

A Predicated Few

By Chris Nagele

Author's note: *Although I have adopted the narrative style of Glen Cook's The Black Company, the setting is not the same.*

After a decade of fighting under a gate-hex, the ease at which we traveled around the continent of Pause was a marvel. Rather than two months pounding away in an ill fit saddle, we now ambled into a ready room in Salin and just like that, we were out in the field, mere kilometers from the enemy.

Of course, the increase in connectivity that our return to civilization entailed was not always a boon. Theater was being hounded by a black market smuggling ring out of Linnow, who had located him after he had been sold out by one of his nastier cousins. Pillow was dealing with the uncomfortable realities of bigamy, and I myself had received more than a few terse messages from friends and family long left behind.

None of us missed the saddle though.

The enemy these days was the Yield reservation, a city state out of a history textbook which found itself suddenly caught up in the planetary power struggle. Like many reservations, Yield maintained a standing army, but it had not seen action in millenia, so they had hired mercenary companies from that wreck of a continent that our outfit had once called home— no doubt due to generous backing from certain corners of the planetary government.

I listened quietly as the boys discussed fighting their former comrades. We lay on the leeward side of a grassy ditch, in the middle of farming country, a few kilometers outside of Yield's borders. The sun was high and the clouds fair, not necessarily a day for magic and steel.

'Look, I know they're assholes, they know they're assholes, the whole damn world knows they're assholes. But they're still good guys.' This was from Perch.

Queen responded, 'you're just saying that because you slept with three of the women.'

'Well that and the fact that they saved our asses twice.'

'Wasn't it three times?'

'I didn't include the bit by the volcano. I was going for understatement.'

'Did it work?'

Perch cleared his throat. He was lying several bodies down from where I was. Queen lounged just beyond him. She was the most powerful mage of our party, numbering twenty three. 'The *point* is that I don't like the idea of going toe to toe with people we once stood beside.'

'This ain't a fucking social club, Perch.' The gruff voice was Scamper's.

'All I'm saying is-'

'Can it, all of you.'

When Whisper spoke, people listened. The thin man was only a sergeant, but you wouldn't have known it if you had spent a few hours with our band. In this case, however, he was right.

We lay in silence for a few minutes. Less than five, but more than three. I couldn't check the clocks. We weren't supposed to use magic till the time came.

Bodies stiffened to attentiveness. The message flowed down the line.

Caravan spotted. Two minutes out.

I checked the straps on my daggers. Both were secure.

My hands were sweating. It didn't matter so much for the buckler clasped in my right hand, but the grip on my short sword could get slippery if I wasn't careful. I wiped my hand on the shirt under my leathers, not that it really helped.

We were up and running.

Over the side of the ditch, a quick splash through a rice paddy, and then we were on open ground, sprinting headlong at the cluster of wagons on the small road fifty meters ahead.

There were shouts of alarm, and bows twanged, but Queen did not bother as the arrows sailed harmlessly. Magic followed, which Queen and Fallow deflected, though Fallow dropped to one knee as a particularly nasty looking bolt of amber light passed just by him.

Over the last few meters, I drew in a small amount of magic and quickened my pace, aiming for a divet in the still forming shield wall. I am not a fighter by heart, as most of my responsibilities lie in a provisional capacity, but when I do fight, I have a few tricks.

One of them is breaking a shield wall.

Perhaps men do not expect a ton of force from a one hundred and thirty pound woman, even if she is hurtling at them with unnatural speed.

Perhaps I'm just good at it.

My shield hit right between two of the enemies' and I went straight through, banging my shoulder against a wagon just behind. I whipped myself around shortsword low, shield high. I grimaced as the sword connected just above knee height. It came out easily. Not a crippling blow.

The line broke as our wizards overwhelmed whatever the caravan guards had been able to muster. Suddenly, instead of me facing four on my own, Perch and Sphinx were there. One of the enemy bolted, while the one I had hit lashed out at me wildly as he blocked a heavy blow from Perch. The one on my right, who was preparing for another swing at me, got a crossbow bolt stuck in his right eye during his windup.

He fell backwards onto his comrade, a woman who buckled and started cursing in a dialect I didn't know.

Whisper halted the pursuit before it even started. About two thirds of the guards had tried to run, with most of those making it. We captured a few. Seven killed. Whisper bent heads with Nectar, our ranking, and then announced that we would take the captives back to Salin.

We weren't paid to take prisoners, but it couldn't hurt our standing.

I helped splint the prisoners' fingers and bind their wrists. It was probably unnecessary considering how easily Queen had rolled them, but caution is one of our virtues.

Afterwards I inspected the wagons. I was quartermaster after all. These were fancier than those we had left in the north, with not just the beds made of hardened glass, but also the wheels. I gave one of the wheels a tentative kick, wondering if it would shatter. Fallow grinned.

Next I hoisted myself up onto the bed, swinging my trailing leg up over the baseboard. I am the shortest of our band, though that was not always the case. Inside were regular wooden boxes. I opened the nearest one.

Arrows.

I put the top back on and heaved it up and onto the other side of the wagon. The next one.

Arrows.

Queen called up, asking if there was anything interesting. I ignored her. I went one level deeper.

I frowned.

Five minutes later, fifteen of us were clustered around the box. It was identical to the others, and packed with hay as they had been. Only its contents differentiated it.

The company was silent for a time, until Fallow asked, 'why are we staring at a box?'

Perch sounded annoyed, 'it's not the box itself, idiot, it's what's inside the box.'

'Ok smartass.' As Fallow said this, a light flickered just in front of Perch's eyes and the small man jumped back. 'What's inside the box, then?'

Everyone looked at Perch, who was blinking rapidly. 'What? Well, it's obvious, isn't it?'

Whisper shrugged, 'it's a ballista, wizard, or at least the makings of one.'

Fallow grimaced, no doubt recalling our past work. 'Ah. Don't see too many of those around here, do you?'

Whisper just shrugged again.

Malt, one of our newest recruits— though she was older than me— asked the obvious question. 'Are they gonna drop a gate-hex over Yield?'

I frowned. 'Who is they?'

No one had an answer.

We had to wait longer than usual for the gate out. There must have been some other operation going on at the same time. I finally managed to induce one of the prisoners into a chat. He was a surly looking fellow, but once I drew him out he was content enough to pass the time with conversation.

When we had broken them so easily, I had assumed they were militia from Yield, but it turned out they were mercs from Tart's Revelry. I had heard of the outfit, though had never heard of them seeing real action in the north.

It had been this way with most of the skirmishes so far. We knew that Yield had hired some proper fighters, Marlot's Revenge, The Half Thousand— Perch's personal harem— and possibly even The Gainful, though reports conflicted there. I asked the prisoner, Geoff, about it.

'You know I can't go telling you stuff like that now.'

That was all I needed to hear. I thanked him and went off to find Nectar, who had found an empty rice paddy to stare into.

'Thinking deep thoughts, lieutenant?'

'It's not deep at all, Quette.'

'That was the joke, sir.'

He looked over at me, mouth slightly open. 'It wasn't very funny, was it?'

'No, sir.' I paused. The man had a striking profile. 'What were you thinking about?'

He turned towards me. 'You know what I'm thinking about. This whole situation could fucking explode.'

I considered that. 'Good for business, though.'

I don't think he bought my callousness. 'Did you want to tell me something?'

'Prisoner got real quiet when I asked him about the Gainers.' I jerked my head back towards the line of men leaning up against the wagons. 'Could be we come up against Thrash and Evening again, not too far in the future.'

He didn't respond.

I spoke after a few seconds, 'just thought you'd want to know.' I turned and walked back to the wagons.