

## 23. Fate and Oblivion

Bouncing loosely in his saddle, Wyl leaned and wobbled groggy from exhaustion, and observed nothing other than blurry shapes from under heavy eyelids. Although he may have encountered no more than one accumulative night of sleep in several days, Wyl knew that probably accounted as far more than most others in the company. Vague shapes and colors ranging from deep midnight blue to black drifted past and Wyl nodded off several times, convinced by brief inspection all others did the same. The ride passed like a blur with only one short break for personal business on an endless sprint along a trail riddled with ruts and potholes that ran up and down lesser inclines and around larger hills, across an eerie wilderness of dark boreal forest abbreviated by small occasional clearings with high grasses and shallow standing waters. Late into the night, the leading group of the company encountered an Angoran company then the pace quickened as news filtered the pursuit gained on Oostrigr, trailing by no more than an hour.

Conducting an ingenious ploy in the pursuit, Volod dispatched riders two or three dozen at a time to sprint out at full speed in progressively shorter rotations. Each group sprinted as hard as they could until their horses tired then came to a stop and rested until the main company caught up, while the subsequent group sprinted past until they tired. With the ruse, Volod presented the appearance to Oostrigr of a cavalry hot on his heels and gaining. Consequently, Oostrigr drove his horses in a continuous sprint wearing them down and though he relentlessly pushed onward, his pace only progressively slowed all the while. The main body of the Angoran cavalry closed in behind the Sethians and presently held a position to overtake them at their convenience, waiting only for the Highlander, Seilvhanian and Gath reinforcements to catch up, and estimated the combined strength might merge then overwhelm the Sethians at the bridge over the Black River on the edge of Meldanich. The strategy involved unrelenting pursuit for the duration of the night but at sunrise, Volod and his company planned to make their move where an unusually narrow bridge spanned the Black River just outside of the town and the crossing would surely cause congestion bringing the bulk of the Sethians to a stop as they funneled onto the narrow span.

Dense clouds of fog rolled over the terrain and the riders rumbled on through the darkness on the beaten dirt trail under scattered dim moonlight, grim and ghostly in appearance like tormented spirits following some single-minded quest to resolve an ancient curse. Hills, turns and series of potholes occurred in nearly identical repeating patterns and those riders that paid little attention might have sensed they even traveled the same ground as half an hour earlier, as if caught in some time paradox doomed to repeat the same hour for the rest of eternity. Perhaps even alert and attentive riders might have entertained the same thought as the terrain exhibited very little if anything to disprove such a suspicion. As the first light spread across the sky, more Angorans swelled the ranks at the leading companies while the pace accelerated then emerging from thinning forests, the companies crossed over the crest of a hill to discover the Sethians well within sight less than a mile ahead running in disorganized clusters. The pursuit maintained a fixed distance, matching the Sethian pace weaving over and around a series of low hills until the trail entered a wide low valley of farmlands. With the river within view at the basin, the Sethians broke into a final dash for the bridge as Volod and his company at the lead commenced their play for the position.

Straying off the trail, the pursuing companies charged across crop fields, preparing for an angled assault at the riverbank while the Sethians ran along the trail and made the bridge. Although a constant stream ran across the span in single file, just as predicted, the majority immediately congested at a stop on the apron. While the Sethian companies packed together tightly at the mouth of the bridge, captains frantically attempted to form defensive ranks but all motion at that point only caused further disorganization then the first of the pursuers, an Angoran company, charged in from an angle, peeled past and showered the dense crowd with arrows. The Sethians attempted to hurriedly organize a shield wall and return fire but as the Angorans swept away, the dispersing dust cloud revealed a shield and archer wall of Seilvhanians and they unleashed a murderous salvo into the unprepared Sethians, depriving them of any opportunity to organize a defense of the bridge. Breaking ranks and abandoned the position, hundreds then fled up the riverbank while hundreds more simply charged down the slope and into the water where most toppled from their saddles and sank with their heavy gear and armor. Some riders leapt from their horses, tearing off their weapons, armor and boots then plunged into the river to swim across. The Sethian companies that fled along the bank, rushed past the edge of the archer wall taking fire as they passed then ran some distance upstream but encountered a dense pocket of trees along the bank, and scrambling back up toward the field, met Gath and Highlander in ambush, suffering terrible losses as they struggled unbalanced up the steep lip. Turning and hurdling back down the bank, the wayward Sethians then plunged into the river while archers sniped at them in the water where they sank, floated or swam as their luck might determine.

Marching calmly up and down the bank as random arrows sailed nearby and struck down men around him, a captain among the Sethians barked orders at his troops to form ranks and maintain discipline. Some soldiers followed the instructions of the captain and attempted to form a wall while archers fell into position loading bows, but too many scrambled in panic for the water and bumped through the rank disrupting the formation then a synchronized salvo from a Seilvhanian company tore into those few still holding the position. At least half fell dead or stumbled away bleeding, dropped their weapons and staggered for the water while the captain raised his voice shouting orders as the last of his men deserted him or fell over pierced by arrow. The captain suddenly halted in mid-sentence and fell silent although his mouth still dangled open then he turned his head to behold the disaster upon him and slowly raised his eyes up to the lip of the bank. Fae stared down upon the captain and he stared back at Fae as he calmly loosened his gear and dropped his armor and weapons into the stones on the shoreline. Even though arrows still whistled near, the man paused and very slightly bowed his head then Fae lowered the tip of his sword to the earth and returned a slight bow of his head. With that, the captain turned and walked calmly into the water until the depth exceeded his waist then he leaned forward and stroked at the surface swimming into, around and over floating or partially submerged brothers in arms with limbs splayed out and arrows protruding while red clouds swirled around him. Upon reaching the opposite bank, the captain crawled up and staggered on the slope, and as he conducted a last look across, an arrow clearly protruded from his back, visible from the distance only as he turned to his side. With another step forward then a pause, he tumbled backward and into the water then the current washed his body from the bank and as it pulled him toward the middle and downstream, the Sethian captain gently submerged forever and descended into oblivion.

The single file across the bridge tapered off to a conclusion and those that emerged alive on the other side of the river organized no defense, simply racing straight up the main road into the town while the area at the bridge fell under a tense quiet. A large group of Sethians suddenly leapt up from the ground and raced to the bridge on foot, firing darts wildly as they ran. Seilvhanian archers returned fire and hundreds of the survivors fell about the bridge or tumbled into the water, yet still hundreds more successfully crossed the river and continued up the main road as well. Suddenly apparent, hundreds of survivors curled up and lay down near the bridge as an Angoran company dismounted then approached on foot with swords drawn as the passivity of the surviving ranks implied intent to surrender. The battle at the Black River Bridge concluded and accounted as an unmitigated and virtually uncontested massacre from start to finish.

While the Angorans organized their prisoners, Orna dismounted and led her horse slowly across the bridge with Fae and Gaeryn following her. Wyl quickly fell in line and stepping off the apron after the crossing, conducted a perfunctory inspection of the area immediately concluding less than favorable treatment occurred in Meldanich during the Sethian occupation. Scorch marks covered every house and barn in sight rendering them uninhabitable by all indications and only recently plowed fields otherwise suggested any human presence. At the edge of the town, five Sethian ramp machines and two launchers spread out in a row along a side street, all presumably inoperable due to some obvious damage to one component or another. A fortress stood atop a low mound covered by a blanket of grass at the center of the town and jumbled collections of one and two floored rustic wood frame structures, most also damaged by flame and vandalism, sprawled away separated by slim patches of wooded groves.

Two rows of tall mature elms ran alongside the main street from the edge of town to the gate of the fortress and although evidence indicated the presence of a population, the absence of any visible humanity contradicted the indications. Orna and a small group behind her abandoned their horses then continued ahead on foot as they rounded a corner onto the main street to the fortress and while all others halted abruptly to gaze awestruck, Orna slowly continued alone up the tree lined street where hundreds of bodies, men, women and children dangled over the earth, impaled on stakes. Walking ahead slowly and deliberately, Orna stared directly at the fortress as though she might not even have noticed the spectacle while the group behind her stood motionless for a moment then slowly proceeded. Some wandering or some choosing a place to stand still, all present surveyed the scene in silent anger and disgust as wind whistled in the trees and rushed around the buildings with a ghostly howl. Concluding her approach in the middle of the street not far from the fortress gate, Orna stared up like a statue while Fae came to rest in front of a young girl on a stake, her face toward the sky hung back below her shoulders and her eyes still open. Staring into her eyes with an emotionless expression that mirrored hers, Fae reached and lifted from the ground, a small gray stuffed bear likeness that lay below the girl then he cradled it in one arm while Wyl pressed the back of his hand over his eyes and winced until the initial shock faded. Guessing the age of the girl on the stake approximate to that of his little sister, Wyl shivered with a mental image of Myr clutching her own stuffed animal with the innocent smile of a child and observing bloodstains on the bear, he wondered if the girl held it close when these cruel men committed this abomination. He prayed that the object somehow comforted the girl in that moment but Wyl suspected in all likelihood it did not.

Tucking the bear under his belt, Fae curled his arms under the girl to raise her from the stake, but he struggled to lift her over the pointed tip and Wyl hurried over then leaned on the stake to assist. Fae carried the girl past the trees alongside the street into a wide grass park that sloped down to the river and there he laid her onto the grass in the sunshine, knelt and straightened her hair with his fingers then pulled out his dagger and dug at the ground with it. As others followed, a procession carried all the bodies into the park while others arranged shovels or otherwise appropriate digging tools then the party dug out a long common grave and placed all the bodies side by side within it. Concluding with a moment of silence after covering the grave, the burial party wandered back to the street where the balance of the companies gathered after crossing the bridge. Prisoners sat in rows along a side street and hung their heads in shame or possibly disillusionment or at the very least, embarrassment over their obvious association with the deeds committed. Still occupying the same place in the street from which she evidently never moved even over all the hours that passed during the burial, Orna relentlessly stared at the fortress.

Glancing at the prisoners, Wyl leaned and asked Fae in a whisper, "If they hang their heads isn't that an indication they know what they did is wrong?"

Fae nodded slightly and calmly remarked, "That's an excellent observation, Wyl. I'm glad to see you're paying attention and learning."

Stepping toward the prisoners, Fae withdrew his sword and in the still and quiet of only a gentle breeze, Wyl heard the blade slide across the opening of the sheath with a horrible wailing screech, rising in tone as the tip made its way to the opening and then rang like a bell as it slipped out the end. Orna suddenly reappeared, pulled Fae close by an elbow, spoke softly and deliberately into his ear and though he nodded slowly perhaps with a bit of reluctance, he returned his sword to its sheath then the two walked together out of sight into a side street. Wyl wandered to the edge of town where companies engaged in setting up a camp, making use of several relatively intact buildings nearby for mess halls, storage and watch posts while Volod organized a watch routine over the fortress. Since the crossing of the bridge, not a sound of any kind or any motion occurred in the fortress but after sunset, some windows glowed from within. Rejoining his company, Wyl located Aengys and though they spoke not a single word, they ate some bread and bacon together while drinking warm beer from leather flasks.

Throughout the night, an odd sequence of creaking and banging echoed from the street the ramp and launcher machines occupied then in the morning, a committee of Gath cavalry canvassed the town, knocking on every door. Although most residents hid, the Gath committee managed to speak to some few informing them of recent events in Algath and reassuring them then in the afternoon, a party of four locals visited the camp and after performing a cursory inspection, approached Volod most likely due to his uniform in that it clearly stood out as unique and quite impressive. Volod himself in addition also stood out as unique and impressive, unusually tall and dark with black eyes and black hair, he spoke with a thick accent in a deep authoritative voice, and the locals evidently found him quite reassuring. Each of the four in the party presented Volod with a welcoming gift of a large bottle of beer all four of which he graciously drank in short order. Volod then advised the locals to pass his recommendation to the rest of the population to move temporarily into all stable structures near his camp, stay away from the fortress and all activity around it until further notice and apparently accepting the invitation, some time later in the evening hundreds moved into the area.

In speaking with Volod, the locals recounted the events of the occupation and explained Oostrigr and a small company appeared four weeks earlier, killed the local lord and his army, which amounted to little more than a personal bodyguard, mercilessly executing even those that surrendered along with the lord in a particularly public spectacle. Over the following weeks, the Sethian army arrived in full force and used the town to stage supplies then marched to Algath. Initially the army appeared content to put the population to work but for reasons unknown or perhaps for no reason but mere impulse, the impaling commenced, twice under the direct instruction of Oostrigr and once more at the discretion of his captain, Nortrogr after his departure for Algath. The impaling of those on display along the street leading to the fortress in fact occurred only the day prior to the fight at the bridge. Although collecting over the course of his life many ceremonial names, the people of Meldanich never called Oostrigr, the Silver Tongue, they called him the Stone Hand, a name more common among the smaller remote communities of less strategic or economic value than advanced and developed cities such as Algath and Angora.

After nightfall, more creaking and banging echoed from the location the ramp and launcher machines occupied, followed by a rumbling sound through the street, and in the morning, the sunrise revealed the two launchers parked in the center of the main street a short distance from the front gate of the fortress. Accompanied by a small select group, Orna moved about at the launchers and Wyl wandered in that direction along with many others as she suddenly stepped away and walked toward the fortress coming to a halt stiff and rigged in the street, dangerously near the gate. At the conclusion of a lengthy silence, Orna suddenly chanted, "Oost! Oost! Oost!" steadily increasing in volume then turned and waved her arms in provocation until thousands chanted in an intimidating roar while Orna leapt and danced in apparent mockery of the kind of ritual the Sethians performed outside the walls of Algath prior to their initial assault. Upon each chant of 'Oost', Orna briefly froze in a disrespectful mock combat pose until abruptly concluding the ceremony with a commanding signal then glaring up with fists overhead in a taunt, tilted her head as if straining to hear but from the fortress only silence occurred in reaction.

At the launchers, a small group of prisoners under guard materialized at some point during the chant and as Orna approached, she clutched one from the group by his collar pulling him toward the launcher but he struggled loose and spit at her. Fae and Gaeryn then pulled the prisoner by his arms and threw him into the missile basket and though he struggled to climb out, with bound hands inside the loose rope webbing, his attempts amounted to an act of futility. Three other prisoners then fell into the basket in quick succession and with a loud click and a clank, the armature swung up overhead and cast four hairy beast men up and over the fortress wall, kicking and shouting. Two of the men fell from sight behind the wall while two others struck the high keep beyond then tumbled down inside leaving splattered bloodstains behind them.

Recalling he wished all the prisoners dead several times but suddenly squeamish, Wyl felt despair that Fae and Orna might engage in actions so reprobate yet he did not dare object then backing away, he blended into the crowd while the launchings continued over the course of the day. Prisoners paraded over then the launchers hurled them off to their final rewards and their bodies bounced and ricocheted off the parapets, towers, roofs and walls of the fortress, splattering and smashing inside. At sunset, the launchings suspended followed by an immediate eerie quiet while the only signs of life in the fortress again consisted of some few illuminated windows.

In the morning sunlight, a passively despondent line of prisoners marched to the launchers but before an opening volley occurred, a man waved a white rag from the wall over the front gate of the fortress. Orna walked alone up toward the gate and as she approached, the man with the white rag emerged from a narrow side door. Continuing directly toward the man and apparently, before he ever spoke a word in negotiation, Orna swung out her dagger and slashed his throat then he staggered and collapsed onto his face. Clutching his ankle, Orna dragged the man facedown back to the launcher, hurled him into the basket then added three live companions and launched the assortment over the wall evidently concluding all ostentations of parlay with a resounding rebuke. The launchings then continued without further interruption and in the afternoon, the prisoners that surrendered at Almath arrived in the custody of a party of Gaths and Angorans.

Over several days, a series of rainstorms moved through the area and the launchings temporarily suspended then resumed at full pace whenever the storms subsided for any duration. Most of the companies drank quantities of beer and rested idle in between rounds on watch over the fortress while a parade of flying beast men continued to rain down on the interior including those killed in the battle at the bridge.

Wyl mostly shied away from the launchers but on occasion, he gave into morbid compulsion, ventured near and watched from a distance as Orna, half of her face concealed by a layer of gauze strips, a grim expression on the other half, ushered a procession of hairy men to their last journey. Some among the condemned protested or struggled defiantly and Orna or others struck blows to their heads then threw them into the baskets. Wyl remembered vividly what the Sethian ranks did in Almath and even saw in his dreams, the body bridges and the joy in their eyes as they ran willfully into incendiary blasts, walls of shield, spear and sword, and the ghastly obvious intent in the eyes of the beast that advanced on Reneta. Despite even the depravity and mindless viciousness, under present conditions, Wyl perceived only helpless victims and he remembered the words Gaeryn spoke to him what felt like years earlier, almost the first words Gaeryn ever spoke to him, *“To some, it feels too much like... murder.”*

As the launchings progressed, the bandages on her face deteriorated until loose shreds dangled clinging by an end exposing the flesh underneath where a horrible jagged pink and red scar traversed her face surrounded by bruises and a blackened socket encircled a terrible red eye from which Orna glared relentless. The procession of prisoners cowered and recoiled before Orna as if looking upon the face of death itself and thus hurdled to their fates having observed so much as their last earthly remembrance.

Flowers and trees blossomed on a bright spring morning and the valley filled with the hectic colors and mingled fragrances of new life. Farmers worked fields while others returned to shops and engaged in constructive actions perhaps only forcing themselves through the motions in an attempt to resume some form of their previous lives. Half the companies present maintained a vigilant watch over the fortress while the other half rested and drank beer as the prisoner procession finally and abruptly concluded.

With the supply of human projectiles exhausted, companies organized into crews that shoveled and packed horse manure into flimsy fragile wooden crates hastily constructed from loose scrap. Launching activities then took on a curious twist as throughout the course of the day, the launchers hurled horse manure crates along with a compliment of stones, flaming logs and coals, and all common refuse, over the fortress wall crashing into the buildings and onto the roofs inside.

A bizarre gruesome mess of manure, bodies and blood spattered all over everything within the fortress as the barrage broke holes in the walls of the buildings inside, in the roofs as well, and smashed out all the windows. Flaming projectiles ignited and scorched out the upper floors and roofs while broken bodies lay upon the heights and dangled by threads from high places in a crust of manure, blood and ash caked over everything. While the top of the fortress parapets stood high over the town, on occasion a breeze carried a hint of the conditions within its walls.

Searching for Orna at the launchers, Wyl observed her with diminishing frequency as she spent long durations conducting a brooding watch over the fortress and on those occasions he spotted her, she appeared sparkly, fresh and fragrant again after scrubbing away the scraps of her deteriorating bandages. Although the bruising faded and the horrible scar healed incrementally, it still constituted a gruesome disfigurement but even so, Wyl wished to feel her presence again and wanted Orna to touch him and take him back into the beautiful dream even though she frightened him and he no longer saw her as innocent. Wyl recalled awkward moments with Orna after pestering her too much or after she taught him a lesson, but those moments Wyl guessed would likely pale in comparison to the awkwardness that lay ahead.

Days passed with more launcher barrages and a tense quiet rested over the town. Some among the companies openly wondered how the Sethians survived inside the fortress and if perhaps, their only nourishment might occur by way of those things thrown over the wall. The routine dragged on but one particular sunny morning after so long a silence, a clamor rose up from inside the fortress and the watch as well as idle companies asleep, stirred and rushed into positions around the fortress. A group of thousands cast open the front gate then charged down the main street as Gath and Seilvhanian archers cut the fleeing riders to shreds with a maelstrom of arrows along the entire length of the street and no more than half those that commenced the charge escaped the far end alive. An Angoran cavalry company gave chase and pursued the Sethians northbound on the trail while the rest of the companies frantically prepared then mounted their horses. From a position near the gate, Orna observed the riders rush past and calculated their numbers incomplete then rounding up Fae and a scout company, she led through the woods in a more directly easterly direction and there, the company encountered at least a thousand Sethians consequently fighting with them at a run while weaving through the trees. The charge out the front gate amounted to little more than a diversion for the group led by Oostrigr that exited the east side of the fortress through a tunnel they dug while holed up and most of that party escaped the immediate area alive then headed east with a slim lead while scouts fought with and struck down stragglers.

Executing a sharp turn north, Oostrigr and his company headed in the direction of the eastern trail but upon reaching it, rather than turning east which qualified as the more predictable direction as it led to one of two mountain passes, they continued across the trail northbound. The group pursued by the Angorans meanwhile came to an unexpected stop where the northern trail intersected with the eastern trail then just as unexpectedly, fell into a defensive position as if to contest the intersection while the Angorans pulled up firing arrows. As the Gath and Seilvhanian companies converged on the intersection, a fierce exchange of arrow fire occurred but the Sethians stubbornly insisted on holding the position, and conceded the fight only after something close to half of them fell then frantically continued their flight northbound on the trail.

After less than glorious action in the Angora campaign, appointed ranking officer in charge of the occupation of Meldanich and with naught to boast of his exploits but the massacre of unarmed women and children, Sethian Captain Nortrogr at last died the undeserved death of a war hero, pierced in the eye by dart in defense of the intersection. While the arrow fight at the crossroad occurred, Oostrigr and his company looped around then encountered the northern trail at a run, north of the intersection as scouts still pursued from a distance. The once great army of Oostrigr which at that point numbered no more than fifteen-hundred, escaped Meldanich and headed north on the trail with a lead on their pursuers while ahead lay the pass over the Carcaras Mountains into the Sethian frontier. Escape suddenly appeared a very real possibility for Oostrigr and although return to his homeland under such circumstances could not possibly account as anything less than catastrophic, his mere survival as so many times before would in all likelihood only reinforce his mystique as a man compelled by providence. Furthermore, none in any degree familiar might ever doubt the hypnotic spell the great orator cast over his adoring masses or their collective irrevocable zeal for freewill, liberty and prosperity.

Through woodlands then into a vast field, the Sethians rumbled along the dirt trail while a delicate myriad of brightly colored wildflowers stood silent witness to the last desperate flight of Oostrigr as he charged toward the pass with reckless abandon. Up an incline of gentle slopes, the trail wound between thick pine forests and the Sethians drove their horses mercilessly while their pursuers barely kept up enough to hold the pace perhaps even falling further behind. The rocky tree lined crest of a low spur of the mountains loomed up closer and higher toward a pronounced gap and nearing the height through a final series of turns, Oostrigr approached the entrance to the pass. Once in, as little as an obligatory defense at his rear would in all likelihood, provide sufficient cover for one last downhill plunge that would place him in the frontiers of his homeland.

A great wide field sprawled out ahead and on the other side, a rugged stretch of trail ran through a narrow crevasse choked with pine forest up to the crest and the Sethians dashed across with possibly the first hope they felt in weeks as it seemed even after an unrestrained sprint, their pace actually yet increased. Thundering through the weedy fringe, Oostrigr smiled contently as he approached the entrance to the forest trail while behind him laid only empty field then executing a sharp turn around a peninsula of dense pine, he and his company ground to a sudden halt nearly face to face with a formation of Angoran cavalry. Unexpectedly confronted with an overwhelming force, the Sethians impulsively retreated to the field after only a brief exchange of arrow fire.

Keenly suspicious of the ill-advised confrontation the Sethians conducted at the crossroads, an Angoran captain guessed their intent and consequently led his company at a safe distance around the arrow fight at the trail intersection, anticipating further that not all the Sethian cavalry under pursuit stopped to stage the defense. As he and his company returned to the trail further north, the Angoran captain discovered no fresh tracks upon it and assuming he already held a position too far west to contribute to any pursuit on the eastbound trail, he simply conducted a dash up the northbound trail all the way to the pass as a preventative measure. When Oostrigr and his company reached the northbound trail, they evidently assumed their own companies that survived the fight at the intersection left the tracks and already sprinted to the pass ahead but at last, upon the very doorstep into the last stretch to the crest, they discovered the disappointing truth as they encountered the Angoran company there.

Oostrigr may have intended to double back across the field then turn west along a high shelf of traversable land to the next natural pass some ten miles west but as he trotted into the weedy fringes, the rest of the pursuers spilled out of the trail from the forests and into the field on the other side. Pulling his horse to a stop with nowhere left to run and trapped like a rat, Oostrigr peered across the field and there among the greens, grays, blues, and browns, the one in red stepped forward and emerged at the forefront. Instructing his cavalry to dismount, abandon their weapons and assume a passive position, Oostrigr then trotted casually toward the center of the field while Orna signaled her party to hold their position as well then also trotted alone toward the center of the field. Though he never said and none would ever truly know, perhaps Oostrigr remembered the words:

“... *Seven... No more than seven will ever return...*”

The two halted their horses a short distance apart at the center of the field and Orna stared coldly while Oostrigr inspected her as if assessing a total stranger for the first time. With an exceptionally brief yet just as exceptionally subtle smile, he shook his head slightly then in a gracious tone and with a hint of surprise or perhaps even regret, Oostrigr confessed, “I underestimated you.”

With a nearly imperceptible and perhaps even somewhat sympathetic nod in response, Orna remarked, “Everybody always does.” The pair subsequently stared upon one another for a protracted moment until Orna finally interrupted, casually inquiring, “Shall we submit terms then?”

Holding a long appreciative gaze, Oostrigr slowly smiled his most intimidating smile with twinkling eyes then he placed his hand upon the hilt of his sword and declared, “I’ve got your ‘terms’ right here.”

“Good enough.” Orna countered through clenched lips.

His smile faded and for just a brief moment, Orna might have sensed some long lost humanity in Oostrigr she only vaguely recognized from long ago. “If ever you felt any love for me at all... make this spectacular.” he whispered.

Clenching her eyes closed, Orna only cringed in response as the pair turned about, trotted back toward their respective ranks then halted abruptly to turn again and face each other from a distance. Withdrawing his broad sword and raising it over his head, Oostrigr prompted his horse gently accelerating to a gallop while Orna prodded her horse to rear up then spring into a reciprocal gallop drawing her slender graceful blade.

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*When great warriors become politicians with ideological agendas,  
the first thing they always lose is their courage  
and invariably they always fill that void  
with the cowardice of convenience, compromise, hypocrisy and self-preservation.*

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Lowering his sword, Oostrigr howled a harrowing battle cry as he barreled forward in an all out and reckless full speed charge, locked in an unstoppable hurdle toward redemption, fate and oblivion, and it was a rare and a beautiful thing.