



THE KING'S OWN

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Gulf of Middlebank Patrol, 587

The 23rd Assault Recon Company of the King's Own Trenchers moved into Wallerton with typical professionalism and efficiency. Two platoons of line infantry and the company's rangers took up elevated positions on the hill north of the town to cover the commando platoon that swept past the outer wall with readied rifles, scatterguns, and grenades. The men of the 23rd wore the dark blue of the King's Own, a color so deep it was almost black. Their company badges showed a coiled serpent and their motto, "We are the snake in the grass," intended to reflect their skill at ambush and incursions behind enemy lines.

Captain Asheth Magnus walked at the center of his soldiers, a vigorous twenty-nine-year-old warcaster in the prime of his career. Magnus was lean and fit from a decade of military service along Cygnar's borders, and he wore his warcaster armor like a second skin. A hefty mechanically augmented Caspian battle blade was strapped to his waist, and he held his hand cannon ready. His Arcane warjack, with its expensive but quirky arc node, strode just ahead of him. A Defender and Charger he himself had considerably modified backed him.

Magnus had always had a strong aptitude for mechanical

tinkering, a habit that unsettled the mechaniks assigned to attend to his machines. His Defender—which he called Impious, or “Imp”—had lost its shock hammer in a battle along the Protectorate border. Magnus had tired of waiting for a replacement and had finally outfitted it with a spiked flail stolen from a Templar. He had also replaced his Charger’s hammer with a mechanically enhanced cleaver. He called that ‘jack “Rust,” more in reference to its age than to its actual state of repair. It was a reliable machine he had been using since his journeyman tour. The unreliable Arcane he refused to dignify with a name.

The streets were eerily quiet aside from the crackle of dying embers from the burnt buildings. Magnus signaled two squads to peel off in either direction from the central road as they checked the structures and declared them clear. Pieces of shattered rifles lay along the ground. Pools of blood dried amid cobblestones, and red splattered the walls. The stone and wood buildings bore gouges and holes. There were no bodies. This more than anything else told Magnus they were too late.

Lieutenant Arthur Jacobs finished clearing the buildings ahead and returned. “Nothing,” he said with a disgusted expression. He took off his bronze helmet and scratched his shaved head.

Jacobs had been with Magnus through the two and a half years of the current Cryxian conflict and another six years on missions along Cygnar’s northern and eastern borders. He was a trencher commando with a squat, muscular build belied by a friendly, almost boyish face. Magnus could always rely on Jacobs—they had been through many firefights, and each had saved the other more than once. The look they now shared spoke to a familiar frustration: Cryx had eluded them. Again.

Magnus and Jacobs looked across what was left of the village. It was a squalid place with no strategic value, no wealth to plunder, yet

Cryx had erased it from the world just as they had Ingrane, Langerby, Paulson Bridge, and a dozen other villages and towns. There was no rhyme or reason to it so far as the Cygnaran command could determine. They had been continually confounded in their attempts to predict Cryxian attacks or even understand them.

One of the nearest commandos put words to those thoughts. "At least they didn't hit anywhere important. No one's going to miss this town."

"These were Cygnaran citizens, which makes them important," Magnus reprimanded sternly. "They were counting on us to defend them, and we weren't here. Remember that." The commando looked abashed and backed away after apologizing.

"Always the dutiful soldier." Jacobs sighed. "A little hard on him, don't you think? You know we're not going to find anything here. How about we call it a day?"

The warcaster gave a weary smile but shook his head. "You know the drill. We need to do a thorough sweep. The one time we don't search will be when Cryx gets into the interior with no one the wiser."

Magnus and his men painstakingly scoured the sands and hills for tracks while patrols checked on the nearby villages. Once word arrived that those settlements were unharmed, Magnus was able to declare Cryx conclusively withdrawn. They were marching back to their ship when a military courier arrived, bringing new orders.

The warcaster opened the sealed documents with enthusiasm on recognizing the royal seal. Jacobs and two of the other lieutenants approached, and he held up the papers. "Looks like we have real work to do. We're sent for by the king."

"I told you Vinter was planning something!" Jacobs said with a grin. "I knew his arrival at Sandbottom wasn't a fluke!" At the major battle at Sandbottom Point, both King Vinter IV and his brother Leto had arrived with soldiers from Caspia to lead them to victory.

Having the royals involved in the war directly had made an impact on the men, raising their morale significantly.

Magnus nodded, feeling his own blood stirring. More than the thought of a real battle and an end to empty patrols, he was eager for an opportunity to show the king what he and his company could accomplish. “This could be what we’ve been waiting for,” he said. “Tell the boys to polish their boots; we’ll be in the presence of royalty soon.”

Barrel Branch Passage, the Meredius

The powerful warships cut through the waves as if eager to leap past them. The wind was with them, but the majority of Cygnar's fleet did not rely on sails alone; massive steam-powered paddle wheels pushed the vessels through the water regardless of the weather. The ships had made excellent speed through the Barrel Branch passage, heading west into the heart of the Cryxian Empire.

Ship guns firing filled the air with the roaring bellow of a massive broadside attack. Answering booms from distant enemy vessels were followed by either the plumes of cannonballs plunging into the water or the wrenching sound of solid impacts. The ships on the periphery were quickly in the thick of it. Crews scrambled on decks and up in rigging to add the crackle of rifle fire to the mighty broadside blasts.

These outer battles did not affect the heart of the fleet, where King Vinter IV's flagship, the *HMS Indomitable Storm*, was protected by a cordon. Its closest escorts were the *HMS Blade of Caspia* and the *HMS Vengeance*, each a formidable first-rate ship of the line. The fleet included many of Cygnar's mightiest vessels, some of them aged and bearing many scars, others of newer design, delivered fresh from the shipyards. Over two years of warfare with Cryx had motivated the treasury to pay for an influx of new warships.

As yet the ships chasing them were a ragtag assortment crewed by Scharde raiders. Spotters atop the crow's nests scanned the horizon with spyglasses, fearful of more formidable vessels such as the infamous *Atramentous* or even the ships of the Black Fleet, which brought their own sulfuric winds. Cygnar had sent a sizable flotilla ahead of them along the Shattered Neck, nearer Giant's Head Island, as a lure for the Black Fleet. If they succeeded, many of those diversionary ships would likely never be seen again.

Magnus was at the rail watching the distant clash and considering the likely fate of the diversionary fleet when he was summoned to the aft deck where King Vinter IV awaited. He made his way quickly, feeling a stirring excitement. He had seen little of the royals since boarding the flagship. There had been an aura of secrecy from the outset, and the sailors had evaded questions related to their destination. Magnus wondered if the king believed Cryxian spies could be even here, on his own flagship.

Rumors circulated among the soldiers on board. Magnus had learned that Prince Leto had been promoted to lord general of the expedition and was being groomed for warmaster general, the highest rank in the Cygnaran Army. There were ominous suggestions that the previous warmaster, Archduke Carston Laddermore, was languishing in a cell below Castle Raelthorne. His lands had already passed to his son, Fergus. Magnus listened to the talk closely; he had a taste for drama regarding Cygnar's elite. All too often he had witnessed nobles vaulting through the army ranks with a speed disproportionate to their ability.

A group of senior officers had gathered on the aft deck around the royals. It seemed reckless to meet in the open while the outer fleet was engaged in battle, but King Vinter IV was not a timid man. The king stood stoically in his black armor, his heavy crown pressing down his black hair. He might have been in his audience hall instead of upon a rolling deck.

Prince Leto—*Lord General* Leto, Magnus reminded himself—stood slightly behind the king in full military uniform. He was noticeably smaller than his brother and far less impressive. He wore his uniform comfortably and was allegedly no stranger to battle, but he looked very young. Magnus knew no love was lost between the brothers. If the king was considering Leto for future warmaster, it indicated he trusted no other candidate, a

significant rebuke of the rest of his general staff.

Adjacent to Leto was Commander Adept Sebastian Nemo, a warcaster in his early fifties who was only vaguely known to Magnus. The eccentric warcaster had spent most of his recent years in workshops hatching military inventions rather than fighting in the field, until Cryxian hostilities had lured him back to active duty. Rumors suggested Nemo served as military advisor to Prince Leto, who had also sponsored his research. Magnus cynically concluded it was Sebastian Nemo, not Leto, who would actually be making the leadership decisions for the army.

The third warcaster in the group was a much younger man who stood respectfully apart from the senior officers. Magnus caught his eye briefly and they shared a nod. This was Captain Markus Brisbane, a thick-framed and dark-skinned young man who had just recently finished his journeyman tour. Magnus approved of the fact that Brisbane was of humble birth and that he had served as an enlisted trencher before his warcaster training.

He noted that the seniormost of the king's warcasters, Commander Adept Birk Kinbrace, was missing from the flagship. Magnus paid close attention to the ebb and flow of the king's favor; he was certain Kinbrace's absence was no coincidence. Likely the senior commander had spoken doubts about this expedition and had been assigned to the *Blade of Caspia* or the *Vengeance* as a subtle rebuke. Several of the other warcasters of the force were aboard those ships, ready to lead the veteran soldiers who would serve as Vinter's vanguard. The rest of the army was distributed among the other ships of the fleet.

King Vinter's hawk-like eyes scanned the gathering before he spoke. "We are about to invade Blackrock Island, which intelligence suggests is the most heavily fortified and significant Cryxian holding outside Scharde itself." He paused to let this news penetrate. Blackrock had a dire reputation: it was infested with blighted trollkin

and ogrun said to feast on human flesh, as well as other horrors. Additionally, its position directly adjacent to the main island meant that any attack against it would place Cygnaran soldiers deep inside Cryxian territory.

The booming of heavy guns from the *Vengeance* drew their attention, and simultaneously a plume of water erupted off the port bow. A swift Cryxian pirate frigate had approached too near the Cygnaran vessel and fired its smaller guns toward the flagship, only to be met by a massive eruption of return fire. The larger turrets of the *Blade of Caspia* joined in with several thundering reports. The pirate ship's wooden hull was torn apart by a dozen heavy impacts, and its main mast shattered and fell. Similar clashes were happening aft of the flagship, where numerous smaller Cryxian vessels endured punishing barrages as they raced to close to boarding distance.

Vinter raised his voice to regain their attention. "We have solid intelligence of numerous sizable factory complexes on Blackrock. We will make our landing, advance inland, and annihilate these facilities with overwhelming force. This will hamper Cryx's capacity to launch attacks against our shores." His eyes bored into his assembled military leaders, and his voice took on an even more dangerous tone. "We will succeed, whatever the cost."

After this grim pronouncement Vinter waved his brother forward and climbed the steps to the elevated pilot's deck to observe the naval clash. Lord General Leto took over to discuss the specific plan of attack with the generals and commanders. Descriptions of landing order became a dull drone to Magnus' ears. His thoughts were on his company. He wondered how a few hundred men could make a difference in an operation of this scale.

Commander Nemo stepped away from the lord general and gestured for Magnus and Brisbane to approach. Nemo's voice seemed condescending to Magnus' ear as he explained, "You two

will be under my command. First we will secure and hold the beach. It will take hours to unload our soldiers, during which we must ready against enemy attack. During the landing your only priority is the safety of the Raelthornes. Is that understood?"

At his glare both Magnus and Brisbane voiced automatically, "Yes, sir!"

The older warcaster grunted as if not entirely satisfied with their enthusiasm. "Several target factories are proximate to our landing region. Once the beach is secure, the army will divide to deal with them." Nemo did not say it aloud, but Magnus knew their assignments would depend on the casualties they sustained. "Captain Brisbane, your battlegroup is intended to attack the western factory. Captain Magnus, you will join the strike on a different facility northeast of our landing position. Once that is completed, I will need you in ready reserve to support Major Durnwick in his mission to penetrate deep inland and strike the largest and most remote of our target necrofactoriums."

Magnus felt some jealousy, as the mission Nemo had described was just the sort he had hoped to undertake. Still, of all Cygnar's warcasters, Strom Durnwick was the man Magnus most admired. He was a living legend, and his 199th Light Infantry Battalion was one of the most highly decorated units in the army. Magnus had patterned his 23rd after them. Durnwick was another warcaster Magnus would have expected on the flagship, although his absence might have been a simple matter of logistics. "Where is Major Durnwick, sir?" he asked.

"Aboard the *Vengeance*," Nemo answered. "He will join us in securing the beach. I suggest you two see to your men and warjacks; we will be the first in. You are dismissed."

As they walked away from the aft deck, Magnus turned to the younger warcaster. "I've spent the last two years kicking Cryxians off

every scummy island and forgotten beach along the Broken Coast. If you've got any questions, now's the time to ask."

Brisbane drew himself up. "Thanks, but I know what to expect." His eyes conveyed the confident arrogance of youth. Magnus smiled knowingly. There was a saying in the Strategic Academy that the first two years after the journeyman tour was the riskiest time in a warcaster's career. "See you on the beach," Brisbane said as he offered his hand. Magnus shook it, and the two went their separate ways.

Landing on Blackrock Island

The largest vessels in Cygnar's navy had to be anchored in the deep water some distance from the island. Their guns shelled the beach and cliffs as numerous smaller launches were lowered into the water from the three vanguard ships to creep toward shore. Only the largest of these were capable of delivering heavy warjacks. Magnus and the other warcasters joined the royals on the *Indomitable's* main launch vessel, a fully functional schooner with two masts and its own steam engine and wheel. They were not nearly as vulnerable as the soldiers in the first landing wave, who rowed toward the beach in a variety of smaller landing craft fixed with high side-shielding panels.

The island ahead seemed to emanate menace through the hot, muggy air, and there was palpable tension among the soldiers of the initial wave. They had little idea what awaited them. What scant information they possessed of Blackrock had been extracted from captured Scharde pirates and smugglers, and Magnus doubted its usefulness. Such prisoners had described the necrofactoriums looming above the dense foliage, but none had known the extent of the island's defenses. The fog-cloaked cove ahead with its sandy beaches was among the few places on the craggy island that was accessible to landing craft. It seemed inevitable that defenses would be in place. Against another nation Magnus would have anticipated heavy cannon batteries protecting such a beach, but Cryx had little artillery; what cannons it plundered or forged were used to outfit their raiding fleet. Yet Cryx was endlessly inventive when it came to delivering death.

Lieutenant Arthur Jacobs stood behind his platoon, as frozen and tense as the rest of them. Magnus asked with deliberate joviality, "How are you this fine morning, Jacobs?"

Jacobs looked at him as if breaking from a trance and gave his boyish grin. "Ready for action, sir!" The lieutenant lowered his voice and leaned in to say, "But I'd feel better if the rest of the company were here."

Magnus nodded agreement. Large as it was, the launch could not carry their entire company, particularly with several warjacks and the personal guards of the royals aboard. The 23rd were scattered among the smaller boats, and some would not arrive until the second wave.

A shout went up from those on deck, and Magnus saw what seemed to be a dozen catapulted rocks soaring toward their boats. Such weapons might be crude, but a giant stone could sink a landing boat as easily as a cannonball could. A dozen yards from their vessel, one splashed down with a sizzle upon the waters, and he realized it was not a stone but a massive gob of foul liquid that bubbled and steamed with an acrid stench. "Bile!" he said with alarm.

Magnus had never heard of a bloat or bile thrall capable of firing at such a distance. The shots seemed to originate from somewhere along the looming black cliffs set back from the beach. Thick, twisted foliage and gnarled trees grew atop that area, ahead of the jutting crag of obsidian stone that gave Blackrock its name.

Another of the giant globes came down directly across a boat on their starboard side. The high side panels might have helped had the angle been more direct, but the bile came in from above to splash onto the heads of those rowing. The soldiers screamed out with ungodly cries of agony. Magnus gritted his teeth. He had seen men subjected to the fluid before. It was a terrible way to die, worse than being burned alive.

"Were any of *our* boys on that boat?" Jacobs asked, staring at the horrifying spectacle. The vessel listed and began to sink, spilling the gruesome and unidentifiable remains of half-melted bodies.

"Focus on the beach ahead," Magnus ordered, although he had

been wondering the same thing. He gathered his arcane power to create a mirage-like haze of shimmering air around the launch. He was uncertain whether the magic would be effective to obscure a vessel of this size, but it might reassure the men.

While most of the incoming bile splashed into the turbulent water, several more vessels were struck, giving rise to a chorus of screams. The crossing seemed to take forever, until finally there was an impact and the boat slid up onto the sands. Tethered weights were thrown to secure its position, and its modified blunt prow dropped to become a ramp. Several of the swiftest secondary vessels slid alongside, and soldiers began pouring onto the beach. Magnus and Lieutenant Jacobs were among those at the fore, and Magnus mentally linked with Imp, his Defender. His light 'jacks would arrive with the next haul; all the warcasters had a limited number of warjacks for the initial landing. As exposed as Magnus felt, he knew it had to be far worse for his soldiers, as at least he had his warcaster armor and its power field to give him some additional protection.

Other launches and rowboats hit the beach and soldiers leapt out, rifles ready. A hundred yards to Magnus' right he saw the largest launch from the *Vengeance* disgorge troops led by a tall man in warcaster armor: Major Strom Durnwick. As the Cygnarans raced up the sandy beach, the enemy appeared. An inhuman roar poured forth from the shadowed recesses beneath the black cliffs as heavily muscled blighted trollkin rushed to meet them. Trenchers and long gunners opened fire with their rifles, adding a grey haze of smoke to the light fog.

Caustic fluid continued to fall from above, catching men with the spray. Most of the bile seemed directed at the incoming boats, but some was fired on the beaches instead. Magnus took control of his Defender and drew his hand cannon to fire into the approaching trollkin. They were monstrous creatures, bearing only

slight resemblance to their mainland kin, each with scaled skin, jutting blackened barbs, and other deformities. It was difficult to tell where their thick black iron armor ended and scaled flesh began. They wielded a variety of wicked killing implements. One trait they clearly shared with mainland trollkin was the resilience of their species—they charged into the Cygnaran line heedless of bullets that ripped through their flesh. They attacked with a savagery far beyond a simple defense of their territory. Magnus had fought such blighted creatures after they had pillaged Cygnaran coastal towns. He felt a vindictive satisfaction in taking the fight to them now.

The enemy swiftly closed on the disembarking soldiers, and soon Magnus was in the thick of it, with the swirling smoke and lingering fog making it difficult to aim his pistol or guide his Defender's heavy cannon without fear of striking allies. Lieutenant Jacobs shouted orders to the men of his platoon and soon had them formed into a tighter line to concentrate their firepower. At Magnus' direction two chain guns were hauled forward and set in place. Ammunition belts were fed into them, and they quickly spun up to speed to hurl bullets into the savages.

A cluster of blighted trollkin carrying massive rounded shields advanced up the center, bullets sparking off the metal surfaces. Magnus extended a hand and evoked an explosion in the soil beneath them, sending them flying. He ordered Imp forward, abandoning its firing position so it could punish the enemy with powerful sweeping arcs of its chain flail. The weighted metal head of the weapon drove through the savages with a succession of meaty impacts, clearing a section of the beach as the trenchers of the 23rd advanced and rallied around Magnus' position.

Smoke stinging his eyes, Magnus was so focused on the enemy ahead that he did not see a group of trollkin overrun the position

to his left. Jacobs shouted a warning and stepped behind him with his scattergun to fire a massive blast of metal shards through them, stopping several cold but enraging the one survivor. Magnus drew his mechanically augmented Caspian battle blade just in time to block a jagged axe. Pushing forward with the strength given him by his warcaster armor, he got inside the blighted trollkin's reach and brought the blade across in a great arc, hacking almost halfway through the creature's torso. Still the trollkin glared at him and bared its sharpened teeth while raising its axe for another strike. Jacobs had reloaded and fired again, taking out one of the trollkin's legs. Magnus jerked his sword free and carved through its neck before it finally collapsed. Imp stepped in front of him protectively, its head swinging left and then right as it looked for its next target.

His immediate vicinity momentarily clear, Magnus saw Vinter and his escorting sword knights in their black tabards sweeping up the beach toward the cliffs sheltering the blighted trollkin villages. Lord General Leto was nearby with his own guard, the Stormblades, knights in modified lighter blue armor and wielding storm glaives. Commander Nemo strode ahead of them alongside his Ironclad to catch up with the king. King Vinter outpaced his escort as he advanced with his great sword Kingslayer in hand, heedless of his own safety, toward several trollkin that had massacred the long gunner squad trying to hold a low hill ahead of him.

Magnus knew of the king's skill but was still startled by the ease with which the sovereign swiftly decapitated three trollkin with horizontal sweeps of his ancestral blade. Bile from above landed amid his sword knights and poured through their visored helmets. They staggered and collapsed, flesh falling from their hands and faces even as they tried to pry their helmets off. Vinter did not look back but marched on to strike down the next blighted trollkin that rushed him. Leto's Stormblades gave a battle cry and unleashed streaks

of lightning from their storm glaives against several nine-foot-tall blighted ogrun that had closed on them from the left flank. Captain Brisbane, also fighting on that side, charged an ogrun with his two-handed mechanical hammer.

Magnus knew he should get closer to the royals. He was about to order his men in that direction when Jacobs shouted, "Magnus!" He turned to see his lieutenant looking back to where the main launch from the *Vengeance* had landed and was facing stiff opposition.

Those soldiers had fought off the initial trollkin, but more of the creatures had emerged from caves beneath the cliffs. They swarmed Major Durnwick's Ironclad, which used its quake hammer to knock down those at the front but was beset by those following after. The trollkin battered it with axes, clubs, and spiked hammers. The heavy 'jack smashed them with its own hammer, turning bodies to pulp, but there were too many. It staggered under their combined onslaught.

Major Durnwick was confronted by the largest trollkin Magnus had ever seen, one he initially mistook for an ogrun. After smashing through the nearest soldiers, it had charged the warcaster with a massive raised axe, the blade of the weapon almost as tall as a man. Durnwick fired his hand cannon straight into the blighted creature's monstrous face, tearing off half its chin and part of its throat, but it hardly faltered. It swung its axe downward, and the major barely leapt aside in time. He dropped his pistol and took his poleaxe in both hands to square off against the brute. He delivered a solid blow to its left leg, but the wound seemed not to trouble the creature, which swiftly retaliated.

Durnwick easily got his polearm in front of the clumsy strike, but the great axe cut straight through the weapon's metal shaft and Durnwick's power field and warcaster armor to bite into his side. The major reeled back, bleeding, while the men who had been firing behind him rushed in to stab the giant trollkin with bayonets. They

looked like children sent against it. The trollkin knocked them aside with a sweep of its axe blade, killing several, and let loose an inhuman howl that echoed across the sands.

Magnus linked his mind with Imp's cortex to peer through the warjack's eyes as he raised its heavy barrel. Firing into close combat was risky, but he felt compelled to take the chance. He chose his moment carefully. The cannon fired and its shell crashed into the giant trollkin's chest, tearing through ribs and internal organs. It was certainly a fatal wound, yet the nightmare creature did not fall. Instead it raised the axe and brought it down with horrible finality onto Major Durnwick's helmet. The helmet shattered, and the axe made a ruin of the man's head. Both warcaster and trollkin toppled to land heavily on the bloodied sands. One of Durnwick's officers, a woman with a captain's shield on her shoulder, broke through the other trollkin and ran to where he lay. Kneeling next to the major, she let out a strangled sound.

Magnus was too stunned to react. He had never imagined he would see one of his heroes laid low before the main battle had even begun. A soldier yelling for his attention brought him back to the fighting still raging nearby. He called to his men and directed them to rejoin the royal escort. Together they battled to the ground beneath the overhanging cliffs, where they appeared to be sheltered from the bile fluid being flung toward the approaching launches. The villages here were filled with grisly trophies and totems. Human skulls and gnawed bones were both heaped in piles and strung up as decorations around the crude huts. Lengths of indeterminate meat hung drying, each covered with oversized flies. The remaining blighted inhabitants fought tenaciously to defend their homes but were quickly overwhelmed.



The senior officers gathered where King Vinter had established his command post. Tents were already being erected, and chain gun crews and sentries had been posted to watch the beach approach on both sides. Trenchers were quickly creating earthworks around the position.

While the undestroyed landing craft were sent back for the second wave of Cygnarans, Vinter called his officers to order. Magnus recognized several other warcasters, including Commander Kinbrace, who looked winded from the short battle. Magnus felt it his obligation to report the details of Major Durnwick's fall, being as factual as possible and restraining his emotions. Lord General Leto shook his head, and several of the ranking officers looked shocked and dismayed.

King Vinter's expression did not change. He was silent a long moment, perhaps gathering his thoughts. His look was piercing and unflinching when he spoke. "The loss of Major Durnwick is a serious blow, but the battle has just begun. We will suffer more losses in the fighting ahead. Harden yourself to that inevitability." Vinter's eyes scanned his officers and lingered sternly on his brother. "There are tasks we must accomplish. Major Durnwick had the highest-priority mission; his men were fully briefed and prepared. I need another warcaster to assume command of his battalion for that strike. Who feels worthy of this vital task?"

Magnus' pulse quickened at this unusual request, but he also felt uncertain. It might be insufferably impertinent for someone of his rank to volunteer. If the king refused him so publicly it could deal his career a crippling blow.

The pause extended, and the king scowled. Magnus could feel the moment slipping away. He saw Commander Nemo frown as if to speak, but Prince Leto stopped him with a look. The prince said, "I need Commanders Kinbrace and Nemo with the main army. This

mission must be led by someone else.” King Vinter gave his brother an inscrutable look but did not overrule him.

Before Magnus could resolve his internal struggle, a tall man stepped forward and knelt on one knee. “I volunteer, Your Majesty.” Magnus was startled to see it was the haughty warcaster Colonel William Rathleigh. He felt an instant and visceral surge of loathing. Rathleigh was the second son of an earl, and despite being a warcaster of some small talent, he had been advanced swiftly to colonel solely due to his family standing. Magnus had seen him fighting at Sandbottom Point and had not been impressed—in his opinion, the man was timid and reactionary. The colonel added, “I have met the officers of the 199th. I am prepared to stand in for Major Durnwick.”

The sound of Rathleigh’s voice and the thought of him leading the mission galvanized Magnus. He had no doubt this self-serving toady would fail, and in doing so he would bring shame to the expedition, with ruinous consequences for Cygnar. He stepped forward and said, “Meaning no disrespect to the colonel, I am better qualified to lead this mission.”

Vinter eyed him appraisingly. “Explain.” Rathleigh’s face went red, and he glared at Magnus as he stood to his feet. Several of the command staff drew themselves up with disapproving expressions.

Magnus knew it was too late to back down. “Colonel Rathleigh has done an admirable job defending Highgate and its environs for the past few years, but he has never led a major offensive in enemy territory. Under my leadership, the 23rd Assault Recon Company has undertaken many missions behind enemy lines. This mission is similar to others I have conducted. I am ready for this, Your Majesty.”

“Your Majesty,” the colonel protested, looking aggrieved, “it would be improper for a captain to lead a battalion. This is not a mission we can trust to a junior officer!”

“In that you are correct, Colonel,” Vinter said, prompting a

relieved smile from Rathleigh. The king turned to Magnus and said, "You are promoted to brevet major. The commission will become permanent after that factory is destroyed. Take command of the 199th, and fold your company into the battalion." He ignored both Magnus' astonishment and Rathleigh's indignant look and addressed the others. "We must eliminate Cryxian artillery so the rest of the army can land. Every boat sunk on approach is a mark of failure."



Magnus went to check on the men of his company who had landed with the first wave, now occupied digging a trench west of their encampment. Magnus pulled Arthur Jacobs aside to explain the situation. Jacobs stared at the new rank insignia on Magnus' sleeve and shook his head. "I'm not sure whether to offer congratulations or condolences," he said. "Living up to Durnwick's reputation is a tall order."

"He can keep his reputation. Getting the mission done and staying alive will be enough." Magnus would never have shown doubt or uncertainty to any of the other men, but with Jacobs he could be honest. "This is a big opportunity. I know we're ready for it, but I'll be relying on you."

Jacobs clasped his hand. "I'm always behind you, Cap—er, Major." He grinned, then pulled a chain from around his neck. Dangling from it was a large, misshapen bullet. "I think it's time to pass this on." He held it out.

The warcaster accepted the memento reluctantly. It dated from a skirmish with Khador years before, when a *uiske* flask Jacobs had stolen from Magnus stopped a bullet from piercing his chest. Jacobs had claimed it was proof that stealing the flask had been a good idea, while Magnus had insisted it meant Jacobs owed Magnus his life. Jacobs had kept it with him ever since. Magnus

eyed the bullet and said, "I don't want to steal your luck."

Jacobs grinned and waved dismissively. "I've gotten good use out of it. Now it's your turn. You're going to need it—the king's eyes are on you." Magnus nodded and put the chain around his neck, tucking the bullet out of sight. Jacobs seemed satisfied and asked, "What's next?"

"We'll make a move on the cliff-top artillery soon. Do a head count after the *Indomitable* finishes offloading and keep me apprised." Beneath his words was the grim reminder that they could expect more casualties. "Right now, I need to talk to the captains of the 199th. They won't be happy about my taking over. I want you with me to represent the 23rd as captain."

Jacobs blinked in startled surprise as Magnus' words sunk in. "What did you just say?"

"I meant it when I said I'd be relying on you. You're captain of the 23rd now." He grinned. "Figured I need someone with more courage than sense leading my men."

Jacobs smiled and said, "I'm going to choose to take that as a compliment."

Magnus chuckled, and then his grin faded. "Come on, let's go meet the fine officers of the 199th. Try to make a good first impression."

Jacobs made a show of smoothing hair he did not have. "Don't I always?"

The warcaster frowned. "This isn't the time to be funny. Remember, they just suffered a serious loss." Jacobs sobered immediately, and they crossed the encampment to find Magnus' new officers. Most of the 199th Light Infantry Battalion had yet to land; only a couple of platoons had accompanied Major Durnwick on their ship's launch. Those were on the eastern section of the perimeter, also focusing on entrenchment.

Magnus and Jacobs introduced themselves and were met by sullen

looks and barely restrained hostility. The platoons had taken heavy casualties in the landing, and their mood was dark. Durnwick had been the most prominent, but many had fallen. Magnus knew they would adapt; they were professional soldiers. He pulled aside the three captains, hoping to get their measure.

The first was Captain Jalise Kirkwall, a wiry woman with short-cropped black hair and a scarred face who led the battalion's main commando company. While smaller than was typical of women who qualified for trencher service, she had muscular arms and shoulders and a knife-fighter's stance. She greeted Magnus with cool reserve and made a show of being surprised to see he was a major.

"I suppose I cannot fault you for seizing the opportunities afforded by wartime casualties," she said.

Magnus took the statement in stride. This was the captain he had seen checking Durnwick when he fell, and her grief was fresh. While she spoke she unconsciously touched the well-worn ivory handles of a pair of knives at her waist.

Captain Broderick Haggin, a hulking brute of a trencher in whose massive hands a scattergun looked like a toy, said very little. He led a mixed company of trencher infantry and commandos. While his eyes had the far-off look of someone who was not entirely present, Magnus knew the man's reputation. He was a natural killer and fighter, one of Durnwick's mainstays. Likely he was the sort of man who came to life only in battle. He listened to the news that Magnus would take immediate command of the 199th with no discernable reaction.

The last captain was the lean, redheaded Gordin Thatch, who had an intense look about him. The rifle slung over his shoulder was equipped with an expensive sniper's scope. He led a company of trencher marines, soldiers outfitted similarly to regular infantry but trained aboard ships to work with the navy. Marines drilled in

boarding and repelling operations and had greater experience in beach landings, and the Cryxian conflict had seen their numbers grow.

“I have heard of you, Major,” he said to Magnus. “I expect you have found fighting Cryx to be more difficult than massacring Khadoran civilians along the border.” Magnus felt a flash of anger and almost rose to the bait, but he restrained his impulse. The 199th had been involved in exactly the same sorts of border operations his company had been. He simply agreed that Cryx was a different sort of beast and ignored the implied criticism.

Magnus did not push; acceptance was better forged in battle. “Get what rest you can,” he advised. “We’ll be fighting as soon as orders come down.” He shared a look with Jacobs as they returned back to their own camp. Things had gone about as well as could be expected.

Purging the Cliff Tops

It took hours for the remaining soldiers and gear from the three lead ships to land. It was painful watching the boats cross the water with the constant threat of corrosive death. Even with the inaccuracy of the defending weapons, every wave of skiffs lost several to projected bile. Everyone in the encampment was eager to neutralize that threat, but until the three lead ships offloaded, they lacked the soldiers to assault the cliffs without leaving the command area vulnerable.

The wisdom in staying encamped was proven after nightfall when they were beset by a massive assault on their position by blighted ogrun and trollkin from other nearby villages. The bloodthirsty savages attacked from both ends of the beach at once, and with them came mechanithralls and bonejacks. Throughout this clash the soldiers could hear the roar of guns from offshore as the fleet came under sustained attack by additional Cryxian vessels. Spotters reported a thick fog had rolled in behind what might have been revenant vessels. The distant rumbling of the ships' guns punctuated the land battle, and Magnus was not the only man to wonder what their fate would be if the Cygnaran fleet was driven off while they were on shore.

Amid punishing rifle volleys, trencher chain guns and cannons joined Sentinel and Defender fire to chew through onrushing waves of the enemy. Magnus had never fought alongside so many warcasters. Even with relatively few warjacks at their disposal they made all the difference, not only by quickly obliterating enemies but also by keeping the defenders safe. The Cygnaran force suffered very few casualties, and the fortified command encampment held.

After they had shattered the waves of blighted attackers, the warcasters pushed out from the encampment alongside their warjacks to ensure the greater region was purged. A heavy patrol rotation was

put in place to forewarn of additional onslaughts, while Magnus and the other warcasters were taken aside to hear their next orders. The boats had finished offloading; there would be no rest.

Rangers gathered from various companies had earlier been assigned to reconnoiter their surroundings. Word had it only a third of those sent out had returned, as the dense, blighted vegetation above the cliffs hid any number of additional Cryxians. Those who returned described the best routes to the top: two different switchbacks carved into the cliff face, each wide enough to allow warjacks access to the heights.

Magnus took his orders from Commander Nemo, who delivered them in his typical patronizing fashion. Magnus' battalion was to take the nearest switchback, just to the east, with Brisbane watching their rear. Nemo referred to a hastily sketched map of the cliffs where X marks indicated the likely origins of the bile bombardments. He tapped one of these with an extended finger and said, "You are to neutralize *this* area—" he tapped another spot and continued, "—then move to *this* position. Got it?"

"Yes, sir. I understand." Magnus tried to keep the impatience from his voice. His impression that Nemo had a low opinion of him was slightly diminished when he overheard the commander speaking similarly to the next officer. He concluded that Nemo might simply consider the reliability of everyone under the age of forty suspect.

Magnus was reunited with his modified Charger Rust and his Arcane. He added Durnwick's freshly repaired Ironclad to his battlegroup, along with a pair of Sentinels. Additional Defenders intended for his priority mission would arrive when the other ships offloaded. Magnus' mind balked at the thought of controlling so many 'jacks at one time.

Once his group was ready for the initial mission, they made their way to the ramps and began the climb. The switchback was narrow—

only a few men could walk abreast—so their column stretched long. Magnus and his men were halfway up the incline when a trencher behind him gave a choked cry and fell, impaled by a heavy spear with an obsidian tip. Dozens of similar weapons rained down upon them. Trenchers raised rifles to fire blindly into the thick undergrowth above until Magnus ordered them to stop. Looking through the eyes of his warjacks, he fired more carefully, neutralizing several of the blighted savages along the top of the ramp.

The forward section of the column surged ahead as Magnus impelled the warjacks at the front to run. Bile thralls emerged from amid the bullet-shredded vegetation to line the cliff top and spray corrosive fluid down onto the soldiers. The air was filled with the putrid stench. Trenchers tore at their uniforms and armor in futile attempts to evade contact with the deadly fluid. Most of those splashed died, their end neither quick nor merciful. This time Magnus did not discourage the men from firing onto the cliff top, and the rush of their bullets joined the whirring of his Sentinels' chain guns. The defensive volley hit many of the bile thralls, but every one they cleared was immediately replaced by another.

Magnus' Ironclad reached the summit, its quake hammer in hand as its baleful eyes searched for enemies. They were not hard to find; clumps of grotesquely rotund bile thralls shambled forward. Disgusting abominations, they bore little resemblance to the humans whose corpses had been stitched together to create them. Lengths of black piping wrapped from their distended stomachs to their weapons, their undead bodies serving as reservoirs for liquid death. They made up for their individual inaccuracy by sheer volume, with the capacity to unleash their full payload in a single devastating purge.

The Ironclad smashed through the nearest of them, crushing them underfoot. Bile fluid could eat through even warjack armor in

time, but the machines were far more resistant to corrosion than the soldiers. Pools of the caustic liquid were left behind in the Ironclad's wake; the soldiers would need to tread carefully in this area.

Once his Arcane and Charger had also reached the top, the warcaster drew on his sorcerous power to send explosive energy through the Arcane's arc node out into knots of bile thralls. At least they were not very durable, succumbing quickly to the blasts. His Charger added the alternating fire of its double cannon to the onslaught, and soon Magnus and the first of his trenchers reached the summit to lay down their own fire. The enemy was quickly dispatched, although a black ogrun with a double-handed maul managed to land a tremendous impact that buckled his Arcane's shield and nearly tore off its arm before Magnus hacked the enemy down with his battle blade. Captain Jacobs and the men of the 23rd rushed forward to support him as they cleared the summit, firing scatterguns to chew through both walking dead and blighted living. The rest of the column reached the top relatively unmolested.

What followed was a nerve-racking march through the twisted trees and thorny hedges that choked the region. The beach below had seemed like any other, aside from the grisly scene of the trollkin villages, but the top of the island was disturbingly alien. None of the plants were familiar. Their leaves shone a dark oily green, every branch riddled with thorns. Everywhere was the sign of dragon blight, which left all living things twisted and warped. The constant buzzing of strange insects hung heavy in the air, and occasionally oversized flies or beetles landed on a man's neck or leg to bite with razor-sharp mandibles through cloth and skin. Even the smallest creature on the island seemed hateful. Everything about the place, from the plants and insects to the putrid smell and unidentified clicking noises amid the shadowed trees, seemed unnatural and tainted.

After several light skirmishes with thralls and blighted trollkin,

they broke through to a cleared plateau. A peculiar structure sat in the center, its bulging dome at least thirty feet in diameter. From the apex of its curved roof extended a long, elevated barrel, almost like a telescope, pointing toward the ocean. Green light pulsed from vent-like slats along its upper surfaces, and they could hear the rumble of pumping machinery from its interior.

Attached to the structure at points around the perimeter were a dozen enormous bloated monstrosities, giant spherical creatures sewn of rotting flesh and supported by a carriage of spider-like metal legs. They were far larger than the bile thralls they had fought below.

"Bloat thralls," Magnus spoke aloud. He had fought them before and knew that as larger and more frightful variants on bile thralls they were able to deliver tremendous volumes of bile fluid. At present their weapons were inserted into apertures around the base of the dome, and as he watched the giant barrel at the top shuddered to disgorge liquid mass of bile that soared out in a high arc toward the distant ships. They had found the Cryxian artillery. It seemed this building concentrated the output of multiple bloat thralls into a pressurized projectile to fire with unprecedented range.

"Destroy them! Quickly!" He shouted to his men as he impelled his Charger and Defender to fire. The nearest bloat thralls exploded wetly, their vile innards spraying outward to burn anything they touched. The remaining bloats disengaged from the structure and turned on the approaching trenchers. Simultaneously a large metal door facing them rumbled opened to unleash dozens of mechanithralls that rushed the Cygnaran soldiers. The trenchers in the forward line had already fired at the bloats and were caught in the middle of reloading. The mechanithralls smashed into them with their steam-powered fists, killing anyone they could reach.

The rest of the force reacted quickly, directed by Magnus' captains. Magnus sent his Ironclad into the midst of the mechanithralls to

pound the earth with its quake hammer, rippling the ground to send thralls toppling back. An overwhelming volley of trencher rifle fire mowed them down. Several bloat thralls at the rear managed to launch horrendous gouts of bile fluid deeper into the trencher ranks. Magnus saw a number of men from the 23rd he had fought with for years melted into unrecognizable forms, and he had to clamp down on his anger to focus on directing his 'jacks.

Captain Jalise Kirkwall made a brave charge around the perimeter with her commandos to reach the last of the bloats. Captain Gordin Thatch and his marine sharpshooters flanked to the left while Kirkwall went right and took one out on the opposite side of the building. Those cleared, Magnus sent his Ironclad and Defender to batter the building to rubble, prompting a ragged cheer from the men that was more relieved than triumphant.

Jacobs looked at the smoking wreckage and nodded in satisfaction. "One less thing hurling death at our ships."

Magnus tore his eyes away from the ruin of the trenchers who had fallen there. "There's still another site to neutralize," he said. "Get your platoons in order and let's march."

The 199th disassembled the next artillery site with swift and smooth precision, as now they knew what to expect. They suffered far fewer casualties this time. Once the building was destroyed they launched a flare to signal the completion of that phase of the objective. The gleam of other flares was reported in the distance; it seemed the forces that had climbed the second ramp had also succeeded. This meant the ships could begin offloading the main army. Magnus looked over his force in satisfaction. His new group had worked well together to complete this part of the mission, and he saw a glimmer of respect in the faces of his captains. Even Kirkwall gave him a small nod. It was a start.

Magnus' orders were to hasten inland and join with the other

assault forces to create a perimeter line while other squads swept the intervening region to be sure they had not missed any undiscovered artillery sites. As Magnus and his officers got the men and 'jacks ready to move out, a ranger rushed into the clearing from the east. Wasting no time, the man cried, "Major Magnus! Captain Brisbane's company is overrun!"

The captains looked to Magnus, all of them tense. "Where are they?" Magnus asked.

"Holding the ramp we climbed from the beach. Enemies came from inland."

"What kind of enemy?"

"Ogrun, mechanithralls, bonejacks. Not sure what's leading 'em, sir." He waited, agitation evident in his ragged breathing and tensed muscles.

It would take them away from their intended position, but then, it might be worse if their flank were overrun and they lost access to the path down to the beach. And Magnus could not stomach leaving another warcaster without support. He could see his captains watching him closely, likely remembering Durnwick's fall and wondering if he would simply follow orders or go to Brisbane's defense. He said, "Change of plans. We're heading back to the cliffs, double-time!" No one needed additional encouragement.



They heard shooting through the trees before they could see the enemy: sporadic shots, not the heavier fire of an intact company. Magnus cursed the dense, hostile undergrowth that slowed the force's progress as it pulled at his Ironclad and Defender and tore at his soldiers. Anywhere bleeding skin was exposed, buzzing insect swarms landed and bit.

The soldiers at the front broke through to a slight rise, and

Magnus joined them to survey the situation. Captain Brisbane and his mixed company had taken up a position on a low hill fronted by a line of large, jagged rocks. They had situated a chain gun and cannons at the center of the riflemen. At either end of a line of frantically firing trenchers and long gunners stood Brisbane's pair of Defenders, already engaged by blighted ogrun with heavy mauls. Cygnaran and Cryxian corpses alike littered the hill and its perimeter. Brisbane had gone to the assistance of one of his Defenders, engaging the ogrun with his mechanikal hammer. Just in front of his position, a large number of mechanithralls pounded into a ragged platoon of sword knights. Magnus estimated Brisbane was down to less than half his original company, and those left were barely holding on.

Behind the mechanithralls Magnus spotted a man-shaped skeletal figure wearing a hooded robe set with armored plates. Its eyes gleamed green within a face of white bone, and sooty smoke poured from stacks on its back. An iron lich! His pulse raced at the sight of the first significant Cryxian leader they had yet encountered. It carried no obvious weapon but held an ironbound book chained to its left wrist. Its right gauntleted hand was extended to summon baleful green fire that burst forth to consume several long gunners atop the hill.

Captain Thatch unslung his sniper rifle and snapped a shot to pierce the head of a blighted ogrun about to charge Brisbane. Magnus ordered, "Jacobs, Kirkwall, charge with your men to reinforce Brisbane's left flank! Haggin, Thatch, cover their advance!"

The soldiers rushed from the twisted trees to hurl grenades and fire scatterguns into the enemy. An eruption of rifle fire followed. Magnus invoked his magic to manifest as a ring of runes around Imp's heavy barrel, augmenting its range. He impelled the Defender to take a shot at the iron lich—he would not let that creature feast

on the souls of his trenchers. He felt grim satisfaction when a shell smashed through the creature's left shoulder, knocking it back.

He urged his Ironclad ahead as Brisbane's left Defender collapsed under ogrun mauls. The Ironclad barreled into the nearest ogrun and sent it flying back through its companions to smash into the rock face sheltering the long gunners. Toppled ogrun were scrambling back to their feet as the 'jack laid into them with powerful blows of its quake hammer. His Charger's double cannon did not have the range to reach the iron lich, so it fired at the nearest targets of opportunity. His damaged Arcane ran to the left behind the commandos, where Magnus hoped to use their advance to get its arc node closer. He saw a pair of Slayers charge into Brisbane's sword knights and rake several apart with their claws. Magnus gritted his teeth and felt an even greater urgency to get to their controlling lich.

Deathrippers and Defilers raced around the periphery of Magnus' force. Green hellfire surged through their arc nodes to blast the nearest trenchers. Magnus fired on one with his Defender, scoring a crippling hit to its legs. Captain Thatch shouted to his trencher marine platoons to concentrate fire on these threats; experience had clearly taught him their dangers. One Deathripper leapt into their midst and savagely mauled one trencher after another with its fanged jaws. The nimble construct easily evaded their attempts to fend it off with bayonets.

Magnus drew his battle blade and pushed through his men to engage the machine. He landed an overhand blow directly to its upper chassis, cleaving through its light armor and hearing the satisfying metal crunch of delicate internal mechanisms. After another blow it stopped moving, its blood-smeared jaws hanging open.

The lich had vanished behind a line of mechanithralls by the time another shell dropped into Imp's heavy barrel. Magnus had the 'jack fire at one of the blighted ogrun nearest Brisbane instead, giving the young warcaster the chance to step clear of the melee.

Brisbane quickly surveyed the battle and then charged the nearest Slayer to deliver a steel-crumpling blow with his weighty hammer. His faltering sword knights were encouraged by his presence and restored what was left of their line.

Kirkwall had nearly been surrounded, but Captain Haggin and his commandos came to her support, hurling grenades to unleash a rippling wave of explosions that consumed the nearest line of mechanithralls. Jacobs and his platoon fired scatterguns to rip apart another batch before the forward trencher line was forced to draw knives and fight hand-to-hand. Kirkwall was a blur of motion as she demonstrated her skill with her blades, nimbly evading steam-powered fists that could kill her with a single blow and retaliating with expert strikes. Although mechanithralls had deadly strength, they could be neutralized quickly by severing the connecting tendons on their arms or cutting their heads from their shoulders. Kirkwall and the trenchers of the 199th had obviously fought them enough to know how to take them down quickly and efficiently.

Magnus got his Arcane close enough to invoke a sorcerous blast into the thralls nearest to the lich's last location, sending animated corpses flying. He felt a sharp stab of pain in the back of his head at a surge of feedback from the faulty arc node. Smoke rose from the Arcane as the delicate mechanism atop its chassis lit on fire. Magnus growled and sent the unreliable machine to spear one of the bonejacks with its pike.

Haggin looked like an enraged berserker as he smashed through mechanithralls, not bothering to draw his knife but instead wielding his heavy scattergun like a club. The heavily muscled trencher ducked beneath what would have been a fatal blow and then belted the offending thrall so hard with his gun stock that its rotted head flew from its shoulders. Other commandos took out other thralls, finally clearing enough that Magnus saw the lich at last, its black

gauntlets glowing green as it summoned more hellfire.

He linked his sight to Imp and fired. The ordnance—designed to buckle Khadoran heavy armor—made a wreckage of the lich's torso. Its destruction sent a mental backlash that halted the remaining bonejacks and Slayers. Magnus saw Brisbane, who had been leaning back to avoid a Slayer's raking claws, take a deep breath and then bring his hammer around to crash into the inert helljack, which toppled to the ground. The mechanithralls became uncoordinated without the guidance of their master and were quickly overcome.

After the enemy force was cleared, Brisbane approached Magnus and extended a hand. "Thank you, Major. Looks like I owe you one—or maybe more than one." He smiled, and Magnus clasped his hand. Brisbane's expression suggested he remembered having refused Magnus' earlier offer for advice. His eyes took in the countless bodies strewn across the hillside. It was a grisly scene, as bad as the beaches below had been after their initial landing.

Magnus nodded. "You'd have done the same. I'm sure you'll get the chance, sooner or later."

Jacobs approached and said, "Sir, we had better get back. They'll be waiting."

Magnus looked back to the other warcaster. "Can you keep the ramp secure? I'll inform Commander Nemo of the situation."

Brisbane nodded and said, "We'll hold as long as necessary."



Commander Nemo was furious when Magnus' half-strength battalion arrived late to their rendezvous. Magnus learned there had been hard fighting during his absence, and the perimeter line had been breached. After enduring a brutal tongue-lashing, Magnus was eventually able to explain the situation with Captain Brisbane and how near the junior warcaster had come to being overrun. This

slightly mollified the commander, who begrudgingly agreed he had made the right decision. Magnus and his team were integrated into the perimeter forces and told to stand ready against additional assaults.

Fortunately Cryx did not try their line again before the other patrols that had been sent to do a more thorough sweep of the cliff region located and dismantled two more bile artillery sites. Commander Nemo then declared the cliffs neutralized, and the bulk of the army withdrew back to the beaches. Entrenched forces stayed at the top of each ramp to serve as mustering points for the next phase. As Magnus and his officers wearily descended the switchbacks he saw many more launches crossing from the fleet by the light of Calder, the largest moon. No bile was pitched from the cliffs to interfere with them, and he took no small satisfaction from this. It had been a good night's work.

The fighting had clearly had an impact on the captains of the 199th, who were now at greater ease with their commanding officer. Bonds forged quickly in combat, and they all knew they would soon be embarking on their main mission. Magnus eagerly anticipated even a few hours of rest in his tent. He had just settled when he received an unexpected summons from the king.

Whatever ease he might have felt evaporated when he entered the king's larger but otherwise unadorned tent. The king was alone, but he stood leaning upon the hilt of Kingslayer, its point in the ground, with a posture and expression that radiated baleful anger. Magnus felt as if cold water had been hurled into his face, and he shivered with a fear that was palpable and overpowering.

He immediately knelt to one knee and bowed his head.

"Major Asheth Magnus." Vinter spoke slowly, giving his words ominous emphasis. "I am *very* displeased. Perhaps your promotion was premature."

Magnus' mind reeled as he tried to imagine what he had done wrong. He had succeeded in his objective of destroying the ammunition battery. He had rejoined the greater force and helped hold the perimeter. And he had backed up another warcaster who otherwise would have been killed and his position compromised. Nevertheless, he was very familiar with the terrible consequences of losing favor with King Vinter Raelthorne IV. He stared fixedly at the ground, and his voice shook as he asked, "Your Majesty?"

"We walk the razor's edge between success and failure." Vinter paused. "I joined this expedition because only *I* can make the difficult decisions required to defeat our foe. Success requires my officers to follow their orders. I expect complete obedience. I know warcasters think they are above the chain of command, but let me disabuse you of that idea. Today you disobeyed your orders in a vain attempt at personal glory. Do you deny this?"

Magnus felt the blood drain from his face at these words, understanding at last. "Your Majesty, I offer my humblest apologies. I thought we should not allow our position to be flanked. I was concerned at the possibility of losing another warcaster." He remembered Vinter's words after Major Durnwick's death and wished he had not spoken that thought aloud. He stammered, "I had no intention of disobeying orders."

The king stepped closer, looming over Magnus and casting him in shadow. Magnus trembled, expecting a blade to bite his neck at any moment. "You presumed to *interpret* your orders. It was not your call to relieve Brisbane. He would have fought to hold that ramp—and held long enough. I had contingencies ready. While you were absent,

Colonel Rathleigh, whose flank you were to protect, was encircled. He was wounded. Commander Nemo almost went to his aid; had he done so, our lines would have been frayed. The effort atop the cliffs might have failed.” Magnus felt the full weight of that last word twist in his gut. The king continued, his voice no less menacing. “I anticipated your absence, however. I had Nemo hold and sent Leto to fill the gap. Your lord general stood in your place. Because of you, my brother was imperiled and we suffered needless casualties.”

“I was in error,” Magnus said, his voice hoarse. “Forgive me.”

Vinter was silent for a time that felt agonizing to Magnus. Then he said, “Much rests on tomorrow. We have lost the element of surprise. We must achieve our goals quickly, before this island becomes our tomb. Should I pick someone else for your task? Someone with greater mental fortitude?”

Magnus felt his face burning with shame but also resolve. He said, “I will see the mission done, my King. I will not fail.”

“See you do not. You are dismissed.” Vinter turned away from Magnus, and the warcaster rose and withdrew. As he walked back to his tent he felt the powerful irrational fear that everyone he passed knew his humiliation.

Penetrating the Interior

Magnus had little sleep that night, although he was dimly aware of closing his eyes. A moment later Captain Jacobs was jostling him awake. Dawn had not broken, but the commanders hoped to be on the march by the time the sun rose. It was almost startling to step forth from the tent and see the transformation of the beach after several hours of launches and rowboats from the rest of the fleet continually landing. The army had arrived in full. Tents and campfires filled the beach in every direction as far as he could see.

There was a tremendous sense of urgency, since the cove where the ships anchored could be easily sealed should Cryx send its full naval might. Vinter's words of the previous night had been no exaggeration: if the Black Fleet arrived and drove off their ships, the entire army would be left to fend for itself on Blackrock, with little hope of rescue. Nevertheless, no force so large could move with alacrity, particularly with limited access to the cliff top. The sun had risen by the time their columns made their way up the switchbacks. With the army gathered, Magnus' sense of himself as only a small part of an enormous effort was magnified. At the same time he knew the importance of his mission, a responsibility he would shoulder alone.

Magnus had been entrusted with five additional Defenders offloaded from the ships overnight, all originally intended for Major Durnwick. It was primarily by their cannons and a limited quantity of explosive ammunition that he was to demolish the target necrofactorium. He still had his two Sentinels, but his old Arcane had been deemed unfit for battle. He had been given another to replace it, plus another Charger and Ironclad as well. Altogether he now controlled thirteen warjacks.

Captain Thatch stopped nearby while checking the status of their ammunition stores and gave Magnus an appraising look. "Are you all right, Major? Not enough sleep?"

Magnus had been staring blankly ahead with his mind dispersed among his warjacks. He shook his head and said, "Gravediggers don't sleep; we fortify." It was an old trencher saying, and several of the nearby men chuckled. Thatch nodded in approval and returned to his men.

Controlling so many warjacks represented a mental challenge he had never attempted before. Their military-grade cortexes were sufficient to engage in battle without his constant supervision, but he still needed to give them periodic general orders. If he wanted them positioned for maximum effect, he had to stay in contact with their cortexes at all times. He felt distracted connecting to so many, as each sent signals to him that included glimpses through their ocular systems. It would require acclimation.

This challenge was overwhelming enough without considering the full battalion of a thousand soldiers now under his command. Though it was a fraction of the forces being supervised by the ranking colonels and commanders, to Magnus it was a significant logistical challenge. He was glad to have experienced captains working under him, each overseeing a quarter of the force. He knew he needed to project an air of utmost confidence despite Vinter's words echoing in his mind. He could not help but wonder if his promotion had indeed been premature.

The air filled with shouted orders as the army got underway. They had split into four divisions, each targeting a different necrofactorium complex. Magnus and the 199th were attached to the largest single division, directly led by King Vinter, Lord General Leto, and Commanders Kinbrace and Nemo. They would penetrate deepest into the dark island. Rangers had gone out in the night

to survey the mustering Cryxian forces, and those who returned reported the enemy massing at several places in the interior. Detailed reconnaissance was limited, though, with so many rangers missing.

The division making its way inland was large enough to be fronted by a line of heavy warjacks that flattened and hacked through the twisted undergrowth as they went, making it easier for the wide columns of soldiers who followed. Along the most direct route toward Magnus' intended target was a narrow pass through steep hills that the rangers had reported as guarded by the largest concentration of Cryxian forces. A towering, undead horror with tattered wings had been seen leading that army—likely Lich Lord Terminus, one of Lord Toruk's most terrifying generals.

Magnus would have given much to see Vinter's army clash with that of Terminus, but his battalion peeled away from the main column miles ahead of that choke point. The warcasters with the division were not seeking to break through the Cryxian army at that position but rather to engage them in a protracted and costly battle. Hopefully the fight would lure reinforcements from deeper in the interior; every enemy attracted to this clash would be one less lying in wait to intercept Magnus' battalion. The king would withdraw as necessary once the bait was taken.

The 199th took a circuitous route nearer the shoreline to approach the target. Magnus had often been forced to reconcile speed and stealth while penetrating the Khadoran interior. The 23rd had been used for many covert strikes against Khadoran settlements deemed too close to the Cygnaran border, and he and his team had needed to be brutally efficient in order to strike and escape before the Khadoran Army retaliated. He drew on that experience as he could, although he now maneuvered an entire battalion.

After a long march they arrived within sight of a blighted trollkin village. Following a bit of scouting they determined that most of the

village's hardier inhabitants had already left, likely to join war parties in the interior. Mostly youths and a few females remained. Even these were fierce, though, and Magnus could not take the risk of them alerting others in the vicinity; he had no choice but to clear the village. To suppress the population as quietly as possible, he ordered his men to refrain from rifle and cannon fire, relying instead on commandos closing to melee and his warjacks assisting after battle was joined. The work was quickly and efficiently accomplished, and the battalion was able to move on. Magnus took no enjoyment in such actions, but he knew war required a certain pragmatism, one his company had long since learned to accept.

Their path took them near the eastern shore of the island, which was rocky and craggy even without the wall of cliffs that loomed along the southern horizon. Magnus and his officers kept a watchful eye on their surroundings as the force hastened down a narrow defile descending closer to sea level. They spotted no further enemies in their path, but through a break in the trees along a rare stretch of beach they glimpsed a sight that made their blood run cold: a pair of large Cryxian ships lying at anchor in the light mist.

The nearer one had the distinct silhouette of a blackship. The other appeared to be an old but more typical sailing vessel, except a green glow hung beneath its sails and unnatural green flames danced along its rails and rigging. It was a ship of the revenant-crewed Ghost Fleet. Just below their path along the beach they could see an entire line of beached Cryxian raiding launches, a clear sign that a sizable landing party had arrived.

Captain Thatch peered through the scope on his rifle to get a better view and cursed. "Beautiful. Just beautiful. That blackship is the *Widower*." The name of the most notorious Satyxis blackship to sail the Broken Coast sent chills down the spines of all gathered there. Any Cryxian ships were a cause for concern, but the captain of the

Widower was a Satyxis warcaster of particularly fearsome reputation. Thatch added, "Can't see the name of the revenant ship. It's not the *Atramentous* at least, thank Morrow."

Kirkwall looked down at the boats pulled up on the beach and said, "That's a lot of launches."

Magnus felt a knot of unease in his stomach. The *Widower* was said to most often travel with the flagships of the Black Fleet. The thought of their navy being engaged rose to the forefront of his mind. He pushed these worries down, knowing they had to focus on the mission at hand. "Chances are, whoever landed went deeper inland. It's imperative we don't open fire or use grenades except as a last resort. Other than that, nothing changes."

With a thousand soldiers and over a dozen warjacks, stealth was impossible. The smoke of Magnus' 'jacks created a haze over their position, while the sound of their force was as obvious as the trail they left behind. Magnus was not trying to remain hidden, only to avoid easy observation from afar. Visibility on the island was generally poor due to the thick vegetation and uneven terrain. They could only hope no significant enemy force was nearby.

Within the hour, their forward scouts reported another village ahead. Magnus passed down orders to clear it with similar pragmatic efficiency as the last. Captains Kirkwall and Jacobs went ahead, with their commandos. Magnus had most of his light 'jacks and his Ironclads at the front of the regular infantry, ready to send them in after the first strike. It began to rain, which should have been a relief amid the stifling island heat, yet even this had been fouled by the Cryxian miasma on Blackrock. Each warm, oily drop that landed on skin left a burning sensation.

This village, a ring of crude huts, sat atop a craggy hill near the shore. The commandos crept up the hill in silence, ready to carry out their bloody task. Before they could enter the village there was a

sudden rumbling and the ground erupted in front of them as several Helldiver bonejacks leapt from the earth. Simultaneously a line of heavily armored black ogrun charged from the nearest huts. Magnus knew he had miscalculated: they were ambushed.

Desperately, he sent his Ironclads, Chargers, and Sentinels forward. The Helldivers had fearsome hinged jaws set with metal tusks that easily tore through the nearest commandos. Those who had been advancing with knives ready were met by long warcleavers in the hands of eight-foot-tall ogrun and were quickly hacked down. Simultaneously Magnus heard warbling cries to the rear of his line. He glanced back to see Satyxis had emerged from the forest to carve into his flank. Things had gone from bad to worse. Magnus impelled his Chargers and Defenders to fire even as he screamed, "Free fire!" The reports of multiple rifles erupted throughout the force before the words were fully spoken.

The hilltop village was the most defensible section of the immediate landscape—they needed to seize that ground and hold it.

"To the village! Advance and fire!" He directed Captains Thatch and Haggin to get their men away from the tree line, where seemingly countless Satyxis with barbed whips were emerging. Mixed among them were groups of rotting corpses armed with cutlasses and pistols—revenant pirates.

Amid these attackers he spotted a Satyxis woman in warcaster armor, her attire more ornamented than the others'. With the earlier identification of the *Widower*, Magnus knew instantly this must be Skarre Ravenmane, said to be a queen among the Satyxis. She was flanked by Slayers and Reapers, and together they leapt into the fray. Skarre's expression was cruel and gleeful as she waded into the trenchers with her cutlass in one hand and a dagger in the other. She then pointed higher up the hillside and invoked bursts of red acidic liquid to splash into squads of fleeing soldiers. Each drop burned

flesh with the same deadly acidic intensity as bile. The trenchers fled from her warjacks, which loped among them like hounds on the hunt.

Magnus knew he had to seize the higher ground and rally his trenchers before he could deal with her. He had his Defenders provide what cover fire they could, directing several to concentrate on and annihilate the nearest Slayer. He then turned his back on the retreating trenchers to confront the blighted ogrun ahead. It took an effort of will to ignore the screams of his men as barbed whips opened Cygnaran throats and lashed soldiers to shreds. He ran up the hill while invoking explosions among the ogrun and then drew his sword to hack into the nearest survivor.

Amid the chaotic melee he lost track of anything beyond the nearest enemy. He saw Kirkwall narrowly evade an ogrun's great chopping blow. He drew his hand cannon and squeezed the trigger to blast a hole through the head of the blighted creature. He was nearly tackled by another of the brutes but Captain Haggis intercepted it, screaming incoherently while stabbing with his long-bladed trench knife. The two tumbled down the muddy slope and were lost to Magnus' sight. An entire gang of hulking ogrun battered his Sentinels to scrap before his Ironclads charged into their midst. Rust and the other Charger beset the Helldivers.

In a few short minutes the ogrun and bonejacks were eliminated and the hilltop was theirs. Magnus ordered his captains to get cannons and chain guns into position. His Arcane ran along the lower slope to let Magnus deliver sorcerous blasts where the enemy clustered. Soon the light 'jack was rushed by revenants who battered it with their cutlasses. He yelled, "Take out revenant officers first!" after seeing many of the men firing futilely into the seemingly invincible pirates, which fell to bullets only to rise again.

Magnus had hoped to catch Skarre with his Defenders, but the

cagey Satyxis queen used her warjacks and the terrain to stay out of their lanes of fire, keeping at the rear of her force. She commanded her Satyxis to converge on the warjacks as Magnus moved them toward her.

The nearest of the raiders cracked their barbed whips to score the armor of the two closest Defenders. Suddenly there was an explosion of unnatural agony in Magnus' mind as unholy energies from the whips blazed through the 'jacks, penetrating cortexes and through them searing Magnus' brain. He fought through the pain to urge those 'jacks to trample through those besetting them and run up the hill back toward the Cygnarans. The numerous warjacks in his arsenal had suddenly become a liability. Any thought of eliminating Skarre with Defender cannon fire was gone from his head amid the haze of searing pain, and he fell to his knees.

The trencher line along the lip of the hill unleashed a deadly hail of lead to cut down the Satyxis who had been pursuing the 'jacks, but as chain guns and cannons opened fire the revenants and Satyxis withdrew back into the trees. Magnus stood shakily to his feet. The pain in his skull faded. Although he was more rattled than seriously injured, he knew a sustained assault by those whips against his 'jacks might well have killed him from feedback alone. Doing a quick mental survey of his 'jacks, he saw that his newly acquired Charger was scrapped and that Rust and his Ironclads were damaged, his remaining mechaniks attempting hasty field repairs.

Magnus' mood was bleak as he saw many bodies of the 23rd lying motionless on the bloody ground. He recognized several of his fallen sergeants and one of his senior lieutenants. As he took in the carnage, he saw Thatch and Kirkwall standing near one of the fallen just down the slope, their faces ashen. At their feet was the bloody and battered corpse of Captain Haggin. He was sprawled alongside the ogrund that had nearly tackled Magnus, his trench knife buried in

its chest. The man had saved his life, but Magnus could think of no comforting words to say to the remaining captains. Other trencher corpses littered the village and the surrounding hillside.

Magnus felt a surge of relief to spot Arthur Jacobs alive near the cannons. He approached his old friend, who reported, "Our defensive position is sound, sir." It was the trencher instinct to fortify, and Magnus could see it in Jacobs' eyes.

Magnus knew the enemy would never be so stupid as to attack their position now that they were ready and had the better ground. They had not come here to seize an ogrun village, though. "We need to be on the march," he said. His voice sounded merciless even to his own ears. They all wanted a reprieve—if only a brief one—to gather their dead friends and bury them. When time permitted in a battle against Cryx, bodies were always to be dealt with, as each could be reanimated as an enemy. But Magnus was operating beyond the ordinary rules, and speed was all that mattered. The more time that passed, the worse the odds became for the success of their mission. All the while, additional blackships might be rounding the island to menace their fleet.

The men grumbled, but they obeyed. Platoons were reshuffled as companies made adjustments for casualties. Once the warjacks were refueled and every soldier was resupplied with ammunition they set off, leaving the carnage behind.

Soldiers warily scanned the dark trees as they went, knowing the enemy was out there, somewhere. Magnus felt confident his battalion still outnumbered Skarre's landing party, and he hoped this strength of numbers would see him through. But he also knew they walked on Cryxian soil, which the enemy knew far better than they. Ravenmane could choose when and where she struck.

The next hours proved this dread to be well founded. Skarre Ravenmane stalked them, besetting them without warning again and

again. Satyxis, revenants, and bonejacks charged from the trees while Slayers and Reapers emerged from the opposite side to beset one or more of Magnus' warjacks. Her objective was clear—she focused relentlessly on his Defenders, and he lost one after the other in quick sequence in the course of three ambushes, until he was down to just two. During each of these attacks he made wrecks of helljacks, but that seemed a trade Ravenmane was willing to accept. At each ambush Satyxis and revenants were slain, but they lost two or three trenchers for every foe they put down. When they tried to pursue the enemy into the trees, they lost even more.

The situation became desperate as their numbers shifted. After the third ambush Magnus knew he no longer possessed a numerical advantage. The toll of death weighed heavily on his mind, and he could see he wasn't the only one. The remaining soldiers of the 199th looked harrowed, their eyes sunken and their hands gripping their rifles desperately. Magnus knew he had to risk his own ambush to try to regain the advantage, so while the rest of the column continued on, he stayed back. He took with him a handpicked force led by Captain Kirkwall, along with one of his battered Ironclads, Imp, and Rust.

Staying off the main path, he managed to flank the Satyxis queen and catch her off guard after the rest of her raiding party marched past. She had kept warily near the rear of her force with a Slayer, a Reaper, and a single Ripjaw. Magnus and Kirkwall's scattergun-wielding commandos leapt out from the trees to beset the queen and her immediate escort, which they quickly gunned down. But just as quickly the Slayer was among the commandos, tearing them apart with its claws. Magnus sent his Ironclad to intercept the fiendish helljack while directing Rust and Imp to fire on Ravenmane. He hoped to take her down quickly.

Skarre reacted with preternatural alacrity to evade the Defender's

shell, and her power field absorbed most of the Charger impacts. Blood along her side told him at least one had gotten through. He advanced, firing his hand cannon, but her power field shimmered and the shell deflected. The Reaper turned on him in response, nearly skewering him with its harpoon before closing to strike at him with its helldriller. Magnus smashed his mechanikal blade through the tempered steel of its melee weapon and impelled Rust to charge the machine and hack at its armor with its augmented cleaver. Meanwhile the Ripjaw leapt upon his Defender, the whirling blade between its mandibles cutting through the warjack's armored plating with alarming efficiency.

Showing foolish bravery, Captain Kirkwall rushed the Satyxis queen. There was nothing Magnus could do to stop her. Skarre smiled as if welcoming the duel and easily parried and evaded Kirkwall's blindingly fast strikes with her cutlass and dagger. Magnus observed the clash with dread, knowing how it would end, and renewed his assault on the Reaper with desperate haste.

The trencher captain feinted and sliced at Skarre's throat, but the strike deflected off her power field. The Cryxian smashed her horns into Kirkwall's forehead with a brutal crunch, sending her sprawling. Magnus hammered the Reaper with his battle blade to finish it and staggered toward the Satyxis, but he was too far away to do more than watch as Skarre's dagger cut Kirkwall's throat with a spray of arterial blood.

Magnus charged her with a cry, but she just laughed and stepped to meet him. He felt tremendous rage as he hacked at her with his Caspian battle blade, but she was too skilled to be easily struck down. She smiled mockingly as she parried and riposted. He had seen what she could do, but her cutlass and dagger kept him preoccupied enough that he could not avoid it when she crashed her horned forehead into his just as she had done with Kirkwall. He saw stars

as he fell to his knees and blindly raised his sword to parry, feeling certain the killing strike would descend.

Through his link to his warjacks he felt his Ironclad and the Slayer deliver mutually crippling blows to one another. Imp managed to batter the Ripjaw to wreckage with its flail, and the badly damaged Reaper fell to Rust's cleaver. With Skarre's 'jacks destroyed or crippled, he summoned Imp and Rust to charge the Satyxis queen. Magnus saw her raising her cutlass over him, but before she committed to the blow she spotted the movement of his warjacks. Frowning as if in annoyance, she leapt toward the cover of the trees. His 'jacks fired, but their shots only splintered bark. She was gone. Magnus stumbled shakily to his feet, his eyes swimming with spots and his head reeling from the concussion. He shook his head in frustration to see Kirkwall lying dead at his feet, her eyes staring blankly upward.

Thoughts of vengeance were derailed when another explosion of pain erupted in his head. Raiders back at the main column had beset the 'jacks he had left there with lacerator whips. He and the remaining men rushed back to see Satyxis and revenants attacking the rear of his force while mechanithralls alongside Deathripper bonejacks struck at the front. Magnus lost his temper and threw himself into the minds of his 'jacks as he charged those nearest with his blade.

He had no thought for his own safety as he hacked through them, feeling a sizzling fire in his brain as more lacerator strikes brought down his second Ironclad. Chain guns were set in place and spun up to firing speed, but their crews were overrun and sliced to bloody ribbons. The battle came down to revenant cutlasses, Satyxis whips, and trencher knives and bayonets.

A Deathripper barreled into Magnus, knocking him from his feet

as he wedged his sword into its fanged mouth. Weak from fatigue and blood loss he could only strike at it feebly, but Jacobs came to his side and kicked the machine from him and then blasted it with his scattergun. Magnus summoned one last adrenaline surge and battered the bonejack to oblivion with his blade. He and Jacobs were then separated as they plunged back into the fray.

It seemed a long time of metal on metal and bloody carnage, and at the end Magnus was half-blinded by the blood seeping into his eyes from a gash along his forehead. At last there was a moment of calm, and he was able to step back and take stock of the situation. He had resigned himself to dying here, to taking as many of the enemy down with him as he could. What he saw now was almost startling: they seemed to have won. The trampled and shredded section of forest where they fought was littered with corpses from both sides. He blinked and stared at the remaining trenchers, who seemed so few.

Magnus breathed hard, his heart beating heavily. He felt strangely distanced from his body, which ached from battle fatigue as well as countless cuts and bruises. He took in the bodies around them and could not muster any emotions, whether he looked on men in the navy blue of the King's Own or Cryxians in Satyxis leathers. Both seemed the same. A remote part of his mind registered he was down to two of his original 'jacks: Imp and Rust. The rest had been wrecked. Where had his force gone? The answer lay in bloody piles around him.

His mind balked to consider how few soldiers were left. He looked up as his last two captains approached, covered in gore. Jacobs was limping from a hastily bandaged slash along his left leg, but Thatch appeared relatively unhurt. A trencher lieutenant took Thatch aside to tell him of Kirkwall's fall, and the sniper's face drained of blood.

“ . . . the mission.”

The world came back into focus and he realized Jacobs had spoken. Magnus blinked, and his tongue felt thick in his mouth as he asked, "What? Say that again."

Jacobs spoke with quiet intensity. "We need to consider aborting the mission, Major."

Magnus swallowed, his hands trembling. He knew Jacobs was right. They needed the Defenders in order to destroy the necrofactorium. Now he had only one, and most of the explosive ammunition had been spent or lost besides. As he considered this, Magnus remembered Vinter's words and the icy dread he had felt in the royal tent. How could he face the king if he failed? Death seemed preferable.

He spoke in a hoarse voice. "That's not an option. We've nearly reached the target. We've defeated the Satyx leader." He had no absolute certainty of this, to be truthful, but the scheming part of his mind told him they must have at least dealt her landing party a crippling blow. Skarre might gather additional Cryxians from elsewhere on the island, but doing so would take time. They had a narrow window in which to act.

"Look around!" Jacobs jabbed a finger back at where the remnants of their battalion gathered. "We've lost most of our men! All your Defenders are destroyed but one. This mission is *over*, Asheth."

Despite their long friendship, Jacobs rarely used Magnus' first name—but if he felt it would have an impact now, he had miscalculated. Magnus said flatly, "This is not a debate, Captain. I *will* destroy that factory. Let's march."

Jacobs stared in disbelief as the major marched past him. Magnus did not wait for the men, but they soon followed, leaving behind the corpses of their friends.

Assault on the Necrofactorium

The men passed the rest of the march in fear, knowing Skarre might descend upon them at any time. But as Magnus had predicted, there were no additional ambushes. Above the trees the great necrofactorium loomed, a massive brooding edifice as squat, ugly, and unadorned as any built by Cryx. It was made of blackened stone that called to mind old stories of Orgoth fortresses and temples. Baleful green light gleamed through countless slits and apertures.

They sent their last rangers to check the structure more closely. As they awaited the rangers' return, every trencher gripped his rifle fearfully, finding little solace in the pale faces of battle-scarred sergeants and officers. They had lost their chain guns and were down to one cannon, now pointed at the great closed metal doors.

A pair of tremendous smoke stacks extended from the domed roof of the building like wicked horns. Several times as they waited there was a strange moaning noise, as from some doleful horn, before acrid plumes erupted from the stacks to fill the air above. This vapor was tinged with green and bubbled and boiled in the air. Several of the trenchers had torn off cloth to wrap around their mouths and noses, fearing the air itself, which was biting and foul. Each indrawn breath brought a metallic taste, with something rotten beneath.

The rangers returned and their sergeant reported, "Massive bile production facility. Found an aperture on the south face, too narrow to get through, but I could see inside. The whole central area's filled with bile thralls, unmoving. Hundreds upon hundreds. They don't look . . . um . . . active. Saw huge armored tanks: bile reservoirs. Lots of thumping machinery. Some necrotechs in there, moving around, but I couldn't get a count. No patrols outside we could see. If there's a garrison, it's not as big as we feared. But we couldn't see everything.

Most of the space inside is taken up by the inert bile thralls. Likely they're being pumped full before activation." The soldiers around them muttered fearfully.

Magnus had been staring at the stacks as great plumes of smoke poured forth. "I wonder . . ." He locked eyes with Arthur Jacobs, who showed a glimmer of interest. He knew the tone in Magnus' voice when a plan had come to him. Magnus continued, "I don't think we need Defenders to bring this place down. We just have to block those vents. Whatever they're doing in there, it requires pressure. Like a steam boiler. If we block the vents, the pressure will build—"

Jacobs' eyes widened. "And the place might blow. The machinery could destroy itself."

Thatch looked back and forth between the two of them as if they were crazy. "What if there's a safety mechanism to shut down the engines?"

Magnus chewed the inside of his lip, his mind racing. "Here's what we do. We break in, then the two of you find a way to stop the venting. I can check the engines for fail-safes. Then we get as far away as possible before it blows."

Captain Thatch scowled. "You make it sound so easy!"

Magnus said calmly, "This factory is deep in Blackrock, where no living man has ever stood. This place has but one purpose: to make weapons. Cryx doesn't build places like this expecting they will be attacked. We left a trail of corpses to get here. *That* was the hard part."

Thatch said nothing more, but Magnus sensed his morale—and that of the men—was shaky. Every soldier was imagining the horror of hundreds of bile thralls in one place. Magnus had to admit he also found the thought terrifying. He spoke again: "Every Cryxian weapon made here might be turned on our countrymen. We've made it this far. Now we just need to finish the job and destroy this

place. In doing so, we'll save far more lives than we lost today." He could see his words had an impact, firming their resolve, although fear lingered in their eyes.



Magnus touched the cortexes of Rust and Imp and told the cannon crew to get ready to fire. At his signal the trencher cannon bucked and rolled back from recoil, and the Charger and Defender also fired. The massive metal doors buckled and exploded inward, torn off their hinges.

"Advance!" he shouted. The sound of the cannons had gotten the adrenaline of the men pumping. They forgot their fear for the moment and charged.

Dozens of mechanithralls emerged from the shattered doors only to be immediately cut down by rifle fire. More were met by sprays of metal shrapnel and grenades, and then the soldiers got inside the doors. Battle became chaotic in close quarters, and a number of trenchers fell to steam-powered fists before the force cleared the vicinity. Additional grenade explosions and rifle fire cleared the immediate area enough for Magnus and his 'jacks to push inside. Just past the shattered doors he spotted an ancillary square room set into the left wall, likely where the mechanithralls had originated.

The interior of the factory was lit by a now-familiar green glow from the fires of numerous churning machines. The foul stench of burning necrotite was heavy in the air, prompting many of the trenchers to fall into fits of coughing. The main chamber was indeed filled with endless rows of bile thralls, a sight that was even more sinister in person than they had imagined. Magnus knew his men did not have enough bullets to shoot all these thralls even if they were so inclined. Fortunately the thralls were as still as statues.

He saw necrotechs scurrying amid the machinery deeper inside

the open chamber, hurriedly throwing levers and switches. The sight alarmed him, and he wondered what they might be activating. He targeted those he could see with Defender and Charger fire, hoping to eliminate them before they could finish whatever they had planned.

Jacobs grabbed Thatch's arm and pointed up along the outer walls to where scaffolding and metal-grilled platforms allowed access to sections of the building's upper machinery. "I think we can get to the vent shafts up there. You go that way."

Magnus said, "Work quickly. The rest of the men will keep the exit secured while I check the engines."

Thatch nodded, and each captain selected a squad of trenchers to accompany him as they made their separate ways up the small and precarious ramps. Those seemed sturdy enough to sustain their weight, but there were no railings, and the platforms were uncomfortably narrow.

The doors to several other cell-like rooms along the first floor perimeter clanged open to disgorge additional mechanithralls, plus a number of active bile thralls. There was no sign of an intelligence directing them. The trenchers not with Thatch and Jacobs had formed into a defensive cordon just within the entrance to the main chamber. Magnus used his arcane power to augment their firing range as they took aim at the approaching enemy. The men in the front row fired and fell back to reload while the next line with readied rifles took their place.

It was one of the few times when Magnus wished his battalion included long gunners. He preferred the more adaptable skills of hardened trenchers in general, but when it came to laying down a volume of firepower, no soldiers could match long gunners. He and his 'jacks stepped forward to assist, but the line suffered additional casualties when mechanithralls reached them, and he could plainly see that the rest of the men were rattled and afraid, eager to leave

this nightmare place. While they fought, their eyes strayed to the hundreds of statue-like bile thralls looming nearby.

Magnus went ahead alone to make his way toward the heavy engines. This meant stepping directly through the eerie rows of bile thralls, getting too close a look at their bloated stitched flesh and grotesque weaponry. Lengths of piping like black snakes connected each of them to thicker conduits extending from the central reservoir. Numerous pipes attached this to smaller vats and those in turn to the pumping steam engines. Magnus ran his eye along the maze of piping, puzzling out their relation to the churning pistons and other machine elements. He thought he could see how this place functioned.

As he rounded one machine he was startled to see several thralls shoveling necrotite into the open maw of a furnace. The blight-filled radiance from the heat of its fire made his muscles ache, and nausea clenched his stomach. He raised his hand cannon toward them but stopped when it became clear they paid him no mind. They were designed for the simple task of shoveling Cryxian fuel, not to fight; their work would actually help him in his objective. Magnus did not interrupt them.

He climbed blackened steps to reach the upper section of the large machine and the pressure tank connected to the exhaust vents. There he discovered an immense configuration of valves and triggers that might, in fact, quench the engines if it detected a pressure overload. It seemed the building's engineers had taken steps to avoid at least a simple malfunction after all. Not seeing any elegant solution, he used his mechanical sword to batter the pressure meters and valves to wreckage. He finished this just as his two captains on the catwalks above were concluding their own sabotage on the main vent stacks to choke off the steam exhausts. Thatch managed to hammer one of the thick pipes closed, but then it released a thick surge of hideous

gas straight into his face, prompting him to cough and retch. He staggered away, coughing up blood, and his nearest soldiers helped him move from the noxious fumes and back down the perilous scaffolding.

Magnus felt a moment of satisfaction when heard the apparatus shudder as it attempted its next venting. The pressure had begun to build. His appreciation was short-lived, though, as he heard shouts of alarm from the soldiers near the doors. Through the eyes of Rust and Imp he saw an entire line of the previously inert bile thralls swing into motion. They were waking up.

He gritted his teeth and raced back through the silent rows of their kind, expecting those to turn on him at any moment. Fortunately they seemed to be activating slowly, a few at a time, and he did not have to fight his way back to his men. Rifle fire increased in intensity ahead, and Magnus sent Imp and Rust to intercept the thralls that escaped the initial hail of bullets and scattergun fire. Even with these efforts, several exploded close enough to send caustic fluid across the front ranks. The men collapsed screaming as their flesh melted, and then the rest of Magnus' remaining soldiers broke and ran. They were not willing to stand against certain, torturous death.

Acidic fluid coating the warjacks slowly ate through armor and conduits, although they should endure for several minutes longer at least. Magnus evaded another spray of the fluid as he reached them. More and more of the biles were animating, pulling loose from the black umbilical cords connected to the bile reservoir and stepping forward to engage. The machinery at the vaulted chamber's center shook noticeably, the metal creaking and groaning as the pressure in the chamber grew.

Magnus stood in the opening of the exit and assessed the situation. The troops accompanying Thatch and Jacobs had scrambled down the catwalks while firing at the nearest biles. Jacobs limped to the

lower level, but bile thralls blocked his path to the doors. "Magnus!" he shouted, "Clear the way!" He fired his scattergun to shred several of the nearest foes. Thatch and his men were farther back, cut off by more active biles. They were forced to retreat back up onto the walkway.

Imp lurched for a moment and took a step toward Jacobs as Magnus considered sending it to trample through the biles to get to him. Magnus stopped the 'jack as a horrible calculus suddenly came together in his mind. The machinery might soon reach its pressure limit. He visualized the rupturing tank and bile fluid pouring forth to consume them all.

As frightful as that was to imagine, there was a possibility worse yet: the explosion might not even happen. He could not be sure the tanks would rupture without assistance, particularly as the sabotage to the upper stacks had been incomplete. A miasma of greenish corrosive steam continued to pour from the battered cylinders below the ceiling, perhaps releasing too much pressure. Impious was quickly being overwhelmed by the caustic fluid of the biles and would not last long. He could send it to save Jacobs, but that would be its last act, and then he would have no Defender to use as backup against the necrofactorium. He might well fail in his mission.

If the mission were not completed, all these biles—now active and ready—would march against Vinter's army. The factory would endure to make more thralls from the gathered corpses of the King's Own. Magnus remembered the sensation of awaiting the king's sword severing his neck when they had last spoken.

Jacobs caught his eye again, desperately reloading his scattergun. Magnus stepped back, shaking his head once, and turned his back on his closest friend to exit the building. Through the eyes of his 'jacks he saw the horror dawn on Jacobs' face.

As he walked away, Magnus clenched his teeth and directed Rust

to aim at the main pressure tank and Impious at the bile reservoir. They fired in sequence, bursting the straining pressure tank at the same time as his Defender's shell struck the reservoir to send a spiderweb of cracks through its armored exterior. The blast was enormous, deafening him and hurling him to the ground outside the building despite his power field. A chunk of stone managed to penetrate it and hit the back of his head hard enough to draw blood.

Through Imp's ocular apparatus, he saw Jacobs blasted off his feet to hit the far wall as a green tide of bile fluid gushed from the shattered reservoir. The impact might have killed him outright if not for a large intervening vat, which absorbed the brunt of the explosion. Still conscious, he had only a moment to register the approaching flood of bile. Even the bile thralls themselves, ordinarily resistant to corrosive fluids, were unable to retain cohesiveness against complete immersion. As they were swept up by a torrent of concentrated fluid, the hundreds of thralls began to disintegrate. Magnus barely registered it.

His borrowed eyes stayed locked on Jacobs, who had just regained his feet as the fluid reached him. He screamed as his flesh rotted and sloughed off, transformed into a horrifying slurry. It was no small blessing when acid overwhelmed the 'jack cortexes and their vision went dark. Feeling dizzy, sickened, and wretched, Magnus staggered away between blighted trees toward the distant thunder of cannons.



Magnus awoke disoriented and confused. It was too quiet. He realized he was lying on a crude cot within a hospital tent alongside other wounded. His entire body pulsed with pain, and his side was wrapped in bandages. His head was also wrapped; in fact, there seemed to be little of his skin that was not bandaged.

He had a vague recollection of a Leviathan spike piercing his

power field after he had rejoined the battle occupying the main army, but most of that conflict was an uncertain blur, a sequence of hazy images that did not quite make sense. It did not seem important to sort them out right now. A great numbness filled him, tinged with bitter sorrow.

The images from the destruction of the bile factory came back in a rush, and once again he saw the expression on Arthur Jacobs' face when Magnus had turned away from him. His hand reached for the shared memento that should be around his neck, but it was not there. His heart pounding, he looked to his side and saw the necklace with the bullet Jacobs had given him lying with some of his other possessions on a crate by the bed. He reached out and clenched his fist around the bullet, then fell back onto the cot in exhaustion.

Someone stepped into the tent, and it took him a moment to realize who it was—the black armor, the piercing stare. He tried to raise himself but shooting pain paralyzed him, and he groaned.

"As you were, Major." King Vinter Raelthorne IV spoke in an unusually gentle tone. "The battle is ended. You will be back on the flagship soon."

"My King," Magnus gasped, feeling a rush of shame, "I lost my battalion. All of them. I'm sorry. I have failed you."

Vinter shook his head. "No. You completed your mission and returned alive. The deaths of those you led, while tragic, were necessary. You learned to make the hard decisions that define a leader, and your nation is indebted to you. We will honor you properly when we return to Highgate."

His head swimming, Magnus stared in mute disbelief at his sovereign, who offered a rare smile and went so far as to clasp him on his shoulder before turning to leave. Tears rose in Magnus' eyes. He felt some great weight slide away, some burden that had been pressing his chest. He let it go, along with the memory of Jacobs'

horrified face. He chose to focus on Vinter's words instead. He knew every soldier was a weapon that might be expended. Yet by those same words Magnus wondered if he might have become something more to the king. Someone truly important, worth preserving.

He let the bullet on its chain slip from his fingers and fall to the floor next to his cot. He rolled to face the tent wall and fell into a deep sleep, not waking even when he was lifted to be carried onto the *Indomitable Storm*.