

Era Of Darkness
Volume II: Extinction

By
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This book is dedicated to my
parents Patricia and Leonard.
I'm so lucky to have been your son.

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Preface

If you haven't read Era Of Darkness Volume I, then I'd like to suggest you read that book first. Otherwise, it will be a little like watching a movie from halfway-in. Volume I establishes all the characters, sets the scenes and drives you into the war of Emeran. This volume builds on that foundation.

If it's been a while since you read Volume I, then the next few pages are just for you! They offer a thumbnail sketch of the story so far to remind you of where we are.

So, let's journey to a far-off world and witness its darkest – and perhaps final – days...

Ian Thompson, March 2016

What Has Gone Before

“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 naive 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.”

The Era Of Darkness began with the falling of the final Wall of Light. Huge demonic armies flooded into the known world. They used black fire missiles, gigantic abominations and their great scythes to massacre everyone they found. By means of magic, these Northerner hordes kept their invasion veiled from the eyes of more distant targets...

In the great Human city of Tremok, Pec, one of the two Royal Princesses, grew aware of the prophecies. Although her warrior sister Lar believed her, it took great efforts and magic to prove the danger to their father Hancham. The King then ordered the formation of a huge army – to meet the approaching enemy legions on Deshnere Plain. Of the seventy-eight thousand men who went to Deshnere, only a handful escaped massacre by the demons. One of these was the female captain, Befaris.

Across Emeran, other villages, towns and armies were being slaughtered by the invaders. In the Callis lands, the renowned Captain Plyn led hit-and-run attacks on the demons. Cu’si’war, a Graex

traveller, returned to his home and tried to persuade his people to abandon their pacifist ways and try to repel the aggressors: many lives were lost before the Graex would follow him.

The city of Tremok prepared for war. Lar and Befaris led the remains of the Human forces. Pec, having determined that the demons were driven by powerful magic, set out with a small expedition – travelling north in the hope of destroying the source of the invaders' power.

On the Callis border, a Human Captain named Ku was unaware of the invasion, but had received reports of unrest in the Callis territory. He led a small army over the border to take advantage of the situation... When the Humans and Callis encountered a great demon force, they had no choice except to form an alliance against the Northerners. Plyn and Ku battled side-by-side, and vanquished their foes. Ku then left for Tremok, whilst Plyn continued to face the invaders on his own soil.

Over two hundred thousand demons assaulted Tremok. Lar's forces fought with every weapon and strategy they had – from cannon designed by Pec to immense man-against-monster conflicts. The enemies were repelled, at a terrible cost in Human lives.

Pec's journey had proven almost impossible and many of her comrades perished. As she approached the North Pole, she found her own mystical powers growing – allowing her to heal or even kill with magic. The survivors of her original team were joined by a Vere named The Death, and two Callis named Corfel and Kein. They followed underground rivers to approach an ancient citadel at the heart of the pole... And made horrific discoveries...

The Northerners were harvesting the dead – to liquefy and magically process them into new demon warriors.

Pec guided her team through a tunnel system towards a 'life-force', which she instinctively felt they must reach. They finally found a chamber in which members of an ancient race were sealed, thousands of years ago...

One of these ancient corpses began to speak to them...

56: Troop Movements

Three thousand Callis warriors crept towards the edge of the Darness Forest.

They moved in silence. No words were spoken. No branches were trod upon. No leaves rustled. No birds or animals were disturbed at this pre-twilight hour.

No-one standing in the great northern clearing would have been able to hear or see the stealthy approach of these vengeful killers. Before an alarm could be raised, any guards would be slain, and soon after, the entire Callis horde would fall upon their enemy. This Northerner encampment had been detected by Captain Plyn's scouts barely eighteen hours ago and he had quickly targeted it for extermination, just as many Callis settlements had been annihilated by the invaders. Plyn's three thousand warriors would attack from the trees, drawing the attention of the fifteen thousand-strong demon force – then a combined army of ten thousand dakan-riders and another eight thousand footmen would lay siege from the flanks.

Lieutenant Behlcar, Plyn knew, had spent the night advancing his larger force around the demons in a great sweeping arc. Though no signal could be offered to prove the other man was ready, the captain's implicit trust of his officer prevented any concern that the plan might not be met with precision...

...Until Plyn reached the very edge of the clearing, his stooped form like a shadow amid the undergrowth. Here he found something which had not figured in his careful calculations...

The Northerners were gone.

He frowned and ground his teeth silently. *The demons could not have known of the attack. His reconnaissance information was not flawed. So what could have happened..?*

A single hand-signal caused all the Callis around him to halt – and to repeat the signal to spread the silent instruction outward.

Plyn proceeded alone into the clearing. He crept for thirty yards, softly cursing, stood and started to walk.

His eye scrutinised the area around him and read the signs like words in a book. *The disturbance of moisture on the grass showed the recent passage of thousands of demon tendril-feet. Haste. North-easterly travel. Demon centaurs and footmen running without formation...*

Two hundred yards east, a large object loomed in the darkness. The captain broke into a run to identify the thing swiftly...

A cart, normally drawn by demons, filled with the chemical dust that Plyn had been destroying at every opportunity in recent days.

"They left behind the one thing which is important to them," he muttered to himself. "And fled like hounds away from Veres."

Emitting a series of bird-like hoots and squawks, the officer signalled a few dozen warriors to join him. He pondered the Northerners as the team approached, and succeeded only in frustrating himself further.

Twoal, one of his best scouts, expressed the captain's own feelings when he spoke: "The Northerners don't usually flee. We've seen them die by the hundred in total futility at the end of a battle rather than escaping. We've seen them trample their injured to reach us, such is their ferocity. We've rarely seen them run away."

A scout named Gul added gravely: "They didn't flee. They didn't know we were coming. They left to go somewhere – and in a blazing hurry."

Plyn looked around at the anxious cyclopean faces which now encircled him. "It's a mystery, my friends, but one we can solve. Twoal, Gul, Setrui and Kaal: I want you to divide our scouts among you and check this entire area. Have messengers instruct our fighters north and south to remain in place until further notice. Report to me before sunrise."

"Sir," interrupted a new voice, "they won't find anything."

The group turned to see Lieutenant Behlcar and two other Callis arriving on foot from the north. There was grim certainty visible on Behlcar's face, even in the gloom.

Plyn masked his surprise at seeing the junior officer. "Why?"

"As we swept around north, we came across fresh tracks leading from this clearing. I had scouts follow them... The demons from this clearing travelled ten miles north-east and united with three more groups of Northerners. We estimate each of the other battalions held at least ten or twenty thousand fighters. They have continued eastwards together."

"At least fifty thousand demons are leaving Callis territory?" Twoal blurted. "That's a massive portion of their army."

"It could mean all of them," Behlcar told him. "It could be a general retreat."

"Not out of fear of failure," growled Plyn, "At best, we're losing as many battles as we win. They aren't giving up. This is a tactical withdrawal... And they will be back."

“Orders, sir?” Behlcar prompted.

After a pause for consideration, Plyn offered clear instructions. *“The search is cancelled. Instead, I want our fastest messengers and our fleetest dakans. I want to contact each and every other Callis army before mid-day. First, I need to know from them if the demons in their areas have left. Second, I will have an order for them to follow if that’s true.”*

Only Behlcar dared to question the prospect of such an order. *“You are going to instruct all the Callis armies..? Generals included?”*

Plyn’s great eye winked and he smiled. *“I’m going to do just that... Thirdly, I want scouts following the Northerners and a chain of communication to provide information on their findings. I have my suspicions, but I want them confirmed... We need to know where the demons are going..”*

* * *

“Just where are the demons coming from?” Lar rasped at her council of military leaders. “Thousands more arrive by the hour as though they were part of some endless tide.”

Befaris knew she could do little to dilute the ill-temper of the Queen. After the slaughter of so many Humans during the first siege of Tremok – even though it had to be considered a victory – the pressure of ultimate command bore even more heavily on the young leader.

“We smashed the bulk of their attacking force,” the general said with more pride than she felt. “They have sent for reinforcements. And every second they need to build up their forces is a second in which we re-fortify the city.”

Lar breathed deep and smiled at her new, close friend. “You’re right. Our blood has been spilled by the gallon, but not a single drop has been in vain. We have succeeded thus far and we will triumph.”

Lar looked around the Conference Chamber table, from Befaris on her right to Captains Marvik, Ureem, Coros and Debik, and Lieutenant Tegnar, the cannoneer, on her left. Their faces were resolute but there was no absolute certainty in their eyes – they knew the odds and were realistic. The absence of two of the group added to the sombre atmosphere. Captain Tur had been slain on the West Wall; Sarn had managed to return to Tremok after destroying the demons’ artillery, but had lost his right forearm and was now hospitalised.

After a few seconds of pondering, the Queen asked: “Brief me on the defences. Coros: you’ve been transferred to the West Wall...”

The bald man’s scarred face twisted into a scowl. “The West Wall was completely penetrated, as you know. We’ve used rubble from the collapsed buildings to form an inside wall about twenty feet high. But the demons will be able to scramble over this rapidly. We have bolstered our numbers there and moved five cannon into place on the new rubble-wall... We anticipate a heavy conflict during the next assault.”

Befaris nodded. “When they enter the city proper – and they eventually will – it will almost certainly be from the west. It’s our weakest point.”

Lar mentally logged the information. She turned to Ureem. “The North Wall?”

The captain did not waste words: “Battered, but unpierced. Reinforced.”

Debik added: “Same on the east.”

Marvik, who like Coros had not yet seen action, added with a hint of annoyance: “Central defences being prepared as per your orders. The South Wall, now also under my command, remains untouched by the enemy.”

“The full count on the Northerners?”

Ureem replied. “The good news is, all the sky-demons are dead. The last one managed to get away from our walls, despite its wounds, but it crashed to the ground an hour later. They were terrifying, but slow-moving and thus easy targets. No more have been seen... As to footmen and centaur-demons, there are now at least a hundred and fifty thousand in total. They remain north – still waiting for further reinforcements. None have moved to our eastern and western flanks.”

“None that we have seen,” Debik corrected. “There could be more demons forming-up out of sight. Even with the Long-Eyes – now they work again – we can’t see through hills.”

“Or,” Befaris suggested, “they might be considering a full frontal assault on the North Wall.”

“Tactically unwise,” said Ureem. “Knowing the state of our West Wall and the size of their force.”

“With an enemy like the Northerners, it’s hard to gauge their strategy or motivations.”

“It’s irrelevant,” Lar cut in. “We’re not going to face them outside. Nor can we provoke an early attack. All we can do is continue to wait and prepare.” The Queen paused, then looked to her

general: “Any changes in our inner layers of defences..?”

“I’ve reviewed the barricades that run across the Main City Streets and decided to keep the number to four barriers per street. Every barricade is manned by shifts of three hundred men; these can provide support during a retreat if necessary, and can be quickly reinforced from the City Centre... Buildings either side of each barricade are set up with explosives now. We’re going to do the same in all the other Main Street buildings too... The outermost of the barricades to our north, east and south now hold two cannons each, aimed for our main gates. If the enemy breach the gates, then the demons which pour inwards will be blasted to pieces. We might, of course, lose those cannon afterwards. I’ve left orders for the engineers to destroy the weapons before the Northerners can capture them.”

“The damage the cannon are capable of at the gates makes their loss worthwhile,” Lar agreed. “Plus, we have nine more of the new cannon in reserve... Anything else?”

Befaris replied uncomfortably: “A request from some of the civilians here in the Palace...”

The Queen could tell from Befaris’ tone that the appeal troubled her. She asked gently: “What..?”

“Poison... For the children. Just in case.”

Lar’s stomach churned at the thought. Her head lowered.

“I’ll look into that personally... but tell them their request will be granted.”

57: Voice Of The Lost

“Who... *What* are you..?”

Pec’s eyes were fixed on the apparition before her. A corpse long dead and utterly inhuman, standing upright amid thousands of its own kind; motionless, dark, lifeless... yet somehow capable of transmitting speech.

“We are... were,” it corrected, “the Enuael.”

The Queen looked to Corfel while the creature spoke – and recognized that he too, although deaf, was hearing the message.

The apparition went on: “...A race revered by your kind. We have been responsible for your salvation in the past – and now, your demise...”

Pec’s brow furrowed. *What could it mean?*

“When the Humans came to this world, three thousand years ago, we were already a very ancient race. We remained isolated and aloof from other species, believing ourselves superior. We watched as the Humans saved the Callis and others from plague, and as you offworlders became new children of Emeran... And ‘children’ was how we thought of all of you. You were the children, using technologies to thrive... We, the wiser, all-powerful parents of this world. We thrived not by the use of technology – but by magic. Powers of the mind, of the heavens and of the world itself.

“Time passed. Our ‘children’ grew powerful and aggressive. Eventually they warred against each other. This we ignored, since it was none of our concern. We allowed bloodshed to spread across Emeran. We saw your ancestors use weapons against each other that are utterly beyond your imaginations today... We only intervened when the world itself was in danger...”

The familiarity of the story made absolute sense to Pec. It was the foundation of so many religions across Emeran.

“You created the Walls of Light?” she said. There was surprised elation in her voice.

“We did far more than that. We had to prevent you all from the very capability of endangering Emeran. So your cities and your technologies were decimated. You were reduced to virtual barbarism. Survivors of our attack were segregated and imprisoned behind the Walls of Light, not just to prevent you from warring, but also to allow us to seek out and destroy every remnant of your old technology without interference. We even destroyed your past histories, leaving you with only legends and rumours. A side effect of our work was that you came to call us...”

“You... are... our *Unseen Gods?*” Pec exclaimed. “Not Gods, but people?”

“A people beyond your understanding. So powerful that to your ancestors, we were God-like.”

“And that’s why you kept the Northern Wall of Light erected. To separate us all from you?”

“At first.” A feeling of shame emanated from the mental voice now. “Then to stop our own war spreading and harming you...”

“The Enuael had survived for millennia by living in total peace. But the devastation and horror which we exposed ourselves to when attacking your peoples infected the minds of a faction of our race. It was as if murder was a drug and they were hopelessly addicted. They petitioned our councils to continue fighting against you – to exterminate all other species. And when the councils refused, a civil war ensued. Havoc raged across the North Pole. Weapons of terrible fury were unleashed upon kinfolk. Our city-towers crumbled into ash. Our sky-townships became vapour. Our numbers diminished from millions to thousands.

“Energy from the weapons used rendered our surviving people sick and infertile – dooming our race to extinction – yet still the evil ones sought conquest. We pleaded for peace, begged them to end the insanity they had created, and found them utterly beyond reason. This citadel is the relic of our final stronghold. Here we held out for decades. We had control over the Northern Wall of Light and empowered it so that even after our deaths, our leaders believed it should have been impossible to destroy. Our hope was that although the Enuael were doomed, the races outside might never face the wrath of our evil brethren.

“Eventually we were captured, stripped of our powers and buried alive in this catacomb. I was chosen to be a messenger, in case our worse fears should be realized and the evil ones escaped the North Pole. If it were to happen, our seers believed that a powerful mystic like yourself would gain entrance to this chamber.”

“So...” Pec tried to control her exhilaration. “The last remaining Unseen Gods are the masters of the demons now warring against us?”

“No. The Masters you speak of are no longer of my race. I have watched as they have become monsters, travesties of their former selves. For many years they have tried to change themselves in order to extend their lives and cheat extinction. Only four Masters still exist – dying a long, foul

death...”

“What do we have that they could want? Why do they attack us?”

“After the war, the Enuvaeal survivors first put their efforts into finding cures for the sicknesses which were killing them. Though they found ways of slowing the degradation of their bodies, there was no way of recovering their fertility... In desperation, they next sought ways of penetrating the Wall of Light – and, regrettably, they were successful. They used magic to secretly seed members of the Callis, Human and other races. Some of the experiments had limited success and Enuvaeal abilities were passed on to the children produced: these beings became the first mystics of your races. Yet, since the children were still physically Human, Callis, Graex, Vere or whatever, the evil ones regarded the experiments as failures and eventually abandoned all hope of a next generation of Enuvaeal.

“The knowledge of certain extinction increased their bloodlust and hatred. They focussed their power on annihilating Emeran. If they cannot live, they will allow no other being to live. For centuries they have worked stealthily, slipping through the Northern Wall of Light unseen to complete tasks, building up the basis of an unstoppable army, developing their magics... Only when they were ready to start their baneful quest did they cast down the Wall of Light completely and expose themselves... You are facing an enemy you cannot reason with under any circumstance – they seek only your death before their own.”

Pec failed to react to the chilling statement. Instead, she asked: “What is the source of their power? I can feel it. The closer I get to it, the stronger I feel myself grow.”

“Your strength comes from an Enuvaeal seed implanted into one of your ancestors. Though you are Human, part of the blood in your veins is of my people. This allows you some access to the power source that the Masters utilise.”

“And this source..?”

“The Old Enuvaeal used the will of their minds and spirits, combined with special physical elements, to accomplish tasks. Sometimes one, ten or even fifty thousand Enuvaeal would work together to accomplish a single goal. And their common, peaceful desire would make the magic happen... As the evil remnants of the Enuvaeal continued to perish, they had to develop new means of gaining supernatural power. They draw life-force from victims, and the chamber in which they live channels this energy into the Masters themselves...”

For the first time, one of Pec’s companions interrupted the creature.

Deris grated: “You mean they use the life-force of their victims?”

“Yes,” it replied. “The scythes wielded by the demons act like lightning rods – absorbing life-energy and transmitting it back to the Masters.”

Pec recalled Lar’s spirit-encounter with the demons near Deshnere, so long ago. “My sister saw the demons being supplied with energy to sustain them. Does this mean that the demons too are fed on the same energy..?”

“The Masters have established a pattern of horror. They use life-energy to create and sustain their demon minions. Their minions in turn harvest life-energy for them. The bodies of the demons’ prey are brought back and become the raw material for new demon warriors... It is an endless cycle of death.”

“But a cycle which can be broken?”

“From your thoughts, I know that Tremok has repelled a massive demon assault. This alone will have created a great disturbance in the cycle. The demons’ harvest will have been small, whereas the energy lost in the conflict will have been great. It is a start in breaking the cycle – but, even now, there are hundreds of thousands more demons. The Masters have prepared well.”

“These ‘Masters’ themselves...” The Death snarled, wanting the questions to become more direct, “...can they be slain?”

“There is nothing in the universe which cannot be killed,” it replied cryptically. “But the Masters are well-guarded and their own powers are staggering...”

Pec took another long look at the corpse’s vertical remains while her companions contemplated the ominous response. Her expression grew hard and she considered what to do next. Then, slowly and carefully, she brought up her free hand and placed it around the desiccated creature’s throat.

One swift twist of her arm snapped the thing’s head free. The horned skull was dropped – to shatter on the ground into thousands of lifeless shards. Immediately all residues of the Enuvaeal’s voice vanished from the group’s minds.

Veown uttered in amazement: “My Queen, why–?”

She turned to face the others and smiled evenly. Her companions regarded her with a mixture of curiosity and nervousness.

“That thing,” Pec scoffed, “was once part of a race which held almost infinite power. It died a

pathetic animal, entombed in the earth.”

“It,” the Vere said icily, “may have been able to tell us more about the demons’ Masters. To give us a way...”

“...of killing them?” She shook her head. “That may have been your intention, Vere, but it was never mine.”

The Death growled and took a threatening step towards the woman. Veown, in spite of being her guardian, found himself unwilling to intervene.

“You took an oath with us!” the Vere spat.

“I needed your help,” Pec replied coldly. “So I took it. Now I’m here, you’re no longer necessary.”

“My Lady,” Veown asked, his own anger rising. “If you did not come here to slay these Masters, why did you come?”

“Are you fools?” Pec threw up her hands in disbelief. “Have you truly no idea?”

She looked from one tense, distrusting face to the next, and added: “I have been able to feel their power since the Wall of Light was broken. I knew I was connected to these great beings in some way – and this creature has revealed that the connection is in my very lifeblood. I came not to fight the Masters, but to join them.”

The Death moved in a streak of swift, dark wrath. He leapt at Pec whilst tossing aside his torch and unsheathing his war-axes. Both blades swept through the stale air to rend apart the young mystic’s face.

Yet instead of bleeding and disintegrating, her face twisted into an expression of fury – a heartbeat before the razor-edges would have struck...

And the Vere felt an almighty force strike his chest. Like a massive invisible fist wielded by some giant. His body doubled-up in mid-leap and he was thrown backwards like a rag doll.

He crashed to the ground on top of a group of Enuvel corpses. A great gasp of pain left his mouth. Instinct alone caused him to tighten his grip, or else both his war-axes would have been knocked out of his grasp.

A dozen feet away, Pec looked down at him like a hunting animal regarding a crippled prey. All the youth and sensitivity had left her beautiful face – replaced by twisted hatred.

She spat with icy contempt: “I’ve been wanting to do this since I first met you, Vere...”

Her mouth opened and Pec hissed like a wild cat. Yet rather than sound, a great flowing tentacle of energy gushed from her lips: blue-green liquid fire, writhing through the air at incredible speed...

Deris leapt at Pec. She reacted without either pausing or looking at him. Her right arm slashed out like a sword, caught his left shoulder and sent him hurtling past his companions.

The end of the energy-tentacle touched The Death and the supernatural flame poured over his body. Veown and the others saw the Vere’s hair ignite – the man contorted helplessly; then they glimpsed him give a great wide-jawed scream of agony, only to have the living blue-green fire surge down his throat towards his innards. The Vere vanished inside the expanding blur of flame.

Suddenly Pec took in a sharp intake of breath – which retracted the energy-tentacle down her throat. Her eyes regarded the Vere’s last location with tremendous satisfaction.

Only charred ash remained now. Not even bone. Not even melted metal from The Death’s weapons.

“You bitch,” Veown gasped, drawing his sword. “You slew him.”

She smiled once more. “I did more than that. I ate his soul... And very nourishing it was too.”

Veown gave a careful side-glance left and right. On his left, the two Callis were edging to flank Pec, their weapons ready. On his right, Deris had already risen to his feet and drawn his sword; seeing the Callis’ motion, he started to circle towards Pec’s other side.

Pec watched their careful approach.

“You don’t really think I’ll let you harm me, do you?” She eyed Deris: “Remember what I did to the Zworm?”

“You’re betraying your people, your kingdom, your sister...” he rasped.

“I’m re-joining my forefathers,” Pec replied. “But you’re not going to join Sufil and your children in the Afterlife. I’m going to devour your soul.”

The provocation was too much for the man: “Don’t you dare utter my wife’s name!”

Deris ran at the Queen and slashed his sword for her neck. Seeing his lunge begin, Corfel, Kein and Veown attacked with him.

The air seemed to ripple around the young mystic’s form, as though she were encased in thick surging liquid. Swords and Callis daggers struck the transparent layer together... and stuck in the magical shield like insect’s limbs in the web of a spider.

Deris heaved at his weapon, found the blade completely imbedded, lost his grip on its hilt and fell to land on his rear. Veown uttered a snarl when he discovered his sword was locked in position: he brought up his right foot to press against the barrier and allow him a stronger pull on his weapon. To his horror, his foot sank into the invisible wall and became as immobile as the weapon itself... Next to him, the two Callis warriors were already struggling against the magical shield. Their daggers had been thrust right into the layer and their upper hands were held fast. Corfel and Kein released their stuck swords with their lower arms, to grasp at their upper wrists and try to pull themselves loose.

Pec, on the other side of the magical defence regarded her former companions maliciously.

“Trapped like flies...” She shrugged and added, “Which is all you ever were...”

Her steely gaze fell upon Deris, sprawled on the ground and gaping at Pec in horror. He was the only member of the group who was not already trapped.

“Join us, my friend,” Pec said softly.

A section of the fluid-wall before Deris shifted uncannily. It bulged until a head-sized lump appeared. This shape stretched towards Deris, forming into a great transparent hand in the same motion.

Deris tried to scramble backwards, like an upturned turtle struggling away from a predator. The hand took his left foot in an unbreakable grasp. Slowly and inexorably, he was drawn back to the rippling shield.

Pec looked down at the man’s panicked face. Her eyes were afire with raging hostility. Her expression promised worse than death...

“Feeding time...” she hissed.

In a heartbeat, the magical wall was no longer clear and no longer liquid in form...

It was a brilliant haze of blue-green fire – the hideous, flesh-consuming, soul-devouring mass which had taken The Death.

Deris, Veown, Corfel and Kein could only writhe and curse whilst the mass swamped and filled their bodies.

Suddenly there was silence and darkness.

The four people, their weapons and their torches, were completely gone.

Pec tossed her own torch to the floor. It sputtered and died.

She stood in the coal-black solitude for a moment, her mind racing. Then Pec closed her eyes hard before re-opening them...

When her eyelids opened, they revealed glowing orbs that sent out light beams into the darkness. The woman turned her head and the twin shafts of light cut through the blackness like white-hot swords.

She gazed about, at the crumbled remnants of the Enuvel race and the patches of sizzling ash... until her attention shifted higher to the stairwell which wound along the high walls of the chamber.

Dozens of demon-warriors were descending the steps like scurrying insects.

Pec drew her sword and discarded it.

“Tell your Masters,” she cried, “that their child is home. And that she bears a gift greater than any they could ever have hoped for.”

58: The Noose Tightens

Mid-afternoon the next day, Befaris found Lar in one of the Feasting Halls of the Palace. The massive room had been the venue for elaborate festivities during King Hancham's reign, and had entertained hundreds. Now the hall was a crowded temporary home for thousands of children, women and elderly. People were asleep, resting, waiting or praying on the marble floor; braziers provided heat; a number of tables had been set up near the large fireplace so that food could be served.

Lar walked alone, unguarded, through the centre of the hall. Hers was a different kind of Royalty to her father's. Instead of an indomitable will and booming authority, Lar possessed the ability to deal with every situation on its own terms. In battle she was as ferocious as her father; as a planner, she was razor-keen; as a judge, she could be merciless; and, in the face of fear and suffering, Lar radiated compassion and strength. A few words, a smile or a hand-gesture from the Queen lit her subjects' faces with hope. When she knelt to speak to a small child, he threw his arms around her neck to hug her as though she were his lost mother...

Befaris left her own personal guards at the hall's entrance and strode through the crowd towards the Queen. The general found herself disturbed by her inability to emulate Lar's compassion – that she was purely a warrior and incapable of more than a brief nod to those she passed. *Incapable, she considered, or rather unwilling? Wasn't it easier to hide her own fears behind a steely expression..?*

"My Queen," Befaris said gently.

Lar looked up at the general and carefully detached the child. "News?"

"I think you should come to the North Wall. They're manoeuvring in formations."

The Queen nodded, then spared a last second for the unfortunate boy. "I'll come visit you later. Go get yourself some soup."

She ruffled his mop of dark hair before following Befaris to the exit.

"You think it's about to start?" Lar kept her voice to a whisper.

"They don't need more reinforcements to make an attack. They could just be moving into position. Or parading to worry our men."

Accompanied by the two guards, the pair marched briskly down the Palace halls for the main northern exit. On route, four Royal Guardsmen joined the group as bodyguards to the Queen.

The Palace's northern doorway was closed when they reached it. Ten guards stood ready; timber was at hand to reinforce the twelve foot high, eight-inch thick wooden barrier. It took four soldiers together to push the doorway open and allow the group out.

Horses were ready in the cobbled courtyard outside. Befaris, Lar and their companions ran down the flight of ornate steps and mounted their steeds swiftly.

Lar let Befaris take the lead. She noted the defences they passed, racking her mind for ways to improve the fortifications.

The original walls within the Palace grounds were purely decorative in nature. Low, intricately-carved structures which would do little more than inconvenience an enemy. However, Befaris had found a basic use for them and this was shown by the stocks of arrows hidden behind each one: archers could utilize the short barriers as cover whilst shooting at an approaching horde. A number of spear-launchers and catapults also stood ready for manning.

They reached the outer buildings of the city centre in three minutes. These were vastly changed from their appearance of a week ago. The six-storey Garrison – to the north – and the formerly luxurious buildings of the richest nobles and traders – east, west and south – were all reinforced and manned by archers. Ten foot high walls of stone and wood joined the buildings together, forming a primitive castle-boundary. Cannon were positioned two each on the north, east and south sides of the enclosure, and three to the west; all were aimed at the main streets of the Outer City. Forty catapults were dispersed evenly behind the barricades. Soldiers patrolled these inner defences; tent-campments had been erected nearby for warriors who rested.

Narrow, roughly-made gates existed in the new walls, to allow fighters to enter or exit. Befaris had the closest of these opened and their small team rode on.

Beyond the uneven combination of buildings and swiftly-made walls, was the entire cavalry of the city, currently at rest. Cavalry would form up in groups to ride-down the main attack should it reach the city's ring of gardens. Ironically, what the people of Tremok still called the 'gardens' area was now virtually stripped of foliage: wood had been cut down for timber; shrubbery that might offer the enemy cover had been levelled.

Captain Marvik greeted the general and Queen when he saw their approach. He spurred his horse until it was alongside his superiors.

“My Queen, General,” the burly officer called. “You go to the outer walls?”

“Aye,” Befaris nodded. No further explanation was necessary.

“Then I’d better hasten to the South Wall.” Marvik saluted, turned his horse and rode off.

Once he was out of earshot, Befaris said softly: “He’s eager for blood, especially since being given control of the South Wall. So many of his comrades have perished, yet Marvik hasn’t even seen a demon yet. And he isn’t the only one. Most people on the South Wall and here at the Palace are fraught with a sense of guilt after the losses we’ve suffered.”

Whilst they continued across the flattened gardens area, Lar replied: “Well, by the end of this, I don’t think there will be a man left unbloodied. I just pray that many of them live to tell the tale to their grandchildren.”

Four hundred yards and they reached the trench which surrounded the gardens. Fifteen foot deep, filled with spikes, and sodden with a mixture of oil, pitch and any other flammable liquids the defenders had been able to find. The hole ran like a great circular scar in the city’s flesh.

Wooden bridgeways spanned the pit at regular intervals. Retreating fighters would have to remove these before they fled further.

Once across the trench, the group dismounted and left their steeds in the care of nearby guards. They started down the main northbound street. Lar and Befaris’ bodyguards kept a suitable distance to allow their leaders to speak with some measure of privacy.

From here on, the defences consisted of four street barricades and the City Wall itself. The barricades would be impossible for a rider to pass – or at least for any Human rider. The street itself looked like a man-made canyon, all the entrances to side-streets having been sealed off. Lar knew that they were partly counting upon the demons’ apparent instinct for surging directly at their enemies to keep the devils in the main streets. Since the demons could climb well, there was still a threat of an invasion spreading sideways: if this happened, it would have to be dealt with at the time.

“Have you any word from your sister?” Befaris asked cautiously. She knew the concern Lar felt for Pec.

“I know she’s alive,” Lar told her. “But after she helped us, I ceased receiving her thoughts. And I don’t think she can hear mine either. The power-source she is looking for must be hampering our link... The only thing I can feel is her living force.”

“That’s something.” The general tried to sound reassuring – knowing the distance of so many miles made any such attempt hopeless.

“It’s something,” Lar agreed flatly.

The pair grew silent whilst they clambered over the street barricades. Their eyes roamed the defences searching for weakness; their minds concentrated on the impending battle. When Lar gazed up at the gateway and wall-defences, her expression grew hard.

A number of the turret-tops were gone, reduced to charred dust and rubble. Sections of the upper walkway had had to be replaced by hastily-nailed lengths of plank. The grey stone was stained with soot, explosion-scarring and patches of Human and demon blood.

Befaris seemed to read Lar’s mind: “We lost eighteen hundred and sixty men on this wall alone.”

“Yes, and the fact that the demons lost almost two hundred thousand is no consolation.”

“It is to those who fought here.”

“It isn’t to me. Every life in this city is precious to me. Every death eats at my conscience.”

Befaris considered for a moment and then discarded etiquette completely. She laid a hand on the young Queen’s shoulder.

“That’s why you’re the best leader we could have... And a fine friend.”

Lar clapped a hand on Befaris’ shoulder in return.

“Enough soul-searching. Let’s see what the bastards are up to.”

* * *

On the walkway above the North Gate, soldiers cleared a path upon seeing their two leaders arrive. Captain Ureem attempted to salute – Befaris shook her head to dismiss the action.

With trepidation, Lar and her general paced to the wall. No-one spoke as they surveyed the disciplined motion below.

Over a mile away, the main force of the Northerner army lay sprawled across the plain. Lar estimated between a hundred and eighty to two hundred thousand warriors, up to half of these being centaur-demons. There were still no launchers or sky-demons in sight – hopefully none were hidden beyond the hills either.

Formations of footman-demons ebbed from the main mass like drips of blood from a wound...

They paced away and formed-up into contingents which marched in rectangular blocks. Once created, the small battalions started to manoeuvre around Tremok. Some paced east and some west, towards the city's other sides; some headed southward for Tremok's North Wall.

"The ones that are moving have different shields," Ureem told the pair. The older officer ended his report with a simple: "Why..?"

Even from this distance, Lar and Befaris could see what Ureem meant. Whereas the stationary creatures possessed standard demon spike-shields, the marching demons carried six-foot high flat shields in front of them. Each larger shield looked like a giant reptile's scale; it was wider towards the top than bottom and bore deep slits in the edges.

Befaris squinted. "Wait, look... They still have the other shields too – slung across their backs."

Ureem and Lar peered hard at the closer creatures, and realized that the general was right. The monsters had their smaller shields tied behind them.

"What..." Lar said slowly, "...would require them to need... two shields?"

Her companions could not suggest an answer.

About thirty demon contingents were approaching Tremok's north side. They strode slowly and evenly, shields borne under their hideous faces, scythes held high in apparent defiance.

"When they get close enough," Lar rasped, "hit them with the catapults."

Her eyes shifted from the nearest demons towards those marching left and right to encircle Tremok like a giant living noose. Their very motion was repugnant: it was utterly without haste...

As if, she thought, they've got all the time in the world. And nothing to fear.

Ureem was already passing on her order to the catapult-engineers on the nearby rooftops. He was as eager as the Queen to see the creatures begin to die.

What the Hel was their plan..?

59: Masters Of The North

The demons which had entered the catacomb of the Enuvael failed to reply to Pec's bold announcement. They neither attacked nor greeted the woman: instead, the fifty-strong unit of Northerner footmen halted on the giant stairwell.

Pec regarded the slayers above using the glowing beams emanating from her eyes. *These creatures were little more than zombies. Perfect for combat so long as they were well-guided, but incapable of creative thought or decision-making.* She unfastened and discarded her light armour, then began the long passage up the steps.

Upon reaching the creatures, Pec pushed past them. They regarded her murderously, whilst taking care to move their razor-edged scythes out of her path. Under other circumstances, Pec might have found her proximity to these vile monstrosities disgusting – their nodular flesh was repugnant, their bodies oozed fetid sweat and the shifting of their footpad tendrils gave an unholy, nerve-rendering rustle – now, the mystic didn't even find the things curious. She, like them, remained silent until reaching the chamber's doorless entrance. Here Pec approached the nearest pair of demons.

"You will guide me to your Masters," the Human Queen ordered. "Now."

Their massive horn-crowned faces shifted to view the woman. Anger and bloodlust flashed in the soulless eyes... Until an unseen force instructed the pair to carry out her request.

One creature led the way; the second followed Pec closely – its hands ready to deal a death-blow at any time.

* * *

A ten hour journey took the trio up from the subterranean depths of the citadel into its original surface remnants. Pec found the structure to be similar to that of an immense, crumbling castle. Walls, floor and ceiling were of dark granite – all rank after hundreds of years of dirt and decay. Some areas had collapsed completely through lack of repair. Others crawled alive with cockroach-like insects. Sections of wall or roof were missing, allowing natural light to pierce this gloomy, desolate realm. Fragments of ancient curtains and drapes existed rarely, these looking more like shapes formed from ash. The remains of furniture, presumably made from wood, were unrecognizable – eaten away, burned or rotten apart. The only recent additions to the citadel were the slim braziers occasionally found lighting corridors; many passageways were illuminated by phosphorescent slime growing on the walls.

Eventually, the area she was led into became familiar. It was a region Lar's spirit had entered before the Battle of Deshnere Plain. Pec recalled her sister's descriptions of the decadent corridors.

The two guards left Pec on the walkway of a massive domed chamber. She watched the creatures leave and looked around. A single glance was all the mystic needed to be certain that this was the same location where her sister's spirit had been attacked: the smooth curved surface of the ceiling, encrusted high overhead with shimmering coal-black crystals; the expanse of the ancient walkway itself, stretching right around the three hundred foot wide lower level; braziers standing at regular intervals along the walkway; the eerie green light emanating from far below...

Since there was neither greeting or warning, Pec strode to the very edge of the balcony. Placing her feet on the crumbling rim, she peered downwards.

The sight beneath was as Lar had said. The supernatural glow came from a sphere of living green energy, some fifty feet wide. Immediately beyond the sphere's ten-yard aura, light ceased completely – eaten up by darkness... And it was in this pitch-blackness where the Masters dwelt.

Across the radiant globe shifted images of Pec herself. The Masters were scrutinising her closely. Pec smiled at the thought.

Motion was apparent in the wide zone of darkness. Yet, though it was audible, it was also too indistinct for her to be certain what kind of movement there might be. Feet or claws treading or scuttling over the stone floor? Wings or limbs shifting? Tendrils sliding?

Pec had ceased using her own magic for illumination when she had reached the better-lit section of the citadel. Now she blinked hard and opened her eyes to send the glowing shafts of light downwards...

The light beams struck the dark area and failed to pierce it. Pec blinked again and her seeking beams vanished.

"I see you like darkness," she said, more to herself than her hidden companions. "Or is it that you fear light?"

A voice entered her mind like liquid fire pouring into her brain. Pec had to concentrate hard to

stop the pain overwhelming her.

"We... Fear... Nothing."

Breathing hard, Pec steeled herself against a re-occurrence of the voice – or was it voices...?

"Not even death itself?"

"We welcome death. We are death."

"But what if you could cheat death? What if you could be made to live forever?"

"Impossible."

"If you truly believed so, you would not have brought me here. You know I have power within me – power spawned from yourselves. I can offer something greater to you than your extermination of Emeran. I can offer you life."

The voice hissed in a combination of contempt and anger. *"You try to save your people from our armies? You wish to trade our lives for theirs?"*

Pec laughed.

"Do... not... mock us."

The venom in the penetrating tone brought tears to the woman's eyes. She forced herself to give a steady, fearless response: "I mean no mockery. But it seems ironic that you, like my former companions, believe I have journeyed here to help my people. You, like them, fail to see my intentions. You fail to see my needs."

"And what are they?"

"More power," Pec replied with feeling. "I want more of this power. I've grown in strength during the last week. I want to grow more. I want to be like you – to become one of you."

"And your people?"

"Kill them." Pec shrugged uncaringly. "Kill them all."

The voice returned to her thoughts once again. This time without any pain at all.

"We will discuss your offer. If we favour it, you will accept whatever terms we decide. If we refuse, your life will be over."

60: The Walls Of Tremok

Early evening.

Over ten thousand men stood on or within the South Wall of Tremok. The eyes of each and every one of them regarded the movement of the demon warriors. Some soldiers watched with trepidation; some with bone-chilling fear; many of the fighters silently urged the enemy to begin their attack and end the awful waiting.

Captain Marvik returned to the battlements above the South Gateway less than an hour after he had left. Since the beginning of the enemy manoeuvres five hours ago, rumours had spread to the South Wall of what was happening to Tremok's north, east and west; these stories had been supported by the distant sounds of catapult and cannon fire. The officer had finally decided to see what was happening elsewhere first hand, in order to bring back hard facts.

He emerged from the left-hand stairwell onto the walkway accompanied by two guards. Sergeants Gorsk and Rami immediately turned from eyeing the Northerners to view their leader. Both men had served beside Marvik in Tremok for several years. Gorsk was an ape of a man: tall, gangly-limbed and possessing eyes as wild as his black hair and beard. Rami was a son of gentry and his appearance stayed forever immaculate – armour untarnished, hair impeccably combed, his moustache oiled and twisted to resemble horns. Whereas other fighters at Tremok had soiled their swords in the Callis feuds, Marvik, Gorsk and Rami had risen in rank through local peacekeeping actions, such as conflicts against bandits. In truth, the siege of Tremok would be their first battle.

Gorsk spoke first, which was normal. Rami would only ever speak when he had carefully prepared a sentence to reflect his personal status and intellect.

“The word, sir?”

Grinding his teeth, Marvik strode past the pair to set his eyesight upon the accursed horde below.

Rami regarded Gorsk scornfully. There was an ongoing mild dispute between the pair – built around their difference in perceived ‘class’ – and any snub to one of the sergeants by their leader would always be enjoyed by the other.

“Return to the wall,” Marvik hissed at his subordinates. “And see what I’ve just witnessed from the western fortifications.”

Together the trio and the guards around them, returned their gaze to the southern plain.

Darkness had begun to eat at the sunlight, reducing Human vision. The remnants of a few catapult-bombs launched at the Northerners provided a little additional light – these diminishing pyres were a hundred yards from the demons. Amid the combination of twilight and flickering flame, the creatures were forming a massive line parallel to the South Wall. The line was ten demons deep and the rectangular shields of these thousands of warriors shone like glass... To the right, the last sections of the great line grew complete.

“Now it comes,” Marvik said ominously.

The first rank stepped forward together. Every demon knelt and thrust its shield outward at ground level... And the entire nearest line of shields seemed to shimmer from the east and west ends to the centre: the shields being slammed together so that the slots in their sides connected. In a heartbeat, the first line of shields had been transformed into one massive shield, over two and a half miles in length.

“By the Gods,” Rami uttered. For once his speech was uncontrolled and simple.

Captain Marvik warned: “It’s not over.”

Behind the foremost line of demons, the other ranks moved with precise coordination. The second row of shields was slam-locked into the first; the third into the second; the fourth into the third... until the final row fitted between the ninth row and the ground behind the Northerners.

The incredible motion ended in an uncanny rippling of the combined shields. A great metallic snap rang out.

Seconds ago, thousands of enemies had been visible in the dim light. Now they were all hidden beneath an immense shield that resembled some huge metallic garganipede.

Slowly and relentlessly, the shielded army began to pace forwards.

“They’ll be in catapult range soon,” Gorsk snarled. He turned and roared at the engineers: “Ready all launchers! A hundred yards more and we can hit them with everything!”

His head lowered, Marvik added under his breath: “For all it’ll be worth...”

* * *

Marvik had watched another section of the demon army approach the West Wall twenty minutes

ago. They had moved towards Tremok at a steady march.

Once the shielded force had reached four hundred yards away, Coros had unleashed every one of the forty weapons across his broken wall and all five cannons through the hole where the West City Gate had stood. A great wave of fireballs had leapt into the sky, as though threatening to set the very heavens alight, and then crashed onto and around the enemy force. Cannonballs had torn through the air, screaming with tremendous power. Detonations had boomed onto the long metallic mass and sent fire writhing across the glistening plates.

The result had been utterly sickening. For the result had been nothing at all.

Demon shielding did not shatter. It did not burn. Cannonballs and great masses of blazing rock careened off the locked shields like pebbles bouncing off armour...

And, ignoring the pounding, the Northerner army had continued forwards.

Second, third and fourth waves of catapult-fire had been unleashed. Firing had grown more accurate with every attack – yet had grown more futile with every piece of ammunition expended. Twenty-five fiery projectiles had hit the shields in one place on the fifth assault: a concoction of lethal explosives and oil-soaked rock. Coros' warriors had watched the expanse of the enemy fortification shudder and blaze under this terrible hail. Seconds later, the fires had begun to sputter and die; the few cratered areas of the metallic shelter had been pushed back into position from below...

Two hundred yards from the city, the creatures had stopped.

At this time, Marvik had departed to rejoin his own warriors – leaving Coros standing braced against the wall, glowering down at the enemy line. An order had been spat from the captain's lips:

“Cease fire.”

* * *

Over half an hour later, the shielded Northerners were still immobile.

The hatred-filled expression on Coros' scarred face made the captain look like some menacing gargoyle. His eyesight still seared down upon the demons.

Of all his subordinates, only Lee would dare approach Coros while his mood was so dark. Lee was neither formidable in appearance – average height and build, an unaggressive face often crossed by a smile – nor did he possess outstanding courage. He was from a simple farmland upbringing and merely acted according to his needs. Right now, the lieutenant needed instructions and so he would ask for them.

“Your orders?”

Coros' malevolent gaze shifted from the Northerners to Lee. Inwardly, he was surprised when the man failed to be affected by the look.

“How long have you been a soldier, Lee?”

“Eight months, since I left home.”

“And you're a lieutenant already?” Coros couldn't help but be surprised.

“My promotions have been unfortunate,” Lee said with honesty. “My superiors and many of my comrades died, so I was promoted. On three occasions.”

Coros ran a hand over his shaven head. He lowered his tone. “I wouldn't tell everyone that story if I were you. Some might regard you as bad luck.”

After another lapse of silence, Lee repeated: “Your orders, sir?”

From his vantage point, to the right of where the West Gate had been, Coros could see the entire shielded mass of their enemies. He checked once more for a flicker of motion amid the metal plates, before replying.

“Have the catapults target twenty feet in front of their shields and stand ready. If they emerge to charge the wall, I want to smash them... Send a runner to the other walls. He is to report the enemy status here. I believe the demons are doing the same outside every wall, but I want to know for certain. The runner is to report to me upon his return... Tell the men to ready torches and to expect an assault during the night... Inform our first street-barricade of the situation. Tell them to pass the message on to the other barricades.”

“Aye, sir.” Lee turned to go.

“And Lee...” Coros' call made the younger man turn.

“Yes, sir?”

“Don't expect to be a captain in the morning.” Coros twisted his ugly features into a grin. “I plan to survive the night intact.”

“So do I, sir.”

* * *

On Tremok's East Wall, Captain Debik strode the defences with an air of calm control. He paced up shattered, partly-repaired stairways and along walkways, talking to individual fighters to bolster their spirits. Inside, hidden beneath a veneer of ego and authority, he grieved the loss of so many warriors during the last attack – Tur, previous captain of the West Wall had been a lifelong friend – and he feared that the next, imminent assault would be far worse.

Every hour, Lieutenants Feran and Kromir reported to him above the Main Gate. He was pleased that both men had survived thus far – although livid smarting across Kromir's face and arms showed how close he had come to being incinerated by a demon fireball. The midnight report from these officers was like all the others: the enemy remained silent and in place.

Debik nodded at the two lieutenants as they returned to the central battlements above the gateway.

"I take it there's nothing new?"

"You'd have heard about it already if there were," Feran replied.

The captain plucked at his moustache and peered over the wall. Every so often, torches or burning catapult-bolts were cast out to penetrate the pitch-blackness.

"The demons are wasting time," Debik mused. "It's been dark for three hours. They should have used the cover of night to attack... If not, why else approach all four walls?"

Neither of his officers could offer an answer.

The captain shrugged. "The men are getting tired waiting. Pass the word: every third man stands guard, the others may rest and sleep for a few hours at a time... I'm sure they'll wake if a battle starts."

Feran saluted and left to carry out the order along the northern end of the wall. Kromir waited to speak to his captain.

"Sir, what use are the shields?"

Debik frowned and gave the obvious answer: "They repel all our attacks."

"Yes. But they also prevent the demons from attacking. I can't imagine them being able to climb the walls with them either..."

"So...?"

"So," Kromir concluded: "What good has it done them to shield themselves outside our walls, rather than simply charging like before?"

The captain chewed at his lip whilst considering the point.

"No good I can see," he admitted.

"That's what I believe. And it frightens me – because everything the demons do always has a purpose."

* * *

"It's dawn in three hours," Ureem said to Befaris. He gazed out towards the horizon. "Soon there'll be a glimmer of sunlight. They'll have lost all advantage of the night."

The general had given up staring into the blackness. "It seems they never intended on an assault under darkness."

"Damn fools. It was their best option."

Befaris regarded her friend. "Perhaps their hope was to have us on alert all night. To tire us."

"Then they were naive," the captain replied curtly. "Every fighter across every wall has been allowed to rest... Even you, I and our Queen."

The woman tried to weigh alternatives: "They could have been getting in position, awaiting the arrival of more forces in the morning..."

"Twelve hours in advance... Why?"

Befaris shrugged. "I don't know. Their strategy is unfathomable."

Ureem smiled at her. "Take a suggestion from an old war dog. Return to the Palace and work with the Queen. You have a seasoned captain at each wall and you'll be alerted if those unholy bastards make a move."

"I'm not really doing much good here, am I?"

"Other than keeping an old friend company, which is always welcomed."

She clapped him on the shoulder. "I'll see you later. Watch your back."

Befaris left the wall, followed by her personal guards. Her mind was afire with questions posed by

the action – and inaction – of the Northerners. Every question had innumerable answers, which in turn each birthed new questions themselves. Shrewd though Befaris was, she felt like a child pondering some impossible riddle.

Yet, of all the possibilities in her thoughts, there was one she would never have guessed or believed...

That she would never see her friend Ureem ever again. For he and every defender on this wall, were already doomed.

End Of Sample

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