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BASED ON THE AWARD-WINNING **WarMachine** GAME

DARK CONVERGENCE



BY DAVE GROSS



Aurora

Aurora oversaw the attack from the southern edge of the observation deck. Sabina stood at her side, the rest of her bodyguards behind them. Far below, Convergence forces fired on the Cygnaran camp.

Even as she stretched out her thoughts to direct the Ciphers in their bombardment, Aurora sensed the tension in Sabina. Aurora no longer joked that her bodyguards were wound too tight. Those who had resided in clockwork vessels as long as Sabina found such puns more pitiable than witty.

“Numen, Storm Lances to the east,” said Sabina.

Aurora saw them. A dozen mounted knights rode out of camp in an obvious attempt at a flanking maneuver. With their lightning lances ignited, there was no missing them in the early morning light.

Rather than draw back the Ciphers, Aurora reached out to one of the heavy vectors. She changed its servipod mortar from bombardment to flare mode and fired a shot directly over the cavalry. A blazing white flare descended toward them, less to direct additional fire than to remind them just how visible they were.

With the remaining Ciphers, Aurora continued punishing the camp with a combination of anti-personnel and trench-breaking mortars. The bombardment shells fell among the tents, flinging shrapnel in all directions, felling soldiers who failed to reach shelter in time. Elsewhere, the penetrating shells left enormous craters in the ground, hindering movement.

A shell fell directly on a tent, blowing scraps of canvas and a cloud of sod into the air. Aurora noted no sign of furnishings or human remains

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in the brief explosion. Another tent exploded nearby, equally devoid of contents.

"I knew it!" she said, turning to Sabina. "There was no way Nemo could have moved such a large force so quickly. He seeded decoys throughout the camp."

"You were wise to probe the defenses, Numen."

To the southwest, the storm lances spurred their mounts to a gallop, heedless of the warning flare. They rushed toward the seemingly undefended eastern quadrant of Calbeck.

Aurora diverted her attention to the light vectors she had hidden beneath a thick bramble. The servitors had done excellent work laying camouflage upon the heads and torsos of the three-legged machines.

Aurora first took control of the Diffusers. The vectors' articulated arms gave them the appearance of Galvanizers, a similar model dedicated to repair—but that impression was as deceitful as the foliage concealing them. Aurora targeted the enemy through the Diffusers' sensors, calculated the optimum course for their projectiles, and fired their spring-propelled weapons. The homing ripspikes flew out in perfect trajectories, blasting the shield out of one man's grip and impaling two of the other riders.

Aurora's mind next leaped to the Mitigator, physically distinguished from the Diffusers only by its upper chassis and ranged weapon. Its hurlon chamber hummed as the bolas spun inside. It flew, whooping, toward the cavalry, its razored net enveloping the legs of two horses, shredding the animals' flesh. The mounts screamed and fell, pulling their riders down with them. In their struggles, they only tore themselves more dreadful wounds.

Under other circumstances, Aurora would have let the vectors charge in to finish their work. She could hear the eager tension in her angels' limbs as they leaned forward, aching to join the conflict. Yet this was not an assault, Aurora reminded herself.

It was only a test.

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The shriek of a chain gun rose from a trench at the edge of the Cygnar camp. Aurora felt a flash of irritation at the realization that her servitors had failed to locate both the trench and the presence of a heavy gun. What else might they have missed?

The anger barely warmed her cheeks before transforming into a pang of guilt. She knew full well the limitations of the servitors when she assigned them the task of scouts. Unlike vectors, which she controlled directly, or the autonomous clockwork soldiers and priests, servitors were limited by their situation response algorithms. They could harbor only the most succinct lists of conditional commands encoded from the small brass sheets fed them that provided their instructions. Even the most advanced servitors could not approach the ability of a living soul to comprehend what it saw and relay that information in a cogent manner.

Aurora should have sent troops to scout the camp before mounting her rescue operation, but she had focused her attention on the ill-fated recovery mission. The result was poor intelligence on the camp, as well as the loss of another Monitor and eight of her reducers.

Even without First Prefect Pollux to remind her, Aurora knew she had no one but herself to blame for these mistakes.

“Numen, Commandos,” said Sabina. She pointed west, at the edge of the same woods where Nemo had ambushed her strike team.

At first Aurora noticed nothing, but then she perceived the faint movement of men through the woods. If not for the autumn’s stripping of the leaves, they might have been invisible from the observation deck.

“Shall I warn Prime Enumerator Septimus?”

“No,” said Aurora. She had ordered the clockwork priest to keep those troops in reserve while she used the vectors to probe Nemo’s defenses. “We’ll keep the soldiers in place behind the Ciphers. I want to see how these Cygnarans react to the reflex servitors.”

Confident she would hear that reaction when it came, Aurora returned her gaze to the east.

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While the surviving cavalry withdrew out of range of the Mitigator and Diffusers, two of the storm lances dismounted and ran back to the fallen riders. One needed help to walk, but both had slipped out from under their fallen steeds.

Despite their efforts, the rescuers couldn't free the horses from the razor nets. Aurora kept her face still as the fallen horses thrashed, the blades digging deeper into their legs. When the futility of escape became clear, one of the rescuers raised his lance and fired a mercy shot into a horse's skull.

Aurora flinched. She cast a surreptitious glance to the side to see whether Sabina noticed her reaction to the animal's death. If she had, she betrayed no sign of it.

After euthanizing the second horse, the rescuers fled on foot. If she allowed them to retreat unchallenged, Nemo might think her weak.

She returned her attention to a Diffuser, targeted one of the retreating men, and fired. A homing ripspike cut through his chest and dropped his limp body to the ground.

As the lance fell from his hand, something twisted in Aurora's gut. She couldn't decide whether it felt just or pathetic that he was the one to die after saving his men and dispatching their horses.

In either event, she had not given the appearance of weakness.

A flash of lightning drew Aurora's gaze to the center of the Cygnaran camp. The Thunderhead was on the move. As it tramped through the camp, two pairs of smaller warjacks fell in beside it. Aurora recognized them from the identification plates she had studied. They were Lancers and Fireflies. The former would extend the reach of their warcaster's spells, while the latter could fire bolts of lightning, like the Thunderhead and their controller.

"Where is Nemo?" said Aurora. She squinted down at the field but couldn't spot him.

Aurora imagined the hand of the goddess had directed Sebastian Nemo to this first substantial conflict with the Convergence. Prime Enumerator Septimus had told Aurora that Cyrissists from several factions in Caspia

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had made repeated overtures to the Artificer General. Such a keen mind would have made a splendid addition to the leadership.

Or a splendid triumph to the one who defeated him.

“Here he comes,” said Sabina.

Nemo and his assistant emerged from behind a long tent. A platoon of Stormblades followed, their glaives igniting as they ran.

The Thunderhead leaped the trench, followed an instant later by the Fireflies and Lancers. The smaller warjacks clutched sizzling electro-glaives or war spears in their right hands. Upon the Fireflies’ left arms were mounted storm blasters, lightning already flickering along the weapons’ coils. The Lancers held up their shields and ran past the other warjacks, exposing themselves to a charge from the Ciphers.

Aurora would not be lured into another trap. She reached out her thoughts to direct the Ciphers to retreat. This time, Nemo could come to her.

With his apprentice at his side, Sebastian Nemo leaped the trench behind the warjacks. For an instant he seemed to hover above the gap, his hair lifted and illuminated by the lightning arcing from the coils on his back to the head of his mechanical staff.

The brief image caught Aurora’s breath. Twice now she had glimpsed her enemy’s snow-white hair. Once she had even been close enough to see the deep lines in his aged face. She wondered how someone so old could appear so vital, so full of physical power.

The Stormblades followed the warcaster over the trench, glaives or storm throwers in their arms. A moment later, trenchers poured out of their concealment, carbines held high as they ran forward at angles, leaving room between them for the chain-gunner to cover their advance.

As the vectors withdrew, Septimus ordered his obstructors into position before them. Once they stood before the vectors, the clockwork soldiers interlaced their scalloped shields to form a shield wall. There they stood with telefails raised, ready to smash any who approached their line.

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Aurora returned her thoughts to the Ciphers, adjusting their aim to fire upon the advancing Cygnarans. Explosions rained dirt and sod over the Thunderhead and Fireflies, but none landed a direct hit.

A quiet whirring told Aurora that Sabina had magnified her vision as she peered down at the warjacks. For the thousandth time, Aurora rued her mortal eyes. She should have brought a spyglass, but lifting it to her eye would only remind her bodyguard of her fleshy body.

“Not even a scratch,” said Sabina.

Another bombardment servipod volley obliterated a pair of trenchers, painting their nearest comrades red and black.

An explosion in the western wood drew Aurora’s attention. Another followed, this time with the agonizing crack and scream of a felled tree. Amid the clamor of snapping branches came the cries of the commandos who thought they were approaching undetected. The reflex servitors had performed their function, detecting their movement and flying straight toward the men to explode on impact.

Nemo raised his weapon. Beside him his apprentice raised her own, guiding lightning from the warcaster’s galvanic coils and directing it to the Thunderhead before them.

A blazing circle of runes appeared around Nemo’s body, slowly rotating as he filled himself with arcane power. From both his staff and his empty hand, lightning leaped skyward and vanished. The voltaic storm reappeared at the far end of the advancing Cygnar line, where it shot out from one of the Lancers.

The bolt shot into the nearest obstructor, raising the clockwork soldier off the ground in a hideous dance before leaping to the next. The second soldier stood firm as the lightning blackened its shield, and still the lightning traveled along the line. Before it was done, two obstructors lay jerking on the ground, while the others closed the gaps to retain their shield wall.

Before Aurora’s mind could process the swiftness of the attack, Nemo’s storm flashed again, this time from the opposite Lancer. The

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chain lightning coursed from the warjack to demolish five of Pollux's reductors.

The Fireflies shot next, lightning arcing from their storm blasters. Each of them shook another pair of obstructors, blackening and melting their armor. The defenders stood fast, but Aurora knew they could not withstand many more such attacks.

The Thunderhead raised its arms, blue palms open toward the nearest Cipher. Electrical arcs leaped across its galvanic coils, coruscating down each blue arm to converge at a point between its extended hands. There the lightning massed for an instant before leaping toward the Cipher.

Superheated rivets popped off the Cipher's body. One of its arms jerked and spun away. It flew across the field until its piston-spike sank deep into the ground and hung there, trembling like a banner.

"Such power," said Sabina.

"I have to get down there," said Aurora.

"Numen, you have just seen what he can do. You must stay well back."

Aurora leaped from the observation deck. Her spreading wings caught the air and guided her course even before the hovering field took hold. Her bodyguards leaped after her, their own mechanical wings barely contributing to their flight.

As she dove toward the conflict, Aurora mentally reached out to summon the Mitigators from the east and the Monitors standing in reserve. The vectors responded instantly. Aurora could almost feel their razor bolas and ellipsaws clicking into place. They would make short work of the Cygnar infantry.

At the sight of Aurora and her clockwork angels descending from the astronomic nexus, Septimus signaled most of his troops forward.

With First Prefect Pollux at their side, the reductors held their ground, swarm projectors raised to shoot at any who came within range.

Thick-chested eradicators moved up to defend the reductors. Aurora could almost hear the heavy blades of their protean bucklers as they snapped out to turn the shields into deadly weapons.



BASED ON THE AWARD-WINNING



GAME

INTO the STORM



BY LARRY CORREIA





PART I: THE RECRUITERS

Spring, 606 AR

He hadn't been dealt a very good hand, but when you make a habit of gambling with your life, you learned to make your own luck.

Considering that the tavern was a seedy little place on the outskirts of a tiny village deep in the Thornwood, it was fairly crowded. The patrons were rough folk, gathered here to spend their ill-gotten gains on poor quality ale, bad food, and ugly prostitutes. The tavern was the center of a lawless, wild settlement. The entire village consisted of a handful of huts on stilts to keep them out of the mud, a flea-ridden stable, and this sorry excuse for a tavern. It was made of logs slowly being devoured by moss and was so ramshackle it didn't even warrant a name. This place was still within the borders of Cygnar, but only in the loosest sense of where lines fell on a map. The village was a forgotten place and a haven for bandits, though he was only looking for one bandit in particular.

"You been pondering on those cards a long time . . . What's your play, stranger?"

"I'm in. Knights over jacks."

One of the other players scoffed. "Not bloody likely odds, that."

"I'm feeling lucky." He slid three farthings across the table
"Give me one more."

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“Bold move, gambler.” The dealer shoved another card at him. He was a big, thick-armed man, with a bushy black beard that would make any Khadoran proud. The dealer matched the description of a certain bandit leader with a hefty price on his head. “If you’re so confident, how come only three coppers?”

“Well, after losing the last few rounds to you boys, I’m afraid that’s all I’ve got left to my name.”

“Times are lean,” the dealer agreed. His armored great coat opened a bit as he leaned back, revealing a holstered repeater. That confirmed every man at the table was packing at least one weapon, a reasonable precaution in the Thornwood. “You looking for work, gambler?”

The two other players exchanged knowing glances. Of course, they were all with the same gang, so they would know what was coming next. The Thornwood Blades needed recruits. He’d made sure he looked the part. These types always fit a certain mold.

The gambler picked up the card. It was the Black Knight. *Appropriate.* “I’m between jobs.”

“You strike me as a fella that knows how to handle himself.” The dealer gestured at the Caspian battle blade leaning against their table. “Seems like that sword has seen some use.”

“A bit.” He looked down at his sword. The metal grip had been polished smooth by hundreds of hours beneath callused hands. The cross guard was nicked and dented from countless impacts. “It’s gotten me by.”

“You’re a sight older than most of my men, but I figure a fella don’t get to be your age wandering around places like this without knowing how to take of himself. Marks on your face say you’re no stranger to getting cut.” The dealer ran his finger across his jawline, or at least where he probably had a jaw under all of that beard. “There’s work to be had here, good work, if you’ve got the guts for it.”

“When there’s enough crowns involved, I find the guts.”

INTO THE STORM

“That’s what I like to hear.” Their current round of Fellig’s Fortunes was forgotten. Their hands of cards were laid on the table, and now it was time to talk business. The dealer leaned over the table conspiratorially, though everybody in the tavern either already knew or suspected his identity, and they were all too crooked themselves to try and collect a bounty. “The name’s Devlin. You heard of me?”

Devlin Norwick. Leader of the Thornwood Blades. Killer of men, women, and children. “Can’t say that I have, but I’m just passing through.”

“My trade is on the roads to the east. Take what I want. Make a tidy profit doing so. Locals get a piece too, so they’re keen on keeping us around. I’ve got an outfit, and I could always use a good swordsman. I’m short a few hands—”

One of the other bandits loudly interrupted. “Only because of that bastard Madigan killing them!”

Devlin just shook his head. “We’ll deal with him in time, Rolf.”

But the outburst had attracted the attention of some of the other patrons, who had begun muttering as well. The name seemed to be well known by many of the local cutthroats and invoked either nervousness or anger.

“Madigan, eh? Never heard of him either. He seems like a beloved sort.”

“*Sir* Madigan. Cygnaran Army. He’s been hunting our gang all up and down the Thornwood. Latches on like a war dog and won’t let go.”

Another bandit pounded the table for emphasis. “Makes life miserable for the workin’ man, he does!”

“Cage it, Nash,” Devlin ordered. The bandit shut his mouth. “We had us a nice arrangement with the authorities before this Madigan came along. Even the army don’t like him. They say he’s an evil type, brings bad luck wherever he goes. So they sent him out here to fight

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farrow or some scut work, but he had to go sticking his nose into other folks' dealings. You know how them knights are."

"Pushy know-it-alls, the lot of them," he agreed. "But I've got an empty coin purse, an empty stomach, and an empty mug, so why don't you buy us some dinner and a round of drinks, and tell me more about this job of yours, Mr. Devlin?"

"I like that attitu—"

"*Attention, villagers!*" The tavern fell silent as everyone turned to see who had shouted. The newcomer was a tall, handsome young man who was obviously, painfully out of place. Though his expensive wool great coat had recently picked up some traveling grime, it was probably the cleanest thing the tavern had ever seen. When he got a lungful of the thick smoke filling the room, he began to cough, then covered his mouth with a clean, white handkerchief. "Thank you. Pardon my interruption, villagers, but I am here to deliver an urgent message and would appreciate your assistance."

The well-spoken young man might as well have entered holding a sign that read *Rob me and leave my corpse in a ditch*. Rolf turned to Devlin and whispered, "I reckon he's not from around these parts."

"I am looking for someone. I was told at the fort that I could find Lieutenant Hugh Madigan here."

Bloody hell!

It was silent for a long few seconds, and then nearly everyone in the room began to laugh uproariously.

"What's so funny?" The room was uncomfortably hot from the roaring fireplace, so the newcomer unbuttoned his great coat, revealing the bright blue uniform of the Cygnaran Army. The laughter slowly died and hands moved toward guns or blades as the patrons realized this was no joke. "This is no laughing matter. I have an important message for Lieutenant Madigan."

"Sorry, young sir." The tavern owner approached cautiously. "I

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think you've got the wrong place and should be going now before anything bad happens."

"Bad? What? This is important. Once again, I'm looking for Lieutenant Hugh Madigan, Third Platoon, 22nd Company. I've got priority orders straight from Corvis."

"Ha, ha! Yes, very amusing." The proprietor took the young man by the sleeve, trying to hustle him out the door before his establishment had yet another killing inside of it. "Please, sir. Right this way."

"Are you daft, man?" The oblivious soldier pushed the tavern owner away. "I'm Sergeant Cleasby, and I'm on important business on behalf of the crown. This is a priority. You probably don't get that much out here in the backwoods."

"Hold on, now!" shouted a rat-faced man from the opposite corner. "What's all this about Madigan being here?"

"I was told the lieutenant was in this village hunting for a bandit gang."

Oh, you dithering imbecile. The gambler reached slowly for his sword. The bandits in the room were glancing about nervously now. The tavern owner retreated for safety.

"I've not met him, but he was described as being in his late forties, in excellent health, of average height, grey haired . . ." Sergeant Cleasby was glancing about the room as well but found he was the only person dressed in blue and gold. "He may not be in uniform."

Devlin turned to study the newest addition to their game of Fellig's Fortunes.

"He is a swordsman of some renown, favors a Caspian blade . . . Let's see, what else?"

Rolf and Nash turned to stare at the big sword leaning against the table. Devlin's eyes narrowed dangerously, then he shook his head slowly in the negative. "Easy there, gambler," Devlin whispered. "Let's hear the lad out."

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He stopped reaching for his sword and calmly placed his hands on his lap. There was bad luck, and then there was military incompetence. The two often went hand in hand.

“Oh yes, Madigan has distinctive scars on his face from the Scharde Invasions, sustained in an action for which he received the Star of Valor and knighthood—”

“Where’s these scars on his face at, boy?” Rolf asked as he pulled the hand cannon from his belt.

“Boy?” Cleasby grew indignant. “How dare—”

“Where are the scars?” Devlin demanded.

Several other men had risen from their seats. Knives and guns had been drawn. Many eyes were now focused on Devlin’s table and followed his gaze. Madigan had been a plague on every bandit in this part of the Thornwood for months. Other toughs were approaching Cleasby, who only now was realizing what he had blundered into. Cleasby raised his hands defensively as several weapons were pointed his way. “Gentlemen, calm down, please . . . I must have the wrong village. I’ll be on my way.”

This time Devlin roared. “*Where are Madigan’s scars?*”

Cleasby swallowed hard. “On his cheek and jaw.”

Everyone in the tavern was looking at him now. The gambler’s eyes flashed back and forth, a movement most would take for fear but a few would recognize as an experienced combatant assessing every potential threat. There were a *lot* of threats.

Devlin grinned, showing off blackened teeth. “Pleasure to meet you finally, Sir Madigan. Good thing you got yourself uglified up to such a noteworthy degree.”

“I was marked by a Satyxis whip. Left me a face only a mother could love.” The gambler’s voice was cold, and he no longer sounded like a hungry bandit, but rather a commander of men. “Devlin Norwick, in the name of the crown, I hereby arrest you for murder,

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banditry, general lawlessness, and the theft of military supplies. Surrender your arms and stand down. Resist and I'll kill you."

"By yourself?"

"What do you think, Devlin?"

"I think if you'd brought help, they would've stopped this idiot from coming in here and mouthing off." Devlin moved his head from side to side, making a big show of taking in the many well-armed and surly patrons. "You're as mad as they say, coming in here alone, demanding my surrender."

"I'll take that as a no. Sergeant Cleasby, take these men into custody."

"Uh . . ." The young soldier had been surrounded by a few members of the Thornwood Blades and was slowly being backed into a corner. "That'll be just a moment, sir!"

"I'll hand it to you, old man. You've got a pair on you." Devlin chuckled. The great battle blade was still sheathed, resting against the table, only a foot from Madigan. Devlin eyed the sword. "But nobody's that fast."

Madigan raised his voice so every occupant of the tavern could hear him clearly. "I'm only here for Devlin Norwick. He's not worth dying for. I don't give a damn about the rest of you or what you may have done, but if you raise so much as a finger in my way, I swear I will begin to give a damn, and none of us want that."

Devlin's snarl displayed his rotten teeth. "Shoot him, Rolf. Shoot the knight in his big, stupid mouth."

Rolf lifted the hand cannon.

POP

The noise came from beneath the table. Rolf gasped as the bullet hit him in the pelvis.

When you leave a big sword in the open, people tended to focus on it rather than on the tiny hideout pistol hidden in your coat sleeve.



BASED ON THE AWARD-WINNING **WAR MACHINE**® GAME



CALLLED to BATTLE

VOLUME ONE



A **WAR MACHINE**® COLLECTION

LARRY CORREIA, ERIK SCOTT DE BIE,
ORRIN GREY, AND HOWARD TAYLER





HEARTFIRE

BY HOWARD TAYLER

Northern Thornwood, Cygnar, 605 AR

Captain Arlan Strangeways frowned as he watched the pair of Minuteman warjacks, Jagger and Hess, finish unloading the company's wagons. It was a little distasteful to treat a fresh-off-the-line war machine as if it were a common laborjack, but these were more than just fresh off the line; they were fresh off the drawing board.

Fresh off the drawing board and too complicated. Sure, they were working fine today, walking alongside the wagons and hauling box tents, but they remained completely unproven. Strangeways' frown deepened. This march from the foundry to the front was as strenuous a test as he could arrange, but it still wasn't enough.

"Thorne!" he called out to the lieutenant in charge of the trencher platoon. "I've been taken by the desire for another field test. Get your lollygaggers and greenhorns out of the middle of my camp!"

Strangeways allowed himself a small smile as trenchers scattered without waiting for direction from Lieutenant Thorne. Tons of metal would shortly be airborne, and even the greenhorns knew it was unwise to be under them. Also, they'd had two days to learn

it was equally unwise to be underfoot when Captain Strangeways used that tone of voice, even if he wasn't wearing his steam armor.

He turned to his own greenhorns, Corporals Tully and Merriweather. They were both freshly minted field mechaniks and had proven themselves adequate during this trip. Tully was stout and quick with a wrench, and Merriweather had the nimble fingers of a field surgeon. That worked out fine, because Cygnar's Mechaniks Corps and their teams of gobber bodgers really *were* field surgeons and battlefield medics—for warjacks.

"Tully, pace off the distances here, drop some stakes. Merriweather, start taking notes. I want the boiler pressures from Jagger and Hess recorded before and after, just like this morning. Only this time write so I can read them."

Both men snapped salutes and barked "sirs." Tully was swift into action, spearing stakes into the loam with every second pace of his short legs. Merriweather scrambled back to his tent for a clipboard.

Strangeways turned to his gobber crew—a skeleton crew, really, as the junior members of the team were on loan to the foundry. All he had to work with were the twins, Privates First Class Mo and Rala, but they often did the work of a half-dozen.

"You two, top off the fireboxes on Jagger and Hess, and try not to burn Merriweather while he's reading things. Unless he gets clumsy."

"Yes, sir!" they said in unison. Mo grabbed fire tongs, and Rala headed for the wheelbarrow.

Lieutenant Caspi Burrick stepped alongside Strangeways, her warcaster steam armor hissing and clanking. She cleared her throat.

"Captain," she said hesitantly. "We jump-tested yesterday morning. Is something wrong?"

"No, Lieutenant. But Jagger and Hess have been walking on guard all day. This morning's jump-test was after a night of idling. It would be good to know the hydraulics in the legs are

up to the task after eight hours on the march.”

“I thought those nozzles next to the firebox did most of the work.”

“It’s much more complicated than that.” Strangeways rubbed his forehead, leaned on the armor he’d laid out on his workbench, and tried to come up with the shortest possible explanation.

He gave up and decided to be accurate instead.

“The Minuteman vents heartfire across an arcane turbine, banking power between that turbine and four compression chambers. When you add your own arcane energies and give the command, the power moves in three directions: down and out through the rocket nozzles for thrust and stabilization, up and across a pair of rune plates to momentarily reduce the ’jack’s mass, and deep into the hydraulics to boost the pressure available to the legs. If any of that goes wrong, even if the timing is just a little bit off, the ’jack doesn’t jump.”

“You make it sound like this model should be breaking down all the time, sir.”

Strangeways leaned even more heavily on his table and looked across the camp to where Jagger stood. Mo was perched atop the wheelbarrow, peering into the warjack’s firebox, while Rala chucked coal hand-over-hand past her brother’s head.

“Frankly, I’m amazed it doesn’t. So let’s test it yet again and hope I keep on being amazed.”

Burrick nodded and strode over to Jagger, her armor pulsing with arcane energies as she went. Like the Minuteman, her armor had rune plates and arcane turbines to make her fast and fearsome in combat despite the addition of nearly a quarter ton of machinery. The sound of steam and hydraulics were the only noises she made, however; Burrick did not need to shout commands at Jagger and Hess to get the ’jacks to do her bidding. Both Minutemen strode, hissing, clanking, chuffing, and thumping, into the center of camp. Merriweather followed them, scribbling furiously as he checked

gauges—the report was going to be illegible again, Strangeways was sure—and then he backpedaled out of the test area.

Burrick scanned the area around her. All was clear except for Mo and Rala, who stood a few paces behind her. Mo met her gaze and shrugged. Burrick turned back to Strangeways.

“Ready, Captain.”

“Start with Jagger. Leap like you mean it.”

Burrick took a step toward Jagger and narrowed her gaze a bit. Then she furrowed her brow and grimaced.

Had the girl forgotten how this worked? Perhaps fatigue had lessened her—

Mo and Rala hit the ground, and then Jagger’s firebox exploded with far more force than any natural pressure could have provided.

The explosion rocked Strangeways. He felt the heat of it on his face and hands, but the real fire, the dangerous heat, was the anger that instantly flared inside him.

The gobber twins were both flat on their faces, and Lieutenant Burrick had been thrown fifteen feet back by the blast. Jagger had gone the other direction, staggering forward a pace and then toppling over.

Strangeways had shrugged out of his steam armor earlier in hopes of curing the faint buzzing his voltaic gauntlet had begun to make, so it was his good fortune he hadn’t been any closer to Jagger when its firebox blew. He needed to be a lot closer now, though. He grabbed a long wrench and a bucket of sand and charged straight toward Jagger’s fallen, flaming chassis. Hopefully he could save it.

The firebox had exploded, splitting the exchanger and throwing burning coal in several directions, including all up and down the lubricated hydraulics. The burning lubricant wouldn’t permanently damage the arms or legs, but the cortex wasn’t quite as tolerant of extreme heat. Shifting his grip to the rim of the bucket, Strangeways



DESTINY OF A BULLET

BY LARRY CORREIA

Volgorod, Kos Volozk, Khador, 607 AR

He had once hidden in a pile of garbage for three days in order to kill a man. That job had been completed during a summer in Imer. It had been miserably hot, and insects had feasted on him continuously. Stinking of filth, badly dehydrated, sunburned, and sick, he had still made the two-hundred-yard shot on demand the instant his target had shown his head. One round. Nice and clean.

That job had been preferable to this one. For two days and two nights now he had hidden, watching the blank white of a high mountain pass. He was chilled to the bone but couldn't light a fire for risk of being seen. It must have been because of the unrelenting cold that he found himself thinking wistfully about the desert. The northern woods of Khador had never been intended for man. Fools lived here simply because they were too stupid to leave and too stubborn to die.

He had come all this way to put a bullet into a particular one of those stubborn fools.

Some folks called him a mercenary, others a hired gun. Most would argue he was nothing more than an assassin. Regardless of

their opinion of how he earned his coin, everyone knew Kell Bailoch was the finest rifleman in western Immoren. Give him a clean shot and the gods themselves couldn't save you.

The hard part was the waiting. The sniper let his mind wander.



He had spotted them coming long before they saw him. Picking his potential employer out from the crowd had been easy. The hooded woman walked between two men in long cloaks. The common folk were deferential and moved quickly out of the woman's path. The two men were trained killers, and they couldn't help but act like it, with wary eyes constantly shifting as they scanned the busy market. Their predatory nature made them stand out among the shoppers.

Kell Bailoch preferred to blend in. It made his job easier. He kept his wide-brimmed hat low over his eyes and covered the lower half of his face with a scarf, masking his Cygnaran features.

He stepped from the shadows and followed the three discreetly for a time. The gently falling snow barely stifled the merchants' enthusiasm as they loudly hawked their wares. Fall in northern Khador was like winter in any other kingdom. Once he was certain this wasn't an elaborate trap and they were isolated from potential eavesdroppers, Bailoch walked up behind the kayazy's guards and waited to be noticed.

It didn't take long. The first bodyguard turned, his hand inside his cloak and surely resting on a long dagger. The second moved immediately in front of the woman. They were quick, but he noted that neither looked toward the rooftops. *Sloppy.*

"What do you want?" the first guard demanded.

"I wish to speak with Mistress Padorin about a job," Bailoch answered. His Khadoran was unaccented, as bland as his appearance. "I was informed she's looking for me."

The woman turned, giving him a glimpse of pale skin and blue eyes inside the hood. She was rather young for the leader of a ruthless trade organization. “You are the one I was told about?” she asked.

Bailoch tipped his hat. The survivors of Talon Company could always be counted on for referrals.

“You’re shorter than I expected.” She appraised him. “Are you as good as they say?”

“Are you as rich as they say?”

She nodded.

“Then I’m good enough.”



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