

THUNDERCLIFF PEAKS

SHATTERED GROUNDS LEAGUE FICTION

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MERCENARIES

From the rubble at the western end of the ravine, dozens of crossbow strings slapped against their prods with a muted snap and sent up a buzzing cloud of red-fletched quarrels. Murgan jerked up his shield and crouched low as the bolts fell, barely fitting his eight-foot frame beneath its protective expanse. The missiles thudded against the hammered bronze but found no purchase.

"Persistent bastards, aren't they?" At Murgan's knee, Captain Vornek Blackheel tapped an elven quarrel stuck in the dirt no more than inch from his foot. "Accurate, too." The High Shield captain grinned, his dark eyes glinting in the shadows beneath the ogrun's shield.

Murgan glanced down and grunted agreement. "Aye, they certainly seem motivated. What in the name of Dhunia are the losans doing here, though?"

Vornek snorted. "In my experience elves don't need a lot of motivation to murder anyone who isn't an elf. But we're not exactly guarding a key strategic position here. Baram Fort is at the ass-end of nowhere."

Vornek was right. Baram Fort had earned its reputation among the Searforge Commission. Drunks, thieves, and malcontents who avoided exile or execution in Rhul found themselves shipped off to Baram to serve out the rest of their contracts. It remained so far off the beaten path and of so little consequence to both Rhul and Khador, the Searforge believed the fort's inhabitants could do little damage to the commission's reputation.

The squat stone fortress stood behind the dwarven line, deep within the Khadoran side of the Thundercliff Peaks. The negotiable pass meant merchants traveling from Khador to



Horgenhold often passed through Baram Fort, which was manned by three squads of High Shield Gun Corps and one aging ogrun warrior. The dwarves were charged with ensuring Searforge caravans made it through the pass unmolested and rarely dealt with anything more aggressive than a cranky merchant bickering over the cargo toll. If nothing else, it helped pass the time between gambling, fighting, and drinking themselves into unconsciousness.

Although most of Baram's garrison had been compelled to serve under the capable, if gruff, Vornek Blackheel, a few others had chosen the remote garrison. It was where one could go to be forgotten. For Murgan, however, it was also a place where he could allow himself to forget.

A veteran ogrun without a *korune* had little place in dwarven or ogrun society. Murgan's *korune* had been killed in battle more than a decade ago. Although the events that led to his master's death had been beyond his control, Murgan's survival was considered a monumental failure on his part. He had few options. Expected to retire, draw a meager pension, and live out the rest of his days pondering his failure, Murgan instead requested permission to stay on and serve the Searforge Commission. The request had been denied, but Murgan had been persistent, and eventually the Commission relented — on the condition he serve at a post of their choosing. He had been assigned (some would say "sentenced") to Baram Fort, where he had served Captain Blackheel for the last decade.

As he helped Vornek wrangle the ever-changing cast of misfits at Baram Fort, Murgan had slowly reclaimed some measure of confidence and self-worth. His association with Vornek was nothing like what he had shared with his *korune*, but he had developed a relationship with the unpredictable High Shield captain that teetered between "friend" and "cellmate."

"I suppose we should return fire," Vornek said. "Not that the last five volleys have done much more than demonstrate what piss-poor shots we are." He glanced down the lines of dwarven warriors to his left and right and frowned through his beard. "You hear that, you miserable sons-of-whores?" he bellowed. "You couldn't hit the broad side of Toruk's ass if he sat on you!" Vornek's insults elicited a few half-hearted curses and what sounded like a bout of energetic vomiting.

"Kurn?" Murgan asked the captain. Kurn was Baram Fort's most notorious drunkard.

Vornek nodded. "Aye. I think he was drinking that stuff we use for cleaning the powder residue from carbine barrels."

Murgan looked down the line of dwarven warriors. Each was outfitted in standard High Shield Gun Corps gear: steel breastplate, greaves, gauntlets, and a stout rectangular shield that covered its owner from neck to ankle. The corps' primary armament consisted of a heavy, dual-barreled war carbine, light enough to be fired with one hand but with enough punch to penetrate armor. Each gun corps member also carried a short-hafted war axe for close-range fighting.

This was no ordinary gun corps, however, and the ragged state of Baram Fort's warriors would horrify any other High Shield commander. In fact, several top-ranking High Shield officers had petitioned the Searforge to have the Baram Fort garrison expelled from the corps altogether. These attempts had been unsuccessful—every order needed a place to store its

trash. Still, the state of Baram's warriors and their gear was nothing short of deplorable. Patches of rust, some as large as Murgan's fist, stained nearly every dwarf's armor, and most of the carbines had not been properly cleaned in months. Murgan would have been surprised if a single war axe in the entire garrison possessed an edge sharp enough to cut bread, let alone cleave through steel. He could smell the stale sweat and acrid vomit on the dwarves closest to him, and many of them swayed beneath the weight of their kit, accustomed as they were to a sedentary lifestyle that centered on drunken revelry rather than battle readiness.

Murgan stood in the center of the dwarven line next to Vornek. At twice the height of any dwarven warrior, he stood out from those around him like a greatsword among daggers. His huge, round shield was as wide as a dwarf was tall, and his saw-backed glaive was mounted on a twelve-foot iron pole. His equipment was in good repair, his shield stout, the edge of his glaive honed to a razor edge.

"Recover!" Vornek shouted, and twenty battle shields thumped to the ground more or less in unison. The barrels of twenty Rhulic carbines slid into wide slots at the top of each shield. The slots allowed a High Shield warrior to aim his carbine and still claim his shield's vital protection.

"Fire!"

A deafening fusillade rang out, and the rubble field at the other end of the ravine exploded in shrapnel. As the dust and smoke cleared, a single elven corpse became visible, partially exposed from behind a small gravel mound.

"Hah! We got one!" Vornek said. Then his jubilant tone soured. "Though, that's what? One dead elf in six volleys? At this rate, we'll be here a fortnight."

"So we wait a fortnight," Murgan said. He settled his shield in front of him, preparing for the inevitable return volley. The rest of the corpsmen settled back behind their own heavy shields, groaning, cursing, and half-heartedly reloading their carbines. The few dwarves that had fallen to the elven barrage were now dragged back behind the line and into the fortress.

"What?" Vornek asked, confused.

"We wait them out," Murgan said and pointed to his shield. Its surface was scratched, but not a single elven quarrel had penetrated it. The same could be said for most of the dwarven shields. "Their crossbows aren't powerful enough to pierce our shields, and they certainly don't have an endless supply of bolts . . ."

"But we've got enough powder and shot to hold out for weeks," Vornek finished. He chewed his lower lip. "I hate sitting here with our thumbs up our asses. But that's not the worst idea I've heard."



"Such praise," Murgan chuckled. "But I don't think we'll need to hold out much longer. This attack smacks of desperation, if you ask me. If we stand firm, I think we'll force their hand. Make them do something rash."

The elves had taken position about one hundred yards from the gates of Baram Fort in a dense field of rubble, where last year's heavy rains had caused a rockslide. Because the merchant caravans had been able to pick their way through, Vornek hadn't bothered to clean up the mess. It seemed an unnecessary expenditure of time and effort. Unfortunately, the piles of enormous boulders and debris now afforded the attacking Iosans plenty of excellent cover.

Murgan noticed sudden movement at the other end of the ravine. Two Iosans burst from behind a large, irregular boulder and moved rapidly forward. They disappeared behind a mound of gravel before he could call out their position.

"Did you see that?" Murgan said to Vornek.

"Aye. They looked different than the rest, didn't they?" Vornek replied.

"Black cloaks. And they weren't carrying crossbows. Something else. A rifle maybe." A glint of light reflected off a metallic surface where the two black-cloaked elves had disappeared, then a deep, penetrating hum rose from their position. Murgan was about to shout a warning when a sharp crack echoed through the ravine. The head of the dwarven warrior to his left—a young recruit named Ulik—burst like an overripe melon and splattered him with its warm, red contents. The corpse pitched backward to give the ogrun a clear look at the eye-level hole in Ulik's shield.

"Sniper!" Murgan shouted and threw himself to the ground.

Vornek simply standing stood there, mouth agape, staring at Ulik's holed shield and the missing top half of his head.

"Get down, fool!" Murgan let go of his glaive and pulled the stunned High Shield captain down beside him. The snipers fired again just as Murgan slammed Vornek's face into the dirt. Further down the line, another dwarven warrior—Murgan could not tell who—began screaming. Another report followed, and the screaming stopped.

Vornek raised his head and spat out a mouthful of dirt. "Down! Now!" he bellowed. The rest of the line needed no further encouragement. The ravine suddenly echoed with the chaotic metal clattering of eighteen fully armored dwarven warriors throwing themselves face-first to the earth.

"So much for waiting them out." Vornek turned his dirt-stained face toward Murgan. "Those damn snipers can take our bloody heads off at their leisure."

"There's only two of them," Murgan said. He struggled to talk with his face smashed into the ground, but he offered such a large target he dared not raise his head. "We could rush their position."

"Too late for that." Vornek's tone was grave. "Our pointy-eared guests have other ideas."

Tempting fate, Murgan cautiously raised his head to follow Vornek's gaze. Two dozen elves charged toward them, their long, slender blades drawn and glittering in the afternoon sun. A stunning figure in white armor led them. She held her naked sword high over her head as she charged effortlessly over the ravine's rough ground.

Vornek bolted to his feet with a grunt. "The bastards used their snipers to give the rest of their troops time to charge," he said, acid in his voice. "Smart."

Murgan stood and saw the dwarven line haul itself to its feet, form ranks, and prepare to meet the elven charge. He lowered his shield and took his glaive in an overhand grip, cocking it over his right shoulder like a spear. He favored Vornek with a sickly grin. "Well, at least we won't have to wait."

Vornek snorted and pointed his carbine at the advancing Iosans. "Oh, excellent. I'm glad they've decided to get my murder over and done with."

RETRIBUTION OF SCYRAH

The dwarves opened fire and were momentarily obscured in the thick gouts of smoke that belched from their carbines. Kaelyssa could almost feel the tiny metal slugs hissing toward her. She threw herself forward into a rolling dive, letting the bullets pass harmlessly overhead. The dive did not slow her forward momentum, though, and she came up from the ground no more than a dozen paces from the front rank of dwarven warriors.



Kaelyssa's two squads of mage hunters charged along beside her. They were well trained, highly skilled, and used to facing overwhelming odds, but they were not accustomed to such unsubtle warfare. Without myrmidons to punch through the dwarven line, she was forced to use her mage hunters in a role for which they were ill-suited. Shadowy killers, mage hunters struck from concealment and took their targets unaware. To charge over open ground at a well-armed and prepared opponent ran counter to the fighting style they had perfected over centuries.

But what choice did they have?

The dragonspawn were close behind. They had hounded her from the gates of Klywen base, across the Thundercliff Peaks, and now here. The Nyss who led them had proved herself an accomplished tracker, and not even Kaelyssa's own considerable skill at covert movement was enough to throw them off her trail. The blighted pursuers had caught up to them once, and Kaelyssa and her mage hunters had found themselves cornered in a small canyon. That battle had been costly. Dragonspawn and black-fletched arrows had slain half her force. She could feel the grim reminder of that battle burn beneath her armor: a wound on her upper right thigh dealt by a Nyss blade. It sent waves of agony and numbness down her leg with every pounding step. As she charged headlong into battle, Kaelyssa knew she was not as swift or nimble as she ought to be, but she had fought through worse.

The dwarves stood between her and the fastest path to Nyreth base, where a full legion of Dawnguard waited. Without those vital reinforcements, Kaelyssa knew the horde of dragonspawn laying siege to Klywen base would overwhelm the defending garrison within the week. She had been forced to leave all her myrmidons behind to support the defenders; that her small force had escaped the siege *and* managed to evade the dragonspawn and blighted Nyss was nigh miraculous. She would not be stopped by a paltry force of dwarves at a crumbling fort in the middle of nowhere.

Kaelyssa's heart hammered as she and her mage hunters crossed to the dwarven line. She summoned forth her will to surround herself and her men in a concealing shroud of darkness. It would keep the dwarven guns at bay until they could get within striking range. Her goal was simple: break through and keep going. She did not think the dwarves would give chase. They would soon be up to their necks in dragonspawn.

She had charged the very center of the dwarven line, at what she perceived as the greatest threat. The ogrun warrior towered above his dwarven comrades, his massive round shield dented and scarred but unbroken. He held his glaive in an overhand grip, ready to jab over the lip of his shield and repel her charge.

When she and her mage hunters were mere steps from their front rank the dwarves fired again. At nearly point-blank range, Kaelyssa's shroud of darkness offered no salvation from the fusillade. In her peripheral vision she saw several mage hunters blown off their feet. She had little time to dwell on

the loss; the bulk of the ogrun warrior's shield rose up before her. and the gleaming point of his glaive shot forward. Besides being surprisingly fast for his size and the weight of his armor, the ogrun also had nearly six feet of reach on her. She did not slow but snapped her sword Vengeance up in a short cross-body slash that knocked the shaft of the ogrun's glaive askew. It flashed past her face, flared against the field of energy surrounding her armor, and harmlessly grazed the pauldron on her left shoulder.

The ogrun jerked his weapon back for another thrust. He was within her striking distance now, but he was a nearly impenetrable bulwark behind his shield, and Kaelyssa had no desire to duel a much larger opponent with superior reach and armor. Instead, she raised Vengeance overhead as if to strike at his head. He raised his shield high to ward off the blow, the move momentarily obscuring his vision. It was the opening she needed. Kaelyssa gathered herself and leapt forward, and her right foot found the top edge of the ogrun's shield. Ignoring the bolt of agony that shot through her, she pushed away with her right leg and vaulted over his head in an acrobatic flip. At the apex of the vault, she lashed out with Vengeance in a strike that should have removed his head from his body. Her weakened leg altered her trajectory by a fraction of an inch, enough to throw off her aim. Instead of the ogrun's neck, Vengeance plowed into his armored shoulder. The enchanted blade cut through the heavy steel and scored the flesh beneath, but the wound was not mortal.

Kaelyssa landed behind the ogrun in what should have been a balanced fighting stance, but the landing proved more than her wounded leg could take. As she touched down, something gave way and she felt a warm gush of blood run down her leg beneath her armor. Her agility kept her from falling, but she stumbled and jabbed the point of Vengeance into the ground to brace herself. The ogrun's speed surprised her again as he spun in a tight, controlled circle to bring the massive weight of his great shield toward her.

Off balance, Kaelyssa could not dodge the blow, and the bronzed edge of the ogrun's shield slammed into her face with the force of a runaway warjack. Her power field flared as the shield smashed into it, but the effort she had put into her attack had left it dangerously low, and the ogrun's strength and momentum burst through the protective barrier with appalling ease. Her nose and left cheek shattered. Blood sprayed in a wide arc and she crashed to the ground.

Kaelyssa's vision blurred and her limbs would not respond to her commands. Her mind was a fog of pain. She knew she was on the ground. She knew Vengeance had been knocked from her grasp. What she did not understand was why she was still alive.

"Hold! Hold! Gods damn it! I said hold!" Kaelyssa spoke the Rhulic language well enough to understand the simple commands the brash dwarven voice bellowed. The sounds of combat faded away.

Her vision began to clear, and what she saw filled her with both horror and relief. The ogrun towered over her, holding the

blade of his gigantic glaive inches from her throat. Beside him a gray-bearded dwarf with a captain's insignia on his shoulder—the one who had called the cease-fire, she assumed—pointed his carbine at her head. Behind stood more dwarven warriors, their backs to her and their rifles pointed at what remained of her mage hunters. Cautiously her team pulled back, faces etched with concern for their leader.

"Well, elf," the dwarven captain began, a smug smile on his face. "What do you have to say for yourself?"

The ogrun pulled his glaive back, allowing Kaelyssa to sit up. She spat out a wad of blood and a bit of broken tooth and stared up at the dwarven captain. Rage and shame warred with one another in her mind. To be defeated by such a lesser adversary was an outrage she could barely fathom. Much more was at stake here than her wounded pride, however. The ogrun and his dwarven master had not slain her outright; perhaps she could turn this defeat to her advantage.

"Are you deaf? Why did you attack us?"

The left side of Kaelyssa's face was numb, and speaking was difficult. Finally, she replied in a low monotone, "I needed to get through the pass."

The captain's face twisted into a snarl. "Well, you could have bloody well asked!"

"I do not ask permission from *outsiders*," she said, unable to hide the scorn she felt.

He threw his head back and laughed. "And look what happens when you don't! You get your pretty face all smashed to hell, don't you?"

Kaelyssa glanced to her right, where Vengeance lay on the ground a few feet away. The thought of taking up her sword and cutting the mocking grin off the dwarf's face was so tempting it was almost worth dying for.

"Vornek," the ogrun interjected, his low baritone commanding. "This isn't helpful."

The words surprised Kaelyssa; perhaps she had misjudged the relationship between the two. Ogrun typically served Rhulfolk, but this one's tone implied a relationship of equals.

The ogrun pulled his glaive away, then pointed the tip skyward and ground its butt into the dirt. "I am Murgan Grimspear," he said. "This is Captain Vornek Blackheel, commander of Baram Fort." He gestured at the squat stone fortress behind her with his shield. "We've never had trouble with Iosans before this, so perhaps you can understand our justifiable concern over your unprovoked attack."

Kaelyssa had never actually heard an ogrun speak, and she was momentarily taken aback by his measured tone and obvious command of the dwarven tongue. She studied him for a moment. He was no youngling, as were most of the ogrun she had encountered. His mane was flecked with gray, his face lined with age and experience. He was a veteran, a skilled warrior, and perhaps worthy of some respect. She would speak to this Murgan.

"As I said, we needed to get through the pass. Our reasons for doing so are not your concern. We would have passed through with as few casualties to your men as possible. You proved more resolute than I had anticipated."

"Resolute?!" Vornek jabbed his carbine at Kaelyssa. "You mean you didn't expect us to hand you your ass on a platter?"

Murgan shook his head. "I cannot help but echo my dwarven companion's sentiment," he said. "You could have gone around us. There wasn't any need for bloodshed."

"There wasn't time," Kaelyssa replied. "I do not spill blood lightly, ogrun. Even when it is so justly deserved." She shot Vornek a withering glance. He was like most outsiders she had encountered: crude, ill-spoken, and worthy of no more consideration than the time it took to slide a blade between his ribs.

"Why are you in such a hurry?" Murgan asked. "What are you not telling us?"

Kaelyssa sighed and slowly rose to her feet, wincing as the wound in her leg burst into fresh waves of agony. She stooped, picked up Vengeance, and quickly returned it to its sheath across her back. She looked out over the ranks of dwarves and elves that filled the small ravine. The dwarves stood sturdy and tough in their heavy armor and thick shields. Her mage hunters were lithe, nimble, and versatile in both melee and ranged warfare. She had to admit the two forces complemented one another. With that realization, the decision was simple.

"Murgan," she said, doing the ogrun the honor of using his name, "I cannot tell you whence we came or where we are headed, but I will tell you this. There are dragonspawn close behind me. They have been hunting us for days, and I now lack the strength to defeat them or the time and speed to outrun them."

"Oh, that is *bloody* wonderful!" Vornek exclaimed. "So not only did you attack us unprovoked, you brought a horde of dragonspawn down on our heads to boot! Would you like to kick me in the stones, too?"

Kaelyssa glared at Vornek, then turned her attention back to Murgan. "The circumstances that brought us to this point are now irrelevant. The simple truth is that the dragonspawn will be here soon, likely within the hour, and neither of us possesses the strength to stop them alone."

"You're proposing an alliance?" Murgan said, scratching his chin. "Interesting."

"An alliance!?" Vornek turned to his companion in horror. "You can't honestly consider trusting her!? There are dwarves dead and bleeding here, and it's her damned fault!"

"Calm down, Vornek," Murgan said. "I'm not exactly thrilled about the prospect. But if what she says is true—and I think it is—then what choice do we have? I don't want to see any more dwarves die when there's something we can do to prevent it."

"This one gives you wise counsel, dwarf," Kaelyssa said coolly. "You should take heed."

Vornek lowered his carbine and slung it across his back. Every movement was exaggerated, filled with scorn and loathing, as if not holding a gun on Kaelyssa was deeply insulting. "Fine. I'll agree to a temporary—and I bloody mean temporary—alliance," he said, disgust plain in his voice. "If we survive the dragonspawn—if there *are* any—then you and I will come to some kind of reckoning for what you've done."

Kaelyssa nodded. "Very well. What do you say, Murgan?"

The ogrun set down his shield and unbuckled the straps that held his armored pauldrons to his shoulders. Beneath the left pauldron his padded gambeson was stained bright red. "I say we patch up our wounded and get those unable to fight inside the fortress. Then we put our heads together and figure out the best way to fight and survive your dragonspawn."

LEGION OF EVERBLIGHT

Elyshyvah allowed herself a wan smile as she and her forces neared the mouth of the small ravine that held her quarry. She could hardly contain the surge of pride at the glory that would soon be hers, but the smile disappeared

almost as quickly as it appeared, and the Nyss battle shepherd's face resumed its usual mask of icy reserve.

She raised her battle staff and motioned her striders forward. As the blighted Nyss warriors fanned out behind her in well-ordered ranks, they moved in a swift, predatory gait that ate up the rough terrain with silent efficiency. Versatile killers, each strider gripped a short, recurved bow in his taloned right hand and wore a long, curved sword sheathed at his belt. The striders could wield both weapons with murderous skill.

For Elyshyvah, the striders' battle prowess remained secondary to their value as versatile scouts and trackers. Without them she could not have followed her quarry from their secluded elven base over the rugged expanse of the Thundercliff Peaks. Her mistress Vayl, Disciple of Everblight, had laid siege on the losans with an army of dragonspawn and blighted Nyss, then bestowed upon her the great duty of hunting down the losan warcaster and bringing her to heel.

Elyshyvah now commanded six squads of Nyss striders. She had also received a pair of the hulking nephilim protectors, massive humanoid dragonspawn intelligent enough to follow her verbal commands. It was an honor without equal to be trusted with beasts crafted from Vayl's own blood.

Vayl had warned Elyshyvah that the fleeing warcaster and her mage hunters were stealthy killers. Though Elyshyvah took the warning seriously, she felt vaguely insulted Vayl would stress such caution; she could skillfully handle the fearsome dragonspawn and fight alongside them in the thick of combat, and she was confident she could defeat the warcaster. She longed to corner and slay this Kaelyssa and prove herself to Vayl.

Unfortunately, Kaelyssa had proved a crafty opponent, and Elyshyvah had caught up to her only once. Though it had been a glorious battle, Kaelyssa and many of her mage hunters managed to escape the killing field and flee further into the mountains. They had managed to capture one of the Iosans alive, from whom Elyshyvah had learned the name of her quarry.

Elyshyvah had followed doggedly, and her persistence had paid off. A forward scout reported the Iosans had engaged a group of dwarves in a ravine not more than a mile from their position. Kaelyssa had nowhere to run. She would be caught between Elyshyvah's forces and the dwarves. Once Elyshyvah finished with Kaelyssa, she could easily dispatch the paltry dwarven force.

It was time. The chase was over, and the predator would feast on the flesh of its prey. Elyshyvah raised her battle staff again, and the pair of nephilim protectors moved up to flank her. Their hulking forms and ornate armor filled her with confidence. What enemy could stand against her with monsters such as these by her side?

She moved forward. Her striders and nephilim needed no further encouragement and followed.



Ahead, the ravine narrowed to a jumble of rubble and fallen rock. She and her striders picked their way through with ease.

Beyond the rubble field stood a small stone fortress, its simple wooden gates stretching across the ravine. A single line of Rhulic warriors stood at the gates, heavy rectangular shields interlocked to create a short wall of steel and wood. Atop each shield rested a short-barreled rifle, aimed at her advancing force. Elyshyvah saw a number of Iosan corpses strewn in front of the dwarven line, making it obvious to her that the Rhulfolk had emerged victorious in their battle with the Iosans. However, the half-dozen elven corpses did not comprise Kaelyssa's entire force, and she did not see the elven warcaster's body among them. What had the dwarves done with the Kaelyssa?

The answer was obvious. The dwarves had forced Kaelyssa and what remained of her mage hunters to surrender and were holding them within the fortress. No doubt the greedy Rhulfolk believed Kaelyssa a valuable hostage; perhaps they thought to ransom her back to the Iosans. In the end, it didn't matter; they would not keep Elyshyvah from her prize.

She raised her staff again and the striders behind her ground to halt. Roughly fifty yards separated her force from the Rhulic line. She estimated they outnumbered the dwarves three to one—perhaps more.

A single dwarven gunman stepped forward and lowered his shield, resting it on his right foot. His beard was gray and his armor slightly more ornate than that of his fellows. "Turn back!" he called out in Khardic, a language with which she was vaguely familiar. "Advance any farther, and we'll open fire!"

Amused at the dwarven commander's bravado, Elyshyvah called back: "Where are the Iosans, dwarf? If you tell me, I may let you live."

"The Iosans are dead!" the dwarven commander replied and pointed to the elven corpses with his rifle. "You have no further business here. Turn back now. This is your last warning!" With that, he picked up his shield and resumed his place in the center of the dwarven line.

"Fool," Elyshyvah muttered. She would try to capture this dwarven commander alive. His insolence demanded special consideration.

"Forward!" she barked. Her striders surged ahead to form three ranks in front of her. The dwarves did not open fire as she had expected but hunkered down behind their shields. "Draw!" The striders fitted arrows to strings and hauled the black-fletched shafts back to full draw. She let them hold for a single breath. "Loose!"

A swarm of arrows leapt from the ranked striders and slammed into the dwarven line. The heavy impact of their iron tips striking steel and wood was shockingly loud in the echoing confines of the ravine.

Elyshyvah had expected half the dwarven line to crumble from the first volley. Horrified, she saw that not a single dwarf



had fallen. Their shields bristled with arrows, but none had penetrated. She thought she detected a slight mocking tone in the dwarven commander's voice as he bellowed out the order to return fire.

The dwarven rifles thundered to life, spraying smoke and lead at the first rank of striders. Any other troops would have been massacred beneath the hail of gunfire, but her striders dropped close to the ground en masse a fraction of a second before the dwarves fired. Finding no Nyss targets, the heavy slugs of the Rhulic carbines wasted their lethal energy against the ground and the walls of the ravine.

It seemed at this range they were at a stalemate: the dwarves could not hit the quick, nimble striders with their rifles, but neither could her striders penetrate the dwarven shields with their arrows. She could order the striders to concentrate their fire on single targets, and without doubt such a barrage would bypass even the stoutest defense. But that would take time, and worse, it might force the dwarves to withdraw into their fortress, forcing her to lay siege—a task she was ill-equipped to undertake—to claim her prize.

Faced with the possibility of a protracted siege, the decision was simple. The dwarven shields protected them from Nyss arrows, but they would be far less effective against Nyss blades wielded up close. Elyshyvah raised her battle staff and slashed its bladed end down in a swift stroke. "Charge! Slay them!" she shouted.

Dozens of blades slid from their scabbards, and the Nyss ranks glittered with steel. Then the entire force was running forward, and she was right behind them, reveling in the sheer visceral joy of battle, blade, and blood.

The dwarven line erupted in smoke and noise as they fired another volley. This time, the Nyss were closer and had less time to avoid the shots. A half-dozen striders were gunned down, but the overwhelming majority smashed into the dwarves to stretch blades over their opponents' shields and slice through armor and flesh. Elyshyvah and her nephilim plowed into the left flank of the line, her bladed battle staff and the nephilim's heavy halberds taking a heavy toll in Rhulic blood.

The dwarves abandoned their rifles in the melee and reached across their backs to draw stout, single-bitted war axes. They wielded these weapons with surprising skill but were outnumbered by the faster Nyss. It would not be long before they were routed.

Elyshyvah and the nephilim had decimated the dwarven left flank, and she released the dragonspawn to slaughter at will. Momentarily alone on the battlefield, she cast about for

another target and spied the Rhulic commander in the center of a desperate melee. He fought back-to-back with another dwarven warrior, strider corpses strewn at their feet. The two were surrounded, however, and she could see a bright splash of crimson on the commander's left thigh where a Nyss blade had wounded him. She smiled, hefted her battle staff, and broke into a dead run toward the scrum.

She had nearly reached them when the gates of the fortress flew open. She whirled around to see nearly two dozen mage hunters surge out. Half had blades in hand and charged forward to engage her Nyss in melee. The others gripped crossbows and fired into the swirling melee. Leading them was a familiar figure in white armor: Kaelyssa. A towering armored figure, an ogrun easily the size of a nephilim, charged beside her. He wore a huge, round shield strapped to his left arm and gripped a heavy, long-hafted glaive in his right. He barreled into the striders, smashing one to the ground with a blow from his shield and removing the head of another with an easy swipe of his glaive.

Elyshyvah's mind reeled. The Iosans and the dwarves were allied. How had outright animosity and warfare transformed into cooperation? The answer came to her at once and filled her with grim pride. They had allied to battle a threat greater than they posed to each other. They had allied to face Elyshyvah.

She and her striders still outnumbered the allies, and she still had the two nephilim protectors, now in the thick of melee and felling enemies with each slash of their mighty halberds. It would not be an easy victory, but that would only make it sweeter.

"Kaelyssa!" Elyshyvah called out. She pointed her battle staff at the elven warcaster, who was picking off striders with her runebolt cannon.

Over the din of battle, Kaelyssa heard Elyshyvah's challenge. She turned, slammed her runebolt cannon back into its holster on her hip, and drew her sword from where it hung across her back. She stepped toward the Nyss, deadly focus clear in her measured gait.

Elyshyvah noticed the left side of the elven warcaster's face was heavily bandaged. In fact, bloody gauze obscured her left eye. Wounded and half-blinded, Kaelyssa would be at a severe disadvantage in melee combat. Elyshyvah could not help smiling as she raised her battle staff and charged. She would soon prove her worth, when she laid Kaelyssa's head before the Disciple of Everblight.

