

“Seventh Decimate”

Book One

The Great God’s War

Prologue

© Stephen R. Donaldson 2017

This excerpt created from the final manuscript version of the book
for the Stephen R. Donaldson official web site:

<http://www.StephenRDonaldson.com>

“Seventh Decimate”

Book One

The Great God’s War

Prologue

Under the paling stars before dawn, Prince Bifalt and the squad in which he served gathered on an escarpment overlooking the valley where the battle would take place. There they settled themselves to wait for their captain’s final instructions. A few years ago, they had been uncomfortable around the Prince; but he was a veteran now, one of them. Resting while they could, they sat or squatted some distance from the rest of the Bellegerin cavalry and the pickets of waiting horses. Elgart tossed a stone from hand to hand, apparently studying how it rose and fell. Klamath wiped his palms in the dirt to rub away sweat. Camwish, the squad’s horse-master, who fancied himself its entertainer as well, had nothing to say. In the night’s chill, the breathing of the clustered men made faint plumes that gathered around their heads like the dimmest of halos.

Whetting his saber, the Prince considered the task ahead of them. This squad was essential to Belleger’s tactics now, and to their homeland’s hopes for survival. If they succeeded, they might enable an eventual victory. They would ride with the rest of the King’s army, yes, and throw themselves headlong against Amika’s forces; but their purpose was their own. They had been chosen for it in secret, trained in secret, equipped in secret: twenty-one men including their captain and the Prince, King Abbator’s eldest son. In the battle, they would learn whether they were the last desperation of their people, or the first bright promise.

Prince Bifalt intended to be an instrument of promise, if he could. The idea filled him with a fierceness like joy. He had lost too many comrades, too many friends; seen too much misery. Belleger had become a wretched land. His father’s grief and pain at what had been done to the realm’s people was a burden the Prince carried constantly. He wanted to end it.

It had to end, in victory or extinction. Belleger and Amika had been at war for so long even that their grandfathers had forgotten the two realms may once have been at peace. Now they only met when their forces were strong enough to inflict more slaughter. The men of Belleger called those struggles “hells.” No one knew what the Amikans called them.

Below the ramparts along the far side of the valley, the enemy cavalry waited. That army was as ready as Belleger’s. No doubt the Amikan sorcerers had chosen their stations above the battlefield, coverts from which they could watch and kill without danger to themselves. Certainly, Belleger’s Magisters had done so. But the fighting would not begin until daylight emptied the lowland of dusk and dawn; until the armies and their precious theurgists could see. At present, Prince Bifalt and his comrades had nothing to do except wait for Captain Swalish to return from his last meeting with the King’s lead commanders, and for light.

Most of the men remained still, conserving their stamina. Some kept their hands busy. The rest hardly turned their heads: Camwish and Nowel, Elgart and Gret, even Klamath. But the Prince was not surprised to see Flisk squirming with anxiety. Flisk was the youngest soldier among them, new to fighting, untested before his first ride into hell. He had been chosen for his quickness and accuracy, despite his lack of experience. Although his comrades and captain had prepared him as well as they could, he had no real understanding of what it would be like to face gusts of arrows and flurries of blades, howling Amikans and raving sorcery. Prince Bifalt knew this about him. All the veterans knew it. For that reason, they were patient with Flisk’s restless

questions. They did not snap or sneer when he asked the darkness, “How many battles have you seen?”—a question he had asked before, and had been answered often.

The other men deferred to the Prince for his father’s sake. “Two,” he replied curtly. He had the scars to prove it.

“Three,” said Jeck, one of the men who would ride shoulder to shoulder with the King’s son. The other was Gret, who never spoke, even when he was addressed directly.

“Captain Swalish,” rasped Elgart, “claims five.” He was the squad’s cynic, a man who questioned everything despite his obvious alacrity and courage. The stroke of an Amikan sword had scored him from hairline to jaw, but he had killed two more men before his comrades had rallied around him.

Flisk’s voice cracked as he asked, “Do you doubt him?”

Before Elgart could retort, Bartin pronounced harshly, “Seven. I have come through hell seven times.” Then his tone softened. “If I thought a wife would spare me an eighth, I would marry.”

This was a jest. Bartin, the oldest of the veterans, was an inveterate misogynist. To say he would not touch a woman to save his life was an understatement. He might not have touched one to save his closest comrades. They suspected that he had been beaten unmercifully by his mother when he was a boy, usually for no reason he knew.

Camwish chuckled dutifully, and a few other men joined him. But their hearts were not in it.

After more squirming, Flisk breathed, “Seven? *Seven* hells? How many have there been?”

Another familiar question. Flisk knew the answer as well as anyone. But to ease him, or perhaps simply to fill the silence, Nowel replied, “My father survived three.” The squad’s stitcher and bone-setter, Nowel had learned kindness from gushing wounds and crushed limbs. “Not the fourth.” His tone suggested a shrug. “The war was old when he was conscripted.”

Flisk’s silhouette nodded against the pearling sky. After a moment, he ventured, “They say we have fought Amika forever. But they do not say why. What is it *for*?”

“For us?” muttered Elgart. “Survival. For Amika? Who knows?”

Elgart may have been the only man there who wanted to know what the enemy gained in this war. For the rest, it was enough that Amika hungered to destroy Belleger. It was enough for Prince Bifalt. However, he was the King’s son. He had more education than his comrades. He had been tutored—and had studied on his own as well. Until now, however, he had kept what he knew to himself. He had bided his time, saving what he had learned for this moment: the hour before Belleger’s fate turned toward life or death; toward future victory or final defeat.

“There is a tale,” he said as if the subject held only casual interest. “It is preserved in the records of the Fist.” The *Fist* was the high citadel of the land’s kings. When it was first raised, it was known as *Belleger’s Fist*, brandished against the unrelenting heavens, but over generations it became simply the Fist. “It claims there was a time, decades or more before the reign of my grandfather’s grandfather, when Belleger and Amika were one realm.”

His comrades were little more than outlines under the waning stars, vague shadows of themselves. Still Prince Bifalt felt their attention, their held breath.

“One realm,” he repeated. “It must have been a prosperous land, blessed with fertile fields and ripe forests and mines rich in metals. But it changed because the King in those days had two sons, twins. Their names were Fastule and Brigin, and they grew to be mighty men, equal in strength, ambition, and desire for dominance. They were their father’s pride, admired

everywhere. Yet when they grew to manhood, they discovered they were in opposition. Although they loved each other, and did all things with easy excellence, they could not resolve their one conflict. Which of them should rule when their father passed? Which should stand aside?

“Being stubborn as well as ambitious, when their father did pass they chose the only imaginable course to keep peace between them. They divided the realm into two parts so they could both rule. Fastule chose the northern region. He named it Amika and made himself its monarch. Brigin took the southern land—Belleger—and became its king.

“They intended peace, and might have achieved it. But they were doomed by their likeness. They both fell in love with the same woman. Her name was Malorie, said to be the embodiment of every womanly perfection, and the brothers strove extravagantly to win her.

“Sadly for them—and for us—they were not *entirely* alike. There was a strain of savagery in Fastule that Brigin did not share. Even in matters of sport and training, Fastule often fought to the death, while Brigin knew when to hold back. For that reason, Malorie chose Brigin to be her lord.

“From that moment, there was no true peace. Grinding his teeth, Fastule appeared to concede defeat. While all Belleger prepared to celebrate King Brigin’s wedding, Fastule withdrew to the fortress he had built to house his ambitions. There he waited, readying himself, until the time for the ceremony came. Then he marched into Belleger with a small squad of soldiers, a large retinue of royal adherents—and two Magisters disguised as courtiers. Grinning like a beast, he presented himself and his court to attend the wedding. His soldiers he left to share the festivities at the city gates.”

To the rapt curiosity of his comrades, Prince Bifalt explained, “The records do not describe what followed in any detail. A host of armed Amikans approached the Hand in secret.” The *Open Hand* was the fortified city surrounding Belleger’s Fist. “The guards at the gates were killed so the host could enter. At the same time, when King Brigin bent to kiss his new bride, sealing their marriage, there was a clap of thunder in the hall. In an instant, Queen Malorie’s loveliness became a mask of boils oozing pus, of rashes squirming like worms under her skin, of bruises like sudden cankers.” Prince Bifalt heard hoarse surprise from his comrades, but he did not pause. “Fouled blood gushed from her eyes, her nose, her ears. She had been struck by the Decimate of pestilence. In her finery, she resembled an embodiment of plague. And while she shrieked her last, Fastule rushed to kill his brother.

“Fortunately for us, there were brave men in King Brigin’s court. They saved his life. Many of his own Magisters were in attendance. They struck down the Amikan sorcerers with fire and lightning. And Fastule had not risked enough of his forces to ensure his victory over the Hand. There was terrible carnage in every quarter, terrible suffering. The city had not been taught to defend itself. But King Brigin’s Magisters were able to drive out the Amikan host. When Fastule fled, he fled in bitterness. His brother still lived. And Belleger knew its enemy.

“From that time to this, we have been at war, fighting again and again to defend ourselves. That is the tale. The heritage of Fastule’s bitterness and savagery still rules Amika.”

Every veteran knew he rode into hell in self-defense. Belleger was losing. Every battle took place on Bellegerin land—although the border, the Line River, was less than a league away. But among his comrades only Prince Bifalt knew that several times during the long war, various kings had sent emissaries to talk peace with Amika. On each occasion, the emissaries had been killed as soon as they revealed their purpose.

The Prince’s audience fidgeted, uncertain what to make of his story. Bartin swore under

his breath. “All for a woman.” But Elgart surged to his feet. Flinging away his stone, he asked, almost demanded, “Do you believe it?”

Prince Bifalt shrugged. “It is one version of the tale.” He had a different idea. “There is another.

“It says Fastule had no sorcerers with him. Rather he was gifted himself, born with the talent for pestilence. That was the savagery in his nature, the strain of viciousness he could not restrain. With his own theurgy, he made a ruin of the one woman who had spurned him. But he could not kill his brother by the same means because he had expended too much of himself—and because Belleger’s Magisters acted too quickly. He needed all of his host to help him escape the city.”

Then Prince Bifalt declared, “*That* version I believe. It explains the killing strain in Fastule, a *gift* Brigin lacked. It explains the power of his heritage in Amika.”

And, thought the Prince, it was typical of sorcerers. Some of them acted like amiable men. All of them had savagery in their hearts.

Abruptly, Nowel spoke. Harsh as acid, he said, “I have seen the truth. After every battle, Amikan Magisters kill their wounded. They do not allow prisoners or hostages. While we struggle to retrieve every fallen comrade who still breathes, *they* lash theirs with fire, or swallow them in cracks in the earth, or drain the life from their lungs. And ours they kill as well, as many as they can.”

Every veteran knew this. Prince Bifalt knew it. He had been burned more than once, and slashed with stones, and almost suffocated while he tried to help hurt Bellegerins. Some of them had been his friends.

Flisk had been forewarned, of course. Only the Prince’s tale was new to him. But now Prince Bifalt saw a more vivid horror on the young man’s face.

The Prince approved. Flisk would fight harder because he felt more horror. The whole company would fight harder.

After a long silence, Klamath concluded sadly, “Tales change nothing.” He was a brave soldier with a notoriously soft heart. Sooner or later, he wept after every battle. The Prince had seen him. “We fight because we are attacked. What else can we do?”

Retreating to familiar ground, Flisk asked—an implicit plea for reassurance—“Then why have they not overwhelmed us? Why does the war go on?”

Again, the squad deferred to Prince Bifalt. Unlike his comrades—unlike even Captain Swalish—he was present when King Abbator debated with his counselors and lead commanders.

“Our sorcerers are as great as theirs,” answered the Prince. “The proof is that Belleger endures. Our Magisters hold when we cannot.” His tone was sour. Many of his comrades saw theurgists as protectors, even saviors. Prince Bifalt did not. Amikan sorcery had caused the war. Amikan and Bellegerin sorcerers sustained it. “But we cannot hold without them. Amika has more men. This war is less ruinous there, or Amika is more populous. Or they have allies while we do not.” Belleger was isolated along all its borders, unable to look for aid in any direction. For all he knew, Amika was less constricted. “In every battle, they outnumber us more.

“Perhaps it was not always so. It is so now. You know this.” The truth was terrible, but it could not be denied. “We only remain to fight again because the carnage of each hell is so great.” Most of it wrought by theurgy. “Two years pass, or three, or even four, before they grow strong enough to strike again. Without that respite, we would not have enough men to face them. Even our Magisters would be overrun eventually. They are too few.”

He did not add, And their gifts have too many limitations. Instead, he concluded grimly,

“That is why *we* are here. Today we will test our fate. We will learn if we can accomplish what sorcery cannot. If there is hope for Belleger, it rides with us.”

Every man in the squad knew what he meant. They had spent a year training for it. Still the weight of Prince Bifalt’s assertion silenced even Flisk. Abruptly, most of them stirred, unable to rest longer. As dawn spread down from the opposing heights into the lowland of the battlefield, the soldiers began to re-count the arrows in their quivers, or test their bow-strings, or sharpen their sabers one more time, or check the contents of their satchels.

Soon they would be able to see their enemy clearly.

Then a muffled voice warned them Captain Swalish was coming.

After all their training together, the Prince knew his captain well. Scarred and burly, with the shoulders of a wrestler and the legs of a man who stood his ground, Swalish was not a man who tolerated disrespect. He obeyed orders himself, and expected his to be obeyed. At the same time, he knew what his soldiers were about to face better than any of them except Bartin. Experience had taught him when to tighten discipline and when to relax it. In addition, he was not a tactician. He understood what his squad had been commanded to do, but he was not entirely sure it was reasonable—or even possible. And—a further difficulty—his habit of submission to Belleger’s ruling family ran deep. Prince Bifalt’s presence in the squad made Captain Swalish uncomfortable.

As he approached his men, the captain glared as if he meant to lash them for not leaping to attention. But when he reached them, he hesitated until he caught Prince Bifalt’s eye; until he saw the Prince’s slight nod.

By that time, the soldiers were on their feet.

“Listen well,” began Swalish. “Even you, Bartin.” The effort of compensating for his doubts made him harsh. “Soon we will ride into hell, where better men than you have died between one heartbeat and the next. I will have the hide of any man who ignores our orders.

“You know why we are here. You know why you were chosen. You know why we have done everything in secret. You know what we must do. I will tell you again.

“For the first time, we will let Amika see our rifles. We will let them see what rifles can do. You were chosen for this duty because you are skilled riflemen. But you—*we*—are too few to turn the battle. We do not have enough guns to turn any battle. What we will attempt is a test. We must know whether rifles can kill Amikan sorcerers.

“*Hear me,*” insisted the captain fiercely, although he kept his voice low. “Our task is not to *fight*. It is to *win through*. That is why we ride in threes,” twenty men and Swalish himself.

“To make a way for each other. We must survive Amikan sorcery, Amikan tactics, Amikan cavalry. We must breach their lines. And we must do it without revealing our guns. We must keep our purpose hidden until we are in range of the ramparts where the Amikan sorcerers stand.

“*Then* we will shoot. We will do what we can to drop those theurgists. If we can kill enough of them—hells, if we can kill *any* of them—in the next battle we will be able to repay generations of Bellegerin blood.”

Like his comrades, Prince Bifalt held his rifle in front of him, hardwood stock under his elbow, barrel pointed safely at the sky, showing Captain Swalish he was ready. His pulse beat a fighting rhythm. He was not afraid to die. He was not a man who flinched or shirked. His courage was proven. But he could admit to himself that he was afraid to fail. If his homeland could not be saved with rifles, it could not be saved at all.

“Do I need to add,” rasped the squad’s commander, “that the enemy must not be allowed to capture any of our guns?” Camwish, Nowel, and others shook their heads. Unnecessarily,

Captain Swalish explained, “That is the only exception to our orders. We are allowed to shoot if that is the only way to keep our rifles out of Amikan hands.

“More than that, I have only this to say. Any man whose rifle misfires because it has not been properly cleaned and tested will *not* be punished. He will already be dead.”

His soldiers had trained hard. They knew a veiled order when they heard it. In the sun’s rising light, they removed the loaded clips from their weapons, confirmed the pressure of the springs that advanced the cartridges, then unlocked the breeches, checked the action of the triggers and bolts, squinted down the long barrels. With practiced precision, they relocked the breeches, replaced the clips. Then they went through their satchels, counting their spare clips, assuring Captain Swalish more than themselves that the clips were loaded.

“Right,” said the captain. That was as close as he ever came to expressing approval. “You know your threes. You know your place in our lines. It is time to mount. Protect each other. Protect your guns. Succeed if you can. If you cannot, return alive. I will not be amused if you compel me to train more men.”

Only Elgart laughed, a humorless sound quickly stifled. Around him, the squad formed its teams. Captain Swalish and a big man named Malder, a natural brawler, took Flisk between them, protecting the young man’s inexperience. With Gret and Jeck, Prince Bifalt followed the horse-master Camwish toward the pickets where the mounts waited.

As the Prince walked, blood beat like music in his veins. He did not relish killing his enemies, but their deaths were necessary. Belleger’s extremity justified him. Amika’s attack justified him. What his heart craved, however, what he burned for, was to shoot sorcerers.

In every generation, they were few. Most men were born without the gift to wield incomprehensible powers. Nevertheless they were mighty. Their sorceries were enough to start the war—and to block both Belleger and Amika from victory. Without the aid of theurgy, Belleger would have been erased as a separate realm long ago. Its remaining people would have been forced to live their lives under the dominion of Amika.

Prince Bifalt believed all sorcery was dishonorable: worse than unfair or dishonest. A Magister could conceal himself in perfect safety while he killed ungifted men, ordinary men, by the dozens. People without the talent for theurgy were helpless against sorcerers. Every act of sorcerous power was an atrocity.

Nevertheless Belleger could not endure without sorcery. Magisters were essential to the realm despite the way they dishonored whatever they touched.

But if the riflemen’s tactics proved effective, Prince Bifalt might live to see the day when every Amikan theurgist was dead. In another two or three years, Belleger could make more than enough guns, hundreds of them, thousands. Then Amika would be defeated. King Abbator’s people would be able to savor their natural lives at last, as men and women and families should. They would have no need for Magisters themselves, and would be content without them.

If there were no sorcerers, a man like Prince Bifalt might finally have the right to an honorable life: a right he could not afford now because his homeland was assailed by theurgy. The rifle he carried was his own hope as much as Belleger’s.

With his comrades, he went to his mount. When he had tested its girth and tack, and had murmured a few comfortable words to the war-horse, he secured his rifle in its plain leather scabbard, where it would rest unseen under his thigh until he needed it. Then he surged into the saddle, holding the reins in one hand, his bow in the other.

Arrows would be his first weapons. He might require every shaft in his quiver. Then he would have to rely on his saber—and on Gret and Jeck—until one or two or all three of them

broke through the Amikan lines: until he or they neared the high wall of boulders, the ramparts, that closed the far side of the valley. After that, he would be free to draw his rifle; and the true worth of King Abbator's eldest son would be measured.

It all came down to rifles, every hope, every future. But not to simple muskets, single-shot guns that wasted an eternity of fighting while they were reloaded. *Repeating* rifles. Prince Bifalt knew more about their discovery and development than any soldier of Belleger. The secret was stringently guarded. But as a member of his father's inner circle, he knew the name of the alchemist, three generations back, who had discovered the composition of gunpowder, aided by a sheaf of brittle papers found in an old trunk; papers written with fanciful diagrams, peculiar recipes, and obscure terms. He knew the names of the skilled iron-wright and the famous jewel-smith with whom the alchemist had shared his discovery. The Prince even knew the name of the apprentice who had been wounded when the three men had succeeded in using gunpowder to expel a lead ball from an iron tube. The King who had learned of this accomplishment, foreseen its possibilities, and imposed a severe secrecy on its improvement, had been Prince Bifalt's great-grandfather.

The work that followed had taken a long time. The subsequent kings and their advisers had scorned the use of any gun that could not match an archer for quickness. In addition, the obstacles to be overcome were unprecedented. Guided by the original alchemist's papers, Belleger's blacksmiths, iron-wrights, and jewelers were able to devise, first, the cartridges that held both gunpowder and bullet, then the breech that secured the cartridge so the triggering mechanism could spark the gunpowder, and finally the bolt-action that ejected the spent casing and accepted a new cartridge. These innovations they were able to effect within a few decades.

Unfortunately, shaping iron for the barrel posed a more daunting problem. Year after year, the barrels ruptured themselves, or exploded the whole gun, when they had been used once or twice, or perhaps three times. No forge in the realm burned hot enough to harden the iron. Muskets, by comparison, were simple: their barrels had time to cool between shots. But muskets could not save Belleger's people.

Eventually, keeping the process secret became easy. Its failures made it seem trivial, too pointless to prolong curiosity among people who were either numbed or ruined by the enduring costs of the war. Only the succeeding kings of Belleger kept faith with Prince Bifalt's great-grandfather's vision—and they did so only because they were desperate.

This impasse persisted until one blacksmith in despair was inspired to consult a Magister. Their long experiments proved the Decimate of fire could enable any forge to shape barrels durable enough to withstand the stress of rapid shots.

The fact that his hopes, and Belleger's, depended on sorcery made Prince Bifalt bitter. He accepted the contradictions of his position only because the stakes were so high. The plight of his people made nagging questions of honor meaningless.

Mounted now, and eager because they could not afford fear, Captain Swalish's three

formed a wedge in the center of the Bellegerin lines. Around them, horses jostled, men cursed, officers shouted for order. As daylight filled the bottom of the valley at last, the two armies faced each other, Bellegerins on the south, Amikans to the north. The Amikan forces had crossed the Line River and come here because there was no better place for their battle than this. The bouldered heights which walled the lowland gave the commanders on both sides the advantage of being able to watch and direct the whole conflict from above. It also allowed their theurgists the opportunity to strike at will without hazarding themselves. But the armies also relied on the horsemen in their lines below the ramparts. Both forces needed open ground for cavalry. Foot-soldiers had no hope of reaching the high positions like redoubts from which the Magisters fought.

In this confrontation, as in the entire war, Belleger's whole attention was fixed on its enemy. It had no other concerns. Any student of the heavens could have told their kings that the world was wide: far wider than the lands claimed by Belleger and Amika. But Belleger knew nothing of this. Bordered on the west by seas and an unnavigable coastline too sheer and reefed to be sailed, to the west by mountains with jagged cliffs and peaks that clawed the sky, and in the east by a trackless desert, the Bellegerin realm had nowhere to look except toward Amika in the north.

If Amika knew more, no one in Belleger cared. The fight for survival stripped away other considerations.

Here Prince Bifalt was clad like any other soldier. None of the riflemen wanted to call attention to their unique purpose, their unprecedented tactics. In addition, King Abbator did not wish his eldest son singled out for death. The Prince was indistinguishable from his comrades in his boiled leather jerkin and leggings; in his helm and breastplate, both marked with the emblem of his homeland, the sign of the beleaguered eagle. In every obvious respect, his weapons—his bow and arrows, his saber and dagger—were identical to those carried by all the Bellegerins.

In full daylight, horns sounded from the Amikan lines. At once, the enemy horsemen began to move. As they came down the slope below their heights, they swept from a canter into a full gallop.

Almost immediately, King Abbator's lead commanders responded. When they gave their own signal, Prince Bifalt and the entire Bellegerin army surged toward the plain.

Mounted on their armored chargers, they rode with the wild hearts and severe discipline of well-trained cavalry. The sight of the Amikan forces pounding to meet him made the Prince ache to draw his rifle. But he had his orders: he did not touch his gun.

As he and his comrades drew within bowshot, the opposing Magisters attacked. Without warning, a line of fire spread across the Bellegerin front. It seemed to come from nowhere, feed on nothing, yet it burned with the ferocity of a furnace. In an instant, the screams of men and horses appalled the air. Heat made torches of hides and heads. Flesh bubbled and ran like wax. Bones flamed like tinder. In that instant, scores of Bellegerins died.

At once, Belleger's sorcerers countered. Wielding their gifts, they answered fire with fire—and with other powers. Elsewhere a deep cracking sound shook an Amikan company, knocking the horses to the ground. Under them, the earth opened: it swallowed men and mounts whole, broke the legs of beasts trying to avoid it, pitched riders headlong to their deaths. When the surface of rocks and dirt closed again, it claimed more victims.

From both sides, sudden winds with the force of hurricanes struck the riders. Blasts like battering rams punched horses and horsemen to the ground. And after the winds came waves of pestilence that sickened both beasts and men, covered them with oozing boils. The pain of those

infections was so intense that some men clawed off their faces and even tore their eyes to escape the agony.

It should have been a cause for wonder that Belleger and Amika had not eradicated each other from the world generations ago. But sorcery had limitations. Its range was limited, as was the stamina of the sorcerers. The Magisters could not attack each other directly: the distance between their positions was too great. And they could not sustain their attacks. Their exertions drained them. Each wave of theurgy was horrific, but it was also brief.

In addition, the sorcerers were handicapped by their own cavalry. As soon as the charging armies met, the Magisters could not unleash their powers without killing their own men as well as their foes. The result was that sorcery could not rout either army. Despite the carnage on all sides, Prince Bifalt and his surviving comrades still had to fight for their lives.

As in past battles, the Amikan strategy was simple: kill Bellegerins, as many as possible. But now Belleger's defenders had a more definite objective. Supported by vicious spates of fire, by quakes that tore sections of the earth apart, by winds and pestilence, and warded by companies of their comrades, Prince Bifalt and the other riflemen strove to pierce the Amikan lines so they could approach the enemy ramparts.

The Prince loosed arrows until the battle engulfed him and his bow became a hindrance. Then he discarded it, snatched out his saber, and began hacking at his enemies.

Dodging through the chaos of screams, war cries, curses, his charger trampled charred corpses, skirted crippling pits and cracks in the plain, skidded in blood-drenched mud. The riders assigned to his squad's protection absorbed most of the Amikan force near him. Still he had to cut and thrust savagely to keep himself alive. When his blade was batted aside, he turned his blocked slash into a swing against a different foe, trusting Gret and Jeck to guard him.

Abruptly, an Amikan dropped Gret and rushed close, mouth wide in a bloody howl. Prince Bifalt stopped him by driving his saber between the man's jaws. The Amikan died in a red spew; but the bones of his skull trapped the blade. As he fell, he wrenched the saber from Prince Bifalt's hand.

Snatching out his dagger, the Prince went on fighting as well as he could. Some soldier behind him would try to retrieve Gret's gun.

Stride by stride, Prince Bifalt's mount began to ascend the slope at the foot of the Amikan redoubt.

Then, suddenly, he won free of the battle. Several other riflemen had been forced back. Others were too heavily engaged to accompany him. But no one stood between him and the last rise, the stretch of ground where the high pile of the enemy's rampart reared upward. There or nowhere he would be able to find his targets and take his shots. And Jeck still guarded his back.

Off to his left, he saw three members of his squad emerge from the fighting. At a glance, he knew they would fail. Amikans had rallied behind them—and the Amikans had not discarded their bows. Already arrows hissed in the air. One rifleman died with a shaft in his back. His comrades were thrown when their mounts stumbled under them.

But they rolled to their feet, recovered quickly; turned their rifles on their immediate foes. That was necessity, not tactics. They disobeyed one order to obey another: keep their guns out of enemy hands. For the first time in the long war, shots cracked through the clamor. For the first time, Amikans were flung from their horses by bullets and rapid fire. In shock, nearby riders halted like men hitting a wall.

The Bellegerins would be visible from above. Surely at least one or two sorcerers would come to the edge or rise from their coverts to see what was happening. If their comrades could

not save them, those two riflemen were as good as dead.

But they might open a clear shot for the Prince.

His gun was more accurate than any bow loosed in combat. It had greater range.

He needed mere moments to reach the crest of the rise he sought. While Jeck dismounted to cover him, the Prince leapt from his charger. Taking only his rifle and his satchel of ammunition, he slapped his mount away, then ran to a boulder that he hoped would shield him from sorcery.

Quickly, he scanned the horizon of the redoubt. He looked for niches between boulders where a Magister could stand to survey the battlefield. In the distance, above the tumult of his heart, he heard the sharp stutter of rifle fire as his comrades fought to keep the Amikans back; to protect each other, and their guns, and him. But he did not glance away from his sights. Holding his breath, he searched the heights.

There: the flicker of a Magister's slate-grey robe in a gap below the rim of the ramparts. Without hesitation, Prince Bifalt tightened his finger on the trigger. The gun bucked in his hands. While the muzzle-flash flared across his vision, he controlled his rifle, aimed again.

A brief puff of stone shards and dust from the side of his target told him he must have missed. By good fortune, however, the ricochet was as effective as a hit. The robe toppled, fluttering, out of its covert. Limbs floundered until the body struck the ground and lay still.

Yes!

Working the bolt to chamber another bullet, the Prince scanned the rocks for another sorcerer.

Almost immediately, he was rewarded. A robed figure stepped into view; stood against the backdrop of the sky as if he had been etched there for killing.

Prince Bifalt's second shot did not miss. Spouting blood from his chest, the theurgist fell backward out of sight.

Yes!

Again he worked the rifle-bolt. Again he searched.

If he had bothered to count his heartbeats, he would have reached ten or twelve when every hair on his forearms stood on end and his scalp crawled inside his helm. In that instant, he knew what was coming. Only one form of sorcery had this effect. He had no more than a moment to pray this theurgy was not meant for him; to hope it would strike and melt the ground rather than take him or any Bellegerin. Then a wild blare of lightning from the bright heavens punched through him, and he understood that he was dead.

While that terrible discharge of theurgy claimed him, he saw himself as if from the outside. He saw his bones glow like iron in the forge; saw his eyes drip from their sockets. He watched his flesh melt from him, leaving only the coruscation of his skeleton. From a great distance, he felt an instant of absolute agony.

Then a voice spoke. Although it was not loud, it had the depth of a subterranean convulsion: it seemed to emerge from the foundations of the world. It took no time at all, yet every word was distinct, as if it had been written on his mind.

It said: **Are you ready?**

The King's eldest son rolled onto his back, staring sightlessly at the Amikan ramparts. His last thought was that he did not want to die. He had not accomplished enough.