



BASED ON THE AWARD-WINNING



GAME

THE WARCASTER CHRONICLES



VOLUME ONE

THE WAY OF CAINE

BY MILES HOLMES





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PROLOGUE

AR 596: Merywyn

The old man stumbled down the dim corridor, leaving his lavish bedroom in panic. He tripped over thick carpet, and tumbled into an awkward heap. With a whimper, he scrambled to his feet, and lurched forward again. He risked a glance over his shoulder as he went, peering into the shadows of his departed doorway, mouth agape.

Nothing moved.

At the end of the corridor, a grand balcony overlooked a wide hall. The walls were laden with priceless paintings, almost too many to count, though he could name each and every one. The balcony divided left and right into a polished stone stairwell spiraling three stories down before joining the main floor. As he neared the stairwell, he looked back once more, his breath ragged.

Nothing pursued.

No one could be seen at all, in fact. Neither guard nor servant was about, and most of the torches along the corridor had been snuffed. Finally reaching the balcony, he grasped the polished marble rail and called down for a servant. Breathless, his voice was reduced to a faint rasp.

No answer below.

Enough of this, he thought, taking a deep breath. The demons that hounded him were the stuff of his dreams. There was no more to it than that. Granted, he had endured terrible nightmares for months now, but he

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was a fool to let them get the better of his nerves like this. He turned from the balcony, scowling ...

... to witness a figure *appear* from smoke.

He blinked, his scowl turned to astonishment. Time enough passed for eyes to meet, and not one second longer. A silent shockwave of spectral force surged into him, borne along tendrils of incandescent blue mist. The old man was a rag doll, tossed up and over the rail. He plunged three stories down, a gasp in his throat. There wasn't time for more. Before he could draw breath to scream, he found himself eye to eye with the well preserved snarl of his prized white bear-skin.

Beneath it, the marble floor ended his fall as abruptly as it began.



PART ONE

Five Years Ago

Spring, AR 591: Bainsmarket

“C’mon, Allie, help me up!” Tylene Reilly’s pale face was flushed, his breathing hard. The drainpipe groaned as its shoddy bracings threatened to pop from the brick wall. The youth swayed, unable to pull himself over the eaves.

Allister Caine, reclined as he was atop a rooftop haunt, leaned forward with a smirk. He raised a worn black boot, and held it in mocking suspense, as though ready to kick his waifish friend back down the three-story height.

“C’mon then! Some of us have to do this the hard way, you know,” Tylene groaned, more annoyed than alarmed. Caine nodded, the smirk still in place, and reached forward. With a forceful tug, Tylene was up and over, thudding to the sooty rooftop with a grunt. Rolling over, he glared at Caine, and then shook his head in disgust. “Ech! My ’cerest thanks, yeh horse’s ass.”

Caine straightened his thick canvas jacket before reclining against the rooftop once more. He gazed beyond the city walls. Bainsmarket at dusk sprawled out before him. The working-class neighborhood bent and sagged becoming a canyon of tin roofs and brick walls. Laundry lines strung across balconies festooned with linens and undergarments, and

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chimneys puffed here and there. A half-mile west as the crow flies, Caine could see the towering smokestacks of the pulp mills churning thick black smoke in silhouette against a blood red sky. Even from a distance, the rancid stench reached Caine's nostrils. The smokestacks reminded him of Tylon's errand.

"Well?"

Caine's red-haired, lanky companion nodded sullenly, taking a seat beside Caine. He pulled a frayed satchel from his shoulder, setting it before him. "Why I should give ye any is beyond me, what with such abuses as I suffer."

Caine smiled, returning his gaze out over the sprawl, but nevertheless held a hand out. Tylon reached into the satchel, bringing forth cured meats, bread, and a few wine-dipped Ordic cigars. Rolling his eyes at Caine's outstretched hand, he passed one of the stogies over and then took one for himself. The elder, Caine, twenty years old and lean as a whip, brushed back a wave of jet black hair and produced a wooden match from his boot. Striking it against the nearest chimney, he cupped the sputtering flame and held it to his cigar. Tylon leaned in and, likewise, lit up. Puffing contentedly, the two young men sat back against the roof and enjoyed the view.

"A proper feast we have here, but what was the take?" Caine said with a puff and a sidelong glance at Tylon.

"Ech ... not as good." Tylon retrieved a change-purse from his jacket, tossing it onto the tin roof. Five coppers spilled from an otherwise empty bag. Caine rolled his eyes, to which his friend shrugged.

"Market square 'peared near empty today."

"All week." Caine corrected, frowning.

A scream came from below, quickly muffled and followed by the sounds of a scuffle.

Caine and Tylon scrambled to the edge of the roof and peered down into the twilight shadows. Below, two men shoved a third to the wall. The

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larger of the two, a pudgy man with a clean shaven scalp, held the sobbing victim in place while the other, a lean brute in close fitting dark clothes, pressed close to speak. Even from their lofty vantage, the man's visage was unnerving to behold. Either a wound or some deformity had left him with only a narrow gap where a nose should be. The victim protested, his voice shrill. The ham-fisted enforcer responded by punching him in the stomach, hard enough for the man to double over. The skull-faced man laughed, a grating hideous sound, and yanked the victim's head back up by his hair. A moment later, the victim relented, reaching to pull something from out of his boot.

"Ech! The hounds are out." Tylen snorted, eyes narrowing. "That's Horace, eh? Boss' Dakin's second?"

Caine nodded. "No mistaking that beauty. Looks like a collection night."

He looked at Tylen, lips curling into a grin. "Maybe this is a chance to make up for a bad week?"

Tylen laughed. Caine did not. The ginger-haired youth swallowed, his face twisting to a grimace.

"Yer not kidding."



In the shadows of a twisting alley, the pair awaited their marks. Caine leaned back against the wall of an alcove, listening to the footfalls of Horace and his goon. In the alcove opposite, Tylen did likewise. The youth looked across to Caine, his face sickly pale. Caine eased him down with a gesture, his ear still cocked. Tylen nodded back, and pulled a hood over his face. Caine heard the footfalls nearby there. It was now or never. The signal given, Tylen bolted around the corner and into the enforcer. Both men cried out. Tylen's light hands clasped a shiny bauble at the large man's belt, and in the next instant, he was sprinting down the alley.

"Blighter took me time piece, he did!" The big man shouted, turning to watch as Tylen escaped. Horace was not so slow-witted.

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“Well?!” he shouted, clapping the larger man on the back as if driving an ox. The thug stumbled ahead to give chase with heavy footfalls. Horace shook his head, frustrated, then made to follow his henchman.

Caine stepped from the shadows, Horace’s back to him. His brow furrowed in concentration, and his eyes flashed with an unnatural light.

Magic was coming.

Most times, he kept it back, hidden. Never show them the ace up your sleeve, he’d learned. Now was different. *Nobody here but ugly and me*, he smiled. The magic bent to his will, manifesting and curling around him in an incandescent circle of runes. He put a hand out, and force surged ahead, catching Horace square in the backside.

The mobster tumbled forward into the slick stones of the alley with a grunt. He slid face first along the slime and muck that lined the alley before coming to rest. The enforcer ahead of him was oblivious on his fool’s errand, shouting after Tylan with impotent rage.

Caine fell upon Horace like a vulture, snatching an overstuffed coin-purse with practiced ease. Horace flailed, trying to fight off his attacker.

“Do yeh have any idea who I am?!”

Their eyes met briefly in the shadows, and Caine winked in reply. Then he was gone, slipping back into the alcove from which he had come.

He heard the skull-faced man getting to his feet, cursing. Caine’s attention fixed upon the eaves of the rooftops above his shallow alcove.

“Yer as good as dead, little dog! D’ye hear me?! Yeh’ve nowhere to go now!” Horace screamed from around the corner.

Caine smiled, the magic within him surging still. Focused on the eaves, the air bent around on him like a soap bubble. The dead-end alcove vanished. Blinking, he found himself three stories up, crouching on the spot he had spied from below.

Not a second too soon. He turned to see the alcove just as Horace rounded the corner, a brutish looking pistol leading the way. The ugly mobster wore a feral grin, but as he saw his attacker gone, it abruptly

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vanished. He screamed an oath. Reaching for a barrel of rubbish, he cast it aside, spilling the contents. For good measure, he trained his pistol on a large turnip as it rolled from the upturned barrel. The shot splashed rotted pulp against the greasy brick wall. The report of his weapon echoed like a thunderclap in the confined space, and Horace shook with rage. Screaming a final time, he turned on his heel and stamped off.



“Stupid! It was stupid! Boss Dakin ... he will ...” Tylen fretted as he and Caine pushed through the crowded streets on a dilapidated row of tenements. As they neared the last door in the row, the light of the gas-lamps fell short. A red door upon a broken stairwell loomed over them.

“Did the tarheels get a look at you or didn’t they?”

“No, but ...”

“Ech, then give yourself some credit, why don’t you? You’ve faster feet and lighter hands than anyone I’ve ever seen. If you just had the stones to go with them, you’d be a nightmare. Now take your cut, and trouble yourself no more on it.” Caine smirked, clapping Tylen on the back.

“Will it be enough? Referrin’ as I am to your share?” Tylen called after him, his expression softening to concern.

“Maybe.” Caine said, tapping his cut from the top of the steps.

Caine watched as his ginger-haired friend melted into the flow of workers shuffling home from the mill. He turned to the door, and saw faint lights within the crooked gap in the shutters. With a deep breath, he entered.

A motley collection of weathered furniture and castoffs filled the living room. The long wooden dining table was held in balance with a stack of old books, and knitted blankets had been carefully placed over torn upholstery. If there was one thing he could say about his mother, it was that she would never let hard times rob her of her dignity. Caine took it all in with a sigh.

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Despite the remains of a fire sputtering in the hearth, the house appeared empty. His sister was likely on shift now, over at the textile factory, but what of his parents?

Caine paced until he heard a faint sob from upstairs.

Bolting up the creaking steps, he found his mother alone in her bedroom, curled in a ball next to the bed. She didn't notice his arrival, and pulled a house shawl tightly around her as she wept. Her long brown hair had been left unkempt, a rarity for her. Caine stared at her in the gloom, a lump in his throat.

"Ma?" He asked softly. Pulling herself up, she wiped her eyes, and tried to smile.

"Allister ... you're home?"

"For a moment ... what's wrong, Ma?"

"It's nothing, Allister. Come downstairs. You'll be hungry, I expect?"

Caine sighed, his face hardening. "Where is he?"

"Never you mind! It's just, he ..."

"Where, Ma?" Caine pressed.

"The Boiler Plate, I think. It's not his fault, Allister! Not this time," she said, as resolutely as she could manage. Her eyes told a different story. He saw lines around those eyes, saw the years of worry they held, and he could not bear it. He turned to go, but paused at the doorway. Taking the still bulging coin-purse from his coat, he tossed it on the bed beside her.

"Of course it's his fault."



Caine opened thick double doors to reveal a roaring fire at the hearth of the Boiler Plate. All around it, tankards were struck and ruddy-faced men laughed loudly. A stone's throw from the mill down the road, it was a full house of poor working men, rejoicing in another day done.

Caine scarcely noticed. All he could see clearly was his father Seamus hunched in a booth at the back, a full tankard before him. Actually, he was

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more pressed into the booth, hemmed closely on either side by two men. The paunchy old machinist pressed a wisp of graying hair across the top of his bald head, and adjusted his spectacles, but did not touch his tankard. Caine frowned. A second later, the large man next to Seamus slammed his own tankard to the table, and the elder Caine nearly jumped clear of his seat. If he didn't know better, Caine could have sworn his father was stone cold sober and scared witless.

As he drew closer, Caine felt nauseated. The men sitting with his father were not simply drinking partners.

They were the men he'd just robbed, not an hour ago.

Caine wheeled abruptly to face the bar, for fear they might spot him through the crowd. What was his father doing with them? Caine groaned. *He owed them money.* What else could it be? Exactly when had things gotten so bad his father had stooped to taking a debt with the mob? Sure, things had been tight since he'd been hurt at the factory. Caine knew his father had had his share of troubles since, not least of which was the bottle. But had he not also managed a few crowns here and there with odd jobs? How had it come to this? Caine ran a hand through his hair, and elbowed his way up to the bar.

What now?

He leaned in to flag the bartender, and let a moment pass before daring a peek over his shoulder. Horace was no longer looking his way. Rather, the skull-faced mobster was distracted by a passing serving girl. Caine let out a long exhale, and faced forward again. Opening his coat, he checked the two-shot holdout in the folds of his jacket. The thing was bound together with worn cloth wrappings, and its iron sights were long since gone, but it had served him well enough in a handful of scrapes thus far.

At the stool next to him, an imposing tree-trunk of a man wrapped in a black riding cloak tilted back a tankard, and eyed him dubiously. The man had a mane of black hair tied back in a ponytail, and had set a sturdy black tricorne on the bar before him.

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"You expectin' trouble?" the stranger mused, with a voice both sonorous and gravelly. Caine flinched, closing the lapel of his coat. He narrowed his eyes at the stranger.

"Not your concern now is it?" he hissed.

The big man turned to look at Horace.

"Right. Well, if you're going to start something, you'd best be packing more than *that*." The man turned back to the bar, sipping at his tankard.

Caine stared back at him, incredulous. A tankard slid down the bar, settling before him. As he pulled the draft to his lips, he peered back to see if his father had yet appeased Horace's demands. As he did, he choked on his drink, spilling it over the bar.

The booth where his father had been was empty.

The man in black chuckled without looking, and Caine was on his feet. Pushing past drunken patrons with a snarl, he made for the back of the tavern. He arrived at the rear exit, and swung the door open to reveal a narrow alley lit only by the gas lamps from an adjoining street.

There, his father was against the far wall as the enforcer repeatedly pummeled him. Seamus withered with the beating, sobbing from under upraised arms. Blood ran from his mouth and nose. Horace cackled, watching. Caine snarled, drawing his holdout in anger.

With the squeeze of the trigger, a shot echoed in the alley, and the enforcer's cocked fist unclenched in a splash of red. An ugly hole gaped from the center of his palm, leaving tendons shredded and visible. The mobster looked at it numbly before starting to whimper, his grip on Seamus long forgotten.

"That's enough!" Caine shouted.

Horace turned, his face twisted in rage. The mobster had his own gun out, a quad-barreled pepperbox, and it shone in the moonlight. Too late, Caine saw the brutal weapon aimed his way. In a heartbeat, Caine's thoughts exploded into action. His eyes flashed and ethereal runes swirled before him. For the second time that night, a shockwave of force slammed into Horace.

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The mobster tumbled into his mewling enforcer, his pistol dropped. Both Horace and his father looked at him, breathless and wide-eyed.

"I've got one more, and it's in your eye if you don't put your hands where I can see them." Caine said, keeping his holdout evenly on Horace. Slowly, the mobster stood in compliance.

"All right, kid." Horace said soothingly. His hands up, he studied Caine. Eyes flashed in recognition, and an ugly smile spread across his face. "Well, well. We've met, ain't we? I'll give you that first one, you got balls. But I ain't stupid. You should have quit when you were ahead." Horace took a half step forward.

Too fast for Caine to react, a shadow came from behind, cracking him on the head with a blackjack. He was down in a heap, the world a blur. His holdout clattered to the ground, and the distorted silhouette of Horace advanced on him, blocking out the gaslight. Rough hands gripped him from behind, pulling him up, shoving him to the wall. Feet kicked at his own, spreading his legs. Horace's laugh grated in his ears.

"Right. Now let's see about those big balls. Marten! Give me yer knife."

There was a muffled shout in response. Somehow, Caine was no longer being held to the wall, and the sounds of a scuffle had broken out behind him. Falling to one knee, he caught a glimpse of a bulky figure stepping toward one of Horace's goons. As the figure moved, arm outstretched with a hand bathed in strange light, two deafening shots rang out from Horace's pepperbox. Caine blinked, trying to get his head straight. To his addled senses, the newcomer appeared to warp and shift just as the weapon fired, causing the point blank shots to miss ... badly. In two steps, the dark figure followed through with a haymaker into Horace's nearest goon. Raw power like lightning arced and crackled in the attack, and the man smashed into the brick wall hard enough to crack it. Caine watched as another assailant was tossed past him, slumping into the garbage.

Horace stood shaking, looking at the stranger only a second. Without a word, he turned and fled as fast as his legs would carry him.

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His vision clearing, Caine looked up at the stranger over him. It was the cloaked man from the bar. He had his tricorn on now, pushed close to his eyes, and a high collar buttoned to cover his mouth. His black cloak had come unfurled in the scuffle, revealing the glint of steel within. He reached down with a mailed hand and pulled Caine to his feet, then pointed at Caine's father.

"Go home. I'll have a word with your boy now."

Caine heard an order, not a suggestion, and Seamus nodded before limping out onto the street.

The stranger turned his attention back to Caine while pulling his collar open. As his cloak opened wider still, Caine glimpsed the steel within was nothing less than full plate armor. Impressive enough to account for half the man's bulk, it was a complicated affair of hoses, steam-pipes and intricate armatures. Of greater significance to Caine, there at the center of the breastplate was an ornately carved golden swan. Caine grimaced at the Kings mark: the Cygnus.

Was this man an inquisitor? Precious few had the gift of magic as Caine did. The King's Inquisition made sure it stayed that way. Morrow help you if they caught your scent.

No, he'd had his share of near misses with those villains. Though they might wear the Cygnus like this stranger, they were nothing like him. He had to be something else. He was a soldier. More than that, he must be a leader of some sort, if his bearing was any indication. Then there was the fact he had magic of his own.

So what was he then?

A *warcaster* perhaps? Caine swallowed.

Caine had heard stories about those larger than life mage-warriors like everyone else, though few ever actually met one in person.

Armies followed at their heels and fell by their hands, or so it went. Warcasters were masters of steel and spell alike, and they alone could drive those walking, steam-belching tanks, *warjacks*, with but a thought. Caine

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could only stare, his mouth hanging open as the cloaked man extended a mailed hand.

“The name’s Magnus.”



Caine sipped his beer, studying the grizzled face of Magnus warily. The warcaster said nothing, yet even as he breathed, he exuded a certain menace. The pair sat opposite a worn table at the back of the Boiler Plate in abject silence. Caine twitched in his seat, eyes darting to the door waiting for a mob reprisal. Magnus grunted.

“So here’s me,” Magnus finally declared, his voice low, and in an accent Caine couldn’t place. “Travelling from Caspia on the kings’ business. I take shelter for a night in Bainsmarket and *what* should interrupt me at my drink? A bloody rogue sorcerer. Now, our good and noble King Vinter has made clear my duty in such circumstance.”

“You mean to take me to the Inquisition, is that it?” Caine asked.

Magnus relented, settling back in his chair. “No. As I’ve thought upon it, I’m not sure I could. You’ve a rare gift, if you’ve stayed ahead of them this long. I don’t think it will be me taking you in. Rather, I expect *you* will, after I’ve said my piece.”

Caine crossed his arms, his eyebrows raised.

“Boy, you’ve got something most would kill for. What’s more, you’re a decent shot, and have a stout heart in there. So what are you?” Magnus paused, disgust on his face. “By the look of you, a thief at best, but likely much worse. A bloody waste of your potential, I rate. Now, there’s another path, without Inquisitors. Enlist.” He took a long pull from his tankard. “Sure, you *could* keep hiding, but I don’t think that’s who you are. Even if he was your father, that’s one person that meant more to you than your own arse. It’s a start. Putting something ahead of yourself is at the core of any good soldier. Add to that such gifts as Morrow has provided, and then you’ve potential for something greater still. *Leadership*, Caine! Look at *me*.

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I'm as lowborn as you, but I fought my way to become advisor to King Vinter himself! That's the kind of potential I'm talking about."

Caine scoffed, looking down at his own tankard. The service was for fools. You traded your freedom for that uniform, your life too. A pittance of crowns was all you were worth to them. Maybe they'd throw you a little strip of ribbon if you were a good dog. Somehow, though, even as he told himself these things, they fell a little ... flat. He had to admit, there was something in what Magnus was saying. It wasn't command, it wasn't power, and it certainly wasn't some overblown sense of patriotism ... so what was it?

Caine stiffened in his chair, and met Magnus' stern gaze head-on.

"Thanks for the advice, but I've got my own to protect right here."

Magnus's face went hard, and the big man pushed back from the table at once. As he stood, he leaned forward until his eyes were only inches away from Caine's.

"This won't last, son. You'd best make the decision while you can."



Caine found his father by the hearth, hands crossed in his worn chair. Only embers remained, and he stared into them, absorbed, as Caine came in quietly by the front door. He caught the glint of crowns spilled across the floor before him. The sack Caine had left his mother in his hand.

"What d'you think yer doin' here, boy? After what you done?" his father slurred, spittle at his lips. There was an empty bottle by his feet.

"I tried to save you ..." Caine sighed from the stairwell.

"It would have blown over, if you'd just let it be. What I must do to make amends now, Morrow knows."

"Boss Dakin is a pitiless man! How could you take a debt with him to begin with?" Caine shook his head, frustrated.

"Shut yer mouth! What do yeh know of it? I was handling it! My debt wasn't even due. Not for another week!"

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Caine grimaced. He thought back to his first encounter with Horace. The night's take, stolen. Could it be Horace had tried to collect a few debts early to save face with his boss? The idea that he may have caused this mess made his head spin.

"So then yer ma ... she shows me *this!*" His father shouted, tossing the half empty sack to the floor. Still more crowns spilled out over the old floorboards. "So you think I need yer help?" His father's eyes were wild now, and he stood on shaky footing.

"No, Pa! You're looking at the thing in the wrong way."

"If yeh think I don't know how you come by this money, think again! I know precisely what you are!" His father tripped, staggering out of the main room. He came at Caine, grabbing him by the lapels of his coat to keep from falling. Caine backed up against the wall, to keep balance.

"Yer not better than me, boy! Understand? Yer just a thug. And as for this ..." he spun wildly from Caine, diving at the crowns on the floor and scooping them in his hands. "It's blood money! I won't have it!" He tossed the crowns at the embers of the hearth.

Aggravated, Caine moved to the hearth, reaching past his father for a poker. "For Morrow's sake! You need it! They need it! I don't think I'm better. I just ..."

His father struck him hard in the face. Caine flinched, the pain of the blow watering his eyes. Struggling to get up, his father was over him, leering. The poker fell from his hand.

"Pa!" He pleaded. "Just take it. They deserve ... better ..." he sputtered, his lip bloody.

His father struck him again, his face twisted in rage.

"It's beyond money now, Allister! Bainsmarket ain't such a big place. How long before they figure out who yeh are? What then for yer dear mother?" he swore, striking Caine again. Despite the pain, Caine struggled to get Seamus off him.

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“Yeh’ve helped enough! Go back to the streets! Yer garbage! D’ye hear me?”

It was the final straw. With both hands, Caine reached up, grabbing his father’s fist.

“You’re wrong!” Caine shouted.

Caine met his father’s eyes with equal wild intensity. “You’re wrong!” he spat this time, holding his father’s fist at bay. Both men now strained with the effort.

“I’ll show you, you bottle sucking drunk!” Caine’s eyes burned white. Sound sucked from the room with a sudden rush of air. He saw his father’s eyes widen above him, and his skin started to tingle. In the next instant, everything was gone. As the glare in his eyes faded, his hearth and father both were replaced with the darkened road in front of his house.

Caine walked into the night.

Four Years Ago

Summer, AR 592: Strategic Academy, Point Bourne

Caine stood straight-backed and focused, lined with a dozen more like him along the firing range. A clouded day overhead, they stood sheltered within the thick stone walls of the academy. Each was dressed in the weathered blue and grey cloaks of Arcane Tempest Gun Mage cadets. Their panoply was completed with tricorn, marksman goggles, and the trademark sidearm, a magelock pistol, holstered at the waist.

Downrange twenty paces, the crew in the pits of the intricate mechanical gallery began to grind cogs into action.

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Behind the cadets, the gunnery sergeant paced, adjusting his own goggles. Next, he tightly gripped his hands behind his back and cleared his throat.

“Cadets, at the READY!” he screamed in a tightly measured pitch.

Caine flexed his fists, and steadied his breathing. Behind his own goggles, he blinked, counting the scrum points of his corridor. He listened to the steps of the sergeant behind him. Ahead, the gallery came to life. Still, the instructor paced, on the edge of giving the word ... until ...

“Cadets, FIRE!”

With fluid, deliberate movement, Caine drew an ornately embossed pistol from his holster. Runes carved in the barrel faintly glowed at his touch. Steadily he aimed downrange, and watched. Within the corridor of each cadet came a kaleidoscope of colored and animated targets. Some darted left to right, others moved in patterns or sweeping arcs.

“Two minutes!” The gunnery sergeant bellowed.

Caine lined up his first target. With a whisper and a soft squeeze, the barrel of his pistol exploded with glitter-laced fire. Mystic runes swirled around his shot, streaking after it like fireworks. He had whispered *Break*, just as they had been drilled, day after day these past eight months. The word itself, he had learned, was not nearly as important as the thoughts it evoked. With the right thought, the will of the gun-mage was imposed on his weapon, and the shot itself was greatly altered.

Within the great frame of the mechanical shooting gallery, a blue painted steel plate waved up and down until Caine’s shot found it, and the thing shattered like so much confetti.

One after another, cadets to his left and right followed suit, whispering their own words of power. The courtyard sang with the cacophony of spell-fire.

Caine paid no notice. He was within his own head, hands already moving to reload without him, as he fixated on his next target. Five more shots, and five more hits as the seconds ticked down.

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“One minute!”

As his focus concentrated, the world around him slowed, dimming to obscurity. Only the targets down range still looked vibrant, as they darted in and out of the scrum points in endless supply. There were red targets, hinged and weighted by brick. To them Caine whispered *Thunder*, his shot shattering on impact with enough force to knock them back. There were also spinning yellow targets, set well back from the rest. To those, he whispered *Reach*, spurring his shot further and further ahead. Each time as his pistol emptied, he paused mechanically to reload it and fired again without hesitation. He had not missed one yet.

“Thirty seconds!”

Two more rounds left in his belt. A score of thirteen was impressive enough, just one shy of the record. Yet he felt a playful curiosity tug him away from the urgency of the test. He had wondered many times in the months prior if he might evoke new ways to spur his shot. Caine grinned as he reloaded. Why not try? What did he have to lose? His mind raced as he reloaded, excited to push at new boundaries. His weapon loaded, he focused his thoughts. He reached out, aiming and firing fluidly. *Bounce*, he whispered this time. He watched the shot fly, and nodded at the erratic result. Not bad, but he could do better. His hands trembled as he reloaded, he was desperately eager for one more try. Again he aimed, and again he whispered it. *Bounce*. The shot erupted from the muzzle, streaking to the gallery. Targets cracked, shattered and fell, as the magically imbued shot ricocheted between them. Caine smiled at the spectacle.

“Cadets, CEASE FIRE!”

Caine’s hand slammed the weapon back into its holster. He assumed the stand easy posture, crossing his hands behind his back. Taking a breath, he let his attention wander until he heard the steps of the instructor behind him.

“Cadet Caine, step down!”

THE WAY OF CAINE

With measured movements, Caine stepped back, and over one pace. The instructor moved to take his position at the corridor, peering downrange.

“Corridor eight; indicate!” The sergeant shouted. From the lower deck of the gallery extended a long stick with a slate mounted at the end. There in chalk had been etched a number. Around him, Caine’s fellow cadets began to murmur. For his part, the instructor began to swear an oath. “Cadet Caine! Would you care to enlighten me as to the perfect score for this examination?”

“Fifteen, gunnery sergeant!” Caine shouted back.

“Outstanding. Hazard a guess *why* has that score not been bested since the founding of this battle school, cadet Caine?” He growled. Caine avoided looking at the surly instructor, keeping his eyes downrange.

“Because we are issued only fifteen rounds, gunnery sergeant!”

“Brilliant, Cadet!” The sergeant darted this way and that around him, studying his face, for some tell of guilt. “Then how do you explain *your* score?!”

Caine looked at the number scrawled on the slate. It read seventeen. Caine fought back a smile, poorly. The instructor saw this and immediately flew into a rage, swearing up and down at his insubordinate cadet. At last, he became gravely calm.

“I say you’re a cheat.”

Caine scowled. “I didn’t cheat, gunnery sergeant! I just tried something different ...”

If his explanation was meant to assuage the sergeant, it had the exact opposite effect. The face of the grizzled pistoleer purpled with indignation.

“Is that so Cadet Caine? You expect me to believe you just *improvised* a new evocation on the spot? Polished enough to put down more targets than you had shots?” Caine started to open his mouth. “Don’t answer! I’ve got you figured, I do. You had a little help from your chums, is that it? How much did it cost to persuade them to put some crossfire down your corridor? Corridor seven and nine, indicate!”

THE WAY OF CAINE

Again, slates with chalk etched numbers arose from the gallery, on the corridors adjoining Caine's. The instructor stepped to the cadets on either side, comparing the chalk numbers against the remaining ammunition in their bandoliers. His lips were moving as he counted to himself.

Then they stopped.

"Cadets, DISMISSED!" He barked, extending a restraining hand on Caine's shoulder. "Cadet Jenkins! Get me the Lieutenant!" One by one, Caine's class filed past him. The gunnery sergeant had grown curiously silent as they waited. A minute later, the battle school lieutenant stomped out of the mess hall, visibly annoyed.

"This had better be good, gunnery sergeant," the lieutenant growled on approach. Seeing Caine standing next to the gunnery sergeant, he rolled his eyes. "Glory be! Are we to talk about Cadet Caine again? What was it this time cadet? Caught with hooch in the barracks? More fights?" The lieutenant's exasperation was thick.

The gunnery sergeant saluted sharply as the officer stopped before him, and Caine stood at attention.

"Not this time, *sir*." The gunnery sergeant answered. "It would appear the cadet has just scored a legitimate seventeen on the range test."

The lieutenant licked his lips and blinked. "Gunnery sergeant, on me." He said in a near whisper.

Caine remained at attention, face forward and hands pressed down at his side. Yet he watched the senior gun mages pace the range with a sidelong glance. After a few minutes of hushed but animated discussion, they returned. The lieutenant's expression was unreadable as he squared with Caine. The gunnery sergeant, meanwhile, made for the armory at double time.

"Cadet Caine. Last week the quarter-master claimed one of his labor-jacks went missing overnight. I don't suppose you remember?"

Caine's jaw clenched and his mind raced as he tried to figure the angle.

THE WAY OF CAINE

“Sir?”

“It occurs to me your barracks hall was the only one to pass inspection the next day. Your troop was the only one granted a leave pass.”

“The ... uh, boys and I just put our backs into it, sir,” Caine lied. From the armory, he could hear the sound of great iron-shod feet stamping closer, with a rhythmic hiss of steam. Nausea started to twist at his guts and the swell of pride he’d felt only moments ago had long since gone. Why was the lieutenant bringing this up? Hadn’t he just done something no-one had ever managed? Shouldn’t they be lauding him? Asking him how to perform the evocation, even? How was this suddenly going so wrong, so fast? Caine fought to keep his breath, but his heart pounded.

“Or maybe they had help? Eh, cadet?” The lieutenant turned to watch the doorway of the armory. Through the open doors, an immense figure stooped to pass the archway, and out of shadow. It was a worn Engines East model, built for general labor duties. In appearance, it was like a hulking armored man some ten feet high with a visored face, thick bulbous shoulders, sinews of pistons and oversized triple-jointed claw-grip hands. From a single chimney on its back, a wisp of smoke billowed. Alongside, the gunnery sergeant marshaled it on with barking commands. His expression was unmistakably smug.

“You know, if it weren’t for your little gunnery show today, I might never have put it together.” The Lieutenant’s arms were crossed now, eyes narrowing.

Caine felt the thing, its blunt thoughts now pushed at the edge of his mind. As it drew closer, it felt him too. Smoldering eyes set deep within the slit of a grated visor perked up, locking on him. He tried not to look at it, but the recognition it showed put him in a panic.

No! Stay back! He thought, desperately trying to bend the semi-intelligent machine to his will. It had worked last week, after all ...

THE WAY OF CAINE

He just couldn't stop it now.

The beast broke stride with the gunnery sergeant and made a beeline for Caine. In a few broad strides, the heaving, hissing machine was standing submissively before him, head cocked.

"Aw, for pity's sake! Will you just get away from me?" Caine sighed.

Dutifully this time, the labor-jack took precisely one step back. Holding still, it cocked its head once more, awaiting another order.

"That's what I thought." The lieutenant nodded. "That will be all, gunnery sergeant."

The gunnery sergeant shouted for the machine to fall back, but it remained fixated on Caine.

"Sir, I don't know ..."

"Cadet Caine! In light of this and other incidents for which you've been cited, it is my decision to file for your *immediate* dismissal from this battle school." The lieutenant declared evenly.

Caine could not hide his outrage.

Over a year's work! Sure, he'd had his share of troubles adapting to life in the service, but had not his very blood and sweat been shed in this uniform? Had he not shown talent? Since that last night with his father, accomplishing this one thing had burned in him, like nothing before. He would hold it up to the old bastard. Rub it in his face.

"You can't take this from me!" A snarl twisted his face, and the officer before him recoiled.

"Stand down, Cadet Caine!" the lieutenant waved him off. "This is a *transfer*, not a discharge! Clearly, we're wasting your time here. I'm putting you in for battle school in Caspia. Your shenanigans will probably get you tossed, alright. But if they don't, you might just make *warcaster*."

Three Years Ago

Winter, AR 593; Orven

“Journeyman Caine! We’re nearly there, sir.” Lieutenant Gangier called out.

Caine wasn’t listening, lulled as he had become by the steady *clip-clop, clip-clop* of his horse’s shoes against the cobblestones.

“Journeyman Caine, sir! The Long Gunner junior officer repeated, regarding Caine with puzzlement.

Caine snapped up, looking across to the lieutenant bundled tightly in winter dress on horseback alongside him. The streets of Orven bustled with life around them, and the lights and livery of the upcoming winter festival were everywhere one might look. From within his suit of armor, Caine shivered, and pulled his riding cloak tighter around him.

“The train station is just ahead, you see?”

Caine nodded, still trying to turtle within his armor for warmth. He hadn’t gotten used to the weight of it even after a year, and it chafed despite oils and softening balms he’d rubbed into the leather lining. He particularly hated that the breastplate would bind at his chest when he was short of breath, it felt as though he were trapped. Even so, he couldn’t deny it was the first thing he’d ever worn that was new, fitted for him. There was something comfortable about that. What he liked about his armor was what was emblazoned on the contour of his shoulder plates. There, on the left, the golden etched Cygnus, and on the right, the white curving horns of his rank. After a year’s training in Caspia, he had entered the final phase.

He was a journeyman warcaster.

“So where are they shipping you, anyway, lieutenant?” Caine leaned over casually, grasping the reins. The fresh-faced junior officer brightened, slowing his horse as children ran ahead.

THE WAY OF CAINE

“Bound for the garrison at Northguard, sir.”

Caine winced at the formality. He had to admit he had come to enjoy the company of the young officer. His western accent sounded bland to Caine’s ear, slow and measured, but he spoke in earnest, an effect that Caine found at once disarming. Despite their technically equal rank, the lieutenant had deferred to the authority of Caine’s arcane rank thus far. Caine decided it was time to put a stop to it.

“Call me Allister. We’re *both* juniors, eh?”

The lieutenant’s young face cracked wide in a warm smile.

“All right ... *Allister*. You can call me Gerard, although only my mother does. Back home, I’m just Gerdie.”

“So you’re done at the Academy and off to face Khadorans at Northguard?”

“Like my father before me, Morrow rest his soul. Nothing so exciting as your post though, I daresay.” Gerdie smiled, his eyes lit up.

“Ech, well ...” Caine scoffed in false modesty.

“Posted to apprentice under Commander Magnus? Sir, I mean, Allister! Are you daft? He’s a living legend! Rumor has it he hand-picked you, no less! Any truth to that?”

“None whatsoever,” Caine replied with a grin.

Ahead, a steam-whistle blew and the mighty wheels of the train screeched along the rail, announcing its arrival at the crowded station. The long train was loaded with passengers, happy to disembark after their long journey abroad. Dismounting, Caine and Gerdie brought their horses to the servicemen stables adjoining the station. Caine gave his mare a pat along the snout as he handed the reins to a ruddy stable boy. Turning, he looked upon the train that would take him north. The intervening crowd was daunting, but both he and Gerdie made their way. Ahead, a barker shouted news of unrest in Caspia, the way they’d just come. Caine frowned to hear the words “threat to Vinter” and “Leto challenges,” but pressed on, soon forgetting them. Then, a hand brushed into him from out of the crowd.

What was this?

THE WAY OF CAINE

The hand fluttered soft as a butterfly and twice as fast to his belt. Had he not the gift of magic and years as a pickpocket himself, he would have missed it.

Caine had a split second to react.

Shooting his own hand forward, he seized the wandering hand. The thief was good, all right. Bold or insane to try this stunt on an armored officer. His fatal mistake had been to miss the arcane rank on Caine's shoulder.

"A pardon to you, sir! I didn't ..." a world-weary face said in alarm, then paused. There was confusion in his eyes. Caine looked back at the man, equally stunned. The face was scarred, prematurely worn, the hair ragged, but a familiar shade of red. The hand he now gripped was missing two fingers, but he realized who it belonged to just the same.

"Looks like you found your stones after all, eh Tylen?" he grinned.

His old partner smiled, eyes lighting up in relief and surprise.

"Allie? See true my eyes! Could it be? Alive and in person?"

Caine released his hand, and nodded.

"The same, chum."

Tylen marveled over his transformation from thug into clean-cut serviceman.

"We thought -- *feared* -- Horace had made good on his word. Now that I see you, I'm not sure it isn't actually a fate worse than that!"

Caine laughed, clapping him on the back. Wheeling to face Gerdie, introductions were made. Gerdie, obliged to secure their tickets from the kiosk inside, stepped off. As he went, Caine frowned.

"Tylen, what are you doing in Orven?"

His former accomplice's face turned grave at the question, and he favored his mutilated hand. Caine looked at it, squinting.

"Did you get pinched, Ty?"

"You could say that," Tylen admitted. "When Boss Dakin died last year, Horace took over. He felt it proper to make some examples." Caine nodded, eyes narrowing at the name.

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"First thing he did was run a few folk like me down. Made sure we understood we either worked for him, or we didn't work." Tylene displayed his three fingered hand now with ironic pride.

"After that, he opened his book of grudges. He looked for you for a long time. The bounty was stacked high, but in the end, he figured you dead, like the rest of us. Listen, what he done to your Pa? I'm real sorry Allie. He didn't deserve it."

Caine felt fire in his chest. His gaze was at once intense, piercing.

"What are you talking about, Tylene?"

"Bloody hell. I thought ..."

Caine's world was flooding over in red. His ears burned, and he felt as though the seconds were now ticking at a snail's pace. He grabbed Tylene roughly by the shoulder.

"Alive? ... Is he *alive*, Tylene?"

"Yes ... but Caine, he's ... uh, ow! You're hurting me!" Tylene protested. Caine released him as quickly as he had grabbed him, turning to go. As he did, Gerdie was returning, pushing through the crowd with tickets in hand.

"Hallo!" the junior officer shouted after him across the noisy foot traffic. Caine did not answer, but instead turned to his old friend.

"Tell him to go on without me. I've got something needs doing."

Tylene nodded, and watched as Caine disappeared into the crowd.



Caine barged through the old red door, frantic. It seemed so old and frail to him now, like something left from centuries ago. The house within had fared no better, more withered than ever he had seen it. The hallway smelled like death. Balms and liniments wafted from the stairwell above.

As he entered the front hall, a cry of surprise came from the front room. His diminutive sister, Bethany, stared blankly at him. On her knees, she had been scrubbing mud from a pair of work boots, with a dozen more waiting

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in a row. She looked up from her chore, mouth hung wide. The sight of her dead brother, not just alive, but somehow now a soldier, left her a statue.

"Beth!" Caine came to her, taking a knee and putting an arm to her shoulder. She lunged forward to embrace him, nearly knocking him down. He returned the embrace, gripping her fiercely. She said nothing, but began to sob in his shoulder. He patted her head, and pulled back enough to look her in the eye.

"Father. I heard he ... is he alright?" he asked gently.

Bethany sniffed, still in shock at the vision before her. She looked past the cramped front hall, and to the stairs. Caine followed her gaze, nodding. Patting her once more, he stood up and made for the stairs.

The bedroom was still and dark, with mildewed curtains that held back the late afternoon sun. Were it not for ragged breathing within the shadows, Caine would have thought the room empty. Pulling back the drapes, his father lay before him on the bed. The old man was nearly motionless and moribund beyond anything he'd ever seen. His unblinking eyes stared vacantly at the ceiling. He had aged twenty years in slightly more than two, if appearances were to be believed. His hair had been reduced to only a few white wisps, and his once meaty frame was nearly skeletal now. Caine noticed a disquieting scar around his neck, like an uneven collar.

Then, he stopped breathing. Caine rushed to his side, a hand to his ragged arm.

Convulsing, the old man shook as though possessed, and next was wracked by a hacking cough. His throat clear, he once again wheezed slow ragged breaths into his withered lungs.

Caine sat in a chair next to the bed, and cupped his hands. At length, he sat forward, leaning over toward the ear of his father.

"Pa?" He stared at Seamus, uncertain what to do. Gradually his face hardened.

He opened his long coat, revealing the breastplate of his armor. "Look at this! Do you see me? Am I a thug to you now? Does a thug wear the king's armor?"

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Caine watched his father's face, desperate for a sign. There was no flicker of recognition in those grey, unfocused eyes. They simply twitched randomly at the ceiling above. As the moment grew longer, his head shook slowly. Two years of pent up spite and anger drained from him and he sagged in the chair with a long exhale.

"You just couldn't let me have this, could you?" he whispered.

"He's been like this since they cut him down," Bethany said from the doorway.

"Morrow forgive me, they should have let him die up there. I swear it would have been better. Better than this," Bethany added, her face flushing. Caine was shocked at how much she reminded him of his mother the last time he'd seen her.

"Where were you, Allister? We thought you were dead."

"I'm sorry, Beth ... I had to go."

She nodded wordlessly, coming to his side. She looked down at their wheezing father, wiping her eyes.

"Why ...? Why did this happen?" he asked.

"Who knows?" Bethany sat down on the bed, putting Seamus's withered hand in her own, stroking it slowly.

"Ma says he'd paid his debt to Boss Dakin. That should have been the end of it. But when Horace took over, he came for him, like he had a score to settle. He never said why. His gang strung Pa up at the marketplace, on the clock tower, for all to see. He was up there five minutes before anyone bothered to cut him down. Horace strung a dozen more like him all in one week. Everyone saw it, but no witnesses, of course." Bethany looked back at him, but Caine looked away, his jaw clenching. Standing, he made for the door.

"Where you going? Ma will be home from her shift soon. She'll want to know you're alright," she pleaded.

"I'm not alright, Beth. Not one whit."



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Caine walked the street, murder in his eyes. Despite the cold, the rage in him burned hotter than the power plant on the back of his armor. As it turned out, finding Horace was no challenge. A couple of wayward drunks were quick to point out he and his crew were at the Boiler Plate, as most nights, just as he had been when Caine had last seen him. Nearing the pub, he could hear the tune of a fiddler within, and a boisterous crowd singing along. Approaching the door, he drew his gun. Those few gathered by it marked him with fearful glances, and were quick to clear a path. All except one, that was. Even from his rage, he recognized Horace's old enforcer, by the scarred hand he'd given him. To his credit, the big man stood his ground, even daring to reach for a weapon of his own.

Too late.

Three strides in, Caine exploded his rage forward. An arc of force threw the mobster back into the thick wooden doors, which in turn splintered like matchwood. Within the tavern, the fiddler stopped, and abruptly the roaring crowd fell silent.

Caine stepped over the shattered threshold and the unconscious gangster, passing stunned patrons that had been knocked back from the force of the impact.

"Horace!" He shouted over a bewildered crowd with eyes smoldering like embers. "I'm calling you out!" From the booth at the back, Horace sat, a serving girl on either arm. The mobster blinked, head cocked quizzically. In truth, Horace looked much as Caine had last seen him, no less the skull-faced villain than before. Yet somehow, he could not seem more different. Where Caine had once seen an adversary or a threat, he now saw only prey.

Gradually, Horace began to stir, his eyes squinting in recognition. "Sure, sure ... I'm coming." He shouted back peaceably, half speaking to the crowd. His crew watched him go, looking for the signal to act. He waved them off, stepping clear of the booth.

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Caine nodded, and turned for the door. Across the hushed silence of the room, he heard the sound of a pistol being cocked.

He smiled.

Wheeling back on Horace in a blur, his weapon spat once, a thunderous roar in the enclosed space. Horace cried out in dismay as the shot knocked his weapon to the floor. Clutching his numbed hand, his eyes flashed darkly at Caine.

“You want to do this in here, eh? Right. Pick it up.” Caine holstered his weapon, crossing his arms as he did.

The mobster dove for the weapon, rolling behind one of his prized serving girls as she had hidden beneath an intervening table. Grabbing her about the neck, he pulled her up as a shield. Leaning out from behind her shoulder, he tried to put the gun on Caine once more.

Fire spat from Caine’s second pistol, followed by another thunderclap and a wreath of smoke. Horace released the girl and rolled on the floor in agony. His off-hand had been reduced to a tangle of ground meat, and spurted blood. Once again, Horace had dropped his pistol. Caine, meanwhile reloaded and re-holstered.

“PICK IT UP!” Caine barked, his rage boiling over.

Shaking with pain and anger, Horace reached for his pistol. Standing with great effort, he was panting with shock. Caine only watched him, arms crossed. A shaky arm raised the pistol to aim, and tried once more to fire the weapon. One more time, a muzzle flashed, and a thunderclap roared.

Horace fell to the ground, screaming, his kneecap gone.

Caine strode insouciantly to the now whimpering mobster. This time, Horace dared not touch his weapon. He only whimpered as Caine kneeled to hand it to him.

“No? Is that all you’ve got? Anyone else? Is no one here capable of giving me a real fight?” Caine shouted, glaring around the tavern. Silence answered him. Patrons remained, peering in terror from under their tables

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and behind the bar. The mobsters he'd marked at a booth were gone. He took a deep breath. As his rage cooled, his manner became detached, calculating.

"So be it."

Caine tossed Horace's weapon aside then reached over to pick Horace up by his shirt with a grunt. Draping the mobster's good arm over his shoulder, Caine steadied him to stand.

"Come on Horace. We're going for a walk."

Out into the marketplace, decked with colored lights and holiday wreaths, the pair limped. Horace hobbled to match Caine's pace, he cried out with each step. Before them loomed the great Market Clock Tower, five stories high and decked with festive boughs. Horace looked up at it, panic on his face.

"I remember ye ... look, we kin resolve this, eh?" he pleaded.

"Certainly."

"I have money, ye know? Ye kin ... take ... as much as ye want." He fixed a weak smile over the pain, trying to seem congenial. Caine looked coolly at Horace.

"I wanted a moment. You took that from me. Can you give it back?"

The bewildered mobster looked blankly at him.

Caine glanced skyward, his concentration tightening. Closing his eyes, he bent the world around him. With great effort, he brought the wounded mobster with him. The pair vanished, only to reappear on the catwalk at the face of the clock tower. Breathing heavily, Caine swayed with the exertion of flashing another. Horace, disoriented by the teleportation, fell to his knees, splashing his dinner over the side of the catwalk. As he heaved, Caine caught his breath and glanced to the gargoyle at the corner of the tower.

That will do.

He bent over, loosening a rope tied to the gargoyle. The rope was strung with boughs to a nearby lower tower. With a sudden and forceful tug, the

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rope came loose at the other end, and the boughs slid clear to the ground below. As he gathered the rope in a coil around his arm, the giant backlit face of the clock marked time, iron hands ticking past with loud, steady beats.

Still disoriented and on his knees, Horace was oblivious as Caine fashioned a noose with the rope, and secured it. Peering over the edge, Caine saw his spectacle had gathered a large audience, which, at last, included the local constabulary. Guardsmen shouted up to stop and surrender. A piteous flat-faced Horace looked up at Caine, wiping spittle from his lips.

“Not like this. Not ...” Horace gasped as Caine fastened the noose over his neck.

“Just like this.”

Caine kicked Horace from the catwalk. The onetime mobster pulled the line taut with a loud snap, and convulsed only once before becoming the newest addition to the holiday decorations.

Caine vanished from the catwalk, only to reappear on the cobblestones, swaying a moment before falling to his knees. Guardsmen moved in from all sides, weapons drawn, and he put his hands up mockingly.

“Alright. I’m finished.”



Two Years Ago

Late Spring, AR 594: The Presidium, Bainsmarket

“Prisoner 31071! You’ve company.”

Caine turned over on his cot to find a specter in grey watching him. He put a hand over his eyes to block the glare, and squinted at the shape of a cloaked man on the other side of the bars. As his eyes adjusted, he saw the stranger was gaunt both in face and frame. For a moment, the man just stared at him, his face blank.

“There was a story I heard, two seasons ago,” the grey man began, his voice barely louder than a whisper and devoid of dialect. “It seems there was a remarkable incident during the king’s inspection of the strategic academy in Caspia.”

Caine said nothing, but sat up from his cot.

“A cadet was asked by King Vinter to fire upon a target from twenty paces, which he did. Afterwards, an advisor to the king was overheard to be, shall we say, unimpressed. The cadet proceeded to fire a sidelong shot which struck two walls and a chandelier before knocking the advisor’s brooch pin from his shoulder, leaving his cloak at his feet.”

The grey man’s pacing stopped, and he put a long finger to his lips. “The king remarked at the glorious future this cadet had ahead of him. An interesting irony then, that he should vanish only a few months later, wouldn’t you say?”

Caine glared at the grey man. He stood, stretching, and next emptied his bladder in the bucket by his cot.

“Just why are you here?” The grey man pressed, his voice still low. “We both know you could leave anytime.”

“It is where I belong, ain’t it? In the end it seems I’m no more than a thug. A common killer. Is it not so?” Caine muttered, re-fastening his breeches.

THE WAY OF CAINE

"An *exceptional* killer, in fact. Such a thing, I fear, is a valuable commodity in times as these. Beyond this cell and your self-pity, our nation teeters on the brink. Since King Leto seized the throne from the corruption of his brother Vinter, we are more vulnerable as a nation than ever before." Caine was unimpressed still. The grey man paused. "I have decided Leto is the better man for Cygnar. I mean to keep him on the throne, with whatever means available. To this cause, I expect you will pledge yourself also."

"Is that so?" Caine scoffed.

"I realize patriotism is not a particular virtue of yours. However, I believe you once took pride in your career?"

"Yes, well, I've thrown that away, as you can plainly see. It is no more than could be expected of me."

The grey man produced a letter from the folds of his cloak.

"It need not be so. I have here the means for a clean slate as it were. I have procured for you a pardon. You could be posted to resume your journeyman apprenticeship. As early as tomorrow, should you wish it. This, I will do to enlist your services whenever I deem appropriate, without exception."

"You've wasted your time coming here." Caine said, leaning against his cell wall with crossed arms.

"I see. So you are content then, to wallow in your failure?" the grey man stared. "To meet an end more ignoble and obscure, even, than that of your fool of a father?"

Caine's face betrayed surprise. The grey man pressed.

"Yes, that's right. He died last week. Were you not told? No, I suppose not. What would it matter to you? Does anything?"

Indignant rage flared in Caine. He glared at the sinewy man before him, contemplating wringing his scrawny neck. The man watched his anger coolly, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes. Suppose you were to kill me? What then?"

THE WAY OF CAINE

Caine shook his head. Were his thoughts so transparent? In frustration, he turned away.

“My offer would expire along with me, and you would either end up on the gallows pole, or hunted for the rest of your short life by those who are most certainly your equal.”

“You should go.”

“Perhaps you’re right.”

Caine said nothing, but gripped the bars at his window. He heard the grey man turn to go. Footsteps echoed down the hallway, growing more and more distant. Caine looked from his window, shaking his head.

No. No! He would not be manipulated so easily. Except ...

Glancing down the front gate beneath him, he closed his eyes and bent space around him. In a flash, he was leaning against the keep wall, arms crossed. A moment later, the grey man stepped clear of the main gate. As he spied Caine, he did not seem at all surprised. Rather he smiled thinly.

“It is a pleasure to meet you at last, *Lieutenant Caine*. My name is Bolden Rebal, Scout-General to the king.” He extended a gloved hand, looking Caine in the eyes.

“We have a deal then?”

AR 594 December; Ceryl

It was an overcast morning as Caine walked out along the seawall, just as he had most every day since his arrival to the coastal city of Ceryl. The waves of an early winter ocean battered against the stone breakers, frothy white and bone-chillingly cold. It had come to hold a powerful fascination

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for him in his Journeyman posting, and he often stared at it from the windows and ramparts of the fort that was now his home. That it should occupy him so, should perhaps come as no surprise. He had never seen an ocean prior, after all.

He watched as the whaling ship *Impudent Dog* slipped free of the harbor. Her men aboard sang loudly at their work, and even from here, he could make out the lyrics of their song as they left civilization behind them.

The town garrison loomed up behind him some eight stories high, built alongside the old lighthouse. With a deep breath, he began the long stair climb to the ramparts above. Bulky as his armor was, he had long since grown accustomed to it, and did not begrudge the long stairwell. Three seasons had passed since his meeting with Rebald, and under his mentor, the venerable Lord Walder Brigham, the armor had certainly been put through its paces. Caine counted at least a score of skirmishes in his time with Lord Brigham, nearly all against raiders from the Scharde Islands west of the harbor. Twice, there had been pursuits with Khadoran scout ships, persistent to test the resolve of Cygnar's coastal vigilance.

What there had not been was any word from the Scout-General. Since their deal, he'd been asked to keep a journal of the ships at harbor, and no more. A courier for Rebald had come to fetch it each month, but there was never more to it. He began to think the bargain had been forgotten entirely.

Caine cupped his hands to his breath for warmth, and looked out beyond the horizon. He wondered where the *Dog* was headed, and for his own part he wondered the same.

Nearing the summit of the old stone stairwell, he was passed by army trenchers coming on shift. At the rampart preceding the top of the tall keep, he heard a familiar and irascible voice boom down.

"Allister! Come here lad!" Despite himself, Caine smiled up at the old man.

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At the mast of the Cygnaran flag more than fifty feet high, Lord Brigham took his morning tea. From gorget to sabaton, his elaborate armor gleamed, nearly to distraction, and his long black fur-lined cloak flapped in the wind. Creased as leather he was, white-haired, as ancient as his armor, and equally well preserved. A hero many times over in days past, now surely on his last tour of duty. A smile was never far from his lips, and indeed, he grinned wide as Caine crested the last step.

"Which ship is that?" Lord Brigham asked, as he pulled his neatly trimmed white beard and watched.

"Impudent Dog, sir."

"Ah, yes. Whaling out beyond the Scharde the next six months, I'd hazard to guess ..." the old man's attention drifted out over the water. Caine stepped to the edge of the stone railing, and looked to the fishermen below as they emptied their catch onto the docks.

"Allister, you've been a good student." The old man mused, his attention sharply returned. Caine looked up from the docks, surprised, and turned to face his mentor.

"Before you arrived, I had been warned you would be difficult. Your time here has certainly not been without incident, has it?" Brigham asked.

Caine nodded, fighting the urge to smirk as Brigham continued. "Yet during this time, I have also witnessed your blossoming talent to wage war. With but a pair of pistols, you have grown formidable. In you, I may well have taught my finest pupil."

The elder warcaster put his tea to his lips, pensive.

"But there is another part to this. If I were to be blunt, well, there's a darkness that gnaws at you. I've seen it in others, friends lost over the years. Believe me when I say that you will make your peace with it, or it will consume you. This would be a tragedy indeed, for there is more to you, son, than you let the world see."

Caine unaccountably felt his cheeks flush. He looked away, embarrassed. "Sir? Why are you telling me such things?"

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“Because I won’t be able to tomorrow.” The old man laughed, sipping his tea.

Caine’s eyes widened in concern. “Are you alright, sir?”

“Yes, Allister. You however, are not. You’re leaving in fact. I put the paperwork in a week ago, and it has returned this very morning.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your apprenticeship. It has ended. You are to be re-deployed to the first army in Fellig next week.” The old man chuckled, in response to Caine’s surprise. He looked as though he had forgotten something.

“I wanted you to have something,” Lord Brigham reached into the folds of his cloak, and produced a small, polished brass artifact on the end of a chain. With a kindly clap on the back, he pressed it into Caine’s hand.

“Never forget there is a dignity in this life, Allister. Morality too, though we are often called upon to do terrible things.”

Caine nodded, seeing the old man was retracing his own past as he spoke. “Never forget this, should you wish to honor just what it is Cygnar fights for.”

Caine looked at the artifact, curious. Opening it, he saw a small compass, crafted with uncanny precision. Stunned, he could thank his mentor with no more than a whisper. Lord Brigham nodded.

“It belonged to my father, Allister, and now I give it to you. He told me something the day I enlisted, so long ago. He told me that to follow orders and never your heart will surely drag you to hell, no matter what they may pin to your chest. I never forgot those words, Morrow rest his soul. Only you will know at the end of your days if your life has been a worthy one, Allister. May this compass lead you to the same peace I have found at the end of mine.”

Autumn AR 595; Khadoran border near Fellig

Caine ran. In form fitting armor slim and new under a full length duster, his legs pumped and his lungs heaved.

He was a warcaster now, or so the ranks on his shoulder proclaimed. As a full Lieutenant in the King's army, he now commanded a platoon of soldiers. Armed with the most powerful magic the academy could teach, his own steady aim honed to a deadeye shot he could lend to others, if it served him. He could spur his bullets ahead to find targets far from reach, or likewise to any other he might choose. Like Magnus, he had learned to twist shadows around him as a cloak to keep bullets from finding him. Most of all, the magic he had always known had become more powerful than ever. He could flash further and more than ever before, and his force push had blossomed to a devastating thunder-strike of raw power.

Just the same, Lieutenant Allister Caine the great and powerful warcaster was running for his life.

The bombard shell impacted the damp earth two strides ahead of Caine, casting up dirt and knocking him back with a shockwave of force. He struggled to get back up, his ears ringing. Dazed, he staggered and spit dirt. As his hearing returned, he realized the impact had only been a marking round. The whistling of more shells as they arced overhead brought him to his senses like a smelling salt. With a glance, he spotted the trenches of the left flank as his best choice for cover. Within, he could see the trenchers of a third platoon trading shots across no-man's land.

They were too far away.

Desperately looking for closer cover, he spotted a dip in the ground. He pulled his concentration as tightly as he could. Unsure he would flash away in time, he instinctively raised an arm to shield his face from the incoming shells.

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The world went black around him. He disappeared.

Upon the very ground he had crouched only a second before, hell was unleashed. The fire of more than a dozen bombardars churned the earth, creeping across the left flank. The trenchers manning the line were soon screaming in the chaos of shrapnel and overpressure.

From his cover, Caine shook off the dirt that covered him and looked up over the crest. As the smoke cleared it revealed a surreal vision. The left flank had been devastated, reduced to pockmarked earth. Where once had nestled a full platoon, there was now only scraps of armor and the fading screams of the dying. He was breathless at the sight. Since deploying with his first army, he'd seen his share of border skirmishes with the Khadorans. Not once had he seen them come with such fire in their eyes.

Caine dragged himself to his feet, and ran once more for the flank. He leapt into a crater, looking left and right for any sign of the living.

He was alone.

A whistle blew from across no-man's land. Three long blasts. He had come to know it well. Winter Guard charged after three long blasts. Peering into the thicket across the battlefield, he saw their shadows advance. Company strength. Caine blanched and looked back to the center of the line.

There, the massed cannon fire of Cygnaran Defenders on his side was engaged with whistling mortar volleys of the enemy's Bombardars. Through it all, his side seemed too preoccupied to deal with a collapsed flank. He squinted against the steady flash of pyrotechnics and spotted his own warjacks.

He had been issued a pair of light warjacks designated as Sentinels, but now, as he needed them most, he saw he'd outpaced them to reinforce the flank. They labored on without his mind in theirs, their massive iron shields steadily pelted with fire, but giving more in return with the incessant chatter of their chain-guns. They laid down suppressive fire as the mighty

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Defenders behind them spat successive earth shaking salvos. Caine looked helplessly at the Sentinels. They were too far to summon and he was too far to teleport back to them.

Allister Caine was on his own.

The first wave of the flank assault began. Winter Guard came screaming from the thicket, their silhouettes easy to mark with distinctive greatcoats and wooly ushanka hats.

From a fitted leather holster, Caine withdrew twin shining pistols. Spellstorms, the armory had called them. Two of a kind, made for him and him alone, the exquisitely crafted long-barreled revolvers gleamed with intricate brass lattice and inlaid magic-amplifying runes. The runes on each now glowed white hot at his touch, and he took aim.

The first spat fire, a shimmer of rune-halo at her muzzle, and the nearest enemy in the charge fell back straight as a board, the icon on his ushanka rendered a smoking hole. Now the other roared, with an equal measure of rune-halo and death. Another Khadoran shouted, clutching his chest. The pair spat in rapid succession, tasting blood each time, yet still they came.

Caine was going to fail.

It was like shooting at a tidal wave. There was nothing to be done, even as he felled three more Khadorans, six more surged over the fallen. A withering hail of shots came at Caine, and the power-field from his warcaster armor visibly dimmed with the strain. They were too close, too many. Kneeling, he gasped for air. The arcantrik generator on his back was churning black smoke now to keep his power-field from failing. Both Spellstorms were spent. There was nowhere to fall back. A screaming Khadoran was but two strides away, the point of his axe aimed right at Caine's face.

Caine closed his eyes, resigned. With a single exhale, he let it all go. Fear. Anger. Regret. A second became his whole life. With a final breath, he waited for the weapon's touch.

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It didn't come.

Perplexed, he opened his eyes. The axe was still there, perhaps a stride closer. But there it stayed. Caine looked up. The screaming Khadoran had fallen silent, though his war face remained no less fierce. He was still as a statue. Behind him, some threescore of his comrades were equally still.

Caine saw a world robbed of color around him, only faded gray. The sounds of war, once deafening, had become a dull hiss of white noise. An ethereal glitter drifted languidly in the air, and his Spellstorms faintly hummed. Then it clicked.

That day at the pistol range ...

Caine remembered the moment. His magic, then as now, had brought him here. A place *between* the seconds, perhaps? Caine laughed at the spectacle, his voice echoing in this strange timescape. Incredible it was to find such power even as all hope left him. How long before it would ebb away? He couldn't say. It didn't matter.

He would make the most of it.

He flicked his Spellstorms open, sending spent brass cartridges cascading down. As they fell to earth, their sheen faded into the ubiquitous gray. In a fluid movement, he drew his pistols past speed-loaders set in his belt, and then snapped them shut, loaded. Space buckled around him as he vanished, reappearing some thirty feet over the charge of the Winter Guard.

Caine opened fire.

His twin pistols began to stitch radiant death left to right, a maelstrom of lead. Each shot flared like a starburst from his muzzles, leaving a wake of concentric shockwaves as they went. The figures held bizarrely in pause below him answered with their blood. Slowly, it began to spatter into the air, blossoming abstract patterns.

So much blood ...



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Caine awoke with a start. He sat up and immediately regretted it. He lay back down with a grimace, clutching his head and closing his eyes. With a deep breath, he opened them again, and looked around. He found himself upon a cot in the field hospital. There was a nurse watching him, and he smiled feebly at her. His smile was gone a second later. Next to her stood his commander, warcaster Major Horlis Abernathy, cross-armed and looking more stern than usual in his thick battle-scarred armor.

As Caine met the gaze of his commander, the patrician looking man, some ten years senior only, shook his head.

"I would not believe it, were you not right before me. There really isn't a scratch on you."

"Sir? The flank, I didn't ..."

"You did not what? Kill the entire company? You could hardly be blamed. They fled after you shot nearly two full platoons down." Major Abernathy shook his head, incredulous. "With two pistols."

Caine rubbed a swelling temple. "If you say so, sir. It's a blur to me."

"Aye. The blur was you. You stopped the Khadoran advance cold. I've never seen anything like it."

Caine nodded, his face slowly cracking into a smile. The major's eyes narrowed.

"I would be remiss as your commander if I did not find some fault with your conduct here. Had you not abandoned your warjacks in the first place, they might equally have held the flank under your control. Bah. In the end, I suppose the results speak for themselves. You have saved the day, *Captain Caine*."

The major uncrossed his arms and handed Caine his new rank. Stepping back, he saluted. Caine moved to his feet, to return the salute, though he winced as he stood.

"Nurse, clean him up, then send him on to the officer's mess. I think we've earned a celebration this day."

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Tankards were crashed on either side of Caine as he downed his third whiskey in one pull. Chomping at his half spent stogie, he waved the bartender to send another, as a passing officer clapped him on the back in a congratulatory manner. A piano played a familiar refrain, “The heart of Cygnar,” to which the officers around him were boisterously singing along. Smiles found him wherever he looked, and he had to admit, it was strangely appealing. Never before had he gained such acceptance, felt so welcome. Brandishing his cigar, he wheeled to the captain next to him, glass raised. Perhaps he could get used to this. With a firm clank of the glass, he returned the toast. A captain indeed, he chuckled. Who would have believed it, back home?

“Congratulations, Captain,” an even voice said from over his shoulder. “It was truly a feat you achieved today.” The voice was an unmistakable near whisper. Caine spun around. The smiling face of Bolden Rebald waited for him. “I trust you have not forgotten our arrangement?”

Caine shook his head, his smile fast receding from his face. He put his whiskey down. Rebald, with a drink of his own, took a sip, and tilted his glass to Caine.

“You may as well enjoy the night, *Captain*. We leave at first light.”



PART TWO

Four Days Previous

Spring, AR 596: Northguard Fort

“**S**o what is it to be this time?” Caine smirked over a steaming plate of mutton and potatoes. “Am I to keep a ledger of the trains? Perhaps note the weather?”

Across the table of the private dining car, Rebald was not amused. Behind drawn velvet curtains, the world rushed past with a *clicka clack, clicka clack*.

“I think not,” the scoutmaster replied coolly, cutting his mutton with fork and knife. “There is a plot to overthrow King Leto, Captain. I expect you will put a stop to it.”

Caine coughed, his dinner somehow caught in his throat. Rebald skewered another piece of mutton and placed it delicately into his mouth, his eyes glittering as he watched Caine gasp for air. “A change is always a dangerous thing. For some, it brings prosperity, for others, ruin. Those who did well under Vinter now fear for their future under Leto. That, unfortunately, has led them to make some, shall we say, *foolish* decisions.” Rebald pierced the mutton, and began to cut it forcefully with his knife, cutting away a strip of fat. “Such decisions have compelled us to act.”

“Who exactly are we talking about?” Caine asked, wiping tears from his eyes.

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“The nobles, of course,” Rebald said, setting his fork down. He gestured to the map unfurled between them. “They’re gathering forces, here, here, and here. That we are aware of, at any rate.” Rebald daubed his mouth with a napkin.

Taking a sip of wine, the spymaster watched Caine with curiosity. “We don’t know what they intend to do with these non-partisans, but for the moment they seem content to fear-monger. Presumably it gains them the support of the citizenry. The only thing for certain is they want Leto out.”

Caine shrugged. “I think I could understand that, circumstances such as they are. He’s repealed longstanding trade agreements, appointed new trade delegates. He’s tipped their apple cart.”

Rebald nodded, swirling the wine in his glass. “Yes, if only to scoop out the rotten apples. The issue here is not the discontent his ascension has caused. With enough time, Leto might have begun to earn their trust, one at a time. Thus, he would reduce the sway of any remaining dissidents. The problem is he’s not going to get that time. The nobles have somehow been able to generate significant capital for his ouster. Too much, too soon. As you see on the map, they already have enough to create a credible threat to Leto’s security.” Rebald watched Caine’s reaction, unblinking.

“Right. So they’re getting help,” Caine muttered, rubbing his chin. “I have a feeling this is where I come into your grand scheme.”

“Indeed, Captain.” Rebald looked over the map, his finger coming to rest on the Llael capital of Merywyn. “We have an informant. Kreeel. He has identified our noble’s mysterious benefactor. One Thaddeus Montague, royal treasurer to King Rynnard of Llael. You’ll note Baron Malsham’s estate is just south of the Llael border, and Merywyn itself. This would certainly implicate the Baron as part of the conspiracy, though we must keep up appearances for the moment. Once you’ve deployed to his estate, you will keep an eye on his affairs under the guise of protection. Meanwhile, I want you to infiltrate Merywyn and meet with this informant.”

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"I don't understand. You want me to babysit a baron and then sneak out for a chat with this Kreel?"

"You're going there to *kill*, Caine," Rebald corrected. "While your detachment puts on a show of good faith for our nobles, you will infiltrate Merywyn to cut off the head of the snake. Through Kreel, you will get to this treasurer. Interrogate him. Learn his motives if at all possible, but kill him either way."

"Why me, Rebald? Do you not have sufficient cutthroats at your disposal for such things?" Caine scratched his chin, absently glancing at the map.

"According to Kreel, Montague is well guarded. Yet that is only half of the thing," Rebald sipped his wine. "There are ... complications I believe you are well suited to deal with. Understand this is an awkward time between our nation and Llael. While they are still officially our ally, at present, there is only one thing King Rynnard fears more than licorice root, and that is King Leto."

"I don't understand," Caine shook his head. Rebald looked up from his map, irritated.

"The regime of the most powerful nation in western Immoren is toppled on his doorstep, and you don't see how that might cause Rynnard concern?" Rebald asked quietly, yet Caine simply shook his head.

"That part I get. What do you mean about the bloody licorice?"

Rebald shrugged, "It is common knowledge that Rynnard takes deadly ill at the slightest taste of it." Rebald tapped the map, re-focusing. "Now, as I was getting to, it is *imperative* that you are not caught or identified. A Cygnaran agent discovered assassinating a royal courtier would be nothing less than a disaster. On this point, I believe I have the best man for the job." Rebald, still absorbed by the map, traced a line across the Llael border. "You see, while diplomatic relations appear to continue as normal, Rynnard has steadily increased border patrols. He's even gone so far as to mobilize forces south over the last few months. Just north of the border, he has fortified his

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home, the capital of Merywyn. The city was defensible enough prior, with the Black river serving as moat to the east, and the city walls creating a thick perimeter on all other sides. Recently, he has doubled the garrison there, and the gates are now methodically checking papers for any who approach.”

Caine shrugged, unconcerned, “I could shed my armor and pass as a commoner easy enough.”

“You could. It would be a trivial matter to forge you the papers required. Remember, however, you have no idea what you’re facing. Intelligence indicates your target is well protected. If Kreel is correct on that point, to go in without armor and weapons would deny you a considerable tactical advantage. Is that really what you want?”

Caine frowned. “Ech. I suppose not.”

“Could you not simply flash within the city from the outer walls?”

Caine shook his head. “I’ve not mastered moving to places I can’t see. No telling where I’d end up if I were to try a stunt like that. Halfway in a wall, I expect.

Rebald nodded, swirling the wine within his glass absently.

“Then, in any manner you might contrive, gaining the city will present a challenge. I leave it to you to devise your own strategy, but should you wish to use it, I have requisitioned a prototype warjack that may well prove useful for just such an occasion.”

Rebald tipped his glass, finishing the last of his wine. From across the table, he studied Caine.

“There is one last order of business.” With a deep breath, he pulled a small felt bag from his pocket. He held it a moment, and then tossed it across the table to land before Caine.

“What is this?” Caine sat back, looking at the bag as though a mouse had joined them at the table.

“A hunch. If the treasurer’s story does not add up, then consider it your next assignment. Otherwise, tuck it deep into one of those pockets of yours and forget about it.”

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Without warning, their train could be felt grinding to a halt. The steam whistle blew, heralding a station ahead. Nodding, Rebald stood up.

“Our stop, Captain.”



Three days later, Caine found himself equal parts bored and irritable. Leaving his chair on the top deck of the ship, he stepped outside. As the riverbank passed slowly by, he patted the pockets of his long leather duster for a stogie.

The riverboat steamship *Katie* had been plodding along for hours and they were no closer to where they were headed, as near as he could tell. They had set out from Northguard that clear spring morning, but the longer they ran the Eel River, the drearier the day had become. The Eel River was a winding tributary of Blindwater Lake in the far north of Cygnar, and led gradually into the quagmire of swamp and moss covered woods better known as Bloodsmeath Marsh. Here and there, docks and landings reached out to them from the shore, with stilted houses tucked just beyond the tree-line, but the further they went, the sparser the settlements had become. Striking a match, Caine lit up and took a long pull on his cigar. What kind of people would live in a place like *this*? He shook his head.

By late afternoon, they expected to make the east shore of the lake, at Perry's Landing. There, his first command would begin in earnest. In the decks below, nearly threescore of fighting men, munitions, warjack support and other logistical elements had been loaded. All of them, *his* to command, *his* responsibility. As he rolled the rich smoke of the Hooaga leaf over his tongue, he found the notion ludicrous. How long ago had he made his living on the streets? The intervening years blurred in his mind like the smoke of his cigar as he exhaled, incorporeal and vague.

“Ah, there you are, sir.”

A familiar voice from behind interrupted him as the door to the cabin opened. Caine waved his adjutant over without bothering to turn around.

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The man approached, stretching, with a weary yawn. As the pair looked out over the sluggish Eel, the long gunner lieutenant, a young man with an even younger face grasped the iron rail, taking a deep breath as he did.

“By Morrow it stinks!” he gasped.

“Try growing up next to a paper mill, Gerdie,” Caine replied with a smirk. Caine’s one-time travelling companion grimaced with the notion before speaking again.

“The skipper says we’re set to arrive in the next couple of hours. Everything is in hand for the moment, so I thought I might get a word with you,” Gerdie said.

Caine nodded, taking another pull on his stogie.

“Well, sir, it’s just that, since you swooped into Northguard with that, shall we say, ‘anonymous’ gentleman and commandeered this detachment along with myself, well, you haven’t said much past ‘border patrol.’ So, if you don’t think me too insubordinate, sir ...”

Caine rolled his eyes at the formality, but Gerdie continued. “Why in hell are you taking us into this stinking swamp?”

Why indeed? Caine smiled, measuring his response against the conversation he’d had with the Scout General only a few days prior.

“Mercenaries, Gerdie. Camped out past Perry’s Landing. Causing a local panic.”

Gerdie paced the deck, a frown forming on his face. “Why? What have we to fear from them unless ... are they working for Khador?”

“We don’t know. We’re not even sure *where* they are. The fact they’re out there, and getting bigger by the day is enough to get the nobles flustered. They’ve challenged Leto to act. So here we are.” Caine watched his flummoxed adjutant with narrowed eyes and leaned back against the rail. His cigar down to a nub, he took a final pull then flicked it overboard.

Gerdie nodded. “All right. So our orders say we billet with Baron Malsham, nephew to the Duke of Northforest. What’s the plan? Set up a defensive perimeter at the estate? Patrol the neighboring hamlets? Send

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our scouts out on long-range reconnaissance to see if they can find this 'threat'?"

"Ech, about the size of it, Gerdie. If we're lucky, maybe we figure out just who they're working for too," Caine replied, leaning over the rail.

Gerdie raised an eyebrow. "With respect, sir? We might be a while just finding them in this mess." Gerdie gestured to the vast morass surrounding them.

"True. But I hear Sergeant Reevan is a real old hound. If they're out there, I trust he'll find them." The pair walked along the rail of the boat, nearing the prow.

"What of the rest of the men? Are you really expecting combat here?" Gerdie looked over the prow, worry plain on his face. Ahead, the Eel at last was opening wide into the Blightwater. Clouds ahead made the open water seem grey and cold, and a wind was coming over the lake. Caine looked ahead, nodding. "I wouldn't rule it out."

The pair watched Perry's Landing appear at last out across the open water of Blightwater. Only a tiny smattering of buildings and docks from this far out, it was growing larger by the second. Try as he might to downplay it, the stakes in this, his first command, began to weigh upon him. Gerdie looked on, impassive.



As the last of Caine's troops cleared the boarding ramp, *Katie* blew her whistle. Caine watched the great smokestacks on the steamship puff with impatience while the tread-wheel crane from the dock lifted crates from below decks. Wooden crates emerged one after another, placed gently on the dock. Caine marveled as the crane produced three iron monstrosities from *Katie's* hold. The eyes of his anthropomorphic machines were dimmed, their hearth fires extinguished. Chargers, light and fast, he had been issued a pair, along with the heavy barreled bruiser known as a Defender. Each in turn was carefully placed upon heavy horse-drawn carts for the journey

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ahead. Almost as an afterthought, a singular crate emerged at the end of the crane's hook, conspicuous in size and a lack of identifying stencils. Caine recalled Rebold's mention of a prototype with growing curiosity.

Gerdie was busy staging the troops into formation along the crowded docks, as laborers worked around them. The junior officer's youthful voice was perfectly capable of barking drill orders over the din, and the men lined up by squads. The tread-wheel crane at last backed away from *Katie*, and her thresher began to churn water. She howled a single petulant whistle in farewell. As Caine approached Gerdie, the young adjutant turned and saluted. Stiffing his reluctance to formality, Caine returned the salute before the assembled men.

"All equipment and personnel present and accounted for, sir. We're ready to depart upon your order." Caine took a long look at the ranks of men standing to attention before him and drew a deep breath. He saw long gunners with their precision rifles at the shoulder, then trenchers, bundled within leather long-coats, and alongside them, an assortment of ragged looking scouts. A local approached, leading two mottled grey horses by the reins. Caine took the offered bridle, and stepped up into the saddle.

"Let's get to it, then."



Evening fell as Caine and his procession found the black iron gates of the Malsham family estate. Darkness hung like a blanket across the overcast sky, and a damp mist had crept alongside them the entire way.

The path had led them through a treacherous land. From the edge of Perry's Landing, civilization had vanished into a tangle of moss-draped woods and endless marsh. All around them, the terrain was alive with unfamiliar birdsong and the croak of frogs. They eventually made their way through the great peat bogs of Cear Brynn. Here, the shoulders of the narrow road were lined with peat stacks, some as high as two men. The bogs themselves were alive, as laborers harvested peat from the wet ground

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with spade and shovel. Singularly, they had stopped at their work to gawk at Caine's long procession. They seemed to him a dour lot, though he could hardly blame them. The dampness of this place had set a chill to his bones, and the gates ahead could not have come as a more welcome site. Spurring his horse, he galloped past the ancient black iron entry.

The estate was old, and built on the best land they had seen for leagues. Gone were the stilted wooden longhouses of Perry's Landing, given over to traditional stone and mortar construction. The mansion was elegant even, prefaced by a long, landscaped yard with crushed stone paths and shrubs. Equally, the servants' quarters, stables, and other structures on the estate grounds were opulent by comparison to prior settlements in the region. Gerdie spurred his horse to catch up with Caine, nodding in the direction of the mansion. "Well, it's a lovely home, if you don't mind bullfrogs singing you to sleep at night."

Caine grinned, nodding. Looking ahead, he saw the main entrance of the mansion, with a line of servants gathered to receive them. "Get the men settled in for the night. I'll go meet our host."

Gerdie nodded, and led his horse away.

Caine looked back to see the slow carts roll in ahead of his soldiers. Gerdie was quickly in the middle of things, coordinating with servants to direct one formation after another to their billets. Caine swung a leg over and dismounted, a young servant boy in white came forward to take the reins. Caine patted his mare on the snout before letting her be led away.

"Sir?"

The whisper came from behind him. Caine whirled around. Sergeant Reevan, a graying and slightly built ranger wrapped in a dun cloak, eyed him cautiously, looking every bit a caged animal.

"If it be all the same t'ye, Captain, the lads and I would fancy an early scope of the land, if you take my meanin'."

"Back by mornin'?" Caine sniffed.

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“Most certain. Give ye a fine report of things, we will, for say, a three league circle?”

“I’d like an eye to the border. They say Llael is locked up tight. Give ‘er a look.”

“Most certain, sir.”

At the entrance to the mansion, a lady stepped forth, her long crimson dress displaying an embroidered floral pattern, and framed by a reticella collar and cuffs. Atop her head, long auburn tresses had been dressed with ribbon, and her face had been white powdered such as was fashionable among the elite of Corvis to the south. She was as beautiful a woman as Caine might imagine. As she made her way down the steps to greet him, Caine heard the sergeant chuckle next to him.

“Vexing though it may be t’ye, I’ve prepared my first scouting report, sir. *That one’s taken.*”

Caine coughed, glaring at the man. The sergeant retreated with a wry grin. Caine bowed as the Baroness Sarah Fane Malsham approached, then kissed her offered hand.

“It is my great honor to welcome you into my home, Captain Caine. I apologize that my husband, the Baron, is indisposed for the moment, but we would be greatly pleased if you would take your supper with us?”



Caine picked at his food, trying to make sense of it. It was tepid, bitter, and ... unidentifiable. What rubbish was this? From the other end of the twenty foot long table, the Baron Ivor Malsham II sat flanked by servants, and watched Caine’s struggle with thinly veiled contempt. Midway along the table to his right, the baroness watched with encouragement as he tried the white stringy dish. After a few bites, he swallowed hard and reached for the basket of bread, grabbing several pieces.

“Sweetbread in cardamom-wine sauce is a delicacy that few chefs outside of Llael can properly prepare. Does it not meet your approval?”

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the baron sniffed with narrowed eyes. Caine looked down the length of the table, ill at ease. Bad enough he'd been asked to remove his armor in favor of formal dinner attire. Worse, the baron's servants had seen fit to provide him garments not quite his size.

He knew the look coming at him from down the table. He'd borne it many times before, not least of them from his own father. He clenched his jaw a moment, trying to settle himself. The thought of a quick flash of movement, a drawn pistol, and a bullet in the baron's face brought some peace. Accordingly, he found himself able to produce a genuine smile.

"I'm sure it's fine, Baron," Caine said, reaching for more bread. He tore a strip to chew on slowly. The baron still wore a frown, his eyes on Caine.

"In truth, I found it unpalatable myself, at first," the baroness said with a warm smile.

The baron glowered at her before fixing his attention to his own plate. Caine saw the man's mustache and slight beard was utterly at odds with his rodent-shaped face. Long and twisted with wax, they had a mind of their own as he chewed. They wriggled as though they intended to leap clear of his sneering face.

Caine's eyes wandered to the baroness while reaching for more bread. To his surprise, he found she was already looking at him with eyes of liquid green. After the moment had lingered a second too long, both of them looked back at their food awkwardly.

The Baron studied his plate as though it had offered a portent of some kind. Chewing thoughtfully, he looked up at Caine, and swallowed.

"I'm curious for an explanation of just what you're doing here, Captain. Your arrival does not come without some inconvenience to us."

Caine sipped his wine. "I find that odd, Baron. Was it not you who demanded the king take action? Has he not met your demands?"

The Baron scoffed. "To ask for the safety of your borders and lands is one thing. To have an army descend upon one's household is another thing entirely."

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“Please, Ivor. You will offend our guest,” the baroness interjected.

“Still your tongue and let the men talk!” the Baron hissed. The baroness looked down at her plate and made no reply.

“Rest assured, Baron. King Leto takes your security as priority. This far to the border, Northguard is more than a day’s ride. We’re better to position here, if we’re to find these marauders you make claims of.”

“Do you suggest my claims are false?”

Caine blinked. “I said no such thing. Why would you ask it?”

The baron frowned. With gathered composure, he cleared his throat. “We, of course, will welcome you until your work is finished. However, I am rather inclined to see it done with expedience. The appearances of a nobleman under occupation are ... most unseemly. I would not expect a commoner such as you to understand.”

The baroness blanched, but held her tongue.

“Baron, as tempting as that may sound to both of us, I won’t be going anywhere until the job is done.”



Over the next day, Caine’s detachment was put to work. The trenchers dug and fortified a perimeter around the estate, then ran observation points out along the north and south of the Serinye trail. The rangers led long-range reconnaissance sweeps from the Orgoth marsh down to Cear Brynn, and nearly back to Perry’s Landing.

Caine made a point of having the Baron escorted in his comings and goings. On two separate excursions, the baron made pointless visits to Perry’s Landing. His business quickly concluded both times, Gerdie relayed to Caine that the nobleman had appeared ready to flee the escort. While on the estate, the Baron kept to himself, avoiding Caine and his men whenever possible.

Caine met with Reevan after the first night, and confirmed the border crossing north was well patrolled, but the veteran ranger recommended a

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few points through which one could slip. On a few occasions, Caine and the baroness crossed paths as she spent time touring the estate grounds upon her horse.

For all the activity within the estate, there had been no sign of mercenaries outside. Gerdie's suspicions were gaining support.

On the second night, Caine readied a horse to scout the way to Merywyn for himself. At twilight, he followed the Turpin highway north for a league. As he came within sight of the border, he broke from the trail just as Reeve had advised. He found the sergeants' advice well timed. Pausing in the shade of thick brush, he saw a contingent of Llaese soldiers thunder past, and more ahead on the trail. Seeing such resistance, he decided his horse was best left behind, and tied her in a secluded clearing. He crosscut the woods for a half-hour before rejoining the highway. By his count, he had come a league into Llael. On approach to her capital, he twice found himself diverted back into the brush, as more soldiers tramped along the highway. Caine couldn't shake the feeling that Llael was preparing for something big, and seemed scared, just as Rebal had said. At last within spyglass range of the capital, he stopped to observe.

Merywyn cast colorful lights into the night sky, and its great walls stood proudly over a periphery of old forest. Behind the safety of these high walls, he could see dozens of tall spires stretching into the night sky. The spires were iconic to the city, and impressive in their craftsmanship.

Despite the beauty, the more of it he saw, the more he frowned. The city was inaccessible from the east, bordered by the Black River, and the west side did not look much better. The landside of the city was encircled by a stretch of clearing at least a hundred yards wide, and, of greater concern, lit by gas lamps. He could make out guardsman patrols along the ramparts of the city walls high above. The city gates were double thick, and though some traffic moved, it was clear the guardsmen were monitoring anyone going in or out, checking papers and marking ledgers.

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"That's bloody tight," he spat. He frowned, unable to spot any point of approach that was not in sight of the guardsmen. Replacing his spyglass to his pocket, he turned back for his horse, soon crossing back into Cygnar.

Back at the estate, Caine tied his horse within the stable. He soon made his way down the aisle to find his chief mechanic, Ewan. The grizzled old man was still at work well into the evening. This part of the stable had been converted into a mechanika workshop, with benches of tools and crates of supplies unloaded. Caine's three warjacks stood in line, chains slung over the rafters to keep them balanced while their furnaces were out. Numerous gibbering gobbler assistants were crawling over the fearsome war machines, making adjustments with an assortment of tools. The waist high green-skinned creatures paused at their work and watched as Caine entered.

"Everythin' to your satisfaction, sir?" Ewan gestured at the warjacks. The gobblers, begoggled the same as Ewan, continued to stare at Caine. The effect was paradoxically comical and unnerving at the same time.

"Oh, don't pay them no mind. They've a short attention span. Isn't that right, boys?" Ewan chuckled as the creatures responded with an indignant patois before returning to their work.

"I think it's time," Caine said.

"Oh?"

Caine pointed to the unmarked crate set aside from the rest of the supplies, and then looked back at the mechanik with crossed arms.

"Build it."

Ewan nodded impassively, wiping his hands on a rag. The gobblers however, were pleased. Their faces broke into toothy grins, and the tone of their strange language rose to a shrill pitch. They bounded across the stable floor and swarmed the crate, brandishing crowbars in green clawed hands.

Caine stepped outside, reaching for a cigar within the pockets of his duster. With a sigh, he found his supply had fallen to two. He drew one

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out and passed it under his nose slowly. Striking a flame, he lit it under a lantern post and drew deeply. He looked up at the moon, relaxing a moment in the cool night air.

"That was a beautiful horse I saw you on. What's her name?" The woman's voice came from the shadows. Caine whirled, startled at the shapely figure at the edge of the shadows.

"They ... uh, call her Nessa," Caine said, chomping his cigar at the unexpected company. His eyes widened as the baroness stepped into the lamplight. She was a perfect vision, eschewing her formal day dress in favor of a simple green bodice and white skirt. Her powdered makeup was gone, revealing smooth skin. Her auburn hair spilled about her shoulders. He caught a glimpse of a large welt peeking out from beneath the tresses and winced. Embarrassed at his discovery she flinched, turning away.

"They say if you marry for money, you will earn every cent," she said weakly, looking out upon the moor. With a deep breath she turned back at last. "There is no victim here, Captain. I knew what I was getting into. Do you have another?" she gestured to his stogie.

Caine saw the extent of the bruise now, from neck to collarbone. His face hardened, and he threw his cigar to the ground.

"That son of a bitch ..." he spat, his feet already moving for the mansion. He made three paces before she clutched his arm.

"No! You must not! Please!"

There was terror in her eyes. He pictured her like this before the baron, and rage took him. He pulled his arm free. She stumbled as he did, and fell to her knees.

"Please!" she cried.

Caine stopped in his tracks, and turned on a heel. He saw her on the ground and shook his head. Coming to her side, he put an arm around her and steadied her up. Tears fell upon her cheek and she looked at him in gratitude. The blood in him boiled, but seeing her lips so close and her

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beautiful eyes looking in his, he was overcome with another impulse. He leaned in and kissed her hard on the mouth.

She did not resist.



Caine awoke alone in his chambers. There was an insistent knocking at the door. The light of the morning sun streamed in through the gap in thick velvet drapery, striking him in the eyes as he stirred.

“Gerdie, if that’s you, it’d better be good,” he grumbled.

“I’m ever so sorry to intrude, sir. The Baron insists upon your presence for breakfast. He *insists*, sir!” an anonymous servant pleaded on the other side of the door. Caine looked sheepishly at the empty space that had been left upon the mattress, and the tangle of bedding at his feet. He shook his head.

“Ech. Tell him I’m coming,” Caine sighed.



“How dare you, sir! How dare you!” the Baron shouted, pounding the table for emphasis. His wiry mustache fidgeted upon his face, his expression livid. A servant astride him leaned in to pour juice, but he waved the man back.

“I assure you, it was not my idea, Baron,” Caine took a cup of steaming coffee as it was handed to him, and rubbed a temple. He wasn’t sure he wanted to hear the answer. He avoided looking at the baroness, though for her part she seemed content to daintily pick from a bowl of fruit before her. She looked radiant in a velvet dress of deep green.

“Would you have me believe you are not in charge here?!”

Caine raised an eyebrow, and looked over his coffee.

“I’m not sure I understand ...”

“These unceasing escorts, sir! I am not a prisoner, nor are my actions suspect! Your men dog my every step beyond the gates. They refuse to

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leave me be. Always, they claim they act on your orders. I tell you this now, sir, it will stop!"

Caine set his coffee down, about to deliver his defense when he realized what the baron had said. From her place at the table, the baroness placed a napkin across her lap and smiled sweetly in his direction.

Taking a breath, he began again. "Baron, we are only here to protect you. Until such time as ..."

"It. Will. *Stop*," the baron repeated.

"Is there nothing else here I can offer you?" the baroness said coyly, a strawberry lingering on her lip as she spoke. Caine blinked at her, and then looked over at the baleful glare of her husband. He found himself about to laugh. Alarmed, he stifled it with an improvised coughing fit.

"I ... kaff ... I've no appetite for the moment, ma'am. Perhaps ... kaff ... later." Caine pounded his chest, eyes watering.

"Our kitchen is always open to you, Captain. Please avail yourself, as you wish." She smiled, swallowing her strawberry.

The baron scowled, impatient. "For pity's sake, Sarah! He's a grown man and can avail himself of your pantry whenever he likes! Now, Captain. Your word. I will have it!"

"Regarding?" Caine rasped, trying to regain focus.

"The *escorts*, sir!" the baron boomed.

"I didn't ... oh ... right. There will be no more escorts. You have my word."

The meal was interrupted as Gerdie burst into the dining hall. Nodding to the baron and baroness, Caine's adjutant was breathless in coming to his side.

"Sir, the rangers have returned from evening patrol. They have found a mercenary camp." He whispered in Caine's ear, looking down at the baron's reddened face with a genial smile. Caine nodded, tossing his napkin to his plate.

"I'll take my leave now, Baron. Seems we have a ... *development*."

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He pushed his chair out from the table and stood. As he and his adjutant made for the door, Gerdie glanced back at the fuming nobleman. "Sir, did I hear you right? We're to discontinue Malsham's surveillance?"

Caine smiled cruelly, shaking his head. "No. But we'll be certain to let him think we have."



At the oversized wooden workbench in the carriage house, Caine's sergeants gathered around in a semi-circle, arms crossed and stern faced. Sergeant Reeve, still camouflaged, stepped to the bench, whereupon a large map had been unfurled. Dragging a finger from the barons' estate into the Brillig marsh, he tapped a grid reference.

"The mercs are *there*, sir. Dug deep as a tick, most certain. Passed near that way before and missed them, we did. They're keepin' as low as any group that large can."

"What're we dealing with?" Caine pulled at his chin, staring down at the map. He saw the camp was only a few hours' walk east of the estate, at best, and close enough to the Black River to redeploy quickly should they wish it.

"Not sure the affiliation, but it's mercs all right. A goodly number at that. Say, understrength company. Some heavy 'jack support, I count two, maybe three Mules ready for the line, a couple more on the bench. Riflemen, pikemen, the usual suspects, and well supplied, *most certain*. Didn't get a look at their boss." There was a low murmur among the sergeants as they considered Reeve's report. None had failed to notice they were outnumbered.

"Your orders, sir?" Gerdie looked up from the map, his expression sober.

"I think we should pay them a visit this evening."

The officers stared from across the table.

"Say again, sir?" Gerdie asked.

"Just me and the rangers. The rest of yeh stay back, for now. I don't want a fight. I just want to see what they might give in parley."

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“Isn’t that risky, sir?”

Caine shrugged. “Easy, Gerdie. Yeh’ll find I’ve always an ace up my sleeve.”



In the shadows of the stable, something moved. Something big. It puffed steam and whispered with grating iron. Caine saw the embers of its eyes staring back at him as he entered, and smiled. The elder mechanik, Ewan, stirred at his bench, tired, but doggedly at work on the frame of a metal forearm. Assisted by two of his gobbers, he was ratcheting a manifold into place on the limb. At the sound of Caine’s feet, the mechanik turned. Sliding his goggles to the top of his stubbly head, he revealed heavy bags under his eyes.

“Is it ready, Ewan?” Caine asked, a thumb in the direction of the shadowed hulk.

The mechanik wiped soot from his cheek, and passed the arm to his gobbers. They proceeded to feed ammunition into the gun mounted on the shadowed hulk. Ewan watched them and then turned to Caine with a nod.

“Aye, sir. A rare prize, that one.”

The mechanik called the red-eyed shadow forward, and it replied with a hiss of steam. Into the light of the downcast lamp it took its first step. Then another. The hunch of its metal back swelled head and shoulders above Caine, though its red eyes met him level. It hissed steam from its vents, and stopped gingerly. It grasped an axe in its newly attached arm, while the other was a long-barreled cannon of a design Caine had never seen. The lean contour and sweep of this beast was, for that matter, entirely unfamiliar. In keeping with the covert nature of Caine’s mission, it had been washed over in drab black, and absent from its shoulder plates was the traditional insignia of Cygnar. The sharp beak on its face lent the appearance of a bird of prey, if only it had been given metal wings to match.

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At the base of the single smoke stack at its back, some manner of arcane device had been mounted. In appearance, it was similar to the arc nodes some warjacks were equipped with, those being mechanika derived to augment the sorcery of the controlling warcaster. This device was not quite the same. Caine stared at it, bemused.

“They call it the umbrella,” Ewan said.

Caine cocked his head, glancing at the mechanik.

“Engage it, and you’ll find this hulking thing will nearly vanish. Stick close enough, and the umbrella should shelter you too. A handy ward against unwanted eyes, or so they tell me. Yours will be the first field trial,” the mechanik chuckled, much to Caine’s consternation. “As you may have been appraised, that gun is called a *Longarm*. It’ll put a hole in iron plate three inches thick from as far away as two locomotives end to end.”

Caine whistled in appreciation.

Smiling, Ewan threw down his rag. “I thought you’d like that. Are you ready then?”

Caine nodded, taking a breath. Imprinting a warjack made possible the mental link between warcaster and machine. It was also something of an ordeal. To imprint with a ‘jack was to see through its eyes and to feel its thoughts. Simple as such thoughts might be, given they were only a basic, sorcerous facsimile of consciousness, some warjacks presented a stronger personality than others. It could be overpowering. Caine had come to see it as mounting an unfamiliar horse; you never knew what to expect, and getting bucked was not out of the question.

Ewan approached the metal beast, and tugged it to one knee with the grip of an access handle near its neck. The glowing eyes did not wander from Caine as Ewan pulled, but neither did the machine resist. As he opened the shoulder brace, the mechanic reached in to loosen an interior lock. Within the shielded chamber he had opened, Caine spotted an orb of tempered steel. Known as the cortex, it was the mind of the beast. Within, it awaited him. Caine reached out and placed a hand to it ...

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Dark. Cold. Nothingness. Caine found himself floating in a void. He spun about by will alone, peering this way and that.

There.

A singular point of light. He kicked to steady himself, scrambling to keep the light in sight. Slowly, he pulled himself forward. As he neared the light, he perceived the darkness concentrating itself around him. A convergence of pure will in the non-space began to form, like smoke, silhouetted by the growing light ahead. The form began to take on the aspect of a man. He saw it went so far as to mimic his duster, until at last it was a mirror of his own shadow.

He compelled the shadow to yield the light to him. It did not. He sensed defiance, or perhaps curiosity? Was it testing him? The shadow was so bold, even, to push back. Caine's ethereal form dug in, and fought to move forward. Again the shadow resisted, keeping him from the light. Willpower was his only muscle here, and with all that he had, he heaved. He surged forward, bracing for impact. Instead, the shadow vanished. He crashed upon the light, surprised.

The light was in fact a window floating within the nothingness of this place. He now gazed from it, and saw Ewan. There, standing before the window on a bed of straw, the old man watched him, hands-on-hips, while he himself was just out of sight. The man looked alien here, a strange caricature, skewed and warped. With effort, he swiveled the view of the window, until he was able to see his own body. Beneath the window, his arm reached past the line of sight. He saw his own face twisted with effort. He tried to focus on it ... until ...

Caine blinked. He looked over at the mechanik, eyes wide.

"This one's got some mischief in it," he said, breathless, and withdrew his hand from the cortex chamber. The mechanik nodded, smiling. Setting his goggles back upon his sooty cheeks, Ewan patted the metal beast, and snapped the hatch shut.

"Right. Does it have a name then?"

Caine nodded.

"Ace."

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As the sun slid from a cloudless sky, a cool breeze blew in from the lake. Caine left his jacket open to the chill, as sweat trickled down his forehead. Reevan and his team were moving like shadows ahead, fast as wind through the rough terrain. Ace loped behind him with a gait something like a primate, sometimes hacking brush away with his broad axe. The warjack's smokestack puffed sooty black smoke from time to time, the only sign the beast was working at all to keep up. Caine marveled to see something so big move so uncannily quiet.

Up ahead, Reevan signaled a halt with a hand gesture and turned to watch Caine's progress. He had done so several times, and while he neither complained nor chided, he did meet Caine each time with a leering smirk that said enough. It was time to even things up. Tapping his innate power, space bent around him in mid-stride, and he appeared this time *ahead* of the waiting sergeant. Finishing his stride, he glanced back at Reevan. The ranger sergeant, however, returned his smirk with a frown, and waved him back.

"We're here, sir," Reevan said in a whisper, as Caine scrambled back. He indicated a break in the trees to their right. Caine turned to his new warjack, and willed him to stay back. Ace obliged, slinking into a copse of trees. Once within, he disappeared entirely.

"You and your men, stay put. I want to talk to their leader alone. If they get spooked, I shouldn't have any trouble getting clear, but don't hesitate to give me some cover fire. *That goes for you, too*, he thought to Ace. The metal beast acknowledged by quietly chambering a round in the breach of the Longarm.

Caine peered over Reevan's shoulder, seeing the mercenary camp for the first time. The mercenaries were well disciplined, and intent on remaining hidden. Absent were the campfires, and loud talk amongst men common to an encamped army. These men moved about in silence,

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using shuttered lanterns. They betrayed only the occasional glimpse of light as tent flaps were momentarily opened with the coming and going of their occupants.

Into this hideaway Caine strode, guns holstered. With a breath, he stopped, and closed his eyes. He listened. He could hear the footsteps of the soldiers as they moved to and fro, or talked within their tents. Opening his eyes again, he looked at the pale moonlight upon a row of tents. Stepping carefully to avoid any twigs, he followed the row. There, at the end of the row, another larger tent. Surely, the commander's quarters.

Drawing close, he heard a heated conversation within. A man and a woman argued. He paused, listening.

"... again today he does not come. We must consider ..." the woman's voice sounded tired.

"What? Would you have us leave, Lily?" the man answered, his voice thick with a Caspian twang.

"We are now a week without pay, father. The men are more restless by the hour. If he does not come to us, why *not* go to him?"

"You well know that goes against the terms of the contract ..."

"Father," the woman's voice pleaded. "It is a contract he has *already* breached. Let him renegotiate at ... wait ... is that ...?"

"Let us discuss this later. I sent for Luthor. He approaches, most like."

Caine heard footsteps nearby. He saw shadows moving in the moonlight, a patrol on approach. So *much for that*, he thought. He stepped from the shadows as he heard the last of the soldiers pass him by.

"Hallo there!" he called out.

The men whirled about, fumbling for their rifles. Caine waved them down.

"Easy, now. I just want a word with whoever's in charge."



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“What exactly do you want, Captain?” the young commander asked. They were at the clearing just outside her large tent, its large flaps had been drawn back to cast long shadows. She stood before him in a unique suit of plate and sipped from a tin cup filled with steaming coffee. Her armor had extensive armatures built over it, ending in bizarre claws at the feet. The way she had limped out of the tent, Caine wondered if the armatures might be compensating for missing parts. Whatever the case, he approved of what he *could* see of her. Long blond hair, tied into braids, and piercing blue eyes that regarded him like a hawk. Even the scar that ran chin to scalp had a certain appeal. He wondered what a smile might look like on that face. He saw only weary exasperation now.

“A simple thing, really. I want you to tell me what you’re doing here, Commander Von Baum, was it?” Caine said lightly, a wry smile on his face.

The woman sighed. A haggard but formidable man emerged from the tent, also with a coffee in his hand. He was similarly dressed, though his own armor was not nearly so strange. He made up for it with an enormous long sword strapped to his belt. He stroked a bushy grey mustache and narrowed his eyes at the sight of Caine. The young woman looked back at him with a shrug.

“Did you hear him father?” she asked. The man grunted, looking at Caine.

“I’m Hector,” he extended a firm hand, which Caine shook at once. “We’re under contract, Captain. Sorry to have wasted your time, but we’re not doing anything illegal here,” the old soldier said softly.

“Perhaps not,” Caine replied. “But it is clear you are doing everything in your power to stay hidden. I find that a mite suspicious.”

“Suspicious is not illegal, sir. Our client has stipulated discretion, nothing more,” Lily protested. Behind the tent, Caine heard the sound of metal grating, and the puff of steam being released.

“Perhaps I might take it up with your client, then. Care to point me their way?” Caine asked, still smiling. Lily rolled her eyes at this, but her burly father only chuckled, putting a hand to her shoulder.

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“You know we don’t have to tell you that, lad.” He said, shaking his head in amusement. Caine studied the worn leather of the man’s face. This pair wasn’t going to give him anything, he thought with a sigh. Perhaps a change of tactics was in order.

“Have it your way.”

The clank of heavy jointed limbs was getting closer. Caine saw two sets of glowing red eyes coming toward the light. Caine felt Ace out in the shadows. The warjack tensed, drawing a bead on the advancing machines. Its eagerness to open fire scratched at the back of Caine’s mind, but Caine resisted the urge with an emphatic *No*.

“Let’s get something straight,” Caine growled. “Slink down as low as you like, we know where you are now. We’ll be keeping an eye out. Step out of line, and our next chat will be less ... *friendly*.”

As Caine finished, the hulking shadows of two Mule warjacks limped into the light. Each brandished a spiked mace longer than Caine was tall, while their other arm mounted short-barreled cannons. They flanked their young master, and steam hissed from them like angry bulls. He could feel they were eager to charge. It must have been a great effort for her to keep them at bay.

“Argiv! Hedo! Steady on!” she said with verve, her steely gaze fixed on Caine. “It is unwise to threaten me, Captain. They ... are ... very protective.” The elder mercenary, Hector, coughed, but remained silent.

Caine smiled. From the copse, he peered into Ace’s mind. The light warjack had already lined up a headshot on the nearer of the two mules.

Lily narrowed her eyes, still fighting to keep her warjacks restrained when Hector put a hand to her shoulder. “He’s not alone, dear,” he said, squinting in the still blackness.

“Just remember what I said,” Caine said. With a wave, he turned his back to her and stepped off into the shadows.



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"I admire your sand, sir, most certain. I should very much like to have seen her face when you gave her your back, as you did." Reevan shook his head, a wry grin upon it. The ranger sergeant was a shadow in the pale moonlight. Caine nodded, a half smile in response, and compelled Ace to his side.

"This is where we part ways, Sergeant."

"Sir?"

"Take your boys back. I've an errand to run. We'll see what our new friends are up to tomorrow."

Reevan nodded, pulling his cloak tight against the cool night air. "Good hunting, sir."

Caine and Ace ran.

Through peat fields and along the road headed north, they neared the border. As the evening before, Caine knew well enough to bypass the border gates through the woods. He sidestepped only a single patrol this time. He wondered if Ace had been overcompensation. At length, he neared the same hillock overlooking Merywyn as the evening prior. Slowing their pace, he took a breath. Peering out from the cover of brush, his face grew severe, vexed.

"Bloody hell."

There were ... *hundreds* of them. He stepped back into the brush. Ace watched him with a cocked head, sighing softly with steam. Caine paced a moment, and then looked back upon the wide clearing that formed a belt around the west half of Merywyn. Under the light of torch posts, Llael's corps of army engineers worked at the nearest extent of the belt, only a dozen yards away. They were setting wooden fence posts, and unfurling wire spools. Closer to the city walls, what looked like two full battle companies of Llaelese regulars, along with numerous heavy laborjacks, were moving supplies. Amongst the mill of soldiers, a series of large brown tents were taking shape, poles lifting the heavy canvas from within.

THE WAY OF CAINE

“They’re pitching a bloody field camp!” Caine hissed an oath. Rebal had been right. Looking up at Ace, he regarded the umbrella upon its shoulder with a scowl. “I’d have been better to try this last night. Now I’m supposed to trust that thing against *them*?” The warjack raised its broad axe, and pushed the brush back as it did. It indicated a few hundred yards ahead, nearer to the shore of the Black River. The engineer’s perimeter hadn’t reached that far, and the light of the gas lamps was spotty. Caine nodded at the gesture, pulling his chin. “Ech. I reckon that’s as good as we get, eh?”

Ace shrugged. Caine looked ahead to the base of the city walls where a heap of refuse from the army camp lay in piles. Empty crates, barrels and large canvas wrappings had been gathered and abandoned. Adjacent, a large culvert protruded from the wall, large enough to shelter Ace. Every now and again, a heavily burdened laborjack would limp over to the heap from the main staging area, and add to it, though it was otherwise ignored. Caine looked at his warjack skeptically.

“Well, are we doing this or not?”

Ace lurched forward without hesitation, breaking from the edge of their cover. As it did, Caine watched the umbrella begin to stir. A series of vents along the cover of the device glowed cool white, and a haze like heat distortion began to ripple the air around the warjack. By degrees, Caine watched as it increased, until Ace was no more than a strange anomaly in the space before him. Neither visible nor invisible, it was actually uncomfortable to even *try* to look at. From within the bubble, he could feel his warjack urging him on, impatient. With a groan, he obliged, stepping into the bubble of shimmering distortion. As he did, Caine saw the world around him take on a strange aspect. From this side of the umbrella, the world had somehow become muffled and even a little out of focus.

Slowly, stepping together, they began to walk into the clearing.



THE WAY OF CAINE

Caine saw the refuse heap ahead, only another dozen yards away. His skin crawled, and his breath came in shallow gasps. Though they had threaded the needle thus far, there were still dozens of men moving around him. They had wound a precarious path through the gaps in the light, pausing several times as soldiers passed around them. He cringed each time, but the umbrella had held. Another few yards gained.

Until.

A lone corpsman stepped into sight, walking behind a trash laden laborjack. As the lumbering metal beast unloaded its refuse, Caine saw the man reach for something in his service jacket. The laborjack turned about with a series of clockwork lurches, and stepped back the way it had come. The corpsman did not. Out came a silver flask, and with a sheepish look the way he had come, the man took a long pull.

Caine waited for the corpsman to leave, but he didn't, his eyes roving about until they fixed directly on the space distorted by Ace's umbrella. With another pull from his flask, his face twisted into a mask of bewilderment.

Caine internalized a curse. What now? Pull the man into the umbrella and cut his throat? What other choice did he have? Caine willed Ace forward, ready to strike. For his part, the corpsman stepped a pace closer, mouth agape. Caine drew his service knife and tensed.

The man suddenly looked with horror at his flask and tossed it to the ground. He whirled about and ran back to his crew with a whimper. Caine followed Ace, stepping past the slowly draining flask.

At last, the refuse heap was theirs. Eyeing the culvert, he ushered his warjack within. Ace easily pushed aside rusted bars, and in a moment its bulk was hidden from sight.

"Wait here until I get back. This shouldn't take long."

Caine began to climb.



THE WAY OF CAINE

Caine shimmied from the drainpipe to a tooting stone, and from there reached across to grasp the slit of a murder hole. Safe from the light of the torches below, he was nevertheless not out of danger yet. Another story above, sentries marched along the ramparts. He could hear their chatter and smell the smoke of their pipes. He concentrated, looking to the next murder hole. It was too far to reach, at least by climbing alone. Bending space around him, he pictured his hand gripping it. An instant later, so it was. He braced himself in his new position and looked for the next handhold. An adjacent loop hole was in reach, and he slid slowly across, then grabbed another drainpipe. Shimming a few more feet up, he saw the roof of a parapet just over the heads of the sentries. Yards above, perhaps, but close enough for him. He caught his breath a moment, and gathered his focus before risking another flash forward.

There.

In an instant, he found himself upon the eaves of the parapet. He paused to catch his breath, watching the sentries below like a spider from its web. Sure that they had not seen his passing, he crawled the rest of the way to the summit of the parapet. The view of the city from this height was spectacular. He peered over the rooftops below, recalling his directions from Rebal. There was a little pub down the south side, not far from here. He marked a path, and started slinking forward.

“Do y’see that!” a sentry shouted, somewhere below him. Caine spun around, clutching at a weather vane. He looked at the guardsman, expecting their eyes would meet. Instead, it was to the south woods the man pointed. Other sentries were gathering to his call. Caine followed their gaze out over the dark of the wilds. He saw the rolling hills, woods, even the swamps of Cygnar to the south. He did not, however, see what the fuss was over.

He was about to turn back to the city when a flash of pyrotechnics lit the night sky in the distant south. Then another, and another. There was no mistaking cannon fire, even from this distance. It was a battle. Squinting to spot where they were coming from, a sick feeling hit him in the pit of his stomach.

THE WAY OF CAINE

“Bollocks. I’ve got to go back,” he whispered.

With a groan, he let go the weather vane, and flashed down. The sentries heard only a faint *whoosh* at his passing. As he appeared on a drainpipe above the trash heap, he let himself fall, aiming for some discarded canvas wrappings. He grunted on impact, and came up sputtering. Ace poked his head from within the culvert, curious. Caine was already on his feet, and pumping his legs as fast as they would go across the belt. He could feel its thoughts probing his own as he ran.

Umbrella? it asked.

“There’s no time! RUN!” He thought back, running past some bewildered corpsmen.

“Hey! You can’t ...” one of them shouted. In the next instant, the man was nearly trampled as Ace bounded past, the earth shaking with its heavy footfalls. Around the camp, the alarm went up. Llaelese regulars came running, weapons at the ready. Too late. The odd couple of Caine and Ace had dashed, flashed and leapt their way clear of the belt before a single shot could be fired, or anyone could figure what had happened.



Caine leapt over brush and puddle alike, running faster than he’d ever been pushed at the academy. Sweat poured down his face, and here and there, he flashed forward where the marsh would have stuck him in. He vanished mid-stride, appearing yards ahead on a tilted tree trunk. He ran up the ramp it created, higher and higher. At the end, some twenty feet in the air, he leapt clear of a wide pond below. He struck the soft ground on his feet and kept running without breaking stride. Ace was born for this. It easily kept pace alongside, through puddle or brush.

They were nearly there.

He could hear the strange mortar fire of the enemy, and see it just over the trees. He had to keep going. It may have already been too late, but he had to try.

THE WAY OF CAINE

When Caine at last broke into the clearing, he found the blank faces of a half dozen weapon crews manning both mortar and field gun batteries. He had crashed into the back end of a mercenary line, and his surprise was mirrored on the faces of the hardened men before him. For a moment, they were speechless, their eyes looking up at the shadowy hulk in his wake. One by one, they began to fumble for their sidearms, shouting as they did.

Caine looked at Ace with a feral grin. He ran forward, his Spellstorms drawn and spitting fire. To the left and right of his approach, men fell, their weapons unfired.

Ace advanced, firing as it went. The overpowered Longarm pulped a mercenary as he tried to duck behind his mortar. The man crumpled without a sound, oozing blood into the wet ground.

Only a single shot resisted their charge. A trooper aimed and fired at Caine, a second too late. Caine had already vanished in smoke, to reappear behind the stunned man. Caine executed him from behind with a single blast to the base of his skull.

Looking around, he heard battle raging beyond the thicket, into the baron's estate. He looked at Ace, shaking his head.

"Just what do you suppose this is all about?" Ace offered no reply, watching his master in silence.

"That makes two of us, then." Caine shook his head and reloaded his Spellstorms, while compelling Ace to scuttle the abandoned guns. The agile warjack obliged, bringing his broad axe down in three fluid strokes. As he did, Caine saw company coming.

"Why have you men stopped firing? We are on the verge of assaulting their position!" The shout of a woman sounded through the woods. It was her voice. With it came red eyes in the tree line, and the smell of smoke in the air. Trees cracked and snapped as they came, and Caine compelled Ace back to cover. Like a shadow, his jack disappeared.

"What have you done? What have you done?" A woman's voice shouted from the other side of the thicket. Lily Von Baum regarded the carnage

THE WAY OF CAINE

with shock, brandishing a cruel looking grenade launcher. Her wide eyes narrowed as she spotted him. The claws of her platemail snapped down, digging into the earth. So braced, and leveled her grenade launcher his way. Caine groaned.

Thump thump thump!

Shells whistled in the sky, and burst spectacularly overhead. Reflexively, Caine flashed away, narrowly avoiding the barrage. Her claws unfolding back up, she limped toward him, bathed in a halo of light. Her launcher cracked open, and she slid more shells home, before snapping the weapon shut again.

“What a waste of blood! We came to talk to the baron, only to find your men waiting in ambush!” she shouted, scanning the woods around her.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about!” Caine shouted from cover.

“Liar!”

Caine dashed across the thicket, from one tree to another. As he did, he lined Lily up with both Spellstorms and snapped off a pair of shots. Deadeye shots each, he focused his magic to make them count. The muzzle flash of his Spellstorms gleamed with rune-halo, and their shots spit forth to strike her square in the face.

She didn’t flinch.

The nimbus of light around her dimmed, but deflected the shots away. Her eyes flashed as though charged by the attack and she gestured to Caine’s tree with her weapon. Like a locomotive, her towering Mule warjack, Argiv, began to speed forward. A churning, earthshaking charge, Caine leapt out from his tree and ran headlong to meet it. The two raced toward one another. At the last second, Caine leapt up, his foot catching the head of the beast like a stepping stone. Into the air he vaulted, a wide arc. His guns trained, they spat once more at Lily.

From out of the thicket, Ace answered Argiv’s missed charge. A single shot blasted from his Longarm, and the mighty Mule’s head and the hull behind it erupted in scything metal shards. The beast stumbled, but did not fall. For her part, Lily reacted to the loss of her beast’s cortex with a shrill cry.

THE WAY OF CAINE

"If you're so innocent, lay down your weapons! We can end this now!" Caine said from the cover of a new tree.

Whump Whump Whump!

Three shots whistled down. Caine was a heart beat too late this time. The shells detonated overhead in a spectacular airburst, and he reeled with the concussive force and overpressure. His armor's power-field dimmed, and he staggered back, firing blind as he went. Crouching by a stump, he tried to shake off the fireworks still bursting in his eyes. She saw her opening. Claws retracted, she stepped forward while reloading with practiced movements. She marched on him now, fearless. She was soon mere yards away.

"I think we're well past that, Captain." Her voice trembled with building rage. "My family has never had cause to trust your flag, and you've reminded me of that today. More to the point, I've lost assets and time! I'm not leaving until that welching baron pays us what he owes, adjusted for this fiasco! Are you satisfied to know he is our client? At what cost do you have your answer?"

Headless Argiv stumbled on still, before tripping into the swamp. His fire doused, he stirred no more. Hedo, however, was far from done. The second Mule stamped in after the reclusive Ace. Ace fired again as Hedo came on, blasting the Mule's mace into shards a second before it was brought down over his head. Yet Hedo was undeterred. He dropped the shattered weapon, and lunged at Ace in a lopsided melee. With contempt, Hedo reached forward with a great iron fist, and picked Ace up by the Longarm. Ace flailed at the larger warjack with its axe, but Hedo shrugged the blows off and began to drag the lighter jack from the thicket. The Longarm was soon bent in half in the futile tug of war. With a great heave, Hedo tossed the smaller machine out into the clearing. Ace landed badly, rolling head over heels. Mighty Hedo strode after its fallen foe, its own cannon blasting Ace's mangled Longarm to bits. He trampled over Ace, without breaking stride. The Mule's attention shifted to Caine.



THE WAY OF CAINE

Wincing at the loss of Ace's ordnance, Caine staggered to his feet. His head was clearing from Lily's barrage, and she stared after her beast as it came to flank him. *She's focused her all on that Mule*, he thought. Ducking back from his stump, he made for a deadfall and leveled a fusillade of shots in her direction. Her shield seemed less formidable this time and dimmed with the attack, but didn't break.

"By Morrow, she's a hard nut to crack!" Caine growled, still moving, and headed for his next point of cover. The Mule Hedo had not lost him.

Hedo came after him in a rush, and was gaining fast. At the last second, Caine spun in place, to meet the beast, and drew every ounce of his focus into a single surge. A thunder-strike of incandescent force erupted from him, and lashed into the charging beast. Hedo was slammed straight back, its momentum completely blunted. Bowled over, Hedo slid along the ground, while blue mist dissipated from his armor.

Caine knew the attack would cost him. He'd taken his eye off her, for only an instant, perhaps, but it was enough. He knew she was still close. He lamely turned back to face her, raising a Spellstorm in her direction, only to find she had closed within arm's reach. He never even saw the butt of her weapon as it came round in a wide swing.

It connected with his jaw, sending him to the ground like a sack of bricks.

Caine's world was a blur as his power-field ruptured. Gasping, he looked up at a hazy figure silhouetted in moonlight. With her free hand, she drew her pistol and leveled it at his face.

Wiping blood from his lip, he looked up dazed, and managed a weak smile. Even as he did, he reached across the clearing for Ace. *Could it get to him in time?* Though his own eyes were failing him, in Ace the world remained clear. He watched Lily standing over his body. Her big warjack was in the way, moving to regain its feet. With a heave, battered Ace was up and moving. She did not seem to notice it had gained two strides toward her, so complete was her focus on him.

THE WAY OF CAINE

“This was your doing. I want you know that,” she said, her own breathing labored.

“Can’t win them all, darlin’,” he replied with a cough.

To Ace, he gave it all. Everything left in him went into the wounded beast, and he flopped back in the muck. His warjack had turned a few strides into a run, and now the axe was raised high. With uncanny grace, the light warjack bounded up and over the recovering Heddo. Heddo swatted after him, too late. High into the air, the warjack leapt and came down upon Lily, its broad axe arcing down with brutal force. With an audible *pop*, her powerfield burst, and she fell back with a scream.

Overcome with the exertion, Caine blacked out.



A moment or perhaps an hour passed, Caine could not say. Yet there were now strong hands pulling him up, and he reckoned it had all been for nothing. He had lost, and the mercs would surely end him.

A blurry face leaned in, slapping him.

“Are you all right, sir?” Caine realized he was surrounded by Gerdie and a group of battle weary trenchers.

“Did we ... win?” he coughed, sitting up.

Gerdie looked gravely serious, but nodded. “Well, they’ve been driven off, sir. I thought they had us dead to rights. We were badly pinned down by their artillery. They seemed ready to run over us back there, but then ... the guns just stopped. They couldn’t advance without them. I see now we have you to thank for that.”

“How many dead, Gerdie?”

“We’ve taken our share, sir,” Gerdie took a sober breath. “Sergeant Holly is going squad to squad for a final count.”

Caine laid back down, sick to his stomach with such grim news. He sniffed the air. There was an *awful* lot of smoke, and it occurred to him there was a reddish glow coming through the woods.

THE WAY OF CAINE

“Is something burning?” he rasped, rubbing a temple.

“That’s the other thing, sir.”

Caine sat up immediately. Through the tree line of the clearing, a fire raged against the night sky. It was the Malsham mansion. Just within the iron gates, a figure could be seen wandering erratically. He was screaming at anyone who would listen. His silhouette before the fire was unmistakable. It was the baron himself and, even from here, they could hear him.

“Where is he!?” he screamed. “Where is your fool of a Captain?”



PART THREE

Yesterday

Spring, AR 596: Bloodsbane Province

As he walked arm in arm with a pair of trenchers, Caine felt as though he'd been trampled by a warhorse. He was streaked with blood and dirt, and his jaw tingled like seltzer water. Limping alongside his master, Ace appeared to have fared worse. The warjack was battered and dented, the place where his left arm had been now a tangle of cable and bent rods. As they limped past the detritus and bodies on either side of the road, Caine shook his head, numbly. He swore under his breath as he was brought within the front gates of the Malsham estate.

The grounds were a disaster of collateral damage from the battle during the night. Across the yard, Caine could see the baron's burning mansion was well past saving. Dawn broke from the east, revealing trenchers and riflemen alike scrambling to contain the inferno, or help those who had been evacuated.

As Caine approached, the baron caught sight of him and moved to intercept. Sergeant Holly intervened, putting his large frame between his beleaguered commander and the deranged Baron.

"Easy then!" the Trencher sergeant shouted, putting a calloused hand up. The baron was incensed, failing to push past the brawny sergeant.

"You will answer for this! You will answer for this disaster you have caused!" the baron screamed, leaning around Holly. Caine met his gaze unflinching.

THE WAY OF CAINE

"Where is she?" Caine rasped.

"What are you talking about?" the baron snarled.

"The baroness, you idiot! Is she all right?"

"I don't ... do not ... Do not change the subject!" the baron stammered, still flailing to get past Sergeant Holly.

"Sir ... she's here ... We got everyone out safe!" Gerdie shouted from across the yard. He was conferring with the baron's servants, who had gathered by the stables well back of the blazing mansion. Among them, Caine saw the baroness wrapped in a blanket. She looked tired and disheveled, but otherwise no worse for wear. Gerdie left the group, returning to Caine's side.

As he approached Caine noticed his adjutant's cheek had been badly torn and he whistled.

"Morrow sake, Gerdie, ... yeh got clipped."

Gerdie nodded grimly, reaching up to touch the wound lightly.

"It's not so bad, sir."

"What happened here, man?" Caine gasped, entranced by the fire. The baron was still shouting an oath over the shoulders of Holly. He heard Caine's question and waved a fist.

"Your men did this! They started this fight!"

Caine looked at Gerdie, trying to focus his eyes. "Wait. What? We let the mercs be. What were they doing here in the first place?"

Gerdie nodded. "Malsham is half right, sir. They came sometime after you left, said they wanted to talk to the baron. They were ... very *surprised* to find us here."

Caine grimaced.

"There was something of a standoff. Then, Private Lehr happened. His weapon misfired, killing one of theirs. They did not handle it well. In fact, things were out of hand from that point ..." Gerdie coughed, unable to look at Caine. For his part, Caine could only groan.

"They destroyed my home!" the baron screamed. Caine stepped behind Sergeant Holly, and waved him clear. Without missing a beat, Caine

THE WAY OF CAINE

grabbed the wild-eyed Baron by the collar of his stained shirt, pulling him in close. Their eyes were only inches apart.

"We both know why they were here, now don't we? I'd watch my mouth if I were you." Caine's voice was a low growl, filled with menace.

The baron blinked, his face flushed. Gone was the indignant rage, and his mouth clamped shut. He grew sullen, eyes darting left and right. Caine could practically see the gears turning in the noble's head.

"That's right Baron, what now?" Caine shoved him away in disgust.

The baron stumbled to the muddy ground, but quickly regained his feet with a sneer.

"You have no idea what you're talking about and you don't have any evidence either, you low born piece of shit," he spat. He looked around appraisingly at his audience, before focusing on Caine.

"What we *do* have here is a failure of command!" He raised his voice, making a scene of the exchange. Sure enough, his oratory was drawing a crowd.

"Where were you last night, Captain?" he taunted, circling with an accusatory finger. "You certainly weren't *here*. 'Charged with my protection, were you?' Last night a company of mercenaries stormed this place and burned my house to the ground, while you were out wandering the woods! Your men were outmatched, thanks to your desertion!"

Caine glared at the baron, his temper raising.

"That is the word for it, am I wrong? Is it not dereliction of du ..."

The baron fell on his ass, clutching a broken nose.

With a muffled cry of pain, blood flowed freely from between his fingers. Caine shook his hand, bare knuckles raw from the punch. Around him, the crowd of soldiers and the baron's servants seemed frozen by the sudden turn.

Caine loomed over the baron, ready to strike again. The baron withered beneath him, shaking, but it was the faces of his men and the baroness watching, that stayed his hand. With a breath, he stepped back, waving off the baron with a grunt of disgust, before stamping off toward the stables.

THE WAY OF CAINE



Caine took a long drag on the bottle, then pulled it away as whiskey burned down his throat. Somehow one drink and a moment to gather his wits had become seven and his wits unraveling altogether. There was nothing for this pain, was the thing. Fifteen bloody men. Dead. It was all on him. Had their deaths even meant anything? He'd barely made the wall at Merywyn, let alone the mission within. He took another swig. Maybe this one would make him forget. It was worth a try.

As the whiskey burned his throat, he felt a sharp pain jab at the back of his jaw. It still ached where the merc had hit him, and he jammed a finger in to probe his teeth. Spittle and whiskey dripped from his chin as he plucked a loose molar and tossed it into the far corner of the straw laden stall. Trying to stand, he was only able to lean against the wall, legs bowed beneath him. The world was spinning and he cursed out loud. The bottle was nearly spent.

"So is this what you were doing last night? Is this why fifteen good men died?" Gerdie stood at the end of the stall, disgust plain on his face.

Caine looked up, bleary eyed.

"I thought there was more to you. I really did."

"Yeh've no idea what yer talkin' about."

"Then correct me, sir! I see nothing but a common drunk." Even through the haze of the alcohol, Caine felt the sting of his adjutant's assessment. He forced himself to stand, without the wall for assistance. It was a struggle, but he kept balance.

"What do you want, Gerdie?"

"I came to tell you Sergeant Reevan and his men have followed the mercs to the Black River. They sent word back the mercs are making ready to leave by boat. If we leave now, perhaps we might just catch some of them. That is, assuming you'd like a shot at some evidence of the Barons' treachery. If not, please, don't let me bother you."

THE WAY OF CAINE

Caine growled, and shook himself until his vision was straight.
“Oh, bollocks. Let’s go.”



“They should be just ahead!” Gerdie shouted over the tumult of hooves. Moss and tree alike were a blur as they rushed down the muddy road. As the whiskey subsided, his head pounded in time with the hooves of his horse. The day around him was no less miserable. It was going to rain. That much was certain. Cold and grey, the trail took them along the north edge of the Brillig marsh.

Ahead, the trees opened wide to the Black River. Under grey morning skies, more than a dozen narrow dories and barges crossed the waterway. On the west bank, some few had already landed, and the mercenaries had disembarked to continue along the highway. Caine’s mare whinnied with the pace, and he turned from her to the shore with a lurch. In their haste, the mercenaries had left behind several dories. Reevan and his scouts were picking through them, carbines at the ready. As Caine and Gerdie dismounted, he noted dourly Reevan had taken no captives.

He looked back to the water, and saw one of the last boats to leave contained the elder mercenary, Hector, who was looking right at him. Cradled in his arms, the grizzled man held his wounded daughter. A more baleful glare, Caine could not imagine. The old man’s eyes never once left him as their boat neared the west bank.

Caine shook his head with disgust. He well knew what awaited him back at the estate. His mission was coming apart, cracking at the seams. How could it be saved now?

His thoughts jumbled and his gaze drifted over the boats left ashore.

“The ferryman isn’t running today, but there might still be time to requisition boats from Perry’s Landing to track them?” Gerdie’s tone was less hostile now, but remained guarded. His scarred face was weary. He seemed to have aged a decade this morning over the last.

THE WAY OF CAINE

"No, I don't ..." Caine muttered, turning back to the river.

"So are you ready to talk about last night?" Gerdie interrupted.

Caine turned to his stern-faced adjutant. He opened his mouth to reply, but Gerdie cut him off. "Let's be clear about something. You obviously have another agenda here, for which you've been making excursions since we've arrived. If it's over my pay grade, that's fine, but between you and me, I'd prefer if you didn't think of me as stupid." Gerdie stared at him unflinching. "We lost men last night, sir, and I'd like to believe it was for a good reason."

Caine couldn't help but respect Gerdie for having the stones to speak his mind. He met Gerdie's glare evenly.

"This thing ... aye, it's over yer pay grade."

Gerdie nodded, unperturbed. "Is it done?"

"I'm afraid not. I made a mess of things, last night, when I saw ... well, what was afoot here. Yer right. I shouldn't have left you. I had no idea ... those bastards ... would ... do as they did." Caine waved to the procession of mercenaries out on the water. "Just the same, this is only the start of it if I can't see this thing done."

Gerdie nodded, the hostility gone from his face now. "How can I help?"

Caine pulled his chin. "Well for starters, I need yeh to go back. Keep an eye on our friend the baron. Keep him there. No matter what he threatens ..."

"Keeping a nobleman under arrest without any real evidence? He'll have you court martialed for certain!"

Caine nodded. "There's nothing for it. Doesn't matter now, anyways." Caine said absently, his thoughts racing ahead to Merywyn. He recalled the camp around the city, and the spectacle he'd made of himself. He kicked the wooden long boat at his feet appraisingly. "Ech, I doubt I can go back the way I came, but maybe I can come at this from another angle."

Gerdie squinted at the boat. "Anything else you need?"

Caine nodded, reaching into a pocket.

THE WAY OF CAINE

“A cigar. My warjack fixed, fast as can be.” His hands came up empty, and he frowned.

“But mostly, that cigar.”



The rain had fallen throughout the day, and the damp began to wear at Caine’s soul. As he returned to the shore of the Black River at late afternoon, it appeared the rain had finally run its course. The Brillig Marsh to the south of the highway came alive with the song of its inhabitants. Frogs croaked happily in such volume as to nearly drown out all thought.

The boats remained where they had been left, and Caine approached on foot. Ace went ahead, the dun colored warjack setting down its axe to overturn the nearest boat, and then drag it to the water’s edge. Caine followed slowly after the lithe warjack. Ewan had replaced the Longarm and patched Ace where he could. The mechanik seemed to have no end of spare parts, no matter how rare. To Caine’s eye, Ewan’s repairs looked first rate. Ewan had nevertheless grumbled he needed more time to properly restore the wounded beast, arguing Ace wasn’t ready, but Caine had only waved him off.

Time was running out.

Ace sensed Caine’s thoughts and looked back, steadying the boat in the water. Caine looked into the fire of its eyes.

“Ech. It’s now or never.”

Ace sighed softly, the creak of groaning iron.



The dory drifted slowly down river leaving the afternoon behind. Caine kept the boat near the river banks, guiding it with a long wooden pole, while Ace burned a low steam and kept mostly covered with an old tarpaulin. He passed some ships along the way, but none that found

THE WAY OF CAINE

him particularly remarkable. After all, cloaked and hooded as he was, he appeared no more than the common folk that made their living along the river each day.

As he approached the border, a station could be seen along the east riverbank. He could scarcely believe his luck. Compared to the difficulties of the evening prior, this tiny bunker and docks had but a small garrison. Engaging Ace's umbrella once more, he and his metal companion became no more than a smudge on the water. Above, the overcast skies gradually grew darker and darker.

Caine carefully drove his pole into the murky water, working quietly against the gentle current. Their passing was as silent as it was invisible. Caine could hear the Llael border guards on the docks laughing at some crude joke as they passed around a bottle of spirits and smoked cigars. So still was the air as he drifted by, he could smell the Hooaga leaf they smoked.

Something else too, perhaps. Caine wrinkled his nose, picking up the scent of something acrid in the air, and getting stronger by the second.

Even so, there was nothing for it and the station was soon distant behind them. No longer needed, Ace released the umbrella and they were on their way. Merywyn was not far ahead now, perhaps only another bend or two from sight. Finally, he would get to business. He looked out over the water, seeing no traffic ahead.

"Too easy! I reckon I might have left you back tonight, for all the trouble this has been."

Ace turned back, his smoldering eyes somehow less optimistic. Caine felt the warjack's thought's reach out to him.

Caution.

Indeed, the lights of Merywyn would not be so easily skirted as the border station. They could be seen reflecting from the clouded sky well in advance of the city itself. When their small boat rounded the last bend, bringing the capital into sight, it was no less imposing than on previous

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visits. Caine was amazed at how bright a place it was. There on the southern perimeter, the camp he had run afoul of had been completed. He gave it but a passing glance, instead focusing on what lay ahead.

Giant throatcutter chains were directly ahead, only a few feet above the water and each link the size of a barrel.

Merchants doing business along the Black River were subjected here to tolls paid directly to the king's coffers. The chains had been strung across the south end of the river, and then again in the north. Their design ensured no merchant ship could pass without ripping through the hull first. They were suspended at numerous foundations built on the water and some had watch stations to monitor traffic. Caine's dory was just low enough in profile to slip underneath. As they passed near a watch station, Caine engaged Ace's cloak once again.

Merywyn's harbor beckoned.

The usually busy harbor was still and quiet for the night, and they made straight for it. The harbor was cut into the great city walls and within it many dark ships were moored. Pulling out his spyglass, Caine took stock of the place. As they passed within the high walls on either side, Caine could see just what a fortress Merywyn was from the river. The high walls that loomed down on him were solid enough, and complete with manned ramparts and gun batteries easily capable of stopping any ship. Yet just beyond the fearsome walls, the intricate peaks and spires he had glimpsed only the night before peeked.

They only needed to clear the harbor, and they were in. A large, sheltered dock drew closer, crowded with barrels and supplies. It was there Caine needed to go. He spotted a nook where their boat could easily hide, adjacent to that, some storage sheds large enough for a warjack.

Yes, that should do it.

So why did he feel as though something was wrong? As they were in the center of the harbor, Caine smelled that peculiar burning scent from downriver again. He looked around with a growing sense of unease. It was

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not the boat, nor the tarpaulin Ace had discarded. It was not until the world flickered back to its normal hues that he realized where the smell had been coming from.

It was the umbrella itself.

An acrid white smoke was coming from the arcane device. The stink of it burned in his throat, and Caine's eyes widened in alarm. Here, in the very center of the harbor, the umbrella had failed. There was no time to wonder at what had happened. The sudden appearance of his boat, and with it a rogue war machine, in plain sight of Llael sentries carried immediate consequences.

The alarms rang out, clanging bells on all sides. The creak of cannon and mortar, traversed in their carriages could be heard only moments later. Angry shouts echoed across the water, and sailors along the docks stopped what they were doing to regard the sudden spectacle.

No! Not this close!

Caine stove his pole down, again, and again to advance. There was a row of docked boats only a hundred yards ahead, and beyond the entrance to the sewers.

The first mortar was sent skyward with a flash of thunder that lit the harbor like fireworks. A moment later it came screaming down to strike the water just off Caine's starboard side. As it exploded in the murky depths, water splashed over him, and the wake buffeted his small boat.

Still he pushed on, frantic.

The second mortar struck a moment later, screaming into the water just to his port side, closer by a yard. It was a losing race and he knew it. There were too many yards left and he was completely exposed. Something had to give. With desperation, he pushed into Ace's head. He drew the warjacks attention up to the ramparts, and there found the nearest gun in the battery. It was a longshot. Well beyond even the Longarm's considerable reach.

If only he could just help it on its way ...

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At Caine's compulsion, Ace fired the Longarm with an echoing clap of thunder. An armor piercing round screamed up to the ramparts above. Just as he had all that time ago as a gun mage, Caine tried to exert his will on the shell as it sped forth. He strained to push it further, further, further, far enough to meet the gun now lining him up for a third shot. It arced toward the great iron gun zeroing in on his position ...

... and fell short.

Even for Caine, it was well out of range. In answer, another mortar in the battery erupted, sending more whistling death his way. Then another. In the water, the shells were pelting closer, and the tiny ship was rocking in their wake.

Caine was resolved. He had to try again. He looked up with Ace's eyes one more time, and raised the Longarm.

Caine was floating weightless in inky blackness.

He tumbled back, head over heels, tossed from Ace's window on the world. It fell from sight, until he gained control and spun himself back to face it.

Just what was going on here?

Was he losing his bond with the warjack? He surged forward, to regain the window. There was no time for this! The specter that was the very being of Ace appeared swiftly before him. The shadow that had become like Caine's very own would not let him pass. It blocked him, just as it had done before. This time, however, the shadow was not playing. Caine fought to push through, but it met him, will for will. Something back in reality was happening. He couldn't keep this fight up, he had to ...

Caine was dumped from the rebellious warjack's head, and found himself caught in an iron grip. Ace had him by the scruff of his collar, and he wheezed for breath. What was going on? Was Ace so badly damaged from the night before? With the merest flick of its wrist, Ace hurled Caine over the side. Caine had no chance to call out. The screaming artillery finally converged as a direct hit, drowning out his voice.

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In a flash of fire, the dory and everything aboard it exploded like matchwood.

Caine rolled beneath the water, his senses overwhelmed. Above, the scene played out in warped dimensions and distorted sounds. The slagged hulk that had been Ace began to sink while shards of the boat no bigger than kindling burned on the water. As bubbles escaped his lips, Caine shook his head in shock.

Ace had not been out of control. It had only meant to save him from his own stubbornness.

Assuming of course, he did survive. The problem with warcaster armor was that it was not intended for water. It weighed upon him as though a bag of rocks had been tied to his ankle, and he sank into the muddy murk below. He struggled in vain to swim, while above the light of the burning ship faded.

But there! A chain in the water!

Caine reached for it, his lungs fit to burst. It was tethered to a buoy right near the spot his boat had been hit. He grabbed it and climbed, hand over hand until he thought he might pass out.

His head peeked out under a shattered timber, and he took a deep, gasping breath. Men were running along the docks, pointing at what remained of his boat.

Scanning the docks just out of reach, he pondered his next move. There was nothing; no cover, no solid ground to flash to, so he was going to have to swim at least a few strokes. Worse, with all eyes looking this way and nothing but open water around him, he'd have to keep underwater to avoid being seen.

There.

Caine spotted a row of sloops, their anchors weighed for the night. If he could just make it that far, he should be able to flash to the sewer grate by the dock. Fearful the bulk of his armor would ruin any chance of making the swim, he hastily shed what he could. Still clinging to the

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buoy, he loosened shoulder pads and shin guards alike, and watched them disappear into the deep. Taking a deep breath, he steeled himself before plunging back beneath the surface.

When at last his head broke the surface again, it was in the shadow of a sloop. Grasping the sloop's rode, he caught his breath. He lingered a moment, able only to brood as the men along the docks marveled at the mess he'd left behind.



“You should have been ‘ere last night. Would have been *much* easier.” The man named Kreel shook his head slowly. The cadence of his words, delivered in a thick Llaelese accent, sounded ugly to Caine. The man wasn’t pretty to look at either. A sardonic smile split his face wide as he gripped a tankard of ale. His teeth were crooked, and painted with whatever he’d eaten for dinner. He dragged his tongue across them, before taking a sip of the brew.

Caine got the better of his temper. He tensed his jaw, keeping his mouth shut over the flippant remark. The fact that this informant had not yet given him any intelligence may have been a factor. From his seat in the cramped tavern, he took a sip of his own drink.

While it was safe to say he had taken an instant dislike to the vile man before him, moreover, he was just pissed off. The vagrant’s cloak he’d covered up in smelled like a sewer and his boots still sloshed from the swim. The arcantrik generator in the back of his armor had gotten waterlogged and failed twice on the way here. These things were, of course, minor. The disaster of the night before had left blood on his hands and lingering consequences. Even that was not the whole of it, he knew.

Then there was the thing with Ace.

He couldn’t shake the warjacks bizarre act of loyalty, nor the feeling it had set in his gut. In a word, guilt. But ... over a warjack? He took a breath. There was more to it than that. He’d never lost one before. The link in his head was gone, and it felt ... awful. In a strange sort of way, Ace now felt

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like a hole in his jaw where a tooth had been. Except now he couldn't stop putting his tongue in the spot, and each time he did, the nerve flared red hot at him.

"Getting to you has ... not been easy." He admitted with difficulty across the table.

The informant insouciantly probed his mouth with a toothpick. "Rynnard has seen fit to put us in martial law for the last few months. Not that they call it that, no! It has been a chafe, sure."

Caine stared at him.

"So what do you have for me?"

Kreel sucked in through his teeth, and then looked around in a conspiratorial manner.

"Well he's still *here*. That's your luck. He leaves town tomorrow, 'on king's business.' Tonight? Different story. Big shipment of gold into Cygnar. Or so a little peek at his ledger says. With twice as much protection as usual."

Caine sniffed. Fine, he thought. *I could use a good fight right now.* "What exactly am I looking at?"

"I don't know. He's had McCoy on retainer for the past two months. Trollkin. Bouncer at glitzy gambling house, north district. He freelances for Thaddeus on the side. Bulletproof, as I hear it said. Can't be killed, and those that try are all in the dirt now. He got a new guy too. I don't know him. Not local. A sniper ace, what I hear. Goes by Zeke."

Caine pulled his chin. "Where is this happening?"

Kreel slipped him a scrap of paper with an address scrawled.

"West side. Cannery district. Be careful. This is as big as it gets. Maybe he intends to finish this thing with your nobles now?"

Caine turned on that point. "And just what do you actually know about this 'thing'?"

Kreel shrugged, digging out a piece of meat with his toothpick.

"Beyond what I told your boss, who knows? Thaddeus was always square, so I can't figure why he plays this game. But his ledger don't lie.

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Whatever his reason, he's gone to big trouble to cover the tracks. I never see more than a peek at a time, behind his back. This? I saw. Payment scheduled to more than dozen of your nobles. Whatever they're up to, it's goin' t' happen ... *soon*." As he emphasized his final point, another chunk of meat was dislodged from his jagged teeth, landing on the table between them.

Caine frowned, his arms crossed. "Exactly how is it you come to know so much about him anyways?"

"He's my brother." Kreel smiled most unpleasantly.

Caine sat back, shaking his head. "Ech! You know I'm to kill him, right?" Kreel nodded, still smiling.

"That's the deal," he said casually, a sidelong glance at the barkeep as she passed. Seeing Caine's scowl, he continued. "He's the elder son. Our father? He's rich, but not much longer for the world. He always liked Thaddeus better. Bastard will leave him all he's got, even though he knows ... I got *debts*," Kreel finished, sipping his drink while narrowly eyeing Caine from over the rim of his tankard. "When I figured out Thaddeus was up to something, I saw my chance."

Caine pushed out from the table in disgust. "And I thought *my* family had issues."

Kreel, pulled his toothpick out and pointed it at Caine. "Make sure the body is found. If he goes missing, it complicates matter with the lawyers."

Turning to go, Caine didn't bother to look back at the man.

"Yeah, I'll get right on that."



Caine cleared the summit of the rooftops with well-timed jumps. Below, his passage went unseen by the citizens of Merywyn. It gave him a rare *déjà vu*. He thought back to days gone by in Bainsmarket. From such heights, he had been in control of the world, free to prey upon his marks, whoever they might be. Then, as now perhaps. The night sky had begun to clear, and

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with it a cool breeze from the west. Unsettled though he was, he couldn't deny it felt good to be running high once more.

Along the flat roof of a warehouse he made his way, gaining speed. With a tuck and roll, he blinked out of existence, to reappear over the open air of the chasm between buildings. His momentum carried with him, and his roll brought him over the buttress of a Morrowan cathedral. He landed like a cat on a solitary gargoyle.

He paused to crouch upon the sculpture, peering at the streets some five stories down. He consulted the scrap of paper Kreeel had given him. He saw the steady bustle of the main street below, lined with horse drawn carriages and countless pedestrians going to and fro under gaslight, even at this late hour. At the end of the street, he watched a covered carriage approach. On the sides of its canvas covering, a name had been written with stenciled black paint. The same name that had been written on his scrap. Next to it was the icon of a milk bottle.

"Where are you delivering at this late hour I wonder?" Caine smiled.

In an instant, he had flashed away from his perch, to reappear on the eaves of the cathedral a short distance away. He began running to keep pace with the cart as it advanced the length of the avenue.

At the corner of the cathedral, he easily hopped the gap to the next building a few feet away. His feet rapped along the row of copper roofed townhouses, and he kept an eye on the cart as he went. He saw it near an alley, then slow down. He was soon close enough to hear the driver's coarse voice call his horse to a stop.

From the alley, he saw shadows moving. They stepped out into the gaslight for a moment, three large men, as near as he could tell. Just as quickly as they had appeared, they piled into the back of the milk carriage, before the driver spurred his horse on. Caine had seen the glint of a pistol stuffed in the jacket of one of them. He scoffed to think what milkmen needed weapons for. He watched the carriage move off, turning right at the next intersection, and into a maze of warehouses. Beyond that were

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numerous buildings lined with great smokestacks and twisted scaffolding. He lunged forward, on the move again.

He leapt, sliding down the slant of a rooftop to keep pace with the carriage. Arriving at the lip of the roof, he leapt for a drainpipe and used it to slide down a story, and onto a lower roof. He leapt clear at the last second, setting down in a crouch, his heart now racing with the fast pace he'd kept. Just in time, he saw the wagon disappear into an old factory, some five stories high. The sprawling structure was crowned with three massive smokestacks and numerous conveyor lines. On the rooftops, he could faintly make out shadows moving.

The dairy plant.

By all appearances, Kreel's information had been good. There was no question there was a gathering happening within, at an hour no one had any legitimate business afoot. Caine withdrew his Spellstorms from under his cloak. He cracked them open with a flick of the wrist, checking each one with a spin of the chambers before flicking them closed once again.



Caine was among them now. He could hear their loose talk on all sides, and he slinked down as he stepped lightly ahead. The first man he'd tailed had wandered too far from the pack, and he'd put the man down for good, but there were a half dozen more he counted spread out over the rooftop of the large factory. Occasionally, they stepped within the up-cast light of large skylights across the roof, allowing him a better glimpse of them. No less than a motley crew of dog-faced cutthroats by his estimation. There had been no sign of the rumored sniper, Zeke. Whoever was up here, he'd get to them. He had no intention of leaving guns on high once he got to work below.

Over a length of oversized ductwork, he saw a silhouette shuffling in the dark. "Louden? Where you at lad? You don't want to piss off Zeke now do you?" Caine crouched low, and watched the shadow pass by. The man

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was armed with a basic long rifle, like the first had been. Across the way, he saw another pair of thugs over the largest skylight on the roof. They were talking, and staring down at the proceedings below.

An idea struck him.

The skylight they stood over had large glass panes he could open. That was his entrance, and the rafters within should give him a commanding view of things. Patiently, Caine waited for the man nearest him to get closer, and flipped a Spellstorm around in his hand. He loathed the idea of using his beautiful Spellstorm as a simple blackjack, but until he had eyes on the target, there was no sense in causing a commotion. The man drew closer in the darkness. Caine lunged.



Caine drew near the skylight, checking each corner of the roof as he went. To all appearances, the roof was his now. Just the same, he couldn't shake the notion he was being watched. The thought was interrupted by a murmur by his feet, and a feeble hand reaching for his ankle.

"Easy now, chum," he whispered.

Another strike with a Spellstorm turned club and the man fell silent. A second later, Caine stepped to the skylight and peered down. He saw large copper vats along one side, crates stacked three stories high on another. There were catwalks crisscrossed to the rafters, and circular gantries around the vats. There, in the center of the place, he saw twenty men in a loose circle around three wagons. The wagons looked exactly like the one he'd seen before. From what he could make out, not one of the men down there was a trollkin. *No McCoy, no Zeke*, he thought. Caine wondered if Kreel wasn't as connected as he thought he was. Maybe it didn't matter.

His target was down there, sure as sure could be.

On the factory floor, Thaddeus Montague, royal treasurer to King Rynnard himself stood out from the rogues' gallery around him like a

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sore thumb. A slightly built and bespectacled man of early middle age, he nervously held a ledger while the others around him clutched at hand cannons. Moving from crate to crate and marking his ledger as he did, he opened each, revealing a breathtaking horde of gold. Caine looked at the man, lining him up along the iron sights of both Spellstorms. It could all be over so quickly. Just a pull of the trigger and the man's brainpan would burst onto the floor, here and now.

Aye, but that is only half of the thing, he thought with a sigh.

Rebald had sent him here to find out what was in Montague's head *before* he emptied it. With another look about the place, he sighed and reholstered the Spellstorm. Even for him, a one man assault into the hornet's nest below seemed near suicide. All in all, there were just too many angles, and too many exits. He had no idea how many men were in that tangle, and where the high priced talent was, if it was here at all.

Meanwhile, of course, his target was right in the middle of it.

Reluctantly, he slid in through the opened glass pane, and stepped down onto the crisscrossing network of rusting iron rafters to get a closer look. Carefully, he tested his weight on the old frame and then started to climb across it. Below, no one noticed. At least he'd have the element of surprise.

He didn't hear the whistle of displaced air until it was too late.

Caine's shoulder was on fire and with it his head. The shock of an impact sent him keeling over, just as he was within arm's reach of the gantry. Reflexively, he tried flashing to safety, but something was wrong.

He couldn't.

Magic was gone from his body, replaced entirely with pain. It spread voraciously from his shoulder, and he glanced there numbly.

Somehow, a tiny crossbow bolt was stuck in him. Even as he gaped at it, his forward momentum took him abruptly out of the rafters and into open space. The gantry became a blur beside him, and he regained his wits only at the last second, shooting a hand out. He managed two fingers on the dusty metal, but couldn't keep the grip. Momentum

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swung him over a little before he resumed his perilous freefall. Cursing in midair, he saw a stack of crates rushing closer. He gritted his teeth, and braced for impact.

Over and over it came.

He fell like a ball bouncing between two stacks of crates, with each blow he sorely regretted what armor he had shed. He landed at last on the floor, bruised on all sides, groaning. In the fall, the bolt had come loose and lay on the floor next to him, smashed and bloody. He flared his arcantrik generator to full charge, and immediately a power-field surged around him. The snub little chimneys of the generator began to belch thick black smoke.

So much for stealth.

From his cover, Caine's eyes darted back to the rafters. *Where did that shot come from?* He scanned every corner, but saw nothing.

As he rolled clear of the crates, he groaned to find he was now in plain sight of the assembled. His shoulder bled freely, but at least the fire in his head was gradually receding. Whoever had fired it was well equipped. The bloody thing had taken his magic, if even for a moment.

Magic he badly needed now.

Shots immediately bit at the ground and crates around him, and he got up with a grunt. He dove over a nearby pipeline, making for the vats along the far wall. In an instant, his pistols were out, and he cracked a few hasty shots at his enemies. Two of them found home, as men doubled over across the floor. Adrenaline began to course through his veins, and he risked a glance over the rusted pipeline. Buzzing ricochets chased him back down, but not before he had managed a quick glance at his target.

He cursed loud enough to be heard across the entire room.

Montague was breaking from the pack, running for the door on the far side of the room! He fought to pull his magic back. It was almost as if his leg had fallen asleep, and slowly the circulation returned. He squinted in concentration. If he could just flash away ... almost, but no.

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A hammer, from out of nowhere, came smashing down at him.

He twisted clear of the blow at the last second, and watched as it buried itself in the rotted floorboards in a shower of splinters. Gripping the hammer, and now pulling it free, Caine saw a leering trollkin well over seven feet high, peculiarly dressed in an immaculate tailored suit. He did not look at all happy as the hammer came clear of the impact, and was raised high to strike again.

"McCoy, I presume?" Caine gasped.

"Ah!" The trollkin's eyes lit up, pausing. "You have me at a disadvantage, sir. You are?"

"Leaving!"

Caine raised his pistols, and cracked two into the trollkin's midriff, point blank. The beast winced at the kiss of twin Spellstorms, but to Caine's surprise, he didn't fall down. He paused a moment, as if savoring the pain, gradually grinding his teeth into a snaggle-toothed smile. His hammer still raised, the beast began to growl, and brought it down. Caine's eyes were wide with horror. *If ever there was a time.*

He flashed away.

He appeared halfway across the room in cover, still cringing from a hammer that was now long gone. He sighed in relief, and shook his head. Looking up over a crate, he smiled to find Montague in the foreground, only a few yards away. Their eyes met and the shifty fellow yelped in dismay. Montague turned and dashed for a stairwell, still clutching his ledger. As he went, Caine noticed his new position had also flanked several thugs. They were shouting and pointing his way, but none of them had time to relocate. Caine took advantage, and cracked off a flurry of shots. Some gunmen fell screaming, leaving the rest to scramble for cover. In the confusion Caine made a dash across open floor to give chase to Montague. Rushing to a copper vat between him and the stairwell, he hit it with his good shoulder and rolled around behind it. Immediately the vat was pelted with shots, creating a cacophony of ricochets.

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Caine glanced ahead to the stairwell from behind the vat. Montague was there, halfway up. Caine risked a salvo in the direction he was taking fire, then ducked back behind the vat. As more return fire struck his cover he conceived it was now or never to cross the no-man's land between him and Montague. *If there's no cover, I'll make my own*, he thought. Drawing on his magic, his form became vague, shifting. Emboldened, Caine ran from the vat like a specter, firing as he went.

A volley of shots followed after him. So many, it was as though he was the only target in a carnival shooting gallery. Scores of shots chased after him as he went.

All of them missed, save one.

Caine convulsed forward in mid sprint, falling on his face next to some barrels. In his side, the sharp jab of another bolt, and with it that unbearable fire in his head. Where were those bloody things coming from? He bit his lip at the pain and scrambled to roll behind the barrels. With the bolt in his side, his magical cover dissipated like smoke around him.

He could see Montague had made the top of the stairs, and now pushed on the exit. Still reeling at the pain, Caine leveled a shaky Spellstorm after him in a lame attempt to wing the man.

Pursuit had already made it as far as the vat he'd used only moments ago, three men with clear shots despite the barrels he now lay behind. They leveled their hand cannons with cruel smiles. Grimacing with the pain of the bolt in his side and still on his back, he put each man down in turn with rune kissed hellfire. As the last of them fell to the ground, he looked back up the stairwell to see the door slamming shut.

It's like that, is it, he sighed.

He couldn't flash away, and all around him the shouts of more men closed in. It was clear he wasn't going to take the stairs without getting hit; they offered no cover at all. Rolling away, he struck off in another direction, firing his Spellstorms wherever he saw movement.

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Caine found a corridor ending in another stairwell up. Pausing, he looked down at his side. The bolt had tagged him by the barest margins, and he tugged it free with a grunt. Gradually the fire it put in him seemed to ebb. Daring to reload, he had made it halfway through when shouts came from around the corner. Slamming both Spellstorms shut, he moved on. He'd lost sight of his mark and he knew he was fading with every drop of blood that hit the ground. *I'm not done yet.* Taking the stairs, he pushed the burning pain from his head with sheer, stubborn anger. At the second floor landing, there was an access hatch to the side of the building. He seized upon it. Unbolting it, Caine looked out to find a long drainpipe running up the side of the outer wall.

There, below.

Caine saw Montague leaping from a fire escape to the alley. The panicked man started running, soon rounding a corner and out of sight. Caine looked across to the adjacent rooftop a story higher up, and stepped back.

You're going to lose him, he thought, pain shooting across his body.

"The hell I am!"

With an oath, he lurched forward into a running leap, and pushed himself to flash just before he would have hit the wall. With relief, he vanished, only to reappear some ten feet higher in mid-air over the alley. As he came to a skidding stop on the adjacent roof, he looked back the way he'd come, panting with the effort. His head was throbbing, and he felt slightly dizzy. Just the same, he'd leapt not a moment too soon.

Shots from the hatch he'd left behind chased after him, buzzing wide into the night air. He squinted at the mob, spotting the trollkin with the hammer at the head of them. Caine shook his head in exasperation, and started along to the eaves to try and find his lost mark.



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Fatigued though he was, Caine made his way round a silo, arriving at the north side of the building. Just in time he saw Montague stepping out onto the main street. The man stopped, leaning against the wall to catch his breath in ragged gasps, and looked the way he'd come for signs of pursuit.

Near as Caine could tell, it was just the two of them now. Montague was headed for the bright lights of the busy avenue, lined with taverns, carriages and foot traffic of all sorts. Caine leveled his pistol, stepping forward along the eaves, hoping once more for a leg shot to slow the man down. As he went, he failed to notice the small stove pipe underfoot. He was suddenly falling, the street yawning three stories below. Flailing, he kept his balance, but went down on a knee, a gasp in his throat. As he did, the unmistakable *whoosh* of another bolt flew in the place his head had been only a second ago.

He had not lost his tail. Not at all ...

Caine cracked three shots in the direction the bolt had come before diving for a brick half-wall. He saw a shadow move from across the roof and with it the whistle of another bolt. The thing caught him by the coat as he dove, but no more. His own shot had cracked the stone facing of the wall behind the man, and he heard a hiss of anger as brick shards showered him. He glanced at the bolt protruding from his coat. He recognized the undamaged barb as Iosan, very rare. Very dangerous.

So that's Zeke. The bastard's some sort of elf mage hunter, he thought.

His pursuer might be in cover, but at least he had come out of hiding. *He must think I'm done*, Caine smiled grimly. Caine could just make him out at this range. He squinted to see the Iosan nock another bolt while leaning against his own brick half-wall. This was a fight he could win, as he saw it. He'd just have to get it over with quickly. Risking a glance over the side of the building, he saw Montague on the main street, approaching a taxi carriage. He glimpsed numbers stenciled on the side of the taxi.

"Two-nine-three-three," he whispered.

THE WAY OF CAINE

Then promptly swore in shock. Up and over the side of the wall, McCoy climbed the fire escape only a few yards away. Getting his bearings, the trollkin turned and looked around. As he found Caine, he smiled his ugly snaggle-toothed smile. Caine groaned. He was about to get caught on both sides.

Zeke didn't seem much pleased by the development either. From his cover, he shouted out at the arrival of his colleague.

"McCoy! I have him!" he cried out from behind cover.

McCoy grinned, hauling his hammer over his shoulder. "I think not!" he roared back. "This little one put a bullet in me. Two maybe! I will split his head over the affair." The trollkin laughed deeply, brandishing his hammer to readiness. Caine was only a few strides away from the monster, and totally exposed. He raised a Spellstorm and fired. Three shots now found the trollkin, tearing into his midriff. Dark blood stains appeared in the silk white shirt and vest, but just the same, he only grunted, stepping forward as though walking into a strong wind. McCoy only smiled amicably at Caine as he came on, his hammer rising once more. Caine looked at his pistols hopelessly, then back up at the advancing Trollkin.

Across the rooftop, his colleague Zeke was undeterred. "Ten crowns you don't touch him before I get a blade in him?"

"You're on," McCoy shouted back, only three strides away from Caine. He dared a glance back to Zeke, and found the elf was at once clear of his cover. His shadowy figure had become a fluid dance of movement, almost impossible to track. On and on he came, leaping and tumbling over the intervening obstacles. Somehow as he tumbled, a long curved blade had already made its way to his hand.

Caine nearly let panic take him. On one side, a rampaging monster, hammer ready to strike. On the other, the relentless Iosan hunter was ready to strike with blade and crossbow.

Death on both sides.

THE WAY OF CAINE

Caine's mind raced. Focus shots one way, get taken from the other. Flash away, maybe, but lose the mark and certainly not get far enough to lose this pair.

No.

It had to stop. He just needed more time to think.

Caine recalled the Khadoran raid, and the lesson it had taught him. The path he'd found, that special magic that led him to the place between seconds. He was tired now, so very tired, but he could find it again. He had to. His head throbbed and was fit to burst. Immediately, he thought he'd pushed too hard. It wasn't going to work ...

The pain was gone. Sound too. Caine opened his eyes to a world of gray and glitter. Zeke and McCoy were radiant shapes on either side of him, their movement reduced to an impossible crawl. He felt the strength to stand. He had time enough to line them up. Not a second longer.

Time moved again.

They came screaming at him, wild eyed and open mouthed. With eyes closed and arms crossed, he squeezed a single shot from both Spellstorms. Thunder echoed across the rooftop, the muzzle flash of either barrel hung motionless, rapt in rune-halo.

Iosan and Trollkin alike were struck square in the forehead, and both were thrown back, their eyes wide. Caine blinked.

It was no dream, he had done the thing.

Both men were dead within feet of him, their lifeless eyes looking skyward in stunned silence. He could only chuckle, dropping to his knees.

Dazed, his eyes drifted down to the avenue below. He smiled weakly, watching the pedestrians moving to and fro. He noticed cabs moving along the avenue, their horses at a trot.

Clip Clop Clip Clop.

Caine snapped his head up, focusing his eyes. He scanned the traffic, to find a cab marked two-nine-three-three still in sight. With a groan, he struggled to his feet. Moving to the fire escape, he shimmied down, every

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muscle screaming in protest. He was soon jogging at street level, guns holstered in pursuit of the errant cab. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he pushed past the crowds along the avenue. He gasped. The cab was too far to catch. He didn't have the strength left. His steps slowed. As another cab rushed alongside him in the same direction, he grabbed the running bar. Swinging into the passenger compartment, he shouted to the driver breathlessly, "Follow two-nine-three-three!"

That was when he noticed the cab was already occupied. He looked across the bench to find a middle aged man clutching a ledger, gaping in terror at the sight of him.

It was Montague.

Caine started laughing, and shaking his head. Montague made to leave with a whimper, his hand reaching for the door. Caine kicked his leg up, knocking the treasurer back to his seat. He already had a Spellstorm on him, and he cocked it slowly. Montague grimaced, clutching his ledger like a shield, but sat still.

"As you were driver," Caine shouted after him, panting still.



"Please don't kill me!" the bespectacled man pleaded in flawless Cygnaran. Caine reclined casually behind the man's desk, his feet up. They were in the fourth floor study of a typical looking townhouse, in the well-to-do neighborhood of Ules. The place seemed unlive in except for this study, which had been well supplied, not least of which included a full liquor cabinet. Caine absently kept a Spellstorm trained on the man across from him as he flipped through his ledger, page by page.

"Why shouldn't I?"

Montague only moaned, putting his head on the desk.

The facts were neatly laid out and immaculately detailed, in fact. There had been four shipments like the one tonight, already sent into Cygnar.

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It was incredible, really. The ledger included the name of each Cygnaran nobleman implicated, how much they'd been promised, and how much they had received. The names of a dozen mercenary companies, including the Von Baums were listed. Montague had been so thorough as to detail the stages of the operation for which the mercenaries would receive their pay, as appendices. Even if it did not list the exact agenda of the nobles, the fact that it detailed as much information as it did, left one readily capable of deduction.

Clearly, they were gathering diversionary forces across the periphery of Cygnar while a singular force gathered near her heart. Even more incredible, a payment history showed an earl in Caspia was taking the largest of the gold shipments. It inferred a bribe was in play. Caspia had never fallen. Caine knew that, hell, everyone did. It was the stuff of old stories. Of course, in those stories, the enemies were always on the other side of her thick walls. Was there really someone on the inside capable of compromising her defenses, and actually willing to do it? Caine looked up at the despondent man across from him, baffled.

This man was running the show? Really?

The chances he might actually be capable of moving this much gold out from under Rynnard's nose without him knowing seemed incredible. Yet Rynnard was an old man. It was not impossible, and Thaddeus here might well be putting on a show for Caine. He looked up from the ledger, regarding the man before him as he might a card player.

"Oh, I suppose you should kill me. This was wrong from the beginning. I begged him against it!" Thaddeus lowered his head, pulling his spectacles from his head to rub the bridge of his nose.

"Who? Who did you beg?"

Thaddeus looked alarmed, instantly covering his mouth. Caine shook his head, rolling his eyes.

"This is Rynnard's show, isn't it?" Caine glared at Thaddeus over the top of the ledger. The treasurer said nothing, only keeping his head low.

THE WAY OF CAINE

Downstairs, there came a pounding at the door. Caine looked at Montague sharply, while Montague himself blanched. With a growl, Caine stood up and grabbed the treasurer by the scruff of his shirt, pulling him out to the balcony. Below, they could see a squad of city guard, knocking at the door. Caine pointed a Spellstorm in Montague's face, then pointed to the roof above them. The man nodded, shivering in the cool night air. Caine boosted him up, and then flashed himself there an instant later. Montague jumped, startled by the display, but kept quiet. Below, they could hear the door being smashed open. Guards stormed in.

Caine kept the gun to Thaddeus forehead, and listened. Room by room they moved, calling for Montague. Finally, they were right below, looking out at the balcony.

"He's not here, sir!" came the shout in Llaeese.

"I can see that, idiot. Would you like to inform his majesty of this yourself?"

"N-no. No, sir!" Then, as quickly as they had come, the guards stomped out.

Caine laughed at the timid man next to him, as the pair sat still on the roof.

"Why all this ... *subterfuge*, Montague? If Rynnard wants Leto gone so bad, why not just supply the nobles without all this?" The distraught man nodded. A weight seemed to lift from him with each bob of his head.

"He wanted to be able to distance himself from it, if there was a chance it came to light. Plausible deniability. It's ambitious. He knew it could blow up in his face, and we're supposed to be your allies after all. You are Cygnaran, yes? The accent ... from around Orven?"

"Bainsmarket, actually," Caine corrected, as he glanced back at the ledger.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," Thaddeus sighed, despondent.

Caine looked up at the stars as the odd pair continued to sit on the sloped copper roof. Dawn was coming, maybe another couple of hours.



THE WAY OF CAINE

By Morrow, what a night. He had the ledger and the man, too. By Rebal'd's order, what came next was clear enough.

And yet.

His hand was reluctant to point a Spellstorm at Montague anymore. Instead, he holstered it, and reached into his pocket for a trinket he'd been given in Ceryl. He found it easily enough. Caine turned it over in his hand, and thought about the words of the man who'd given it to him: Lord Brigham Walder. Montague saw the gleam of it and looked over with interest.

"What is that?"

Caine looked up, as if breaking from a trance.

"I reckon it's the reason I'm not going to kill you. No matter how dear that decision might cost me."

Montague blinked.



Caine and Montague tinked glasses and the fourth round of brandy disappeared in a sudden warm rush.

"Every day! She used to bake them ev'ry day! You wou'nd't be'lieev how good they were," Montague slurred, eyes wide at Caine. For his part, Caine had only managed to get tipsy, but with each new round, the aches and pains of the day receded a little further. In fact, when he'd gone down for the bottle and glasses, he'd managed to patch himself up with some bandages and a cooling balm. It felt wonderful on his shoulder. On the whole, he felt surprisingly good, despite the fact that just about everything he'd touched in the past week was a smoking disaster.

He leaned back on the slope of the roof, looking up at the stars.

"Just remember what I said about yuir brother, Montague," he said. "If he sold yeh out once, he'll do it agin." Montague's eyes were instantly glistening, and he rubbed them with a sleeve.

"Thaddeus, Caine. Call me Thaddeus. Kreeel, ... my brudder, ... he ... wasn't always like this. Before he started playing cards ..."

THE WAY OF CAINE

"Don't yeh make excuses for him!" Caine snapped with surprising anger. "I mean ... well ..."

"What ... will happ'n to you now?" Montague, still sitting with the bottle between his legs, looked down at Caine, frowning with brandy-exaggerated worry.

"Hell with it. I don't care." Tracing the lines of a constellation with a finger, he shrugged. "Oh, I reckon they'll toss me out. I got men killed last night, Thaddeus. What's more, when I get to the one I'm actually *supposed* to kill, I refuse. It's a mess."

Thaddeus nodded slowly, a frown forming on his face.

"You're a better man than I, Mr. Caine," he said slowly, with deliberate effort. "Whatever your faults, you have a code, and it's not for sale. Me? I did what I was told, even tho' I knew it was wrong." He shook his head, disgusted.

"Relax."

"No! Listen. You've shown me. Starting now. This thing tonight? I never saw you. I ..." Thaddeus gestured, lit up and animated now. A second too late, he realized he'd let his grip on the bottle go. As it started to roll down the roof, his eyes grew wide in alarm. He dove for it.

And disappeared over the eaves.

Caine laughed, looking at the place Montague had been a second ago. "You stupid bastard!" Heaving himself up, he leaned over the eaves, expecting to see the drunken treasurer on the balcony below.

Except Thaddeus wasn't there.

The treasurer had missed the narrow balcony. He was a splayed heap now, bent in wrong angles on the cobblestones four stories down. A pool of blood was already radiating from him, and the smashed brandy bottle was just out of reach of his dead hand.

"Aw ... now what did yeh have to go and do that for?" Caine moaned, resigned. He sat back blankly, and then checked over the eaves again. No, he had not imagined it.

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The idiot was still dead.

What now? In the stillness of the night, the bark of a dog in a nearby alley was his only answer.

“Oh, I need a cigar,” he sighed. Reaching in the folds of his coat, he put a hand into a deep pocket, and felt within. He couldn’t find the familiar foil pouch for his stogies, but his hand did brush something *else*. He pulled it forth, and his eyes widened in recognition. It was the black felt bag Rebal had given him.

“In case the story doesn’t line up,” the spymaster had said.

Somehow, Caine had all but forgotten it. He held the thing in his hand as he sat cross legged on the roof. He debated against opening it. Finally, cursing, he reached within. There was only a single small object he could feel. It was light, and rounded. Drawing it out, he realized he was holding a bit of licorice root.

“Bugger me,” Caine said, stunned, and flopped back on the roof.

In that unseen alley, the dog barked again. Caine sat up, his face gradually more stern. Well lit even at this late hour, he could see Rynnard’s palace westward over the cityscape. It stood head and shoulders above the rest of the spires. He stared at it, and then shook his head.

You had it figured from the start, eh Rebal? Still holding the root, Caine was at a loss.

At length, he looked up to the night sky overhead. “Well? Do you see me now, you old drunk?” No answer. “You’d say I told you so, wouldn’t you?” he scoffed. “Maybe you’d be right at that, eh?” he muttered. He drew a Spellstorm, and aimed down the sights, at some phantom target. *Maybe I am no better than this. Then again, maybe this matters.* He holstered the weapon, and looked skyward one more time, his expression thoughtful.

“And maybe I don’t give one whit what you think anymore.”



EPILOGUE

Two Weeks Later

AR 596, Caspia

Within the labyrinth that crisscrossed the venerable walls of mighty Caspia, the young courtier moved with purpose. His outfit was the simple blue frock of a royal clerk. His face was clean shaven, and his hair a close cropped blond. His steady pace echoed in the darkness as he negotiated the maze without hesitation.

At last he arrived at a corridor ending in a solid iron door. Set within the center of the door was a single keyhole. The young man withdrew a small, dull key of unusual shape from the pockets of his trousers, and set it to the hole. He turned it a quarter turn left, then a full rotation to the right.

The key's movement was met with a series of clicks from deep within the thick reinforced door. As the final click sounded, the groan of thick iron bolts receding from their braces could be heard. The door swung slowly open, revealing a width of over a foot. The light from within bled into the ancient corridor, casting long flickering patterns on the musty floor.

The clerk stepped smartly within, grasping the handle to pull the thick door shut behind him with a heave. Within the windowless room, an immense map of western Immoren stretched upon the great stone wall opposite the door. Light was cast upon it from gas lamps bolted into the arched alcoves along either side of the chamber. A wooden desk in the

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center of the room was scattered with numerous map cases and leather bound ledgers.

He faced the back of a man dressed in grey who was busy adjusting pins upon the map. Each of the pins had been painted in a variety of colors, and some had been affixed with a strip of paper, etched with iconic markings. While the pins crisscrossed the entire map, there was a notable concentration along the border between Cygnar and Khador. Presently, the grey-frocked man added several more pins in the small intervening nation of Llael. He did not turn at the arrival of the young clerk, who stood waiting respectfully. The clerk found it strange, given he had entered arguably the most guarded sanctum in all of Cygnar, behind the back of her highest ranking spy, Scout General Bolden Rebal.

“What is it, Baldasarre?”

“How did you ...” the young man blurted in astonishment.

“Your left leg is perhaps two inches shorter than your right,” Rebal said quietly without turning. “You have developed a gait in which your left footfall has a brief but distinct shuffle to compensate the difference.” Rebal finished by pushing a pin in the center of Merywyn, and crossed his arms in contemplative silence. With an audible exhale, he motioned for the clerk to approach.

The clerk looked in surprise at his feet as he sidestepped the battered oak desk, coming alongside with Rebal, his gaze followed Bolden’s, up at the map.

“Couriers have just arrived with word from Merywyn, sir.”

The elder scout general turned wordlessly to raise an eyebrow at the clerk.

“It’s good news this time, sir. Captain ... I mean Lieutenant Caine’s account led our agents to the wreckage at the bottom of the harbor. Our agents were able to extract the cortex, intact. They report there was nothing else remaining that might implicate Cygnar.”

“Nothing?”

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“Ah, yes, the matter of Rynnard’s death. The official story from the Llaesele ambassador is natural causes. It seems they are either unaware or unwilling to accept the notion their king could have been assassinated.”

“They are in damage control now, apprentice. They know. It is important only that they do not know who,” Rebald said, his arms still crossed. His attention remained fixed on the pin he had placed in the center of Merywyn.

“What next, sir?”

“We wait, Baldasarre, though I wish it were otherwise.”

“How did Caine accept his demotion, if I may ask?”

Rebald smiled approvingly at his apprentice’s persistent curiosity. “He took the news with stoic indifference.” The clerk nodded at the thought, but then frowned as he thought upon it.

“To the point, do you think the gesture will have the desired effect with the nobles?”

“For the virtuous among them? I believe so. Caine’s actions, to official account, *were* unbecoming. They could not be condoned. As for any true malcontents, there will be no appeasement we might offer. No, for them, *other* gestures are now being made. In the end, they will all come around.”

Baldasarre nodded grimly. “Still, the scope of the nobles’ plan, now laid bare ... startling, was it not, sir?”

“Aye. We came within a hair, make no mistake. I would scarcely have doubted the safety of our king within these walls prior to having read their communiques.”

“And the implication of King Rynnard as their sponsor!” At this, Rebald looked once more to the pin he had placed in Merywyn. The spymaster’s trademark deadpan betrayed a hint of anxiety, if only for the briefest of moments. A second later, the clerk felt he may have imagined it.

“We’ve traded their fate for a little time to clean house. In the end, that’s the net gain of Caine’s actions.”

Baldasarre frowned. Seeing the confusion of his apprentice, Rebald pointed to the map.

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“Khador, ever ambitious, will now see a nation without a king. In turmoil. They will certainly take advantage, if not immediately, soon. Rebald sighed, looking up to the pin at the capital of Khador. “Why wouldn’t they?”

“As you say, he’s given us time, sir. Was that not worth it?”

“The people of Llael are much as our own, son. In killing their king, whatever his vices, we may well have killed them too. I feel the weight of it,” Rebald said with sober certainty.

The clerk nodded, turning to the oak desk, and brought forward a brief, thumbing quickly to find a particular page.

“And of Caine, sir? By his own account, the mission was clumsy in its execution, nearly lost at several turns. Do you risk activating him again?”

Rebald looked dryly at his apprentice. “I think you’ve rather missed the point, Baldasarre. What Caine achieved in his first mission was ... surprising. In the end, he succeeded on all points.”

The apprentice skimmed the brief again, running a finger down the margin of the page. He paused at a paragraph near the bottom of the page. “He killed an awful lot of men, sir. We can confirm only Rynnard’s death. Do you really believe this account?”

“I’ve no reason to doubt it. For all of his faults, Caine is no braggart. In Fellig, he proved a force of nature when properly motivated. Now, in Merywyn he has demonstrated a measure of control, though I suspect his best is yet to come.”

Baldasarre closed the brief, replacing it on the desk. “Impressive enough, I suppose.”

Rebald turned to the young clerk, surprised.

“I will tell you this, apprentice. That man was born to kill, and I will employ him to save this kingdom, whatever the toll to his soul ... or mine.”





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.

THE WAY OF CAINE

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.

THE WAY OF CAINE

Deepwood Tower: Northern Cygnaran border fortress, destroyed in 608 AR.

Dragon: Immortal and unnatural creatures spawned by Lord Toruk, the first and greatest of their number. Dragons are hostile to one another, and particularly to their progenitor, and rarely notice the affairs of lesser beings.

Dragon's Tongue River: River stretching from Corvis to the Bay of Stone which separates Cygnar from Ord and is relied upon by a number of river towns such as Point Bourne, Tarna, and Five Fingers.

Drer Drakkerung: Ruins of the former Orgoth capital city on the Garlghast Island, now claimed by Cryx and deemed a seat of Lich Lord Terminus.

Eastwall: Southeastern Cygnaran fortress along the Black River.

Fellig: Northern Cygnaran city in the Thornwood, currently partly occupied by Ordic troops and cut off from Cygnar.

Fisherbrook: Former Cygnaran town north of the Dragon's Tongue River, razed in 607 AR by the Protectorate's Northern Crusade.

Five Fingers: Ordic port city known for its gambling, criminal gangs, and smuggling trade, also known as 'the Port of Deceit.'

Garlghast: Northernmost and largest of the Scharde islands, site of former Orgoth capital of Drer Drakkerung, partially occupied by Cryx.

Gbord: Capital of Rhul, on northeastern shore of Armsdeep Lake.

Gobber: A diminutive race of inquisitive, nimble, and entrepreneurial individuals that have adapted well to the cities of men. Most gobbers are around three feet tall. Gobbers are known to have undeniable aptitude for mechanical devices and alchemy.

THE WAY OF CAINE

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.

THE WAY OF CAINE

Merywyn: Former capital of Llael, presently the most important industrial city held in the Khadoran occupied territory.

Midfast: Northern Ordic city and fortress, along the Khadoran border.

Nightmare Empire, The: Cryx.

Northguard: Formerly a northern Cygnaran border fortress, successfully besieged and taken by Khador in 608 AR, presently serving as a resupply fortress for the Khadoran Army.

Nyss: Cousins of the Iosans, the Nyss are a race of wild hunters who wants claimed large portions of northern Khador as their territory. Largely decimated by the emergence of the Legion of Everblight, the surviving Nyss are largely refugees dependant on Khador and Ios.

Ogrun: A large and physically powerful race renowned for their great strength and honor. Most ogrun are citizens of Rhul, though they can be found throughout the Iron Kingdoms and are also present in Cryx.

Olgunholt: Forest in southern Ord and that nation's most important source of lumber.

Ord: Iron Kingdom on the western coast between Khador and Cygnar, largely neutral in the recent wars and seen as a haven for mercenary companies.

Orgoth: A fearsome race of men who invaded and enslaved western Immoren for centuries. The Orgoth arrived in great numbers on Immoren's western shores and soon conquered the human kingdoms of the era, and were driven out just over four hundred years ago.

Protectorate of Menoth: Southeastern theocracy dedicated to the god Menoth. Considered the fifth Iron Kingdom, though it did not exist at the time of the Corvis Treaties.

THE WAY OF CAINE

Redwall: Llaelese fortress on the Khadoran border, destroyed 604 AR.

Rune Shot: The specially crafted rune inscribed bullets used by gun mages to channel their arcane energies into.

Rhul: Northeastern dwarven nation bordering Khador, Llael, and Ios; natives called Rhulfolk.

Rhulfolk: The dwarves of Rhul. A tenacious and skilled people who have long traded with the nations of man.

Scharde Islands: Island group southwest of Cygnar, named after the largest island that has become the heart of Cryx. The majority of the Scharde Islands are part of the Nightmare Empire while those that are contested are preyed upon by Cryx.

Sul: Western Protectorate city, formerly half of Caspia east of the Black River, ceded after the Cygnaran Civil War.

Spiritgrav: A district of Five Fingers noted for its production of alcoholic spirits, a major source of income for the city.

Steamjack: A steam powered mechanical construct designed in a variety of configurations and sizes, used for both labor and warfare throughout the Iron Kingdoms, Cryx, and Rhul.

Tarna: Southern Ordic city on the Dragon's Tongue River, the site where the first sorcerers were discovered during the Rebellion against the Orgoth.

Thuria: Ancient human kingdom conquered by Tordor centuries before the arrival of the Orgoth, presently divided between southern Ord and northern Cygnar.

Thurian: A cultural group of the people of southern Ord and northern Cygnar who share common ancestry.

THE WAY OF CAINE

Tordor: Ancient human kingdom renowned for its great fleet.

Tordoran: A cultural group of the people of northern Ord, including among them the most powerful land-owning nobility and the royal line.

Trollkin: A hardy race related to full blooded trolls. Trollkin live both in their own communities on the fringes of civilization and amongst the cities of man.

Uldenfrost: A small city of trappers and hunters on Khadors northern-most, western-most fringe.

Umbrey: Former human kingdom centered in what is now eastern Khador and formerly northwestern Llael.

Urcaen: A mysterious cosmological realm that is the spiritual counterpart of Caen, where most of the gods reside and where most souls pass to experience the afterlife. It is divided between protected divine domains and the hellish wilds where the Devourer Wurm stalks.

Veld: Iosan name for Urcaen.

Void: Two different meanings: the emptiness surrounding Urcaen from which undead banes arise; and where skorne souls are cast after death if not preserved in sacral stones. It is unknown if these two uses describe the same place.

Warcaster: Arcanists born with the natural ability to control steamjacks with their minds. With proper training warcasters become singular military assets and among the greatest soldiers of western Immoren, entrusted to command scores of troops and their own battlegroups of warjacks in the field. Acquiring and training warcasters is a high priority for any military force that employs warjacks.

THE WAY OF CAINE

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.

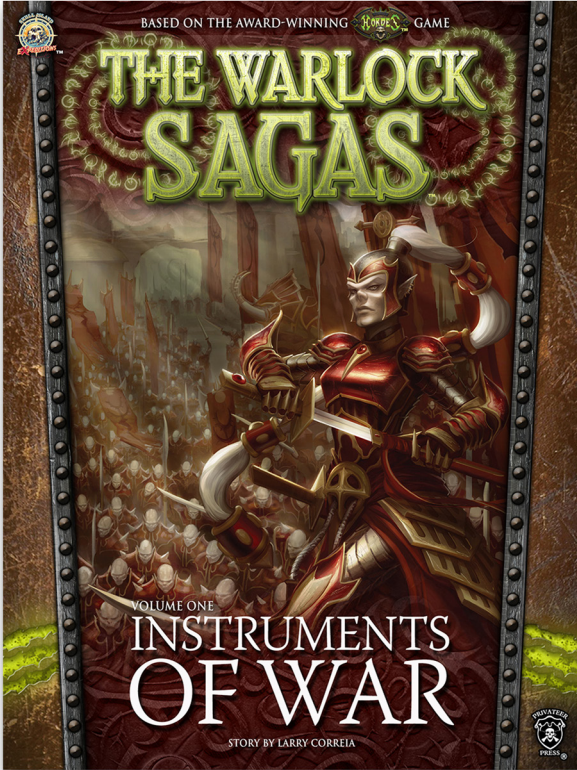
Zu: Little explored continent south of Immoren, engaged in lucrative trade with the Immorese for certain exotic goods.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Miles Holmes is a game designer with experience in the industry going back more than fifteen years. He's worked on a lot of games, including well known franchises like Mass Effect, Sonic the Hedgehog and Full Auto. He has also played tabletop games since he was a kid, and has spent far too much money on games like WARMACHINE. He writes fiction on his website, www.infinitygate.com, where he offers free content for interested parties. He's currently putting the finishing touches on the manuscript for his first full novel, *Tales of the Invisible Hand*.

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The Way of Caine

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