

“Your highness?”

Betan struggled to open her eyes. Three days on the road had passed in a haze of exhaustion and painbalm fog, broken only by insistent hunger managed somewhat by quick meals. Getell hadn't been much better off. They had each wrapped in blankets and laid down on the cushioned benches that made up the carriage's seats. Betan was propped up, Getell prone. At some point during the journey Betan had groggily noted that Getell was curled up on the floor. She'd gone back to sleep.

It was dim, maybe dusk. Betan finally forced her eyes open and blinked at whoever was addressing her.

“Your highness?” someone was standing in the window she was facing.

“She's out of it, sir.” a voice out of her sight said. “They'd apparently been drinking a lot of *nemal* to stay awake, and she's on balm pills.”

Betan rubbed her eyes as the door opened.

“Watch the floor, sir.” the second voice warned. Betan could see a uniform, blue and yellow, with stripes on the arms. *Staff brassards*. Betan's mind managed to conclude. She rubbed her eyes and the officer came close enough for her addled brain to identify him.

“Major Derver!” she croaked, she tried to sit up but a groaning from her side stopped her. It didn't really hurt, strangely enough, but she relaxed against the wads of bedding holding her up regardless. Getell stirred, rousing himself more quickly without the painbalm to cloud his mind. He slithered up to his bench, out of Derver's way.

“It *is* you!” Derver knelt by her. “I'm not sure who will be more pleased to know. I would guess First Sergeant Alman, but Master LEADER was nearly sick to hear the news of your capture.”

“Are we at camp, sir?”

“We are, your highness.” Derver said. “I have been sent to conduct you to Brigadier Reigh's tent immediately.”

“Then her highness's sword and pistols can be returned to her?” Getell's voice was surly.

Derver looked at him strangely for a moment. “Of course, of course.”

“This is Getell, who has served me since my escape.” Betan said. Derver nodded.

“Do you need help exiting the carriage?”

“I can help her highness.” Getell said. Derver backed out with a slight smirk on his face. Betan was not a large woman but Getell was a tiny scrap of a malnourished boy. Betan didn't need much help, but she let Getell have his moment. He removed her blankets and made a show of allowing her to lean on his shoulder as she rose. The wound was tight but not painful. He preceded her from the carriage and again allowed her to lean on him as she dismounted.

“I do hope the Brigadier is not far away.” Betan said.

“Not so far, your highness.” Derver answered. An officer of the guard that had accompanied her carriage brought her kit to her. Betan put her sword on and gave her satchel and pistols to Getell to carry. “We'll transfer the rest of your kit, your highness.” he said.

“Very good, thank you, Mister Tetelan. Major Derver?”

“This way, your highness.” He gestured and following the direction with her eye she could already see Reigh's massive command tent. She started walking slowly toward

it.

“I take it from your form of address that my position has been filled?” she asked, steeling herself against the answer.

“Captain Dem has been in command of the Durannian rifles since your capture, your highness.” Derver answered in a level voice.

Betan's heart fell, although it was the only decision Reigh and Pautark could have made. The jagers were too valuable to the army to disband and too unique to fold into another unit.

“But some changes have been made. After the Durannians held the line at Southbend the company has been transferred from Fourth Brigade to the Army, although in truth they usually operate with Fourth Brigade. General Pautark found some well sprung wagons that are used to move the rifles from engagement to engagement on the battlefield. They were instrumental in our first two victories.

“In addition we finally thought to ask how such troops were normally employed. Thus we have produced pavises with stands to protect the rifles from enemy fire.”

“That seems almost cruel to the Oldsters.” Betan said.

“Great bloody thick ones, too.” Derver said with a vicious joy. “Proof against musket shot beyond fifty yards or so. The troops have taken to calling them the Murder Company.”

“Apt, I'm quite sure.”

Derver muttered something to an underling who sprinted away.

As Betan walked her side loosened up and she picked up the pace. Within a few minutes they were at the opening to Reigh's tent. Reigh came out to greet them. *Must have been waiting for me.* Betan thought.

Reigh walked out past his guards and bowed.

“Welcome back, your highness. It is a pleasure to have you again.”

Betan nodded in return. “You mean, of course, it is a pleasure for you to be able to tell my father I have returned.”

Reigh laughed. “I cannot deny your return lifts a great burden from me. But I daresay First Sergeant Alman and Master Ratkando will be even more relieved to see you. Major, you have sent word to pitch her highness's tent?”

“Yes, Brigadier.”

“Very good. Your highness, if you will retire to your tent I will send the Brigade physic to examine you.”

“Thank you, Brigadier but before I go I must introduce you to someone.”

Reigh looked surprised. “Ah, very good. Who?”

“This young man, who I recommend to you for a cadetcy. He has served me since shortly after my escape and has proved invaluable. I say with no exaggeration that I would have likely been recaptured were it not for his assistance.”

Reigh peered at Getell and was clearly put out to be put on the spot.

“Ah. Very good. Uh, what is your name, lad?”

“Getell Terl, sir.”

“How old are you?”

“Nine, sir.”

“Nine? Very good, just about the right age.” He paused. “Well, we can sort that out later. Major Derver, take this lad's name and at her highness's convenience ask her to write a letter of recommendation for him. We will, we will see about available cadetcies.

In the meantime will your highness retain him?"

"Gladly, Brigadier."

"Excellent, thank you, your highness." Reigh bowed again and Betan let an ADC indicated by Derver lead her away. They found Ratkando harassing some pressed soldiers into pitching her tent. He gave her a curt nod, if he felt any relief at her return he didn't show it, but Betan would have been shocked if he had in public.

He set up a chair for her to rest on and managed to glare at Getell without changing expression before redoubling his efforts on the soldiers. When the tent itself was up he sent them away and escorted Betan inside with the chair. He drafted Getell into helping him set up her furniture.

Betan removed her sword belt and jacket before gratefully sinking onto her camp bed. It wasn't as comfortable as the absurdly soft beds in the Prodolan manor house, but it marked her freedom

"Maybe a bit too free." Betan sighed.

Ratkando entered with a camp table. "The boy?"

"Helped me after I escaped. He wants to be a cadet in the Yellow army."

Ratkando grunted and set up the table before leaving. Getell entered a few moments later with her satchel.

"You'd best keep the food." Betan said. "Trouble getting into the mess if they take their time finding a cadetcy for you."

Getell nodded. "Um, the man?"

Betan chuckled. "My valet. My father's choice."

"Damn cold blooded."

"Indeed."

"Where should I put your pistols, and should I keep calling you 'your highness'?"

"Leave them in the satchel, put the satchel on that trunk and I suppose you'd best although I find it tiresome."

"Boy!" Ratkando shouted from outside. Getell sighed.

"Any officer could be like that?"

"Afraid so."

"Damn." he turned to go.

"Getell?"

"Yes? I mean, your highness?"

"You'll be expected to ask a superior officer's leave before, uh, leaving. The phrase is 'by your leave'".

"Ah. Thank you. Uh, by your highness' leave?"

Betan waved him away.

"Poor kid." she muttered as sleep began to overtake her again. She hardly noticed the two servants' comings and goings for the next few minutes.

"Your highness?" Ratkando said. He was standing in the flap.

"Yes?" Betan asked groggily.

"The Brigade physic."

"Show him in."

The physic, a spare serious man Betan had never met, entered.

"Your highness." he greeted in a somewhat bored tone.

"Doctor."

"I'll have to examine you." It was a physic's apology to a lady.

“Of course.” Betan tugged up her shirt and jacket.

“Well, that was quite a bit easier than normal for a lady, your highness.” he smiled a bit as he leaned over her. Ratkando was standing by and Betan asked him for something to prop her up so she could see.

“I can do better than that, your highness. Master Ratkando, if I could have your assistance outside?” Ratkando asked Betan's leave and followed the physic. They returned in a moment with a large metal pole on a stand with a mirror on top. Doubled mirrors, Betan saw after a moment. They set it up on the opposite side of the camp bed of her wounded side and the doctor returned to his examination.

Betan looked up at the mirror, which was a bit to the left of her. It only took a minute or so to get the hang of it. The doubled mirror avoided the reversing of the image. “This must be an expensive rig.” Betan said.

“It's only for senior officers and dignitaries, your highness. If you'll excuse me.” he poured on the solvent and removed the patch and then the bandage. No blood had soaked through it but when it was removed there was a light staining on the inside. “Just a bit of seepage from moving around. We'll have to put a stop to that, your highness.”

Someone moved near the flap, and Ratkando moved to keep the royal torso discreet. Betan heard Getell whispering and then he was next to the doctor with a piece of paper.

“Beg your highness' pardon?”

“Doctor, my other servant has a note from the person who tended me after my wounding.”

“Ah, excellent. Thank you.” The physic took the note from Getell.

“Getell, you don't need to say 'your highness' on 'beg your pardon'.”

“Ah, thank y-, er, thank you, your highness?”

“Very good. You may go.”

Getell bowed and left.

“Clever lad.” the physic said as he perused Afsholar's note. “Filthy, though.”

“He was an urchin when we met, but he is very clever.”

“This wasn't a physic, was he?”

“No, sir. But he'd had some physical training.”

“Yes. The treatment was correct but the notes aren't in our normal shorthand. But they will serve and your highness was well cared for, for the limited resources.” He put the note aside and bent over the exposed wound.

“A bit of lifting.” He picked up each of Betan's arms in turn, checking the wrist and elbows. “A bit of bulging. Not bad. The Ashtobenelin helped, you were on the maximum safe dose.”

“Will you have to perform surgery?” Betan asked.

“Oh, most certainly, your highness.” The physic said as he straightened up. Ratkando produced a camp chair for him and he took it. “Any serious wound, a gunshot or a sword thrust, requires surgery. I'll scry it to make sure I won't be cutting unnecessarily but the if nothing else the bullet must be removed. You also appear to have a bit of internal bleeding, that must also be repaired.

“The report of your highness' capture said that your highness was wounded, a cut to the back and side. Was that tended?”

“It was, sir. I think I pulled the stitches, unfortunately.”

“I'd better have a look, then. If your highness would oblige me?”

Betan rolled over so he could examine her back.

“Yes, a bit. Nothing serious, your highness. More painful than anything. Thank you.” Betan rolled onto her back again. “I will see to the scrying and send in a physic to rebandage your wound. Does your highness want for painbalm?”

“I have some pills-.” she stopped when the physic shook his head.

“I will sent your highness liquid balm and liquid Ashtobenelin. Pills are convenient but inefficient. Since the Brigade is not in action as present I think I should be able to scry your highness tomorrow morning, I will have your highness informed if there will be any delay. Will that serve?”

“It will. Thank you, sir.”

“By your leave.” he said before exiting.

“What was his name?” she asked Ratkando.

“Grillon.” Ratkando said. “What should we do with the boy?”

“Let him cool his heels outside. It'll be good practice. Check on him once in a while, make sure he's not fidgeting or skylarking.”

Ratkando nodded and sealed the flap's closure.

“A rare speech?” Betan asked, a little more resentment than she'd meant creeping into her voice.

“No.” Ratkando said. “Everyone knew the risks. I am glad you're back safely. Orno will be beside himself, not to mention Dem.”

Betan smiled. “Alman was just warming up to me.”

“You'd proved yourself. You know that none of them were volunteers.”

“No, just you, uncle.”

Ratkando smiled at his niece. He had been one of the conditions under which King Dray had allowed his daughter to go adventuring.

“He'll be pissed at you.” Betan said.

“Ah, sod him. Dray's always been a pisser. Especially where you were concerned.

“Pardon, sir, -ugh!” Getell's voice came from outside. Ratkando turned to block the flap, although he had a good idea who was coming.

Alman charged in and visibly changed upon laying eyes on his captain and princess. Betan could see the months of tension draining away from him. It took several moments.

“You best not have harmed Getell.” Betan scolded.

“Getell? Oh, the boy? Is he yours?”

“Temporarily.”

“I don't think I did.” King Dray's former captain of the guard said. “Damn, you gave me a scare, girl.”

“**You** were scared?” Betan marveled. “I was the one with a sword cut!”

“Pah. Your line never made much of wounds. I can see you scored another scar there. Why isn't it covered?”

“Grillon looked at it.” Ratkando said. “They're sending a physic to bandage it, which means we should get back into character, if your brave charge hasn't already ruined yours.” A cruel grin stole over Ratkando's face.

“Get fucked, Ell.” Alman said. Ratkando's grin magnified then disappeared as he went outside to check on Getell.

“They've put you into wagons?” Betan asked.

“I've been riding Arkor but yes, we're a flying company. About half of the lads had been used as such before. I was thinking they'd never get around to asking us how we'd been used before. Pig headed Bra-”

A grunting as Ratkando cleared his throat outside stopped Alman, who stiffened into a brace. The valet/bodyguard's head appeared in the flap.

“Physic to see your highness.”

“Thank you. See him in.”

“By your leave, your highness.” Alman said before leaving.

Ratkando escorted the physic, a youngish one, in.

“I'm Junior Physic Morel, your highness. I've come to bandage your wound.”

“Very good. Proceed.”

Morel's hands were soft and warm, slightly damp as if he'd soaked them to remove a chill. He applied an ointment to the wound before applying a bandage and a patch.

“The sticky cover will give your highness a clue as to how much you're straining the wound.” Morel said. “The ointment will soften the scab just enough to allow it to stretch instead of tearing and seeping. I have also brought your highness painbalm and Ashtobenelin.” He removed two small stoppered jars from his physical case. “This is enough for tonight, more will be delivered in the morning.”

“Which is the balm?” Betan asked. “I prefer to take less than the normal dose.”

“This one your highness, the, uh, whiter of the two.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Morel set them on the folding table next to her camp bed.

“Is there anything else your highness requires?”

“No, sir. Thank you, you may go.”

Morel stood, bowed and left. Ratkando poured Betan a glass of cider. “That stuff tastes awful.” he said quietly. Betan smiled, didn't laugh. She picked up the anticorruption jar and drained the muddy tasking concoction, quickly taking the cup her uncle handed her. Then she laid down.

“The balm?”

“I'm quite tired already. I think I'll save that for later if need be.”

“You should take a little now, if you wake up in the middle of the night-”

“Ah, you're right. A little now.”

“This doesn't taste any better.”

Betan took a half mouthful, the taste wasn't as bad as the Ashtobenelin but it was grainy and harsh on the throat.

“Yech.” Betan said after she drained the cider cup. Ratkando chuckled and stoppered the balm jar. He turned down the lantern on Betan's bedside table.

“It's warm enough to not need covers. I'll see about getting you a new uniform if command permits, suitable men's clothing if it doesn't. I don't think the lads could handle you in a Brannan gown.”

The balm and fatigue were claiming Betan already. “I wouldn't want to anyway.”

“Good night, lass.”

“Good night, unk.” And Betan was asleep.

Betan woke from surgery in a sub tent just off the main hospital tent of the Fourth

Brigade. As before her throat and eyes were unbearably dry. *I somehow doubt two nice ladies are waiting to make me comfortable this time.* She thought before she croaked, not trying to speak words.

“I think she's awake.” a voice said. Her ears were foggy with whatever the physics had used to put her to sleep, so she had no idea who was speaking.

“Your highness?” another voice said. That voice was a bit more distinct but still unidentifiable. Betan waggled her head in response.

Something wet touched her lips and she opened her mouth. It entered her mouth and she sucked the water from what she guessed was a rag. “Get the eye drops.” the voice said. *Oh, thank goodness.*

Her eyes were gently pried open, even more so than the ladies of Fern Island had done, and refreshed. She blinked excess moisture away and saw two men she didn't know over her.

“Welcome back, your highness.” One of them said. “I will inform your man and the brigade physic that your highness is awake.” The other also disappeared for a moment. Betan followed him to a table where some items were laid out, she couldn't really tell what they were.

She relaxed in the bed and wriggled a bit to test her side. It was tight and heavily taped but not painful. Prior experience told her she had better not try to sit up.

Ratkando appeared before Physic Grillon. He took up station just inside the flap of the sub tent, saying nothing. His eyes flitted over Betan for a moment then settled to a point in on the opposite wall of the sub tent. Grillon appeared a moment later. “How is your majesty feeling?”

“Cloudy.”

Grillon chuckled. “The surgery went well. We bled you and filtered out the bad blood. That should only slow your highness' recovery by a few days. There was no significant organ damage from the gunshot and no sign of firepowder poisoning.”

“I'm glad to hear all of that.”

“We'll be ready to transfer you back to your tent this afternoon. Your highness has been asleep for about nine hours so your highness may receive visitors.”

“Can I be propped up?”

“Of course, your highness. I will send in some aides to see to it. By your leave?”

Betan waved him away. The gesture had always struck her as rude but it was the standard.

“Where's Getell?” she asked Ratkando when they were alone.

“Someone from Reigh's staff took him away while you were in surgery. I gather he's been assigned.”

“Ah.” Betan was glad for him but also felt let down. He was a capable boy, she'd miss his service. Such was life.

The aides appeared a few minutes later with a large wedge of padding to sit Betan up. They eased her shoulders into the air and inserted the wedge, fluffing her own pillows over it. They also brought her a pitcher of water and a cup.

Betan dozed for a bit. When she awoke she found a sealed beaker on her table.

“What's that?” she asked Ratkando.

“Dem found a source for a more palatable painbalm.”

“Ah, excellent.” That reminded her of a polite argument she'd had with her former lieutenant before surgery. “Have you spoken to him?”

“He's still adamant that the company is yours to command.”

Betan sighed. She desperately wanted to take control of her jagers again, but she didn't want to punish Dem for happenstance. “It's up to Pautark and Reigh in any event.” she finally said.

Ratkando sealed the tent flap and walked to her bedside. “You'll be well enough to command by the time the Army moves out. The replacements are still arriving. It'll be some time before we march. With the company in wagons you won't have much need to dismount. They only operate as a mass now, to better concentrate their fire.”

“I'm not so concerned about my physical state. I healed quickly enough before, under Oldster care. I have no doubt I'll recover much more quickly with VIP status. No, I don't want Dem forced into a demotion. Again.”

Ratkando smiled. “When the king asks a major to become a lieutenant, the former major does it. Besides, he's still paid as a major and he's always been more of a staff type.” Ratkando forestalled her protest with a hand. “He's a good commander but he prefers to be behind the lines. You won't take anything away from him.”

“Argh. It's up to Reigh and Pautark. I'm not sure they'll be willing to demote *me* from princess to captain.”

“We'll have to see on that one. How's your side?”

“Sore.”

“Try the balm, it's very good this season.”

“Ha. Ha. Pour me some, boy.”

Betan was transferred back to her tent on a litter, which was as embarrassing as anything she'd ever encountered. It was a large litter intended for gravely wounded men and her wedge, pillows and blankets had been transported with her. Everyone had watched as several large orderlies had carried her, attended by Ratkando.

Two days after the surgery she was allowed to walk. As before she was restricted to short distances. A week passed and she was given leave by the physic to return to light duty. Ratkando had found a decent suit of conservative cut and color for her to wear to be interviewed by Pautark.

She walked slowly but steadily to Reigh's tent where the General's flag flew over it, Ratkando at her side. The guards passed her in without challenge and she found the two Brannan commanders looking over a map. Reigh turned his head and saw her. They came to the entrance to greet her.

“Your highness, I am pleased to see you well.” Pautark said.

“Thank you, General. I take it word has been sent to Durannia that I have returned?”

“The moment Reigh confirmed the news. We had to buy a bird capable of the journey but you can understand the eagerness we had for your royal father to be informed.”

“I thank you, General. I'm sure I was no less concerned with how he would receive the news than you were.”

“I've no doubt, your highness.” Pautark said.

“There are chairs here, shall we sit?” Reigh said. A little sitting area had been set up where the officers normally congregated for briefings. Betan preceded them and sat herself down. Ratkando took up station behind her and Pautark and Reigh sat. That left an empty chair, which Betan found strange.

“Pray forgive me for going directly to business.” Pautark began. Betan nodded for him to continue.

“We promoted Master Dem to Captain following your capture. Your highness has no doubt heard that certain changes have been made to the doctrine regarding the Durannian company.”

“I have, General”.

“Captain Dem has already petitioned for demotion.” Pautark said. Betan held back a growl. “We are not disinclined to grant his request but we must, of course, first assess your highness' willingness and, forgive me, fitness to command in the field. So first, is your highness willing?”

“I still regard myself under your command, General, as ordered by King Dray. If you order me to take command of the, Durannian company, I will.”

“Of course, I appreciate that. But the question remains, are you willing?” Pautark dropped the 'your highness' bit.

“I did not want to force a demotion for Captain Dem. He already accepted one at King Dray's request. But I have spoken with him and he is not disappointed to return to the post of assistant company commander. I am willing, General.”

Pautark suppressed a glance at Reigh. *Not the answer they were hoping for?* Betan thought. She continued before they could speak. “But I fully understand that such a reappointment would require me to be in physical shape to take the field. I have been cleared for light duty and in speaking with Captain Dem I believe that I need only be capable of riding a horse to take the field with the Durannian company.”

“Yes.” Pautark said. “That is, uh, technically true. But I must say that I would be loathe to send you to the field if you were incapable of fighting. The Durannians have not yet been exposed to attack since the changes, but nothing is certain on the field of battle.”

Betan grinned. “Would you feel better if I had a bodyguard?”

“A bodyguard?”

Betan could almost feel Ratkando stiffening behind her. She couldn't suppress an overly sweet smile. “I don't know if either of you have daughters but I'm sure you can imagine the distress sending me overseas caused to my royal father.”

Pautark and Reigh shifted, uncomfortable with the change in topic.

“One of the conditions was that I take a bodyguard. He was good enough to agree to stay behind when I went into combat and has since my arrival taken the guise of my valet.”

Both Brannan eyes flitted up to Ratkando.

“I should introduce you to my uncle, Prince Ell Ratkando Lebornier.”

“Damn it.” Ratkando muttered.

“Prince?” Reigh said, then he smiled ruefully. “I've always thought you were rather impressive for a valet.”

“It was supposed to be a secret.” Ratkando said. “But yes, I was assigned as her bodyguard. I never intended to protect her in the field although I am certainly capable of doing so.”

“That does ease my concern somewhat.” Pautark said. “But I am also concerned about the effect on your ability to command should you be forced to retreat when your company was required to stand. Should such an occasion occur.”

“If I may, General?” Ratkando said.

“Yes, your highness.” Pautark said.

“The men are quite proud of their warrior princess. Knowing her to be recovering from an injury sustained in a heroic escape, they would not think less of her if circumstances forced her to leave the field when they stayed. Given that she would actually leave the field.”

“My next concern, your highnesses.” Pautark said. “Prince, would you be able to bodily remove her should the occasion require it?”

Ratkando paused. “I would be loathe to incur her wrath were I to do so, but if she didn't have a fair chance of winning a personal combat I would.”

Pautark paused. “Not a rousing acceptance. I will think on the matter. The Army will be encamped for some time yet. Until your highness has had a chance to recover, Captain Dem will retain command of the Durannian company in the event it deploys.”

Pautark stood and Betan knew the interview to be over.

“Thank you, your highness. I must return to army headquarters.”

Betan stood. “Thank you for your time, General.”

“Prince Ell, I presume your highness will want us to maintain your secret?”

“I would, thank you, General.”

“Does the entirety of the company know?” Reigh asked.

“They do, Brigadier.” Betan answered.

“We had no idea.” Reigh said. He had remained seated, rubbing his left knee. “Most impressive.”

“They had inducements to keep the secret.” Ratkando said to laughter.

“I'm quite sure they did.” Pautark replied. “Royalty is royalty, although I have not doubt the King of Durannia is better regarded, and better, than our Bad King. Well, by your leave, your highness.”

“Thank you, General.”

“A moment, your highness?” Reigh said before she could turn to leave. “The boy Getell. He has been assigned to Lord Colonel Goldopan's staff.”

A wide smile grew on Betan's face. “I cannot think of a better mentor for the boy.”

“His lordship was hoping you would think that.”

“Thank you, Brigadier.” Betan said.

“Good day, your highness.”

“Good day, Brigadier.” Betan cast one last look at him rubbing his knee and left.

“What's wrong with his knee?”

“Old age, I think.” Ratkando answered. “I ought to hide you for letting that loose.”

“Oh, we were disobeying my father anyway.” Betan replied churlishly. “You wear a uniform, it's not like anyone thought you were a civilian valet.”

“Hrm. I'll have to find you a foil for practice.”

“Yes. I should start right away.”

Sword exercises were never fun, they weren't meant to be, but with her torso muscles weakened they were agony.

Betan was going through the forms that made up the basis of Durannian fencing. The double edged Durannian sword, a design cribbed from some of the more enlightened Dark civilizations of New Blue Home, was equally suited for slashing or thrusting, much

more than the curved sabers and backswords of the Central Lands. It had no hand guard, only heavy quillions(?) on the hilt. Ratkando had needed to order a practice foil made by a local blacksmith, who thought the design odd but had accepted the commission.

“You'll have to use a buckler.” a voice said. Betan whipped her sword around in perfect form and almost dropped it from the pain shocking out from her scar.

It was Dem.

“Probably.” Betan said. She was upset with him for requesting a demotion, not because he'd gone straight to Pautark but because she'd always felt a bit guilty at her imposition on these men.

“You're better than most of the Brannans we've seen anyway. Few of them train from birth.”

“The NAs do. The one that wounded me at Southbend had an even chance of overcoming my guard before I stumbled.”

“That's not good news. Reports are that a corps of NAs are massing in front of the capital.”

“And the Bad King's army?”

“Strung out along the road to Zhatano. The NAs seem to be independent of his command, which is good for them and bad for us. He's a terrible marshal.”

“Has anyone offered to depose him for us?”

“If they have they've been quiet about it. That's probably the reason that the political head of the reformation isn't in Branna.” Dem stepped closer. “But the reformation has other demands than the removal of the Bad King's line. Political representation for gentlemen. Very few of the Yellow army think the nobles will willingly allow that.”

“Matters are pressing.” Betan assumed the guard position.

“Indeed. The Army is eager to assault the capital. It's doubtful they'd accept terms before then.”

The word “assault” made Betan pause. “Are they planning an assault?”

“The army's poorly organized for a siege and by all accounts Zhatano is a very large city.”

“And there are still a lot of NAs that haven't yet engaged us.”

“Also true.”

Betan went through a routine. Dem fell silent to watch.

“Not bad. A little slow on the transitions.”

“That's right, you were a fencing instructor.” Betan began a short routine. “I hate fencing instructors.”

Dem laughed. “You're meant to. Sword practice is fucking hard, so we have to be harder or no one would do it.”

Betan laughed in spite of the pain. “I have no doubt of that.”

Dem let her go through a few more routines.

“I came to update you on the status of your company.”

Betan sighed and dug the point of her foil into the ground. “It's not my company, not yet maybe not again. If I can't get up to snuff on my sword work you'll be quite stuck in the captain's horse.”

“Then we'd best find you someone to spar with.” Dem said. “At any rate, we presently have 58 men, with 8 wounded. A total of 10 men were killed in the three battles that occurred while you were captured. With the new role of the company is resupplied

with ammunition quickly, we now have a reserve of over 50 rounds per man. The company wagon is almost overflowing, actually.”

“That’s a nice change.” Betan lifted her foil, flicked a bit of dirt off the tip and resumed her guard.

“Howl in four.” Dem ordered. Betan performed the attack.

“Greuder.” Betan whipped her sword backward in a triple parry.

“Achel’s ninth.” A block to the left, a block to the right that blended into four rapid thrusts.

“High six... double Shinten to the left... Achel run crisp, I said *crisp*.”

“Oh, sod you.” Betan finally said. Dem chuckled.

“Sorry. I did love instructing. Work with your buckler, I’ll ask around for sparring partners.”

“I’ll be aflutter with anticipation.” Betan walked toward her tent for her buckler as Dem drifted away.

Ratkando stepped into Betan’s tent with a large paper bundle. She was holding her sword, idly sweeping it through the air, drenched in sweat after thrashing two ensigns and a lieutenant. The buckler had made the difference although she felt clumsy with it.

“What’s that?”

“Your uniform. General Pautark will be along this evening with your captain’s badges. Dem has been granted his wish. I’ll fetch you some water to wash before you dress.”

Putting on the uniform, made by someone in the Wives Brigade, felt like putting her honor on one piece at a time. She looked at herself in her mirror for what felt like an hour. Ratkando was standing to one side and finally brought her back to the present by putting her sword belt around her waist. She adjusted the hang so that her sword came to her hand easily. Then her uncle handed her shooter’s hat to her. She’d always thought it was a ridiculous thing, tall and narrow with the brim clipped up on the sides, but settling it on her head completed her return.

“I’ve got someone working on boots for you. Until then you’ll have to make do with the ones you stole.”

“Can’t tell by looking.” Betan whispered, back to her reflection.

“What?”

“Ah, nothing. When’s Pautark due?”

“A few hours.”

“Argh!” Betan threw her hat down. Ratkando chuckled. “Oh, shut up.” she grumbled. “Are you and Dem planning a big change of command to-do?”

“No. Can’t pull the men from their watches.”

The knocker on the tent sounded. Ratkando opened the flap and an ADC stood there. “General Pautark awaits Princess Betan.” he squeaked.

“A few hours?” Betan snarled at Ratkando.

“So I’m bad with time.” he said with a vicious grin.

Pautark handed her a new yellow sash and the twinned crescent moon badges of rank. He removed Dem’s moons and gave him the triple crosshatch badge of a commissioned lieutenant.

“Captain Lebornier, take command of the Durannian flying company.” Pautark

ordered.

“Yes, General.”

They saluted.

It was done.

Arkor snuffled Betan's hands, pressing his nose into her grip.

“I don't think he much liked me.” Alman said. Arkor moved up, nuzzling Betan's face.

“He liked you fine, I'm sure.” Alman rubbed Arkor's nose.

“I didn't exercise him the way he wanted.”

“He'll be disappointed, then. I don't think I'm fit for exercising him. But we'll see.” She had taken a small dose of painbalm before coming to see Arkor. He was starting to prance and play, a sure sign he was eager for a good run. Betan whispered to him until he calmed, then she took his reins and mounted.

“You'll need a horse, First Sergeant.” Betan pronounced.

“Lieutenant Dem already saw to it, sir.” Alman replied. “It's being brought up now.”

“I'll meet you on the lines, then.” Betan gave Arkor a gentle nudge, then clamped down on him before he could leap into a gallop. She kept him at a walk as they headed north toward the trench works that formed the northern lines of the camp. Her side didn't hurt so she slowly let him speed up, checking him when he tried to bolt.

The ground was level, broken only by villages and stands of firetrees, so the trenches forming the camp's defensive positions were an ugly scar of the plain. Her men had been parceled out along the trenches and amongst units on patrol as sharpshooters. Betan took Arkor to the right and let him gallop for a few minutes before pulling him back. He fought just enough to let her know he was displeased but then obeyed.

She came to the first group, almost upon them when one turned to look at the approaching horse. “Ah.” he muttered before nudging a comrade. The other, a corporal Betan could see, looked up and gave a short start. “Captain!” he called.

“Corporal. Anything happening out here?”

“Quiet as the morning after, Captain.”

“Good. Keep up the watch, we'll be here for a while, I hear.”

“Yes, Captain.”

The second group had a similar reaction, not sure for a moment if she was coming as royalty or as their commander. Alman joined her on a dark brown horse of unimpressive lines before she came to the third picket, which answered the question for the rest of the company.

Her confidence soared with every group of soldiers she addressed. They were clearly happy to see her back, leaping up from their watch and conversations to greet her and report no activity. It took an hour to sweep the northern boundary of the Yellow Army's camp. The pickets were a formality, really, any approaching army would be seen for hours in advance. The river was several hours to the east, half of her company was deployed in that direction guarding the lines of supply from small parties of raiders. She wanted to go see them, but it that would bring her back to camp well after dark.

She and Alman halted at the extreme left of the army.

“Good to be back?” Alman asked after confirming no one was around.

“Yes. It'll be better to get back into action. Durannian Wagon Infantry, eh?”

“We've been calling ourselves the Charioteers.”

Betan laughed. “I like it.” she took one look over the terrain again. “I supposed I should get back. Do I go to Pautark or Reigh for briefings?”

“Pautark, although most of the time we end up working with 4YB.”

“What did they do for light troops?”

“A typical Brannan light battalion.” Alman answered. “Reigh misses us.”

“Of course he does. Let's back to camp.”

Betan felt the painbalm loosening its grip on her so she let Arkor go to see how she could stand up to fast riding. A small knot of fire had blossomed in her side by the time she arrived at her boudoir. Again Arkor was loathe to stop running. Alman asked Betan's leave and walked his new mount to his tent among the soldiers' tents.

Ratkando took Arkor's reins. The horse let his displeasure be known, so Betan spent a few moments with the poor steed. “Ah, I'm sorry my friend. I just can't take care of you the way you'd like. But tomorrow I'll try to find time to give you over to some unsuspecting Brannan gentle brat for some exercise. You'd like tormenting one of them.” Arkor accepted her whispers and rubbing and finally calmed down, although he gave her a few tosses of his head to demonstrate that he wasn't completely satisfied. Finally he allowed Ratkando to lead him away.

Betan hobbled into her boudoir. She removed her hat, jacket and sword belt before sitting on her bed. A sip of painbalm and a draught of cider sufficed to ready her for bed. She hissed as she removed her boots. They were too loose and she'd neglected to wrap her feet to make up the difference, so she had a few nice blisters forming. An ointment from some of her baggage would reduce them, but for now it felt nice just rubbing her feet before bed.

She had no trouble sleeping.

Betan had become all too familiar with the boredom of a light infantry officer during an operational pause when the Yellow Army was building up in Dorway. Fortunately she had her wound to act as excuse for hiding in her tent. The mornings began with briefings but there was rarely any news. The Yellow Army was in southern Branadin and the Oldster Army was still behind them. Even with the Yellow Army holding place for two weeks, the Bad King was unable to organize his army sufficiently to march. The move on the river had been successful. NAs were mustering but not massing as if to attack. They were elite troops but being made up entirely of nobles there weren't a great deal of them. The massing of NAs to oppose the landing at Southbend had been the largest in anyone's memory.

Betan was ashamed to think of it, but she slept a lot. Alman and Dem were perfectly capable of running the company without her, as they had proved when she was resident and then escapee from Fern Island. Occasionally she thought of the Prodolans, hoping they weren't suffering from her escape. She had trouble thinking of Arminten and Cial as the enemy, although they had been loyal Oldsters.

Three more weeks passed before Pautark judged that sufficient new strength had arrived. He ordered the Yellow Army back into action.

“Third Corps will start the march.” Pautark said. The attentive silence of the assembled officers deepened for a short moment. “As they are closest to the road. Attempts to cut our lines of communication with the river have dropped off in the last few

weeks, therefore I suspect the Oldsters are massing on the the road to Zhatano, possibly hoping to attack us before we get moving.”

“Army supply stocks are quite full. Sustenance reserves have been built up and some of the time spent here has been dedicated to acquiring or building wagons to carry them. Ordnance supplies are sufficient for several major battles.

“Keep your supplies well guarded. Our lines of communication are going to be strained as our path and the river trend apart. It's probable that convoys will have to be established. I've already spoken to those officers that will be staying behind to escort them.” Betan glanced and could see some glum faces that were clearly from the escorting units. She didn't know any of them.

“Most of the army cavalry will be sent in advance of the army's march. We will hopefully have sufficient advance notice of any Oldster moves to react accordingly. I wish I could venture a guess as to the Oldsters attentions, but nothing has been divined from them. The army is still under the Bad King's command, which is why the NAs that have caused us the most trouble were operating independently.” No laughter came from the audience, not even many smiles. It was a simple statement of fact.

“We do have reports of continuing discipline problems in the Oldster camp. Further conscription has been enforced, including raids on nobles' servants. There are also supply shortages, both in sustenance and ordnance.”

Pautark turned to a map board that was set on a stand so everyone could see the map, which was a hand drawn detail of the area between the Yellow camp and Zhatano.

“The Oldster Army is here at Belabo. Four understrength Corps, five Royal Brigades and 6 NAs. Total strength almost 90,000 men.” Pautark paused while some whispering and murmuring swept through the audience. “The Retatans are exhausted, reports are that they've been spread throughout the rest of the army as cadre. The only pre-war Corps still intact is the Quonsil. The rest of have had so many replacements through they're just not the same units. The Royal Guards are likely going to be busy with army security so it is the NAs that I believe are our biggest concern. In addition to the 7,000 or so under the Bad King's command, there are another dozen or so between us and Zhatano, or near enough to become so. The strength is hard to estimate but is unlikely to be less than 10,000 men. I can't venture as guess as to whether they will try to hold the road against us or harass us. We're not sure which NAs are out there. That will be the first task of our cavalry, identifying the NAs so we can get some idea of the personalities in command.”

“I want to be on the road in four hours. Quartermasters briefing in ten minutes. Dismissed. Captain Lebornier, please remain.”

Betan let the audience flow around her until she was alone with Pautark and whichever of his staff he'd given leave to stay.

“You've had some experience with the Third, certain of their Brigades fought at Chassels.” Pautark began. “It's not unsteady, I trust the officers and the training of the men. But given that we are outnumbered and in some cases outclassed, it's vital that we minimize casualties between here and Zhatano.

“Therefore, your company will be the first infantry unit in the march. I expect your men to be in wagons just behind the cavalry screen. Keep in close contact with the cavalry, you may need to redeploy off the road if we are threatened or attacked from the flank.”

“Yes, General.” Betan said when he paused.

“You are **not** to become engaged.” Pautark said. “Your company, and you personally. Master Ratkando will accompany you into the field. If your company is pressed you will fall back.”

“If it comes to my company to hold a gap in the lines, General? Should I allow the army to be split, or flanked?”

“The Brigadier of the Ninth was sacked after Southbend, as was the Colonel of the 2/9. I believe that all of the commanders of my army have learned the lessons of that day. In other events, I am not telling you that you should under retreat any any circumstance. I know better than that. But if you can retreat, you should.”

“Yes, General.”

“Coordinate the details of your march with General Bilimak and Brigadier Maldar. Also, I expect regular reports as to your supply of ordnance. Your company has very high priority among the army artificers.”

“Yes, General.”

“Questions? No? Dismissed.”

Betan saluted him then left the tent and went to Arkor, waiting with the other officer's horse. The camp was still relatively quiet, only beginning to ramp up for the march. Each Corps was mustering its officers to work out their marching order. That would repeat at the Brigade level. The first two hours of the four hours given for mustering would be briefings and reports. Turning out the men to march wouldn't occur until Companies mustered, which would be done by First Sergeants when Captains were at the Battalion briefings.

The sun was already up, it was late for a march to begin. Pautark would have to at least consider marching well into the evening to make up for it.

Betan tracked on the flag of the 3YC, where Bilimak had his command tent. She weaved Arkor along paths made up by tents, rope corrals and wagon parks until she came to the tent. An ADC ran up to take Arkor's reins and she presented herself to the guards. They passed her through and she found the 3YC briefing in progress. The general situation and marching order had already been covered, a discussion of Corps supplies was underway, so Betan waited at the rear of the tent. Bilimak's adjutant whispered in his ear and the General glanced at her before continuing.

The briefing was much quicker than the detailed logistics wrangling that Brigade briefings entailed so it seemed very quickly that Bilimak was dismissing his officers, save for Brigadier Rechair.

“Brigadier, this is Captain Lebornier of the Durannian company.”

Rechair was a blocky man of about sixty winters who had probably been quite fit in his younger days. His uniform bore no extra decorations, no fine tailoring. “Captain.” he said, regarding her with watery eyes.

“Brigadier.” Betan replied.

“The Durannians will be ahead of your Brigade. They will be the first infantry unit to engage any attack from the front or the forward flanks. You've heard of their effectiveness.”

“Quite, General.”

“Have your point battalion and light battalion commanders coordinate with, ah, the Captain.” Betan suppressed a smile, Bilimak had almost said “with her.”

“Yes, General.”

“Dismissed.”

Rechair and Betan saluted, then left the tent.

"I need to begin my briefing, Captain. Will you report to my tent in an hour?"

Rechair said.

Betan paused, she'd expected to attend the briefing. "Yes, Brigadier." she said as Rechair stalked away.

"Hm. That was odd." She took Arkor from the ADC and rode him back to the Durannian camp. Alman and Dem were talking over a warmer, the men were roused but resting.

"Good morning, Captain." Dem greeted.

"Good morning, Lieutenant." Betan halted Arkor and dismounted to join them.

"We're going to be marching ahead of the Tenth. Any word on them?"

"A middling Brigade, Captain." Alman said.

"What's the company's status?"

"Roll has been called, they've been inspected and have eaten, Captain." Alman said. "Lieutenant Dem and I were just discussing supplies."

"We're fixed quite well, as you know, Captain." Dem said.

"Indeed. I have to report to Brigadier Rechair in about an hour."

"Time enough to eat, Captain." Alman prodded.

"Yes, thank you, First Sergeant." she'd had to skip breakfast to make the 3YC briefing, having slipped out of her easy rising habit.

"I'll take Arkor, Captain." Dem said. "Ratkando has some food set aside for you.

"Thank you, Lieutenant." Betan handed over the reins and went to her tent.

Fifteen minutes later, after a breakfast she would miss the quality of in the field, she was ahorse again, heading back to the 3YC area. Rechair's guards held her up just as it was reaching twenty minutes, telling her Brigadier was finishing his breakfast. After a few minutes his adjutant escorted her in as he was entering himself. Rechair was sitting at a small folding table with a small bit of *zachit* and redbulbs, the same breakfast Betan had, left on his plate.

"Ah, Captain." he said. "Very punctual. I apologize for finishing my breakfast in front of you, can't get food like this on the march."

"Not at all, Brigadier. I just ate mine and I quite agree with you." She politely turned her attention away from him while he finished. It was half of Betan's breakfast and the only last dregs of his. *Which explains his build.* Betan thought.

"Colonels Tettal and Jendilimiar should be here soon." the adjutant said.

"They're briefing their battalions right now."

"Thank you, sir."

Rechair grunted a few times, then approached Betan.

"I've been looking forward to seeing your Murder Company at work, Captain. I rather doubt we'll get the chance today, however."

"Most likely not, Brigadier. No reports of anyone nearby."

"No, indeed. But, ah, Colonels." Rechair was interrupted by the entry of two officers. One was a tall Brannan of no particular interest, but the other was an absurdly narrow beanpole with dark gray skin.

"Colonel Tettal of my Fourth Battalion and Colonel Jendilimiar of my Light Battalion. Captain Lebornier of the Durannian Company."

The two Colonels nodded at her.

"Colonel Jendilimiar is another foreigner, Captain. You two should get on

nicely.”

“From a different area than you, however, Captain.” Jendilimiar said. “But somewhat similar circumstances. My government would like to see Branna enter the modern world in at least some function.”

“I’d of course never tolerate such slander from a Brannan.” Rechair said in good humor. “But Jendilimiar is from far enough away that it makes no difference. Brigadier Maldar will be here shortly to talk about his horses. Now, to our business.”

Betan watched what were again her jagers loading onto the wagons. They were a bit smaller than most commonly used drays, well-sprung with inflated rather than solid tires. Not quite what the Durannian flying companies used, but close enough to give good service. The heavy shields her men were hauling onto their rides with them were made exactly to Durannian specifications, four feet high and two and a half feet wide with a large handle and a hinged leg with a wide foot so it could stand freely while a jager worked his rifle behind it.

“All loaded, Captain.” Alman reported with a salute.

“Very well. Let’s get onto the road.”

They saluted again and mounted their horses. The wagons were parked side by side, steering into a column one by one. The company bypassed the marshalling fields where the 10YB was being put into order and took up position on the road. The first few hours of marching would be relatively slow, giving the Army time to uncoil out of its camp.

The Yellow Army cavalry were also lined up on the road, several hundred horses snorting and stamping. The Cendralese horses were highly energetic and didn’t take well to standing for long periods of time. More cavalry were afield, wandering around the plains of Branadin.

Like the kingsway near the Chassels, this one was lined with thin trunked trees that provided shade and protection from the rain. But they limited visibility and deployability from the road. Betan planned on riding off the road, with Dem doing the same on the other side, but even then the company would have to rely on the cavalry for warning of Oldster approaches. She didn’t see that being a problem, really, not with this veteran cavalry. She just didn’t like relying on other units.

Her job would get even more complicated when the ground grew more hilly as it got closer to Zhatano. The cavalry would be responsible for scouting the hills and screening the army’s column, but there were certainly many places where the army could be attacked from both sides and it was extremely vulnerable while in marching order. Which was the purpose of the Durannians, how they could cope with the kingsway’s foliage was yet to be determined. Each Brigade’s light battalion would be marching ready for action, of course, but the Durannians were expected to be able to stall or break up any attack that got past the cavalry screens. She and Alman had spent some time discussing possibilities for getting off the road and setting up. With only 54 effectives, options were limited.

“The Tenth is coming onto the road, Captain.” Alman said. Betan turned in her saddle to see a Battalion guidon of the 10YB step onto the road, preceded by Colonel Tettal. He waved to Betan, who returned the wave. She repeated the gesture to one of the cavalry officers that was watching and callers began to sound. The cavalry columns on the road left it, forming a double wedge in front and long screens to the sides of the

forming column.

“Forward slowly, First Sergeant.” Betan ordered.

The first day's march ended as dusk was coming. The ground was still flat so the army simply swarmed out into the countryside, setting pickets in the fields and camping on the grassy borders of the kingsway. The Durannians simply rolled in a blanket and slept next to their wagons, Betan allowed them to set up her smaller tent and slept on a cot. Her company was spared guard duty in the night, they couldn't aim in the dark so they wouldn't be any more effective than any other soldiers.

The army was roused before dawn the next day and was marching once the sun was complete. Betan stayed on Arkor, pacing the wagons that carried her Murder Company. The 10YB horse and the army cavalry were arrayed in front of the column and wide off the flanks. Pautark had predicted entering hill country the next day and that was when vigilance would be important. The column, at least the part Betan could observe, was relaxed.

Oldster cavalry scouts were reported at endnoon, but the Yellow cavalry dispatched them when they tried to flee on their normal mounts. The gunshots roused the front of the column a bit but not much.

There were a few rests, then the army camped in the same style as the day before. Officer's call in the morning warned them to tighten up a bit, ambushes from the hill country could be coming, with an expectation for the army to enter it late in the morning.

“The kingsway winds through the hills.” Pautark said. “Staying on the flattened ground between them. The roadtrees will cause deployment problems, so the army will have to go in two columns on either side, with wagons staying on the road. When we camp tonight, it will be on the hilltops.

“This area is little populated, the locals find it entirely too windy although having dwelt in the meadowlands we should have no problem. Tomorrow we will leave the kingsway to avoid the Prenal preserves. The road through the forest isn't strong enough to carry the army and the area is entirely too suitable for ambush. We'll be slowed down then without a good road for the wagons, so I fully expect to be attacked on this phase of the march.”

Pautark held the vanguard officers back after dismissing the rest of the officers. “Captain Lebornier, your men will remain mounted and stay on the kingsway. You will deploy them from there if necessary to whichever side an attack comes from.” She tried to follow the rest of the instructions to the cavalry and to Brigadier Bilimak but eventually she lost the details. She was getting better, however.

When the sun was complete, Betan could see the hills. They were getting close by midmorning and around an hour into noontime Pautark's caller sounded the halt. Standing orders had no instructions for the Durannians to deploy at halts (something Betan found odd) so she waited when the army stopped. The plan was for 10YC to share point with 7YC so that Brigades weren't split on either side of the road, but she didn't know why the army would have to stop for that. Horses galloped up and down along the kingsway as the army remained immobile. Then the call for forward march came again and Betan, riding to the left of the kingsway saw why after a few miles.

A paved local road intersected the kingsway, which meant there were gaps in the roadtrees. “Captain Lebornier?” Betan turned to see an aide riding up to her. “General Pautark orders your company to halt on the other side of the intersection. The army will

split here, your company is to wait for the other wagons to meet up with it, advancing only as you are pressed forward by the supply trains.”

“Very well.” They exchanged salutes and the aide rode away.

Betan took Arkor onto the kingsway to relay Pautark's orders.

“Should I deploy the men?” Alman asked.

“Might as well. We'll be surrounded by the army but there's no reason to keep them cooped up.”

They arrived at the intersection and Alman halted the wagons once they were on the other side, relaying the orders to their teamsters. The men dismounted and made a loose perimeter, clustering around their wagons so they could remount quickly.

“This is a stupid idea.” Betan muttered to Alman. “We'll be far behind the vanguard if we stay at the pace of the trains.” Alman didn't reply. They didn't bother ordering the men back into the wagons when the trains began pushing them forward. As each Battalion came to the intersection their small train crossed it. The Brigades added more and the Corps added more yet. But the pace was agonizingly slow, 3YC filtered past and the Durannians didn't advance a mile.

Gunfire from ahead made Betan order the men to mount. *Do the earlier orders to reinforce the vanguard still apply?* she thought. *Am I supposed to protect the supply wagons?* The fire was sporadic, probably pistol fire from the cavalry. The company continued to advance slowly as 1YC went through the intersection. *The terrain will prevent infantry of the line from forming proper lines. It's going to go down to shield work pretty quickly. That might be why Pautark wanted us back.*

“Lieutenant Dem!” Betan called. “Go back to General Pautark and ask him if we're still to support the vanguard if it is attacked. Quickly.”

“Yes, Captain.” Dem turned his horse around and trotted away, scattering stray teamsters and lounging clerks and storemen. He returned quickly as the fire ahead was thickening.

“General Pautark says do not engage unless attacked or ordered to do so by his headquarters. He is sending messengers forward to relay that order to the commanders ahead.

Betan grumbled to herself, even though she had guessed it. “First Sergeant, let the men off the wagons.”

Volleyes began to sound ahead, not the massive reports of the firing line, so Betan guessed they were light troops. The company continued its slow progress, crawling for another hour before coming across the first casualties of the fight. Wounded and dead were stretched along the thin barrier between the kingsway itself and the roadtrees. White writing on their jackets indicated what treatment they had received. The columns continued marching on either side of the roadtree screens. Betan watched but didn't recognize anyone. She finally saw a guidon of the 3/2YB, which was the Brigade immediately preceding 4YB. *Bransim's in the fight soon.* She thought.

Shouldn't be jealous, girl. This ground isn't suited to our kind of fighting, at least not when all of these clumsy line battalions are handy. She had seen fighting conducted with troops similar to hers in much rougher territory, but they weren't considered elites in Durannia. Her father, and local militias kept large bodies of soldiers armed with light arms and short spears for mountain and forest fighting.

Not that it matters here. Betan told herself. *This makes sense under these circumstances, no matter how much I don't like it.*

A horseman came down the road and pulled up in front of the lead wagon.

“Captain Lebornier?”

Betan prodded Arkor to where the horseman was. “Yes?”

“Update from Brigadier Maldar.” the rider was a chasseur Lieutenant, with a bandage wrapped around his waist. “NAs have attacked the army from the hills. They're not closing but firing from distance. Brigadier is going to request permission for your company to come up and drive them away.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant. We'll be ready.” Betan said. She saluted him, he nodded in return as his saluting arm was cradled against his side and trotted away.

“Captain, should we mount?” Alman asked.

“Not yet, but keep the men close to their wagons.”

Shortly after the chasseur officer left Betan heard the first full line battalion volley. The arquebuses of the line used much larger powder charges than musketoons and were thus much louder. The sound made her start slightly. “NAs must be massing if they're volleying on them.”

The chasseur officer came galloping by. “You'll be joining us soon, Captain.” he said without stopping, his face drawn tight in pain.

“The company will mount.” Betan called. Alman relayed the orders and the men began scrambling into wagons. A few minutes later an aide came up with confirmation of the chasseur's claim.

“A chasseur officer, a different one, I hope, will be waiting for your company to show you where to leave the road.” the aide said. “Leave orders with your teamsters to halt there and continue advancing when the trains reach them.” The aide snapped a salute to her, the battle salute, and Betan returned it.

“Company fast forward!” Betan ordered, spurring Arkor into a trot. It took ten minutes to reach their guide. The men dismounted, lugging their pavises through the screen to the left. The chasseur, a Coronet, lead his horse with them.

“NAs are on the right as well, but the main attack is over here, sir.” the Coronet said. “They're still hanging off, don't want to tangle with our pikes directly.” Betan took Arkor through the screen and into the fight. There was a thin haze of firesmoke hanging over the columns of Yellow soldiers. They were still marching forward, still straggling off the kingsway. Betan used her looker to get a clear picture of the field. About seventy yards away a thousand or so NAs stood at the base of a hill, shooting into the Yellow army as it moved. Had the army been able to form lines and deliver regular volleys the NAs wouldn't have stood a chance. But getting caught half on the kingsway and half off was a recipe for disaster, Pautark didn't dare.

“First Sergeant!” Betan yelled over the intermittent fire. “Filter the men through to the other side of this column. Form a shielded firing line and fire at will on those NAs!”

“Yes, Captain!” Alman said. He began hollering orders and the Durannians pushed their way through the columns, which caused the marching units no small amount of grief, probably much more than the enemy fire did. But within minutes Betan's men had set up their large shields on the stands built into them and taken cover. The fire broke out sporadically but soon the entire company was shooting in a steady but irregular stream of outgoing bullets. Betan walked Arkor up and down the line, watching the effect of the fire. As usual it was immediately visible, the finely uniformed nobles dropping to the ground.

The guards at the roadblock when Reigh's task force had gone on its revenge campaign through southern Dorway were NAs. Betan hadn't even heard of the units at the time, an oversight of briefing. Like those guards these NAs were armed with accurized musketoons. Much better than those carried by either side's regular light troops, but not very good when compared to the Durannian rifles.

It didn't take long for the NAs to identify the new threat and shift their fire to it. The tall and broad pavises gave good cover to the men, however, and they were thick enough to withstand most musket shots. With their return fire ineffective, this NA unit was doomed. Fifteen minutes of fire thinned their ranks noticeably.

"Captain Lebornier." Betan turned to see an aide approaching her on foot. She was still on Arkor. For their fancy musketoons the NAs were terrible marksmen, she felt no threat. "General Pautark bids me inform you that the army is off the kingsway. Thus it will be halting to engage yonder NAs. He orders you to remove your company to take cover behind the column."

Dammit. Betan grumbled internally, though her face didn't change expression. "Very well. First Sergeant!"

Alman reported quickly. Unlike Betan he had dismounted, as had Ratkando. She'd caught her uncle giving her disapproving looks. Betan relayed Pautark's new orders to Alman, who called cease fire. The column had halted by then so Alman put the Durannians, holding up their pavises for cover, balls thumping into the heavy wooden shields, into columns and double timed them to a break in the line. Betan followed with Arkor. Ratkando trailed, leading his and Alman's mounts.

"What are you doing up there?" Ratkando hissed, his voice masked by the orders being called to the line battalion they were using as cover.

"Viewing the battlefield." Betan said simply.

"Captain, shall we go back to the kingsway?" Alman called.

"No. Let's stay on this side of the roadtrees if they need us." Betan replied, spurring Arkor away from Ratkando.

The Brigade facing the NAs, the 6YB, gave them a volley, smashing into the Oldster position. Just ten seconds after the first volley, another one went off. Then the Companies counter marched to bring fresh guns to the front for yet another volley. Betan watched with her looker. The NAs couldn't stand this kind of abuse and their noble pride forbade retreating so.... "Ah, here they come." Betan said. They had began a foot charge. A caller ordered the battlers to the front, crouching so musket fire could continue over their heads.

When the NAs began to close the pikes were lowered. A good many were simply skewered on them but some fought their way through the hedge of spiked poles to close with the battlers. Sword work was the noble's pastime so they actually gave a good accounting of themselves there, but they were outnumbered from the Durannian depredations, the line volleys and the pikes. The much heavier armored battlers wiped the unit out in less than fifteen minutes.

Someone used a wind charm, a big one, to clear away the smoke from the battle. Physics began running about, tending to the wounded. Betan ordered her company back to the wagons, wherever they were on the kingsway.

Another six hours passed until dusk began and the army was ordered to halt. The head of the trains wasn't a bad place to be. The fairly narrowly spaced

roadtrees were enchanted to have extremely flexible trunks to allow access at any point on the road, but it required a bit of doing and the wagons that formed the trains were too widely spread out to bother. So again the army swelled off, this time into the nearby hills. Camps were set on the tops of the hills, but pickets and patrols swarmed the little valleys made by them.

Betan ordered her men to sleep on the kingsway itself. Most interpreted her orders to include the grassy shoulder of the road and she thought that was fine. Her small tent was set up on the paved surface and she laid in her cot after officer's call.

Ratkando entered, ostensibly to bring her water. "That was damned stupid." he said in a low voice.

Betan sighed. "I needed to be able to see the fight. Yes the NAs were on a hill, but I still needed the vantage point. I wasn't in any real danger. It's fencing that they have the advantage in, not marksmanship."

"It only takes one."

"I'm quite well versed in the effectiveness of skilled shooters. You can't keep me safe out here, you know that. We agreed on that."

"But I didn't damn well have to *watch* you." he grumbled.

Betan softened. "I'm sorry, uncle. I have to do my duty and I have no doubt you'd have been in the exact same position were you in command."

Ratkando put the ewer on Betan's bedside table. "Bodyguard, pah. I'd gotten so that I didn't even worry about you while I was sitting with the wagons. Just don't do anything stupid." he left before she could reply.

Betan sighed and nudged her boots off. New ones had still not been delivered from the Wives' Brigade. Rewrapping could wait until morning.

Her body was stiff, but not sore. She had an ointment to rub into it to restore flexibility, so with a sigh she rose to undress and use it.

The Yellow Army continued its march through the Branadin hill country, sweeping NAs out of their way with minimal losses. Reports indicated the Oldster Army was just now trying to leave Belabo but the Bad King was having trouble keeping it organized.

Zhatano was visible to the Army two days before they were expected to arrive at its walls. On that day, Pautark had a larger than normal officer's call, Corps and Brigade officers, outside his tent. Betan stood in the front, next to Reigh.

"The capital is protected by twelve bastions and a wall. The wall is not high, but the bastions are strong and normally augmented by the Royal Guards and City Guards.

"However, the Bad King has taken the Royal Guards with him and picked at both the City Guards and the Fortress Guards. Reports indicate that the Fortress Guards only have enough manpower to fully man three bastions and that the City Guards are down to two Brigades. Two very good Brigades but only two Brigades nonetheless.

"The question is whether the Fortress Guards intend to fully man three forts or partially man six or all twelve. Since Zhatano is too large to quickly march the Army around the city looking for a gap, it's not anything we will change plans for."

Pautark looked around the assembled officers.

"Army artillery will engage the bastions while an infantry attack is made on the wall between Po-Randon and Uilar bastions, with flying company in support. Sappers and grenadiers will attempt to reduce the wall and infantry will go through. Second

Corps will act as rear guard and Third Corps will demonstrate against the wall between Uilar and Gogan bastions.

“The plan is simple. Our path of march will take us to the area between Po-Randon and Frlitan Bastions. We will attack them straight away. 1YC will lead, with artillery in the vanguard. Second and Third Corps will forward deploy a portion of their artillery to support First Corps' attack. Cavalry will screen in case any of the local NAs are hanging around planning to disrupt our attack.

“I won't bother asking for questions at this point, I'm quite sure there are. You are dismissed to Corps briefings, I will be around to answer questions later.”

The Brigade commanders from 1YC stayed behind as the other Corps officers left. Pautark was left with his four Brigade commanders and Betan.

“The Fourth will lead the attack on the wall.” Pautark said to no one's surprise. Reigh didn't react to the announcement. “Klenzadar, you will have all of the light artillery I can muster, as well as the flying company. I will also reinforce your grenadiers from Second Corps.”

“What happens when we breach the wall?” the 2YB commander asked.

“Hopefully they surrender. They've left Softball in charge of the city and he's called that for a reason. Master LEADER has had agents provocateur in Zhatano for months, tangling with the Commission and trying to foment rebellion. Once we beat the City Guards the residents will have only Softball between them and us. I wouldn't even open a book on Softball's survival, let alone him staying in charge.”

“If they don't surrender?” Chipar asked again.

“Then the next rebellion will have to do better.” Pautark said. “Any other questions?”

There were none. “I will speak with Brigadier Reigh and Captain Lebornier later.” he left and the other Brigadiers drifted away, leaving Reigh and Betan.

“Who's Softball?” Betan asked Reigh.

“The Bad King's younger brother. He's a dim, sorry lad. Hence the name. Ball, if you're wondering refers to his head, not to anything else.”

Betan felt herself blushing. “I see, thank you.” she had assumed it referred to something else.

“This is going to be ugly.” Reigh said. “I have to brief my Colonels. Will you join us?”

“Gladly, sir.”

Betan caught sight of Getell, although it took a few moments to recognize him clean and uniformed. He was trailing Goldopan's long legged stride toward Reigh's tent.

“Captain. Good to see you again.” Goldopan called to Betan. “We've managed to have a bit of fun without you, and I'm sure we're about to have even more with you. Eh, Brigadier?”

Reigh grumbled in response as he entered his tent.

“We knew it and it happened. We're attacking Zhatano first.” Reigh said simply. “The wall between Po-Randon and Uilar.”

“Is that the only attack?” Rilmoran asked.

“Yes.”

Muttering swept the assembled officers.

“Third Corps will demonstrate against the wall between Uilar and Gogan.”

“That won't fool them for long, if at all.” Goldopan said.

“I don't believe so either.” Reigh agreed. “And I hope I'm not just being vain when I say that. We'll stay in the same marching order when we approach Zhatano and we'll draw straws tonight to see who attacks the wall. We'll have all the light artillery General Pautark can gather to bombard any troops across the wall, additional grenadiers to storm it and our Durannian friends to sweep the wall clear. Hopefully that will make some difference.

“Prepare your Companies. Dismissed.”

Zhatano was an elaborately decorated city.

“It's awfully whored up.” Ratkando muttered as he rode next to Betan. 2YC had been put on point and was fighting its way through scattered NAs and militia. Even through the haze of firesmoke Zhatano was a glittering, brightly painted city. The Royal Quarter was easily picked out with the Pendral Palace dominating it. To the unaided eye it was a blue and red mass with a giant central pyramid. To Betan's looker it was a nightmarishly complicated array of spires and domes and towers, all with gilded tops. An eye watering menagerie of flags spread in the breeze, one for each noble family in Branna.

The pyramid itself, a vast glass work that encapsulated the Bad King's atrium of a throne room, was mind boggling in its complexity of scaffolding and supports.

“I think whored up describes it.” Betan said.

“Imagine the interior.” Ratkando remarked.

“I've been inside a less lofty noble home, that was bad enough.” Betan replied.

“If we're lucky a good portion of that city will burn.”

“The fortifications, on the other hand.” Dem said. They all turned lookers onto the bastion they identified from sketches as Po-Randon.

It was a monster compared to the Brailot fortlet. Two rows of gun ports, a gentle curve and a parapet with loopholes instead of castellations made it look somewhat like ship's hull. A heavily barnacles on with its the grass covering. There was four hundred yards of wall between it and Uilar.

“They're too far apart for supporting fire.” Betan said.

“Bastions these large don't really need to support each other, just to prevent an army from moving between them.” Dem replied.

“As we're about to attempt.”

Betan looked over the skirmishes. The twenty one thousand strong 2YC was making short work of the few thousand NAs that were sniping at their heels. The Yellow cavalry was chasing down stray NA horse units with their superior horses and lances. There was nothing to worry about there.

Looking behind her, she saw the 3YC starting to turn out of the column, angling for the space between Uilar and Gogan bastions. Uilar was a bit shorter than Po-Randon, but no less formidable in appearance for it.

“Let's examine our wall, gentlemen.” Betan said. The three trained their lookers on the twelve foot wall. It was square in cross section, packed earth surrounded by heavy masonry. Rumors were it was enchanted for strength. The parapets had an odd undulating shape to them, like round, shallow castellations.

“Those are decorative.” Ratkando said.

“Some kind of metal.” Dem agreed. The wall was concave from their

perspective.

“Shiny. Maybe aluminum?” Betan guessed.

“Could be. We should bet on polished steel, however.” Ratkando said.

“Just to be safe.” Betan nodded.

Betan followed the wall to where it joined Po-Randon. She could see a sturdy door, some heavy wood banded with metal.

“This is going to be an ugly assault.” she said. Dem and Ratkando both muttered agreement.

3YC's cannon were already bombarding Uilar and fire cracked from the wall occasionally as musketeers chanced shots at the army chemists placing their smoke pots, but none hit. One by one the pots, cauldrons, really, began issuing colored plumes. Red, blue, yellow, orange, purple. In a minute the fortifications were fully obscured by a mountain range of obscurant and horse teams began dragging cannon into position. They were guided to their sited positions by surveyors working under Aelion. The gunners were well drilled and had been practicing at camp. The evolutions took minutes and they were quickly targeting the unseen, but known, gun ports opposite the wall of cloud. 1YC was maneuvering to attack the Uilar side of their wall, hoping to find the crew distracted from 3YC's demonstration. But return fire from the right of Uilar was slack, which proved that 3YC's demonstration had fooled no one. Reigh stood on a hillside a mile away from the wall, using a massive looker to watch the scene, the Oldsters knew that's where the attack would come from. They had lookers even bigger than Reigh's tripod mounted monster, so moving flags about would be of no use. The ex-Marshal was too well known.

Thus the smoke.

Betan stood on the ground behind the cannon, which were being loaded. Overheads birds reeled through the sunny sky, those slaved to witches were slow and clumsy compared to the hunters that pursued them. Other birds, larger and stronger than the slight hunters protected their distracted comrades and the screeches and cries reached the ears of the men below.

The first massive volley wiped out those noises and the concussion rattled Betan's bones. All of the shot disappeared into the billowing smoke, and underneath its flight, the chemists were setting up a second round of smoke pots.

The bombardment was rapidly making Betan feel dizzy. She was with the 4YB a half mile or so from the arrays of cannon. The cannonade at the Chassels was the largest she'd been close to and that was only a bit larger than a brigade's standard complement. In front of her was an entire Corps' artillery, with extra. The sharp, loud snaps of the cannon and the rolling blasts of mortars buffeted her chest and head. Her voice quavered from the force of the shock waves from the huge muzzles. Her feet shook on the ground.

“Aiming is going to be difficult.” Betan said, as she watched the efforts of the chemists to blind Po-Randon.

“A bit, Captain.” Alman said. “But we'll have help.”

Several teams of horses that made Betan seem sleepy by comparison for their jittery-ness were nearby. Their light carriages mounted light cannon were little more than huge muskets. It was reckoned they would do most of the heavy work clearing the parapets to protect the sappers and grenadiers.

“If the teamsters can get the horses past the cannon.” Betan said.

“They do seem agitated, Captain.” Alman agreed. “This is a lot of artillery.”
“Some of it is the Oldster's. And the horses have been drugged, if they weren't they simply wouldn't stand for this.” Goldopan said. Betan and Alman turned to look at him.

“Colonel.” Betan greeted. No one saluted.

“We do have a rather lot of artillery. The army's expenditures for ordnance are record setting. But the bastions of Zhatano have very impressive cannon.”

“How long before the cannon shift, Colonel?” Betan asked.

“I didn't pay attention to the artillery briefing, either, Captain.” Goldopan said with a smirk.

The second cannon shift was the signal for the infantry attack.

Betan lifted her looker. She couldn't see anything through this smoke. It was a special mix, not the standard firesmoke, deliberately engineered to block enchanted sight as well as eyesight. The thought made her turn her gaze upward where sleek figures could be seen arrowing at each other. The noises of the bird combat could only be heard in the rare instances when there was a long enough pause in the cannonade for the ears to recover. She saw a formation of small birds diving, their wings mostly tucked back. Their target was a large, lazily drifting creature with a huge wingspan. But it was protected by three other birds with a build somewhere between the other two. The defender birds put themselves between the aggressors and their charges, simply spreading wings to foul the air. This threw the hunters off and they were forced to abandon their dive. Several of their bodies tumbled to the earth between the mustered IYC and their support elements, twisted and broken by the talons and beaks of the large fighting birds.

Betan felt a moment of sympathy for the creatures before putting away. The birds weren't volunteers, but they were born for their tasks in the army. They would be the least of the injuries and deaths today.

“That's a remarkable boy you found for me, Captain.” Goldopan said. “He's probably not line material, but he'll make an outstanding light infantry officer some day. A born skirmisher.”

“Been getting into fights, has he?” Betan asked.

Goldopan smiled slightly. “A few. Establishing the pecking order. It will pass. Boys, you know.”

“Rather not, Colonel.”

“Ah, good point.”

Their conversation was conducted in shouts, not quite top of the lungs, but they quickly fell silent to preserve their throats. There was no gap in any of the firing and sometimes it seemed like several dozen cannon fired within a single moment. Those events made Betan's eyes wobble in her head. She could only imagine what it was like with solid shot smashing into the wall and bursting shells blasting chunks out of it. Some of the cannons were aimed at the Uilar, some at the wall. It took her several moments to realize that the firing had stopped. The colors had shifted as the smoke screen pots were renewed.

“The first shift, Captain.” Alman observed.

“Yes.”

The artillery teamsters were hurriedly connecting carriages to harnesses to draw back the cannon. Several of them had been knocked out by return fire. Betan didn't know how, but the enemy had a way of telling through the smoke where they were. The

birds, of course, and sound, maybe. Shifting was important to keep up the advantage of the screen.

“How are the men?” Betan asked.

“Bored, sir.” Alman replied. “Due for a bite once the cannonade restarts.”

“Not too much.”

“Of course not, sir.” It was tradition to feed fighting men lightly in advance of expected combat, lest they foul themselves too greatly when killed.

Betan's head hadn't yet cleared when the cannons started up again. Not only were there a massive number of cannon, they included no few much heavier than the long, slim pieces she'd seen at the Chassels or in Durannia. These were fat bellied weapons that took two men to load the projectiles. They went off with a deep bass shock that Betan felt at least as much as she heard. The smoke screen was wavering with the muzzle blasts. *Imagine what the gunners feel.* She thought.

Ratkando brought Betan a snack that she ate while watching the renewed bombardment.

“The Brigadier approaches, Captain.” he muttered. Betan turned to see Reigh and a small staff walking toward her.

“Brigadier.” Betan greeted.

“Captain. The bombardment is proceeding better than we had hoped. General Pautark has ordered the infantry attack to begin.”

“Yes, Brigadier.”

“The birds show that the wall is occupied only by a few lookouts. Hopefully they won't see you deploying from their birds. The sappers will follow once you've cleared the parapet.” Reigh nodded to her, which Betan took as his order to attack.

“Yes, Brigadier.” He saluted her, she returned it.

“First Sergeant!” Betan screamed over the guns as she turned to the front again. Alman relayed the orders to pick up shields and double time forward. Betan fell into her customary position to the left of the company as it moved, Ratkando was behind her, although a bodyguard would be of little help in this kind of fight. She had to accompany her men through the wall when they went, there was really nothing for it. Her uncle would probably be engaged himself so he would be unable to assist her.

The reports from the cannon were nigh unbearable as the company passed closest to the artillery array.

A peek behind her showed the carriages with the light cannon were on the move.

Then they were at the smoke curtain. They were going to run through a greenish-blue mixture of the stuff which was much worse than the normal stinking, choking variety of firesmoke.

Betan came through hacking the mist out of her lungs, as were the rest of her men. She wiped tears from her eyes and forced herself to focus on not vomiting. A gunshot ahead brought her attention up and she mastered herself. There were about a half dozen blue and white figures on the wall, which was about a hundred yards distant.

“Ha-” she coughed. “HALT!” she yelled. The company shambled to a quick stop, still wheezing. “First Sergeant... firing lines!” Alman swiveled the company and spread it out, Betan and Ratkando took position behind them. “Post someone to make sure ...the carriages don't run us over.” They'd need to be closer for their small pouches of grapeshot to have an effect. “Aimed fire when ready!”

Two of the lookouts ran, one toward each bastion, and the remainder were cut

down by the first five shots fired by the Durannians.

Betan took a deep breath, which burned, and waited. The carriage came from the smoke. Betan saw that the horses were protected by some kind of cloth bag covering their mouth. "That would have been nice." Betan muttered. The carriages rounded the company hiding behind its large shields and quickly set up. The teamsters took the horses back through the smoke to safety and the gunners stood by.

The wall was empty. Betan checked her watch, figuring it was six minutes since the attack had begun. She had seen messengers escape to call out the garrison, but no one was responding.

"Hm. That's odd." Ratkando said.

"I was just thinking that."

"Maybe they don't *have* a garrison any more."

"Could be. I wonder how long we should wait?" Betan asked. "But I guess that's up to the sappers."

They waited.

No one came.

"Here comes a sapper." Ratkando announced. Betan turned to see someone in the plain smock that the sappers wore approach. She saw he wore Captain's badges.

"No garrison, sir?" he asked.

"No garrison, sir."

"Odd. The Bad King must have depleted them even more than we thought. Well, I'll send word to Brigadier and start on the wall." In moments his company was jogging past the Durannians. They used wheelbarrows to haul the explosive that would breach the wall.

"Ah, here they come." Ratkando said. Guards were streaming from the door of Po-Randon. Betan's looker showed her blunderbusses and boxes, which probably carried grenades. The light cannon on the right swept a number of them away, setting off a huge explosion. The sappers didn't even seem to notice.

The next wave of the garrison stayed behind the undulating metal barriers atop the parapet. Whatever the shiny stuff was it seemed to give the Oldsters no protection. Not many were making it past the light cannon during the reloads. No one came from Uilar.

"Captain?" Alman prompted. Betan was watching with her looker. She could catch glimpses of hats and shoulders over the wavy metal.

"Volleys into the metal thing, First Sergeant." she ordered.

"Yes, Captain." The first volley knocked down most of the indications of life she saw, but she let them put two more into the Oldsters before calling check fire.

The sappers continued their work, unconcerned at the danger overhead. Some kind of scaffold was being erected, and rather quickly. It was made from strong timbers cut square and bolted together. Betan had to force herself to watch for Oldsters, the assembly of the sappers' framework was ingenious.

"Volleys, First Sergeant." Betan ordered when she saw more of the garrison's tall caps poking over the metal screen. They quickly disappeared. The light cannon were steadily popping on the right, the decorative metal thing was gone where they were firing and blood had splattered even on the near side of the wall.

The scaffold was now a rectangle fifteen or so feet high made of the heavy timbers. Lighter boards formed a cat's cradle near the top. Pulleys were built into the large timber on the top and some kind of wooden barrel with a flared end was being

pulled from a large cart that had been pulled by a half dozen extremely muscular men. The sappers swayed it to the lighter boards and set it against the gentle curve of the wall, tying off ropes to hold the that wider end of the barrel in place.

“That's a fucking *bomb*.” Betan realized.

“I've never seen one so big.” Ratkando said. “I'd been curious as to how they were going to get through the wall.”

“Volleys, First Sergeant!” Betan ordered. She'd caught glimpses of movement.

“I hope they don't get smart enough to remove those ridiculous hats.” Ratkando said.

“Have you seen what's on *your* head?” Betan asked. Ratkando glowered at her.

“What's wrong with our shooter's hats?” he asked.

“Oh, never mind.”

A second scaffold was going up behind the barrel. This one was much narrower but even heavier than the first. Another cart had been pulled up by another half dozen two legged beasts of burden and a thick slab of stone four feet square was being swayed out. This went up much slower than the bomb.

“ah” Ratkando marvelled. “there's slots on those struts to-” Betan interrupted him to order more volleys. She'd seen the heavy triangular pieces that the stone slab was being fitted into.

“That's going to tamp the bomb.” Ratkando said. “I've seen smaller versions of this. A half-drum of firepowder placed thusly is really impressive. That barrel, with whatever they have in it, that's going to be large.”

“Enough to breach the wall?” Betan asked. “CHECK FIRE!”

“I'd bet so. I wouldn't have believed it before but they don't have another one of those monster's standing by. Pautark and Reigh don't seem to be the type to suffer inefficiency.”

The stone in place, the sappers fled.

“First Sergeant, company will retreat.” Betan called. Alman gave the orders and the company hefted their shields, each man turned in place and began running away, trailing the fleeing sappers.

“COVER YOUR EARS!” one of them yelled back to the company.

The Captain stopped next to Betan, he had a large horn in his hand.

“Really, cover your ears, and crouch down, no, lay down.” he took a deep breath and winded the horn.

“First Sergeant! Tell the men to lay down and cover their ears!” Betan said. The sapper captain dropped the horn and threw himself to the ground, wrapping his arms around his head. Betan followed his example.

The Oldsters began firing, but Betan was minded of falling off a terrible log bridge her brothers had built over a stream near a settlement called Shipan. She had landed flat on her back on the stream bank when a rotten bit of the poorly inspected materials gave way under her foot. Her vision had dimmed when the impact forced the air from her lungs and stunned her body too harshly to remember to breath again. The first inhalation had been agony, and the returning colors were too bright and she'd been terribly frightened.

The exploding wall was worse. Much worse.

Betan sat up, she'd rolled over at some point and not realized it. Her chest heaved air back into her lungs and she coughed.

“That right sucked.” someone yelled.

“Durannians, on your feet!” she hollered as she struggled to her own. Alman was still down, rolling his head back and forth. Ratkando was likewise recovering slowly but the jagers were mostly younger and were rebounding almost as fast as Betan.

The wall was eclipsed in dust.

“That was fun.” someone said. Betan turned her head to see the sapper Captain standing with a monstrous grin on his face. Betan looked away again.

“First Sergeant.” Betan said in a low voice.

“Yes, Captain. Coming, Captain.” Alman had risen to all fours and was shaking his head.

“No great rush, I imagine the Oldsters were quite surprised by that.”

The company slowly recovered and Betan set about with the two youngest Sergeants, Biral and Teldek checking the men. A quarter of them would be of no use in the coming fight. The rest rose on mostly steady limbs and readied their rifles and swords.

“Here come the grenadiers.” Alman said. Betan met his eyes, which were watery and unsteady. “First Sergeant, you will remain with, the rear guard.”

Alman frowned.

“Stay here, Orno. That's a royal command.”

“Oh, sod-” Betan turned away from him.

“Those of you on your feet, we'll follow the grenadiers in to support with aimed fire. Aim with a bit more care than normal.” The Sergeants ordered the twenty nine remaining Durannians.

“Captain.” Ratkando said. He was mostly steady and Betan knew better than to argue with her uncle right before an assault.

“Stay with me.” she said.

“Grenadiers gone by, Captain!” Sergeant Biral, the Sixth Sergeant, who was now senior, said.

“Follow them in.” Betan ordered and began to jog on the left.

The breach was almost visible through the dust. The bomb appeared to have turned the wall into a long shallow mound. The grenadiers mounted it and received a volley from inside. *The City Guards*. Betan thought. The assault troops crouched down and returned fire, but there weren't enough of them.

“Double time!” Betan yelled, picking up her pace.

The grenadiers were wavering, probably about to charge rather than retreat. “Grenadiers, coming through!” Betan yelled. Biral took up the call with his more impressive voice and the grenadiers steadied, hunkering down and paying attention to their shooting.

“One squad to each side of the breach!” Betan ordered. “Sergeant Biral to the left!” The company split and increased their pace, leaping onto the mound of broken earth and wall, crouching and readying rifles. Betan dug a few wind charms out of her satchel and shook them out, blowing the dust into the Oldsters.

The City Guards were clear, fifty yards away.

Five thousand of them, judging from the guidons.

“FIRE AT WILL!” Betan yelled as she drew a pistol. The Durannians complied,

the meager wave of fire digging into the mass of Oldsters.

“Grenadiers, fall back to defend the breach!” Ratkando yelled, whipping out his sword. “We need some people here.”

“Puymora drew the short straw, he should be on his way.” Betan replied. “Fire faster! Grenadiers, fire!”

Betan stepped behind a large chunk of bricks, watching the City Guard work their drill. Counter marching, cocking, lifting muskets. “TAKE COVER!” The volley crashed. “FIRE!” the Durannians popped up to blast at the enemy.

“If they realize-” Ratkando began.

“I know!” Betan replied. She watched the Oldsters fall from her mens' fire as the line drill advanced. Not enough, not nearly enough. The rifles continued to fire, getting two volleys in as the City Guards readied their next. Betan ordered her side to take cover and the wave of shot was ineffective.

“How many times will that trick work?” Betan asked her uncle as the Yellow troops resumed firing.

“Depends on how smart the enemy commander is.”

“Are there any grenadier officers here?”

“fraid not, Captain.” a grenadier Sergeant replied. “Captain was held back as usual and the subalterns bought it in the first Oldster volley.”

“Well, shit.” Betan grumbled. “Can you throw grenades that far?”

“No, Captain. Way too far.”

“And we didn't bring any of our slings.” a nearby Corporal said as he reloaded. “I'm never putting mine away if I survive this.”

“We don't have much ammunition, Captain.” the Sergeant said. “We don't ever expect to do much shooting.”

“TAKE COVER!” they all ducked but the volley didn't come.

“Damn.” Ratkando griped. “I was hoping he'd be dumber than that.”

Betan popped up and fired her pistol but the City Guards didn't take the bait.

“FIRE!” Betan ordered, the return volley came immediately and Betan heard voices cry out.

“Here they come!” someone yelled.

“Quick fire! Quick fire!” Betan ordered. A company, a full company of two hundred or more, had detached from the line and was charging, battlers in the lead. Betan drew her sword and buckler. The Durannians shifted their fire to the assaulting company as the grenadiers shucked their musketoons for their hatchets, they carried no shields.

As the Oldster battlers closed, Betan saw a second company leave the City Guard's line. She cursed and stood next to Ratkando. The Durannians fired until the last moment, then drew their sword bayonets and shields, the Grenadiers, let by the two royal Durannians charged forward on the rough, rocky mound to join the fight.

Betan glanced a falchion off her buckler and cut the Oldster through his arm before turning to another, slashing his leg, then a third, an officer who lunged at her with his broadsword. She parried, thrust low and was blocked, recovered and slashed outward in an upper diagonal, he dodged this and with the backhand Betan hacked his leg.

A vicious swing knocked her buckler aside and she kicked her attacker in the groin before leaping away from an axeman. He took a hatchet from behind and Betan moved on.

She was knocked flat from behind and someone with heavy boots stomped past

her. There was a lot of screaming and when Betan tried to regain her feet she was tackled again. She spun on the ground, foot sweeping someone before leading with her sword at a blue and yellow armored figure.

Yellow.

She cut off her attack and a startled battler lowered his shield, he was bumped from behind and carried into Betan, who struggled past him and began to fight her way to the side of the breach to clear the counter charge against the City Guards.

“Jagers, rifles!” she yelled in (Durannian), hoping some of them could respond. “Rifles to the right!” Puymora's battalion would be woefully outnumbered by the assembled City Guards, they'd need aimed fire support.

She reloaded her pistol and repeated her call as Durannians stumbled from the melee to where she stood clear of the fight. When she had a dozen who'd found or kept their rifles she ordered them to fire on the City Guard formation. The fight spread as more Yellow troops piled through the breach, Betan kept her men moving, adding to them as they made their way to her. Some of the jagers dazed from the explosion began to appear, including Alman. “The 3/4 is through the breach.” he said. “1/4 is advancing through, now. It sounded like the artillery fight has trailed off.”

“They might be mustering gunners from the bastions to come fight us.” Betan ventured. She saw the 1/4 guidon come through the breach, the men of that battalion snaked to the right at double time as her men kept up a screen of fire into the unengaged City Guard unit.

“I think they're working up to charge, First Sergeant.” Betan observed.

“I quite agree, Captain.” through the screams and clanging of weapons of the melee she could hear shouts from across the field. Oldster officers were waving swords and she could see muskets being dropped.

“Captain Lebornier!” a voice sounded behind her. She turned to see Colonel Hantor, still mounted, approaching. “Matters are about to become confused, your men will be of better use elsewhere.”

Betan growled and Alman touched her arm. “Yes, Colonel.” she replied. “First Sergeant.” she prompted before stepping to the side. Hantor rode past, exhorting his men to move faster.

Betan cleaned her sword to keep her mind off sticking it in Hantor before Alman announced that the men were leaving. Betan sheathed her blade and stepped up to the mound that used to be part of Zhatano's wall.

The wall.

“First Sergeant!” Betan called. The bomb had blasted a wide V out of the wall, more likely a circle that dragged down a wide V.

“Captain? The 3/4 is waiting to pass through.”

“Up there.” Betan ordered before clambering up the earthen core of the edges of the breach.

“Captain? Alman called after her. She was pretty sure she heard a muttered curse before he ordered the jagers after her. Used to operating in rough territory, the jagers easily mounted the ruin of the wall with little slipping. A quick count once they were all up showed she had thirty seven effectives. The inside of the parapet had only a low curb, but the jagers gamely lined up on it.

“Fire at will!” Betan ordered and watched the Oldsters fall to her men.

“See, Captain!” Betan looked down and saw Hantor watching her with a smile.

“I told you.” Betan smiled back.

The capital, as it was hoped, soon surrendered.

Seven jagers had fallen in the breach, with twelve wounded, including Ratkando who was being a terrible patient in the Army hospital. Two more would take a long time to recover from the shock wave from the breaching itself.

“They killed Softball.” Reigh said.

“I'd almost feel sorry for the idiot.” Goldopan said. “If he'd hadn't been so convinced of his competence.”

The 4YB had been the first to camp on the broad lawn between the fringes of the capital and its wall. Betan was with the 4YB officers (as always, except Hantor) outside Reigh's tent, sipping some unfamiliar Brannan liquor.

“What odds do we give the Bad King himself?” Puymora asked.

“Short, hopefully.” Reigh said. “But with Zhatano in our possession, it matters little. He will come here, it will all be decided within sight of his precious palace.

The next day news came that the Oldster Army had mutinied finally, once the assembled NAs attacked the Royal Guard. The Bad King died in the fighting.

The Brannan Civil War was over.

“It's nice here.” Betan said. She had found someone to make an approximation of Durannian dress from her recollections. She hadn't thought to bring patterns with her.

Ratkando, still nursing what had been an awful thigh wound, grumbled. “You can say that, you can walk.”

Betan smiled at her uncle's distress, he was cantankerous enough to earn it.

“Your highness?” Cial called. The Prodolan family had fled Fern Island after her escape and arrived safely in Zhatano for the post-war political wrangling. Arminten had been quick to appoint a staff for the visiting warrior princess.

“Yes, Cial?”

“His Lordship Goldopan to see you.”

“Show him in, please.” Betan didn't look, but she knew Cial curtsied before she left the porch of the borrowed palace the Durannians had been installed in.

Betan rose when she heard Goldopan's footsteps. “My Lord Goldopan.”

“Your Highness.” Goldopan said with a mild scolding tone. “Royalty does not rise to receive a mere noble.”

“You keep telling me that.” She offered her hand, knowing Goldopan would demand it and he laid a kiss upon it. Betan brushed away a piece of imaginary lint to compliment his suit. As a political delegate of the Yellow faction, he had put away his uniform, although he'd kept his sword and dagger as a pointed reminder to the nobles.

“And good day to *your* highness, as well.” Goldopan said to Ratkando, who grumbled back.

“He's grumpy.” Betan explained. “Can't walk.” she said in a stage whisper.

“Your highness, I have asked around for the information you requested.”

Goldopan said.

“Ah, thank you, my Lord.”

“Information?” Ratkando said warily. The strong bird the reformation had bought to carry word of Betan's redemption had returned with a letter from King Dray.

Ratkando knew the letter to be still unopened.

“Shall we discuss it in my parlor?” Betan suggested.

“As your highness wishes.” Goldopan offered his arm and Betan took it.

“Wait, what information?” Ratkando called after them. His protests were ignored as Betan and Goldopan swept into the house.

“What have you to tell me, my Lord?” Betan asked once they were seated with refreshments in the room she had claimed as her parlor.

“Your highness has several options available to her.” Goldopan said, drawing a sheet of paper from an interior pocket of his almost flouncy jacket.

“There are pirates in action off the shores of Shotobar, and no one likes pirates.” Goldopan said after consulting his notes. “Across the Ocean of Trees there are bandits said to be organized into brigades.”

Ratkando's yelling could faintly be heard through the walls.