

“Is that the valley, sir?” Dem asked as they crested what they thought had been a hill.

For the last day, the plains of Dorway had been uneven. Not even hilly, just lumps of grass covered grazing land that the animals had been removed from. But the Betan and Dem had noticed that the horizon stopped advancing with the hours and the land seemed to drop away in the middle distance.

Betan reached into her satchel for her map. She hadn't used it in some time and it had sunk to the bottom. She turned the bag around and flipped the cloak draped over it up. She rifled through the collection of charms, napkins and spare cartridges until she found the small rolled up map Brigadier's staff had given her a few days ago.

She hummed as she consulted the map. *The last town we passed through was, damn.* “What was that last town called?” she asked Dem.

“Ah, Krulan, I believe, Captain.”

“Ah, yes.” She ranged her finger along the map until she found the town. “That appears to be the Bilan River valley. But the river is some distance off. From the map the valley appears to be some three hundred miles wide.”

Dem was silent. “That's, impressive.”

“Indeed.” Betan rolled the map up again and tucked it into the front of her satchel. *I need to sort that crap out.* The satchel's interior was festooned with pockets and pouches. *I swore I organized it just a few weeks ago.*

“Horse coming from the front, Captain.” Dem's voice took on a businesslike tone. Betan looked up. Her jagers were spread out, only a few were presently visible to her among these weird midget hills. Only Dem rode with her, the company wagons were back with the force's baggage train.

“Oldsters!” the dragoon shouted when he was close enough to do so. “The cavalry has sighted Oldsters! The vanguard is two hours ahead!” he saluted as he trotted by, on his way to tell the Brigadier.

Betan returned the salute, even though the horseman, a coronet by his uniform, was already past. She took out her caller and blew a tune that meant “First Report”. Her men would know the enemy was out there somewhere, but probably not close. Her orders were to remain on the march until she received orders, so she did nothing else.

Except fret and fidget.

She and Dem were silent for the half hour it took for Major Derver to arrive.

“Captain, Brigadier Reigh orders that you will advance at quick march to stop the Oldster vanguard. Your map, sir.”

Betan gave silent thanks that she'd had occasion to consult the map earlier so it was dug out from its warren. Her hands were shaking to a barely noticeable degree when she handed the roll to Derver who, much to her dismay he began folding it once it was unrolled.

“We are... here, or near about.” Derver said, holding the map for her to see his point, which was the same area Betan had figured before. “The Oldster vanguard should be about... here by now. As you draw closer, Major Rilmoran will know better. Brigadier suggests you use these stands of trees around here to conceal your men, but stresses that you should act on your own discretion.

“The dragoons are even now clearing the path to this point and will report to Brigadier on your progress.” Derver handed her now creased and marked map back to Betan.

“Yes, Major. Do you know the terrain of that area?” she asked. *I hope it's not these damnable little hills.*

“It flattens out, but the first ridges of the valley begin thereabouts.” Derver answered. “Fortune with you, Captain.” Derver said.

“And with you, Major.” Betan took her map and looked at it, not noticing for a second that Derver had snapped her a salute in keeping with Central Lands tradition of rendering honors to an office entering combat. Betan hurriedly returned his salute and Derver turned his horse away.

Betan looked at the map. The points Derver had indicated were still dark from the warmth of his touch. *A brigade would have a battalion of light troops as its vanguard, probably with a horse escort. Musketoons teamed with billhooks and spear-carriers. If I find a good shooting position for the men, I could put a real twist on them. I'll need cavalry support, however.*

Betan shook off her thoughtfulness, gathered breath and lifted her caller. She made the recall tune and in fifteen minutes the company was mustered. The men became bright and eager as she announced the situation to Alman.

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Sergeant Amol held Arkor as Betan moved forward on foot to look at the ground.

As Derver said, the ground had flattened out, but the area around the trees Reigh had recommended sloped gently upward for about a quarter of a mile before dropping off and away. There was a nearer drop off on the right, leading to a broad terrace on a fairly steep slope. The trees themselves were a fast growing wood used for fuel for the two villages in the area, the nearest which was a mile away on the broad terrace. Her map marked it as Bedachassel. Alman had the company secreted in a pair of the larger stands.

A dragoon captain wrapped in a short greenish cloak walked out to join her. “You can just see the dust, sir.” He said, pointing. Betan drew her looker and could see a faint cloud of to the north, following a kingsway on the plain. “That’s the main body, about an hour away. The vanguard is about forty minutes ahead of them.”

“No forward cavalry screen, sir?” Betan asked, lowering her looker to view her surroundings.

“Not anymore.” The captain said. Betan wasn’t looking at him but could hear a savage grin in his voice. “It’s a shame mounted archers are out of style. They’re damned useful.”

“None got away to report?”

“There weren’t many to begin with, sir. We got them all.”

“Well enough, sir. Did you hear from the lancers?”

“I did, sir. There’s only a troop here, but they’re yours. I’m told their captain is on his way.”

“Very good, sir. Thank you.” Betan turned to face the man. The dragoon gave her the battle salute; he was not to be in this fight. Betan returned it and they parted. In the trees, Betan gave Alman the orders.

“What about cavalry, Captain?”

“There’s a troop of lancers about, supposedly at our service, but I haven’t seen

them.

Alman let himself nod doubtfully. "Yes, Captain." He moved away to set the jagers. He didn't salute, not so close to battle. Betan gave herself a moment to savor the irony before heading out again to see if she could spot the vanguard.

When she returned from her short reconnaissance a helmeted, vambraced and greaved lancer captain was waiting with Alman.

"7th Troop, Rekar Regiment at your service, Captain." The officer said. Betan exhaled, not realizing she'd been holding some breath. *Bad habit, that.*

"Good to have you, Captain. Do you know if the approaching vanguard has any cavalry?"

"Not for certain, but it's fairly typical for Brannan formations to lead with light cavalry and have heavy cavalry behind the vanguard. Apparently your dragoons took care of the advance screen. As for the heavy cavalry, many defected with their regiments, so it's hard to be sure. Your company has no horse defense, does it, sir?"

"Indeed, we do not, sir. I'd have you wait in these trees until you're needed."

"As you wish, sir."

"It would also be best, sir, if you left it until the last possible moment, so you don't block our aim."

"Do you know 'call horses' on that thing, sir?" The lancer pointed to her caller, tucked into a flap of her jacket.

"I do, sir."

"Then you blow that tune and we'll come galloping out."

"That will serve, I believe. Thank you."

"You're quite welcome. Let's hope we find a nice spot of dirt." With that, the lancer captain, Betan realized she didn't know his name, turned and jingled away to his assembled troop.

"That sounded rather pessimistic." Betan observed quietly. Dem stepped to her. "Captain, did he mean by that what I think he meant? A good place to be buried?"

"Or simply to fall dead, Lieutenant."

"Captain." Alman returned. "The company is set. Half here, half in the other stand of trees. I've set men in the trees to keep watch."

Betan turned to look at the other stand. She could see a few men standing on the edge of stand, signaling batons in their hands.

"I see them!" Someone called from a treetop.

"Corporal Bladen." Alman provided.

"What do you see, Corporal?"

"About thirty men in a wide wedge, musketooneers, I think. All in Oldster white and blue."

"Nice of them to dress brightly." Betan remarked, then bit down her lip.

"I think I see movement behind them!"

"Getting a signal from the other lookout, Captain." Alman said, pointing. Betan stepped to where she could see. A signaler had stepped somewhat into the open. Betan waved and he began swinging his batons.

"Fifty, short arms, right echelon, half a mile out." Betan read aloud. "Short turn to the left."

"I bet we'd see a left echelon on the other side of us if the ground was level, Captain." Alman offered.

“Indeed. But no lookouts over there. A wedge in front of us, an echelon to our left and probably another one to our right. First Sergeant, send a scouting party off our right flank to see if that echelon is there.”

“Yes Captain.” Alman jogged away.

Betan looked around. It was an overcast day and the trees left her in shadows. Her men were standing deeper in the stand than she was, all waiting calmly. Most of them were veterans, having been sent abroad by her royal father as auxiliaries, to fight in other people’s wars.

Much like now. Betan thought.

“Scout party away, Captain.” Alman reported upon his return.

“Very good.” Betan thought. Companies were typically 150 or so. If there was an echelon moving to her right, she was looking at a widely dispersed small company. If not, then it would be a not so widely dispersed very small company. Either way it wouldn’t be the whole vanguard, and they’d already be wary having lost contact with their advance cavalry. If the dragoon officer had been wrong of the thoroughness of the Yellow mounted archers (she hadn’t even known of their existence) they’d know for sure something was amiss, instead of strongly suspecting it.

Where did the archers attack the Oldster cavalry? Betan suddenly thought. *There are no dead horses here and we didn’t pass any on the march. If it’s in front of this place, this Oldster vanguard will already have been well warned of this ambush. Dammit, stupid noble girl, why didn’t you think of this before?*

Betan shook her head. A plan formed.

“I’ll lead ten men from each group up to open fire. It’s best, I believe, if we don’t show our full hand right away. If there’s too many for the first element, the rest of the men in the left stand will advance to support, on my signal. First Sergeant, stay here if the scouts on the right report. If there is another echelon.” Betan paused, too much to think about.

“If there is another echelon, send a small group to hold our right flank and inform me. Any questions?”

Alman paused. Betan imagined he had a question something along the lines of “How dim are you?” or “Why did I come with this princess brat?”

“No, Captain.” was all Alman said. Betan nodded and he moved away.

“How far away?” Betan called to the lookout.

“About a quarter of a mile, and they’re bunching up some.” Corporal Bladen said. Betan nodded and took a moment to check her pistols before moving out of the trees. She stopped to signal 10 men from the left stand to report to her and then jogged forward with the 10 men Alman had detailed on his way out. She moved with an unconscious hunch, holding her sword down in its scabbard, waiting for the slope to level off.

Suddenly there were Oldsters, marching in a wedge towards the gap between the trees. Betan instinctively crouched down; they were about a quarter mile away, spread out, but not as much as they should have been.

Betan stopped and looked. They were mostly musketooneers. Betan saw some billmen and a few spear-carriers. They didn’t appear to notice her.

Then her men were there, automatically spreading out into a firing line at double arm interval, taking one knee.

Looking to her left, she could see the Oldster echelon. The ground still sloped

away sharply on her right, so she couldn't see anything there.

She had 20 men, 50 frontal targets and a quarter mile to attack.

"Alright. Ready." She ordered her men. Hammers were drawn back. "From the right, every other man take aim." Betan looked up. Still cloudy, but probably not wet clouds. Powder would fire when wet, but it got sticky and clumpy. Betan hoped it wouldn't rain.

Half of her men were aiming. Betan looked again at the Oldster wedge. *There must be another unit on my right. Wedges are center formations, not wing formations.*

Betan inhaled.

"Fire."

Eruptions of sparks, then the noise and smoke. She watched Oldsters fall.

"Bunch up, bunch up." She pleaded in a whisper. The Oldsters were not obliging. They went into a crouch, billmen and musketoons pairing off.

"Second group, aim for shooters. Aim." Rifles were leveled. Two breaths.

"Fire." Click, snap, BAM. More smoke and more fallen Oldsters. A ragged volley returned fire, but the Durannians were well outside musketoons range. "Fire at will, quickly." Betan drew her looker and peered through the gathering smoke. Her men's fire cracked in bits as each man loaded and fired independently. Most shots dropped an Oldster, Betan didn't think they'd take too much of this. When they fell back in disarray, she'd counted twenty-seven troops and there were some left over.

"Cease fire." Betan called, swinging her looker over the inert blue forms left behind. The Oldster echelon on her left had halted and gathered into a number of small groups. They were between a quarter and half a mile away. Long range, to be sure.

"Turn to bear and open fire on that group of Oldsters." She said.

She stood and moved behind her men. Some shifted a bit in line to get a field of fire they liked. While they adjusted Betan turned to look back at the trees that concealed the rest of her company. No sign could be seen of them. This was as it should be, although it left her feeling somewhat alone. Her men began firing. Betan looked at where the Oldster wedge had melted back to. Two miles away was one of Branna's royal highways, paved and tree-lined.

Am I being watched? Betan asked herself.

"Captain!" a voice came from behind. Betan turned, hand automatically flying to the hilt of her sword. It was a jager, running toward her.

"First Sergeant reports a half company of Oldster light troops moving towards that village." The man pointed in the direction of the more distant of the two nearby villages, Grudachassel. "They were moving in files until the shooting started, now they're waiting down that slope, about a mile away. He asks for orders, sir."

Betan thought. Half a company was 70 or so. Was that the remainder of the company she was engaged with, or a new company? Either way, she had a lot of Oldster vanguard left.

"Take another 10 men from each element in the trees to First Sergeant. I want him to meet that half company. Tell him his orders are to stay at long range and retreat towards this position if pressed."

"Yes, Captain." The jager said.

"Go." He dashed back to the trees.

Betan turned back to her firing line. The fire was much slower as her men took more time aiming. Even so, half the Oldster echelon was down. The smoke was a bit

thick, so Betan called the order to sidestep away from it.

The pause in firing gave the surviving Oldsters the nerve to break and run. Her men had been picking off the musketoons; Betan could see it was mostly billhooks and spears being taken back toward the highway.

“Sergeant!” Betan called. Lokar stood from the firing line and slung his rifle to approach.

“Yes, Captain.”

“I’m going back to the rest of the company for a moment. If more Oldsters come.” Betan stopped to think. “Engage at long range. Send a runner for me if it’s greater than half a company. In any event, fall back in steps if pressed. If cavalry comes, signal for the lancers.”

“Yes, Captain.”

Betan turned and jogged back to the trees. As she ran, gunfire broke out from the direction of Grudachassel. Alman’s element. The fire was individual, not volley. Betan made a quick wish for their aim to be true.

When she got to the trees she found an officer with a staff brassard waiting.

“Captain Lebornier, Captain Melabor.” He greeted. “Colonel Puymora’s battalion will be here in 20 minutes. He orders your report, sir.”

“The gunfire you hear is a detachment of jagers engaging half a company of Oldster light troops, somewhere between here and Grudachassel. I’d wager closer to here. My forward detachment just sent off about 80 men or so. Their remnants can probably still be seen fleeing back to the highway. No other Oldsters sighted yet.”

“Very good. Captain Fedorin was here a moment ago, Captain Lebornier. He relays from the dragoons that Oldster line units are a mile away down the highway.”

“Then why are their light troops coming across these fields?” Betan asked, thinking aloud. “Does the highway curve away from these villages?” She asked before the Melabor could answer.

“Indeed, it does. Once the highway comes to this point, following adds nearly two hours to the march. The Brigadier felt they’d come off the highway here an attempt to forage from the two villages. It’s an obvious move, but only because it’s necessary for the Oldsters. We have many reports of supply problems in the Oldster army.”

A slight jingling announced the return of the lancer captain.

“How goes your engagement, Captain Lebornier?” he asked.

“One sided, Captain.” Betan answered coolly, a bit annoyed at the change of subject. The lancer began a savage, satisfied smile.

“Your detachment on the right is probably skirmishing with a scouting party for foraging operations.” Melabor said. “The aforementioned supply problems. I’ll suggest to Colonel Puymora that your men be reinforced as soon as possible.”

“Thank you, sir. Although my men have orders to withdraw if pressed.”

“That is even better, sir. I imagine once the line units meet here foraging will rapidly become a secondary concern.”

“Indeed, sir. What about Bedacha—” a thundering boom stopped Betan’s question about the other village. She spun just as a second explosion resounded. Smoke was drifting over the highway. A third blast went off and then Betan could see that they were coming from the highway itself.

“They deployed artillery *on* the highway?” she heard Melabor exclaim as she dashed to her men. Dirt exploded from a spot about twenty feet behind them, they were

quickly spreading out.

“Grenades, sir!” Lokar called out to her as she closed. “Two hit.” He pointed to the right end of the line, where one of her men lay dead and another was being pulled away from a small crater.

“Keep the men spread out, Sergeant. If they keep cannoning, we’ll pull back.” Betan looked at the point of fire. “How many do you think they have?”

“I just saw the three, but I believe Oldster light batteries have four cannon.” Lokar said.

“You’re quite right, Sergeant.” Betan drew her looker.

“I could see the flashes dead ahead, Captain. I couldn’t see anything else.” someone else called.

Betan looked. “I can see four guns, and Oldsters standing about.”

“Why are they blocking the road?” one of the jagers asked

“Why are they firing grenades at us? They must think there’s a lot more of us.”

Another followed.

“Brannans don’t use rifles.” Betan responded. *Why are they blocking the road, indeed? I’d take my unit off the highway further up the road and try to flank us in a main attack.* With a flash and a boom, the fourth cannon fired. The shot came out, trailing smoke.

Betan froze. She wanted to dodge, to leap out of the way, but her body saved her the disgrace by locking in place. The smoke from the charge faded and the giant ball was invisible until a divot was struck in front of the jagers and a cannon ball bounced harmlessly through the line. Betan resumed breathing, but the next blast stopped that.

It was another ball, the third and fourth shot were the same. The tactic was intended to be used against massed infantry, bouncing its way through formations, rending flesh and crushing bone. Against the dispersed jagers, the shots were careening past. The battery repeated its volley faster this time; Betan was watching the eighth shot come to rest half way between her and the trees. “That was odd.” She said. “Even more so than the grenades.”

“Cavalry!” someone shouted. Betan turned to see a wave of horsemen break out of the tree-lined road. She reached into a pocket concealed in the flap of her jacket and drew her caller. Keeping it in her hand she turned and signaled to the trees “ready support”. The enemy horse would hear the caller and she didn’t want to ruin her advantage.

“Hold your fire. Steady, boys.” She called out to her justifiably nervous men. Betan could imagine the lancers shrugging off their short concealing cloaks and setting the long spiked poles that gave them their name. She glanced backwards and almost collapsed from relief when she saw a line of glittering horsemen emerge at a fast walk from around the trees. Looking back at the Oldsters rapidly closing, she could see that they were fairly basic. No armor on mount or rider, sabers drawn, plumed caps flailing in the wind and silver braids streaming from gloves and bridles. Cavalry kits were designed to increase the naturally high intimidation factor of a line of armed horsemen bearing down on one and as Betan tried to breathe, she considered it working. She gulped air and put the caller to her lips, blowing the tune for “Call horses”, fighting the urge to turn to check their progress.

The Oldster horses were mostly bays and chestnuts, masses of liquidly rippling muscle and glinting steel in two ranks. The Durannians were getting nervous and some

were peeking behind them. “Here they come.” One of them said.

Finally a quavering buzz filled her head, “cavalry ready” The lancers were in a cantering line behind her jagers, ready to charge at the gallop. “Open up!” Betan ordered needlessly, turning despite herself to look as “charge” was called.. If the Oldster cavalry gear was intimidating, the Yellow lancers were vengeful demons. Tall, gleaming helmets wreathed in bright yellow feathers, rider’s arms and legs sheathed in brilliant armor, mounts’ heads and necks the same. The 10-foot lances with two-foot spikes trailing a long, streaming ribbon of garish yellow to keep blood from splattering up to the rider.

They pounded through the jager line, the men jeering and insulting them as per tradition, to mask their relief at their cavalry support arriving. Betan followed their progress, two perfectly steady groups racing to each other. She didn’t know whether the Oldsters were unable or unwilling to check their charge, but the lancers crashed into them, driving lance points into chests of man and beast. Screams raked the air, the shrieks of the horses almost painful. The first rank was struck down and the lancers drew their tulwars and leapt to receive the second rank. Betan watched as one Yellow man drove the jagged end of a shattered lance shaft into an Oldster’s face, another delivered a long slash without slowing down. The charge broke into a swirling mess of individual duals, but the lancers’ longer swords and armor quickly told. None of the enemy attempted to break away or surrender, preferring death.

The lancers did not cheer their victory, but immediately set to ending the agony of the grievously injured horses. When the pistol shots stopped, injured and dead lancers were quickly slung over saddles, whole lances salvaged and the loose horses, from either side, taken lead of for the return.

“How fared you, Captain?” Betan asked as they passed through.

“One horse and three men dead. Two horses and six men wounded, eleven horses redeemed from the Bad King’s stables. A fair exchange, I should say.”

“Infantry coming!” Lokar called. Betan turned to look. Three ranks of light troops were now emerging from the highway.

“We will need some time to regroup, Captain.” The lancer called. Betan turned back.

“You have served well today, sir. I’m not sure we’ll need your pointy sticks again.”

The captain laughed as his horse continued. “I’ll keep them ready nonetheless. Happy killing, sir.”

“Happy resting to you, sir.” Betan turned back to face the advancing enemy, wondering if she’d been flirting. *Did he even know he was addressing a woman?* The line infantry were advancing at the quick march, heavy muskets held across the body. Betan listened; the shooting off on the right was slower now. The cavalry skirmish had quite driven Alman’s fight from her mind, but no time to think about that now.

She turned to signal the remainder of her company to advance. They came running out and she ordered them into two firing lines, they quickly fell in, second rank staggered so they could fire through the first. Betan watched with satisfaction and then turned back to the enemy, now out of quick march into a normal parade step.

Betan turned back, making a quick count. 38 men, Alman had taken more than she’d expected. “Fire at will.” Betan shouted.

Rifles were lifted, cocked and swung level in one ragged wave, and then nothing

happened as they took aim. Some seconds passed and this always made Betan nervous, although she knew better. Then with a burst of sparks and smoke and a loud report, one man fired. Then another, then another and then the entire detachment was engaged.

The Oldsters marched bravely into the irregular waves of shot that tore through them. Hardly a step was taken without one of them falling. But Oldsters kept emerging from the highway.

Betan drew her looker to see through the gathering smoke. *Forty, at least.* The new troops off the highway were wading through dead and dying comrades, but they still kept coming. *Can these be conscripts? I can't imagine they could force pressed men through that.*

"This is the Oldster main body!" Betan yelled over the fire. "Sergeant Lokar, take a few men and go watch our left. And, you, Sergeant Biral go off to the right to see how First Sergeant is getting along."

Betan moved to the left of her company as the pace of fire quickened and the smoke grew thicker. She'd have to start falling back soon, the constant stream of Oldsters were far too much for her dispersed company. If 4YB lost its light troops so early in the campaign, the unit would be crippled for the duration. Later she might be called upon to sacrifice her men, but not now.

Now, however, her men needed to see. Betan reached the left wing of her position and reached into her satchel, finding one of the knotted handkerchiefs that her map had fallen under. She pulled one out and yanked once on the loose ends of the knot and then shook it out. A wind picked up, carrying the smoke away to the right. The breeze was too light to affect the flight of the jagers' shots, but it sufficed to clear the air. The rate of fire picked up again.

Betan watched, maintaining a calm mask, but anyone watching her would have seen her right heel bouncing very quickly. She watched the enemy columns abruptly turn right into an L and form lines to face her men. The maneuver was hampered by her fire constantly sending soldiers to the ground, the pikemen in particular were having trouble managing their 15-foot staves while high stepping over writhing wounded.

"Captain! More enemy infantry." Someone from behind her shouted. Betan turned to see another column of Oldsters exit the highway far to the left. Her looker told her these were more infantry of the line. A peek forward told her that the group facing her men was dressing its lines, preparing to advance on her by ranks.

"Captain! Captain!" Someone else was running down the firing lines, interrupting the fire from the second rank. This was a cardinal sin among jagers, so either this was a horrible soldier or had news of such import that he forgot.

"First Sergeant Alman reports a full battalion of Oldster line infantry on our right." The soldier managed to blurt out between gasps. *The latter, then.* "He says that he sent off a partial company of light troops, but that the line started coming at him. He's been falling back when pressed, as your orders instructed, but he's running low on ammunition. He asks for further orders."

Betan looked at her front, the Oldster line was just beginning its march. She was outside the effective range of their muskets, but wouldn't be for long. The column to the left would take some time to either form lines or turn to come after her men.

"Tell him to retreat his men to the top the ridge." Betan said. "Just where the slope you ran up turns into this field here. But not where we are right now. The remainder of the company will begin to fall back towards the trees. First Sergeant will

have to post his men further back than here. But I can't say as yet where exactly. Tell him to use his own discretion as to where he should post, but I'll need him to guard the company's flank against that battalion marching this way. Understand?"

"Yes, Captain." The man took a deep breath. "First Sergeant is to fall back to the top of the ridge to guard the company's flank, which will be in an unknown position between here and the trees."

"What's your name?"

"Kanten, sir."

"Very good, Kanten. Go." The jager turned to run behind the firing lines, dashing towards the slope."

Betan looked forward, that line was getting close. "Second rank, cease fire!" Betan yelled. A few shots sputtered out, but the firing there stopped. "Empty men, reload." The first rank continued to fire, but the volume was now much less and the Oldsters moved forward with greater confidence. Betan watched until the ramrods stopped moving and rifles were held at port arms. "Second rank will fall back-," another peek forward to judge the speed of the Oldsters. "-twenty yards and form new lines. Go." The men turned and jogged backwards.

Betan around. "Left flankers, fall back into the second rank!" The small party began jogging. Betan cupped her hands. "Sergeant! Do an ammo check when you get there!" She saw him wave as he ran, which was good enough for jagers.

Now she turned her attention to the threat to her front. They were now in long musket shot, but they didn't stop to set up their clumsy weapons. *Probably four hundred left there, even if we dropped a hundred of them. Another battalion on my left. The one Alman's shooting up is probably foragers. That leaves almost a thousand against 40 or so. If these bastards get much closer they'll decide it's worth the time to use those muskets.*

"First rank! Cease fire!" Again the men that had been about to fire let their shots fly after her order, but she quickly had a silent field. Now she could hear the drums of the Oldsters keeping the time. "Get that wounded man up and fall back to the second rank, empty men reload when you reform your line. Go!" The line broke up, but waited for their wounded comrade to be picked up before falling back. The dead were dead, they no longer mattered, but Durannians did not abandon wounded to the devices of the savages they were used to fighting. That habit would not be allowed to lapse even in the Central Lands.

Then the Durannians began heading back for the other half of the detachment. Betan walked backwards, watching the Oldsters to the front advance; fortunately they were in a slow parade march. *I wonder if that's as fast as they can move and preserve their ranks.* The enemy on her left flank were still in column, *Hope they don't come at me like that. That would be bad.*

Then they all were with the second rank. Betan walked to where the wounded man was being supported by a comrade. A hasty bandage had been wrapped around his leg and side where pieces of the grenade had lodged, but he looked pale. "Get him back to the trees, lay him down." Betan ordered the man's supporter.

"Yes, Captain. Come on, lad." The able jager drafted another comrade to take the wounded man away.

"Second rank!" Betan hollered, returning to the fight. "Fire at will!" Rifles were lifted, leveled and then the moment of expectant silence before the shooting started.

Again, Oldsters started falling. Betan watched as members of the advancing small forest of pikes were toppled. When the first rank was all settled, she ordered them to join the fire and then the culling began again in earnest. As the line grew closer, it began to bend and warp, as soldiers dodged falling pikes (Betan had never handled one, but she didn't imagine they'd be light) and stumbled over struggling wounded.

Betan looked at the battalion on her left. They were finally forming a line, but it was parallel to her own. *That doesn't make any sense. Why wouldn't they come at us? Ooh! The Yellow main body must be close.* Betan squelched the urge to turn and look. Then gave up. She turned and could see a bit of dust behind the trees. She took a few steps away from her men to the left. *Saved!* She could see yellow and blue lines forming.

"Second rank, cease fire!" Betan took a few hurried steps to the left wing of the first rank. "Form echelon on me!" The second rank melted and poured into a line at angle to what had been the front rank. "On the flanking enemy, fire at will!" Betan stepped away from the corner and looked over the unit. Betan used her looker to see through the gathering haze. The enemy to her front had lost most of its cohesiveness, the gathered ranks jagged and gapped in places. If the Oldster force was going to turn from the highway here, Betan had probably mauled the first element of its left wing. Now she had to put some heat on the next part of the line. But mauled wasn't dead, and the Oldsters showed no signs of quitting the field, so Betan also had to keep her jagers out of their musket range.

Explains why they had cannons in the vanguard. They were marching so they could be ready to turn on their flank and engage. They expected us to be here. Betan smiled grimly to herself. *But they didn't expect us to be here.*

A buzzing sound filled the air. Betan turned to look behind her and saw a line of Yellow musketeers and pikemen marching between the trees. Another group marched from between the trees and the beginning of the slope, with cannon being rolled out. Then Betan realized that the tune on the caller was the recall. She was being pulled out of the fire.

"Main line! Fall back to the trees." Betan ordered. She wanted to put just a little more fire into the battalion on her left. The jagers from the front rank hoisted their rifles to port arms and turned to jog back to the trees. "Echelon. Each take, two more shots, then fall back."

She realized in a moment that two shots were too many too allow. The targets were distant and the men taking more careful aim. It took a few minutes for those shots to be fired and as the last of her fielded jagers turned to leave, the recall tune was being sounded again. Betan took one last hurried look to the front and saw the Oldsters hurriedly dressing their lines, sergeants and officers in front shouting instructions. Then she joined her men in quitting the field.

She had to weave her way through the Yellow line infantry standing stiffly at attention, pikes standing tall, muskets grounded and pointing to the air. She almost plowed right into Colonel Puymora's horse.

"Colonel!" Betan blurted.

"Captain." He regarded her coolly. "Feeling greedy, sir? You didn't really think I'd let you kill all of them did you?" He paused and Betan goggled at him. *Is he really angry?* "Didn't you think you'd have to share?"

Betan stuttered trying to respond.

“Be good enough to take your company to guard my right flank. I believe a number of your men are there already.”

“Ah, yes, Colonel.” Betan hurriedly rushing away, calling out an order for her men to follow her.

A few men were laying on the ground; comrades hunched over them as Betan lead the balance of her company to reinforce Alman’s detachment. She could see a group of Oldsters on the plain near Grudachassel.

“Captain.” Alman greeted steadily. His demeanor was as imperturbable as ever, but he was breathing faster than normal.

“Report, First Sergeant.”

“We were firing and falling back according to your orders when we received your order to redeploy to guard the flank, Captain. Are we now guarding the right flank of the force?”

“We are.”

“Very well, Captain. I lost two killed, four wounded. They went into double time and got a few of us on a volley.” Alman paused. “How did you fare, sir?”

“One killed, one wounded. Walking wounded. How are we fixed for ammunition?”

“About half up what we brought, Captain.”

“I think the men who were with me are more so. Redistribute ammunition and make sure the men are watered.”

“Yes, Captain.” Alman paused again. “Have you had any?”

“Ah, no, I haven’t. I will after the men.”

“Yes, Captain”

Betan stood and watched the company form up, Alman put them in two lines, one half way down the slope and one at the just below the top. It was a rather secure flank; the hillside was steep enough that any infantry of the line trying to attack would be hard-pressed to maintain formation, especially the pikemen. But cavalry or light troops would have little trouble ascending.

Except for us.

Betan listened to the called and shouted orders behind her as the Yellow army prepared to take advantage of the situation. *We must have hurt that wing battalion badly; hopefully we shook up the next one in as well.*

The sounds behind her melded into an unintelligible morass of sound. The clear sky above seemed to slip and roll and Betan's head lolled as she looked down at the field before her. She shook herself, the battle reasserted itself and the enemy threatening the right flank was milling about on the road to Grudachassel. The ground wavered and her head spun. Her hands were shaking. She gripped them into tight fists.

Get a hold of yourself, girl. You're too bloody wound up. Keep tight or you'll slip away.

“Water, Captain?” Alman held a large canteen out to her. Betan looked at it blankly for a second, then accepted, meaning first to sip but tilting her head back when her thirst asserted itself. She handed the canteen back to Alman, who then took his own long drink. Betan took it again and had another long draft, which she swirled in her mouth and spit out.

“How was the unit you faced?” Betan asked, trying to focus on it.

“Well-drilled, Captain. Must be regulars. The second time we fell back out of

musket range they went into double-time, pikes and all.” Alman drank again. “Then they set up fast and fired a volley at us. I think, Captain, that it must have been a foraging party headed for Grudachassel.”

“That was my thinking as well. My enemies were not so well drilled, at least not that we saw, although they kept marching right into the men’s fire.” A groan penetrated Betan's haze and she turned to the right. “How bad are your wounded?”

“Shot in the torso, Captain. I didn’t feel I had time to evacuate them.”

“I think we’re safe enough now. My wounded was sent back to the trees. Take these there with a sergeant and see if they can be removed to the field hospital. I imagine it should be up by now.”

“Yes, Captain.” Alman moved away quickly.

Betan looked back at the Oldsters, who did not look so well drilled at the moment. Their pikes had been set in a large circle and soldiers were seemingly wandering about. She drew her looker and scanning the field behind them she could see a path of blue and white bodies. *Alman had exacted a goodly sum for his six casualties. Looks like they’re getting their wounded taken care of. Disciplined enough, must be regulars.*

A massive explosion rocked Betan onto her toes. She lurched backward and another one knocked into her. Betan turned to see the third of the nearest battery of Yellow field artillery beginning bring further harm to the Oldster wing. The guns were much larger than the light pieces that had attacked her company, firing heavy balls into the massed Oldster ranks. If they couldn’t open ranks fast enough, the casualties could be appalling. Slow but steady booming continued from that battery and others further away.

Betan forced herself to turn her attention back to the Oldster unit facing her. She picked out the unit guidon, it was the third battalion of whatever brigade they belonged to. The standard was white and orange, with stars. It was hard to pick out how many.

“First Sergeant!”

“Yes, Captain.” Alman replied from where he was checking ammunition.

“I need a messenger.” Alman produced one quickly. “Find someone on Colonel Puymora’s staff and tell him that the force on his left flank is the third battalion of a brigade with an orange and white standard with a number of stars on it. I can’t see how many because there’s little wind. It’s been reduced somewhat, First Sergeant, how much would you say?”

“Perhaps a third, Captain.”

“I agree. It’s been reduced by perhaps a third. Understand?”

“A battalion reduced by a third, the third battalion of a brigade with a orange and white standard with some stars on it.”

“Very good. Go.” The jager jogged away.

The cannonade had stopped and Betan could hear the drums of marching units when one of Colonel Puymora’s staff officers joined her. He greeted her rather perfunctorily, she thought, and examined the Oldster battalion through his looker.

“That, Captain, is the standard of the Retatan brigade. One of the better brigades in the Bad King’s army. Very few of them joined us. If it were windier you’d see six stars in a semi circle.” The man scanned the field, noting the casualties along the direction of the Retatan Third’s march. “Looks like you took a number of these out as well, Captain.”

“This was a portion of my company, sir. Perhaps fifteen.”

“Fifteen?” The officer sounded skeptical. “But there are at least a hundred

Oldster dead.”

“Rifles, sir.”

“The sun don’t shine.” The officer cursed. “You should know, Captain that the Oldster wing battalion you shot up, which was from a different Brigade, which is odd, has been destroyed in detail by our artillery. Rather, I should say, finished off. We estimate you killed half of them.” He regarded her icily.

“Again, rifles, sir.”

“Indeed.” He turned back to examining the Retatan Third. “Have they been doing anything, sir?”

“They assumed that defensive position you see, sir, and started collecting their wounded. Nothing other than that.”

“Very well. You’ll send word if they get their dander up?”

“Of course, sir.”

“Very good, sir.” And he left.

“Rather brisk, I think, Captain.” Dem said after the staff officer left.

“I agree, Lieutenant.” Betan sounded surprised, she wasn’t aware that Dem had arrived.

“Our wounded have been removed to the field hospital, Captain. I came to inquire as to your supplies.”

“First Sergeant Alman is doing an ammunition check right now. I imagine we’re low on water, as well.”

“Not too hot, fortunately, sir. This is the Brannan autumn.” Musket volleys from behind interrupted small talk, they sounded somewhat distant.

“What is the disposition of forces up there, Lieutenant?”

“Colonel Puymora has advanced his right wing, the Oldster left has collapsed. When last I saw a third Oldster line battalion had joined the fight, but the Colonel was about achieve an enfilade on the second battalion. Unless the Oldsters can commit their second brigade to the fight almost immediately I foresee a bad day for their side, Captain.”

“And if they can, Lieutenant?”

“Bad day for us, Captain. But word spreading in the rear is that you’ve already had rather a good day at the Oldster’s expense.”

“The men had some good target practice, yes, Lieutenant.” They heard some of the nearer jagers chuckle quietly. *Why must I put on airs around this man? He’s a veteran himself, he must know that I’m not as calm as I seem.*

“Captain, ammunition check complete.” Alman was in front of her suddenly, his calm restored.

“How are we fixed?”

“About forty rounds per man, Captain. As you suspected, the men from your detachment were a bit lower. I’ve spread the ammunition about, sir.”

“How many reserve rounds do we have, Lieutenant?” Betan asked Dem.

“I’d say another sixty rounds per man, Captain.”

“Very well. We’ll need more, I believe. Talk to the Brigadier staff about getting the alchemist shop working on bullets for us, if you please, Lieutenant.”

“Wagons coming!” someone shouted. Betan looked at the Retatans and indeed several wagons were being run out to the Oldster position. Betan got her looker out and checked. Apart from being packed with hay the wagons were empty.

“Ambulances, Captain?” Alman asked.

“Indeed, First Sergeant. We’ll leave them be for now. If they move to a posture to march on us we’ll open fire.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“By your leave, Captain.” Dem said. “I’ll see about getting our shot molds to the alchemist shop.”

“Very good, Lieutenant.” Betan said, keeping her eyes on the ambulances. They were fancy wagons, with spring mounted axles to keep the wounded from bouncing painfully. The hay was more to absorb blood than for comfort. She’d heard of them but had never seen them. The Yellow army had been unable to afford them, relying on the old method of one dragging his wounded comrades back when one good.

The sounds of battle still came to her ears. Volley upon volley firing with occasional cannon blasts, there was no way to tell which were Yellow and which were Oldster. Callers and shouted orders echoed over the crest of the hill. Betan watched the loading of the wounded and the stripping of the dead to keep her mind occupied on the situation at hand. After some short time the incapacitated were loaded onto ambulances and the walking wounded were put into a formation. Then the pike ring began shuffling.

“Steady!” Alman cried as the jagers began to chatter. “Wait for it.”

“Load rifles!” Betan asked, making sure anyone hoping to avoid clearing their rifle at the end of the fight was foiled. A dozen or so of the men grumbled and began to load. Betan glanced at Alman who nodded, he would make sure they didn’t attempt to slack in the future.

Betan watched the Retatan Third form up, facing away from her. They fell into files and formed a short column. A single shouted order set them moving, with the ambulances keeping north, the side facing the direction they came from.

“First Sergeant, I need a messenger!” Betan shouted. A jager, it was the same one she’d sent before, presented himself quickly. “Tell Brigadier Reigh that the Retatan Third sitting on his right flank are marching away toward the rear. After you do that, look at the progress of the fight so you can report to me when you return.”

“Yes, Captain.” He dashed away.

Betan scanned the horizon. Grudachassel was utterly still, no one daring to be seen with a fight so close. *No refugees leaving town, though. They must think it too late. They’re probably right. Perhaps, though, they would have no place to flee to in the Bad King’s realm.*

The messenger returned after about ten minutes, breathing somewhat heavily.

“Captain. Brigadier says...maintain position. Do not pursue.” Deep breath.

“One of Colonel Puymora’s battalions is marching along the Oldster line... looks like that second battalion that your detachment shot at...mostly gone.” Deep breath “There were two Yellow line battalions in firing position, getting that second battalion in a crossfire.” Breath. “The third battalion looked to be retreating, but I didn’t stay to look closely. I saw some movement behind the big tree-lined road, but I wasn’t sure how much. More than just a few men.”

“Very good, return to your position.”

Alman walked over. “Probably the remainder of those Retatans getting into position to cover a retreat.” Betan said before he could offer an opinion.

“Most likely, Captain.”

“Brigadier probably won’t want to pursue, but we should be ready for it just in

case. How are the men set for water?"

"Bit low, Captain, but it's not very hot."

"That should do. Food?"

"Ah, I should say a day's meat and biscuit."

"Hopefully they won't need it, but if we're posted as forward pickets I don't want anyone's stomachs growling."

"Yes, Captain."

"Captain Lebornier!" a younger staff officer, from Brigade staff, was walking down the hill towards them. "From the Brigadier." He jogged the last bit of way. "The Oldsters have quit the field, withdrawing in poor order across the Kingsway. He suspects the Retatans are covering the retreat, using the Kingsway as a defensive line. The Brigadier wants your company guarding our camp for the night. Therefore, you are to quit this position and march to the rear to await specific orders for guard detail."

"Very well. Inform the Brigadier we will move out immediately."

The staff officer nodded and walked away.

"First Sergeant. Skirmisher lines, route step. To the rear."

"Yes, Captain."

"Captain Lebornier!" Reigh called out. "Send your company back with my man and come to me."

"Yes, Brigadier!" Betan replied. "First Sergeant."

"Yes, Captain."

Betan walked towards the Brigadier's position, he was climbing down from the scaffold wagon he used to view engagements. He was down by the time Betan arrived. *Rats blood, do I salute or not?*

"An excellent performance from your men, Captain." Reigh's face was flushed and his voice had an unusual tone of excitement. "Colonel Puymora found a much weakened enemy when he engaged. Your men are to be commended, I will address them myself."

Betan knew were eyes were wide, she couldn't help it. "I, I thank you, sir. It will be an honor for them."

"Puymora estimates you killed more than half of that first battalion." Reigh rambled on. "The horse artillery barely had to fire three shots per gun to drive them from the field. Then the good Colonel got them in enfilade and Colonel Ordolan marched his men to get them in a crossfire. Bit of a risk, it left his flank open, but it worked beautifully. The third battalion hardly attempted to engage. I had already ordered the horse artillery shifted to the left flank, so we put a few bombs into that third battalion just to make sure they didn't try anything. A damn good day, Captain. Ah, Major Rilmoran."

"Reporting as ordered, Brigadier."

"Yes, sir. I understand your men have been in the saddle since dawn, but there's no rest for them. The Retatan still has two battalions out there unscathed. I want you to make sure the Oldsters have no rest tonight. You may rotate your men to give them some rest, but I don't want to hear much of a lull out there. Issue grenades and bombs if you think it will help."

"Yes, sir. We'll start shortly after dark. With your permission may I pull in a troop to rest until then, Brigadier?"

"Yes, that will be fine, Major." Reigh turned back to the battlefield. Some Yellow

men were walking the field, looking for wounded Oldsters that might be worth the trouble to drag to the field hospital.

“How many casualties did you have?” Reigh asked, a bit of concern edging out his excitement.

“Eight total, Brigadier.” Reigh’s head jerked around. “Three killed and five wounded.”

“The stars...” Reigh whispered. “Three killed? Only three? For the damage you inflicted? Oh, my dear Captain. You have proved the worth of the many Durannian auxiliaries that have been dispatched throughout the known worlds.

“I do believe that whatever the outcome of this war, it shall be the last Branna ever fights without rifles.”

Reigh held an officer’s call, where Puymora joined him in praising the performance of the Durannian jagers. Betan could almost feel the exaggerated rumors generating.

It was well after dark before everything was done and Betan could shamle back to camp. Two jagers stood guard over her tent she idly returned their salute as she approached.

“Captain!” Dem called. Betan restrained a curse.

“Lieutenant?” she turned to face him.

“What was the verdict?”

“The Brigadier was well satisfied by our performance, as was Colonel Puymora.” Betan looked around and walked close in to Dem. “He said he would personally address the men to thank them.” Betan was pleased to see her assistant’s eyes goggle the way she imagined hers had. “But I think he was overexcited, let’s hope he doesn’t forget.” Betan looked around. It was warmer in central Dorway than it had been at the foot of the Malia. Those of her men that were sleeping had just wrapped a cloak or a blanket around themselves and laid down, she saw no tents up apart from hers.

“How many men were drawn off for pickets?” Betan asked. Reigh had told her during officer’s call that he was sending a runner with that order.

“Fifteen, Captain. I issued some extra rounds to them. First relief is in half an hour. Sergeant Plian is the sergeant of the watch right now.”

“Very good, Lieutenant. What is our situation regarding ammunition?”

“Fair, sir. Another engagement like today’s will leave us with a small reserve for the return to camp. More than that and we’ll be in real danger of running out. Which reminds me, a runner collected our shot molds for the first flight taking reports back to the army.”

“That’s good. Hopefully, we’ll be given priority. I’m not sure anyone this side of the Beddisae sells our caliber.”

“Very doubtful, Captain.”

A yawn burst out before Betan could even think of suppressing it. “If you’ll excuse me, Lieutenant, I must retire. Leave orders with the sergeant of the watch to wake me if anything unusual happens.”

“Yes, Captain. Good night, sir.”

“Good night, Lieutenant.” Betan walked into her tent. Ratkando had stayed with back at Army camp, but Betan was too tired to be fussed with. She dropped her hat, satchel and sword belt into the ground and took only long enough to unbutton her jacket

before falling onto her cot and letting sleep take her.