containers. The corrosive fluid hissed as it burned deep into the loam.

"Yes, Sergeant!" Dawson raised his pick to strike again, stabbing deep into the seams of the helljack's armor.

Nearby, Steelhead rifles fired in the opposite direction. As the Cryx thralls withdrew, their sergeants ordered the riflemen to regroup behind the halberdiers. One called out that the main body of the Cryx forces had withdrawn to the north. Another whistled for silence and pointed at the Devil Dogs swarming over the fallen Corruptor.

Sam wiped her blade clean of oil and sheathed the weapon. "Casualties?" she asked Lister.

The big lieutenant counted with his thumb upon his fingers. "Where's Swire?"

"Here, Sir," said a soldier standing up from behind the Corruptor's boiler.

"All present and ambulatory, Captain."

"That's what I like to hear."

Thunderous hoof beats approached. A huge man rode out of the mists from the east. Over one shoulder he carried a battle blade nearly large enough for Gully. From his other hand hung a scalloped black bowl containing three skulls and a mass of flesh and metal viscera, or so it appeared at first glance. As the man rode closer, it became apparent that his prize was really a cluster of the severed heads of the iron lich overseer



that had been commanding the Corruptors. Three iron-rending blows had cut them from the top of the creature's armored body.

Burns whistled low. "I heard Bocker was a monster with that blade, but I'll be damned if I thought he could do that."

The Steelheads who could still stand did so, cheering as their commander returned triumphant, but their voices were tempered with loss. Too many of their fellows tended the wounded or lay helpless on the ground.

"Why Stannis," said Sam. "You always bring me the most charming gifts."

"What the hell are you doing here?" Stannis Bocker kneed his horse toward her. As it came closer, the Dogs could see that it was the size of the draft horses in their wagon train. Only its gigantic rider made it seem smaller from a distance.

"You mean apart from saving you from those Corruptors?"

"I had it under control."

"If you'd retreated any faster, by now you'd be shoveling snow in Korsk."

After pronouncing the hated name, Sam turned her head and spit on the ground. All of the boys and most of the men did the same in perfect unison.

A surprised laugh escaped Dawson. Bocker glared at him until he covered it with a feigned cough.

The other Steelheads looked to their leader, holding their breath as they awaited his reaction.

"You drill them in that spit thing, don't you?"

"We all have our little indulgences. Those smudges on your lip, for example. Has anyone ever mistaken them for proper mustaches?"

Bocker showed his teeth. In contrast to his tanned and battle-scarred face, they were very large and very white. When he grimaced, his brush-stroke mustaches appeared all the more ridiculous. "You're funny, MacHorne," he said. "For a woman. I don't usually like my women funny, but in your case I'd make an exception. After we finish running down those thralls, you can come into my tent and tell me some bad jokes."

## THE DEVIL'S PAY

The Dogs bristled. Burns stepped forward, but Lister put a hand on his big shoulder.

"A bad joke is about all I'd find in your tent, Brocker." Sam covered the grip of her sword, leaving only two inches between her hand and the butt.

Even the Steelheads chuckled at that, at least until Brocker silenced them with a look of death.

"But enough about your shortcomings," said Sam. "Who hired you to hunt Cryx?"

"The better question is, who the hell would hire your band of rejects? Or are you out here on your own, scavenging for parts? I see you've found enough to make two puppet-show warjacks."

"You mean the big lugs who just saved your asses?" said Sam. "You didn't answer my question. It's Baird, isn't it?"

Brocker shrugged. "I can't think of a reason to tell you anything."

"I can," she said, raising her voice. "Think of how many more of your men those Corruptors might have turned inside out if we hadn't showed up. At the very least, you owe me thanks."

A few of the Steelhead troops nodded until they saw Brocker watching. He scowled and considered before answering. "King Baird is very careful where he commits his own troops, especially in spots like the Wythmoor. Yes, we're collecting bounties on Cryx infiltration units, and would have been fine without 'help', but this run was different, like they were after something other than the standard grave culling."

"See? That wasn't so hard. Any day now, you're going to work your way up to, 'Thanks for saving my skin, Sam.'"

"I'd sooner put you across my knee," he said. His sneer vanished, replaced by a naked leer. "And teach you to like it."

"Why you red, boot-licking son of a—" Burns lunged forward. This time it took the combined weight of Lister, Smooth, and Crawley to hold him back.

## THE DEVIL'S PAY

Sam held her gaze on Brocker. "While I can't tell you how much I've enjoyed our little chat, I can see you're in a hurry. If you don't leave now, you'll never catch up with the rest of those Cryx."

"You never said what you're doing in the Wythmoor," he said.

"That's right."

"But I told you—"

"And I appreciate it. Let me show you my appreciation." She bowed and made a flourish with her hand. "Thank you, Stannis. See how easy that is?"

As Brocker glowered at her, Sam continued. "Come along, Dogs. Let's leave the Steelheads to bless their dead and gather their bounties."

Sam called to Foyle and Gully, the latter of whom had developed a shrieking whine with every other step. The Dogs headed back toward their wagons, past the bodies of Cryx thralls and Steelheads.

When Sam paused to look back, so did those nearest her. Behind them, the Steelheads combed the fields to retrieve their dead. They collected hands from the dead thralls and cut out cortexes from the helljacks.

"You know he's probably lying," said Lister. "That bounty collection could be just for show."

Sam nodded. "Probably. Still, his story makes sense. While he chases down those Cryx, I want to backtrack, find out where they came from. Even if Brocker isn't going after our quarry, there's every chance the Cryx are. They're always on the hunt for— Son of a bitch!"

The boys turned to see what had caused their captain to curse. The Steelheads stacked the corpses of their fallen comrades along with deadfall and kindling. As the Dogs watched, Brocker's men threw flaming brands on the hasty pyres.

"That's no way to treat a comrade," growled Lister.

"Why are they burning the bodies?" asked Dawson.

"To keep the Cryx from scavenging them for parts," said Burns. He shuddered. "And souls."

"Souls?" said Dawson. "I thought that was just—"

## THE DEVIL'S PAY

Burns pulled him away and spoke quietly, his eyes on Sam as her shoulders hunched and she stared daggers at the Steelheads burning their comrades. "We take your fallen home," said Burns. "And we bless their bodies to preserve their souls against the Cryx. We never burn them. Sam's rules. No exceptions."

The Devil Dogs watched in silence while Sam clenched and released her fists.

At last, Lister broke the silence when he turned to Sam. "Your orders, ma'am?"

"Have Crawley and the mechaniks give the 'jacks a close look. Gully needs attention. Once they're ready, we'll let the big lugs walk for a while. Keep half the troops on the wagons, the others supporting the 'jacks. Also, send two men to scout our rear, reporting every half hour. I want to know if the Steelheads are following us. Could be they have the same job we do."

"I can't believe the Old Man would hire a beast like Brocker."

"He wouldn't," said Sam. "But somebody else might have. The Old Man might not be the only one who's heard of this strange 'jack in the Wythmoor."

"That's just great," said Burns. "We get to dance with Steelheads, Cryx, and who-knows-what-else, and we still don't know whether we're on some damned gobber hunt."

"I don't think that's likely," said Sam. "With this much competition in the moor, I'd bet even odds it turns out to be we're chasing a dragon."



## PART TWO

“Gully, Foyle, left turn. Now, forward slow!”

Sam guided her warjacks through a labyrinth of scummy puddles and sluggish streams. The hanging fronds of willows were less a barrier than an annoyance, but she avoided the thicker trees after the Devil Dogs spent ten minutes hacking Foyle’s stun lance free from half a willow he’d pulled down.

Even as Sam maneuvered the Nomad and the Talon on a relatively firm strip of land, off to the side Morris cried out as he plunged into a soft patch.

Morris struggled to step out of the hole, but he couldn’t move his leg. He set aside the heavy slug gun and shrugged off his pack. Even with both hands free to push against the ground, he managed only to wriggle deeper into the soft mud. “Somebody give me a hand!”

Dawson was the first to reach him. He grabbed Morris under the arms and pulled, but the wet ground held the man in place.

“Move over, Dawson.” Setting down his gun and pack, Smooth took Morris by the left arm. Dawson took his right, and together they pulled. Morris grunted and cried out in pain, but he rose. With a deep sucking sound, his leg came up glistening black.

“Dammit,” grumbled Morris. “My boot is full of muck!”

“You’re welcome,” said Smooth. He tucked his gun back under his arm and walked on.

“It’s cold as ice.”

“At least there’s no wind,” said Dawson. He shivered in sympathy as he exhaled a plume of breath.

## THE DEVIL'S PAY

Morris hissed through chattering teeth. He scraped off a handful of mud, dead leaves, and a writhing red earthworm as thick as his index finger. "Ugh!"

"It could have been worse," said Dawson. "Sergeant Crawley says there are hundreds of unwitting men buried in the Wythmoor."

Morris shook his head. "Of course there are. The Cryx have murdered thousands in this moor."

"The sergeant wasn't talking about battle dead," said Dawson. "He meant travelers and foresters who were just swallowed up by sinkholes like that one. They're all around us, just a few inches beneath the ground, still standing upright where they sank straight down. We're walking on their skulls."

Morris scoffed. "He just says that to scare pups like you. That's another reason they call him Creepy." Despite his brave words, Morris shivered as he continued scraping muck from his leg.

"I don't know. It feels like we're walking through a graveyard. A little while ago, Robinson stepped on a ribcage."

At the sound of a concealed hiss, both men looked around. Dawson clutched his gun tight but nothing was there.

The mist thickened as they drove deeper into the Wythmoor. Sunlight seeped down through the clouds. It offered little light and less warmth.

"Knock it off, Dawson. Now you're giving me the creeps." Morris looked away from the mist and down at his sodden boot before he released a heavy sigh. "Let's go. They're getting ahead of us."

Dawson nodded at Morris's blackened leg. "Just be careful."

They soon caught up to the rest of the company and fell in beside the supply wagon. The iron-reinforced wheels squelched through the soft loam, the drivers following the lead of Gully and Foyle to stay on solid ground.

Lieutenant Lister led a squad about fifty yards ahead of the warjacks. He paused now and then to ensure they remained within visual range of

## THE DEVIL'S PAY

those escorting the lead wagon. He vanished briefly into the thickening mist, only to reappear as they drew closer. Usually he materialized while peering at a map and compass, since the obscuring clouds made navigation by the sun uncertain at best.

Far ahead, lost in the mists, Devil Dog scouts led the company along the wake of the Cryx raiders. Every half hour, they returned to Lister within a few minutes of each other, giving their reports too quietly for the rest to hear.

The scouts searched for signs of ambush, not for the trail itself. It took no special training to see the trampled plants and churned earth the undead left in their wake. Even the men by the wagons could make out the iron boot prints of the thralls. Bigger three-toed prints marked the passage of bonejacks and helljacks, the latter twice the size of the former.

Morris whipped around, raising his slug gun at the sound of a snapped twig. Until she had stepped on it, Sam had moved silently through the moor. She reached over to turn aside the barrel of his gun.

"This place gives everyone the jitters," she said. "The trick is to keep them inside."

"Yes'm," said Morris.

Sam looked at Dawson. Under his captain's gaze, he relaxed his grip on the slug gun to carry it loose but ready at his hip. Her own eyes looked hard even in the muted light, but she gave him a confident nod.

As Sam walked on, checking in on the other Dogs, Morris turned back to look at Dawson, who offered him a sympathetic shrug.

Now and then, one of the Dogs bent down to retrieve an artifact from an earlier battle: shell casings, canvas straps, brass buckles, iron shrapnel, and jack nuts as big as apples. Most of the iron had long since rusted to flakes, but some of the debris looked new. Those items went to Sergeant Crawley, who peered at them before either tossing them aside or dropping them into his belt pouch.

"Fresh?" asked Sam as the sergeant looked over the newest trinket.

## THE DEVIL'S PAY

Crawley shook his head. "Not fresh enough to be from the lot Brocker's chasing."

Harrow returned from scouting to speak a few quiet words to Lister. The lieutenant nodded and sent Harrow back before approaching Sam.

"We've found something," he told her. "A strange track."

"Foyle, Gully, forward march!" Sam went with them, moving with cautious speed.

"Careful!" Lister shouted after her. The big man slipped as he hurried to catch up. Steadying himself, he pointed at the nearest men. "Dawson, Morris, Robinson, you're with me." As Sam jogged between the big Talon and the even bigger Nomad, Lister and his unit pushed to keep up.

Morris's drenched leg squished with every step as the Dogs followed Sam and her warjacks. The sound of the wagons' wheels fell back as the soldiers advanced.

A flare blazed through the mist ahead. As they drew closer, the Dogs saw Harrow kneeling to examine something on the ground. The crimson light of the flare cast his face in hellish shadows. When he looked up at the approaching mercenaries, Dawson and Morris averted their eyes.

Sam slowed and halted the jacks before moving up to join Harrow. Lister gestured for the men to take up guard positions with their backs toward the flare.

Sam and Lister examined a rectangular puddle slightly larger than a brick. One end was slightly wider than the other, and three parallel lines formed narrow bridges across its width. "I haven't seen anything like this before," said Sam, "but I'd bet it's not Cryx."

Harrow stood, gesturing with the flare to indicate more prints nearby. They were all identical, spaced out in wide, repeating patterns.

"That's odd," said Sam after a long look. "Get Crawley over here. I want his opinion."

"Morris," said Lister, jerking his thumb back toward the wagon train. "Double-quick!"



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"Sir!" Morris set off at a run, squelching with every step.

Sam followed Harrow as he pointed out more and more of the prints. He indicated two parallel trails, one large path of over-trampled Cryx prints, the other the rectangular prints of the lone traveler.

Sam asked, "The Cryx were trailing whatever this is, you think?"

Harrow shook his head.

"You think it was shadowing them?"

He nodded.

Crawley arrived, breathless. Behind him, Morris braced his hands against his thighs, panting.

Sam took the flare from Harrow and showed Crawley the strange prints. The sergeant pulled the goggles down around his neck and squinted at the rectangular depression. His brow furrowed as he followed the pattern of its steps.

"What do you think?" said Sam. "Quadrupedal?"

"Definitely. And extremely regular. Too regular, if you ask me. Even with a new 'jack fresh out of the forge, you expect more variation in the strides depending on its weapon loadout, which way it's turned, whether it's carrying something, and all the rest. These steps, they're perfect."

Crawley knelt. He plunged his hand into the rectangular puddle to measure its depth. He stuck a thumb into the compressed dirt at its base, feeling the firmness of the ridges inside the print. His eyes half-closed as he performed a silent calculation, "Assuming four legs, I'd say about seven tons. Maybe eight."

Lister whistled low. "Big as Gully."

"How many were here?" asked Crawley.

"Just the one?" Sam glanced over at Harrow, who nodded confirmation. "Yep, just the one."

"Any prints from a controller?" asked Crawley.

Harrow shook his head.

"Is this the thing we're looking for, Sam?" asked Lister.

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"The Old Man's message said I'd know it when I saw it," said Sam. "Now that I see it, I'm thinking yes."

"My question is, are the Cryx looking for it too?"

"Could be," said Sam. "But judging from the position of these tracks, I'd bet this thing saw the Cryx before they saw it. Maybe they didn't even know it was here."

"What about Brocker?"

Sam shrugged. "Could be he was telling the truth. Or maybe the Cryx just got in his way while he was searching for our mystery 'jack."

"Do we follow these tracks or the Cryx?"

"For now it doesn't matter. They might not intersect, but they go back in the same direction. Make sure the other scouts see these prints. Put one on either side of the trails, and then Harrow down the middle, between the paths."

"Yes'm," said Lister.

"I'm taking the big lugs back to the wagons. I want them fully loaded and ready for action."

"You got it, Sam," said Crawley.

"Let's find this thing before anybody else does," she said. Then, almost to herself, she added, "And let's pray the Cryx don't find us first."



The third time the supply wagon became mired, Sergeant Crawley called a company-wide halt. After conferring with Lister and the captain, he directed the men to unload the water and food stores and divide the load equally between the empty 'jack wagons. A little more than an hour later, the march resumed with fewer stops for lagging wagons.

Scouts returned to report treacherous ground ahead. Sam directed the warjacks away from the most perilous terrain. Sometimes doing so required a detour, but Sam insisted on caution. Pushing a wagon

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through a rut was bad enough. No one wanted to pull a warjack out of a sinkhole.

By the time Sergeant Crawley blew the whistle to stop, the Devil Dogs were damp and weary to a man. Those chosen as pickets and sentries grumbled while the rest set to work making camp on the relatively dry patch of ground they had chosen.

Within an hour, the mechaniks, under the watchful eyes of Sergeant Crawley and the captain, were elbow-deep in Gully after Foyle had passed inspection and received a full load of coal and water. Crawley snatched a rivet gun from one of the men and re-secured the plate reinforcing Gully's venom-burned chassis.

"Look at this," said Robinson. A lean, ginger-bearded veteran, he lifted a concave object from beneath a litter of leaves. He brushed the detritus away to reveal the toothy upper skull of a bonejack. "This will keep my bedroll off the wet ground."

"Don't touch that," warned Burns. "It's bad luck."

"Don't be such a superstitious ninny."

Burns showed him a fist. "If you don't control that mouth of yours, your bad luck is coming sooner than you think."

"You do what you want, Blondie," said Robinson. "Nobody's stopping you from sleeping on the damp ground."

Morris returned from scavenging with a cloth full of mushrooms. "Hey, Corporal," he called. "How about these?"

Harrow peered at Morris's harvest. Picking through the cloth, he threw a pale green-capped mushroom to the ground and crushed it underfoot. When he was done, he took a few conical mushrooms to nibble as he walked away without a word.

"Thanks." Morris tasted the mushrooms, squinted, and nodded approval.

"What was that?" asked Dawson.

"Before he joined the company, Harrow was CRS for King Leto."

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"The Cygnaran Reconnaissance Service!"

"Shh," said Morris. "Keep it down. He doesn't like us talking about it."

"Why did he leave?"

"Nobody knows—and don't even think about asking Harrow. He won't like it. Anyway, they say you can abandon him for a year in any gods-forsaken place, and he'll come back ten pounds heavier with the names and locations of every wretched thing living under a rock or up on a tree branch. He knows all the things that are good to eat and all the ones that'll kill you."

"Good man to have around."

"Aye," agreed Morris. "As long as he wants to have you around."

Dawson winced. "Back in Tarna, he mistook me for a Khador spy."

Morris studied Dawson's face. "No, he didn't."

"What?"

"If he thought you were a spy, we wouldn't be having this conversation. Here, try this one." Morris offered him a wedge of shelf fungus.

Dawson eyed the crimson-ridged mushroom with suspicion before taking a bite. As he munched, he began to smile. "It's really good."

Morris divided the mushrooms into two unequal mounds. The smaller he folded in a cloth and put in his belt pouch. The larger he brought to Sam, who sat on the open tailgate of the supply wagon, eating a cold supper beside Smooth.

She set aside her tin plate of corned beef, hard yellow cheese, and flatbread to accept Morris's haul. "Did Harrow see these?"

"You know it, Captain."

Sam took a nibble and nodded her approval. She put a couple on her plate and passed the rest to Smooth. "Share these around, Smooth. And tell everyone we have a fearless mushroom hunter in our midst."

Morris saluted Sam and turned away before a foolish smile spread across his face. Dawson followed him to the supply wagon, where Morris signed out a stiff brush to clean his sullied boot.

"Make it two," said Dawson.

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They went back to the spot they'd claimed for their bedrolls. Dawson looked at the skull Robinson had laid beneath him to stay dry. He shuddered and glanced at Morris. By unspoken agreement they picked up their packs and moved away to another dry spot.

Morris removed his sodden boot, unclasped his knee guard, and shucked off his leather trousers. After a vigorous shake, he hung them from a nearby branch.

"Give me that," said Dawson, reaching for the armor. As Morris scrubbed his boot, Dawson brushed the caked mud from his knee guard. Morris offered Dawson an appreciative nod.

They worked in silence for a while before Morris asked, "What did you do that you thought Harrow took you for a Red?"

With a grimace, Dawson described how he'd been caught spying on the boys' briefing. Rather than admonishing him, Morris chuckled. "Rose did the same thing last spring. Burns had him so afraid Harrow would cut his throat while he slept that he almost deserted his contract. That happens now and then—not the throat-cutting, but sneaking a look at first briefing. Every new pup wants to be one of the boys."

"What does it take?"

Morris shrugged. "I don't really know. Lister and Creepy have been with the captain since before the game. I guess they were the first."

"When I signed on, the sergeant told me all about how Captain MacHorne won the company's charter in a game of cards. Before I heard his story, I wouldn't have thought she was a cheat. Is that why none of the company will play cards with her?"

"Did you hear Lister's version?"

"No."

"It's worth asking him sometime, assuming he's in a good mood."

"What about the corporals? They're all one of the boys, right?"

"Most of them, but not all: Robinson, for example. And I've heard of privates who were considered one of the boys, but that was before

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my time. Anyway, it's not a question of rank or seniority, as far as I can tell."

Dawson nodded, but his expression remained perplexed.

"There's no announcement or anything. One day Crawley tells you to show up for the first briefing, and everybody knows you're not just one of the men anymore. You're one of the boys."

"Huh." Dawson got a far-away look in his eyes.

"Don't get too excited, kid. There's no raise or anything."

Morris set aside his boot and began brushing the drying mud from his trousers. As he leaned over, three talismans spilled out of his shirt. Two were polished bronze, the third gleaming gold.

"I didn't know you were so religious," said Dawson.

Morris stood up and took one of the bronze medallions between his thumb and finger. "No more than the next fellow. This one's from my sister."

Dawson stood up to squint at it the circular disc. Upon its face was stamped a sword enveloped in a banner inscribed with Caspian words. "Ascendant Solovin," said Dawson. "The patron of healers."

"Murдина's a midwife back in our home village, just west of Carre Dova. Whenever she writes, she reminds me to stay close to the surgeon."

"But we don't have a dedicated field surgeon."

Morris held a finger to his lips. "Don't tell Murдина."

He dropped the first bronze medallion and lifted the next. A sword against a crenellated wall was stamped on its face.

"Ascendant Markus," said Dawson. He touched his breastplate. "I have one just like it."

"Does it give you the courage to challenge fourteen barbarian chiefs to break a siege?"

"Well...maybe thirteen. Markus died as he slew the last one."

Morris laughed. "You mean he 'ascended'?"

"Well, sure. But first he died."

"Don't let Lister hear you talk like that. He'll cuff you for blasphemy."

## THE DEVIL'S PAY

"He's that pious?"

"Mostly about Ascendant Markus. His best swears are in Caspian."

"Who speaks Caspian these days?"

"The Primarch, his Exarchs, all their priests, and Lieutenant Lister," said Morris. "But I think Lister's more fluent, especially with the cursing."

"That I'd like to hear."

"You say that now, but you'd best pray you're at a safe distance when it happens. He'll blister your ears."

"What about the third medallion?"

"Ah, that one's my treasure." He raised the golden disc. "Ascendant Katrena, defender of the faith, patron of valor, knighthood, and nobility—far too good for the likes of me. And look here." He turned the disc over to reveal a flake of ivory embedded in the metal. "A chip from her leg bone. I bought this from a man who traveled all the way to the Sancteum."

"It must be worth a fortune."

"Most of my first year's earnings," said Morris. "It's for my daughter. You know, one day."

Dawson nodded. "I didn't know you had a wife."

"I don't." His smile faded. "Her mother married another fellow. One with prospects."

"Is that why you joined the company? To make your fortune and win her back?"

"Nah. I just wanted to get away. I was working in a village where any day I might see my little girl riding about on the fishmonger's shoulders, calling him daddy."

"What's her name?"

Morris brightened. "Isla. Her eyes are the color of cornflowers."

After supper, Dawson drew the next watch while Morris hit the sack. He sat south of the camp, shielded from the light of the banked fires by Foyle's wagon, staring into the murk. After a light rain, the ghostly moons peeked down through keyholes in the clouds. Dawson listened to the

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rhythmic serenade of frogs until Parks relieved him. Then he returned to his bed and slept until the Sergeant's whistle woke the company.



After a morning of scouts reporting strange sounds in the mist, Lister assigned Dawson and Robinson to go out as two pairs of fresh ears. They were barely ten minutes away from the company before they encountered another runnel of still water barring their path.

Dawson crossed first, holding his gun and ammo pouch above the waist-deep water. He climbed out on the other side and turned to see Robinson doing the same. As the corporal emerged from the water, his shirt rode up, revealing fat, brown leeches covering his body.

"Pull up your shirt," said Dawson. "Don't move." He pinched the leech just below either of its tapered ends, forcing its suckers to open, before peeling it off. Two bloody wounds leaked from Robinson's skin.

"Oh, Morrow," said Robinson. "Get them off. Get them off now!"

"Don't be such a baby. They're just leeches."

"Gah! I can't stand them."

"You can sleep on a bonejack's skull, but this bothers you?"

"They're eating me alive!"

Dawson tossed another leech aside and turned Robinson to examine the rest of his torso. "Drop trou."

"What?"

"They might have gotten into your clothes."

Shivering, Robinson peeled down his leather pants. Dawson gave him the once over. "You're clear. Now, check me."

Robinson re-secured his belt before checking Dawson for leeches. He found only one on Dawson's hip, but he couldn't bring himself to touch it. Dawson peeled it off himself.

"Did you hear that?" asked Robinson.



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Dawson made himself still. He heard a distant bird call and a few frog-sized splashes in the nearby puddles. Then he heard a faint sound of springs compressing and releasing. There was no accompanying chug and huff of a steam engine, but it was unmistakably a mechanical motion.

"Should we get a closer look?" Dawson whispered.

"I don't—" Robinson looked in the direction of the sound. More stagnant runnels and pools stood before them. "No, we'd better report first."

When they reported what they'd heard to Lister, the big lieutenant squinted down his cigar at Dawson. "Are you sure that's what you heard?" he said. "Some of you pups can't tell the difference between a frog and a whippoorwill."

"I heard something similar," said Harrow, appearing out of nowhere. "And a ratcheting sound, more like a clocktower than a warjack."

"Did you at least get a look?"

Harrow shook his head.

"More tracks?"

"None that I could see. Whole area's flooded."

Lister turned to Sam. "What do you say, Captain?"

"Whatever it is, it's clever enough to hide its tracks."

"Seems likely," Lister agreed.

"I don't like the idea of taking the big lugs wading. Still.."

She ordered the company to halt. "I want our six biggest men walking a line ahead of Gully and Foyle. Keep two men on rear guard with two more on either side. Keep one squad close at hand."

"That doesn't leave many scouts," said Lister.

"Make do."

"Yes'm. Sarge, you pick the flower girls."

"Big ones, huh?" Crawley adjusted his goggles and peered up at Lister.

"All right, all right. Count me in."

"Listen up, Burns, Smooth, Harrow! You three escort this strapping young groom down the aisle." He knocked on Gully's knee. "Fraser,

## THE DEVIL'S PAY

Bowie, you're walking the bride along with the lieutenant." He indicated Foyle.

The Devil Dogs took their new positions, leading the 'jacks and wagons through calf-deep water. When Burns and Smooth plunged into a pool up to their hips, Sam halted the 'jacks until they found a shallower path.

"This is stupid." Burns cut down a long branch and hacked off its twigs. With the stick he probed the ground as the Dogs proceeded. One by one, the others followed his example, except for Harrow, who glided through the scummy water without benefit of a probe, leaving barely a ripple in his wake.

Within minutes of each other, Robinson and McBride returned from scouting to report no unusual sightings. Robinson confirmed that their watery path peeled away from the trail left by the Cryx.

"Whatever was following them came from this direction," said Crawley. He signaled for the scouts to go back out.

Sam agreed. "We're moving closer to the Dragon's Tongue. What do you think? Five, six miles?"

Crawley removed a compass and a map from his pocket. "Let me check the map."

Without turning, Harrow held up five fingers on one hand, three on the other.

"Eight miles," said Crawley. He left the map folded and returned the compass to his pocket.

"What would be out here, so close to the river?" Sam said to no one in particular. No one had an answer. They walked on, splashing through the mire.

"Here we go. Look." Burns pointed with his stick.

He indicated a dark patch of water to the southeast. An iridescent sheen mingled with darker eddies beneath the water's surface. Beyond the dark core of the stain the water glowed.

"Oil and Cryx venom," said Lister. "Be careful."

## THE DEVIL'S PAY

Feeling with their poles, Lister and Harrow moved forward. Soon they were hip-deep in the mire.

Burns jumped in to join them, but he slipped sideways, splashing under the water. He came up sputtering, "Help! Something's—" He plunged under again, coming up to add, "Something's got me!"

Lister and Harrow turned around. Lister aimed his slug gun but thought better of it. Harrow already had his pick-axe in hand. He swung it in an arc to strike near Burns' foot. The point hit with a dull thunk under the water. Whatever it hit, the blow was enough to free Burns. Lister pulled him up.

Harrow struck again, but the water remained still.

"What is it?" said Lister.

"It grabbed my leg," said Burns, not quite blubbing in alarm.

Harrow thrust his axe under the water, striking an object under the surface. When there was no reaction from it, he moved the weapon around, feeling the shape of the thing. With the barest shake of his head, he slung the axe back over his shoulder and thrust his hands under the water.

"Be careful, man," said Burns. "It took my whole foot in its mouth."

After feeling the sunken object, Harrow stepped back and reached out his hand. Lister gave him the pole he had dropped. Together, they used their poles as lever to lift up the skull of a ruined bonejack.

Beneath a fanged jaw, a pair of iron-reinforced tusks curved up to sharp points. Pistons connected them to mechanisms inside the brass heat sink forming a collar behind the 'jack's "head." The Dogs could see little more of the mechanism's iron-clad body, but most nodded in recognition of the commonest form of Cryx war machine.

"Ripper," said Crawley.

"Careful!" yelled Burns. "It's slipping!"

He went down to one knee, but the bonejack didn't sink with him. With a muted crack of iron and a gurgle of swamp water, the raised head of the Ripper came up above the surface, revealing the damage that had nearly separated its head assembly from the body.

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The cut appeared perfectly straight except for a regular pattern of sheared points along the edge of the wound.

"That's not from a battle blade," said Lister. He tested the edge of the serrated cut with the finger of a gloved hand. Hissing, he brought it to his mouth but stopped himself before putting his tongue to the wound. Even at a light touch, the shorn metal sliced through the leather.

"It looks like somebody ran this thing through a lumber saw," said Crawley. He examined the oil patch, first with his goggles, then squinting after he pulled them down around his neck. "Hasn't been here long. I'd say whatever found this Ripper did so right before Brocker and his men first met the Cryx back to the northwest."

"So," said Sam, "it's possible the Cryx were looking for it, found it, and then were drawn off into a fight."

"Which could suggest Brocker was also looking for it, and that's why he was here," said Lister.

Sam looked back over her shoulder before nodding. "Maybe. Either way, we need to keep watching our backs."

They resumed their march. The chatter dwindled to whispers, punctuated by hissed warnings to silence by the men farthest from the huff-and-grind of the warjacks.

"Did you hear that?" asked Morris.

Dawson closed his eyes to listen harder. "I think it's just the trees. Wait—" He turned as he glimpsed unexpected movement out of the corner of his eye. "Look out, Burns!

Foyle stumbled forward. His shadow loomed over Burns as the Talon tilted toward him, raising its long stun lance in a desperate attempt to catch itself.

Burns turned, eyes widening as he saw the danger. He started to move, but the clutching mud held him fast.

Sam dashed toward him, leaping up to tackle the big man with all her weight. Even at half his size, she hit him at just the right angle to knock

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him out of the warjack's path. They plunged into the mire. An instant later, Foyle came down beside them, splashing everyone within twenty feet.

Swamp water hissed as it touched the firebox on Foyle's back. The warjack coughed as the flood reached its engine.

Sam emerged first, sputtering. "Foyle, steady up! Brace yourself!"

The Talon thrust out its stun lance and planted its butt in the ground. It did the same with its shield arm, pushing up from the side while pulling forward on its weapon. Its pistons surged and locked, its gears straining.

Burns stood up and moved to push the warjack from behind. All the nearby men sloshed into position to aid his efforts. Morris put a hand too close to the firebox, shouting as the hot metal burned his palm through his leather glove.

Lister unleashed a litany of obscenities in a head-spinning mixture of Ordic, Cygnaran, and Caspian. Dawson's eyes grew wide, but no one else so much as cracked a smile.

At Sam's direction, the men heaved in time with Foyle's own efforts to step out of the sinkhole. As the alarm of the warjack's fall subsided, their efforts became more coordinated. Strain as they might, the result remained the same: Foyle was stuck.

"All right, Dogs, let's step back," said Sam. The men backed away with care as Foyle tottered and stood still.

Sam pushed her goggles up on her forehead and wiped her eyes with the back of a hand. "This is going to take a little more thought. In the meantime, we can't let down our guard. Crawley?"

The sergeant assigned two units to sentry duty while the rest he put at ease, awaiting further instructions.

"How the blazes did this happen?" demanded Lister. He paralyzed Burns with a glance. "You walked right over that hole!"

"I don't know, Lieutenant. I didn't feel a thing."

"Said the actress to the Exarch," Smooth added, grinning as he looked around for approval. Seeing none, he raised his empty hands like an

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actor apologizing to the audience. He stepped back out of an imaginary limelight.

"Ow! Son of a—" Smooth flinched away from a spot near Foyle's left knee. Hissing, he raised his leg. Blood poured from a wound high on his calf, just below the bend of his knee. He clutched it tight.

"Grab him," said Lister. He grabbed Smooth under the arms. Burns and Harrow took his legs, and with quick, short steps, they carried the big man to the nearest wagon. Another Dog lowered the tailgate, and they laid Smooth upon it.

Lister tore at the rent in Smooth's trouser leg and pressed his hands against the wound. Blood poured out between his fingers. "That is one hell of a cut."

"I barely touched it," said Smooth.

"Then it was sharp as spite."

One of the drivers was already on hand with water, clean cloths, and bandages. He cleared the wound with fresh water, blotted it with a clean cloth, and sprinkled clotting powder over the wound. Once they had the bleeding under control, Fleming broke out the suture kit and threaded a curved needle.

While Fleming stitched Smooth's injury, Lister stomped back toward Foyle, chomping at his cigar.

"Look," Sam said. She pointed as Dawson, Morris, and Harrow carefully lifted the sharp object out of the water.

It was a blued steel disc nearly two feet in diameter. Its outer edge bristled with saw teeth. Swamp weeds clung to a hole in its center.

"See?" said Burns. "It wasn't my fault! That thing must have been caught up over the hole and some weeds or something. When Foyle stepped on it, his weight tipped it up."

"Something tells me this isn't from a laborjack," said Morris. "Besides, we'd have seen signs if someone had been sawing down trees nearby."

"No," said Dawson. "This blade wasn't made to cut wood. The teeth are all wrong, the gullets too shallow. There's hardly any kerf. The steel has

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to be incredibly strong. And look at that fleam!" He stared at the blade in admiration until he realized that everyone else was staring at him.

Lister removed his cigar. "What language are you speaking, Dawson?"

"Sorry, Sir. I suppose lumber jargon does sound strange to others."

"Did you grow up in a lumber mill?"

"Well, not exactly," he said. "But I worked with my uncle at the village sawmill until my brother was old enough to take my place and I left home to join the Ordic—"

"I'm sure it's a very touching story," said Lister. "My question is this: You know about saws?"

"Yes, Sir."

"What else can you tell us about this one?"

"Well, there's not much wear near the hub. That hole was used to support it, but not to spin it regularly. But there is a scuff mark near the center. It was spun at least briefly, but then... I don't know. It looks like it was shot out of its vice."

"Either this blade or one like it is what cut that bonejack in half," said Sam. "Does that seem right to you, Dawson?"

"Yes'm. These teeth are designed to cut through metal, not wood. Of course, spun fast enough, they'll cut through wood, too...or darned near anything else."

Burns mouthed the words "Dragon hunt." Lister shot him a withering look.

Sam rubbed the back of her neck. "This just keeps getting more exciting. All right, somebody bring me Crawley. I want him to look at this. Lister, get the drivers to bring over the winch. I want Foyle back up within the hour. And Dawson?"

"Yes, Captain?"

"Nice work."

"But I only—" Dawson closed his mouth. "Yes'm."

Sam smiled, tipped him a wink, and walked away.

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In the end it took a little less than an hour to position the wagon, erect the tripod for the block and tackle, and lift Foyle out of the mire. Crawley inspected the warjack's muck-encrusted foot and declared it serviceable. When Sam directed the Talon to walk, the jack did so with a slight limp at the ankle joint.

Dawson helped Morris disassemble and stow the tripod. They finished just as Harrow returned from ranging to the rear. Setting his pack and gun on the wagon tailgate beside Smooth's bandaged leg, he reported no sign of pursuit: Cryx, Steelhead, or otherwise.

Moments later, McBride and Crowborough returned to report the all clear to either flank. Lieutenant Lister checked his pocket watch and scanned the mists ahead. "Where the hell is Robinson?"

Dawson's eyes followed the second hand as it tick-tick-ticked its way around the watch dial. As it completed a circuit, Lister's eyes met Harrow's. The scout picked up his gun, leaving his pack behind, and slid silently through the mire.

Sam approached, her eyes on Harrow's retreating figure. "Who's missing?"

"Robinson. Forward scout."

"Let's get the company moving. Same configuration as before, but keep the pickets closer."

The last of the chatter faded as the Dogs trudged forward. The creak of wagon wheels and the chug-and-hiss of steamjack engines seemed all the louder for the men's silence.

When they first saw the flare, a few of the men hastened their pace.

"Stay with the company," Lister cautioned them. "Keep formation."

Crawley repeated the lieutenant's order for emphasis, and the men passed it down the line as they came near Harrow's flare and saw what he had found.



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On a glistening mound of mossy earth, Robinson lay in pieces.

One of the strikes had bisected him from shoulder to hip. The other was a shallower wound, but still mortal. Together the injuries had spilled what appeared to be every drop of the man's blood. Beneath a lacy red mask, Robinson's face had blanched pale as a grub.

Silent, Crawley signaled two units to take up guard positions on either side of the corpse. The third he signaled to follow him. Dawson was the nearest as Crawley and the officers joined Harrow beside his gruesome discovery.

"Doesn't look like another blade." Sam said. Even her whisper seemed too loud.

Harrow pointed along the scorched wounds. "Some type of energy impact, maybe lightning. Two strokes."

Lister retrieved Robinson's slug gun. Its squat barrel had been sliced at an angle, the cut as clean and sharp as that of a dropped teacup. The metal at the edges of the cut were discolored as if from intense heat.

Crawley took Dawson by the shoulder and quietly relayed his instructions for dealing with the body. With measured haste, Dawson and Morris fetched a length of heavy canvas from the supply wagon and laid it beside Robinson. Burns and Craig helped them transfer the remains to the cloth.

As the Dogs worked, Lister reached inside his collar to hold an ascendant medallion between his fingers. He murmured a prayer in Caspian.

The men folded the ends of the body bag. They sealed it by weaving a cord through the brass eyelets on its hems. With reverent economy, they lugged the corpse to the supply wagon and lay it in the space beside Smooth. Favoring his injured leg, Smooth moved to sit up front with the drivers rather than sit beside the dead man.

"Whatever did this to him..." Lister growled around his cigar.

"We'll bring it down, break it up, and deliver it in pieces for the Old Man," said Sam. "We'll fulfill our contract and get payback for Robinson in one stroke."

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"I'd like to get my hands on whoever's operating this thing."

Sam touched his arm. Against Lister's massive biceps, her hand appeared small. "Be careful what you wish for, old friend. The important thing is we do the job, and we take care of our own, alive or dead. Still, if we have a shot at revenge, we'll consider it a second bonus."

Lister nodded. He kept his chin down and bit hard on the end of his unlit cigar.

The march resumed. Lister had Crawley equip all the scouts with flares. The sergeant sent them out in pairs along with a warning to keep the flares in hand and to signal at the first sign of danger.

The first of the scouts returned fifteen minutes later.

Fleming saluted Lister and Sam. "We've found a shelter."

Ross added, "It has to be a supply depot."

"So that's what Baird's men were doing out here," said Sam. "Let's have a look."

As the scouts led the Devil Dogs out of the water, the company remained vigilant to anything approaching from the sides or rear. They passed through a light wood as the ground rose higher and drier.

The clouds parted enough to reveal the sun. Its golden light repainted the gloomy surroundings in vivid colors. A patch of startlingly yellow mushrooms climbed a fallen tree like a tiny stairway. A lichen-covered stone lay like a jeweled crown upon a jutting hill, and at its foot lay the hulk of a battered helljack.

The Slayer was nearly as large as Gully, and just as bulky. With its lobstered shoulders and heavy claws, it resembled nothing so much as a malevolent crustacean that once walked upright but now lay defeated upon the moss. One ridged tusk jutted from its armored head, the other severed less than a foot from its blank, iron face. Scorched brass spikes flared from its knees and shoulders, sharp claws at toe and nail. The barest wisp of venom flickered behind the ribs of its chest and smokestack, seeping from the severed tubes connecting its massive shoulders to its chest cavity.

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Serrated cuts, and the cleaner lines of energy burns, crisscrossed its black iron chassis.

"This fellow won't be getting up any time soon," said Lister. He waved away the foul odor of nectrotite fumes. "You want Crawley to have a look?"

Sam lowered the goggles over her eyes and frowned. "Let's check the building, first. Whatever wrestled with this monster might still be nearby, or maybe worse, more of the Cryx we thought we'd seen the last of."

The hemi-cylindrical structure stood twenty feet tall and lay sixty feet long. The building was composed of stout pine reinforced with iron bracings. Wire mesh covered skylights set high upon its walls and roof.

Someone had made an effort to conceal the sides with brush and uprooted saplings, but the creeping vines had risen barely more than a foot up the convex sides of the shelter. Except for a few mismatched spots, the entire structure was painted dun gray, excellent camouflage for the misty Wythmoor.

"See there?" said Lister. He pointed at a matte black section of wall. "This whole thing was built somewhere else. Then it was hauled here for assembly."

Sam nodded. Her eyes followed Harrow and Bowie as they crept up to peer around the nearest corners. Harrow made the all-clear signal.

Sam marched Gully and Foyle up to the nearest end of the half-tube and set them to stand guard on either side of the entrance. Stenciled in light gray paint on either door was the broken sword of Ord. A heavy chain and padlock secured the doors.

The wagons pulled up behind. At a nod from Crawley, the drivers began fetching food and water for the horses, but left them hitched to their wagons.

Lister nodded at the symbols. "Your friend from the village gave us a good report," he said. "Baird must be laying in supply depots. But why?"

"Let's have a look."

Lister shrugged the pick-axe from his back and called out, "Swire!"

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A lean man with a pencil-thin mustache ran forward and saluted.

"Remember that little predicament Smooth got himself into? The one you helped him out of?"

"Yessir."

"Do you have them on you?"

"Sir!" Swire set aside his gun and lay his pack down beside it. From a compartment inside his boot, he removed a slim leather parcel. He unrolled it and flipped over the felt inside cover to reveal a set of flat brass probes, each with a different shape at its tip. Some resembled waves, others a woman's figure, and still others a barber's picks.

Kneeling beside the lock, Swire removed his gloves and cradled the lock in one bare hand. He probed the barrel with a simple rake tool, listening as he felt the vibrations within. "Tsk," he said, setting aside the rake. He took up a pick and a torsion wrench in its place. "I should have known it wouldn't be so easy."

As he worked, Sergeant Crawley approached and peered down at Swire's tools. "What's this, then? Why didn't you ask me? I could have that open in—"

The padlock clicked. Swire left it hanging from the chain as he returned his picks to the case. "Done, Lieutenant."

"That's why, Creepy. Good work, Swire."

Swire returned the kit to his boot and retrieved his pack and gun. Even as he did so, the sun retreated from its brief visitation. Swire looked up, shaking his head in disbelief. "I was just starting to think I might dry off."

"Crawley, take charge of the men out here," said Sam. "Lister, I want two squads inside."

Lister chose his men, including Dawson, Morris, and all the boys except Smooth. The wounded man watched them from the driver's seat of the supply wagon, scraping his beloved razor along his jaw in a nonchalant gesture belied by his intense gaze, directed at where he would surely rather be standing, among his fellows.

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Mist crept through the assembled men, beasts, wagons, and machines. The air grew heavy with the promise of rain, and then the first few drops spattered on helms and pauldrons. Seconds later, a steady drizzle set in.

Lister led the way inside the building.

Blue-white fingers of light reached through the skylights to brush the crates along one wall, leaving the other side of the depot in shadow. More stacks of crates and barrels stood in the center of the spacious aisle. The wood of the crates was still fresh, the nails showing no trace of rust.

The Ordic crest was stenciled just above a pasted label indicating COAL, MUNITIONS, PARTS, or PROVISIONS. Some lazy soldier had left a dried paint bucket behind. Burns removed the splayed brush, holding it up to his face as a comical mustache.

"Sharpen up, Burns," said Lister.

"Relax, Lieutenant. Can't you see we've hit the jackpot here?"

"We'll take only what we need," said Sam. "Restock the coal bins. Crawley, you see if there are any parts you need for the big lugs. Other than that, we're not looting the king's supply depot."

Burns dropped the brush and hefted his gun.

"What I really want to know," said Sam, "is why Baird would go to all the trouble of leaving a supply depot out here without guards."

The Dogs moved toward the far side of the shelter. Behind the crates stacked in the center aisle, the other end of the depot lay steeped in blue gloom.

"Hsst!" Lister held up a fist, fingers closed to signal a stop. With a glance, he beckoned Harrow forward.

The scout advanced only a few steps before he too stopped to listen.

Most of the Dogs heard it then, the sound of a spring expanding in a well-oiled chamber.

Harrow cradled his bulky weapon in one arm while gesturing with the other. His fingers indicated a shadow looming over a distant stack of crates.



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The enormous figure stood out in a depot full of the familiar shapes of boxes and barrels. Its upper body curved in perfect symmetry, an oval with a ridged square close behind. To either side were more complex shapes, a pair of rectangles with cylinders jutting back and to the side. Blue-white light reflected off the figure's steely carapace, not from the skylights above, but from its own torso, below.

Sam took charge of the hand signals. She sent Harrow to the center to take up a position behind a crate. Burns she directed to the left, Lister to the right. She beckoned Dawson up to support Burns, Morris to support Lister. She moved up behind Harrow and signaled those behind her to take cover.

A shadow passed over Sam. She looked up at a sudden movement across the center skylight. Just as she drew her long-barreled pistol and aimed upward, the huge figure beyond the crates emitted a low hum and several sequential clacks. It lunged forward, scattering the crates and barrels. Blue-white light blazed out of glass lenses on its body, briefly blinding the Devil Dogs.

One of the barrels smashed into the crate that Burns had chosen for cover. The impact knocked away his slug gun. He cried out in surprise as he tumbled backward.

The heavy warjack moved toward him, its four-legged gait uncanny. Each of its crab-like legs ended in a small, hoof-like block. The legs supported a massive chromium torso which in turn supported a fat, ovoid upper chassis. On either side, brass gears and pistons supported an arm: one short and buzzing, the other ending in a four-fingered mechanical hand. The lights shone from panels on its abdomen and shoulders, as well as from several lenses around a central glass eye.

Burns staggered to his feet and slung the pick-axe off his shoulder. He bellowed and raised his weapon. Before he could strike, the strange jack grasped him around the chest. With a quick mechanical action, it smashed him into the crates lining the wall.

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A deafening report filled the depot as Harrow fired his weapon. A heavy slug grazed the joint between the strange 'jack's shoulder and buzzing arm. Flaming, the shell ricocheted through one of the side skylights. As fragments of glass sieved through the wire mesh, Harrow retreated, opening the breech of his gun to reload.

The strange 'jack dropped the stunned Burns and moved forward, each step singing a high note of oiled springs. Its short left arm unit whined a higher and higher pitch before a steel disc shot out, tearing through the crate that formed Sam's only shelter. Grain and dried beans spilled out next to her.

"Back!" Sam shouted. She took her own advice, retreating to the cover of another crate.

"Nets!" roared Lister. "Take it down!" He swung his heavy chain net overhead and hurled it toward the strange warjack's legs.

Dawson and Morris threw their own nets an instant later. Two more from the men behind them struck soon after, each one a perfect cast. The heavy chains wound around the 'jack's six-jointed legs, binding them together.

The warjack hesitated, its upper chassis turning side to side as it leaned forward, glowing lenses inspecting its predicament. Then, like some floating crustacean, it splayed its legs outward. The nets spread out on top of the extended legs. The warjack levitated upward, retracting its legs in a smooth motion as the nets slipped away.

"Nets are no good," said Sam. "Fire at will!"

As the Devil Dogs unleashed their slugs, the shadow on the roof once more crossed the skylight. It was about the size of a man but with some wide garment flowing out to either side, like a cape in the wind. Between the reports of gun fire and above the steady patter of rain, a different rhythm crossed the depot ceiling.

Sam drew her pistol, aimed as the shadow crossed the skylight, and fired. Her shot spider-webbed the glass. She covered her face with one arm



and looked away as shards rained down through the mesh. She reloaded and called out, "Marshal on the roof!"

With a new cartridge in place, Sam raised her weapon again. Her aim followed the sound of footsteps, hesitating each time a slug exploded on the enemy warjack or among the supplies.

"Damn it, Dogs, watch out for the munitions!" bellowed Lister, retreating.

Harrow and Morris retreated with him. Dawson hesitated as he saw Burns lying among the wreckage of the crates. The one behind him was stenciled "MUNITIONS."

Even as Lister yelled at him to retreat, Dawson sprinted toward Burns. He kept his head low, throwing himself prone when the strange 'jack's grasping arm reached for him. Its bright chromium claw struck him hard on the side of the head. His helmet absorbed much of the impact, but he shook his head and spit out blood as Burns looked up bleary-eyed.

Dawson grabbed Burns by the breastplate. "Come on, let's move. This thing got in here somehow. There's got to be another door on the far side."

Together they ran past their attacker toward the farther end of the depot. What they saw stopped them in their tracks.

There was no door on the far side of the depot, but a huge hole yawned open in the floor. An enormous wet passage sloped down to the east, easily large enough for the entire company including their warjacks. Splintered wood formed fangs all around the open maw, and dark muddy prints trailed from the soft earthen banks of its lips.

The dead bodies lying to either side only heightened the impression of a hungry mouth in the floor. Three Ordic soldiers lay among the shattered ruins of the nearest crates. Their bloodless faces stared up at the ceiling.

A stench of necrotite wafted up out of the hole. The heavy clank of iron pistons echoed through the tunnel, growing louder with every step.

"Oh, hell," Burns said. "We got to get out of here."

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Before they could take more than a step backward, six tons of bone and iron came charging up out of the subterranean passage. Its damaged chassis and the clumps of mossy earth spread over its right arm and torso identified it as the same Slayer they had seen lying in the moor outside. With every step the helljack kicked back a divot of wet earth, until its clawed feet crunched through the floor of the supply depot. It reached out with one clawed arm while raising the other above its bulky shoulders.

Burns yelled, "Get down!"

Burns and Dawson threw themselves to the floor as the helljack charged past. It smashed into the alien warjack, its black claws clamping onto its foe's shoulder.

Burns opened the breach of his slug gun to reload. "Let's hit it from behind."

"Which one?" Dawson asked. Magnified by the enclosed structure, the clash of iron and steel grew deafening.

"I don't care!" roared Burns. "Just don't miss!"

They fired simultaneously. Both shells exploded against the helljack's back. One left a red-hot crater in the firebox. The other ripped open the Slayer's chimney. Necrotite fumes billowed out to smother both warjacks.

The chromium warjack grasped the Slayer by the arm, its four-finger grip denting the heavy armor. A wedge-shaped blade shot down through its wrist to penetrate the heavy iron of the helljack's thick forearm. Iron screamed as the blade shot down again and again. Hot oil splashed across the chromium chassis of the quadruped.

Dawson glanced back at the subterranean passage. A new figure stood just inside its jaws.

Above the entrance hovered a slowly turning abomination of black-armored bone. Three skulls glowered from beneath a tripartite helm, its segments linked by pauldrons glowing with necrotite. Three seething lanterns hung from a ribcage overflowing with noxious fumes. Beneath it all hung a thick, tail-like appendage entwined with three lesser tendrils,

one of them severed midway along its length. In a black gauntlet on one of its three spindly arms, the iron lich overseer clutched its three-pronged fell staff.

Mute with fear, Dawson slapped at Burns's arm until the big man turned to see the Slayer's master.

"What do we do?" wheezed Dawson.

Burns replied with an improbable vulgarity before adding, "Get back to the others!"

The men lowered their heads and ran back to the clashing warjacks. As they avoided the titanic brawl, another volley of slugs exploded against the strange warjack. The big machine shuddered and released its grip on the helljack.

The Cryx Slayer pushed its foe back into a tumble of sundered crates, but the chromium warjack moved only a few feet before its four legs held fast. It shoved back, slamming the Slayer against the lighted side of the depot.

"Don't shoot, don't shoot!" yelled Burns as he and Dawson ran through the wreckage. They ran up to Sam. Beside her, Lister and Harrow were alternating firing and reloading their slug guns.

"What did you think you were doing?" Sam shouted at Dawson. Behind her, Foyle marched forward through the depot entrance, now widened in the shape of his broad shoulders.

"Saving my ass," Burns answered for the speechless Dawson. "And by the way, we got a damned iron lich on the other side!"

"Gully!" Sam yelled to the warjack outside. "Move around to the back!"

All the Dogs winced as a terrible scream of shearing metal rang through the depot. With both of its massive arms, the Slayer clamped down on its enemy's gripping arm. Its claws sank into the chromium plate as it twisted its enemy's limb backward. As its shoulder cogs screamed in protest, the Slayer tore the arm away, ripping it free from the warjack's shoulder.

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The chromium warjack stepped back, torso twisting side-to-side as if in confusion.

"Keep firing!" yelled Sam.

The Dogs unleashed another volley. Most of the slugs glanced off the warjack's rounded shoulders, but a few left shallow dents in its armor.

Prize in hands, the Slayer shouldered its foe aside and thundered down the aisle, away from the Devil Dogs and into the great hole in the floor.

The chromium warjack pursued. With another shriek of metal, it flung a saw blade at the fleeing helljack. The screaming disc grazed the helljack's shoulder and went on to shear a hole in the far wall.

"Foyle, hit it!" Sam pointed her stun sword at the remaining warjack.

The Dogs leaped aside as the Talon charged through the building, kicking away heavy crates as it ran. Its massive foe turned just as the stun lance struck sparks off its curving abdomen. The heavy warjack shuddered and balked, but only for a second before its saw-blade arm swept around to knock the smaller Foyle back against the shadow-side crates.

More Dogs poured into the depot. "Captain!" shouted Fleming. "There's someone on the roof!"

"I know!" she shouted back. "One problem at a time. Dogs, take out its legs!"

As her men switched from slug guns to pick-axes, Sam looked up again at the skylight. Whatever had been there was no longer visible.

Burns and Lister led the assault on the enemy warjack. The points of their pick-axes struck sparks and left scratches, but the heavy jack barely reacted to the beating. Instead, it launched another projectile point-blank into Foyle.

The saw blade sank deep into the Talon's chassis. Lightning flickered at the edges of the wound even as black smoke poured out the back of its sundered firebox.

"Bring it down!" thundered Lister. No sooner had he spoken but the strange warjack ran crablike past the front line, charging the Dogs standing between it and the depot entrance. "Stop it! Don't let it escape."

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"Wait!" cried Sam, and an instant later everyone could see what she had noticed. The rushing warjack left no mark in its wake, disturbed none of the crates in its path.

It was nothing but an apparition.

Behind them, barrels tumbled to the floor as the real warjack raced toward the passage into which the helljack had run.

"After it," called Sam. As if understanding her words, the enemy warjack paused just inside the shelter of the depot. It turned, adjusting the aim of its saw-flinger.

"Cover!" shouted Lister.

The Dogs scattered, but they needn't have bothered. The warjack's saw blade shot out not at a living target but at a crate marked MUNITIONS. Dozens of boxes of rifle cartridges scattered across the floor.

Lister exploded in a litany of Caspian curses. Sam shouted, "Get out! Get out now! Get out!"

The warjack continued to throw sawblades at the munitions crates as the Dogs scrambled to pour out of the depot. Its second shot ignited a string of reports as the sparks found powder.

The third smashed another crate just as Foyle widened the entrance further, escaping just behind the Devil Dogs. The fourth exploded as the saw blade cut through the cartridges inside.

Outside, the Dogs ran into a torrent of rain. The depot shook as explosions cascaded down its length. The skylights went first, showering the Dogs outside with glass and wire fragments. Flames washed over Foyle as the Talon's bulk sheltered the men fleeing before him.

The horses screamed. In their panic, those hitched to Gully's wagon bolted as the drivers shouted for them to stop. The other teams barely managed to control their animals, turning them away from the exploding depot.

An instant later, the entire building bulged and cracked as the chain reaction reached the largest charges. Within seconds, the entire building

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crackled with flames, and the rain hissed its displeasure as it fell upon the fire.

Shaking their heads and slapping at their deafened ears, the Devil Dogs picked themselves up off the ground. Sam was the first to speak. "Get to the other side. That tunnel has to come out somewhere nearby this damnable knoll before it dips below the waterline."

Sam ran beside Dawson, who pointed at a gleaming shape rising up from a hole about eighty feet away. "There!"

"Gully!" Sam cried out to the Nomad standing at the far end of the depot. She pointed at the retreating machine. "Stop that 'jack!"

She ran after the Nomad, Dawson and a few of the other Dogs close on her heels.

The chromium warjack ran after the foe who stole its arm, seemingly unaware of the massive Nomad charging to intercept, battle blade rising. The chromium warjack swiveled at the waist and shot a spinning sawblade just as Gully's sword descended. Sparks exploded as blade met blade. The impact knocked Gully just far enough out of position that its body glanced off the enemy warjack and tumbled forward through a stand of saplings.

Sam aimed he pistol but lowered it again as the chromium warjack disappeared into the gray veil of heavy rain.

Gully strained to pick himself up from the ground. A massive dent creased his upper chassis, but all his limbs still functioned.

Sam turned to face the burning depot. The orange light of the conflagration colored the lenses of her goggles. She looked up as something moved against the current of smoke and rain above her. Without hesitating, she raised her pistol and fired.

All the nearby Devil Dogs crouched. Those with slug guns aimed generally at the sky, but they saw no target.

Inside the burning depot, pine crates crackled. Another volley of explosions followed.

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“Get these wagons out of here,” Sam shouted. “Dogs, move away! I don’t want anybody taking a hit from a gods-damned munitions crate.”

As she led the Dogs away, Crawley reported two men missing. Sam told him to send a quick reconnaissance around the fire, but not to lose any more men doing it.

“What did you see, Sam?” Lister coughed. “What was that on the roof?”

She pushed her goggles up, revealing a clean stripe where the smoke had failed to blacken her eyes. “I don’t know,” she said. “But I promise you we’re going to find out.”



## PART THREE

**T**he Devil Dogs found the corpses of the missing men not far from the smoldering ruin of the Ordic Supply Depot. The men had fallen nowhere near the fire, but their bodies lay burned and twisted on the far side of the structure.

Against all advice, Smooth insisted on standing with the aid of a crutch Harrow had hewn from an ash branch. The other Dogs kept an eye on the heavy bandage wrapped around Smooth's upper calf. Sergeant Crawley had issued a general order that the moment anyone saw blood seeping through, Smooth was to be dragged back to the wagon, no matter how many men it took to do so.

Smooth raised his voice over the patter of rain. "They must have run into the iron lich while we were fighting inside the depot."

"There's no worse way to go," said Burns.

"Not even burning?" asked Dawson. He and Burns sewed one of the dead men into a canvas bag, while Swire and McBride did the same for the other.

Burns nodded, his face uncharacteristically sober. "Burning's horrible, but it's only pain. You die, it's over. These Cryx, their iron liches and some of the other monsters, they don't just kill you. They draw out your soul and use it to feed their wicked machines."

Dawson had nothing to say to that.

Once the bags were sealed, Lister murmured a prayer over the bodies. Morris and about half the other men reached under their breastplates to



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touch their ascendant medallions as they added their own silent invocations to the impromptu ceremony.

When Lister finished, Sam pulled off her goggles and stepped forward. "We'll take good care of Bates and Hughes until we can get them home," she said. "There's more to say about each of them, but for now we have a job to finish. When we're done, we'll drink to their memories, and I'll tell you pups about the time a gobber sold Hughes a half-share in a talking horse."

A few of the men smiled at the captain's mention of the incident. Burns wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. "He was so damned gullible."

"You want me to tell them who bought the other half?" asked Sam.

"I don't know what you mean, Captain." Burns feigned innocence.

A few of the men forced a laugh, but the mirth never reached their eyes.

"Once the rain lets up enough to track it, we're going to find that warjack. And this time we're going to bring it down no matter how slippery its legs prove. We're going to deliver it to the Old Man, and we're going to collect the bonus, not just for ourselves, but for Robinson, Bates, and Hughes, and for their families."

"Hear, hear," said Crawley. His eyes were red from smoke, but he didn't rub them. Instead, he polished the lenses of his goggles and set them back in place. "Now, I need a look at those big lugs."

The Dogs bore the dead back to the wagon, where they lay the bags beside the one containing Robinson's remains. As the others watched them go, Sam called Crowborough back. "I need you to deliver a message."

"Yes, Captain. Where to?"

"Well, that's the tricky part. Give me your map." When he did so, Sam circled three locations on the other side of the Dragon's Tongue River. She handed Crowborough a folded letter. "The Old Man's eyes only. You'll find him in one of these areas. Start with the closest first."

Lister handed Crowborough a coin purse. "Take the courser. Cross at the Calbeck Ferry if it's open. Otherwise, you'll have to ford at Oxbridge."

"Yessir," said Crowborough, saluting each officer in turn. "Yes'm!"

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He ran to the supply wagon, sparing only a moment to nod his respect over the fallen before requisitioning a hooded rain cloak and the swiftest of the riding horses. Within minutes, he was riding away from the dying blaze of the supply depot.

Sergeant Crawley had the mechaniks climbing over both warjacks, their efforts hampered by the driving rain. Once he could assure Sam that they were fit for marching, the captain led the Dogs south, the direction in which they had last seen both the Cryx helljack and the strange, chromium warjack fleeing.

"You think the saw-flinger wants its arm back?" Lister asked Sam. They trudged side-by-side with Crawley ahead of the wagons. Burns, Morris, Dawson, and Smooth guarded them, their slug guns reloaded and held ready for sudden action.

"It looked that way to me," said Sam. "Just as it looked like the lich wanted to take home a piece of that warjack. If the Cryx learn its secrets before the Old Man has a chance to figure them out..." She left the rest unspoken.

"I never saw a 'jack like that before," said Burns. "It definitely isn't Swans or Reds. Not the zealots, either. Could it be the elves?"

"It was weird enough for the Iosans," said Lister.

"No, the way it moved, it didn't seem at all like elf magic," said Crawley. "It was a lot more mechanical. This is something completely new. Did you see its smokestack?"

"No," said Sam.

"Neither did I. That thing was running on some completely different form of energy."

"You sure it isn't just some new arcanika?"

"No, I'm not sure," said Crawley. "It doesn't seem like magic to me. Not just mechanika, either. This is something new."

"I'm starting to understand why the Old Man is so interested in this thing," Sam added.

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The rain ebbed and flowed like the tide. At its heaviest, it steamed against Foyle and Gully's hot smokestacks. When it was no more than a drizzle, it seemed to evaporate even before touching the hot iron.

Distant thunder warned of fiercer rain to come, but Sam kept the Dogs moving through the early evening. She moved from unit to unit, praising the men for the courage they had shown, asking them how they wanted to spend their bonuses upon their return to Tarna. She threatened a few with a game of cards, a gambit that evoked a smile or a firm refusal from even the most traumatized of the men. When the combined twilight and rain made further tracking futile, she called a halt.

Crawley directed Dawson's unit in erecting a tarpaulin shelter over the warjacks. Imperfect as it was, it kept the rain off the mechanics' heads while they hammered out the dents the strange warjack had pounded into Foyle's iron body.

As they finished, the men stood under the shelter for a while, enjoying the refuge from the rain.

"What I wanna know is what the captain saw up on the roof," Crawley said. "Who was controlling that warjack? We were on the wrong side of that fight. What did you see, Morris?"

"Just a shadow," he said. "We were too busy trying to tip that 'jack. It didn't matter how many nets we threw on it, the damned thing wouldn't go down."

"We didn't have much better luck with the slug guns," said Dawson. "But at least it knows it was in a fight."

"It was bad luck we didn't have both of the big lugs in there," said Burns.

"Sam did send Gully around," said Smooth. "It would have been better if she'd been there to guide him. The big fellow's not the brightest with anything more than simple directions. It took him forever to get around the other side of the depot."

"Say, you were outside, Smooth," said Dawson. "What did you see on the roof?"

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"I wasn't looking at first," said Smooth. "Later, after the explosion, I could have sworn I saw something flying above it."

"Flying?" asked Morris.

"I know, it sounds crazy. At first I thought it must have been a trick of the light in the rain. But I could have sworn I saw something with wings."

"Something like a bird?"

"A big damned bird, maybe," said Smooth. "But no, the shape was different. Its wings didn't flap like a bird's, either. It was more like it soared. It was almost like...nah."

"Come on, give," said Burns.

"Well, it was almost like a person with a great big set of wings on her back."

"A *person*?" said Burns. "Wings on *her* back?"

"It was just the impression from a second of seeing something," said Smooth. "The battle was distracting. Besides, I told you I didn't really see anything."

"Ha!" Burns laughed. "Your near-death scratch has you seeing angels!"

"Watch your mouth, Burns!"

"I always thought it'd be the lieutenant who'd end up having divine visions."

"I'm warning you..."

"I believe you," said Dawson.

"Don't humor him, kid," said Burns. "He's run Lucille across that scalp of his a few too many times, nicked his brain."

"Don't you talk about Lucille," warned Smooth.

"I'm just saying I thought I saw something, too," said Dawson. "Something flying through the rain as the warjack ran away. It could have been...you know...shaped like an angel."

"That's all I'm saying," said Smooth. "Something with wings. That kind of shape!"

"Angel-shaped," scoffed Burns. "I'm going to leave you girls to your prayer meeting before you start holding hands and singing hymns."

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After Burns had gone, Dawson looked to Smooth and began to ask a question.

"I don't even want to hear it," said Smooth. The big man left the shelter.

A few hours later, Dawson returned to camp after standing sentry duty. The constant patter of rain on his hood had threatened to lull him to sleep, but he kept his eyes peeled for any sign of green Cryxlight or the strange blue-white radiance he had seen on the chromium warjack.

Once the mechaniks had done all they could for Gully and Foyle, the men took turns under the shelter to eat their meals of white beans and bacon. Soon after Dawson joined them, Lieutenant Lister trudged into the tent, leaning over his bowl to shelter it from the downpour.

Dawson watched as Lister removed his ever-present cigar from his mouth and tucked it into a belt pouch. Streaks of gray in the man's beard glistened in the light of the work lanterns. Unlike Smooth's groomed scalp, Lister's baldness appeared entirely natural. Where hair had once fringed his scalp, he now had only a pair of black hellhound tattoos on the back of his skull.

He ate with mechanical precision: spoon to mouth, six bites, swallow, repeat. With every bite his thick eyebrows formed a deep furrow between his brows, as though he were concentrating on the battle waged in his bowl.

The other men lowered their voices slightly but otherwise ignored the lieutenant's presence. They talked of which cobbler in Tarna made the best waterproof boots, whether King Baird or King Leto had the more talented kitchen staff, and whether the famous doxy Malvina came by her red hair naturally or purchased it from an alchemist. The latter dispute inspired a half-hearted round of boasts and denials until Burns arrived to settle the dispute with a pithy anecdote that caused even a few of the veterans to blush.

Dawson waited until Lister scraped his bowl clean before clearing his throat. "Excuse me, Lieutenant. I was wondering..." He pointed at the back of Lister's skull. When the big man raised a sinister eyebrow, Dawson lowered it again. "I mean, I hear you were present when Captain MacHorne won the company charter."

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Lister turned to stare hard at the other men present. "Who's been telling tales?"

Craig and Bowie left without a word. Burns crossed his arms as he leaned against Gully's knee, smiling like a man expecting to enjoy an entertainment. Smooth and Harrow came in out of the rain, the latter carrying two bowls while the former sat on a mechanic's stool and put aside his crutch. As Smooth accepted his bowl, he looked up, raising his eyebrows at all the mute faces. "What's going on?"

Burns shrugged and made a half-hearted attempt to wipe the smile from his face.

"All right," said Lister. He shoved his empty bowl at Dawson and pointed past Burns. "Gimme that."

Burns tossed him another of the mechanic's stools. Lister slapped it against his butt and sat down hard enough to sink its legs two inches into the ground. He removed the cigar from his pouch and jabbed it in Dawson's direction.

"A lot of wild talk goes on about that game. Every time some little gossip passes it along, it gets a little wilder. Some of the versions I've heard, well, they don't bear repeating. The thing that all of them have in common is, the fellow telling the story wasn't there – not unless it's me."

"Wasn't Sergeant Crawley there, too?"

"Who're you going to believe, me or him?" He popped the cigar into the corner of his mouth.

"You, Sir."

"Yer damned right, me. Now listen tight, because if I hear one more tale about how Sam seduced that Khadoran dilettante or picked his pocket after getting him drunk on amberwine, I'm going to come looking for the minstrel responsible.

"It was back in 603, on the *Gilded Griffon*, a gambling steamer cruising the Rohannor River from Merin to Berck. The festivities included an invitation-only card tournament, which is how we got involved."

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"You and Captain Sam?" asked Dawson.

"And Crawley. He and Sam knew each other from the Rust Market in Merin. They'd signed on together a few times for other companies, strictly as mechanics. That's the same way I knew Creepy, and he'd introduced me to Sam. Anyway, Sam was the one who got invited to the tourney. She didn't like the idea of going alone, so she invited us along to watch her back."

Dawson nodded. The flash of a broad smile caught his eye. He turned just in time to see Smooth cover his expression with another spoonful of beans.

"So there we are, Sam the gambler, me the muscle, and Crawley our spotter."

"Spotter?"

"The one who keeps an eye on the spectators. Don't you know anything about serious gambling?"

"Not really, Sir. No."

"That explains why he signed up with this outfit," said Burns. "He doesn't know a long shot when he sees one."

"Stifle it, Burns." Lister pointed at Dawson. "It's one thing to keep an eye on the other players. Most decent gamblers can do that without any help from a spotter. But in the bigger gambling halls, and on fancy river boats like this one, you also need to keep an eye on the audience. Some gamblers have partners in the crowd, those who can see the other players' hands and tip off their player."

"That's why you never see Sam pick up her cards," said Smooth. "She only tips up the corners to take a peek."

"That's right. Even so, that's enough for a sharp-eyed spotter to catch a hand."

"Didn't you say Crawley was your spotter?"

"Yes, but only to look for other spotters. He wasn't there to signal Sam."

Burns snickered, "If you say so, Lieutenant."

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"I'm starting to think the latrine wasn't dug deep enough today."

"You know, maybe I'll shut up and listen for a while."

"Good thinking. Now, where was I?"

"Crawley's spotting," said Dawson.

"Right. Crawley's up on the balcony, across from Sam. I'm behind her, ready to grab anybody Creepy fingers as a spotter. Sam's acting like she doesn't know either one of us, which is the way they all play it. But everybody knows that half the people watching are there with the players. They're mostly bodyguards, mistresses, lovers, pickpockets, broke gamblers spying on the competition, rich aristocrats scouting for a player to back, all sorts.

"So the first day cuts the players in half. That night, another half get eliminated. Creepy's keeping a sharp eye on the audience. He points out a few spotters, but before I have to get involved, the boat guards are already on them. Security is tight. I'm thinking that's a good sign.

"Second night, the tournament comes down to a single table. Sam's playing a conservative game. Some of the other players are testing her, trying to make her lose her cool. When they see she won't be gulled, they adjust their own games. Pretty soon, everybody gets real boring with their bets. Everybody except one guy."

"Dorenski," said Dawson.

"That wasn't the name he was using, but yeah, him. The great-great grandnephew of Grigor Dorenski, former kapitan in the Winter Guard."

Dawson turned his head to spit, but he stopped himself when he saw no one else was doing the same. He swallowed. He also noticed that the men who slipped away before were now standing just outside the lamp light, along with half a dozen others.

He saw that Sam stood among the audience, hanging back as if to avoid detection. She listened with the others.

"We don't spit on the Winter Guard," Lister said. "It was Telyev Zerkova of the regular Khadoran Army who betrayed Dog Company."



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On cue, all of the men in the tent turned their heads and spit, all except for Harrow. Dawson looked around, but no one else gave any indication that they minded his abstention.

"Zerkova, who turned Dog Company against Khador during the Ordic war. He's the one who hired Dog Company to take Boarsgate, never expecting them to succeed. When the company's commander, Grigor Dorenski, took the site in a single swift action, he drove the Ordic garrison south, where they fled to Midfast, which was under attack by Zerkova's own army. The unexpected reinforcements strengthened the city enough to drive away Zerkova's own army from the city.

"Rather than admit that he himself had caused his own embarrassing defeat, Zerkova refused to honor his contract with the Devil Dogs. After that, Dorenski revised the Company Charter in his own blood. Not if they were the last employer on Caen would they take a single red kuppek. We do the same today, honoring Dorenski's decision. You know this much, don't you, Dawson?"

"Yes, Sir," said Dawson. "But it seems much more vivid to hear you tell it."

Burns coughed, but everyone distinctly heard him say "Asskisser!"

"Hrumph!" Lister chewed his cigar while his eyes studied Dawson's face. "Well, of course it's more vivid when I tell it. I've been a Devil Dog longer than anyone but Sam and Creepy."

"You aren't going to tell him you were there for the siege of Boarsgate, are you, Lieutenant?" asked Burns.

"You ready to fetch that shovel?"

"No, Sir."

"Now, where was I?"

"The final table," said Dawson. "Dorenski's great-great grandnephew."

"Right. He didn't call himself Dorenski, but that wasn't unusual. Most of the noble gamblers traveled under assumed identities to spare their families disgrace when they lost and notoriety when they won. Of course,

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it was no great trick to ferret out a gambler's true identity. I knew who it was sitting across the table from Sam, and so did she."

"Did she know he'd bet the Dog Company charter?"

"Which one of us is telling this story? You or me?"

"You are, Lieutenant."

"I'm starting to think Burns has been a bad influence on you."

"Truer words," said Smooth.

Burns raised a fist to slug him in the arm, but Smooth stopped him with a warning finger.

"Ah, I'll save it for when your leg heals."

"I'll beat you unconscious with this bad leg. Just like that warjack and his arm."

"Boys," warned Lister.

"Sir," said Burns and Smooth in unison.

Lister plucked the cigar out of his mouth and pointed once again at Dawson. "Yes, Sam knew Dorenski owned the Devil Dogs charter. Everybody did. It was the one thing he was known for. Every once in a while someone would offer him two kuppeks for it."

"Why?" said Dawson.

"You see, Dog Company had been inactive for so long, nobody thought it was worth two copper coins. It didn't matter that Dorenski said he wouldn't sell it for a hundred thousand koltinas. For him, the Devil Dogs' charter was a matter of family honor. For everybody else, it had become a bad joke.

"The only one who didn't think so was Sam." Lister took a long pull on his cigar, as if it were lit and he were drawing smoke deeply into his lungs. When he released the breath, his eyes focused on a point far beyond the men or warjacks in front of him. Then with no prompting from anyone else, he resumed his story.

"Eventually the game came down to three players, Sam, Dorenski, and a snake-eyed little Ryn, no taller than Creepy." Lister relaxed his eyelids

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in imitation of a reptile's slitted gaze. "Sam was still playing it cautious. Dorenski and the Ryn took turns showing big wagers at each other. It got to the point where they were dropping five or ten times the ante on their opening bets.

"They took turns calling each other's bluff, too. Each of the men was only about half-good at reading the other. Every time one of them was on the verge of bust, the other one would push a hand too far. Now and then Sam would take a bite out of one or the other, but neither one of them pushed back when she had a good hand.

"I was getting suspicious, but every time I looked up at Creepy he shook his head. If there was any funny business going on, I couldn't spot it either. But then it didn't matter. Dorenski went all-in, and the Ryn called his bet. Dorenski went bust."

"But how did Sam win the charter if he was out of the game?" said Dawson.

Burns rolled his eyes toward the canvas roof. The dripping from the runoff grew louder than the dying rain.

"The house declared an hour's intermission. I went to the bar to have a word with Sam. Creepy had the same idea, but she never showed up. She stayed at the table talking to Dorenski. By the time the rest of us got back, they'd cut a deal.

"Sam split her chips to keep him in the game. The Ryn didn't like that one bit, but the house backed the arrangement; there was nothing in their rules against it. If the Ryn didn't like it, he could forfeit the rest of his chips. Needless to say, he didn't like that idea any better. He stayed in. But from that point on, it was a completely different game.

"I expected Dorenski and Sam to work together, but it didn't look like that's what they had in mind. When he had a strong hand, Dorenski went after Sam as hard as he did the Ryn. The difference was that the Ryn didn't learn until too late that Dorenski had changed his game. Before he knew it, Dorenski had cleaned him out.

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"That's when Dorenski pulled out the charter and laid it beside his chips. It was only then that we understood the deal Sam had made with him. She had agreed to back him on one condition: if she beat him in the end, she'd win the charter as well as his money."

"But if he wouldn't sell it at any price, why would he gamble it away?"

Lister shrugged. "That's where a lot of folks go wrong when they tell the story. It could be that gambling with his family honor gave him a thrill. Some think he saw something in Sam that made him want to lose it to her. Others say he never thought he'd lose. Maybe he'd just had too much brandy. The truth is, only Dorenski knows."

Dawson nodded, realized his mouth was open, and closed it. "What happened next?"

"You know what happened. Sam beat him."

Dawson stared, an expectant expression on his face, but Lister shrugged and chewed his cigar.

"But isn't there more to the story?"

"Sure, but you already know that part. Sam invested the money she'd won in warjacks, slug guns, nets, all the top-quality gear you Dogs enjoy humping across gods-forsaken territories like the Wythmoor. Two years later, the Devil Dogs were once more a respected mercenary company, although by the looks of you lot I can understand why some might think our standards are slipping."

"But didn't you ask her why she staked Dorenski instead of just challenging him to a game over the contract?"

Lister removed his cigar, inspected the wet end, and stuck it back in his mouth. "As a matter of fact, I did."

"What did she say?"

"She said Dorenski needed a reason to put that contract on the table, so she gave him one."

Lister stood and stretched his back as he looked around at his audience. Nearly half the company had gathered around the 'jack tent. "Now I know

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Sergeant Crawley must be looking for some of you. You'd better report before I point him in your direction. The rest of you, get some sack time. Now that the rain's gone, we'll move out."

The gathering disintegrated as Lister walked away. Harrow handed Smooth his crutch, and the two big men walked out together.

Dawson thought he was the last to leave, but as he stepped out of the tent he heard the captain's voice. "Nice job, Dawson."

"Captain?" His brows met in a question.

"You got Lister to tell one of his favorite old stories. There's nothing like it for cheering the Dogs after a black day."

"I didn't mean to pry," he said.

"What, about the story of the card game?"

"It's just that before we left Tarna, Corporals Burns and Harrow told me...I mean, it's more like they suggested...that is, they implied that maybe I shouldn't be so curious."

Sam smiled. "But you were curious enough to ask about the game."

"Well, I'd heard a different version, and somebody mentioned I might like to hear the Lieutenant's."

"Now that you've heard it, which one do you think is true?"

Dawson hesitated, thinking it over. He shrugged. "I figure they're both true, as far as it goes."

"As far as it goes?"

"Everybody sees things from a different angle. For a little while, in the depot, Burns and I saw the back of that new warjack. And we saw the iron lich before anybody else. You saw whatever was on the roof, but only through the glass. And then there was the fire, and all the smoke, and then the rain. Everybody saw the fight from a different angle, some of us better than others, some of us worse. And there were lots of things nobody saw at all."

Sam's smile faded. She looked hard into Dawson's face, turning her head as if she were trying to see him from a new angle. "Is there something you want to ask me about the game, Dawson?"

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"Were you afraid?" he said at once. "Whatever it was you arranged with Dorenski, was it something that made you afraid of losing?"

Sam blinked, apparently surprised at the question. Her smile gradually returned, and she said, "You know what, Dawson, I was scared half to death. You want to know something else?"

"Yes'm."

"That's how I knew I was going to win."



Sergeant Crawley's whistle roused the camp long before dawn. "Get moving, Dogs! We've got ourselves a hot trail."

The entire Company leaped into action. There was none of the usual grousing and chatter as they broke camp and assembled in their assigned units. Two men in every unit carried a lantern rather than return it to the supply wagon. Harrow was already waiting to lead the way toward the path he had discovered.

The strange warjack's tracks followed the Slayer's clawed prints along a path of trampled brush and scarred trees. Just over a mile through the southern Wythmoor, the Dogs encountered the end result of that pursuit.

No one needed a flare from Harrow to see the steaming Cryx light oozing away from the helljack's ruined body. Its chimney had long since ceased chuffing smoke, and no steam rose from the cold necrotite engine. A pair of gleaming saw blades protruded from the bulky Slayer's rear chassis, but Crawley pointed their attention to a wavy line burned through the thick black iron of the helljack's front.

"What on Caen could do that sort of damage?"

Sam frowned. "I've seen lightning burn that hot, but not in such a regular line."

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"Here's another one," said Burns. He pointed to a deep dent just under one of the Slayer's shoulder joints. "It looks like an impact, but there's the same deep burn."

Sam let one hand drop to her sword hilt. "If I were a betting woman, I'd wager whatever hit the Slayer there gave its cortex one hell of a shock. It doesn't look like the blast came from the warjack we fought in the depot."

"No," said Crawley. "It must be from its marshal."

"Or warcaster," countered Sam. "Let's face it, from what little we've seen, we're looking at something that can fly. You can't tell me there isn't magic in that."

No one contradicted her.

"What interests me is what we don't see here," said Lister.

"The arm," Sam agreed. "The other warjack chased down this one to get its arm back."

Burns whistled. "That's one tough bastard of a warjack."

Crawley pointed at Harrow, who signaled from a spot fifty yards farther south. "He's found something else."

The lich overseer lay in a tangle, burned and battered by the same weapon that had helped bring down the Slayer. Two of its three skulls had been shattered to bone chips. The third stared blankly at the gray sky.

McBride came running back from his turn as forward scout. "Found the warjack. Quarter mile ahead. And it's not alone."

"Did you see its warcaster?"

McBride shook his head. "No, but it's standing in some kind of lighted metal structure. There's a smaller 'jack that looks like it's repairing the big one."

"Repairing it?" said Crawley.

"That's what it looks like, yes, Sergeant."

Sam ordered the big lugs topped off with coal and water. "We'll leave the supply wagon here," she said. "Crawley, have the other two wagons follow us, keeping about a hundred yards behind. I don't want our target

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to see them before we're ready to say hello, but I want them to move in as soon as they see us make contact."

"Yes'm." He pointed at the driver's seat of Gully's wagon. "Smooth, welcome to management. Don't get comfortable."

The big man squeezed in between the two drivers, grinning as he hugged them in a powerful grip. "This'll be fun."

"Douse lanterns," said Sam. "Leave them in the wagon."

By the diffused moonlight, Sam divided the remaining Devil Dogs into three units. The first included Burns, Dawson, Morris, and Fraser. They followed her as she marched Gully and Foyle in the direction McBride had indicated. Lister and Crawley took the others.

"I want you two to pinch the flanks, left and right," she pointed to Lister and Crawley in turn. "Principal target is the one we've seen before, but if the little one tries to escape, stop it. I'm sending Foyle and Gully in hard. We know there's no point trying to knock it down, so I'm going to try to keep it stalled. Let's take a lesson from the Cryx and take out its arms."

"What if its controller shows up?"

Sam nodded. "In that case, we change targets. If we move fast, we'll have the warjack inoperative before we need to worry about reinforcements. Any other questions?"

There were none.

"All right, Dogs. Let's collect our prize and get out of this damned swamp."

Sam led the way up the middle. At her sides, Gully and Foyle trampled the brush flat. From the south, distant thunder echoed their heavy footsteps. Sam reined in Foyle to keep the warjacks moving in pace with each other, just fast enough to bend the black towers of their exhaust behind them.

As the Dogs moved forward, a flash of lightning from the south cast the hill in silhouette. Another peal of thunder struck, far closer than the previous one. After blinking away the dazzling effect of the lightning, the Dogs saw what McBride had spotted earlier.



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The structure stood about thirty yards below the crest of a hill, sheltered to the east, west, and south by stands of ash and oak. Light from the structure limned the branches and the scant remaining leaves of the trees in silver. Two moving lights and occasional flurries of sparks added a sense of industry to an otherwise lonely haunt.

With a base no more than ten feet in diameter, the building rested on a circular foundation of what appeared to be polished steel. Every surface was inlaid with a darker metal, its true color obscured by the blue-white lights. Four graceful braces supported an arrangement of bi-metal beams which in turn held up a weird, four-lobed cupola about fifteen feet above the ground.

There was another square set inside the outer one, offset by forty-five degrees. From the beams descended pipes and corrugated rubber tubes of varying thickness, from the width of a man's finger to the circumference of his arm. The larger pipes fitted against the big warjack's chassis, holding it in place as smaller tubes extending from the structure's support columns connected to ports in the warjack's abdomen. The glass lenses nearest the ports shone with energy, humming as they seemingly recharged the war machine.

There could be no doubt it was the same warjack the Dogs had fought at the Ordic supply depot. The injuries were identical, including the severed arm, now hanging from cables beside the gaping hole in its shoulder.

Another mechanical construct stepped carefully through the columns and pipes of the station and around the larger warjack. It walked on three legs rather than four, its economical motions resembling a clockwork device more than a war machine, each careful limb finding its place before either of the others moved.

The construct's three legs converged in a steel base. Beneath it hung the lower extremity of a coil glowing with blue-white energy. Upon the base sat a pair of rotating brass gears supporting a squat cylinder. Inset with chromium plates and blue lenses, this abdominal section supported yet

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another brass rotor. On top of it all sat a “head” unit from which protruded a fixed radial saw, a small steel claw, and the top of the glass coil that formed the construct’s axis.

The three-legged construct extended its saw to cut away a ragged corner of chassis on the heavy warjack’s shoulder wound. As sparks cascaded from the metal, a pair of helm-sized globes descended from the roof of the structure.

They appeared like little more than floating chromium balls, each with one greater and two lesser “eye” lenses and a gripping claw attached by a simple gear-and-piston arm. Heeding some invisible command, they gripped the torn metal and held it fast as the repair construct sheared off the damaged metal.

“McBride saw only one of the little ones earlier,” said Sam. “Let’s take them down before any more show up.”

Drawing her stun sword, Sam looked left and right. The gloom obscured the movements of her flanking units, but she nodded as if she had seen them—or as if she simply trusted them to be where she had directed.

“Come on, you big lugs,” she said to her warjacks: “Straight up the middle, double-quick!”

She ran with them. Just as Foyle approached his full speed, the larger repair construct stepped out of the recharging station to turn its inhuman “head” in their direction. One of the floating spheres followed it, clenching its claw in a nervous gesture.

“They spotted us,” said Sam. “Charge!”

Foyle unleash his full speed, raising the stun lance high as it followed the point of Sam’s sword toward the construct repairing the warjack. Sam remained closer to Gully, who raised his enormous battle blade high above his head as he followed his smaller counterpart.

One of the floating globes emitted a high squealing alert and clutched a nearby pillar in a mockery of human fright. The other immediately began fleeing east, piping and whirring in alarm.

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Still holding her sword in one hand, Sam drew her long pistol and aimed without missing a step. She fired. Sparks and shattered glass flew from the fleeing servitor, silencing its alarm and sending it falling to the ground.

That was the only signal Crawley's unit needed. Rushing out from the cover of the alders, Crawley's unit fell upon the larger repair construct. It whirred and peeped in alarm, sounding less like a jack under assault by professional soldiers than a pipe organ under attack by an inquisitive child. Its fixed saw reached out, but Crawley smashed it blunt with his pick axe. Swire smashed the protruding coil as its energy surged to form a welding arc. The others fell upon the construct's legs, smashing the brass cogs and levering the legs away from the base.

Behind its felled companion, the heavy warjack stirred in its recharging cradle. At some silent signal, the cylindrical supports withdrew. An angry whine in the saw-flinging arm grew louder as it turned to face its attackers.

This time it was a moment too late. Foyle's stun lance struck deep into the warjack's silvery chest plate. Lightning crackled along the lance, and the stricken warjack shuddered in a dance of electricity.

"Gully, break the arm!" Sam pointed with her sword.

The heavy Nomad lunged with all its weight. Its battle blade sheared the clockwork gears driving the saw axle in the shoulder unit. With a pathetic whine of deceleration, the saw-flinger's rising fury dissipated.

Lister's unit had already intercepted the second little globe, which had fled in the opposite direction. With fierce but precise blows, the Devil Dogs batted it down with their pick-axes. The point of Craig's axe caught the globe's "elbow" and pinned it to the ground. Bowie finished the job by impaling its spherical chassis. With a pitiable whine, the construct gave up the last of its protest.

Back at the recharge cradle, at Sam's command, Foyle withdrew its lance and stabbed again. This time the lance gouged a deep crease upon the warjack's chromed chassis, but the point did not penetrate far enough

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to stun the machine. Yet even as the wounded warjack raised its partially reconnected gripping arm to strike, Gully lopped it off with a single stroke.

Even armless, the heavy warjack struggled against the big lugs. "Beat it down!" Sam told them. They slammed the foe with their shields. Armless, it could do little more than twist and whirl in impotent desperation.

"Wait!" called Sam. When the war machines paused, she thrust her stun blade up into the enemy warjack's abdomen. Like a smaller version of Foyle's lance, her sword crackled with cortex-stunning lightning. The dismembered warjack shuddered, its legs twitching in an involuntary lightning dance. As if in sympathy, lightning exploded just above the hill, the crash of thunder striking simultaneously with the flash. "All right, Dogs! Take it down!"

All three units converged on the warjack as Sam ordered the big lugs, "Out!"

Once they got in close with their pick axes, the Dogs knew instinctively where to strike, smashing exposed cogs and denting power trains beyond functionality. They continued until the blue lenses of the warjack flickered and Sam shouted, "That's enough. Now, hold it steady!"

"Are you sure, Sam?" said Lister.

"I know what I'm doing. Just hold it down."

As the Dogs pinned the warjack's remaining limbs, Sam plunged her blade deep into the chassis. At her nod, Lister moved over and peeled away the metal with his pick-axe. After a peek inside, Sam stabbed again, widening the wound. She did it three more times, until Lister pried back the metal to reveal the glowing blue cortex.

With a few more strokes of her blade, Sam severed the connections. The warjack's last lights faded, and its limbs slumped with a pitiful whirring sound. She pulled out her trophy.

"Now this should give the Old Man something to study. Get the rest of this thing loaded on the wagon, along with the others."

It took Smooth and the drivers a few minutes to arrive, so swiftly had the assault succeeded. Once they had the wagon turned around, Sam

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directed Gully and Foyle to tip the body of the enemy warjack into the wagon and shove it onto the iron-reinforced bed. Lister's unit carried the machine's severed arm and heaved it over the wagon side to join the body.

"This isn't as heavy as it looks," remarked Lister.

"It's still pretty damned heavy, you ask me," grunted Burns. "Sir!"

Once the bulk of the work was done, Lister and Burns went back to fetch the felled globes. Sam beckoned to Harrow and together climbed the hill for a look beyond. Somewhere near, the Cygnaran town of Calbeck lay across the river.

The rest of the Dogs secured the heavy warjack for travel and added the smaller constructs to the load. All told, they made for heavier cargo than the wagon was used to hauling, but Crawley grudgingly approved the job.

As they were finishing, Lister climbed the hill to join Sam and Harrow, but they were already running back. "Move it!" said Sam. "Move it fast!"

Lister fell in with Sam and Harrow. "What is it?"

"Warcaster," said Sam. "This time she's brought friends."

The wagon drivers slapped the reins. Smooth let himself fall back into the wagon, turning around to sit with his back against the seat. He held his slug gun at the ready as the rest of the Dogs ran beside the accelerating wagon.

They turned their heads at each new flash of lightning in the coming dawn, sometimes catching the barest glimpse of their pursuers. From the wagon, Smooth pointed upward and said, "Morrow preserve us!"

Seven winged figures soared above the ridge of the hill and descended toward the retreating Devil Dogs.

Those on either flank appeared perfectly identical: in the fleeting radiance of the storm, their bodies gleamed with chrome and brass. Their curvaceous figures were undeniably feminine, yet they were over seven feet tall and every inch metallic, from their immobile faces to the razor-sharp edges of their brass wings. In one hand each held sharp steel blades. In the other, a heavy gauntlet hinted at unrevealed power.

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Their leader differed in every detail. Her wings spread three times wider than those of her subordinates, every bladed feather connected by its own powered gear. The elegant lines of her armor were at once sleeker and more elaborate than the others, from the imperial wings of her headpiece to the tall heels on her gleaming boots. She held a massive staff, itself a clockwork device bristling with the same blue-white energy the Dogs had seen at the recharging station. Yet for all of these distinguishing features, what set the leader apart from her minions was the human face beneath her helm, the human flesh exposed at her shoulders, and the human expression of anger in her eyes.

"It *was* an angel!" Dawson shouted at Smooth.

"We have what we came for," yelled Sam. "Time to leave. Go, go, go!"

The horses caught the men's panic, shrieking as they pulled the heavy cargo over the rough terrain. Every time the wheels struck a rut, Smooth bounced side to side. The armless warjack began sliding toward him. With his good leg, he pushed himself into the corner of the wagon bed and braced for the worst.

Another flash lit up the sky. Rather than thunder, a throbbing scream accompanied the blue-white glare. The ray shot forth from the warcaster's staff. Where it stroked Gully's bulky chassis, the beam left a white-hot line. Flames licked up where the intense heat touched oil or debris upon the warjack's iron skin. The wound faded from white to red as Gully chugged along, falling behind as Foyle moved up to challenge the wagon for the lead.

A blue-white bolt struck the ground beside the wagon, covering its passengers with wet turf and detritus while knocking Burns and McBride to the ground. Burns was the first to rise. He grabbed McBride by the belt and hauled him back to his feet. "Quit lollygagging!"

Another blast came down. Dawson turned to see the source. The energy bolts shot out from the clockwork angels' gauntlets, one after the

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next. They fell all around the retreating Dogs, knocking them down and hurling the wagon side to side.

The others took up Sam's call as they neared the site where they had left the other two wagons. In the confusion among the storm, the dawn's gloom, and the chaos of the sudden retreat, the drivers and mechanics struggled to turn the wagons around before their soldiers arrived.

Dawson looked to the side to see Morris running beside him, then looked back just as another angel hurled a bolt of energy. The earth exploded between them, showering them both in fragments of flame. They stared at each other in disbelief, and relief, that they had survived. They continued running, slapping the hot debris from their skin.

Another screaming ray from the warcaster's staff caught the fleeing Gully. This time the beam tore through his armor plating to blast brass and tin reservoirs out of the wound, along with a long tongue of flame and a black cloud. The war machine managed a few more steps before crashing down in heap of steam, fire, and smoke.

"Faster, Foyle!" Sam cried. Her glistening eyes lingered on the fallen Nomad for a moment before she heeded her own advice.

A sound of rushing air descended toward Dawson and Morris. Dawson threw himself aside, rolling up with his slug gun cradled in both arms. As three clockwork angels swooped past Morris, Dawson aimed and fired at the nearest.

As if by some intuition, the angel's wings contracted, catching the brunt of the blow. Even so, the impact was enough to knock the angel to the ground. Dawson pulled his utility knife from its sheath and started to run toward the foe, but a moan from Morris stopped him. He went instead to his fallen comrade.

The angel's sword had opened Morris from ribs to shoulder. Hot blood sprayed Dawson in the face as Morris struggled to breathe, his open lung gaping through his sundered ribcage. He mouthed a word, but only blood

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came out. Dawson didn't need to hear it. He recognized it by the shape of Morris's lips: "Isla."

"Dawson, get out of there!" Burns bellowed.

Another trio of angels descended. They thrust their swords down in unison. Like the blades of a plow, they reached down to tear him into furrows.

Once more Dawson threw himself to the ground. He stood up lighter, and for a moment he turned around like a dog chasing its tail to see what had been cut off of him. It was only his pack.

Above him, another slug round exploded. He looked up to see the creamy plume of Burn's shot trailing off the wings of another clockwork angel. Whether it was by instinct or design, their wings folded to shield them from each of the incoming slugs.

"It's no good," Dawson yelled. "The wings are shields!" He tried to run, realized he had lost his way, and turned himself around, searching for some sign of his company. He focused on the rattling clamor of the wagon and ran toward it.

"There you are!" Burns grabbed him by the arm and pulled him along. "I thought they got you."

"They killed Morris," shouted Dawson. "The angels use their wings as shields."

"Right. Tell Sam. Hurry up!"

They didn't have far to run. Sam was busy turning the congestion of all three wagons converging on the same space into an advantage. "Circle them! Foyle, move to the rear. Smash them if they come close."

Lister and Crawley repeated her commands, each in his own fashion. While the clockwork angels and their mistress circled high above, the men hunkered down behind shelter.

"Captain," said Dawson, half breathless. "The clockwork angels, they use their wings to protect themselves against gunfire."

Sam shook her head, as if she couldn't believe the news.



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"If that's true, Sam," said Lister, coming up from behind, "then our only hope might be to cut and run."

They threw themselves to the ground as the clockwork angels unleashed another volley of energy blasts. Seconds later, the fliers dived toward the Dogs, slashing with their keen blades. One trio of angels swept past Foyle, who thrust uselessly with a stun lance that seemed sluggish compared to the angels' lighting. Another winged trio fell upon a pair of drivers, whose eviscerated corpses fell to the ground.

Dawson picked himself up. "Lieutenant, we've lost so much already. Gully's gone. Morris is dead. We can't just run now. They'll cut us down!"

"Get a grip on yourself, Private."

"What about the leader?" said Sam. "Do her wings shield her too?"

"I don't—" Dawson began to say. "I bet they don't. Her wings are much larger than the others. She flies differently, too. I don't see how she could move them in time."

Sam considered his opinion.

"Besides," Dawson added. "She's not like the other ones. Beneath that armor, she's flesh and blood. If we hurt her, she might withdraw."

Sam made a silent calculation and nodded. "All right, Dawson. I'm going to cover that bet." With a glance upward, she lowered her voice. "Pass it low to all the men. The next time they come near, the first volley is on all those great big angels. Reload double-quick. If we can draw her close, we can then concentrate all fire on their leader."

Lister, Crawley, and Dawson passed the word around in whispers. The soldiers readied their slug guns, while the drivers and mechanics produced the pistols they carried in case of emergencies or a lamed horse. "Second volley, all on the leader," Dawson reminded one of the drivers.

Thunder rolled toward them, but not from the south. This time the rumbling came from the west, and it came before the flash of lightning.

"Oh, hell!" cried Burns. "They've surrounded us."

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Sam cocked her head, listening. Glancing up to ensure no angels were poised to drop on her, she leaped onto the supply wagon and stood tall, scanning the west for some sign of what approached.

The thunderous sound resolved itself into the rumble of horse hooves. Half a dozen mounted men rode toward the Devil Dogs' wagons. At their front was a Cygnaran banner.

"Sam, get down!" Crawley screamed.

Without pausing to look, Sam folded forward, tumbling off the wagon and onto the ground. A trio of clockwork angels swept past the space she had just occupied, their swords cutting chunks out of the wagon panels.

Their leader plunged down an instant later, her radiant staff striking the driver's seat completely off the wagon before she withdrew.

Sam shook her head clear. "Looks like she and I had the same idea."

"What do we do now?" asked Crawley.

"Same plan, only this time we know she's coming. All fire on the leader."

"How can you be sure she's coming again?"

"I'll give her a reason."

Sam clambered back up on the wagon, stood tall, and aimed her hand cannon. As Crawley and Lister shouted at her to come down, she waited as the angels descended. She trained her cannon on the trio, lowering herself to a half-crouch, steadying the butt of the pistol with her off-hand. As they came into range, Sam bent her knees and leaped back, turning to face the opposite direction.

The warcaster swooped directly toward Sam, her staff already surging with energy. Sam fired as she fell back into the shelter between the wagons.

A roar of slug guns deafened the Dogs. The slugs ricocheted a few feet from the warcaster, deflected by invisible energy shielding her body. Despite the defense, her wings bent backwards from the impact, her armored body jerking out of her intended path.

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Nearby, the clockwork angels unleashed metallic shrieks at the sight of their leader falling from the sky. They plunged toward her.

Before they arrived, the winged warcaster leaped back up to perch – just as Sam had done a moment earlier – on the edge of the supply wagon. She shook out her bent wings like a cloak and looked down at Sam with ice-blue eyes. Then, with an air of surprise, she touched her cheek and looked down at the blood on her fingers.

Sam stared back at her adversary, while all around her the Devil Dogs reloaded their slug guns and pistols.

The warcaster glanced up as the Cygnaran cavalry arrived. At their head was a white-haired man clad all in blue and gold armor. He too carried a staff, but instead of the angel's strange radiance, his crackled with lightning.

The winged warcaster leaped from the wagon, taking flight even as the Devil Dogs took aim. Before anyone could draw a bead on her, the clockwork angels moved in to shield her with their wings. Together they flew south, past the lonely hill and into the darkness of the storm.

One by one the Devil Dogs stood to survey their surroundings.

“Take care of those fires,” snapped Crawley, grabbing a sand bucket and leading the way to the flaming corner of the supply wagon.

Without a word, Dawson walked in the opposite direction. Smooth pulled himself up on his crutch and began to go after him, but Harrow shook his head. Together they watched as Dawson knelt by Morris's body. They saw that he was speaking to the dead man, but they couldn't hear the words. When Dawson was finished, he removed three medallions from the Morris's neck and placed them around his own.

The riders took up defensive positions around the triangle of wagons, but their leader dismounted and went straight to Sam. Without preamble, he said, “I received your message.”

“We've got a little more to show for our efforts since I sent that,” said Sam.

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"Good timing, Old Man," said Burns. "You showed up just in time to watch us finish the job without any help."

The man's white eyebrows rose, but instead of responding to Burns he turned to Sam. "Is this the one who bought half a talking horse?"

Sam smothered a laugh with one gloved hand. "Corporal 'Bulletproof' Burns, Artificer General Nemo."

Nemo peered at the bullet hole in Burns's helmet. "A hole to the skull and he's back in the field? It's wondrous what they can do with head injuries these days."

"Never underestimate the determination of a Devil Dog." Sam saw no need to clarify *how* Burns had earned the bullet hole. "Come see what their sacrifice bought you. Your prizes are a little worse for the wear, but we have them."

The captain led Nemo to the wagon and showed him the dismembered warjack and its attendant constructs. Nemo lifted the spherical servitor and gazed into its dead lens. He poked a finger into the bullet hole that brought it down and shot a rueful glance at Burns.

"Well done, Sam. I'll be more than glad to sign off on that bonus we discussed."

"Don't speak too soon," she said. "I've something else to show you."

She led him to the crest of the hill just as dawn broke fully through the gray clouds. Sam gestured for Nemo to join her at the edge of a prominence overlooking the river. There they looked across the Dragon's Tongue, at the sight that had so startled her as they were preparing to move the wagons.

In the distance they could see a riverside town teeming with activity in the halo of blue-white lights. Sam watched Nemo as he surveyed the scene she had already viewed.

Clockwork figures were everywhere, but without the telltale steam exhaust produced by mechanical workmanship. The strange light emanating from their helms, and various other apertures, gave away their inhuman natures.



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Those guarding the outer streets of the town bore heavy maces and shields, similarly illuminated by the strange energies common to the warjacks and “angels” the Dogs had defeated. The shields were especially curious, their crescent design suggesting some unknown purpose. Behind these defenders stood ranks of halberdiers, their figures no less feminine for their steely construction.

Other clockwork figures – men this time – patrolled the inner regions of the town of Calbeck. They carried no separate weapons, but marched with raised fists, one enhanced with a heavy punching blade, the other bristling with gun barrels. At the intersections of the larger streets, smaller three-legged and larger four-legged warjacks stood watch.

A new building towered far above it all, stretching out four vast, arched legs to touch the town’s four corners. Far larger than the recharging station, it was a rising tower of brass, steel, glass, suffused with the eerie blue-white light that powered all their machines. Four petals yawned open around a huge gray orb atop the structure. The tower’s elegant lines spoke as much of art as they did to efficiency, pointing to the sky like the cathedral of an alien god.

As Sebastian Nemo watched, the flying warcaster and her clockwork angels arrived to alight atop the unfinished tower. The warcaster turned to look back toward the Ordic bank. Her eyes turned directly toward the hill on which Sam and Nemo stood.

The Artificer General lowered the spyglass. “What have you brought me, Sam?”

“Some of the boys were worried you’d sent us on a gobber hunt.”

Nemo shot her a hard look, but his expression softened. “Well, I certainly didn’t think you’d bring me a dragon! But you, Captain Samantha MacHorne, you have brought me right to the dragon’s lair.”

“With that in mind, and considering the difficulty we faced, I’d be remiss in my duty to the boys, and the men, if I didn’t suggest an additional bonus is in order.”

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With a glance across the river at occupied Calbeck, Nemo nodded slowly. "I'll revise your letter of credit accordingly."

"You want us to give you an escort back anywhere?"

"No," said Nemo. "I'll send a messenger to bring the rest of my forces here. I don't know what this new enemy across the river intends to do there, but you can bet that I will find out."



Dawson counted the coins before signing two copies of the receipt. The bank clerk countersigned them both and pushed one back along with a calfskin purse. "Courtesy of the establishment, Private Dawson. Always a pleasure to do business with the Devil Dogs."

"At least when we're flush from a new contract, right?"

"I assure you, Sir—"

Dawson tipped him a wink. "I'm kidding. When will she start receiving the money?"

"The next courier reaches Carre Dova in two days. Young Isla should receive the payment the day after."

"And the medallion?"

"Yes, Private, and the medallion. The delivery receipt should come back in a week or so." The clerk bobbed his head, eager to ingratiate himself with a new client. Dawson walked away, smiling as he shook his head.

As he left the bank, he saw a familiar trollkin peddling roast chickens that dangled from a stick she held across her big blue shoulders. Dawson beckoned her over and held up a finger. When he saw a legless man navigating the boardwalk by gripping a pair of blocks, he changed his order to two and delivered the second to the beggar.

"Don't I know you?" said the beggar.

Dawson shrugged and dropped a handful of coins into the man's pocket. "Buy yourself something to wash it down."

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As Dawson walked away, the beggar called after him. "I like your new jacket, Devil Dog," he said. "I remember you now."

Dawson tore off a drumstick and waved goodbye with it.

As he rounded the corner, he almost collided with Bowie, who'd come pelting down the cross-street. "There you are, Dawson! Sam wants all the boys back at the warehouse for first briefing."

"Oh, come on," Dawson complained. "I wish she'd pick someone else to fetch the boys this time. I just grabbed dinner."

"She isn't sending you," said Bowie, pushing past to head on toward the Rust Market. "She sent me."







## IRON KINGDOMS INDEX

***Ancient Icthier:*** An ancient city in the southernmost Protectorate, deemed the source of western Immoren's Menite civilization and the original Canon of True Law.

***Armsdeep Lake:*** This is a massive lake and river at the heart of Rhul, and source of the Black River. The Rhulic cities of Ghord, Ulgar, and Brunder are along its shores.

***Battlegroup:*** A warcaster and the warjacks he controls.

***Berck:*** Ordic port city, largest city in Ord and home port of the Ordic Royal Navy.

***Black River:*** Longest river in western Immoren, which connects Rhul, Llael, and Cygnar. Merywyn, Corvis, and Caspia-Sul rest on this river and it forms the eastern border of Cygnar, separating it from the Bloodstone Marches.

***Blackclad:*** Term applied to enigmatic and potentially dangerous mystics who are part of an ancient secret society that draws on the destructive power of the elements and the wilderness.

***Blackwater:*** Cryxian port city and home to its pirate raider fleet.

***Bloodstone Marches:*** A large barren geographical region between the Bloodstone Desert and western Immoren, occupied by tribal Idrians, farrow, and the Skorne Army of the Western Reaches.

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**Caen:** Name of the world containing the Iron Kingdoms, Immoren, Zu, etc. Sometimes contrasted as the material world as opposed to the spiritual world of Urcaen.

**Carre Dova:** Ordic port city, located on the northern shore of the Bay of Stone.

**Caspia:** Capital of Cygnar, the 'City of Walls' and only human city not to fall to the Orgoth.

**Ceryl:** Cygnaran port city, home of the Fraternal Order of Wizardry and the Cygnaran Navy's Northern Fleet.

**Chatterstones:** District of Five Fingers on Hospice Island, notable for a large mass graveyard filled during a former plague on the island.

**Colossal:** Massive predecessors to the modern steamjacks, these great machines were originally constructed during the Rebellion against the Orgoth.

**Cortex:** The highly arcane mechanical device that gives a steamjack its limited intelligence.

**Corvis:** Northeastern Cygnaran city occupying the conjunction of the Black River and Dragon's Tongue River, also called the "City of Ghosts."

**Crael Valley:** Farm valley in northern Cygnar, south of Bainsmarket, briefly seized and held by Madrak Ironhide and the united kriels.

**Cryx:** Also known as the Nightmare Empire, an island kingdom of necromancers, undead, and pirates in southwest ruled by Toruk the Dragonfather.

**Cygnar:** Southernmost of the Iron Kingdom, ruled by King Leto Raelthorne, bearing the Cygnus on its flag.

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**Deepwood Tower:** Northern Cygnaran border fortress, destroyed in 608 AR.

**Dragon:** Immortal and unnatural creatures spawned by Lord Toruk, the first and greatest of their number. Dragons are hostile to one another, and particularly to their progenitor, and rarely notice the affairs of lesser beings.

**Dragon's Tongue River:** River stretching from Corvis to the Bay of Stone which separates Cygnar from Ord and is relied upon by a number of river towns such as Point Bourne, Tarna, and Five Fingers.

**Drer Drakkerung:** Ruins of the former Orgoth capital city on the Garlghast Island, now claimed by Cryx and deemed a seat of Lich Lord Terminus.

**Eastwall:** Southeastern Cygnaran fortress along the Black River.

**Fellig:** Northern Cygnaran city in the Thornwood, currently partly occupied by Ordic troops and cut off from Cygnar.

**Fisherbrook:** Former Cygnaran town north of the Dragon's Tongue River, razed in 607 AR by the Protectorate's Northern Crusade.

**Five Fingers:** Ordic port city known for its gambling, criminal gangs, and smuggling trade, also known as 'the Port of Deceit.'

**Garlghast:** Northernmost and largest of the Scharde islands, site of former Orgoth capital of Drer Drakkerung, partially occupied by Cryx.

**Gbord:** Capital of Rhul, on northeastern shore of Armsdeep Lake.

**Gobber:** A diminutive race of inquisitive, nimble, and entrepreneurial individuals that have adapted well to the cities of men. Most gobbers are around three feet tall. Gobbers are known to have undeniable aptitude for mechanical devices and alchemy.

## THE DEVIL'S PAY

***Gun Mage:*** An arcanist capable of channeling their arcane energy into rune shots fired from their magelock pistols.

***Hammerfall:*** Western Rhulic fortress protecting the western approaches through the mountains to Ghord.

***Hellspass:*** An ancient ogrun city once conquered by the Khardic Empire and now part of Khador.

***Horgenhold:*** Southern Rhulic fortress protecting the southern approaches to the Rhulic interior, including the road from Leryn and the Black River.

***Highgate:*** Cygnaran coastal city, home of the Southern Fleet of the Cygnaran Navy and headquarters of the Cygnaran Third Army.

***Imer:*** Capital of the Protectorate of Menoth, a relatively recently expanded city near the Erud Hills.

***Immoren:*** Continent containing the Iron Kingdoms, Ios, Rhul, the Skorne Empire, and the lands between them. Much of Immoren remains unexplored, and its inhabitants have had limited contact with other continents.

***Ios:*** Isolationist nation east of Llael and north of the Bloodstone Marches, Ios was founded long before the nations of men by survivors of a destroyed empire called Lyoss.

***Iosan:*** Inhabitants of Ios, a long lived elven race that has suffered a long gradual decline and faces an imminent cosmological catastrophe.

***Iron Kingdoms:*** Initially the four nations founded after the Orgoth Rebellion: Cygnar, Khador, Llael, and Ord. The Protectorate of Menoth, founded after the Cygnaran Civil War and having recently declared its independence from Cygnar, became the fifth Iron Kingdom. With the conquest of Llael, little of that kingdom remains free.

## THE DEVIL'S PAY

**Jack marshal:** A person who has learned how to give precise verbal orders to a steamjack to direct them in conducting labor or battle. A highly useful occupational skill, although lacking the versatility or finesse afforded by the direct mental control of steamjacks exercised by a warcaster.

**Khador:** Northernmost of the Iron Kingdoms, once a kingdom and now an empire. The Khadoran Empire is ruled by Empress Ayn Vanar.

**Khardov:** Industrial city in western Khador that is also a major hub of the Khadoran railway.

**Korsk:** Capital of Khador and that nation's largest city, located on the eastern shore of Lake Great Zerutsk.

**Lake Great Zerutsk:** Largest of the three large lakes surrounding Korsk in central Khador.

**Leryn:** Former Llaelese city and birthplace of the Order of the Golden Crucible, now the seat of the Protectorate's Northern Crusade. Occupied by Khadorans during the Llaelese war and was subsequently taken by the Protectorate.

**Llael:** Once the easternmost Iron Kingdom; largely conquered during the Llaelese War from 604-605 AR and presently divided between Khador, the Protectorate, and the Llaelese Resistance.

**Mechanika:** The fusion of mechanical engineering and arcane science.

**Mercir:** Southern Cygnaran coastal city, home of the Mercarian League.

**Meredius, the:** Western ocean, only successfully crossed by the Orgoth.

**Merin:** Capital city of Ord.

## THE DEVIL'S PAY

***Merywyn:*** Former capital of Llael, presently the most important industrial city held in the Khadoran occupied territory.

***Midfast:*** Northern Ordic city and fortress, along the Khadoran border.

***Nightmare Empire, the:*** Cryx.

***Northguard:*** Formerly a northern Cygnaran border fortress, successfully besieged and taken by Khador in 608 AR, presently serving as a resupply fortress for the Khadoran Army.

***Nyss:*** Cousins of the Iosans, the Nyss are a race of wild hunters who wants claimed large portions of northern Khador as their territory. Largely decimated by the emergence of the Legion of Everblight, the surviving Nyss are largely refugees dependant on Khador and Ios.

***Ogrun:*** A large and physically powerful race renowned for their great strength and honor. Most ogrun are citizens of Rhul, though they can be found throughout the Iron Kingdoms and are also present in Cryx.

***Olgunholt:*** Forest in southern Ord and that nation's most important source of lumber.

***Ord:*** Iron Kingdom on the western coast between Khador and Cygnar, largely neutral in the recent wars and seen as a haven for mercenary companies.

***Orgoth:*** A fearsome race of men who invaded and enslaved western Immoren for centuries. The Orgoth arrived in great numbers on Immoren's western shores and soon conquered the human kingdoms of the era, and were driven out just over four hundred years ago.

***Protectorate of Menoth:*** Southeastern theocracy dedicated to the god Menoth. Considered the fifth Iron Kingdom, though it did not exist at the time of the Corvis Treaties.

## THE DEVIL'S PAY

**Redwall:** Llaelese fortress on the Khadoran border, destroyed 604 AR.

**Rune Shot:** The specially crafted rune inscribed bullets used by gun mages to channel their arcane energies into.

**Rhul:** Northeastern dwarven nation bordering Khador, Llael, and Ios; natives called Rhulfolk.

**Rhulfolk:** The dwarves of Rhul. A tenacious and skilled people who have long traded with the nations of man.

**Scharde Islands:** Island group southwest of Cygnar, named after the largest island that has become the heart of Cryx. The majority of the Scharde Islands are part of the Nightmare Empire while those that are contested are preyed upon by Cryx.

**Sul:** Western Protectorate city, formerly half of Caspia east of the Black River, ceded after the Cygnaran Civil War.

**Spiritgrav:** A district of Five Fingers noted for its production of alcoholic spirits, a major source of income for the city.

**Steamjack:** A steam powered mechanical construct designed in a variety of configurations and sizes, used for both labor and warfare throughout the Iron Kingdoms, Cryx, and Rhul.

**Tarna:** Southern Ordic city on the Dragon's Tongue River, the site where the first sorcerers were discovered during the Rebellion against the Orgoth.

**Thuria:** Ancient human kingdom conquered by Tordor centuries before the arrival of the Orgoth, presently divided between southern Ord and northern Cygnar.

**Thurian:** A cultural group of the people of southern Ord and northern Cygnar who share common ancestry.



## THE DEVIL'S PAY

**Tordor:** Ancient human kingdom renowned for its great fleet.

**Tordoran:** A cultural group of the people of northern Ord, including among them the most powerful land-owning nobility and the royal line.

**Trollkin:** A hardy race related to full blooded trolls. Trollkin live both in their own communities on the fringes of civilization and amongst the cities of man.

**Uldenfrost:** A small city of trappers and hunters on Khadors northern-most, western-most fringe.

**Umbrey:** Former human kingdom centered in what is now eastern Khador and formerly northwestern Llael.

**Urcaen:** A mysterious cosmological realm that is the spiritual counterpart of Caen, where most of the gods reside and where most souls pass to experience the afterlife. It is divided between protected divine domains and the hellish wilds where the Devourer Wurm stalks.

**Veld:** Iosan name for Urcaen.

**Void:** Two different meanings: the emptiness surrounding Urcaen from which undead banes arise; and where skorne souls are cast after death if not preserved in sacral stones. It is unknown if these two uses describe the same place.

**Warcaster:** Arcanists born with the natural ability to control steamjacks with their minds. With proper training warcasters become singular military assets and among the greatest soldiers of western Immoren, entrusted to command scores of troops and their own battlegroups of warjacks in the field. Acquiring and training warcasters is a high priority for any military force that employs warjacks.

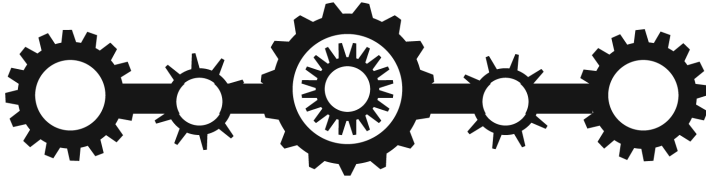
## THE DEVIL'S PAY

**Warlock:** An arcanist with the ability to bond to and mentally control savage or enslaved beasts.

**Warbeast:** A savage beast bonded to a warlock.

**Warjack:** A highly advanced and well armed steamjack created or modified for war.

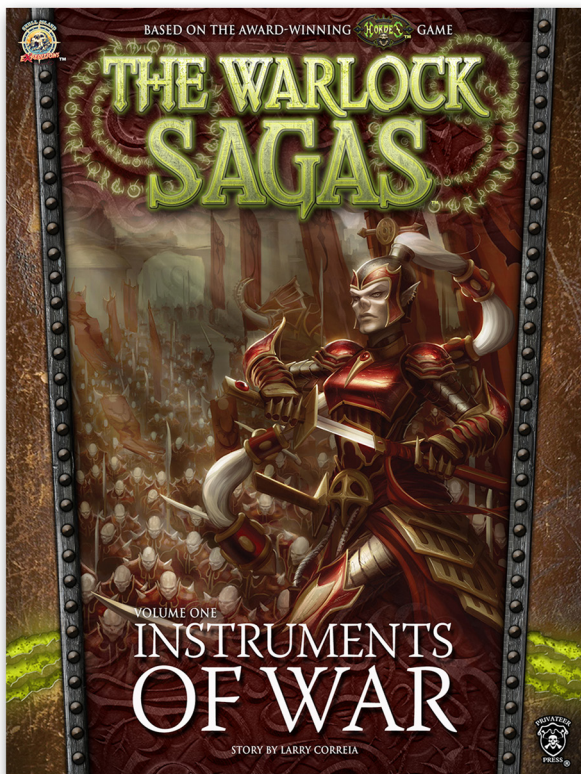
**Zu:** Little explored continent south of Immoren, engaged in lucrative trade with the Immorese for certain exotic goods.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In the early 90s, Dave Gross fled academia for the glamorous life of fantasy game and fiction publishing. Since then he has served as editor for half a dozen publications, including *Dragon*, *Star Wars Insider*, and *Amazing Stories*. In that time he's also written many short stories and novels, often for shared-world settings. He's also occasionally written for computer games, most recently *Baldur's Gate: Enhanced Edition*. He's the author of the *Forgotten Realms* novels *Black Wolf* and *Lord of Stormweather*, and the *Pathfinder Tales* novels *Prince of Wolves*, *Master of Devils*, *Queen of Thorns*, and *King of Chaos*. You can find him on Twitter @frabjousdave.

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## **The Devil's Pay**

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