



AT WHAT COST

BY DOUGLAS SEACAT



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WELCOME TO THE IRON KINGDOMS

The world you are about to enter is the Iron Kingdoms, a place where the power and presence of gods are beyond dispute, where mankind battles itself as well as all manner of fantastic races and exotic beasts, and where a blend of magic and technology called *mechanika* shape industry and warfare. Outside the Iron Kingdoms themselves—the human nations of the continent called *Immoren*—the vast and unexplored world of *Caen* extends to unknown reaches, firing the imaginations and ambitions of a new generation.

Strife frequently shakes these nations, and amid the battles of the region the most powerful weapon is the *warjack*, a steam-powered automaton that boasts great mobility, thick armor, and devastating weaponry. A *warjack*'s effectiveness is at its greatest when commanded by a *warcaster*, a powerful soldier-sorcerer who can forge a mental link with the great machine to magnify its abilities tremendously. Masters of both arcane and martial combat, these *warcasters* are often the deciding factor in war.

For the Iron Kingdoms, what is past is prologue. No event more clearly defines these nations than the extended dark age suffered under the oppression of the *Orgoth*, a brutal and merciless race from unexplored lands across the great western ocean known as the *Meredius*. For centuries these fearsome invaders enslaved the people of western *Immoren*, maintaining a vise-like grip until at last the

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people rose up in rebellion. This began a long and bloody process of battles and defeats. This rebellion would have been doomed to failure if a dark arrangement by the gods had not bestowed the Gift of Magic on the Immorese, unlocking previously undreamed-of powers.

Every effective weapon employed by the Rebellion against the Orgoth was a consequence of great minds putting arcane talents to work. Not only did sorcery allow evocations of fire, ice, and storm on the battlefield, but scholars combined scientific principles to blend technology with the arcane. Rapid advancements in alchemy gave rise to blasting powder and the invention of deadly firearms. Methods were developed to fuse arcane formulae into metal runeplates, creating augmented tools and weapons: the invention of mechanika. The culmination of these efforts was the invention of the first colossals, precursors to the modern warjack. These towering machines of war gave the Immorese a weapon the invaders could not counter. With the colossals the armies of the Rebellion drove the Orgoth from their fortresses and back to the sea.

The people of the ravaged lands drew new borders, giving birth to the Iron Kingdoms: Cygnar, Khador, Llael, and Ord. It was not long before ancient rivalries ignited between these new nations. Warfare became a simple fact of life. Over the last four centuries periodic wars have been broken up by brief periods of tense but wary peace, with technology steadily advancing all the while. Alchemy and mechanika have simultaneously eased and complicated the lives of the people of the Iron Kingdoms while evolving the weapons employed by their armies in these days of industrial revolution.

The most long-standing and bitter enmity in the region is that between Cygnar in the south and Khador in the north. The Khadorans are a militant people occupying a harsh and unforgiving territory. The armies of Khador have periodically fought to reclaim

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lands their forebears had once seized through conquest. The two smaller kingdoms of Llael and Ord were forged from contested territories and so have often served as battlegrounds between the two stronger powers. The prosperous and populous southern nation of Cygnar has periodically allied with these nations in efforts to check Khador's imperial aspirations.

Just over a century ago, Cygnar endured a religious civil war that ultimately led to the founding of the Protectorate of Menoth. This nation, the newest of the Iron Kingdoms, stands as an unforgiving theocracy entirely devoted to Menoth, the ancient god credited with creating mankind.

In the current era, war has ignited with particular ferocity. This began with the Khadoran invasion of Llael, which succeeded in toppling the smaller kingdom in 605 AR. The fall of Llael ignited an escalating conflict that has embroiled the region for the last three years. Only Ord has remained neutral in these wars, profiting by becoming a haven for mercenaries. The Protectorate has launched the Great Crusade to convert all of humanity to the worship of Menoth. With the other nations occupied with war, this crusade was able to make significant gains and seize territories in northeastern Llael.

Other powers have been drawn into this strife, either swept up in events or taking advantage of them for their own purposes. The Scharde Islands west of Immoren are home to the Nightmare Empire of Cryx, which is ruled by the dragon Toruk and sends endless waves of undead and their necromantic masters to bolster its armies with the fallen of other nations. To the northeast the insular elven nation of Ios is host to a radical sect called the Retribution of Scyrah that is driven to hunt down human arcanists, whom they believe are anathema to their gods.

The savage wilds within and beyond the Iron Kingdoms contain various factions fighting for their own agendas. From the frozen

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north a disembodied dragon called Everblight leads a legion of blight-empowered warlocks and draconic spawn. The proud, tribal race known as the trollkin work to unite their once-disparate people to defend their lands. Deep in the wilds of western Immoren, a secretive order of druids commands nature's beasts to oppose Everblight and advance their own various plans. Far to the east across the Bloodstone Marches, the warrior nation of the Skorne Empire marches inexorably closer, bent on conquering their ancient enemies in Ios as a step toward greater dominion. Shadowy conspiracies have arisen from hidden strongholds to play their own part in unfolding events. These include the Convergence of Cyriss, an enigmatic machine-cult that worships a distant goddess of mathematics, as well as their bitter enemies the cephalyx, a race of extremely intelligent and sadistic slavers who surgically transform captives into mindless drudges.

The Iron Kingdoms is a setting whose inhabitants must rely on heroes with the courage to defend them using magic and steel, whether in the form of rune-laden firearms or steam-driven weapons of war. The factions of western Immoren are vulnerable to corruption from within and subject to political intrigue and power struggles. All the while, opportunistic mercenaries profit from conflict by selling their temporary allegiance for coin or other favors. It is a world of epic legends and endless sagas.

Enter the Iron Kingdoms, and discover a world like no other!



FOREWORD

This story has gone through quite a journey to get here, but so has Major Victoria Haley.

The character of Haley has always fascinated me because she represents the infinite potential of mortals in our setting. The Iron Kingdoms has its share of gods, their powerful intermediaries, vast invulnerable dragons, undead lords, immortal crones, and other supernatural entities. Some Cygnar players have lamented the lack of a warcaster embodying one of these concepts. If you ask me, what Cygnar has in people like Victoria Haley is more inspiring—mortals who stand toe-to-toe with immortal terrors and sometimes even win.

Victoria Haley had been through plenty of trials and tribulations: having her parents and home ripped from her in one horrific event as a child, surviving alone at only thirteen, discovering that her twin sister was actually alive but utterly corrupted by Cryx, killing her sister after losing her arm in the fight.

While her background is filled with tragedy, since becoming a warcaster Haley has repeatedly shown the ability to break the laws of reality through sheer will and the strength of her magic. This made me consider: how would she handle that power being stripped away? What would it mean to her sense of identity? The more I reflected, the more strongly I felt that this would be more terrifying to her than anything she had ever faced, on or off the battlefield.

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The emergence of the mysterious Convergence of Cyriss could change many things for the people of western Immoren. The machine worshipers represent a unique temptation for Haley, though—one she might not be able to refuse.

In this story we see Haley in her darkest hour, bereft of magic and dealing with an incurable condition, trying to figure out who she is at her core and whether she still matters. How can she best fulfill her duty as an officer, serve her nation as a warcaster, and reach her potential as an individual? What is most important to her? For the first time, she finds herself forced to choose between the ideals she holds dear. She learns that she can escape even her own mortality . . . but at what cost?

Douglas Seacat



PROLOGUE

The Thornwood, Late 608 AR

Major Victoria Haley had no time for thought as the shaking earth settled to reveal fresh undead thralls and mindless enslaved drudges climbing up through widening cracks in the ground. They immediately set upon the disordered Cygnaran soldiers all around her. The barrels of her Cyclone's chain guns glowed orange from the heat of ceaseless firing and sent steam rising in the rain. Her mind was linked to the cortex of the machine, urging it on, directing its aim. No matter how many bullets it unleashed, there was no end to the tide of horrific enemies.

The Firefly light warjack fighting on her left flank was already battered, but she sent it ahead to intercept several thralls closing on one of her trencher squads, which was performing a tactical withdrawal on that side. The machine was illuminated by blue voltaic energy, but its light was quickly swallowed by the pouring rain, and its feet sank deep into thick mud. The trencher sergeant kept his men moving and firing, but she could see the panic in their eyes. Her right flank was held by the Morrowan warcaster Constance Blaize, together with her warjacks and Precursor Knights, attired in silver armor now. They stood stalwart against the fresh assault but one by one were struck down.

A tremendous crash shook the ground as a pair of rampaging Krakens toppled one of the embattled Khadoran Conquests closer to the main Cryxian fortress. Haley strode closer, adrenaline making her momentarily forget her weakened condition. She had kept a Hunter warjack near, using its cannon and armor-piercing shells on hard targets. She mentally urged it to fire on the nearest Kraken. It was then she spotted Deneghra. Her corrupted twin stood back between the Cryxian colossals, directing them.

From Haley's right flank charged the glowing form of Lord Commander Stryker, the coils on his back empowering his warcaster armor thrumming. He raised his sword Quicksilver above his head as he and his warjack Ol' Rowdy rushed the nearest Kraken. His sword was a shining streak as it cut through one of the clawed tentacles and sheared through the nearest armor-plated leg. Ol' Rowdy pounded the Kraken from the other side with its quake hammer. The colossal staggered, then leaned as Stryker leapt up to sweep his sword into its innards with a spray of sparks and twisted metal. The Kraken began to topple, and Stryker had to dive out of the way. Ol' Rowdy interposed itself to deflect the crippled machine, whose bulk pressed the warjack into the mud, partially pinning it.

One of the Krakens tore through the crippled Stormwall and was beset by the last Conquest, but another closed on Stryker. Haley gasped as she saw a tentacle lash out, barely missing him. Ol' Rowdy was still struggling, trying to pry a bent leg from under the bulk of the downed Kraken. Without thinking Haley extended her hand and gathered her power, trying to reach into the foreign cortex of the Kraken to halt its attack as its other tentacle reared back like an angry serpent. Searing pain and white light erupted in her head as though a firebrand had struck her, and pain shot through her chest and legs, making her heart beat erratically. She fell to her knees as she fought for breath, her vision swimming.

The incoming Kraken tentacle smashed into Stryker, shattering through his power field, crumpling his warcaster armor, and knocking him backward into the mud. It groped for him again with its claws. Clutching her head in pain, Haley could do nothing. A claw seized him and lifted him through the air, and his sword tumbled from his fingers. An iris hatch on a portal along the side of the central hull opened, and in a second Stryker was gone, crammed inside to be methodically disassembled by the machine, his vitality and soul extracted to empower its necromantic weapons. In the next moment the colossal's reiver cannons fired, sending blackened spikes to punch straight through Constance Blaize's armor. She staggered and fell, coughing blood.

Around Haley was nothing but carnage, and she saw blazing green balefire spreading to consume the soldiers who had not fled. She tried to regain her feet but could not move. Still gasping from pain, she cried out as torturous cramps twisted down her legs and arms and forced her hands to clench. The Cryxian tower surged with unholy power, and Deneghra's body seemed a beacon, the source of the wildfire that swept forth.

Haley had never felt so hopeless. When she locked eyes with her twin, she was startled to see pity in the wraith witch's expression. She heard herself screaming as her skin began to burn.



PART ONE

Point Bourne, First weeks of 609 AR

Victoria Haley's heart was racing painfully as she woke from the nightmare, a now-familiar experience. She blinked and stared around her, taking in the familiar walls of the simple hospital chamber that had become her unwelcome home. An attendant was already stepping to her side, bringing a glass of cool water and a square of clean cloth with which to dry her brow. The young woman spoke calming, quiet words, but Haley barely registered them. It was a relief when the woman left.

Haley's panicked awakening was no less disconcerting for having happened many times before. Each time these horrific dreams confronted her it felt real and fresh, with no sense of retreading familiar ground. After waking she could tell the details were subtly different from previous nightmares, with the slain dying in distinct yet equally horrific ways. The primary constant was a feeling of utter helplessness.

In the real battle in the Thornwood, it had been the Morrowan warcaster Constance Blaize who had come to Stryker's aid. Neither of them had died, thankfully—though none of that outcome was owed to Haley's actions. She had just watched, impotent to help. Long-ingrained battlefield instincts had made her reach for her arcane

power without pausing to consider how such an act would backfire. It had prompted a surge in the magic-reactive poison lingering in her veins, unleashing destructive toxins to flood her muscles and internal organs and nearly killing her. Since her return to Point Bourne there had been no improvement.

Vigilant Peer Carrick Dolan entered the room and approached Victoria Haley. Dimly, she noticed he had become increasingly unkempt and his eyes were shadowed. She suspected he was getting even less sleep than she was.

Taking her hand to feel her pulse, he asked, “How are we feeling today?” She ignored the question; it had been repeated often enough to have lost any meaning. He continued, “I’m confident the nightmares are just a side effect of the poison. I wouldn’t dwell on them. They don’t mean anything.”

When they had first met in Corvis, immediately after her poisoning, he had been introduced to her as the Church of Morrow’s foremost expert on Cryxian afflictions, an erudite scholar of the Order of Illumination. His impressive credentials had given her hope, a fact she resented more and more as time—and her illness—went on. He had shown no sign of having made any progress on reversing her condition. Still, it wasn’t Carrick’s fault she was dying. How hard he was trying to help her just underscored the futility of finding a cure.

“It’s no mystery what my dreams are about,” she said as he inserted a needle into her arm to draw blood. She had become quite accustomed to this routine.

In addition to reliving the clash where Stryker had almost died, she had been having a variety of nightmares about being poisoned in the first place. Sometimes she dreamed of the secret meeting with Deneghra that had started her on this path. In reality, that had been short and to the point, with Deneghra warning her of an imminent

assassination attempt on Sebastian Nemo. In her dreams, though, the conversation went on at length as the creature who had been her sister sought to entice her to join her, to give up her living flesh and become undead. Such a prospect was one of Haley's deepest fears, one that went back to first discovering what had become of her twin after her kidnapping.

When she had allowed herself to listen to Deneghra's poisonous words, it had felt like surrender. Even at the time, she knew with absolute certainty she was being manipulated. She could not ignore Deneghra's warning, though—could not allow General Nemo to be murdered. Her path had been decided for her. She had danced like a puppet on strings.

Other times she dreamed of making haste to get to Corvis, sailing up the Dragon's Tongue River while thralls crawled up from the dark waters to swarm the riverboat. From these dreams she woke gasping for breath after being pulled under. Sometimes she reached Corvis only to find the assassin with his poisoned blade standing over a corpse, Nemo's eyes flat and lifeless as the wind stirred his white hair, the ground soaked with spreading blood.

Even in dreams her magic did not respond to her will.

To a degree these nightmares had lost their impact, at least after she awoke. But her mind was inventive in finding new ways to leave her breathless and with her heart pounding in panic. Carrick had reprimanded her for stressing her body when she should be resting, as though she had any control over the echoes dredged from her memories.

He took the syringe of blood to the rear of the room, where a series of glass tubes and beakers were aligned on a table. Shortly after she had first been afflicted Dolan had attempted blood transfusion, before he had determined that the invading substance now pervaded her entire body, not just her blood. Since then he had been trying

other methods of isolating the toxin, including the alchemical tests he conducted on the freshly drawn blood now. A familiar battery of other tests followed. Her breathing proved to be shallow; trying to take deeper breaths caused shooting pain in her chest. When she sought to squeeze his hand as hard as she could, sincerely wanting to see him squirm, he showed no discomfort and she was left gasping. Carrick made neutral noises and wrote notes on his ledger, but she did not need to read them.

She was getting worse.

Before he left, Carrick turned to her and said, "You should know that we're going to Caspia as soon as certain arrangements are made. I wanted to avoid moving you, but I don't think we can hold off any longer."

"Caspia?" she asked, disbelieving. "But there's a major operation being planned in the Thornwood. I need to be here, in case they recall me. They'll need everyone they can muster." She hated that her voice sounded more desperate than determined.

"Major, we've been over this. I sympathize with your desire to get back to active duty, but as it stands even you must admit it's impossible. You would be a distraction and a detriment to those around you. Do you honestly think you are battle-ready in your condition?"

Haley knew he was right, but that did not change her indignation. "Certainly there's something you could give me, some potion or pill, that would give me strength and keep me alert if I needed to fight. What use will I be in Caspia?"

"We're past that now, Major. You need to focus on conserving your strength. In the capital we can get the best minds in Cygnar working on curing your condition."

"I thought we already had," she said.

He returned a sad smile. "So did I. Clearly we need new insight.

Fresh eyes. Not to mention better facilities. It's our best chance. I've exhausted everything I thought might work." He frowned, swallowing. She suspected he regretted saying that last fact, but she appreciated the honesty. She was tired of attempts to instill false hope. He cleared his throat and said, "Try not to exert yourself meanwhile. Rest as much as you can." He left, closing the door behind him.

His words only made her want to do more. She got out of her bed and made herself do several pushups and sit-ups, though it tired her and made her light-headed. All too aware that she used to be able to do so many more, she kept at it until she could barely crawl back into bed.



She was grateful it was only blackness that took her, her mind too exhausted to dream. The next time she opened her eyes she felt a visceral surge of relief and recognition at the wizened face looking down at her, the bushy white eyebrows and disordered array of white hair. "General Nemo!" she said. She sat up, prompting dizziness and an explosion of spots before her eyes.

He reached out and steadied her, his eyes concerned. "Easy, Major. I'm glad to see you, too."

She adjusted herself into a more natural sitting position. The general looked weary. He had clearly come to her immediately upon his return from the field, taking no time to rest or clean up. He sat heavily on a chair pulled up next to her bed, seeming glad for the respite.

"I heard you had been called away to some disturbance at Calbeck," she said while trying to gather her wits. She still felt groggy from sleep. Nemo was not wearing his warcaster armor, but countless small clues in his bearing, his expression, and the state of his uniform suggested he had recently been through battle. "Is that resolved?"

"In a manner of speaking," he answered grimly. "An ugly bit of business I'll not trouble you with." He was silent for a moment and she let him be, though questions crowded her mind. He looked out the window, lost in thought. Eventually he added, "We lost people. Including an old friend."

"I'm sorry," Haley said. She knew very little about the officers closest to him. She could not resist asking, "What were you facing? I've heard a few rumors, but nothing definitive." He gave her a measured look and she felt surge of indignation. "I've been lying here for days, and everyone seems intent on keeping me in the dark."

His eyes softened and he chuckled. "Understood. The situation at Calbeck was—unexpected. Too much to get into, but the short of it is the town had been seized by a dangerous arm of the Cyrissists. Death cultists." He said the last as if it were a curse.

"Death cultists?" She found the term strange in this context, particularly coming from someone who had fought for decades against Cryx. "Aren't Cyrissists obsessed with mathematics, engineering, astronomy?"

"Yes, but these ones have other . . . interests. They want to *become* machines, not just build them. We've known for a while that some of them had managed to transform themselves into clockwork, but I had no idea how far they had gone with that. There were hundreds of them at Calbeck, very few still flesh and bone. Rank upon rank of what used to be men and women, now housed in bodies made of gears and steel. Their souls are torn from their bodies and sealed in metal and crystal canisters built into the bodies." He paused and shook his head, his disgust plain. "They are well organized and well armed, and their technology is startling in its sophistication. Now we know they also have an army."

"Morrow! I had no idea."

"No one did." He had been examining his hands as he talked, but

he now looked up and straightened in his chair. “We drove them off, but not without cost. What we saw in Calbeck suggests they have grander aspirations. They want to change Caen. We will be seeing them again, I am certain. Hopefully we bought ourselves a reprieve.”

It was clear he was holding back a great deal—volumes were left unspoken. She said, “We really don’t need another threat in the interior.”

He gave a startled laugh. “That’s quite an understatement. We’ll find a way to deal with them, I’m sure. Until they make another move, we just have to wait for them to reveal themselves.” He frowned and admitted after a pause, “They even tried to recruit me.”

“You spoke with them?”

“Yes, one that was still alive approached me. A girl.” He seemed to remember to whom he was speaking with and cleared his throat. “A young woman, I mean. Named Aurora. Perhaps only a few years younger than you and also a warcaster. But naive. Sheltered. She was raised knowing nothing but that strange religion. Hoped to talk me into going over to them.”

“Clearly she was ill informed,” Haley said, considering how Nemo had given his entire life to the defense of Cygnar. “What did she offer you?”

His expression became more neutral, but weariness seemed to collect in his eyes. “Immortality.” After a moment he raised a hand and gestured to indicate himself. “They don’t let their kind get this old. They thought I would hand over my soul in exchange for freedom from backaches and hearing loss. I told them I had no interest in a metal body.”

They shared a look. She said, “It must have been tempting. A lifetime doesn’t seem like enough, does it?”

“A lifetime is plenty. What they do is unnatural, unholy. It isn’t so different from becoming undead. No. I’ll just keep my aching back,

thank you very much.” He harrumphed in a way that was familiar and endearing.

Haley smiled. “You heard about Stryker’s promotion, I presume?”

Nemo scowled, though his anger was clearly at least partially feigned. He said, “I swear that boy has been trying to find a way to outrank me for half his military career. Lord general, indeed.”

“What do you know about his mission? He took most of the city’s uninjured soldiers and marched north. I wasn’t invited to the briefing.”

“Honestly, I haven’t been fully briefed on Stryker’s mission yet, though I heard a few things. An Ordic spy discovered Cryxians trying to smuggle something important through the Wythmoor. Stryker is eager for a victory, which I can understand. We could use one. I just hope he doesn’t risk too much to secure it.”

“Will you be going to join him?” she asked.

He shook his head. “My focus will be on planning our eventual return to the heart of the Thornwood. We can’t give Cryx a chance to regroup. There is much to do to make ready, and that falls to me and General Duggan. In the meanwhile, I’ll be here, if you need anything at all.” His voice thickened at this last. She was reminded of the fact that he had lost a wife to illness while away on duty and had then become estranged from his daughter. It was a subject he was not prone to talking about.

Their conversation turned to other things, and she was eventually able to pull from him more details about the fighting at Calbeck, a story he warmed to once he got over his initial reluctance. Then he noticed she was fading and insisted he had to go attend to certain urgent matters. She could not stop herself from reaching out to take his arm.

“They’re sending me to Caspia,” she blurted.

His eyes narrowed. “Probably for the best,” he answered after a brief moment.

“I’d prefer to stay near the front. I can help here. I can still control warjacks.” She said it firmly, confidently, but she knew her desperation was plain. “I’ll not be consigned to Caspia while everyone I know and respect is putting their lives on the line.”

He pulled his arm away, his eyes stern. “You are off active duty, Major, and for good reason. You persuaded me to risk your life once, but not again. Your only job is to obey your physicians and recover. I’ll see to it that letters are sent to keep you apprised of the situation here.” His expression softened and he patted her hand. “But until you leave, I’m here for you, understand? Send for me if there is anything I can do.” Given his ordinarily gruff exterior, this tenderness was more unsettling than anything Dolan had said.



That evening, Haley spent some time staring at the sleek but angular contours of the mechanical prosthetic serving in the place of her missing right arm. She did not wear it while she slept, but affixing its shoulder housing and straps to attach to her stump had become an integral part of her morning routine.

It looked somewhat jarring and out of place when she wore it without her warcaster armor, which had been designed to integrate with it. It had its own small capacitors to function on its own, but without the power from her armor’s arcane turbine its strength was considerably diminished. She didn’t ordinarily mind, as it could still perform nearly identically to a living hand. Using the arm didn’t cause the poison in her system to stir, likely for the same reasons she could still control warjacks. She was safe so long as she did not draw on arcane energy and invoke runic magic.

She vividly remembered trying to become accustomed to the prosthesis while recovering from the trauma of the terrible injury inflicted by her erstwhile twin. Some of the anguish of those days

came from the sickening feeling of having killed her sister, though there was no question she had been justified. Then, too, she had experienced recurring nightmares, reliving the clash in which her conflict with Deneghra had reached its inevitable conclusion.

She had initially viewed her artificial arm with loathing, cringing inside as its countless fine gears and servos made their soft, metallic clicks. Her flesh used to itch and crawl where she joined with the mechanism. It had taken time to accept. Within weeks she acclimated, however, and soon she found it served her every bit as well as her living arm. Better, in some ways, though it still sometimes caught her off guard when she saw her reflection. It was easy to forget.

Now she found herself staring at it with something approaching fondness. She preferred to attach it first thing in the morning so she did not need to stare at the stump of her arm. It allowed her to become symmetrical, whole. She rotated the wrist and opened the metal fingers one by one. The components moved with a sound she found reassuring, almost meditative. It distracted her from the deep-seated pain in her chest and lungs.

Her mind kept returning to Nemo's words describing the Cyriss cult and their steel bodies. His abhorrence had been obvious, but she did not find the thought as repellant as she once might have. What she felt instead was intrigued. More than intrigued. Her mind was racing, and she could not think of anything else. She wondered if it truly worked, if they were still "people" inside those metal shells or only some sort of inferior copy. It was difficult to believe such a state existed. What must the world seem like to someone in that condition? No hunger, no fatigue, no illness—but also no touch, smell, or taste. No heartbeat, no breath.

Was it wrong to feel something akin to hope based on what Nemo had described? It was impossible not to wonder if this technology might be applied to cure her condition, somehow, even if not taken

to its ultimate extreme. She had to find out more, but how? If she were to actually pursue this, she would need to make contact with a member of the faith who knew its more advanced technology. And she had limited time.

There was also the fact that armed members of that religion had just gone to war with Cygnar, but she knew how varied the faithful of Cyriss were. As she understood it, most Cyrissists were ordinary people—university professors, engineers, astronomers. She had met several Cyriss worshipers during her military career, going back to her early training as a warcaster. They had made a generally favorable impression as intelligent and thoughtful people. Some of the innovations credited to Sebastian Nemo had involved the study of their technology. Clearly they had accomplished things others could barely imagine. The armed contingent Nemo had faced in Calbeck had to be just one particularly dangerous offshoot sect.

It seemed an avenue worth investigating. Nothing against Carrick Dolan, but the Order of Illumination was an organization best known for hunting down and killing infernalists and necromancers, not for innovative breakthroughs. Was the Church of Morrow or its affiliated organizations the best place for her to find an answer? She considered herself a Morrowan and had sometimes taken solace in praying to one or another of the Martial Trinity of ascendants. But even by Morrowan doctrine, prayer by itself was not enough. One had to ask questions, act, and search for solutions, sometimes taking paths others feared to tread.

Her door opened and Carrick Dolan looked in, offering a disapproving shake of his head to find her still awake, her lamp still on. “You should be asleep by now, Major.” He entered, bringing with him a small glass vial filled with a familiar purple liquid. “This should help. I’ve made adjustments that should mitigate the nightmares.”

Haley accepted the vial and felt annoyed as he waited for her to

drink it, as if she were a child. On the days when the pain was at its worst she sometimes welcomed the medicine, but now she was reluctant. She did not want her wits blunted. Still, under his watchful eyes she felt compelled to upend the vial and swallow its contents, wincing at the bitterness on her tongue.

He said, “Oh, I meant to tell you, our plans have been accelerated. We’ll be catching the *Lady Ellena* out of Bainsmarket tomorrow. It’ll require leaving early. I hope to be in Caspia by evening.” He inclined his head and then left, closing the door.

The words sent a shock of fear straight through her. The thought of being sent off to Caspia filled her with panic. It felt like a surrender, a last and futile move. It represented just how badly those treating her were floundering in the dark. She would die if she went to the City of Walls right now. She knew it, with a cold certainty that defied all reason.

Before she even realized she had made a decision she scrambled from the bed, ignoring spikes of pain shooting up her legs. She recovered a washing bowl on a nearby table. She inserted a finger into her throat and caused herself to gag, then retched into the bowl as quietly as possible, wincing against the taste of bile. The purple liquid emerged along with her supper. She hoped she had purged enough of the drug so it would not affect her.

She remembered seeing the symbol of Cyriss once held by one of her favorite mechaniks, a seasoned crew chief named Lyle Garner. He had demonstrated particular skill at repairing Thorn, her enhanced Lancer. She didn’t trust anyone else to do more than superficial upkeep on that warjack. Lyle had also been the only member of her support crew who had bothered to visit her during her hospitalization. She remembered him talking about how he was keeping busy repairing damaged warjacks the withdrawing army had brought with them, and she knew where that was likely taking

place. Many mechanics, even chiefs, preferred to bunk in the same buildings where they worked.

Victoria Haley changed out of her hospital gown and into her civilian clothing, the armored shoulder of her mechanikal arm the only lingering remnant of her uniform. She covered the mechanikal arm as much as she could with a loose jacket, then pried open the window in her chamber, feeling the cool wash of fresh air from outside. Though it was early winter, the evening was relatively mild, which was good, as she was not very warmly dressed.

The bottom of the window opened from a central pivot and only pulled back so far. Wriggling free required some contortions, and she found herself panting from the exertion. She was glad she had kept up with her exercises. Then she was through, and she did not look back.



PART TWO

As she stood behind a thick hedge at the periphery of the garrison hospital, Victoria Haley knew she had not thought things through. She was aware of being impulsive and reckless; it had felt necessary to make a move before she talked herself out of it. Yet despite the cool air she felt a thrill of excitement.

Tomorrow when they discovered her gone she would be guilty of taking an unauthorized absence, a serious offense. Not that arresting her would be foremost on the minds of her superiors, given their primary concern was keeping her alive. They might even conclude her affliction had made her unhinged, something Haley admitted might even be true. Whatever they made of her motives, as a warcaster her life was worth more than others'. It was a cold calculus, but one with which she was quite familiar. She was a special military asset, and her life was not her own—it belonged to the army. Had her illness changed her perceived value? They had to know her outlook was bleak. No matter what anyone else thought, though, she knew Nemo would send people looking for her.

She wondered what she could possibly hope to gain on her own like this. Something from deep within drove her to act, to take matters into her own hands. She could not lie still while her fate rested with others, particularly when they were grasping at straws. Dolan had enough of her blood to continue his work.

Pushing doubt aside, she slipped down the dark streets of Point Bourne, away from the hospital. She slowed as she neared the outer

perimeter of the military quarter, where a sentry post guarded the closest road out. She was glad to see the gateway was open, if watched.

When the city had been besieged recently, the military quarter had sealed itself up. Doing this had enabled it to remain largely intact even as the rest of the city was overrun. Since Cygnar had reclaimed the streets and driven Cryx back into the Thornwood, the military quarter had reopened and had taken in many of the city's returning refugees, offering temporary housing until they could restore their own homes amid the war-ravaged streets. Soldiers still watched the comings and goings, alert to potential trouble. The two stationed here looked bored but not inattentive, well in that trance of alertness familiar to all who stood watch.

She stayed back, obscured by the shadow of a brick building adjacent to the road. She could have blustered her way past the guards, invoking her rank. But she was not in her uniform, which would make the encounter more memorable, and she wanted to give any subsequent searchers as few clues to her whereabouts as possible. She waited, pondering what she knew of the layout of the quarter and the wider city.

"Hold there!" one of the guards said sharply. Haley started but they were facing away from her, watching a group of a half-dozen men and women approaching from outside the quarter.

It was a group of young soldiers, perhaps cadets of the Strategic Academy returning from leave. They stopped and endeavored to answer the watch guards' questions. They spoke too low for her to hear their words, but the posture and ritual were familiar. It was just the distraction she needed. Without any attempt to be furtive, she walked toward the gate with brisk confidence, choosing her path to avoid the eye line of the sentries.

One of the youngest of the returning soldiers saw her. She gave him a quick smile, and he blinked stupidly at her before the guard

asking him questions demanded his attention again. Haley slipped away before anyone else looked to see what he was staring at. She angled her body so her mechanical arm would be less visible as she passed. She took a quick turn down another side street and waited again in the shadows, controlling her breathing and listening for any sound of pursuit. There was none. Even this bit of excitement had taken her breath, and she had to pause to recover.

A small victory but one she savored. She continued along side streets as she made her way closer to the river. The 'jack maintenance facility Lyle Garner should be attached to was located on the north side of town, facilitating access to the supply lines serving the front. She could hear the sound of water rushing down the falls that were used as diversionary runoffs from the river locks.

Haley was so pleased at attaining her freedom without being noticed that she did not realize at first that the neighborhood she was crossing was in particularly bad shape. She slowed her pace and took stock, noticing several of the buildings around her had been entirely reduced to rubble and had yet to be rebuilt. Even when the city had been intact, this had been a poor neighborhood, one often neglected by the city watch late at night.

It looked as though this area had suffered shelling from the Khadorans before they pushed through, likely while they were driving the Cygnaran defenders pulling back to the military quarter. There were also signs of the Cryxian incursion, such as the melted stone and metal debris blocking a nearby doorway that had been blasted off its hinges. The entryway was pooled with a liquid, and even at this distance she recognized the acrid scent of bile.

Haley had heard many stories of what the city had endured, but it was something else to see the destruction firsthand. She had missed the battles here while she had hastened to Corvis to warn Nemo about the assassination attempt. She felt a pang of guilt at

this, knowing her absence had been precisely what Deneghra had intended, facilitating Cryx's invasion on the heels of Khador. Perhaps she might have blunted or slowed the undead, allowing more civilians to flee. The horrors they had endured at the hands of the Cryxians who swept through the streets on the heels of the Khadorans had been atrocious—thousands systematically slaughtered and their corpses made into thralls.

Light flickered behind the shuttered windows of several of the half-blasted buildings, suggesting occupancy, although she doubted this neighborhood had been declared safe. Those living here must be squatters, then, not lawful residents. She couldn't blame them for trying to survive, particularly with winter threatening.

As she turned a corner she was startled to find herself face-to-face with a trio of men gathered around an open metal barrel within which they had lit a fire. Their clothing was little more than layered rags—remnants of what used to be better clothing, now torn and soiled. Their scruffy, unshaven cheeks were sunken below brooding eyes that glittered darkly in the light of the fire. She came to an abrupt stop and her eyes locked with those of the largest of the three, to her left. Around his head was tied a dirty strip of cloth that might have been a bandage, though its bloodstains had become blackened and dry.

The three men looked at one another and seemed to come to some sort of unspoken agreement. The leader nodded her direction in a way Haley did not like. They stepped toward her.

"Hey, spare some coin, lady?" asked the nearest on the right, a man with the bushiest beard of the group. He stepped forward as he spoke, reaching out his left hand. His right hand was down and against his leg, holding what looked like a thin club or a smooth but hefty stick.

A gleam of what might be metal in the hand of the large bandaged

man on the left caught her eye, though he immediately hid whatever he was holding behind his leg. He stepped toward her also, while the third was keeping back a bit and moving to the side around her in a wider arc. She stepped back a few steps. The man with the bandage attempted a smile, though it felt empty. "Don't worry. Give us something to buy some food, and we'll let you be. Help us out."

The other one said, "I lost my home in the invasion. You can spare a little, right?"

Despite their assurances, their posture was predatory. "I don't have any money," Haley said. As they resumed closing on her she warned, "You don't want to do this."

The bandaged man lost his smile. The third man, who had a slight limp, seemed to be working to get behind her to cut off her retreat. "It's not a matter of want, lady. It's a matter of need," the first demanded. "Hand over what you have, and you won't get hurt." She could smell the alcohol on his breath and saw his eyes were bloodshot. He reeked of desperation. In other circumstances she might have pitied him, but as they worked to surround her, she felt a sudden stab of fear.

Never in her adult life had she felt afraid of ordinary people. More often she had been afraid *for* them. There had been plenty of opportunities for fear, even desperation, on the battlefield. More than for herself, she had feared for those serving with her, the inevitable casualties. Her magic had always been with her. The ability to seize objects, people, with her mind and move them where she would. To unleash an explosion of arcane energy with but a thought. To create a bubble of protection where time moved differently for her than for those who came against her. With her power at her command, being surrounded was not daunting in the least. She could pick the foe apart one by one at her leisure, especially when directing her warjacks as extensions of herself. It had felt godlike, and she had

taken it for granted, reveled in it, knowing it was a part of her, like her lungs and her heart.

Now that was gone—or unreachable, at least. She could sense her magic just beyond her grasp. If she reached for it now, the arcane poison lingering in her body might kill her. Extending her senses, she felt the glimmer of warjack cortexes in the distance, but none were close enough.

But she was more than a warcaster; there was her training as a soldier, as an officer. She squared her shoulders and projected confidence, staring at the apparent leader. “Back off,” she ordered. “I’m an officer in the army. You don’t want to get in serious trouble.”

She saw immediately she had made a mistake. Maybe other people, at another place and time, would have been cowed, but these were not. The bandaged man’s expression went from empty and hungry to furious: his eyes and nostrils widened, and his mouth set in a snarl. The posture of the other two betrayed a similar shared anger.

“Is that supposed to *impress* us?” the man with the bandaged head asked, his voice rising. “It’s your fault this happened! Your fault my wife died, my house was destroyed! The army failed to stop them, then hid behind your walls. Pox on the army!” He spit at her and then lunged, reaching out with his free hand. She could see a short knife in the other. His friend was also closing.

Haley should have evaded them and fled, but she saw the knife and her reflexes kicked in. Until that moment her mechanikal arm had been obscured beneath her jacket, which she had draped over her side. Without thinking she grabbed the man’s knife arm by the wrist with her mechanikal hand. She didn’t have as much strength as she would have with her arcane turbine, but it was enough to check its motion. She squeezed, hoping to force him to drop the knife. It worked—perhaps too well.

As soon as the cold steel of her prosthetic hand gripped him, he

let loose a strangled yell, his eyes widening in panic. She squeezed too hard, and when he yanked back, she both felt and heard something give in his wrist. The knife dropped from his fingers but his eyes went wild, both terrified and angry. He swung clumsily with his free hand, trying to backhand her.

Haley ducked back out of his reach but got too close to the man with the club, who swung at her with gritted teeth. She deflected the swing with her living arm, not thinking she wasn't wearing armor there. The impact caused a throbbing surge of pain that ran straight up through her elbow. She lashed out with a retaliatory punch, but the pain and her weakness robbed it of its strength. At full health she would have flattened him, but instead she just jarred his head slightly. The third man, now close behind her, kicked her in the back of the knee.

She twisted and fell, landing hard on the cobblestones. She kicked out and felt impact accompanied by a grunt of pain. Then the stick came down again, cracking into her ribs. An explosion of pain shot through her, sending spots dancing across her vision and making it impossible to think. She tucked into a ball and covered her head with her mechanical arm while they kicked repeatedly, venting their rage. Haley had become accustomed to pain, but still it overwhelmed her. She panicked as she labored to breathe.

After what felt like a long time the kicking stopped, and then there were hands upon her waist, groping around her belt. She twisted and kicked out again, still covering her head with her arms. The hands withdrew. She peeked up and saw the bandaged man being pulled back by the others. His injured hand dangled at his side. "She doesn't have anything," he said, his voice shaking. He was breathing hard, his eyes wide.

Haley's ears were ringing but at last she sucked a ragged breath into her lungs.

“Come on, let’s go!” the first said in a pleading voice. “We’re gonna get in trouble.”

Another asked, “Is she dead? This could be bad.”

The first again: “No, she’s alive. We gotta get out of here!” They weren’t real criminals—just desperate, broken men.

By the time Haley could breathe with a more normal rhythm, they were gone. The spots were slowly fading, but every breath produced fresh pain from her ribs. She found herself chuckling, the sound slightly giddy. She got control of herself and sat up, then forced herself to her feet, wobbling. The world was spinning.

This was what she was reduced to. Three desperate and starving men who had been driven from their homes had overwhelmed her. She had held off an unending tide of Khadorans at Northguard—battled Lich Lord Asphyxious and Deneghra at the Temple Garrodh—even snuck into Blackwater to confront the Satyxis pirate queen. Now she knew her true worth: she was nothing without her power. She looked at her mechanical hand. She had despised this part of herself, but now it was all she could rely on.

Wincing, she limped toward the sound of falling water, toward the locks. She felt something in the distance, small glimmers like stars twinkling inside the back of her mind. Steamjack and warjack cortexes. Doing this did not provoke the poison, thankfully, and she could reach out and sense where they were. Finding the greatest concentration of them would guide her to her destination.



She must have looked quite a sight when Chief Lyle Garner opened his workshop side door to find her standing there, leaning against the frame, battered, dirty, and out of breath. He was a portly man with a wide, friendly face, most of his left cheek stained by a large port-wine birthmark. She was not surprised to see evidence that

he had been working. His overalls were grease-stained and he was wiping his hands with a rag as he opened the door.

“Major Haley! Aren’t you supposed to be in the hospital?” His eyes widened as he took in her condition. “Are you all right? What happened?” He looked past her as if expecting to see pursuers behind her.

“It looks worse than it is,” she said, moving inside and past him. “But I need to sit down.”

The interior of this area of the workshop had been transformed from an office into living quarters. It contained a slightly ordered chaos that was somehow comforting and familiar to Haley, reminiscent of similar buildings, often hastily erected at garrisons or within tents attached to army forces that settled anywhere for any length of time. She could see where he slept, a cot with rumpled blankets adjacent to a small wood-burning stovetop. There was also a simple table he likely used to eat his meals and take his morning coffee. On the other side of the room, a stout desk was littered with machine parts, gears, and an assortment of scattered tools.

Through an open interior door she saw the darkness of another, much larger room, the main workshop garage. The faint glow of mechanical devices, coming from alchemical capacitors and arcanodynamic accumulators. The glow revealed large skeletal devices, vises and frames to hold larger machine parts so they could be examined or worked upon from any angle. She knew there would be cranes attached to steam engines for lifting parts too heavy for any person to carry. She could sense a few cortexes in there, and many more in the broader complex beyond these specific rooms. This particular shop was just one small building of a larger facility where hundreds of military mechaniks worked on an endless series of broken and battered machines, trying to get them combat ready for the army.

The chief mechanik directed her to one of several old chairs and

took another for himself. She felt immediate relief on sinking into the sagging chair and let loose a deep sigh. Her head was spinning and there was a deep-seated ache that coincided with her heartbeat. Even without the beating she had just endured, she had pushed herself well past the limits of her stamina.

Garner leaned forward with obvious worry. "Were you attacked?"

"An attempted mugging on my way here. It doesn't matter."

He looked confused. "Should I get the watch?"

"No." She spoke in a stern voice, her officer voice, though the effort caused a jolt of pain in her head. "Now stop fussing and listen!" He immediately obeyed, his eyes wide. "No one can know I'm here. It's extremely important. I need your help."

She adjusted in her chair and a blaze of agony swept up her side, making her wince. She ran her living hand gently over her ribs, prodding the extent of the bruising. She didn't think anything was broken, but the poison had left her especially vulnerable. Everything she did hurt.

"Of course, Major. Whatever you need."

Reassured by the speed and sincerity of his statement, she said, "You've always been there for me, but I'm taking a risk here. I have an unusual request."

"I'm no good at fixing people, Major, just machines. Maybe we should send for your physician."

"Dolan is the *last* person I want to talk to. He's done everything he can for me already. Listen, Chief . . . *Lyle*. I know we haven't had time to talk much before. But I appreciated your visit to the hospital very much." She realized she wasn't making much sense and paused to gather her thoughts. "Look, we've seen a lot since you joined me during the war in Llael. You've kept my machines going in the worst circumstances. I don't trust Thorn to anyone but you. Those machines you fix, they keep me alive. I took it for granted, I

don't know if I ever thanked you for that." She felt herself becoming unexpectedly emotional, her eyes watering slightly. It took an effort of will to clamp down on it. It was the pain, the aftermath of spent adrenaline. She felt weary, and the room was spinning.

"You don't need to—"

"Yes," she interrupted. "Yes, I do. There are dozens of people around me, all the time, who help me do my job, as an officer, as a warcaster. They've been invisible to me, or nearly. That isn't right. Since my power was taken from me, I've become more aware of things I've done wrong. Things I neglected. I couldn't have done what I have without people like you."

"We're just doing our duty, Major." His face flushed a shade closer to his birthmark, and she could see her words had affected him, stirring both pride and embarrassment. "But I don't think you came here to thank me."

Haley swallowed and said, "Look, Lyle, I'm dying. No, it's true. I've not wanted to face it. Everyone has tried to keep up hope, but that won't change anything. There's nothing anyone in the hospital can do to change what's happening to me. Not Vigilant Peer Dolan, not the priests of Morrow, not Artificer General Nemo. We're running out of time. I can feel it."

Now his eyes were the ones watering. "What can I do?"

She took a deep breath. "I have an idea, a strange and unlikely one. Right now it's the only real hope I have." She paused a second, then said, "I was hoping you might be able to get me in touch with someone who worships Cyriss."

He blinked at the question. She saw a brief flash of fear and apprehension before his expression became guarded. "I don't have anything to do with those people. Why would you ask me that?"

His vehemence startled her, but then she quickly realized how the question must seem to him since the events at Calbeck. Rumors

were spreading like wildfire through Point Bourne about the attack on that neighboring town, with the Cyriss cultists to blame. General Nemo was respected and beloved among the support crews, and his life had been on the line.

Her mind went back to the outset of the Caspia-Sul War, when non-Morrowan soldiers started to hide their Menofixes. Overnight the Cygnaran Army had become an uncomfortable place to be a practicing Menite, though most Cygnarans who worshiped the Lawgiver had nothing in common with the zealots of the Protectorate. Things got worse after Lord Commander Stryker started to hunt down suspected traitors, rounding up the Menites of eastern Cygnar for questioning. Cygnar prided itself on tolerance, but that had vanished when the kingdom was threatened.

She leaned forward and said, "I don't care who you worship, Lyle. Every faith has different sorts of believers. Even in the Church of Morrow, everyone finds their own way. I know you had nothing to do with Calbeck. I wouldn't be here if you didn't have my trust."

She had always been a Morrowan, though her relationship with religion had been sometimes difficult. After the death of her parents she had been fostered at an abbey where the sisters had been spooked by the first manifestations of her arcane power and had tried to make it go away. She had nursed resentment for the church for years after that. She had not spent much time thinking about such things until her hospitalization.

Chief Garner sat back and seemed to relax slightly. He shook his head and said, "Not all gearheads and steamos are cultists."

"I understand that. But I know some mechaniks worship her, and I thought I saw you with her symbol once."

His face reddened again. "I dabbled with it briefly. Went to a meeting or two, but it wasn't for me. Made me uncomfortable. Now I'm glad I turned them down."

Haley slumped. “Oh,” she said. “I hadn’t considered that possibility. I need to find them.”

“What for?” He gnawed on his thumbnail.

She paused a moment, unsure what to say given she had only the barest start of an idea. “There might be a solution to my illness known to members of that cult. A slim chance, but that’s all I have. I need to find out if it’s possible. And it’s not something any of my superiors would allow.”

He frowned and said, “I’m really not a member, but I know some people who are.” He looked up at her and hastily added, “Good people. They’d never do anything against Cygnar.”

She leaned forward again. “I need to meet with them. Or, rather, I need to arrange for a meeting with someone who knows about clockwork bodies.” The words sounded strange the moment she said them. It was clear from his startled expression he had not expected anything of this sort. She explained, “I’ve heard some cults make use of them. I need to find someone who understands how that works—someone who knows their advanced technology, not just their beliefs. All I want is to talk. I’m no threat to them—quite the contrary.”

“Do you know what you’re asking of me, Major?” Garner’s voice was hoarse. “This is a bad time to be asking questions about Cyriss. I could lose my job. Or worse.”

Haley looked to the side. She had not fully considered the peril she was bringing to him. “I’ll understand if you can’t do this. If you do decide to help, I’ll do everything I can to protect you from potential blowback.”

He stood and began to pace. “This will take time, if I can do it at all. Your people will be looking for you.”

“That’s true,” she admitted. “They’ll start searching for me in the morning when they realize I’m gone.”

“You’ll need to stay here and keep a low profile. It shouldn’t be

hard for me to make sure no one comes in here; most of what I do here is on my own projects. My work shifts happen across the street, at the central foundry . . . I don't know, it might work. I'm not sure how long it'll take to make arrangements, though. You'll have to promise not to so much as peek outside."

She felt her vision getting blurry from tears before she consciously realized his words implied he had agreed to help. She felt an intense rush of gratitude that nearly stole her voice. "You'll do it?"

"Of course," he said, as if offended. "We're going to have to make room, though. I can sleep on the floor, maybe under the table or out in the garage. First let's get you cleaned up. I'm no physician, but I know basic first aid. I'll get my kit."



Over the following days Haley considered that she had exchanged one hospital bed for another. This one was messier, smellier, darker, and more confined than the last. Nevertheless, she felt a surge of renewed energy and enthusiasm, spurred by a hint of hope. She had time to think—too much time, really. She sought to distract herself, at first with simple exercises, though even these were becoming difficult. She felt weaker every day.

The first night Garner helped bandage and wrap her injuries, mostly surface scrapes and extensive bruising. When she checked her sides, she found that the large purpled blotches extended over a good portion of her torso, displaying an array of bruised colors. Her warcaster armor usually kept her safe from this sort of abuse. Despite years of warfare and battle, Haley had only been battered this thoroughly once before: when she had fought her sister and lost her arm. That was a memory she sought not to dwell on.

Garner returned after the next evening looking cautiously hopeful. He had made contact with his people, who had told him they could

arrange a meeting with someone higher up the chain. He evaded her questions about identities. She could understand his being protective of his friends. They would all be in potential peril if discovered. She remembered Nemo's simmering anger when he described his experience in Calbeck. Death cultists, he had called them. She had to hold to the idea that the Cyrissists Garner knew were different—and reasonable enough to talk with outsiders.

The next night the chief showed her around his garage, talking about its components as if he were introducing his relatives. With quiet pride he unveiled one of his pet projects, an old, battered Sentinel light warjack he had restored. It was one of the machines given up for scrap, having been so badly damaged they'd thought it not worth the time to repair. It was obvious from countless welds and mismatched scraps of metal that he had worked on it a long time, practically rebuilding its entire steam engine.

Haley didn't question him about how he'd come by the machine. Functional cortexes like the one it held were supposed to be recovered to be installed elsewhere, if possible. But she knew procedures were sometimes a bit fast and loose among the mechanik crews. Senior mechaniks turned a blind eye if a trusted subordinate took on work like this, seeing it as a means to sharpen their skills. If Garner succeeded, Cygnar would get a working Sentinel restored, one they'd written off the books. If not, they could recover the cortex later and he would presumably be better at his job for whatever he'd learned trying.

Haley touched its chassis with her mechanikal hand while reaching out with her mind to connect with its cortex, which was immediately responsive. It gave her a feeling of satisfaction to establish that connection again, to slide aside its cortex locks and let her mind meld with it. She looked through its eyes and beheld herself, shocked at how pale and fragile her own face appeared. She

spent some time silently communing with its artificial mind while Garner talked about fried reflex conduits, leaky hydraulics, and sheared pistons.

Though she'd always favored the Lancer in battle, she harbored some fondness for the Sentinel. Eight-and-a-half feet tall and over three tons in weight, it was a heavily armored and useful 'jack. The chain gun taking the place of its right arm was perfect for chewing through incoming Cryxian thralls or Khadoran Winter Guard, while a thick, spiked shield was attached to its left arm. Sentinels were conditioned to put themselves in harm's way for living soldiers; several of her officers owed their lives to the intervention of one of these warjacks. The surface of this one's shield was pocked with countless impact marks, dents, and cracks.

Something about that shield led her to realize that this specific Sentinel felt very familiar. Looking at the machine more closely, she saw a word inscribed on its left shoulder armor that confirmed her hunch. "Brand" was scratched crudely in the blue paint, as if inscribed with a trench knife long ago, possibly decades. Whether the name indicated the machine itself, an old 'jack marshal, or maybe someone whose life it had saved, she didn't know, but at some point she had definitely controlled this 'jack before. Given how long Garner had been with her, it might have been one of any number of engagements. Likely it had been destroyed as a tactical sacrifice and forgotten, at least by everyone but Crew Chief Lyle Garner.

"Brand," she said aloud. It was powered down, its engine still, but its auditory pickups heard her and she sensed recognition from its cortex.

While she recuperated, she watched Garner work on the 'jack after his shifts ended. She was too weak to help out directly. They soon realized her mental connection with Brand's cortex could help him test its connections with the rest of its chassis. Garner explained

he hadn't been able to isolate a problem with the complex array of reflex conduits that served as its nervous system.

Together the two of them were able to find the main impediment, a fried cluster below the cortex that wasn't allowing energy to pass through. With some labored work Garner rebuilt the conduit with a voltaic soldering iron. After opening the workshop's upper vents and hood to collect the smoke, he fired up the warjack's engine. She urged Brand to walk forward, and it took its first step since its apparent destruction, prompting a whoop of delight out of the mechanik. Haley shared his enthusiasm, finding it felt good to be useful again.

Over the noise of the machine's engine, they heard a sharp rap on the side door of Garner's living quarters. They both froze. Garner pointed at a mostly empty vertical supply locker. Once Haley had managed to squeeze inside, he went to see who had come calling.

Haley couldn't see or hear anything from her position, and it was a tense couple of minutes until he returned. "You can come out now," he said, and she extracted herself. His face was grim.

"Bad news?" she asked, her mind going to the thought that her presence had been discovered. Garner had previously affirmed that there were people throughout the city searching for her, and a sizable reward had been offered for news of her whereabouts.

"No . . ." he said, though his voice was subdued. "That was my friend with the local Cyrissists. The meeting is set up."

"Good!" Haley paused and asked, "Why the long face?"

"I didn't tell him to come directly here. He was supposed to slip a coded note under the door in secret, after which I'd go find him. Looks like his contacts wanted to accelerate things. It makes me uneasy."

Haley considered this, thinking about the reward being offered. "How accelerated?"

"They want it to happen tonight, in a remote spot south of the

city off the main road. I know how to get there.” He paused, then added, “I told him I wasn’t sure that would work, but he said it was a one-time opportunity. Now or never. Someone’s supposed to meet us there, someone versed in the advanced technology kept by the inner faith, whatever that means.” He was silent for several seconds before saying, “This whole situation feels wrong. I don’t think you should go.”

Haley frowned and considered his warning. “How much do you trust this friend?”

“The one who came over tonight? Completely. We grew up together, apprenticed together, enlisted together. He’d take a bullet for me, and I’d do the same for him. But he’s deep into this religion. He might trust them too much. I don’t know anything about anyone else he brought in.”

Haley weighed this. It was entirely possible they had been deceived, and someone wanting to collect the reward was waiting to confirm she was here. She pressed her lips together. “I have to,” she said finally. “This is what I’ve been waiting for. I appreciate and understand your concern, but there was always going to be some risk.” Haley gave him a steady look. “Give me all the details. I’ll need to figure out the best way to get there without being seen.”

“I have a plan in mind. It includes Brand here.” He rapped a knuckle on the steel shoulder of the Sentinel. “He’ll be my excuse to be out and about. We’ll have him fueled up and ready and will keep his engine idling during the meeting.”

Haley shook her head. “I can’t risk you on this. It’s my problem.”

He glowered and said, “Like hell! Have you thought about how you’re going to get to the meeting place? It’s not close. Consider what happened on your way here the other night. You’ll want someone with you.”

He had a point. “Okay, so how were you planning to get us there?”

“I have access to a wagon, and with Brand loaded on the back and a tarp over him it’ll be easy to keep you hidden. I’ll be the driver. It won’t be a lot of backup, but my wrench and a Sentinel’s chain gun is a lot better than nothing.”

Haley sighed. She didn’t have any better plans to get past the outer wall sentries without being observed. “Fine. But you’re staying with the wagon, and so is this hunk of metal, while I find out if these people can even help me.”



PART THREE

The wagon lurched along the trail, giving her a jolt of pain every time it bumped over the uneven road. She was wedged in against the Sentinel, which was inert and strapped down flat on its back, taking up most of the wagon bed. The air was close and stale under the tarp, and she resisted the urge to find a way to peek outside.

After what seemed an interminable journey, the wagon stopped. She heard the crunching of footsteps around the side and waited tensely, even knowing it was probably just Garner. Her metal right hand gripped a long, slender steel rod, one she could ostensibly use either as a walking staff or as a weapon if needed. It was nowhere near as formidable as Echo, her mechanikal spear, but she was glad to have something. Garner had improvised its fabrication by installing accumulators into its shaft that fed energy to small force generators at either end, letting it deliver blows with far greater impact than her strength alone would have allowed. She'd also borrowed a small holdout pistol from Garner, which was tucked into a holster hidden behind her back, under her jacket. She hoped none of this would be needed.

Garner pulled the tarp back and gave her a smile. He whispered, "We're not far, and I saw a place where I can watch your back. Help me get this thing down." He patted Brand's metal foot. Though it was night, the bright moons allowed for reasonably good visibility.

Attached to the wagon was a small crane akin to the larger ones in his shop. The wagon was wide and stout, with a reinforced frame,

specifically designed to bear a warjack's weight. A pair of heavy draft horses were harnessed to the front. Garner leapt onto the back of the bed, untied the Sentinel, and with Haley's help hooked the crane's chains to the chassis. He engaged the crane engine to lift the warjack out and onto its feet. As soon as it was upright, Garner ignited the 'jack's steam engine as well and let it build up pressure. Haley looked around but could tell little about where they were except it was familiar terrain amid the rocky hills between Point Bourne and Bainsmarket.

"This isn't particularly quiet," Haley said, raising her voice to speak over the rumbling engines.

"We're not going to be exactly hidden," he said. "They'll know we're here. I'll keep back with the 'jack so as not to seem an immediate threat, but I'd rather they knew you aren't alone. My friend will be escorting the person you're meeting so we can tell everything's on the level." He lifted a bronze collapsible spyglass. "I'll confirm he's there. If anything looks strange, we'll turn around."

They began hiking up a slight incline, one that reinforced to Haley how diminished her endurance had become. She was soon struggling to breathe and was seeing spots again, though the walking staff helped. Soon they reached a flatter area near the summit of the hill. Brand had walked stoically behind, its heavy tread sending up a shower of dirt with each step. Haley felt reassured to have the machine there, and she periodically looked through its eyes. While it was a relatively clear night, the warjack's optics were better than her own eyes in low light conditions.

"We'll wait here," Garner said. "They'll be up ahead." He pointed down the slope toward a wider level area where a pair of old trees stood, each leaning apart. There were a variety of craggy boulders in the vicinity, and just past the trees was a sharp drop down toward a small stream.

Staring at the shadows between the trees, she saw a pair of figures standing there. She pointed. "Is one of those your friend?"

The chief extended his spyglass and squinted through it. "Hard to tell in the dark." He was silent for several seconds, then said, "Yeah, that's him. On the right. His name is James. He looks nervous, but I guess that's to be expected."

"You said you two enlisted together. Is he still in the army?"

Garner shook his head. "He's a civilian now, a member of the Steam and Iron Workers Union. We often hire guys like him for specific projects, and he's been volunteering his time since the attack on Point Bourne."

"I'm sure he's a great guy," she said. "You don't have to convince me. Wait here." She left Brand a standing mental order to stay on high alert, then walked down the hill. It was difficult to see the ground well, and she used the metal staff for support more than once when she almost stumbled. She felt quite exposed and vulnerable. Reaching out with her mind she sought to detect any warjacks or warcasters in the vicinity; she had always been especially sensitive to such things. She sensed nothing nearby other than Brand.

She held up her left hand in what she hoped was a friendly gesture. The man on the right responded in kind.

As she neared she could see James was a man of similar age of Garner, though he was thinner and his hair had gone prematurely to grey. He gave a half-smile that was probably intended to be reassuring, though he kept glancing uncomfortably at the man beside him.

That man pulled back the hood of his robe to reveal a head that was shaved bald. She was struck by his youth. He would have looked perfectly at home alongside recently trained long gunner recruits. Haley had asked for someone versed in advanced Cyrissist technology, which seemed dubious at his age. Pulling back his dark outer robe revealed strangely ornate armor beneath. Moonlight

gleamed off chromed silver and bronze, and she saw the symbol of the Maiden of Gears etched on several surfaces. It was difficult to tell if he was armed. Several unfamiliar devices and metal cylinders were hooked into his waist alongside a dangling metal helmet. If he had been wearing it, she wasn't sure she would have known he was human at all.

The stranger spoke first. "Major Victoria Haley?" At her nod, he smiled in a way she did not like. "Excellent. I am Optifex Quintus."

"Thank you for answering my invitation, Optifex. That is a rank? Are you a priest? You are younger than I expected."

His smile faded. "Optifex covers a wide array of tasks. You can consider me akin to an initiate, someone who must prove himself before being allowed full awakening. Goddess, save us from the corruption of our flesh." He said the last under his breath, a reflexive prayer. He held up a hand to forestall the question Haley opened her mouth to ask. He interjected, "Do you any means of proving your identity?"

Haley felt a surge of annoyance. "Such as? I don't have any paperwork from the army, if that's what you're asking. Who else would I be?"

Quintus looked to James and asked, "Can you confirm her identity? I presume you have seen her before." His voice carried a degree of self-assured arrogance.

James stepped closer to get a better look at Haley. She met his stare calmly. Garner had described his friend as deeply religious, but his body posture suggested he was not comfortable with the man beside him. Perhaps Quintus did not meet the ideal he had imagined for a young priest of his goddess, or more likely clandestine meetings in the middle of the night made him nervous. James said, "I'm reasonably certain that's her, Optifex. She looks different without her armor, of course. But . . . Yes, this is Major Haley."

Quintus smiled and nodded. “Good. The time to prove my commitment is at hand.” He looked directly at Haley and said, “Please, ask the questions that brought you here.”

The Cyrissist’s demeanor unsettled Haley, but she gathered her thoughts. “I understand your mechaniks, or however you refer to them—”

“Optifex,” he interrupted mildly, condescendingly. “Or engineers.” He had taken one of the devices hanging from his waist in hand and was idly adjusting its settings. Haley had seen mechaniks do something similar with wrenches on their tool belts.

“Of course,” she continued. It made sense a religion founded on gears and machinery would combine the roles of mechaniks and priests. “I understand your engineers have gotten around bodily concerns by making clockwork vessels, and you can transfer the mind of a living person . . .”

As she spoke he seemed to be paying her no attention. He raised the cylinder he had been adjusting, eyeing it intently. He then twisted a series of rings near its top, each twist making a series of sharp ratcheting noises. It occurred to her that he was setting about this task with deliberation rather than from some sort of nervous habit. Even as her words trailed off, the optifex raised the cylinder and thumbed a switch.

Haley’s instincts had her already in motion, having adjusted her grip on her staff with the intent of knocking the thing out of his hand if necessary. She was too slow. A small metal orb launched from the top of the cylinder straight into the air as if pushed by an intense but narrow beam of silver light. There was a gong-like tone as rippling white light burst from the hovering orb, making it momentarily as bright as day.

Many things happened at once.

The light blinded her, and her swing missed the optifex. Through

squinted and pained eyes she saw a blur that was the priest twisting and leaping away. He went off the edge of the overhang just past the trees. She had only taken a step in that direction when James gave a shout, and out of the corner of her eye she saw something spherical erupt from the ground where they had been standing. This orb was almost two feet in diameter, and its mirrored surface was festooned with rounded, knob-like protrusions. It had clearly been buried prior to the meeting.

It was not difficult to deduce the orb was hostile. She tried to leap away. James unexpectedly came to her aid, interposing himself between her and the device to give her a sharp push and send her tumbling. She almost misinterpreted it as an attack and might have swung at him if she hadn't already been off-balance. She tumbled painfully across the rocks and sand, a renewed insult to the bruises covering her torso.

A high-pitched keening noise from the metal sphere was followed by a low thump powerful enough to rattle her bones. She was sliding behind one of the tree trunks just as the metal sphere exploded into shrapnel in a flash of light. She covered her head as the upper half of the tree was shredded. Sharp metal fragments thunked into the trunk behind her as well as sinking into the ground inches from her feet. James was gone. She saw a few bloody pieces of what must be the grisly remains of his body scattered nearby.

She drew the pistol from her back with her right hand, transferring the staff to her left. Before risking giving up what little shelter she had, she reached out mentally to Brand and looked through its eyes. The warjack's military-grade cortex had urged it into action, and it was already rushing down the hill, chain gun spinning. Numerous other floating metal spheres of different configurations had arisen around the area. The Sentinel sprayed bullets at the nearest.

One with what looked like some sort of bolt-firing mechanism

slung beneath it turned and launched a metal projectile at Chief Garner, who was advancing just behind the warjack, his heavy wrench in hand. Brand shifted to the left and extended its shield, intercepting the shot intended for the mechanik. It deflected off the curved steel with a clang.

Haley urged it to concentrate fire on any spheres targeting Garner. A spray of bullets from its spinning barrels tore two of these bolt-firing spheres to scrap, but more were floating its way. Haley didn't spot another of the knob-covered mine spheres until it had moved close enough to detonate against Brand's right flank. Fortunately Garner was safely on the other side and didn't get hit by any of the shrapnel, but the blast tore through the armor on the Sentinel's torso, leaving some of its inner workings exposed. Haley clenched her teeth and mentally directed its fire against the other nearest spheres. One managed to launch a bolt past Brand's shield to sink deep into Garner's thigh. He gave a strangled scream and fell, clutching his leg.

Haley ignored her aches and pains amid a burst of adrenaline as she scrambled to her feet. She snapped off a pistol shot to deliver a bullet into the innards of one of the spheres closing on Garner, but through Brand's eyes she saw another turning toward her. It launched a bolt she barely stepped to the side in time to evade.

With no time to reload the holdout pistol, she dropped it to grip her staff in both hands. She whirled the metal staff overhead to crash through the sphere's thin armor, sending it tumbling down the hillside clanging and spraying metal parts. The impact sent a jolt of pure agony up through her arms, making her gasp. Through a haze of pain she remembered Dolan's words that she was in no condition for a fight, which had been even before three men had kicked her ribs in.

She limped back toward the Sentinel even as a different sphere launched a glass globe filled with some sort of liquid at her. It shattered

just to her left and sent a wash of glowing chemicals across her legs.

She felt a jolt of fear, thinking of Cryx's corrosive bile, but there was no burning. Where the liquid had struck, her legs were glowing with a peculiar yellow luminescence. Several of the bolt-firing spheres immediately turned to track her, apparently drawn to the light. Giving a yell, Haley swung her staff at the sphere that had marked her and felt satisfaction as the blow connected, its force generators sending that enemy from the air to shatter onto the rocks. Once more a jolt of pain went up her arms, and she gritted her teeth, forcing herself to retain her grip on the weapon.

She made a desperate lunge just in time to get behind Brand as several of the spheres fired bolts, hitting the warjack instead of her. Though the projectiles were small, they were fired with great force and managed to penetrate the warjack's armor. Brand returned fire and took several more of the floating contraptions from the air.

With despair Haley spotted almost a dozen metal entities striding over the rise. They looked akin to warjacks, but smaller—man-sized, bipedal clockwork creatures with glowing Cyriss symbols on their chests. Each had a single gleaming eye at the center of its conical head. Across the back of each figure's left hand was an array of menacing barrels that almost certainly represented some kind of projectile weapon.

She missed her hand cannon. The only weapon she had to deal with enemies at range was Brand. She sent the light warjack marching in their direction, firing as it moved. The barrels of its chain gun were red-hot and sizzling with heat, making her concerned the firing mechanism might seize up if she pushed it, if she didn't run out of ammunition first. She prioritized the last of the fast-moving floating spheres as its first target. Meanwhile she leaned down to check Garner. He was alive, but his leg was bleeding badly, the metal bolt stuck fast. She needed to get him to cover.

“On your feet, Chief!” she ordered sternly. She helped him up, letting him lean on her shoulder as they moved toward a nearby boulder. He could only use his good leg, and she felt pathetically weak as his weight crushed down on her. She set him against the rock on the opposite side from the approaching metal men and labored to catch her breath, her lungs on fire.

Haley’s mind had been divided as they moved, guiding the Sentinel’s shots in short bursts, trying to let the glowing barrels cool. If she had her magic, none of this would be a problem. She felt impotent rage and could do nothing except channel it into her warjack.

The metal men advanced fearlessly. Three were torn apart in sequence by chain gun bullets, but the rest got close enough to fire their own weapons, unleashing a whizzing swarm of spinning projectiles, each like a hungry, miniature drill. These ripped through the Sentinel’s shield. One more severed vital pistons in its left arm, causing it to drop its shield. Its torso armor was already compromised, and several more drills hit it center mass. Brand managed to gun down two more before metal-shredding drills pierced its cortex and Haley lost her mental connection.

“Let’s go! We can’t stay here!” Haley ordered Garner. He looked pale and dazed as she helped him again to his feet. He blinked and nodded, then leaned on her as they moved as quickly as they could away from the metal soldiers, which she could hear gaining ground on them.

All Haley had to protect them with was her staff, and she felt close to blacking out herself.

She looked up, and her heart sank to see several more metal soldiers approaching from directly ahead. They raced down the slope with a smooth, unnatural gait. The gleaming light from their single eyes pierced her and she froze, raising her staff instinctively. The one

in the fore raised its left arm and she found herself staring at the black holes of six barrels, knowing death had come. *Better to die in combat than in bed*, she thought, but the fact that Garner would die alongside her filled her mouth with a bitter taste. He squeezed her shoulder in fear as he braced to be torn apart by incoming fire.



The landscape seemed to darken for a moment, as though the moons above were eclipsed. Then bluish-white light flashed across her eyes and her skin tingled as the hairs on her arms and neck stood on end. She heard muffled blasts and the rending of metal as the manlike machines in front of her were consumed in a coherent beam of something that looked like solid lightning. It bored a searing hole through their chromed bodies, and they collapsed noisily to the ground.

She looked past them to the source of the light and saw a very different floating machine, this one considerably larger than any she had seen so far. It reminded her of a heavy warjack in size and proportions, with arms that terminated in some sort of voltaic weapons, each glowing arcane blue. It had no legs but instead floated several feet above the ground. Below its waist was an inverted cone and the air beneath it shimmered like heat waves over a stove.

She felt a sharp tingling in the back of her head, and she knew a warcaster was very near—closer than should have been possible without her sensing it until now. Adding to the sensory confusion, her mind could detect nothing resembling a cortex inside the warjack-like machine that had just melted the adversaries about to kill her and Garner.

Garner mumbled something incoherent and his eyes rolled back into his head. He slumped, the blood loss getting the better of him. Unable to bear his weight, she could only try to guide his fall to

avoid him landing on the bolt in his thigh. Ignoring the fact that she was surrounded by strange machines whose intentions she did not understand and a warcaster she had not identified, she bent down to rip strips of cloth from his shirt and cinched his wound to slow the bleeding.

It felt as though the world had become unnaturally still. She looked up at last to see additional floating machines approaching from closer to the blasted meeting site. The nearest had arms that terminated in large, scalloped, shield-like plates with bladed protrusions. She looked for the metal men that had disabled Brand but saw nothing more than scattered pieces of chrome and sheared gears. The warjack itself had toppled over downslope, smoke and steam rising from its inert form.

Strange and amazing as the hovering cortexless warjacks were, the next arrival utterly captivated her attention. This was a smaller but regal figure who strode between her hovering protectors, which followed and flanked her. There was no question she was in charge.

Haley recognized this as another machine, but the word felt inadequate. With wide hips and a curved bosom, there was no question the newcomer was female, despite her body being crafted of mirrored chrome.

Dozens of intricate gears clicked and spun at the figure's narrow waist. A steel circlet surrounded her head, while behind it swept something that at first appeared to be some sort of headdress or cowl but on closer examination seemed a far more complex machine. What looked to be a cloak flowing behind this figure housed two of the floating spheres, and below these were dozens of segmented metal arms, each terminating in a curved blade. Whereas surgical arms cephalyx bore on their backs were frightening and horrific, these were somehow graceful and pleasing to the eye, their motions like a flowing dance of steel. In addition to the larger warjacks, she

was escorted by a pair of floating spheres that looked like metal eyes. They stared fixedly at Haley, who felt pinned beneath their gaze.

There could be no question that this figure was dangerous, doubly so with Haley in her current state. She wasn't even certain she could swing her staff again. Yet remarkably, she discovered she felt not fear but wonder and awe. For just a moment she had the unlikely thought that she was beholding the goddess Cyriss made tangible.

She quickly dismissed that thought and collected her wits. The figure came near, within ten feet, and stopped. The blades on her back flowed smoothly together like folding scissors. "Who are you?" Haley asked, glad to hear her voice did not shake.

The voice that came from the machine was as feminine clear as it was inhuman. "Greetings, Major Victoria Haley. I am Directrix, Iron Mother of the Convergence of Cyriss. I apologize for the delay in my arrival. I had hoped to intervene before any harm was done, to prevent the error of my subordinates. Those responsible for this assault will be punished."

Amid this strange battlefield, having endured an ambush that had nearly killed her, Haley was not expecting apologies. She blinked, then glanced at Garner and said, "My crew chief is hurt badly. He needs attention."

Directrix was quiet for a moment and Haley sensed something, though it was fleeting: something like the echo of a mental command between a warcaster and a warjack. Then the figure said, "I have sent for aid. It will be here directly."

"You are a figure of authority among your . . . hierarchy?" She had trouble finding the right word.

Directrix inclined her head. "I am *the* authority."

Haley blinked and decided it was better not to ask for clarification, whether that meant Directrix was in charge of some local branch of worship, an entire regional cult, or something else. Clearly she

possessed formidable firepower and machinery, and it was not lost on Haley that the forces she had faced were akin to the ones Artificer General Nemo had described fighting at Calbeck. She had not intended to approach the Convergence at all, but clearly they were more connected to other Cyrissists than she had thought.

“Why did your subordinates ambush me? I sought a peaceful meeting. As you can see, I came nearly unarmed.” A slight exaggeration, but a justified one.

“Decisions were made by those who should have asked permission,” Directrix said smoothly. “A misunderstanding. There have been recent unfortunate conflicts with your military. Certain members of the clergy labeled you a potentially dangerous enemy and thought it best to arrange for your elimination. A lapse in judgment.”

The entire situation had an aura of unreality. Haley could not ignore the possibility that this entire arrangement had been staged, including her “rescue.” At the same time, she could see little reason for such complexities, given she had already indicated a willingness to make contact. She asked, “But unlike your subordinates, you do not see me as an enemy?”

“Not at the moment, no. I would classify you as a *potential* enemy: an important distinction. Some prefer to eliminate anyone in that category, as a short-sighted expedient. I believe a potential enemy is also a potential friend. It is vital we establish useful relationships beyond our halls. There is much to learn.”

Haley considered this and remembered another part of Nemo’s story. “Is that why your people tried to recruit General Sebastian Nemo?”

Directrix folded her metal arms and said, “Sebastian Nemo is a great mind, a nescient savant. We would be tremendously enriched were he to join us. But I did not come here to speak of him. Ask the questions that prompted you to take such risks. You, too, seek to learn.”

Haley felt she was on slightly more solid ground at last. Given what Nemo had experienced, Directrix would likely try to recruit her as well. It explained the metal woman's willingness to talk; in any negotiation, each side had goals. "I wished to learn about clockwork bodies," she said, feeling a bit foolish to be broaching the subject with what was clearly a mechanikal person. "I had heard you used them, though I hadn't expected to see such irrefutable evidence."

Directrix made a rhythmic sound that might have been laughter. Then she said, "Oh, yes, we are able to transcend the flesh. It is the greatest gift of the goddess. By this we are awakened."

"Optifex Quintus was alive," Haley said. "Not clockwork."

"The awakened state must be earned. He is unready. He may never be ready."

Haley felt her hands trembling and forced herself to remain calm, to conceal the eagerness she felt. She said, "And when you become clockwork, what happens to your mind? To your soul?"

"The essence is preserved within a protected and sealed capsule that remains with us: our core, our being. Nothing is lost. In fact, a great deal is gained. Removed from the flesh, the mind becomes pure, unfettered. Thought is easier, the imagination freed. All distractions from the imperfections of biology vanish. It is tremendously liberating. Though I admit, there are aspects of the flesh that are lost, and some of these are missed." There was a pause and Haley wondered if it was the result of an emotion attached to this last sentence. Directrix said, "In the aggregate, the gains far outweigh what is lost."

"And your power, if you had any before? Arcane power, I mean." Haley realized she had broken her calm facade and looked away.

"That is also retained and even augmented. What you perceive as the arcane is simply the ability to harness the underlying formulas and laws of reality, which are responsive to the will of an empowered

soul. Each soul is itself a formula, a fragment of the divine. A soul longs for freedom from the flesh, a state ordinarily attained only in death. Ours is another way.”

Even though she had little interest in exploring or understanding their cosmological beliefs, Haley had to admit there was something appealing in these words. She was self-aware enough to also understand how badly she wanted everything Directrix said to be true. “You said a clockwork body must be earned. What about outsiders? Is it possible for them?”

“It is a sacred transformation. Not even all who are committed to our cause are deemed ready—or worthy.”

“I see.” Haley felt her heart sink in her chest.

She tensed as a trio of figures approached from behind Directrix, their armor and helmets nearly identical to what Optifex Quintus had worn. They strode with purpose and carried a variety of weapons or tools. She tightened her hands on her steel staff. Directrix said, “These will tend to your companion.”

Haley was relieved to see the promise of assistance had not been empty. Lyle Garner was as comfortable as Haley had been able to make him, but his breathing had become uneven. She helped adjust his position for the newly arrived Cyrissists and watched them warily. They had brought medical supplies and surgical implements and seemed to know what they were doing.

One of them set out what appeared to be a pair of collapsible rods. This proved to be a portable gurney, with white cloth between the two rods once extended and support poles terminating in rugged wheels. They lifted Garner atop this and tended to his wound. One used a clamp and wire cutter to sever the head of the bolt that had impaled his leg. The projectile was quickly removed, and then the wound was neatly cleaned and sealed. They conducted the entire procedure with the same swift efficiency she imagined they displayed

when tending one of their machines instead of a living person.

Directrix merely waited, though there were always elements of her frame in gentle motion, as if she were some sort of elaborate timepiece. Haley said abruptly, "I'm dying. I don't think I have much time left. My body is filled with a Cryxian poison we can't eradicate."

"I am aware of this," Directrix said. Her certainty gave Haley a start. Had the Convergence been spying on them somehow? It was unnerving to imagine this previously unknown, radical cult so familiar with her vulnerabilities.

"It occurred to me that perhaps, with all you have accomplished, with the technology at your disposal, you might be able to fix my problem." She inclined her head toward Garner. "Clearly you have skilled medics and surgeons."

Directrix said, "The biological body is akin to a machine, albeit a chaotic and highly imperfect one. For members of our faith that have not awakened, we know how to tend their injuries, to set bones, stop bleeding, and accelerate mending. We know nothing that would eradicate the toxins threatening your life."

Haley felt her hope dwindle. "What if one of your own were afflicted as I am? Could you perform some sort of partial replacement?" She fumbled a bit at the words again, uncertain what exactly she was asking for. "Like my arm, but more extreme."

"We do not believe in partial replacement. What was done with your arm would not be performed by us. One is either living or machine, not both." These words were a surprise to Haley. Directrix continued, her tone thoughtful. "I have a living daughter nearly your age. Were she afflicted with your condition, I might be forced to grant her transformation. That would be the only way: to become clockwork."

Haley said, "But that route is not available to me. I'm not one of you. Even were you to allow me to join you, there wouldn't be time to prove myself."

Directrix tilted her head slightly. She said slowly, "Exceptions can be made."

A jolt shot through Haley, bringing her to full alertness. "What do you mean?"

"There are circumstances that allow accelerated awakening. Among our own, those who are gravely injured in battle are often allowed to become clockwork to preserve their minds, even if otherwise they might be thought unready."

"And outsiders?"

"Outsiders are another matter. Ordinarily, this would not be possible. Not without first joining us and proving your devotion."

Haley considered lying, expressing a firm commitment to their cause. She did not think she could fool this "iron mother" for a moment, though, and she would not risk being forced to turn on her people. "I will not join you. I will not break my vows to Cygnar or help you harm my countrymen."

Directrix held up a single metal finger and said, "We have no designs on Cygnar. Not directly."

"At Calbeck—"

"It was necessary for us to erect a structure there, for a brief time. Its inhabitants would not have cooperated and we could not allow interference, so there was battle. Unfortunate, but the scope was limited."

"Because you were defeated," Haley said, feeling some indignation on Nemo's behalf. "You were driven from the town."

Directrix seemed nonplussed by this. "We accomplished our objective in Calbeck. We fought only as long as was required and then withdrew. We have specific goals, and conquest is not among them. To any degree we find ourselves at cross-purposes with your government, it is a matter of finding an expedient means for removing obstacles. Violence is a tool, one of many. It is not always the best tool."

Haley grew more wary. “I meant it when I said I won’t join you. I don’t worship your goddess, and I will not convert.”

The clockwork priestess spread both her arms in a gesture of conciliation. “Listen to me carefully. Ordinarily we would never consider the divine form being given an outsider. You are not ordinary. We know you, Victoria Haley. You are a nescient savant as well, though of a different sort. Your potential is unlimited. This is of value to us. Great value.”

“What do you mean, ‘nescient savant’? You used that term about General Nemo,” Haley said.

“Nescient savants are those whose minds are touched by our goddess without knowing it. They shape a new reality through knowledge, will, and an intuitive understanding of the underlying laws by which all things are governed. They are exceedingly rare. Lesser minds flock to them or scatter before them. Our faith has only existed for four centuries, but the goddess has been guiding humanity since before the written word. Very few such minds have been collected, preserved.”

Haley swallowed and said, “I don’t like the idea of being collected. And I worship Morrow, not Cyriss.”

“In this case it does not matter. You do not need to convert. Few outside our faithful know that Morrow was himself a nescient savant. His mind was touched by our goddess, and his teachings served her well. What he accomplished served to advance the coming of our faith, our ability to find and recognize the Maiden of Gears.” Haley narrowed her eyes. Directrix continued, “Morrow’s teachings did more to advance science than anything accomplished by anyone else of his era. All the mathematicians and engineers that followed in Morrow’s wake were but walking toward the discovery of our goddess. Several of his ascendants performed similar work.”

Haley shook her head. “I am not interested in learning your beliefs.”

Directrix replied, "As you wish. The fact remains, your faith or lack thereof is no barrier. I can ensure you endure, transformed. This is within my authority."

"What do you want in return?" Haley asked, feeling she had come to the crux of it. She had to know the part Directrix had been withholding, the line she would be asked to cross.

"Nothing," Directrix said. "I ask nothing of you beyond discretion and an open mind. The process can occur only within the halls of our greatest temples. I would need to take you there. I would show you the wonders therein and ask you not to use that knowledge as a weapon against us. The insights you would gain might allow you to assist me in finding better solutions to obstacles between your nation and our faith in the future. You could serve as an ambassador, a liaison."

"There would be no other obligations? No demands? You would just let me walk away?"

"I would," Directrix said. "Although it must be said that your life would never be the same. You may find your old friends will not welcome you back, when your skin is steel." Haley considered Nemo's strong aversion to this process as well as what she had herself felt when she had first replaced her arm. "You may find yourself in exile, or needing to remain as our guest. This would not be imposed, but our halls would be open to you. You would likely wish to remain with us, at least for a time, until you mastered your new form. But you would be under no compulsion. We want you to exist."

These words put matters into closer perspective than Haley had allowed herself to consider. She had thought of what existence might be like after taking a clockwork body, but it had seemed a wild but unlikely possibility. Was she ready to sunder herself from humanity? She had to admit, the thought did not frighten her as much as it might once have. She would not be alive, but she would still exist.

Her power would be restored. She could fight for Cygnar—if not alongside the army, perhaps from the shadows. Might she prevent hundreds of thousands of deaths by serving as a liaison to the Convergence for her nation?

It was tempting. More than tempting.

Would her mind be her own? Directrix had acquiesced easily to her questions, had made no effort to convert her. Their conversation had taken surprising turns. Would Nemo have been persuaded, were he in her position?

“Victoria Haley, come closer. I would show you something.” Directrix opened her arms.

Haley warily stepped forward, finding as she did so that the iron mother was larger than she had realized. There was a scent of clean oil from her, and a smell like the air after a storm. She was keenly aware of just how much her life was in this creature’s hands. A single one of those bladed extensions on her back could kill her. But that had been the case since the warcaster had arrived. Whether she was ten feet away or a hundred yards, Haley was at the iron mother’s mercy.

“Touch my vessel,” the priestess said, “and send your senses into me, as you would one of your warjacks.”

And so she did, reaching with her living hand to place several fingers in contact with the cold metal of Directrix’s hip. She closed her eyes and extended her mind, like she had done many times, not just with warjacks, but other mechanika as well. When she picked up her weapons for the first time, she would send her mind into their conduits, attuning herself to them. So, too, with her warcaster armor. Such actions had once required effort, when training as a journeyman, but they had since become habitual and unthinking. Now her mind flowed into the startling complexity and ingenious design of Directrix’s frame. It was a marvel of engineering, beyond

anything she had ever experienced. She could feel the flow of energy throughout the clockwork frame, like a branching system of blood vessels.

“Now, find my essence chamber, here.” Haley opened her eyes to see Directrix touch her chest with one of her metal hands, above where a heart would be on a living person. There a glowing circular ring was situated on her outer form, and Haley saw it was the top of something larger, a cylinder extending into the center of her torso. This was the source of the iron mother’s power, the core of her mind. Haley could not interface with this like a cortex—she was held at bay—but she could sense the complex patterns of thought and energy. Directrix spoke again: “There is no outside influence affecting me. I am not controlled. I am my own self, complete. So it would be with you.”

It was nearly impossible to confirm this, but Haley could sense nothing external impinging on the clockwork vessel’s core. All the flow of energies through her frame was regulated from within that cylinder of blazing light. Haley was cynical and suspicious enough to know this proved nothing. That Directrix was free and unrestrained did not guarantee she herself would enjoy the same liberty. Still, she desperately wanted to believe Directrix was being forthright.

She withdrew her hand and after a long pause said, “All right. I think this is the path I must take.”

Directrix inclined her head and lowered her arms to her sides. “I am pleased. You should accompany us to my temple. We can begin the procedure immediately.”

Haley looked at Garner, strapped to the stretcher and still unconscious. His face was so pale that his birthmark stood out like a dark stain upon a white cloth. “No,” she said. “I must see my chief safely returned to the city. And there are other things I must attend to. As you say, I might not find it easy to go back once I have changed.”

Directrix paused before speaking, and then said, "I strongly believe you should come with us now. We take a risk anytime we move on the surface close to cities. My subordinates will ensure your friend is returned safely. I can dispatch living optifex disguised as Cygnarans to handle this task. Come with me." Her tone was insistent.

Haley stood firm, shaking her head. "You said I would be free, that there were no obligations. If that is true, you must allow me to see to my duty. This man is my responsibility."

There was a much longer pause. Haley wondered if she might be taken by force, though the course of their conversation led her to believe Directrix felt it important to have her make the decision voluntarily. She wondered if the process might fail if it was inflicted on someone who did not desire it. In matters involving the transfer of a soul, this seemed possible.

"Very well," Directrix said at last. "I understand your reasons. Time is of the essence. Do not forget your illness." She turned to the side, and one of the floating spheres that had been accompanying her drifted closer. She reached out, detached something small, and then turned back to Haley and extended her hand. Within her metal palm was a perfectly circular silver disk, with a threaded edge and what looked like an astronomical pattern on its surface. "When you have seen to your subordinate and are ready, return to this place alone and bring this. My subordinates will detect its presence and escort you the rest of the way."

Haley accepted the disk, clenching it in her living hand so it pressed into her palm. "Thank you," she said. She returned to Garner and took one end of the gurney in her hands.

Directrix made a graceful motion that was akin to a half-bow. "Until we meet again. Be well, and know a place awaits you in our halls." With that she turned and swept away, her floating warjacks alongside her. Haley reached out to them, but once again she sensed

no cortexes. All she could sense was Directrix herself, tied to them by strands of thought.

Haley spared one mournful look at the wreckage of Brand, the Sentinel. She felt a pang at the work Garner had put into the ruined machine. At least he was still alive, though. That was what mattered. She turned and began the laborious process of pushing her unconscious crew chief up the slope to the wagon, trying not to pass out from the effort.



The heavy clunk of the door closing startled her awake, disoriented and confused. It took only a moment to remember where she was. She was sitting on a narrow couch inside the cramped but warm and cozy living room of an apartment suite within the Strategic Academy of Point Bourne, part of a dormitory reserved for professors and special guests of the military academy. Closing the door in front of her was the man she had come to find, Sebastian Nemo, who turned and saw her for the first time. His eyes widened, and then his expression changed rapidly from bewilderment to anger, his bushy eyebrows narrowing. She could almost hear the rumble of thunder.

Haley had not intended to fall asleep in his rooms, but the events of the night had pushed her to her limits. She had managed to get Garner back to the city and attended by an army surgeon some hours before dawn. This had forced her to convince those she enlisted to help that she had been involved in a priority mission, one that required secrecy. She knew this wouldn't hold up for long, but she didn't need much time.

Getting inside the Strategic Academy without being confronted had been easier than she expected. It made her realize how easily the place could be compromised by someone of nefarious intent. She had gone straight to Nemo's preferred quarters, the ones directly

across from a private laboratory and workshop he had maintained in the building for decades. She'd had the feeling he was far more likely to be staying here than in his official residence near the army garrison on the other side of the military quarter. When she arrived she'd discovered him unexpectedly absent and had situated herself in his book-strewn living room, facing the door, intending to sit vigil until he returned. Clearly the quiet and the calm had gotten the better of her.

Even as Nemo opened his mouth to speak, she said, "You should lock your door."

Myriad emotions passed over his face, from relief to incredulity, though anger still dominated. He sputtered, "I was only across the hall, working."

"All night?" His hair was disheveled and there were sizable dark rings under his eyes. "You haven't been sleeping."

He threw up his hands. "Morrow's sword, Victoria! Do you have any idea what you've put everyone through?! Dolan's been going out of his mind, and I've had the entire city looking for you! Where in Urcaen have you been?"

"That's not important," Haley said. Under other circumstances she might have gotten defensive, felt her indignation rising in response to his, but instead she felt calm. If anything, she found his outburst endearing, a reminder that there were people who cared about her. She was glad she had come. It wouldn't have been right to leave without seeing Nemo again.

"Like hell it's not!" He frowned and stepped forward, then stopped and closed his eyes for a moment. She saw him restrain himself from launching into a lecture, and she almost felt disappointed. "Is this about Caspia?" he asked. "You're not a prisoner, Major. If you didn't want to go that badly you should have said something. Vigilant Peer Dolan just wants to see you well. We all do."

"I'm still not going to Caspia," Haley said firmly.

"So what was your plan? To hide somewhere until you died, alone? How would that have helped anything?" He stopped, and she realized he was getting choked up. She had never seen him like this.

She said, "I had to do something other than just sit and wait for an answer to come out of the blue. Either way, I came back and I'm here now." She felt an ache in her chest.

Dawn was underway and orange light filtered in through one of the windows, sliding across Haley's face. Nemo peered at her, then leaned over and reached a hand toward her cheek. "Were you in a fight?"

"It's a long story," she said evasively. She wasn't entirely sure how she wanted to handle this. She steeled herself and said, "I came back because I thought it was important to say goodbye."

"Goodbye?" Nemo's moustache twitched as he gave her a severe frown. "You can't give up, Victoria. I know things look bad, and you've been discouraged, but you have to keep fighting. You're young and strong. We have the best people in the kingdom on this." There was a look of desperation in his eyes that moved her more than anything else. Then his gaze shifted to the rug at her feet, and his frown deepened.

Haley followed his glance and froze, the blood leaving her face. On the carpet, gleaming in the early light, lay the coin-like piece of metal Directrix had given her. She realized she had taken it out after sitting down to wait for him; she'd held it in her hand as she contemplated her the future as a clockwork being. She must have dropped it when she fell asleep. She reached down now and plucked it up, keeping her expression neutral as she tucked it away in a pouch at her waist.

"What was that?" he asked sharply.

"Nothing important," she lied. She felt no guilt or shame, just

foolish for having dropped the disk. The certainty that she had discovered a means to restore herself, extreme as it was, had given her a serenity she had not felt since becoming poisoned. It had dispelled her former anxiety, leaving her detached.

Nemo ran his fingers through his moustache and considered her. She could almost see pieces of a puzzle sliding together in his mind. She braced herself for accusations and interrogation.

"I want to show you something I've been working on," he said, surprising her. He waved her over, adding, "Come on. It's in my workshop—won't take but a minute."

She stood and followed as he exited into the long, dark hallway and then took out a small ring of keys and unlocked the opposite door. She smiled to consider he was more security-conscious about his workshop than his apartment. That seemed fitting.

He pulled open the door and ushered her inside, his eyes twinkling. Haley looked around the space, a stark contrast from Garner's grease-and oil-spattered garage. This one was just as crowded with tools and apparatus, but they were of an entirely different caliber. Here she saw voltaic coils, conduits, spheres of glass within which sparking electricity danced, disassembled storm glaives, and other advanced apparatus. She could almost trace the history of Cygnaran storm technology by looking across the many shelves and counter surfaces. Her eyes landed on a stand that Nemo was approaching.

"Is that—" she began, stepping closer.

"Yes!" he said with enthusiasm. "A new set of warcaster armor for you. Powered galvanically this time, of course. No more coal, no more smoke."

She ran her hand along the gleaming surfaces of the armor and felt an immediate appreciation for its craftsmanship. It was clearly based on her old armor in terms of the balance between weight and ease of mobility, but this suit utilized Nemo's storm technology

instead of a coal-fed arcane turbine. Gleaming coils extended from the back in place of smokestacks. Until this point, only Nemo and Stryker had adopted this newer power source, and Haley knew there were considerable technical challenges to crafting such a suit. It represented a considerable investment, especially in time. “Did Finch help with this?” she asked. Caitlin Finch, the general’s most skilled immediate subordinate, was herself a prodigious innovator.

His answering smile seemed smug. “No, not a lick. This was all my work. I’d been intending to send it on to Caspia as a surprise after your arrival. A reminder that I fully expect to see you on the battlefield again. I know you’ll get the chance to wear it, as soon as your condition is cured. Would I put so much time into something like this if there were any doubt?”

“It’s beautiful work,” Haley admitted. It was, and she felt very touched. A part of her mind could not help but compare its relative simplicity with the extraordinary complexity of Directrix’s clockwork vessel. They seemed worlds apart, yet each was a different sort of technical masterpiece and artistry.

“You have been in contact with them,” Nemo said after a long pause, startling her. His tone was changed—measured, certain. “The Cyrissists. Was it someone from the Convergence? What did they say? You can’t trust them, Victoria. They are deluded, and dangerous.”

Haley turned back to face him squarely. The question had taken her off guard, as he surely intended. He watched her closely. It was the disk he had seen, combined with everything else. His eyes were still keen, as was his mind. She said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

His eyes narrowed. He clearly didn’t believe her, but he didn’t say so directly. “Listen closely to me. I want you to think carefully about what you do next, in the days ahead. I want you to consider your humanity and how precious it is. It may be easy to forget in the state

you've been in, but perhaps that's the best time to think about it. About who you really are, deep down."

He paused and gave her a chance to interject, but she remained silent. He sighed and said, "When I was in Calbeck, I had reason to ponder these things. You asked me before if I was tempted when they tried to recruit me. I didn't answer truthfully. At my age, the idea of sticking around for a few more decades, even centuries—who wouldn't want that? But it sounds too good to be true, which means it probably is. I've learned to trust my skepticism over the years. I remain convinced, from everything I've seen and everything I know, that making people into clockworks is no different than animating the dead, just like Cryx.

"People die, Victoria. Sometimes before they should." He cleared his throat and she heard his emotion laid bare in his voice. "This illness, it might kill you. I want you to fight it, but you might lose. I'd still rather you went down fighting. The Convergence wants you to give up. Don't surrender to temptation. What they offer, that's not living."

His words scored deep incisions in her mind and heart. Her serenity was shattered. She blinked away tears and took a deep breath. "I appreciate your advice. I do." She looked back to the armor. "And your faith in me."

"We should get you back to the hospital."

"No," she said, "Not just yet. I want to rest first, before being interrogated by Dolan."

Nemo smiled and seemed relieved. He remarked, "He *is* a member of the Order of Illumination. They train them well."

Haley returned his smile. "Let me lie down here on the couch for a little bit. Just a few hours. Then we can go deal with him. You should get some rest, too. It's still very early."

After a measured look he nodded grudgingly. "Very well. Then

you're going back to the hospital. We'll talk about Caspia again later."

"Fine," she said. She realized she had many people in her corner, and it felt good. But it also made things confusing and complicated.

She followed him back across to his suite, all the while considering that if she were going to leave, she needed to do it now. She could slip away once he fell asleep. She would not be going to the hospital, or to Caspia, but somewhere that might as well have been another world. The thought did not fill her with the same tranquility it had less than an hour before.



PART FOUR

Slipping out of the city without attracting attention proved to be much easier amid the busy morning traffic than in the middle of the night. Her mind held a jumble of conflicting thoughts and ideas, a storm that churned between certainty and doubt. She hadn't expected her talk with Nemo to have such an impact on her and wondered if she'd made a mistake in going to him.

She moved on foot, despite her body's aches and fatigue. She needed frequent rests, but it seemed a necessary penance. She walked without thinking of her path, her mind entirely absorbed, and was startled to realize where she had wound up.

Rather than walking to the site where Directrix had told her to go, her feet had taken her, seemingly of their own accord, to an almost-forgotten wooded clearing. Its center was dominated by a tomb-like structure topped with several kneeling soldiers, a monument dedicated to the Cygnarans killed at the Battle of the Tongue in the First Thornwood War. It looked considerably different in the light of day, even a chilly winter day, than it had at night. The last time Haley had come here had been for a wary rendezvous with Deneghra, and it was here she had the conversation that had set in motion the events leading to her poisoning.

She felt a reflective mood settle upon her as she looked down on the carved Cygnus, then up at the soldiers immortalized in stone. She began to take internal stock, considering Nemo's words and her own sudden reservations. It did not take her long to realize doubts

had always been there, even when she had stood before Directrix and come to the decision to accept a new body. That was how she had been thinking of it: a new body, a restoration of her power. She wanted it so badly.

She had been focused on whether Directrix was manipulating her, seeking to control or subvert her free will by offering enslavement instead of freedom. Such fears had drifted above the real heart of the matter, which lurked in the darkness where she did not want to look. Some instinct had told her not to go with Directrix. At the time she thought it was concern for Garner, and perhaps it was, in part. But it was also a symptom of deeper thoughts.

Haley forced herself to think about her sister. Not Deneghra, the vile Cryxian creature that wore her sister's skin, but Gloria, born the same day as her. The part of her that was missing and which caused a deeper ache than even her severed arm.

She had mourned her twin more than once. While she was growing up she had been allowed to think her sister had died when they were five, during the massacre at their little fishing village, Ingrane. No one imagined a child could survive being kidnapped by Cryx. The nuns who raised her had encouraged her to grieve her sister as well as her murdered parents.

Years later, after she had discovered Deneghra and realized the warwitch's identity, the knowledge had brought its own share of nightmares. It was impossible not to envision the terrible things Gloria must have experienced in the intervening years. She had been raised in the Nightmare Empire, mentored by an iron lich, twisted into someone who savored death and suffering.

The atrocities Deneghra committed made it hard to see her as a victim, though clearly on some level she was. Spirited, adventurous Gloria had been extinguished, but it could not have been quick or painless. Haley mourned again after she fought and killed Deneghra

in the same clash in which the Cryxian severed Haley's right arm. Again she had thought her sister put to rest until facing her as an undead. Gloria's immortal soul had not been allowed to pass to Urcaen but instead was imprisoned unnaturally, bound to a walking corpse.

So much suffering and pain. Such was life. It was not difficult to see why the Convergence disdained the flesh.

Nemo's words would not leave her. The fog in her mind cleared, scoured away by memories and old grief. He was right. If she were to become a clockwork she would be like Deneghra, her soul trapped in steel and no longer human. The memories of her held by those she knew and loved would be tainted by the knowledge of what she had chosen to become.

It was natural to fear death, to seek to avoid it. But this transformation would be an act of cowardice and surrender.

She felt calm again, centered. There was no cure for her condition. If there were, Vigilant Peer Carrick Dolan and his people would have found it by now. Time had nearly run out. Her body was saturated. Soon she would not be able to walk or even tend to the most basic needs. Eventually the pain would overcome her and steal her words and even her thoughts. Better to take her fate in hand for an ending of her choosing. Death could be a release.

More than anything, she wished to feel her magic again, the rush of energy flowing through her as reality obeyed her will. The first day she had ever felt anything other than powerless was the first time she had manifested magic, when she was barely out of childhood. Her life otherwise had been regulated by a seemingly endless list of rules and regimens at the Morrowan abbey. The magic happened amid a petulant rage and narrowly avoided tragic consequences, but she mainly remembered the way this ability had opened up and changed her world, returning her destiny into her own hands. It had allowed

her to become a warcaster, a soldier, an officer. To make a difference.

She sat cross-legged before the war memorial. Closing her eyes, she extended her arms loosely to either side and raised her face to the sky. With no thought but to experience that joy one last time, she summoned her power, tapping into that source she had been afraid to touch.

The backlash was instantaneous and excruciating. Magic flowed into her, answering her call, surrounding her form in blue and white energy. Within her body the poison surged violently, feeding upon the magic's energy and releasing a cascade of necrotic toxins that flooded her entire body. Tissues split. Organs ruptured. Her lungs expelled their last breath. Her heart seized, convulsing, and stilled. The blood flowing through her arteries and veins slowed and stopped.

As she died she was suffused with a blazing pyre of bright blue arcane energy that for a moment eclipsed the sun.



PART ∞

Darkness.

Something like consciousness remained. Not thought, precisely, but will and awareness. A sense akin to vision returned, but without any other sensation.

Without effort, she drifted above her body, able to look upon her form from above while remaining utterly detached. She felt no emotion, only an awareness of the cessation of pain, a relief as profound as the tolling of a bell sounding an unending and blissfully pure tone.

She could hear and feel that tone, a resonance that shimmered through her. It was also light and heat. She experienced these things, though not through mortal senses. She felt immersed in liquid, a soothing balm that moved and rushed and passed through her. She was both the liquid and what contained it. Her essence was fluid and intangible, amorphous. It responded to her will, and it comprised her will. The tone and light intensified, though she had no ears to hear or eyes to see. Something resembling thought asked, *Am I a soul?* The unspoken words joined the shimmering tone.

Some portion of her awareness considered her body below, and she saw slender strands of light flowing in all directions, branching endlessly like a tree whose leaves formed a canopy and its roots a tangled network, each of infinitely increasing complexity. As she considered each small piece of light an image came to her, a memory or sensation from the past born of all her decisions in life. The

branching roots reached into the past, past her birth to the lives of her parents, each of them the beginning of yet another infinitely branching system.

Her consciousness swept along those roots with dizzying speed and she sought to retreat from them, to gain some perspective. A bright spot drew her attention and she soared toward it. She saw herself as a young girl, angry at the world, filled with fire and defiance, drawing on arcane energy for the first time, letting raw power blaze forth.

She was overwhelmed by an array of colored strands of light, all crisscrossing and intersecting one another, whirling in plenitude. Then she was hovering above her body again, disoriented yet calmed. Between the lines of light she saw branches of darkness extending and dividing in a similar profusion. They made her uneasy. As she stared at them she found herself falling into them, swirling along what she realized were future possibilities. Glimpses of a distorted future, of times that would now never be, flashed past her. These disintegrated and faded even as she watched, a rippling chain reaction to her death.

A beacon of dark light like a pulsing shadow drew her eye and she fell into it, finding it difficult to perceive her surroundings, the world distorted. Her vision focused on herself, but not herself—someone older, in armor resembling what Nemo had made for her, but different in many respects. Energy blazed in the hands of this strange future Haley that would never be as she fought an obscured foe. The figure appeared to sense her, for she stopped and turned, pulling up her goggles to peer with narrowed eyes at the one observing her from the past.

Startled, she withdrew from this image, and other scenes that had never happened and some that could never happen flew by. Her smiling mother, but clearly older than she had ever been, handing a perfect, crying newborn to an exhausted Gloria, while Haley wiped her sister's damp brow. Nemo, older and smaller, walking down a

sunlit street toward her alongside a serious-looking middle-aged woman whose features echoed his own. A coffin atop which a pair of Spellstorm pistols rested. Her own clockwork body, standing before a great hollow metal orb that shifted and spun, set with dozens of light-filled cylinders. Overwhelmed and not wishing to see more, she fled back to her body, which was still limned with blue fire.

Something pulled at the liquid whole that was her self, gently, like a slight current in otherwise still waters. There was an opening above her that tugged at her, seeking to draw her upward. She knew the pull would increase and eventually become undeniable and sensed a vast benevolence calling to her, but she resisted nonetheless. She was as a bubble released at the bottom of a jar of water. She had no choice but to rise, and this prompted a feeling of sudden panic. She did not wish to go.

Stop! It was her first true decision since entering this state: a denial, backed by prodigious will. The fluid of her essence churned, and around her froze. The passage of time ceased.

Amid the glowing lines of the past a new beacon shined to her, the light filling her with longing. She did not intend to go to it, but her mind fell toward that light, which grew and expanded to reveal a moment in her past, one that represented a major turning point. The lines of possibility extending to this moment pulsed, thick and strong. To reach it she soared past her recent struggles, past the assassin's attack on Nemo, and past her duel with Deneghra, arriving at a moment just before that brutal clash. She saw herself as she had been when she was whole, before she was maimed and her power had been stolen from her. When her sister was alive, though corrupted. Her longing caused her will to gather like a deep pool, and before she knew what was happening this essence of thought flowed into that memory. The moment became more vibrant than any other image she had seen until this point. Without a conscious

thought, her entire being poured into this unifying image, this echo of her past.

The gentle flow of her essence became a roar, and she pulled free of the tide. She was falling faster and faster, seeing the strands of fate above, below, and around her like a glittering, unending web. Her deceased body was engulfed by bright blue fire and became a pillar of ash that was obliterated in a blast of energy before being replaced by a vision of flesh and blood, a person she had once been. Her soul fell into place within it, inhabiting this living vessel with comfortable familiarity.

Haley gasped and took a breath—her first breath—then opened her eyes wide in shock. Her heart pounded, and her face was flushed. She found herself almost painfully aware of all the smallest aspects of her body: the bent grass under her, the ant crawling across her boot, the steel grey of the sky, the smell of the winter wind. The sensations flooded into her with overwhelming intensity, though in the space of a heartbeat she realized she was not in pain. It was at this moment she looked down, clenching her hands, and realized that both were alive. Her mechanikal arm was gone.

It seemed unreal, dreamlike, though she felt solid. She almost expected her right arm to turn to mist and fade as she made a fist and peered at it, but it did not. She reached down and picked up a small stone, marveling in the feel of its cold, smooth surface against her skin.

Already the thoughts and experiences of that other state were fading into a blur, something she could not quite grasp. She stood and looked around herself uncertainly, as if doubting the earth and the sky as much as her own flesh and blood.

Swallowing, she closed her eyes for a moment and drew a deep breath. Then she steeled herself, gathering her courage, and drew her magic into herself once again, hoping the painful death she

remembered would not be repeated. The power flowed into her, responding to her will so effortlessly and swiftly she laughed in relief, tears running down her cheeks. She drifted several inches into the air, pushing against the earth, savoring the wind against her skin.

She was whole.

The future was restored, with all its dizzying and terrifying possibilities. As she opened her eyes she saw an after-image of bright strands extending before her, gold and branching like the canopy of a tree reaching into the endless sky.



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Douglas Seacat is the Writing and Continuity Manager at Privateer Press, where he has oversight over narrative fiction and continuity for the Iron Kingdoms. He started freelance writing for Privateer Press in 2001 after an unlikely series of events best left in the mists of the past (and now covered by a detailed non-disclosure agreement). Doug spends most of his work and free time living vicariously in the Iron Kingdoms through fiction and games. His spare time is occupied reading all manner of science fiction, fantasy, and historical fiction, playing computer games, and participating in weekly pen-and-paper RPG sessions. Occasionally the Seacat Signal is lit by those discussing Iron Kingdoms content and he is called upon to shed light on topics as varied as the existence of rum in the Iron Kingdoms and whether gobbers and trollkin are mammals.

At What Cost
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