

Officer's call was just before dawn. Betan was roused by her valet with great difficulty, having slept little despite retiring relatively early the night before.

It was chilly in the meadowlands province of Branna, where the Yellow Army was camped. Betan forgot her cloak and shivered slightly as she trudged to Brigadier Reigh's tent. She passed his guards and stepped into the range of the warmer, sighing as the cold was forced from her body.

She appeared to be the last of the Brigade's officers to arrive. The Brigadier himself was still meeting with the Yellow Army's commanding general, the officers of the Fourth Brigade stood or sat in small conversations, eating small breakfasts and drinking tea.

"Good morning, Captain." Colonel Puymora called to her.

"Good morning, Colonel." Betan walked over to Puymora, who stood with Colonel Aelion and an officer Betan had not yet met.

"Captain Betan Lebornier," Puymora began, "This is Major Budet Rilmoran, horse commander of the Fourth Brigade." Rilmoran greeted Betan and offered his hand. Betan returned his greeting and shook his hand.

"Tis your good fortune that you did not arrive at camp earlier, Captain." Rilmoran told her. "We were just discussing that this is one of the more dreadful locations for an army I've had the profound displeasure to experience."

"Indeed, Major." Puymora agreed. "Between the wind and lack of proper drainage, the meadowlands are hardly a satisfactory campground, but there are no areas more suitable in the region."

"At least the ground is solid." Aelion stated. "I've been in campsites where my carriages sank in mud to the axles."

"This is as good an introduction to camp life as could be expected then." Betan began.

"I'd quite forgotten this was your first campaign!" Puymora exclaimed before Betan could continue. "Forgive us, Captain. We stand complaining of matters familiar to us while you stand before us famished and exhausted." Puymora touched Betan's arm to turn her to the right. "There is food and drink back there. Help yourself, this army is short of stewards, I'm afraid."

"I thank you, sir." Betan said as she plodded to the back of the tent, fatigue unsteadying her gait the way her heavy boots and sword had at first. Looking around, she noticed officers holding food in their hand, eating as they talked. *Fine manners do not long survive in the field* she mused.

The table was piled with food left over from the previous night's evening meal. Betan picked up a small piece of meat and ate it from her fingers. It was half raw, stringy and she barely noticed as she devoured it.

Brigadier Reigh entered the tent as she finished the last bite of bread she'd taken. "Gentlemen." He began as he headed for a large table, his adjutant spreading a map on it. Betan refilled her cup with the surprisingly good fruit tea and made her way to the table. The officers stood around it, one row deep, shoulder to shoulder, looking at a map of the meadowlands and western Dorway.

"The army marches today, our Brigade will be the first part of it to enter Dorway, beginning tonight." Reigh began. "Local militia report Oldster cadre patrols moving into the Malia Mountains, more likely scouts rather than skirmishers, either way we must take the offensive before the Oldster army can muster. Intelligence indicates that they are presently massing near Betraba, a seven-day march from the Malia. We move out as soon as units can be mustered. Captain Lebornier's jagers will scout in advance of the vanguard." Betan looked up to Reigh, whose attention had already moved on to the vanguard battalion assignment. Discussion

of marching order for the 4,200-man Brigade followed. The sun was nearly up by the time the details of the baggage and artillery trains were sorted out. Betan struggled to pay attention to the matters of horse, cannon, shot and powder, but the whole thing was above her head. She glanced around to gauge the countenances of other officers and was gratified to see a few subalterns looking as confused as she felt.

Reigh dismissed most of the officers, leaving only Colonel Bransim of the Third Battalion, Major Rilmoran and Betan. Reigh looked at them evenly.

“This is the first movement of the Yellow Army.” Reigh said almost absently. “In many ways, the whole of the Branna reformation rests on our shoulders. It had been hoped that reformation could be undertaken peaceably but it is, of course clear that this is not to be the case. The people of the meadowlands have been good and gracious hosts, but they can not much longer sustain this army. In any event, we must press our case in Dorway.

“We must cross the Malia with all haste. It should take no more than a day to get the Brigade across. Once across, we must set up a new camp for the rest of the army. General Pautark reports to me that the reformation leaders of Dorway and Almadan promise enough recruits for two more corps. After the camp is built and garrisoned, we must meet the Oldster army.”

Reigh surveyed the four officers again. “But that is after the Malia. We must be vigilant in them. As I said earlier, these are most likely to be raiding parties moving in from Dorway, but because of the importance of this first movement, we must be cautious.

“Captain Lebornier, your jagers will lead the army into the foothills of the Malia. Major Rilmoran, your dragoons will guard our flanks up to the hills, then back up the jagers. The meadowlands militia maintain pickets in the foothills, we hope to meet these pickets by noon and be ready to move into Dorway with the bulk of the Brigade by dusk, the remainder will follow at dawn tomorrow.

“I have no specific reports for you, I’m sorry to say. The militia speaks only in generalities. The Malia are perfect for ambushes and if we lose our rifles before we even get into Dorway we’ll be at a severe disadvantage. Therefore, Colonel Bransim, you will be required to keep a shorter interval between your vanguard and the advance party than is normal. You must be ready to provide volleys if someone surprises them.”

Bransim glanced at Betan for a short moment, then looked back to Reigh. “Yes, Brigadier.”

“Major Rilmoran, once we get into the hills, your dragoons will dismount and fall into the column, until then, you’ll be our screen.”

“Yes, Brigadier.”

“In addition, your men will be required to reinforce the jagers as they near the pass, I will talk to you further about that before the Brigade moves out.”

“Yes, Brigadier.”

“Captain Lebornier, I’ll need to speak with you further. Colonel Bransim, Major Rilmoran, you are dismissed, gentlemen.” The two saluted and left. Reigh looked at Betan for a long moment, all of his experience weighing on her. Betan struggled not to flinch or shrink.

“You know the stakes.” Reigh said simply.

“I do, sir.” Betan responded.

“I must admit that were I in a more secure position, I would have held your company back. But frankly, I’m in no state to be choosy about my officers.” Reigh turned slightly and walked around her, his head down, arms clasped behind him. She nearly sighed audibly with relief from no longer being exposed to his piercing gaze.

“You’re like a great many of the young officers I’ve served with. Your determination shows through the fear and uncertainty you’re not ashamed to show.” Reigh paused to laugh. “Or perhaps not able to hide.” Reigh turned back to her and she brought her eyes back up from his sword. “And that is why I feel confident putting you in the lead of this army. Where you an unblooded braggart, I *would* keep you at no further than arm’s length.”

Reigh held Betan’s eyes for another long, terrible moment. “The Malia are not terribly high,” he finally said. “But there is still only one decent pass across them. Our Brigade was selected as the first to enter Dorway because we happened to have made camp in front of that pass.” Reigh stepped back to the table the map was laid out on.

“That’s all, sir? We are to lead the army because- “

“Because we are in the best position to do so, yes. Such are the fortunes of war, Captain.”

Betan smiled a small smile. “Of course, sir. I’m sorry.”

“The Barnal pass is here.” He stabbed the map with a finger and Betan looked carefully. “About four hours march from our present position. It’s on the other side of this forest-“ he ranged his forefinger around the woods marked on the map “-which is only known as the hill wood. There are a number of good roads, trade routes, through the hill wood; these are guarded by the local militia, but only as far as the meadowlanders can make short walks into the wood. The only road that leads to the pass narrows quite a bit, so it will take some time to get the Brigade through it and I shudder to think of the trouble it will cause the rest of the Corps. If the Oldsters mean to oppose us with these small parties they’ve sent across the Malia, it will be there. Your duty will be to clear the wood along the marching route, then to secure the pass while the vanguard crosses it.

“Rilmoran’s dragoons will join you dismounted to hold the pass, but until the vanguard meets you, I fear that your jagers and the dragoons will be vulnerable.”

“Could the Oldsters attempt to hold the narrow road between the wood and the pass?” Betan asked.

“They could, but it would be foolish. The road to the pass is mostly straight; your rifles could cut them down long before they closed to effective volley range. If they held off until we were straggling onto the pass itself, they could likely destroy the vanguard in detail and hold up the Brigade for some time.”

“Yes, sir.”

“From the eastern camp gate, take an east by south heading and march in a straight line. You’ll find the first road leading to the pass. It’s called the green road, due to the color of its markers.” Reigh pointed to a green line drawn through the hill wood. “It has a formal name, but the meadowlanders aren’t much for them, so the green road it is. Once on the green road, spread your men across it. There is a stream about ninety yards south of the green road often used by travelers and smugglers, if the Oldsters are running scouts or skirmishers through the Malia, that’s the route they’re likely to be taking. Other than the roads, the stream is the only sure way through the hill wood for those not born to it.

“It is two hours’ march from the beginning of the green road to the pass road, at a steady slope uphill. From the pass road to the pass should be less than a half-hour for your men and the dragoons. The line battalions, of course, will take longer. When you and the dragoons secure the pass, wait to make contact with Third Battalion you before moving into Dorway. Any questions?”

“How long is the pass?”

“About one mile.”

“Why don’t we broaden the road from the wood to the pass?” Betan felt it was a stupid question, if Reigh hadn’t already ordered it done she was sure there was a good reason why. But she thought it should be asked. Reigh only smiled slightly. “Can’t be done. You’ll understand when you get there. Any other questions?” Betan had none, and she was dismissed.

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The sun was up and her jagers were mustered by the time Betan returned from Brigadier Reigh’s tent. Lieutenant Dem and First Sergeant Alman were talking as she walked up to them. The company was called to attention, and Lieutenant Dem saluted as she stepped in front of her tiny staff.

“Good morning, Captain.”

“Good morning, Lieutenant. Fall in with the staff.”

“Yes, sir.”

Alman stepped over to her and saluted. “Good morning, Captain. The company has eaten and been inspected. 74 present, one ill, one injured at the Brigade hospital.”

Betan returned the salute. “When was the ill man discovered?”

“This morning, Captain. Physic Bertain examined him and pronounced it to be a mild ill. A day or two’s rest should bring him about. He was shaky and vomiting, Captain, he’d be useless in the field.”

“I quite agree. Where is he now?”

“Asleep, Captain. Lieutenant Dem says he has room aplenty in the company wagon for him.”

“Very good. Strike camp, First Sergeant, we’ll be leading the Brigade into the hills this morning, bound for Dorway.” Betan ordered.

“Yes, Captain.” They saluted and Alman turned to give orders. Lieutenant Dem returned to stand by Betan as the company broke ranks to strike camp.

“How are we fixed for ammunition and victuals, Lieutenant?”

“About three hundred rounds per man with stone and four days rations, Captain. I’ve talked with the Brigade quartermaster and our rifles use a different caliber shot than the army’s muskets and he can spare no sparkstones. As for food, the Brigade’s rations are meager; many companies are not provisioned even as well as we are. The quartermaster assured me, however, that Yellow agents in Dorway are arranging for provisions even now.”

“We’ll be in Dorway tonight barring stiffer opposition than we anticipate.”

Dem stiffened. “Are we to lead the invasion of Dorway, sir?” he asked.

“We are, sir. Are the mounts ready?”

“They’ve been fed and watered and I believe Sergeant Amol is grooming them now.”

“Get someone to help him, I don’t know how soon we’ll be on the march.”

“Yes, sir.” Dem saluted Betan before leaving to talk to First Sergeant Alman. A wind blew across the camp, tugging at the turned-up brim of Betan’s broad hat. She heard a curse from her right, where the staff corporals, Charn and Melmor stood. Melmor was struggling with his coat and satchel.

“I’ve heard talk of this being a poor camp.” Betan called to them. “You both are experienced soldiers, what think you?”

“It seems fine to me, Captain.” Charn said. “But I’ve been a simple footman during my soldiering time.”

“It’s not the worst I’ve seen, sir.” Melmor offered, halting his struggles. “But it’s terrible exposed and this damned wind is a problem. The ground is solid enough, but it doesn’t look as if there’s proper drainage.”

As Betan considered his opinion, Dem called out to Charn and Melmor from the distance. They asked her leave and went to him.

Betan headed for her tent. Her valet Ratkando had already packed her things. Betan took up her pistols and stuffed them under her belt. Her satchel with maps, compass, fetishes and a few odds and ends she slung across her body. Ratkando, typically silent, handed her cloak to her; she threw it over her shoulder. “I’ll need help with the tent.” He finally said.

“I’ll have First Sergeant Alman send a few men over once the soldier’s tents are down.” Betan offered. Ratkando simply nodded in response. Betan left and watched her men work.

Striking camp was quick enough. There were four men to a tent and four tents to a camp cooker. The tents and the cookers were bundled up and loaded into the company wagons. Twenty minutes was all it took, half again as long for ten men to strike Betan’s tent. In well under an hour, the company was mustered and waiting when a member of the Brigadier’s staff came with the order to move out. Lebornier’s Fourth Yellow Brigade Fusiliers were on the march in a moment.

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The jagers made good time, reaching the foothills of the Malia in a little over three hours. Once Betan turned to look behind her. The Brigade stretched out in a thick line of men and dust. Nearly four and half thousand men. The rest of the Yellow Army was a vast gray cloud stretching nearly to the horizon, murky and indistinct. Twenty odd thousand men milling about, waiting for their turn to be lead into the first campaign of a civil war by a nineteen year old girl who had never fired a shot in anger.

Betan uneasily turned away from the sight. If she thought about it she’d panic.

“The royal blood of Durannia flows through my veins.” Betan muttered, gripping her mount’s reins tightly. “I will do my duty.” She forced her eyes up to the mountains ahead of her jagers. “I will not embarrass my nation or my family.”

The path before them to the hill wood was open and empty. The dragoons were in plain sight spread out a hundred yards off her flanks and as far ahead. The jagers marched in parade; there could be no lurking threat in the broad, flat meadowlands. Neither subterfuge nor magic could hide anything here.

The Malia loomed over the column. Even without seeing the actual road, it was easy to locate the Barnal pass. It was the only part where the Malia’s lower reaches were flat. All the other passes were craggy and crevassed.

The militiamen were sighted several miles distant. The dragoons in advance called them out to Betan and she took out her looker. The picket lounged on the first hill that began the Malia mountain range. Betan waved one of the dragoons on her right flank closer.

“Yes, Captain?” a slight dragoon corporal asked.

“I mean to ride ahead and greet these meadowlanders soon. Might I have a bodyguard in case there’s mischief?”

“I’ll ask, Captain.” the corporal saluted and wheeled away at a gallop. A few minutes later eight dragoons under a sergeant presented themselves.

“First Sergeant!” Betan called

“Captain!” Alman responded from his position to the left of the column.

“I ride in advance to speak with our welcome party yonder. If trouble arises- ” Betan halted. If the small group were the bait for an ambush, her and her squad of dragoons would be cut down in a trice. There would be no assistance.

“If trouble arises, I’ll have found your first lot of Oldsters to kill.” She blurted. A cheer rose from the company, nearly knocking Betan from her horse in surprise. A grin forced past her guard and she spurred Arkor into a trot; the dragoons close in her wake, musketoons out of their scabbards, loaded and charged.

It only took a few moments to reach the waiting group, who were clearly meadowlands militiamen. Eight men of wildly varying ages lounging about in farmers’ clothes, with only their musketoons and harnesses distinguishing them from layabouts.

Betan slowed her squad and approached the militiamen. She forced a calm mask onto her face; not everyone would be disposed to accept a lady adventurer as Brigadier Reigh was. Betan had cursed her small bosom and slim build countless times, but now she relied on it.

One of the militiamen stood as she approached and saluted.

“The sun rises, Captain.” He greeted her in the local custom. Betan eyed him, a sergeant according to the markings on his harness, for a moment before returning his salute.

“The sun rises, Sergeant.”

“We are part of the guard for the entrance to the green road, Captain.” He turned to point. “The entrance is about two hundred yards yonder.”

“And how is it I find you and your squad at your ease? I have reports there are Oldsters in the hill wood.”

“We were sent to meet you, Captain. There are more guards at the green road entrance. I have heard no news of Oldsters in the wood this day.”

Betan considered him for a moment longer. “Very well.” She said. “The Yellow Army follows me. Are you to stay here?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Very well.” The sergeant saluted again, more precisely this time. Betan returned the salute before spurring Arkor forward, motioning the dragoons to accompany her.

The marker showing the entrance was a stela eight feet tall of a green so bright it nearly hurt the eyes. Twelve militiamen stood guard around the marker. Betan could see more trying to hide behind trees.

“Halt!” one of the militia called. “Who are you?” the half crooked man of at least sixty winters challenged in a creaky voice.

“Captain Lebornier of the Fourth Brigade of the Yellow Army.” Betan called.

“You do not wear a Branna uniform.” The elder said. Betan stared for a moment, this was not one to underestimate.

“I am a captain of jagers sent by His Royal Highness Dray IV of Durannia to help the reformation.” As Betan’s eyes adjusted to seeing through the shadows of the hill wood, her challenger came into clearer view. He wore better clothing than the other militia and a yellow sash under his harness. The devices on his harness were the same as Betan wore on her shoulders. Two crescent moons facing each other. He was a captain of the militia.

“And who might you be, sir?” Betan asked. The old man peered at her imperiously.

“I am Captain Bolar nom Artis Cheledonaigh, local commander of the meadowlands militia. I have been charged with defending the green road.”

“Good day to you, Captain Artis. I have been charged by Brigadier Reigh of the Fourth Yellow Brigade with leading the Yellow Army down the green road.” As Betan finished speaking she heard footsteps behind her and Alman calling the order to halt.

“The jagers approach, Captain.” One of the dragoons announced belatedly. Artis had clearly already heard them. He peered through the horses facing him to see the green-coated riflemen come to a halt.

“Does the Yellow Army approach?” Artis asked.

“It does, *sir*.” Betan answered with emphasis to remind the old man he was addressing a fellow officer.

Artis only turned to the trees. “Go to Medon and see if the Yellow Army approaches.” he ordered one of the ill concealed lurkers, who mounted a draft horse and trotted away.

“I pray you indulge my caution, Captain.” Artis said.

“So long as your scout is quick about his task.”

A few minutes passed before the draft horse returned. “*Thousands, Artis!*” Artis averted his eyes to look at the returning scout. “Marching in from the meadowlands.”

“I trust, sir, that you are now convinced we are not a party of eighty Oldster spies?”

Artis looked up at the haughty jager captain.

“You may pass. But I warn you, we’ve not enough men to guard the length of the road and there are openings onto the road between here and the Barnal Pass. Beware, Captain Lebornier, there *are* Oldsters in the wood.”

Betan eyeballed him for a moment. “I thank you for your words of, caution, Captain Artis.” Betan turned to the dragoons. “Wait here until the vanguard arrives, then rejoin your troop.” The dragoon sergeant acknowledged the order and saluted.

Betan called for Alman as she dismounted Arkor. The first sergeant presented himself.

“We move onto the green road. Call a man to hold Arkor until Ratkando comes forward, then follow me.” She turned and walked past Artis and his men, entering the green road. She had been a bit confused by Artis’ warning about openings onto the road. Once on the road she saw his meaning. Sloping hedgerows formed the shoulders of the road on both sides, rising head high, with thickets atop. They were nothing strictly impassable, but they would definitely present a hindrance to large bodies of soldiers, unless gaps were made in them.

“Captain.” Alman announced himself behind her. Betan considered the road for a moment longer.

“Deploy the company in two lines across the road. The second line will be fifty yards behind the first.” She thought a few moments longer. “Each line will have three sections, left, center and right, of course. If any part of the first line is engaged, the company will halt and the same section of the second line will advance to support the first line. All other sections will await orders.”

“Yes, Captain.” Alman said.

“Also.” Betan turned to face her First Sergeant. “Brigadier Reigh said there was a stream some ninety yards to the right of the road. Find it and put a dozen men to scout along it in advance of the first line.”

“Yes, Captain. Does the Captain have further orders?”

“No.” Alman saluted her and turned to relay her orders.

Betan walked back to the entrance to the green road to watch her men form their lines. Apart from a few volleys fired to ward off bandits on the march from the port city of Gufris this

was the first time Betan would take her men into the use of arms. She felt sure her company would encounter Oldsters, either scouts assessing the Yellow Army's strength or skirmishers to slow the Yellow Army's advance. It would be foolish of the Oldster army to have neither on the meadowlands side of the Malia.

Betan felt a tapping on her arm as the lines began to form. She looked down to find it was her own fingers drumming. She looked around to see if anyone had noticed, but the jagers were too busy forming up. To busy herself, Betan checked her pistols. She carried two tucked into loops under her belt; long-barreled rifled sparklock handguns. Their locks had been hardened to receive the blue-white stones of Kiltorn manufacture finding favor with military shooters in the Near World. One pistol at a time, she shook the stones from the locks and peered through the sparkhole to confirm powder and shot were loaded. She replaced the stone, closed the striking cover and lowered the hammer on each, stowing them under her belt again.

"The company is ready, Captain!" Alman called.

"Very well, First Sergeant. I'll join the advance squad. Move the company out in two minutes." Betan walked around the hedgerow and walked down the line, not looking to see if her men were watching her. She fought her stomach to be still and wondered if all new officers worried so. In addition, she sometimes feared they looked at her as men look at women. Her uniform was quite contrary to Durannian women's fashions and certainly not flattering. The military breeches were snug and clung to her legs, but her officer's coat covered her backside and much of her thighs in the back. Her broad shooter's hat and, of course, her sword would be decidedly unattractive. In uniform her fine features made her look a bit like a boy, which was the hope.

She found the stream and the advance squad standing about it. They came to attention and their sergeant saluted her. She returned the salute and took up a position on one side of the stream. "The First Sergeant will give the order to advance." She told the men. Silence followed her statement, only slight puffs of wind and the water running downhill were to be heard.

A quavering buzz filled Betan's head, the signal for "forward with stealth" At once the jagers moved forward, marching uphill slightly. The western face of the Malia sloped gently upward. Its woods, thin at the base, grew visibly thicker as the company advanced. The company was nearly silent, only an occasional snapping twig or brushing branch could be heard, and the jagers' gray and dark green coats quickly became indistinct in the gloom of the forest. Progress was slow and only small animals were revealed to the Durannians.

After a half-hour, the stealthy jagers were noisy as dueling gongs. Every jingling buckle seemed a church bell to Betan's ear, each footstep an avalanche. Betan's sword kept rattling in its scabbard; she pressed the hilt down to minimize the noise. She shuddered at the thought of what their approach sounded like to any Oldsters lurking in the silent wood for hours.

Another twenty minutes' advance brought the sounds of the forest to Betan. Birds, crawlers, wind in the trees all masked the tiny sounds of the jagers. Betan looked around, the advance squad was apparently alone, she knew that if she stopped and looked downstream she would see the first line after a bit, but she wanted to keep pace. Turning her attention back to the path ahead of them, Betan saw sunlight on the underbrush ahead. A clearing.

"Sergeant." Betan whispered. "Halt the squad and send two men forward to flank that clearing to see if it's occupied."

The sergeant relayed her orders and they waited. A minute passed with only the forest's sounds being heard. Betan noticed a pair of small birds sitting on a nearby branch; she was narrowing down their possible species when the sergeant called her.

"Privates Branz and Copir report to clearing to be empty."

Betan looked upstream to see the scouts standing ahead of the squad.

“We’ll walk around the clearing so as to preserve our vision on the other side. Send Branz and Copir along the stream to meet us where the sunlight fades again.”

“Yes, Captain.”

The squad skirted the clearing in two columns and met the two privates in the restored shade of the forest.

They conferred with the sergeant for a moment, who then approached Betan as they all moved out along the stream.

“Captain. Private Branz found this as he crossed the clearing.” The sergeant handed her a paper cartridge. Betan examined it.

“Lokar, isn’t it?”

“Beg your pardon, Captain?”

Betan looked up. “Your name, its Lokar?”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Did Branz or Copir find anything else?”

“No, sir, but they didn’t have time to search carefully.”

Betan looked at the cartridge for another moment. It, as was typical for cartridges, unmarked and unremarkable.

“How does one lose a cartridge, Sergeant?”

“While resting, sir. One could slip out of a cartridge box, or from a pocket if the soldier doesn’t have a proper box. Copir reports a pool in the middle of the clearing.”

“Halt the squad, quietly.” Betan ordered. Lokar made a chirping sound with his lips and then a hand signal, the squad halted and turned their attention to the surrounding wood.

“A few soldiers dispatched to fill canteens, one lies down and this- “ she held up the cartridge “- falls out?”

“That would be my guess, Captain.”

“All right, redeploy the squad. Put three men on either side of the stream, ten yards out. The remainder stay on either side of the stream, in two columns.”

“Yes, Captain.” Lokar relayed the orders and the squad moved out again.

The slope increased again and the underbrush grew thicker as the jagers moved along the stream. Betan found her hand on a pistol and her body crouched slightly as she moved. She was on the left of the stream, to her left she could barely see the squad’s flank party, to her right the three jagers on the opposite bank of the stream were partially obscured.

“Don’t spill it!”

Betan froze, looking across the stream to Copir. The admonition came from upstream. She drew her pistol and cocked it, mouth chirping three times, the signal to advance and engage.

The jagers rushed ahead, slapping through the brush. A soldier in Branna dark blue trimmed in white appeared. An Oldster. He cursed and lifted a musketoon, a shot took him in the chest. Smoke burst from the muzzle of Copir’s rifle in a foul silvery cloud. The Oldster fell and all was still except for the echo.

Two more Oldsters stood and fired. Betan aimed at one and fired her pistol as the others in her detachment fired. One Oldster fell and yet another fired. The sparkstones flared with a pop, setting off the muskets’ powder charge with a boom and a rush of smoke. Betan drew and cocked her second pistol as empty rifles and musketoons were hurriedly reloaded.

The Oldster musketeers finished first with their simpler weapons. Three presented themselves to fire and Betan shot, her pistol’s smoke obscuring the result, but she was sure one fell.

She scuttled sideways to seek cover behind a tree as she reloaded her pistols. She tore the end off a paper cartridge with her teeth and poured the powder down the barrel of one pistol. She flinched involuntarily when an Oldster volley sounded as she stuffed the paper cartridge and ball down the barrel.

The flank party appeared as she swiveled the pistol's attached ramrod around to tamp the paper, shot and powder. They fired their three rifles in unison, closely followed by the riflemen in the stream.

Betan came to a crouch, drawing a sparkstone from a pouch on her belt. It went into the breech and she cocked the pistol. Peering around the tree trunk, Betan saw only smoke and branches, heard only the fevered sound of reloading.

"Throw down your arms, Oldsters!" she shouted, then cringed. Her shout was in a clearly feminine voice.

"Damn you, traitors!"

Betan turned to the jagers in the stream and made the gesture to form an echelon. The half dozen jagers did so. Betan used another gesture to order the left flankers into a line, hoping to catch the Oldsters in a crossfire.

"Bayonets!" she ordered, more for intimidation than any use they might be in such a small engagement. "Sergeant!" She called. She rested her loaded pistol on the leg that had ended up raised as she'd gone into her crouch. "Captain!" Lokar called. The wood was silent as she reloaded her other pistol. "Come to me!" Lokar was at her side as she fed a sparkstone into her second pistol.

"Find the other flank party and get behind whoever we have here. We all will advance in half a minute."

"Yes, sir." Lokar ran off, splashing across the stream. An Oldster chanced a shot at him and a jager returned fire. Betan peered around the tree, pistol ready. She could see nothing through the smoke.

"Echelon, advance at the ready!" Her jagers stood and marched up the stream bed, rifles leveled at waist height. "Fire on target." [Betan fell into step behind the echelon, both pistols out.

A shot sounded in front of them, but not at them. A shot was returned, then another delivered.

"Throw down your arms!" Lokar shouted.

"Don't shoot me!" a terrified voice sounded, then a shot followed by a pair of reports and more clouds of firesmoke.

"Please!" the fearful one again.

"All is well, Captain Lebornier." Lokar called. "One prisoner, seven killed."

"Echelon halt! Any losses, jagers?"

"One shot, Captain." One of the men in the echelon said.

"Tend to him."

"Yes, Captain." The soldier turned and ran downstream.

"The rest form a perimeter." Betan ordered as she advanced. Lokar became distinct through the haze as she approached him. Betan lowered the hammers on her pistols and tucked them away. "Sergeant Lokar, dispatch a messenger to the company to halt them. I need First Sergeant Alman."

"Yes, sir." Lokar saluted and turned to find a volunteer. Betan stepped to the prisoner, a young man in Oldster colors on his knees, hands up and bayonet against his back.

"What was your party doing?" Betan asked.

“W-w-atch p-party, si-ir.” The prisoner didn’t look up to answer. “T-to look out f-f-for a Yellow a-advance.”

“Did you have runners?”

“P-Please, sir, I, I can’t- .” Betan interrupted him by drawing and cocking a pistol.

“Did you have runners to take reports of contact or are you near enough your comrades to use shots as signals?” Betan asked quietly. The prisoner looked down. “Runners, sir. Two of them.”

“To where?”

“I don’t know, sir.” Betan pressed the muzzle of the pistol against his forehead. “Hon-honest, sir! I d-don’t know! ‘Twas an hour’s march here from my company last night. No one told me where we were!” The words tumbled out, tears seemingly close behind.

Betan lowered her pistol, turned away from the man and walked downstream to find her casualty.

“How is he?” She asked. He was undressed to the waist with two soldiers fastening a bandage to his shoulder.

“The shoulder, sir. He should be fine.”

Betan leaned over to look at her injured soldier. “I’ll have you sent you back to the Brigade hospital. You can keep our countryman there company.”

“Yes, sir.” The response was weak, but not deathly so.

“First Sergeant Alman approaches, Captain.” A voice called. The veteran appeared a moment later and saluted.

“Reporting as ordered, Captain.”

“I need a message sent back to Brigadier Reigh, choose a presentable man.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Also, inform the sergeants, we’ve encountered what is probably a picket. Not a terribly skilled one, either. Eight men here, but this group had two runners, so expect ten men and shoot any fleeing Oldsters.”

“Yes, Captain.” Alman said as Betan turned to walk back upstream.

“Oh!” She cried out. “We’ll have a prisoner to send back, so muster a security detail as well. I’ll write the message to Brigadier Reigh.”

“Shall I go select the detail, Captain?” Alman asked.

“Yes, First Sergeant.” Alman saluted and left before Betan could add to his list of tasks.

Betan turned around. The smoke was mostly cleared and the Oldster bodies could be seen. Betan looked at them for a while and gave a small shudder.

“Look at this.” a jager said to a comrade. He picked a jug up from the ground. It was uncorked and the man sniffed it. “Whiskey.” He said, shaking his head. “Fools were drinking in the field.”

“Don’t spill it!” the other man said in a mocking voice to a chorus of gunshot sounds from the others. Betan watched the men carry on for a bit, before looking down for a place to sit and write her note to Reigh. As she did so, she realized she still held her pistol from threatening the Oldster coward. She lowered the hammer and put it away. She had to write her message, then the jagers had to continue to the pass.

The jagers of the Fourth Yellow Brigade encountered three more picket parties. The Second Battalion was redeployed to sweep across the hill wood, flushing out dozens of small pockets of Oldster troops, some of which had become so lost in the hill wood they surrendered without a fight. Less worried about resistance, Betan moved her company to the pass road at a normal march, a sprint compared to the standard creep of light infantry.

Looking upon the road to the pass, Betan understood Reigh's laughter at her question of broadening the road. Bright Brannan blue stelaes defined the edges of the road and unnaturally thick thorn bushes blocked the wood on either side. It all smacked of magic and customs officials. Dorwain-meadowlands relations must have been unfriendly at some point in the past.

"We'll march down the road in rifle crews." Betan ordered Alman. "Rilmoran's dragoons should be arriving shortly, they can march at the ready behind us in case we find ourselves in need of a volley."

"Yes, Captain."

Betan stood, watching the company breaking into three man teams. One to shoot, one to load powder and shot, one to charge the weapon with sparkstone. Crewing the company reduced the number of rifles available to fire at a time, but the speed of fire greatly increased. With the best marksmen selected as shooters, a crewed jager company could be devastating.

The dragoons marched up and halted. Betan conferred with Rilmoran, as he outranked her. The dragoon commander accepted her plan and reported that Bransim's battalion was just behind his men, so the jagers and dragoons set across the pass from the meadowlands to Dorway.

A wind blew at their backs, sending shivers through some of the soldiers. Even at the low height of the pass it was cold. The drone of footsteps threatened to lure Betan's mind away, she fought back memories of Amorelon's last visit to Durannia and the time they shared in the royal family's mountain estate.

Betan placed a gloved hand on the hilt of her sword and looked around her, at her men. They were jumping up to tiptoes as they walked to see over the slight rise of the pass road into Dorway. She looked behind her to the dragoons fumbling with their musketoons. *I am in a war and fond memories have no place in it.*

Still, they came.

Voices sounded from the rifle crews leading the company.

"Captain." Alman called. Betan trotted forward. "Dorway can be seen."

Betan looked. The pass now curved downhill into a set of switchbacks. The eastern face of the Malia was much steeper than the western and went straight into the plains of Dorway with no foothills. Fields of crops made blocks of greens, yellows and reds. Small villages dotted the landscape.

Betan cursed. "Halt the column." She ordered Alman. Alman relayed the order as she dug for her looker in its pouch, lifted it to her eye.

Fires. Tents. Horses.

Soldiers.

"Put the company in the first few switchbacks as sharpshooters." Betan ordered. *About twenty tents, but are they two or four men tents? No cannon but an awful lot of horses.*

Rilmoran quickly appeared. "Why is the column stopped?"

"There's a camp, sir." Betan reported, still looking into Dorway. Rilmoran took out his looker and put it to his eye.

"They fly the yellow flag." He pronounced.

Betan stared at him for moment, then raised her looker again. "Near the large tent." Rilmoran prompted.

There it was. The Branna flag inside a yellow field. She felt a hot flush come over her. “I’d heard no report of friendly camps in Dorway.” She said, hoping she wasn’t whining.

“Nor have I.” Rilmoran responded. “It could be some overeager noble, or it could be a trap. We *are* considered to be traitors.” Rilmoran lowered his looker and looked over Betan as she stared through her enchanted glass at the camp.

“I see no signs of patrols or pickets.” Betan stated.

“May I suggest you that you send your jagers to clear this road, Captain?” Rilmoran began. Betan lowered her looker. “With my dragoons in support. I will halt the Brigade and inform the Brigadier of this development.”

Betan exhaled fully for the first time since she’d seen the camp. She’d dreaded the thought of bringing the Brigade, and thus the Yellow Army, to a halt.

“I thank you for your suggestion, sir.” Betan called for Alman. “Would you say two hours’ march from the base of the Malia?”

Rilmoran looked out. “I would, sir.” Alman reported and Rilmoran excused himself to call his troop commanders.

Reigh had a double looker instead of the one-eyed lookers Betan and Rilmoran used. He looked at the camp through them as the second battalion in the column, the Fourth, filed into the Barnal Pass. Lieutenant Colonel Bransim, Colonel Goldopan of the Fourth Battalion and Major Rilmoran stood with him.

“Where is Captain Lebornier?” Reigh asked.

“She took her company and my dragoons down the secure the road to the bottom of the Malia.” Rilmoran answered.

“Good.” Reigh swung his looker around the camp again. “You may join them, Major. You have done your duty here.” Rilmoran saluted and left. “Many horses. No cannon. Looks to be cavalry.” He lowered the looker, turning to his aide, Major Derver. “Call for the witch first thing in the morning.”

“Yes, Brigadier.”

Reigh stowed his looker. “We’ll send a bird to have a look.” he muttered as he looked up at the sky. It was late in the day; the sun was heading to the horizon. “Colonel Goldopan, Colonel Bransim, move down to the bottom of the mountain and form ranks with the jagers as sharpshooters. Make sure the dragoons rest, we’ll have need of them early on the morrow. The remainder of the Brigade will join you there then.” The two Colonels acknowledged their orders and left.

Reigh looked down the road. He could see the dragoons’ blue and yellow coats, but the jagers were already invisible in their green and gray uniforms. His lady adventurer had done well in her baptism of fire. A small beginning to be sure, but it was the sort of engagement she should expect to fight as long as she was a jager officer.

Below Reigh, on the road leading to the plains of Dorway, Betan watched her men skulk along the twisty road. It would probably take until nightfall to secure the road. Which meant that defenses would have to be made in the dark. Never a good thing.

“First Sergeant.” Betan winced as she shouted. Alman appeared in front of her and saluted.

“Captain?” Alman shouted back. Betan realized that he spoke at conversational volume, the same tone she’d called him in. Her ears had grown used to the silence of the light infantry.

“This is taking too long. We’re going to send a party through the switchbacks.”

“*Through* the switchbacks, Captain?” Alman asked in a confused lilt. Betan turned and pointed to the steep slopes between turns of the road.

“Through there. A squad at a time, with another squad in overwatch.”

Alman gaped at the route Betan indicated. The company had already descended to a warmer clime and the patches between the straight parts of the road were clogged with ancient rubble overgrown with bushes and trees.

“I’m not sure how much faster that would be, Captain.”

“Why? We’re not top heavy like line infantry. We have enough rope to string lines down.”

“Once someone leads them, Captain.”

“Of course. We must have some Rashiri or Velinians in the company.” She said, referring to inhabitants of two mountainous regions of Durannia.

Alman looked at the slope again. “Yes, Captain.” They saluted and he left.

Four volunteers were found in short order. They removed their coats and harnesses and slung their rifles around their bodies. Betan watched with Alman as half of the group had ropes tied around their waists and carefully scabbled down the slope. The other pair followed them down, holding onto the lines. Once the next section of the road was pronounced clear, the ropes were secured across the slope and used as hand holds by the rest of the company to cross.

Cutting through the sharply turning road, Betan more than halved the transit time, but it was still well into dusk when she set sharpshooters at the base of the mountain in a rude perimeter. It was dark when the Second and then the Fourth Battalion arrived. A proper perimeter was formed, lines set.

Dorway had been invaded.

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At sunrise, Reigh and his staff were at the small headquarters Betan had established in a Dorwain tollhouse next to King’s Highway 3. She stood at morning orders, shivering. Having missed the previous night’s sleep as officer of the guard after climbing and descending even the lower heights of the Malia, she was exhausted. Her cloak would have put her back to sleep.

Her stomach’s growling outshouted Reigh’s detailing of the arrival of the remainder of the Brigade. No one had stopped long enough for an evening meal the previous day, and Betan had been too busy with the perimeter to even partake of the salted meat, hard bread and dried fruits that were field victuals.

Some part of her mind paid enough attention to hear Reigh begin his orders for the day’s march.

“Major Rilmoran scouted in advance this morn. There is very little activity in this camp.” Reigh said. “As soon as the Brigade wick arises, a bird will be flown. Until then, we’re going to maintain a defensible position. The jagers will post as sharpshooters, the muskets will form lines. As new companies arrive, the lines will be extended.” Reigh looked over his officers.

“Will artillery be posted?” Colonel Goldopan asked.

“No. Colonel Aelion will bring his guns up the green road today. We can expect them to arrive this afternoon.” Another look. There were no further questions.

“Very well, see to your men.” The officers began to disperse. “Captain Lebornier?” Reigh called.

Lebornier turned back to him, startled. “Yes, Brigadier?”

“Eat something before you collapse.”

“Have you ever seen a war witch?” Rilmoran asked.

“No, sir. Only the wisewomen around the Royal Palace.” Betan answered. “A sorcerer my father retained. Artificers, of course. Never a war witch.” They walked toward the tollhouse. The sun was halfway through it’s crawl into the sky and the war witch’s birds were aloft.

“It’s not as interesting as you might think.” Rilmoran said quietly. “Armies try to avoid recruiting wizened old ladies. They don’t do well on the march.”

Betan smiled, thinking of some of the crones she’d seen in villages. “I’d imagine not.”

“War witches are mainly used for birds, although they have other uses, of course. We use the birds for spying.” As he finished they arrived at the tollhouse. Two of Reigh’s guards were on watch and admitted the Major of horse and Captain of jagers.

A man sat bent over the large table in the middle of the room, which had been the public office of the tollhouse. Reigh and Goldopan were watching, along with a few members of the Brigade staff. Reigh waved Rilmoran and Betan to the opposite side of the table. Betan examined the war witch; he was not very old, thirty or so winters. She guessed he was about the same age as Rilmoran and a little older than Bransim, the youngest of the battalion commanders.

The witch was peering into a large silvered bowl half filled with water. He leaned on his elbows, fingers pressed against his temples in intense concentration.

Bransim and Puymora entered the tollhouse and nodded greetings, were waved to position next to Betan. She watched the bowl intently, her mind filling with questions.

If birds could be used as spies, why were dragoon and jager patrols necessary? Swift and sharp-eyed birds could see the smallest game animals from far in the sky, bodies of troops should be quite simple to identify.

Who was in the camp? Would the Oldsters really fly the Yellow flag in order to lure the rebel army in a trap? Such deception was specifically forbidden by international convention. The Branna reformation had carefully ordered its army to not violate those conventions. But as Bransim had noted, the reformers *were* considered to be traitors, and the reformation was an internal conflict.

But if the camp was not a trap, who would be foolish enough to camp on an invasion route without informing the invaders?

The water in the bowl clouded suddenly, then swirled and took on colors to form a scene. Blocks of color, reds, yellows and greens. Roughly the view Betan had the previous day on the eastern end of the Barnal Pass.

“I’ve got it, Brigadier.” The witch said, a bit hoarsely. “It’s nearly to the camp.” Abruptly the camp could be seen in the bowl. Reigh walked behind the witch to look closely.

Betan had seen scrying before, she'd used it herself to spy on lovers in her younger, more jealous days, but this was new to her. The point of view was constantly moving as the bird soared and the image was much sharper than the haze she'd seen things through.

The camp grew closer in the bird's sight until it started to spin as the witch locked it into an orbit.

"Fifty four tents. Two-man tents. Two much larger tents." The witch reported. "A pen with about four hundred horse. No cannon."

"Take the bird lower." Reigh ordered. "I want to see that flag."

The war witch picked up a long gray feather and the scene in the bowl twisted, the ground rushing closer." It steadied suddenly, leaving Betan a bit dizzy.

"That's not a proper Yellow flag." Puymora said. "Begging your pardon, sir."

"Indeed it's not, Colonel." Reigh agreed. "I want to see the perimeter of that camp."

Betan closed her eyes as the bird twisted again and descended. When she chanced opening them again the bird was flying low around the camp, looking for defenses. There were none. No pickets, no fences, no earthworks. The view answered one of her questions, the scrying bowl was clear only when the bird watched something closely. When looking at greater distance, only the very center of the bird's vision was unclouded.

"Major Rilmoran, Captain Lebornier, begin scouting toward the camp. It appears to have no defenses, which is more reason to keep careful watch. I expect Colonel Hantor's First Battalion to be in camp shortly, within the hour. I want our flanks absolutely clear by then and I want a safe path to this mystery camp before highsun."

Betan and Rilmoran came to attention and saluted before departing.

Betan found Corporal Charn and Sergeant Amol at the jager company's camp. They saluted as she approached, Betan returned the salute. "Corporal Charn, find First Sergeant Alman and tell him to muster the company here."

"Yes, sir." Charn saluted before rushing off.

"Orderly!" Betan called. A jager reported. "Where is Lieutenant Dem?"

"With the Brigade quartermaster, sir." Amol answered.

"Go fetch him. I need to know the state of the company's supply." Betan ordered the orderly, who saluted and ran away.

Betan clasped her hands behind her back and stood. Sergeant Amol stood similarly. They were the only people in the company area, which meant-

"Who is the sergeant of the watch?" Betan asked Amol.

"I am, Captain." he replied.

"Ah, very good." They fell into silence again. Amol stood unmoving with the patience of a career soldier, Betan envied him.

Finally First Sergeant Alman appeared. "Reporting as ordered, Captain." He said with a salute.

Betan returned it. "We are ordered to scout the path from here to yonder camp. Pull the company off the lines and muster it for skirmishers." Captain and Sergeant saluted and Alman rushed away to carry out his orders.

Betan pondered the maneuver to contact with the strange camp. It was fairly standard. Dragoons would sweep out in advance, probing for hostile parties. The jagers would follow, scouting the Brigade's marching route in greater detail. There were always unknowns, but the terrain was fairly flat and the bird had not been able to see any enemies lurking behind the few villages between the Yellow position and the camp.

A Brigade staff officer rode up to Betan as the company's sharpshooters straggled in and mustered under Sergeant Amol's supervision. The officer quickly described the marching route, following a leveled, unpaved road that would bring the lead Battalion to musket range of the camp.

Betan expected something unplanned to occur before then.

Nothing did. Betan had eyeballed the distance from the base of the Malia to the camp as two hours march. It took the company four hours to crawl down the road, looking for traps, spies or magical tricks. A few dragoons sent to report to her that said only a few villagers, who fled from the armed horsemen, had been seen.

Betan arrayed the jagers in a rough box, with most of her men facing the camp. She peered through her looker at the largest tent in the camp. The Yellow flag flying was clearly not any issue of the reformation. Those flags were deliberately improvised. Yellow banners were roughly sewn onto the top, bottom and flying edges of a Branna royal standard, the lack of a manufactured flag intended to demonstrate the reformers' ultimate loyalty to their homeland.

The Oldsters were generally not impressed.

The flag Betan examined was an elaborately embroidered original. Rich blue field with a crimson star in the center, a red bear and a red lion reared up flanking it, trimmed by bright yellow. Even the flying corners were notched to simulate the Yellow flag.

"Reinforcements march to us, Captain." Alman said. Betan turned to look. The column was blue and yellow, she lifted her looker to examine the unit standard. It was the Fourth Battalion, and the Brigade flag. Brigadier Reigh was coming forward, still an hour away.

"Captain Lebornier?" She lowered her looker and turned to see a dragoon standing with Alman. The horseman saluted.

"Captain Gimel, third troop of the Fourth Brigade dragoons." Betan returned his salute. "Major Rilmoran ordered my troop here to reinforce your company."

"Very good, Captain, I welcome your assistance. We are presently deployed in a box, wherever the men may find cover. I would use your men as flankers and rear guards so I may put more sharpshooters facing yonder camp."

"Very good, Captain."

"May First Sergeant Alman direct the placement of your men?"

"Certainly."

"Thank you, sir. First Sergeant, accompany Captain Gimel." She prompted. Alman saluted Betan; the two captains saluted each other before Gimel led Alman away.

Betan turned back to her surveillance of the camp. There was very little movement, few guards, and no perimeter. She could see blue and tan garbed soldiers milling about, probably private guards. Someone was very foolish to establish this camp.

Betan wandered the position, checking on the state of her men as the sun climbed higher into the sky. A party was dispatched to find water to refresh the men's canteens.

"Captain!" someone called. "The Brigadier!" Betan turned as Reigh and a truncated staff approached her. She saluted, Reigh returned it.

"What goes, Captain?"

"Very little, sir. A few guards, people check on the horses, but nothing else."

"Someone's coming!" A different someone than whom announced Reigh's arrival called. *Of course someone would now that I just said nothing was happening.* Betan grumbled inwardly as she drew her looker out of its case. Reigh did likewise and together they observed a party on horseback slowly approach the jagers.

"Hold all fire!" Betan yelled.

“Find Colonel Goldopan.” Reigh ordered a staff officer. “Deploy the battalion.”

“Six men.” Betan called.

“Yes, only three soldiers.” Reigh observed. “Two others look to be merchants. The last-” Reigh cursed.

Betan looked to him. “Sir?”

“Have Goldopan report to me *immediately*.” Reigh growled.

Goldopan came galloping within a minute. “Brigadier?”

“Look at the approaching party, sir.”

Goldopan retrieved his looker, an expensive double version like Reigh’s, and peered. A string of curses fell from his lips.

“Sir, you recognize someone.” Reigh said humorlessly.

“Indeed, shall I have a volley fired at the pimp?”

“Nay, we’ll talk to him. If he displeases me, we’ll torture him to death.”

“Ah, very good, Brigadier.”

Betan looked at the two officers, debating before she asked: “May I ask the Brigadier who it is approaches us?”

“The pimp, as Colonel Goldopan so delicately described, is a prominent Dorwain merchant. Bambo sid Lamelian. Apparently he thinks there’s money to be made off the reformation. Let’s ride to meet him. Major Derver, Captain Gimel, Captain Lebornier ride with me. Captain Lebornier?”

Betan looked up from the storage of her looker. “Brigadier?”

“Leave orders with your First Sergeant to kill everyone in that whore’s camp if treachery is found to be afoot.”

“Yes, sir.” Betan relayed the orders and the party of officers rode forth, a small guard of dragoons in their wake.

It took less than a minute for the two groups to meet in the midst of a green field of savory vines.

“Good day, General Reigh.” The merchant said in a resonant voice, making a small bow from his mount. Reigh stared at him silently, a hand on his sword.

“Good day, Lemla.” He finally growled. Betan and Goldopan flinched inwardly. Derver and Gimel, not being nobles, had missed the full scope of the insults traded. Reigh was indeed a general officer of the Yellow Army, but the title General was usually reserved for offices with independent commands, corps or army groups. By overstating Reigh’s title, Lamelian implied he was underachieving. Reigh’s use of a diminutive for the merchant’s family name was a more direct attack. Betan’s hand inched toward a pistol, her eyes on the closer of Lamelian’s guards.

“Welcome to Dorway, sir.” Lamelian continued, apparently not having grasped Reigh’s intent.

“What mean you by setting up this camp?” Reigh asked, ignoring any attempt at pleasantries.

“I mean to join the reformation.” Lamelian said. Goldopan snorted.

“Sire doubts me?” Lamelian’s voice held a slight challenge.

“Forgive my intrusion, Brigadier.” Goldopan responded in a very bored, very aristocratic voice.

“I’m sure you understand my and his Lordship the Colonel’s doubts.” Reigh said. “Your interest in reform prior to this was rather-” Reigh paused.

“‘Nonexistent’, I believe is the word the Brigadier is looking for.” Goldopan answered.

“That will serve, Colonel.” Reigh responded. “In fact, you spent a great deal of time entertaining a number of royal officers strongly opposed to any reform.”

“I did, sir. I was looking after my business interests.” Lamelian’s voice lost its haughtiness. “I had no idea the reformation would lead to civil war.”

“And still you wait for two years as the reformation is *slaughtered!* You sit in Alvendor in your silks, your great bulk ever growing while many a good and noble Brannan is *murdered* by the **Bad King’s dogs!**” Reigh finished in a full shout. Lamelian flushed, his eyes falling from Reigh to his mount’s head.

“I admit my cowardice, Brigadier. I am not a man accustomed to bold action. I understand my position.”

Betan waited for Reigh or Goldopan to react derisively or mockingly, but both held their tongues. It was silent for what seemed half a day until Lamelian finally looked up at Reigh again.

“What can you do for the reformation?” Reigh asked, his voice ringing with disdain. He clearly didn’t like asking anything from Lamelian.

“I have victuals, arms and funds. All of my loyal men are at your disposal.”

“What has emboldened your heart?” Goldopan asked. Lamelian glared at Goldopan. He paused, seeming to think.

“The King’s Army has withdrawn to the province line.”

“Which line?” Reigh asked.

“Dorway-Previtch. What agents and men left behind I had dispatched by my men, and certain parts of the Dorwain militia friendly to reformation.”

Goldopan sniffed, clearly not moved by Lamelian’s timing of his switch of sympathies.

“I can’t trust you, Lamelian. But I will accept any help you can offer.” Reigh paused again. “As long as you are my prisoner.” Lamelian blanched. “That is the condition under which I will accept your assistance. It is too late to withdraw your offer.”

“I see, Brigadier.” Lamelian said, regaining his composure.

“Colonel Goldopan, detail a squad to escort Master Lamelian under guard.” Reigh gave his orders without looking away from Lamelian.

“Yes, Brigadier.”

“Major Derver, bring the Brigade quartermaster forward to examine what stores Master Lamelian has to offer.”

“Yes, Brigadier.”

“Now-” Reigh said by way of dismissal, wheeling his horse to face his officers.

“Beg your pardon, Brigadier.” Betan said.

“Yes, Captain?”

“Master Lamelian speaks to the location of the enemy army, I believe we should confirm that.”

“I *am* only a merchant, sir, but I *can* tell when an army moves.” Lamelian protested haughtily.

“But how does the Master know the precise location of that army?” Betan challenged, not condescending to look at the merchant. “If the Master is privy to special information, should we not be told as an act of good faith?”

“I should think so, Captain.” Reigh agreed, turning his mount to face Lamelian again.

“How do you know the Bad King’s army to be on the Dorway-Previtch line?”

“Hearsay.” Lamelian said flatly.

“Colonel, detail your guard.” Reigh ordered, turning and trotting back to the jagers’ position.

Following the confrontation, with Lemelian under close guard, Reigh and Goldpan spent some time talking at some distance from the rest of the force. Goldpan's Fourth, along with the jagers as sharpshooters, were redeployed around the perimeter of the camp.

Betan waited.

“Captain.” She heard Reigh call. She turned to find him approaching her. “What we saw from the bird indicates that this is the best location nearby for our camp. The army will remain here while it musters.”

“Yes, Brigadier.” Betan responded.

Reigh was silent for a long moment, looking east towards, Betan figured, where Lamelian had reported the Bad King’s army had withdrawn to.

“A civil war for your first campaign.” He muttered. Betan wasn’t sure if he expected a response, so she made none. He looked at her again. “This is a tricky situation you’ve found yourself in, Your Highness.” Betan hoped she concealed her surprise at being addressed as royalty rather than an officer. She couldn’t fathom what Reigh was getting at. “Most wars in our world are fought with a degree of civility, according to the rules and norms established by civilized peoples. I understand that in Durannia your wars do not have that advantage?”

Betan hesitated before responding. “Against the savages of the plains and mountains, no, sir. They are brutal conflicts. The Yen and Pila have never welcomed us. But we have fought with our fellow colonists from time to time. In such instances we do attempt to stay within the codes of civilized warfare, but our neighbors are also used to fighting savages and, there are lapses, sir.”

“There may be similar lapses here as well.” Reigh looked away again. “Passions are enflamed, Your Highness. You almost witnessed something of a cold blooded murder. Lamelian-“ he stopped. “Success in our endeavor is not assured. Should... should you encounter Oldsters closely, I do hope you shall be careful. Do you have a commission from your royal father on your person?”

Betan suddenly realized what he was getting at. He was warning her that she could not be assured of fair treatment should she be captured. “I do, sir.” The commission would mark her as an auxiliary, sent by an ally of the reformation rather than a mercenary. In a civilized war it wouldn’t matter. But an Oldster tempted to execute her would know that someone could be angered by such an action.

“Very good.” Reigh turned back to her and regarded her for a moment. She was again uncomfortable under the direct gaze of such an experienced soldier. “We will encamp here, Captain.” His return to military address marked the end of the personal conversation. “Deploy your company in pickets east of here, particularly watch the road to the east. The dragoons will patrol in advance until further orders.”

“Yes, Brigadier.” She saluted, Reigh returned it, then Betan went to find Alman.

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The Yellow Army entire was in Dorway by the end of that day. The camp they made took over the entirety of Lamelian's camp and began sprawling into farmer's fields. The merchant had not made arrangements for the land, but the Yellow Army found the owners, no small feat as no one was anxious to even speak with the rebels, let alone make monetary claims, and taken care of it. Betan's company was left on the eastern perimeter over night, taking turns to huddle in cloaks and blanket, illuminations at the ready in case some sort of Oldster rush was in the offing.

The company woke to find a small town had sprung up in the dark, twenty some thousand soldiers in neat rows of small tents pocked by larger tents and rope kraals of horses.

"They work fast, sir." Dem said casually as he and Betan looked at the camp, risen but still cloaked.

"Indeed." She agreed. "I hope they left space for us." It was rapidly warming up without the near constant winds of the meadowlands.

"It seems to be a bit more humid here." Dem commented.

"I imagine that's from the Bilan River. The delta of it is not too far to the north I understand." Betan explained.

"I do hope we won't have to march through it."

"As do I, Lieutenant." Betan's stomach rumbled a bit, which brought something to mind. "First Sergeant." Betan called. Alman presented himself shortly, omitting the salute as they were in the field. "All men not on watch may eat, if they haven't already. Cold rations only." Alman left to relay the orders. Betan excused herself from Dem and walked to where she'd left her gear. She unbuttoned her cloak and let it fall before picking up her satchel and digging through it to find her rations, which was the same fare her men lived on. Some officers purchased better fare for themselves on campaign, but Durannia was too far away to haul dainties about. She had enough womanly luggage as it was.

That thought brought to mind the time of month. She'd completely lost touch with Durannian time in passage through the Beddisae Channel. No use worrying, she thought as she tore a strip of beef. It would happen when it happened. Her men had been few a through cycles already, on the journey.

When the sun was risen but had yet to begin its crawl up the sky, a dragoon subaltern came to make new contact as Betan relieved the night watch to eat and sleep and she redeployed the remainder of the company into pickets.

"No contact, Captain. Not even the locals. They all seem to be in bed." The young man said. "Can't say as I blame them."

"I can find no fault with their worries, Coronet." Betan was watching her men spread out, the dragoon was taking a pull from his water skin.

"They got a proper flag up over camp. That's good to see, sir."

Betan turned to see a vast Yellow flag, a "proper" ad hoc Yellow flag, hoisted above General Pautark's tent on a long extendable metal pole. Cheers could be heard coming from camp.

"Odd to see that merchant's banner." The coronet said. Betan turned back to look at him, he was stuffing his water skin back into a saddlebag. Betan didn't know the man, she hoped he

wasn't about to attempt a conversation. Fortunately, he begged her leave and took his mount away at a canter.

Betan looked about, nothing but some dozen of her men finishing a breakfast of field rations and laying down for a nap and scattered sightings of jagers seeking cover among clumps of sweetgrass. She sighed and returned to her meal. She would simply have to find ways to cope with waiting for something to happen.