

by Max Barry



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Ghant
Minister

Posts: 2457
Founded: Feb 11, 2013
Civil Rights Lovefest

by **Ghant** » Tue Feb 16, 2016 7:55 pm

QUOTE

OOC

Part III, Ch. V

Baby Shower

Leto's Palace
Letople, Zathalon

"Imagine the state of one's mind if they were to recall its details. All those months cocooned and then the onslaught of this ugly world. Lights and noise and strangeness. It's no wonder we scream with terror at our birth."
— Melina Marchetta, *Quintana of Charyn*

For what it was worth, most of the people in attendance were excited. The Emperor should have been, but alas, he was not. He was nervous more than anything...he could feel the anxiety gnawing at his chest, chewing on his insides and tying knots in his heart. *My heart... do I still have one?* Ever since his wife Lara had told him that Sophia had perished during a coup attempt in Ghish, he felt...hollow. *How could success feel so much like defeat?* he thought as he wandered from his chambers into the palace, where his party was waiting for him. In spite of his depression, he had to focus on the task at hand...the celebration of the fast approaching birth of the heir...

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*Defeated, ill treated,
A spirit torn apart.
Betrayed, waylaid,
The shredding of a heart.*

*Forlorn, still born,
Hopes for a future bright.
Unfed, half dead,
Strangled by fears too tight.*

*Unmourned, scorned,
The innocent are crushed.
Still green, unseen,
Under rugs are brushed.*

*Ill used, abused,
Cast down into despair.
Reach up, reach out,
Look up and I'll be there.*

*Support, self taught,
Together we are strong.
A team, no seam,
Try to right a wrong.*

*I'll be there, I care,
I'll try with all my power.
We two, me and you,
Are growing future's flower.*

Indeed, he could still feel something. Emperor Nathan of Ghant, Emperor of Zathalon, could feel the weight of his crown as he strode the length of the hallway with his loyal guards and retainers in tow. Good, loyal men like Atticus Voor, Barrin Errauts of Arrautsa, Fendulias of Gaemar, Kukavanger Vangalish, Lord Commander Hemlock of the Zinpalak, and even the likes of Gorm the Cleaver...huge, savage and fierce, tough as nails and loyal to the bone. There was also Rodrigo Viesu the Priest of the Sunshard Church, Captain Joseph Marlow of the Imperial Guard and even Nathan's half-brother the young Charles Kindaro Jr.

The hallways were brightly lit, both by the myriad number of lamps along the walls and the great golden chandeliers dangling from the ceiling. The large Victorian style windows occupying the opposite wall allowed the fading evening light to shine through as well, painting the hallways in a luminous glow that reflected off of the smooth, shiny surfaces. The richly colored paints on the walls and ceiling, the patterned marble tile floor and the columns just outside the windows that stood monolithic in spite of the sun that beat down upon them. It was all so grand...all so *appropriate for the occasion*.

There was excitement in the air...an energy...a *presence*. It was one that the Emperor had never felt before. Whenever he just closed his eyes and took a deep breath, he could feel a buzzing sensation in his chest, like something great was about to begin. An exuberant thrill of creation...of creating something new, and giving life to something great...the idea that he was going to be doing something no one else had ever done.

Yet he knew he wasn't the first...and that he wouldn't be the last. That he wouldn't be the first to be a father, of an heir for that matter, or the creator of an empire, albeit a reunited one centuries dead. It still made him feel special all the same. *Try to focus on that instead of the anxiety.* He would be better for it he realized...not to be so pessimistic about something to be optimistic about.

Nathan stopped in front of a tall mirror standing solitary in the hallway, to look himself over. The man he saw was a man he had a hard time recognizing at first. He observed a somber faced, pale fleshed man with fair lightly freckled skin, and short reddish brown hair laying atop his head. His blue-grey eyes looked sullen as they started out, back at himself, and belied the golden, jewel encrusted crown upon his head and the regal nature of his garb. His ornate doublet was a rich blue, orange and white, with a blue cape that flowed like a waterfall down behind his shoulders past his back, stopping just above the floor.

*Mirror, Mirror lie to me,
Show me what I want to see.*

*Where we can fix what has been broken,
A world where cruel words are left unspoken.*

*Where no-one ever becomes ill,
A world where she loves me still.*

*Now show me what I should see,
what has become reality.*

*Life which balances everything,
people may hurt, while others sing.*

*Open my eyes to everything around,
let me see both pain and beautiful sound.*

*There may be a wall around my heart,
but it is so I cannot be torn apart.*

*I want once again to let myself feel,
I want a world where pain is not real.*

*I wish wrong always lost to right,
but now set me free to live my life.*

It could never be that easy though...*no, it never is.* Nathan continued to stare at the mirror until he saw *past* his reflection, into whatever depths lay beyond. He didn't like what he sensed. Confusion, fear, doubts... insecurities that haunted him, addled him even. As he usually did, he tried to swallow it, put it at the back of his mind and lock it away before throwing away the key...

Nathan adjusted his crown, before turning around to face his companions. "Just making sure everything's in order before we enter the reception hall. I don't want a thousand people to look at me and think, 'he doesn't look regal at all!' Impressions are everything you know, and I don't want to give a bad one."

Lord Voor clasped the Emperor on both shoulders and smiled. "The impression you wish

to give will coincide with the one you yourself give off. If you feel good, others will feel good about you. Just remember to smile, keep your back straight and your chin up. Then you will appear as the Emperor you wish to be seen as." With that, Atticus put a hand on Nathan's back, and gestured down the hall with the other.

With a nod of his head, Nathan acquiesced, and continued walking, with his entourage in tow. "What exactly is the significance of a Baby Shower, anyway?" Granted, Nathan knew what they were, but not necessarily why they were construed to be such lofty events of import. Apparently, it was important enough for people of import to travel from throughout the Empire of Zathalon to attend.

It was the hefty Barrin of Arrautsa that answered the question. "Basically your Grace, it's an event where loved ones, family and friends get to spend time with the prospective parents...the mother especially. The guests bring gifts and impart supportive wishes and advice and generally make sure that the parents to be realize that their baby is highly anticipated. In such circles of high society as this, they are often held to celebrate the impending birth of an heir, which is the case here."

Hence, the irony of our plot. "I trust our plans are in order then?" the Emperor inquired generally to his party.

"...Indeed they are, your Grace," Fendulias of Gaemar grinned widely, showing a gap between his two front teeth. "Everything will go quite smoothly, rest assured."

What a relief. Closer to the reception hall, the hallways grew wider, and far more elaborate. They sprawled out, featuring detailed tapestries, suits of armor, weapons upon racks, large paintings and delicate artifacts set upon narrow tables running the length of the walls. All the while, the waning light of day signaled the deepening dusk, as a myriad of colors filled the sky and colored the light that beat down through the glass, playing tricks of light upon the floor and the walls.

"...I've heard reports that enemy vessels are harrying the coasts to the north," Nathan said with a concerned tone. "Selena's return to Heilanor has emboldened the southrons, and Constantine is competent enough to lead them and keep them organized. No doubt he has reached out to potential allies in order to spur them against us. If these reports are true, then they are forcing our hands and calling our bluff," he said, referring to Lara's threats of mutually assured destruction by weapons of mass destruction...which she did possess. Nathan, unlike the others, knew his wife to be cavalier enough to seriously consider using them.

Kukavanger snorted and even chuckled a bit, before shaking his head and explaining, "I wouldn't worry about them if I were you, your

Grace. Let them harry the shores all they want. Why, when I was but a wee lad, my grandfather used to tell me stories about the Kanpotar that would come raiding...they would always stay close to shore, and wouldn't come too far inland away from their ships. In Izotza, the Ghantar of old were clever. When they caught wind of raiders coming, they would leave their coastal towns and go deep inland and hide. Sure, the raiders would get some things, but not much, since the villagers would take their most valuable possessions and take them with them when they left. Sometimes the raiders would go inland in search of the villagers, but when they did that, some of the villagers would then go to the ships and burn them as they sat idle and poorly guarded. Then the raiders were stranded with a local population that wanted them dead."

"The lesson of the story is that the kanpotar would be wise not to press their luck inland, especially up north. That's your base of power, where the people most fervently believe in the restored empire and your...God. Resistance would be high, and more trouble than what it'd be worth methinks. Like I said, don't worry about them if it's true...we'll take care of them soon enough," Kukavanger smiled.

"What we need to do," Atticus pointed out, "is to gain legitimacy. We need to prove to these would be enemies that this government is functional and respects basic rights and adheres to the expectations of how a state should operate. We may need to make peace with Heilanor in order to achieve that, rather than try to conquer it outright. That's a public relations battle we can never win...not now."

Zara couldn't help but laugh at that. "I thought the whole point of this war was to restore the lost empire of Zathalon from its fractured successor states. If there's still one part remaining that isn't in the Empire, that the Empire isn't reborn, now is it? All of these followers of yours...they share that dream. If you settle and appear complacent, they will grow restless. Then you may quickly find yourself in the same position your ancestors did, where the Empire is being pulled apart from within, because everyone is moving in different directions."

"...That," Barrin began, "and so long as Constantine and Selena linger on the continent, there will always be a threat to your legitimacy. You will be seen as an usurper by many, including those in the international community over which they hold sway. If you let them hang around, they will eventually harass you, and possibly overthrow you and take what you have gained."

They are right, Nathan realized. By now he was already too far gone. He had a hard time believing that all would be forgiven if he relinquished himself from his station...people held grudges and weren't like to forgive and forget. No, he would bear the consequences of his actions in Zathalon for the rest of his life, if he wasn't arrested or executed first. At the

same time, Lara was growing mad with power and lusting for more, and had to be stopped before any serious damage could be wrought by her hand. "...Uncle Albert could help, couldn't he?"

Hemlock of all people knew Albert well enough to comment. The two had spent many, many years at court together. "Your Uncle's mind has been poisoned by sycophants...he will do nothing to risk his own position, even if it means salvaging your own. He will be more of an obstacle than an ally at this point, and his creatures will be loathe to abandon their positions of power in Ghish when you return. I fear they will work to perpetuate the conflict, if only to keep you here and extend their time there."

"...How did these worms manage to infest my seat?" Nathan spoke angrily out of frustration at the possibility of having to reassert his position in Ghant by force. "I'm tired of these vermin, my lords...everywhere I look, everywhere I turn. This was supposed to be about history, about the triumph of righteousness in the face of overwhelming corruption. Yet, all it seems to do is just beget more corruption. Dare I say, then, that what's the point of cutting the head off a snake, if simply another snake shall emerge to take its place? A man could spend all of time cutting the heads off of snakes!"

Rodrigo nodded, and sagely declared that "One cannot eradicate evil any more than light can eradicate the dark...one can merely compensate for it in the end, and learn to contain it. Rather than cut the head off the snake, trap it and keep it ensnared. Learn to contain and adapt to their existence, while also being true to your faith. For that will ultimately be what delivers you and the outcome that you seek, your Grace. True faith in the one true God, that has seen you through this far and will see you the rest of the way, if you believe."

"I believe," the Emperor told him with a smile as he made his approach to the tall oaken doors leading into the reception hall. He could already hear the commotion emanating from within the chamber. The guards standing outside the entrance to the reception hall acknowledged their Emperor's approach, and bowed to him before pushing the doors open. The sight of the reception hall inspired awe in the Emperor, the likes of which he had not felt in some time.

The reception hall had been restored. It radiated a golden sheen off of the walls while the evening light shined down through the large glass domed roof. The ceiling surrounding the dome was painted with imagery of religious significance, mainly dancing angels in flight wielding trumpets and horns. The room itself was a cavernous rectangular chamber with two levels. The upper level wrapped around the length of the reception hall and overlooked the main floor below. Tall golden columns supported the over level like colonnades, while

on the upper floor, there were smaller columns that rose into arches connecting to the ceiling.

The upper level connected to a gallery where musicians played life music on their lutes, violins and various other instruments, while guards patrolled the upper level and the periphery of the lower. Along the edges of the reception hall were great long tables covered in lavish tablecloths of blue and orange and white, with a myriad assortment of dishes and drinks from one end to another. There were tables beyond count where patrons sat, feasting and drinking on the palace wares, while others mingled in small clusters all around.

At the far end of the hall was a large table for presents in front of an elevated dais for the imperial couple, already piled high with wrapped gifts of various shapes and sizes. Some were so large and heavy that they had to be placed on the floor beside or underneath of it. Due to the sheer volume of gifts, it wasn't practical to open them all that night. Rather, it had been decided that it would be done some time after the event, handled by palace staff and an inventory list presented to Lara when it was convenient. *Without a doubt, this child will be spoiled*, the Emperor thought with a smile as he made his way into the room, in search of Lara, no doubt eager for the evening to get going.

Nathan found her not too long after beginning his search, standing tall and proud with a swollen belly near the center of the room surrounded by guests. Her blue satin cape was patterned in orange thread, with several roaring lions featured prominently upon it. Underneath the cape was a great blue and white satin gown that dragged behind her across the patterned marble tile floor.

The royal steward led the Emperor and his companions in. "All hail His Grace, Nathan of the House Gentry, the First of his Name, Emperor of Zathalon and Ghant," he sang out. *That got everyone's attention*, Nathan thought as people turned to look at him from all around, the Empress included. She nodded slightly and stretched out her arms to embrace her husband in a formal display of affection.

"The Emperor has arrived," Lara proclaimed with a smile. Her teeth were white and mostly straight, and her face stretched wide when she smiled. "Over two thousand people present, all here for the same occasion...isn't it marvelous?" she asked him as she reached out for an embrace.

"It certainly is," he replied as he hugged her back, mindful of her swollen tummy. Nathan observed the usual suspects not far away from Lara...those being Generals Slood, Zotwel and Gogh, Admirals Pole and Zutwenk, Prime Minister Martina Tangerine, Princess Sula, Ghantish Emissary Ion Lorus and Lord Lendel Uros, newly appointed Ghantish Liaison to the Court of Letople, compliments of Uncle Albert.

Zara Thrall looked around the room, and then she put a quick hand on Nathan's shoulder to get his attention after he stepped away from his wife. "...I am going to get outside, if you don't mind. I don't do well in large areas filled with so many people..." something seemed amiss...she was *worried about something*.

"...Is everything alright, Zara?" Nathan asked her with a hushed voice and a look of concern.

She nodded though, and merely said "...I just need some fresh air." With her having said that, Nathan nodded, and in haste, Zara turned and walked briskly back towards the towering doors of the reception hall, and out the other end she disappeared. It was that particular display of anxiety that made Nathan's own anxiety flare up again. He looked up at the sky again through the dome, and saw that night was quick taking over, and a full moon rising. The night seemed especially dark...

*A day that was born of the brightest light
Has now shattered like crystals in the sinking
dark
Where once the spirit was unfettered and free
Now it weeps painfully in a cage of thorns*

*Blood is drawn from its tender flesh
And drips slowly down to mark the skin
A tattoo of pain forever remembered
By a ghost that lives within*

*There is emptiness in this void
A cold and lonely song of existence
A solemn note born from the sheer magnitude
of the silence
That it deafens both the heart and mind*

*In the quiet serenity of utter despair
What is born from the lack of a sense of hope?
A cold determination to steal the future
From the wanton wheel of fate...*

*Such is the nature of desperation, when
caught in an endless cycle of hate...*

The Emperor had to shake his anxiety...it would do him no good now. "...Perhaps you will walk with me, my love, while my esteemed guests get themselves situated," he smiled as he offered Lara his hand.

Returning the smile, Lara took it. "Aye...please, come with me to the dais, so we can share a few words with our guests."

"Yes, of course," he replied, as it was she, not he that led the way. Lara walked briskly towards the elevated dais, consisting of a wide flat platform on the far edge of the room. Guests said their congratulations as they stepped aside for the Emperor and Empress, while Nathan studied their faces, and those of the people looking on from the upper balcony. Theirs' were faces of eagerness, of joy and merriment, as though this day was a great day, which it certainly did appear.

Lara arrived at the feet of the dais and climbed

the steps to the top, although it was hardly a top as the dais wasn't that much higher than the surrounding floor. Only two long narrow steps surrounded the dais and separated it from the floor, and she seemed to reach the dais with just one step. She yanked Nathan up there with her, and came to stand before the microphone sitting idly atop a stand.

"Excuse me," Lara said into the microphone, causing what music was being played from the gallery to cease, and everyone turning to look upon the dais. Nearly two thousand people stopped what they were doing and stared at the Emperor and Empress, waiting her for to say whatever she intended to say next. Nathan stood beside her perfectly still and silent, as he himself waited to see what Lara was going to say.

"I just wanted to take a moment to thank the palace staff for hosting such a wonderful baby shower to welcome our first child, the heir to Zathalon. It means so much to me that all of you were able to come today and celebrate with us. Having a new baby can be really overwhelming, but this event makes me feel so supported and loved. It reminds me of how privileged I am to be Empress of Zathalon, and have an entire empire behind me."

"There are so many great women here today. I especially admire the mothers in this room. I am glad to have your example as I get ready to give birth to the heir in a few weeks time. It shall be the completion of our vision fulfilled. For as Leto the First once said, there shall be one Empire, united and bound by blood for all time. So let us celebrate! Let us sing and dance and rejoice in this dream being realized once more!"

"Thanks again for coming today and please have fun tonight and all the nights to come!"

The reception hall was drowned out by a thunderous applause, and it was in that moment that Nathan realized the scope of this room. It was literally cavernous, the size of the interior of a leviathan church cathedral. *No wonder it made Zara so dizzy*, he realized as even he started to feel dizzy just taking it in. Not long after Lara was done speaking, the musicians in the gallery began to play once more, and the dancing took over in greater furor than before Lara spoke from the dais.

Lara made her way down from the dais alone, and Nathan moped after her, only to be greeted by an old, familiar face. "...Ormund Borlidoc, is that you?"

"Indeed, your Grace," the older man smiled. Once a tall and dignified man who served admirably as Prime Minister, he was now a virtual prisoner, wearing an old suit and with an old, unshaven face of grey hair. "It's been a long time."

"...What happened to you?" Nathan asked incredulously. "What did they do to you?"

Ormund put a hand on Nathan's shoulder, and began to walk with him, there near the edge of the reception hall where they might have some privacy. "I came to Letople to negotiate with Prime Minister Tangerine...this was before she betrayed Empress Selena. It was a trap...once I had arrived, Tangerine imprisoned me, and then after Simon Brignac was killed in Loufe, the government fell apart. From what I understand, your uncle assumed imperial power in your absence, and used that power to appoint Maeson Margela as acting Prime Minister for the duration of my term, until elections could be called. Which, given the political situation there, may be some time off..."

"Is that why Martina never let you leave Letople?" Nathan asked, beginning to get a clearer picture of the chain of events. "Did she anticipate this dysfunction arising, which she could then exploit to her benefit?"

"So it stands to be reasoned," Ormund nodded sadly. "With all due respect, I did advise you that this course of action would lead to the ruin of our nation, and others too. The days are dark and only grow darker...with each passing day Zathalon becomes more fanatical. I fear the worst is still to come."

Oh, I know that now, Nathan thought of Ormund's words. *I know that now better than any man living.* Nathan pulled him aside and spoke softly. "...What if I told you it's not too late? We could still set things to rights."

Ormund seemed surprised by that admission... he raised his eyebrows and exhaled deeply. "How would you even go about doing that?"

"...Just wait," Nathan turned a grin. "You'll see..." when he started to look around the room once more, he took in the sights of the festivities. People danced to the orchestral performance coming from the gallery, others stood off to the side, talking or cheering on the dancers in their reveling, while others sat at tables and wine and dined on palace wares. Guards stood around the upper balcony and stalked the edges of the reception hall. Great banners and flags rattled from the balcony rails from where they were tied.

"I suppose I will have to take your word for it," Ormund nodded as he scratched at the grey hair sprouting from his face like a mane. "Hopefully you've learned your lesson, and that indeed as you say, it isn't too late." Putting a hand on Nathan's shoulder, he exhaled deeply and added, "I remember many years ago, when your father was Crown Prince, and you were just a boy, maybe three or four, your father fawned over you every chance he got. You were an energetic child, intelligent beyond your years and good-hearted, that much was obvious. But you were also spoilt, prone to melancholy and above all else, rambunctious to the point of inviting negative attention onto yourself. I was just an MP in those days, but I recall all too well. I pointed out to your father that you had the potential to be reckless and

wanton. He countered, 'perhaps at first, until the error of his ways is pointed out to him. Nathan learns fast and never makes the same mistake twice.' I'd like to think your father was right."

Nathan nodded along, trying to remember those days. His father died when he was only six, after all, and so his memories were too few. His father was a busy man, devoted to his work and at times remote. Yet, Nathan was his pride and joy, it was often said, and Nathan both admired and looked up to his father as the model man, even if he fell quite far away from imitating him properly. "I certainly hope so, sir. I would certainly hope so." With that, Nathan bowed and said "excuse me," before wandering off aimlessly.

Listless was he as he walked around the reception hall...he never felt more alone than when he was surrounded by so many people that he didn't know. Sure, they looked at him and smiled, bowed and offered congratulations, but these all seemed like hollow gestures made because that was what social expectations dictated. *That's what this all is...a grand show, with the main event still to come...*

The Emperor wandered over to the food table, and made a plate of shrimp, lobster tail and calamari. Taking that and some red wine, he headed over to a table nearby and took a seat in one of the party chairs. He considered his position while he ate...Emperor of Zathalon and Ghant...both by blood, but Zathalon was acquired through force. It left him asking himself, *was Lara using me all along just to get power?*

Such questions could haunt a man, and of late such questions were nagging the Emperor. He had built a great sandcastle, but would it hold up against the tide? *For the tide is coming, and I fear it shall all have been for naught.* That was why he was so tempted to abdicate and negotiate with Heilanor...it was because he was not all that much of a gambling man. *It is better to leave my child with something, than nothing, and live thinking all those men died for nothing. I must give their sacrifices a lasting impact.*

Nathan lingered in his seat for some time...how long he wasn't exactly sure. He was waiting for the time to come when their plan was ready to launch...there would be no turning back once that time came. He finished his seafood and washed it down with wine as he watched the show go on, all the guests enjoying themselves to the music of the orchestra and the pleasure of each other's company.

"...You having a good time, ya Grace?" Kukavanger said casually as he walked by the table. "Looks like it ta me!"

"Just enjoying the seafood," the Emperor replied with a grin, fond as he was of Kukavanger. "What are you up to?"

Tugging at the belt on his doublet, he waved a

hand and said "trying ta get outta here...I need to take a piss. Not in one o those fancy white bowls but on a damn tree or inda bushes outside, where I can feel da wind blowing on me ass." It was clear that Kukavanger had been drinking, as was his way, but Nathan made nothing of it. *The man can get shitfaced drunk for all I care.*

"Go ahead and be my guest," Nathan told him with a smile as he raised his wine glass to him.

Returning a toothy grin, Kukavanger responded with, "see ya around, yah Grace...be good, and we can talk more when I get back." As he left to go, Nathan watched him, for a lack of much better to do at the moment. He observed curiously as Kukavanger arrived at the double doors to leave, only to find the guards trying to *stop him from leaving*. There were some words exchanged and some hand gestures, but eventually Kukavanger pushed his way past them and stormed out down the hall.

...I wonder what that was all about...why would they try to keep him from leaving? Indeed, something seemed off...especially what happened *next*. "If you would excuse me," Lara said loudly into a microphone a servant delivered to her near the center of the floor. "I thank you all for coming and for your gifts and well wishes. It has been a pleasure to host you all, but the time has come at last to bid thee a goodnight. Although, knowing the nocturnal nature of our Ghantish comrades, I'd like for them to stick around for some after-hours celebrations, in honor of their heroic deeds and sacrifices in the name of Zathalon."

During the past few hours that had gone by since Nathan entered the reception hall, many of the Zathalonians had trickled out, but after that announcement, the ones that remained made their way out. *My, the time does go by fast*. According to the agenda, the baby shower was already at its end, demonstrating that Nathan had been wandering around and sitting down for a few hours in total. That was when Nathan pushed himself up and began to walk around a bit more, finally towards Zara in the center of the room.

After the Zathalonian guests left, all that remained were the Ghantish guests and their many guardsmen, and many of Lara's soldiers and commanders, generals and admirals included. Many of the Ghantar were unarmed and casually dressed...yet *all* of the Zathalonians were strapped, it appeared. *Good thing Fendulias's men are armed too*, he thought, knowing that the time was drawing nearer to execute his plot.

"Nathan," Lara said over the microphone gingerly. "Perhaps you would like to say a few words."

"...I would," he replied as everyone turned their attention to him. His accomplices knew it was time, and began to draw near to him. Barrin Errauts, Fendulias Calien, Gorm the Cleaver, etc. *Kukavanger will be back any minute*, he

thought, while looking around again as he took the microphone. "It's been a lot of fun tonight," Nathan began. "To be surrounded by loyal people, noble and true, who share a vision of peace and prosperity for all...we are truly blessed." Then he cleared his throat and took a deep breath, while noticing Ormund look on from a distance. "...People of Ghant, people of Zathalon, you have bled, you have died. You have sacrificed so much for the sake of restoring this long lost empire...but I ask you all, here and now...at what cost? What price are we willing to pay to bring this empire back from the dead? Are we willing to sacrifice our honor, our virtues...our righteousness, in order to fulfill that vision? Some of you might be, but me...I am afraid I cannot in good conscious. I've seen too many innocent people die, I've seen too much bloodshed and dishonor to think it's a glorious dream anymore. If we are here to celebrate new life, than how can we as good men usher in that new life with hands of death? That's not what I want to give my child...an empire built on blood, treachery and deceit."

"You don't mean that," Lara replied as many of the remaining guests gasped and began to chatter. "Clearly, your mind has been addled by the tribulations of late. I've not realized the extent of the problem, dismissing it for some time, but now I see it as clearly as I see the sky above. You need rest...by all means, relax and enjoy the comforts of the palace, and let me *assume* the burden that you bear upon your weary shoulders."

Nathan took a deep breath and exhaled just as deeply. "Would that I could," he responded grimly. *If Lara is so determined to force the issue here and now, then she leaves me no choice.* "This has gone on long enough...I fear the end of all this will prove to be the run of us all. Hence, I believe the best course of action would be to abdicate in favor of our child upon their birth, and negotiate a peace with Heilanor, which would result, I hope, in a division of the continent between the two empires. No doubt, they will wish for Lara, Martina, and their commanders to answer for their crimes...namely treason."

The entire room seemed to gasp at once, and then the room grew so quiet, he could have heard a pin drop. "Liar!" Lara screamed, her face reddening and pointing at Nathan sharply with a look of hatred in her eyes. "You fucking bastard! I should have known you wouldn't have the guts to see our vision to its end. You are spineless, treacherous worm, and you condemn yourself with your own mouth!" Lara continued to scream. "Men of Zathalon, those who would prove their loyalty to the empire, seize this traitor *at once!*"

"Men of Ghant, men of Zathalon," Nathan cried out loud and clear. "Take the *Empress-Consort*, Prime Minister Tangerine and her commanders into custody. This is the command of your lawful emperor."

The Lord Commander of the Imperial Guard

hesitated as he looked between Lara and Nathan. In the blink of an eye he was surrounded by Ghantish soldiers, some with swords in their hands, others with pistols and rifles. They encroached upon Lara as well, with barrels pointed at her chest.

"It would appear as though your treachery is complete," Lara said. "Do you think I stand alone, my husband?" All along the upper level, men of Zathalon drew their firearms and pointed them down towards the floor of the reception hall. Sula drew her gun, and others loyal firstly to the Empress drew theirs, nearly all in unison.

"If they move, kill them!" the Empress screamed as she shook tightly clenched fists in the air. "If one of them moves you kill them all, that is my command!"

And so it begins. "You leave me no choice," Nathan told Lara with a shaky voice while his legs trembled and his hands jittered. He called out to Fendulias of Gaemar, who brought a large number of his men with him to fulfill the plot that they set in motion at the research facility. "My lord, take the Empress and her cohorts into custody. Do them no harm, but escort them to their chambers and keep them there, under heavy guard."

"Men of Gaemar!" Fendulias shouted as he drew his Arragara steel sword. At least a hundred of his men drew their weapons and surrounded the room.

"I want no bloodshed," Nathan pleaded passionately with his wife, his face sad and his hands clasped together. "Tell your men to lay down their weapons and yield...nobody needs to get hurt, Lara...please..."

Nathan saw it out of the corner of his eye, and then he heard it. With a single sharp thrust, Fendulias drove his sword through Barrin's back. Barrin's blade dropped from stunned fingers as the wet red sword burst through ribs out through his chest...the clattering sound the sword made when it hit the floor seemed like the loudest noise Nathan had ever heard. Barrin groaned and spat blood as he looked down at the blade sticking out of his chest. Without looking, Barrin knew who's sword it was, and with his dying breath, looked to the full moon shining through the glass dome of the reception hall and muttered, "And so it ends." He was dead before his body hit the floor.

In that vacuum of frozen time and space, with Fendulias standing over the fallen Barrin of Arrautsa, the former gripping his sword drenched in the blood of the latter, Nathan could only think of one thing, that burned him from the inside out, like the flame of some dragon whelp lurking inside his heart...

*I wear a scarlet letter
Inside my insidious chest
Adorned so beautifully and heavily
That I can find no rest*

*I pick up the worn tome,
not knowing that in the pages
is a secret that I never thought
I would discover.*

*As I read, the past clouds me.
This scarlet letter bounds me yet!
My demons have yet to leave me alone.
They still find reasons to torment my
weakened soul.*

*The screams echo yet again,
and the moon howls long and low.
The blade shines like the night as
dark crimson flows.*

*Each maroon drop splashes in slow motion;
life giving way to death.
I watch them fall like rain from
these words and this page.*

*I take my last breaths,
the deed finally being done.
I shake as I remember his eyes on me.
Was all I could say: "Why?"*

*I close my eyes and let out an
inward scream of near insanity:
Then he said: "You deserved it!"
I was the victim, the martyred-
though I still live.*

*They will never find this note,
this damning confession.
I will destroy it like they did me-
and let it all go to rest.*

When Nathan shouted for action, his cries came far too late. One of Barrin's men shot first, Nathan reckoned, and then the entire reception hall became a storm of raining bullets and the clash of steel upon steel and flesh and bone. The Emperor, still staggering, whirled around as Atticus Voor took him by the shoulders and flung him away as Captain Marlow and Ser Hemlock tried to get him out of the flurry going on around them.

...But there was nowhere to go. The tall double doors of the entrance were closed, and more men seemed to be streaming in from the sides of the room where the balcony staircases were...that much Nathan could see through the chaos. The balcony was lined with men shoulder to shoulder emptying their rifles into the crowd below...the sound was deafening. Screaming bullets mixed with the sounds of screaming men, right in Nathan's ears. All around him, blood sprayed from where bullets punctured flesh, splattering the Emperor's fine clothes. Chunks of brain slashed him on the face where the heads of struggling Ghantar were impacted by small arms fire, getting in his nose and eyes.

The sound of the orchestra still playing mixed in with the screams of both men and bullets, playing their melody as though nothing had changed, the noise echoing off the walls as if the marble was playing some erstwhile chaotic tune. The instrumentation concealed Nathan's scream as something bit into his leg, sending

him crashing down towards the hard marble floor. He looked around in horror as he noticed his men getting cut down, old and young alike.

"Help!" he screamed. Nathan saw men toss over tables for cover from the small arms fire, while Gaemarians dove after them with bloody swords in hand. Hemlock and Marlow had Nathan by each arm, and flung him behind one such table. Gorm the Cleaver had his cleaver in hand, nearly half as long as he was tall (he was a solid eight feet), and was surrounded by Gaemarians, charging at him with their blades. "Fuck the lot of you, you traitorous scum," he cried out as he clove the traitors with his cleaver, cutting them in half, and from shoulder to navel. But there were too many of them, and they plunged their blades into his leather armor, causing him to sink to the ground and scream, "Cursed be traitors, the lot of you be damned," before he faded from view as Gaemarians hacked him to pieces.

"...We need to get to the dais," Marlow said to Hemlock as they tried to move through cover along the side of the reception hall, as fighting was all around them. "There's no where else to go." Indeed it was true...the double doors were closed, barred from the other side. Many of the younger Ghantar rushed it, pounding on the wood with closed fists, screaming for their mothers or for mercy or for forgiveness as they were hacked at from behind by the countrymen that had betrayed them, and by those on the balcony that mowed them down with their firearms.

Others were on their knees, praying for mercy as they were struck down. "Mercy!" they cried "Quarter!" but there was none to be found for any in that room. *...Malibar was right, Nathan realized. All who journey to Zathalon shall be cursed, and shall die.* Those words seemed prophetic especially now, as intense pain shot up throughout Nathan's body as he gripped at his bleeding leg where he got shot. He couldn't walk on it, and Hemlock resigned himself to carrying Nathan, as Hemlock used to do when Nathan was just a boy.

They moved through fighting Ghantar who huddled around the sides of the reception hall and around the dais, brave men determined to fight to their dying breaths. Hemlock carried Nathan almost halfway to the dais with Marlow following close behind with suppressing fire before Marlow staggered and fell to the ground. Nathan saw him go down as he was slung over Hemlock's mighty shoulder, and whatever color was in the Emperor's face was now gone.

...Not Marlow, Nathan began to panic. *Please God no, not him!* Nathan watched in horror as Marlow smiled to Nathan and said, "...the game is up," before a pack of bloody Gaemarians converged on him from behind and drove their swords into his back. *...I will kill that fucking traitor,* he thought of Fendulias. *This slaughter shall be avenged.* Behind them, the double doors burst open, and many more armed men in combat gear streamed in. They began to

unload their weapons in unison with the Zathalonian soldiers, into the throngs of desperate Ghantar trapped like wild beasts in a hunter's snares.

There was a swarm of loyal Ghantar at the dais, but before Hemlock could reach them, he suddenly staggered and violently fell over, causing Nathan to awkwardly fall and hit his head on the marble floor. His head now joined his leg in a flare of pain, his head throbbing and his leg burning. He was practically covered head to toe in a sheen of blood, and the floor was just as slick with it. He tried to move but struggled to pull himself forward along the bloody floor.

In an instant it seemed, the fighting caught up to where he was, and the cluster of Ghantar was broken by the charge of Gaemarians bearing steel. The wiz of bullets was raining on them again as well, causing Ghantar to drop all around him like flies, down into the slippery red marble floor. Nathan, although his ears rang and his eyes were blurry and stinging with blood and sweat, could hear the noise loud and clear. *Click.*

Nathan turned and saw it, and when he did it was clear as day. Lord Lendel Uros stood perfectly still in a sea of men fighting to the death, with a pistol in his hand pointed at Nathan. With a grin on his face, Lendel said "... Any last words, your Grace?"

Struggling through the searing pain, Nathan rose to his feet, putting the weight on his good leg. "If I am to die, it will be on my feet." That moment of standing, and speaking what probably would be his final words, made him think...it was as though his life flashed before his eyes.

*Again and again on my knees
Broken by those who should help me stand
Not sad nor happy in this life
Forgotten*

Fallen

*And getting up
Again
Again and again
Every time
After every fall
More determined to keep standing
More desperate to avoid another
Fall*

*Depression doesn't hurt
It's beyond limits of sadness
Beyond any other feeling known by man*

*Why?
Being alive is too hard
There are easier ways around*

Why to stand up after fall?

*Standing
Stubbornly holding on worthless things
Patiently crying when no one hears*

*Broken pieces glued together
By what?*

Life

*Effort testing limits of strength
Buying time to find more will
Forgetting to smile
What did it feel like
For the last time?*

And again

Falling

*Why do I keep getting up
Only to fall again?*

"Good man," Lendel said with a widening smirk. "Your Uncle Albert sends his regards." When Lendel pulled the trigger, the screaming bullet came racing out, and a sudden jolt hit Nathan's body. Though it wasn't the bullet that hit the Emperor...it was Atticus Voor. Atticus pushed Nathan off from his right side, and the bullet struck him in the chest instead. Nathan and Atticus found themselves both on the floor, while Lendel grunted and stormed towards Nathan with gun in hand, ready to shoot again.

Before Lendel could shoot again however, he lurched forward with his gun dropping from his hand. Hemlock had buried his axe deep in Lendel's back, causing the latter to fall to the floor as well. Hemlock wasn't that far away from falling down himself. Nathan's concern though was for Atticus, who lay bleeding out on the steps of the Dais, breathing hard and turning ghastly white.

"...Lord Voor," Nathan said in a breaking voice as he struggled to pull his body across the wet floor. "Lord Voor." By the time Nathan got close enough to him, Atticus appeared faint. All the same, he reached out a hand and took Nathan's in it, two bloody hands locked together.

"...I don't take bullets for just anyone," Atticus stammered out, his breaths growing uneasy. "This is it, you know...but it's ok, Nathan. It was worth it."

It was finally in this moment that the Emperor began to cry, the wet tears streaming down his face as they mixed with the patina of blood and sweat coating his body. "...No...you can't die...don't, please."

"...Sometimes we don't have a choice," Lord Voor told him. "Sometimes we do...and we have to live with them either way. Mine have haunted me...now I can be free." With his other hand, Atticus grabbed Nathan by his collar, although the grip was quite meek. "...tell your mother that I'm sorry...for everything. You will see her again...you are a survivor."

Nathan wept, and buried his face in Atticus's chest. "No, tell her yourself..."

Atticus's eyes began to grow faint. "Too late for that...too late for a lot of things...I love you, my...s..." with that, Atticus Voor was dead, and it seemed as though as he died, the room began to grow quieter. The music at last stopped playing, and the bullets stopped screeching...although the sounds of dying men still filled the room. Even still, under that full moon, sons picked up the swords of their fallen fathers only to be cut down themselves by blade and bullet, while elsewhere men wept over their dead sons, or rose to avenge them, only to be butchered like cattle. *This is hell...I am in hell...*

"Who would have thought, the mighty Emperor of Zathalon and Ghant cries like a little girl," a husky foreign voice sounded in the distance. Nathan looked up from Atticus's corpse, and saw that the room was painted red with blood, bodies laying dead everywhere, while Zathalonians, Gaemarians and Rhodeseans crowded around the balconies and the floor. "General Sarel Kruger...at your service," he chuckled in his squeaky clean uniform with a patch on his eye and a cigar in his mouth.

"...Thank you General," Lara applauded from not far away. Her gown was covered in blood as well, though she smiled brightly as she gave a shallow curtsy. "You've delivered half of your promise...and the other half?"

"The other half as promised," Kruger grinned as he raised a hand. Half a dozen Rhodeseans in urban camouflage brought forth none other than Prince Michael of Dakmoor, beaten and battered and cuffed. They brought him before Lara and kicked him in the back of the knees, causing him to drop to the ground in front of her. "The White Roses's little brother...all the leverage you will need against those pesky Ghantar."

"Good, and as promised, here is your reward." Lara stepped aside as her men hauled off Michael, and then Lara's men cleared the way. Rodrigo Viseu, Nathan's young half-brother Charles and Ormund Borlidoc were on their knees watching as Hemlock was surrounded by Zathalonians taunting him...the giant, proud Jendebasa knight flailed, battered and bruised, his axe taken from him by the crowds of soldiers.

Kruger stood still and looked at him, as a circle formed around him and Hemlock. "Hemlock, Lord Commander of the Zinpalak," Kruger called out with a sharp voice and a pointed finger. "Do you remember me?" the Rhodesean general began to remove his cap and his jacket before handing them off to his men.

Hemlock though, only shook his head. "Should I know it? You look just like any other Rhodesean maggot I've come across."

"...Is that so?" Through the blood, sweat and tears that clouded Nathan's sight, he watched from his position on the steps of the dais, the circle to his left and right so he could watch. Kruger removed his eyepatch, revealing the

hideous hole where his eye should have been. "You took my eye, many years ago. Now I have returned to claim my revenge, Hemlock. For I am General Sarel Kruger, and I will not be denied that which belongs to me." With that, he drew a bowie knife from his belt, and approached Hemlock with it in hand.

Hemlock was kicked in the back by the crowd and prodded forward, with nothing but his bare hands. *That's all he needs*, the Emperor thought, hoping beyond all hopes that Hemlock wouldn't die too. He was wounded though, staggering around as he met eyes with Kruger, who brandished his bowie knife. With a quick step, Kruger reached out and tried to slash at Hemlock's chest.

Perhaps knowing he wasn't going to prevail in this particular situation, Hemlock dodged the slash and tacked Kruger, sending them both crashing down onto the slick marble floor. There was a loud thud, and then the two men proceeded to grapple at each other on the floor. While Hemlock was the larger and more powerful of the two, he was hurt, while Kruger didn't have a scratch on him. The surrounding circle of onlookers cheered and hollered as the two men struggled against each other, covered in blood and with a bowie knife between them.

They rolled around together for a few moments, before Kruger managed to get Hemlock pinned underneath him. That was when Nathan noticed the bowie knife sticking out of Hemlock's chest. *No*, the Emperor thought as he lay in the blood crying. *No...* Kruger laughed as he looked down at the dying man that took his eye. "You see now, stupid Ghantar? You tried to kill me, you took my eye...and now the tables have turned. Now you will die by my hand. What do you think about that?"

The old knight lay on his back, coughing up blood and breathing irregularly. Then his bloody mouth twisted into a smirk, and he began laughing. "What's so funny, you Ghantish piece of shit?"

"...You are a proud man, General Kruger," Hemlock spat out. "But pride comes before the fall." With that, Hemlock grabbed Kruger by the back of the head, and shoved his face down. Hemlock's other hand was waiting with thumb pointed up. Before Kruger could react, Hemlock's thumb was in his one good eye. Kruger's subsequent shriek seemed to shock his fellow Rhodesians.

"You mother fucker," Kruger yelled as he covered his face with both hands. "I'm blind, you asshole, I'm blind!" Kruger staggered towards the edge of the circle, and lashed out with flailing hands. "Give me a gun now, you cocksuckers, give me one!" Once one soldier did, Kruger grasped it and began shooting it down into the floor recklessly. The first few missed, but eventually one hit Hemlock in the chest. A few moments after that, Kruger was restrained by his men and escorted away.

Nathan watched in horror as Hemlock turned his head towards him, and grinned one last time before dying.

Lara let out a throaty laugh. "Be careful what you wish for, General," she said as she stepped forward. Her sister Sula, the Prime Minister and others were standing nearby. "Even in death, you Ghantar find ways to be poetic. It amazes me, truly. You had a good thing going for you, Nathan...you really did. Yet you just had to fuck it up...and now everyone you care about is dead...well, almost everyone," she laughed, taking a few steps closer.

"If I may, dear husband, I'd like to share with you an epiphany I had very recently. I came to the conclusion that the better part of the human race is little more than vermin... especially your race of men. They breed, go forth and multiply, and profane the one true god and life an existence of heresy and debauchery. Hardly more than a virus...a plague upon this earth, and I'd like to fancy myself the redeemer. Why settle for just Zathalon...when the entire world is at our fingertips? You were useful for a time...you served your purpose...but the fact is I don't need you or your filthy countrymen any longer." Lara turned to her sister and with a raised fist said, "bring me the vial, Sula. It is time."

"...But it's not ready yet," Martina countered. "It is not safe for human contact...we don't know what kind of effect it shall have..."

"Nonsense," Lara snapped, as Sula brought her the vial of pink liquid. Lara snatched it, and held it up in her hand. "Behold the future of humanity...behold the beginning of our glorious revolution. Bear witness to evolution!"

...I have to try. Nathan got up to his knees, painful as it was, and clasped his hands together. Still crying, he pleaded, "Don't, Lara...don't become evil...there is good in you, good in what you want to do. Your mind has been corrupted by sycophants...Fendulias!" he cried out. "You betrayed me, when you swore you were my friend. How could you do this to me? I honored you as my friend...and yet you would turn your back on me...for what?"

"...Because you are weak," Fendulias said softly. "Because you are the past, and this is the future. The future belongs to the strong. Lara is strength...she has the vision to reshape our world. The power that she has access to is unlike anything I have ever seen."

Lara looked between them and shrugged. "It is the privilege of the strong to rule over the weak, and so I shall, Nathan of Ghant. So I shall." Having said that, Lara opened the vial and threw it back down her gullet before casting the drained vial away, causing it to shatter upon the floor with a sharp noise that carried across the room. Afterward she gripped her face, and shuddered. "Give me my sword," she commanded with an unsteady voice.

One of her soldiers brought forth her Arragara steel sword, and then Lara took it with both hands. "Let this be a message to all who would oppose me...they will find nothing but death." She wheeled around with sword in hand and pointed it at the back of Ormund Borlidoc's head.

"...Such madness," was all he had time to say before Lara decapitated him with one swing of her sword, causing his head to roll in the blood on the floor and his body crashing down after. *...Damn this woman to nine hells, Nathan looked down and cried, still on his knees. She has truly gone mad...God have mercy upon us all.*

Lara looked at Nathan as she walked towards him. "Now, as for you dear...you still have something I want...something I need. Tis high time I take it from you and bring this little show of ours to an end. Though before I do, I feel as though I would be remiss if I didn't tell you that your precious little White Rose is still alive...but that will change, soon enough. I have special plans for Ghan, and for her if I get my hands on her. Too bad for you, you won't live to see it."

The Emperor gasped as he let her words soak in, and for the first time in a long time, he smiled genuinely, for Sophia was still alive after all, only the knowledge of that was kept from him. Still, he looked at the bloody floor, and then up for a moment. Indeed the room was painted red, while distorted figures of the dead lay strewn about, while demonic looking men with bloody swords and guns stood around watching him. Further up, he saw the glass dome in the roof and the full moon shining its somber light down upon it all...

*This night studded with stars
Crystal tears the angels cry
Everyone is hurting with me alive*

I am not with you

*Everything I touched is
Streaked with blood
Thoughts of concealed swords
In my sea of darkness
Nothing is alright
It hurts to never see
All my demons
That cry within*

I am not with you

*Sketch after sketch using lines of pain
Every dream I dream is the same
This night, flooded with darkness
Lost am I and lonely
Undeserving am I
A wilting flower in my hand
Fingers stuck to thorns
A white rose, red with blood*

I am not with you

Playing with shadow men

*My only friends in this
Sweet hell that never ends
This night ablaze with flame
Come to me
I cannot wait
I am torn, hurting, lying in pools
Of blood on the floor*

I am not with you

*I have never known
That which tears me apart
Flowers die
All is gone
All have lied
Nothing is right
All I do is hurt you*

I am not with you

*This night, reeking of death
Swords do the angels cry
All my hurt will soon be gone.*

Realizing that Lara was standing on the dais behind him, Nathan grinned, feeling some strange madness sweep over him. *I would die a thousand deaths, if it would mean that Sophia could live but one. Watch over her, Gods of Ghant. Keep her safe, and give her the strength she will need to prevail.* He kept his eyes forward, and slowly outstretched his arms, as if to embrace the moon high above. Then he started to laugh. "...So it is, that we all shall reap our Patu."

Lara's sword took him in the back of the head.



The Emperor fell forward, face down into the floor, causing Leto's Crown to come rolling off of his head, streaking through the blood. After a few seconds, it came to a stop, rolling gently down until it rested on the floor, while blood trickled down off of the gems. The sound it made when it settled still echoed throughout the hall, while everyone stood in silence and stared.

Lara handed off her sword, and then with two hands reached down and plucked the bloody crown from the floor. With both hands she raised it high into the air, and then lowered it onto her own head. Trails of blood ran down her face and through her hair, and she began to laugh manically as she clinched her fists. "Bow," she yelled. "Bow before your rightful sovereign!"

Most people took a knee, but Fendulias stood still. "I want what I was promised," he said pointedly. "I want Ghant."

"And Ghant you shall have, Fendulias," Lara said as she spread the blood around her face and licked it off of the ends of her fingers. "Bow before me, and you shall have that and more."

Fendulias inclined his head, and finally took a knee, prompting his men to do the same. Once

all were on bended knee, Lara giggled in her giddiness and said "and to think, I began as a Princess, became an Empress, and then a God. The God-Empress of Zathalon! All shall tremble before my might...for I shall be master of the universe...of time and space."

She turned to Charles and Rodrigo. "Take the boy away...I mean to use him as leverage. As for you, priest," she grabbed Rodrigo by the chin. "You shall serve me as ably as you served Nathan...is that understood?"

"...Yes, your Majesty," Rodrigo replied sadly. "That I shall."

"Good, now let us begin our preparations," Lara commanded from the dais. "We shall destroy all of our enemies, starting with Heilanor. I will break them...all of them. Selena, Constantine... and who stand in my way. The world will be mine...all mine!" the room erupted in a chorus then...*all hail the Empress! All hail the Empress! All hail the Empress of Zathalon!*

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"Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!" - Percy Bysshe Shelley,
Ozymandias



Ghant
Minister

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Letople, Zathalon

Kukavanger ran...he ran as fast as he could. He was in a palace bathroom taking a piss when he heard gunfire, and when he emerged, he noticed Ghantar being shot like old horses. He tried sneaking out first, but after he was seen, he had to fight through it. Fortunately he had men outside, and once he managed to escape the palace through a combination of good luck and sheer force of will, he informed them of what was happening...and endeavored to get the hell out of Letople.

All around him and his men, there was fighting, and there was dying...it was hardly a fair fight. The streets of Letople were awash with Ghantish blood, their flags and banners burning as Rhodeseans, Gaemarians and Zathalonians ran rampant through the Ghantish camps, taking them by surprise. Kukavanger had a few good men and some wits about him, but that would only get him so far.

His men laid down suppressing fire as he headed for his jeep in the parking lot, which had become the scene of a violent battle between the loyal Ghantar and their multifaceted enemies. *We need ta get da fuck outta here*, he knew, but that would be easier said than done. "Fucking traitors," he said of the Gaemarians. "Curse them all." He heard someone coming before he saw them, and readied his weapon just to be safe.

"Don't shoot!" Zara said panting as she emerged from around another car, covered in blood with a rifle in her hands. "We need to get out of the city, pronto. This is a deathtrap." She had a weapon in her hands and her uniform was torn and bloodied. *She's seen some fighting too*, he realized. Then she asked him and his men, "what the fuck happened anyway?"

"...We were betrayed by Fendulias," he explained. "He must have tipped her off...the Gaemarians turned on us. It was a trap...and Lara had the Rhodeseans come in as insurance."

"I suspected treachery," Zara snorted and spat onto the asphalt. "I smelled it, but didn't say anything. I didn't think anyone would listen to me...I am sorry." As she finished speaking, some Rhodeseans were heard shouting and shooting in their direction. Kukavanger's men tried to hold them back with return fire, but they were severely outnumbered by hostile forces fast surrounding them. "Well fuck this shit...we need to go, and go now."

Lowering his weapon, he grinned, glad to see her unharmed. "Damn straight...get in," he told her as he looked around warily. Zara hopped into the backseat with two of Kukavanger's men, while Kukavanger sat in the passenger seat while another one of his men climbed into the driver's seat. The five of them readied their weapons as the driver slammed his foot into the gas pedal and sent the jeep flying across the pavement. Hostiles noticed this, and began unloading at the jeep. "Shoot the muthafuckas, damn it!" Kukavanger cried out.

Zara was sitting behind the driver's seat, and she kept her head down most of the time as bullets whizzed by her. When she thought she had an opportunity, she poked up with her rifle and fired it upon the enemy. The streets of Letople looked like the scene of a riot, with armed men running back and forth, screaming at each other. The sounds of small arms fire filled the night, and dead Ghantar were in no shortage.

"Shoot, guys," Zara told the other two in the backseat with her. When she looked to see what they were doing, she noticed it then. The other two men in the backseat of the jeep had taken bullets to the head, but Zara didn't notice right away. "Damnit!" she exclaimed as she popped her head up to shoot. "They're dead." Kukavanger turned his head and saw it for himself, causing him to groan.

"We will be too if we don't get da fuck outta here," he snapped back, shooting his own rifle out into the chaos of the night. "Floor it, damn you!" Kukavanger barked to the driver. The driver was going as fast as he could, and speeding through the city towards the south, in the direction of the forest, and further than that, Heilanor. The further out of the city they got, the fewer enemies there were, and the more spread out buildings became.

Just when Zara thought they were getting into the clear, the bullet whizzed by Zara's ear and struck the driver in the head. More bullets continued to shoot out from a few buildings at the jeep, hitting the doors and the windshield. Kukavanger had to lean over and take the wheel while keeping his head down, while Zara did the same in the backseat. "Damn, we just can't catch a break!" Fortunately she had not been shot, but she didn't want to assume her luck wouldn't run out.

A good thing, as it did. The jeep went soaring through the streets into the outskirts of town, into the woods. It was dark and dimly lit, and devoid of people, as they had come into the city for the event. Kukavanger still held the wheel with one hand from the passenger seat, reaching over the dead driver in order to guide the vehicle. But a combination of Kukavanger failing and the consistent speed of the vehicle had dire consequences.

As the jeep got out into the thick forested area, it went off the road, and went crashing down into the thicket below. It eventually stopped when it tapped into a tree... Zara would have been thrown from the backseat if she didn't grip the door handle, but the crash certainly did leave her jarred. She looked around, noticing that the driver and the two other bodies had been thrown from the jeep. Kukavanger was still in the passenger seat, but opened that door and pushed himself out.

Zara hopped out of the bloodied, torn up jeep and rounded it to where he was laying. The jeep was littered with bullet holes, and Kukavanger laid in the dirt clutching his side. "Come on, get up old man," she told him as she went to pick him up. "We need to get out of here...they will come looking for us." Zara helped him up to his feet, and without thinking about it, began to walk off with him into the forest.

The ruined jeep was sure to become a beacon for their enemies, so Zara and Kukavanger had to make time in order to get far enough away to where they wouldn't be easily caught. Zara feared that if they were captured, they would be killed. "...Do you think anyone else made it?" she asked him as he hobbled along with her assistance. *This is no country for old men... especially Ghantish men it seems.*

"...Only da gods know that, Zara," Kukavanger replied with strenuous breaths as he struggled to walk forward. "Damn them though... Fendulias especially. Traitorous bastard, he is... he'll pay for it."

Deep in the dark forest and some ways away from the car, Kukavanger collapsed into the dirt. He managed to haul himself over to a tree, and laid against its trunk. Clutching at his side, Zara noticed he had been hurt...he had been shot. "You've been shot...come on Kukavanger, we need to go...we can take care of that wound later. We need to keep moving."

Kukavanger shook his head as he winced and gritted his teeth. "Na, you need ta go...my time's up. Hada good run though for sure. But all things must come to an end." Looking around the darkness of the wood, he began to explain, "Zara...there's something you must know...bout me."

Zara got down on her knees beside the dying old man, and took his hand. "Anything, Kukavanger...although you should tell me while we are on the move."

"...There is no 'on the move' for me anymore, girl...this is it. I want to make peace with the Gods before I go. You should know...I was involved in the expedition that killed your parents...I'm sorry girl. Dey were rebels, and da Iron Eagle rose up to crush dem. I was there in his army...but it was the Iron Eagle that laid your mother low. Robar Roika brought down your father."

She seemed shocked by this, and for a moment her face seemed to harden. "Thank you, Kukavanger...for telling me that. They will be avenged. All the same, I forgive you."

He grabbed her by the arm and added, "ya need to go, and tell em what happened. People need ta know what happened here dis night...so ya go, Zara Thrall. Ya run ya pretty little ass off and ya don look back."

"...I will," she nodded. "Goodbye, Kukavanger Vangalish." Zara wheeled around and ran off into the forest, leaving him alone to die in peace. Once he was alone, he began to realize just how close it was to all being over for him. Kukavanger the Great Lord of Ice, and the last of his line. Word of his death would reach Izotza in time, and Izolde Grismarka, his second cousin's granddaughter, would be informed that she now ruled those lands. Yet...how would he be remembered after he was gone?

Fuck all this noise, he thought as he laid against the tree in pain, blood streaming from the holes in his abdomen where he'd been shot. He tried to avoid thinking about the pain...instead, he thought about his life. Had it been worth it? Did he make right by the Gods? His Patu he would reap, he knew...and he was ok with that.

He laid there for some time, as his body began to grow faint, and the darkness of the wood seemed to blur together. Despite all the treachery, power grabs and dishonor, he clung to the memories of his wives and his dead babes that never got the chance to live. *Perhaps it's a good thing, for what kinda world is this anyway?* Just then he looked up at the sky, and saw that the sun was rising.

Slowly around him, the darkness faded as the light of dawn shown through the trees. It was so bright...the light so warm. He could feel the warmth upon his face, and the bright white light enveloping him. Somewhere in the distance he thought he could hear laughing

children, happy and carefree. He could see the vague figures of loved ones long since passed...his two wives, his mother and father, his grandparents. Smiling, Kukavanger rose up from the ground light as a feather, and walked towards them...and into the light.

In that moment, Kukavanger realized one thing. That even though there was darkness in the world, there was light too, and that light was worth fighting for...and ultimately worth dying for. In the end it all seemed worthwhile... that his journey brought him to this one moment of absolution. He embraced it eagerly, and in doing so he finally felt free. There was no suffering anymore, no more pain and anguish. Just bliss.

He'd never felt so free in all his life.



Ghant



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"Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!" - Percy Bysshe Shelley,
Ozymandias



Mizrad
Senator

Posts: 3789
Founded: Jan 02, 2013
Ex-Nation

Downfall

by **Mizrad** » Thu Aug 03, 2017 8:52 pm



Seven months prior...

Off the Coasts of Gilesholm and Heilanor, Outside of Mizradian Landing Zones 1st Naval Theater Group Operation Downfall

This is to be what the war comes to. For every step taken, throne stolen and bullet fired all paths now lead to the coalition surrounding Lara's Empire of Zathalon. Everyone is to play their part and Mizrad is to be no exception. The first step in playing in this part has already been completed. The blockade successfully surrounded Lara and her forces, condemning them to Zathalon with little outside intervention. The attempted breakthrough by Emperor Titus in Alderaan led to another Mizradian victory having sent the fleet either retreating or to the bottom of the ocean. With the fortunate interception of a blockade runner sent from Alderaan the 1st NTG knew what they would be dealing with long before Titus thought his cover was blown. The next step was to ensure Lara made no further gains. Destinado Tierra and the Mizradian homefront, though costly, were also successful defenses. Within a matter of months the Alderaanian Navy, the Maverican military, Destinado insurrectionists and the entire nations of Teaurnai and Rhodesea have all tried and failed to take on Mizrad. The final step now is to finish off the puppeteer behind it all; Lara.

The coastlines of Gilesholm and Heilanor are pockmarked with various coastal defenses. Though numerous they are mostly impromptu emplacements put together by Lara's militias. The bulk of the perimeter put in place by the legitimate governments of the continent are already long gone thanks to the Lara's invasion causing them to be targeted and taken out or scuttled by their fleeing inhabitants. Extensive SEAD and precision strike operations in the weeks leading up to the Coalition assault have already rendered the majority of the real threats such as anti-shipping missiles or modern anti-air defenses useless as well. The bombing campaign destroyed much of what was not already taken out by Lara herself and the blockade has left the empire with no outside supplies. If Titus had managed to break through, the situation could have been much worse. Regardless, an entire continent is bound to have some sort of hidden traps. Though

unlikely to be used the weapons of mass destruction under Lara's belt are no laughing matter. Once ashore, special ops teams will be sent out to handle those pressing matters. In the meantime the fleet can mount it's own volley of ordnance.

Anyone on shore looking out to the invasion fleet would have a chance of seeing but a tiny grey speck on a good day. Undoubtedly what little radar capability the empire possessed would surely have detected the massive fleet. This brings Admiral Talden little to worry about. His fleet possesses enough amassed firepower to bring down anything the defenders could muster to throw at the ships. On the other hand, the fleet is preparing to launch it's own weapons. The various cruisers, destroyers, submarines, frigates and so on that have been stuck waiting at general quarters for days finally get to put their weapons to use. The same plan of where and when to strike has been hashed and rehashed for the entirety of the journey to the continent. While the Ausitorians were busy wreaking havoc in southern Heilanor the Mizradians are to set to glass the coastline and land ten thousand men in a single wave. All they need now is the green light.

"Bridge this is CIC"

"This is bridge go CIC."

"The Ausitorians have begun their final bombardment, Operation Downfall is a go."

"Copy CIC, this is Admiral Talden you are clear to begin first phase. Bridge out."

Clear to begin first phase. A single sentence is all that is necessary to launch enough munitions to turn the coast into an endless field of craters. From around the fleet the first volley of ballistic and guided missiles is launched. Every single weapon in the fleet's arsenal bar WMD's are pointed to their targets along the coast and launched. The Illuminati and Mason class subs send up countless tomahawks and ballistic missiles from the depths. Back on the surface, the VLS cells of the destroyers and other guided missile capable ships open up and launch their payload. The cannons capable of making landfall begin unloading shells on any suspected enemy position. The first volley of precision strikes is designed to destroy both defenses and vital infrastructure ranging from bunkers, troop encampments to gas lines and dams. Sending a defensive QRF would be rather hard for Lara with all her bridges and roads washed out. The Mizradians on the other hand care little. An AAV or LAV doesn't need land let alone a paved road. The only issue is that corridors for heavy equipment to pass through to the front are still in existence. This issue also has a solution. Coalition airpower based either off the carriers or from Naybra are on call for quick and accurate close air support.

East of Heilanor, Southeast of Mizradian Target Landing Zones Strategic Bomber Wing, Fighter Escort Squadron Joint Mission Operation Downfall

The War of the Two Empresses, now dragging into another month, has broken all sorts of barriers. All sorts of old boundaries and rules have been thrown out due to the wide range of events that have taken place over the past months. What this means for the Mizradian Air Force among other things is that they can load up their strategic bombers and send them out to fight a conventional enemy.

Asymmetrical warfare, even in polite terms, is a pain in the ass for a developed modern air force. If your target decides to hide in a village full of farmers while wearing civilian clothing there isn't much a pilot can do about it. It then becomes the problem of some unfortunate grunt who must go door to door trying to find said target.

Conventional warfare on the other hand is an entirely different story. The targets wear uniforms and tend to congregate around each other in formations. Now the pilot needs not call his infantry buddies on the ground but can instead dust off the many colorful buttons in his cockpit and proceed to drop millions of dollars worth of ordnance right on top of whatever poor bastards decided not to call in sick

that day. For Lieutenant Colonel Bradley Simmons the time to dust off the trigger gets closer by the minute.

"Squadron, be advised we are now entering hostile airspace. Enemy defenses still assumed light if any. Ausitorian forces report large gatherings of enemy QRF on the ground heading towards the landing zones."

He declares to his fellow pilots in the squadron. A brief few seconds pass by and he switches over to his communications channel with the Mizradian invasion force CIC.

"Overlord this is Tropico we have entered AO and are on call for tasking, over."

A brief second passes and the ship's CIC responds.

"Tropico this is Overlord we copy, as expected there is continuous enemy troop movement on the ground to the rear of the beachhead. You are clear to engage any and all combatants within the AO. Overlord out."

Simmons returns to the squadron's channel.

"Squadron proceed to target zone west of the landing zone and line up for weapons release, break."

The pilots acknowledge their leader and continue barreling towards their targets. The planes descend low enough to easily be spotted by anyone on the ground. Although not particularly close to the ground, the thunderous roar and the sight of a wing of B-52's dropping hundreds of thousands of pounds of bombs over Lara's forces would be enough to make any sane man question his decision to fight the coalition. As the squadron comes over their target, a buildup of enemy troops in an outcropping behind the front line that had survived the first volley, Simmons gets back on the radio.

"Prepare for weapons release"

The doors on the belly of the fuselage of each B-52 open up and reveal a plethora of carpet bomb munitions.

"Ten seconds.... five..... weapons away."

On Simmons' order the pilots release their bombs and the explosives free fall towards the target. Shell after shell deploys from the internal rotary bays of the bombers as they soar above the helpless militiamen. Once clear of their payload and with a multi-mile section of Gilesholm now turned to ash the bomb bays close back up and the pilots begin regaining speed. To add to the shock and awe of their operation the bombers and their escorts gain speed and break the sound barrier right over the heads of the defenders before ascending to a safer altitude and returning to their base in Naybra.

"Tropico is RTB, solid work ladies and gentlemen."

Simmons takes a sigh of relief as his squadron gets further and further from the danger zone. A job well done and nobody was shot down. To his dismay he acknowledges the issue that once the element of surprise disappears the B-52's would be in far more danger. Yet this issue is easily solved by the presence of B-1B and B-8 supersonic strategic bombers, whom as if on cue fly thousands of feet over Tropico squadron and barrel towards their targets with precision munitions. The bombing campaign is just getting started and the morning Sun has yet to even show up.

Mizradian Landing Zones
2nd Marine Division, 1st Naval Theater Group
Operation Downfall

"Rise and shine motherfuckers it's D-Day!"

Screams a gunnery sergeant from inside the marine berthing quarters MNS *Gerald Daughtry*, a Wasp class assault ship. As the Sun rises so do the marines of the fleet. Unlike most of the sailors they had been given a proper night's sleep. This only makes sense, a good deal of them might be going to sleep forever in only a few short hours. Despite the extra sleep the grunts remain just as miserable and angry as always. From the bottom bunk of his rack, Sergeant Dre Fargo stares up at the bed above him. The grey painted springs keeping the mattress up were all he had to stare at for the past eight hours. Others may have slept but Dre could not quite bring himself to shut his eyes. Once again he would charge into the fray, one last time. The young sergeant finds himself deeply concerned with getting both himself and his men through the day alive. Fargo takes a moment to compose himself and then climbs out from his rack and rushes to throw on his uniform. After four years in the unit the yelling to get up in the morning and the need to quickly get gear on, these things have become pretty easy to deal with. Within a few minutes Dre and his fellow marines have thrown on their uniforms, boots and gone about their hygiene or other such morning routines. In an organized rush the complement of marines on board file into the multiple mess halls.

"Morning sergeant."

Corporal Brian Swenson says while standing next to the sergeant in line for chow.

"Swenson... better eat your veggies you've got a big day ahead of you."

Dre says with a grin, attempting to poke fun at his friend. The two grab their trays full of food and take a seat over with other members of their platoon. Fargo and Swenson take a seat next to Private Cuarenta and PFC Khaled Hayes. They all say their hellos but eat relatively quiet compared to their usual levels of chatter. Breakfast wraps up and the men head back to their quarters to gather up any gear they need their before heading over to other sections of the ship to prepare the rest of their equipment. Before the Sun has completely risen the marines across the fleet have already been up for about an hour performing final preparations for the invasion. From topping off the fuel tanks in aircraft and vehicles to tightening boot laces the finishing touches are put on things designated for use in the invasion.

Only a short time to go. The men begin shuffling down into their positions across the fleet. Pilots, drivers, infantry and so on queue up to get into place. Below the decks in the assault ships and fleet carriers the vehicles all get ready to deploy. LAV's and AAV's take their place in the flood bays and the non-amphibious vehicles roll on to LCAC's and LST's. The infantry board their transports and wait patiently for the order to go. Back on the flight decks the helicopters and VTOL's start up their rotors and troops load themselves in. All the while seaborne jets keep up their bombing runs of targets on shore. As zero hour approaches the bays fill with water and the chopper doors slam shut. Over the loudspeaker, Admiral Talden delivers a message.

"My fellow Mizradians I stand here today with you as we commence our great crusade to flush out the evil that at this very moment is attempting to spread through the world. I need not give you an elaborate speech. You have all personally witnessed and experienced the pain caused by this war we find ourselves in. Today we are presented with an opportunity to bring an end to the pain and bring to justice those who have caused. Good luck and God speed, may we all move forward unto victory."

Upon finishing his speech the radio channels immediately light up with orders to move. The first wave of choppers take to the sky and the the first AAV's propel themselves into the open ocean all headed towards the beach. Sergeant Fargo and his squad file into the rear of an AAV and they take their seats. The platoon leader, Lieutenant Dean Cobral, climbs in and the rear ramp closes up. The sunshine

outside fades away and the red interior lighting takes over.

"This is it gentlemen, let's go get this shit."

Cobral states with confidence. The platoon, trying to suppress their anxiety, all respond with a customary

"Rah"

Before drifting back into silence. The driver moves his foot on to the gas pedal and they move into the water. The men inside feel the vehicle shift from the safety of the ship's flood bay into the open ocean. Fargo lifts his Cross kisses it, then tucking it back into under his blouse. A few of the marines throw up on to the deck. Cobral attempts to pen a few more words on to what the others assume is an "if I don't make it" letter and tucks it into his vest. The assistant driver finally breaks the silence.

"Sixty seconds!"

More men cross themselves or perform other religious rituals and some simply just take a deep breath. Private Cuarenta speaks his mind outloud.

"Man fuck these royal assholes, let's end this shit now and get home. I'mma kill every one of these motherfuckers and send a crown home to my grandma. Rah?"

Fargo and the others pipe up.

"Fuck 'em!"

The platoon hype themselves up but reality quickly checks in when the gunner opens up with his machine gun and 40mm grenade launcher. From outside the hull the sounds of explosions, screams, gunfire and waves are easily audible.

"Ten seconds! I'll see you boys soon, Hoo Rah!"

The jolt of the AAV coming ashore knocks the crew and the complement of marines around and after a brief drive up the beach the vehicle comes to a halt.

"Drop the ramp!"

Cobral gives the order to go and within seconds, the rear ramp drops and the platoon scrambles out. The light from the morning sun bursts into the cabin as the men inside burst out. Above their heads a pair of F-18's scream by and dump their payload over the defenders. Before the men even have time to address the chaos around them they begin taking fire. No more than few meters to their left the sister platoon's AAV gets knocked before the marines can deploy. All the hatches blow up and men clambor out on fire. Their screams pierce the ears of Fargo, who was the closest to the blast. Cobral makes his way over under heavy fire and provides suppressing fire with Cuarenta, the machine gunner, as Fargo and a few more men rush to the aid of their fellow marines. The platoon to their right finds themselves more fortunate as they begin pushing further up the beach.

"Where are the fucking LAV's? We need ground support!"

Screams Cobral as he takes cover in a crater with a few more men.

"Sir! 2nd LAR is on the way with cavalry suppo-"

Before the radioman can finish his sentence he's pegged in the chest with a bullet. The other troops in the crater come to his aid for a moment before a nearby corpsman rushes in to take over. Finally the first wave is supported by the LAV-25's that come ashore in force. Their marines disembark and assist those already on shore. The LAV's then speed towards the bluffs between the Mizradians and the

enemy to lay down fire support with their 25mm cannons. Back up in the sky, more accurate fire support is able to be called in due to finally having boots on the ground. The sight of B-52's heading further inland to destroy QRF battalions brings back any confidence lost due to the hail of gunfire the 2nd Division had just sustained.

"Move up! Move up! Get to the bluffs!"

Screams Cobral as he and his platoon maneuver to cover. The thousands of other troops deployed across the beachhead slowly but surely gain a foothold as they take out the defenses put in place by Lara's army. As the defenders begin to get beaten back the LAV's and AAV's vault the bluffs with the marines in pursuit giving adequate support for the LCAC's to come ashore.

"Now it's a party! Make way for the armor!"

Fargo calls out to his squad as the Panther tanks roll off the LCAC's and towards the enemy. In support of the invasion the fleet continues a rolling barrage with missile and cannon strikes that force anything in their path to either take cover or eat the brunt of an explosion. Operation Downfall is in full effect.

Government Center, New Boston, Mizrad
President Ryan West
A Statement on the Current Status of Hemithea

The average presidential address comes about a few times a year and on a strict schedule. Only during times of dire circumstances does the president personally address a situation. Sure, a secretary or minister of some department may make a statement on an event but getting the president of Mizrad to come outside and face the nation in both a live crowd and international news is certainly something. This situation however is one of those "dire circumstances". President West steps up to the podium and clears his throat. The crowd goes silent and everyone pays attention.

"My fellow Mizradians, people of Hemithea, the world; I stand here today to deliver the message of the Mizradian people. The brave members of our armed forces have commenced the invasion of the Empire of Zathalon. The downfall of the evil empire created by Empress Lara and her associates will be no longer. Mizrad and her mighty allies have come together in a coalition to destroy this evil wherever it rears its ugly head. We have fought this war on many fronts. Mizradian blood has been spilled on far away foreign shores and even on this beautiful patch of land we call home. However being a Mizradian isn't about simply having a patch of land or being born in it. It is about upholding the ideals of freedom and democracy around the world. This is a task that we take very seriously and take pride in doing. From our own lands, to Destinado Tierra, to Maverica, to Teaumai and Firmador we have shed blood. Yet the tragedy of losing some of our brave men and women is the price of freedom. Now I ask you all to support one more push to rid Hemithea of the evil that makes us pay for our freedom. On the shores of Gilesholm, to the palaces of Letople, to the castles of Ghant and to the bunkers in Rhodesea we will fight. Lara, Kruger, Nathan, Titus. The Make no mistake, the Mizradians are coming. You cannot run and you cannot hide. We will find you and we will bring you to justice."

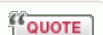
Short enough, simple enough and informative enough. Mizrad's place in the War of the Two Empresses is now set in stone.

"No good decision was ever made in a swivel chair" -George Patton
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News Media Network member



by **Ghant** » Mon Sep 04, 2017 6:00 pm



Part III, Ch. VI
"The Battle of Ghish"
Ghish, Ghant

"Sacrifice is a part of life. It's supposed to be. It's not something to regret. It's something to aspire to." — Mitch Albom, The Five People You Meet in Heaven

Sophia of Dakmoor felt a great sense of unease. The ground beneath her feet was covered in a thick blanket of snow, and the glum grey sky above sprinkled more of it down in swirls from ominous clouds. The so called "Ghish Square" was once a magnificent public forum, nestled between the Imperial and Government Palaces, and the Great Temple of Ghish. *Now it's a dark and dreary place*, the princess thought.

In spite of her long fur cloak and insulated hood, the snow still somehow managed to creep into her long black hair, adorning it like a white tiara. Even still it managed to creep into her dark mitts, causing her fair hands to tingle. Yet, it was not the cold of the late afternoon, nor the snow upon her tender flesh that made her shiver. Beyond the gloomy sanctity of the city square, trash fires burned while desperate figures gathered around them for warmth. Many of them men with ragged beards, women with gaunt faces and children that seldom knew better days. *All victims, no doubt awaiting a grim fate...*

The Great Temple of Ghish was large from a distance, but grew even larger still upon approach. It's old stone columns were cracked and weathered, it's great doors seemed crooked and the stained glass windows distorted into strange images that Sophia could not recognize. The princess did not stop her somber march towards the main entrance, nor did the Iron Eagle's guards that trailed her, trudging through the snow behind.

It may as well been night outside, dark as it was within the Great Temple's interior. The lights burned low and dimly, while holy men proved few and far between. *There are more of Albert's guards here than there are men of the cloth*, Sophia noted, as she stepped inside and lowered her hood, shaking her hair loose of excess snow. When she removed her mitts, Sophia put her hands near a burning brazier, and noticed the stinging sensation that shot through her fingers.

There were many great halls, fantastical shrines, modest churches and places of worship within the bowels of the temple, but there was one in particular that Sophia of Dakmoor sought out. *It has been too long*, she realized as she made her way down the empty hall, on gentle feet that muffled across the floor below. The guards behind her clanked their sturdy boots across the ground, causing a great echo to fill the vast and empty chambers.

It was as she remembered it, the last time she had been there. Foreigners often called it the Norcross Church, though within Ghant it was

called Ipargurutze, that strange Christian denomination originating in Dakmoor. The chapel was empty, rows of seats bleak, the shrine long since deserted and left to fade away. A few candles at the altar burned low, their wax spilling out in dried pools onto the floor. At the end of the aisle stood tall the Great Wolf statue, lurching forward on his two back paws, and the front two making the sign of the cross. All around him, the winter winds howled. *Like wolves.*

Sophia walked up to the Great Wolf statue, and knelt. She began to pray, and it was the same prayer that she prayed the last time she was there...

Dear god, I know that I've made wrong decisions. I'm sorry for the suffering that they've caused people. Don't let them endure such pain on account of my actions. Please protect the people of Zathalon. Please protect the people of Ghant. Please forgive the Emperor, and deliver him into your arms.

She thought about what was soon to happen, and wanted to cry. Though she couldn't, because the time for tears had past, and now she had to be strong. The Iron Eagle was kind enough to include Sophia in his meetings of state with Maeson Margela and the rest of his cronies that comprised the government of late. Ghant, and indeed, most of the world was in a state of war, and very much in shambles. National troops were spread far and wide, dealing with uprisings and various insurrections, most notably Gaemar, which had unleashed itself upon Ghant just as it had in the days of old.

Indeed, once already Gaemar, openly allied with Lara, had attacked Ghish. Though the attempt to capture the capital failed, Gaemar only expended a portion of its strength, and the city was left in a much weakened state. *And Gaemar is coming back*, Sophia knew from the intelligence shared at Albert's meetings. *Stronger than before.* Albert was doing what he could to ready the capital for that event, but men and defenses were weak...it would be, in his words, *"a fight to the man."*

As Sophia was on her knees praying before the Great Wolf effigy, subtle footsteps echoed upon the floor behind her. She turned her head to look, past the empty pews and the idling guards. It was there, cloaked in shadow, that she saw the northern seer. Esmeralda approached, clad in her long, flowing black robes as always, while only the pale white flesh of her hands and face were revealed, the latter partially concealed by her hair as black as night. Her eyes sparkled a brilliant violet, as rich as amethyst.

The Princess of Dakmoor watched the northerner approach, and did not speak nor stir as she closed in. Esmeralda stopped beside the princess, and then she too came down to her knees, and looked on towards the Great Wolf of the Ipargurutze. "...I did not think that the Jainkozahar engaged in Christian prayers,"

Sophia remarked quietly to the other woman, who was older but still quite handsome, if a woman could be described in such a way.

Esmeralda smirked, and said that "Even the false churches have shreds of truth to them. The Ipargurutze especially so." The Jainkozahar were the keepers of the Old Gods, strongest in the north and becoming fewer in number the further south one went in Ghant. Those were the gods of the wilds, of the various aspects of the world, nameless and innumerable. Some claimed to have divine powers on their behalf, such as this Esmeralda, who among the northern tribals was a seer of sorts. *Or a witch to those of the south...*

"...And what truths might those be?" wondered Sophia aloud, as she looked on at the altar before her.

"That there is an eternal struggle between opposites. Good versus Evil, Light versus Darkness, Truth versus Lies, Warmth versus Cold, so on and so forth. One side never truly prevails over the other, and that shall never come to pass. For where is one, there must also be the other, for if not, then how will we ever know one from the other?" explained the seer casually.

A philosopher, I see. The Princess arched an eyebrow. "Then what's the point, if good will never prevail over evil?"

"To prevail is not the point," the seer pointed out. "Balance is the goal. When the evil in the world has grown too great, it must be reduced, because it can never truly be eradicated. Contained, perhaps, but not vanquished altogether."

Sophia nodded soberly. *That's quite the shame.* "And that prophecy of yours...is that a restoration of balance, then?"

The northern seer inclined her head. "Yes it is...for it is evident that there is a grave imbalance that upsets the world. It shall be restored, rest assured."

How optimistic. The princess looked at the great wolf statue that towered above her, supposedly receiving her prayers. Then she ever so slightly turned her head to Esmeralda and asked, "the prophecy...care to repeat it?"

With a faint smirk, Esmeralda closed her eyes and grew still, followed by a silence that lasted a few moments. Then her prophecy was revealed once more.

"The Soldiers shall be scattered like smoke,
And the Lords shall succumb to madness.
The Sword shall be drawn too late,
The Eagle shall bathe in its own blood,
The Wolf shall fall into its shadow,
The Dragon shall with two heads devour its
children,
The Leopard shall witness a miracle,
The Bleeding Roses shall bloom once more,
And the Dark One shall bring forth the night

upon entering the world.
A thousand lands shall be rent with fire,
And even the Immortals shall tremble,
For there will be no haven but the night,
No safety without fury,
No peace until the ashes grow cold."

That could mean a great many things, Sophia thought after she listened. *And it's so very cryptic*. Few of those things seemed to have even taken place yet, and the rest could be interpreted differently depending on the person in question. "...And how many of those have happened already?" she asked the northerner with an arched eyebrow.

"Two," Esmeralda answered swiftly. "The warriors of the world are scattered throughout, lost in all their wars. The lords of Ghant have grown mad, from those in Zathalon to your father and the Gaemarians...the next sign is upon us, however."

Is it now? "Oh, and which one might that be?" Sophia almost let out a chuckle, but she contained it. "Did you come all the way here to regale me on your visions?"

Giving Sophia a severe look, Esmeralda shook her head slowly, and exhaled deeply. "No, my princess...I came to see the sign."

"...What sign?" The Princess looked at the seer with a look of bewilderment. Before Esmeralda could answer, Sophia heard a faint noise emanating from far off in the distance. There were booms and blasts, causing the ground to shake. Pieces of dust and debris fell from the ceiling of the Great Temple, and the guards present began to stir with weapons drawn.

Then the sirens came. The guards that were with Sophia scattered, leaving the chapel on hurried feet with rifles in hand, causing Sophia to stand up wide-eyed while Esmeralda rose casually from the ground. "The time has come," she told the Princess.

Sophia looked around, unable to summon spoken words. *...the time has come...* She felt it before she heard it. The explosion rocked the Great Temple's exterior façade, causing parts of it to come apart. It was struck so violently that the Great Wolf statue began to teeter over. Sophia and Esmeralda had to step aside as it fell forward, down into its own shadow. When it broke upon the floor, it crashed among the rows of pews, shattering the wood and causing pieces of them to shoot out. Broken fragments of the Great Wolf now laid upon the darkened floor, with the head shrouded in its own shadow, its empty eyes staring at Sophia.

The Princess's ears rang with a constant, undying noise, and she staggered across the floor away from the chapel. "We must leave," Esmeralda said sternly as she grabbed the Princess by the arm. "It is not safe here." Sophia could only go meekly along, still staggered and stunned. Esmeralda however seemed unfazed, and moved quickly upon sure

feet with the Princess of Dakmoor in hand.

Back at the entrance to the Great Temple, Sophia could see that the sky was a grim shade of grey, dark and ominously overcast. The snow was still falling, though now it seemed to whirl on account of strong winds. Esmeralda ran from the course stone floor of the Great Temple out into the snow, her shoes crunching against the blanket of snow beneath her feet. Sophia breathed in the brisk winter air, letting it fill her lungs. It seemed to reinvigorate her enough to become more aware of her surroundings.

The sirens rang heavy in the winter air, with the orchestra of warfare playing amidst its persistence. There were sounds of gunfire, the explosions of bombs, tanks and machines of war, all contributing to a violent crescendo as men ran to and fro in the city square and beyond. Citizens that before had warmed their gaunt hands over dismal garbage fires now fled hysterically, some with children and some without, leaving them wailing in the alleys. Jeeps and armored vehicles loaded up with soldiers drove out into the snowy city, ready to meet their enemies and more than likely, their doom.

"Imperial Palace," Esmeralda snapped at the Princess. "That is where we must go. That is the safest place for us. To the catacombs...we can hide there."

Sophia, stunned at the suddenness of the battle, shook her head firmly. "No...we must go to Albert," she countered. "Albert has a plan... he's always prepared. He will know what to do."

Esmeralda nodded her reluctant agreement, and then the two women continued on across the square. Sophia looked to the north, and in the distance she saw them. Great banners bearing the standards of Gaemar, mixed with the Dragons of Zathalon, twisted and black. Fires erupted over the horizon where buildings burned, and Sophia could hear men shouting, and others screaming. *This is hell*, she thought. *Hell has come to us.*

Guards were pouring forth from the Imperial Palace as Esmeralda and Sophia arrived, having ran across the snow-covered Imperial Square to get there. The guards, recognizing the two women, didn't intercept them, but rather just let them enter the palace while they continued on their way. Many of them had been running hastily out of the palace towards their vehicles in order to engage the enemy, leaving only a few to guard the palace.

Sophia knew the way, and rather than let Esmeralda lead her like she did before, they ran beside one another to the throne room. Along the way they encountered more guards running in the opposite direction as they, while others remained at their posts, looks of anxiety and anticipation on their faces. Sophia could still hear rumblings in the distance, and no doubt they could too. *They all know what's*

coming...

The doors to the throne room were closed, and heavily guarded by a dozen of Albert's elite guard. They knew who Sophia was, however, and allowed her and Esmeralda in. It was there in the throne room that Sophia and Esmeralda saw the Iron Eagle himself, perched upon his roost. The Obsidian Throne was no comfortable seat, but Albert didn't seem mind the discomfort, or the heavy iron crown that sat upon his head. He leaned back against the throne, with his war hammer laying atop his lap, resting against his thighs.

"Lord Protector," Sophia called out, panting as she tried to catch her breath. "They are here. Marius of Gaemar has returned with his strength to bear."

The Iron Eagle didn't respond immediately, rather wiggling his lips as though he was annoyed and deep in thought. "I know...it was only a matter of time."

"What shall we do, then?" she asked him swiftly as she recomposed herself. "Should we go downstairs, and into the catacombs?"

Albert's eyes closed, and he exhaled a deep breath. "No, Sophia...not the catacombs. If Marius takes the palace, that's where he will look for you, and rest assured, he will find you." After saying that, he turned his head to the right, and gestured towards the next hallway. "Go that way, to the roof. The palace is being evacuated. A helicopter will take you and the seer safely away into the north. What remains of the northern lords are friends of mine, and they will look after you, until come what may."

"...But what about you?" Sophia asked pleadingly. "You can't stay here..."

"I can," Albert snapped. "And I will. I will not run like a coward or cower like a beat dog before my foe. This is my home, child. This is where I am from, where I grew up. I made my life here, and so help me God, I will make my grave here, if that's what fate awaits me. If Marius wants this throne, he can come and take it from me. He will not win it so easily."

You damned fool. "This country and our people need you alive, Albert. I urge you to reconsider before it's too late." Sophia felt as though as she was kicking a dead horse, but alas, she felt compelled to get him to change his mind. *Stubborn old man.*

For the first time in a long time, if not ever, Sophia witness Albert smile. He said that "No, it doesn't. It never did, child...and it's already too late. My story has been written, my history defined. In spite of that, I will write my final page, consequences be damned. Now go... you don't have much time..."

The blasts rang louder. *No...they've reached the square,* Sophia realized as she heard the music of war grow louder still. The building

began to shake, as pieces of stone and debris began to fall from the tall ceiling. Sophia continued to look on at Albert, who sat there upon the throne with a look of sheer rage upon his weathered face, his hands gripping his hammer tight.

"Go!" he shouted at Sophia, before turning to the infamous Knight of Skulls. "Ser Toregg, please see Princess Sophia and the Seer Esmeralda to the roof."

The Knight of Skulls nodded, and as the towering warrior clad in lavish armor adorned with bones took a step towards Sophia, another loud blast sounded off, the impact rocking the palace. The impact was so great that a part of the roof gave way, letting in the snow and the light, while a massive column collapsed in on itself, crashing down onto the floor and taking another down with it on the other side of the room. The second column crashed through the wall behind it and little by little pieces of the roof began to fall. One unfortunate guard was crushed beneath a falling piece, and more snow began to fall down into the throne room, the light poking through where the ceiling once was.

Everyone seemed staggered aside from the Iron Eagle and the seer, the former staring off into the distant void ahead, and the seer beginning to drag Sophia towards the hallway that lead up to the roof. There were more explosions going off around them, and fires breaking out. Tapestries were burning, men were shouting orders or crying as they were being crushed to death beneath the weight of the slabs of marble and stone pinning them to the floor. Albert watched it all, not disconcerted in the slightest.

Just as Sophia found her footing again and began shaking off her state of disorientation, the doors on the far side of the throne room flew open. Guards were scrambling to keep whoever was coming out, but they were mowed down by rifles and swords. With bombs continuing to go off all around them, and the constant noise of small arms fire ringing everywhere, a shadowy figure with a large number of armed men walking behind him stepped forward, over burning debris, bloodied corpses, ruined columns and patches of dirty snow.

Emerging from the darkness was that same wicked man that Sophia once maimed. Tall, slender and strong, with short dark red hair and one burning green eye, Marius of Gaemar walked purposefully towards the Obsidian Throne, clad in dark green armor with a black dragon upon the chest. Half of his face was a burned, scarred mess where Sophia shattered a burning oil lamp against his face, and one eye was missing, having been burned so bad that it had to be removed. Now there was just a menacing black pit.

Marius approached the throne, and then he came to stop at its feet. He exchanged glances with the Iron Eagle, the Knight of

Skulls and Sophia, scowling ruthlessly at the last before turning his gaze to Albert. "Your city folded like a house of cards before me," he boasted with confidence. "Your family is dead, your house extinguished, hunted like dogs and assassinated. Your city is in ruins, its people burned, or cut down. There is nothing left for you now, Albert. Surrender your throne, relinquish your crown, and give me the White Rose of Dakmoor, and I *might* let you live."

Looking down at Marius with a contemptuous expression, Albert replied, "You came all this way, able to do all that...and yet you ask me to submit to you. Sounds like it would be very easy for you to just kill me and take what you want, and yet you ask me to give it. Maybe that's because you don't think you can. Afraid of a real challenge, *boy*? Scared of a true fight? You're a coward, just like your father. I should have killed you while I had the chance," snorted the Lord Protector.

Listening to this, Marius laughed. "How completely and utterly useless your cause is. You cannot defeat the Dragon of Zathalon. No one can. She shall rule the world, and all the other words that are and shall ever be. Her power is too great for anyone to overcome. Even you, Albert of Gbant. Submit to her, swear to her service, and you shall have a place in her new world. All the things that you could want, hope for or dream of, they shall be yours."

Albert glanced at Sophia, who listened to everything that had been said in terror. Indeed she was shaking, sensing the danger present and the acid in Marius's words. The Iron Eagle nodded slightly, before returning his gaze to Marius. "What I want you, or Lara of Zathalon cannot give me. What I want is what I already have, and I cannot give it to you. Marius, you've come to my city, caused great destruction, death and chaos, then you make threats and speak of submission. You will not have it from me, and you're nothing to me but another traitor, who will suffer a traitor's death."

Laughing again, Marius took another step forward, and his twisted visage grew even more evil, somehow uglier in appearance. "I'm done wasting my time with you, Albert. I'm going to ask you one more time. What's it going to be, Lord Protector of Gbant? Are you ready to swear your undying allegiance to your new Overlords?"

Giving him a long look, Albert leaned forward and spat, the wad flying down the steps and landing at Marius's feet. "Get on with it, boy."

Marius turned to his men and gestured towards the throne. "Bring me the Iron Eagle's head." Four men rushed forward with swords drawn, attempting to charge up the steps of the throne towards the Lord Protector. The Knight of Skulls stepped away from Sophia and practically leaped at them with his own battleaxe drawn. He brought it down on the head of one of the Gaemarians, cutting him in

half from his brain down to his groin, sending viscera and blood flying out and spraying the other men. Then with a sideways slash, he cut two more in half at the midsection. The last one tried to spar with him, but the Knight of Skulls was too large and too fast, grabbing the man by his head and crushing it with just one hand.

The other men of Gaemar stood back, stepping away from the grisly scene as the Knight of Skulls wiped brain and bits of skull and flesh off his gauntlet. More of Albert's men began to emerge, appearing emboldened by this development. They too drew their weapons, while Sophia and Esmeralda looked on and while Albert kept himself perched upon his throne.

With a smirk, Marius threw back his cloak and reached for a weapon on his belt. "I don't have time for this." Marius drew forth from his belt a hilt, but with no weapon. Yet then it appeared as though he pressed a button on it, and a narrow blade emerged, punctured by holes in the steel. Suddenly there was the smell and the hint of gas, and the blade let out arcs of electricity. The gas seemed to catch fire, and the blade was thusly surrounded by what appeared to be a combination of fire and electricity.

Laughing, Marius said loudly, "I warned you, the power of the Red Dragon is too great. This weapon is but one of her many tools, this... plasma sword," he exclaimed as he held the weapon out and in front of him. Staring down the Knight of Skulls, Marius charged at him with the weapon in hand.

The Knight of Skulls swung his axe at Marius, but the latter proved too fast, dodging the blow. Perhaps against a normal weapon, the knight's armor would block the attack. Yet, this weapon struck the great knight *through his armor*, causing him to reel from the impact. Marius struck the knight again while staggered, causing him to fall to the ground. Circling around the knight now prone on his back, Marius dropped the plasma sword through his helm, and the Knight of Skulls was dead.

Albert grunted, and quickly rose from his throne with his warhammer in hand. He turned to Sophia and cried out, "Fly, my little white rose." Then he charged down the steps of the Obsidian Throne and met Marius in single combat, his warhammer against Marius's wicked plasma sword. The rest of Albert's remaining men charged forward and met Marius's men in battle.

Esmeralda once again grabbed Sophia's arm, and together the two of them ran into the hall. Parts of it were on fire, flames licking the walls and floors while plumes of smoke rose and escaped through holes in the walls where bombs and debris blew gaps. The hallways were devoid of people, though Sophia could hear Gaemarian soldiers outside, shouting orders and trampling through the snow in their boots.

The two women eventually arrived at the stairs, and began to run up, past the second floor and onto the third floor. That was when she could hear him, calling out to her below. "Sophia!" Marius screamed. "You cannot run from me! Come to me, make this easy. The longer it takes for me to get to you, the longer I'm going to take killing you!"

Oh no, Sophia shuddered at the thought of Albert being dead. *Marius got him...* she stood there for a minute, stunned, before Esmeralda pulled on her arm. "Keep going...don't stop now." The Princess of Dakmoor went meekly along, while tears filled her eyes at the thought of the Iron Eagle lying dead on the floor of the throne room. *He could have gave me to Marius*, she realized. *But he didn't...*

The third floor was in worse shape than the second or first. Here, large swaths of the ceiling were gone, rubble and debris piled up in the hallways and collapsed rooms, and fires raged throughout. The way to the roof access was partially blocked, though together Sophia and Esmeralda were able to climb and crawl their way through the hallway, avoiding the fires and plumes of smoke rising from the burning ruins.

Before them were the steps leading up to the roof, and together they ran up and pushed the door open. What Sophia saw shocked her. All around her in every direction, buildings were burning, with great fires licking the sky above. Helicopters and planes filled the skies, while bombs fell on the city causing great explosions. The sirens were out now, leaving only the booms of explosions, dying men and small arms fire.

The roof of the palace consisted of many great chimney tops, air conditioning units and signal towers, though many of them had been ruined. Gaping holes in the roof dropped down into the third and second floors, and fires bellowed from the open wounds. At various points the roof's surface made noises where it was about to give way, and great fissures and cracks drew their way across the floor beneath Sophia's feet.

Ahead of them was a great helicopter, where the last of a number of people and supplies were being loaded. "Wait," Sophia called out to them, prompting them to look out in astonishment at Sophia and Esmeralda. "Don't leave us."

From within the helicopter emerged a familiar face. Maeson Margela stepped out, and down onto the snowy ruin of the palace roof. The short man with beady eyes and neatly combed hair offered a slight smile at the two of them. "Your Highness," he said to Sophia. "I was wondering if you'd make it." Then he turned to the seer and simply said, "seer."

"I almost didn't," the princess replied as she closed in on the helicopter. "Ghish has fallen. Marius has taken the palace...Albert...I fear he

is dead. Quickly, we must go! Marius is coming!"

"Of course." Maeson took a step back, hanging halfway out of the helicopter, and his arm outstretched. "Come now, we don't have much time, then...do we?"

Something's not right. Sophia and Esmeralda ran up to the helicopter and began to climb in. "Thank you, Mr. Margela...for waiting for us."

"Of course," Maeson smirked as he took Sophia's arm, while Esmeralda climbed up on her own. He turned to the pilot and yelled, "let's go!" After a few seconds, the helicopter lifted itself off the roof. Then he returned his gaze to Sophia, staring into her deep blue eyes. "I'm sorry," he told her.

"...for what?" she asked him, as she could feel his grip tighten on her arm.

"...for this." With the helicopter hovering over the roof, Maeson let go of Sophia's arm and gave her a kick in the stomach, causing her to fall from the helicopter. Esmeralda, still clinging to the helicopter door and only halfway inside, screamed "no!" Almost immediately, she tried to reach out and grab Maeson by the arm.

"Oh, don't worry witch, I haven't forgotten about you and your stupid fucking prophecies." Maeson drew a pistol from under his coat and shot Esmeralda in the stomach, causing her to let go of the helicopter door and go crashing down onto the roof of the palace. Like the Princess, she landed on her back, clutching at the bullet hole in her gut.

Maeson looked down at them as the helicopter continued to rise into the air. "Marius wants you, Sophia...you're more trouble than your worth. He can have you," he shouted at them. "May the Gods receive you with open arms." That was the last thing he said to them before the helicopter was too far up.

Screaming, Sophia clinched her teeth as she clung to her leg, burning and throbbing in pain. "Curse you, Maeson Margela! You fucking coward!" she screamed, before noticing Esmeralda lying in a pool of blood, clutching at her bloodied dress. "Esmeralda..." Sophia stammered through the pain. "It'll be alright..."

Esmeralda groaned in pain, wiggling and breathing hard. "I know the manner of my death," she informed the princess. "It draws ever near...don't worry about me. Look to the north, where the Golden Sun shall signify the Dawn."

"There's no time for that," Sophia said with a broken voice, tears streaming down her face. She tried to stand, but her leg and lower back wouldn't let her. "We need to get out of here... we must escape."

Coughing, Esmeralda murmured, "there is no escape...not from this..."

Behind them, on the other side of the roof, the door burst open from the third floor. Out stepped Marius, with his plasma sword in hand. The wind made his hair and his cape flutter about, with the light of his sword causing his face to grow an eerie pale blue color. "Sophia of Dakmoor," he called out. "Thought you could hide on the roof." As he walked closer to her, he stretched out his arms and laughed. "Look around you, White Rose. Look at what you see. This carnage...this destruction...I suppose I have you to thank. If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't have become powerful enough to see this all through."

Sophia tried to stand again, but once again she collapsed to the floor in pain. She tried to crawl away from Marius, saying "no, no," but he was upon her quickly. She screamed as he grabbed her by the hair and yanked her head up. "Before, I wanted to have you...I've always wanted to have you. Take you every way a man can take a woman," he told her as he lifted her up by her hair and licked her ear.

"But now, I just want to kill you and be done with it...but not right away," he said as he threw her back down to the floor. He gave her a swift kick to the ribs, causing her to curl up in the snow, experiencing a combination of burning and freezing. "I've dreamt about how I was going to do it...what I was going to do to you. Burn you, cut you to pieces, fuck you to death...all of the above," he chuckled. The possibilities are endless..."

"Please," Sophia said through all the pain. *I just want to die.* "Just get it over with."

"Oh, you'd like that wouldn't you?" he laughed again. "Make it all go away quickly. That's all it's ever been for you huh? Getting what you want, getting it fast and easy. Well, this isn't going to be quick...fast, or easy. You're going to hurt, Sophia of Dakmoor. You're going to suffer...you're going to beg for death long before you actually die, which won't be when you want to. Think about that...you will be powerless, totally devoid of control. The first, and only time you'll ever know what that feels like. I want you to experience that, I want you to know what that feels like, even if it's just this one time."

Not if I kill myself first. Sophia began to crawl towards the edge of the roof, while Marius was distracted by his own savage amusement. He was quick to catch on. "Not so fast," he said as he grabbed her by the hair again, once again prompting Sophia to scream in agony. "I know what you're thinking, Sophia of Dakmoor. I know what thoughts run through that pretty little head of yours. Not happening." Marius began to drag her across the roof by her hair, the pain sharp and severe enough to cause Sophia to scream so loud and for so long that her voice began to break and give out."

"There you go, my princess...let it all out. I do enjoy hearing you scream...scream until you can scream no longer..." Marius's gloating, as well as his steps, came to a halt. Then he let

Sophia go, causing her to fall to the floor once more in a thud. There was a faint sound in the distance...a mixture of a horn and trumpets.

Marius spoke to himself just then, saying "something's coming. From the north...what is it?"

Looking up from the snowy surface of the roof, Sophia stared out onto the horizon, unable to see anything. *Who could that be? Friend or foe?* It was possible that Lara could have convinced another of the Ghanish kingdoms to turn traitor like Gaemar did, and venture south to reinforce him. *But why are they blowing horns, then?*

Again the horns blew, louder still, reverberating through the winter air. Marius stared leery-eyed out into the light of dusk, while the sky turned a shade of purple. Turning to Sophia, he bellowed, "what's going on here? Do you know anything about this?" he stammered.

He's just as surprised as I am, Sophia thought as she laid on the floor, feeling the snow clover her skin where her dress was torn. *He's scared, too...*

"Banners," he said, scowling. "I see banners." With a grunt, he turned to Sophia and strode towards her once more. "So much purple...you knew about this didn't you?" he pressed her as he grabbed her by the hair again.

The trumpets rang louder and louder, as did the sounds of incoming planes. The previous fight had died down in earnest, as it appeared that Gaemar had successfully taken the city. Now it was being contested again, as there was fighting in the city again. Once more there was the sound of small arms fire and shouting, but no explosions. *Who doesn't fight with bombs?* Sophia thought. *Could it truly be? No... could it be so?*

Marius flung the princess by her hair across the floor, pulling parts of her hair out and clutching it in his hand. "This cannot be so. The northern kingdoms have been subdued, Dakmoor has been infiltrated and cowed. Your father is bedridden and mentally lost, his bannermen too cowed to stir themselves from their keeps."

Sophia coughed, and said with a cracked voice that "someone's coming that you didn't expect...someone that will oppose you, is that the case?"

With a wide smirk, Marius replied, "it's too late for you though...nobody's going to save you. I guess I'll just have to get this over with quickly." Marius took a few steps toward Sophia with his plasma sword pointed out at her, all the while the sounds of trumpets, horns, planes and fighting surrounded them.

The banners became more distinct now, in the distance closer than before. Red and Yellow and Black and White, but mostly Purple. The Bleeding Rose of House Dakmaran prominent

among them. *Father has come to save us*, she thought as Marius grabbed her by the hair and flipped on her back.

His plasma sword in hand, Marius stood over Sophia and held his weapon above her face. The arcing blue light singed her eyebrows and caused her eyes to water and wince. "I suppose I'll have to get this over with quickly. Such a shame. At least I'll finally get the chance to kill you. That will make it all worth it." Then Marius raised his plasma sword, intending to bring it down on Sophia's head.

"Let her go." The voice caught both Sophia and Marius off guard. *No, it can't be...* Sophia looked at the source of the voice, and saw a tall man clad in gold and purple armor, with hair as black as night and eyes the color of the deep blue sea. In his hands was the two handed Arragaran steel greatsword known as Iluntzean, the ancestral sword of House Dakmaran. *But...he's dead*, Sophia thought as tears filled her eyes. *Martin...*

Marius stepped away from Sophia, and turned to face the newcomer. "You," he said. "You're dead...you've been dead for years. Died in Rhodesea during the war."

Not too far away, Esmeralda, barely clinging onto life, smiled and repeated the same line she told Sophia earlier. "The Golden Sun shall signify the Dawn..."

The Golden Son, Sophia thought as she looked on. Martin boldly stepped forward through fire and smoke and snow and ash. "I did die," he spoke with confidence. "I have been reborn." With arms outstretched, he gestured with his sword towards the burning city surrounding them. "You've been defeated, Marius of Gaemar. A great army of Dakmoor, Arrautsa, the north and the Seven Lords has taken you from the flank. Throw down your weapon, and surrender."

Taking a step back, almost falling over as he did, Marius said "no, that's not possible. We had them all subdued. Subdued!"

"Aye, you did," Martin answered with a nod. "And then I returned. I freed my father from whatever poison was inflicted on him and gathered Dakmoor to me. Then the northerners and Arrautsa joined me. I will destroy Lara of Zathalon," he told Marius.

With clenched teeth, Marius screamed "no!" and charged at Martin with his plasma sword. Martin met it with his Arragaran steel greatsword, causing a great clashing noise to fill the air around them. The two exchanged furious blows, pushing and shoving against one another as their swords met, all the while avoiding the pits in the roof that descended into burning lower levels.

Sophia looked out into the city and saw the fighting taking place in the streets. Men of Dakmoor and Arrautsa shot and cut down men of Gaemar, some standing their ground and

fighting back, others hiding behind cover while many more fled south towards the sea, or to the east and west. The banners of the great houses of Dakmoor rose in place of the banners of Gaemar and Zathalon. ...*It's a miracle.*

Continuing to dance with their swords ringing against one another, Marius and Martin exchanged savage blows. They both were incredible swordsmen, parrying swings and thrusts and evading them by jumping to the side or ducking. This went on for a few minutes until Marius caught Martin's sword at the hilt, the heat of Marius's plasma sword causing Martin to lose his grip on his greatsword. It fell to the floor while Martin recoiled his hand.

"You fought valiantly," Marius said mockingly to Martin. "But not well enough. Lara's power is too great," he said looking at his plasma sword, before shaking his head. "You'll be the only man I know to die twice." Marius swung his plasma sword at Martin, causing the latter to have to jump back. Martin lost his footing and fell backwards on his back, looking up at Marius as he came forward.

Now's my chance, Sophia thought as she saw Iluntzean laying in the snow. *I have to act now.* Sophia did all she could to push herself up, and limped over to the greatsword while Marius had his back turned away, facing the downed Martin.

"It doesn't matter," Martin said to Marius coolly. "Lara will fall. She cannot stand against all the nations of the world."

Marius smiled wide. "I beg to differ. The weapons she has...will have, are far too powerful. All the world will bend the knee. Too bad you won't be around to see it, Martin of Dakmoor." Then, Marius raised his plasma sword to swipe it at Martin's face.

"Neither will you." Sophia picked up her family's sword, and before Marius could turn to face her, shoved it through his back. Marius let out a sick gargling noise, and dropped to his knees, letting his plasma sword fall to the floor at his side. He spat out blood as he looked down at the sword sticking out of his chest, and turned his face towards Sophia.

"Stupid bitch," he groaned with his dying breaths. "You're already dead...you just don't realize it...yet...the Dragon...shall devour...all..."

Sophia knelt down and picked up Marius's plasma sword. "And so are you." With one mighty swing, the plasma sword cut through Marius's neck, and his head came clean off, falling down into the snow at his knees. His body slumped over, and the snow around him turned red.

Turning her squinty, watery eyes towards Martin, she inched her way to her long believed deceased brother. "Martin," she cried as she embraced him.

"Sophia," he said back sweetly, embracing his sister and holding her close. "Are you alright?"

"...I'm okay for now, but I'll need medical attention soon," she told him before pointing at Esmeralda. "Esmeralda is my friend...I wouldn't have made it this far without her."

Martin stood up and helped his sister walk over towards the northern seer, who was now breathing slowly and pallid in color. She was still murmuring "the Golden Sun shall signify the Dawn," but when Martin got close to her, her eyes grew wide. "Mun...mun..." she stammered, before exhaling her last breath, and laying lifeless in the snow.

Clinging to her, Sophia cried, "no...don't die... come back...come back damn it!"

"She's dead, Sophia," Martin said to his sister as he grabbed her by the shoulders. Come, we should go..."

"Albert!" She exclaimed. "He's in the throne room...we must go to him!"

Martin nodded somberly. "Aye, we must." By that time, men of Dakmoor had emerged from the third floor with fire extinguishers and axes to cut down and remove debris. Sophia was weak, and so Martin and a few of his men carried her with them, back down into the palace. They had been busy trying to put out fires, clearing debris and trying to stabilize the structure before it might collapse any further. This was so all the way down back to the throne room.

The great lords of Dakmoor gathered in the ruined throne room, which was in worse shape than it had been when Sophia left it. At least half of the roof was gone, letting in the light of dusk and the snow to fall in, covering a large swath of the throne room floor. Men of Gaemar and Ghant laid dead on the floor, with Albert laying in a pool of blood at the foot of the throne.

The Eagle shall bathe in its own blood. Sophia and Martin went to Albert, who was quickly dying from a nasty wound inflicted to the side of his abdomen. The Lords of Dakmoor, Arrautsa and the north were gathered around, and it was one of the great lords of Dakmoor that spoke. "The Gentries are dead," he spoke firmly. "The Lord Protector may as well be." Putting a hand on Martin's shoulder, the lord said "take the throne...you've earned it."

Martin's eyes shifted from Albert to the throne, and back to the lord who made the suggestion. "No...that's not my purpose."

Albert looked up at Martin and Sophia, and smiled genuinely. Martin and Sophia both said "thank you." He put a hand on each of their faces, and then looked at Sophia. Through great effort, he removed the crown from his head, and extended it towards Sophia. Then he exhaled one last time, and his eyes rolled

back, the crown escaping his grasp and clanging to the cold, hard, ruined floor.

With tears streaming down her cheeks, she embraced Albert's body, pressing her cheek to his, before Martin knelt down to scoop her up. When she rose, she turned away from Martin and reached down to pick up Albert's iron crown...the crown of the Lord Protector. She held it in her hands for a few moments, observing it, feeling its roughness in her delicate, blackened fingers. *I know what must be done.*

Sophia rose to her feet, hard as it was, and with both hands, lowered the iron crown onto her head. She took Iluntzean from a nearby guard who had retrieved it from the roof, and used it to walk towards the throne. Laboriously, she began to climb up as the Lords of Ghant looked on, with Martin taking a step forward. "Sophia," he pleaded, but she ignored him as she made her ascent.

Once Sophia reached the top, she turned to face all those present, and lowered herself onto the seat. She laid Iluntzean across her lap, and leaned back into the throne, staring off into the void in front of her. The dusk began to turn to night, but the snow was still falling all around her. Looking down at the lords, she said to them, "we will destroy Lara of Zathalon, and restore the world to its proper order."

The lords nodded their agreement, and drew their own weapons, raising them into the air in front of their faces. "Sophia! Sophia! Sophia! The White Rose of Dakmoor!"

Martin stood there and inclined his head toward his sister. "We must prepare for war with Zathalon. Gather what strength remains in this country and strike while we still can."

"To war, then!" Sophia cried out, causing the lords to erupt in loud cheers. Martin looked down at Albert's lifeless body, and knelt down to close his eyes.

"Rest in peace, Albert," Martin said with sorrow in his voice. "I'll see you and my mother someday...but not today, God willing." With that, Martin stood up, and while Sophia sat perched upon the Obsidian Throne and the lords of Ghant cheered, Martin walked through the ruined throne room and faded into the void. *And just like that*, Sophia thought, *he's gone just as fast as he appeared...* Just like the *Battle of Ghish*.

Last edited by [Ghant](#) on Mon Sep 04, 2017 6:10 pm, edited 1 time in total.


Ghant


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Recipient of the [Greater Dienstad Roleplay Reward](#)

"Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!" - Percy Bysshe Shelley,
Ozymandias





Libraria and Ausitoria
Negotiator

Posts: 7099
Founded: May 30, 2011
Ex-Nation

by Libraria and Ausitoria » Mon Feb 05, 2018 3:19 pm



OOC

{Both Mature & Immature Interpretations of Innuendo are possible. Viewer discretion is advised}.



"In the deep twilight of the Jurassic live the dinosaurs and dragons, far below the place they call the magic cauldron, from whence the pillar of fire and cloud issues forth. Venture there, bold traveller, to the deep, in search of that history still present..."

~ Journey to the Center of Time, Arcomte Simone I of Wyfen, 48 – 10 BC

Prince Kazpia was flying. The silver-gold coastline vanished behind, and the tumbling hills below suddenly dipped into the mile-wide crater, lit from behind by the warm penetrating rays of the morning sun. Blasted by the column of hot, humid air from the baking rocks underground, Prince Kazpia descended down the tube, emerging almost instantly into the rolling cavern, steam and bats rising from the gloomy jungle. He spiralled round to the left, to the cracks towards the long lake, alighting on a promontory on the eastern cliff face, beside Prince Matthew, the last Prince, who was staring intently down a tunnel, from whence a slithering sound emerged. There was a red light emerging - splitting with the Rayleigh criterion into two diverging lights. Prince Matthew raised his shield, the one with the indigo dragon on it, and raised his longsword.

"When is a snake a friend?" asked Prince Matthew, poised and ready to strike.

"When it is one of those sentient dragons," replied Prince Kazpia, sure of his footing, for he was no speciesist, and the battle over equal opportunities has been won decades ago. "I thought these giant monster snakes had died out millennia ago anyway. Even with caverns tens of miles long, there simply isn't enough energy to maintain a large enough number for genetic diversity. That's why the caverns are nowadays populated only by smaller creatures, or those exhibiting dwarfism."

"A python above ground can still be 6 feet long," replied Prince Matthew. That was exactly what Prince Kazpia had said on the tour the previous day, when remarking on the hazards of the early gem-mining and exploration of the caverns in the early modern period.

"But this bit of Guardaria is more mountain than jungle, so this has never really been an area where pythons can grow unhindered, and the lack of the webbed feet is a disadvantage on slippery rocks, and for tunnelling," replied the Prince Kazpia in turn, which was exactly what the tour guide had replied to him the previous day. "Hence the persistence of the Wyverns, and their association with the area, and the Wymon tribe, and the Wuvon family, who developed a close relationship with them, and took refuge in the underground lakes, like you did with the 8 1 Wyvern Dragooneers Legion and the 28th Lakers, in the War of the Ausitorian Succession, when you were hiding from King John."

The Prince Kazpia paused, aware, for the first time, that he was probably dreaming, especially as he wasn't generally in the habit of flying unaided when he was "awake". But, as always, this knowledge made no difference to how he acted. Knowing the probability that you were in a dream merely made you less sure you probably weren't in a dream, or someone else's, when you woke up. And anyway he was too busy being analytical. He had a more important question to ask. "What I don't understand is why we're here looking at a snake. After all there's nothing about you and snakes in the legends."

"Well, perhaps this is not about me, but about you," replied Prince Matthew, insightfully.

"Well, I'm not Ausitorian, as you know, and I get the creeps with snakes..." explained Prince Kazpia, "but no, everybody does that, and that's just a product of a childhood in Amraja's jungles... I mean, I look at giant snakes more scientifically, perhaps, than you Ausitorians did in the myths; with the full advantage of the geological record." He babbled on. "And speaking of science, that snake is taking so pathetically long to try to get out here that it's probably an artificial robot biomimicry designed to investigate the defences we've erected. It's a threat, but a very modern threat: a terrorist attack leading to the collapse of the gulf on top of the underground lake network would lead to a tsunami which would kill about twenty million people in Alexandria alone, obliterate our government, and destroy about a tenth of a naval facilities to boot. Hence the necessity of our seismic surveying technologies, and indeed why I was on that tour yesterday to get a better feel for the area."

Prince Kazpia smiled at Prince Matthew, and resumed speaking.

"So really your presence is a reminder of history in the setting of the present. You are here, ready to cut off the head of a historical threat, while I am here to assess a modern threat. Very neat. A perfect metaphor."

"Does that make me useless?" asked Prince Matthew.

"Do you know how productive the average person is with their hands?" replied Prince Kazpia.

"No."

"About \$500 per year – \$5000 if they're in a factory. Do you know how productive the average Alexandrian is with their brains?"

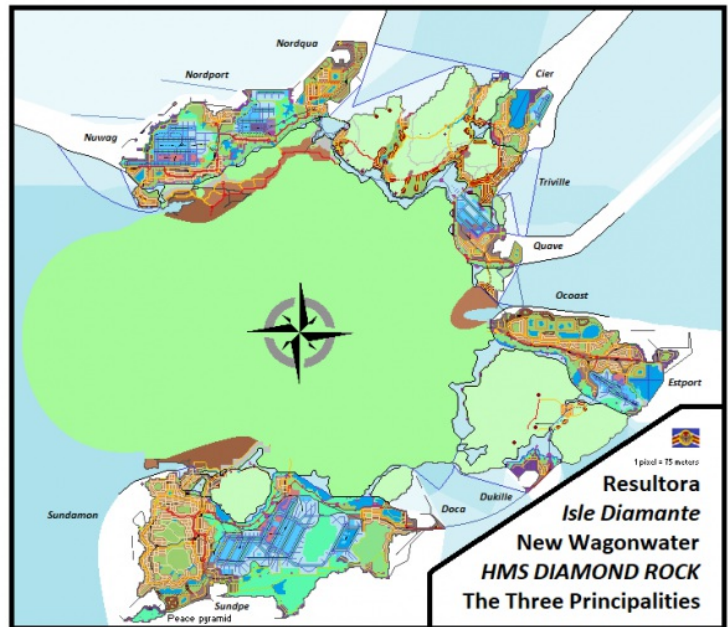
"No?"

"About \$150,000 per year. An Alexandrian brain is three hundred times more powerful than that of a medieval peasant," Prince Kazpia said, with satisfaction, although there was a throbbing sound in his head. He carried on regardless. "The population of Alexandria used to be five hundred thousand. Now it is more than a hundred million. Which is more powerful, a modern civilization or a medieval one. Discuss."

It was not a question.

"But if history is unimportant, why do you have an historic *valet* knocking on your historic gilded door?" asked Prince Matthew, with emphasis.

"Because Victoria and I turned our phones off for an uninterrupted night's s-" started Prince Kazpia, just as the dream evaporated.



Masterplan

"The present is ours. The past is someone else's. The future is what we do to it.

But although there's a lot of truth in that quotation, that comes within the limits of the light-cone or time travel, or anything else that we may discover later. And I know to add that caveat because we can act according to the future we expect, and so project backwards and forwards..."

~ Theological Continuity, 18th Grand Warlock Archbishop Matthew Batsbridge & Zaminder R. J Williams, 1993

There was a second knock on the door.

Richard Henry Terefort-Kazpia, Foreign Secretary, rolled over in bed. Victoria Wainwright, Deputy Prime Minister, snuggled her duvet around herself.

There was a third knock on the door.

What, exactly, was the point in being an Ausitorian prince if you couldn't be left to dream? Richard opened his eyes just in time to see Victoria's open. They smiled at each other.

There was another knock on the door. Victoria's face turned despondent. Remarkable, really, how insistent the knocking was. The person on the other side must have selected the only bit of the door that wasn't encrusted with patterned jewels.

"Oh, very well, we're awake," declared the Turquoise Foreign Secretary, as they wrapped their duvets around themselves in time-honoured toga fashion, which is the correct attitude to take when woken up from a slumber party several hours too early in the morning.

The door opened.

"Foreign Office telegrams," said the valet.

"At this time?" queried Richard, sitting upright and glancing at the window, and estimating that it was at least ten minutes before dawn.

"This has better be good," intoned Victoria who had fallen back in bed. "Didn't you notice neither of our phones was on? That means 'do not disturb'."

"That's why I had to knock," replied the valet, Sir Charles,

apologetically. "Sophia seems to be back in power in Ghant."

"Like that'll last more than fifty seconds. What's the point of telling me something that may have changed by morning?" asked Richard sharply.

"Also," continued Sir Charles apologetically, "the Occidental Alliance is complaining about New Wagonwater. They don't think the suggestion of enclosing parts of diamond isle with commonwealth internal territorial waters from artificial reservoirs, in such a manner that the enclosed enclaves can be independent puppets, really falls within the spirit of the treaty."

"And what's the point of telling me something that can wait 'till next year?" asked Richard, raising an eyebrow.

"Um," replied the valet.

"That was for me, sorry," said Victoria. "I told them to alert me instantly when Batavia demanded anything. It's so I can speak to you about it before you do your usual take-everything-to-the-brink response. Perhaps I should have specified 'alert me unless I'm sleeping with the foreign secretary'."

Richard struggled with this distrust for a few moments, his face passing from shock, anger, rage, and denial, through to analysis, and recognition.

"Oh," he said. "What should I do, then?" he asked Victoria.

"Say the handover will go ahead as planned. If this is to happen, it must be done with the strongest possible legal and diplomatic support, and after our trade networks have adjusted away from these unreliable partners... I wonder how they found out about it all."

"Newag is crawling with spies hidden among the refugees, looking for gems," he commented.

"Charles," said Victoria, swinging fully upright, "since we're up, could you please be a dear and order a banana split?"

"Two, please," added Richard, who was usually suggestible this early in the morning.

"Poor Sophia," he commented, as Charles agreed to be a dear and scurried off.

"She's back in power," replied Victoria.

"I know, but to have to deal with all those Ghantish internal politics... they give me a headache," said the Turquoise prince.

"I can't work out whether they're more complicated even than ours."

"Certainly a lot more warlike. It's one killing after another, traitors all over the place. One moment you think you've got the measure of them and the next there's an explosion or a stabbing and everything changes. But complicated they may be. Important they are not. In the battle between good and evil, the good will always triumph eventually. Even if it takes a hundred years for the experts to redress the balance, and for the Capitalist Association to finish a siege."

"But history has a funny way of influencing the present," remarked Victoria.

"Entropy. But yeah, I was having a dream about that. At least when you decide you want to keep an eye on me, you take me to bed and ensure that various key civil servants notify you of what I'm up to and get your private cyber office to hack into my emails. If you were Ghantian you'd probably have stabbed me in the front with one of those longswords from the armoury ages ago. But you still wouldn't

achieve anything by killing me.”

“You’re the one who took me to bed to keep an eye on me and ensured that various key civil servants report to you and you’re the one with access to all my texts anyway. And anyway last night you used your own longsword to stab-”

“Yes, hold on for a minute,” said Richard quickly, sensing where the conversation might be going, and trying to focus on one thing at a time for a second. “I’m just wondering what, if anything, I should do in response to the latest Ghantish coup.”

“Issue a statement expressing our support? The Watch Office will have sent that already. Modern government takes very little intervention, even if you try.”

“I know, but... well, have you heard about the connection in Destinado Terra?”

“What connection?”

“I don’t know, I’m trying to work it out. And it’s got something to do with Mizrad. I think I should invite their ambassador to dinner.”

“Use the siege of Zathalon as the cover story, and the Wagwater crisis as the secondary cover? I could leak that they could help mediate in the handover arrangements with the Senate...” replied Victoria, inventing advanced levels of policy in the fly. “Actually not a bad idea.”

“Certainly give the Senate a reason to exist. Although as you said modern government is such a matter of inevitability that it probably won’t change a thing. Perhaps that’s the only way history affects us, because even if it’s less powerful than we are, it’s more powerful than I am at half past five in the morning. Although those mountains in Newag don’t know what’s about to hit them.”

“One of those water reservoirs we’re building is fifteen kilometers long... so much for the supremacy of geological determinism when the Ausitorians start moving mountains to reclaim the seas,” commented Victoria.

“Quite. Anyway let’s make arrangements, then have breakfast, and then get back in bed and let the rest of fate look after itself for a bit...” smiled Richard.

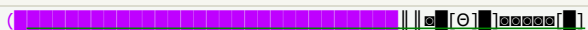
*His Royal Highness the Foreign Secretary,
accompanied by Arthur Wright, Permanent
Secretary for the War Office, hereby request the
pleasure of Their Excellencies of the Mizradian
Embassies to join them for a semi-formal dinner,
at their earliest convenience.*

Last edited by [Libraria and Ausitoria](#) on Mon Feb 05, 2018 4:40 pm, edited 5 times in total.

The Aestorian Commonwealth - Pax Prosperitas - Gloria in Maere -
([Factbook](#))

Disclaimer: Notwithstanding any mention of their nations, Ausitoria and its canon does **not** exist **nor** impact the canon of many IFC & SACTO & closed-region nations; and it is harassment to presume it does. However in accordance with my open-door policy the converse does **not** apply: they still impact Ausitoria’s canon.

[◦ Commonwealth Capital \(Bank\)](#) ◦ [◦ Commonwealth Connect \(Bank Treaty\)](#) ◦ [◦ SeaScape \(Shipping & Energy\)](#) ◦



☐ by [Ghant](#) » Sun Feb 18, 2018 9:00 pm



Ghant
Minister

Posts: 2457
Founded: Feb 11, 2013
Civil Rights Lovefest

QUOTE

The Prisoner of Zathalon

**Leto's Palace Dungeon
Letople, Zathalon**

*"Within yourself deliverance must be searched
for, because each man makes his own prison."*
— Edwin Arnold

He dreamed of battle, adventure. Young as he was, he knew that the walls which held him close, protected him, were the same walls that he would one day nearly fall in his rush to escape his past. It has always been the way of the world that people do not wish to stay contained in what they've known forever. The desire to experience something new is rooted deeply, and even those who treasure comfort and familiarity still desire to run somewhere.

When it came down to it, *people are all such cowards*, he thought.

He ran, as a part of this campaign of his. It was an adventure then. Oh, how young he had been, and how foolish! The brilliance of his exit had been surpassed only by the wonders he had imagined beyond the walls of his home. As a boy, he had known nothing of humanity—everyone he had ever met had been exactly as they seemed. There was nothing which could compare to a child's imagination - yet children have such a capacity for good, and the horrors he had seen could not possibly be the product of an innocent mind.

He preferred to think of the times before, when he sat at home and thought of what once was. He had heard all the legends, of battles and gods and winners and losers - he had dreamed of being remembered through song and story. It was not the fame he wanted, it was the glory. There was a difference, he felt. Fame was for those who desired approval. What he wanted was immortality. He achieved it— and he regretted it. A fool he had been...

*This bereavement is unbearable.
My heart weeps for you and my soul begs for
alleviation.
I was your protection, your knight, your
friend, your love.
How is it that I was unable to save you when
it mattered most?*

*I am inferior, surviving only with hope that I
will hold you again; that you might forgive me
and liberate me of this burden I carry.*

*I've smothered the night sky with the darkest
shades of veil, leaving only gentle whispers of
resplendence to comfort me.*

Such were the Emperor of Ghant's thoughts during his confinement. He didn't remember much between the Baby Shower and the present moment, only that he had been knocked out cold with a blow from a blunt object to the back of his head, and when he came to, he was in a dark cell. It could have been hours, or days, or weeks or even months...he had lost track of time.

His hair had been shaven down to the skin, and the wound stitched. For a while it throbbed in pain, causing him headaches, but then it changed to an itch. The temptation to scratch it was maddening, and there was nothing to distract him from it. Usually clean-shaven, he sprouted short, coarse facial hair, nearly the length of the hair on his head now. *That's not the worst of it though...no oh no...*

The cell was a square room roughly a few yards in length and width, with only a small, rusted old bed frame with a dirty mattress, and chains dug into the wall. The manacles on the other end of the chains clung to his ankles loosely, but not so loose that he could remove them easily. He could sleep, and reach a hole in the corner where he could produce his excrement. There was also a narrow slit in the door where his food trays would slide in and out.

Meals came three times a day...at least what he reckoned were days. Presumably they were breakfast, lunch and dinner. Nathan liked to think they were "sloppy joes," though really they were just some sort of mush. That was what the imprisoned emperor was waiting for this day, while rubbing the wound in his scalp. His stomach growled as he awaited his mushy meal, and yet it had not come. *Where is it?*

Nathan heard footsteps echoing in the hall beyond his dark cell, prompting him to crawl forward and sit cross-legged upon the cell floor. Strangely enough however, the food door didn't open, and there was a brief moment of silence. Instead, the entire cell door began to open, slowly at first, and then wide open. *Oh no...is it time?* he trembled as he cowered before the sudden rush of light. *They've finally come to get rid of me, yes oh yes...*

The Emperor recoiled before the light, seeing only a tall, vague figure standing before him. The man standing there spoke, saying "how bad is it?" in Rhodesean, of all languages.

"Very bad," another man replied in the same language. "He looks like a cave creature...pale, thin and weak. A ghoul of a man."

The first man sighed, and then addressed the manacled emperor. "Oh how the mighty have fallen, wouldn't you agree, your Majesty?" he asked Nathan in Zathalonian.

Nathan's eyes watered as he tried to look forward, but even still his sight failed him. "It's been some time since anyone's called me 'your Majesty'...you're Rhodeseans, aren't you? Come

to do your master's dirty work? Taking me away to get beheaded publicly?" It was only when he tried to speak that Nathan realized how dry his lips were, how hoarse his voice was and how thirsty he was.

The Rhodesean snorted. "That was the plan originally...your wife wanted to have you executed publicly as a traitor. I cannot see you but my aide says that you're a filthy wretch now...everyone thinks you're dead, and you might as well be. I pity you, Nathan of Ghant, both for the man that you were and for the man that you could have been."

"Get on with it then," Nathan spat at the Rhodesean. "I'm ready to die...I'd rather die now then wait and bear witness to the horrors that Lara will unleash upon the world of men. I pity you that you will still be alive for it when it happens."

Taking a few steps forward, the Rhodesean crouched in front of the Emperor, which gave the latter a brief respite from the torment of the light. Opening his eyes, Nathan strained his sight to behold the man in front of him. The Rhodesean was an older man in a decorated uniform, and a white cloth tied around his head, covering both of his eyes. *General Kruger...blind as a bat.* "About that...that's why I decided to pay you a visit."

Nathan scowled at the man. "You...you're a snake...yes oh yes that's what you are! You betrayed us all, murdered my friends...you killed Hemlock!"

"Hemlock and I had unfinished business," Kruger said before pointing to one of his eyes... or where one would have been. "He took my eye, then he took the other one before I got my revenge."

"And what of my revenge?" the Emperor's manacles were tight against their chains, and as he pulled hard against them, he stared at the floor. "He was my friend, my protector. I'll kill you if I ever get out of these chains, yes oh yes."

"Can you truly kill a man who's already dead?" Kruger sighed, and stood back up. "Hemlock took both of my eyes, and cursed me to blindness. I cannot see anything ever again, and that truly seems a fate worse than death. Hemlock got the last laugh. I could take you away and listen to you get executed in the streets like those politicians and rebels did, or I could leave you in here to rot, but I don't intend on doing either of those things."

The Emperor cocked his head in surprise. "What do you mean, Kruger? Don't play games with me. As far as I'm concerned, I'm already a dead man too. We're all fucked, you best believe it."

Kruger frowned as he stared down at the imprisoned emperor. "Ever since that...baby shower, things have been...very unpleasant. Lara's gone mad...madder than she was

already. Her behavior has become erratic, and she's surrounded by sycophants. She presumes to order me around like I'm some henchman, all the while conducting purges, intrigues and murders. That's not the worst of it though," the old General sighed as he leaned up against the doorway of the cell. "There are whisperings of some secret, terrible weapons of great power that she intends on unleashing. The allied coalition has surrounded Zathalon... the Mizradians, the Ausitorians, all of them are closing in. Yet she's not worried about a damn thing because of whatever she has up her sleeve."

Nathan began to laugh maniacally. "Fools, the lot of them! They don't know what's coming, but I do. Yes oh yes, I know what they will face, and it's insurmountable indeed. Everyone everywhere is going to die or become slaves, including you Rhodeseans. I hope it was worth it for you all...stupid bastards."

With a powerful step, Kruger stepped forward, and found Nathan's slender neck with his large, course hand. He gripped it tightly, but not so tight that the Emperor couldn't breathe. "You know what this shit is that Lara has hidden away, don't you? You know where I can find it...I need to see it, and you're going to take it to me. Or I can snap your fucking neck and be done with it."

"...Why do you want to see it?" Nathan asked as he feebly clutched at Kruger's hand. "You'll find out...soon enough..."

"I didn't do everything that I've done in the name of Lara," General Kruger said gruffly to the Emperor. "I did it for the good of Rhodesea. If Rhodesea will be destroyed, or as you say, 'enslaved' by Lara by whatever the fuck she has going on, then I intend to put a stop to it. So what's it going to be, Emperor of Ghant? Are you going to help me, or are we done here?"

What choice do I have? Meekly, the Emperor nodded his agreement. "...Yes." To that, Kruger grinned, and released the Emperor's neck. The Rhodesean General produced a leather skin and offered it to the Emperor.

"Here's some water...drink up, you sound like shit," Kruger told the Emperor, the latter taking the leather skin with shaking hands and drinking from it eagerly. *I've never tasted water quite so good as this*, he thought as he drained it down his gullet.

"...The keys," Nathan told the Rhodeseans after he quenched his thirst. "How did you get down here, anyway? How will you free me?"

Kruger chuckled as he stepped away, back into the hallway. "One thing we Rhodeseans do best is staying one step ahead of anyone else." The General turned to his other man and gestured he come over. The Rhodesean soldier produced the gaoler's keys and proceeded to unlock the Emperor's manacles with them.

"...How did you get these keys?" Nathan asked the soldier in front of him upon being freed. It had been so long since the Baby Shower that he forgot what it was like to not have manacles around his ankles. The skin was sore, dry and chafed, though Nathan tried to stand and walk forward in spite of his discomfort. The Rhodesean soldier caught him as he fell forward, and helped him to stand again.

The General answered the question gruffly. "I made up my mind before I came to see you. We took this facility by force, and the guards are dead. We don't have much time so we best get going. We're severely outnumbered deep in the heart of Zathalon, and we're all basically dead men walking. I'm at peace with that...but I'll be damned if I die in vain. So let's get moving, shall we?"

Leaning on the Rhodesean soldier, Nathan walked weakly towards the cell door before hesitating. "What about my brother Charles and Prince Michael of Dakmoor?" he asked Kruger worriedly. *I hope they're alright...*

"Ah yes, I did have a gift for you." Kruger gave a hand signal down the hall, and just as Nathan entered the hallway, he strained his eyes to see more Rhodesean soldiers escorting both Charles Kindaro and Prince Michael of Dakmoor. Charles ran forward and embraced his brother tightly, tears streaming down his cheeks.

"Nathan..." Charlie stammered, his voice broken. "I thought you were dead." Charles and Michael were in better condition than the Emperor was, at least appearing to be stronger.

Michael clasped Nathan on the shoulder. "I'm glad to be out of that cell...and it's good to see you, though I've seen you in better shape," grinned the Prince of Dakmoor.

"Alright alright, enough of the kumbaya." Kruger turned to the Rhodesean that Nathan was walking with and said "Piet, get the Emperor out of here now...we're running out of time." The Rhodeseans, at least twenty in number that Nathan could see, moved swiftly down the hall with Nathan, Charles and Michael. The Emperor's eyes were slowly readjusting to the light. He could see that the Rhodeseans were carrying silenced rifles and pistols, which had been used on the now dead Zathalonian soldiers that were slumped up against the walls.

Even though the dungeon was beneath Leto's Palace, there was another entrance that led straight to the surface just beyond the main palace. That was the way that the Rhodeseans went, moving forward hastily with their weapons raised and pointing forward. The dungeon was quite old, the walls and cells consisting of stones set in place centuries ago, though there was a modern lighting system that illuminated the otherwise dark and dreary halls. There were probably other poor unfortunate souls locked away in the many

other cells, though there was nothing that Nathan could do for them.

It didn't take them that long moving at the pace that they were to emerge outside. Fortunately for them it was dark, the dead of night. Around them stood Rhodesean soldiers near a large transport vehicle. "Load them up," Kruger instructed his soldiers, who promptly gathered up the Gbantish and escorted them into the back of the vehicle. They shuffled Nathan towards the front of the truck, while Kruger climbed into the passenger seat.

"Where's the Janus Project?" the General asked Nathan pointedly. "We need to go there now."

"...It's to the south, on the outskirts of the city in the forest," replied the Emperor as he watched the rest of the Rhodesians load up and shut the doors behind them. Then the truck began moving. "I caution you though...it is under heavy military patrol, and they have jeeps and armored vehicles. A barbed wire fence surrounds the facility, so getting in will be most difficult."

Kruger flashed an old, crooked smile before grimacing. "I wouldn't worry too much about that. The south you say? I had a feeling it was in that general direction. There's been a lot of activity down that way. Luckily for us we won't be lacking in force or guile." The truck moved casually down the ruined streets of Letople, past hollowed out buildings and scattered guards who thought nothing of the lone Rhodesian transport.

Incidentally, on the southern outskirts of the city was where the Rhodesians had set up their command post. It took them about fifteen minutes or so to arrive there, and when they did they were greeted by some Rhodesian soldiers that waved them through their own makeshift security checkpoint, towards a squat rectangular building.

"When need to stop here," Kruger informed the Emperor with a groan once the truck came to a complete stop. "We need more men if we are going to infiltrate this compound...all the men we can get. So let's head in and prepare." The blind General got out of the truck, followed by his soldiers that escorted the Gbantish out and into the compound.

The walls of the compound were an old, cracked and rusted stone, the floors a dull broken tile and lights dangled from the ceiling, connected to their switches by loose hanging wires. Grim soldiers stood around listlessly as they glanced at the blind General walk past with his entourage. Fractured wooden doors laid before them, and when they were opened, Nathan observed a large round table sitting in the middle of a poorly lit square room. Seated at the table were a number of Rhodesian officers, joined by, interestingly enough, a collection of scraggy Gbantar.

"Ah, General Sarel Kruger," a small Gbantar

with beady violet eyes and dyed dark purple hair said with a smile. "So we meet again...on such short notice at that."

Kruger frowned as he was escorted to his chair at the table. "Itinu Tigin...I see you and your northern rabble have finally decided to join us." Looking to his officers, Kruger asked them "when did the mercenaries arrive?"

"This morning, Sir," one of the officers replied. "They've been waiting for you to return ever since."

Nathan looked between them all and asked, "Mercs from northern Ghant?"

Itinu bowed his head. "Soldiers of Fortune, your Majesty." The mercenary leader recoiled at the sight of his emperor, saying that "You seem rather...pale. No doubt you were locked away somewhere dark." Recomposing himself, Itinu changed course. "Forgive my manners, I've never met an Emperor of Ghant before, allow me to introduce myself and my companions. My name is Itinu Tigin of Jehenna. I am an emissary, on campaign with some, as I previously said, 'soldiers of fortune.'" Gesturing to each of the other Ghantar present, Itinu introduced them one at a time.

"The Silver Company, under the command of Malaro Morazhan, the Company of the Wolf, under the command of Jog Toth, the Knights of the Trident, under the command of Lur 'the Lurker' Etoro, the Sons of the Titan, under the command of Nuck Quelt, the Stargazers, under the command of Diggory Diaw, the Nightcats, under the command of Guel 'Goldeneye' Banr, the Pale Riders, under the command of Nul Oitu, the Blackblades, under the command of Tygo Lom, the Onyx Men, under the command of Mando Yurn, and lastly the Revenge of Queen Caroline, under the command of Prince Quentyn of Ghant. A cousin of yours, I presume."

"Aye, it is so." Nathan approached his seated cousin and embraced him. "It has been far too long. Tell me cousin, what exploits have you undertaken with these mercs?"

Prince Quentyn, tall and strapping with brown hair and blue eyes, answered his cousin's inquiry as best he could. "We fought in Pensalum and Asasia with the Rhodeseans for the gold and the glory, as they say. There was plenty of both to be had. We answered the call to come to Letople alongside some Rhodesean reinforcements, for that very purpose. I wasn't expecting to see you here... we all thought you were dead."

Stiffening his back as best he could, the Emperor looked at all of the mercenaries. "A treacherous lot you all must truly be. I called all of the free companies to my banners, and yet not only did you not answer, you took up with the Rhodeseans instead. Tell me why you did that?"

Hesitating before answering, Itinu replied with

"with all due respect, your Majesty, your wife has the touch of Madness about her. Waging war against the nations of Zathalon, uniting them under her banners...that seemed like dangerous work. Even we have principles, you see. We fight for profit, not for power."

Prince Michael spit on the floor and glared fiendishly at Itinu. "The lot of you are treacherous snakes. You betrayed me to Kruger, handed me over like a sack of potatoes! There's not one shred of honor between the lot of you!"

Itinu shrugged dismissively. "It's just business, your Highness. Besides, you turned out okay. Kruger let you out and now you're free...and what you do with that freedom is up to you."

Sighing, Kruger held up his hand, before addressing them all in Rhodesean. "Men of Ghant, men of Rhodesea. You have all been gathered here for one very important mission. The Janus Project Research Base is in the forest just south of Letople. They are working on numerous top-secret projects there, chief among them the Sword of Sanctification and Project Seraph. Our intelligence indicates that these projects are secret weapons of terrible power, and once they are ready to be used, Lara will use them to remake the world in her image. We cannot allow this to transpire, none of us can."

The Ghantish mercenaries exchanged amused looks between them, a few of them shaking their heads. Itinu turned his head towards Kruger with a blank expression on his face. "And you want us to help you with this? What's in it for us?"

Kruger snorted incredulously. "What's in it for you? You won't be destroyed or enslaved by Lara in her new world."

That answer prompted the Ghantish mercenaries to all laugh heartily. "Now how the fuck is she going to do that exactly?" Itinu asked mockingly. "She gonna personally tie a leash around my neck and walk me around the neighborhood? Nah, I don't think so. Sounds like a bunch of bullshit to me." His northern companions nodded in agreement.

While the General looked like he was about to burst a vein in his face, the Emperor stepped forward. "It isn't bullshit, Itinu. I've seen this technology with my own eyes. The Sword of Sanctification is a bio-weapon that, once released into the atmosphere, will wipe out anyone that doesn't possess the Rosea gene. Anyone that somehow manages to survive that will be enslaved by Lara's master race. I know it sounds like science-fiction but it's the truth."

The Ghantish exchanged uneasy looks between them. "Even so, you want us to follow General Kruger on this suicide mission of yours to sabotage these projects? There's no way."

"So don't follow General Kruger," Nathan

countered. "Follow me, the Emperor of Ghant... your Emperor."

Itinu laughed again without even a moment's pause. "You want us to follow you? Sorry your Majesty, but you're a fool...a fool for starting this whole mess, a fool for getting used by Lara until she didn't need you anymore, and a fool to think we'd all die for this nonsense."

"Is it foolish to defend your world? To fight for your homes and families?" Nathan tried to appeal to their better nature. *Stupid bastards.* "If Lara succeeds, you'll be slaves with the rest of us."

The Ghantish continued to exchange looks between themselves, their expressions growing more uneasy. Finally Itinu spoke, saying "noble sentiments, but we fight for profit. Besides, the world is big enough for us to escape this thing. She can't get everyone."

"...And what of the people that you care about?" Nathan looked at the older mercenary captains specifically. "If Lara succeeds, your loved ones, your people...your children will be enslaved forever. What good is profit then, when your gold means nothing? When everything that you know has been ruined and everyone that you ever loved is dead or in chains? That's what is at stake here, gentlemen."

Itinu didn't wait long to respond. "I've heard enough of this nonsense, your Majesty. I have no children..."

"...But I do." A middle-aged, willowy man with graying brown hair and smoky grey eyes rose from his chair. "I will fight for you, your Majesty."

"The old man shames you all," the Emperor said looking around the room, before returning his eyes to the middle-aged man. "What is your name, captain?"

My name be Diggory Diaw, of Gauekoizarra, the Jewel of the North! I am the champion of Hermania, yes indeed, and let it be known that in the world's darkest hour, Diggory Diaw will be the champion of Ghant." Diggory bowed courteously before his Emperor.

The Emperor nodded as he looked upon Captain Diggory. "Your sword, captain." Gently, Diggory pulled his sword from its sheath and offered it to his Emperor. Nathan, taking it in his hand, extended it and placed the blade upon each of the captain's shoulders. "In the name of Ghant, I as Emperor hereby dub thee Ser Diggory Diaw, a knight of the realm. Rise, Ser, as a Knight of Ghant."

Slowly, the mercenary captain now known as Ser Diggory Diaw, rose from bended knee and stood tall and proud. Itinu seemed unamused by the Emperor's grand gesture, however. "One old man who commands only one free company..."

Prince Quentyn stood up, glaring at Itinu as he did. "My company shall join you, cousin. For the good of the realm, we shall join you."

Tygo Lom was the next to rise from his chair. "Fuck it. I'll fight to save the world. If we succeed and we survive the pay's going to be rather good I think. Don't knight me just yet though. If I die then I'll die as a man of the free companies." The other captains were in agreement with this.

"You know what? Fuck it." Nul Oitu stood up next, and bowed his head. "The Pale Riders will fight for you."

"As will the Onyx Men," seconded Mando Yurn. "Fight to the death or come what may." The rest of the free company captains rose and pledged to fight for the Emperor, the last to do so being Guel Banr, the captain of the legendary Nightcats otherwise known as 'Goldeneye'. After a brief staredown between Goldeneye and the other captains, the one-eyed captain of few words rose, and placed his right hand over his heart.

Realizing that he was overruled, Itinu rose, and nodded to the Emperor and Kruger. "The captains have spoken. So be it, we're in."

"I'm glad you could all have your little moment," Kruger finally spoke again, his tone rather dry. "Now that we're all on the same page, here's the plan. Between all of us we can muster a thousand fighting men. We will need to act quickly...very quickly. We use what force we have to overwhelm the outside of the facility, and then with three-hundred men, we storm the facility's interior. Once inside, we will disable whatever the fuck is going on in there. While we're doing that, the other seven-hundred men outside will hold off the enemy and buy us time to complete our mission, and once that's done, we emerge and they will cover our retreat into the south. We will then proceed to rendezvous with allied forces in Heilanor."

Once we go in we won't be coming back out, Nathan thought to himself as he listened to Kruger explain their battle plan. *Once Lara realizes that the Rhodeseans have betrayed her and that I've been rescued, she will stop at nothing to destroy us all.* Waiting until Kruger had finished speaking, Nathan added that "if I may, I'd like to propose that Prince Quentyn depart now with my brother and Prince Michael of Dakmoor and a small contingent of men."

Quentyn stiffened his back as he stared at his cousin. "...Is this an order, your Majesty?"

Returning the gaze, Nathan said "as your Emperor, this is what I command."

"...Then consider it done." Quentyn hadn't finished his response before Charlie ran up and embraced his brother.

"No!" Charlie refused with tears in his eyes. "I

won't leave you again. I won't!"

"You must," the Emperor countered his little half-brother firmly. "I will not have your blood on my hands too. You will go, I command it." Turning to face Michael, Nathan sternly instructed him to "go to Heilanor with my brother and seek out the safety of Empress Selena and Prince Constantine of Heilanor."

Michael nodded, and put his hand on Charlie's shoulder. Quentyn joined the two of them, ushering them into the hall with some men before stopping to address Nathan privately. Whispering into the Emperor's ear, Quentyn said "this sounds like a suicide mission...if you go I doubt I'll ever see you again. I urge you to reconsider."

Sighing, Nathan put a hand on Quentyn's shoulder. "Aye, but for all my misdeeds, I must accept my fate and suffer it like a man. Just do me one small favor. If you ever speak to Sophia again, tell her that I love her, and that I'm sorry."

"Consider it done, your Majesty." With that, Quentyn slipped away into the entrance of the hall to join Michael, Charles and their escort, though Nathan said his final goodbyes as they left. The Rhodeseans and Ghantish all watched them leave, with somber expressions on their faces. *These men know that they will likely perish...*

Kruger exhaled deeply while grabbing Piet by the arm, telling him that "it's time to go, gentlemen. Let's ready ourselves."

The Emperor glanced curiously at General Kruger. "...Wait...you're coming? You should go with my cousin, General. I doubt you'll be of much help..."

"Fuck that," Kruger snorted with incredulity. "The way I see it I have three options. I can go with your cousin and leave my men to their fates, as you say, and be apprehended and charged as a war criminal and die imprisoned and disgraced. I can stay here, and wait for Lara's goons to come and kill me, or worse, or I can go with you and die with a gun in my hand. Choice seems pretty obvious to me."

So be it, Sarel Kruger. "Very well, let's be on our way then." The Emperor, the Rhodeseans and the Ghantish filed out of the compound in orderly fashion, and the various officers and captains relayed their orders to their men. Most of them were already armed and properly equipped for combat, and those that weren't promptly readied themselves.

Nathan watched as the truck bearing his cousin, brother and the Prince of Dakmoor drove off into the night, before doing the best he could to suit up for a battle. He put on a Kevlar combat outfit, and afterward noticed a gathering of many Ghantar praying in a circle to the Old Gods of Ghant. They sat cross-legged on the pavement, their eyes closed and speaking in Ghantish.

Despite being Christian, the Emperor joined them in prayer, sitting cross-legged on the ground and lowering his chin. Closing his eyes, he said quietly "God, give me the strength to defeat evil this night, and spare the people of the doom that would be visited upon them. Oh God give me the strength to be courageous, noble and true. In Jesus' name, amen."

When the Emperor finished his prayer, he observed the captain known as Goldeneye staring at him with a stern expression. The northern mercenary captain had a solid gold eye in place of one that he had lost, while his sole remaining eye was a lilac color. He wore a white ninja-style headband, white cape, white sleeves and white pants, contrasting with his black combat armor and boots. He inclined his head toward the Emperor before rising to his feet and walking off.

"...They say he doesn't talk much, but truth be told I've never actually heard him speak," Diggory told Nathan gently as he approached from behind. "I think he's mute but just doesn't want people to know it. Pride among we northerners is a treasured thing."

Pride...a sad and useless thing. Nathan stood up and faced Diggory. "No man is complete, captain...we all have our flaws. Mine is...short-sightedness."

"And mine is not liking guns, but then again, isn't that every northerner's greatest flaw?" Diggory laughed, but was interrupted by Kruger's gruff commands.

"We're ready to roll out, so let's get on with it. Move your asses, move!" A phantom habit, perhaps, compelled Kruger to look as though he were surveying the area, despite being blind. A few moments later he stopped and called for Piet to escort him to his truck. Nathan and his mercenary companions followed closely behind, as did their men and the rest of the Rhodeseans, leaving only a small contingent behind to guard the compound and slow down the Zathalonians once they caught on and came for them.

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Ghant
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"Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!" - Percy Bysshe Shelley,
Ozymandias



Ghant
Minister

Posts: 2457
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Civil Rights Lovefest

by **Ghant** » Sun Feb 18, 2018 9:02 pm

QUOTE

Part III, Ch. VII

The Prisoner of Zathalon

**Janus Research Facility
Letople, Zathalon**

"Within yourself deliverance must be searched for, because each man makes his own prison."

— Edwin Arnold

Once they were on the road, it wasn't long before the trees alongside the road grew more numerous, until suburban environs gave way to the forest. A mist hovered in the woods, surrounding the trunks of the trees while creatures of the night moved about and made various noises. The Emperor guided the convoy over radio, taking one turn and then another, until they went from paved roads to one-way dirt paths.

Roughly twenty minutes passed since they left the Rhodesean compound on the southside of Letople until they arrived at a well-lit, fenced-in area at the end of the dirt road. Inside of the barbed-wire fence was a large parking lot surrounding a one-story blue and grey square building not that much larger than a retail store.

"That ain't no top-secret base," Tygo Lom laughed derisively. "That's a damn warehouse!"

"It only looks like a warehouse on the outside," explained the Emperor as he looked ahead to the security checkpoint. "It's at least ten times larger than that...underground." As was the case last time he came to the base, security stood at the entrance to the parking lot. The security guards wore blue jumpsuits and armored vests bearing the Janus insignia, a bearded man with two faces looking in opposite directions.

The checkpoint guards numbered half a dozen, and with their rifles in hand, they walked towards the driver's side of the first truck. "Guess it's time to make our grand entrance," said Nul Oitu as he readied his own rifle. "Unless the..."

Swiftly, a dozen Rhodeseans emerged from the top of the first truck with silenced pistols and dispatched the Janus guards in quick fashion. "...Rhodeseans got it," Oitu finished as a pair of Rhodeseans soldiers jumped out of the truck and entered the security booth. They opened the gate, and one by one the vehicles entered the base's parking lot.

"This is where things are going to get chaotic," the Emperor informed his companions via radio. "We'll have precious seconds before Janus security notices what's going on and sounds

the alarm. It's imperative that we're inside the facility before it goes on lockdown. We'll need to disable the security desk inside to prevent lockdown, and then we will need to defend it long enough to accomplish our mission."

"Sounds simple enough then, eh?" Diggory drew his sword and glanced at the Emperor. "Gonna have to do it all nice and quick."

"...Where's your gun?" *The fool intends on bringing a knife to a gunfight*, thought the Emperor with narrowed eyes as he looked upon the mercenary captain.

With a laugh, Diggory shrugged his shoulders. "Well I did tell ya didn't I? I don't like guns. Plenty of the other fellas are using them, no reason why I need to. I'll stick with the feel of cold steel."

The convoy pulled up near the entrance of the base, and numerous guards came out to greet them. "They probably assume we've been granted clearance," explained the Emperor. "The next two minutes are going to be very important..."

Piet escorted Kruger out of his truck with a dozen armed men, while the Gbantish and Rhodesean soldiers prepared to flood out. Nathan noticed the security cameras surrounding the building's exterior. "General Sarel Kruger," one of the older security guards said to the blind general as he approached. "We weren't expecting you...I don't seem to recall you having a security clearance?"

"...Do you want to see my security clearance, officer?" Kruger asked the guard bluntly, to which the guard nodded. "Here..." giving the hand signal, the Rhodeseans opened fire upon the Janus guards, killing them. The others, Nathan and the mercs included, ran into the entrance of the base as quickly as possible.

The guard on duty at the security desk was slow to react and was caught off guard. Just as he was reaching for the lockdown button, he was shot in the head by Mando Yum's silenced pistol. Holding the doors open, Diggory ushered in the armed Rhodesean and Gbantish soldiers who proceeded to pour into the base and engaged the Janus guards present, who like the desk guard were caught off guard.

Soon enough however the guards caught on, taking up cover behind desks, corners of hallways and in the doorways of rooms and began exchanging fire with the intruders. There was a flurry of gunfire being exchanged back and forth with casualties on both sides. The Emperor and his mercenary captains took up cover nearer the entrance while more of their men filtered into the facility.

The inside of the Janus facility was futuristic by Gbantish standards, sanitized and compact. There was furniture in comfortable seating areas, men's and women's bathrooms, offices and supply rooms. Despite it being very late at night, there were still many non-military

personnel present, including women. Most of the people there that weren't soldiers cowered under their desks or put their hands up in surrender, which the Rhodeseans and Ghantish accepted in good faith.

"Most of these people have no idea what's going on here," explained the Emperor to Kruger and Piet. "They're just trying to pay the bills."

"Fuck the bills," snorted Itinu as he crouched behind cover, exchanging fire with a guard several yards away hiding behind a corner. "How are we getting down to the bottom of this base?"

"The security cards...all of the guards have them." Nathan pointed at one of the dead guards laying on the floor with an orange keycard poking out of the breast pocket of his vest. Also on the dead guard's belt was that strange hand weapon that he noticed some of the guards having on them the last time he was there. "Look at that weapon on his belt too...what is that?"

Tygo Lom reached out and pulled the body towards him, taking the keycard and the hand weapon. Playing with it for a few seconds, he activated it, revealing it to be what he described as a "shock baton," which activated a field of electricity around it when turned on via a button on the hilt. "Oh gee, would you look at that?"

"We need to get to the stairs," Nathan yelled at his comrades. "The elevators can be sealed." Remembering where the stairs were, he pointed towards a small room down the hall. "It's in there...it doesn't go all the way down. There's a different set of stairs on each level, and each one will require a keycard to access."

"Let's get going then," called out Itinu as he dove out of cover and shot down the hall, hitting the Janus guard in the abdomen. The intruders moved from cover to cover until they arrived at the first staircase entrance, which Lom opened with his security keycard. Once it was opened they began pouring down the stairs towards the next sublevel of the base.

Diggory asked the Emperor "how deep does this thing go anyway? What's down there...can you say?"

Nodding as he struggled to climb down the steps, the Emperor explained that "the first level is security and communications, support that sort of thing. The second level is staff housing. The third level is executive offices and laboratories. The fourth level is for mind control experiments, the fifth level is for weapons research, the sixth level is for genetic experiments, the seventh level is for cryogenic storage, the eighth level is for the Janus Project labs, and the ninth level is for the Sword of Sanctification project. Level nine is where we're going."

"The lowest level...of course that's where we're going." Itinu proclaimed dryly as he ran down the stairs.

"...What's below level nine?" Diggory asked cautiously.

He had to ask, didn't he? "...I don't actually know for sure," answered the Emperor. "Supposedly it's just a bunch of caves...there's a cage-elevator that goes down there, but apparently nobody ever does because it's unsafe. Could be creatures and experiments gone wrong that they dump down there though, so who knows. Nothing good I imagine."

"That's where all them cave critters live," Lom chuckled, not far behind Nathan and Diggory. "Waiting for spelunkers to go down into their lair."

One floor after the next, the intruders pushed down the stairs, occasionally encountering more Janus guards that were quickly dispatched. *This is almost too easy*, Nathan thought as they descended further and further down into the vast underground complex. One level after another, they opened the security doors with their keycards, until eventually they were so far down that they could hear nothing besides the sounds of their own feet trampling down the staircase.

The façade of the complex changed the deeper down they went as well. While before the interior was steely chrome and blue, down in the bowels of the facility there were more brown and smoky grey hues, while pale yellow lights shown upon them from the light fixtures above. It seemed as though the deeper the facility went, the older it became...or at least less frequented by anyone that would bother with cleaning and upkeep.

"...This fucking door won't open," Oitu proclaimed as the door rejected his keycard. "We're stuck!"

Recalling what Sula had told him before, Nathan instructed the merc to "give the keycard to someone else. There's a pressure plate under the floor in front of the door that's sensitive to the weight of the keycard's owner."

"Oh for fucksake." Scowling, Oitu passed his keycard around, until the door opened less than a minute later for Nuck Quelt. Once the door was opened they pressed on, inching closer and closer to the sinister level nine.

After what seemed like a long time indeed, Nathan, the Gbantish mercenaries and the Rhodeseans finally arrived at the place where the stairs only descended one more time, ending in a thoroughly locked metal gate bound in chains. "We're here," the Emperor told the others, so weak that he fell down against the wall, gasping for air and sweating profusely. "That gate goes to the underlevel...level nine is just down the hall opposite of that."

"That be where the cave critters are," Lom smiled at his companions before walking forward down the hall towards the entrance to level nine. "Nice little work out, Gods damn! Almost there now too."

Diggory reached down to offer the Emperor a hand. "Come on, get up," Diggory told Nathan as the latter accepted his hand. "I don't like this place...it's too quiet. Places like this...aren't meant to be so quiet."

No, it's not supposed to be. After rising back to his feet, Nathan walked down the hall breathing heavily, feeling the pain in his knees and feet. Nuck Quelt opened the next door, grumbling as he did, and before them was a hallway like the one that Natha remembered. Sterile and clean, it was a metallic grey color, and stunk like bleach. The doors too began to change, opening up by retracting each half into the walls.

Surprisingly enough, the fingerprinted security door was opened already by the time they got to it. The Gbantish mercs didn't seem to think anything about it, proceeding through it like there was nothing there at all. *Those aren't just supposed to be opened like that,* Nathan thought as he passed through. He thought about saying something, but by then it was already too late, as the merc captains had already entered.

At last they arrived at the ninth level plaza, though unlike the last time Nathan was there, there were no people present...just the low humming noise emanating from everywhere. The plaza was a large, square chamber with many metallic doors that went into parts unknown. There were numerous large containers and crates of things that Nathan didn't understand.

"Alright, so where to first?" Itinu asked the Emperor sternly. "Let's get this shit done with so we can get the fuck out of here."

"There are many doors, Sir," Piet informed Kruger as he guided him along. "This place is...advanced..."

"...Advanced indeed." A lone feminine voice called out from the depths of the chamber, and then from out of the shadows the woman emerged. Tough looking with mangled pink hair, broad tribal neck tattoos and a lean, athletic figure, Sula stepped forward, alone, to greet the base infiltrators. Her eyes were a soft lilac, but they burned with something otherworldly. "Greetings brother-in-law and friends."

"And who the fuck are you?" Itinu demanded an answer from Sula, who only grinned in response.

"That's Sula Yaraslan, Princess of Heilanor," answered General Kruger glumly. "Fugitive, mad scientist...you name it."

Sula took a few steps forward. She was

wearing a crimson and violet uniform with tall black boots and a belt with various weapons on it, including a strange looking pistol...of sorts. "I've come a long way. Charged with treason by my sister Selena and branded a traitor by Heilanor, hunted like a dog and destined for life in Block 400. Thanks to you, Nathan, I was saved, and able to finish my work here. Oh, how I've longed to show it to you."

The Gbantish and Rhodesean soldiers continued to accumulate in the room from the stairwell, while the captains pointed their weapons at Sula anxiously. "It's over, Sula. The Sword of Sanctification, Project Seraph, the Janus Project...it's all getting shut down. There's no choice but surrender now...your enemies surround Zathalon as we speak." The Emperor pleaded with his sister-in-law in the hopes that she would see reason. *Please see reason, Sula. This has gone on long enough...*

Staring at him blankly for a moment, Sula began to laugh dismissively before clapping her hands. "Bravo, Nathan, bravo. Oh, you've always been so funny, Nathan. You and your band of misfits came all the way down here so quickly, thinking everything would be so easy." Sula shook her head slowly. "No, Nathan...it's not that easy...it never is. Now let me tell you what's going to happen. You and all these men that came with you will never leave this place again. You will all die here, if you're lucky." Turning to General Kruger, Sula added that "Lara will be most disappointed in your betrayal, General. Consider the lives of your countrymen forfeit...Rhodesea will suffer a fate equal to that of all the rest. I hope it was worth it."

"Ain't nobody got time for this shit." Oitu aimed his rifle at Sula and pulled the trigger. Just like that however, she was gone, only to reappear on top of one of the crates.

"Time's up, boys." Sula then proceeded to clap her hands, and the metallic doors that led back to the stairwell closed, prompting the men closest to it to bang their fists against the sturdy steel door to no avail. The Gbantish and Rhodeseans looked around in confusion as Kruger screamed "we need to fucking move!"

Dear God was this a trap? Nathan looked to meet Sula's gaze upon him. She had a look of sadistic pleasure on her face, like a bully delighting upon their torment of a weaker child. A twinkle in her eye, Sula cried out. "You've made it this far, brother-in-law. Now, witness what we have in store!" Her eyes sweeping over everyone, Sula bellowed "unleash the Slayers."

Two metallic doors at the end of the chamber, two on the right and two on the left opened vertically, retracting the doors into the walls while the intruders aimed their weapons at the openings. "The *Slayers*? Really?" laughed Itinu. "What kind of dog and pony show is this shit going to be?"

"The kind ain't nobody got time for." Oitu took a step forward while aiming downscope. Red warning lights came on, flicking as the main lighting system began to dim down, casting the room in an eerie red and white glow. At that moment, a strange noise sounded from across the great chamber, and a burst of light streamed forth and caught Nul Oitu in the chest. He grunted as he was pushed back, and staggering, slumped back against the floor, a great burning hole in the center of his chest. "No time," he murmured as he drew his dying breaths.

Diggory and Tygo dragged the dying merc captain behind cover as the rest of the soldiers took up positions behind cover, staring at awe as they observed what emerged from the opened doorways. Tall bald men in white armor, full-bodied uniforms wielding what looked like long white spears. One of the "slayers" turned his spear in his hands until he held it like a gun, and then from the end of it, a burst of light shot out, hitting another soldier in the abdomen, causing the man to slump down the ground in agony.

The Gbantish and Rhodesean soldiers fired back at the Slayers from behind cover, discharging a flurry of bullets to collide with their strange new enemies. The armor that the Slayers wore was apparently quite robust, only staggering them as they moved methodically in unison towards the intruders. At least one appeared to be struck in the head, causing him to fall over dead. *Whatever the fuck these things are, at least they can be killed*, thought the Emperor as he witnessed the battle from behind a large container.

Behind them, several other soldiers were trapped in the stairwell, unable to enter the ninth level chamber. To his horror, Nathan could see through the thick glass windows that the stairwell was filling with gas, causing the trapped soldiers to clutch at their necks as they desperately gasped for air. *What did I get these poor men into?*

Sula was laughing from her perch atop a large container when Tygo aimed his rifle at her and pulled the trigger. "Fucking bitch!" he screamed as his gun discharged, but once again she was gone before she could be struck. "We need to get to the fucking control room, where is it?"

Desperately trying to get himself composed, Nathan looked around the room that was quickly filling up with Slayers. "It's over there on the right," he told the others hurriedly. "Behind the...sealed steel door."

"What do you mean it's fucking sealed?" Itinu snapped back at the Emperor, shooting at the Slayers from behind the large metal container. "We need to get in there."

"Yeah and how do you suppose we do that exactly?" countered a rather angry Tygo Lom. "That Sula bitch has this whole thing all fucked up now. No way we can get past that sort of

steel." The Slayers kept walking forward, frequently discharging their weapons in the direction of the Gbantish and Rhodeseans. Already at least a dozen men laid dead on the floor from where they got shot by the Slayers' strange energy weapons.

Living up to his nickname, Lur the Lurker and some of his Trident Knights burst forth from behind cover with their swords and axes and began slashing at the Slayers in melee combat. This tactic appeared to be far more effective, as the Slayers' armor was less effective against sharp steel. The Lurker and his men hacked and slashed at the Slayers, who in turn thrust their spears forward or slashed at their enemies with them.

As the battle in the chamber turned into a proper scrum, the Emperor called out to the rest of their men. "Get in the fight!" he ordered, then telling them to "take their weapons! Take their weapons!" Mando Yurn led a charge into the Slayers, cutting one's head off just before picking up its weapon and tossing it towards Nathan. With the spear in hand, Nathan aimed it at the armory door nearby and tried to figure out how to fire the weapon at it. *Come on come on!* his mind played on repeat as he fiddled with it for a few moments before finally finding a button on the hilt. Pressing it, the spear fired a ball of energy at the door, blasting it powerfully upon impact.

"Get some of their spears and shoot this door!" Nathan ordered as he continued discharging his energy weapon at it. Heeding his command, soldiers burst forth from their covers and entered the fray against the Slayers. When the Emperor turned his head and gazed upon the carnage, he was awestruck by what he saw. Northern Gbantish mercenaries and Rhodesean soldiers fighting desperately against strange, tall bald men wearing elaborate white armored uniforms wielding long spears with directed-energy weapons. *These are truly the strangest of times...*

Soon enough, Nathan was joined by other soldiers who picked up the Slayers' spears and together began blasting at the armory door, while their comrades formed a defensive line against the Slayers, many of whom were still engaged in melee combat. While the intruders' resolve was great, the Slayers seemed more resilient, their weapons proving more devastating than the conventional weapons used by the intruders.

"What's in there?" Lom asked as he joined the Emperor in shooting at the armory door. More Slayers continued to enter the chamber, while more Gbantish and Rhodesean soldiers were dying. Nathan noticed Mando Yurn out of the corner of his eye, fighting against four Slayers who surrounded him on all sides, before they finally thrust the blades of their spears into the mercenary captain's chest.

"It's the armory...there are weapons in there more powerful than these spears, that we will need in order to beat back the Slayers." After

at least a minute of a steady barrage upon the armory door, it gave way, allowing several of the intruders to enter it. "General Kruger, you should stay in here for now," Nathan instructed the Rhodesian leader as he entered the armory.

The armory consisted of a long, rectangular room with racks, shelves and glass containers of many strange and abstract weapons that looked like they were straight out of a science fiction film. Nathan had no idea what most of them were, or did, and neither did anyone else for that matter. "Be careful with these...I imagine most of them are experimental prototypes."

One after another, the soldiers dropped their conventional firearms for direct-energy weapons of various sizes and shapes. Many of the northerners took part as well, with at least a half taking unusual melee weapons instead, chief among them Goldeneye, who opted to take a strange looking sword. "Take what you think you can use and let's kill these fucking Slayers," Itinu barked as he took a large, two-handed gun that made a high-pitched noise when he cocked it. Apparently it was called a "Bio-fusion gun."

Nathan chose to take from a glass case what was described as an "arc-gun," which required two hands to hold. It was a long, metallic weapon with a short, round conic barrel that when powered on, created what he could only describe as fluctuating blue arcs of energy that converged upon a point at the center of the cone.

"...If only I had the eyes to see," Kruger lamented as Piet hastily escorted the General into the bowels of the armory room. "What horrors Zathalon has at its disposal."

"You're not missing much," responded Diggory as he readied his old sturdy sword. "Just a bunch of bald guys with laser-spears...could be worse right?"

It can always get worse. "On me!" the Emperor jumped out of the armory back into the bloody battle in the ninth level of the base. His weapon was cumbersome, requiring him to hold a large handle at its end with one hand, while gripping the underside of it where the power controls and trigger were located. Once he was back in sight of the Slayers, he pulled the trigger on his arc-gun. The weapon recoiled mightily, kicking back into Nathan's chest as a stream of electric energy discharged from the cone. When the stream struck one of the Slayers, it electrocuted him to the point of paralysis and convulsions on the ground. *I can get used to guns like this...*

The Gbantish and Rhodesian soldiers seemed embolden by the new counterattack, doubling their efforts to fight against them with conventional firearms, direct-energy weapons and blades of steel. Lur the Lurker and his men managed to fight along the side of the chamber until they were behind the Slayers,

hacking and shooting at their flank while occupying the Slayers that were only now entering the chamber.

"Keep pushing them back so we can access the control room!" cried the Emperor as he launched streams of electrified energy at the Slayers that struggled in melee combat before him. The recharge time between discharges lasted roughly ten seconds, during which time he ducked behind the cover of some steel containers.

"...Time to see how this thing works," said a smirking Itinu. Diving out from cover, the Ghantar stood up and aimed his bio-fusion gun at a pack of Slayers that had killed some Ghantish mercs with a combination of spear thrusts, slashes and energy discharges. When Itinu pulled the trigger, nothing happened other than a soft, though high-pitched noise. "What the fuck I don't think this piece of shit works," he scowled.

Then it happened. A great burst of energy shot forth from the gun so hard and so suddenly that it caused Itinu to get flung back, knocking the wind out of him. The energy burst hit the containers next to the Slayers, causing those containers to explode with such a ferocity that the nearby Slayers were practically disintegrated. Burning pieces of metal or plastic were flung about the room, leaving a great fire in its place that caught on the floor.

Nearby soldiers and Slayers alike were flung to the ground ferociously, including the Emperor, recoiling against the sudden explosion of light and heat. His hearing was compromised now, a sudden and constant ringing taking place in his ears. He slowly got up and looked over to Itinu, who was laughing even while surrounded by burning fragments, the flames rising all around him.

"Is this the best you got, Sula?" Itinu mocked the Princess, who had seemingly disappeared as Nathan could not see her. "Your Slayers are no match for these weapons." The Slayers and the intruding soldiers resumed their engagements, although now it seemed more like an even-match...or possibly even going in the intruder's favor. They were steadily pushing back the Slayers, allowing the soldiers to push towards the control room with their new armaments in hand.

Nathan didn't see her...he only heard her voice. "Unleash the Negator."

Itinu continued to laugh while his weapon was recharging. "Haha the Negator, that's it? Just one...this is pathetic, laughable even. We've won, you dumb cunt, give it up!" he laughed heartily while Nathan looked on in horror.

"Move, you idiot!" the Emperor screamed at Itinu as a great door slowly opened behind the northern Ghantar, rising up into the ceiling. The door's opening revealed a great black void, from which he could hear the sounds of

something...terrible. "Itinu, you idiot...get out of the way!"

"Ha, get out of the way, you say? You've been saying that to me since this whole war started," Itinu laughed as he stared at the cooldown timer on his gun. "I'm done getting out of the way. It's time for these fuckers to get out of my way!"

God be good. Nathan's jaw dropped and whatever color he had in his face drained as he watched the Negator emerge from its doorway into the chamber. *...This...this can't be possible...* there was nothing else he could think or say that could adequately describe what he saw enter the chamber. *Please, God have mercy on us all...*

The thing had to have been at least fifteen feet tall. It was vaguely humanoid in shape, having a head, two arms, two legs and a torso, but that's where the similarities ended. It's legs were bowed backward like a dog, and it walked on broad, flat feet that had no toes. It's body was a chasis through which wires and tubes were interconnected between various components. It's arms were long, one ending in a claw like a vise, while the other consisted of a great canon of sorts.

Then there was the thing's face. It was like the skull of a man, but metal, with menacing metallic steel teeth, a hole where a nose would be, and two great ruby-red eyes that reflected the fire dancing on the ground before it. The thing was clearly mechanical in nature, but intelligent, as it surveyed the area around it, before focusing on the man that stood in front of him.

Itinu heard it too, casting his gaze upon the Emperor that stood several yards away from him. "...It's behind me isn't it?" Itinu asked to no one in particular before turning around to face it. "...Well, I'll be Gods damned."

Trying to fire his gun before it was ready, the bio-fusion gun stuck as Itinu stared up in awe and horror at the Negator. With one swift, powerful motion, the thing grabbed Itinu's head in its vise-like grip, and just like that, closed it, crushing Itinu's skull with a sickening crunch.

His now headless body slumping to the floor, Itinu's bio-fusion gun fell with a thud as it hit the floor. The Negator kicked it away while looking around the room, blood and brain matter splattered in its claw. Nathan screamed at the others, some of whom were too distracted with fighting the Slayers to notice, others standing in horror at the monstrosity that towered before them. "Shoot the giant robot!"

Nuck Quelt aimed his directed-energy weapon at the Negator from across the chamber. Preparing to fire it, Nuck braced himself, though the Negator saw this and reacted quickly. It aimed it's gun-hand at Nuck and fired a laser stream at him that only lasted a second or two. When it was done, Nuck looked

pale, dropping his gun and clutching at his stomach. "Fuck me," was all he could say as he collapsed, the top half of his body sliding off onto the floor in front of him, while his insides gushed out.

The others tried to dive behind cover to avoid the Negator's laser attack, and began shooting at the machine with their whatever weapons they could muster. The Negator proved especially resilient against both projectile and directed-energy weapons, but was annoyed by them nevertheless. I practically jumped across the room, landing with a great thunderous clash against the floor. With one mighty stroke it swept aside the cover like cheap plastic, exposing the soldiers hiding behind it.

...*Oh no.* That was all the Emperor could think as the Negator swept it's arm with one mighty stroke, sending Nathan, and the soldiers near him flying into the air. Nathan never remembered getting hit as hard by anything in his entire life, nor did he remember hitting anything as hard as the wall that he flew into. He fell broken and bruised to the floor completely disoriented, the air completely knocked out of his lungs and his eyes dazed by the blow.

All around him the Slayers and the soldiers fought with guns and steel, laying each other low amidst the chorus of carnage. The Slayers only grunted and gargled as they fell, but the Ghantish and the Rhodeseans screamed and groaned in agony as they lay dying. He saw them all, covered in burns and bloodied holes as they gasped for whatever air they could before death found them. The Slayers gave no quarter, ruthlessly stabbing downed enemies with the blades of their spears.

Malero Morazhan and half a dozen of his famed Silver Company men were surrounded by encroaching Slayers not too far away. They screamed even while covered in the blood of their comrades and their enemies, letting out mighty roars as they fought against the Slayers until the bitter end. First came a bevy of energy discharges that sent the Ghantish to their knees, and then came the spears. Malero didn't stop swinging his sword even as the Slayers closed in, slashing one across the leg even while he caught several spears through his neck.

Across the room, the hulking Negator reeled around to face the desperate men fighting for their lives against the Slayers, suddenly finding themselves once again outnumbered by their strange, alien-like foes. Jog Toth turned to stare down the Negator, shooting at its face with an energy weapon. The Negator took the shots, before ducking down and scooping up some twisted piece of metal that lay on the floor in front of it. With a mighty heave, the Negator flung the debris at Jog, who only slightly managed to get out of the way. The debris landed on his leg all the same, and pinned against the floor, he screamed while a Slayer lunged at him and buried it's spear into his heart.

...I have to do something...I have to do something now. Nathan looked around him as best he could despite his dizzied state. Then it dawned on him what door was only a few feet away from where his broken body laid. The door was badly damaged, twisted and smoldering, just enough to where he could crawl inside. It was the cold storage room... where the Rosea Serum was kept.

Sula had told him of its properties previously. *"We have reason to believe that it could bestow certain...powers and abilities upon introduction into the bloodstream."* That was enough to convince Nathan that despite it being experimental in nature, he had to go inside the cold storage room...and take the serum. *Or I will surely die...*

Through the pain, he began to crawl forward towards the door, while the fighting ensued around him. Looking to his right however, he could see that the Negator was lumbering towards him with its laser pointed. *No...no...* Nathan feared the worst, that the thing was going to kill him like it did Itinu or Nuck.

Then Guel Goldeneye stepped forth from the blood, fire and smoke, stopping in front of the Negator with a sword in his hands. Facing the thing, Goldeneye activated his sword, causing a swirl of blue flames to erupt from the hilt and enveloping the steel in a spectacular glow. The Negator looked down at the mercenary captain before sweeping down its clawed hand at him, but Goldeneye dodged the swipe while lashing out with his blue sword. It cut into the Negator's arm, causing it to recoil before attacking him again.

Keep going, man...keep going. While everyone else was fighting, Nathan laboriously struggled to crawl towards the mangled metal door, and then proceeded to squeeze through the hole into the cold storage room. It was still cold despite being exposed, but the room was a ruin. Liquid was splattered upon the floor along with shattered glass and ruined containers. *There has to be at least one in here...*

Nathan found one undamaged vial laying in a cracked contain on the floor in front of him. Reaching out with a trembling hand, he took it and pulled it towards his body. When he pulled forth the vial, it was full of the transparent pink liquid he remembered. *I have no choice.* The Emperor carefully opened the vial, and poured the sweet-smelling though bitter tasting liquid down his throat.

The effects kicked in immediately. First there was a burning sensation in his throat, and then in his stomach, like his insides were on fire. It made Nathan choke and gag, and then he began breathing rapidly as his heart pounded in his chest. The burning sensation was followed by tenseness in his muscles so great that it made him scream in pain. He could see the veins in his hands as he experienced a seizure, and then his body slacked against the cold wet floor.

By the time it was done, the pain was gone. The weakness was gone...the lethargic malaise of his imprisonment...was gone. He stood up, and looked around with a crystal clarity that he never had before. Suddenly he felt faster.. stronger...more aware of things. ...*Wow, that shit really does work.* Boldly, Nathan slid down through the hole and back out into the chamber of death and destruction.

The fighting was still going on, though now Nathan felt a power coursing through him that he never had before. He ran into the fray, picking up a Slayer spear as he went, and ran one of them through with it. "On me!" he called out to what men still lived. "On me! On me!"

Of the Gbantish mercenary captains, only four remained. Goldeneye still did battle with the Negator, the former now wielding his flaming blue sword in his right hand a small energy pistol in his left hand. Tygo Lom was off with some other men fighting a cluster of Slayers with Piet and Kruger, who finally got flushed out of the armory, and Lur the Lurker and his men were still towards the back of the chamber harassing the Slayers from cover.

Diggory Diaw and a dozen combined Gbantish and Rhodeseans fought their way to the Emperor. "On to the control room!" cried Diggory as he slashed his sword at the nearby Slayers. The Lurker's men were the closest to the control room, and fought ferociously to cut down the Slayers near it. "Make the push, damnit! Give em everything you got!"

Then she appeared again, fighting in the thick of the Lurker's men with a bayoneted energy rifle. *Get her, please...fight her!* Sula moved fluidly as she shot, stabbed and slashed the Lurker's men, moving so quickly and with such power that there wasn't much they could do to stop her. ...*She drank the serum too,* Nathan realized as he watched her face off against the Lurker himself.

The Lurker swung his sword at her, though she dodged it, and then again, this time parrying it with her bayonette. They only fought for a few seconds before Sula slashed the Lurker right through the neck, causing his head to fall off with a swift, clean stroke. The loss of their captain broke the morale of his remaining men, who tried to flee from Sula only to be caught against the Slayers who dispatched of them with relative ease.

"Sula!" Nathan roared his sister-in-law's name, who promptly looked up and stared him down. Without saying anything else, Nathan raised and pointed his weapon at her. *Time to end this.* He aimed and shot his Slayer spear at Sula, only for her to then dodge the discharge. Snorting, he jumped after her, away from the battle towards a secluded part of the chamber, just before a wave of Slayers clashed with Diggory and his comrades.

Looking around for Sula, Nathan observed how

the floor there was soaked in blood, the bodies of dead men on both sides covering the floor. Nathan looked off and witnessed Goldeneye battling the Negator with his flaming blue sword and his pistol, while the Negator tried to attack him ferociously. So indiscriminate the Negator was that it swiped and bashed at anyone in its path, intruders and Slayers alike, unable to vanquish Guel Goldeneye. Just then the Negator swooped down so low that Goldeneye had one opportunity that he didn't let go to waste. He drove his sword through one of the thing's ruby red eyes, sinking it so deep into the Negator's head that it shuddered with an eerie, metallic groan until at last it collapsed on top of Goldeneye, who was unable to get out from under it in time.

Nathan lamented Goldeneye's fate while proceeding to look for Sula with his weapon raised, calling out her name. "Enough games, Sula. Come face me now. Let's settle this, you and me."

"Let's." Sula lunged at Nathan from behind cover, tackling him to the floor with greater force than he anticipated. She pinned him against the slick wet floor while his weapon flew out of his hands, just out of his reach. She tried to shoot him with her weapon but he was quick enough to knock it away, prompting her to start punching him in the face savagely.

Nathan struggled against her, resisting as best he could in spite of the blood and sweat that soaked his hands. They wrestled on the ground for at least a minute, before he finally got the upper hand and flipped her on her back. Cackling, she kicked him with all of her might off of her, sending him flying back against some cover, hitting his head against it. Not even the serum could spare him from feeling dizzy all over again.

Sula was upon him again very quickly, and with a strange object in her hand. It was like a hacksaw, but with no blade. Sula grabbed Nathan by his neck with her free hand, and slammed him against the floor so hard that it knocked all of the air out of his lungs. The back of his head hit the floor, and then the pain came rushing back. Sula was on top of him again, her grip around his neck tight.

Then she spoke. "I know you drank the serum, Nathan...such as shame that its power was wasted on the likes of you," she spat in his eye. "Even in the end, all you did was get your people killed. What do you think about that?"

Through his daze and in spite of the pressure on his neck, Nathan tried to laugh. "We're about to shut it down, Sula...we've almost taken the control room..."

Laughing hysterically, Sula shook her head and replied "all this time and you still haven't realized it. There is no control room, you idiot. What you think is the control room is only my office, where I do my work. Nothing can be shut down from there...and did you even think that those projects were here? My, you truly

are an imbecile, aren't you?"

...No... he had to believe she was lying. *That can't be true.* "You lie, Sula...that's...the control room.."

"Ha!" she laughed. "The control room, that's grand! There was never a control room, and even if there was, I never would have shown it to you. I always knew you would betray us...I always knew you were weak and stupid. I warned Lara that she didn't need you, and I warned her that you would betray her. I wanted you dead at the baby shower...she should have killed you while you had the chance. I'm going to correct that mistake."

The hacksaw suddenly lit up, and where the blade was supposed to be, instead there was a narrow beam of white energy running from both ends of the hacksaw. It was bright and burned hot against Nathan's face, as Sula tried to press down with it. Nathan struggled against it, though Sula was stronger than he was.

"You truly are a pathetic man, Nathan of Ghant...so romantic, so gullible and naïve. You didn't know Lara or me, and yet when we came to Ghish and spoke sweet words to you, you were unable to resist. Such a sucker for a pretty face. Such weakness makes me sick!" As Sula forced the hacksaw down towards Nathan's face, he could increasingly feel the heat of the laser against his skin, singing whatever hair was there.

"All of this...all that you have seen...it's only a fraction of our true power," Sula said to him menacingly as the hacksaw went closer and closer towards the Emperor's face. "Yet you resist, even in the face of utter annihilation. No matter what you do, Nathan of Ghant, it's always inadequate, you always fail. I've seen more versions of you than I care to remember, and each and every one of them weak, used and taken advantage of by others more powerful than you."

Sula laughed maniacally when the laser got so close to Nathan's face that the heat from it made him scream in pain. *She's going to cut my head in two*, he feared as he could feel the skin of his face begin to burn. The laser began to slice into his forehead and his cheek, above and below his right eye. "Even if you succeeded, you couldn't possibly win. The technology we have...the places I've been, the things I've seen...there's no overcoming it. What we're going to accomplish...you couldn't possibly imagine."

The heat and the edge of the white hot laser cut deeper into Nathan's face, causing blood to pour out into his eye and mouth, steaming hot. "I never envisioned that this would be how it ended, but alas, here we are. Try to die with dignity, sweet Nathan. It will all be over soon. Think of it as a favor...you have my sympathies..."

Nathan heard a sharp, high-pitched noise

behind him, prompting Sula to look up and pull the laser hacksaw away. When he glanced with his one clear eye to see, he saw Diggory Diaw, bloodied and bruised with a two-handed energy weapon in his hands. "Catch you at a bad time?"

"...I don't believe it," said Sula with a scowl before trying to jump away. When she tried she found that she couldn't, as Nathan had grabbed her by the shirt.

"You best believe it, bitch." Diggory fired his weapon just as Sula let out a blood-curdling scream. The energy discharge struck her in the face with such force that her head exploded, splattering both Nathan and Diggory with blood, brains and bits of skull.

After her body fell to the floor, Diggory walked over to the disfigured Emperor, and grimaced when he looked upon his face. "That'll leave a scar," Diggory told Nathan as he helped him up. "Come on, let's get to that damn control room before we're all dead."

As Diggory helped Nathan up, the latter looked around the room, which had grown increasingly quiet with some many now dead. Most of the Ghantish and Rhodeseans were dead, and what few remained managed to fight towards each other near the control room door, led by Tygo Lom and with Piet and Kruger close to him. The Slayers now greatly outnumbered them, and in most places were finishing the intruders off. *All of those men...died because of me...*

"I'm sorry, Diggory...there is no control room," Nathan told the mercenary captain. "There was never a control room...it was all a ploy."

Diggory stared at the Emperor with a look of disappointment. "What do you mean there is no control room?"

"...It's just Sula's office...there's where she does her work. Her computer...all of her files..." *Oh wait.* Nathan grabbed Diggory by his shirt and told him that "those files...we need to access them. Send them to allied command. Let the world know what Lara and Sula were working on here at Janus. There might still be time for them to stop it, even if we can't."

Nathan bent over and picked Sula's keycard off of her belt, and then he began to move, with Diggory following behind him. Fortunately he could still see out of his right eye, though it burned and ached, and stung with hot blood. "One last push."

"That's a good plan, your Majesty," Diggory agreed with Nathan thoughtfully. "Though you know...we will have to barricade ourselves in the room long enough to a file upload to be completed."

"...Unfortunately yes, we're all going to die." The thought was sobering, in light of what just happened. "But it won't be in vain. Everyone will know what's at stake, and then it will be on them if they succeed on the battlefield."

Looking ahead, Nathan could see Tygo Lom, General Kruger and Piet surrounded by all that remained of their men fighting against the Slayers that surrounded them. Another few minutes, and they'd all be dead unless they got inside Sula's office.

"Do me a favor, will ya?" Nathan asked as they got closer to the fight, hugging the wall as they went. "Get everyone inside...I'll hold the Slayers off while you secure the room and get to work on those files. Can you do that?"

With a heavy sigh, Diggory said "yeah. Okay, your Majesty." Suddenly, Diggory reached around from behind the Emperor and took Sula's keycard out of his hand. By the time Nathan realized that Diggory had taken the keycard, the mercenary captain swept around to Nathan's side and gave him a hefty push, causing him to fall to the side.

When Nathan fell, he didn't hit the wall however, but instead fell into something he didn't even realize was there. The rectangular cage elevator that went down to the underlevels. Before Nathan could get back up, Diggory lunged forward and hit the button that closed the chained iron-bar elevator door.

The Emperor grasped at the bars as he tried to get out, though the elevator didn't feature such a mechanism within it. "What the fuck Diggory! Let me out now! I command it!"

"No, I don't think so," Diggory shook his head. "I'm getting you out of here...by sending you down there."

"Diggory, you son of a bitch!" Nathan frantically beat against the chains. "You can't do this to me! It's my job!"

"Your job is to survive and put an end to all this shit once and for all," countered the mercenary captain. "That's your job. Don't worry about us...we'll get the job done." Diggory hit the button, and then the old elevator began to shake and rattle as it made its descent into the darkness below. "Good luck, and may the Gods be with you always, your Majesty."

"No, Diggory, stop!" Nathan cried out in what at first was anger, but now it was sorrow. "Don't do this...don't."

Diggory inclined his head towards the Emperor while he was barely still in view, and then looked down at Sula's keycard in his bloodied hand. He then pointed his weapon forward and walked away. That was the last thing Nathan saw before he was encapsulated by darkness, going down into the unfathomable depths of the underlevels of the Janus Base, where his ultimate fate awaited him.



Rhodesea
Lobbyist

Posts: 11
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Inoffensive Centrist
Democracy

by **Rhodesea** » Sun May 13, 2018 1:30 pm



"The Lion's Last Stand" **Janus Research Facility** **Letople, Zathalon**

Diggory Diaw looked down at Sula's keycard, his hand soaked in blood and sweat. In his other hand he held his weapon...some strange gun unlike any he had ever used before. The important thing was that he knew how to use it, and if the Gods were generous, he'd get one last chance to. He walked purposefully towards what would likely be his final destination. *Just a little longer...that's all I ask for.*

The vast subterranean chamber was a great mess of fire, blood, gore and debris. Dead Ghantar, Rhodeseans and Slayers laid side-by-side upon the hot, slick floor, while blast marks and blood stained the otherwise sterile chrome walls. A strange blue fire still burned amongst the smoldering debris, despite that material not being flammable. Those that were unfortunate enough to not have died instantly during the course of the fighting were now mostly dead, having at last succumbed to their wounds. Their screams of agony still lingered in Diggory's head, however.

Only one part of the chamber still possessed activity, and that was near the secure door leading into Sula's office. It was a terrible scene that made Diggory's heart plunge into the depths of his chest. What few men remained were all piled up at the door, some pounding it, others shooting at it, other still either fighting back against the Slayers that formed a semi-circle around them or simply trying to run away.

There was no mercy for any of them. Men were shot and cut down where they stood, others ran through while frantically trying to escape. Those hapless soldiers who piled up at the door were shot in the back, slumping down to die. Among those that were fighting still in that dwindling mass were Tygo Lom, who stood in front of General Sarel Kruger and his assistant Piet. Diggory reckoned that there were roughly twenty men left, against at least three times as many Slayers, all of which had their backs turned to Diggory as he made his way up to their rear.

I only have one chance, Diggory realized as he came up behind them, once again staring at the keycard in his hand. He thought about his clan, his family back in northern Ghant. A wife he'd never hold again, a son that he'd never get to teach, a daughter that he'd never get to give away at a wedding. *Such is the soldier's price,* he understood. *Such is the cost of the warrior.* Hard as it was, Diggory knew what he had to do.

Diggory took a deep breath, and with a booming voice, he called out "Tygo." Everything that happened after that was a frenzied blur. Most of the Slayers began to turn around to face the Ghantish merc captain. Through them all Diggory could see Tygo with his weapon in hand, fighting desperately against the Slayers. Briefly they made eye contact, and that was when Diggory made his next move.

"Catch," he cried out as he threw the keycard up into the air, as far as he could toss it, in the direction of Tygo Lom. At the same time the Slayers opened fire upon Diggory, who began to exchange fire with them. That was it... before he could feel intense heat and energy ripping through his torso. With a shudder and a gasp he fell on his back, his eyes fixated upon the ceiling above him as he came crashing down to the floor.

Don't look at it, he thought about the wound inflicted upon him...if one could call it that. He couldn't feel anything below his chest...perhaps nothing was there anymore. Strangely enough, it didn't even really hurt, it was just...numb. As he bled out and as his vision began to blur, he thought once more of his family, and of his sacrifice, before everything faded to black...

*I am a warrior.
A sword-swinging,
Mercenary,
Soldier of fortune,
Knight errant.
I go by many names.
And equally as many titles,
Too many to list.
I am an instrument of war,
Good only for skill with a blade*

*Little do my cohorts know,
I am a man of peace.
There can be no peace without war.
Thus I am constantly fighting.
I fight so that others may have peace.
I fight for the love of my people.
I fight because I must.
Mine is the sword that carved your freedom.
Mine is the blood that stains the floor.
Mine was the courage that sparked the fire of war.*

*Mine however, was not the death of a nation.
Mine was not the massacre of children.
The burning of cities,
Or the decimation of a race.
Instead, mine were the nightmares.
The faces of the men I've killed,
And those of my comrades,
Cut down by monsters.
Their screams haunt me still
As loud as they were when first uttered.*

*Be grateful, then,
That I made the stand.
And took the sword of our people.
Placing myself between you and destruction,
And helped forge a life, free from bloodshed.
These things I have done for the good of our*

kind
Remember my sacrifice,
And that of my comrades.
Remember our deeds,
So they do not have to be repeated...

Tygo Lom reached up, and caught the object in his hand, only afterward realizing that Diggory was dead. *Looks like I'm the last of the merc captains still standing*, Tygo realized as he looked upon the object resting against his palm. "The fuck is this thing?" he genuinely didn't know, though he knew it was important. *If Diggory died for it anyway...*

"The keycard!" Piet cried out. "Open the door. Now!" Just as the Slayers were turning back around to face the remaining soldiers, Tygo pushed his way through struggling soldiers, towards the door. Beside it was a security lock, where the keycard could be inserted. So desperate was Tygo to get to the lock that he started hitting people with his gun in order to get through them.

"Out of the way you sons of bitches!" He screamed at them, his voice hoarse. "Get out of the fucking way!" he could hear the Slayers open fire on them again, with more men subsequently screaming out in pain and anguish. Before long, Tygo at last reached the wall, and with nothing between him and the lock, he slid the keycard into the mechanism on the wall.

A little green light flashed, and then the door began to open, pulling up from the floor into the ceiling. "Get inside, quickly you stupid bastards!" He yelled at what remained of the soldiers as he took the keycard back out. Piet guided Kruger inside, followed by a few more men and then Tygo. Others pushed their way inside after him, the doorway so thick with men that the Slayer's weapon fire couldn't even breach the room.

"Shut the door!" Piet said frantically as the last of the soldiers still standing forced their way in, the Slayers closing in behind them. Tygo hit a large red button beside the door on the inside of the room, and then the steel door began to lower itself back into the floor. Dead and dying men laid beneath it, though the door didn't stop closing. When it finally did, there were a few arms and fingers inside the room, with blood pooling on the floor and upon the now sealed door.

There were eight men remaining, including Tygo, Kruger, Piet, three Ghantar and two Rhodeseans. They quickly spread out across the room, some of them clutching at their wounds, others slumping up against the walls and catching their breaths. The room itself was rather small, a brightly lit white square room with nothing in it except for a plain white desk at the center of the room and a computer sitting upon it.

Piet made his way to the computer and sat down in the white chair at the desk. Fortunately for them, the computer was on,

and at the home screen. "I suspect we don't have much time, General," Piet said to Kruger with a sad voice. "I can try to upload the Project Files to a secure server in Rhodesea, and give them instructions to disseminate it to the allies. I don't know how long that will take though." There was a second chair at the desk that Piet helped Kruger sit down in.

"As long as it takes," Kruger replied with a heavy sigh. "Find them and get them out. We made it this far...now it's time to finish the job." Not knowing who else was there, Kruger called out, "who's still alive?"

"Tygo Lom, General," the merc captain answered. "A few Rhodeseans and Ghantar still draw breath. You get those fucking files out, we will give you all the time you need. The rest is in the hands of fate."

Kruger grinned at that, saying "I underestimated you Ghantar. You've got grit, and are willing to fight the good fight no matter the odds. There's no getting out of this...I'll be damned proud to die with your kind at my side."

Tygo nodded his head, and readied his weapon. "Ain't gonna start talking about dying just yet...I still got a little bit of living left to do...and I'm gonna spend it taking some motherfuckers with me."

"I've found the Sword of Sanctification files," Piet informed Kruger and the others. "And then some...I have access to the online server too. Now to begin the uploading process. Once they're out, they cannot be deleted from this end. We just have to wait for the upload to complete." Piet clicked to begin the process, and so it began, though Tygo knew that shit like this always came down to the wire. *If this works, it's going to be by the hair on my ass...*

Suddenly the room rumbled as something heavy hit the door, followed by the sound of an intense discharge of heat, like a rocket launching. "Oh shit, there it is boys," Tygo groaned as he stood in front of the door with his weapon ready. "Them fuckers are coming for the final act." Looking over his shoulder at Piet, he said to the young Rhodesean "you better hurry the fuck up."

"It's out of my hands now, Ghantar," Piet answered nervously as he readied a sidearm. "It will be done when it's done."

Tygo snorted as he waved for the other soldiers to form up around him. "Fucking fantastic. Well, let's do what we can then." The merc captain watched as the steel door in front of him began to glow from whatever heat was being put upon it from the other side. "It's gonna start getting real hot in here boys." In fact Tygo was already feeling it, the sweat streaming down his pale face.

"It's going it's going it's going," said Piet anxiously, tapping his hands compulsively on the desk. Kruger sat stoically beside him with a

pistol in his hand, resting it against his thigh. Perhaps sensing his final moments were drawing near, he began to pray to God for redemption for his crimes, for they were many.

The General then turned to Piet and said, "inform my second-in-command that there are to be free and fair elections in Rhodesia. Release the POWs to their nations of origin and make peace with our enemies."

Piet turned sharply and looked at the General with surprise. "...Are you sure, General."

"Yes," Kruger nodded. "Let Rhodesia be free in a world of peace that we fought and died for this very day. Those are my wishes." Piet inclined his head and sent the message to the Rhodesian military government while the files were still in the process of uploading.

The door became so hot that it was glowing red and orange, before parts of it seemed to melt away. "We're out of time, damn it!" the remaining soldiers aimed their weapons at the melting door, and when at last there was a gap exposed, they opened fire on it and whatever was trying to get through. "Give em hell boys! Don't let em get through!" Tygo screamed as he unloaded his weapon.

More of the door melted away, and then fire was returned into the room. "Stay in front of the door!" cried Tygo, with the small group of soldiers forming a barrier between the door and the computer. One of them caught an energy discharge in the chest, causing him to fall. Then another, while those that remained desperately fought back. "Time to die, boys! Go out like you came in, kicking and screaming!"

Once the door was weak enough, the Slayers burst through, with a taller one between them, clad in black and with a strange weapon in his hands. They made quick work of the defiant soldiers with their weapons, though Tygo lasted the longest, dropping to one knee as he clutched at one of many wounds on his body. Blood trickling from his mouth, he looked at the Slayers and spat. "Fuck you...Fuck you all."

Another blast and Tygo Lom met his end in a bloody mess, falling forward to the floor. Not even a second after that, Piet looked up and said, "upload complete, Gen..."

Kruger heard the blast, and Piet's words were cut off. All the General could feel was wetness against his face, presumably Piet's blood. Then there was silence. Kruger couldn't even raise his gun to shoot it, he just leaned back in his chair and laughed. "It's done...you're too late. They have everything now, assholes. Game over." Kruger laughed as he raised his gun to his own head, ready to take his own life.

Then the Rhodesian General felt the cold caress of steel against his temple, the blow so hard that it sent him flying back out of his chair and crashing on his back to the floor. That was the last thing Kruger knew before

everything went dark...darker than everything already was due to being blind. As he faded out of consciousness, the General grinned in satisfaction. The Lion of Rhodesea got the last laugh after all.



Mizrad
Senator

Posts: 3789
Founded: Jan 02, 2013
Ex-Nation

The Final Chapter Begins...

by **Mizrad** » Tue Jul 30, 2019 5:16 pm



Central Zathalon, Southern Theatre 1st Battalion, 2nd Marines

Seven long months have passed since the Coalition's invasion of Zathalon. Formerly barren tree branches sprout new leaves, the cold winter air is replaced by a more comfortable spring thaw. As mother nature's frost loosens her grip, the Coalition's noose around Letople tightens. Leading the way are a collection of Mizradian divisions who just over half a year prior had led the charge onto the beaches of Heilanor as the first to make landfall in the area. Many weeks of brutal combat against determined resistance from Loyalists, weather, and the terrain had finally given way to the Line of No Return. A perimeter south of Letople all the way east to the ocean had been established. It is here where the resistance has become more bitter than even those who manned the coastal defenses on first contact. The Coalition's shock and awe blitzkrieg has devolved into static warfare upon reports that Lara's threat of annihilation may actually hold some basis in reality. Not wanting to incite the launch of a doomsday weapon, the Coalition has since surrounded what remains of Lara's forces in the north of the continent as they await a diplomatic solution. Unfortunately the odds of a peaceful outcome decrease more and more with casualties ever increasing. Much like the temperature, tensions on the line have began reaching highs unseen in months. The last of Lara's forces are a tenacious bunch, armed to the teeth and willing to die for the cause. It is only a matter of time until somebody makes a move.

While the politicians and diplomats attempt to sort out the mess in their own way, the men and women on the frontline dig in and pass the time. What little remains of the alcohol and cigarettes from the holiday gift packages is shared amongst those in the trenches. The ancient fortifications of kings of old in the land around Letople has long since been modified to suit more modern purposes. Where defenses had not yet existed, engineers construct new ones. Ports and airstrips have been reopened around the liberated areas of the continent shipping supplies in and wounded or refugees out. Much of the major infrastructure destroyed over the course of the Coalition's advance has since either been rebuilt or temporarily replaced with stopgap measures. Reconstruction efforts have yet to go into full swing. The threat of Lara and the remainder of the Loyalists striking out remains too high. At the moment the lives of those who call Zathalon home remain in pieces. They must wait a little longer for peace to return. Though costly both in monetary and human terms, the operation has so far been successful. The democratic world remains intact for the time being.

On the frontline, the men of the 1st Battalion, 2nd Marine Division settle into a recently liberated village. The companies either set up around the perimeter to take the first watch or find comfort inside the various empty structures for the night. On a handful of lots the embers of the fires set during the preceeding battle still smolder. The main road displays a column of destroyed armored vehicles and transports pushed aside for traffic to pass through. The two largest structures still intact are a townhall and a church, albeit the bell tower had since collapsed from being hit. The last of the Mizradian dead in the field have finally been picked up by the stretcher bearers. Losses like these have unfortunately been amounting to numbers almost on par with the initial landings due to the fierce, final throes of the Loyalists in their attempts to slow down the Coalition's advance.

Inside what must have once been a large house or inn, recently promoted 1st Lieutenant Dean Cobral's platoon search for their own

indoor spot to relax and finally get some sleep for the night. Cobral himself is already tired enough having just returned from an officer's meeting in the battalion's new forward command post in the townhall. Gathered around a large table in front of the lit fireplace are a few of the enlisted men in the platoon. First Sergeant Dre Fargo, Sergeant Brian Swenson and Corporal Manuel Cuarenta play poker together with Private George Umarov as the dealer. Fargo and Cuarenta have been promoted since the invasion after the platoon's original first sergeant was killed only days after the beachhead had been established. Cuarenta on the other hand is just getting used to his new position. Unfortunately, his good friend Khaled Hayes is not enjoying it with him. Hayes had been hit by a sniper a few days ago, succumbing to his wounds just before the 1/2 Marines encountered the village they are now calling home. Many of the men in their platoon are no longer familiar faces, but young and inexperienced replacements. Despite their hardships they try to happily pass the time in their own way while others choose to sleep.

"All in"

Fargo confidently states to Swenson, who chose to go in against him on the current hand. On the table are a king and four spade cards of various values.

"All in? Really? Alright sarge don't try to PT my ass after you get three-pieced."

The two show their cards: Swenson slaps a pair of kings down on the table. His chuckling stops when Fargo shows his hand of one king and an ace, both of which are spades. Swenson smacks his head on the table and pounds his fists while muttering obscenities. Those who have yet to fall asleep around them all laugh at his misfortune. Umarov then hands the first sergeant the prize, an unopened bottle of whiskey. He takes only a swig before returning the bottle to the table and getting up.

"I just need enough to help me sleep. You boys can share the rest. Don't ever say I didn't take care of you. Good night, I better not see any of you asshats hungover at formation tomorrow morning."

The rest of the Marines gathered around the table laugh and wish their first sergeant a good night before starting another game. Fargo grabs a pillow off the occupied couch and goes up to fall asleep on a mattress in the second floor hallway. He gets up the steps and is met by Lieutenant Cobral. The two salute each other and Cobral motions him into his room. A large bedframe sits half broken in the corner, most of it having already been used for firewood. Cobral's sleeping accommodation is a bed roll on the floor with a large blanket and his rucksack for a pillow. A desk and two chairs have yet to be converted into food for the fireplace, the makeshift office space gives some semblance of sanity.

"Can't get used to a regular bed again after all this, can you sir?"

Fargo says as Cobral takes a seat on one side of the desk and motions for Fargo to do the same.

"Not quite. I almost miss sleeping in a foxhole at this point.... almost. Look, I wish I called you up here to reminisce but we've got a job to do. Brass is getting word of large troop movements northwest of us near the coast towards local blufor positions. Not sure what we're going to do about it. I hope they all kill each other for all I care but reality is we're probably going to have to be the ones that make the final push."

Cobral explains while twitching his right leg. The creaky wooden floorboard trembles beneath his boot, revealing his embarrassing tendency. Fargo points it out.

"You're doing it again sir. This shit is catching up to us. I thought they handed the tip of the spear to somebody else. Every inch of freed dirt on the continent is covered in our blood. Hayes, Woodrow,

Al-

The trembling abruptly stops. He raises his hand, signalling Fargo to stop. The lieutenant solemnly shakes his head. The youth has slipped from his features. His dark blue eyes are all that bring color to his face akin to an oasis across an otherwise remote desert. Though only twenty six, the torment of surmounting violence has taken its toll on Cobral.

"We *are* the tip of the spear. The guys with the cool guns and gear might be the ones that handle the high value stuff but we're responsible for the liberation of this medieval clusterfuck. I try not to think too much about our original guys. Not yet at least. For every ounce we've given to this place, there is still more to be done. There will come a time when we can worry about the aftermath but until then, a lot more people have to die. Our job is to make sure its the other guy. I can't stand to lose anyone else."

Fargo ponders his lieutenant's words. The officer was not much of a speaker, but after spending years together he and the "originals" of the platoon have come to know he is a genuine leader; one that cares for his men. The differences in rank were at this point more of a formality. These two men, along with the other veterans of the campaign are the closest thing to family that many have had since their deployment. The lapse in conversation ends, Cobral continues.

"Let the boys know we move out in a few hours. Something must've rubbed the brass the wrong way and we're finally getting our asses in gear. Whole division is getting a move on. We're not pushing hard just yet but the plan is to get everybody prepared for one final thrust at Letople. If intelligence is right, Lara will be spending the last of her 'professionals' in a counterattack out west. Even if they're wrong, it still means we've got an open shot to hit them in the flank."

Fargo sighs.

"Shit, so now we working with the same fucks who got us into this mess?"

Cobral reluctantly looks up to Fargo.

"The short answer? Yes. That call is way above our pay grade. Get some sleep, we move out at sunrise."

Fargo nods. The two stand up and salute the other. Fargo is about to exit the room when Cobral stops him. His voice noticeably more hoarse than before.

"Don't think I forgot their names. There is a reason why I let you all drink at night."

The conversation becomes enveloped by silence and the sergeant exits the room. The young lieutenant notices his leg jerking about once again. His gaze drifts off to the west facing window. The night sky towards Letople occasionally comes to life with gun fire. The sound of the cold breeze is pierced by the noise of aircraft roaring overhead. Out in the street of the little village men and vehicles move about further modifying the place to suit their needs. This war is far from over.

Coalition Forward Command, Eastern Zathalon

As the armies of democracy march upon Lara's forces, the liberated areas behind the frontline finally see some semblance of their former lives return. Shops receive customers, farmers grow crops, kids go to school. To the dismay of those still attempting to flee the continent entirely, the largest international airport in liberated territory had been completely commandeered by the Coalition. The runways buzz to life with military traffic coming in and out. All across the sprawling property, new fortifications had been constructed as well as various other additions such as communications centers and barracks. The allies had quite literally run out of roofs to stuff even themselves

under. On open ground laid men and machine alike waiting for orders. New replacements are flown in here or arrive by boat to one of the many ports now under allied control. One of forward command's many responsibilities also included acting as the first "filter" for collection and analyzation of relevant battlefield intelligence.

In order to handle the seemingly limitless requirements of surveying the frontline, hundreds of drones and their pilots also operate out of the airport. A few hundred miles west, a reconnaissance drones fly round the clock sorties to keep the Coalition up to date on enemy troop movements. One particular cause for concern recently has been the growing build up of a military force near the coast just south of Letople. This collection of hardware had not gone unnoticed by surveillance assets, especially at this static stage of the conflict. To the dismay of the Coalition the intention of this force is still unknown and monitoring their movements has placed an immense strain on reconnaissance assets. On the contrary, constant overhead flights and humint missions have provided intelligence organizations of the Coalition with a near endless supply of material to analyze.

Beneath the radar over the forests outside of Letople, one of the countless recon drones goes about collecting aerial images when it's sensors pick up an interesting anomaly. Back at control the pilot adjusts his course to take a closer look. A long line of infrared signatures appears from under the cover of the forest canopy inciting the pilot to divert course and circle to the rear. The pilot monitors the situation for a moment before he is stunned by the sheer size of his find. The drone's dual infrared and night vision cameras reveal the "anomaly" is in fact a sizable military convoy. Assuming it is one of many transport convoys adding to the stockpile of troops and equipment in the Northern Theatre, the pilot calls over the officer in charge.

"Sir! Large unknown combatant force moving south of Letople. Unknown origin and destination. Treeline is making a good size estimate difficult."

As soon as the officer arrives by the desk to watch the camera feed, the trucks pull into a small base. The two watch quietly until what appears to be a violent firefight ensues. There had been multiple incidences of rebel cells attempting to lash out at the Loyalsits, though this incident does not come across as a simple hit and run. Curious but not quite concerned, the officer marks down the location on a notepad and is about to walk off when something catches his eye.

"Wait... zoom in on the entrance to the warehouse."

The pilot oblige his orders and does so. Unbeknownst to them, they are the first foreigners to lay eyes on the Janus Facility. Nothing seems quite out of the ordinary until the two realize that it appears as if more people are packing into the main warehouse than can possibly fit.

"Its like a damn clown car. How many guys you think they're stuffing in there?"

"Sir it could be some sort of tunnel complex, should we inform command?"

"Already on it."

The officer paces away from the pilot and over to a radio set. Something mysterious was clearly located in that warehouse. Typical protocol for such a discovery usually called for continued surveillance or in some cases, an airstrike. The OIC goes about following procedure when he is suprised to hear none other than the Army's in-house intelligence organization, G-2, on the other end of the radio.

"Drone Control this is G-2 can we get a flyover of the following coordinates uhhh..."

Before the intelligence officer can repeat the coordinates, the OIC states the location of the warehouse.

"How the hell did you know that?"

"We just picked up a huge gunfight and quite a bit of suspicious activity, we'll patch you into the feed now."

"Affirmative, keep an eye on it from your end."

The base, complete with multiple runways, barracks, and storage areas, held nothing quite as important as the grouping of warehouses that complete the nerve center of the invasion force. Anything and everything, from request for air support to troop movements is sent up the chain until it reaches here. All the information is either analyzed and acted on or gets sent home to Mizrad for further processing. It is here where the massive data dump on the Janus Project had just been received. G-2 was already descending into near chaos upon realizing the gravity of the document. The in-country commander of the organization, Intelligence Chief General Michael Morrison arrives at the G-2 warehouse soon after being raised by his second in command and takes control. An officer approaches him.

"Sir, Janus upload completed. We have the memo ready to be analyzed."

"Good. Send it up the chain, try to figure out who the hell sent it. And somebody get me a goddamn satphone please!"

The aide salutes the general and quickly communicates the order. Around the Coalition base those assigned to the matter at hand begin operations to prepare a proper response. Computer AI systems and human brains alike carefully comb through the uncovered documents. The data dump is sent further up the chain all the way back to MCID headquarters in Mizrad, where the nature of the documents is revealed. Morrison soon secures himself a satellite phone and begins a group call with the special operations and MCID's liaison officers. He steps into an office to conduct the phone call in private. Two voices perk up on the other end of the line in curiosity before Morrison speaks up.

"Gentlemen I believe we just netted the big fish, either conference call or be in person at the TOC in five minutes. I'll explain then. See you in five."

The two liaison officers hang up and the general follows. Each one immediately diverts their attention to the Janus situation at hand, leaving behind other tasks to the second in commands of their respective units. A short trip down the road reveals a smaller, brick, one-story building, sturdy in its construction. Beyond the bustling command center with maps and radios, the three men along with a handful of other top echelon officials and representatives from around the Coalition take their seats in a secluded conference room. They busy themselves exchanging greetings until a middle aged woman in civilian clothes arrives, files in hand and an MCID identification badge on her hip. The board at the head of the room switches to a compilation of satellite and drone imagery of possible locations of the Janus facility. The largest of which is an image of the base where the firefight had occurred. On the wall a massive map of the frontline is plastered up for all to see. The windowless, bunkerlike nature of the room allows for a bit more leniency in operational security; more so considering that not a soul without top secret clearance is allowed within the TOC. The chatter soon silences and the woman speaks up.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I suppose I could say it is a pleasure to be here. With respect to the urgency of the situation I will gloss over the niceties. What we are discussing is what we have so far discovered on the Janus documents. While we are unsure of what is truth or rumor, I can say with confidence that the developing situation on the ground is cause for concern. Assets are being relocated to maintain a surveillance presence over suspected origin sites and our specialists have already begun to follow leads on where

the sender is located."

The agent is correct, It did not take long for Coalition electronic warfare and communications specialists to pick up on the general location of the sender. Without a doubt they were residing somewhere near Letople. The real catch is finding exactly where. Fortunately the massive assault staged by Kruger and Nathan was the equivalent of igniting a wildfire in an otherwise pitch black room, and had already led most specialists to place their bets on that location being the origin site of the transmission. A video of the initial firefight as captured by the Mizradian drone is played on the board for the room to see.

"At first we were skeptical of your reports General Morrison, however in the brief time we have had so far we can safely assume there is at least something of importance going on at this location. Additionally, we have cross referenced confirmed intelligence reports from the Ausitorians on the "Sword of Sanctification" Project, and it seems that many of these Janus files have basis in reality. This is without a doubt the superweapon that Lara has been taunting us with. Much of the specifics have been confirmed by our head operator in the field, though this is a fraction of the entire data dump."

"Why should I trust him over our own reports?"

Morrison asks, a few other military men nod in agreement. MCID Field Director Wendy Gerber gives him a stern response.

"Because he has been embedded with Lara's inner circle for longer than many of us have been in country. I do not know what strings he pulled, but he has interwoven himself with some of Lara's worst enemies and closest allies. Both he and his team have been underground since their covert action in Letople after the Alderann incident, I would trust this man with my life. Whatever they discovered is enough to corroborate what we know from the data dump. There is no ego here Morrison, help us pull the trigger on this thing once and for all."

Though he initially scoffs at the director's jab to his pride, the other members of the room look on at him for approval. He begrudgingly accepts that the director is right. The conference phone on the table buzzes to life, and Admiral Talden's greeting fills the room.

"Sir!"

The room chants out in unison. His deep, powerful voice resonates back to them.

"Relax, we have more important matters to discuss than that of courtesies right now. I have been in contact with all of your subordinates monitoring the situation as well as the MCID report. The thorn in the side of this entire operation is the WMD threat. If this is our one true chance to move forward while we have the upper hand, I'm giving the approval for the final push on the Loyalists. With most of the enemy forces concentrated in the Northern Theatre, we can redirect our assault to the east and hit them from their flanks. I am transferring control of ground forces to General Carter, who will work with you all in the modification of Operation Downfall. He has been given clear instructions to give you any support you need. My team has opened communication with the rebel forces and we will work to act in unison with their efforts, any developments on my end will be sent to you as well. I will be in touch."

The admiral hangs up. At last the gravity of the situation dawns upon anyone in the room who had yet to realize it. With Lara's ace in the sleeve now within reach of the Coalition, the final push to liberate Zathalon can begin unhindered. General Carter, commander of Mizradian ground forces and one of the joint chiefs of the Coalition, rises from his chair in the back of the room. He points at the invasion plan on the wall.

"I am sure you are all familiar with Operation Downfall. Our original

plan to strike at Letople involved a much larger front than we will now actually be fighting on. What I am calling for is simple; rather than waste time preparing an entirely new plan we will reroute the northern component of the assault to act as a rear guard for the western flank of an assault from our positions in central Zathalon. The offensive thrust will be aimed at breaking through Lara's defenses in their weaker points further away from the coast, and moving on a northwesterly path to encircle Letople rather than striking it directly. This will divide Lara's forces in two, one on the far northeast coast, and the others in Letople. As you should also be aware, there has been a tremendous build up of Loyalist forces on Zathalon's western coast. Whether this is defensive in nature, or they plan to attack Free Zathalon positions we are still unsure. All of our strategists have bet on the latter, it would make little sense to defend against an army that is at the present time incapable of mounting an offense. That being said, it provides the Coalition with a window of opportunity to outmaneuver the elite elements of Lara's forces. Commanders on the ground have already been informed of their new roles in advance due to the build up, but with the revelation of the Janus Project we will have to move forward a little sooner than expected. That being said, we should continue to gather intelligence on any infrastructure suspected to be involved with the project. Are we in agreement?"

The many commanders, directors, and other important figures in the conference show their support. With the big picture out of the way, they begin to delve into the smaller details. Though the execution of the operation will now have to take place sooner than expected, the long planned and awaited Operation Downfall is finally ready to begin.

Central Zathalon, Southern Theatre Coalition Invasion Force

Over the course of the preceeding months, the Coalition had been constructing a military build up of their own. The amount of military might required to strangle out the final breath of the Empresses' stronghold was slowly but surely procured for the Coalition's use since the first landfall in Zathalon. At last, the combined force of well over a million troops and the necessary equipment for them to wage war has been moved into place. After the near complete failure of indigenous militaries to hold their ground, each and every inch of once occupied territory had to be liberated by Coalition troops. From the Mizradian forests, to the Ausitorian islands, and within Zathalon itself, the men and women of the Coalition have dragged themselves across the world reclaiming the lands they call home. Now they find themselves on the doorstep of those who have caused them so much pain. There is no argument on who is responsible for their suffering, and the idea that they will at last have the chance to claim victory over the instigators is not lost amongst them. Lara's forces had put up a more determined resistance than ever in the defense of their bastion in Zathalon, though the united front of the Coalition proved too much for them and they were soon pushed back to the cradle of Lara's power: Letople. The offensive thrust would have continued if not for the very real threat of mutually assured destruction. Now, with the prospect of destroying the weapons program before it can be used, the Coalition prepares to make one more all or nothing push to end Lara's reign of terror.

Across the frontline, intelligence officers spread word of Operation Downfall's specific plans to those in the need-to-know. Preparations for this operation had been on and off for months. Now, with the exact locations of attack and defense finally determined, the exact roles of each involved combatant are relayed to their officers. From divisional commanders to infantry platoon leaders, everyone in a leadership role distributes information of the attack to their subordinates. Rather than briefing the exact specifics down to the grunt, commander's intent is distributed along with all necessary intelligence. Meanwhile, Admiral Talden attempts contact with those under the banner of Free Zathalon planning a parallel assault.

TO: Free Zathalon Command

FROM: Office of Admiral Patrick Talden, Coalition Commander

SUBJECT: Spring Offensive
ENCRYPTION: Full Encryption

Greetings,
I hope this communique finds you in good health and spirits. Though I regret the necessity of brushing aside a more formal conversation, I am fully confident you are aware of the urgency of the present situation. Cooperation between our forces has so far been immense in terms of intelligence sharing and meetings between leaders but, we have yet to truly maintain a combined presence on the ground. That being said, the Coalition extends the offer to partner with our forces on the ground in a final assault on Loyalist territory. A secure communication link has been opened to my office if you so choose to contact me about furthering this plan of action. I wish you luck in your endeavors.

For a brighter future,
Admiral Patrick Talden

"No good decision was ever made in a swivel chair" -George Patton
Proud Member of the [INTERNATIONAL FREEDOM COALITION!](#)

None (100% hidden)



Ghant
Minister

Posts: 2457
Founded: Feb 11, 2013
Civil Rights Lovefest

by **Ghant** » Sat Dec 28, 2019 5:18 pm

QUOTE

OOC

Part III, Ch. VIII

The Miracle Of Osserheim

Osserheim, Heilanor

*"You will face your greatest
opposition when you are
closest to your biggest
miracle."* — Shannon L. Alder

*Our armies march
without fear of the resistance before us
casting down those who move against us
conquering the lands of the fallen
our eyes set on our goal
to tear down the walls of peace and justice
and plaque them with the hatred we hold in
our souls*

*guided by hatred
we trample the world leaving it in dismay
as the ground beneath our feet turns a dark
red*

*blood has been spilled
upon once innocent soil
now contaminated by bodies of the fallen
as their spirits depart the earth in anguish
their cries howling like banshees on the north
wind
as their souls travel to the land of the dead*

*eerie winds carry souls in seek of a new home
forgotten by the world of the living
and welcomed by the halls of the damned*

*glorious victory shall be held in the hands of
the one who can control the horde of the
damned
eternal torture shall be brought upon the
victims of her merciless killings
the hatred that consumed every last soldier of
the darkened legions
shall be the key to pandemonium...*

There was a time when the continent of Zathalon was vibrant and beautiful. It was a land of plenty, with fields of gold and rolling green hills, with serene coastal cities and quaint beachside villas. There was a time when the various nations lived in relative peace, though sometimes uneasily, but never in outright hostility. Oh, the naïve people of Zathalon, those poor unfortunate souls had no idea what wicked fate was to befall them.

For so long now the sky had been turned grey from ash and smoke, blotting out the sun while the earth was bleak and desolate. The ground was littered with debris, the bones of the dead while ash fell like snow upon them. Skulls were trampled upon the treads of tanks and machines of war, while the air was punctuated with the sounds of bombs, gunfire and the screams of dying men.

Perhaps in the beginning it was a fair fight. Empress Lara had but a fraction of the continent under her control, and then the whole thing. She produced men and machines of war seemingly out of nowhere, and they poured forth from Letople in droves. At first they seemed like ordinary men, their equipment, weapons and abilities comparable to those of the nations surrounding them.

However, gradually that changed. Their equipment became more sophisticated, their weapons more advanced, their abilities greater than an ordinary soldier. Their machines of war increasingly efficient and deadly, and they just kept on coming. Their enemies stayed the same, yet dwindled in number, until only Osserheim and Palan were left standing in opposition to Lara's Empire of Zathalon.

Now Osserheim was under attack, and if Osserheim was to fall then Palan wouldn't last long after that. Palan was the stronghold of the resistance, and Lara wouldn't consider her victory complete until all the continent was within her grasp. For as long as her sister Selena and her brother Constantine lingered in Zathalon, her plans would be threatened. So it was that her infamous Generals Slood, Zotwel and Gogh commanded the field while Admirals Pole and Zutwenk commanded the Imperial Fleet, which unlike the ground forces had been greatly reduced by constant war.

The nations of the world had flocked to the rebel's cause, and even now their numbers swelled in Zathalon. The soldiers of Zathalon moved on Osserheim with a grim determination, surrounded by their advanced machines of war, trampling the bones of the dead underfoot beneath a darkened sky. Many of

them wore breathing apparatus, masks and oxygen tanks to avoid breathing the contaminated air.

Among their ranks were the traitorous Gaemarians of Gbant, who's King Fendulias betrayed his emperor in exchange for the favor of Empress Lara. Somewhere in the battlefield he watched on as tens of thousands of Lara's soldiers move tactically through the obliterated landscape of southern Zathalon. Osserheim and its gilded towers were in sight, though the outskirts of the city had been reduced to ruins by bombs.

The rebels had dug trenches and tunnels beneath the ground, laid traps in the fields and lurked behind walls, in blasted shells of buildings and in rubble. The rebels were a motley crew of soldiers, levies, militia and volunteers, some of them properly equipped like modern soldiers ought to be, while others were literally nothing more than civilians with rifles, some as young as eight or nine years old, others old men with unsteady hands.

For every Zathalonian that a rebel killed, a Zathalonian killed two rebels, or so it seemed. With great effort the rebels took shots at their enemies from behind cover, throwing grenades or activating C4. Mines blew up at the feet of their enemies, killing soldiers and damaging the machines of war. Yet this seemed like little more than the sting of a bee against a bear, and the bear, when provoked, lashed out with a savage ferocity.

The Zathalonians aimed and shot their weapons at the rebels with a deadly efficiency. Some of their weapons fired standard projectiles, while others seemed to discharge bursts of energy, some white, some blue, some red. Beams and bursts of light glowed brightly in the darkness, blasting through cover and killing the men on the other side. The war machines launched mortars of red light, like ball lightning splashing upon the ground and spreading out in arcs. Those rebels unfortunate to be caught in the blast were vaporized, while those further away were burned to a crisp.

Great hulking machines with red eyes that glowed in the dim light of the smoke-choked day lashed out with long metal claws, raking buildings down to the ground in one fell swoop. The rebels within were crushed by the collapsing debris or exposed long enough to be shot down or trampled by these unholy machines of war. Attempts to shoot down or blow up these machines was a futile effort, as their metal bodies seemed impervious to gunfire.

Indeed, this was no battle. It was a slaughter. From a tower in the heart of the city, King Constantine and his sister Selena watched on in a room with glass walls as the forces of their sister Lara advanced upon Osserheim, hell bent on tearing down the city and crushing the resistance to her domination once and for all. Constantine's face was grim, his visage tired.

This was a young man who appeared prematurely aged by the stress of leading a country in wartime. The only question was, would he accept defeat and surrender to his sister in the hope that she would be merciful?

Selena on the other hand was a woman so close to death that perhaps not even death realized it. She had never fully recovered from her assassination attempt, unable to walk without limping and her once impeccable form crooked and misshapen. Her once long beautiful silk smooth hair was now a frayed, unkempt mess of grey and white, her eyes sunken and her body so gaunt that she may as well have been a wraith. Once the Empress of Heilanor, all she was now was just another stunned spectator to a grim display of her sister's evil.

In the heart of that barely furnished tower, there in that room full of rugs and ornaments and beat up couches, Selena spoke to her younger brother. "She was always like this, you know," the Empress began to explain with a broken, hoarse voice. "Jealous, prone to anger...it was mother's fault. He would say that she was the younger sister and special care had to be shown to her, otherwise she would grow up bitter and resentful at not being the heir. She never realized what lengths Lara would go to consummate her desire."

Constantine leaned back in his chair as the sounds of collapsing buildings and explosions roared in the distance. "The Janus Project was a mistake," he told his sister pointedly. "Men should never have access to that sort of power, ever. I warned you about this...that something like this could happen."

Selena shook her head in dismay. "It wasn't supposed to be like this...it was never supposed to be used like this. It was for research...the things we could learn. How many people it could help...how many lives it could save..."

"How many lives it is saving, Selena?" Constantine shouted as he slammed the coffee table with his fist so hard that the drinks set upon it tumbled over, spilling on the table and floor. "How many millions are dead? Look outside, sister, and see the horrors from other worlds that are literally tearing down our world. Janus did that, *you* did that!"

Bursting into tears, Selena buried her face in her hands. "Lara...she hates me. She hates everything and everyone. She'd...destroy the world if it meant destroying her enemies. I...I always tried to love her. Her and Sula. They never wanted it though...they only wanted what I had. They wanted my world, and they took it from me. I have nothing left, Constantine, besides my life, and even that...even that is worth nothing now."

At that moment, the doors to the room opened, and in walked several generals with resigned looks upon their faces. The most decorated among these men stepped forward

and bowed his head to Constantine and Selena. "Your Majesty, your Highness," he said to them. "We have come to the conclusion that we cannot defeat Lara. It is our recommendation that you surrender, in the interest of saving what remains of your people from this slaughter."

Selena was unable to give the order to surrender, as she was in a state of great despair, weeping profusely as she curled up on the couch. Constantine sighed, standing up and approaching the General who now had his head lowered, staring at the floor. Constantine put his hand on the General's shoulder and told him "you know Lara will execute you and the other commanders, right?"

The General exhaled deeply and replied "I am aware, your Highness. There is no other way... we must save the lives of our people, even at the expense of our own."

Constantine nodded his head in agreement. "I agree. It has been an honor, General. Whatever our fates shall be, I thank you for your service to Heilanor. It couldn't have asked for more, from any of you. You did your best."

A curt nod and the General looked at Constantine, matching his eyes and asked, "Your Highness, do we have your order to surrender?"

Only having to look out the windows one more time to witness the horrors being inflicted on Osserheim, Constantine took a deep breath and began to say, "You have my order to surr..."

Constantine's order was interrupted by the deafening roar of a jet flying above the tower, causing him to close his eyes and pinch his face. More of them flew past the tower but nothing happened. Surprised and confused, Constantine and the generals rushed to the windows and looked out to see what was happening. All around them jets roared in the sky towards the frontline, where Lara's machines of war and her advanced soldiers were decimating Osserheim and Heilanor's resistance.

The jets unleashed a bevy of missiles upon them, causing great explosions that rocked the enemy. Soldiers were blown apart and blown into the distance while the machines of war were destroyed or disabled by the explosive projectiles. In response they turned their weapons against the air attackers, firing lasers and energy projectiles into the sky. The jets outmaneuvered these strange threats, as more came in from the sea to strike at their staggered foes.

"The alliance!" Constantine shouted at the generals, while Selena began to wipe away tears as she limped towards the windows to catch a glimpse of the battle. "The alliance has come at last!" To the west along the coast, ships and soldiers began to advance upon the shores as more jets, helicopters and

bombers flew in overhead. The flags of Heilanor, Mizrad, Epraria, Asasia, Pensalum, Libraria and Ausitoria, the New Lowlands, Ghant and elsewhere could be seen flying high in the distance.

The rebels found a new sense of morale seeing their allies come to their relief, and in response they pushed against their enemies, their rallying cries piercing the air as they unleashed fire upon them. The soldiers of Zathalon were caught between flanks and began to fall, while others attempted to find cover or fall back to a more defensible position. Even as they found themselves fighting against rebels and allied soldiers, their positions were being bombed from above, from which there was little defense.

Yet Zathalon was not without one more trick up its sleeve. The machines of war, with their great claws and laser weapons, turned to the skies and transformed so that their weapons suddenly became like mortars upon their backs, and with careful aim shot great beams of energy into the sky. Some of the jets were hit by these attacks, some of them exploding instantly while others had their wings destroyed before tumbling down to the earth.

This did not deter the air assault however, as the damage the jets and bombers were inflicting upon Zathalon were far greater than what the allies were suffering. Finding themselves increasingly set upon from multiple fronts and pinned down, the Zathalonians continued to fight, some increasing desperation. Though they went into cover and fell back, they did not flee, instead fighting on with grim determination.

The machines of war were all destroyed by air strikes within thirty minutes, leaving behind only smoldering husks of twisted metal, leaving only the soldiers. They fought to a man, with none surrendering and none fleeing, and even to the end they fought with such ferocity that their enemies dreaded combating them. Though only midday, the air was dusky with smoke and dust, and the allies and rebels engaged the soldiers of Zathalon in close quarters combat.

From the smoke walked a group of men, with one of them carrying the Ghantish flag. There were seven of them, led by the armored Prince Martin of Dakmoor, a grizzled expression upon his face. He was joined by six others who had joined him in the alliance, all of them from Ghant. They were Taboro of Arrautsa, son of the slain King Barrin, King Belos of Gauekoizarra from northern Ghant, Lord Bolvar Dain from Martin's own Dakmoor, King Kame of Odolargia, who at least had stirred from his northern abode, Magnarok the Warrior-Prince of Thule, and lastly Zara Thrall, who informed them all of Lara's treachery at the baby shower, and had returned for revenge for her fallen comrades.

Martin led the way through rubble, dead men and ruined machines, their once red eyes now empty black holes, their claws and limbs now

mangled stumps of discolored metal. All around them allied soldiers moved out into the ruins of Osserheim, advancing through cover and bent on engaging their foes wherever they might be lurking. Zathalonian soliders struggled from underneath rubble and attempted to surprise an enemy, only to be shot down from elsewhere. Eventually the sounds of gunfire subsided, replaced with only the sounds of shouting of soldiers, the groans of the dying, the sounds of helicopters flying overhead and of vehicles driving upon ruined roads.

The Gbantish proceeded carefully along the road, flanked by allied soldiers who fanned out into the ruins. Martin and his comrades rubbed their eyes as a result of the combination of smoke and heat making them water, but otherwise were not discouraged from proceeding. Martin could sense that their target was ahead of them, watching...waiting.

Then they appeared. The white flag of surrender, and their hands raised. While the Zathalonians fought unto death, the Gaemarians threw down their weapons rather than suffer the fate of their masters. Leading them was Fendulias of Gaemar, his commanders behind him, and allied soldiers behind them and to the sides of them, their guns pointed at their backs and sides, ready to pull their triggers and put an end to their treacherous ilk.

Taboro immediately spat upon the ground as soon as Fendulias came into sight, while the other Gbantish looked on in utter disgust. Martin spoke first to Fendulias, once the two groups were a few yards away and had come to a stop with soldiers surrounding them. "Fendulias of Gaemar, you have betrayed your Emperor and your nation, taken up arms against them and have murdered your countrymen. What do you have to say for yourself?"

Fendulias stood beneath the white flag, and with his eyes lowered towards the ground, simply said "I have betrayed no one, for I have stayed true to the cause. It was the Emperor who betrayed us, when he conspired against Lara at her own baby shower. If you seek traitors, then look no further than yourselves."

At this, Taboro drew his warhammer and stepped forward. "Yet your intention was to betray the Emperor, and you conspired to destroy Gbant!" he shouted with rage. "You set your son and his partisans against all of Gbant, and you stabbed my father in the back. I will have my revenge upon you, and the only thing I regret is that I'll only be able to have it once."

Martin put his hand out and stopped Taboro from walking any further. Then Martin told Fendulias that "we know everything, traitor. That you sought the conquest of Gbant by way of your son, that you poisoned my father, attacked my sister and imprisoned my brother. That you murdered Gbantish lords and kings in violation of guest right and that you broke the

oath that you swore to your own Emperor. Yet the worst crime of all is that you betrayed your world, and consigned it to darkness and ruin for your own personal gain. Such a crime deserves only death."

Taboro called out once more "he who passes the sentence should also swing the sword. The privilege is mine and mine alone, for what he did to my father. I will have my revenge."

"And have it you shall," Martin agreed as he looked on at the surrendered Gaemarians. "No more of our people need to die. Only you, Fendulias, and six of your choosing, for I offer you a Trial of Seven, in the sight of gods of men."

Fendulias smirked, and nodded his head. "I demand a Trial of Seven, Martin of Dakmoor, and know that I shall personally take my pleasure in killing you, for I know it was you that killed my son. The Ghost of Dakmoor, they call you, for all the world thought that you were dead. Soon you shall be." With a deep breath, Fendulias named his six champions. "I choose Heenor Ganimice, Alan Tarla, Imanol Galadra, Erramun Zuul, Frederick Femlar and Gero Reyna."

From the crowd of Gaemarians emerged six men, all tall, strong, able-bodied men, well dressed and well armed for battle. They appeared troubled, yet confident, and eager for combat in a traditional Gbantish custom. "Who are your six then, Martin of Dakmoor?" Fendulias asked with a seething anger in his voice. "Who are the six that would presume to fight us in the ruins of Osserheim?"

The first to step forward was Taboro of Arrautsa, that giant of a man with a warhammer and a dusky complexion flecked with ash and stained with smoke. "Taboro of Arrautsa. I will not bury you, Fendulias of Gaemar. I will leave your battered corpse opened upon the ground for the crows to peck your eyes out."

Belos of Gauekoizarra stepped forward with sword in hand, and said "Belos of Gauekoizarra, at your service. Such a day, and such lovely weather for a battle that the poets would be proud of."

"Lord Bolvar Dain," the tall, veteran warrior proclaimed as he walked forward. "In the name of King Malibar of Dakmoor, I am here to exact justice upon thee for numerous crimes committed."

King Kame of Odolargia was next, his bald head dirty from the residue of war. "Kame of Odolargia, in honor I have come to set the realm to rights."

Next came Magnarok, who scratched the stubble on his chin and introduced himself. "Not sure if you remember me, but I came to the wedding feast. Never thought it would get this far, but alas, here we are. There for the beginning, here for the end, I suppose."

Last was Zara Thrall, who gave Fendulias a cold stare as she drew her Arragaran steel bastard sword from her back. "I witnessed your treachery with my own eyes, Fendulias of Gaemar. I will fight for those who cannot, and only your life can bring their spirits peace."

With a gruff sigh, Fendulias discarded his cloak and drew his sword. "You all like to talk, I can tell. Let's see how much you like to die."

Martin and his six companions readied their weapons, and called for more space. The allied soldiers and the surrendered Gaemarians backed away, giving the combatants ample space to fight. Once this was done, and all fourteen combatants had their weapons in hand, Martin and Fendulias stepped towards each other and crossed their swords. Then their comrades did the same, and the Trial of Seven had officially begun.

Frederick Falmar was the first to fall when Kame of Odolargia struck him through the neck with his greatsword, severing arteries and causing the Gaemarian lord to collapse into the rubble gushing blood from his partially severed neck. Kame had no time to revel in his victory as he was then rushed upon by the great knight Erramun Zuul, who had evaded Taboro of Arrautsa. Erramun was much younger than Kame, and much faster too.

Ultimately, Erramun prevailed, and ran Kame the Blood King through, leaving the famed northern king to slough down to the ground to breathe his dying breath. Meanwhile, Imanol Galadra and Belos of Gauekoizarra exchanged furious blows with their swords and dealt each other grievous wounds to each other's legs and torsos. In the end, Belos rose to his feet and attempt to come to the aid of Bolvar Dain who was fighting Alan Tarla most ferociously.

Tarla was a master swordsman, and he was able to deflect attacks from both men, before pushing away Bolvar Dain with a kick to his stomach. Then he turned and slashed King Belos across the chest, causing him to collapse to the ground on his back, clutching at the gaping wound in his chest. He died with his eyes transfixed upon the bleak sky above him, in a pool of his own blood.

Zara Thrall had traded many blows with the knight Gero Reyna, and evaded many of his sword thrusts and slashes. After one such evasion, Zara arced out with her sword and cut Gero across the stomach, opening his belly. Gero fell to his knees and dropped his sword as he tried desperately to keep his entrails from falling out, though he couldn't stop the bleeding, and soon enough he too found himself in the waning moments of his life.

Bolvar Dain continued to valiantly battle Alan Tarla, and while Bolvar delivered a serious gash to Tarla's swordarm, it was ultimately Bolvar who fell defeated having been ran through the stomach. Death was coming quickly to Lord Dain as he fell to his knees in blood and pain,

while Tarla scowled in pain at the wound on his arm. Yet with a last burst of strength, Bolvar reached out and cut Tarla across the back of his legs, causing him to fall to the ground in agony. Bolvar then climbed on top of his wounded foe and drove the point of his sword through Tarla's neck. Death suddenly came quickly for Tarla as he choked to death on his own blood, before Dain fell to the ground beside him and gasped for air as the life began to leave his lungs.

Magnarok had been fighting Heenor Ganimice the whole time, beside Martin who was fighting Fendulias and Taboro who had been fighting with Erramun Zuul. Magnarok was a scrappy fighter, and ultimately caught Heenor in the face with his axe, nearly splitting his head in half. Only Fendulias and Erramun Zuul remained standing against Martin, Taboro, Zara and Magnarok.

Ultimately Taboro prevailed against Erramun Zuul, the latter never knowing what hit him. Up to that point Erramun had been deft in evading Taboro's might hammer swings, until he got slow and tired. Taboro found Erramun's head and hit it with such ferocity that it practically exploded, causing the Gaemarian knight to collapse to the ground with his head a bloody pulp.

Fendulias suddenly found himself surrounded by four foes, though remained undeterred. "I pity you fools," he said as his enemies closed in around him. "You have no idea what you're dealing with." Taboro charged Fendulias with his hammer ready to swing, but Fendulias moved so fast that Taboro could hardly see him move. Fendulias then practically threw Taboro with one hand against a ruined concrete wall, staging Taboro as he fell to the ground.

Zara was neck to attack him, but likewise, Fendulias simply moved too fast, and also threw her off to the side with such strength that she hit a slab of concrete, knocking her out. Martin and Magnarok both charged Fendulias simultaneously, crossing sword and axe with the latter who deflected the attacks of both men. Then Fendulias kicked Magnarok so hard in the stomach that he went flying backwards into the air, leaving the former alone with Martin.

"The power of the Sword of Sanctification is beyond your understanding," Fendulias said to Martin as he bared down on the younger man with all his might. "strength, speed, stamina, senses...everything beyond a mere mortal man." Fendulias attacked Martin with such strength and speed that all Martin could hope to do was deflect the attacks, for he could not risk an offensive, and lacked the energy to do it.

"Now, Ghost of Dakmoor, you will die," cried out Fendulias as with one more bevy of blows he drove Martin to the ground. The Gaemarian slammed his boot down on Martin's sword arm, leaving his body defenseless. Fendulias raised

his sword to plunge down into Martin's chest, and then grunted in pain as he was hit in the back by Magnarok's axe.

Much to Magnarok's surprise, Fendulias turned around to face him, the former's axe still stuck in Fendulias's back. "We don't die so easily, either," Fendulias mocked Magnarok before swinging his sword through Magnarok's neck. "Shit," was all he could say before his head was severed from his body, with Fendulias standing over him, still grunting in pain from the axe embedded in his back. He tried to reach it with his off hand, though found himself unable to reach the shaft.

Martin rose to his feet and readied his weapon again, though he was clearly fatigued from battle and had difficulty steadying his arm. "Stupid boy, still trying to fight," Fendulias taunted. "You can die on your feet if you'd like." Having said that, Fendulias rushed at Martin with his sword raised, ready to unleash a ferocious slash at the Prince of Dakmoor that the latter would likely find unable to deflect, and difficult to evade.

That was when a warhammer emerged from the side, swinging with such fury that Fendulias ran into it at full speed. There was a sickening crunch, and Fendulias fell on his back while his sword went flying away. Gasping for air, Fendulias looked above to see Taboro standing over him, with Martin walking up to stand beside him, panting hard from his fatigue.

"You fools," Fendulias struggled to speak, coughing up blood as he clutched at his collapsed chest cavity. "You have no idea what you are doing."

As Martin began to reply, it started to rain, while thunder began to roll in the distance. "Trying to save the world," Martin answered, confident in his answer.

Fendulias, despite the difficulty, mustered a laugh, and replied "no, you fools. I...I was trying to save the world...I know what happens...I've seen how it ends. You...you have doomed us all...Ghost of Dakmoor..."

Martin frowned, his hair and clothes getting wet from the rain as it steadily fell down to the earth. He looked at Taboro and nodded his head. "He's all yours."

Taboro didn't waste any time, and was uninterested in listening to what Fendulias had to say. The Gaemarian's last words were "the demon," and then Taboro's warhammer came crashing down upon his head. "For my father," Taboro cried out just before Fendulias's head exploded from the might of his hammer. Then the King of Gaemar was no more, and all of his companions laid dead strewn about the ground.

Zara Thrall came through and staggered to her feet, while Martin said to her "it is done. Victory is ours." As he stood there in the rain

with his sword in hand, he heard a voice call out to him. "Martin..."

The voice calling out in the rain, Martin turned in its direction. He saw allied soldiers part ways, and emerging from the gap between them walked Selena of Heilanor. The Empress was limping on her bad leg, her back crooked and her graying hair and simple white dress soaked in the rain. She stood still once she broke the plane of soldiers, and looked on at Martin in shock.

"...Selena," Martin struggled to say, his body so stunned that he dropped his sword and shook. The entire area was sitting in a stunned silence, with only the sound of the rain falling upon the ruins filling the air. "My Selena," he said again as he stretched out his arms. Selena began to cry as she ran as best she could towards Martin, while Martin began walking fast towards her at first, before then running towards her as well.

When they embraced, Selena practically fell, collapsing into Martin, who held her tightly against him. Selena began weeping into his chest. "You were dead," she told him. "I saw you die, in Rhodesa. That bunker collapsed on you...you were dead," Selena cried. "Then you came back...but I didn't believe it was you...it didn't look like you, at the conference. I thought it was some sick joke. Some ploy..."

Martin repeated what he told her at the conference when they had last met. "I'll take you to Nightstar, and show you the world from the tallest spire. And I will bring you an Amaryllis flower, because it reminds me of you, elegant with red hair."

Selena wept while Martin cradled her in the rain for all to see, and then she told him "when I saw you last, the last time you told me that, you were weak, and different. Now it is I that is weak, and different. How could you ever love me again, my sweet Martin, after I rejected you so callously before?"

With a tender hand beneath her chin, Martin raised it so that their eyes met, and then he said, "because everyday I sat in that dungeon cell, I thought of you. The hope that I would hold you again. You will always be my Amaryllis flower, and I will never leave you again." With that said, Martin crossed the Rubicon and kissed her, and Selena kissed him back with all the strength her meek and twisted body could muster.

The crowds of soldiers roared in approval, while Constantine, Taboro and Zara all clapped as they converged upon the long lost couple, reunited by destiny and tragedy. "The Leopard of Heilanor has witnessed a miracle this day," Constantine cried out to his soldiers. "The Miracle of Osserheim!"

"The Miracle of Osserheim," the soldiers all cried out, briefly drowning out the sound of the rain, while Martin and Selena kissed passionately. Zara coughed into her hand, and

Martin and Selena stopped, though their foreheads remained pressed together. "There is the matter of Letople and the Janus Facility," she said to everyone, matter of factly. "Those things are still coming, and they're getting stronger with each passing day."

Constantine nodded in agreement. "The day is won, but until Letople falls, the war is not yet won. We have superiority at air and sea, and a temporary window with which to strike at Letople."

Selena responded to her brother as she temporarily released herself from Martin's arms. "We must shut down the Janus Facility. As long as it remains operational, Lara will continue her nefarious plot, and then bring the Sword of Sanctification down upon us all. Make no mistake, time is not on our side, and we must act quickly, or else our world is doomed."

Shaking her head in dismay, Zara sighed, "there's no way in, it's too heavily guarded. By now those things are crawling all over Letople and that base."

It was then Selena that shook her head and countered, "no, there is another way. The facility was built under my watch, and there's another way in...a secret way in the woods south of the city. It's an old tunnel dug underneath the earth, and it leads to a secret entrance. If you can get me there, I can show you the way, and pass the secret security protocol."

"No," Martin pleaded with Selena. "You're too weak, and it is too dangerous..."

"No!" Selena cried, trembling in the rain. "I'm tired of being weak, tired of being afraid, tired of trembling before my sister! I will go, and I will finish this myself. Any of you that wish to join me may at your own peril."

Martin embraced Selena once more, and told her that "I will never leave you again. If you go, I will go."

Zara raised her voice and said "I will go as well, and see this whole matter to its end!"

Scratching the back of his head, Constantine added "I suppose I should go too..."

"No," barked Selena at her younger brother. "You must stay, and lead the resistance. If I am to fall, then you shall be the Emperor. You are the last of our family, and it will be your responsibility to continue our dynasty, Constantine."

The Prince bowed his head before his older sister. "Of course, Selena...I shall do as you ask."

"I will go as well," Taboro said as he approached the group, clutching in his hand a pink liquid vial attached to a broken necklace. "I found this around Fendulias's neck...any idea

what it is?"

"The serum," Selena's eyes widened as she reached out and took the vial from Taboro's hand. "It contains the power...it is dangerous, and no doubt Lara and her ilk have consumed it for its powers."

"Don't drink that," Constantine pleaded with his sister. "It will turn you mad with power.. look what it did to the others. You know how dangerous it is."

"Aye, it is dangerous," nodded the Empress grimly. "But I am desperate, and weak. This is the only way I will be able to defeat my sister, and you it's true."

Selena looked to Martin, and the latter nodded his head with sad eyes. "Do as you must, Selena. I will support you." Martin and Selena wrapped their hands around each other, and then Selena broke the cap of the vial and raised it to her mouth. The liquid went rushing down her throat, and within seconds, she began convulsing and screaming in Martin's arms, while everyone else looked on stunned and in horror.

Within less than a minute, Selena looked stronger and healthier, the color returning to her hair, her eyes beginning to glow and her skin flushed with blood. Slowly, her body came to stillness, and she rose steadily to stand in front of Martin, tall and strong against the rain. "The War of the Two Empresses shall come to an end at last," Selena said to Martin with power in her voice while her hands trace Martin's face. "Then we shall rule Heilanor side by side, the way it was always meant to be."

The two embraced tightly and kissed once more with all the passion of the songs of old, while their companions and soldiers looked on in fascination and awe, all the while shouting "the Miracle of Osserheim! The Miracle of Osserheim! The Miracle of Osserheim!" as for Martin and Selena, perhaps all they would have would be a few days of blissful love before fate would have their way with them, but for now, they were content to be together again.

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"Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!" - Percy Bysshe Shelley,
Ozymandias



Ghant
Minister

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Part III, Ch. IX

The Abomination

Letople, Zathalon

"The Devil's minions worked

his treacherous plot through the hearts of men, possessing them, ruling them. These hounds of hell ran wild these days through their human hosts, working greater and greater abominations.” — Eric J. Martindale

Rodrigo Viseu had always believed that childbirth was a miracle of the one true God. Life was precious, he had always believed, sacred among all things of this world. That belief had never been shaken until this very moment, in the birthing chamber of the Palace of Letople, where shadows danced like demons upon the walls of the dimly lit room, the threadbare lights flickering on and off.

Any other woman would’ve wanted to give birth in a hospital, or in some place full of life and love. *Not Empress Lara Yaraslan of Zathalon.* She insisted that the child be born in the seat of the Emperors of Zathalon of old, no matter how old or downtrodden the palace had become. It had fallen into disuse and ill-repair over the centuries, to the point that the floors, walls and ceilings of the once magnificent structure gave way to cracks, leaks and crumbling material.

Even as Empress Lara laid there in her birthing bed, screaming, the old marble walls and ceiling shook and small pieces of rubble trickled down onto the floor. The doctors, half a dozen of them, went this way and that while Rodrigo stood back against the wall, watching, and waiting. Never in a lifetime did he think he’d end up in a place like this, in a situation like this. He did as he was commanded by the Sunshard Church, to observe the journey of Lara to Zathalon. Fate, it would seem, was not without a sense of irony, as even after all this time, he was still observing, only now it was the birth of the heir.

The priest assumed that were it not for the fact that he was a priest of the Sunshard Church, he’d have been dead a long time ago. Lara was a godly woman however, and she kept Rodrigo around long after other companions had been purged. He had witnessed all of Lara’s sins...the killings, the betrayals, the sacrilege, all of it. Lara would often confess her sins to Rodrigo, but there was no remorse behind it. She remained, until the end, convinced in the righteousness of her actions, however morally repugnant they were.

Rodrigo had seen with his own eyes Lara consume the pink liquid from the vial, that unnatural brew from that infernal base from which the monsters emerged. It was unknown what effect the “serum” would have on an unborn child, but Lara was convinced that it would give the infant great powers far beyond any that a grown person would receive. Lara believed that the child would be a God-

Emperor who would rule the world through divine right and magical powers.

The reason why Rodrigo was there, of course, was to sanctify the infant with the full blessings of the church and confirm for the church that the child had, in fact, been born under natural means by Lara herself. *Make no mistake, this is by no means natural...* Lara wore nothing but a loose white shift, already tainted with sweat and blood. She had the appearance of a wild beast, her hair unkempt and matted and her skin greasy and glistening in the flickering light.

Rodrigo was aware of the eclipse that was coming this midday. Lara took it as a sign that the child due to be born that day was destined to rule the world. *It all seems so perfect*, Rodrigo was the first to admit, though what was happening here was so far from God that Rodrigo shivered. As a man of God who studied in the hallowed halls of the church, he could sense the difference between good from evil. *And this is evil.*

Very little progress seemed to be taking place, though admittedly Rodrigo had lost track of time in that large, square room of black marble and moth-ridden rugs. The delivery was clearly exceedingly complicated and labor painfully difficult, and despite the misery that Lara was in, she possessed an iron determination to bring this child forth. She yelled obscene profanities at the doctors gripped the sheets of the birthing bed with such force that they tore.

The Priest noticed the change through the tall, rectangular windows that let in whatever sunlight the thick clouds would allow to pass through. At first the light began to dim as the eclipse started. Lara could sense it, and screamed "the time is near!" Her voice had become so hoarse that it cracked, and her breathing became erratic. Then, strangely, the room became quiet, while Lara began whimpering.

The light continued to fade, until all that remained was the dim glow of whatever light could escape the eclipse's totality. The flickering lights of the room then inexplicably shut off, plunging the room into near darkness. The doctors stood around in a mesmerized state, and Rodrigo began to suspect that he was the only one in the room that was lucid enough to fully comprehend what was going on around him.

When at last the eclipse neared totality, the atmosphere of the room began to change. The faint light began to turn red, and the shadows upon the walls seemed to grow larger, and darker. Lara went from whimpering to screaming bloody murder while her arms and legs flailed this way and that. Whatever was going to happen, it would happen soon, Rodrigo suspected, and at the sight of this macabre event, he began to pray out loud while clutching the amulet around his neck.

"Oh God, you are the preserver of men, and the keeper of our lives. I commit myself to your perfect care on the journey that awaits me. I pray for a safe and auspicious journey. Give your angels charge over me to keep me in all my ways. Let no evil befall me, nor any harm come to me."

Rodrigo was a godly man who never lost faith. He still dressed in his rich church robes of white and gold, even at this very moment, after everything that happened. He still adorned his person with artifacts of his religion, kept his holy books, and prayed and fasted on the high holidays. He thought he might as well have been the last godly man in Zathalon, for surely, all the rest were beholden to wickedness, sins and vices.

At the moment of totality, the light seemed to take on a dark red color, giving Rodrigo the impression of blood. The doctors frantically paced back and forth, causing the large, black shadows on the red walls to dance, while Rodrigo thought they took on the appearance of demons. Lara screamed and thrashed as blood began to pool on the bed, staining the sheets as red as the room itself.

It was then that the room began to shake, and the items on various tables and shelves began to shake as well, as if an earthquake were taking place. Rodrigo stood back against the wall in horror at the unfolding scene, and then, in the midst of this madness, the infant crowned, before emerging completely from its mother, completely covered in blood.

There were no doctors there to help deliver the infant, and the child simply began writing on the blood-soaked sheet. Lara had entered some sort of dazed state as the doctors dizzily walked over to the infant. As the eclipse at last began to fade and the red light gave way to lighter hues, the infant began to groan unnaturally. *Oh, this poor, ill-conceived child,* Rodrigo thought. *What horrors has your mother inflicted upon the world?*

One of the doctors, a woman, shrieked in horror when she laid her eyes upon the child, and turned away. Another doctor, a male, gasped as he tried to clean the infant and sever the umbilical chord. Upon inspecting the child, the doctor declared "it's...a...boy..." the infant was strangely quiet, though he seemed to move and make noise. The child was unlike anything Rodrigo had ever seen before, as the newborn behaved most unnaturally.

When at last Lara came to, the room had appeared to its previous condition. The lights came back on, and sunlight obscured by clouds tricked through the windows into the room. "It is male, yes?"

The doctor nodded as he nervously tended to the infant. "Yes...your majesty."

Nodding, Lara responded with her eyes glazed over, "His name is Leto." Then, with whatever faint energy she had, she leaned her head over

to the doctor and said, "give him to me."

"...Your majesty," the doctor stammered, "you've lost a lot of blood..."

With what little strength remained in her voice, she yelled. "Give him to me! Now!"

Reluctantly, the doctor brought the infant, still smeared in blood, over to Lara, and with weak, trembling arms, Lara reached out and took her child, and cradled him against her bosom. "Oh, my son, how long have I waited for you...this world shall soon be yours...I promise."

It was at that moment that Lara meekly called out "Rodrigo, come forward." At that, Rodrigo stepped forward, and kept his head lowered. He avoided gazing at the infant, for surely if the babe made a doctor shriek, he had to have been terrible to behold. "Bless this child."

Rodrigo placed a hand upon the infant, still smeared with blood, and began to pray. "God, please bless this child. Give him all that is required for a good way of life and for a good way of living. Please let this child bring joy and pride to his mother and their family. Give all that is needed to this child. And give his mother the strength to guard and protect her child for her lifetime. Amen."

Lara shook her head and sighed. "This I cannot do...Rodrigo. It must...be...you..."

A look of surprise on his face, Rodrigo said "what do you mean, your Majesty? I cannot take this child."

The Empress placed her hand on Rodrigo's arm. "You must. The palace isn't safe...the city isn't safe. Letople is falling...it will fall. They will...try to kill me...they will...try to...kill him too. You must...take the child and go...until it is safe. I will...come for him. Promise me."

Rodrigo found himself suddenly in a moral dilemma. Surely the child was born of some ill-gotten omens. He could not ignore his senses on the matter...*yet the infant is innocent... what sort of man of God would I be to resign this child to his fate?* Reluctantly, Rodrigo extended his arms towards the infant and said "I give you my word, your Majesty."

Perhaps under normal circumstances the doctors would protest about a newborn infant being so hastily removed from their care, but even the doctors could tell that this was no ordinary infant. The doctor carefully wrapped the baby in a thin sheet of white cloth, leaving a hood so the infant could breathe. Lara gave one final command, all the while seeming to regain her strength with haste. "Do not reveal Leto's face to anyone...there will be a hundred soldiers that will escort you and Leto to the base. When the time is right, I will meet you there."

The base. That was the last place Rodrigo wished to go, and he shuddered at the thought. "...What about the monsters, your

Majesty?"

"They will not harm you as long as you are with the soldiers," Lara answered. "They will get you there. Now go, time is of the essence."

With that, Rodrigo bowed, and took the child in his arms. "Farewell, your Majesty." With one last bow, Rodrigo turned and departed the room with the infant Leto. In the dark, gloomy hall, they were joined by an escort of a dozen guards, who promptly formed columns of six on both sides. All the while, the child remained quiet, aside from a few grunts and unusual noises.

The palace saw a flurry of activity. All around Rodrigo, soldiers ran this way and that, and servants scurried like rodents. There was a sense of panic in the air, one that caused the servants to run without purpose and the soldiers to move with a sense of urgency. That was when Rodrigo understood why. Off in the distance, he could hear planes, bombs and gunfire. The war had finally come back to Letople, but this time, it was the allies pressing the attack.

Finally reaching the palace plaza, Rodrigo finally came to understand the extent of the situation. The clouds he thought he saw earlier were actually great plumes of smoke, hovering through the sky, causing the landscape around him to appear dull and grey. Gloomy wafts of fog floated above the ground, while soldiers, jeeps and tanks went this way and that. Off in the distance, Rodrigo could see fires, and the metallic shrieks of unworldly machines of war.

Everything happened quickly after that. Before long, a large number of soldiers came upon Rodrigo, forcing the infant and him into an armored car, with several other vehicles surrounding it. Even then, Leto remained mostly quiet and still. Then the armored car began to move. Trying to remain calm, Rodrigo leaned back in his seat and exhaled deeply. He had to think...hope...that the situation was all under control.

For the next several minutes he could hear the sounds of war going on in all directions. Rodrigo continued to pray quietly to himself, for his God to protect him and the child and give them safe passage. Even if Letople fell, which it very well might, Rodrigo only wished to return home to the bosom of the church, and to fulfill his word to Lara concerning her child. *However maligned he may be...*

After several more minutes Rodrigo's few moments of calm were interrupted by a series of explosions outside that rocked the armored car. There were screams coming from outside and the armored car stopped. The back door dropped open, revealing a thick cloud of smoke through which Rodrigo could see nothing. Soldiers ushered him out into the mist, and out in it, the priest could still see nothing.

Yet, he could feel it, hear it and smell it. The

air around him felt hot, and his nostrils were filled with the stench of burning rubber, debris and flesh. A car not too far away suddenly exploded, causing Rodrigo to flinch in horror and recoil from the flames. He could see soldiers engulfed in flames running and screaming through the smoke, while others simply lay in the ruined road, dead or dying from various wounds.

"We have to go, now!" a soldier cried out to Rodrigo, who very quickly realized why they had to stop. The road ahead of them was blocked off by a collapsed building, while there were no other ways to go that could be accessible to vehicles. The rest of the way, it seemed, would have to be gone on foot. The thought of that made Rodrigo's skin turn cold, and he felt a tingle go down his spine. He struggled on with the soldiers, how many he wasn't sure, into the smoke.

Rodrigo could hear strange, terrifying noises... the sounds of metal grinding, hissing like a mechanical serpent. He could hear buzzing from above, like great bees and other insects. Off in the distance he could make out the sounds of heavy arms fire, the blasts of tanks, the roaring of engines, and the echoes of screaming men, all obscured by smoke. The soldiers that surrounded Rodrigo tried to move tactically with their rifles pointed forward, but to him they seemed like sheep, lost in the forest, surrounded by wolves and other beasts.

Further along, after how long Rodrigo lost track, he could hear small arms fire ahead. A nearby soldier was struck and fell down to the ground, screaming in pain. The others fell behind cover, taking Rodrigo and Leto with them. They were in the heart of battle, and soldiers exchanged fire with one another. There were grenades going back and forth, though fortunately none of those blew up near him.

This went on for what seemed like several minutes, until the last soldier that accompanied Rodrigo was shot from behind, slumping down against the ruined structure they were using as cover. Several men, at least a dozen, surrounded Rodrigo with their rifles pointed at him. "Don't move!" one of them cried out, clearly a southern allied soldier. "You're completely surrounded."

Rodrigo had to wonder if this was it...the moment he would die. The men surrounded him and pointed their rifles at his chest. The infant Leto, for the first time, began to cry, as though he could sense immediate danger. Rodrigo began to pray silently to himself once more, asking his God to grant him protection. It would seem as though this time God answered Rodrigo's prayers.

He saw its eyes first...glowing orbs of blue electricity that seemed to cast aside the thick smoke in the air. It steadily rose up from the rubble behind the soldiers, at least twenty in number, until it towered over them. Silently it

continued to ascend, a long metallic form coming into focus. It had thick, armored metallic scales, and its head was crocodilian in shape. Rodrigo could count several pairs of legs, and guessed that this monstrosity was around forty feet in length, judging at how high into the air it towered.

A dragon, Rodrigo thought, in as much terror as he was awe. *but without wings...* the dragon let out a metallic, shrieking roar that prompted the soldiers to turn around and face the creature, but by then it was too late. Rodrigo jumped over the cover and hid as the dragon lashed out with its many pairs of legs and slashed at the soldiers below. In an instant, Rodrigo was forgotten about, and he tried to put distance between himself and the carnage unfolding before him.

The small arms fire had no effect against the metallic chassis of the dragon, the bullets bouncing off. The dragon tore the men apart with its claws and with its long, sword-like fangs, making quick work of the soldiers until nothing remained but bloody shreds. The thing moved fast, too fast for Rodrigo to get away from it, and it leapt in front of Rodrigo, blocking his path.

The mechanical monster's claws and fangs were soaked in blood and chunks of flesh, and its great electric blue eyes gazed down upon Rodrigo. In great fear, Rodrigo dropped to his knees, Leto cradled in his arms, and again prayed for protection. Though his eyes remained closed, Rodrigo knew the machine was upon him, and he could feel the heat emanating from its body. Death would surely come at any moment...

Yet it didn't. Puzzled, Rodrigo opened his eyes, and saw the creature back away. It hissed, and then the forty foot long dragon-like machine began to crawl away on six pairs of legs, off into the smoke. Rodrigo exhaled deeply and nearly collapsed onto the ruined ground, so overwhelmed had he become. So close to the jaws of death was he snatched by a miracle. *Truly, God is generous this day...*

If only Rodrigo had been so lucky. He could hear footsteps from behind him. Rodrigo stood and turned to face this stranger, who at first he could not see through the smoke. After a few moments, a short-stature man came into view. He was very thin, with jet black hair, small dark beady eyes and a close-shaved beard. Strangely, the man was dressed in a silver uniform unlike anything he had ever seen before, with a glowing golden amulet hanging from his neck.

"...You must be...Rodrigo Viseu, Priest of the Sunshard Church," the man said with a smile on his face. "Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Lysander Lyzahn, and I am very pleased to meet your acquaintance."

Rodrigo looked confused and gave an awkward stare to this stranger. "Forgive me...I do not know who you are...how do you know me?"

"I know a lot of things. I knew you would be here, that you and the Empress's men would be ambushed and attacked by alliance soldiers, and that the dragon would be here. You're lucky I came here when I did, and now we must go...to the base, correct?"

"Yes," Rodrigo nodded. "Did Lara send you?"

Laughing, Lysander shook his head. "No, not quite...but I do know the way. Please, follow me. If you want to live that is." Lysander gestured with his hand in the direction that they were supposed to go, and Rodrigo started walking, with Lysander beside him.

"Why didn't the dragon kill me?" Rodrigo asked Lysander as they walked through the ruined buildings and smoke.

"None of these creatures will attack me," Lysander shrugged. "Call it good fortune."

"And why haven't you killed me?" asked Rodrigo.

Laughing, Lysander shook his head. "I saved your life, and you think so low of me to think me a murderer. If I wanted to kill you, priest, you'd have already been dead. No, I need you alive in case we run into any of the Empress's soldiers." With that said, Lysander flashed a gun hanging from the belt beneath his coat. "I don't like using guns, but I will I have to in order to defend myself. Seems to me like you and I need each other in order to get to where we need to go."

Several minutes of awkward silence followed, while Rodrigo studied the world around him. Still in the distance he could hear monstrous noises and the sounds of war, though Rodrigo enjoyed a few moments of respite with this strange man beside him. As they neared the base, there were more and more trees, all of these bare or dead, and fewer and fewer buildings, though these were more increasingly destroyed when compared to the ones closer to the city.

"This part of town was hit pretty hard already," Lysander began to explain. "The allies eventually figured out that the really nasty stuff comes from down this way." Grinning, Lysander pointed up into the sky, and through the smoke Rodrigo could see at least two dozen flying machines. They looked like winged mechanical scorpions, with a pair of grasping pincers and a narrow, segmented tail, with a backward curve over the belly and ending with a weapon. They discharged energy projectiles from those weapons into the ground, presumably at unknown enemies.

"...What are these things?" Rodrigo asked as he watched the machines fly away.

"Machines of war, of course," answered Lysander as he kicked away a small rock in his way. "They are from another place and time, as you can probably comprehend. This Empress

of yours and her sister were very resourceful... willing to go to great lengths to take over the world. I have to admit, I'm thoroughly impressed with how far she was willing to go."

"...All of this...this is evil," countered Rodrigo with a dismayed expression. "If the Church knew the full extent of the horrors Lara would unleash upon the world, it never would have agreed to support her."

Laughing again, Lysander put a hand on Rodrigo's shoulder. "You really believe that, don't you? My Godly friend, your God, and your Church, they're all monsters. How many millions of the centuries have they killed in the name of domination? The Church knew exactly what it was doing, and still does. I have no doubts that they'd be willing to wipe the slate of the world clean, so that they could reign supreme over whatever is left. That's exactly what your Empress has in mind, and that's exactly what's happening."

Shaking his head in disagreement, Rodrigo had the urge to stop, but didn't because the danger that they faced. He responded in righteous indignation all the same. "You're wrong, Lysander Lyzahn. I still believe in God's plan, and his salvation for us all, including the infant in my arms."

It was at that moment that Rodrigo realized that Lysander had made no mention of the infant in their conversation. Lysander smirked from ear to ear, and said "ah yes, the infant... Leto."

That prompted Rodrigo to stop. The only people who knew the child's name were Lara, the doctors and Rodrigo. "...How do you know his name?"

"...History knows his name," Lysander answered. "The child of destiny, and we're both here to make sure he gets to where he's supposed to go. Now let's keep walking, we're not far now." With a show, Lysander gave Rodrigo a push forward, and again they both kept walking.

This seemed all too surreal. Could it be that this Lysander Lyzahn was from another world? *From the future, wherever these machines came from, or whenever?* Only one thing was Rodrigo sure of as they made their way towards the base, and that was that Lysander wasn't good. Rodrigo realized that Lysander had come for the child, but that he was no in league with Lara. For his own safety, Rodrigo was determined to stay the course...*for now*.

Lysander was right...the battle seemed to pass through where they were walking already, and the thick of the fighting seemed to be taking place in the city. All that remained on the road to the base were destroyed vehicles, the remains of soldiers and the husks of machines. Strange creatures laid lifeless along the road, some of them resembling the winged scorpions Rodrigo saw earlier, but also machines that resembled spiders, centipedes and mantises.

Still, Rodrigo could see more of these things stalking the forests in the distance, solitary, lumbering monstrosities from a faraway world, moving with grim determination. Rodrigo had so many questions...there were so many things he wanted to know. *What are these things, where do they come from, why are they here?* At any rate, Rodrigo believed that he would never know, and a part of him didn't want to know either.

Then, finally, at the end of the winding road appeared a fenced-in enclosure, where a large compound stood, surrounded by tall, imposing black figures. In their hands they held long spear-like weapons. There seemed to be at least a hundred of them, standing perfectly still, as though they were waiting for Rodrigo, Lysander and Leto to arrive. All along the road laid the remains of fallen soldiers, their weapons and vehicles, as though there had already been some battle at the base.

"Here at last," Lysander breathed a sigh of relief. "And nary a scratch...couldn't have gone any better if I do say so myself."

Rodrigo hesitated at the ruined gates of the base. He took note of the strange, otherworldly soldiers that stood as still as statues with alien weapons seemed inhuman... and evil. Rodrigo looked to the side, and saw a dead man laying face-up on the ground. It looked as though there used to be grass and flowers growing there, but now all that remained were the charred remains of scorched earth, and a dead man with his mouth and eyes open, staring up into the sky.

Who was that man? Surely he was someone's son, someone's loved one...someone's friend. Could he have been a brother, a husband, a father? Maybe he was a good man...a godly man. Whatever he might have been, he was dead, and these things that stood before Rodrigo had killed him. It brought tears to Rodrigo's eyes as he passed beneath the mangled entrance to the base.

These evil things...they have come for the child, Rodrigo thought to himself, his arms and legs trembling. *They have come to fulfill this evil child's destiny...I cannot allow it to be realized...* Stopping, Rodrigo closed his eyes and said one last prayer in silence, still cradling the babe in his arms. Rodrigo asked God to give him the strength that needed to be done, and begged his forgiveness, for he was about to commit a terrible sin.

Lysander, still walking ahead, called out. "Time to head inside, Rodrigo. You've played your part admirably, and true to my word, you may leave unharmed. Just hand over the child and we can go our separate ways..."

When Lysander turned to face Rodrigo, he noticed the priest holding the infant in an awkward position, with one hand around the child's head. Rodrigo said with a shaking voice. "I cannot do it," he stammered. "I cannot

allow this child to be used as an instrument evil. I'd sooner break his neck."

At that moment, the hundred alien soldiers raised their weapons and pointed them at Rodrigo, prompting Lysander to raise his hand and cry out "easy now, easy!" He put both of his hands out and slowly walked towards Rodrigo, and spoke to him in a calm voice. "Priest...you don't want to do that. An innocent child, who you were sworn to protect...you asked your God to protect this infant, and that's what he did."

"This child is an abomination...it cannot be allowed to survive. I'm sorry, but I must do God's work," yelled Rodrigo at Lysander. The priest's eyes were full of tears as his hand gripped the child's head.

Lysander laughed. "You call this innocent child an abomination, yet you're the one with your hand on his head. What does that make you, priest? If you commit evil in the name of good, that you makes you evil too. Who's the abomination now?"

The Priest stood there with his hand on the infant's head, ready to snap his neck, and at that very moment it seemed as though the world around him fell to silence. In that silence, he could hear a voice in his head, as loud as thunder. *Rodrigo*. The voice was deep, ominous...and evil, and it seemed to fill his entire body with dread. Determined, he tried to twist his hand, and end the infant's life.

Yet his hand wouldn't move, remaining perfectly in place. It seemed as though Rodrigo had no control over his own body. Unable to control his movements, Rodrigo fell down to his knees, and set the baby down on the ground in front of him, before Rodrigo's neck twisted at an awkward angle as he fell over on his side. His body began to convulse, seizing violently as his eyes rolled back into his head and his mouth began to drool excessively.

As the priest flailed violently on the ground, Lysander stooped over and scooped up the infant tenderly. "Well done, my lord. Very well done," he said with admiration. "Let's go inside now, shall we?" Having said that, Lysander looked up at the sky one last time, and smiled, before walking forward towards the entrance of the base. The doors opened for him, and he disappeared into the darkness within, leaving the soldiers to stand in vigil over Rodrigo, who at last stopped moving, and laid there on the ground, his twisted body devoid of life.



Rodrigo flew effortless through the streets of Hermanium, the capital of Harmael and the seat of the Sunshard Church. He flew through the big, wide open city circle, past the many church buildings where he lived, studied and worked. He flew past the fountain at the center of the circle that contained the monolith, a holy relic of their creed. Rodrigo

flew towards the great Basilica, a massive, ornate domed structure with balconies beyond count. The building was as beautiful as Rodrigo remembered it, white stone and silver and gold marble. At long last, Rodrigo Viseu was home.

The large double doors opened for Rodrigo as he flew in between them. The inside of the Basilica was bathed in bright white light, while the murals and frescos of the stained-glass windows sparkled and seemingly came to life. Rodrigo believed in that moment that he had truly died and went to heaven, and was about to be received by God himself, in the place dedicated to his glory.

When Rodrigo reached the altar, he was surprised to find a shadowy figure waiting for him, standing still while darkness danced around him. "Rodrigo...how many lifetimes have I waited to look upon your face once more."

Rodrigo knew who this strange entity was. "Leto...it's you."

"Aye, the name my mother gave me...so long ago..." Leto lamented. "Welcome to my world."

"...What is this place?" Rodrigo asked, everything seeming so lucid, yet dreamlike. "This isn't heaven, is it?"

"No, my old friend...not yet," answered Leto, sadly. "I wanted to thank you for what you did for me, all that time ago. For helping me to achieve my destiny...which has yet to be realized. Soon though, my time will come again."

"...I don't understand," stated the priest, confused. "What happened...happened merely moments ago."

"For you, yes...but eons for me. Long have I lived with the guilt of killing you, but I was afraid. So new to the world...so fresh, so afraid. My powers were so raw, so unrefined."

Nodding, Rodrigo sighed and said "I forgive you, Leto. Whatever you are, and whatever your purpose is, that is for God to determine. I only wish to go on, to him."

"Then go to him, old friend, and tell my mother I said hello." There in that dreamworld, Leto moved his hands in a circle, and above them, a hole opened in the basilica roof. There was nothing but a large circle of white light.

Rodrigo smiled and said "I will. Goodbye, Leto," before flying up towards the light.

"Goodbye, old friend," Leto replied as he watched Rodrigo ascend into the light. Then he was gone, and the hole in the roof closed behind him, leaving Leto empty in the basilica. With a sigh, Leto waved his hands, and the world around him began to fade into nothingness, until all that was left was him, alone in the void. Then he waved his arm, and before him appeared a round window like a pool of water.

Into this pool Leto peered out and saw the band of men and women making their way through a mist-covered forest. He knew their names all too well. Martin of Dakmoor, Zara Thrall, Taboro of Arrautsa and Tsuni Yousloff, Empress of Gillenor. "And soon, it shall end," Leto said to himself, sadness in his voice. "At long last, it shall come to an end."



Ghant

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"Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!" - Percy Bysshe Shelley,
Ozymandias



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