

Era Of Darkness

Volume I: The Apocalypse Begins

By
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This book is dedicated to my beloved closest family:

My Mother Patricia; Christopher & Rosie;
Louise, Simon & Aidan.

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Preface

The world today is torn apart by so many differences: racial, religious, cultural, economic and political, being perhaps the foremost. It is a terrifying thought to consider how our divided world might struggle to face some new, catastrophic threat.

What if aliens did suddenly invade? Could the nations of our planet combine their efforts for the sake of survival... or would our divisions and distrusts doom us?

Era of Darkness transplants this scenario into a mystical fantasy land – where the nations of a fragmented, feuding world find themselves battling to thwart their utter annihilation. This was a concept I knew could be rich in potential – diverse cultures, characters driven into extreme circumstances, epic battles and a mysterious, seemingly invincible enemy.

I hope you find that I've done the concept justice.

Side Note:

On Emeran, the names of races are also the names of nationalities. Grammatically, then, this gives a question... are they referred to as 'graex' or 'Graex', 'callis' or 'Callis', 'human' or 'Human'? I've chosen to capitalise, others may not have. I like the emphasis and distinction this places on the peoples of this troubled realm.

Ian Thompson

1: The Chronicle Of Emeran

The Monastery of Omnroc had stood for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years. No-one knew when the first monks had decided to construct the great domed building, only that their chosen location had been a deliberately harsh one. Omnroc loomed high on a mountainside, far from civilisation, afflicted by thin chilled air and vicious winters. Even now, at the height of Emeran summer, not a blade of grass grew within ten miles of Omnroc – so the four hundred monks endured not just severe isolation and cold, but also a diet of edible lichens, mushrooms and insects.

Outside, the structure was a roughly carved, simple dome of dull grey rock. Inside, the entire building was based around a vast swirling stairwell that ran in seemingly endless circles from the floor to the High Monks' chambers three hundred feet above. Time and countless footsteps had worn at the staircase, carving a 'v' into every step. During the incessant autumn rains, leaks from the ancient roof would send a small stream surging down the stairwell, and the monks regarded this as a period of cleansing by the Unseen Gods...

Traversing the last part of a ten-thousand step journey, Mevin thought of the cleansing time and how the frigid water would have eased the pain in his bare feet. The young Human monk dismissed the thought, shivered inside his rough-woven wrap and clutched his scroll ever-tighter...

Finally he reached the door to Amaeris' chamber. Mevin paused and took a deep breath. It wasn't every day that one of the High Monks summoned a Chronicler to his room to look at his work. This was a day he would remember with immense gratitude.

Mevin knocked gently and awaited a response. He knew that if Amaeris decided to be fickle, the answer might not come for half a day – and that to knock twice would be an insult.

Surprisingly, the response came not as a call to enter, but with the opening of the door.

Amaeris' face peered out – pale, wrinkled and marred by a blotch of warts across his left cheek. The elder monk nodded, drew the door wide open and ushered the Chronicler inside.

Mevin found the chamber completely bare. There was not even a blanket to allow Amaeris to warm himself with when sleeping. Like Mevin, all the seventy year old possessed was a coarsely woven wrap for dignity's sake.

"Ah," Amaeris exclaimed, his voice a high-pitched whisper. "You're surprised at my quarters?"

Mevin looked to the floor a moment, then to his superior. "No, sir. At Omnroc we have no need of belongings or mortal comforts."

"You say that as though you are reading it, young man," snapped the elder. "But do you believe it?"

Swallowing hard, Mevin considered before speaking. "As a tenth-year student of this monastery, I am learning every day. I do find certain things difficult, but my purpose here is to learn and improve myself. To seek Goodness."

The old man ran a hand through thinning white hair and hissed: "Do you have a favourite quill for your work?"

"I... I have one that works better than others."

"When you leave, destroy it and use another."

Mevin nodded. "Yes."

Amaeris smiled. "Now why do I ask that of you?"

For seconds the younger monk could not answer. Then he uttered awkwardly, "Because a favourite object might eventually become a belonging, and belongings distract from one's service to the Unseen Gods."

The older monk nodded and smiled more genuinely. He gestured to the bare stone floor.

"Let us sit."

They sat together and Amaeris took the scroll from Mevin's hands.

"I hear you have a gift for the writing of fine chronicles... That is why you were asked to perform this short task."

"A test?"

"Yes. To see whether you were ready for greater things." Amaeris unrolled the scroll and peered at the beautifully hand-written text. "Now, be silent while I read."

Mevin lowered his head, clearing his mind of thoughts and awaiting the criticism he felt must inevitably come.

His companion read, slowly and intently, as though devouring each word in turn...

"A Brief Chronicle of Emeran by a humble monk"

“Three thousand years ago, the natives of this world were perishing under the scourge of a terrible plague. Flesh-withering sickness raged across the lands, afflicting each and every race. Efforts to cure the plague – or even to control it by quarantining entire cities – proved utterly futile. People believed that Armageddon was finally upon them...”

“Our Human ancestors came to this world on huge, mystical sky-chariots, fleeing a distant land of their own which had been ravaged by war. At first the tormented natives of Emeran regarded these outsiders as a threat. However, the Humans freely offered their own medicines and healing knowledge, and in a matter of mere weeks, they had devised a cure for Emeran’s lethal blight. Within a year, the death-tolls were diminishing. Within two, the world was safe from the ravages of plague... The Humans were embraced as friends by the peoples of Emeran and given a new homeland to build and thrive upon.

“But kinship and peace can change like the weather...”

“After five hundred years, a world war had begun to rage: every race across the continent against the other. Petty differences had grown into hatreds; arguments had birthed conflicts, which birthed battles; people had turned from constructing towns and cities of beauty to building weapons of hideous destruction. Again, Emeran seemed to be on the brink of total disaster...”

“This time, the Unseen Gods themselves intervened. Weary of the sight of blood and the clamour of war, they destroyed the weapons, separated the races of the world and threw up great walls of shimmering light. Gigantic prisons, hundreds of miles across, were thus created for all the peoples of Emeran. The Humans were given plains grassland. The Graex, an area of desert and mountain. The Callis, open forest. The Veres, swamplands. These and every other race were sealed in a terrain suited for their needs and comforts, whilst keeping them from attacking their neighbours.

“The Imprisonment was a period of penance and prayer. The endless horizons of fiery light that encompassed each people acted as a brilliant symbol of their wrong-doing and of the anger they had evoked from the Unseen Gods.

“More centuries passed and the races learned peace in their solitude. Eventually, the Unseen Gods began to let down their magical barriers. After generations of separation, the peoples of Emeran were united – all but one... Around the North Pole, the hub of the known world, a great circular wall remained and imprisoned the last race. No-one could remember who these people had been. Yet clearly, they had refused the ways of peace and were damned to live in solitude forever.

“Now, half a millennia after the Time of Reunion, the Northern Wall of Light still shines like an eternal beacon. Knowledge of what the wall represents has been lost to many and replaced by rumour and superstition. The Human mystics called the Believers of Light have based a religion upon the barrier: thinking it is the passageway from life to the Otherworld. More naïve Humans call the hidden zone Hel, named after a fiery realm of suffering in their old land. The Graex travel north with their dead – passing the bodies into the wall to incinerate them. Other peoples have sacrificed victims by hurling them into that fiery barrier.

“It is a desperate age, much akin to the time before our Imprisonment. Humans and Callis have risen to become the greatest powers on the continent and they are on the verge of a devastating final war. Border-conflicts rage like fires out of control. Entire villages and towns are sacked. Trade caravans are slaughtered. Farms are destroyed, their crops and livestock stolen or burnt... Villagers pray for the intervention of the Unseen Gods, only to find their pleadings unanswered. When they cry, ‘Have the Gods deserted us?’, priests reply that the Unseen Gods are determined to allow the peoples of Emeran to resolve their own petty differences... Mystics threaten that we are on the verge of an apocalyptic Era of Darkness... Warriors simply continue to harvest death and destruction...”

“As the First Monk Sadis wrote, the future is a woman of two faces: one of terror, another of beauty. She will show us the one that the Unseen Gods deem right.”

Amaeris laid the scroll down and thought for a moment. His appreciation was shown only by a lack of scorn. “I want you to expand this work and construct the true, full Chronicle of Emeran.”

“The history of our world?”

“Exactly.”

“That would be...” Mevin’s wide eyes showed his anticipation, “...a mammoth task. And there is so little information available.”

“I will grant you access to our most ancient tomes. I want you to transcribe the essentials of their contents into a new chronicle.”

“Thank you, and thank the Unseen Gods for this opportunity... I just hope I can prove myself worthy.”

“You must.” Amaeris’ tone turned grave. “For in two months’ time you will bind your own tome in leather and bury it in a stone vault beneath this monastery. A testament to the people who once lived on this world.”

Mevin’s face twisted with concern. He repeated, “Who once lived..?”

When Amaeris’ gaze caught the young man, Mevin found himself transfixed by the High Monk’s

urgency. “You have written of the Era of Darkness which mystics speak of. This is no fable. Emeran is about to suffer a cataclysm. All life as we know it will be annihilated. Only darkness and evil will remain...”

“Is that possible?”

“It is unchangeable destiny. All we can do is provide a record for the future, and that task I give to you.”

“Why...” Mevin uttered, “why... won’t the Unseen Gods help us?”

“Our Gods are dead, slain by the force that will exterminate Emeran.”

Mevin collapsed, weeping like a child.

His life, his dedication, his servitude, his hours of prayer. All a bitter waste. There were now no Unseen Gods to hear him. No great powers to mould him into a man of Goodness.

Death, even by evil ones, would be a sweet release from the awful burden of this knowledge.

2: Bloodfury & Fear

The green sun of Emeran had descended below the horizon hours ago. In its wake, the cloudless evening sky looked like an immense curtain of deep green velvet, and the glimmering stars and three full moons were like adornments of brilliant jewels and pearls.

On such a clear night, the six Callis guards should have been able to see any enemy approaching through the forest surrounding their clearing. The trees were not densely packed and the lowest twenty feet of their forms were bare narrow trunks – both facts offering very little cover. Branches stretching up to support a leafy bluish-grey canopy above the trunks were too frail to bear anything larger than an insect, bird or small serpent. Across the forest floor, patches of thick grass and bush were sparse and short, thus an intruder should not have crawled unseen. Adding to the brightness of star- and moonlight, a cordon of torches had been speared into the ground at regular intervals to ward off any hunting predators. Since the torches and the presence of Callis warriors had already sent animals fleeing deeper into the forest, the area around the clearing was left almost silent: the snap of a twig or the rustle of leaves would have carried like a thunderbolt and should have alerted the sentries instantly...

Yet, in spite of all the advantages of their location, the six guards had failed in their task. An intruder had indeed crept from the forest without detection...

Now this enemy padded evenly towards the one large tent of the encampment – still unseen and unheard by the sentries, some of which were mere paces distant...

For the guards' single, disc-shaped eyes no longer turned in their narrow sockets. And, as for their twisted, twig-shaped ears... their assassin had sliced these off.

* * *

Inside the tent, five more Callis enjoyed the warmth of a large brazier that glowed and crackled at the centre of the structure. In accordance with Callis custom, a circle of clean cloth surrounded the brazier and this bore the scraps of a heavy meal: roasted fowl; *cael*, a cold soup made from pulverised grubs; narrow sticks of spicy black bread; and a dozen skins of wine.

Encircling the food-cloth were the Callis themselves. They were two-legged, all under four feet tall and covered in grey, hairless leathery skin. Callis heads were squat and dominated by the cyclopean disc-eyes set between their upward-jutting ears, under which lay flat fleshy noses and wide mouths of tiny hooked teeth. Their limbs and torsos had a spindly appearance. Legs were short and led to three-toed claw-feet. One set of arms rose up from what would have been a biped's shoulders, another from hipbone joints – each ending with long skeletal hands. The hands had three fingers, plus upper and lower thumbs.

Like all feeding Callis, these five drooled constantly – down over their rough woven tunics, onto their breeches and into small pools on the earth floor by their bare feet. The Callis kept the spittle away from only one thing: the pairs of short scimitars sheathed below their lower arms. Weaponry was life, and so too precious to be fouled.

Tenes, leader of the scouting party, shovelled another load of soup into his mouth using the forefingers of his upper hands – spilling more broth onto the floor than succeeded to pass his slobbering maw – whilst his lower hands snatched the gambling-cup from the Callis on his right.

"My turn," he spat – literally – in shrill Callis tongue. *"You win well, Sahk. Let's see if you can lose well too ..."*

He covered the top of the cup with his lower right hand and slammed the vessel down on the floor three times. The coloured teeth inside shook and clattered... Until, with a flick of his wrist, Tenes opened up the cup and allowed its contents to litter the spittle-wet ground before him.

"Roast my eye!" Tenes growled joyfully.

Nine of the fifteen decayed teeth were embedded into the mud by their points. The others lay on their sides and so counted for nothing.

Sahk counted the value of the teeth quickly. This was his job alone – for only he of the five Callis could count when drunk. Tenes himself could barely count or read even when completely sober.

"Three reds – at six each... Four Blues – at five each... Two Yellows – at one each... That's... twenty-two." Sahk looked apologetically at his leader. *"You lose, captain."*

Tenes regarded the teeth with dismay. *"But it's a good score. Three sixes... Four fives... Two ones... Is that really just twenty-two?"*

"Would I lie, sir?" Sahk reached for the betting pile and took the dozen tarnished yellow coins.

When Tenes looked away, Sahk couldn't help but smile. At this rate, he'd have enough money from the fools before morning to buy himself a week's leave.

"I just don't understand it..." Tenes tossed his bowl over his head and heard the soup splatter against the heavy cloth of the tent. He picked up the teeth and returned them to the cup. *"You just have the luck of the Unseen Gods, Sahk, you really do."*

Sahk rippled his upper arms, the Callis equivalent of a shrug. He took the cup and tossed a coin down to start a new pile. Grumbling and cursing, the other four Callis threw in their bets. Dhal, eldest of the group, rubbed at his eye until it squeaked.

"Tired, old man?" laughed Hadris, next to the older Callis and nearest to the tent-flap. *"Maybe you should go to sleep?"*

Dhal touched at the paler grey skin under his eye-slit, the sole visible sign of his advanced years. He retorted. *"I might be double your age, but I've still got the strength you lack... Plus the wisdom of my thirty years!"*

Hadris laughed so hard that he blurted out a mouthful of wine. *"Aye, Dhal... That's why you're down to three Dagmars..."*

The fifth and youngest member of the group, on the other side of Dhal, guffawed and pointed at the older soldier's depleted coin-pile. Dhal swore and gave the eight-year-old a slap across the shoulder that sent him reeling.

"Mind yer mouth, you scrawny pup!"

Corfel was still laughing when he hit the ground with a slam that smashed the air out of his lungs. The tent became an uproar of laughter and ridicule as he struggled for breath and scrambled to his knees...

The youngster glared at Dhal, his teeth grinding. It was a moment of decision: should he strike at the man and instigate a fight, or...

Wisely, Corfel grinned: *"You sure knocked the wind out of my sails..."*

He looked from Dhal to the others, unsure whether his reaction would be considered a weak one by his friends. From Tenes' belly laugh, it was clearly accepted. Beside him, Sahk threw up three hands and used the fourth to guzzle from a wineskin...

Corfel's features twisted into a scowl.

"Where's Hadris...?"

Tenes blinked hard at him – wondering if the youngster had gone blind – then turned to look at Hadris....

Or rather at the place where Hadris had been. Now an empty space before the wavering tent-flap.

"Hadris, are your bowels loose again-?"

Instead of a snarled retort, the missing man uttered another sound. One which made four Callis' blood chill and their skins crawl with apprehension.

Hadris screamed – long and high-pitched. A cry of agony, cut off by an abrupt sickening snap.

The icy silence that followed was broken only by two swift slicing noises...

Corfel froze, his mouth gaping... *"Hadris...?"*

The reply from outside didn't come from a Callis. It was coarse and guttural, distorting the Callis language.

"Hadris is dead."

Sahk and Dhal looked from the tent-flap to their leader. Tenes forced himself overcome his fear and indecision. He stood. His lower arms unsheathed his scimitars in a flurry of motion; his upper hands reached behind his head to withdraw a pair of curved daggers.

Rising and backing away from the tent-flap, Sahk and Dhal armed themselves in the same manner. On the ground, Corfel remained motionless...

All eyes focussed on the tent-flap – anticipation preventing the possibility of blinking...

The flap was pulled back slowly to admit a form which dwarfed the four Callis.

Even Tenes, survivor of dozens of bloody battles, found himself awed by the size and visual ferocity of their adversary.

He was at least seven feet in height and stooped due to the six-foot roof of the tent. His build was bipedal and every limb was cross-corded in steely muscle. From the bootless paws of the killer's feet to his enlarged head, he was covered in ash-grey fur – this and his leather weapon-belt now sprayed in purple Callis blood. The slayer's head was more daunting than his physique: shaped like an arrowhead; broad at the rear with long, back-curving ears; narrow towards the front, where the feral face grew to a point. If opened to full extent, the intruder's jaws would have been almost large enough to swallow a Callis' skull – whilst the teeth filling them resembled banks of cutting discs.

Twin tongues flitted between the teeth, licking at thin lips. Set back away from the mouth, on the upper part of his head, the killer possessed two luminous yellow eyes that seemed to burn with molten hatred.

Each of the intruder's huge fists held the haft of a great, doubled-headed war-axe.

Sahk uttered under his breath: "*A Vere...*"

Tenes regarded the killer more closely. "*More than just a Vere... You're The Death, aren't you..?*"

The massive head nodded as his glare continued to sear at the eyes of his enemies.

"I've sworn an oath of vengeance against your kind."

Dhal spat, trying to instil his own adrenaline. "*One Vere against the four of us..?*"

The Vere snorted. "*There were six of you outside.*"

"You killed them?" Tenes snapped.

"I killed them and took what I wanted... They didn't get the choice I offer to you."

"Choice?"

"I take the ears of your kind."

On the floor, Corfel whimpered. Tenes glanced angrily at him and then returned his attention to the Vere.

"Their ears? Why?"

He refused to answer. Instead, The Death snarled his offer: "*Any who offers me their own ears may live. Refuse and I take them from your corpses.*"

Tenes shook his head in disbelief. "*How can you offer this... You know no-one—?*"

"I offer it because it is better than what was offered to my own people."

The Callis leader glanced briefly at Dhal and Sahk. His look was enough to give instruction. Dhal began creeping towards the Vere's left side; Sahk moved to The Death's right. Tenes stepped forwards – preparing to leap over the brazier and attack...

Still at the tent-flap, the Vere flexed his body in expectation. He brought his axes up so that their razor-edges were close to his face...

Tenes' order came out in a rasp: "*Now!*"

Dahl and Sahk rushed the Vere from his sides. Tenes took two strides and leapt the brazier, swords flashing in the firelight as he bellowed a warcry.

The Vere moved like a blur of dark, lethal lightning. His huge arms swept sideways and carried the axes outward to crunch into the torsos of his nearest adversaries. Impact smashed the two Callis backwards – their ribcages were shattered and their innards cleaved. Dhal flew back with a death-scream, spilling gore; he struck the tent-side and dropped to the ground. Sahk's body split in two – so swiftly, he couldn't even utter a sound – and his remnants slammed and spattered the tent opposite Dhal... In the next instant, Tenes reached the Vere. The captain's attack, too, was brutally countered. A great foot-paw whiplashed forward and caught Tenes directly in the stomach...

Tenes went head-over-heels, to strike the ground where he had stood a moment ago. His right upper arm shattered on impact. Dazed and in agony, he forced his body into motion... Scrambling around to reach a crouch and look upward—

The Vere was already at his side. Both axe-blades came arcing down together.

Corfel had watched the brief conflict – no, slaughter – from where he lay on the floor. Now, as the Vere kicked Tenes' body free of his embedded axes, the fear in the young Callis' mind evolved into a crescendo of terror.

The Vere moved slowly and carefully in Corfel's direction. His baleful stare turned the survivor's stomach...

"Please..."

"The same word used by my people," the Vere snarled in guttural Callis, "*while yours backed them to pieces or skinned them alive..."*

The Vere stood above him now, completely filling Corfel's field of vision. He fastened one axe onto his belt and held the other double-handed.

Corfel pleaded: "*I don't deserve to die. I've done nothing... Nothing."*

"My offer stands. I take the ears of dead or living Callis. Make your choice."

The sheer horror of the Vere's proposal made Corfel chill with revulsion. Yet, somehow, part of his mind screamed for him to accept. Better pain and mutilation than death...

Tears in his eye, Corfel nodded. "*All right. Do it... Do it and let me live."*

The Vere's face twisted grotesquely into what had to be a smile. No wonder, Corfel thought, that he was called The Death.

"It's not that simple, Callis. If you want to live... you do it."

3: Village In The Shadow Of Light

No-one noticed dawn in the village of Luminar.

They never did, for theirs was a settlement in permanent and unrelenting brilliance. One of the communities within ten miles of the remaining Wall of Light created by the Unseen Gods.

Luminar's northern horizon was eternally aglow with the barrier. A seething sheer face of fiery energy that burnt upwards to vanish amongst the clouds. Its immensity and the surging confusion of colour inside the structure was both captivating and terrifying. The wall was a beautiful reminder of the seemingly boundless power of the Unseen Gods. *If they could construct such a prison, what could they not do..?*

That beautiful reminder was also a curse. No-one born in Luminar knew of true darkness. Daylight was a time when green sunshine joined the brilliance of the Wall of Light. When nightfall came, the lesser globe of the sun vanished unnoticed.

Effects of the Wall could be seen throughout the village population. The Human inhabitants' faces were fixed into a partial scowl due to long-term squinting from the glare. Their hair was bleached blonde; their skins – once a mixture of all natural colours – now the darkest shade of brown; the pupils of their eyes, small and silver. Older villagers tended to suffer growths on their light-dried skins; young children smeared salves on their soft skin to toughen it and provide protection.

The village itself was equally marked. Its two main streets ran parallel and had buildings constructed from a mixture of stone, wood, mud, brick and animal skins. Riding into Luminar up from the south, a traveller would find the structures dark in hue – yet if that traveller came from the north, he would believe himself to be entering a completely different village. All walls facing the Wall of Light were bleached white; mud and brick structures showed cracks and a gradual drying-out to powder. A few homes had been built with a northern side of stone, as protection from the harshness of light, and a southern half of mud and brick, in the shade.

The one great blessing Luminar possessed was in the crops of the surrounding lands. The pale vegetation had adapted to flourish in permanent light. Harvests came three times a year. And the heat of the distant Wall of Light also prevented frosts or snowfalls in winter.

Hard work in the fields had resulted into the village becoming more and more prosperous over the years. The local Yafish Vines were renowned throughout the towns and cities of the Human territory as producing one of the finest and most potent wines. There were enough crops at each harvest for traders to export widely into southern towns and cities – even to the capital of Tremok – and bring back goods and coin for the village. Many examples existed of Luminar's rising wealth. A church had been built at the village's northern end, with a spire carved out of a single great Sky Tree brought from seventy miles away. Cloth from Isin adorned the women. Fieldworkers ploughed using labour-saving equipment made of the finest steel. Luminar's two taverns offered a wide range of beverages and food...

The future, the citizens of Luminar believed, would be one as bright as their north horizon. Little did they realize that their richness and success was soon to be forever eclipsed.

* * *

“Barkeep!” Deris rapped at the ale-sodden wooden bar as he called again. “Barkeep! Two ales to quench our thirst!”

The owner of the *Running Stallion* was an overweight Human, more than fifty years old and possessing less brain than the leather apron around his broad waist. Thern turned, smiled dumbly at the pair of youthful farm labourers and continued to wipe at tankards with a dirty rag.

Deris shook his long mane of white-blond hair in despair. He and Roden had laboured all night in the fields, then walked three miles back to the village, pushed their way through the bustling crowd inside the *Stallion*, and now...

Roden, taller and stronger of the two men, slammed his fist into the bar.

“Thern! You’re going to have customers dying of thirst if you don’t move your lard!”

Thern smiled again – a glimmer of thought seemed to flash in his eyes – and he approached the two.

“So...” Thern’s tone was a slow drawl. “Will you be wanting a drink..?”

Deris gave a sigh of despair and head-butted the bar before answering: “Thern... Just what else would we come in here for?”

“Somethin’ to eat?” There was an undeniable logic to the reply.

Giving up, Deris drew up a stool and sat down. Roden, laughing at his companion, replied very carefully to the barkeeper.

“Two tankards of ale... One for him... One for me... Any chance?”

Thern shrugged. “Why didn’t you just say so?”

While Thern ambled away to the open ale barrels, Roden took up a seat beside his friend.

“Why, just why...” Deris asked, “do we come here?”

“You know why, Deris... That serving wench in the *Sunstroke* gives you the eye every time we go in. You’re a married man, my friend, with two children. The *Sunstroke* is no place for you...” He chuckled. “As for a single man like myself, well...”

“I don’t want to know what you get up to.”

“It’s your fault. Just twenty summers and betrothed.”

“Happily betrothed,” Deris corrected.

Thern returned, ale dripping from a pair of overfilled wooden vessels. He deposited the ale and Deris tossed him a pair of coins in payment.

The pair drank deeply, seeking the instant invigoration that the strong ale always brought. After seconds of steady gulping, they put down their half-empty tankards and gasped together.

Deris wiped at his mouth. “He may be dumb as a veriik, but he brews a damn good ale.”

“Aye, and after today, we need it. I’ve got aches in muscles I didn’t even know I had.”

Together they turned to lean their backs on the bar and look around the interior of the *Stallion*. Most of the customers were like themselves: tough, well-muscled men with bleached white hair and dark skins, used to hard labour on the farmlands, dressed in simple work clothes. A few richly-clad traders huddled in one area around a table – the pale-skinned man there was obviously a visitor to the region. Far to the right, near the cooler southern wall, a group of women sat drinking wine and swapping stories... Among them was the slender form of Deris’ wife Sufil, half-drunk and laughing with her neighbours...

Deris was surprised when Roden grabbed at his arm. Once his friend had his attention, Roden pointed discretely towards a lone table in one corner. The occupant was far from Human.

“Deris...” he whispered. “Just what is that...?”

Shaking his head, Deris answered. “A Graex. You’ve never seen one before?”

“Never... They’re...” Roden frowned, “...unusual-looking...”

The Graex looked to Roden like a very tall, thickly-set man – a man covered in shell-armour and headless. He was naked, needing no clothing since his purple-blue body-casing protected him from cold and injury. His hands and feet were pincers, the former having more complex segments to allow the grip of awkward objects. Being headless, the man seemed to be blind and deaf – this, however, was untrue. The Graex had a dozen very acute eyes embedded at hidden locations in his armour; his rudimentary sense of hearing came from feeling vibrations via the fine hair that grew in patches over his shell-casing. Although in general the Graex’s shell-armour consisted of shaped pieces between joints, there was a large jagged ‘crack’ running from back to front roughly where a neck might be expected to be.

A serving girl brought the Graex a large tray, on which lay a plucked raw fowl. She laid it down in front of him and accepted payment before leaving hurriedly.

“So what...” Roden asked Deris curiously, “are Graex?”

“Before the Imprisonment, they were the fiercest warriors of all Emeran... It’s rumoured that nothing can pierce their shells – not even a steel sword. The Human armies lost thousands in battle before learning to attack with long spears and aim for their soft joints. And even then, Man against Graex? They’re as strong as five men...”

“He doesn’t carry a weapon. Just a rucksack and a belt-pouch...”

“They used to use huge axe-swords, and could hew fields of their enemies like wheat... During the Imprisonment, though, the Graex became peaceful. Now the only time they wield weapons is in competitions of strength. Graex simply won’t fight anymore. It’s their religion. No fighting. No war. No enemies.”

“Lucky for us.” Roden snatched up his tankard and began to swig heartily.

At his table, the Graex shifted into a comfortable position before his meal. He tensed his shoulders and the crack between them snapped open. Two sections of armour swung outwards to rest on his shoulders... From within came three slimy black tentacles. In a blur of motion, the tentacles lashed out, grasped the meal and dragged it into the small opening. The shell-doors snapped shut immediately.

Roden choked on his ale in astonishment. Deris slapped his back and the man lost a mouthful of drink over his tunic.

“He’s not done yet,” Deris hissed. “Watch...”

At first, Roden thought the Graex was taking in great lungfuls of air. He quickly realized that the Graex was using immense muscles in his chest to crush up and digest his meal... After just a few seconds, the headless visitor had finished: he sat back, satisfied and relaxed.

“It’s disgusting!” Roden uttered.

“Why?” his companion argued. “He’s just a different type of man. It’s his way...”

“I suppose so.” Roden drained his tankard. “Another?”

Deris grinned, having already emptied his own vessel. “Thought you’d never offer.”

They turned to the bar to find Thern serving a group of men.

“So what do the Graex do, other than play at fighting each other?”

“They hunt – they can only eat meat – and they’re artists.”

Roden was amazed. “They draw and paint like children?”

“No. Their cities are filled with stone carvings. Every object they possess – from weapons to...” he considered, looking for another example... “tankards – are sculptured, painted or decorated. Art, sport and peace are their way of life.”

“And this is something else you learned in your wanderings in the south?”

Deris smiled. “Yeah. I never visited the Graex homeland, but I’ve met them. I can even understand a little of their tongue.”

“The adventures you had,” Roden exclaimed, “and you came back here to work on farmland–”

There was a little stern seriousness in Deris’ reply. “You know why I came back. Sufil said I could wander for two years and she would wait for me... I wasn’t going to break my promise to return.”

Roden considered. “That’s something I have to admit about you, my friend. Your word is your bond. Never given lightly and always kept.”

“Just get me that ale.”

4: Sisters In Tremok

Four hundred miles south of Luminar, the city of Tremok dominated the plains land like a man-made mountain range.

Two centuries ago, Tremok had been the capital township of the Human King Terias: a Royal Castle, a permanent army encampment and a trading centre. Civil wars and Callis invasions had brought Tremok and her surrounding villages to the brink of destruction many times – resulting in a decision which changed the shape of the plains-land forever. Terias sought to create the foundation for a city able to safely expand and prosper, by building permanent defences around Tremok and her villages. Walls were constructed forty feet high and formed into a square, each side running for over two and a half miles from corner to corner. The walls were no simple barriers either, rather their twenty-foot width included three levels of internal chambers beneath an upper walkway capable of bearing war-machines of many kinds. Steel spikes were embedded into the walls' outer surfaces; pointed-roofed turrets erected every three hundred yards. The main city entrances were fashioned as great portcullis' to the north, east, south and west – permitting easy, copious access to traders and allied armies, whilst offering security against the possibility of attack.

Believed impregnable, Tremok had been able to develop under the guidance and vision of Terias and succeeding monarchs. Now the city was the greatest centre of commerce on Emeran, with a population exceeding two hundred and fifty thousand.

The Tremok of today still reflected her early origins. Behind the city's considerable defences, the peasantry lived and worked in Outer Tremok – a network of districts built over the original villages. Tremok's main cobbled streets leading inward from the four City Gates had become the arteries of this metropolis and were a bustling chaos of sounds, colours, scents and continuous motion. Buildings alongside the main streets loomed up to five storeys tall and were crammed with homes, shops, stables, inns, blacksmiths and dozens of other kinds of establishment. Even the flat tops of the tall buildings were not free of the flowing Human traffic – for here lay open markets, linked by roof-to-roof bridges.

Away from the main streets, the city diversified. The north-eastern quadrant contained a huge amphitheatre for sporting tournaments, festivals and other entertainments. Much of the north-west quarter was dominated by Brewer's Guilds; here lay fermenting houses, specialised gardens for producing certain herbs and vines, and facilities for manufacturing casks and ceramic containers. Warehouses were very common to the south, ranging from grain-storage to holdings for imported ore and lumber. A few regions had hardly changed from two centuries ago and were virtually villages within a city. Elsewhere, an explorer of the metropolis would discover that there was not any thing or any service which could not be found somewhere – whether he be seeking a temple, cloth-makers, metal-workers, horse-breeding grounds, baker, brothel, healer or even the most obscure trade imaginable.

Outer Tremok ended at an expanse of gardens – which acted as a subtle buffer between that part of the city and her richer inhabitants. The city's core was protected by the Garrison, a six-storey undecorated block containing a minimum ten thousand warriors, their arms, steeds and supplies. Training grounds for the soldiers lay well in view of the population. There were swordsmen, pikemen, spear-throwers, archers and knights – together providing a living sign of Tremok's great strength and perceived safety. South of the Garrison, and flanked to the south, east and west by the buildings of Lords, Elders and the wealthiest traders, the Palace reared upward with five gigantic spires like a massive outstretched hand. Purest white stone had been used throughout the immense complex, so the structure shone like the imagined Gates of the Otherworld. Windows of stained glass, dozens of feet high, highlighted the Palace walls – portraying Kings from the history of Tremok – in between mammoth gargoyle-like carvings. Entrances to the Palaces were sweeping ornate staircases, lined by fluted pillars and sheltered by sculptured roofs. Doors loomed twice the height of a man and were embedded with designs in gold and silver. The surrounding Palace grounds were dominated by an exclusive Royal Garden, lush with gorgeous vegetation, warmed by a number of hot springs and cordoned by huge Sky Trees.

Two of the most privileged women in the city were playing in the Royal Garden as the emerald sun reached midday. Lar and Pec were the sole offspring of the widower King Hancham, and twins. At birth, twenty summers ago, the pair had been utterly identical – from their faces to a dull blue birthmark on their upper left shoulders. Time had changed the sisters and yet brought them closer together. Lar stood just under six feet tall, lithe, physically equal to most men and as sharp with her wits as she was with her tongue. She had earned – not been given – a rank of captain in the Royal

Guard and fought at the centre of the most recent battles between Humans and Callis. Whereas Lar kept her coal-black hair short for convenience, her sister's crimson mane was almost waist-length. Pec was also a head shorter than Lar and fuller in form due to a lack of physical labour. Instead of choosing the life of a fighter, Pec had indoctrinated herself into learning the arts of science and mysticism. Just as Lar was an accomplished warrior, Pec had achieved mastery of her own skills: she had an unrivalled knowledge of herbal medicines; knew the 'powers of the mind'; and could baffle most Elders of science or magic.

On the occasions when the two could spend time together at the Palace, they embroiled themselves in friendship and utterly forgot the troubles of the world outside. They could lose hours in the gardens, listening to each other's stories with interest and devotion. Then, when words failed them, the two played like the children they had been ten years ago.

Wearing short leather skirts and brief, loose blouses, the two ran through the long blue grass barefoot. Amongst the stranded foliage, the tall stems of Ebam plants held up fist-sized crystalline ruby-red flowers. The motion of the racing women vibrated the Ebam and caused their flowers to shatter – filling the air with feather-soft fibres and sweet fragrance.

Lar stopped twenty paces from the gnarled trunk of a Sky Tree. Looking back, she found her sister running behind, slowed by tiredness. Uttering a wild laugh, Lar threw herself back onto the grass. A dozen Ebam exploded and the air became saturated in scent and flower-strands.

Pec dropped down beside her. She was panting hard.

"Putting weight on?" Lar gibed.

The long-haired sister retorted by shoving the other's shoulder. Lar could have overcome the force with her greater strength, but instead she rolled over and broke apart more of the crystalline flowers.

"Don't ever change," Pec said, her voice full of emotion. "Let's be doing this in forty years. Regardless of how the world outside changes, we'll be the same."

Lar grinned broadly. "If we don't have children running with us in just five years, our father will go insane."

"You've had the speech too?"

"Yeah. The day I returned from Darsum..." Lar mimicked the stern, serious tones of their father: "I won't be here forever. When my time comes, I want to know your heirs... I want to know that the strength that I have passed to you has been passed to your offspring..."

"I got that," Pec responded. "Then his rhetoric about the cycle of life..."

Lar continued her mimicking: "It's a natural cycle. Find a mate, bond, bear children and create the next generation..."

Pec gestured around: "He doesn't see that this is life. Enjoying what the Unseen Gods have given us."

After a moment of consideration, Lar admitted. "I may be on the way to finding my mate, though... There are a couple of officers who've caught my eye..."

Her sister's eyebrows arched. "Do tell."

Lar felt a twinge of embarrassment. She chewed at her lip and glanced towards the Sky Tree. "I'll tell you once we've climbed."

Pec frowned. "I'm tired."

Lar urged her sister to rise and she stood herself. "Come on. You've never beaten me yet. Today might be the day."

Shrugging, Pec turned away from the tree – then spun around, swinging her right foot to trip her sister. Lar fell into the grass with a cry and Pec ran for the Sky Tree.

In seconds, the coarse blue-green bark loomed before her. Pec glanced up: the branches of the Sky Tree were thick, short and sprouted densely out of the trunk; dozens of long pale stems ran out from each branch to end in hand-sized transparent leaves. From where the princess peered, the light came down as though through thousands of lenses – a kaleidoscope of dazzling and fantastic colours... Pec refused to allow her fascination with such things to delay her. She reached, grabbed at a branch and heaved herself upward...

In spite of herself, Pec had to admit that this was one part of the day she longed for. Competition between herself and Lar – although she herself stood little chance – was utter joy...

Pec was twenty feet above the garden when she heard a call from beneath her feet. Lar had leapt up to clutch at a branch halfway between the ground and her opponent.

"You don't stand a chance!" Lar snarled playfully.

Increasing her speed, Pec forced herself higher and higher. Already he could feel tiredness begin

to eat at her stamina – and there was over a hundred feet more to climb.

Lar, as always, kept just behind her sister – calling out joked threats to urge the weaker woman onwards. She would overtake Pec within thirty feet of the treetop and then help her exhausted companion up beside her.

The higher they went, the stronger the wind grew – from a faint breeze on the city-shielded lower level to a force that whipped Pec’s hair about wildly. However, the twins were no amateurs at their game and they moved until the tree trunk itself protected them from the brunt of the wind-force.

Sight of the treetop filled Pec with a thrill of urgency. This time she had managed to reserve just a little more strength. If that was enough, she might finally win...

Lar, however, was far from exhausted. Now she threw her body into rapid motion – rushing past Pec like a sand-spider over a dune. She wove her body through the dense mass of branches just under the tree-top, and–

Suddenly the branch beneath her left foot snapped.

Pec wasn’t looking upwards. She failed to see her sister fall, and the roar of the wind disguised Lar’s gasped cry...

...But Pec immediately knew something was wrong. The blood-connection between her and Lar, combined with the fine-tuning of her mental skills, alerted her faster than her eyes or ears could ever have... And made her react in the same instant...

Pec’s right hand reached out and snatched at the arm of her falling sister. Love and desperation made her extended limb as strong as steel.

A heartbeat later, Lar was clinging to the tree alongside Pec and cursing herself.

“...I should’ve been more careful... I’m sorry, Pec.”

The red-haired woman looked at her sister and smiled. “Climb up, I need to rest a while.”

Lar started, then halted: “After you, Pec. You deserve it.”

The pair took the remaining climb slowly and cautiously. In a minute, they were sat side-by-side amongst the highest branches.

“You frightened me,” Pec finally said. “I thought I was going to lose you.”

“I still don’t know how you caught me,” replied Lar.

“I felt you fall. My arm reacted before I knew what was happening.”

“Thanks.” They hugged like children. “Good to know you’re always there for me.”

Pec nodded and added with certainty: “As you are for me.”

They spent the next hour in silence, looking out across the plains and enjoying the spectacle. Acres of blue grassland, cut by meandering threads of river. Villages and towns that seemed to be the size of pebbles. Travellers moving like insects on a rug. Grazing animals that looked like mere specs. The fiery glow of the Wall of Light to the north... And, on the western horizon, the building of coal-black clouds, heavy and bulging with moisture, criss-crossed by forks of lightning...

5: Banishment

Two hundred and eighty miles from Tremok, one of the northernmost Callis settlements suffered rain from the storm clouds seen by Lar and Pec.

The water fell in an unrelenting downpour. It battered at the wooden roofs of Scorafeth like thousands of drumming fingertips, ran down the angled slats and gushed onto the ground fifty feet below the tree-house township. Mud on the forest floor churned and frothed like a stormy sea.

Normally on a day such as this, few people would venture from the high safety of their homes. Callis women – often subservient in their society – would clean, work and cook inside their houses rather than tending the crops of mushroom-like growth on the surrounding trees or harvesting roots, herbs and grubs. Males would relax from their roles of hunter, craftsman or soldier. Children would play instead of being trained for adulthood by their parents.

Today, however, the roughly-built box-structures in the trees were empty without exception. Window-shutters were symbolically closed. Doors stood shut and had been daubed with yellow blood from a slain psanth. The bridging walkways that connected houses like a network of flat branches had been covered in leaves. The Callis equivalent of a church, a small chapel usually lit by candles and scented by incense-burners, was dark and stripped of all contents...

For this was a day of sorrow, hatred and mourning. One of the Callis men had been proven a coward – a crime to shame the whole settlement, unless the Rite of Expulsion was carried out with meticulous care...

Most of the township stood knee-deep in mud, in two parallel rows. Their stance formed a corridor from the exact centre of the town-floor to its outer reaches. Everyone there – man, woman and child – carried a young, slender branch that had been bound with lengths of thorny vine. They chanted in low Callis tongue, whilst rhythmically blinking their cyclopean eyes.

At the settlement's centre itself, four Callis men held the coward by his arms so that he lay spread-eagled on his back in the mud. The Town Elder, Gromerich, stood at the head of their captive. Gromerich was fifty-seven years old – so old that the entire skin of his face had whitened with age and thus gave him the appearance of an albino Callis. Whereas his body had slowed and weakened with the passage of time, lending to his need for a walking staff, his mind was still razor-sharp. He was the source of knowledge, wisdom and decision-making for all in Scorafeth. Obedience to Gromerich was not so much as granted due to his position, but offered freely through utter respect.

This was the saddest day of Gromerich's life. In the past, he had tried town-members and found them guilty – even necessitating their execution. He had sent a hundred soldiers out in border-raids into Human territory, resulting in their complete slaughter. He had personally executed and burned plague-victims to save the remainder of the population... Yet, to have a Callis from Scorafeth be a coward was something that weighed even more heavily on the old man's heart. It was almost impossible to prevent tears welling in his eye.

"We are gathered at this time to carry out a task that sickens us all," Gromerich bellowed to the congregation. *"To show our shame for one of our number and to remove him from our lives forever..."*

He paused and clutched at an ornate medallion around his neck. This was the sole difference in his garb from that of the other town members.

"This symbol I carry is a token of your faith in me and in my duty to you all... Today I cleanse this town of a foul sickness. I cut from the body of Scorafeth a fetid and poisoned limb..."

"This man..." He gestured to the captive squirming in the mud under the weight of his four guards. *"...was known as Corfel. Son of Morban and Slna. Brother to Aram, Turv and Spren. Whilst his fellow soldiers battled an enemy, he quivered on the floor. Whilst their blood spurted, his ran cold. When their departing souls cried for vengeance, he did nothing... And the worst insult of all, to this township, is that he bargained with his comrades' murderer for his life."* Gromerich snarled: *"He cut off his own ears and gave them to his enemy as trophies."*

The Elder looked down with disgust at the man beneath him. Flame had been used to cauterise the terrible wounds to Corfel's head, which had made him deaf and therefore oblivious to the old Callis' words. Gromerich spat on the former soldier – his spittle vanishing in the rain, but the act remaining expressive of his feelings.

"You should have let the Vere kill you, Corfel, rather than forcing us to enact the one rite that townsfolk pray they will never see..."

Gromerich raised his four arms above his head and cried out with anguish.

"Let the Rite of Expulsion begin!"

Corfel looked upwards in terror as four more Callis men approached him. Bare-handed, they grasped at his clothes – tearing them from his body to leave him naked in the mud. His clothes had

been the final possession remaining to him: all Corfel's other property had been either divided between his family or destroyed. The four men retrieved short clubs from their belts and the second stage of the ritual began.

Unable to hear the brutal downward swishes of the clubs and blinded by the rain deluging into his single eye, Corfel only knew the attacks from the merciless impacts that struck his body. He screamed, arching his back and kicking wildly with his legs. Yet, utterly helpless, he could no more stop the bludgeoning than he could the pouring rain. The punishment went on for minutes. Blows battered his flesh, bruising bones and bursting his leathery skin; his eye poured tears and his eyelid grew swollen and bloody.

When the beating was finally over and his arms released, it took Corfel a full minute to realize that the ordeal was at an end. The man lay, gasping, shivering and crying, a mass of overwhelming pain.

"You will leave the town now, and be forever forgotten," Gromerich intoned.

Corfel's four guards grasped him again. They drew him to his knees and threw him into the corridor of townspeople that led out of Scorafeth.

"Crawl, like the worm you are, Corfel. Leave the town or die trying."

Weakly, Corfel raised himself onto his two upper arms. He peered along the passage of Callis – his vision blurred from pain, swelling and rainfall.

There was no option. If he simply lay here, they would kill him like a dying animal...

So he began to crawl. Pain tore at his muscles. His breaths were harsh gasps. Blood poured from his wounds to vanish into the mud.

The branches came down across his bare back with all the strength the townspeople possessed. Thorns embedded into skin and tore agonisingly free as the weapons were drawn back up to be wielded once more. Some blows smashed Corfel into the ground so that he choked on bloody mud.

Out of sheer desperation, Corfel continued to crawl. He withstood the pain and forced all his strength into the motion of his arms.

One word blazed in his mind and kept him from succumbing to the merciless assaults of the township.

Survive...

6: Prophecies

As night drew near at Tremok, the western horizon was a spectacle of colours, shapes and motion. Clouds were like shifting emerald and purple shadows; rain like shimmering crystalline shards falling to litter the land; wind billowing over fields of long grass made the blue foliage appear like an unsettled ocean; the setting sun itself looked like a brilliant green eye, gradually closing...

The Palace's Hall of Justice was already lit by dozens of crackling torches at this time – above which hung curved mirror-discs that aided in illuminating the ornately decorated chamber. The primitive light-makers were set in sections of wall between the massive stained-glass windows of the hall. Great curtains of Royal reds, blues and greens draped around the darkening windows. Far beneath a ceiling painted with heraldic designs, the stone floor of the chamber was covered by a thick, immaculate carpet of ash grey colour.

Members of the Royal house, noblemen, soldiers and peasants alike walked over the rich carpet. For, late afternoon three times a week, was the time when all people could consult the King – or a representative in his absence – over instances of law, trade or other matters important to the kingdom. It was a forum for direct intervention by the greatest power in the Human territories: from the pleading of the condemned, to Law-Lords seeking to create new legislation, to odd matters such as the strange warning King Hancham and his daughters now heard.

Hancham sat on the hall's great carved wooden throne at the northern end of the chamber. His appearance was awe-inspiring to those who saw him for the first time. A tall, muscular form, dressed in rich silks overlaid by military garb – a breastplate bearing his own dragon crescent, armbands of steel and gold, and a sheathed broadsword across his knees which had tasted blood on many occasions. Above those was a head that seemed to emanate intellect and authority – silver-grey hair in a long mane and thick beard; chiselled, brutally handsome features; steely eyes capable of compassion or terrible wrath – crowned by a simple broad band of gold.

Lar and Pec stood dutifully either side of their father. Lar wore the blue-silver armour and chainmail of the Royal Guard, emblazoned with her father's crescent over her heart. Her broadsword hung at her side. Pec, having no uniform, had chosen to wear a long, elegant dress of Royal green. She stood at attention, feet braced apart and hands clasped behind her back – in a combined effort of looking formal and maintaining her concentration on the usually tedious proceedings...

Right now, however, Pec found the court far from dull. The princess was utterly captivated by the speaker at the bottom of the steps before Hancham...

He knelt in simple robes of leather and wool. His built was sinewy, his hair long and unkempt, and there was a wild wanderlust in his eyes. The middle-aged man had introduced himself as Niescha, an oft-time trader and explorer by nature, possessing a loyalty to his sovereign that had brought him to Tremok for the first time in his life.

Around him, the waiting Law-Lords, peasants and chained convicts, and the guards who formed a barrier between the crowd and the King, had a mixture of reactions. Humour at the man's apparent absurdity. Pity from any who believed Niescha was a babbling half-wit. Impatience by those who wished the idiot would end his speech and thus shorten the queue. And just a few grew concerned like Pec – hearing the sincerity in the man's words, the astuteness behind his phrasing and his nervous desperation...

"My travels take me to temples across the continent, to marketplaces where prophets talk for a coin, to the great libraries of Garfol where wise men whisper, and to farmland villages where some faith-healers give the same story..."

Niescha looked the King directly in the eye – an act not forbidden, but which many people were incapable of – and exclaimed earnestly: "There are warnings across your lands, and in the surrounding territories, of a great danger approaching us. Some mystics speak of a terrible storm that will rip the land like the crop-destroying winds in the Year of Damnation. Others hint of a war like none ever before. Others of an evil that will stalk the land mercilessly. Others of an unstoppable plague."

Someone far behind the man laughed.

When Hancham spoke there was no hint of humour in his tone – and the laugh choked into silence...

"And you, Niescha... You give credence to these... rumours?"

The man forced himself to reply with respect rather than the frustration he felt. "Sire, I believe they are more than rumours... I believe the..." he chose his words carefully "...the ill-boding in each prophecy is a warning of some kind of danger. Perhaps not a storm or a war, but something which

could threaten your kingdom. When I hear prophecies of doom whispered right across the lands, I cannot simply ignore them as coincidence. I fear for this nation.”

Behind his beard, the King smiled. Nievescha was not one of the grovelling fools he too-often saw at these audiences. The wanderer’s tone had a ring of sincerity.

“And what would you have me do? I cannot heed the threats of a dozen different prophecies whilst fending off the enemies of this nation.”

“I ask that you simply be warned and consider what you have been told should... strange circumstances arise.”

Hancham waved his left hand – a sign of dismissal. Nievescha reacted according to custom by bowing twice, then standing and turning to leave...

“Wait...”

The voice calling to the man was not the King’s – a fact that raised a mumble in the crowd... But Pec’s.

Pec winced at having broken the etiquette of the audience ceremony. She glanced to her father and bowed slightly.

“I apologise, my Lord. May I ask the traveller a question?”

Hancham’s eyes blazed like burning coals. A breach of code from a subordinate, he would not tolerate and would administer punishment for. Such a breach from his own flesh, in public, could make him look a fool.

“Daughter,” he snarled bitterly. “I trust your reasoning is sound.”

Pec swallowed hard. If intimidation was a virtue, then it was one her father possessed in abundance. She kept her eyes open and on the King’s.

“I would not speak were it not so, my Lord.”

“Then speak.”

Nievescha turned to face Pec, considered for a moment and knelt. *There was no true custom for his reaction, he thought, but kneeling could hardly be a bad idea.*

“Nievescha. You speak of plagues, storms, wars and other disasters... But you decided not to mention the thing that most fills your heart with fear.”

The traveller peered up at her, his face a mask of confusion.

Pec explained. “I have been trained by masters of mysticism and science. I have the nurtured gift of seeing into men, but I cannot see into the future... I know you have held something back... Something you considered saying.”

“I thought it trivial,” he replied. “It does not make sense...”

Pec could hear her father grinding his teeth a few feet away from her. She willed the traveller to reply quickly and help to subdue Hancham’s rising temper.

“Nievescha, tell me anyway...”

“It’s a phrase,” he uttered. “A phrase I have found repeated many times during my travels... *Light shall become Darkness*’... It is this which some prophets interpret as meaning a war, a plague, a terrible storm or some other disaster... They interpret the phrase differently, but each use the same phrase or a very similar one.”

Pec looked from Nievescha to her father – hoping he might find some meaning in the response. Instead, the King shook his head in dismay.

Hancham rose and the entire chamber reacted by kneeling immediately.

“These proceedings,” he rasped, “are over for today...”

He began to pace for the nearest exit, with a snapped call over his shoulder.

“Daughters, attend me.”

* * *

Hancham stormed down the passageway in silence, his manner like a volcano building to erupt. He turned into a side-corridor, stomped through into the open doorway of a chamber, allowed his daughters to follow and then slammed the door with a resounding crash.

The room was a waiting chamber, richly decorated and containing comfortable chairs. A servant at the far end of the room looked at the King, noted his temperament and left swiftly by another exit, closing the door behind her.

Hancham turned on Pec and took a long stride towards her. She stepped back unconsciously.

“Just what...” he spat, “what in the name of Terias did you think you were doing?”

During the short journey, Pec had carefully weighed all the replies to the question. *Apology would*

make her appear a fool and thus enrage Hancham further. Snapping back could result in bloodshed. Calculated logic, though, might just prevail.

Squaring herself and looking directly up at Hancham, she responded evenly. “Father—” In private it was acceptable to use this term – “...I did exactly what you would expect of me.”

He snarled and seemed to be ready to strike her anyway. “What?”

“One day I might be ruling this Kingdom, perhaps in a time of great war or disaster... Would you wish me to be too afraid to ask a question at such a time because of a matter of custom?”

“In the Hall of Justice,” Hancham said, “you and Lar are observers. You are there to learn. You do not speak.”

“It was my only opportunity to ask the question.”

“A question of no importance to a man who may be delusional.”

Pec’s brow furrowed as she considered: “If the matter had been one of war or strategy, would you have been concerned had my sister spoken?”

Behind her father, Lar grit her teeth. Being present at the argument was bad enough, being drawn into it was wholly undesirable.

Hancham half-turned to regard Lar, whilst replying to his other daughter. “Lar would not have spoken in public. She would have consulted me later.”

Words flowed from Lar’s mouth before she had time to stop them: “Actually father, I would have spoken up as Pec did.”

The King looked upward and bellowed a curse. “By the flames of Hel, you’re treble the trouble together that you are apart!”

Lar added, “Would you have me keep silent and then speak to you, when my idea could make you change plans and perhaps make you look uncertain to your subordinates?”

“No. But that’s a different matter—”

Pec strode around to face him fully again. “With respect, it is not. Lar has mastery of warfare. My skills are more subtle. I have to use them to the best of my ability for your kingdom, just as Lar must use her skills.”

The King paced, feeling like a wild animal inside a shrinking cage. Pec’s intellect was keen.

“Tell me what you have learned, then, which is so important.”

“That some of the rumours I have heard from my own circles are reflected across your kingdom... And this requires my investigation. I must know more in order to be able to advise you whether a danger truly exists and what that danger might be.”

Hancham subdued his rage completely. “So what will you do?”

“Send investigators out. Gather as much information as possible. Consult the most reliable Seers of our land... I will get you an answer, but it will take time.”

The King forced a smile. “Let’s hope it’s neither a waste of time, nor too late.”

End Of Sample

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