

Tirasi stared down at the miniature walled town on the table, hands resting as they often did on the sword and the warhammer suspended from her belt, face dour. I watched as she searched, not the maps or crude tokens marking units and positions, but the battlefield itself, her mind stretching over all that she had surveyed as the siege had begun. On the other side of the collection of intelligence, charts and equipment ledgers paced Lord Doraen, awaiting some answer from the woman.

The tent flap opened and in blew the screams of men and the deep bellow of intermittent cannon fire. Along with that gust of life and death entered a soldier; he doffed his sallet in respect and inclined his head to Doraen.

“M’lord; ma’am—“ the soldier began.

“Do not ‘ma’am’ me; I kill people for a living,” Tirasi spat back, her Altaenin accent slightly coloring the Ealthebad words. I could not see her eyes as she turned to face the man, but I knew her expression well: hard, but not aggressive, sure and unchangeable as mathematics and just as disheartening.

The soldier’s eyes widened briefly. He was a boy, perhaps eighteen, hastily thrown into armor when Lord Doraen mustered his troops. His sword hung loosely at his side, the scabbard’s metal chape scratched with the evidence of bouncing along the ground as he walked. His cuirass already showed signs of rust; the journey to Uthcaire had been mostly in the rain. Even now, a light drizzle could be heard during lulls in the shouting and shooting.

The boy continued to stand dumbfounded in the presence of a mercenary captain of the Seven Sisters. His eyes moved across Tirasi, from her blackened demi-plate to the stubble of close-shorn hair atop her head and the scars on her face. He might have thought of the Aenyr as he looked upon her, her visage at once beautiful and terrifying. I had thought that when I first saw her.

“Well, what is it?” Doraen asked, ceasing only momentarily from his pacing.

“M’lord, our scouts ‘ave returned. House Meradhvor’s coming to relieve Uthcaire. Lord Koradh leads them, sir, and they’re ‘bout a day’s ride out and as many as four thousand souls.”

Doraen slammed his gauntleted fist on the table, the model of Uthcaire bouncing and the unit markers toppling from their positions. He looked to Tirasi, anger in his brow but fear concealed within the corners of his eyes. “So, mercenary. I hired you to advise. Advise,” he said, waving his hand in dismissal of the soldier as he spoke.

“Abandon the siege and fall back to favorable terrain on which to meet Koradh’s forces. Meradhvor is an Artificer House; they will bring mechanica with their soldiers, perhaps even an airship.”

“We have mechanica.”

“You have two drudges, one clipper and one siegeman which had to be carried here in a wagon because you lack sufficient power for it. Do you know who does not lack power? Meradhvor. Abandon the siege.”

“I will not.”

“You’ll be outnumbered and beset on both sides. If you break Uthcaire, you’ll have to massacre its defenders to have any surety of position. Do you want that reputation?”

“That was already my intent, Tirasi. Uthcaire has violated its charter by building a standing army. A violation of the charter means the town is mine by right.”

Something welled up within me, and I had to fight to keep it down. Uthcaire’s “standing army” consisted of about two-hundred men raised only when an influx of bandits and predatory creatures had made the countryside too dangerous for travelers and merchants.

“Let us say that you do take Uthcaire and slaughter its defenders to a man,” Tirasi began, “Meradhvor is still set against you, and we have been unable to breach the Uthcaire wall these past days because the local guild of thaumaturgy has devoted itself to the town’s defense. These are not enemies it is wise to have. Even if you win this battle, can you win the war?”

“You think me a fool? I’ve a compact in place with the other lords. All of them want to see the Artificer Houses put in their place. If we take back the chartered towns and cities, the Houses will be forced to deal with us on better terms. We’ll control the venture companies and the Houses will have to go through us to get any recovered Artifice.”

Understanding washed over me, and I clenched my fists. This siege had never been about charters and feudal rights. I knew now that Doraen could not be convinced to abandon the siege. He saw his very livelihood at stake, and better to gamble it on one glorious endeavor than to watch it be consumed by the passage of time. I hoped that Tirasi had realized this, too.

She had. “Fine, but I am ending my contract after the siege is complete. I have no desire to remain in a conflict with the Houses. That you can do on your own.”

“You can’t walk away from your contract!” Doraen growled, again pounding his fist on the table, bouncing the figurines farther from where they had fallen. “Nyssë,” Tirasi said, snapping me from my reverie.

I searched momentarily her purpose. When I thought I’d discovered it, I began, “Contract clause twenty-three: ‘If the scope of conflict changes unexpectedly or new parties are added to the conflict, Captain may give one day’s notice of withdrawal from the Contract and shall be entitled to compensation for all services performed thereunder. If an engagement is imminent or exigent circumstances exist, the notice period shall be abated and shall begin to run only at the cessation of an immediate threat.’”

Doraen glowered at me, and I tried to fade into the canvas of the tent wall. Still looking at me rather than my captain, he said, “We’ll talk about that after. In the meantime, advise on how to proceed.”

Tirasi unsheathed her dagger, its bare blade glinting in the flicker of the torchlight that illumined the table. With the dagger’s tip, she traced an irregular semi-circle around the siegeworks, adroitly navigating around the figurines that

had fallen in the path of her line. “We build another line of defense here, facing outward. Motte-and-bailey style. We will shift the majority of your soldiers to the outer defense.”

“You really think that’ll work?”

“The tactic is described in military memoirs from the Ealthen Empire and has been used to great effect. It is the best option under the circumstances. You have two repeating ballistae—they are of little use against the town’s walls compared to the cannons, but they will prove helpful against troops advancing in the open. I will lead my company to break the siege, supported by a few units of your troops—”

“So that you get the best plunder.”

“Naturally. Nyssë.”

“Contract clause twenty-eight: ‘When—“

“Okay, okay,” Doraen muttered waving me off as he had the reporting soldier.

“Continue,” he said, turning to Tirasi.

My captain moved her dagger along the map, crossing over intervening terrain and figurines without attention, until it arrived at a forested area outside of the defensive line she had earlier traced. “You will withdraw your bodyguard and cavalry to here. No fires, no signals, no unnecessary talking. If you are discovered you will be enveloped and overrun. However, from this position, you will have the opportunity to withdraw if things go poorly for us. Otherwise, once Meradhvor commits its forces to the attack of our defenses, your cavalry will attack them from the rear, specifically pushing toward Koradh and his thaumaturges—the last thing we need is a large-scale thaumaturgical attack. You have an elderly court thaumaturge and two journeymen newly minted from university. They will not stand against hardened House war-thaumaturges.”

“It will take some time to arrange our attack. What if thaumaturges attack before then?”

“Nyssë.” Tirasi stated, as if my name itself were answer enough.

I stepped forward, timidity in my stomach but confidence in my voice, for this was my area of expertise. “The town’s thaumaturges have been maintaining their protection against our cannons for days now. They’ll lack the resolve and focus for any significant attack. House thaumaturges are indeed another matter, my lord. They should be considered additional artillery: they will require time and preparation before they unleash their attack, but it will be devastating if completed.

“It is unlikely we shall see such a thing in the vanguard. Meradhvor battle doctrine advises sending in the mechanica first and resorting to thaumaturgy only once mechanica has failed. To use both at once risks too much Flux, and that can be as disastrous for them as for us.”

Doraen turned back to Tirasi, his face expectant.

“Koradh is cautious, Doraen,” she said. “I do not think that he will break with standard doctrine.”

“And what happens after our charge? We’ll be stuck in and the horses will be no good.”

Tirasi looked back to the map, focusing upon it, seeing the men and women arrayed in battle colors moving across it in scale, visualizing the battle as she spoke. “In the chaos that follows an attack to the rearguard, our outer defenders will sally forth to meet the Meradhvor soldiers in the field. We will be an advancing anvil and you shall be the hammer.”

His face relaxing, Doraen turned away as he spoke, indicating the conclusion of the conference. “Very good, Tirasi. I will summon my commanders and give them their orders.”

With the slightest nod of the head, Tirasi excused herself. I quickly curtsied and followed. We pushed our way past the tent flap and into an unexpected calm. No screams of dying men, no thundering cannons, no clamor of battle; only the acrid, hellish perfume of gunpowder and the heavy artificial fog that accompanied it, clinging to the earth like a desperate lover. A lull had come in the siege while everyone attempted to catch his breath. And not choke on the fumes.

Doraen’s command tent lay outside the range of the town’s defenses. Tirasi knew the layout of the siegeworks intimately; she navigated them without the need for sight through the smoke of battle. Despite her armor, my captain stepped lightly on the muddy fields while the foul quagmire stuck to my boots until I had balls of wet avar for boots.

Before long, we came to the encampment of the company, distinguished by the black of the tents, the lack of Doraen’s livery, and the symbol of the red skull on the black banners. As usual, the men and women of the company had a relaxed air about them despite the conditions. Some threw tattered playing cards on an overturned barrel, laughing and jostling one another as money changed hands from round to round. Malten, a large Rukh and one of Tirasi’s sergeants, harassed the newest recruits as they cleaned harquebus locks, polished barrels, measured matchcord and filled powder horns. Despite my youth and inexperience in battle, my status as the company’s only thaumaturge spared me such abuse.

Only six months before, I had graduated from thaumaturgical studies at the University of Ilessa. The day after completing my studies I had signed on with the Company, fully cognizant that thaumaturges not subject to the Conclave and willing to serve in a mercenary outfit were few and far between and that Tirasi would not—could not—turn me away.

I had enjoyed participation in the privy meetings of the officers, as Tirasi had made me her adjutant in addition to my other duties. This gave me insight into the personalities of the Company leaders beyond the stern demeanors they wore for the newer soldiers, simultaneously an honest attempt to prepare them for the stress of war and Company hazing ritual.

For this reason, I knew that Malten had two selves. When at drill or—as we were now—at war, he was hard, his muscled physique accentuated by his laconic style of speech, readiness to dole out criticism to his charges, and reluctance to give praise that made those in his command so willing to strive for it. Away from the men, however, a different man came forward: a lover of poetry, a great jokester, a philosopher amused by his own cynicism but unwilling to let it go.

Malten’s appearance hid his second self well. He towered over the human men and women, at least a head taller, face angular, nose aquiline as if an arrow pointing to his pronounced canines—the lower of which protruded just slightly over his upper lip, ears pointed, long grey-white hair and beard a mane to frame and accentuate the leathery hue of his flesh. Together, he had the demeanor of perpetual snarler, the man who wished to speak often with deeds and rarely with words.

Just as Tirasi’s foot crossed the invisible barrier between the Company camp and the rest of the siegeworks, her soldiers jumped to attention, saluting with the combination of practiced discipline and graceful nonchalance earned only by hardened veterans. She waived them to ease.

“Shovels and shoulders, axes and asses. We’re building a trench and a wall. Malten, get Doraen’s officers to round up infantry to assist. Nyssë, gather the engineers and requisition the Lord’s mechanica for the heavy labor. Bring water and leave your armor; we’ve got a day and a night to build an outer defense. Make ready the arquebuses. We’ll work in shifts and those resting will stand watch.” Months of drill outside of campaign season obviated the need for additional commands. The mercenaries collected the necessary gear and formed up around their corporals. Within minutes, they were on our way to the site of the would-be barricades, having stripped down to the bare necessities of clothing, wrapped their legs as additional—though futile—protection against the mud, and gathered weapons and tools. The digging of a ditch and the felling of nearby trees commenced in short order.

I was delayed by nearly an hour as I waded through the muddy sludge that had become our home in search of Doraen’s engineers, followed by twenty minutes of bartering that earned me only a single drudge.

The mechanicum and its handler followed me to where I found that Tirasi, too, had removed her armor and stripped down to her breeches and shirt to dig with the soldiers. She tossed me a loaded arquebus and an ammunition pouch, ordering me to keep watch while she worked. I took my position on the small ridge of packed avar that slowly grew on the inside border of the ditch, a quantifiable measure of progress. Up and down the line on either side of me stood those of my brethren awaiting their own turn to work.

As the drudge stepped into the shallow ditch alongside my captain, some of the men began to sing a bawdy marching song, timing the action of digging with the lyrical rhythm. The whirring and thud of the mechanicum’s digging nearly drowned out their voices; Tirasi and I soon gave up on trying to join in.

The drudge beside her was built for hard labor, not for war. The first of its kind had been employed in the loading and unloading of ships, speeding the process over the usage of muscle, ropes and pulleys. The machine stood over six feet high, broad and squat in proportions and covered with shaped metal plates crudely approximating the human body. Under this whirred the cables, winches, pulleys and other Artifice that made the thing move.

Occasionally, a small blast of warm air would jettison from the mechanicum’s arm servos, conveniently buffeting Tirasi about the face. She glared at the device’s sculpted visage, possibly searching for some intelligence within the glow from the faceplate’s eyeslits that might recognize her consternation. Whatever animated the mechanicum focused only on the movements of the shovel and stood oblivious to all else around it.

I tried on several occasions to take Tirasi’s place and work a while, but she would not allow it, telling me that she needed me fresh for as long as possible. So, I provided what conversation I could, which mostly meant telling Tirasi about my youth in the Seven Sisters—she remained reticent about her own. All the while I cradled Tirasi’s arquebus in my arms, shifting it nervously from side to side but trying to maintain an illusion of nonchalance. Thaumaturgical or not, illusion has never been my strong suit.

A few hours after the digging began, Doraen and his horsemen galloped by—or rather over and between—jumping the trench between diggers and throwing soft mud indiscriminately. The air displaced by a horse passing only inches from my side disheveled my hair and caused me to wince. The riders moved swiftly toward the forest, where other soldiers were cutting logs for the barricade. Closer to the town walls, the cannons resumed firing, the leaden projectiles still crashing themselves against thaumaturgical abjurations, unable to touch the ring of stone that defended the city.

“How long until their thaumaturges break?” Tirasi asked.

“Depends on how many there are and the shifts that they’re working. They’re generating Flux faster than they can dissipate it, so it’s only a matter of time before they make a mistake in the working or the Flux itself gets them. They’re desperate to be using so much thaumaturgy at once.”

As if on cue, a sound like ice breaking could be heard even over the din of the cannons. A surge of hoarfrost rushed from the town walls and covered the ground. The dirt, which had softened under the recent rains, now took on a light but definitive crunch when the shovel hit. This lasted for only a moment before the ice melted, adding just enough moisture to the trench that puddles collected in its nadir. Tirasi could hear groans from her soldiers as they fought with the mud, suction now fighting against each pull of earth. The singing had stopped as the work dragged on. Tirasi looked up, expecting an answer from me.

“Flux.” I said, “They won’t be able to hold their thaumaturgical protections in place much longer. This is why Doraen should have brought more than an elderly crone of a court advisor and a couple of babes; he should have hired a dozen thaumaturges and he’d be able to do something about this defense.”

“He hired us. He couldn’t afford both and he made a decision. And it was not so long ago that you yourself were in your infancy, so to speak.” I blushed slightly at this, scanning the horizon watchfully to avoid meeting Tirasi’s gaze. I had joined during a long stint between contracts for the company and this siege would be my trial by fire. I remained as yet untested, possessed of a mercenary’s bravado but not having earned it.

I called the first alarm. “Captain,” I expelled suddenly, my body suddenly coming alive with the tingling of nerves. I raised my hand to point toward the horizon, where, just between the rain clouds and the tree tops, an airship gracefully floated, its blue and strangely-shaped sails being drawn up as it descended. Meradhvor must have taken Doraen’s attack quite seriously to have sent an airship.

We knew that the enemy would not risk the ship’s loss by bringing it within the range of cannons or gones. This meant only one thing: the delivery of troops for an early attack.

Tirasi pulled herself out of the ditch—by now waist deep—and climbed the mound and half-built barricade to join me where I stood. With a quick command, she summoned Malten and the other sergeants. She sent the officers to take those who had been working the ditch back to the camp to don armor and gather weapons while those who had been resting and watching now occupied what defensive positions there were.

The ditch remained shallower and thinner than it should be, and large gaps perforated the defensive structures. The repeating ballistae had been moved to makeshift redoubts in the line, but it would not be enough.

My captain waived for me to follow her and we made our way down the muddy line of the trench to where Doraen’s own soldiers had been working. There we encountered Craith, one of Doraen’s lieutenants, and Tirasi hailed her. The dour woman approached slowly and deliberately, never taking her gaze off Tirasi as she did. A soldier in the stereotypical sense, Craith was purpose and determination, fire and fury without subtlety or finesse; she made no effort to conceal her displeasure at having to treat with mercenaries.

The fighting men and women around them continued to work in the ditch, hardly looking up. They had made greater progress than in Tirasi’s section of the line, but the men had been working in their kit and neared the point of collapse. They would be of little help in the fight to come.

Doraen’s lieutenant spoke first, as if in hopes of heading off a conversation altogether. “Captain. I have seen the airship and I’ve spoken with the other officers. We’ll be ready by the time they arrive.”

“With all respect, lieutenant, I need your men to stop working. Your men will need rest if they are to be of any use to us.”

Craith’s frown filled the entire opening of her barbute. “Very well, Captain.” She turned slightly, what light that pierced the clouds above glancing off her polished cuirass, and passed some signals to her sergeants down the line. Shouts and insults pulled the men out of the ditch; some only made it far enough to sit on the cusp of the trench before loosening armor straps and searching for waterskins. When the orders had died down, only the occasional percussion of artillery fire punctuated the silence of men exhausted.

Tirasi turned momentarily in the direction of the cannons before locking eyes once again with Craith. “I unfortunately do not share your optimism, Lieutenant. If Meradhvor has dedicated an airship to their campaign here, we must assume that they have spared no expense in the other aspects of Koradh’s force. We should

expect that we will not have an easy time of it when his advance party arrives. I need you to have some of Doraen’s cannons repositioned so that we may use them against our attackers.”

“I cannot do that, Captain,” the lieutenant replied. Was there the hint of a curl at the edge of her mouth, a satisfaction at defying Tirasi’s request?

“Why not?”

“My lord’s orders, *ma’am*. We are not to delay or interfere with the bombardment of Uthcaire under any circumstances.”

“That airship has a limited cargo capacity. They could have dropped no more than a hundred men, and an infantry assault of that size could not hope to succeed against us.”

“You argue against your own request, Captain.”

Tirasi now felt a wave of anger wash over her. Anger at the foreseen result of this argument, anger at the shortsightedness of Doraen’s officer. “I do not,” she said slowly, deliberately. The words fell like hammer on anvil, and Craith struggled not to reveal her surprise at the aggressiveness of the tone.

Apparently, the lieutenant did not often have her pronouncements questioned.

She continued. “Koradh is a fine commander. He will not commit his troops to certain death except in the direst of circumstances, and not for the slight benefit a small infantry assault would buy him as the rest of his force advances. Therefore, it stands to reason that he has not sent his infantry. He has sent artillery. A few cannons battering us in the hours before his arrival will put him in far better stead than a handful of infantry. If we can answer in kind, we may be able to turn back his assault.”

“The cannons remain where they are,” Craith said bluntly.

“Then our best option is to send a force to meet them before they arrive and unlimber their artillery. May I borrow some of your soldiers?” The tone of Tirasi’s voice had changed; this had been a true request given in the manner of someone without the authority to simply command. I had never heard her speak in such a way before. It made no difference; the tactic had come too late.

“We have our orders,” the lieutenant stated to no one in particular. She had already turned away from Tirasi and toward her men. “My lord has given us his command and we will not disobey.” There would be no further discussion.

We made our way back to our camp hurriedly. “What’s that about?” I asked as we slogged through the mud.

“This is not the Sisters, Nyssë. Mercenaries are not held in high regard in the Tatters. The people here believe there is only honor in obeying the bonds of an oppressive nobility; they miss the importance of *choosing* to serve.” Clearly, my captain had seen this behavior before.

“But why did Doraen not tell his forces to heed your commands?”

“Because he thinks his blood makes him smarter than he is. Even he does not fully trust us because he pays us for our service. He struggles to hold on to a dying tradition of right and prowess by birth, even as it slips through his clutching

fingers. Have you not seen that that is the reason that he sends his own men to die and condemns the people of Uthcaire?”

We walked the rest of the way in silence. Tirasi had no use for my commentary on the matter. For all my studies at the university, I could add nothing to Tirasi’s understanding she had not already gleaned from experience. A recitation of the schema of the brightest of scholars on recent changes in the societies and economies of the Avar had no place here in the mud and blood of battle, where the reality of such things actually mattered. Anyway, it was not long before we arrived back at the camp.

The soldiers left off their tasks and gathered before Tirasi, ready to receive their orders.

“House Meradhvor has sent four-thousand men against us, due to arrive tomorrow. Our defenses are half-built, and an airship arrives for a first assault. We are outnumbered and unready. But what is our motto?”

“The Dead do not fear!” came the response.

“In their wisdom, Doraen’s officers will not reposition the cannons to resist an outward attack. This means we must assault the newly-arrived ourselves. We will bring none of Doraen’s men with us, for those who love their lives will lose them. But as for us, brothers and sisters—”

“The Dead do not fear!”

The Company of the Valorous Dead was a small company by most standards, with about three-hundred souls. Upon taking command, Tirasi had cultivated her outfit as a band of well-trained, well-experienced and well-equipped soldiers best suited to special actions, raids, skirmishes and deployments of extreme tactical significance. She had served in large companies destined for the meat-grinder of large battle, where soldiers were disposable commodities and the whole affair a simple business transaction in which ledger spaces tracked lives against coin. She would have none of it.

Half of her soldiers stood arrayed before us, and my captain looked to her corporals. “Fisella, swords and shields. Emdir and Eldo: Halberds. Asham and Rellen: gones, sword and buckler. Gather your kit and form up. Nyssë, on me.” I checked the short blade at my side, traded the harquebus for staff and wand and other sundry tools of my practice, and fell into step with my captain, as did the others. Tirasi left Malten in command of the half of the Company that remained behind the lines, needing no orders to guide him. She trusted him, and that was enough.

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We passed over the defensive line, between the stakes that had been erected and through the half-dug ditch. Once we hit open ground between the barricades and the forest, we broke into a run rather than a march, entering the cover of the tress as quickly as possible.

Our soldiers swept through the forest deliberately in loosely-spaced squads, moving fast enough to make good time but carefully enough to keep as quiet as possible. The Company had trained well in maneuvers of this sort and even I found myself well prepared—armor burnished, oiled and muffled, my waterskin full, and anything that might bang or clatter wrapped in spare rags. Communication came through hand signals passed up and down the line.

In the early spring, stealth in a wooded area becomes far easier. The crunch of dead and dry leaves has faded away and only the hazards of twigs and branches blown down by the wind remain. Still, the precarious movement proved taxing as the we traversed miles of forest to close with the enemy.

House Meradhvor’s forces moved without concern for silence; they could not have managed stealth if they had intended to. Drudges pulled sakers, demi-culverin and gunpowder wagons, their clanking apprising the Company of mechanica in the field well before they could be seen. Two heavier Clippers and nearly one hundred soldiers accompanied the guns.

Tirasi signaled us to array ourselves for ambush. The gunners readied weapons, waiting until receiving the signal to light their matchcord, lest the tell-tale glow give them away.

One of the Meradhvor corporals had a keen eye, but not keen enough. He yelled “Ambush!” just before the first volley of harquebus fire slammed into their ranks. Many forces would have fallen into disarray at such an attack, but the Artificer Guilds trained their soldiers from youth. There were no further shouts, no sounds of panic, just the mechanical response of soldiers closing ranks and going about the tasks which had been long-drilled into them. They casually stepped aside the bodies of fallen brothers-in-arms without attention.

As the Company’s gunners reloaded for another salvo, we were struck by incoming fire. Not the loud and smoke-belching retort of more firearms but the quiet, fearsome twang of crossbow strings. This twang, however, came in too-rapid succession for the number of men wielding the weapons. Repeater crossbows, self-loading through the mysteries of Artifice. Their thin, sharp bolts could penetrate even plate at such a close range, and the volume of projectiles easily outmatched the barrage we had given.

Our gunners had taken some cover amongst the trees in preparation for the ambush, but their truest defense had been the artificial fog disbursed by angry gones, though even this proved of little use against the sheer mass of incoming fire. Early in the fight we had already taken severe casualties.

Outmatched though we might have been, we would not be routed by such a show of force; my brothers- and sisters-in-arms had encountered Guild forces before, knew the power of the repeater crossbow and had drilled their response.

After the first exchange of fire, the battlefield came alive with noise. Shouts of orders, the screams of the wounded, and the rumbling and hissing of the mechanica became a world unto itself, an easy place to lose oneself. Tirasi glanced regularly to me, keeping close watch as I wrestled with a fear for which I had not been—could not have been—adequately prepared.

My captain yelled a single word in the Company’s battle-tongue. Only the officers knew the secret language, so they in turn issued their squad commands in Altaenin.

Fisella ordered her soldiers to close ranks; they formed a shield wall and began a slow advance. Tirasi and I fell in close behind them. The soldiers parted just enough to pass around trees like a river moving gracefully around rocks. They had locked step, the squad becoming a single entity, now massive and dreadful.

By now the surviving gunners had unleashed their second volley, searching out where they could the men who had sent their brothers and sisters to an early—but not unexpected—grave. Between receiving this fire and exhausting the last of their quarrels before needing to reload themselves, the House infantry left an opening.

We exploited that opening immediately. The soldiers in front of me broke into a charge, barreling full force into the enemy line. I tried to remain at pace with them, colliding into Tirasi’s back as the lines impacted the enemy and stopped. She turned to me, her face as I had never seen it before, fierce and predatory, eyes glazed over with battle-fury, possessed of a violent spirit. “Stay behind me,” she said, her voice terse and gravelly. I did as I was told.

Guildsmen armed for the press of close combat stepped forward from the mass of crossbowman to meet the charge, and now the battle began in earnest. I clutched my staff in one hand and drew my short sword, to no avail. Tirasi or Fisella had assigned several of the company soldiers to defend me in close formation; there was naught I could do but watch. I had seen Tirasi spar with others before, saw her practice with blade and other steel, but I had never seen her in true violence. She lost herself to her training and experience, ceasing for a time to be my captain and becoming a living weapon.

She directed her strikes, feinting high so that a swordsman raised his shield to cover his face and reversing to strike him in the now-exposed calf. Her dagger followed as the man dropped his guard, its hardened point missing his heart but puncturing the thin breastplate and sliding between the ribs into his right lung. With the recovery of the strike, the man’s breath became ragged; he dropped his armaments and collapsed.

She slid her right foot back and to the left, pivoting herself out of the line of attack of an assaulting spearman. By now, the first crush of the lines had devolved into a mass skirmish, with foes alternately having room for grand swings or being pressed too close for anything but daggerwork.

The spear’s initial thrust narrowly missed my captain, striking again with a serpent’s speed. Tirasi moved backwards, passing her front leg behind the other in each movement to alternate her forward hand, the rotation of her body adding power to her warding strikes. The spearman followed, coveting the boast of felling the enemy’s leader. He failed to measure his distance to the enemy as he closed with her.

After avoiding three more strikes, my captain reversed her motion, moving forward as she parried instead of backward. This put her too close to the spearman

for him to recover his weapon and thrust again. He had time just enough to realize his mistake before he died, looking down to the sword in his neck and the dagger pushed against his spear.

My protectors had pushed me backwards and away from the fray. My hand twitched with the anticipating of swinging the blade I had spent so much time learning to use—not well, perhaps, but passably. Yet I remained thankful that my first experience of battle allowed me to do what I do best: to learn.

In an instant of respite, Tirasi surveyed the field as I surveyed her. The battle had become a large arrangement of individual melees, an ad-hoc tournament where the survivors of each duel sought one another out to fight the next round.

Something caught my eye and snapped me from my thoughts, the battlefield coming back into focus in a rush of sound and color. The hulking thing, too large to be a single soldier, reflected what light penetrated the green canopy above us, clanking and grunting as it moved, gaining momentum, shapes of the rebounding light changing more rapidly as it approached. A House clipper, the true Artifice of war in all its dread glory, charging straight for Tirasi.

There was a shout: “Captain!” The voice came from without, not within, but was nevertheless my own. Tirasi had time enough only to brace herself against the imminent blow.

The strike lifted her off her feet, throwing her into the air and against a nearby tree. She slumped to the ground, unmoving, and I feared her dead. I pushed against my protectors, raising my sword, but a strong and steady arm held me back with little effort. Then I remembered that I am a thaumaturge; my will is a weapon. But thaumaturgy would not suffice in a situation such as this, when there is no time to carefully weave a working. I resigned myself to base sorcery, drawing power through myself and shaping the working in my mind’s eye. My choices were limited: I could not see the pulleys and wires animating the mechanicum to snap them and nothing too complex could be safely achieved with a sorcery.

I selected a working I had told myself I would never use. It seemed, well...trite. A spear of lightning shot from my fingers, forking into the mechanicum’s head and legs, branching from both in search of other nearby objects to which it could attach itself. If the experience were unpleasant for the clipper—and who knows what they experience—it was little better for me. I could feel the lightning coursing through my body before exiting my fingertips, doing no damage to me but leaving an upsetting tingling in my bones that lasted well beyond the working itself. Perhaps once was enough for that trick.

In an instant, the lightning disappeared again, its afterglow stinging the eyes of anyone who had been unfortunate enough to be looking anywhere between me and the clipper. The mechanicum stuttered momentarily, little bubbles of briefly-molten metal forming in the plates struck by the sorcerous attack, smoke wafting from its oversized frame. Enough to get its attention, perhaps enough to slow it some, but far too little to take it out of the fight. With a malicious glow from its eye sockets, the machine turned to face me and my defenders.

“Sorry! Sorry!” I yelled, fully expecting us to be thrown about like so many jacks at bowls. My companions closed ranks into a shield wall. But three of our brave halberdiers had partnered to corral the clipper, alternating their thrusts and positions to keep the mechanicum from being able to focus on any one of them. Behind them, Tirasi began to stir. Her breastplate had been dented into concavity with the blow. She groped for a small knife in her boot, her eyes wild and unfocused as she loomed on the precipice of consciousness. Her fingers pulled the blade lightly from the sheath...and dropped it. Fumbling fingers foraged to find the blade before the clipper renewed its interest in her. Her breaths became ever more ragged, and I feared that she would suffocate while I watched helplessly. Finally, she tore the breastplate free, deep gasps allowing her to step back from the ledge. My captain looked for her bastard sword, finding it broken from the fall. Her parrying dagger had disappeared. As she hobbled to her feet, she pulled the warhammer from its ring on her belt, reentering the fray at a meager lope, an awkward yawp passing from her lips where a war cry should have been.

The mechanicum had already crushed two of the halberdiers before Tirasi rejoined the fight. The last one standing, an Aen named Ithladen, cloaked and masked per the etiquette of his kind, had resorted to his sword after the clipper had casually snapped the haft of his polearm in two. Ithladen ducked and weaved, feinting and striking tentatively to create an opening for our captain.

Tirasi struck the mechanicum in its calf-plate as she moved past, bowing herself to avoid the backhand strike of the clipper’s attempted retaliation. Her blow had left only a slight dent in the clipper’s plate; though slow, the machine had been armored for thick fighting and—as it had done—could easily outmatch a number of fleshly soldiers.

The clipper awkwardly pivoted toward Tirasi, who struck a blow to the mechanicum’s knee as it repositioned itself. Now Ithladen seized the opening, gripping the blade of his sword with his off-hand, guiding its point between the clipper’s armored plates, just as he might with an armored knight. A gout of blue fire escaped from between the plates as Ithladen’s blade caught between gears and shattered. The mechanicum dragged its left foot as it turned.

Seizing the clipper’s hesitation, Tirasi attempted a blow to its head. She had to jump to reach it, flinching in pain at the exertion. The blow only worsened things; the hammer rang off the clipper’s head with a visible vibration in the weapon’s haft. Tirasi grimaced.

The mechanicum had recovered as she landed and fought to stay balanced. The clipper seized my captain with one hand, lifting her several feet off the ground. Ithladen frustratedly slashed against the clipper’s backplate with the broken remnant of his sword, all the while clutching his left hand to his side to staunch the bleeding where the splintering blade had scratched him.

My sorcery had proved too weak to be of much use, so I fumbled through my mind for some thaumaturgy that might turn the tide. Useless fragments of workings from my early studies bubbled to the surface: a working for the growth of plants, one for the levitation of small objects, one for the abjuration of rain. All the

while a voice within me prodded, reminding that I had no time for a thaumaturgical working anyway. My captain would have the life crushed out of her long before I could run through the mental constructs necessary to bring a working into being. In my frustration and fear, I mindlessly seized upon the first full thaumaturgy I could remember and began shouting the incantations that brought structure to my thoughts as I drew and shaped the Power into a tangible thing.

Fortunately, Tirasi’s life was not in my hands; the incantation I’d been reciting belonged to working for the cleaning of kitchen pots. I’d failed the first true test of my battle-mettle, though my companions would be none the wiser for it. Before I could stop myself from completing the working, there came a bark that overpowered my own voice. I blinked as the clipper’s left arm—thankfully the one not grasping my captain—tore itself from the rest of the machine and flew for a distance before coming to rest on the ground. Ithladen rolled aside with almost-preternatural reflexes.

The clipper dropped Tirasi to the ground as it turned slowly, searching out its assailant. A second cannonball smashed into the machine’s chestplate, driving it back a step before it collapsed, the glow from its eye sockets fading to darkness. The sight had stopped my mouth when I couldn’t through my own volition. Another sign perhaps that I’d chosen the wrong profession. When I, too scanned for the cannoneers, a wave of relief washed over me. Eldo and some of his soldiers had seized the enemy’s artillery and turned it against them.

I rushed to Tirasi’s side. She moved cautiously, first opening and closing her fingers before trying her limbs. Satisfied she’d not broken her spine, though nursing a few broken ribs, she sat up with a pained exhalation. I extended my hand to her and Tirasi swung her arm in a haphazard arc; she groaned as I hauled her to her feet.

“What happened?” she asked in voice reduced to a ghost of its usual self. Around us, the sounds of battle had quieted to the soft cries of the slowly dying and a few distant exchanges reaching their end. The men were checking casualties, both theirs and their enemies. Those enemies found alive they finished. They took more time with their own, examining their injuries to determine which could be helped and who had slipped beyond return. Those mortally wounded they comforted as best they could before giving them the dagger of mercy. From the dead of both sides they looted freely.

Fisella, Asham and Eldo approached, each of them battered and beaten. The corporals not among them lay dead or dying.

“Report,” Tirasi managed in her gravelly whisper.

The three looked at one another and Asham stepped forward. “Captain, the enemy is defeated, with about a dozen surrendering and the rest in the embrace of death. As far as we can tell, there were no thaumaturges among our foes.”

“Koradh would not have risked them here,” Tirasi interjected. “Continue.”

“We’ve sustained heavy losses, perhaps as many as one half of our contingent.”

“Any good news?”

“Yes, Captain. We’ve destroyed two clippers and captured the enemy’s cannons. Four of them. The Meradhvor drudges do not seem to differentiate between our men and theirs; they’re obeying our commands.”

In the distance, Doraen’s cannons again roared to life. Now, artillery from the city answered the barks of besieging gones with retorts of their own.

“The city’s thaumaturges have fallen,” I commented.

“Let us return to the siege, then,” Tirasi managed, holding a hand to her chest. “Kill those who surrendered; we do not have the resources to guard them. Do it mercifully, for they have fought bravely. Get our soldiers rallied up and ready to move.”

A few moments passed before the looters could be pulled away from their hunt and mustered. We lacked time to reorder our squads, so ragged bands of men and women, uneven in ranks, made their way back to the siegeworks. The drudges and cannons, loosely attended by those who had captured them, lagged slightly behind.

Despite our minor victory, morale was flagging. We’d lost many brothers- and sisters-in-arms in the past few hours, without time to properly attend to the rites of the dead, much less to honor them in true warrior fashion. How long would it take us to recover from these losses? How many campaign seasons? I knew not, and wondered how the defeat of Meradhvor’s advance forces would influence the future of the siege.

Beside me, Tirasi drew in a deep breath, grimacing, and burst forth in a marching song. The corporals joined in by the second line, and we had all lent our voices by the fourth. We sang:

*Lift your swords and march to war,
Matters not if rich or poor,
Join your brethren in the field.*

*Meet your foe and meet your fear,
Come to where Death draweth near,
Seek to die before ye yield!*

*See the sunlight on helms dance,
Behold glittr’ing of the lance,
Steel without and steel within.*

*Hear the call of trumpets loud,
Earn the price of bearing proud,
Bleed with us, your newfound kin.*

*Trade your blood for gold and fame,
Lose your life but gain a Name.
Fight ye on through hurt and pain,*

*Fight ye on through sun or rain.
Bellow ye with the cannons' roar;
This it is to go to war!*

*Gather'd up for stories grand,
Take this avar; make your stand,
Live forever in mighty tales!*

*Leave lover and home behind,
Embrace Death, mistress unkind,
Cross the Sea whereon she sails.*

*If dawn fails to break 'pon thee,
You'll lie under old ash tree,
With no marker for your grave.*

*But if you live glory follows,
Leave others to their sorrows,
And join the ranks of the brave!*

*Trade your blood for gold and fame,
Lose your life but gain a Name,
Fight ye on through hurt and pain,
Fight ye on through sun or rain.
Bellow ye with the cannons' roar;
This it is to go to war!*

Before the song could end, some of us added the spur of another verse formed in times forgotten, likely in the stupor of celebratory drinking:

*See the foes a-gathered round,
Time to put them in the ground!*

Tirasi's singing voice did not charm even at the peak of health, but she growled on just the same. After the first song, Ithladen began another, an ancient and beautiful song of the Aenyr, sad and hopeful and moving all the while. It fit our mood perfectly, though few of us understood the words.

As we neared the siegeworks, the culverins and sakers swallowed up our songs. Joined by those who had stayed behind, we formed teams to pull the cannons, the ball and the powder into positions across the half-formed trench we'd had dug. The ground remained soft and muddy from the rain and much time and many expletives were expended before we could form the artillery pieces into a battery. Even then, the crews needed time to check the weapons, arrange the ammunition, make the first adjustments to aim and otherwise ready to fire.

Many of the men and women of the Company had been trained to crew artillery, but none could boast that she was a master artilleryist. The teams proved capable but slow, and the purchase of time had grown costly with the town’s few demi-culverin unleashing a steady rain of grapeshotte in response to Doraen’s siege guns.

The shotte fell upon some of us, dropping those who were not killed immediately to their knees. I rushed forward, raising my staff high to expand my zone of influence, already drawing Power as I moved, my right hand forming spastic hand signs, mumbling spilling from my lips as I formed the progression of thoughts and mental structures to shape the sorcery. The Power for the working coursed through my mind and body, tugging at the fabric of my being, gently at first but more insistent as I continued to draw upon it. My muscles twitched; my mind pulsed. The very potentiality of the Power became tangible, its unpredictability reminding me that if I lost control over it, it could become *anything*.

A shimmering shield sprang to life in a sphere encompassing me and as many of the cannon crews as I could manage. An irony, perhaps; the thaumaturges defending the town had used the same sort of sorcery for so many days. We immediately became an even more splendid target for the enemy artilleryists, and soon the heavy splatter of loose shotte against the shield became a heavy hail, a torrent, a deluge.

Some of the shotte began to penetrate the shield, slowed enough on its way through to patter harmlessly off the ground or the soldiers within. I leaned into the working, moving my foot forward into a fighting stance, my incantations became ever louder, drowning out the sound of the cannons and coming from somewhere outside me. My vision narrowed and darkened, reduced to a narrow tunnel through which I could only dimly view the battlefield before me.

As the iron rain continued, sweat gathered on my forehead, in my armpits and at the top of my buttocks, soon joined by a trickle of blood from my nose, staining the clothing under my armor and forming rivulets on my breastplate.

I heard a voice, tiny and distant, at the edge of my fading consciousness. Tirasi. She ordered the artilleryists to move faster. The quickened pace proved costly: I could vaguely hear the shouted curses of the soldiers as they stopped to retrace their steps to ensure that they hadn’t missed a vital part of the loading and readying procedure.

The air became thick about me, heavy with the smell of ozone as some of the Power bled off from the working, manifesting Flux. Short bursts of lightning stretched from empty places in the air to the ground, the crack of accompanying thunder deafening. Clods of avar began to float above the ground, some of them even reaching eye level and passing into my limited field of vision, little gatherings of grass and mud that might have been picturesque in different circumstances.

Another distant voice, Malten’s, yelling to the crews, “Get back you fools! Powder is explosive!” As if they had not realized, the men suddenly backed away. My knees began to buckle under me and what little vision remained retreated to a pinpoint. I fell backward, caught by pairs of hands that dragged me to the relative

safety of the nearby earthworks. As my vision slowly returned, I watched shotte fly through the area my shield had recently protected, felling several of the retreating soldiers. My heart sank for it, but the still-crackling miniature thunderstorm distracted me. How much Power had I drawn?

An arc of white-hot energy reached out from empty sky and danced along the cannon battery, delicately alighting on each. The pieces fired in quick succession, rolling back on their trunions and vomiting fire and death. They had not yet been aimed and sent the balls pell-mell against the town wall, gouging rough craters out of the stone but accomplishing little else.

I was left leaning against the side of the ditch where most of the Company had taken cover, Ithladen delicately setting me down after carrying me the last stretch of the way to safety. I remained in a daze, left only to observe my companion’s continued efforts.

Asham and his reassembled squad arose from the trench behind the cannons where most of the Company had taken cover. Those under his command leveled their arquebuses and fired a volley toward the top of the wall. As they ducked back down to reload, Fisella’s squad, now armed with gones, took their place and fired a second volley. In well-drilled time, Eldo’s squad took its place on the line and fired its own shotte at the town’s defenders.

One of the newer recruits, a young man still without a beard, crawled down the trench toward Tirasi and Malten. “We c-can’t t-take the city,” he blubbered, tears forming at the corners of his eyes and running down his dirty face. His sallet had come loose and drifted to the back of his head, more a bonnet than a helm. Malten seized the recruit, driving his fingers under the top of the man’s breastplate and pulling him close by the straps. When they were nearly nose-to-nose and the soldier could see the crags and scars in his sergeant’s battle-worn face, Malten spoke to him. “Do you remember the words you spoke when you first joined?”

“Wh-what?” the recruit responded.

“The words, recruit, do you remember them?”

“Y-yes.”

“Say them.”

“I-I-I...” he began.

“Say them!”

“I, Ethem of Ansyrr, do hereby pronounce myself dead to the world. Today I join the Company of the Valorous Dead; I acknowledge my life forfeit in service to those who hold our contract. Should I complete my term of service, I may one day return to the world of the living, but I know that that day may never come, and so I shall live as one already dead. Being dead, fear cannot touch me. Cowardice shall not hold me. Injury cannot delay me. Blood shall not trouble me. Being dead, I have already crossed the most fearful threshold in existence; I shall not be moved.”

“Good,” Malten said, his deep voice carrying something of both approval and taunt within it. “Now, does it matter whether we win?”

“N-no.”

“Good. Why?”

“B-Because soldiers fight.... The fighting is the important part...Nothing can take the fight from us.”

“Good. The fight is who we are. And because of that, we may lose the field, but we are never defeated.”

The boy nodded, the sallet sliding back and forth with movement of his head and the chinstrap tugging on his throat.

“Then get on that cannon and let’s bring down that wall!”

Still visibly trembling, Ethem pulled the helm upright on his head, and stood to join the artillery crews. As he stood, the sallet again fell into bonnet position. Ethem reached up to his chinstrap, but before he could right the helm, the ball of an harquebus struck him in the face. A loud metallic ping sounded from where the projectile exited his skull and dented the inside of the sallet.

Malten laughed, a riotous laugh better suited to a night of heavy drinking than the battlefield. Nevertheless, Tirasi found herself smiling, too. There was nothing for it; they could laugh at the young man’s misfortune and move on or they could give into fear themselves.

“Bad Wyrgeas on that one,” Malten said as he looked to Tirasi, still chuckling. His face suddenly turned serious and he bellowed again to the troops. “This is not a one-sided argument! Get those cannons firing and we make our clever retort!”

With the fire of the Company’s harquebuses forcing the town’s defenders to take cover, the artillery crews returned to the cannons. Uthcaire continued to exchange fire with its besiegers for another bloody hour of attrition and contested will. Our soldiers continued to fall, but death had become an occasional visitor rather than constant companion. Between Doraen’s own cannons and the added punch of those seized from House Meradhvor, Uthcaire could only buy itself time; it could not resist indefinitely.

Thus, surprise took none in the Company when—buffeted by extended barrage—a section of the town’s stone wall began to collapse. The destruction was anti-climactic; rather than crumbling into dust, the stones began to roll off the wall, pouring dirt from the earthworks between stone encasements like a torn sack. Some time ago, the citizens of Uthcaire had fortified their walls against modern artillery by building a second stone wall behind the first and packing the center with dirt. This conflict had been a long time coming.

The erupting avalanche of sandy earth created an improvised ramp by which the besiegers could now reach the top of the wall. A final volley of fire burst from the walls before the gones of both sides fell silent.

Tirasi and Malten stood up simultaneously from their positions of cover, and the soldiers they led followed in kind. I watched Tirasi try to shake dizziness from her head as she stood, attempting to hide the affliction from her men. She looked to her sergeant. “Ready the men for assault, but do not charge in just yet; let us give Doraen’s men the glory of the forlorn hope.”

Malten called the squad to order while Tirasi made her way down the line. She half-sprinted, half-hobbled over the craters and debris of the ravaged

siegeworks in the search of Doraen’s officers. I had recovered enough to stagger after her, the others in the Company too busy attending more immediate matters to stop me.

She found Craith, still huddled with her men behind pavises and makeshift fortifications. Wild-eyed, she removed her barbute and threw it at Doraen’s lieutenant, disturbing the silence that had fallen over the soldiers with the clang of metal on metal as one helm struck another.

Craith had been crouched on her haunches; the unexpected blow rolled her to her side. As she struggled to right herself and return to her feet, Tirasi grabbed her by her shoulder-straps and hauled her to standing. Without averting her gaze from the officer, Tirasi barked, “Stand up, all of you,” the gravelly harshness of her voice lending the command the smoldering heat of a coal just beginning to glow.

The lieutenant’s face turned hard; her hand slid to the rondel on her belt. Before she could pull it, my captain brought the muzzle of a wheellock pistol to Craith’s chin. If she looked down her nose, she could see into the barrel.

“No.” Tirasi said quietly. Craith’s hand moved away from the dagger’s hilt. “What do you think you’re doing?” Craith asked, somewhere between fury and incredulity.

“What are you doing, lieutenant? The wall has fallen and you are cowering behind barrels and sacks like a game of seekers. My men have been bleeding and dying, fighting to bring down that wall, and you—“

“We’ve been doing the same thing. Look around, Captain.” The lieutenant pushed her words through clenched teeth.

They had been fighting and dying—the cannons still distorted the air with escaping heat and soldiers in Doraen’s colors littered the ground, some caught by shotte from the walls but more laid low by wooden shrapnel from the defensive works. Farther afield, Doraen’s soldiers had similarly hesitated, unsure of what to do now that the defenses had fallen. We could faintly hear the cries of sergeants berating their men to ready themselves for a fight.

“It is not enough,” she spoke softly. “I have lost far too many good men because you refused to aid me. I will not give you a chance to do the same again.” But as she spoke, she looked to Craith’s soldiers and let the pistol’s barrel fall to her side, still maintaining a hold on the lieutenant with her left hand.

My captain gathered herself and attempted to speak with grace and authority, but her voice came as the sharp rasp of a sword leaving the scabbard, the harsh clatter of armor on the march.

“You men have left your homes to fight for your lord, and many of your brothers now lie in the mud. War is not the heroic endeavor you thought it would be, and you are afraid that the worst is yet to come because you do not know what awaits inside those walls once you scale them.

“I understand that. That fear is not a bad thing—it will keep you alive. But do not let it be a roar that causes you to tremble and cling to the earth. Make of it a whisper that guides without ruling. Gather yourselves and take up your arms. Your foe is more afraid than you, and with good cause.

“They have less experience than you. Their weapons are the tools and implements they have at hand, not the fine steel your lord has given you. They are outnumbered two to one, those who know how to fight ten to one.

“Now is the time for pillage and plunder, the time for recompense for what you have suffered. The town is yours. Let us go and take it!”

Fewer than half the words were Tirasi’s own. Most were lines from plays we had seen during the winter while she courted employers. A monologue from a history performed by a traveling troupe whose lord’s name I had forgotten provided the fodder for her rallying speech.

Their artifice showing through, the words fell short. The soldiers stared at her blankly, as if they struggled to find the reason for the sound of her voice. They’d undoubtedly noticed her lack of a breastplate and thought her mad. Her appearance had likely only reinforced the idea of her they had by reputation anyway. Tirasi’s shoulders fell, exhausted and resigned.

Craith had placed a hand on Tirasi’s back. Not in resistance or anticipation of attack, but in support. Where Tirasi had gripped the lieutenant’s shoulder, she now found herself leaning against it.

The lieutenant pulled Tirasi close. “Our mercenary sister is correct. The treachery of Uthcaire’s citizens has called us from our homes to prove our vows to our lord. We have marched in rain and mud, fought in smoke and tumult, died in bands and droves to show our loyalty. And the One looks down upon us with favor in our righteousness; They smile upon us and grant us a path to victory. Look,” she said, pointing to the breach, “there lies our path. Follow me into it, and let us show these turncoats the wrathful vengeance of the virtuous!”

Tirasi threw a sidelong glance at Craith, an expression of respect passing across her face. The soldiers stood in response to their lieutenant’s words, raising their weapons and voices as a unit. Craith drew her own sword and pointed it to the broken wall, a war cry rising from deep within her.

As Craith began to move, Tirasi pushed her lightly on the shoulder, signaling to her to lead the attack on her own and to leave the mercenary captain behind. Without looking back, Craith took the message. The soldiers fell into rough ranks, neither sprinting nor walking as they navigated the rough craters to the breach.

We made our way back to our own troops as Craith’s assault began. The hale and uninjured had formed ranks; at their master’s arrival Malten signaled them to a determined march to the wall. Unlike the return from their forested skirmish, they raised no voices in song as they marched, nor even to speak. They worked together in silence, their ranks orderly and precise, their determination palpable in the quietude that surrounded them.

Again, we joined the rear of the formation. Despite her silent protestations, Malten succeeded in keeping Tirasi behind her men. Still lacking a cuirass, too beaten and exhausted to put up a real fight, her presence in the front rank would only prove a liability to herself and to her brothers-in-arms.

Tirasi silently observed the onslaught, giving occasional hand signals to be sent down the lines to the corporals. Even this lasted only a short time before the

combatants became too scattered for any semblance of organized command. From then on, Tirasi could only observe.

The front ranks scaled the breach and crossed into the town’s interior, where the fighting remained desperate, spread throughout streets and passageways splayed outward from the wound in the settlement’s defenses. The defenders had prepared ambushes, holing up in homes and business buildings to launch sudden volleys of harquebus fire into their attackers at close range. Others had formed gangs armed with hammers, axes, sickles and any other tool that could be turned to war, rushing groups of the assaulting soldiers as they struggled to navigate a tangled web of unfamiliar alleys and sidestreets.

We watched as the men and women of the Company began the brutal task of kicking in doors, hacking and stabbing at any who resisted them and quietly warning any unresisting townsfolk to remain in their homes on penalty of death. As we slowly followed in the macabre wake of the forward soldiers, I could not help but take in sights and sensations that would never leave me, and I once again doubted that I was strong enough to live the life of adventure I had chosen for myself.

A woman, crazed with grief, turned an alleyway and charged headlong for us, the mad townswoman’s only weapon a stub of a knife useful only in the kitchen. Tirasi shot the woman down without emotion or sound other than the impassioned cry of her pistol. Not much farther, we crossed into an alley littered with dead soldiers liveried in Doraen’s colors. Bullet holes in the bodies and the walls of adjacent buildings told the entire story in a single image. Craith lay among them, her pale face now twisted in surprise and agony.

We left Doraen’s officers to round up the town’s survivors. Tirasi allowed the Company’s troops a short bout of looting while she and her officers selected a command center within the town’s walls.

We settled on the local thaumaturgical guildhouse, both for the spoils of war it would offer and its strategic value. Inside, the Company’s officers found themselves forced to pay homage to the dead; the bodies of the town’s thaumaturges lay in the midst of a large ritual space hastily prepared in the house’s great hall. Eight in all, they had each sustained their protective working over the town until all had died, sacrificing themselves for the hope of holding out until help arrived. Tirasi ordered that the bodies be shown the utmost respect and that, once time permitted, they be given their last rites with full honors.

But at present, time did not permit, and as soon as the space had been repurposed, Tirasi commanded her officers to gather the Company to prepare for Koradh’s impending assault. They formed teams, commandeered Doraen’s troops, and went about the arduous task of relocating their cannons and supplies to the interior of the town wall.

The important pieces of materiel recovered, the soldiers hastily broke down the defenses in the earthworks outside of the town and brought what handiwork they could salvage to construct a barricade over the collapsed portion of the wall. Then began the long vigil for the arrival of Koradh’s forces, when the erstwhile attackers would themselves become desperate defenders.

Gathered together on the town walls, clustered around artillery batteries and behind crenellations and stoneworks, our Company now numbered less than one hundred souls able to fight, with over half killed in the fighting and many others under the care of Company medics in the buildings near the guildhouse, too grievously hurt to continue fighting that day or perhaps any other. The night passed roughly; we took shifts on the watch and struggled for some modicum of sleep amongst the rustling of those awake and several false alarms. Only when the morning broke and light again pierced the clouds did Koradh’s army array themselves at the edge of the forest, outside of cannon range.

Even at that distance, we could see the colorful House banners fluttering in the wind. That same wind carried distant voices to us from the far side of the field, audible but too indistinct to make out. We readied ourselves, lighting matchcord and loading the artillery pieces, but Tirasi raised both her hands in sign to cease.

We set aside our tasks and watched the enemy.

A light flashed in the House battleline and Tirasi called for her spyglass. After a long look, she passed it to me. When I brought it to my eye, I could make out Koradh immediately, identifiable by the extravagance of his dress and armor. He stared back at me through his own device.

The House general’s armor could not but captivate. Bulkier and thicker than even tournament plate, it resembled a miniature clipper or siegeman as much as harness; it, too, was festooned with wires and cables as if a marionette. Runic inscriptions inlaid in gold accented the blackened armor, and I thought that I could make out a faint glow from the symbols. From beneath Koradh’s green silk cloak bulged a protrusion from the backplate that gave the general a hunchbacked appearance. Without seeing beneath the cloak, I knew what would be found there—the Artifice that powered the armor, that allowed Koradh to move faster than a normal man in armor heavier than any man should be able to move in, that gave him the strength of a mechanicum unburdened by its low intelligence.

Koradh’s army indeed appeared to number four-thousand, and I could identify heavy artillery, thaumaturges and other specialists within his ranks. Fortunately, most of our own force remained hidden by the wall itself; Koradh would be forced to rely upon any intelligence he had received to guess at numbers. The general turned to speak with a fat balding man, arrayed not in the vestments of war but those of court. The man held a leather-bound book in one hand and a quill in the other; he leaned forward to show Koradh the pages of the tome. I tried to read the man’s lips as he spoke to the general, but he spoke in a tongue I could not understand.

Koradh only looked at the pages in the book and nodded, stoic and stonefaced. When the fat man had finished speaking, Koradh again held the spyglass to his left eye to survey the enemy. His mouth moved as he swept the eyepiece across the town wall, as if he were calculating or reading to himself. Beside him, his soldiers stood in perfect discipline.

Tirasi quietly gave the order for the cannon to be made ready. Her expression told me that she expected this to be the end of us. A lump came to my throat and my

hands sweated. She was right, of course. Against the House Meradhvor army arrayed against us, the only questions would be how long the fighting would take and how many we could take with us. Even Doraen’s hidden cavalry would do little against such a well-arrayed and -equipped force.

My stomach turned, and I wondered why I had come here in the first place, why I’d been so foolhardy as to think that I could be a mercenary and adventurer. I’d only wanted to avoid a settled life. This was my reward: death at the hands of some cold blade or some arcane working, the ball of an harquebus or the unfeeling arms of some mechanicum. It took all that I had just to stand there on that wall; everything within me told me to run and my legs twitched with the impulse.

As those around me wearily readied their weapons, battered and bruised and exhausted from yesterday’s exertions and a sleepless night just as I was, I remained frozen, fighting with all that I had to remain still. It was a losing battle, and I could feel the fear washing over me in waves, warming me with its intensity, drowning out my thoughts until I was entirely submerged.

Just at the point when I could no longer keep myself still, a shout from the Meradhvor lines shook me from my reverie. As one, the House soldiers turned in place and began to march away. Nervous laughter spilled from my mouth as the waves of terror swept away.

Within minutes, the army had abandoned the field and left us standing on the walls with nothing to do but watch, dumbfounded. Malten busied himself keeping the soldiers alert and ready lest the withdrawal prove a ruse, but the time revealed no turnabout, no hidden plot or scheme, no clever tactic.

Finally, Doraen and his cavalry trotted triumphantly out of the forest in loose groupings, nonchalantly making their way to the Uthcaire gates, their voices in song traveling before them.

“Bastards,” Malten spat. “They have a picnic while we’re in the mud and blood and then they come out of their hiding place like they’ve won the battle by themselves.”

“So we’ve won, then?” I smiled. He frowned in response and I could feel the elation drain from my face. When he gave no answer, I looked expectantly to Tirasi. She pointed behind me. In a square not too far from the wall where we stood, our brethren lit fires, stacking the bodies of our fallen in neat rows, splashes rising from the blood-covered streets as the corpses hit the ground, the stench of death and despair reaching us even where we stood. Too far to make faces, the posture and movements of the living nevertheless betrayed their brokenness as they stripped equipment and baubles from the bodies, the stacks growing higher.

“No.” Tirasi said behind me, her voice a ghost only half heard. “Doraen has won. We have lost.”