



BASED ON THE AWARD-WINNING



GAME

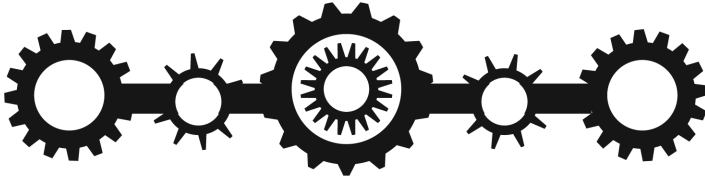
EXILES IN ARMS



MOVING TARGETS

BY C.L. WERNER





EXILES IN ARMS: VOLUME ONE

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Cover by

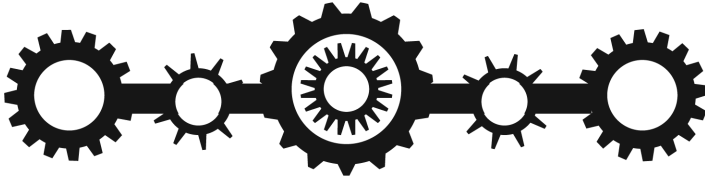
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PART ONE

Early Katesh, 607 AR

“Don’t even think about it..”

The warning was uttered in a low, angry hiss, lashing out with a whip’s stinging bite. The tall, broad-shouldered man to whom the threat was directed visibly winced as the whisper struck his ear. Despite the brawny musculature lurking beneath his heavy cloak of Khadoran furs and the steel confines of Llaelese mail, despite the vicious sword and heavy hand cannon swinging from his belt, and notwithstanding the scars of a hundred battles marring his tanned, warrior’s body, he felt a shiver course through him whenever he provoked the displeasure of that warning hiss. After years defying man, monster and infernal, Rutger Shaw had met his match.

If only she saw things that way too, felt that he was her match, Rutger might consider himself a contented man. As it stood, he didn’t dare confess the depth of his regard for the speaker, Taryn di la Rovissi.

Her lithe frame bundled in the folds of a bearskin robe and although her aquiline face was hidden in the shadow of a leather hood, it was still easy for Rutger to discern his companion’s irritation. The way she fiddled with the twin pistols swinging from her belt, her fingers teasing across the worn wooden grips, her thumbs rubbing each steel hammer spoke of

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trouble. It was a habit Rutger had become accustomed to in the months since he'd first made the acquaintance of Llaeese gun mage.

From a chance encounter across blades in the city of Leryn, Rutger and Taryn had become comrades in arms, plying a mercenary trade amidst the chaos of occupied Llael. What had started as an association of convenience had grown into a deep friendship as they shared the dangers and deprivations of an adventurer's life. They'd become well versed in taking coin with mercenary companies in the conflict, aiding the beleaguered Llaeese nobility in the waning days of the war, assisting the unbowed Resistance once the Khadoran occupation became complete. It seemed to Rutger there hadn't been a quiet moment since he'd met Taryn.

Rutger turned his eyes from his companion and cast a lingering gaze across the bleak landscape beyond; rolling hills covered in the nude blackened husks of trees, the lonely stalks of brick chimneys rising from mounds of rubble, the long gouges across farmyards and meadows where trenches had been dug. The rusted hulks of warjacks lay half-buried in the mud, their frames stripped of all that could be salvaged by the victorious Khadorans. The shattered remains of a Morrowan way shrine, its walls pitted with the marks of bullet and blade, its shingle roof shattered by the blast of some distant explosion. Some pious soul had placed a crude thatch covering across the broken roof in a feeble attempt to keep the rain from falling on the plaster image of Morrow standing upon the shrine's altar.

Making the sign of the Ascendant Rowan, Rutger nodded respectfully to the shrine and to the efforts of the unknown person who had done what little they could to restore the place's dignity. It seemed appropriate to him to invoke the patron of the downtrodden to bless the place. The time for more militant Ascendants like Markus and Katrena had passed. What Llael needed now was mercy and kindness, not swords and guns.

It had taken Rutger a long time to accept that unhappy fact. Indeed, a part of him still wanted to help the Llaeese Resistance no matter how doomed their cause might be. Taryn had urged him for months to give

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up the fight, to leave Llael to its conquerors and seek safer – and more profitable – pastures. After all, what did it matter in the end if the coins minted in Merywyn bore the image of a king or an empress? Her pessimism eventually overcame Rutger's stubborn sense of obligation and duty. The Khadoran presence in Llael grew stronger by the day, while the Resistance continued to weaken and wither. Staying would only get both of them killed.

And it would be both of them. Rutger knew that however much she might rail against the hopelessness of the Llaeese cause, Taryn would never leave without him. Much as she might scorn codes of chivalry and honor, there was a deep streak of loyalty under all that cynicism. No matter how dire the situation, she'd always stayed true to a comrade in arms. Through all their ordeals against the Khadorans, she'd never abandoned him. It was that fact that had finally swayed his mind.

"Rutger," the angry hiss came again. "Don't get involved. It's none of our business."

The big mercenary glanced aside at Taryn, and then looked across the clearing to the cause of her anxiety. Leather creaked as his gloved hands clenched into fists, his eyes growing cold and hard behind the lenses of his goggles. She had been right to warn him, but it was wasted breath. There wasn't a chance this side of Urcaen that he was going to stand back and do nothing.

A fishing village had once stood within this clearing before being destroyed in the war. Now, amidst the burnt timbers and broken masonry of the old village, a new one had arisen, a confusion of tents and wicker shanties that stretched from the encroaching stands of swamp-pine to the edge of the stagnant marshlands. There was only one patch of open ground amidst the camp, a wide swathe leading down to a long, timber pier stretching out into the marsh. The pier ended in the midst of a free-flowing stream, the most navigable of such channels to wind its way through the brackish environs of the Bloodsmeath Marsh. Once, the pier had served

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the rowboats and barges of the village. Now it provided anchorage to a far different vessel.

It was named *Spectre*, an appropriate title for a boat that had become almost mythical among the people of Llael as the “Ghost Ship.” A decrepit, two-funnel steamboat, the black paint of her hull peeling and faded, several of the floaters on her paddlewheels chipped and splintered, the paddleboxes atop the great wheels cracked and scarred, it had been many years since the ship had plied the Oldwick and conducted more respectable trade. Now she had become a parasite, a scavenger picking off the carcass of old Llael, feeding on the misery and sorrow of a conquered people.

A steady file of refugees trooped down the pier, walking in desolate silence towards their chance of escape from the Khadoran occupation, perhaps the only avenue open to many of them. Due to the increased activities of the Resistance in the region, the Empire had tightened its grip along the border, seeking to choke off the supplies being smuggled in to the Llaeese and at the same time prevent any rebels from slipping over the frontier. It was the first step in Khadoran ambitions for taking the Thornwood and prosecuting war with Cygnar. Even the most neglected corners of the frontier were being drawn into the iron grip of the Empire, patrolled by troops of Winter Guard. In the entire region, only the “Ghost Ship” remained as a sure route into the Kingdom of Ord.

As a final slight against the dignity of the refugees, the last step in their exodus was through a cordon of criminal renegades, henchmen of the crime boss Viktorovich Yatsek. With a sufficiently substantial bribe, the smugglers would allow them to depart on the *Spectre*. With the eye of the Empire turning upon the Thornwood, soon there would be no shadows left for such criminals to hide. By the time the army came calling, Yatsek would be long gone, safe back in Khador with a fat chest of gold. This would likely be the last voyage for the “Ghost Ship,” and the last chance for the smugglers to exact their toll upon the Llaeese refugees.

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As Rutger looked towards the shore and the table where the smuggler book-keepers sat, he saw a sorry spectacle. A Llaese man was on his knees pleading with a disinterested-looking clerk. According to the man, his money-belt had been stolen in the night – amid the misery of the refugee camp there was no shortage of thieves – leaving him destitute of the funds to procure passage for himself and his family.

“Everyone pays,” the unsympathetic smuggler declared with a flourish of the quill in his hand. A grim smile twisted the book-keeper’s face. “One way, or another, everyone pays.”

A comely woman rushed forward with a despairing shriek. Furiously, and without thought or concession to modesty, she unlaced her bodice and drew a string of gemstones from where it had been concealed beneath her clothing. Trembling, she thrust the gems towards the clerk.

The smuggler let the string of stones drop into his hand, squinting at them through one eye. “This will compensate the boss for two emigrations,” he declared. The grim smile was back, the quill lingering once more over the ledger. The book-keeper looked past the man and his wife, at the three young children behind them. “Decide who goes and who stays. Unless, of course, you have more baubles hidden away,” he added with a lewd wink at the woman.

“What’s he telling them?” Rutger asked Taryn. Her command of Khadoran was better than his. He’d been brought up in Cygnar, with little exposure to either the Empire or its language until he’d served with the trenchers at Fellig.

Taryn hesitated, then with a nervous pause explained to Rutger the smuggler’s effort to extort more money from the refugees. Rutger’s expression darkened as she related the sordid details.

“We can’t help them,” Taryn said this time with an edge of panic in her voice. Rutger barely listened to her, hearing only the wailing children and the sobbing parents.

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“Wurm’s teeth we can’t,” he growled. “We’ve saved enough to pay for them too.” He cast a wary eye at the armed bruisers holding the crowd back. “Watch them and see I don’t bite off more than I can chew.”

Taryn fingered her magelocks. “You know I have a light appetite. Especially at close quarters,” she warned him.

“Think scary, not fatal,” Rutger advised. His fist clenched around the hilt of his sword as he heard the children crying again. “Leave the rough stuff to me.” Angrily, the armored mercenary pushed his way through the crowd.

The thugs shifted forward as they watched Rutger advance, lowering their pikes and drawing swords. Rutger ignored them, his eyes locked instead upon the family groveling before the clerk. He watched as the book-keeper dipped the quill towards the inkpot and started to write in the ledger.

“Khardovic’s Crown!” the smuggler cursed as something crashed down onto the table, upsetting the inkpot and splashing him from forehead to chin.

Rutger held up his hands as the guards rushed towards him and gestured at the object he had thrown at the book-keeper. “That’ll pay for the family’s passage,” he declared. The smuggler wiped some of the ink from his face, blinking down at the leather pouch lying amid the ink. Several gold coins had spilled from its mouth.

In a flash, the book-keeper had the pouch in his hand, jostling it to judge its weight. Still blinking ink from his left eye, he waved his hand, dismissing the refugee family. “This pays for them,” he declared in rough Llaese. “But what about you?”

Behind him, Rutger heard a groan of disgust. Taryn was always chiding him for his soft heart. It wasn’t that she was indifferent or callous, just a good deal more prudent. She’d grown up in circumstances far different from his, forced to fend for herself almost from the cradle. In her world, before you helped anyone, you helped yourself. Judging by the depth of emotion in that

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groan, she had enough coin stashed away to pay for both of their passages. He knew he didn't need to tell her he would make it up to her.

Before Taryn could step forward and offer the wormy little smuggler a bigger payout, however, the opportunity was lost. "This man is a traitor and a rebel," snarled a vicious voice from beyond the ring of smugglers. "He's worth a lot more in bounty money." The guards parted, admitting a towering Khadoran wearing a tattered Winter Guard kapitan's uniform, but no remaining insignia, on his bearskin hat. He did bare a scowl that could have chilled the heart of a trollkin on his cruel face. The long leather coat the former officer wore didn't conceal the bulky metal arm fastened to his right shoulder, a little stream of smoke rising from the exhaust pipe on its side.

"Rutger Shaw," the Khadoran growled, making the name sound like the vilest curse imaginable. "I've waited a long time for this." The former officer lifted his metal arm, steam venting from its power plant as he clenched its fingers. "Every time I should have held a sword in my right hand, I've thought of you."

His command of the language might not be fluent, but Rutger was able to follow the menacing tone of the former 'kapitan's words. Moreover, he recognized this officer. Of all the people he could have run into on his way out of Llael, there wasn't any he could think of who would be worse. "Vyacheslav Lavrenti," Rutger sighed.

The kapitan's cruel face split in a smile that made the earlier scowl seem comforting. "I am pleased you remember me, Shaw. It will make killing you all the more pleasant. Where is that gun-toting she-witch of yours?"

Rutger managed a smile. He'd picked up enough of Vyacheslav's words to know the kapitan hadn't seen Taryn. As discretely as he could, he warned Taryn back with a wave of his fingers. If Vyacheslav hadn't spotted her then there was no sense letting him know she was around. It was bad enough that he'd been caught. While Vyacheslav was dealing with him, Taryn would be able to slip away.



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"She went ahead of me," Rutger lied. "By now she is probably in Caspia looking for another contract." He looked at a few renegade soldiers behind Vyacheslav, then smiled at the massive Khadoran. "I see your idea of a "fair" fight hasn't changed."

The kapitan glowered at Rutger. "I shall content myself that Morrow has answered half my prayer then," Vyacheslav declared. He snapped the fingers of his left hand and one of his men stepped forward, placing a rune-inscribed sabre in his former kapitan's palm. Vyacheslav made a dramatic flourish with the blade. "I've had a long time to learn to use a sword with my left hand," he said.

Rutger started to lower his arms only to hear the click of a hammer being drawn on a renegades' rifle. "Afraid of getting your sword dirty?" he demanded.

"Lower your weapon!" Vyacheslav barked. "This dog is mine!"

Rutger reached to his belt, drawing his sword. As the mechanical device left the scabbard, the runes etched along its length began to emit a sapphire radiance. An arcanist from the Order of the Golden Crucible had bestowed the blade on Rutger in return for his services helping him escape from occupied Leryn. The runeplate embedded in its hilt endowed it with magical energy, power enough to sheer through troll bone. After seeing its efficacy against the armor of Khador's warjacks, Rutger had christened the blade "Jackknife."

Some of the bravado faded from Vyacheslav as he saw Rutger draw his sword, the renegade kapitan shifting his right shoulder away from the mercenary in an automatic, unconscious motion. A moment later, the officer's face grew flush with anger and shame as he fought down the fear that had momentarily gripped him. He glared at the circle of smuggler guards, then at the crowd of refugees beyond them, his eyes daring any of them to acknowledge his moment of weakness.

"Last time you may have taken my arm, Shaw," Vyacheslav spat, switching to a stilted Llaesele to ensure his foe understood him. "But, this

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time I am ready for your tricks.” The Khadoran’s fist clenched tighter about the fur-wrapped hilt of his sabre, depressing the activation stud concealed there. At once the blade was surrounded by flickering blue flames as the runeplate fitted into its tang sent arcane power coursing through the weapon. “This is the Fire of Skirov,” the kapitan declared. “It is the last thing you will ever see!”

“Not much to look at,” Rutger baited his foe, tracing the point of Jackknife through the mud at his feet. Since their first meeting in the trenches of Redwall, there was one thing for which the kapitan could always be depended upon: his short temper. By feigning a nonchalance he didn’t feel, Rutger hoped to goad his enemy into making the first move – and the first mistake.

Vyacheslav proved true to character. Growling like an enraged snow tiger, the kapitan rushed at Rutger. The mercenary retreated a pace, bringing Jackknife whipping up from the ground and sending a spray of mud straight into the Khadoran’s face. The man’s charge faltered as he reeled back, his swordarm sweeping across his eyes to shield them from the muck.

It was an underhanded tactic, but Rutger had lived as long as he had by adopting the philosophy that any fight worth winning was worth fighting dirty to win. He didn’t give Vyacheslav a chance to recover from his surprise but rushed straight at the Khadoran, bringing the glowing edge of Jackknife slashing down at the man’s unprotected side. He put less force behind the blow than he might have. His intention was to put his foe out of the fight rather than kill him. His own restraint was his undoing. Before his sword could connect, the Khadoran’s blade was sweeping around to parry the attack.

As the two swords met, Rutger felt a stinging numbness flow up his arm, an ethereal chill that nearly made him drop his weapon. He could see little bubbles of frost clinging to Jackknife and the glove that gripped it. “Fire of Skirov” indeed! Despite the illusion of blue flames crackling

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around it, the Khadoran blade was attuned to the icy magic of winter and snow. Vyacheslav might not have learned to control his temper, but he'd learned some new tricks just the same.

The kapitan grinned as he watched Rutger retreat before him, savoring the alarm he saw growing in his enemy's eyes. "Do you want a Morrowan or a Menite funeral?" the Khadoran mocked. "Or would you rather I just leave your carcass out for the creatures of the Wurm?"

"Why, you planning a family dinner?" Rutger taunted in reply, drawing an inarticulate snarl from the kapitan. Rutger continued to retreat, trying to rub feeling into his numbed right arm. Vyacheslav pressed him, slashing at him with his deadly blade, forcing his foe to give ground before him. The mercenary could see the gloating overconfidence building in the kapitan's face each time he fell back and refused to cross swords with him.

"What's wrong, Shaw?" Vyacheslav laughed. "Afraid of a fair fight?"

Even as the kapitan mocked him, Rutger tossed Jackknife from his numbed right hand into his left. Before Vyacheslav was fully aware of it, the mercenary was lunging at him, striking low and shearing through the armor encasing the officer's leg. Vyacheslav yelped, staggering back as the ruined sabaton sagged from its remaining strap and blood oozed through the torn flesh beneath. Another inch and Rutger would have chopped the man's leg from his knee.

His enemy's momentum broken, Rutger exploited the respite to shrug out of his fur cloak and coil the heavy garment around his numb right hand. As Vyacheslav came hobbling back to the attack, Rutger again gave ground before him, waiting for the kapitan to present him the opportunity he needed. The injury Rutger had dealt to the Khadoran's leg wasn't half as telling as the wound he had inflicted upon the man's pride. Vyacheslav would press his assault with redoubled fury now. Rutger was counting on it.

"Come on then," Rutger growled. "While you still have a leg to stand on."

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Rutger was careful to remain on the defensive against his foe's repeated lunges. He parried Vyacheslav's sword with only the most glancing flourishes of Jackknife, feeling an icy sting bite at his fingers even from such brief contact with the frigid Khadoran blade. With each parry, he could see his enemy's frustration growing. It was then that the fugitive kapitan made the mistake Rutger had been waiting for. The man thrust for the mercenary's breast, overextending himself for one brief instant. Sidestepping the attack, Rutger brought the heavy folds of the cloak – still wrapped about his right hand – whipping out at the officer's sword, trapping it within coils of fur and leather.

Vyacheslav howled in alarm and tried to draw back, but Rutger kept a firm grip on the cloak, twisting it so that the Khadoran's mortal arm was forced downwards. "Yield," Rutger growled at the officer.

"Never!" Vyacheslav snarled back, raising his mechanical arm. Rutger thought at first he meant to slash at him with the steel fingers, but then a jet of searing steam rushed past his face, scalding his cheek. Truly the kapitan had learned some unsavory tactics since their last encounter.

Twisting Vyacheslav's swordarm still lower, Rutger brought Jackknife shearing through the mechanical arm, cleaving through it just behind the elbow joint. The wreckage went spinning through the air, forcing some of the onlookers back as it crashed to earth a dozen yards away.

Vyacheslav's eyes blazed with hate as he glared at Rutger. All pretensions of pride and honor were drowned beneath a tide of rage and bloodlust. "Kill him!" the kapitan roared.

Even as the Khadoran renegades started to move forward, the sharp crack of a magelock pistol filled the air. A spectral ring of runes danced around the barrel as the bullet sped towards the soldiers. The single riflemen among them cried out as the bullet burned its way through his hand. Hugging the ruined member to his chest, he let his rifle fall into the mud. The other renegades froze, watching as a lithe, predatory shape stalked out from among the refugees. A smoking pistol gripped in her right

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hand, a nimbus of wraith-letters slowly fading from around the gun barrel, Taryn di la Rovissi kept her eyes roving across the startled soldiers. All of them felt the menace of the unspent magelock she held in her left hand.

Taryn smiled balefully at the guards. "I know what you're thinking. You're thinking 'she can only shoot one of us.' Well, who wants to step forward and be the big loser?" Unsurprisingly, none of the guards offered to test the gun mage's threat.

"I told you to get out of here," Rutger grumbled as she marched towards him.

Taryn fixed him with a glare that was only slightly less enraged than Vyacheslav's. "And you really thought I'd listen?" she asked, a tinge of hurt in her voice. "I would have thought you'd know me better by now."

"Who ever really knows a woman?" Rutger answered with an embarrassed smile, releasing his coat and drawing his hand cannon from its holster.

Taryn spun around, aiming her magelock at a second formerly unseen rifleman who had started to raise his weapon. Almost sheepishly, the guard dropped his gun. "Give any thought to how we're going to get out of this now that you're done playing hero?"

Rutger kept his hand cannon aimed at the guards while Taryn holstered one magelock so she could reload the other. "I was thinking I'd let them capture me and then you could rescue me later." He smiled.

"A little late for that one," Taryn told him.

Vyacheslav listened to the mercenary banter, his anger swelling with each word. "Kill them! They can't get you all!" he shouted at his men, struggling to free himself from the cloak coiled around his hand.

Taryn pivoted in place, waving what were now two armed and loaded magelocks at the ring of renegades. "He's right, but I can promise at least a few of you will be soldiering in Urcaen tonight."

The guards backed away a pace as Taryn uttered her threat. Rutger knew it was a temporary settlement at best. He could see that the refugees

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were becoming unruly. Simply to maintain control, the smugglers would have to reassert their authority and bring down the two adventurers.

A loud, metallic rumble rolled through the encampment. The refugees scattered, the slow burn of their unrest quenched by the mechanical monstrosity that lumbered down towards the pier. Flanked by a score of angry criminals, its whitewashed chassis gleaming in the morning sun, the immense warjack vented a blast of black smoke from the smokestack rising from its back as it marched towards the fray. Rutger felt his last desperate hope wither inside him. The mechanical giant was a mass of armored plate and steam-driven brawn, the flattened claws at the ends of its arm capable of crushing boulders like eggshells. In one fist the warjack bore an immense mace, and the opposite arm ended in a wicked cannon. A brutish stump of a head, fashioned in the semblance of an ancient warrior's great helm, pivoted upon the pneumatic armature that acted as the warjack's neck, surveying its surroundings with the optics buried behind the armored visor of its head.

The thing was a Mule, an older but exceedingly tough, heavy warjack chassis. Rutger wouldn't be certain if the giant could be brought down even if he had a battery of cannon and a squadron of Storm Knights at his back.

The hulking machine stopped at the edge of the encampment, rotating its torso to survey the refugees to either side and remind them to keep their distance. Another blast of black smoke shuddered skyward from its smokestack and it trained its glowing optics on the two mercenaries.

"I knew Llael would be the death of us," Taryn quipped, careful to keep her voice even and controlled.

Rutger kept his eyes on the Mule. "Isn't Llael your home?" he commented. "Doesn't mean I expected to be buried here," Taryn retorted.

Rutger wasn't sure how accurate he could be with his arm still numb from Vyacheslav's sword, but with a target as big as a Mule, accuracy wasn't going to be an issue. Penetration would be the problem. Taryn knew a spell that could melt metal, but it would take an entire fusillade to bring down

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something like a heavy warjack, and it was unlikely the jack would stand still while she was taking shots at it.

There was a stir amongst the thugs flanking the Mule. The criminals closed ranks around a bearded man who had a flat cap of ermine crunched down about his ears and a white sealskin coat hugging his stocky frame. The newcomer tugged at his long moustache with fingers festooned with a lord's ransom in jewels. After a moment, he pointed a massive jade ring at the two mercenaries.

"I am Boss Nikolai Viktorovich Yatsek," the stocky man announced. "Drop your weapons now and I will spare your lives."

"Do we look that stupid?" Taryn scoffed. Boss Yatsek smiled an oily smile and shrugged his shoulders. He held all the cards and wasn't about to bargain. The slightest gesture from him and it would all be over.

"Yatsek!" a voice called out from the direction of the pier. Rutger turned his head enough to see a man dressed in tailor-trimmed breeks and doublet jogging back towards shore. There was a lean, hungry look about his weathered face, yet it also bore the indelible stamp of the aristocrat in the sharp aquiline features and the natural poise of his bearing.

"Please!" the man called out again as he reached the muddy shore. "If I might beg your indulgence, I would like to pay for these two undesirables' passage." He spoke in a cultured, refined Llaeese, the tones were those of pedigree and breeding. As if to strengthen his proposal, the man removed a leather purse from beneath the breast of his doublet.

Yatsek tugged at his moustache again. "There is the question of my injured men to redress," he stated in halting Llaeese.

"Maybe you'd like to bury a few instead," Rutger grinned, his voice carrying such menace that Yatsek pulled several hairs from his face.

"Five goldbust for the kapitan, ten keeps for anybody else," the man on the pier offered, speaking a precise Khadoran every bit as refined as his Llaeese.

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Yatsek laughed. “Ten *koltina* for the kapitan and twenty *denescka* for the other,” he declared, stating the payment in Khadoran coinage rather than the obsolescent Llaelese currency.

A tense moment passed as Rutger waited to hear if their mysterious benefactor would abandon them. After a moment, the man from the pier nodded and made his way to the clerk’s table, removing the payment from the purse.

“Be thankful that Earl Alessandro is in the habit of picking up strays,” Yatsek advised the two mercenaries. He stopped stroking his moustache and pointed his jeweled fist at Rutger and Taryn in turn. “Pray to your ascendants we don’t meet again.”

Warily, Taryn backed away from the cordon of guards, following the earl as he strode back down the pier. Rutger started to follow her when an angry hiss brought him spinning around. Freed from the cloak, the one-armed Vyacheslav was rushing at the mercenary with upraised sword, intending to cut his foe down from behind. Rutger dodged to the side and brought Jackknife’s edge licking out at the furious Khadoran. Vyacheslav shrieked as the mechanical sword raked across his knuckles, sending fingers dancing through the air and the Fire of Skirov crashing into the mud. The kapitan fell to his knees, cradling the bleeding ruin of his hand to his breast.

“It’s okay!” Rutger called up to Yatsek. “This one is already paid for!”

The angry look on Yatsek’s face vanished in a boisterous laugh as he digested Rutger’s boldness. The crime boss’s laugh soon infected the other smugglers. Hurriedly, Rutger turned around and retreated towards the boat. He didn’t want to be around when the laughter stopped.

“This isn’t over,” Vyacheslav snarled at Rutger’s back.

“You should retire,” Rutger called back without turning around. “Before you end up a clockwork clown at a blackpenny carnival.”

He knew it was an un-Morrowan thing to feel, but Rutger took an awful satisfaction in the vindictive howl that followed him down the pier.

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From occupied Llael, the Ghost Ship ferried its human cargo into the lonely expanse of northern Cygnar. With the Khadoran Empire moving against the Thornwood, the maze-like mire of the Bloodsmeath had become the last resort for the smugglers who once conducted their charges downriver to Corvis. Now the hazardous route through the Bloodsmeath offered them the only route around the Khadoran army and west to Ord.

The *Spectre* was little more than a cargo barge, never intended to conduct more than a handful of passengers in anything resembling comfort. So stifling were the holds below the decks that many of the refugees preferred to shiver above rather than endure the dark stink that awaited them below. Knots of desperate humanity, the last of their finery caked in the dirt and grime of their flight, clustered about the wheelhouse and the promenade. After paying Yatsek for the privilege of exile, few of the Llaeese had the funds to make the further bribes that might see a boatswain or ship's mate turn his cabin over to a displaced family.

Under these conditions, Rutger felt pangs of guilt that their benefactor had secured the only stateroom on the ship for his use and that of his entourage. That "entourage" consisted of a slightly worse-for-wear sellsword and a cynical gun mage from Laedry. As Earl Alessandro was quick to explain, such isolation wasn't an extravagant indulgence but a desperate necessity.

Shortly after the steamship pulled out into the Bloodsmeath Marsh, the two mercenaries found themselves seated in their benefactor's stateroom, listening as the earl explained the purpose behind his beneficence.

"You already know I am Earl Alessandro di la Predappio," he stated. The degree of culture and refinement in the way he spoke Llaeese marked him as one of the vanquished nations' aristocrats, perhaps even a courtier from the late king's court. Rutger noticed that he sat with his back to the wall and facing the door. It was a habit he knew quite well from his days as

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a thief and bandit. A hunted man always liked to know what was behind him and to see whatever was ahead of him.

“Not so long ago,” Earl Alessandro continued, “I was a notable personage at the royal court in Merywyn.” A wistful, bitter laugh escaped his lips. “Current events have made it prudent for me to remove myself from Llael.”

“You are beyond the reach of Khador now,” Taryn observed. “They have enough problems inside Llael to bother about those who have fled.” From her tone, Rutger knew that she was suspicious of the earl. Certainly there was the ring of truth in his claim that he required the services of bodyguards, but from his conduct both of them could tell the earl was afraid of more than cutpurses and highwaymen.

The earl tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair, a distant look in his eyes. “It is not the enemies I leave behind who worry me,” he said at last. “It is those ahead of me I fear. Before leaving Llael, I came to a mutually beneficial agreement with the court of King Baird in Ord. King Baird isn’t universally loved by his nobility and I fear that some of those dissident elements resent the arrangement between me and the royal court.”

Rutger shook his head. The world of politics and royal intrigue was as alien to him as the wastes of the Skorne Empire.

“It is more than some nameless enemy that has you worried,” Taryn said. “You have some idea of who is after you.”

Again, the earl tapped his fingers against the arm of his chair for a time before answering. “I know you are both brave fighters. No coward would have stood up against Yatsek’s men the way you did. But I wonder how great a sense of obligation you feel towards me for intervening on your behalf?”

“You’re paying a lot, but you’re also starting to make me wonder if that payment is enough,” Rutger said, irritated by the earl’s intimation that his ethics were questionable. So long as an employer was honest to him, he always tried to honor the letter of a contract. It was Taryn who was always looking for loopholes.

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"I have been as generous as I can be, at least for now," the earl said. "Believe it or not, getting out of Llael was the easy part for me. At least with the Winter Guard patrolling the countryside my adversaries had to maintain a low profile. Now, I fear, they will display no such restraint."

"Just who are these enemies of yours?" Taryn asked.

The earl's expression became grave, his hands clenching the arms of his chair as though seeking to draw strength from the stout oak frame. "Have you ever heard of a man, a blackguard, called Arisztid Olt?"

Taryn and Rutger stared at one another. It was Rutger who finally addressed the earl. "He's the one known in some quarters as 'the Walking Scion.' They say there's no crime too depraved for him to take on. He's massacred entire villages, butchered whole monasteries, slaughtered entire caravans..."

"Worse things than that," Earl Alessandro said with a shudder. "Worse things, and with far fewer reasons than he has for pursuing me." He leaned forward in his chair. "My ultimate destination is Five Fingers, in Ord. Get me there before the 17th of Katesh and I will pay you an additional two hundred goldbusts... I mean crowns."

Rutger whistled appreciatively. He glanced over at Taryn to see if she was equally impressed. If she was, she hid it well. Her face was as impassive as a plaster ascendant.

"A respectable amount... if you expected us to fend off feral bogrin or a few bandits," Taryn said. "But an adversary of Olt's notoriety makes things a good deal more complicated." Her eyes were like gunmetal when she trained them on the earl, "Complicated and expensive."

The earl shook his head. "I cannot afford more than that," he stated. "If I reach Five Fingers, it is possible that I may get access to more funds." He raised a finger for emphasis. "But I would need to get there to know for certain."

"A bonus for safe delivery?" Taryn suggested with a wry smile.

"We'll try to earn your bonus," Rutger interceded. There had been times when Taryn had nearly spoiled a deal by pushing negotiations too far. He wasn't going to let this be one of those times.

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“You will earn it,” the earl promised. “I left my last bodyguards behind in the ruins of Aliston Yard. I do not deceive myself that they were able to stop Olt, but at least they seem to have slowed him down.” He locked eyes with Rutger. “Now that you are engaged by me, I expect nothing less from you.”

“If it comes to it, we’ll stop him,” Rutger assured the nobleman.

It was the earl’s turn to wear a wry smile. “Indeed, or at least slow him down...”



There was a chill in the air as Rutger marched along the *Spectre*’s hurricane deck. Rising above the steamboat’s superstructure, the deck was fully exposed to the cold breeze wafting across the stagnant pools of Bloodsmeath Marsh, presenting a climate unpleasant enough to keep most of the refugees clustered about the promenade deck below. It was the solitude offered by the situation that had drawn Earl Alessandro up here, his two protectors in tow. Despite his intention of remaining sequestered in his stateroom for the entire voyage, the nobleman had become desperate for an “airing” as he called it, even if that air stank of swamp water and pond scum.

Taryn, with her usual cynical pessimism, had advised against the earl sallying forth to meet his public. The reputation of Arisztid Olt was such that it was easy to believe his spies were everywhere. If the infamous villain wasn’t already aware of Earl Alessandro’s presence on the *Spectre*, there was no sense advertising the fact. Her fingers kept fiddling with the grips of her magelocks as she followed the nobleman along the peeling, whitewashed deck. Her eyes were never at rest, constantly turning from one quarter to another, studying the few refugees and crewmen who trespassed upon the earl’s solitude. The fierce, threatening looks she directed at the intruders were enough to send even a hulking trollkin stoker retreating down the ladder to the overcrowded promenade.

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Rutger didn't share the gun mage's sense of alarm. The scene back in Llael had pretty much guaranteed they weren't going to embark without attracting notice. Besides which, the earl himself wasn't shy about spending money to get extra luxuries, something else that was certain to draw attention. There were times when Taryn's penchant for worry bordered on the irrational. If Arisztid Olt knew the earl was aboard, Rutger felt certain an attempt on the nobleman would have been made by now. No, Olt had missed his chance. Either the earl's guards had stopped him at Aliston Yard or else trouble with the Khadorans had slowed him. One way or another, the earl's enemies had missed the boat. The time to worry was when they disembarked near Deepwood Tower. For now, Rutger felt the best course to take was to relax and rest while they had the opportunity.

With a last glance at Taryn and their noble charge, Rutger strode over to the wrought iron railing and leaned out over the edge. He could see the side deck just below, rising above the doghouse over the steamboat's cargo hold to protect the hatches. At the far end of the side deck, its rusty chassis gleaming in the crimson rays of the setting sun, stood a steamjack. A hodge-podge of salvage-yard bits and bobs, the machine was larger than a man but far less massive and imposing than Yatsek's Mule. It was based on the Talon chassis, though the light warjack had been heavily modified. He could even see the faint marks of regimental insignia on the automaton's shoulder. Rutger had commanded several of the mechanical warriors over the years, their light frames endowing them with a speed and agility that heavier models could never aspire to. They could be formidable machines when properly deployed, as Rutger had demonstrated several times to the surprise of a better-equipped enemy.

The *Spectre's* steamjack had certainly suffered from neglect. It bore a heavy scrapsaw in one arm, the other given over to a pneumatic claw with three bronze talons and a jagged stump where a fourth should have been. Its role was obvious from the dried branches and shriveled vines twined about its frame and clinging to the grillwork of its head. The steamer used

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it to clear away the swamp growth that would creep out into the channel and threaten to make it impassable. Standing there in the twilight, rusted and dirty, a black string of smoke slowly rising from its boiler, the 'jack looked so abandoned and forlorn that Rutger felt pity for it. He knew it was sentimental foolishness to be sympathetic to a machine, but he couldn't help how he felt. A pair of grubby-looking gobbers, their green hides spattered with oil and coal dust, tinkered with the 'jack's engine, greasing the gears inside. From the way they bickered with each other, it was apparent that even they had no great interest in the machine they were servicing.

Steamjacks might be the slaves of man, but Rutger felt anyone who treated them without a modicum of dignity and respect was less than human. He might not possess the preternatural connection between man and machine enjoyed by a warcaster, but he didn't feel such an eldritch affinity was required to recognize that 'jacks were worthy of respect. There was a Morrowan proverb which held that loyalty was the measure of a man. If such was true, then it had been his experience that a 'jack was of far greater worth than many a man he'd known.

Turning his gaze from the forlorn steamjack, Rutger stared out across the murky waters of the channel. The fading sun was just a burning smear of orange behind the skeletal branches of swamp trees, a dying ember that sent weird shadows coursing through the marsh and set black patches of gloom drifting behind every clump of reed and rush.

At first he thought the little flat-bottom scow was just a trick of the twilight, but as the sun sank lower a stray shaft stabbed its way through the trees to shine upon the boat like the blaze of a spotbeam. The scow was cluttered from stem to stern with a jumble of oddments: strings of dried fish, heaps of fur and leather, bits of scrap, bundles of reeds, and a motley collection of jugs of all sizes. It had the appearance of a bumboat, those impertinent river-rats who would fall upon vessels midstream to peddle their dubious wares. Only one thing kept Rutger

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from dismissing the boat as a simple peddler. The scar-faced man staring up from the stern looked about as much like a tradesman as a wolf looks like a lapdog.

It was then that Rutger realized some of the chill had dissipated from the air. Indeed, with each passing moment, the atmosphere seemed to become warmer. The absurd image of a kettle being slowly brought to a boil rose in his mind. Then he became aware of the dark shapes swimming away from the scow. They were almost invisible in the murky water, just dark indistinct blotches. If not for the wakes they left behind them, Rutger should have missed them entirely.

Rutger unlimbered his hand cannon from its holster. He was just turning to warn Taryn and the earl when screams from the promenade made the effort unnecessary. The nobleman and his protectors rushed to the starboard railing, staring down at a scene of hideous savagery.

The overcrowded promenade was a bedlam of screaming refugees trampling upon one another in their furious efforts to force entry into the choked passageways leading below decks. The cause of their alarm stood upon the promenade, the butchered husk of a young woman dangling from its claws like a rag doll. The thing was bigger than a man, its body covered with layers of thick reptilian scales. Vicious claws tipped the fingers of its hands, a massive tail stretched behind it. The creature's build was vaguely humanoid but there was nothing remotely human about the saurian head perched atop its shoulders or the fanged snout that closed about the dead woman's arm. Small, beady, yellow eyes with black slits for pupils retreated behind leathery folds of scaly flesh as the monster ripped the arm from the woman's shoulder with a single twist of its neck.

As Rutger watched the hideous spectacle, a second monster scrambled over the steamer's side, pulling itself on deck with the aid of a long hook-edged spear. A third reptile quickly followed, closely pursued by a fourth.

Gatormen! The man-eating horrors of the deep swamps and bayous! In the great cities of western Immoren they were regarded almost as a myth,

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a tall-tale told by ignorant country folk. But to those dwelling near the marshes and moors, the gatormen were terrifying reality, a marauding relic of the Wurm.

The other gatormen quickly followed the example set by the first, using their hooked spears to drag victims from the terrified mob, gutting them with one sweep of their claws. The few men brave enough to confront the monsters were struck down by powerful tails, swatted like annoying insects. Even up on the hurricane deck, the sound of bones snapping when the lashing tails connected could be heard. The crippled heroes lay moaning on the promenade, ready prey for the gatormen still swarming up from the water.

Rutger turned and started to dash towards the ladder, unable to stand by and watch the hideous slaughter. Taryn caught him by the arm and spun him around.

“Our job is to protect the earl,” she reminded him in a voice that cut at him like a knife. The edge of panic in her eyes belied the ruthlessness in her voice. Rutger knew it was concern for him that put that fear in Taryn’s gaze.

“If I can reach that ‘jack, I can get it running,” Rutger growled back, pulling away from her grip.

“You can’t save everyone,” Earl Alessandro cried, trying to make his errant guard see reason. The nobleman had drawn a small gilded pistol with what looked to be a dozen barrels yawning from its stunted frame. The ugly-looking weapon wasn’t enough to put color back into his ashen face. “You won’t do anyone any good with a display of useless heroics.”

The screams rising from the promenade spoke louder than the earl’s logic or Taryn’s displeasure. “If we’re going to have any chance against those monsters, we need the ‘jack,” Rutger told her. “I need you to distract them while I get that Talon up and running.” He took hold of Taryn’s shoulders and stared down into her beautiful face, drinking in every line of her visage in case it should be the last time he saw her.

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"I'll keep them off you," Taryn said. "But I doubt if the earl's 'scary' pistol is going to work on those things." She tapped the butts of her magelocks. "But we'll try and keep their attention."

Rutger nodded grimly. "That's why we need the 'jack, it will be just like Latite Gorge, remember?" he asked her.

"Yes," she nodded.

"Just like then, we don't want to keep them entertained for too long." He looked over at the earl. "Stay close to Taryn," he advised the nobleman.

Waiting for a nod from Taryn to indicate she was ready, Rutger mounted the railing and sprang out across the promenade towards the side deck. As he sailed through empty air, he heard the snap of jaws beneath him, a startled gatorman noting his leap. Almost simultaneously there was the crack of a magelock, the eerie sizzle of enchanted lead flashing towards its target. Rutger glanced over his shoulder, saw the acrid smoke billowing from the mouth of Taryn's magelock, the phantom ring of runes fading from around the gun barrel. The rune shot seared its way through the brute's brain to burst from its upper jaw in an eruption of smoke and steaming blood. When Rutger's boots landed upon the planks of the side deck, he sketched a quick salute towards Taryn up on the hurricane. The look she gave him as she pushed a fresh cartridge into the breech of her magelock told him he could expect a discussion about his "stunts" in the future.

Right now, his problem was to make sure he was there to hear it.

As he rushed down the deck, Rutger could feel the boards shuddering beneath him, hear the creak of groaning wood. A quick glance over his shoulder showed that a pair of gatormen were climbing up the side of the doghouse toward him. From above, Taryn aimed both magelocks at the monsters. As she squeezed the triggers, her lips whispered an unknown word. Cobalt fire belched from the pistols as she shot, a circle of wispy runes dancing away from the muzzles.

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One of the gatormen stumbled and faltered as the bullet smashed into it, but the other sprang forwards in a frenzied burst of speed, less impaired by its own injury. Rutger leveled his hand cannon at it and fired. The blast punched through the reptile's scaly breast, penetrating its thick hide to smash the creature's insides. Blood sprayed from the hole in its back as the shot's force exploded from the gatorman's body.

For any creature, it was a mortal wound, but the slow, sluggish mentality of the gatorman seemed oblivious to the fact that it was dead. The reptile kept coming, rushing at its killer. Before Rutger could draw his sword, the gatorman's powerful arms were wrapped about him, dragging him into a crushing embrace so tight that he could feel one of its splintered ribs stabbing into his side.

The gatorman gave voice to a slobbering, blood-filled wheeze and brought its jaws snapping down at Rutger. Only reflexes honed on a hundred battlefields kept the mercenary from losing his face in those saurian fangs. Before the brute could strike again, its forehead was ripped open by one of Taryn's rune shots. Rutger slipped free from its weakened grip and watched as the creature crashed to the deck, its tail thrashing against the boards in a final spasm as life finally ebbed from the monster's carcass.

Rutger gasped for breath, but as he drew the air into his lungs, he was struck by the tepid, humid oppression of it. Far from the chill of the hurricane deck, the air had become hot and stifling. The hairs on the back of his neck prickled at the unnaturalness of sorcery at work.

"Distraction achieved!" Taryn cried down to him. "They're swarming the roof!"

The gun mage's shots had certainly drawn the attention of the monsters. Except for a few of the reptiles still terrorizing the promenade, the gatormen were using their spears to climb up the side of the superstructure, hooking the railing and using the poles to clamber upwards. Now it was up to Rutger. He had to get the warjack in action before the gatormen could reach his partner and their patron.



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The mercenary spun around, reloading his hand cannon as he raced to the warjack. The gobber mechanics had fled, but in their retreat they'd left the service panel open, smoke still billowing from the boiler. He muttered a prayer to Ascendant Corben, and the goddess Cyriss for good measure, that the *Spectre's* crew had left the machine in working condition. Flinging open the control box, he closed his eyes and threw back the ignition lever.

For a ghastly moment, the warjack remained idle, then with a groaning shudder the machine's powerplant erupted into life, sending arcane energies coursing through the mechanika. Smoke belched from the engine as the 'jack swung around. Rutger stared into the machine's glowing optics, wondering about the arcane cortex nestled inside the warjack's chassis. If the ship's crew had bought the 'jack on the cheap, there was a good chance the cortex hadn't been wiped and that the imprint of the old military protocols would still be there, waiting for the right command to reactivate.

Crossing his fingers, the mercenary rattled off a command code he hadn't uttered since his days as a Cygnaran jack marshal. The 'jack responded immediately, its eyes glowing brighter as its cortex was aroused by the old protocol. It seemed to stare at him expectantly. "The gatormen," Rutger said, pointing his hand towards the steamer's superstructure. "Force them overboard!"

The warjack straightened its posture, its scrapsaw churning into motion, its remaining claws flexing as they worked the rust from their joints. The old commands stirred in the depths of its cortex. Once more it was a warjack in the trenches of Fellig. It took one shuddering step across the side deck...

And went crashing through the splintered boards. Rutger's eyes went wide with horror. For the first time he noticed the reinforced platform the 'jack had been standing on and the arm of the loading crane swaying overhead. The crew must have used the crane when deploying the warjack and returning it to its place above the doghouse.

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A furious bellow sounded from the promenade. Following the sound, Rutger could see a grotesque gatorman wearing a ratty leather coat and with a lopsided beaverskin hat smashed down about its skull. The reptile shook a bone fetish stick at him, hissing and growling in its bestial tones. The commotion of the warjack's activation hadn't gone unnoticed.

The gatormen still on the promenade rushed towards the doghouse in response to their leader's shouts. In a crazed fury, the reptiles began scabbling up onto the side deck. Rutger drew his hand cannon, reloaded, and aimed at the saurian heads as they rose above the level of the deck. At this range he doubted if he could do much damage, but at least he might slow them down.

Suddenly the front of the doghouse erupted in a burst of splinters and flying bodies. Bronze talons closed about a reptilian leg, crushing it into pulp. The teeth of a steel scrapsaw slashed through a saurian gut, spilling blood and offal across the promenade.

Rutger whooped with jubilation as the steamjack strode out from the shattered face of the doghouse. Battered by its plummet into the hold, the machine's cortex had nevertheless remained fixed upon the purpose he had imprinted upon its mechanical brain. He watched with satisfaction as one of the gatormen jabbed at the warjack with its spear only to be pitched overboard by a swat from the automaton's claw.

The gatorman chief was bellowing again, calling down the reptiles swarming onto the hurricane deck to descend and attack the warjack. "The one in the hat!" Rutger called out. "Get the one in the hat!"

As the warjack turned towards it, the gatorman chief cringed back, its long fangs displayed in an almost absurd smile. Pointing the fetish stick at the warjack with one claw, the reptile's other claw snatched the hat from its head and threw the affectation into the channel. The warjack shuddered to a halt, its torso pivoting from side to side as it tried to overcome the confusion afflicting its primitive cortex. Rutger was just as shocked as the machine's cortex. A gatorman who understood Cygnaran?

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In that moment of confusion, the chief shook its fetish stick, setting the finger bones and rat skulls tied to it jostling and bouncing. A ring of glowing runes billowed about the monster's body. Across the promenade, from the butchered husks of refugees and crewmen and even from the carcasses of dead gatormen, an eerie green glow began to rise.

The reptilian chief was a warlock sorcerer, a bokor! Rutger rushed to the edge of the shattered doghouse, aiming his pistol at the gatorman. He cursed under his breath as he realized the distance was too great, that the bullets could never penetrate the scaly hide at such range.

The green light evoked by the bokor slithered towards the 'jack, wrapping the machine in phantom tendrils of malefic energy. The warjack's steel hull began to smoke as the destructive energies started to corrode its frame. Rutger cursed again and jumped down from the side deck, knowing that by the time he was close enough to do any good the bokor's sorcery would already have accomplished its purpose.

Fortunately, the mercenary wasn't the only one who had noted the bokor's magic. From the top of the hurricane deck, two shots rang out as Taryn fired both magelocks at the monster. The glyphs and smoke that exploded from the right pistol burned a sinister crimson, those from the left were wreathed in darkness. The crimson-wrapped runebullet, intended for the reptile's skull, burst into fragments only a few inches from the scaly hide, disintegrated by some arcane defense, its enchantment dissipating in a deafening shrill and a burst of molten lead. Whatever force protected the bokor, however, did not extend to her second target. In a splash of corrosive acid, the fetish stick disintegrated. The gatorman leapt back, clutching at its scorched claw, its beady eyes fixed upon the gun mage above.

The green tendrils faded into nothingness, releasing the warjack from their corrosive grip. Likewise, the stifling heat began to dissipate, the normal chill of a fading autumn creeping back into the air.

The bokor bellowed once, a deep booming growl. In a panicked scurry, the reptile scrambled to the side of the steamer and threw itself over the

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side, vanishing into the murky waters of the channel. The other gatormen hastened to follow their chief.

The warjack caught the last of the gatormen near it, cutting the brute in half with its scrapsaw before scooping up the gory remains with its claw and tossing them into the water. With no other living reptiles on deck, the machine lumbered over to each saurian carcass, pitching them one after another into the channel. Rutger ordered it to desist before it could damage the steamer trying to get at some of the harder to reach corpses.

Rutger patted the steel leg of the 'jack as he left it standing idle on the promenade. "After this, I think the crew is going to treat you a lot better," he told the machine as he walked away. It might have been a trick of his imagination, but he fancied the burn in the optics gleamed a bit brighter after the cortex processed his words.

Leaving the idle warjack behind, Rutger hastened to the top of the steamboat. When he reached the hurricane deck, he felt the weight of fear drop from him. A very healthy Taryn was standing over a pair of dead gatormen, their heads pulped by her rune shots. A third was lying a short distance away, its throat slit and its face a mass of oozing holes.

"A kill to your credit, Earl," Rutger congratulated Alessandro. The nobleman was sitting on the deck, running his hands through his hair, an expression of dumb horror on his face.

"Miss di la Rovissi had to finish it," the earl confessed. He kicked his boot at the discharged pepperbox pistol lying beside him. "My weapon didn't have enough force to kill it. But for Miss di la Rovissi, it would have taken me."

Rutger didn't like the demoralized quality in the earl's manner. "I almost ended up as dinner for one of them myself," he said. "That's the sort of thing that could shake anyone's courage."

Earl Alessandro looked up, fixing Rutger with haunted eyes. "It wasn't going to kill me. It was going to take me. Take me to *him*."

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"The earl believes the gatormen deliberately attacked this ship," Taryn explained.

"Of course they did," Rutger laughed. "That's what gatormen do."

Taryn shook her head and stepped towards Rutger. When she spoke, her voice was a whisper, barely carrying to her partner's ears. "No," she said. "He believes they attacked *this* ship. They wanted the *Spectre*. He thinks they came to get him."

Rutger thought about the slaughter he had witnessed on the promenade, the monsters raging among the refugees. He thought of the scar-faced man in the bumboat, guiding the gatormen to the attack, setting the reptilian horrors against a refugee ship just to get one man. Anger flared through him, as he considered such raw evil.

"So much death, so much horror," Earl Alessandro moaned. "All because of me. To get me, Olt would slaughter everyone on this boat!"

"We have to get him back to his stateroom," Taryn said, waving one of her magelocks for emphasis. "That kind of thing is exactly the stuff we don't want anyone on this boat hearing."

Rutger nodded his agreement. In a few strides he was standing over his employer, lifting the shaken man from the deck. "Come along, sir. You will feel much better down below."

The earl struggled in the mercenary's grip. "You don't understand!" he railed. "Arisztid Olt will kill everyone to get at me!"

"No one is going to kill you while you are under our protection," Taryn tried to reassure him.

"We'll disembark near Deepwood Tower," Rutger told the earl, taking up the reassuring tone. "There are sure to be wagons, maybe even horses there. We can head overland to Fellig and take the train." He smiled at the nobleman. "No gatormen on a train," he promised.

Earl Alessandro smiled back. It was a cold smile, filled with mirthless mockery. "Olt will find me. You know nothi..." he began. Immediately his mouth snapped shut, choking off whatever words had been on his tongue.

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Pulling away from Rutger, the nobleman made a show of brushing the dirt and blood from his coat, then, with a stiff back and bold steps he made his way to the ladder.

“Bring my pepperbox and meet me in my stateroom,” the earl ordered before making his descent.

Taryn and Rutger stared at one another. “What have we gotten ourselves into?” Taryn asked.

Reaching down and retrieving the pepperbox from the deck, Rutger could only shake his head. “I don’t know,” he answered. “But whatever it is, we’re committed until we reach Five Fingers.”

“If we make it that far,” Taryn added, almost too softly for him to hear.



Before the Khadoran invasion of the Thornwood, the wealthy citizens of Ord were disdainful of their northern railway. The nobles, particularly those of Armandor, saw it as a blight upon the natural beauty of the Arman moors. The cost-conscious merchants and nobles regarded such an enterprise as a poor return on investment. There was far greater profit and hazard in the seatriade, they felt. Good business was the best argument against a railway in the north.

That was before the forces of the Empire had started to expand, before Khadoran troops had conquered Llael and threatened the Thornwood. The violent realities of these conflicts transformed the idea of such a railway from financial folly to necessity.

Now that railway served as a vital lifeline between the city of Fellig and the rest of Ord. Troops and materiel could be dispatched north in a matter of days to reinforce the border while a steady trickle of refugees from the fighting was sent southward along the line. For many fleeing the occupation in Llael, the railway was the last leg in their bid for freedom.

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One of those Llaelese refugees, a young girl whose blue frock and satin shoes had yet to lose the veneer of displaced aristocracy, scampered excitedly down the aisles of the improvised passenger cars. Designed with the sparse requirements of northbound soldiers rather than the comforts of civilian travelers in mind, an effort was made to render the barracks cars more comfortable on the southward journey, chiefly through the removing of benches and providing extra leg room for the passengers. The arrangements were still rough, but compared to the hazards of crossing the Khadoran frontier, they were almost luxurious.

Bouncing a brilliant red ball, the young exile sped through the cars, her childish giggles bringing smiles to some, frowns of annoyance to others. Sometimes she would stop and stare in curiosity at some traveler. But youth is inconstant and the attraction would swiftly pass, leaving the child free to chase her ball once more.

In one car, the girl spent a particularly long time watching a group of travelers. One was a man, what her mother would have called a “gentleman.” Though his rough clothes made it seem otherwise, the child could see through the veneer. She could tell from his pale complexion, his soft skin, and his aquiline face that he wasn’t one of “them,” what her father called “peasants.”

The two people with him were. The child could see that at once. Their skins were tough like leather and baked dark from being out in the sun. They had a crude way of speaking, not precise and careful with their words the way proper people were. One of them was a man, handsome in the rough fashion of peasants. The other was a woman, and the girl had trouble deciding if she was pretty or not. She finally decided that she was, but not in the way proper ladies were. Her mother had discharged several of their maids over the years for being that kind of pretty.

When the pretty-but-not-pretty woman looked at her and smiled, the little girl waved her fingers at her. Then she tucked her ball under her arm and retreated down the aisle. Through one car and down another she ran,

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dodging around passengers and ducking under stewards. It wasn't until she was almost at the back of the train that she stopped.

"I saw them, Prelate Corofax," the little girl announced.

The man she addressed was sitting at the farthest end of the bench, right beside the window. There were three other men sitting between her and him, but the girl did her best to ignore them. They were ugly, nasty-looking brutes and they smelled ugly too. Her mother had always taught her that ladies do not dally with peasants.

The man at the window turned around. He was dressed all in black, from boots to gloves to the long coat that was folded around his gaunt frame. At the sound of her voice, an easy smile spread across his thin face, the depths of his icy blue eyes thawed with burgeoning warmth. Leaning forward and lowering his head so that he might be at eye-level with his young conversant, Corofax folded his hands together and waited for the child's report.

"A gentleman and a peasant man and peasant lady," the girl said, her excitement causing the words to run together. "The gentleman was wearing peasant clothes, but I saw he was a gentleman," the child added proudly.

Corofax reached into the pocket of his coat and drew out a shiny silver coin. "And what else can you tell me about them?" he asked, waving the coin so that the light from the window played across it.

At the end of the girl's report, Corofax laid the coin in her palm. "You are a good and clever girl," he told her. "Now go to your mommy and stay with her." He watched as the child raced back up the aisle to find her parents. Corofax smiled as he watched her go, then slowly reached beneath the breast of his coat, producing a fold of yellow cloth.

"She might be mistaken," the burly man seated beside Corofax suggested.

"You are much too suspicious," Corofax reprimanded him. "Innocence can be found in people and when it is, you should trust it." He began to unfold the yellow cloth, exposing the crude skull embroidered upon it. The sight of the death's head caused his companion to look away, casting his

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gaze down the aisle where the little girl could be seen disappearing into the next car.

“We could wait, Arisztid,” the man suggested, a tremor in his voice. “Get them after they leave the train.”

The easy smile was gone from Arisztid Olt’s thin face, his blue eyes fading into arctic pits. “I said to trust innocence, Janos, not to become overly attached to it.” Olt reached to the window, drawing open the sash and tying the edge of the cloth to it. With a flick of his hand, he sent the rest of the cloth whipping out to flutter against the side of the train.

“We will be passing the Scrapwater soon,” Olt told his associate. “When we do, Delt and his reptilian friends will see our signal. Let us hope they prove more capable than they were in the marsh.”

“But the casualties Arisztid!” Janos objected. “Do you know how many will die if those monsters attack the train?”

Olt’s cold eyes bored into his henchman. “You are far too sentimental, my friend. Of course I know how many will die.” Olt leaned back in his seat. “Total massacre. No survivors.”



PART TWO

In the cramped confines of the Fellig train there was no consideration given for wealth or breeding. Utilitarian to the extreme, the barracks cars lacked the luxury or seclusion of even the *Spectre's* dingy stateroom. The best that Earl Alessandro's gold could procure for him was a bench situated at the fore of the car facing rearward so that the nobleman's back might be to the wall and his eyes turned towards his fellow passengers – a motley admixture of Llaelese refugees and Ordic camp followers from all walks of life. Whores wealthy from a season servicing the garrison sat beside penniless aristocrat exiles, boisterous sellswords keeping company with dour Morrowan clerics. Young children bawled, ragged elders wept silent tears, and a dispossessed baron defamed the parentage of the Khadoran Empress in a loud and colorful voice. Running beneath the babble of the passengers, the steady susurrus of wheel against rail lulled the consciousness into apathy, a rhythmic melody to accompany the continual sway and rock of the carriage.

Taryn shook her head. After everything they'd been through, she was surprised these people still had any energy left to complain. Even if they'd been packed into the cars like cattle, this was by far the most luxurious leg of their exodus. Certainly it was better than the twenty-five mile overland slog from Deepwood Tower to Fellig, dodging Khadoran patrols every step of the way. The few horses and wagons available at the tower had been priced at rates even Boss Yatsek would have found criminal. Earl Alessandro had been reluctant to pay the extortionate fees demanded by the profiteering Cygnaran quartermaster, but in the end expediency had

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won out over economy. He was still more afraid of Olt than he was of any empty purse.

Sitting across from Earl Alessandro, Taryn found herself studying the nobleman's haunted expression, the fear of impending doom lurking behind his aristocratic eyes. She had been on intimate terms with a good many noblemen before the Khadorans had decided to add Llael to their ambitions of empire. Their troubles were seldom of such a nature as to be easily understood by a commoner. The disgrace of wearing an out-of-fashion coat to Duchess Highandmighty's Golven Eve ball, or the abominable slight suffered to his prestige by some chance remark made by Palantine Suchandsuch at the Archduke's annual farrow cull. The bluebloods truly moved in a world all their own, so far above the problems of everyday existence that they found themselves compelled to invent new ones in the shape of courtly courtesies and royal propriety. Often they would take such foolishness to tragic extremes. How many duels had Taryn witnessed that had their beginning in some petty and absurd incident? How many feuds had been handed down from one generation to the next because of something as ridiculous as a vassal lord riding a horse taller than that of his liege? It might be laughable if the coin of such affairs wasn't the paid in the blood of those the nobles ruled.

As she scrutinized Earl Alessandro, Taryn was at an equal loss to understand the trouble weighing him down. The difference was, she knew his wasn't a simple matter of injured pride and outraged honor. If a fiend like Arisztid Olt had taken an interest in the earl, then there was a good reason.

Try as she might, Taryn couldn't figure out what that reason was. From the earl's insistence that they reach Five Fingers before the 17th of Katesh, it was clear there was someone or something he was going to meet there. Who or what that was, however, she was still completely in the dark. After the attack by the gatomen on the *Spectre*, the earl had closed up tighter than a steam valve.

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There was something the earl knew that he wasn't telling. What might that secret be? Did it relate to something back in Llael or was it something ahead of them in Ord? Was it some legacy from the past or some possibility of the future? Visions of everything from the lost crown jewels of the Martyns to evidence of Prime Minister Deyar Glabryn's collusion with the Khadorans before the invasion teased at Taryn's imagination and toyed with her more avaricious hopes. One thing was clear: whatever the secret was, it could make someone rich, or dead.

Taryn shook her head, disgusted with the turn her thoughts had taken. Avarice was a quality she'd tried hard to purge herself of. She considered it an unwanted legacy from her mother and father, if the thuggish weasel had indeed belonged to that title. Before she'd escaped them for the shelter of an orphanage, Taryn had seen the depravity unbridled greed could lead to. For all of that, she still knew there was a stubbornly selfish streak in her that defied every effort at exorcism. She always had to be on her guard against it, for she knew only too well the awful places it could lead and the terrible cost it could demand.

Thoughts of the past sent Taryn's gaze straying from the brooding earl to the man seated beside him. Girded in his mail, his sword resting across his lap and his pistol holstered at his belt, Rutger looked like he should have been headed towards the garrison in Fellig rather than away from it. He had the weary, resigned presence of a soldier on campaign, of a man who has been so accustomed to the nearness of death that he becomes indifferent to it. Taryn wondered if she had that same jaded, indifferent look – something else she'd rather not contemplate. It was her first time aboard a train and she was finding it unpleasant, leading her mind into pastures she'd rather not tarry in.

"A few hours should put us in Armandot," Rutger told her. "From there we can find a steamer to get us down the Dragon's Tongue." The mercenary turned his head to consider his employer. "Unless you've made other arrangements." The earl looked out the window, watching the bleak

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expanse of moor turn to swamp as they passed by. The train had started to slow as it trundled across a timber trellis, negotiating the narrow causeway across the foggy morass of scummy pools and mire.

Earl Alessandro was slow to stir from his troubled reverie. “No,” he said. “I think it is better not to plan ahead too much. Plans can be discovered and present the enemy with opportunity.”

Taryn arched an eyebrow at the nobleman’s reasoning. “Playing things off the cuff hasn’t made it any safer,” she pointed out. “You’ve lost your retainers at Aliston Yard. It was only by mere chance you found us to replace them. Where would you have been if we hadn’t been there to fend off the gatormen?” Taryn paused, waiting for her words to sink in. “If you want to keep ahead of the enemy, you need to start trusting the people helping you.”

The earl looked from Taryn to Rutger, then shook his head. “I can’t,” he said. “What friends don’t know, the enemy won’t know.”

Rutger’s expression became almost as grave as the earl’s. “We can’t protect you if we don’t know what lies ahead,” he stated. “You said before that Olt doesn’t want you killed. That must mean he intends to get the information he wants from you – one way or another.”

Before the nobleman could respond, the already slowed train abruptly lurched to a halt, spilling passengers from their benches. Rutger steadied himself against the wall, but was too late to grab Earl Alessandro before the aristocrat was crashing into Taryn. The two landed in a tangle of limbs and epithets, the vitriol of her curses bringing a flush of color to the earl’s cheeks.

“Your Lordship” Taryn hissed as she tried to disentangle herself, “your hand is compromising my modesty.” The earl jerked back the offending hand as though he’d been scalded. Taryn sat up, tugging her bodice back into place. A particularly clever comment flashed through her mind, but the cynical observation went unspoken. She had more important concerns than accidentally being groped by the earl. For instance the shouts and gunshots coming from outside the train.



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Crawling over the earl and a scruffy tinker who had toppled into the aisle, Taryn reached the window and stared outside. What she saw sent both of her hands leaping for her pistols.

The train was under attack. Having moved only partly across the trellis that spanned the edge of the Scrapwater, the locomotive had shuddered to a halt, leaving the train exposed to the horde that now erupted from the bog. They were the same breed of monster that had assaulted the *Spectre* – gatormen. Only this time there were more than just a few dozen.

“Wonderful, we get on a train to avoid a swamp and find one anyway...” she hissed.

From armored cupolas fitted to the roof of each car, riflemen sent bullets slamming into the saurians. Encountering thick, scaly hides, however, few of the bullets penetrated deep enough to work any serious mischief among the gatormen. It was with a sinking feeling that Taryn saw the reptiles creeping out from the fog, stalking past the half-submerged wreck of an ancient colossal. An unholy glow emanated from their eyes, primordial bellows rumbled from their saurian chests. Spears and clubs, crude halberds, and broad-axes crafted from the jaws of swamp beasts were clenched in their scaly claws.

Looking down the length of the train, she could make out the tendrils of magic that had wrapped themselves about the engine, disrupting the flow of steam and arcane energy. It wasn't hard for Taryn to follow the fingers back to their source, a hulking yellow-eyed gatorman wearing a shabby coat, a beaverskin hat crushed down about its skull. The bokor from the steamer...

The warlock was standing on the rocky headland on the far side of the trellis, but not alone. A pack of gatormen were swarming about the headland, blocking the far side of the span with old logs, boulders and even rusted scrap from the colossal they'd dredged from the swamp. It was the sight of the barricade that had thrown the engineers into panic and caused the train to slow. Now, even as the horde from the bog closed

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upon the train, armored soldiers climbed down from the cars, creeping out across the bridge and towards the headland. A pair of warjacks clambered down from the troop carrier at the fore of the train, directed to support the desperate effort to clear the obstruction from the tracks.

Despite her feeling that the bokor would still be protected by its magic, Taryn raised one of her magelocks and aimed the weapon at the gatorman. Then she noticed the armored giant rising up from the mud beside the bokor. It was an enormous ironback spitter, a gigantic turtle with a spiked shell thick as warjack plate all the way down to its stumpy limbs tipped in claws the size of axeheads. At its head, a great leathery face, dominated by an immense black beak, watched the oncoming soldiers. As one of the pikemen drew too close to it, the turtle reared up onto its hind legs, towering above the man. When he stabbed at it with his pike, the turtle's beak caught the weapon and broke the oaken stave with a single snap of its jaws.

The soldier turned to flee, but as he started to run, the spitter's jaws opened once more, vomiting greasy spittle across the man. The soldier screamed, stumbling as his armor began to smoke and sizzle, the turtle's acidic juices chewing their way down into his flesh. Taryn had seen many horrible deaths, but few as grisly as a living man dissolving into a mush of meat and bone before her very eyes.

Taryn started to aim one of her magelocks at the rampaging spitter when Rutger's powerful grip slammed her to the floor. Her squeal of protest faded into a cry of shock as a bullet smashed into the window frame!

"Take Earl Alessandro and his guards alive!" a stern voice bellowed. "Kill the rest!"

The voice issued from a burly, vicious-looking man wearing a long leather duster and boots that stopped just shy of his knees. A large-bore pistol was clenched in one of his hairy hands while in the other he gripped a huge knife with a serrated blade, the sort of knife employed by trenchers and crypt-robbers. Taryn's eyes hardened when she saw the blood dripping from the blade and the body sprawled at the murderer's feet.

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Screams tore through the railcar as a half-dozen human thugs rushed from the rearward car. Savagely they sprang into action, slashing their way through the panicked occupants of the car with swords and knives. Women and old men, sick and crippled, the sadistic killers spared none who got in their way. Taryn darted up from the floor, ready to cut down the murderers in an avenging barrage of rune shots.

As soon as she raised her head, bullets were whistling towards her, one tearing through the side of her hood narrowly missing her face. Taryn was forced back to cover, automatically reaching over and slugging Rutger in the knee as he started to copy her mistake.

"They have a gun mage," Taryn cursed lividly. She had seen the arcane energy emanating from the shots that had driven her back against the floor.

"It's Arisztid Olt!" Earl Alessandro wailed, terror making his voice crack. The nobleman gripped his pepperbox to his chest, looking like a scared child hugging a stuffed toy. Taryn didn't condemn the man for his fear. Better than any of them, he knew what Olt would do to get what he wanted.

There was another high-pitched wail as one of the murderers cut down a woman and Rutger pounded the floor in frustration.

"Gun mage or Wurm-spawn, we can't let this slaughter happen!" he roared.

Taryn felt the same outrage. Such merciless savagery was hideous enough when it was wrought by gatomen or bogrin, but to see it perpetrated by men, men with minds to understand the evil of what they were doing...

Removing a rune shot from her ammo belt, Taryn forced her mind to blot out the sounds of carnage around her. Focusing her thoughts, she quickly evoked an incantation, endowing the bullet with the arcane energies she had summoned. "Cover me," she told Rutger. It was a risk, daring the attention of the enemy gun mage, but if they stayed where they were they were dead anyway.

Rutger rose from behind the bench, bellowing a battlecry to draw the attention of the killers. He fired a shot from his hand cannon, exploding

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the chest of one murderer. A burning rune shot came whistling back at the mercenary, smashing against his armor and making him stagger.

Taryn was in motion before their enemies could shoot again. In one smooth motion she slid out into the aisle, keeping herself low. With unerring accuracy, the skill that had won the admiration of her foster father Henri, she drew the trigger of her magelock, arcane energies swirling about the weapon as she evoked her magic. "Seek!" she hissed, and sent the enchanted bullet blazing between the press of panicked passengers.

The rune shot slammed into the closest thug, striking him at the center of his mass and flinging him backward as though he'd been kicked by a mule. The killer's flailing body cannonaded into those following behind him, hurling them back in a tangled heap and blocking those further back in the car.

"Now, let's get the earl out of here!" Taryn snarled, leaping to her feet and dragging the terrified nobleman after her. The murderers were momentarily impeded, but they'd soon be back on the attack.

Rutger shook off the hit to his shoulder plate and reloaded his hand cannon. "What about all these people!" he shouted. "We can't abandon them!"

Taryn was already shoving Earl Alessandro through the door at the front of the car. "They want the earl," she said. "They won't bother with anyone if they're busy chasing us!"

Taryn wasn't sure how much truth there was in that statement. The sort of men who would do the things she had just seen would kill just because they could, but she didn't have time to argue with Rutger's chivalrous sensibilities. Sometimes she wondered if the man had lied to her all this time, and he wasn't actually a knight errant in disguise.

The noisy discharge of Earl Alessandro's pepperbox greeted Taryn when she emerged out onto the little companionway between the cars. The stink of gunpowder washed over her and for an instant she was blinded by acrid black smoke. She stumbled over something lying at her feet, her hand

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landing in something wet and slippery. It was a pool of blood and the thing she had tripped over was the remains of a brakeman. A spear had passed clean through the man's chest.

"It won't die!" the earl shrieked. Taryn looked up to see the saurian visage of a gatorman, blood streaming from where the earl's shot had blasted the monster's face.

"Yes it will!" Taryn snarled, lunging beneath the gatorman's snapping jaws to press the barrel of her magelock beneath its chin. Pulling the trigger, she sent the reptile's brains spraying from the roof of its skull. A kick sent the dying brute flailing off the companionway. Hastily she holstered the weapon and started to reload its companion.

Taryn whirled as she heard a low, guttural bellow behind her. Her spin prevented the long spear of a second gatorman from transfixing her, but the sharp point of the weapon caught her cloak before burying itself into the wall of the car. In spinning, she had caused the cloak to wrap itself around her, and now she found herself trapped, one arm pinned at her side. The hand holding her magelock was immobile.

For an instant, the gatorman was actually helping her, trying to free its spear from the wall. Then its dull reptilian brain awoke to the helplessness of its enemy. Hissing its appreciation, the monster let go of the spear and started to lunge at her with its fanged jaws.

Even as the reptile was snapping at her, the gatorman's head was leaping away from its scaly shoulders. Foul saurian blood sprayed across Taryn as the headless corpse crashed against her. An instant later, Rutger was dragging the quivering carcass away.

"Are you okay?" he asked, wrenching the spear from the wall and freeing Taryn's cloak. In the same motion, he jammed the weapon against the door behind him. It probably wouldn't hold Olt's men long, but it might give them a few minutes of grace.

Taryn wiped the blood from her face, grimacing at the reptilian gore on her fingers. Reaching past the earl, she started to open the door to the next

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car, then froze. "Rutger, we can't take him through the next car," she said. "We can't lead those killers in there."

Rutger growled and looked back at the jammed door as Earl Alessandro struggled to compose himself, flipping open his pepperbox to replace the spent cartridges. Watching him, Taryn could see the rungs of a ladder bolted to the side of the car behind the earl. "Wait, we won't go through the other cars," she stated. "We'll go over them!"

Bellowing its primitive aggression, a gatorman rounded the side of the car nearest the ladder, a saw-edged axe clutched in its claws. The reptile's jaws snapped at the earl as he started towards the ladder. As the nobleman recoiled, the monster started to climb up onto the companionway.

Before the gatorman could gain its footing, Rutger brought Jackknife crashing through its skull. The flailing body toppled backwards, spilling onto another gatorman as it came charging towards the train. "Get him onto the roof," Rutger told Taryn. "I'll guard your back." Almost as soon as the words were out of his mouth, the big mercenary was spinning around to confront a bellowing reptile.

"Quick!" Taryn shouted, pulling the earl away from the wall and pushing him up the ladder, heedless of the courtesies due his social position. Just as the nobleman's feet were on the rungs, another gatorman lunged onto the companionway, hurtling the thrashing bodies of its kin. The monster raked its claws at Taryn, and then tried to batter her with its powerful tail. Had the strike connected, every bone in her body would have been shattered, but the brutal strike was thwarted by the narrowness of the companionway, the tail slamming noisily against the side of the train, leaving a dent in the steel wall.

The reptile didn't have a chance to recover as Rutger dove towards it, Jackknife licking out in a sweep that took away most of the brute's arm. Taryn pushed past the maimed saurian, jumping onto the ladder and scrambling after the earl. Once she was on the roof of the car, she reloaded and leaned back down. Her intention had been to help Rutger with the

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gatorman, but as soon as she stared down she saw a far more immediate peril threatening her partner.

As she watched, the spear jamming door of the car they had just quitted snapped and the portal was flung open. A snarling marauder burst out onto the companionway. Swiftly, Taryn shifted her aim and sent a bullet slamming into the thug before he could plunge his sword into Rutger's back.

The killer's death curbed the enthusiasm of his comrades who were following close behind. As their friend pitched and fell, the others darted back behind the shelter of the door.

Down below, Rutger had finished off the wounded gatorman and was scrambling up the ladder, with another of the reptiles snapping at his heels. Despite his best effort, Taryn could see that Rutger wasn't going to reach the roof – at least not without some help. Drawing her second magelock, keeping the first trained on the door as a ruse, Taryn fired at the gatorman. It was a hasty shot and she doubted if chance would guide it to one of the monster's vulnerable areas. Still, it achieved its purpose, startling the reptile and causing it to lose its hold on the ladder. With a loud hiss of frustration, the gatorman crashed onto the grated platform below, its flailing claws and lashing tail blocking the door more completely than even the threat of Taryn's guns.

"Well, we're on the roof. What's the next part of the plan?" Rutger demanded when he reached the top.

Taryn could only smile and shake her head at him as she reloaded. "If I tell you I'm making it up as we go along, promise you won't get mad." She made a quick inspection of their surroundings. What she saw wasn't good. The train was in bad shape. Gatormen were swarming all around the tracks. They had brought down one of the warjacks and many of the soldiers. The bokor and its hulking ironback spitter were still concentrating on the locomotive itself, gradually forcing their way towards the engine. Smoke billowing from one of the cars suggested that the reptiles might have already fought their way onboard.

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“Behind us!”

The warning shout came from the earl. Taryn dove at Rutger and sent both of them crashing flat against the roof. The mercenary grunted as Taryn’s elbow drove the wind from him, but she considered it far preferable to catching a bullet. A mob of brutish-looking men were on the back car, carefully picking their way along the roof. When they saw Taryn brandish one of her magelocks, the thugs went darting behind the shelter of an armored cupola. More of Olt’s crew, Taryn decided. Thwarted at the front, they had simply slipped to the back of the car and climbed up from there.

“Give up Earl Alessandro and I will allow you to walk away,” a cold, authoritarian voice rose from behind the cupola.

Earl Alessandro stood up, emptying his pepperbox at the voice, riddling the face of the cupola with shot. The discharge of the weapon was like thunder in Taryn’s ear, but not so deafening that she failed to hear the name the earl cried out in terror. “Arisztid Olt!”

“Give me your answer, and quickly!” Olt demanded as the roar of the earl’s gun faded.

Taryn felt a chill run down her spine. All the stories of Olt’s infamous atrocities rose up in her mind, a panorama of carnage and outrage to sicken even the most depraved Thamarite cultist. An offer of mercy from such a fiend rang as hollow as a Sulese love song. Surely the cutthroat didn’t think them naïve enough to take him at his word?

Rutger was the first to spot a new danger threatening them. With a bark of alarm, the mercenary squirmed out from under Taryn, nearly throwing her off the roof. There was good reason for his haste, however. He brought his heavy boot swinging around, kicking in the snout of a gatorman climbing up the railcar’s side. The reptile clapped its claws to its smashed fangs and toppled to the tracks below.

“Behind the cupola!” Taryn shouted, diving for the cover afforded by the armored emplacement even as she spoke. From the corner of her eye,

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she could see the burly rogue in the leather coat peeking over the top of the ladder, aiming his heavy pistol. Other killers were active once more on the rearward car, creeping forward on their bellies to present as low a target as possible.

“More trouble ahead of us!” Rutger cursed as he scrambled behind the cupola. The corpse of a soldier was draped over the side of the emplacement. The silence of the other emplacements was quickly explained by the presence of a gang of human murderers who had been prowling the roofs at the onset of the attack. Now, at the sound of shots behind them, the renegades were making their way back down the train.

Taryn glanced at the trembling earl. “I hope whatever secret you’re keeping is worth our lives,” she hissed at him, squeezing off a shot that picked off one of the men and sent the others scrambling for cover behind one of the unmanned cupolas. She broke the breech and loaded a fresh round.

The earl’s response was a half-intelligible stammer. Taryn didn’t catch all of it, but the phrase “future of the kingdom” was distinct. She had no time to worry about her charge, however. She kicked her toe against Rutger’s boot, drawing his attention.

“So here’s the plan,” the gun mage told him. “I’m going to try and pick off Olt.”

Rutger frowned. “Only problem is, which one’s Olt?”

“I’ll be able to see the magic around him when he fires a rune shot,” Taryn said.

Rutger’s frown became a worried grimace. “That means you’ll have to get him to shoot first.”

Taryn tried to make her tone flippant. “I didn’t say it was a perfect plan. I kill Olt, the goons coming up from behind should lose heart and let us be.”

“Or become enraged and try to avenge their boss,” Rutger said. “What’s my part?”

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“Keep the earl safe and handle that crowd up ahead,” Taryn said.

“Want me to take the gators too?” Rutger asked as he smashed his boot into another saurian head poking over the edge of the roof.

“We’ll flip for them,” Taryn said, throwing her body into a diving roll that carried her clear of the cupola. As she threw herself forward, she fired a round into one of the thugs on the rearward car. The body went tumbling backwards, rolling across the man behind it before pitching to the rails below.

The survivors on the rear car went scurrying back to cover. Only one man didn’t retreat. Scowling and sinister in his black coat, his blue eyes glaring from an almost skeletal face, the villain raised the gilded, gem-studded pistol in his gloved hand and coldly prepared to fire at Taryn. She could see the arcane energies swirling about the gun mage’s pistol as he cast his spell. Grimly, she aimed her own magelock and started to whisper her own incantation.

The train suddenly lurched and began moving again, nearly throwing Taryn from the roof and causing both her and Olt’s shots to whistle impotently through the air, both spells interrupted by the sudden motion. Gripping the thin steel rail that ran along the edge of the car, she found herself staring down into the fangs of a gatorman. Coldly she struck beast in the face with her magelock but didn’t linger to watch the monster fall onto the tracks. She was already scrambling back for the cover of the cupola.

When she was back behind the cupola, Taryn took the chance to examine their situation. The train was in motion again, steaming across the trellis and out onto the rocky headland, sluggishly pushing through what elements of the crude barricade the soldiers and warjacks hadn’t cleared away. Near the engine, the cars swayed dangerously on the trestle but Taryn didn’t have time to consider the oddity. Rutger was kicking and slashing at the gatormen trying to climb his side of the car and occasionally lifting himself above the cupola to fire his hand cannon at the thugs ahead.

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“Trust you to take the easy part of the job,” Rutger joked when he noticed Taryn’s return. His tone became grave as he asked “Did you get Olt?”

Taryn shook her head. “Looks like we’re in for the long slog,” she told him.

“Maybe we should ask them to surrender,” Rutger offered. He jabbed a thumb at the car ahead of them. “I recognize the goon leading those killers. He’s the same swamp rat I saw before the gatormen attacked the *Spectre*.”

Taryn peeked around the corner of the cupola. The scar-faced thug was roaring a string of commands and curses, alternately using Thurian and a debased Cygnaran to berate his underlings. Strangely, the louder the man’s curses, the more speed the train seemed to gain. Soon it was steaming away under something approaching its former velocity.

The reason for that increase in speed soon reared its grinning face. Peeping over the front edge of their car, one claw clamped atop its beaverskin hat, was the bokor. The gatorman had abandoned its magical assault against the engine to take a more direct role in the attack. “Seek!”, Taryn hissed as she sent a bullet through a tangle of thugs straight at the fanged grin. As she had half-feared, the shot was thwarted by the monster’s sorcery. A leather bag hanging from the bokor’s neck glowed a sickly green. In response, she thought she could see the residue of her bullet evaporating in midair.

Rutger aimed his hand cannon at the bokor, hoping to at least drive the gatorman off. Before he could fire, however, a new crisis struck. The burly thug from the ladder had reached the roof and availed himself of the chance to seize his target. Lunging into the cupola, the killer seized the earl.

He didn’t hold his prey long. As the thug seized Earl Alessandro, Rutger spun around and tackled the renegade. The three men became a tangle of thrashing limbs, sliding and tumbling about the copula. Their dangerous predicament was rendered even more hazardous as the entire

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car began to shudder and quake, lurching to one side, dragged down by the tremendous weight clawing its way up toward the roof. The dull black eyes of the ironback spitter glared balefully at the humans, its beak opening in an angry hiss.

Taryn's mind railed at the recklessness of what she did then. Idiot stunts were Rutger's forte, not hers. Even so, she found herself rushing across the rocking car, leaping past the snapping beak of the spitter, expecting every instant to have her bones dissolved by the reptile's acid or her body shriveled by a spell from the bokor or her flesh pierced by a bullet from the gun mage. No such fate reached out to claim her, however. The turtle was too occupied trying to climb onto the moving car to direct much of its tiny brain to its foes. The bokor was more interested in the struggling mass of bodies rolling towards it, its eyes taking on an eerie green as spell runes appeared around it. Olt, for his part, seemed content to leave the earl's capture in the hands of his minions and allies. He was nowhere to be seen.

She could see a three-foot long, crowfoot wrench fastened to the top of the roof where it could be easily reached by a brakeman. Holstering her magelocks she unfastened the hooks that held the heavy tool in place. Taryn turned towards the bokor and brought her improvised weapon smashing down at his skull. The monster's sorcery had protected it from her rune shots but she was trusting that it wouldn't prove so effective against a more direct assault. As the wrench came crashing down, Taryn felt a strange resistance retard the momentum of her blow, robbing it of much of its impact. Even so, there was enough force left to crush the brim of the bokor's hat and rattle the saurian brain inside its scaly head.

The reeling bokor slumped against the side of the rocking car, its claws tenaciously holding onto the railing. One good kick could have sent the brute falling under the wheels, but Taryn didn't have time for such finality. Dropping the wrench she drew and aimed her still-loaded magelock.

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Forming magical energies into a cohesive purpose she sent a rune shot roaring into the thrashing tangle of bodies. With arcane accuracy, the rune shot smashed into the leg of the thug, missing the flesh of his opponents. Rutger took the opportunity to pound his fist into the thug's face, bouncing the killer's skull off the roof. A few such strikes, and the thug went limp. Taryn reached down and pulled the earl onto his feet.

"Things are bad here," Taryn told Rutger, pointing out the ironback spitter.

"Take the earl forward," Rutger said, glaring at the hideous monster. "We'll have a better chance against scar-face and his goons!" He grabbed his hand cannon from where it had fallen during the fight. "I'll provide cover," he promised. He saw the worry in Taryn's eyes. "And I'll be right behind you," he added.

Taryn swung the dazed Earl Alessandro around. "We have to keep moving!" Taryn shouted at the earl, pointing him towards the car ahead. At first the nobleman balked at the prospect of leaping across the gap between the cars, but a shudder of their own car, followed by the furious hiss of the ironback spitter as it climbed onto the roof decided him. With a frantic cry and eyes clenched close, he threw himself onto the forward car. The earl's cry became a yelp of terror when he landed and started to slide off.

Taryn took her own fear in hand as she watched the rails flashing beneath the hurtling train, feeling the momentum of the locomotive tugging at her body and trying to throw her from the roof. The train was leaving the headland, heading out across a long timber trellis that stretched out over a wide expanse of swamp.

Clenching her teeth and holstering her magelock, the gun mage leaped to the forward car. Like the earl, she wasn't able to compensate for the momentum of the train, her jump ending in a wretched sprawl that set her hands flailing about for any kind of anchorage. The wind whipped about her, dragging her from the roof, threatening to fling her off into the mire beside the tracks.

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Before she could be thrown to her doom, a hand closed about her arm and retarded the drag. Taryn found herself staring gratefully at Earl Alessandro. The nobleman was still pale and there was a tremor in his limbs, but he'd recovered enough of his composure to wrap an arm around the railing running along the edge of the roof.

"I thought we were supposed to be protecting you," Taryn quipped as relief exorcised the panic from her heart. Almost at once, there was a resurgence of terror as she looked around for Rutger. A furious hiss sounded from the car behind them and Taryn felt a new dread claw at her gut. She knew what she would see before she saw it.

Rutger was playing the noble hero again. The brave idiot had stayed behind to keep the ironback spitter from pursuing her and the earl. He'd already emptied his hand cannon into the thing, which had all the effect of using harsh language against it. The spitter was now towering over him, the roof of the car buckling beneath its enormous weight with each thunderous step it took. Anyone with an ounce of common sense would have fled, but Rutger just stood there, the runes of his sword glowing as he activated the mechanikal blade.

Taryn started to draw her magelock to protect Rutger, but the instant she turned the weapon towards the turtle, it was struck from her grasp, sent spinning across the roof to lodge precariously against the hand rail. With arcane precision, Olt had shot the pistol from her hand. Taryn could see the spell runes slowly fading from around the gaunt villain's gun as he reloaded his weapon, his voice shouting into the wind.

"Janos! Delt!" Olt cried out. "Fetch all our prizes before the Ironback eats them!"

Taryn could see the rogue Rutger had been fighting rouse himself and start to crawl along the roof of the car, his trench knife clenched in one hand. Beyond him, four more thugs were climbing onto the roof or leaping across from the rearward car. Between them and her, Rutger was engaged with the spitter, dodging the clumsy sweeps of the reptile's claws while

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slashing at it with strokes that couldn't do more than scratch its ghastly shell. Taryn couldn't understand how anything natural could withstand the force of Jackknife until she noticed the green spell runes surrounding the monster and remembered the bokor clinging to the ladder below.

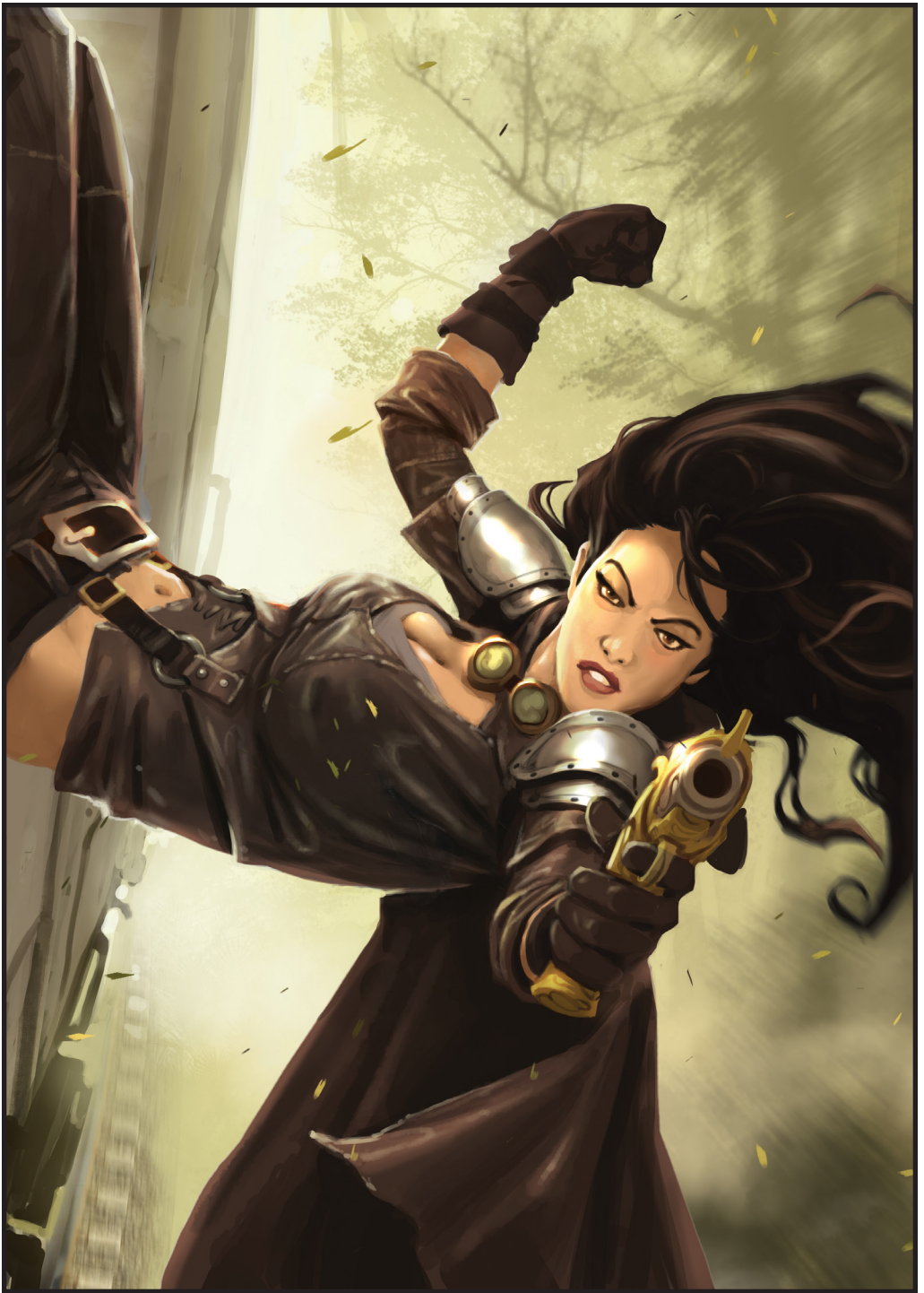
She felt her blood turn to ice. Their enemies were in full force and she had only one loaded pistol to fend them off. If they were to survive, she had to stop all of them.

"Rutger!" she shouted. She looked back to see if her partner heard her. Everything depended on him coming through. If not, the desperate idea she'd had would come to nothing. "Line the trench!" she cried, using one of the simple codes they'd developed between themselves. In this instance, it meant Rutger was to fall back to the high ground – the center of the roof. If he could manage that, and if his gigantic playmate would be obliging enough to follow him...

Taryn dropped into a crouch and leaned over the side of the car. Her hood billowed about her head as the wind tore at her, the terrain racing past in a blur as the train sped across the Ordic landscape. For a sickening moment, she felt herself start to slip, and watched the slimy surface of the swamp rise towards her.

A fierce grip closed about her legs before she could slide from the roof. Taryn glanced back, and saw the earl embracing her. She nodded to the nobleman, then darted a look back at Rutger and his hideous foe. Rutger had heard her. He'd moved himself to the middle of the roof, and the ironback spitter was following him. A few more seconds and it would be precisely where she needed it to be. Taryn smiled as she saw Olt and his men on the rearward cars. Gritting her teeth, she leaned back over the side of the roof, determined to take her shot.

Exerting every muscle in her lithe body, Taryn struggled against the roaring wind. She was fighting to secure the angle she needed, the position she required to accomplish the impossible, all the while hidden from Olt's view.



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Only a pistoleer had the understanding of angle and trajectory necessary to conceive so bold a plan, only a gun mage had the skill and ability to make it reality. ‘Seek’ the gun mage whispered as she fired her magelock. The rune shot whistled over Rutger’s ear as it drove upwards, finding the black eye of the spitter in an explosion of blood and jelly.

The ironback flailed in agony, and in its pain it did exactly what Taryn wanted it to do. The hulking brute lost its footing. The spitter came crashing down, its tremendous weight crumpling the roof of the car. The momentum of the train sent it tumbling backwards. Taryn had fired from the precise angle to send the dead bulk jouncing back into the path of the oncoming killers. Like a rolling siege engine, the spitter smashed into the men, battering them aside like rag dolls and sending their broken bodies hurtling from the train. The foremost thug was splashed into a pulpy mess as the bulk crashed into him and kept rolling. The sight sent the injured rogue with the trench knife scurrying away, his courage shattered.

Olt’s men on the rear car panicked as the hulking mass bounced over the gap between carriages and came careening towards them. Scrambling for safety, their retreat was doomed. Bones were smashed to paste beneath the beast’s weight. Only the cutthroat Olt himself was coolheaded enough to grab the guide rail running along the edge of the roof. Holstering his magelock, he hurriedly slung himself over the side an instant before the titanic carcass could crush him as it had his followers.

“Pull me up!” Taryn shouted at the earl, the thrill of her accomplishment ringing in her voice. The next instant, the hold on her legs was gone and she was falling. Desperately she lashed out, hooking the window of the car with her pistol as she fell to arrest her downward spiral. She screamed as her arm was nearly wrenched from its socket. Above her she could hear the sounds of a furious struggle.

Ignoring the agony in her arm, Taryn swung her body upwards, catching the railing at the edge of the roof with her feet. Using the muscles in her legs, she pulled herself up.

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Gaining the roof once more, Taryn found that the earl had been seized, grabbed by scar-face. The rogue was trying to knock a jeweled dagger from the nobleman's hand while at the same time snarling orders to the two renegades with him to "help Smiler."

"Smiler," it seemed, was the gatorman bokor. With its warbeast vanquished, the bokor had climbed onto the roof to make a more direct attack on Rutger. She could see the reptile's claw ringed by spell runes as it slashed at him. She felt horror twist at her gut when she saw the way Rutger's coat withered and went wormy when the bokor's claw glanced across it, as though years of decay had been thrust upon the garment. She didn't like to think what the reptile's magic would do to flesh should it gain a hold on the man himself.

For his part, Rutger was unable to get close enough to Smiler to bring his blade to bear. The gatorman was keeping him back with vicious sweeps of its tail, then lunging at him with its ensorcelled claw each time he staggered back. Rutger had lost the momentum of the fight and it would take only the slightest push to turn the affair into a disaster.

Taryn reloaded her remaining pistol and prayed it was still working after using it as a wedge. Coldly she hissed the word "Seek" as she evoked the enchantment of her rune shot. Arcane energies swirled from the weapon as the bullet sped towards the two thugs trying to intercede in the fray. The bullet slammed into one of the thugs, the impact hurling him into the other rogue. Both men were sent sprawling, screaming as they fell from the roof of the train to the muck of the Scrapwater thirty feet below. Scar-face spun around at the unexpected attack, holding the earl before him like a living shield. He had a pistol pressed to the earl's head. Even if Taryn dropped him, in his final spasm scar-face might send a bullet crashing through Earl Alessandro's skull.

"Put down the gun, witch!" scar-face snarled. "Or I'll kill him!"

Taryn could only glare at the murderer. He kept eyeing her empty magelock, and she kept it trained on him in a gamble that he hadn't seen

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her empty it before turning. She knew the instant the threat of her weapon was gone, scar-face wouldn't hesitate to shift the aim of his pistol and shoot her down. The man might be under Olt's orders to keep the earl alive, but he was also desperate. The possibility that his chief had been thrown from the train by the ironback spitter could make him bold enough to defy the cutthroat's commands.

Before the issue could be forced, a pained bellow rose from the rearward car. In a flash of mechanical steel, Rutger had gained the advantage over the bokor. Slapping at him with its tail, Smiler had misjudged the careful strategy of its enemy. This time, Rutger didn't leap back. Exposing himself to the sweep of that ensorcelled claw, Rutger chopped down at the gatorman's tail, shearing through it and sending a foot of leathery flesh flying into the air.

The stricken bokor sprang back, clinging to its injured member. Rutger lunged at the reptile, bringing his boot up and kicking into the monster's gut. The gatorman was knocked back, sailing out over the edge of the roof. Its bellow of rage faded away as it hurtled down the side of the trellis and vanished into the swampy muck far below.

Rutger didn't linger over his enemy's destruction, but spun around to confront the renegade holding the earl. He smiled viciously at the scar-faced rogue and drew the hand cannon from his belt. "Go ahead and kill him," Rutger growled, sending a tremor of panic through Taryn. "I'm sure after all the trouble your boss has gone through to take Earl Alessandro alive, he'll be real happy with you!" Rutger's grin took on a cruel, gloating quality as he saw the rest of the man's face turn as white as his scars. The mercenary gestured with his hand cannon. "At this range, this is going to make quite a mess, you know."

Snarling in outrage, scar-face shoved the earl away and dove to the far-side of the train. Taryn rushed to grab the reeling nobleman before he was dragged from the roof. She shouted at Rutger to stop scar-face before the man could leap from the train. Rutger just stood and watched their enemy escape.

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“Why didn’t you shoot him?” Taryn demanded. Rutger just shook his head and aimed the hand cannon into the air. He pulled the trigger, but the only response was the dull click of the hammer against a spent shell.

“Looks like both you and I were out,” Rutger smiled.

Taryn was about to reprimand Rutger for staging such a reckless gambit when a single shot sounded from behind them. She felt the earl’s body spasm in her arms, looking down she saw blood gushing across the nobleman’s chest.

“Olt!” Rutger roared, almost automatically moving to put himself between Taryn and the rear cars. From over his shoulder, Taryn could see the black-coated gun mage holster his pistol and dash towards the back of the train. Having managed to regain the roof, the villain had stolen their victory from them. Taryn saw him drop down the ladder at the rear of his car, putting the carriage between himself and any vengeful retaliation from her gun. An instant later, an explosion rocked the train, and a great gout of smoke and flame leapt from between the cars. When the smoke cleared, they could see the hindmost car receding into the distance, detached from the rest of the train by the charge Olt’s men had detonated.

Rutger clenched his fist in impotent fury. “I guess I was wrong about that scum wanting the earl alive,” he fumed.

Taryn looked up from the wounded aristocrat. “He’s a gun mage,” she stated. “Even from that range, if he’d wanted to kill, he would have. Earl Alessandro isn’t dead, but a wound like this is as bad as it gets. He’ll need a surgeon and quick.”

“Which means Olt’s people will know how to find us again,” Rutger cursed. His statement brought a flash of awareness through the earl’s pain.

“No... we can’t... risk...” the earl gasped. He gripped Taryn’s arm with a bloodied hand. “Five Fingers... too much... depends...” He hesitated, licking his lips, mustering himself for a tremendous effort. “Promise... your... honor. We go... to Five... Fingers...”

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Taryn stared down at the nobleman as he descended into merciful unconsciousness. The noble wasn't a seasoned fighter, a veteran of numberless battles. She'd seen the fear that gripped him when the smell of blood was in the air. Yet he'd still found the courage to risk himself, to come to her aid. On the *Spectre*, he'd only been an employer to her, a talking money belt. Now... now he was something more than another puffed up Llaesele blueblood. He'd become a person she could respect. There was conflict in her face as she looked up at Rutger. Five Fingers was days away and the earl's wound was bad. She didn't see how he could make the journey.

"We have our orders," Rutger told her, reading the turn of her mind. He laid a hand on her shoulder. Almost meekly, he handed Taryn her second magelock, recovered from where it had lodged against the railing. The valuable weapon's recovery did nothing to ease the anguish in her eyes. "It's what he wants," Rutger told her, his tone sympathetic.

Taryn shook her head, her eyes turning from the dead soldiers lying across the cupola to the carcass of a gatorman draped over the edge of the car. So much death, so much destruction and now the earl...

She hoped whatever it was all about was worth it.

Though she doubted that anything could be.



The city of Five Fingers stretched across the tangle of islands that littered the Bay of Stone at the mouth of the Dragon's Tongue River. Built upon the bones of an Orgoth fortress, what had once been a small outpost of smugglers and pirates had expanded to become the most infamous city in western Immoren, the black jewel in the crown of Ord.

Virtually every habitable inch of land on even the smallest of the islands had been built up over the centuries to provide shelter to those bold or desperate enough to seek their fortune in the lawless city. Great spires of

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stone and steel stretched up into the smoggy sky, looming above narrow streets and maze-like alleys, casting their shadows across teeming docks and shipyards. The city's construction had been as haphazard as it had been rapid, buildings built one atop another until they resembled the stacked blocks of some imbecilic giant. A confusion of elevated walkways, bridges and rope rigging stretched between the structures, forming a cobweb hundreds of feet above the ground that danced and jumped with every sea-borne breeze. From the highest towers, great cables reached out across the channels between the big islands, securing the enormous cars of steel that slowly rumbled over the water on their steam-powered wheels, sometimes vanishing into the smoke spewed by the factories littering the ground far below.

For all its filthy appearance and stench of dead fish, Taryn felt her heart swell as she watched Five Fingers heave into view. Many times on the journey across the marshy terrain of Ord she had despaired of reaching the city. The succession of barges and river boats they had employed after leaving the train, the seemingly endless delays as they transferred from one to another, all of it was behind them now. They had done their best to leave a confused trail behind them without inflicting further delay upon Earl Alessandro, yet even so the journey had been fraught with worry. Had they really lost Olt's men, and could the earl hang on long enough to reach the city and a capable healer? Now that they were near journey's end, she felt as though a great weight had been eased from her shoulders.

She and Rutger had held true to Earl Alessandro's commands, even when it seemed their employer must perish from his obstinacy. Disembarking from the train in Armandor the earl had allowed only the briefest medical attention before they were bound for Tarna aboard a steamer travelling down the Dragon's Tongue. The apothecary who had attended the earl – for the noble would not risk the attention of a professional physician – was quite vocal in his disapproval of the voyage. The wound was more hideous than anything he had seen outside of a codex. The bullet that had

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struck the earl hadn't been lead or steel, but wood, and it had splintered on impact, infesting the flesh with morbid splinters that were promoting a rapid corruption.

The apothecary said it was Bloodroot, a noxious substance drawn from a rare carnivorous tree. He explained how the assassins of Morrdrh had once used thorns from that tree to murder their enemies. The healer looked dark as he related how the hideous wood was drawn to warm blood, how the splinters in the earl's body were slowly burrowing through his flesh in an effort to root themselves in his veins. Taryn was impressed by Olt's knowledge and cunning. The assassin had spared her and Rutger, expecting the bodyguards to appreciate the danger the earl was in. He was depending on them to force their employer to the care of a surgeon. Where, as Rutger had said, the villain's agents would soon locate their prey.

Because of this, she kept her knowledge to herself. The earl believed his mission to be more important than his life. She wasn't sure she believed that, but that was his choice. For her part, the image of Olt's men rampaging through a triage or sanatorium was too monstrous to contemplate. In the end, it was the earl's life balanced against all the innocents who might get caught in the fighting, people oblivious to both Earl Alessandro and his mysterious secret.

In his more lucid moments, of which there were increasingly few, the earl expressed an intense anxiety to reach Five Fingers before the 17th of Katesh. In his less coherent moments, when in the grip of fever, the earl raved about a consignment and "the Wolf," whatever that might be.

There was one thing that Rutger seemed certain of – somewhere, someplace, the earl had allowed some part of whatever secret he harbored to slip. Someone knew enough about that secret to put Arisztid Olt on their scent. Clearly they didn't know all, but how much they did know and had divulged to Olt was a problem that couldn't be ignored. The earl, again in his lucid moments, spoke of arrangements he had made once

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they reached Five Fingers. Whatever those arrangements might be, they couldn't chance the possibility that they had been compromised.

The earl had planned to disembark on Bellicose Island, the northernmost of Five Fingers' keys, directly across from Ord's Bold Shore. A fistful of silver made the captain of their steamer adjust his course, tarrying alongside the piers of Chaser Island long enough to disembark a few of his passengers. If somebody was waiting for them on Bellicose Island, Rutger intended for them to have a long wait.

Taryn kept an easy grip on her pistols as she strode down the pier, leaving Rutger to support the earl. The docks were a bedlam of activity, stevedores and steamjacks unloading a confusion of ore and timber from barges and paddleboats while a chaotic array of crates and boxes were trundled out to waiting cargo ships and steamers. Most of the laborers seemed far too interested in their own business to bother about the three strangers – after years in Five Fingers they had certainly seen far stranger sights – but Taryn didn't want to make the mistake of letting down her guard. Short of kissing a farrow she knew no quicker way to an early grave.

North of the docks – “starboard” in the parlance of the natives – Chaser Island converged into a rat-run of workshops and stores. Even at this late hour, when lamplighters were already making the rounds, most of the shops were open and doing a bustling business. Caspian merchants haggled with chandlers over discounted volumes while Thurian ironmongers declaimed the quality of their wares to tattooed seadogs. The close confines and press of bodies soon had Taryn's nerves on edge. Olt would have procured a new crew after the train, so there was little chance she'd recognize an enemy before he chose to reveal himself. In such close quarters, by then it would be too late.

“We have to get out of here,” Taryn hissed at Rutger as she found herself studying a knot of villainous-looking sailors who seemed unduly interested in them. When one of them gave her a lewd wink, she almost felt like laughing.

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“We have to get our man somewhere he can rest,” Rutger told her. The earl had been almost able to walk under his own power when they’d disembarked. Now his vitality was ebbing and he was increasingly dependent upon Rutger to bear him along.

Taryn cast her gaze across the packed street. Half a block down the way she spotted the opening of a side-street that seemed promising. At least it wasn’t swarming with people. “We’ll make for that,” she said, indicating the side-street with a nod of her head.

The street proved to be little more than a glorified alleyway, a service road running behind a shipyard. A single gas-lamp flickered midway along the path, casting weird shadows along the walls of the opposing buildings and reflecting eerily off the hulls of the steamjacks standing idle behind the shipyard’s wrought iron fence.

Taryn felt the hairs on the back of her neck prickle as she stared down the dark path. It looked like a place designed to host a murder or three, eerily desolate and remote when there was such activity only a few yards away.

“Do we go back?” Rutger asked, noting her indecision.

Taryn took one look at the earl, at the beads of perspiration dotting his forehead. Whatever the danger, they’d make better progress and draw less attention this way. Drawing one of her pistols, Taryn started down the darkened path, Rutger and the earl following a few paces behind her.

A scurrying noise overhead caused Taryn to stop short and aim her weapon skyward. There was a section of rope rigging a hundred feet above, the entire piece swaying and shuddering as a wizened figure went skittering along it, pulling itself hand-over-hand like some jungle monkey.

“Rigrunner,” Rutger told her. “Probably some gobber late for his supper.”

“Or on his way to tell Olt about us,” Taryn frowned. She knew it was her pessimism at work again, feeding itself into full-blown paranoia. However great his infamy, Olt couldn’t have eyes everywhere. Then again, with the bad luck that seemed to dog her and Rutger wherever they went, half the island was probably in their enemy’s employ!

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The pair of mercenaries and their noble charge continued down the pathway, past the empty shipyard and down the odious passage between a fishmonger and a tannery. A mangy dog, its ribs standing stark beneath its patchy pelt, growled at them as they trespassed upon its meal of leather scraps and fish bones. A little further along, Taryn leveled her pistol at a sinister-looking shadow, only to find herself menacing the rusted bulk of a wrecked steamjack, a placard tied about its neck offering to sell the scrap for twenty royals.

Rutger paused for a moment beside the steamjack, running his hand along its corroded torso. Taryn frowned as she saw the sadness that pulled at his face. Rutger always had a weakness for the 'jacks, endowing them with the sort of sentiment most people reserved for living things. She started to retrace her steps, to nudge her companion from his melancholy reverie.

She had barely turned around when something dropped down upon her from above. A great weight pressed down on her shoulders and wiry legs wrapped themselves about her waist. Taryn shouted as a hand closed about the barrel of her magelock and tried to wrench it from her grasp. She started to reach for her other pistol, but the cold caress of steel against her neck sent her hand flying to her throat. Her attacker's first rake of the knife had slashed the folds of her hood, missing the flesh beneath. Her hand locked about a leathery wrist, struggling to drag the knife away before the ambusher could try again.

Taryn could see other shapes explode from the darkness. Some, like her attacker, dropped down from the rigging above the alleyway. Others rushed at them from the shadows, lunging into the alley like river eels. They were a mix of men and smaller creatures, low-class Thurians and feral-looking gobbers. Their garb was rough and dirty, the blades and bludgeons in their hands blackened with soot to dull their shine.

The earl collapsed to the street as Rutger spun to meet the attackers. His fist lashed out and cracked the jaw of a one-eyed mugger, knocking him

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back into the rushing gobbers behind him. Rutger exploited the confusion to draw Jackknife from its sheath. The instant he thumbed the activation stud and set the mechanical blade aglow, his attackers drew back in fright.

It was only a moment before the thugs recovered their determination. Snarling like a jackal, the biggest of the muggers charged at Rutger, swinging a viciously spiked club. As the brutal implement came crashing down, Rutger's blade went flashing upwards to meet it. There was a screech of tortured metal as Jackknife ripped through the heft of the club and sent three-quarters of the weapon spinning into the darkness. The mugger stared in shock at the truncated shaft he still held, and then raised his eyes to stare into Rutger's hard expression.

Opportunists, the thieves that had set upon them believed they had found easy prey. Now the muggers appreciated their mistake. Numbers might be on their side, but it had been impressed upon their criminal brains that they wouldn't win this contest without suffering casualties. An easy coin was one thing, but maintaining the strength of their gang was more important.

"Leg it!" the thug spat, dropping what little remained of his weapon and taking to his heels. The other thieves quickly followed his example, vanishing with the same swiftness with which they had appeared.

All except the ambusher clinging to Taryn's back. After that thwarted attempt to slit her throat, the gobber found he had a tiger by the tail. It was all he could do to keep Taryn's pistol pointed away from him. To disengage from her would mean releasing that hand, a prospect he knew would mean his doom.

Suddenly, the weight on Taryn's back grew limp and she felt the thief's clutch slacken. Quickly, she lashed out with the butt of her magelock, but the gobber didn't cry out when she brought it cracking against his skull. The thief simply slipped off, tumbling to the alleyway like a bag of garbage.

Taryn glared down at the gobber corpse, then raised her gaze, shocked to see a short, spider-limbed little man dressed in rough, grimy clothes

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standing only a few paces away. There was blood on the knife he held in his hand.

The man smiled at Taryn. She smiled back and aimed her magelock at him. The man's eyes went as wide as saucers. "Try telling me you aren't one of them," she challenged. In that brief instant before the gobber landed on her back, she'd had seen this backstabbing rat among the thieves. She wasn't sure why he'd knifed his friend, nor was she overly interested.

"Mercy! Pity!" the thief begged in a whine that was more squeak than speech. His words were Ordic but his accent was Cygnaran. Taryn thumbed back the hammer on her weapon while her other hand brushed across the dripping scratch where the gobber's knife had nicked her.

"Marko Vane?" There was a mixture of shock and alarm in Rutger's voice as he ambled towards the whining thief. The rat-faced man turned at the sound of his name, desperate hope flooding into his eyes. "Shaw?" he gasped. "Rutger Shaw!"

"You know this viper?" Taryn hissed through clenched teeth. Keeping her pistol trained on the little man, she circled around to where the earl was sprawled.

Rutger stepped closer to the thief. "Indeed," he said. "Marko is one of my oldest friends." His complexion colored with embarrassment as he glanced around at the shabby alleyway. "We used to make a living in places like this until the watch broke up the gang."

Marko nodded his head with emphatic vehemence. "Those were grand times!" he beamed. "Rutger Shaw could clout the toughest bodyguard and smash the strongest lock!"

"I thought they hanged you," Rutger said, his brow knotted as he dredged up old memories.

"Not a bit of it," Marko said. "I had enough stashed away that I was able to bribe the sergeant of the watch. For fifty crowns he let me go under

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condition I never show my face in Port Bourne again. So I skipped on the first steamer I could find and headed down-river!"

Tending to the earl, gravely checking him for bleeding with her free hand, Taryn found the chummy dialog with their adversary infuriating. "This is all nice," she growled at Rutger, "but if you're finished, I'd like to shoot this scoundrel and get going."

Rutger turned towards Taryn, confusion in his face. "This is my old friend Marko."

"A minute ago one of your 'old friend's' new friends tried to cut my throat," Taryn reminded him, thrusting the barrel of her magelock towards the thief. Marko cringed back, pressing against the wall behind him.

"I saved you from Brak!" he whined. "If my boss had told me he wanted me to assault such a beautiful and gracious lady, much less the woman of my old chum Rutger Shaw, I would have never agreed to participate in this scurrilous business!"

Taryn glared at the whining creature. "First, I wouldn't believe you if you told me the moons were up. Second," she cast a demure glance at Rutger. "Second, I'm not Rutger's woman. I am Taryn di la Rovissi, and I suggest you remember it!"

"To my dying day!" Marko promised in a shrill squeak. He wagged a finger in the direction of the magelock. "Which I hope is a long ways off."

"Taryn, what's done is done," Rutger said. "What good will killing Marko do?"

With a disgusted groan, Taryn holstered her pistol. The earl groaned beneath her hand. Forgetting the thief, she began to open the noble's shirt, to check the dressing of his wound. As she pulled open the shirt, the earl's jeweled medallion sparkled in the starlight. Marko perked up when he spotted the gleam.

"Who's he?" the thief asked. "Some Llaelese moorgrav or baron? Good money smuggling them into the city."

"Just a friend," Rutger said, a warning note in his voice.

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Taryn was more direct. Rising from the ground, she shook her fist at Marko. "Say one word about us to anyone and you'll wish Rutger had let me finish you here!"

Marko bobbed his head in understanding. There was a greedy gleam in his eye, a gleam that lingered even under her hostile gaze. "It looks like your friend is hurt," Marko stated. "I know this island like the back of my hand. I could take you somewhere you can hide until he's better."

"Who said anything about hiding?" Taryn demanded.

A sly grin spread across Marko's face. "Folks don't go wandering about dark alleys with wounded men unless they are trying to hide from someone," he said.

"He could help us," Rutger said. He helped Taryn lift the earl from the ground, supporting him in his arms. The ruckus had left Alessandro looking even paler than when they had disembarked. "He certainly knows Five Fingers better than we do."

Taryn shook her head. She didn't like it, not in the slightest. She knew Marko's type, greasy little underworld weasels who would do anything if there was a chance at a quick crown. Whatever their past relationship, Rutger was naïve to think friendship was more important than gold to a creature like Marko. At the same time, she had to concede that they could use the rogue's help. They couldn't drag the earl through these alleys forever. If Marko could lead them someplace they could rest...

"Alright," Taryn decided. "We'll put ourselves in your hands." Her hand brushed against the holster of her magelock and her eyes were like steel as they bore down upon Marko. "Any tricks, and I promise you'll be the first to pay."

Marko ignored the threat and clapped his hands together. "Any friend of Rutger's is a friend of mine, and no one can say Marko Vane wasn't true to his friends!" He rose from the ground and started down the narrow alley. "First thing we do is get out of Hurley's Purse. This district is too noisy.

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Too many unscrupulous people about. We'll slip into Dag-end. Things are much quieter there.

"An easy place for people to disappear."



The hideout Marko found for them was a spider-hole in the rafters of an old tenement building that creaked and shuddered every time a good wind hit it. It was dilapidated and filthy, the sort of structure that would have been demolished as an eyesore in a more respectable community. There was little respectable about Dag's Ward, however. Never in her experience had Taryn set foot in a place that had a more villainous atmosphere. Every crooked street seemed to have been designed with an eye towards ambush and evasion. The buildings were grimy and caked in soot and brine, the expanses above the narrow byways choked with great swaths of rope rigging so that every ray of sunshine was forced to fight its way to earth. The denizens of the district were furtive and hostile, their eyes filled with either suspicion or avarice.

There wasn't the faintest semblance of law and order about Dag's Ward. In making their way to Marko's hideout, Taryn had been witness to three assaults and a knifing. They'd been forced to walk around a pitch-covered body dangling from the overhead rigging by a noose (a victim of the Driftwolves, Marko had explained with a shudder). Once, Taryn had even experienced the disturbing sight of a tall man in a black cloak stalking down the lanes, Telgesch runes embroidered on his clothes and a jade icon of Scion Drayce hanging about his neck. If anything spoke of how far this part of the city had slipped from decency, the spectacle of a Thamarite priest walking about in the open was enough to damn it as a pit of crime and depravity.

Earl Alessandro now lay upon a cot, his face pale and drawn, sweat dripping from his pores. There was little clean water in Five Fingers, and what

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little there was too expensive for the inhabitants of Dag's Ward to possess. To keep their employer hydrated, Taryn reluctantly accepted the vile ale and cheap sangre wine Marko offered them. It was another condemnation of Five Fingers that alcohol should be more readily available than water.

After a time, the earl's condition began to worsen. Once more, he slipped into delirium. The crazed murmurs brought shouts from the rooms beside and below their hideout and Taryn could see Marko's growing uneasiness with each new outburst. The earl seemed to be reliving past battles and lost loves, sometimes delving into them with embarrassing detail.

Several times Marko suggested he could go abroad and find a discreet physician, his offers seconded by Rutger. Taryn would have none of it. She didn't want the thief out of her sight.

When the earl again started to rave about "the Wolf" and Five Fingers, Taryn glanced quickly at Marko. "Go and get your doctor," she told him. The thief bowed to her and scurried out the door. Taryn wasn't sure he'd come back, but for now that was the least of her concerns.

"You should have sent him hours ago," Rutger grumbled, raising a mug of sangre to the earl's lips. "Why relent now?"

Taryn stared keenly at the earl, listening as he started to ramble once more. "I have a feeling there are some things your friend doesn't need to be hearing."

"The Wolf..." Earl Alessandro gasped. "Cargo... for Cathor... Passenger... from Martyn..."

Taryn and Rutger stared at one another. "Cathor and Martyn," Taryn mused. "The royal houses of Ord and Llael. Two kings..."

Rutger shook his head. "Whoever this Wolf is, he must be the key. The key to the earl's secret."

"A secret that involves royals," Taryn said, feeling the cold hand of dread close about her heart.

Whatever they had gotten themselves into, it was far bigger than she had imagined.

And more dangerous.



PART THREE

Taryn was pacing across the tiny room, drumming her nails against the ivory grips of her magelocks, a habit she'd developed when she was feeling anxious. Rutger was certain the reason for her state of nerves was worrying about Marko.

"How long do we wait?" Taryn asked Rutger for what seemed the hundredth time. The distant clamor of a clock tower brought Taryn stalking towards the tiny window that offered the room's only vantage. She grimaced as she saw cramped the streets were, the tall buildings blocking all view of the sky above.

Rutger mopped the sweat from the earl's forehead with a rag. "I wanted to send Marko off hours ago," he reminded her. "You were the one that wanted to keep him close."

Taryn glared daggers at him. "Okay, I admit I didn't catch your signals, but how was I supposed to know you weren't falling for his line of drivel? You and all your talk about old friends."

"Give me some credit," Rutger said. "I'm at least a half-wit. Even in the old days, you couldn't trust Marko further than you can throw him. That's why I wanted to send him away and slip out while it was still dark."

"Because you think he has somebody watching us," Taryn stated. She tapped her magelocks as she decided on the fact. "Yes, a little rat like that would have somebody keeping tabs on us." She stared hard at Rutger. "We can't stay here."

Rutger shook his head. "We don't know this city. Marko and his cronies do. The only chance we have of losing them is when it's dark." He sighed

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and stared down at the earl. "Until then, we have to wait. Who knows, maybe he really will bring back a doctor."

Taryn opened her mouth to voice some snide reply, but before she could speak there was a knock at the door; tap-tap, tap-tap-tap, the code they'd agreed upon hours before Marko left. Rutger rose from beside the cot and marched to the door, hesitating just long enough to direct a warning look at Taryn. The gun mage drew one of the magelocks from its holster.

As soon as he lifted the latch, Rutger was bowled backwards, the door flung into his face by a tremendous force. Sent tumbling across the room, he had only a blurred impression of something huge bursting into the hideout. It uttered a savage roar and went charging across towards Taryn.

In a panic, Rutger dragged Jackknife from its sheath and lurched to his feet. His gaze was bleary from striking his head, but not so bleary that he didn't recognize the thing rushing at Taryn as a trollkin, massive creatures twice the size of a man and three times as strong. The gun mage's shot slammed into the brute, savaging its craggy blue hide. Even with half its jaw and one side of its scalp reduced to bloody pulp, the trollkin kept coming.

Rutger started towards the trollkin, activating the runes on Jackknife's blade. He had gone no more than a few steps before he saw the gilded pommel of a trench knife flashing into the edge of his vision. The blow caught him just above the temple, felling him as though he'd been pole-axed. Jackknife went tumbling from his fingers, the glowing blade clattering across the floor. As he struck the ground, he heard a hideous din of splintering wood, roaring trollkin and a scream he recognized with horror as belonging to Taryn. Caught between the monster and the wall, Taryn was thrust ahead of it. The trollkin's bulk caused the thin layer of wood to disintegrate. Both the brute and its foe were propelled onwards, through the gaping hole. The street, Rutger remembered, was hundreds of feet below.

Uttering an anguished howl, the mercenary rushed towards the hole, unable to think of anything except the woman who had been hurled to

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her death. Again, the trench knife's pommel smashed against his skull, knocking him down. A hard boot kicked savagely against his ribs as he tried to crawl onward, his eyes unable to look away from where Taryn had made her final stand. A second kick cracked against his jaw, pitching him over onto his back, almost stunning him.

The next instant rough hands were raising him from the floor. He struggled vainly in their grip, almost pulling away before someone buried a fist in his gut and doubled him over. The man who struck him was the burly thug from the train and there was a smile on his face when he delivered a second punch to the mercenary's belly.

"You said you wouldn't kill them!" a shrill whine raked across Rutger's ears. Rage boiled up inside him and he renewed his struggles when he recognized that voice. Marko Vane, the treacherous gutter rat of Five Fingers.

A figure in black stalked across the room, gloved hands folded behind him. Arisztid Olt paused beside the gaping hole where the window had been. The impact of the trollkin's mass had practically blown out the entire wall, pitching both it and its adversary out into the smoggy sky. Olt shook his head and turned away, fixing his icy eyes on Rutger and the man beating him.

"Janos," Olt snarled. "I wanted all of them alive. The girl is lost to us now, so you need to be careful with him."

Janos nodded, dropping an arm that was already poised to deliver another blow. As he turned away to join his master, Rutger saw that the leg Taryn had shot was bound into a steel frame and that the thug favored it noticeably.

Across the room, an elderly man in spectacles was examining the earl, supervised by a trio of Olt's men. The black hat and leather bag the old man bore pronounced him a physician. His face was grim when he finished his examination, and he was trembling when he made his report to Olt.

"You needn't have dragged me here," the doctor announced. "This man won't last more than a few hours."



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Arisztid Olt's expression remained chillingly passionless. "A few hours are all I need him for," he said. He raised one of his hands and snapped his fingers. The thugs by the cot started to lift it from the floor. The doctor glared at the villains, then rushed towards Olt.

"This man can't be moved!" he protested. "You'll kill him if you move him!"

Olt's voice lashed at the old physician. "You won't let him die, doctor," he declared. "Because if you do then I won't have any further use for you."

It took only a second for the import of those words to sink in. With a moan of terror, the doctor rushed back to attend the earl as Olt's men carried the cot from the room.

Olt watched them go, then turned towards Rutger. The mercenary had seen undead with more warmth in their expression than the one Olt directed at him. "What can you tell me about the Wolf?" The villain laughed when he saw Rutger start at mention of the word. "Don't feel bad, that much I was able to learn from your treacherous comrade," Olt waved one of his gloved hands towards Marko who flinched under the attention. "He overheard a bit of the earl's ramblings. I am guessing you heard a bit more than he did." The gaunt face pulled back in a hideous smile. "If His Lordship doesn't tell me what I want to know, perhaps you will be able to fill in the gaps."

Rutger spat at the cutthroat. "Better kill me now" he growled, "or I'm going to feed you your heart." The murderous vow brought Janos's fist slamming into his spine. Rutger barely felt the pain, already crippled by grief for Taryn. His glaring eyes stayed locked on Olt. Somehow, by Morrow, by any god who would listen, he was going to make good his threat.

Olt snapped his fingers and the men holding Rutger dragged him from the room. "Everyone talks," Olt promised him. "You will save yourself much pain by making that choice before I get impatient."

Marko hurried after Olt as he marched from the hideout. Janos limped along behind the two men. Olt motioned for the thug to wait. "Janos, the

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walls in this place are very thin. Somebody may have heard things they shouldn't have. Fortunately, a place like this should burn quite quickly. See to it."

Janos bowed his head, hiding the horror in his eyes, and shuffled off to carry out his master's murderous orders. Olt turned his cold blue eyes on Marko. "There are two sorts of people in my world. Assets and liabilities. I protect assets. I eliminate liabilities. A word of advice: don't become a liability."

The color drained from Marko's face. "I... I can still be valuable... Lord Olt! I know people... I have contacts in... well... everywhere! Right up to the High Captains! Need to send a bribe or fence some loot and I can find you precisely the man to talk to!"

Olt turned away and resumed his march towards the stairs. "See, isn't it better to be an asset?"

Marko shuddered as he followed Olt down the rickety stairway. Behind them, Rutger could hear the crackle of flames and the first screams of those who had been condemned because they were inconvenient to the plans of a monster.



The hideout of Arisztid Olt and his men was an abandoned foundry on Captain's Island, the largest of the islands that composed Five Fingers. Situated in the middle of the city, Captain's Island boasted the most development, the highest towers and the greatest industry. Refineries, distilleries, even a factory for steamjack production were all nestled within the urban sprawl. Here were the estates of the wealthy, the palaces of the Lord Governor, and even a suite for King Baird II for those times when that royal personage was away from his castle in Merin.

The derelict foundry was situated on the starboard cliffs overlooking the imposing hulk of the Old Colossal, a towering titan of rusted metal, its upper

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mass blasted open long ago in the rebellion that finally pushed the Orgoth from their island fortress to flee in their black ships to whatever unknown lands had spawned them. Lost amidst the confusion of steam engine shops, warehouses and sugar refineries, the abandoned foundry looked as though it hadn't been operational for decades. Every exposed beam in its roof, every crack in its brick walls, every corroded iron lantern groaning in the sea breeze, each and all added to the atmosphere of neglect and ruin.

In truth, it was as operational as its owners intended, an unobtrusive headquarters for Arisztid Olt when in Five Fingers. Within the vast sprawl of the foundry and its grounds were a catacomb of hidden barracks and dungeons, caches of weapons and strong-rooms to conceal plunder as well as "liabilities."

Olt's crew used the fire in Dag's Ward to cover their excursion to Captain's Island. Amidst the turmoil and chaos of the fire – which threatened to erupt into a raging conflagration in the narrow streets – no one paid any attention to a small clutch of refugees hurrying away with injured comrades. The small incidence of innocent casualties was of no concern to Olt, and his minions knew better than to voice any qualms of their own.

Rutger and the earl were taken into a large chamber where one of the old smelters had once been housed. The concrete drum of a furnace dominated one corner of the room while a tangle of rusty chains swung from the ceiling. Arms bound behind his back, legs lashed together with leather tongs, Rutger was fastened to one of the chains and hoisted into the air, left to dangle until Olt had need of him.

From his position, Rutger could see the earl, the physician scurrying about him at a frantic pace. The old doctor had given up trying to restore the earl to any sort of health. Now he was simply trying to induce enough lucidity for Olt to extract whatever information he needed.

Janos limped about the hall, snarling orders to the other thugs and sometimes turning a spiteful glance Rutger's way. Marko kept at the fringes

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of the group, trying to escape anyone's notice. His position with Olt's gang was precarious, and the little traitor knew it.

Arisztid Olt himself, upon seeing that Rutger and the earl were secure, had immediately entered into conference with a short, stocky man who spoke in the cultured inflections of the Llaelese court. Rutger had seen enough of the Llaelese nobility over the years to recognize that this man was from the upper echelon of the Llael aristocracy, or at least an intimate of that blue-blooded class. From the way he spoke with Olt, it was obvious he wasn't one of the cutthroat's subordinates, but a highly agitated accomplice. Rutger wondered if the betrayer of Earl Alessandro's mission was down there in the flesh.

"It will do us no good if we don't know what 'Wolf' means," the man was grumbling. "It might be a man's name, or a place or even a code-word."

Olt directed his ally's attention to the cot where the earl was being tended. "If that man lives, Crocella, he will tell us everything we want to know. I promise you." The cutthroat frowned in dismay as he watched the doctor tending Earl Alessandro as Olt continued. "I had depended on catching up to him much sooner than this. If the Bloodroot has started to bud, then there's not much any physician can do. Unless he's disclosed some of his secrets to the bodyguard, whatever he knows dies with him."

Crocella snorted in contempt. "My master will not forget this failure." He wagged his finger before the villain's nose. "We would make powerful friends for your patron, but don't forget we'd also make dire enemies."

Crocella's threats were interrupted by a commotion at the far end of the foundry. Several of the murderous crew rushed towards the iron gate as it creaked open, pistols and blades clenched in their hands. They breathed a bit easier when they saw who was intruding upon their hideout, laughing and joking as they escorted old comrades back into the fold.

Rutger swore under his breath when he saw who it was rejoining Olt's gang: the scar-faced swamp rat from the train, and Smiler, the gatorman bokor. The human renegade walked with a stiffness in his gait and had

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one arm tied fast against his chest. Smiler seemed no worse for his tumble from the train, though there was an ugly black scab where his tail had been trimmed. The bokor lumbered under the burden of what Rutger at first took to be a dried-out log. As the reptile drew closer to the smelter, however, it set the thing down, affording the captive a better look. The thing was a huge alligator, at least twelve feet long from snout to tail.

A ring of curious men formed around the motionless saurian. "Hey, Smiler, that thing looks dead!" one of the rogues laughed.

The bokor grinned at the man. "Nocanbe," the gatorman hissed in a debased Thurian. "Caught him by-an-by with my own claws." Smiler leaned over the alligator and began unwinding the chain wrapped about its jaws.

One of the men still wasn't convinced. "Looks dead to me," he said, giving the brute a kick to the ribs. In a flash, the alligator burst into motion, its body twisting around and its jaws snapping at the man's leg. With a yelp, the thug jumped back, all the color draining from his face.

Smiler grinned at the horrified man. Slowly, with careful motions, the bokor leaned back over its pet. "An' I be puttin de chain back," it declared, winding the steel links around the torpid reptile's jaws.

Olt walked towards the scar-faced renegade and his reptilian associates. "You arrive at a propitious moment, Delt," the cutthroat said. His eyes made a quick study of the hulking bokor as one of his dark eyebrows raised.

Delt scowled at his master. "Not quick enough. Smiler had to make a lot of promises to a lot of tribes to get enough warriors for that attack. They weren't too happy with the way things turned out. My men are all in some reptile's belly now."

"De fellas bein' want put me in de pot too," the bokor elaborated. "Thinkin' make de ju-ju stick with my bones."

"Your reward will be worth the risks," Olt assured them. He turned towards Crocella. "Smiler's presence removes that problem that was bothering you. He has a certain talent for the black arts. Normally, I am

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loathe to rely upon the vagaries of necromantic magic.” He looked over at the doctor and the man’s increasing despair as he tried to restore the earl to consciousness. “Still, there are times when needs must.” Without further explanation, Olt snapped his fingers and pointed at the doctor. Before the physician could react, one of the thugs flanking the cot had drawn a knife and thrust it between his ribs.

“What’re you doing!” Crocella cried. “Earl Alessandro will die without him.”

Olt smiled coldly. “We don’t want to wait that long,” he said as Janos limped over to the cot. With one sweep of his trench knife, the murderer opened the earl’s throat.

“Now, Smiler, I want you to conjure up His Lordship’s spirit,” Olt told the bokor. “There are some questions I want you to ask it.” He glanced aside at Crocella. “In life, the earl might have defied me to the end. But in death, he will be helpless to resist Smiler’s magic.”

At Olt’s command, the bokor approached the cot. Removing a long sliver of bone from the bag tied about its neck, the gatorman stabbed the doctor’s body until it had a great puddle of blood at its feet. Dipping one scaly talon in the mess, Smiler drew a circle around the cot and Earl Alessandro’s corpse. At each of the cardinal points, the gatorman placed a finger cut from the doctor’s hand and between each finger it set a polished riverstone taken from its gris-gris bag. When this was done, the bokor again dipped its hand in the puddle of blood and slapped its paw against the earl’s lifeless face, leaving the imprint of its claw across his features.

Stepping from the circle, Smiler glanced about, then stalked over and snatched a bottle of sangre from one of Olt’s thugs. Spilling the contents on the floor, the gatorman set the empty bottle just at the edge of the bloody ring, scratching a triangular symbol about it, two of its points extending beyond the circle, one pointing inwards towards the nobleman’s corpse.

An arctic chill swept through the foundry as the bokor worked its magic. Smiler’s eyes took on a green cast, the talons tipping each of its

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claws glowing with an eerie luminescence, a ring of gibbous green runes flickering into life around it as it evoked its conjure. The gris-gris bag writhed and jumped upon its cord with a hideous vitality of its own. The light flickering down through the broken roof became dull and dingy, as though filtered through a mephitic haze.

A groan sounded from the earl's body, betokening an agony beyond the suffering of mortal flesh. The clothes of Olt and his men rustled in a spectral wind, Rutger could feel phantom fingers tugging at his suspended body, the beaverskin hat fell from Smiler's head and skittered across the floor.

Smiler's toothy grin spread into a gaping hiss, its tongue shaping itself to primordial spells. The name of Kossk, the terrible swamp god, rasped across the hall, seeming to slither into every crack and crevice with vibrancy beyond mere sound. The empty bottle shuddered, dancing from side to side. Though there was nothing to be seen, Rutger had the impression that something, some invisible force was filling the bottle, being imprisoned within its glass.

"Spirit be namin' yourself," Smiler growled when the bottle's violence was at its height. Though the dead lips of the corpse on the cot didn't stir, Rutger heard Earl Alessandro's voice respond to the bokor's order.

"I am Earl Alessandro di la Predappio," the ghostly voice wailed. "Release me. Let me remain with the dead."

Smiler lashed his scaly tail in agitation, jaws snapping tight at this display of defiance. "Y'll be doin' what I be tellin' you, or by de great god Kossk I be leavin' you in de bottle!" The bokor clapped its claws together, twining its talons in an arcane pattern. At once, the bottle became still and in its depths Rutger thought he could now make out a little orb of glowing light.

"What's de Wulf?" Smiler hissed.

"Do not ask," the spectral voice wailed.

Smiler lashed its tail again. "Ask nothin'. This command! What's de Wulf?"

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An unearthly shriek boomed across the foundry. Rutger could see many of Olt's men make the signs of their patron Ascendants and Scions as the noise raked their ears. The bottle's violence was such that it seemed it must topple and roll out from the triangle, but in defiance of all natural laws, it always righted itself and remained standing however far its gyrations took it.

"The cargo, the price of the Cathors," the phantom wailed. "The passenger, the hope of the Martyns. The Wolf brings them both!"

Through the macabre spectacle there had been silence in the hall, but now the Crocella laughed and clenched his fist. "The Wolf brings them!" he shouted, triumph in his voice. He turned towards Olt. "It isn't a man or a place! It's a ship! The *Jhordwolf* has to be a ship! They are bringing the heir to Five Fingers!"

Arisztid Olt nodded and stalked across the hall to a table, rummaging amongst the papers stacked there. He ran a gloved finger down one page he took from the pile. "The *Jhordwolf*, sailing from Rhul, registered to Clan Stonehammer." He looked up from the page. "It is expected in Five Fingers today."

"That doesn't give you much time!" Crocella exclaimed. "The heir might be in an awkward position without Alessandro smoothing things in Ord ahead of him, but he's bringing enough treasure with him to buy a lot of consideration. You can't let him or his money get that far!"

"They won't," Olt promised, stepping away from the table. "My patrons are just as eager to keep the heir and his treasure away from the Cathors as you are." The villain clapped his hands together and shouted to his men. "The time is at hand! We strike at the Maiden tonight!"

The thugs hurried off to prepare themselves for the attack. Rutger could see them drawing rifles and pistols from caches concealed in hidden cellars beneath the foundry. Having seen Olt's methods, the mercenary knew the villains were arming themselves for a massacre.

"Dismiss your wraith" Olt told Smiler. "I may have need of your magic in the attack."

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Smiler grinned at its master and bobbed its head in a nod of understanding. With a sweep of its tail, the gatorman shattered the bottle. A bone-chilling scream resounded through the foundry as the imprisoned spirit was cast once more into the darkness. Black smoke steamed up from the earl's corpse, his skin corroding off his bones in ribbons of wormy mush.

"What about him?" Marko asked, pointing up at Rutger. It was the first time the little thief had dared to stir from his corner. Olt gave him a withering stare.

"He is no longer an asset," the villain declared. "I should think you'd be more concerned about your own neck."

"I just wanted to make sure," Marko said. "Rutger Shaw is a bad enemy to make. I'd rather not have him loose and looking for me." The thief directed a ratty smirk at the bound mercenary. "Some folks are too dangerous to let live." The thief shuddered at the cold glare in Rutger's eyes. His body seemed to shrink in upon itself as he hurried away to secure weaponry from one of the cellars.

Olt stared up at Rutger and started to draw the magelock from his belt. It was a brutal, long-barreled weapon, far less elegant than the one he had on the train beside the Scrapwater. It seemed modeled on an Orgoth blackdrake, all hard angles and barbaric engravings. A palpable sensation of bloodlust emanated from the gun. "Nothing personal," Olt told Rutger as he pointed the magelock at him. "I just don't like loose ends."

Before the gun mage could fire, however, Delt's hand closed about his arm. "Let me have him," the scar-faced man growled, his broken arm flopping against his chest. "I owe him for what he did to me on the train."

Olt glared at the wounded man until he released his arm and then holstered his pistol. "It seems my associate has other plans," he told Rutger. "You have my condolences. Delt has lived a long time in the swamps and he's picked up habits that would offend a Molgur." He looked aside at his vengeful minion. "I expect you when we attack the ship."

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Delt kept his eyes glaring up at Rutger, sparing no notice as Olt and the others left the foundry. “He’s given you to me,” the swamp-rat growled. “Five or six hours, just you and me.” The scars on his face twisted as the renegade smiled. “I swear they will feel like an eternity!”



The chain from which Rutger was suspended shuddered and jerked as it clattered across the hall, drawn along by the belt bolted to the foundry’s ceiling. Delt smiled cruelly as he stood beside the steam engine that operated the mechanism, kicking lumps of coal into the stove each time the chain’s momentum slowed. Rutger felt his arms being pulled up behind his back with each shuddering halt. Too much more and he knew they would break.

When the chain was poised above the concrete drum of the furnace, Delt pulled back a lever on the steam engine’s control panel and the belt became still. “Stay there,” he told Rutger before walking to a pile of rubble left by part of the crumbling roof. He rummaged among the debris for a moment, then pulled a length of corroded pipe from the mess.

At first Rutger thought the rogue meant to beat him to death with the pipe, but Delt had something far more fiendish in mind. When Smiler had left with Olt’s men, the bokor’s pet had stayed behind. Cautiously, Delt approached the torpid alligator from behind and carefully unwound the chain from its jaws. Then, with brutal jabs of the pipe, he roused the reptile, herding the hissing brute into the open gate of the furnace. Once it was inside, Delt slammed the door closed and cast aside the pipe.

“You have no idea what I went through in the swamp,” Delt snarled up at the captive. “But you’re going to! You’re going to learn what it’s like to watch men eaten alive! You’re going to know because it’s going to happen to you!” The renegade stepped towards a lever protruding from the floor. For an instant it defied him, but then the patina of rust crumbled away and

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it shifted from one groove to another. In response, Rutger felt the chain he was tied to start to slide. Slowly he was descending, dropping down into the neck of the furnace and the waiting alligator.

“That thing’s a bull snapper,” Delt called out in a mocking voice. “Its jaws will pull you apart at the seams. First it’ll get your legs. Maybe that’ll be enough to sate it for a while. Maybe it’ll still be hungry and start gnawing its way up from there!”

Delt’s cruel laugh was lost in the booming crack of a pistol shot. The floor beside the renegade’s boot exploded into fragments.

“That was a warning,” Taryn shouted across the ensuing silence. Rutger twisted about in his bonds, just able to crane his neck enough to spot his friend perched atop an iron gantry. Her clothes were charred, her face black with soot. He should have known it would take more than an enraged trollkin and a firestorm to kill her. His joy at seeing her alive overwhelmed even the terror of his own predicament, making him forget for the moment his slow drop into the jaws of death.

Taryn, however, was still focused. “Release my friend or the next bullet goes right between your eyes!” she threatened.

“Infernals take you both!” Delt roared. He lashed out with his boot, kicking the lever into a different groove. Rutger’s slow descent became an unrestrained plummet as the belt released the chain.

Quickly Taryn shifted her aim, turning her magelock from Delt to the gate of the furnace. Arcane fire blazed from the gun barrel, the rune shot glowing with magical energy as it whizzed across the length of the hall to strike the side of the bolt holding the door and corroding it before it fell loose.

The shot bore immediate results. The moment the gate swung open, twelve feet of enraged reptile erupted from the belly of the furnace. Delt had time for a single shriek before the bull snapper bore him down, its jaws closing about his head as it dragged him to the floor.

Rutger lost the remainder of the death scene when he pitched full into the furnace, his body striking hard into a pile of slag. He was will cursing

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when Taryn rushed through the now open furnace grate a few minutes later.

“You going to just gawk at me or are you going to untie me?” Rutger demanded, rattling the chain looped around his arms.

Taryn dashed forward, using her dagger to saw away at the leather thongs. “Good to see you too,” she said.

The remark brought a laugh from the battered mercenary. “Not as good as it is to see you,” he said. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but aren’t you dead?”

Looking up from his bonds, Taryn favored Rutger with an impish smile. “There are a few spots I wouldn’t mention in polite company that are probably black and blue. The trollkin wasn’t exactly gentle when he pushed me through the wall.”

The mercenary pounced on her statement. “That’s what I’m talking about! I thought you fell to your death!”

With a final flourish of her dagger, Taryn sawed through the last binding. “Landed in the rigging.” She glanced at her clothes, making a sour expression. “I think I’m still wearing a gobber family dinner. All in all, I fared much better than the trollkin. He broke through the upper rigging and didn’t stop until a few stories lower. Got tangled in the ropes and somehow managed to strangle himself.”

Rutger rubbed some feeling back into his hands when they were free. His relief both at his escape and Taryn’s survival made him feel exhilarated. “What about the fire? Olt had his thugs torch the building.”

The woman laughed as she answered. “That gobber family I mentioned didn’t feel like being burned to a crisp. First sniff of smoke and they were scrambling down to the street like rats off a sinking ship. Just stuck to their tails and followed the rigrunners.”

Grinning at her ingenuity, Rutger embraced the gun mage, wincing as the butts of her magelocks pressed against his bruises. “Don’t ever do that to me again,” he whispered too low for her to hear. Looking past her

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shoulder, he saw the defiled body of Earl Alessandro lying on the bloody cot.

Grimly, Rutger released Taryn and gripped her shoulders. "They killed Earl Alessandro," he told her.

A pained expression fell across Taryn's features. "I know," she said in a low voice that was heavy with guilt. "I should have been quicker. I lost Olt's trail. If I hadn't spotted his men leaving this building, I'd probably never have found this place." The last was spoken with a shudder.

"Alessandro was done for," Rutger said, trying to reassure her. "Even Olt knew that. That's why he set that gatorman sorcerer to work on him." He clenched his fists as he recalled the hideous spectacle. "Olt knows everything. Alessandro's secret is coming in on a ship called the *Jhordwolf*."

"Not now," Taryn scolded him as she freed his legs. "We have to get out of here before that beast decides it's hungry again." She eyed him critically as Rutger rose to his feet, frowning at the way he staggered. "Can you walk?" she demanded.

"I'll be fine," Rutger assured her, "just let me get my bearings."

Taryn pushed him back when he would have led the way through the gate. Both pistols were in her hands when the gun mage emerged from the furnace, turned towards the bull snapper. She uttered a sigh of relief when she found the beast torpid, its fury sated by the parts of Delt it had gulped down.

"Let's get out of here," Taryn hissed at Rutger, afraid the sound of her voice might stir the alligator.

"We have to stop Olt," Rutger declared. He winced when he saw the incredulous look in Taryn's eyes.

"Earl Alessandro is dead," she reminded him. He could see she was fighting down the emotion in her tone, forcing herself to be the cold, practical professional. "That means no more paydays," she said.

"This is more important than money," Rutger said. "It isn't just cargo on that ship. There's a passenger, someone the earl said was 'from Martyn.'

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Don't you see? All of his talk about the future of Llael, the last hope for his kingdom? Taryn, the cargo, the treasure for King Baird, they're payment, a bribe to the Kingdom of Ord to shelter an heir who might unite the Llaeese and restore their nation!

Taryn shook her head. Keeping her magelocks aimed at the lethargic alligator, she kicked a bloody weapon belt from the gory mess that had been Delt. Scowling at the remains, she holstered one of her guns and picked up the belt, handing it to Rutger. The mercenary nodded as he saw the holstered pistol hanging from it. Wiping away the worst of the gore, he buckled it around his waist.

The gun mage nodded at the rearmed Rutger. "Heir or no, Llael is lost, and you'll be the death of us yet, but I know when you won't take no for an answer," she said before she hurried into the night.



Stealthily, the tiny fishing boat edged its way across Heir's Finger Channel towards the darkened shore of the island. While the lights of Doleth and Bellicose blazed away across the water, the small island set between them seemed utterly devoid of life, just a forbidding spire of black rock rising from the channel.

Taryn knew it was far more than it appeared to be. The desolation was just an illusion and there was a suggestion of light rising from the starboard side of the island, blocked from sight by the intervening hills rising along the island's spine.

Something Rutger had overheard Olt say had stirred a memory in Taryn's head. On the voyage down the Dragon's Tongue, she remembered the captain mentioning taking on coal in Five Fingers at a place called the Winking Maiden. The Winking Maiden turned out to be the smallest of a set of islands in the middle of Heir's Finger Channel called the Three Maidens. While the other islands were simply stepping stones between

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Bellicose and Doleth, the Winking Maiden was different, given over to coal yards and facilities to refuel the many steamships making port in Five Fingers. If the *Jhordwolf* was going to offload cargo discretely, the one place it wouldn't draw attention was the docks at the Winking Maiden. Any observer would naturally assume she was taking on coal, not unloading passengers.

Stealing a fishing boat had been a matter of almost embarrassing simplicity. The shores of the islands were littered with all sorts of dinghies and rowboats. The two mercenaries had simply marched down to the beach and pushed one of the vessels into the water. Navigating the sharp currents in the King's Finger Channel had been the real ordeal, but Rutger's brawn had eventually carried them through.

Now they were staring up at the dark mass of the island, the mounds of coal heaped along its spine looming above the beaches like black hills. There were a few supply stations scattered along the larboard side of the island, most of them were ranged along the starboard side where the current wasn't as strong and ships could dock more easily. Taryn had a feeling the *Jhordwolf* would choose isolation over convenience. Her impression was borne out when they spotted the iron-hulled bulk of a Rhul steamship lumbering towards one of the supply stations.

"We have to hurry if we're really going to do this," Taryn said as she watched the ship drawing closer to the island.

"We have to do this," Rutger grunted back, throwing his tired muscles into a desperate effort. "We can't let Olt get the passenger."

Taryn shook her head. "I still fail to understand why any mercenary should risk their life for free," she complained. It wasn't the prospect of losing money that troubled her, she already had the earl's gold stashed away in her pouches, but the probability of losing something even more valuable.

"Think of it as an investment," Rutger joked. "We save the possible future king of Llael, and who knows where we might go."

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Taryn shot Rutger a black look. "We'll end up in front of Khardoran firing squad, like this supposed heir," she grumbled. Turning her attention to the shore, she sighed. "So what's your idea? You charge in and take on Olt and twenty thugs while I sit back and try to pick them off one by one? Preferably before they kill you."

"The idea is we get onshore and warn the ship," Rutger said. "That's all we need to do to spoil Olt's plan. He doesn't have the manpower to take on a fully prepared Rhul steamship." The mercenary directed a reassuring smile at her. "Believe me; I'm not planning on tackling Olt's crew of murderers all by myself."

The boat nudged onto the rocky shore. Rutger dropped down and dragged the vessel up past the tide. "I'll make it up to you," he promised as he reached a hand out to help Taryn onto land.

The gun mage ignored the offered hand. "Just don't get yourself killed," she warned him, quickly averting her face lest he see some emotion there she would prefer remain hidden.

Rutger was about to voice some witty rejoinder when the sound of boots charging across the rocks brought him spinning around. In the moonlight, they were only dark shadows, but there was no mistaking the gleam of naked steel in their hands.

"Rutger!" a voice cried out from the dark. "Beware! Olt's men!"

The warning stripped away the last hesitation and quickly Delt's repeating pistol Taryn had given him was ripped from its holster. In a burst of flame and smoke, he fired the weapon into one of the shadows. Taryn was quicker still, while Rutger was aiming his second shot, she was already breaking open the breech of her magelocks and reloading after a round of fire. Men fell before the fusillade, but on Rutger's fourth shot the cartridge misfired and he cursed the weapon as Taryn gunned down two more before the final enemy took to his heels and dashed up the shore. Before he had gone more than a few yards, a shape detached itself from a pile of coal and pounced on the man's back, knocking them both to the

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ground. After a short struggle, the ambusher rose to his feet and started slowly towards the victorious mercenaries.

"Marko," Taryn hissed, recognizing both the voice that had cried out and the craven method of ambush the lurker had employed.

"Rutger... and the lovely Lady Taryn!" Marko exclaimed as he drew near. "You don't know how happy I am to see you..."

"Surprised more like," Rutger growled at him, making the thief's ingratiating smile falter. "Surprised to see us alive."

Marko flinched at the accusation, all the more for the truth behind it. "I had no choice. You've seen Olt! You know the kind of man he is! Why his crew of murderers hasn't left a living soul this side of the island! And they're going to do the same to the *Jhordwolf* when she docks! If I'd done anything..."

Throughout the rogue's whine, Taryn had glared at him in stony silence. Now, in a burst of violence, she brought the barrel of her magelock smashing into the side of his head. Marko gasped, then flopped to the rocks. Rutger leaned over the thief, setting a hand against his chest.

"I thought you were going to kill him," he said in a voice without reproach, obviously having felt the same temptation.

Taryn continued reloading her pistol. "It's still on my agenda," she said. Raising her gaze from the beach she watched as guide lights flickered into life on one of the towering steam cranes that were scattered among the supply stations. "Unless I miss my guess, that's meant to draw the *Jhordwolf* in."

Rutger fumbled at Marko's belt, removing the pistol and sword the thief had acquired from Olt's arsenal. They were poor replacements for his mechanical sword and hand cannon, but they would have to suffice.

"We'll have to hurry then," he said. He looked out towards the steam cranes. "The one advantage we have is surprise. Olt won't be expecting us."

Taryn frowned at his reasoning. "His men were using blades for a reason," she said. "Probably he didn't want the sound of a shot warning the ship. If he heard us shooting, he'll know someone else is around."

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“We’ll just have to chance it,” Rutger said.

“Exactly how much is a royal heir worth on the open market anyway?” she demanded as she raced after him down the beach.



The *Jhordwolf* was already tied to the dock when Taryn and Rutger reached the supply station. The two mercenaries kept to the concealment of the buildings, slowly edging their way past the warehouses and work sheds. They tried to ignore the fresh corpses piled in the shadows.

A cluster of figures stood at the foot of the dock, waving up at the ship’s Rhulic crew. Taryn noted the burly frame of Janos, and Rutger spotted the stocky Crocella, a cloak drawn up about his neck to conceal his identity from the dwarves onboard.

In all there were about a dozen men waiting to greet the ship, but neither mercenary could pick out Arisztid Olt among them. The question of where the gun mage might be was answered once the steamer was secured and some of the crew began to descend the gang plank. There was a thunderous commotion from one of the warehouses as a gigantic shape burst through the wooden wall. At first, Taryn thought it might be one of the station’s laborjacks, for there were several of the machines standing idle among the buildings. Rutger quickly corrected her mistake. The machine wasn’t a laborjack. It was a modified Ordic warjack, a Toro. It was a towering behemoth of steel and bronze, standing almost twice the height of a man. The warjack’s right arm was built in rough semblance to that of a human, its steel talons clenched tight about the hilt of an enormous sword. The left arm supported a vicious-looking gun carriage, the armature fixing it to the jack’s shoulder reinforced with a cluster of struts. A single smoke stack rose up from a back swollen by an enormous steamplant. The head that protruded from between those shoulders was cast in the semblance of an ancient warhelm, tube-like vents projecting from either edge of the

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mouth-like grill. Two narrow, slit-like optics glowed from the sides of what could be called the Toro's face. The metal monster didn't belong to the station. It belonged to Arisztid Olt.

"That never walked off an assembly line," Rutger observed as he watched the giant machine lumber forwards on its armored legs. "Olt's had some extensive customization done to that thing! Just look at the chain-cannon!"

There was an edge of awe in Rutger's voice, the jack marshal appreciating an impressive piece of machinery. Taryn's view was far less appreciative. Her fingers played across the grips of her magelocks. "Rutger, even with the most corrosive spells I know, I don't think I could make much more than a dent in that thing." With an effort, she tore her eyes away from the steel behemoth, fixing her gaze on her companion. "How are we going to stop it? If we go down there, we'll just get ourselves killed." To her it seemed an obvious estimation of the situation, but she wanted to make sure Rutger understood it too. The odds had been long enough already, but with Olt's entire crew and that mechanical monstrosity, the deck was hopelessly stacked against them.

Rutger nodded, his expression turning grim. "We still might get our chance. Olt wants the heir alive, so it's possible we could help him escape into the city." He clenched his fist in a gesture of impotent fury. "I just wish there was some way to help those poor souls on the ship!"

Taryn felt a shudder run through her. Her magical abilities didn't run into divination or prophecy, but she didn't need to be a seer to know what would happen. Olt had already displayed his ruthlessness. He might need the heir alive, but that protection wouldn't extend to the rest of the ship. Feeling helpless, she turned her gaze back to the dock. As the steel giant stalked forward on its steam-driven legs and sparks flew from its smokestack, its armored head swung towards the *Jhordwolf* and a feral growl rumbled from the vents in its helmet-like face.

Small beside the huge warjack, Olt appeared and marched alongside the lumbering machine. "Amok!" he called to the metal monster, causing

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the iron face to rotate and stare down at him. Olt pointed his gloved hand at the ship. "Total massacre! No survivors!"

Steam rippled about the *Toro's* hull as it advanced on the ship, a deafening, bloodthirsty roar thundering from its vents. As it charged forward, Amok raised its left arm, the arm that ended in a large-bore gun barrel. The cannon came to life, blasting the decks of the *Jhordwolf* with rounds, butchering the Rhulic crew in bursts of shrapnel.

The slaughter was repeated on the dock as Janos and the other killers sprang into action, pouncing on their stunned victims before many of them could move. A few tried to make it back to the ship, only to be thwarted when Smiler lunged up from the black waters of the channel and tore into them with claws that burned with malignant rings of runes.

"Murderous scum!" Rutger cursed, punching the wall of the shed beside him in anger. Taryn was sure it didn't help his sense of guilt that Janos was using Jackknife to kill his share of the crew.

Suddenly her attention became fixated on the struggle near the gangplank. A pair of armored men was attempting to defend a comrade from the rampaging Smiler. The third man was dressed simply, everything about him was nondescript except the young, handsome face peering out from beneath his wide-brimmed hat. There was something about that face and the way the youth carried himself that reminded her of Earl Alessandro. A question flashed through her mind: why was it that the earl had been entrusted with the welfare of this heir of old King Rynnard?

Taryn was just alerting Rutger to her suspicion when she discovered that she wasn't the only one who had noticed the youth. Stalking away from the shadow of Amok, Olt shouted a warning to the raging gatorman. "I want the boy alive!" he punctuated his command with a shot from his magelock. Azure runes danced around the pistol in a ring as the cutthroat's rune shot flew towards his foes. The glowing shot slammed into the skull of one bodyguard, then burst from the back of his head to strike the other in the eye. Bellowing, Smiler charged across the fallen guards, ripping the

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long sword from the youth's grip and smashing him flat with a sidewise blow of its tail.

Janos and a few of the other thugs rushed forward to take charge of the stunned boy, lashing his hands behind his back with leathern cords. The decks of the *Jhordwolf* had been cleared by the warjack's murderous salvo. If any of the Rhulic crew still lived, they had retreated into the bowels of the ship.

Olt detached several of his murderous crew to climb aboard. The others he told to help Crocella. Under the traitor's direction, the men raced to one of the work sheds, exhuming barrels of explosives they must have hidden there.

"Into the holds," Olt told them. "Crocella knows where they will be most effective. Find the treasure. We'll take all we can carry. The rest we sink with the ship!"

One of the rogues hesitated as he hefted a barrel of explosives to his shoulder. "Sink it?" he asked.

Crocella rounded on the man, teeth showing behind his beard. "This isn't about plunder!" he growled. "It's about honor!"

Olt waved the man onward, directing him to join the others rushing up the gangplank. "We'll get paid just for keeping that treasure away from the Cathors," he assured them. Turning towards Janos's prisoner, the villain's face pulled back in a cold smile. Gloved fingers closed about the boy's chin, lifting his head, forcing it from side to side as Olt's cold eyes examined his countenance.

"The boy is to remain safe," Olt told Janos. "He's worth his weight in gold." The killer smiled coldly. "Quite a bit more than that," he mused. Releasing the boy's chin, Olt walked over to the armored Toro. "Stay here, Amok," he ordered the machine. He pointed at the automaton's smoking chain-cannon. "No shooting," he told it, eliciting an angry growl from the vents in its helm. "I don't want you blowing up the ship while I'm onboard," the cutthroat growled back. Amok shifted its weight from one foot to

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another, pivoting its torso from side to side, looking for all the world like a sullen child.

“Don’t worry,” Olt told the warjack as he walked off to join Crocella in the hold of the *Jbordwolf*. “There will be plenty of killing for you to do later.”



When Olt and most of his gang were down in the hold, Rutger grabbed Taryn’s arm. “We have a chance now,” he told her. “Maybe we can’t save the treasure, but we can still save the heir.” He pointed to the dock where only Janos and Smiler had been left to watch the prisoner.

Taryn moved Rutger’s hand, pointing the finger away from the men and towards the Toro. “And what is that thing going to do while you’re getting the heir? Count its rivets?”

“You’ll have to distract it for me,” he told her, a trace of guilt in his tone that Taryn picked out immediately.

“What do you expect me to do?” she asked, already knowing however crazy it was, she was going to agree to it.

“I need you to operate the crane,” Rutger told her. “In activating the arcane lamps along the arm of the crane, Olt’s men have powered up its steam engine. It would take only the throwing of a few levers to set the entire machine into motion.”

Taryn raised her eyes to the enormous scoop fitted at the end of the crane, then lowered her gaze to the imposing bulk of the warjack. “You think I’ll be able to destroy it?” she asked. Guilty silence was her only answer. “Slow it down then?”

“All I need you to do is distract it long enough for me to get the heir,” Rutger said.

“What have I told you about these mad stunts of yours?” Taryn hissed at him.

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"This time it's in a good cause," Rutger told her. "Besides, it's your plan, after all. Remember, I dash in and take on Olt and twenty of his thugs while you sit back and try to pick them off one by one."

"That wasn't my plan," Taryn protested. "And even if it was, we didn't know about the warjack."

"I'm hoping the 'jack's cortex is advanced enough to follow Olt's commands to the letter," Rutger told her. "That'll give us an edge. I don't want you doing anything unless that 'jack starts to move."

"And when it does?" Taryn asked, her tone frantic with worry and anger.

"Stop it," Rutger told her, making it sound as easy as pulling on a boot.

Taryn watched until he reached the shelter of a coal cart, then turned around and made her way towards the operator's platform at the top of the steel tower that supported the crane. Midway into her climb up the ladder, she risked a look at the dock far below.

What she saw sent her scrambling upwards with renewed haste. Rutger was still creeping from one patch of cover to another, Janos and Smiler as yet unaware of him. The thing that sent cold horror rushing through her veins was the warjack. Amok's helm was facing towards Rutger, moving when he moved, following him as he stole through the shadows. The Toro knew he was there! Why the machine's cortex told it to wait, Taryn didn't know, but she was certain that the first wrong move Rutger made would unleash the warjack's fury.

Suddenly, with an angry shout, Janos shook his stolen sword and pointed it up at Taryn. "It's the earl's gun-witch!" he roared. Smiler bellowed angrily, charging down the dock with a speed that seemed incredible for a creature of its size and bulk.

The reptile's charge had the exact effect Taryn least desired. Rutger leapt out from behind the crates that had been hiding him. Shouting at the bokor, he aimed his pistol and fired at the gatorman's back. Either Smiler's magic or its thick scaly hide deflected Rutger's shot and the reptile rushed onward without even noticing the attack.

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Others, however, did. Rutger soon found himself diving for cover as Janos aimed Rutger's own hand cannon at him. Before he could shoot, the rogue was forced to deal with the heir as the youth kicked at him and knocked him from his feet. The respite didn't help Rutger, however. He had far bigger problems than Janos to deal with.



Rutger could feel the dock shudder beneath the heavy tread of Amok as the excited warjack strode towards him. True to Olt's command, the chain-cannon retro-fitted to its left arm remained silent. Instead, the Toro raised its right arm and swung. Rutger threw himself flat as the warjack's mammoth sword came hurtling towards him, smashing the crates into splinters. Amok growled with what might have been annoyance and rotated its torso around to lend momentum to a second attack.

Rutger knew the almost organic mannerisms of a complex and sophisticated cortex. It wouldn't easily be fooled by the same trick twice. Instead of trying to duck under the sweeping blade, he instead dove towards it, scrambling between the Toro's legs before it could react. As he scrambled out from the machine's shadow, one of its legs smashed down, nearly crushing him into the earth. Amok swung its torso around and lurched after him, steam venting from the grill in its steampant.

Before the enraged machine could close upon him, a tremendous mass came hurtling down from overhead. The scoop of the steam crane, all three tons of it, smacked into the Toro's hull. The dock splintered beneath the warjack, pitching both it and the crane into the shallow channel beneath.

Casting his eyes upward, Rutger could see Taryn scrambling from the control box fitted to the side of the crane. The cause of her retreat reached the box a few seconds after she quit it. Smiler lashed its tail in annoyance and sprang after the fleeing gun mage, forcing her onto the arm of the crane, driving her upwards from whence there could be no escape.



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Rutger was torn between two obligations: the rescue of the heir or the rescue of Taryn. The choice was taken from him when burning pain seared its way through his shoulder, shearing through his pauldron and burning into the flesh beneath. The mercenary staggered under the impact of the shot, one hand clamped about the oozing wound.

“You should have let Delt finish you,” Janos sneered, smoke rising from his hand cannon.

With an old trencher’s battle cry, Rutger threw himself at Janos, smashing the hand cannon from the man’s hand and driving his knee into his gut. The powerful killer responded by gouging a finger into Rutger’s wound, the resultant pain doubling him over.

Janos glared down at his foe and brought Jackknife’s glowing edge sweeping down. In the instant before the blow could land, Rutger struck out with his own sword, smashing the pommel into Janos’s injured leg. The thug howled as he was sent sprawling. The man’s shriek ended in a ghastly gurgle as his face landed against the mechanical sword’s glowing edge.

Rutger pried the dead man’s finger away from the activation stud, causing the glow to fade from Jackknife’s blade. “Thanks for holding on to that,” he told the corpse as he wrenched his sword free from Janos’s skull.

Lifting his eyes to the crane once more, Rutger felt panic hammer at his heart. Smiler had nearly driven Taryn as high as she could go, the wind up there pulling dangerously at both of them. The reptile didn’t need to reach her, if it kept going after her it was going to send them both hurtling to the ground!

“No time for formalities, Your Grace,” Rutger apologized as he dashed over to the heir and slashed the bindings about his arms. Gruffly, he grabbed young man and pushed him away from the dock.

The planks in front of them suddenly exploded, throwing both men from their feet. A wet steel hand closed about the edge of the hole, dragging after it a battered metal hulk. Amok had withstood the impact of the crane and its fall through the dock to the water and rocks below. Battered, smoke

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billowing from ruptured pipes and torn hoses, its sword lost in the water, the Toro was down but most certainly not out!



Every muscle in Taryn's body tensed as she felt the metal framework beneath her shiver and sway. She resisted the impulse to look down, to see how far she would fall if she slipped from the steel. Instead she turned her gaze towards the grinning reptile climbing after her.

Smiler's fangs glistened in the moonlight. "Gon' bein' makin' de ju-ju stick with y'uz bones," the gatorman hissed. "Put'n y'uz eyes in de gris-gris bag," it added, one of its claws jabbing at the glowing bag tied about its neck.

"Is this about your pet turtle?" Taryn snarled back at the bokor, eliciting an angry hiss.

"Bein' makin' a new pet, a snapper," Smiler growled. "And after, I be takin' y'uz scalp an' bein' stichin' it with de possum bones to remind me of ya."

"Big talk from a pair of boots, especially since I killed your snapper in the foundry!" Taryn lied. Smiler scabbled forward a few more feet, causing the crane to judder and groan. The saurian cast an uneasy look at the framework beneath its claws.

For an instant, it looked to Taryn like the gatorman was going to relent, cut its losses and climb back down. The instant passed, however, when Smiler suddenly lunged at her, the bokor's jaws snapping shut only inches from her face. Taryn reeled back, smacking her head against the framework and nearly losing her footing. While her legs kicked against open air, the gatorman clawed its way upwards.

"Y'all gon' bein' soup when you hit, sure-an-sure," Smiler hissed up at her. The gatorman stretched an arm under the framework, trying to claw at her dangling legs.

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Clenching her teeth, trying not to envision what would happen to her if she miscalculated, Taryn let one of her hands release the framework and pull the knife hidden in her bodice. For a hideous instant, she swung from the crane, supported only by one hand, then her other hand came slashing down.

In trying to reach her, Smiler had also resorted to supporting himself with one hand. Now Taryn's knife came slicing down. She knew from prior experience that the bokor's magic would dull her blow, so she put her full weight behind the blade. The knife bit into Smiler's claw, sending scaly talons leaping away.

The reptile bellowed in pain, its entire body recoiling at the mutilating blow. Smiler's grip broken, its weight now dragged it from the framework. The bokor hissed as it fell, plummeting into the black waters of the channel.

Taryn very nearly joined the monster in its descent. Only by a matter of seconds did she manage to get her legs wrapped about a lower strut before her hand lost its grip. If her knife hadn't struck true, if Smiler hadn't fallen, her new position would have put her within easy reach of the monster's jaws.

She risked a look down into the channel, just to be sure the gatorman was gone. As she did so, she saw a sight every bit as horrible. The warjack was still functional and had climbed back onto the dock.

And standing before it, with only his sword to defend himself, was Rutger!



Amok was living up to its name. With mindless violence, the warjack slashed its now empty hand at Rutger, carving deep furrows in the dock. The warjack was clumsy in its assault, the lenses of its left optic cracked, a fold of crumpled metal partially blocking the vision in its right. The Toro's cortex was struggling to correct the infirmity. With each stroke, it was

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trying to compensate, trying to calculate the correction needed to aim true. Once the cortex found that equation, Rutger would lose what little edge he had.

“Get out of here, Your Grace!” Rutger shouted at the young man. The youth looked as though the very thought was offensive to him. “You have to get help before Olt and his men get out of that hold!” Rutger told him.

“I am in your debt, Sir!” the youth swore before running down the dock. As he passed the raging Amok, the warjack’s head swung around, its torso pivoting to face him.

Rutger charged the Toro, hacking at it with Jackknife and cleaving a six-inch rent in the armor shielding its right arm. Instantly, the machine came swinging back around, its optics blazing. “Remember me?” Rutger snarled at it, slashing the edge of his glowing sword across the warjack’s helm. Bits of severed steel dripped from the torn grillwork.

From the deck of the *Jhordwolf*, a single shot rang out. Rutger risked turning his eyes from Amok to glance at the shore. He felt a great sense of relief when he saw the heir still on his feet and hurrying away.

“He’s no good to me dead!” Olt’s voice barked. From the corner of his eye, Rutger could see the cutthroat struggling to pluck a gun from Crocella’s fingers.

“He’ll warn them!” Crocella protested. “He’ll bring the whole city down on our heads!”

Olt glared at his bearded accomplice. “Then I suggest you make sure the treasure doesn’t get where it’s meant to go. It might be embarrassing for your master, and lethal for you.” He smiled cruelly at the Llaelese traitor. “But I suppose that for someone such as yourself, serving their lord is more important than life...”

Crocella stared at Olt for a moment, then a steely glint crept into his eyes. Releasing the pistol, he scurried back below decks.

Arisztid Olt let the weapon clatter to the deck and stalked down the gangplank. “You’ve cost me much today, Shaw,” he snarled at the embattled

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mercenary. At the sound of his voice, the warjack hesitated, swinging its body around to face its master.

“Amok,” the killer addressed the Toro, “kill this meddling bastard.”

With renewed ferocity, the warjack hurled itself at Rutger, pressing him back, forcing him towards the edge of the dock. The mercenary strove to slip past the Toro’s guard, to intercept Olt as he retreated towards the shore, but at every turn Amok thwarted his efforts. He could only watch as the cutthroat vanished into the darkness.

Rutger knew this was a contest he couldn’t win. For all his deftness with the blade, for all his brawn and stamina, he was still only flesh and blood. His strength was already starting to ebb, his speed slacken, his agility lessening. Despite the damage inflicted upon it, Amok was still a thing of steel and steam, tireless and indefatigable. It wouldn’t relent. It couldn’t be reasoned with or appealed to. The only thing that mattered in the coils of its cortex were the commands of its master.

Staking all on a desperate drive for the warjack’s steamplant, Rutger dove once more at the Toro’s legs. This time his reflexes failed him. The steel fingers closed tight about Rutger’s body, pinning him in a vice-like grip.

Rutger brought Jackknife sawing across Amok’s wrist, but when the warjack tightened its hand, crippling pain forced the mercenary to relent. The shining optics bore down upon him, fixing him in a mechanical gaze. Slowly, Amok raised its left arm, bringing the barrel of its chain-cannon towards the man trapped in its claw.

The Toro hesitated, its frame shuddering for a moment. Rutger knew enough about steamjacks to know why it stopped. Amok was remembering Olt’s earlier injunction against using the cannon and was trying to reconcile the command to present circumstances. His jack marshal skills also taught him that with a sophisticated cortex, such a conflict wouldn’t last long.

The warjack never resolved its logic conflict. Deep in the bowels of the *Jhordwolf*, in a final act of honor and defiance, Crocella touched off the

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explosives Olt's men had set. The steamship's hull shattered in a holocaust of flame. Jagged chunks of deckplate scythed through the air, smashing the brick and timber buildings of the supply station. The violence of the explosion ripped the dock from its moorings, scattering its planks in a storm of splinters.

The blast lifted Amok from its feet, flinging it through the air like a tinker toy. Its smokestack snapped like a twig, its steamplant crumpled as a chunk from the *Jhordwolf* smashed into it. The already weakened arm armor, where Rutger's sword had slashed it, shredded away from its body in a great ribbon of torn steel and left Rutger tenuously pinned to the dock.

Amok's hull smashed through the wall of a warehouse and kept plowing onwards to crash through the opposite wall. Its right arm was ripped from its shoulder as its momentum drove it into the stone foundation of a coal chute. The remainder of the warjack's body smacked into the great mound of coal piled above the station, embedding itself in the side of the black hill.

It was several minutes before Rutger dared to even try to move. He felt like one big bruise, every breath he took sent a little shiver of pain racing through him. Releasing the death-grip his fingers had taken about Jackknife's hilt, he tried to squirm free from the claws of the severed arm. The effort was tortuous, of such agony that several times he felt on the verge of passing out. Just the same, he thanked Morrow for his blessings. It was fortunate for him that the Toro was so sturdily built.

"Rutger!" Taryn's anguished cry forced the mercenary to move his head. Relief flooded into his heart. She'd escaped Smiler! She was all right!

The gun mage was roving through the wreckage, trying to find him. Rutger redoubled his efforts to free himself from Amok's claw. He started to call out to Taryn when he saw something that turned his blood to ice. The gun mage had spotted the warjack half-buried in the coal and was running towards it, but that wasn't what sent fear coursing through his body. It was the still glowing optics behind Amok's visor and the way the machine's head was slowly moving to follow her advance.

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With a roar of pain, Rutger broke free from the iron claw and shouted to his partner in a horrified gasp. “Taryn! Get away from the ‘jack!” Snatching his sword from the ground, he started to run towards the gun mage.

Taryn was just spinning around at the sound of Rutger’s voice, when the buried steel behemoth pulled itself free from the mound. A savage growl rattled through Amok’s chassis as it lurched towards Taryn. Rutger shouted again as he ran towards the imperiled woman. Even as he did so, the warjack lifted its remaining arm and aimed the cannon at her. The Toro’s cortex had resolved its logic conflict. Olt had commanded it not to shoot for fear of blowing up the *Jhordwolf*. With the ship obliterated, however, Amok was no longer bound by such restraint.

Rutger howled, trying to draw Amok’s attention back to himself, make it fire at him and give Taryn a chance to escape. The warjack pivoted towards him. As he looked into the gaping barrel of its cannon, he couldn’t help but laugh. Taryn would be furious with him for such reckless heroics.

A burst of steam vented from the Toro’s arm as it trained the weapon on Rutger, but when it tried to fire the result was far from what its cortex expected. The cannon barrel had been smashed flat when it slammed into the coal. Amok’s head shifted to one side, its optics staring at the impacted weapon. The warjack continued to try to operate it, a frustrated snarl billowing from its grill as its murderous cortex tried to force the gun to function.

Rutger seized the opportunity the warjack’s distraction provided. Thumbing Jackknife’s activation stud, he charged at Amok, driving his blade into the barrel of the chain-cannon. Every muscle in his bruised body shrieked in protest as he wrenched his sword with a savage twist, deforming the mouth of the gun. Even as he did so, he heard a shriek of tearing metal, saw the cylinder start to rotate under the persistent pressure Amok was exerting on it.

The warjack’s optics burned down at Rutger in a hungry glare. It lifted the cannon, aiming it at the mercenary as he fled for cover. The

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impacted cylinder continued to resist, grinding against the gun's frame, slowly flattening the cylinder even further. After a few failed rotations, the smashed cylinder finally cycled past the main shaft, freeing the mechanism. Venting a bloodthirsty growl, Amok fired its now armed cannon at the retreating mercenary, its cortex unaware of Rutger's deformation of the gun barrel.

Unable to leave the cannon, the shell's violence was forced back on the warjack. Its right arm sheared away in a blaze of flame, its hull was scored by the wreckage of its own gun. The Toro trembled, swayed from one side to the other, a droning roar rattling through its steel bulk. Then it keeled over, crashing onto its back, the glow fading from its optics. Rutger hunkered down behind a heap of coal as armor plates and bits of shrapnel clattered down around him. Only when the patter of metal abated did he dare to raise his head.

Smoke from the destroyed warjack blinded him for a moment. As he blinked away tears, he saw Taryn cautiously making her way towards the ruined hulk.

Forcing his legs to follow her, Rutger reached Taryn as she was staring down at the wrecked warjack, a magelock clenched in her hand.

"Why can't the bad guys buy anything on the cheap!" Rutger complained, clapping an arm across her shoulder, ignoring the shiver of pain that raced down his side.

She gave the twisted machinery a concerned look. "It's not going to get up again, is it?"

Rutger shook his head. "No, but it'll be a good salvage job for somebody," he told her.

There was something in his tone that Taryn didn't like. She pulled away from him, staring hard into his bloodied, battered face. Yes, there was no mistaking the gleam in his eyes. "You can't be serious," she snarled.

Rutger didn't answer her, instead turning to regard the blazing wreck of the *Jhordwolf* as it slowly sank into the channel. "Not a bad day's work," he

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declared. “The heir is on the run, and thanks to the explosion, Olt’s entire gang is scattered across the bottom of the bay. The only black spot was the escape of the cutthroat himself.”

Taryn followed Rutger’s gaze for a moment, then a hard edge crept back onto her face. “Rutger,” she said. “What you said about salvage...”

“Olt didn’t get that jack on the cheap,” Rutger repeated, but this time there was wistfulness rather than complaint in the words.

Taryn stared down at the Toro’s wrecked hull, feeling a cold finger slide down her back. Even smashed and blown-apart the warjack looked as menacing and murderous as the hordes of Cryx. She glanced back at Rutger’s gleaming eyes.

“I bet it would be great with a hammer,” he began.

“Don’t even think about it,” Taryn hissed.





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: Ordric 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.

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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.

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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 Llaeese city and birthplace of the Order of the Golden Crucible, now the seat of the Protectorate's Northern Crusade. Occupied by Khadorans during the Llaeese war and was subsequently taken by the Protectorate.

Llael: Once the easternmost Iron Kingdom; largely conquered during the Llaeese War from 604-605 AR and presently divided between Khador, the Protectorate, and the Llaeese 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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

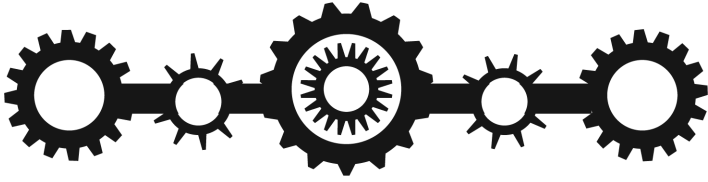
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Warlock: An arcanist with the ability to bond to and mentally control savage or enslaved beasts.

Warbeast: A savage beast bonded to a warlock.

Warjack: A highly advanced and well armed steamjack created or modified for war.

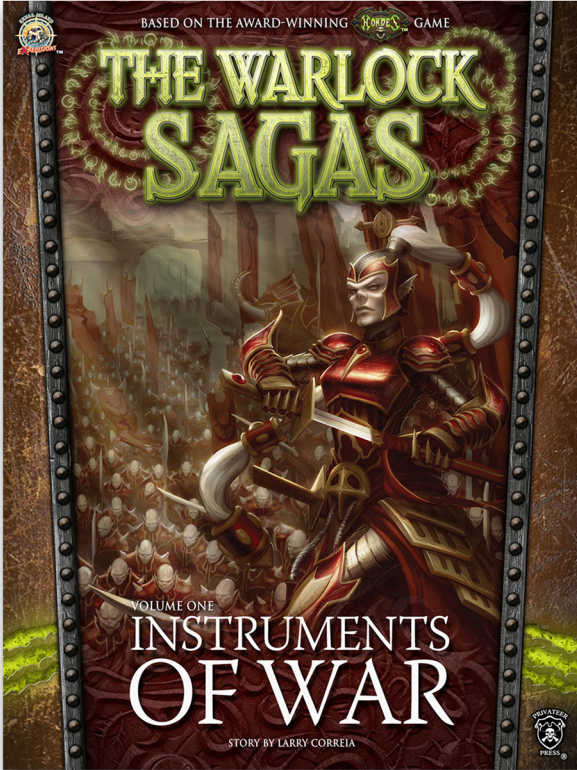
Zu: Little explored continent south of Immoren, engaged in lucrative trade with the Immorese for certain exotic goods.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

C.L. Werner was first published in 1999 with the short story *Inferno!* and has moved on to become a New York Times bestselling author inside the field of licensed fantasy. He is an avid reader, tabletop miniatures gamer, and fan of H.P. Lovecraft and Ray Bradbury.

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Moving Targets

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