



SOLIDARITY

DOUGLAS SEACAT

Magister Helynna of House Shyeel raised a hand to shield her eyes from the sleeting rain as she peered down the hillside to observe humans in blue uniforms and armor climbing the slope. The storm had come suddenly, unnaturally invoked by the Cygnarans below.

Helynna had been sent to help defend a vital Retribution outpost hidden in Cygnar. The underground complex had been built decades earlier, its entrances camouflaged to blend into the hillside. The facility had supported numerous espionage missions and covert strikes and had enabled the Retribution to send mage hunters deeper into human lands. They were not yet ready to surrender it.

The humans were conspicuous as they marched, with crackling energy flickering along the halberds and heavy glaives wielded by their knights. Lightning also danced along a length of massive steel held by a smoke-belching warjack at the front—a Stormclad with a golden swan banner upon its back. Several smaller warjacks accompanied the soldiers, directed by storm knights who shouted orders over the wind and rain. Other soldiers wielding rune-inlaid pistols and wearing tricorn hats marched behind them—gun mages.

Helynna's three myrmidons stood behind her, their beautiful forms and gleaming arcantrik runes displaying a grace and elegance that put the crude human machines to shame. Auras of dim light shimmered around them. These were power fields, designed to both protect and arm them. Each myrmidon was a masterpiece of Shyeel design, assembled for war by the artificers of Helynna's house. She had played a role in their shaping,

improving on previous designs. Helynna was also a warcaster, one of the rare few with the highly valued ability to control such machines with her mind.

“They have nearly reached the compound, Magister. We are too late to execute a proper ambush,” said Lyven, a senior battle mage of her house. “The defenders will be overrun. It would be foolish to perish with them. We should report back to Adeptis Rahn.”

“No.” At her curt reply, his eyes narrowed beneath his hood. She did not care that he was older and thought himself wiser. This was her command. She added, “*You* may be willing to turn your back on our brothers and sisters, but *I* am not.”

His lips compressed. “The mage hunters attracted this enemy by being reckless. Acceptable casualties.”

“Not to me,” she said firmly. It was true something must have gone wrong here. Likely the mage hunters had been followed after a mission. Helynna would not allow that as an excuse to let them die. Most members of House Shyeel cared only for their own, an attitude she rejected. The entire elven race faced imminent extinction—most of their gods had been destroyed by the spread of human magic, and the rest were dying. Solidarity and resolve were vital for her people to secure any hope for a future. The mage hunters of the Retribution were among the few in Ios with the courage to risk their lives to thwart humanity. Helynna admired them greatly. She said, “Send a runner to tell the outpost we are making our move. I need them to flank the enemy after we draw their attention.” He did as she bid, sending a houseguard rifleman.

She gave the soldier a few minutes before lifting her arcanikal polearm to signal to the rest. Their escort included twenty houseguard—soldiers wearing plate armor and wielding a mix of halberds and rifles—together with a single squad of Shyeel battle mages. She led them in a measured charge down the hillside, gathering momentum as they swept through the woods. At Helynna’s mental command her myrmidons took the lead, their power fields flaring to full strength. The Manticore’s field rippled like the surface of a lake as it fired multiple bolts of blue energy into the nearest Cygnaran soldiers, piercing their armor. She yelled, “For Scyrah!”

The sudden assault took the humans off guard. Her riflemen fired down at targets of opportunity just shortly before the gun mages below began firing back. Helynna’s eyes were fixed on the massive Stormclad warjack

near the front of the enemy force. Even without a warcaster controlling it, the powerful machine could tear her myrmidons apart. She knew better than to underestimate it because of its inferior coal-burning technology.

She made a snap judgment and sent her Manticore on a collision course with the Cygnaran warjack. The heavy myrmidon crashed through the foliage and forced several storm knights to dive out of its path as it barreled into the opposing warjack. Moments later the Stormclad was a heap of wreckage, torn apart by the Manticore's saber fists, but the myrmidon had paid the price, hammered down by retaliating storm glaives. The storm knights that crippled it were set upon by houseguard halberdiers and driven momentarily back. Her soldiers were outnumbered. She invoked mystical runes around herself, creating a shimmering bubble that encompassed most of her nearest allies, warding them from incoming bullets and storm glaive blasts.

Helynna moved up and hunkered for cover behind the smoking, battered bulk of her Manticore. Bullets pinged off its steel surface and zipped by overhead. It was heavily damaged but not wrecked—the myrmidon vibrated with latent energy beneath her hand, and her mind was still linked to its cortex. Though its legs were shattered and its torso torn open, it strained to stand and rejoin the fight.

She forced the myrmidon to remain still, lest the nearest humans finish it. The combat swirled around her as she appraised the extent of the damage. She sent her mind into it and along its frame, sensing more than she could see with her naked eyes. She was certain she could get the machine back on its feet, though doing so would require time and concentration. After glancing beyond its bulk to confirm her soldiers had the foe engaged, she decided to take the risk.

Helynna knew every detail of House Shyeel's myrmidons, having spent years engineering their components, and quickly deduced she must restore power and stability to the Manticore's legs and lower field generators. Still touching the machine, she focused her will and mentally took hold of its intricate inner workings to reconnect severed conduits, align gears, and straighten bent piston rods. A lesser arcanist might have required specialized tools, but not Helynna. She could recreate the contours of any tool she required by mentally evoking sculpted planes of kinetic force, and she could twist thick pieces of torn metal and flatten them into proper configuration with her mind.

As she worked, part of her mind remained connected to her Griffon and Chimera myrmidons, which battled along the perimeter. She directed them to targets, guiding the strikes of the Griffon's halberd and the glaives set into the Chimera's arms.

Through the Griffon's receptors she saw a flash of light and heard a cannon boom from a warjack near the rear—a Charger. She sent a pulse of arcane power to lend strength to the Griffon's legs and urged it to race up the left flank to intercept. The machine seemed to defy gravity as it loped, moving with a speed that belied the weight of its steel frame.

The Charger saw it coming and managed to fire one more shell from its double-barreled cannon before the myrmidon reached it. The projectile slowed as it pierced the Griffon's power field and was deflected off its steel shield. The Griffon raised its halberd and slashed the heavy blade deep into the Charger's side. Helynna felt as though the weapon were in her own hands as it struck again, guided by her focused attention. The Charger retaliated with the metal hammer in its right hand, but the blow only dented the Griffon's shoulder armor. The myrmidon's next thrust crippled the enemy machine, piercing its torso to impale its cortex.

Flashes of light accompanied crackling thunder as several stormsmiths called down lightning to strike her Griffon and Chimera. Wielding mechanical implements that looked like long rods topped with spinning metal spheres, stormsmiths could control the weather and summon highly disruptive voltaic discharges. Energy crackled down the myrmidons' frames, doing minimal damage but sending electricity through their cortexes that temporarily severed them from Helynna. They fought on, but without her guidance.

She felt rising anger at the displays of mechanical power all around her. Every storm chamber empowering the Cygnaran weapons, every rune-inscribed bullet they fired—all of it was unclean and harmful to Scyrah, the goddess who protected Ios. The source of their tainted power was quite different from the Iosans' purer energy. The battle raging around Helynna encapsulated the necessity and challenge of their cause: there were too many humans, too few Iosans.

“Lyven!” She shouted over the din of clanging metal, rifle and pistol fire, and crackling energy. “Clear me some room!” The battle mage and his peers were fighting closest to her, their hands and arms enclosed in

oversized power gauntlets that allowed them to hurl rending force bolts into the nearest foes. Lyven had lost all but a handful of his men, cut down by Stormblades, and Helynna felt each loss keenly. Had he been right? Should she have avoided confrontation?

No. More Iosans were trapped inside the outpost, and without her intervention they faced slaughter. Better to die fighting than to simply turn away. She could still see through the eyes of her Manticore and chose her timing carefully. She waited until the gun mages at the periphery had finished one volley and paused to reload. Then she vaulted over the machine and into the fray. Several Stormblades were near, fighting her guardsmen. With another expenditure of will Helynna cursed them, inflicting an enchantment that marked them for destruction.

She charged, spinning as she closed to lend momentum to her polearm, whose enhanced edge bit through her foe's armor. With a downward blow she dispatched another before he could raise his glaive. She narrowly evaded a strike from a glaive behind her, falling into a familiar battlefield trance that let her feel her foes all around her.

The Cygnarans behind this group rallied, pointing her direction. They knew the importance of putting a warcaster down. She took the length of her halberd in both hands, leveled the bladed head at the nearest approaching knight, and squeezed a switch near its base. This sent a bolt of deadly energy into the man's chest. More bullets and lightning flew at her, crisscrossing the air, slowed by her magic but creating a zone where any misstep could be deadly. Her power field barely turned one shot aside and she saw the bullet spin past, inches from her smoothly shaved skull.

Dodging between incoming threats, she drew back while concentrating on the magic that protected her soldiers. She gave her Manticore the mental order to rise. Her repairs had temporarily restored its systems, and it unsteadily regained its feet. Its failed power field flickered as it struggled to restore itself.

At the periphery she saw a welcome sight—mage hunter infiltrators emerging from the outpost like flitting shadows. They closed behind the gun mages and stormsmiths farthest from her and raised slender curved blades that gleamed in the light. They struck, exacting a grim toll from their enemy.

A Firefly light warjack near the stormsmiths turned to deal with them, firing its storm blaster. When it hit one mage hunter with the weapon, lightning arced to electrocute another.

She felt her mental connection with her other myrmidons return as the electrical disruption faded. She channeled her anger through the Chimera's arc node as a sharp spike of kinetic force that sent the Firefly toppling to be set upon by mage hunters.

Raising her halberd, Helynna summoned everything she could from the deepest reservoir of her power. She unleashed a tide of arcane energy into her myrmidons, restoring and overboosting their power fields, making them nearly impervious for a short time. The effort drained her, but she gritted her teeth and focused her attention on the Manticore, directing it to fire into the charging knights. They ran straight into its field of fire and fell, one after another.

Caught between mage hunters and the remaining houseguard and battle mages, the enemy force was cut down. The mage hunters dispassionately finished those who sought to flee. Though it did not diminish the pain of their losses, Helynna took satisfaction in having inflicted a greater toll on the Cygnarans than they had inflicted on her.

She turned to see the ranking mage hunter commander approaching. She clasped his arm. He bowed his head in respect and said, "Magister, your arrival was well timed. Condolences for the blood shed by your people. We are in your debt."

She looked briefly to Lyven, who lowered his eyes. Next time he might think twice before suggesting they let Iosans die.

To the commander she said, "We will mourn our fallen together. House Shyeel stands with the Retribution of Scyrah. Our cause is one."

