

22. Luck and Circumstance

Scribes hurriedly copied the terms presented by Oostrigr during the consideration period and distributed prints around the city so all guard and civilian alike might know the details that indeed included generous considerations for the king, his family and court. Most of those in the guard stood upon the walls to observe the form in which the representative of the king served the rejection but some might still have argued if so predisposed that those of privilege would of course do anything to preserve their exclusivity and avoid subordination to any higher authority. The Silver Tongue might even have enamored some with dreams of freewill, liberty and prosperity, but after years of solicitations and overtures, fifty-thousand heavily armed barbarians with siege machines outside the gate accounted for a difficult reality to rationalize or contradict, even despite his 'conciliatory' words two days previous. All guard may not necessarily all have been entirely convinced but nonetheless recognized the reality of the situation.

Olorik anticipated a missile barrage to precede any assault so he instructed all forces to clear the walls and occupy the streets behind. Two ridgelines stretched out from opposite sides of the great hill upon which the city stood, forming an approximate circle around the sprawling fields outside, and tapered to level ground at the gap on the far side from the city, just short of a complete encirclement. The wall spanned the two ridgelines along the base of the hill where the slope leveled off to the fields and at the two ends of the span, the walls rose nearly vertically up the ridges and circled back up the hill around the city. The heavily wooded steep hillsides afforded the best defense and in any full-scale assault, the front main wall presented the only point of practical accessibility. The army of the Highlands and Seilvhan broke into smaller companies and distributed about the full length of the main wall to compliment the Gath guard. Glendwyn assigned Fae and his company to the section of the wall including the gate, reasoning the best strength of his militia ought to defend the location most likely to encounter special circumstances.

Olorik occupied his post, which consisted of a single room on the third floor in a circular tower structure on a building near the wall that from the outside, discreetly blended into the vicinity like any other ordinary building. Windows wrapping around provided a commanding view of the full length of the wall and the entirety of the field out to the gap. Arieth and Glendwyn, neither of them legitimate combatants accompanied Olorik and prepared to move in and out to relay reports and messages. Reneta also stayed near Olorik for no real purpose other than a sense of duty to remain present and Fae instructed Wyl to stay with Reneta at all times as the time arrived to fight and an apprentice served no functional combat purposes. Fae however privately instructed Wyl if situation should warrant, defend Reneta to the death. Wyl carried a journal in a pocket and his observation of events he otherwise considered his only true responsibility.

Launchers occupied many positions along the wall and on some rooftops, and all stood loaded and ready to fire while some motion and movement commenced in the field. The Sethian army shuffled mobile launchers and other equipment about the field throughout the day but in all the time of their presence, no persons yet ventured within missile range but for the group that pursued Fae and Orna. The sun descended below a red sky and a distant thunder rumbled as dark clouds gathered. Heavy machinery creaked and moaned in the field after dark and all those on or near the wall stole what sleep they might steal as a long tense and quiet night commenced, perhaps the last of its kind for some time.

A tremendous racket of mechanical clanks, creaks and clunks that seemed to vibrate from all over the city jolted Reneta and Wyl from their sleep.

“What was that?” Wyl demanded in distress over such a sudden and loud commotion.

Without response, Reneta leapt to the window with Wyl behind her and only barely visible in the predawn glow, they observed companies shuffle about like shadows in the field as objects descended upon them from the sky, landing with faint thuds. Some two dozen launchers occupied various positions about the field and splinters of debris burst from two of them then a silent moment passed and then with some creaking and cracking, two of the launchers crumbled over onto figures scurrying about underneath as silence again followed. A fainter more distant mechanical racket answered the initial Gath launch then an eerie silence concluded with a rumbling crash and the building shook with a din of shattering glass and loose debris clattering.

The fight thus commenced with the first shot fired by the launcher operators of Algath then another salvo went out and projectiles crashed into the field tumbling through the crowds hurling bodies and objects. A subsequent incoming round crashed about the edge of the city and most of it struck the wall or close to it then the firing on both sides quickly escalated in frequency while single huge stones or clusters of smaller stones smashed against walls, breaking and gouging chunks off the parapet and deck, and deflecting into the buildings beyond. All about the edge of the city, collapsing debris rumbled with breaking glass as incoming projectiles pounded closer and closer to their targets on the walls. At a nearby launcher, men shouted then the crew dove away just as a huge stone crashed almost directly onto the turret and tumbled into a storefront. Cracks spread across the masonry wall, which then crumbled as half the turret slid down into the street with a tremendous roar and the launcher snapped toppling into the rubble.

The Sethian launcher operators ceased firing and immediately hustled their launchers to new locations in the field, a maneuver intended to nullify opposing aiming calculations, and they then commenced firing single rounds with subsequent relocations conducted between each shot. The opening salvos destroyed perhaps as many as eight of the Sethian launchers and although the relocation maneuvers prevented any further losses, the quality of their aim predictably deteriorated. Subsequent salvos randomly smashed into the buildings near the wall and though the impacts caused considerable damage, none of it produced any perceivable strategic gain. Random firing and repositioning then continued for hours while stray shots sailed wildly over the wall, crashing into the city behind.

Several missiles eventually struck perilously close to several sites on the wall in unison and destroyed two more Gath launchers as turrets crumbled and equipment splintered then renewed intensity and urgency occurred on the wall as the pace escalated to a frantic rhythm again. Sethian launcher operators ceased the relocation maneuvers for some time and finally struck strategic targets again but they paid for their renewed accuracy with more losses of their own. A stubborn duel commenced and both sides adjusted and fired as rapidly as they could until at least four launchers on each side collapsed in quick succession then a Sethian launcher collapsed while its single great stone payload misfired straight up in the air then smashed down onto a crowd.

An earsplitting crash rumbled from the roof, where a launcher occupied a perch two floors above causing the building to shudder. Walls and ceilings creaked and moaned then with a loud crack, a roar of debris crashed onto the floor above. Cracks opened in the plaster ceiling and chunks and pieces popped out as plumes of dust rained down.

Wyl and Reneta fell into a corner, curled up and covered themselves, and when no further impacts occurred, they crawled back to the window and watched the launcher death match play out to its conclusion. As sunset approached, direct strikes destroyed some ten more launchers on the wall and nearby roofs, while in the field some number greater than that splintered, wobbled and crashed to the ground then Sethian operators ceased firing just before dark and again shuffled their remaining launchers about the field but apparently suspending hostilities, they no longer stopped to fire. Olorik signaled his launchers to hold their fire and finally the destruction ceased as Reneta stepped into the post and asked Olorik to report the conditions.

The Sethians possessed four intact and operable launchers while the Gath defenses held an advantage at five operable and two more under repair with estimates calculating their return to service by the next sunrise. Although withdrawing their launchers out of range, in all likelihood, the Sethians intended to resume firing after dark and Olorik anticipated a barrage of incendiaries with repositioning between every shot. Numerically, the Sethians lost the launcher contest and random shots fired in darkness accounted for the only remaining advantage from which they might ever benefit. Gath fire crews staged in the streets near the wall armed with canvas hoses under pressure from a reservoir high on the hill, in anticipation of the barrage while the potential for any armed assault on the wall under darkness accounted as no more than slim to none.

Olorik instructed Reneta and Wyl to eat and sleep while conditions might accommodate as much and although neither concern rated very high on their agenda, the instruction from a respected elder sufficiently compelled them. Reneta led Wyl outside and through the streets to an inn, one of several operating twenty-four hours and serving as a mess hall for the armies. After standing in line for bowls of soup, bread and bottles of beer, the pair squeezed close together at the end of a crowded table and Wyl said to Reneta in a near whisper so no other present might overhear, "I don't think I can do this."

Glancing at him a bit puzzled, Reneta inquired, "Do what?"

"This whole thing." Wyl replied, "War. It's not right. I don't understand how-"

"-*Can't*?" Reneta interrupted, "*Can't* is not an option. You don't have the luxury of *can't* any more, Wyl."

"I know this is an uninformed question." Wyl stated, "I know I'm the dumbest person here in these matters, but I honestly don't understand-"

Waiting patiently for a moment, Reneta finally prompted, "What?"

"Why didn't you negotiate?" Wyl demanded almost angrily, "How has everyone convinced themselves they have a chance when the numbers are so overwhelming? Even Fae -- who I think is the most intelligent and practical man in the world -- seems unrealistic to me. Why does it look so hopeless to me?"

"-because you're scared." Reneta explained then asked, "Have you ever seen an open assault on a defensive fortification?"

"Have I-?" Wyl responded with apparent surprise then asserted, "I've never seen- I've seen one fight, a small, brief, extremely lopsided fight, and just from that-"

"-Wyl," Reneta reassured, "when they assault, they will advance out in the open without cover then they will try to scale a twenty-five foot wall, all the while under fire from men hiding behind two feet of stone. They have shields and machines to assist them but regardless, they can only minimize their vulnerability to some small extent. It is going to be a very ugly proposition for them... you'll see."

Inhaling as he recoiled, Wyl declared, “I don’t want to see! I don’t want to know!”

With a sigh, Reneta clutched his hand firmly and stated, “It’s too late for this. You have to pull yourself together; you have no choice. Wyl, look at me.” Looking closely into his eyes, Reneta said, “We may have to fight... you and me.” but her concern appeared to increase as she observed his eyes glaze over in disorientation.

“I ran.” Wyl blurted suddenly while Reneta only stared for a moment with an inquisitive expression. “I ran.” Wyl repeated, “-the one fight I saw. They were picking on these defenseless farmers. They killed some of them. I was so angry. I wanted- I don’t know for sure what I wanted and maybe I don’t want to know. My company ambushed these men and I intentionally stayed at the rear but I had my sword out and I wanted them in pain but then when I saw their eyes and their faces...- I saw them die. All of the sudden they weren’t mindless brutes anymore. They were human beings. It was so horrible. I dropped my sword, I ran away and I hid. I dropped my sword and needed help finding it later. I know now, I can never do it. I can’t.”

Holding both his hands, Reneta faced Wyl then said gently and sympathetically, “We are all scared. When we went out there to parlay with him, I crumbled, both times, and I cried. You saw that.” Tears gathered in her eyes from the memory as Reneta advised, “Maybe if I have to fight, I’ll only freeze and stand still, trembling with my sword in my hand, and someone will easily kill me without a fight, but I would rather die like that than be his property. You didn’t see his eyes and the most terrifying thing about him - I don’t think he even feels any malice about what he is doing. I don’t think he’s angry. He has no complaint. He just wants what he wants and all of this feels perfectly reasonable and realistic to him. When I looked in his eyes and heard the things he said, I knew I would never fear death or fighting again even if I can’t do it. I know now, there are things in this world more frightening than violence and death.” At that point, everything made Wyl only more terrified and he breathed heavily then Reneta pulled at him and instructed, “Wyl, get up. We’re finished.”

Wyl stood slowly then Reneta led him outside by the hand and down the street until she found a recessed doorway out of plain sight, and pushing him in, she slapped him hard on the face. The action appeared to produce little effect so Reneta slapped Wyl again which finally compelled his full attention. “Make a choice, Wyl.” Reneta instructed, “Go up the hill as far from the wall as you can, close yourself into a closet and pull a blanket over your head, or run out the front gate screaming, or stand by me. I am going through this too. Maybe we can give each other strength. Maybe two cowards together equal half a coward. Help me. Think about somebody else. Think about what you believe in.”

“I don’t know what I believe in.” Wyl stuttered.

With raised eyebrows Reneta asserted, “That is another conversation. I hope we can have that conversation one day but have you made up your mind for today?”

Wyl inhaled unsteadily but stated, “Okay - You.” indicating he chose her over the elaborate alternative sequence of actions Reneta described. Pulling Wyl back to the street, Reneta returned with him to the room behind the post occupied by Olorik, and the two then curled up on a couch in an anxious attempt to sleep.

As activity in the field concluded, silence prevailed for a moment then four bursts of flame ignited and immediately screeched up toward the sky, looped high overhead then howled near and crashed with a roaring hiss, shaking the building and illuminating the room in a flash of blazing flares.

In the building across the street, a hole gaped open on the wall and flames rushed out sputtering onto the stone surfaces outside then another round of fireballs sprang into the air from four different locations than the previous salvo, arced high and exploded into buildings and onto the streets. The operators on the wall fired occasionally throughout the night when they detected a clear shot at an opposing launcher or where they caught a concentration of foot soldiers paying less than sufficient attention. Loose rubble fired at low trajectories into the darkness concealed the results from plain sight while howls and screams from the field served as confirmation of every well-aimed or lucky shot. Fireballs rained down on the edge of the city all night and hose crews scurried in the streets dousing what they flames could contain while abandoning those fires beyond their control. Conflagration consumed large areas near the wall and several buildings collapsed in spectacular rumbling crashes.

Reneta stirred and her motions woke Wyl from a restless slumber then the two crept to the window as an immediately noticeable silence dominated but for the whisper of a gentle breeze and the occasional chirp of a bird. The sunrise approached and bathed the field in a dim purple glow revealing thousands upon thousands of Sethians arranged in neat ranks parallel to the wall, at a distance closer than any yet ventured but for the one reckless pursuit of Fae and Orna. Still and silent, the companies stood their places for close to an hour as the sky grew brighter over a forest of hundreds of sparkling standards and banners that rippled in the breeze in every color and shape imaginable out in the field. On the wall, a lesser number of the Gath silver banner flew alone. Perhaps Oostrigr felt one last moment of hesitation over the opposing army of unidentified origin that swelled the ranks of the Gath guard, presented no standard and flew no banner, but if he did hesitate, he resolved himself and proceeded toward his destiny. Only after the sun peeked over the horizon and golden shafts of light streaked overhead, the Sethian ranks suddenly altogether shouted in one unintelligible roar then followed with a chant accompanied by an obviously rehearsed series of steps, postures and stomps, punctuating the performance with one final, sustained random cheer. Wyl leaned against Reneta and said softly, "I thought we are all human beings. I told myself something would ultimately prevent this. Now I just hate them. Why would they do that? Why would they want to inspire the hatred of those in a position to harm them?" Reneta only shook her head.

A long tense silence followed then motion stirred in the Sethian ranks. With a howl, a wave of humanity rolled toward the wall and as they reached arrow range, archers greeted them with a shower of arrows so thick as to nearly obscure the view. Hundreds of Sethian infantry collapsed all at once then those on their feet came to a halt forming shield walls at alternating rows with bowmen taking cover behind each as another salvo of arrows rained down and again large numbers fell. Sethian archers then returned a salvo that rattled and clattered about the wall, parapet and street with disproportionate inaccuracy but nonetheless men defending the wall fell dead.

A ruckus and commotion occurred behind the Sethian archers and they maneuvered to create breaks in their rows while showers of arrow continued. Siege ramps on four wheels rumbled through the spaces, guided by operator crews and they propelled the machines at a run toward the wall, charging in three single files that altered course only to maneuver around disabled ramps and crews. Arrows in both directions filled the sky, and the men driving the ramps encountered horrible losses as ramps ran amuck, crashed into each other and upturned, but still more followed behind.

After clearing the archers, the siege ramp columns converged from each point toward the center and all aimed at one common location on the wall halfway between two turrets even while they continued to crash and tumble, running over and crushing the dead and dying or even the simply unfortunate. The three columns merged and continued to rumble closer to the wall three abreast as their pilots fell to arrow or stumbled and crumpled, crushed under the heavy wheels but those on the machines in the center column found protection between machines on each flank and surged closer to the wall. Infantry companies poured from the formations, holding up shields overhead, and they took up abandoned machines then continued the charge, or even attempted to right upturned machines. Bodies so littered the terrain that every machine crushed hundreds on the run to the wall then finally, the first ramp reached its objective only to crash and collapse into the ditch along the length of the base. Ramp machines bounded over rocks on the rim of the ditch and crashed haphazard or bounced up the other side but most in one way or another jolted to a stop shy of the wall, toppled over or collapsed from impact upon crash. Those pilots that survived the run to the wall and successfully delivered their ramps upright or otherwise then held shields overhead and attempted a dash back to their ranks. The very few that accomplished that much, mostly fell along the way, shot in the back by arrow but those returning to the ranks alive made their way to a designated area where they celebrated and chugged warm beer, their action on that day concluded and that constituted reward for their courageous service and good fortune.

Meanwhile, ramp machines continued to pound and crash into the ditch and the wall, piling up atop one another in a chaotic wreckage heap. A random collection of three or four ramps at last came to rest among the ruin in their intended positions, the high end resting against the parapet, and though the men on the wall threw stones, pushed and pulled with grappling hooks, the wreckage packed so tightly and leveraged into place, no effort budged it. Launcher salvos resumed during the ramp charge and the Gaths fired clusters of small stones at a low trajectory that tumbled and skipped at speed across the field, shattering knees and legs, some taking high hops and smashing skulls while Sethian launchers fired stone clusters also but at high looping arcs that rained down on the wall from above. Four of the remaining Gath launchers fixed one each on the four Sethian launchers, fired large single missiles and destroyed yet another. In reaction, crews on the last three remaining Sethian launchers shuffled the machines across the field in hopes of preserving what modest support three launchers might yet provide in the future, and that occurred to the relief of the defenders on the wall.

The ramp heap accumulated to a condition as favorable as might probably ever occur for the Sethians without sacrificing a strategically suicidal number of their ranks with losses already amounting to something relatively unfathomable. At least three-thousand died in the ramp charge while the defenders lost perhaps two-hundred. No luxury of time to lose accommodated the next step, for the defenders threw buckets of flaming oils upon the wooden ramp heap and parts of it flashed up in blazes. Two columns of Sethian infantry charged with shields and swords a short distance apart then converged toward the ramps. Clouds of arrows sailed back and forth and stone clusters crashed and bounced through the surge. An appalling slaughter occurred as the infantry charged the wall and no matter how many fell, more emerged to continue the effort then the two columns finally converged, piling up as men at the ramps slowed to make the climb raising their shields overhead to form a steel canopy while a shower of arrows clattered against it.

As the first wave ascended, the defenders cast buckets of oil and a burst of flame flared up as the buckets splashed and emptied. Dozens of the first men onto the ramps ignited and tumbled screaming and ablaze while more charged up, running straight through the flames as a hail of arrows cut them down by dozens more. Casualties across the open field before the ramps formed a waist-high wall like a dike on the banks of a river along the path of the approach, from the archer formations to the wall, and subsequent waves ran low in between with a newfound protection from missile and dart. A tremendous surge of humanity roared up the ramps amid a storm of arrows and propelled those at the point toward the parapet dead or alive. The very first to cross the parapet met their opponents blade to blade atop the wall or those already dead simply tumbled over across the deck and down onto the street below. An initial slaughter occurred as the charge conducted vulnerable motions moving from the ramp to the parapet, but waves continued to surge over the bodies and spread out upon the deck. So many Sethians died at the point of attack on the wall, the bodies buried the ramp heap, obscured it from sight and smothered the flames in the process. In appearance, the wreckage resembled a surface paved in bodies piled up and over the parapet, sloping back across the ditch like a bridge. Still more waves swelled to the wall and the ramp of bodies then spilled over while the dead piled up like dunes across the top of the wall and tumbled over to the street below, creating a second body ramp down the inside of the wall to the street.

The last three Sethian launchers parked and fired frantically at the opposing flanks of the defense but the Gaths found their mark and destroyed another then the value of the remaining two launchers so escalated, the operators had no choice but to fire haphazard shots on the move. A constant stream of foot soldiers ran from the ranks in the field, up and over the body ramps, and into the edge of the city, taking arrow and missile shot all the way, finally bulging out in a fan shape onto the street as missiles streaked nearby and crashed into the buildings. At the edges of the surge, shields and blades clashed as conditions degenerated into a fair fight and with or without instruction, Highland and Seilvhanian companies engaged would both withdraw to reassess. Glendwyn and Arieth advised Olorik, warning of the impending eventuality of retreat as the point of the charge reached within three blocks of the post. Olorik finally issued orders all his companies withdraw before opportunity to do so might otherwise pass. Ranks in immediate contact with Sethian lancers and swordsmen turned abruptly to flee but in no more than two steps, dove face down as a subsequent rank of archers behind a shield wall released a punishing salvo directly into the charging Sethians at close range, killing some even after piercing shield with arrow. In the hesitation that followed, the full retreat commenced and Gath hammer ranks swung into a protective rear position. Bristling with lances to slow the Sethian charge, a Gath shield row crashed into contact then counterparts swung long handled spiked ball hammers over the clash of shield and lance, randomly striking the backs and tops of the Sethian ranks upon their heads or shoulders. A mist of blood sprayed up in plumes as the hammers pounded into the front ranks while Sethians bunched up and pushed so tight, the dead at the front remained on their feet and tumbled toward the defenders while the living piled up and spilled over the top of the carnage. Retreating defenders funneled into the streets fanning away from the wall and at the last moment, archers upon roofs above the street fired as accompanying launcher operators dropped their remaining ordinance directly down onto a Sethian charge, instantly terminating the advancing surge with a deafening roar.

Observing the assault on the wall with hands held over their mouths, Reneta and Wyl glanced toward the post expecting instructions from Olorik as the retreat neared conclusion but when the remaining two Sethian launchers fired a final salvo, the wall of the post burst in and shattered. Spinning in reaction, Wyl fell over Reneta onto the floor as rubble sprayed across them causing cuts and painful bruises then they climbed back to their feet in a cloud of dust while the floor rumbled below them, their ears ringing in temporary deafness as they glanced at each other then at the post. A breeze whisked away dusty clouds revealing beyond the archway to the post, no more than open air and stumbling to look over the edge, Wyl observed a Gath captain scramble out from the rubble dragging Arieth with him. Clutching Wyl by his collar, Reneta pulled him toward the back of the building where they descended a stair, emerged on the street one block in from the wall then stumbled out the doorway and crashed into a concentration of soldiers. Looking up from their backs, Reneta and Wyl discovered no fewer than a dozen swords in their faces but suddenly a scout whose name Wyl did not recall, shouted something at them that fell on deaf ringing ears. Quickly assessing who led whom, the scout grabbed Reneta by her arm and hustled her up the street, dragging Wyl along with her. Releasing his grip, the scout pushed and motioned Reneta up the street toward the center of the city then headed back to his company but before he rejoined them, he paused for a tentative observation around the corner down toward the wall. Smoke and dust swirled and slowly dissipated to reveal masses of Sethian infantry packed into the street at the bottom, formed into shield walls that spanned the side streets leading uphill but they only held their ground in a suddenly relaxed condition and did not advance. Stepping out into the open, the scout dodged an arrow that whistled near then held his ground for a moment, hopped and swung his fist provoking the Sethians to jeers, challenges and disparaging remarks about familial relations. With a final hand gesture in punctuation, the scout then rejoined his company.

Reneta tugged at Wyl and the two continued uphill, looking back at the wall all the while until they stumbled into Arieth nearly knocking her over as she leaned onto a windowsill, cut and bruised but otherwise in apparently decent health. Wyl pulled her arms over his shoulders, hoisted Arieth onto his back then continued up the hill a few blocks before pausing to catch his breath. Panting heavily, Wyl dropped to his knees as the ringing in his ears subsided then he asked Arieth, “What is happening?”

“A stand off.” Arieth concluded hoarsely, “I guess enough is enough for one day.”

Wyl scanned the area from the Sethian ranks to the defenders regrouping in the side streets nearby then inquired, “Are you saying this is cooperative?” Both Arieth and Reneta stared blankly as Wyl impulsively demanded, “If they can cooperate for a break during a fight then they can just as easily cooperate before the fight enough to never have the fight, can’t they?” Closing his eyes, Wyl recalled the ramp of bodies and thousands more strewn across the field then asked more or less no one in particular, “How does the Silver Tongue interpret these results as anything other than an absolute catastrophe?”

Arieth repeated, “Enough for one day.”

Wyl nodded apologetically assuming Arieth meant not only enough war but enough questions for one day as well then he lifted her again and carried her to the old wall. Some two-hundred years earlier, the Gaths initially built the main and then only wall, and the area within represented the most ancient portion of the city consequently preserving the most cherished of its architectural relics.

Thousands of Gath guards hustled about in preparation for their next round of defense, gathering and filtering through a gate in the old wall then returning with some mobile machines of their own, similar to wheelbarrows except with two wheels, one on each side from which long handles extended away with canvas fabric tassels dangling from the ends. Once set loose downhill, the tassels dragged behind upon the street, creating resistance and guiding the machines as well in a relatively self-correcting straight path. Opposite the two handles, a suspended wide bar protruded past the wheels, connected to an incendiary device at the center that served as a friction spark ignition plunger upon impact. A diamond pattern of scored grooves traversed the outer shell of the incendiary to blast a semi-circular pattern of small shards about the size of large coins with jagged edges. Wyl stared as guards maneuvered dozens of the wheeled machines out a gate in the old wall then dispersed into the streets below.

A cheer roared from the area at the bottom of the hill as the Sethian army inside the wall cast open the front gate and Oostrigr with his cavalry entered the edge of the city while the rest of his infantry flowed freely through the gate then staged into companies and ranks in preparation for the day to follow. Both armies settled into the confines of the city for an informal campout as sunset approached and prepared for watches or short naps hunched over that would alternately occur throughout the night. Although the Sethian army captured the main wall in a single day, they suffered casualties of approximately fifteen-thousand in the assault while the defending forces lost near six-thousand. With a third of his army dead or otherwise incapacitated, Oostrigr split his remaining forces into two divisions, one camped outside the wall and the other posted inside. The arrangement potentially offered an indication of his thoughts as the seventeen-thousand or so he stationed in the field perhaps accounted for the minimum force Oostrigr calculated necessary to occupy the city, meaning the seventeen-thousand or so inside represented the currency with which he expected to purchase the city. The favorable implications for the defenders suggested they currently faced an opposing force of seventeen-thousand as opposed to the fifty-thousand they faced earlier that very same day.

Darkness fell and the Sethians torched several buildings near the wall for illumination to discourage defenders from approaching too close but regardless, throughout the night, Gath, Highland and Seilvhanian archers sniped at the Sethians from a distance and by daybreak killed hundreds almost uncontested.

Immediately after sunrise, Oostrigr assembled his companies and they simultaneously ascended every street radiating in towards the old wall. Initial defense consisted only of arrow salvos and the Sethians seized the first couple of blocks with relative ease but then the defense stiffened and the Sethians met with sword and spear in ambush as they advanced up the streets in shield wall formations intent on drawing out the defenders into direct contest. However, the defenders fired arrows to slow progress then ambushed from alleys and doorways of storefronts, drove into the ranks stabbing and swinging hammers and then retreated, back into the alleys and buildings. The Sethian shield walls progressed up the streets at a painfully slow pace and frustration led to impatience. Defenders conducted several skirmishes and retreats then just when the Sethian ranks might have perceived some positive development, they conducted a charge, quickly advancing two blocks into the city in pursuit of ambushers that only withdrew yet again. At the conclusion of a short quiet moment, two-wheeled incendiary machines rattled down the cobbled slopes toward dense shield walls that spanned the full width of the street.

Evidently guessing the designed purpose of the wheeled machines, the Sethian shield walls broke ranks in panic and scattered to escape the paths of the devices in question while arrows rained on them immediately upon lowering or turning their shields. In advancing formations of multiple rows packed nearly one shoulder to another, soldiers stumbled over comrades struck by arrow and attempts to clear the streets only produced pockets of congestion. Invariably, the wheeled incendiary machines struck individuals or groups then bright yellow flares ignited in blasts that echoed through the cavernous streets with an accompaniment of shattering glass. For a moment, all motion ceased and in the initial silence that followed, a cacophony of wailing voices occurred while portions of bodies still whole enough to breathe, at least for the moment, writhed in pools of blood and screamed in protest for their collective disfigurements. As the hazard of wheeled incendiary favored neither advance nor retreat, Sethian infantryman fueled by desire for revenge conducted a running charge in disorganized columns at each side of the street. Although the formation minimized exposure, wheeled incendiaries nonetheless continued to strike occasional targets and each city block the Sethian uphill advance gained occurred at abominable cost as bodies and body parts paved the streets in the wake of the charge while rivulets of blood flowed down the gutters at the edges of the sidewalks. Infantrymen charged with battle cries and encountered shower of arrow in vulnerability while scattering to evade incendiary then blasts leveled several at a time producing yet greater vulnerability in the aftermath followed by subsequent shower of arrow.

As darkness descended over western skies of brilliant luminous color, the two opposing forces disengaged, retreating into alleyways and warehouses for food and rest in another cooperative recess. A tense quiet hung over the city while combatants kept tentative watches and held positions but remote sounds echoed from the area of the city between the front gate at the main wall and the front gate at the old wall. Someone somewhere evidently did not appreciate the etiquette of sportsmanship and consequently violated the sanctity of the designated rest break. A sudden outcry of raised voices followed a long sustained silence then a ruckus of horse hooves on cobbled streets preceded a softer shuffling, a moment of silence then a sudden burst of raised voices that tapered off again to silence, and the routine continued for the entirety of the night.

When the Sethians took their first tentative steps away from the wall into the city, Fae and his scouts slipped behind them and for the duration of the battle, Fae denied them a secure encampment. The defense of the city concluded early and abruptly for Fae and his company as they lived in the Almath of the future and conducting a post occupation indigenous resistance, they crept through alleys and basements harassing their opponents Highland style with ambushes, assassinations, unfair fights and cowardly retreats. Somewhere within the city, Oostrigr probably calculated numbers and contemplated in darkness perhaps even guessing the one responsible for such a continuing nuisance. Directing his companies and conducting maneuvers, Oostrigr secured one block at a time, and reacted to ambushes as best he might while nothing he gained occurred without resistance or wasteful casualty. Wyl imagined perhaps Oostrigr sat atop his horse and even smiled in respectful appreciation of the tactics.

The first dim light of day illuminated a dark heavy cloud cover and thunder rumbled then rain fell. Maybe some combatants thought rain might favor the defense or provide cause for a delay in the assault, but after a brief preparatory pause, the Sethians conducted their next maneuver with apparent disregard for weather conditions.

A shield wall advance commenced up the streets and encountered no more wheeled incendiary blasts while at each subsequent street intersection, defenders fired arrows from the cover of buildings on all corners. Some archers pulled their bowstrings back to fully extended positions and fired high velocity shots low at the feet of the advancing infantry, and as darts bounced and deflected off the cobblestones into lower extremities, other archers lobbed soft shots that arced over the shields and dropped into faces and shoulders. The high arcing shots likely proved mostly less than fatal but even a softly lobbed dart into the face easily produced an incapacitating injury in most cases. As the combination of shots disrupted the orderly formation of shield walls, a final salvo ripped directly into the front line at chest level and at close range then the archers withdrew as lancers, swordsmen and hammer wielders crashed into the advance upon entering the intersection. After mowing down dozens at the point of attack with a calamitous and furious barrage, an immediate retreat followed each collision then the Sethian infantry at last advanced unopposed until the process repeated upon approach of the next street intersection.

By the time the advance progressed within three blocks of the old wall, the defense tactics perhaps lulled the Sethians into believing the Gaths exhausted their supply of incendiaries or perhaps rain prevented detonation, but any that might have entertained such thoughts soon recognized as much as wishful thinking. As the shield wall advance charged up the final block toward the old wall, a sudden series of blasts tore off arms and legs, and splattered less easily identifiable shapes of flesh against stone storefronts as the streets below washed in a crimson tide. An alley ran the full length of the old wall on the downhill side and as the Sethian ascent closed in on that objective, the defenders changed tactics offering fierce resistance within the confines of the narrow streets leading into the alley. Charging with shield and lance, defenders crashed into the advance and hammer wielders rained down savage blows into the front ranks until at the last moment, the defenders retreated in a state of apparent panic. As the Sethians mounted a charge to the old wall lured by the appearance of an undisciplined retreat, a final devastatingly coordinated barrage of wheeled incendiary blasts stopped them dead in their tracks, shredding the front lines of the advance within but a few steps of the encircling alleyway alongside the base of the old wall.

Throughout the day, Wyl occupied a position inside a gateway alongside Reneta and during the surge, they moved in and out together collecting dead and injured then dragging them into the confines of the ancient city behind the wall. As the last defenders rushed through the gate in the concluding retreat, Reneta and Wyl clutched each other and crouched low, lingering in the corner of the archway, and observed firsthand at close range a convincing demonstration of the full functionality of the Gath wheeled incendiary machine. Waves of hairy beast men rushed the gate packed tightly together in disciplined ranks behind an impenetrable wall of shields but suddenly unable to separate, they simply cringed as a machine rumbled into them. The detonator bar struck a man at the point of the charge and the blast evidently vaporized him into a semi liquid cloud of mist and granule or something similar while blasting legs out from under others and propelling those nearest in several pieces, bits of whom festooned walls and storefronts in a grizzly parade of carnage. Dying partial beast men writhed and thrashed on the streets, and howled out their final monosyllabic utterances in plumes of blood then a ghostly silence followed accompanied by the shuffling of feet as the last lines of defense rushed behind the old wall and the gates slammed shut.

When the gates of the old wall slammed secure, the fight for the city accounted as half over and the old wall represented the last and final defense. The Sethians actually cheered as if the developments qualified as some sort of accomplishment then another tense truce commenced. Rain collected in a gruesome red soup filling potholes and flowing along gutters yet still, just when a long silence perhaps convinced some present a cooperative suspension of hostilities successfully occurred, short bursts of isolated shouts echoed through the streets and alleys in the area between the old and new main gates. Despite the continuing nuisance, creaking and rumbling echoed as the two remaining Sethian launchers approached the main gate of the old wall accompanied by a tall stocky wood beam contraption and the three objects moved at a leisurely pace, no longer under threat of missile response. The Gath retreat from the main wall long since rendered moot the launcher advantage they enjoyed for only such a brief moment. The Sethians parked their timber siege tower a short distance from the gate and positioned the launchers in an alley behind a low building nearby then shortly thereafter, under scattered showers of rain, fireballs once again hissed and wailed overhead. Gath fire brigades worked their canvas hoses in desperate efforts to preserve the ancient buildings and priceless artifacts of the old city, and the engagement accounted as perhaps the most civilized aspect of the fight, a bloodless metropolitan war against arson. As the rain ceased temporarily, scattered clouds drifted across the sky and birds chirped under the sunset while fires raged below a canopy of smoke and cloud illuminated by an orange glow.

Random salvos of arrow rattled over the wall throughout the night, punctuated by occasional shouts and shrieks as Fae and his insurgents crept like ghosts, haunting and terrorizing the inattentive, unwise or merely unfortunate but nonetheless, a cooperative cessation of hostilities otherwise occurred except for the random dart salvos and flaming missiles from launchers. Both sides then held their positions, stone silent after what surely felt like a lifetime of perpetual carnage, and observed a suspension of activities for a brief snack and some rest. Wyl considered the passage of time, no longer sure of the number of days that might have elapsed as he felt at times a day passed like an hour while at other times, an hour passed like a day.

The sunrise illuminated scattered clouds and the rain tapered off to only occasional light drizzles. An organized effort occurred as the Sethians transported the balance of their pitch incendiary munitions up to the launcher positions and in the meanwhile, they lobbed the depleting supply over the wall into the old city and hurled stone clusters at low trajectories into the wall at the gate. The barrage battered the parapets and archway chipping away and pocking the stone constructions while the concentration on the gate clearly established the intended point of assault on the final defense. As a company gathered up the supply of incendiaries into neatly stacked rows near the launchers, the barrage of flaming projectiles over the wall steadily escalated. Throughout the day, both sides fired arrow salvos in desperate attempts to disrupt preparations while hose crews scurried through the streets dousing what flames they might and isolating what blazes they could not control in attempts to minimize damage.

Just as the conflagration appeared on the verge of engulfing the old city, the conditions changed abruptly. Fae and Gaeryn crept near the Sethian launchers and after waiting most of the day even while flaming missiles continued to punish the city, when all the ordinance lay neatly stacked together in one place, they ignited the supply and an intense initial flare hissed then burst in a ball of flame that engulfed an entire city block.

Ignition of the incendiary munitions blasted roofs off several structures and flattened the nearest building while both the two remaining launchers splintered and crumbled into rubble. The buildings surrounding the point of ignition roared in an uncontrollable blaze while hundreds of Sethian soldiers ran screaming through the streets, flames streaming from their hair and clothing. A thick black cloud of smoke swirled through the streets and blotted out the sun then an utter and complete silence fell over the city except for the crackling of flame within the smoldering wreckage.

Another cooperative truce occurred perhaps more by necessity than anything else and all activities suspended for the duration of the remaining daylight as the Sethians regrouped attempting to recover from the devastating developments. On both sides of the wall, all fires finally exhausted then smoldered and neither side fired a shot as the night passed quietly and peacefully like any other night that might have occurred before or after the presence of Oostrigr and his army.

An unwelcome, dispassionate and harsh sun broke over a new world order, without regard for the concerns of mortal men. Sethian formations packed the street before the front gate of the old wall in rows and columns prepared for the final assault of the last defensive obstruction, staring in silence upon the objective, battle hardened and grizzled veterans alongside frightened young novices, men, human beings, caught up in events larger than their own lives and long since beyond their control. Renewed random salvos of arrow clattered upon the wall and the parapets while the great wooden tower rumbled toward the gate under a hail of darts and as it approached, the Gath guard hurled incendiaries from small tension operated mechanisms over the parapet and into the siege tower. Bright flashing bursts blasted body parts upon the solid surfaces and a grizzly mess hung and dribbled from the wooden beams of the siege tower, but more men rushed in as the tower creaked at last up against the gate and the archway. Archers packed the heights of the siege tower along with the intended initial assault company, but blasts and dart clouds shredded them to mere remnants of the men they had once been, and when the machine reached the wall, not a man within the top of it yet breathed. Buckets of flaming oils then doused the tower and it burst into flame while burning men ran screaming through the streets. A wide ramp device rolled up behind the tower, crushing the bodies of those expended in the effort along the way until it parked snug up against the tower then a crazed screaming wave of beastly humanity charged up the ramp in reckless abandon under a barrage of arrow and flaming oil that cut them down in masses. Subsequent waves spilled over the carnage closer and closer to the top of the archway then the Gaths hurled a salvo of incendiaries and a sudden mind numbing series of blasts spattered wood splinter, blood, shredded flesh and bone fragment in a ghastly calamitous crescendo that shuddered through every wall to foundation.

An ear splitting silence smothered the city, broken only by the soft patter of small bits of debris and liquid drops of an assortment of fluids as they fluttered to the earth. The cloud of dust, smoke and blood mist that shrouded the gate and the tower slowly dispersed in wisps and curls revealing both gate and siege tower still standing firm while all combatants stared in stunned silence then a mournful creaking echoed the length of the alley corridor along the old wall. With a loud crack, the siege tower leaned almost imperceptibly then crumbled onto the gate and the archway with a deafening roar as an impenetrable ring of dust rolled up in a radiating pattern and silence returned in an expectant hush awaiting dispersal of the dust cloud.

Vague shapes appeared in silhouette out of an opaque curtain revealing that all things at the gate and siege tower lay in a rubble-heap-rat-nest of wreckage piled in a narrow breach in the wall previously occupied by the gate and archway. However, no matter how inconvenient or hazardous, the heap of rubble presented an obstacle traversable by foot without the necessity of special equipment.

A screaming wave of humanity broke the silence and assailed the rubble heap. Barrages of arrow laid waste as a new bridge of bodies accumulated over the wreckage. The small number of those that survived the initial crossing, stumbled hopelessly outnumbered into walls of hate inspired defenders that promptly hacked them to bits but some managed to kill one or two first and finally, an overwhelming surge pushed the defenders away and back into the streets behind them.

An unoccupied neutral zone developed as the defenders pulled back and the assailants funneled through the breach, a narrow space perhaps one-hundred feet wide separating the two sides as all took cover for a moment in the occurrence of a spontaneous ceasefire. The flow of bodies through the breach ground to a halt as congestion developed in the small area of the old city the Sethian forces presently occupied within the old wall and for which, they paid such an exorbitant price.

“We should run.” Wyl calmly advised Reneta but she appeared inexplicably oblivious to such a logical recommendation then Wyl subsequently asked apprehensively, “Where do we run?”

With a glance toward Wyl, Reneta withdrew her sword then turned and walked slowly in what he identified as the wrong direction while incrementally comprehending her actions as a direct answer to his question. With no place to run or hide, Wyl shivered, wept then cursed Reneta in anger for the circumstances.

A howling roar shook walls of storefronts and rattled windows with a terrifying echo as the Sethians hurdled down the narrow street like a deluge. A cloud of arrows cut them down in waves as they crashed into a wall of defenders and a savage hand-to-hand fight to the death commenced. Single individuals stumbled through the gauntlet and once behind the defenders, ran amuck hacking and stabbing at anything that moved, some falling to arrow shot or back stab.

A great hairy beast of a man rounded the corner in the surprisingly empty and quiet environs of the streets deep in the old city, away from the fighting and he counted among the first to enter the sanctum still alive. Suddenly there in the shadows, as if in answer to a prayer in the midst of such hazard and carnage, she stood all alone, a soft and slender young girl with short-cropped hair in the clothing of a boy, a delicacy, with sword held out harmlessly in trembling tender hands. With jaw dangling open and saliva moistening the corners of his mouth, the beastly man gawked with eyes wide then returning his sword to its sheath, he stepped toward her.

In the shadow of a recessed doorway, a young man from an obscure and isolated corner of the world wrestled with what surely accounted as the most momentous decision of his short life, his only consolation, he presumed in all likelihood it also accounted as his last. Lunging, he stabbed wildly with an overhand thrust of his dagger, and it plunged into the subject on one side of the throat then out the other as a gagging cough blurted then he leapt onto the chest of the man stabbing at face and neck. A fountain of blood sprayed and speckled his face and hands as Wyl stabbed shrieking at the top of his lungs, “Always stab at the face! Always stab at the face! Always stab-”

Wyl froze as a hand slapped against then clutched his wrist firmly and he staggered backward away from the beast-man-blood-fountain as Reneta tugged him. Wrapping trembling arms around one another, the pair retreated into the shadow of the deep doorway then with eyes clamped tight for some time, Reneta finally inquired with an expression of surprise, “Why is it so quiet?”

Holding their breath, Reneta and Wyl tilted their heads in concentration and the quiet indeed overwhelmed them then a piercing shrill whistle broke the stillness followed by several more whistles that originated from multiple scattered locations throughout the area. A shuffling patter of feet reverberated from street and alley as Wyl glanced at Reneta and in final utter concession, simply collapsed into a seated position onto the street and moaned, “Oh, god... What now?”

A number of distant muffled shouts preceded the patter of foot then the sounds tapered off and silence returned but for the serene chirping of songbirds. A sudden raucous cheer rattled glass panes and spread from street to street, nearer and nearer then faded, and clutching Wyl by a sleeve, Reneta pulled him to his feet then dragged him toward the old gate in a tentative and cautious rush to investigate the developments.

Rounding a corner, the two discovered throngs of defenders gathering at the old wall around the remnants of the gate then dragging Wyl along, Reneta rushed up a stair to the top of the wall and squeezed her way through the crowd on the parapet deck, stopped near the crumbled rubble at the gate and leaned onto the parapet wall. No observable movement occurred on the other side of the old wall but an audible commotion rumbled in the streets below. Stomping of quick marching accompanied the clatter of horse companies galloping and the isolated short bursts of shouts and screams once again commenced, if indeed, they ever ceased but rather than long silences in between, a clamor of escalating motion accompanied an increasingly frequent din of frantic voices with an obviously chaotic quality of disorganization.

The Sethian army clearly conducted an urgent if not panicked retreat from the city apparently attempting to rally and regroup at the front gate while Fae and his insurgents conducted a rolling ambush on companies that fell behind. Subsequent scout companies then burst from gateways in the old wall eager to join the pursuit, collect recompense for accounts unsettled and feast on an all-you-can-kill buffet of panic and confusion that left a veritable blanket of broken and mutilated Sethian bodies in its wake.

Reneta rocked her head backward, closed her eyes, exhaled a sigh like a howling wind then whispered as if in praise to deities, “Orna... Volod...”

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Oostrigr pulled his horse to a halt near the front gate as his cavalry jumbled up behind him, assembling in relative safety while those on foot still desperately attempting to escape the city under hail of arrow with savage men on their trail would live or die by their own initiatives. Peering past the gate toward the gap between the wooded hills, Oostrigr observed the first companies of Angoran cavalry appear in small formations around the tree line then signaling his cavalry, eight-thousand riders, he evidently determined the most favorable odds they might ever encounter occurred in conducting an immediate charge to the gap. Though Oostrigr signaled all forces to retreat to Meldanich, the troops standing by in the field would live or die by their own initiatives as well then eight-thousand Sethian cavalymen thundered through the gate and across the grass fields outside the walls of Almath toward the gap abandoning all infantries in disarray behind.

A mass of grim men in gray cloaks on horseback rumbled to a stop then shuffled restlessly into organized rows with thousands of long spears erect in an intimidating display. Volod squeezed his way through to the front, urgently eyeing the situation and immediately sensing disorganization, he twirled his horse quickly, raised up a fist with index and little fingers extended then in a smooth continuous motion, spun his horse forward, reared up and hurdled across the field toward the oncoming Sethian retreat. In unison, the men in gray boosted their spears into the air then rumbled into a charge. As random packs of Sethian cavalry drew near, the Angoran spears thrust upward then lowered in unison bristling in a prone position and the two parties met at the dead center halfway between the gap and the gate with a horrific crash. Angoran long spears ripped through shield, armor and flesh, and snapped or lodged hopelessly embedded into targets as the front wave came to a sudden halt and cavaliers burst from behind as if out of a slingshot then hacked into the Sethians in wedged formations. Total confusion reigned as the Sethians steered away favoring the southern side of the field while half did not even raise weapon, hurdling at top speed for the gap in an attempt to outrun such a superior force. Near the gap, an Angoran company drove a collection of Sethians toward the trees, trapping them into an alcove at the foot of the hill line. Angorans at the rear, still entering through the gap, in their haste, cut the turn sharp through the edges of the woods and in the process, incidentally blocked what slim daylight might have remained for the Sethians through which to run. The Sethian cavalry unintentionally split in two and the portion that entered the woods met to their surprise, waves of Angoran cavalry already under the trees. Perhaps attempting to turn back to the field, the Sethians encountered a pincer maneuver that pinned them in the woods where a massacre commenced from which only some few of those that continued through toward the road ever emerged alive. The other half of the Sethian cavalry circled back toward the gate then looped around again toward the gap and under the relentless pursuit of half of the Angoran force, mounted a final charge to the gap while the other half of the Angorans neglected them, occupied with the slaughter occurring within the woods at the alcove. The fastest of the Sethian horses carried cavalymen through the gap and onto the road outside, while the rest perished by blade and spear on the green fields outside the walls of Algath. Oostrigr survived the charge to the gap then headed north with half of his cavalry.

In the field, the Sethian infantry already commenced a retreat toward the gap but they did so in battle formations with obvious expectations of encountering a fight on the way while the thousands of survivors under pursuit by Fae and his scouts emerged from the gate and observing the retreat of their counterparts, rushed into the field to join them. Evidently interpreting the maneuvers offensive, the Angoran cavalry regrouped then conducted a wedge maneuver on the infantry nearly identical to that they conducted on the cavalry but with dramatically different results. As foot soldiers suffered an obvious overwhelming disadvantage, they offered virtually no resistance while Angoran cavalry charged, sliced through and trampled them underfoot. Reassembling, the Angoran cavalry then conducted a subsequent charge while the majority of Sethian infantry that emerged from the gate instinctively turned in retreat incidentally directly encountering Fae and his scouts alongside a company of Gath guard. As Angoran cavalry tore into the rearguard, Highlander and Gath drove the companies out from the opposite side into a disorganized hoard while the rest of the Angoran cavalry pursued the Sethian infantry in the field nearby until all surviving Sethians merged into a single concentration.

Swarming together, the Sethian infantries faced to their rear an opponent out of the city enraged by more than a week of senseless carnage and terrible loss, and at their front an Angoran cavalry in significantly less than a casual mood as well. Some may have thrown down their arms intent on surrender but as long as at least one still brandished a weapon, they all accounted as legitimate combatants so the defenders of the city and the Angorans bore into them as an incomprehensible massacre commenced. Many Sethians attempting to surrender may have only reluctantly lifted up arms again only in response to the massacre and if they did, they only fueled the frenzy and not until something less than two-thousand remained while not a single one among them stood or bared arms, did the rage subside and the carnage finally cease.

Surviving captives bunched together seated on the ground as Angoran cavalry slowly circled while some four to five-thousand Sethian cavalry headed north on the road perhaps presently some miles away. Maybe as many as one-thousand Sethian infantry ran north outside the gap on foot under pursuit by a contingent of Angoran cavalry while distant howls already faintly echoed from out on the road. Perhaps as many as two-thousand Sethian infantry sat unarmed in disarray outside the gate, and somewhere between forty and forty-five-thousand Sethian warrior bodies, portions, or residual evidence thereof, befouled the picturesque city of Algath and the bucolic fields outside its walls. Some ten-thousand died in defense of the city, proportionate numbers of Gath, Highlander and Seilvhanian while in addition, perhaps some two-thousand Angorans only just died in the brief battles that occurred upon the fields.

Tears pooled in his eyes as Koulka looked up toward his home on the hill shrouded in smoke that still billowed from isolated locations all over the city and he stared in shock and disbelief at the body bridge, piled across the ditch, up and over the wall, and the blasted out and blackened buildings facing the field. Even from a distance, he easily observed heaps, mounds and randomly scattered bodies littered all over the streets, at the gate and in the field as he walked his horse slowly past the prisoners in the custody of the Angorans then continuing toward the gate, perhaps Koulka hardly noticing a young man, a foreigner, run past in the opposite direction.

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Glancing behind and around him from atop the old wall, the scene exceeded that which Wyl could tolerate. Gath and Seilvhanian lay dead about the streets and easily observable as well, the unmistakable plain and dull greens and browns. Turning away intent on eliminating such things from his sight, he exposed his eyes to the body bridge, a ghastly heap of unspeakable wretchedness then Wyl shook his head and walked away along the parapet, increasing his pace until at last he simply ran. At the archway under which he and Reneta observed the retreat and dragged dead and wounded, he worked open the gate and stumbled through, tripping over bodies all the way down the hill then stopped and turned in a complete panoramic circle observing bodies littered on the streets. Scattered even upon walls, hairy arms and legs, blood and flesh, scraps, remnants and splatters stuck to the surfaces of street, wall and blast damaged storefront, a horrible assortment of shredded flesh and body parts. Wyl imagined nothing in the world might compare but a butcher shop with articles on display for purchase and consumption. The sweet horrid stench of blood stuck like stones in his nose and he gasped and gagged but continued down the street through the grisly display, an appalling variety of flank, rump, skirt, tenderloin, and innumerable others too abominable to warrant names.

Perhaps somewhat instinctively, Wyl associated downhill with out and he associated out with the lush green fields between the hills then he wished for nothing more than to simply stand alone in a green place, smell air and earth, and feel the caress of vegetation on his feet. Splashing through scarlet pools and weaving around obscenities, Wyl recalled what Fae told him about no party ever winning a war, about every war always destroying first those things that account as most desired objectives and he considered the absurdity of mutually cooperative actions in the form of virtually scheduled recesses. Considering then the coordination and organization involved, Wyl marveled that such sophistication might coincide with actions of such depravity yet nevertheless fail to preclude the actions altogether, and most of all, he recognized no motive, not that he perceived a motive beyond his comprehension but that literally no motive motivated the actions. Only disorder motivated the actions, unnatural disorder, elemental disarrangement...

Stumbling through the gate into the field, Wyl glared at the body bridge over the wall, the trails and heaps of carcasses leading to its base and the multinational new carnage scattered all around the gate then glancing at the prisoners, he impulsively wished them all dead. Continuing into the field in no particular direction but away, Wyl never even noticed the dark haired man with the thin moustache atop a horse he saw once before in the tunnel with Orna the night she departed for Angora.

Gazing out toward the woods covering the surrounding hills, Wyl there observed beauty, green growth, wildlife and a gentle breeze then he slogged through red stained mud, stepping high over lumpy objects he only sensed in his lower periphery but suddenly focused on a small girl in red with raven hair. Even upon her knees, she stood out slightly above the flesh, blood and wreckage around her and Wyl approached through wisps of smoke that curled by in a swirling breeze. Beside the girl, the black horse with the long curly mane lay dead as she gently stroked its neck then Wyl held out a trembling hand and gently laid his fingers on her shoulder, whispering, "Orna?"

In response, Orna turned slowly and Wyl observed her soft pale cheek, her graceful neck but as she faced him, he recoiled and a sort of squeak crept out his throat as he held up his hands near his shoulders like a frightened child. A horrible gash spanned her face from forehead to chin, across both lips split by the wound and flesh curled back exposing slim glimpses of bone on her forehead, cheek and chin while a bucket of blood splashed across that side of her body covering even her cute dainty little slipper. Immediately interpreting the wound as obviously fatal that no luck or charisma might ever explain, Wyl concluded a single inescapable truth even speaking the words aloud, "She is a ghost now, a restless spirit forever bound to the field of battle that claimed her mortality."

With a nearly comical expression in reaction, Orna slapped Wyl on his leg with the back of her hand then extended an open palm in his direction and placing his hand in hers, he closed his eyes in appreciation of the gentle softness and warmth he considered a form of perfection. No more than perhaps a mere instant passed before Orna yanked Wyl forcefully to his knees and as she pointed at her pack, he understood her intent in a wave of shock and amazement then impulsively babbled, "Right! Ointments! Gauze! Why didn't I think of that?"

Scrambling through her pack, Wyl shivered and panted until Orna slapped his arm when he placed his hand on the correct item then she opened a jar, held his hand and scooped a generous portion of the contents with his fingers while motioning instruction to apply the substance to her wounds.

Perhaps no more than a quarter hour earlier, Wyl never would have guessed such a situation would ever measure as the most difficult thing he ever had to do in his lifetime and he told himself, *‘After all, it is casual and routine to handle chopped meats, and why should this be any different from that?’* -but other questions occurred to him, for he was a curious young man and he thought, *‘They can’t both be correct, can they? Should this be as casual as handling chopped meat or should handling chopped meat be as horrifying as this? ... Is this why she eats no meat?’*

Sighing quite irritably with obvious impatience, Orna then firmly nudged Wyl by his elbow and he gasped and choked as his hands shook violently while he clumsily smeared and rubbed the goo into the raw exposed flesh and the cavernous gash, even nearly fainting when his fingertip touched the bone on her cheek. Scooping again with his fingers, Orna motioned instructions to apply the ointment out across the skin areas to either side of the wound and in fact, Wyl considered the task not so bad by comparison. Rolling out strips of gauze, Orna guided Wyl through a bandaging process and he pressed the wound closed, pulled gauze taught across adhering to her skin on either side then she tore small scraps and curled them around the splits in her lips until finally a layer of plastered fabrics concealed the hideous disfigurement along with half her face. A bruised red eye peeked out between strips of gauze but in his estimation, Wyl concluded the repair all more or less contoured to the shape of her face and from perhaps ten feet away, Orna did not appear all that dreadful or even more crucially, did not appear all that dead.

Orna bandaged a number of gashes on her arms without assistance while Wyl doubled over on hands and knees vomiting a few paces away. Pulling him to his feet by his cloak, Orna pushed a liqueur flask into his hand and he swished it in mouth even savoring the spiced botanical flavors he otherwise considered somewhat revolting. In a barely intelligible mumble without moving her jaw or her lips, Orna asked, “Carry my things?” three times before Wyl understood the words. After slinging her pack over his shoulder, Orna clasped Wyl by a hand then led him across the field toward the front gate. After all the terror of the preceding days, the warmth and glow of her presence profoundly comforted him, and the touch of her hand brought calm and peacefulness. All the terrible things Wyl considered no less terrible but he keenly appreciated although scared, he did not tremble, although remorseful for the violence of the world, he felt less than despondent, and closing his eyes, Wyl felt he floated over the earth tethered to her.

Standing inside the gate, Wyl found it impossible not to notice Fae as a buzz of activity surrounded him with messengers running to and from, while a company of scouts and horses assembled nearby growing in number by the moment. Orna evidently also effortlessly noticed Fae and immediately approached him dragging Wyl behind her. “Faelryd, where is Glendwyn?” she demanded mumbling through clenched teeth.

Glancing briefly, Fae redirected his attention elsewhere then glanced again, laughed and graciously declared, “Yes, it’s good to see you alive as well. How have you been? You look different. Have you lost weight? No... You changed your hairstyle-”

Stomping at his foot, Orna angrily barked, “Glendwyn!”

“He’s hurt.” Fae replied, “He’s not conscious. I’ll know more about it soon.”

Wyl heaved a sigh of relief to hear the report as the last he knew of Glendwyn, he fell from three floors high in the collapse of the tower room post and Wyl otherwise may have presumed him dead.

“What about the others?” Orna inquired.

“I am in contact with Dorian and Aelbryct.” Fae advised, “Wyndael and Haemyhl are dead... I believe Adail may also be dead... I don’t know anything about Arieth.”

Wyl turned his back, held his hands over his eyes and shuddered as he listened to the death announcements from Fae, but it occurred to him he had information to offer so he interrupted to advise, “I know about Arieth.”

Fae nodded slightly and stated, “It’s good to see you alive too, Wyl... and what about Arieth then?”

“I was with her behind the old wall.” Wyl explained, “Arieth was hurt and we took her to a physician station, and I was with Reneta there too, only just a little while ago. She survived and she’s fine... or at least... you know, assuming she hasn’t suffered some freak accident or something since-”

Orna gently pushed the tip of her finger against his lips to silence Wyl then turned to Fae and advised, “Faelryd... We need to pursue... now.”

Fae nodded patiently and assured, “I know... What do you think I’m doing?”

“How long will it take?” Orna inquired carefully examining the conditions around her.

Fae flexed his brow, stared a moment then stated with obvious sarcasm and perhaps a bit of annoyance, “Orna... It won’t happen in a quarter hour. As I would hope you can easily see, we have some more... remedial issues... to address first? ... as a step in the process? Yes?” Orna stared as if perhaps astonished at such a time under such conditions Fae might presumably consider it remotely appropriate to mock her speech habits but stroking her hair, Fae stated, “It will take a little while. You understand that, right?”

Orna turned her head and huffed then instructed, “Stay here.” and immediately departed in the direction of the gate.

More messengers conducted exchanges with Fae as more scouts, Highland, Seilvhanian and even a Gath company continued to trickle down the streets with material and horses. A sudden tremendous commotion occurred outside the gate and Wyl stepped toward then peered out the archway just in time to observe half the Angorans storm off toward the gap. As Orna returned to Fae, Wyl followed her and asked, “What’s happening? Where are they going? Orna?”

“Volod is underway.” Orna informed Fae, “He will harass them to the best of his ability but we must catch up. We are only two days from the pass and every hour is critical. Volod cannot overwhelm them alone with his present company and that means he cannot prevent them from making the pass. We must reinforce Volod and intercept them before they make the pass.”

“Why?” Fae asked impassively.

With a sigh, Orna stressed, “-because the pass back over the mountains is only another day north of Meldanich.”

“What pass?” Fae inquired.

“The Carcaras Mountains.” Orna explained, “The western frontier of Sethia lies on the other side.”

“So what?” Fae asked with a shrug, “So we’ll chase them.”

“No.” Orna argued, “Once they cross the pass, our degree of difficulty increases by the day. They cannot make the pass.”

“Okay.” Fae finally conceded, “Don’t worry. We’ll catch up.”

Orna again visually inspected the situation and still appeared apprehensive then asked, “What is the order here? This does not appear very organized, Faelryd.”

Glaring for a moment, Fae then asserted, “We’re fine! Dorian, Aelbryct and I have the surviving captains assembling everyone. We are preparing to ride, right now... in fact, most of those who will remain behind, we had to instruct to do so, and they are not too pleased about taking any instructions right now. We will be riding soon, all right?” Staring at her for the duration of an excruciating silence, Fae then inquired as if the notion only just suddenly occurred to him, “-and... while we’re on the subject -- since **you** brought it up -- why is Wyl carrying your gear, Orna? Are you going to ride Wyl there? Considering we have but slim time to spare, perhaps now might be an appropriate moment for you to put some thought into your own preparations? Yes?”

Orna stared at Fae as her eyes slowly bulged then she barked over her shoulder, “Wylmaer! Follow me! Quickly!”

Struggling to keep pace, Wyl trudged uphill through blood and over body carrying the gear while calling out several times to beg Orna to slow down. The sun drifted halfway below the horizon as the pair entered the stables and Orna shopped by torchlight for a new horse with the assistance of the stable master. Wyl replayed the conversations that occurred at the gate in his mind and slowly pieced together an understanding of the situation. The rank structure reduced to shambles. Wyl believed Olorik dead or at least incapacitated in the collapse of the tower. Glendwyn perhaps died or at least his condition prevented him from performing as Martial. Wyndael and Haemyhl both died and a cavalry hastily assembled for a pursuit. Fae conducted the assembly of the cavalry, bruised and splattered with blood but Fae stood on two feet... Fae was Martial...

“I’m going with.” Wyl declared authoritatively.

Orna raised her eyebrows and remarked. “-but Wylmaer, you heard Faelryd. Legitimate soldiers will remain behind by instruction. You would go in place of one of them, yes?”

“No I wouldn’t.” Wyl argued, “They already have their instructions. I’m useless, whether I stay or go. It makes no difference.”

With a gentle grunt, Orna stared skeptically while Wyl gritted his teeth and squinted trying his best to appear resolute. Eventually rolling her eyes, Orna counseled, “Not on your horse. We will find you one that can keep up. Come see. Come collect stories for your journals. Just do not let Faelryd catch you.”

The palace of the King nearly attached to the stables and Orna sent Wyl to collect his gear while she prepared the horses then they descended the hill together in merciful darkness as the horses high stepped over dark lumpy shadows scattered about the streets.

The hastily assembled cavalry mounted, funneled through the gate and assembled in the field. Another one-thousand prepared to lead the prisoners out the following morning and would trail some distance behind. Somewhere out in the darkness, Volod led two-thousand of his cavalry in pursuit, influencing the flight of Oostrigr and steering him toward Meldanich. Wyl pulled his hood over his head, broke from Orna and blended into the crowd as she continued toward Fae. With some degree of difficulty in the darkness, Wyl identified Gaeryn in the moonlight and only because of his unique hairstyle and physique. It pleased Wyl immensely to know Gaeryn breathed, and he wondered if Gaeryn had to lobby Fae for inclusion but he suspected not. The action underway accounted as no defense but a hunt, a true scout action in which the ‘monster’ accounted as an imperative. Shouted signals howled out, ominous clouds smudged the moon and harsh gusts whipped as four-thousand angry riders stormed through the field while bathed in blood behind, the city of Algath smoldered in partial ruin.