

Betan stood on a large fence post, watching 1YC's cavalry brigade ride east to confirm the location of the King's Army. The horses had taken the Second Brigade's turn crossing the Malia to do so, but it was of vital importance to know where the enemy was.

The 1YC had an overly large cavalry arm, thanks to the young kingdom of Cendral, who donated many horses to the reformation. Cendral promised yet more mounts when the Yellow Army was filled out to three Corps.

Work on building the camp that would train the rest of the Yellow Army had been planned to wait until the entire 1YC was mustered in Dorway, but already volunteers were straggling in on news of the Yellow Army's arrival. About a hundred had arrived in small groups in the two days since the invasion began. A group of a dozen or so were fleeing the eastern road to clear the cavalry's path.

This is an interesting experience. Betan thought. *Having an recruits arrive willingly. My father will be most jealous to hear of it. I wonder how King Pandar, the Bad King, rather, is managing.*

When only dust could be seen of the cavalry, Betan stepped down from the post, returning a soldier's salute as she strode to Brigade headquarters. She had finished inspecting her jagers, who were scattered about the lines as sharpshooters. Lt. Dem had seen to the refreshment of their supply from Lamelian's stores, thus she had very little to do.

Betan returned the headquarters sentries' salutes and found Bransim and Aelion in conversation. She stood aside looking off at the Malia. As a junior officer, she had to wait to be recognized.

"Good day, Captain." Bransim said. Betan saluted him and returned the greeting. The Colonels turned slightly to admit her into their conversation. "Have you caught up on your rest, sir?" Bransim asked.

"I have, Colonel, thank you, sir."

"Truly it was a wonder you could walk." Bransim continued. "New officers are not often so able to endure such fatigue. Let alone- " Bransim surprised Betan by doffing his hat and bowing slightly "- if I may take such liberty, princesses. 'Tis truly a credit to your line."

Betan stood dumbly in shock for a moment. Then, recovering her wits, was unsure how to react, being of a higher social class than Bransim, but a lower rank. Furthermore, she was unsure whether she should curtsy or bow. She opted for a stately nod.

"I thank you, good sir."

It was only then that Bransim and Betan noted Aelion's gape. "A princess, sir?" he simply said. It would have been unheard of in the Brannan army for royalty to enter the service as less than a Colonel, no matter how unfit.

"Indeed, sir." Bransim said. "Introduced to you as Captain of Jagers Betan Lebornier, no doubt. But also Her Highness, Princess Betan of the Royal Company Lebornier." Bransim turned back to Betan. "It *is* 'company' rather than 'house' in Durannia, is it not?"

"It is indeed, sir." Betan said, still unsure of herself with the differences in class and rank.

Aelion recovered himself. "And here I thought Colonel Goldopan was the only one of lofty birth in our adventure. The reformation not being popular among the high nobility of Branna, as you could imagine, Captain."

"I can indeed imagine, Colonel." Betan said simply. She had made study of the Brannan civil war as she looked about the worlds for adventures. But she didn't feel sufficiently wise to engage in debate with a native, who may have lost friends, comrades and family to the conflict.

Bransim and Aelion fell into silence for a moment. Colonel Goldopan rescued the trio from their discomfort.

“Good day, gentlemen.” Goldopan said. His greeting was returned. Betan looked at this officer she had barely met closely. He was taller than any of the other officers and rather slimmer. His uniform was of the same yellow-trimmed dark blue, but was more closely tailored. He most definitely possessed an aristocratic mien, meaning he looked rather bored most of the time.

“Bad bit of fortune if the King’s Army is at the Previtch line, eh?” Goldopan prompted.

“Indeed, sir.” Bransim responded.

“Begging your pardon, sirs, but isn’t it better that the King’s Army is farther away?” Betan asked. She hated to show off her ignorance, but she’d been listening to talk about the misfortune of the King’s Army location (sadly, only in general terms) ever since Lamelian’s news spread throughout camp.

The three colonels looked at each other for a moment, then Bransim answered.

“If the King’s Army is on the Previtch border, they’re at Podansir, where a number of kingsways enter.” Bransim managed to not have a patient or lecturing tone, for which Betan was grateful. “Once west of Podansir there’s only one kingsway for an army and its supplies to travel, the road to Betraba. Podansir is an extra nine days, but the army can muster and equip itself much faster than it could at Betraba.”

“How much faster?”

“Three more roads faster.” Aelion said. “It all depends on how large an army the Bad King is massing.”

Betan digested the information. Then a thought occurred to her. “Then how are we to muster an army here, sir, where there are no kingsways at all?”

“Our army is to be filled out by reformation supporters, men eager to fight.” Goldopan said. “The Brannan army traditionally is made up of professional soldiers, half foreigners usually. Worse, for the Bad King, at any rate, there are rumors that the conscription is being enforced, which means the danger of desertion is very high. Recruits will be marched in under guard, kept penned in during outfitting and drill. That alone will double the number of men required for training. We can expect bands of recruits to come in on their own and stay with a minimum of security.”

“Supplies will come down from the port of Wadril in Melalan, through Liken province, which is firmly Yellow.” Aelion continued. “The road from the north isn’t a kingsway, but it is a good road, so we can expect wagons fairly regularly. Yellow irregulars and friendly militia will secure our lines of supply to Wadril until the Yellow army is filled out.”

“Ah, a race to prepare, sir.” It was the prevalent stage of warfare in the civilized world.

“Indeed, sir.” Aelion responded. “But first is to make sure we know where the enemy is.”

“Which is why our horsebound comrades at this moment trot to the east.” Goldopan said. “Hopefully they will find the King’s Army without bringing back a cloud of wasps.”

It took a further three days for the 1YC to fully muster and make camp in Dorway. By that time nearly a thousand recruits had reported and caravans of arms and victuals were streaming in from Lamelian’s sources. Cadres of officers from what Betan had thought was an extremely fleshy 1YC staff began assembling the recruits into new Companies and Battalions.

And Betan endured the idleness.

The cavalry returned and Betan was called to 1YC headquarters to hear the report. She stood with the 4yb's officers and staff to hear it outside the General's tent and finally got a look at General Lendro Pautark. He was younger than Reigh but shared the Brigadier's military spartanism. His long hair was ponytailed but otherwise untreated, uniform clean and orderly, but simple.

"Brigadier Maldar, report, if you please"

A dusty officer in cavalryman's uniform stepped out from a clutch of similarly disheveled horse officers, hat under arm, hand on sword.

"The Bad King's Army is indeed at Podansir. Five Corps cadres and the Royal Guards are mustered to the south of the town, with two complete Royal Brigades guarding Podansir itself." Maldar paused, looking to Pautark, who nodded. "The Bad King's flag flew over the town."

Gasps sounded from the assembled officers, a small bit of chatter rose and quickly died away.

"We do not know at this time if the Bad King intends to lead the army himself." Pautark said. "I have dispatched messengers to the reformation leaders seeking information. Carry on, please, Brigadier."

"Yes, General. The Corps assigned to the army are the Pandolian, the Retata, the Quonsil, the Second Tryan and the Wi-Bandro. I estimate strength to be twenty five to thirty thousand men. We saw some artillery crews, but few cannon. The cavalry arm is also incomplete, we only saw one Brigade, the 7th Paldar, but it looked to be at full strength." He looked to Pautark.

"Thank you, Brigadier." the General said. Maldar nodded and stepped back into the group of cavalrymen.

"Initial reports indicated the Bad King intended to deploy nine Corps to face us. Clearly the complementary risings in Remar and Delpan are working. Additionally we have reports of guerrilla activity in the Far Provinces and there are rumors of raids against the frontier forts of Kelal and Elmadar. We are hoping these have drawn off the other four Corps, perhaps forcing them into garrison duties.

"At present I see no need to alter the plan as presented before the invasion, but we're waiting on information on the Bad King's recruiting and mustering efforts. Master Bratan, please report on the status of our recruiting."

All eyes turned to an elderly gentleman who was standing on General Pautark's left.

"Nine hundred seventy-two recruits have reported for training in the few days we have been in Dorway." Bratan said in a slow, creaky voice. "These are in *addition* to the recruits the reformation leaders of Dorway and Almadan will be bringing. We have received outriders from the leaders indicating they have departed for this location with the first groups. Ten thousand men should be arriving the day after tomorrow, with a further fifteen thousand two days thereafter." As Bratan continued, an officer wearing the brassard of Division staff squeezed past the 4yb officers. Betan looked to see him whisper something into Reigh's ear. Reigh nodded and glanced at Betan. Betan hurriedly returned her eyes to Bratan, feeling like an inattentive schoolgirl. Bratan was through at any rate. Pautark took the floor again to call on the Quartermaster, who only reported that supplies were incoming.

Pautark spoke again after the brief report. "There are no changes to the plan thus far. Any questions, gentlemen?" He paused for only a second, not expecting any, and there were none. "You are dismissed, then."

Conversation rose as the officers began to file out. "Captain Lebornier?" Reigh called. She turned to him. "Yes, Brigadier."

"Come with me, sir."

"Yes, sir." Betan walked with Reigh and Derver, following Pautark and a few members of his staff into the General's tent.

Pautark stopped when they were all inside and turned.

"Brigadier?" he asked, glancing at Betan.

"An officer that was not presented to you prior to march, General."

"Ah, very good." Pautark folded his hands behind his back and waited.

"Captain of Jagers Betan Lebornier of Durannia, General Lendro Pautark." Reigh said.

Betan's mind blanked for a second as she tried to remember the proper protocol. She felt like she should salute, but in time she remembered to make a short bow. Pautark nodded in return. "You are King Dray's officer, yes?"

"I am, General."

"We are happy to have His Highness' assistance in our struggle."

"His Highness is happy to assist the reformation, General."

"You are also a member of the royal family?"

"I am, General."

Pautark surprised her by bowing. "We are doubly honored, then, your Highness."

Betan was again struck by the differences in military rank and social class, she did not know Pautark to be a noble of Branna, he was probably a simple gentleman, finding station from his army rank only. Betan gave a short bow in return and said nothing, as befitted her class.

"If you'll excuse us, your Highness, I must find out about this rogue Lamelian that Brigadier Reigh is holding for us."

"Of course, General. By your leave, sir." Betan said. She saluted then turned to leave the circle and found the 4yb officers standing a discrete distance in front of the tent.

"The General wishes a briefing on Lemla, sir?" Goldopan asked her.

"He does, Colonel."

"We should have him sign everything to us, then hang him from the nearest tree." Aelion said.

"I am inclined to agree, sir." Goldopan said. "But that would not be a course of action befitting a gentleman."

"Then I'd be happy to volunteer my common self and some common rope for the job, sir." Aelion said.

"I'll remember your courage should the occasion arise, Colonel." Goldopan said to general chuckling.

"Colonel Goldopan and Captain Lebornier! Report to the General!" a voice called. Goldopan wordlessly turned and left the circle, Betan at his heels. They found one of the General's aides standing at the flap to his tent, holding it open for them to enter.

"Colonel, Captain, we have need of a special task." Pautark said from a writing table where he was scribbling a letter. "Captain Lebornier will lead a detachment of cavalry and jagers into Alvendor and seize the town bank. Colonel Goldopan's battalion will follow to hold it until we can remove Master Lamelian's cash from the bank for the use of the reformation." Pautark finished writing and stood as his adjutant took the letter. The General then stood and approached Goldopan and Betan. "Master Lamelian is as we speak drafting a letter authorizing the transfer. Speed is of the essence as the master has only now admitted that he might not have killed all of the Bad King's agents in Dorway."

“Beg your pardon, General?” Goldopan interrupted.

“Colonel?”

“If I’m to seize a bank that might be guarded, I would take a number of grenadiers, General.”

Pautark considered for a moment. “Very well, I’ll send word. You’ll have forty cavalry and however many grenadiers and jagers you can quickly muster.” Pautark turned to Betan.

“How many of your men can ride, Captain?”

Betan looked up at the roof of the tent, thinking. “Not many, sir.”

Pautark made a grumbling sound. “I’ll send a wagon. How many jagers and grenadiers would you like, Colonel?”

“Twenty of each, I should think, General.” Goldopan answered.

“Then Captain Lebornier shall only need one wagon.” Pautark returned his attention to Betan. “I’ll send a message to the Quartermaster to send it to you.”

“Yes, General.” Betan said.

“Drelin is looking for a plan of Alvendor. We will deliver it to you when we find or produce one. Questions?” There were none and he dismissed Betan and Goldopan. They saluted and left for their horses. Betan mounted and took Arkor into a trot.

Arriving at the jager’s camp, she ordered Alman to muster twenty men and that they draw additional ammunition. The men were formed up and had been waiting for ten minutes when a wagon and a mounted officer approached them.

“Captain Lebornier!” the officer called. She answered. “A message from Colonel Goldopan to you, sir. You’re to meet him at the southern camp gate as soon as possible. We will lead your jagers to the rally point for the detachment.”

“Very well.” She turned to Alman. “Lieutenant Dem will take charge of the company.” Betan mounted Arkor and cantered to the southern camp gate. She found Goldopan with the assembled cavalry there and reported.

“Speed is indeed of the essence, Captain.” He handed Betan a sheet, she looked at it. It was the plan of Alvendor Pautark promised. “You can see the bank is over a mile inside the town. If there are agents of the Bad King left in town in any number, they will surely know of our approach.

“Well enough. Twenty grenadiers are coming even now. With forty horse and two wagons, stealth will be quite impossible. When we arrive at the bank, station your men with good fields of fire to cover all sides of the bank.”

“It looks from the plan as if the rear of the bank touches the building behind it, and there are only alleys on the sides.” Betan interjected.

“Indeed?” Goldopan took the plan back from her. “Indeed.” he said. “And this wide avenue in front. Hmm. Good location, very secure. Which is unfortunate for us. Very well, cover the street, put men on top of these buildings across the avenue to prevent anyone pot shotting us.”

“Yes, Colonel.”

“Here come your jagers, Captain.” Goldopan said.

It was an hour’s ride to Alvendor, an outpost of wealthy Brannans who used it as a retreat from the intrigues and stresses of the royal capital. The Yellow Army had no plans to take it as it had no military importance, aside from Lamelian’s lately discovered wealth in the town bank. The detachment traveled cross country to avoid the clouds of dust that road travel would have created. Peasants occasionally scattered from the detachment, but few others were seen, too afraid to venture onto the fields with an army encamped on the Dorway plain.

Alvendorf was not walled, as befit an interior town. It was known to have a watch and a guard, totaling perhaps one hundred men of questionable skills as soldiers. The loyalty of the watch and guard and how many Royal soldiers or agents might be in residence was unknown. Betan watched the buildings of Alvendorf grow larger and larger, felt herself tensing for the sound of artillery.

Cavalry enters first to secure the route. We follow to take up overwatch positions to protect the attack on the bank. Simple, simple stuff. And there's no reason this little town would have cannon, so relax.

Her body wasn't listening.

The cavalry broke into a gallop a mile from town, just as uniformed men on patrol could be seen. Betan spurred Arkor to move a little faster, pulling away from the grenadiers, the wagon load of jagers clattering in her wake. No shot or bombs met the jagers as Betan lead her element to the edge of town. They slowed to a trot again when they left fields of juicebulbs for the streets of Alvendorf.

Betan occasionally passed cavalymen stationed to guard the route as well as to direct the other elements to the bank. There were only a few shots heard on the trip through town, but each one made Betan jump. She knew, theoretically at least, all too well the toll a number of sharpshooters could take on a body of soldiers. Being the target rather than the shooter was an altogether unpleasant experience.

But the gunfire was between stray guardsmen and the Yellow cavalry. Betan saw a number of prostrate blue and white uniforms on the way to the bank, a well as a few blue and yellow ones.

She turned onto the avenue that ran in front of the bank. Alman ordered the men out of the wagon as it came to a halt. Betan handed Arkor's reins to the wagon driver and dismounted. Then Betan ordered the group across the street. It broke into three groups as she'd ordered on the way. Betan lead her seven men into the building most directly opposite the bank. Two cavalymen guarded the door, Betan took her group past them, leaving one man in the stairway, the rest followed their captain upstairs. Betan found a trap door leading to the roof and ran up.

Betan looked down onto the street, watching as the twenty grenadiers piled out of their wagon and advanced on the bank. Everything had been effortless so far, if there was a trap it would spring soon. The bombs and enchanted axes the grenadiers carried posed the greatest threat to the bank and its treasures.

Alman was on the roof of the building to her right with five other jagers. Another five stood on the building to her left.

"Not in the drill manual." Betan muttered.

"Beg your pardon, sir?" one of the jagers asked.

"Nothing. Just pondering."

*There **have** to be Oldsters in this building. The bank was an obvious target for us once they knew Lamelian defected. And they have to know, his camp was too large for them to miss it.*

Betan leaned over the ledge, which had no parapet. She could almost feel Alman and her men's tension watching her and it made her want to giggle.

The street was empty except for the empty wagons and a few dragoons. They'd staked their horses down in the alleys on either side of the bank.

What do I do here? Do I go down and check the rooms or do I wait? I don't think I have enough men to watch up here and check the buildings. Too many rooms.

I'll wait.

Satisfied, Betan retreated from the ledge.

Muffled shouts and a few shots drifted up from the street. Action in the bank, maybe some private guards foolish enough to do their duty in the face of certain death. Or maybe overzealous attackers.

Horses arrived below. Betan didn't step forward to look again. She heard Goldopan's voice, so the infantry couldn't be too far away. Voices came up from the street, tense, excited voices. Then footsteps sounded on the trap door's ladder. "Captain Lebornier." a voice called. She turned to watch a subaltern clamber up.

"Yes?" Betan asked, suppressing her nervousness. The subaltern saluted, she returned it. "There is movement in this building, Colonel Goldopan has detailed ten cavalymen to clear it. He orders you to take charge of this effort."

"Very good." Betan said. She returned another salute and turned to call Alman over to the edge of his roof. She told him of Goldopan's orders and ordered him to take charge of the overwatch.

Betan knew she wasn't breathing as she walked toward the trap door, but air could not be forced into her lungs for suspense. A yell from the street and the crashing of muskets gave her breath. Someone yelled "Second floor" again and again. Betan jumped down the ladder and followed the subaltern to the second floor, where a clutch of cavalymen waited with the jager she'd left in the stairwell.

"Report." She ordered her man.

"There's Oldsters down there." he said with forced calm. "Two took shots at me, but they didn't come out."

"Did you see where they were?"

"One in the second door on the left, the other at the end of the hallway on the left."

Betan looked over the men, thinking. She pointed to four cavalymen at random. "You four, follow me closely in line, if an Oldster shows himself too far for me to attack with my sword, the first man in line will shoot him. Then fall back and reload, the next man will step up." They nodded acknowledgment, gripping their musketoons.

Betan turned back towards the hallway, taking a deep breath. She coughed at the thin haze of firesmoke burning her throat. She edged forward and immediately became conscious that the brim of her shooter's hat stood out several inches from her face. She knocked it off her head with her pistol in a sudden motion, as if batting at an insect too close to her face. She caught herself, closing her eyes, clenching her teeth and chastising herself to remain calm, especially in front of the men. She edged forward again, moving slowly so as to keep the hard soles of her boots silent against the wooden floor.

Calm down girl. She thought. *Good light officers lead from the front, even if they don't like it.*

The doorways to the rooms were staggered, thankfully, so she only had to worry about one room at a time. After a short eternity of creeping, she came to the first door, which was on the right. She paused next to the door, unsure of what to do. She considered the situation for a moment, then leaned closer to listen. There was no sound from the room, none that could be heard over the gunfire, at any rate.

She stepped sideways up to the wall and thrust her sword blindly through the doorway, felt nothing. She bobbed her head forward for a quick peek, the room seemed empty. She stuck her head forward for a longer look, it was empty, bare even of furnishings.

As she crossed the hall to the next door, one of those her jager had said he'd been shot at from, she finally noticed a faint cloud of firesmoke wafting from it. As she got closer, she heard a shot, louder and clearer than the ones she'd heard from the stairs. She leaned back against the

wall and motioned the first cavalryman closer. She reached for a plan. Judging from the speed of the fire, there were four shooters on the second floor, or two shooters in crews.

“I’m going to thrust my sword through the doorway, if I hit something, I’ll crouch down. If I do, right away move up and fire a shot into the room. Don’t stand in front of the doorway, just push your musketoon in and try to shoot into the center of the room. Then go in.” Details flooded her mind. What if there were only a few men in the room, her men could take them in a rush, but they’d be open to an attack from the rear by another room, possibly more than her covering jagers could drop. The remaining men at the end of the hallway would be too far away to assist in a brawl. But if she brought them forward, the hallways would become crowded, perfect for a volley from the end of the hall. How the hell would her man know where the center of the room was?

Too many details.

She leaned forward, looking at the second man in line. She gestured him to lean forward and whispered. “If he charges into the room, you all will follow. If he falls back, move up and await my orders. Pass down word to be ready.” Then she turned sideways against the doorway and thrust her sword into the room. She hit nothing, so she waved it around and caught what she recognized to be flesh. She threw herself into a crouch and the cavalryman next to her leaned over her to thrust his musketoon into the room. The gunshot pounded at her skull and hot brands from the sparkstone fell onto her head. Betan spun to stand in front of the doorway, pistol forward. With war cries and the thudding of boots, the waiting cavalymen stormed into the room. Betan peeked in after them, through the swirling silvery smoke she could see struggling blue figures. Her men looked to have the advantage. She waited to see if anyone needed assistance, then movement came to her from the corner of her eye.

Something was issuing from the last door, a long rod of wood and metal. Betan aimed along the wall as a white cuff followed the barrel out of the room.

Part of a body presented itself and in seeming slow motion the barrel swung down the hallway. Betan fired into the body, through the burst of smoke and sparks she saw it reel. Betan leaned away from the wall and waved at the group at the stairs. ““Next four, down here!” She heard more thudding footsteps. “Look to see if that room is clear.” Betan ordered, pointing to the next room on the right as she hurried to reload her pistol. She was pouring powder when one of the men returned to her. “Two civilians, looks like some sort of office, sir.”

“Check the room for weapons.” She rammed powder and shot home and someone squatted next to her. “This room is clear, sir. Three Oldsters dispatched. None of our men hurt.”

“Any Oldsters captured or wounded?” she asked him.

“No, sir.”

“Alright, watch the room at the end of the hallway.” She finished charging the pistol and cocked it.

“No weapons, sir.”

“What?” she asked, looking up.

“The next room on the right, no weapons.”

“Ah, yes. Put one man in to guard the civilians.” The cavalryman yessir’d and moved away.

Betan took a deep breath, then picked up her sword and rose. Three more rooms to clear. Gunshots could still be heard, there was more firesmoke from the last room of the hall. She had seven men up and four men in reserve. She took a deep breath, coughing as the firesmoke burned.

“Alright. You four-“ she pointed at the men who’d cleared the first room “- follow me, same as before. You three,” Betan paused. What the hell was she supposed to do with them? “Wait here.”

Betan edged towards the room, leaning against the wall. She pushed her sword through, nothing. Looking into the room, she saw small barrels stacked. Some sort of store room. She put a man from the waiting three on it and moved forward, crossing the hall to the next room on the right.

Again, a sword thrust, a peek. This room was a bedroom with a man and a woman in civilian clothing huddled against a far corner. Betan put a guard on them and advanced again.

The man she’d shot was moaning, the bullet had taken him in the chest and a pool of blood was spreading from under him. Betan shook her head and took a deep breath, again coughing as firesmoke burned her throat. This was not the time to be sympathetic. Enemy still occupied this room. She turned to the line.

“Same as last time.” Betan turned and thrust her sword directly into someone. She peeked and saw a man in a white shirt and red vest, a musket barrel over his shoulder. It fired as she threw herself across the doorway. The explosion left her huddled against the wall, senses driven out by the noise and concussion.

“Captain? Are you hurt?” someone shook her. She looked up from where she was crouched at the end of the hall. It was the jager, Italian she thought his name was. There was more yelling from the room, the guards from other rooms were standing half in the hallway, watching.

Betan coughed. She wasn’t hurt. “I’m not hurt.” But her left ear was ringing most painfully and that side of her face felt sunburnt. She put a hand down to push herself up and the floor gave a little. She looked down and leapt up in horror. She was laying on the Oldster she’d shot, her ass right on his head. The moment returned, she had a Brannan civilian on her sword and a fight in the last room of the hallway. She drew her second pistol from her belt and moved past Italian to look in the room.

The fight was over. One of her men was sitting on a bed, musketoon clutched in his lap. Another crouched in the middle, saber still in an Oldster. “Clear?” she asked, feeling somewhat stupid for asking.

“Aye, Captain.” The crouching man said. Everyone flinched as someone from the street shot chunks of wood from the windowsill. Betan reached out and grabbed someone by the arm. “Run down and tell them all is clear, they can cease firing.” Betan backed out of the room as he ran away, looking at the sunlight streaming through the thick firesmoke.

A moan broke her stun. It was the man she’d run through. He was trying to move. Betan knelt down to him. “Be still, sir.” She looked the wound over. She’d planted the sword firmly through his middle. She knew that if she pulled it out, he was likely doomed, as the nearest physic was at the Yellow Army camp. But she couldn’t very well abandon her sword.

Nothing she could do in the meantime.

Suddenly there was no shooting. Betan went back into the last room. The wounded cavalryman sitting on the bed had his jacket off, his companion tying a bandage around his waist.

“Is it bad?” Betan asked.

“Grazed, Captain. He’ll be fine.” The bandaging man said.

Betan crouched next to him. “There’s a civilian run through here, can you help him?”

The man looked up from his work. “A bit, Captain, but without a physic or medic, he’s done for.”

“Yes. I want to help him as much as we can.”

The horseman nodded. "As soon as I'm done with Padril, I'll look to him, Captain."

"Very good."

"Captain Lebornier!" a voice called from the street. Betan walked to one of the ruined windows. It was Goldopan.

"Colonel!"

"Is all clear?"

"Yes, Colonel. This floor is clear."

"Order Coronet Brandal to clear the other floors. I need you down here, sir."

"I'll be right down, Colonel."

Betan turned away from the window. Coronet Bradil must be the subaltern who had relayed Goldopan's orders to clear out the shooters. Then Betan turned to her uniform. She had her pistols in her belt, she straightened her coat and her hands went to check her tailed hair before she realized the absurdity of it. Her sword was in the civilian, but the cavalryman she'd spoken with wasn't finished with Padril yet. She left the room and walked down the hallway to the stairs, picking up her hat before heading down.

She exited the building into sunlight and the left side of her face burned even worse in it. One of Goldopan's aides was waiting for Betan and directed her to enter the bank. She found a number of grenadiers guarding a few civilians of various classes. Goldopan stood with his hat still on, an elaborately dressed pale faced gentleman to one side.

The Brannan gentleman was making a good effort to conceal his fear. Betan wondered if he had greater fear of the Yellow soldiers or the Bad King's reprisals.

Goldopan turned to regard her. He looked her over and frowned slightly. "Your sword, sir?" he asked.

"I left it in a civilian an Oldster was hiding behind." Betan said simply, instantly horrified at her choice of words. Goldopan simply nodded and in the corner of her eye, she saw the gentleman he was standing with visibly pale even further.

"Captain Lebornier, you are here to witness this." Goldopan had adopted an aristocratic, disdainful air to confront what Betan assumed was the bank manager. "This is Squire Ratanoran. He is the administrator of this bank." Goldopan turned to the Squire and indicated Betan with a grand gesture. "Squire, Captain Lebornier."

The Squire made a formal Brannan bow, ankles crossed, legs stiff, hands clenched firmly behind his rump, bent as low as could be managed. Betan fought the perverse desire to reply with a Durannian court curtsy, but she simply returned with a stiff military salute.

After the greetings were exchanged, Goldopan produced a folded paper, which he handed to Ratanoran. The Squire took it and, seeing it was folded as a letter, shook it open to read it.

"I believe this writ to have been produced in bad faith." he said, offering it back to Goldopan, who did not reach for it.

"I have no concern for that, *Squire*." Goldopan reminded Ratanoran of his rank. "Master Lamelian authorizes the complete withdrawal of his funds from this bank."

"He was clearly forced to do so."

"Squire, if you neglect my rank again, I will slit your throat." Goldopan said in a perfectly chilling voice. To ignore a person's rank was to insult them. Nobles did not accept insults. Betan hoped it was an act to intimidate the Squire, but she wasn't at all sure.

"Your rank of rebel or the lordship you shat upon?" Ratanoran asked, anger overcoming fear, but still maintaining a thin cool mask. Goldopan smiled in a predatory fashion that left Betan with no doubt of why the reformation was rebelling against the nobility of Branna.

“The former, Squire.” he purred, his hand falling to his dagger, a decidedly utilitarian blade that contrasted his finely tailored uniform. He was humoring the administrator’s last remark, who suddenly lost a great portion of his brave front.

Ratanoran then recalled he was still holding out Lamelian’s letter to Goldopan. “I cannot accept this writ- “ his eyes darted to Goldopan’s shoulders to see the throne and twin burning brands. “- Colonel.”

“You must accept it, Squire. If you do not, we will remove the entire contents of your bank. If you do, we will only withdraw Master Lamelian’s accounts and you will be able to blame him.”

“Little enough a shield, Colonel.” Ratanoran said bitterly.

“Not my concern, Squire.”

The Squire made a small, disdainful noise, then folded the letter and tucked it away. “This way to the depository, Colonel.”

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A subaltern was dispatched to find and purchase wagons, instructed to pay ten times their worth. The funds came from Lamelian’s accounts and were paid in the hopes that if the Bad King’s dogs had money to steal they wouldn’t be in a punishment mood.

Most of Lamelian’s wealth was in Brannan currency, the dirty gold throne, the pure copper eyes and the crystal beads that served as pennies. He had a lot of gold and silver bullion and a smattering of foreign money. Tendo heads, Moratian suns, Cendralese rills, even some of Betan’s familiar cauldron from Durannia.

Goldopan waited until his Fourth Battalion arrived, immediately setting them to work loading Lamelian’s money into wagons. No further attempts were made by the town watch or guard to interfere, which only made Goldopan more nervous.

Ratanoran summoned a physic for the man Betan ran through, she retrieved her sword as he was bundled away to the local medical house.

Near dusk, the battalion and its mounted detachment departed Alvendor. No one was to be seen as they marched, but halfway back a bird was sighted in the sky.

“Rayray’s wondering what’s taken us so long!” a voice rose from the column. Chuckles followed it, even Goldopan smiled.

Betan and her Durannians didn’t quite get it.

“The Brigadier is popular among his men?” Betan asked Goldopan.

“Indeed, the Fourth was the first Yellow Brigade to fill up.” Goldopan answered. “Of course, it didn’t hurt that I brought my battalion complete and entire.”

“You are of higher birth than the Brigadier?” Betan asked, testing the liberality of the reformation.

“Considerably, Captain.” Goldopan responded. “Title is based on royal favor in Branna. There are very few true noble families, my family is one of them. I am a hereditary count of the realm. The Brigadier is an appointed baron, granted peerage in reward for his service to Branna.”

“It must have been a grievous blow to Branna to have him-“ Betan caught herself, she’d almost said “defect”. “-join the reformation. To the Oldsters, at least.” she hurriedly amended herself, thinking how difficult it was to avoid offending anyone during a civil war.

“Indeed. There was a great deal of desertion and several entire regiments mutinied when the news broke. Many of the survivors are in 1 and 3 battalions.”

Betan took that news with a shock. A regiment numbered two to three thousand men, a battalion perhaps seven hundred. If only two battalions could be mustered from several culled regiments, the Bad King’s reign must indeed be quite deadly.

“I appreciate your patience explaining these matters to me.” Betan hoped she didn’t sound like a flatterer. “I made some study of the state of affairs here, but I’m sure many of the complexities escaped me.”

“Your studies have served you well. You’ve made no gaffes that I’ve seen or heard of. We’d try to forgive you, of course, but it’s a difficult thing. Passions are so inflamed in these instances that there may be resentment, no matter how much we wished there wouldn’t be.”

A cavalryman from the advance trotted to Goldopan. “Colonel, outriders from camp inform us that Brigadier Reigh asks you to ride ahead for a Brigade counsel of war. Captain Lebornier is to take charge of the party.”

“Well, I leave it to you.” He said simply before galloping away.

Betan watched him grow smaller as he raced through fields toward the 1YC camp, which was a distant murk.

And I’m in command. She thought. Just like that. This could happen at any time in combat. I must be thankful this lesson was taught to me in such a peaceful fashion.

Her cheek still burned.

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The Yellow Army grew and Yellow spies brought in tales of the Bad King’s difficulty raising a force. The uprisings in Remar and Delpan had been joined by some kind of guerrilla raiding force unknown to General Pautark that even dared to attack Royal agencies in the capital province of Branadin. The five corps sitting in Podansir stood still while the Yellow Army trained the thousands of recruits coming in.

Betan fell into the routine of camp. Every morning just before dawn the company was mustered, the men inspected. Uniforms had to be in order, rifles clean, camp squared away. Then First Sergeant Alman marched the men to the mess they shared with 4YB’s battlers while Betan and Dem went to the officer’s mess for breakfast.

Following breakfast, watches were set. The light troops of the 1YC’s Brigades took it in turns to patrol outside the camp in support of 1YC’s cavalry Brigade’s constant watch to the east for signs of an Oldster advance from Podansir. One week in four of the Durannians were out with them.

On the weeks the jagers were in camp, it was hard to keep them busy. The line battalions were drilled nearly constantly, or set to work on the camp perimeter, or broken out to train the new recruits. The jagers could do none of these. They had no fixed drills, they were too valuable to waste on busywork and Brannan armies didn’t use rifles. So most of the time, the jagers were spread out on the perimeter on guard as sharpshooters.

Meanwhile, Betan spent much of her time at 4YB headquarters, learning the non-combat arts of being a military officer. Staff work and logistics proved to be nearly the better of her. Patience was not a family trait. Fortunately Reigh had much more capable officers for such matters, she only had to know how they worked, not be able to do them.

The Yellow Army grew. In the first month, forty thousand volunteers presented themselves and wagon loads of supplies came from the north, in addition to what Lemelian was providing. Some of the recruits were militiamen, hoping for better lives under the reformation. Many were just bored. The ragged, motley stragglers were uniformed and paraded, incessant drill turning them into the fleshly mechanisms war called for.

The Dorwains slowly became less leery of the Yellow Army. This allowed fresh meat and produce to be purchased by the quartermasters, but it also meant camp followers. The Army had brought a Wives Brigade with them, soldiers' wives and sisters serving as cooks, laundresses, seamstresses and nurses. Dorway was too remote to offer legions of whores like Betan had seen on some Durannian campaigns, but problems were arising regarding the local girls and some soldiers' attempts to woo. No one was crying rape, but there were angry fathers. Not a day went by without soldiers being flogged for trespassing off limits.

In the seventh week of the invasion, word finally came that elements of the Bad King's army were moving.

Betan was called into a briefing by Reigh. Puymora and Bransim were in attendance, along with a cavalry officer and two other infantry officers Betan didn't know.

"Gentlemen. The Bad King has dispatched two Brigades down Kingsway 4. We just received word that they set out two days ago. We're deploying against them. General Pautark has ordered me to take two of our battalions and a battalion each from the Second and Third Corps. This is in order to not deplete the camp of experienced units and to gain some experience for the new ones." Betan had seen Reigh enough to know that he was not happy with this order.

"In addition we are taking several regiments of cavalry and horse artillery with us, in addition to our own dragoons. This will work to offset being outnumbered. Colonels Uintor, Orlodan and Bafrin." Reigh gestured to each officer as he named them. "This is my commander of light troops, Captain Betan Lebornier of Durannia. I apologize that we don't have time for pleasantries. Colonels, you are dismissed to your battalions, marshal on the parade ground immediately. My quartermaster will ensure we have sufficient provisions and ammunition. Captain Lebornier, please stay behind. Gentlemen, you are dismissed." Reigh was more abrupt than even usual.

When alone with Betan and the ever-present Derver, Reigh let loose a growl.

"Captain." Reigh said.

"Yes, Brigadier." Betan said.

Reigh snorted. "We'll be outnumbered and burdened with half a Brigade of raw units. Some of them might know how to use a musket, but if there are a hundred among those two battalions that have ever heard a shot fired in anger, I'd be surprised. We're going to attempt to surprise the Oldsters. We have two advantages. One is those almost immortal Cendralese mounts. The other is your rifles. The cavalry will offset the numbers some, but I'm counting on your men." He fixed her with one of those distressingly weighty looks.

"Yes, Brigadier."

"Then prepare your men. Dismissed."

Betan saluted, Reigh returned it and she left his tent.

It was a quick walk back to the jager camp, where she ordered the company be recalled and camp broken. She informed Lieutenant Dem and First Sergeant Alman of the deployment and half an hour later, the company was formed up on the parade ground.

Betan watched the line battalions straggle in. "It should take another hour for them." She said idly.

“Closer to two, sir.” Alman responded. Betan looked around, it was a cool, cloudy day. She suddenly realized she had no real idea what season it was in Dorway. It looked to be getting close to autumn, most of the crops were in full bloom. It was probably first winter in Durannia. She was going to get maudlin soon.

“I’ll inspect the men, First Sergeant.” Betan said.

“Yes, Captain.” Alman saluted, then strutted off to prepare the men for inspection.

Inspection of light troops was not as important as it was for line infantry. Light troops were more disciplined soldiers or better sorts of men. The uniforms of the line were a good key to their state of mind. Needless to say, if the uniforms were disheveled or out of order, it was a sign that the men were surly or exhausted. The mood of light troops was gauged by talking to them. It was easier to do this with light troops, however. The companies were smaller than those of the line, with higher concentrations of officers.

Betan stepped up when the men were formed for inspection. Starting at the bottom, boots were mostly free of dust, or at least had probably been brushed that morning. Her jagers all wore calf-length boots of sturdy leather. Trousers were as clean as was possible, tucked neatly into the boots. Jacket straight, unwrinkled, as clean as possible. Front closed, no buttons missing, edges not frayed. The bottom of the jacket’s front was cut out in a square and it was split in the back to facilitate bending, stooping and crawling if necessary. The jackets of the line infantry were tighter and longer. Her men’s jackets were collared, loose around the neck so as not to present any hindrance to bending the neck to aim. Line infantrymen wore stiff separate collars that tucked into the jacket when closed and had to be carefully straightened and aligned. Another way to judge the mood of a soldier, if he was willing or able to fuss with his collar.

After the jacket, Betan checked the harness. It was a simple affair, a stout belt with suspenders to hold it up. They were needed, as the belt held a cartridge box with forty rounds of shot and powder, a canteen, a sword bayonet and a dagger, a haversack, a shovel or a pick and a hatchet. Most of the men also had a rucksack or satchel with their cloaks or ponchos and blankets, whatever else they felt they needed. Some attitude was allowed in their auxiliary gear that would never be allowed in a line infantry unit. But it still had to be neatly and orderly packed and aligned. This was where Betan found most complaint during inspection.

Once that was sorted out, there was the hat. A wide-brimmed hat to keep sun and rain out of the shooter’s eyes, the crown featured clips to hold up the brim to keep firesmoke from being trapped under it. It was generally worn with the brim turned up at the sides so as not to look like a big floppy farmer’s hat. Some of the men insisted on trying to twist the brim in ways they thought were dashing or rakish. Betan never failed to correct them.

Inspecting nearly 70 men took up an hour and a half. When Betan returned to stand in front of the company as Alman dressed them for marching. Her mind threatened to wander again, she repeatedly called it back to affairs, limited as they were.

Finally the force was formed up and the officers called. They marched forward and reported to Brigadier Reigh. He gave the marching order, chasseurs screen in advance, lancers flanking, jagers in front of the infantry column.

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The column broke once for a meal a few hours after high sun, then continued marching. Betan rode Arkor at the front of the column. Her company was split into three groups for an

advance party and flankers, 4YB's dragoon squadron out beyond them. No contact was made with Oldsters and camp was in a large fallow field out of sight of any village. There were no fences or ditches to use in setting a perimeter, but the Oldsters were expected to be days of marching away.

A staff officer told Betan where to place her camp and relayed Reigh's orders to deploy her men into the pickets, which were from Puymora's Third Battalion. Once she had that sorted out, she stood in the jager camp, feeling somewhat useless. It was a feeling that no longer caught her by surprise, her company pretty much ran on its own. She spent a lot of time standing about between giving orders. Ratkando and her large tent had been left at the main camp, she had only a fairly standard officer's tent. It would be no good lounging in it, so after another look around the jager camp, she set off on a walk around the main camp. The line soldiers not selected for picket duty or to stand guard on the perimeter were at their ease. Collars removed, jackets open, leggings off. It was cool in the Dorwain evening, but not cold and the soldiers didn't seem to need their blankets and cloaks. Reigh had allowed cooks out so the soldiers could at least heat their meager field rations.

Spices wafted on the air, as soldiers used their hoarded flavorings on the stews they created from salted meat and ingredients bought or found nearby. Quiet music was coming from somewhere, pipes and strings. Betan didn't recognize the instruments used but they were not unpleasant.

She ran across Colonel Bransim sitting on a camp chair near Reigh's headquarters tent, fussing with some small thing Betan couldn't identify.

"How does the night find you, Colonel?" Betan asked. Bransim looked up from his fussing.

"Well enough, Captain. And you, sir?"

"Well. A bit aimless at the moment." Betan responded. Bransim laughed gently.

"I remember feeling much the same when I had a company of light troops. But even Brannan light troops are not as autonomous as your men, Captain. I imagine you have much free time." Bransim resumed whatever he was doing.

"Indeed, sir." Betan looked around a bit before turning her attention back to Bransim. He seemed more relaxed than usual. His sword belt was removed and hanging on the back of his camp chair, pistols laying on the ground on top of his satchel.

"Care for a drink, Captain?" Bransim suddenly asked.

"A drink, Colonel?"

Bransim set down the object of his ministrations on his leg, Betan could see that it was a small clock of some kind, reached next to him and lifted a dark square bottle. "I've only one cup, I'm afraid, but you're welcome to have a bit if you've one of your own."

"No thank you, Colonel."

"Fair enough." Bransim set the bottle down and picked up his clock again. "I can't figure this out. At one time I had a good handclock. Simple, easy to maintain. It broke at Pilantor and my wife bought me this." Bransim offered it up to Betan for a look. Betan took it and looked it over. It was quite probably the most complicated timepiece she'd ever seen, let alone for a handclock. It was fist-sized and on one face it had time, on the other date and season. On the sides it had, incredibly, weather measurements. Temperature, humidity. "What's this one?" Betan said, turning the side to Bransim to point out a sliding marker.

Bransim had his cup. He finished a drink then leaned forward to see in the dimming sunlight. "Altitude."

"*Altitude*, Colonel? And on the other side, is this a compass?"

“Indeed, sir. But using two sliding scales. The one on your left there is north-south, the other east-west. Requires frequent calibration, though. That’s what I was trying to do. Clearly it was meant to hang in some noble’s study. I often wonder who duped her into getting it for me.”

“Does it break often, sir?” Betan handed it back to him.

“In fact, it’s never broken. I suspect it’s enchanted. Rather an expensive piece, I believe. Clockmakers in town at home, you see.” Bransim tossed the handclock on the ground and took his cup to hand.

“I believe your time is about to become more interesting.” he said before taking a sip.

“Yes, action, sir.” Betan said.

“Not just action sir, but action in *terrain*. The meadowlands and Dorway are the flattest, most boring part of Branna. Once we approach the great river valley, you’ll have quite a bit more to do. Screening, patrolling.” Bransim sampled his drink again. “Even if we’d seen action here in Dorway, it wouldn’t be much for you. The ground is so flat and open you’d simply be put on a flank and left to watch the lines bash on each other.”

“I see, sir.” Betan replied. *I rather think he's underestimating what rifles can do. But he'll see soon.*