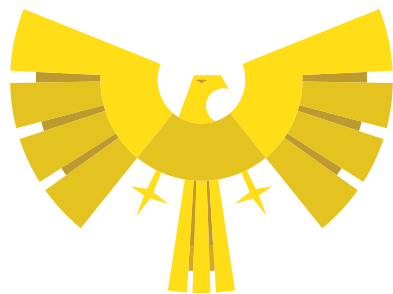


Tales
of
Av'El'Raan

THE
Siege
OF
Meiwirthil



Tales from Av'el'Raan: The Siege of Meiuirthil

OVERLOOKING THE SILVERY PASSES TO THE NORTH, the mountains surrounding Meiuirthil stood tall and proud against the march of ages. The only place in the world where the rock grew from roots within the basalt soil, matching in song-like harmony the volcanic grey and black with the green of tall, thick trees, Meiuirthil was a gem, in its own unique way, like none other in the world. It combined the natural, theatrical landscape with the mysticism and arcane of the elves. One of the first great elvish kingdoms of Av'el'Raan, it stood resplendent in its might, watching the younger kingdoms as a teacher might watch over his precocious students. And they, in turn, looked to this holy place for knowledge, for peace, and for perfection as only elves can understand it.

Today, Meiuirthil burns.

'My Lord, the enemy has broken through the pass' the temple guard said with incredulity, as he surveyed the battle unfolding in the valley below. If battle it could be called, for the citizens of Meuiirthil could do precious little to halt the implacable, almost clockwork, march of the imperial legions. With calculated efficiency and tight formations, they spread through the city. Searching. Finding. Ending.

The temple was built within the mountain; an intricate system of spiraling stairs went up to the summit and the entrance to its depths. There was no other way in, and there was no other way out. The rooted mountain grew tall and lonely inside the basin, surrounded by forests and, further away, by the white capped peaks of Tael'dorthir.

The passes to the north is where they had made their stand against the enemy. It is where elven blood was spilled on holy ground as the guardians were ripped to shreds by the dark talons of the Black Aquila. In truth, they had never stood a chance against this relentless foe. Yet still they went and they stood firm and they did their best. And for one glorious moment, the front held.

Outnumbered and defeated, the guardians rallied to defend the temple stairs, bracing against the inevitable.

'We all know what must be done', said the elf lord high atop the mountain, mustering the remaining temple guards to defend the entrance to the depths, and delay the defiling of the sanctum for as long as possible. 'This sacrilege will not remain unanswered' he said even louder, so that all would hear him and take heart. He knew that none here were warriors, not the way he'd been ages ago. The need for warriors had faded as this place was hidden from the eyes of mortal beings with energies that only the most devoted could wield.

Yet war was brought upon them by the most unlikely of enemies – the humans. Youngest of the races of Av'el'Raen, but the most

daring and audacious, the humans formed vast kingdoms and empires across the world, enduring the passing of time.

They should not have been able to find Meuiirthil. It should have been beyond them as the sun is beyond the grasp of a child. Yet here they were, centuries-old certainties giving way to cruel reality.

'It is forbidden to leave the holy grounds of the temple area' said one of the guardians to another. 'Let them come to us!' he continued. Proud words, and bold. 'Form up in two lines behind the entrance' said another, as a swift crossbow bolt flew over their heads.

The stairs were soon lost to the enemy as the never-ending flood of the white capes, now marred with blood, climbed closer to the summit of the rooted mountain.

'I shall descend to the depths. History will mark down what has happened here today', said their lord. The others bowed their heads and soon the doors to the heart of the mountain closed behind him.

His velvet black cloak, its distinctive pattern of red embroidery upon golden markings used by the high ranking elves of Meuiirthil, covered his white shirt and mail tunic. Scabbarded on his right, a curved sword forged on the silvery shores of Celebafal, sharp enough to cut a windblown leaf in half, swung gracefully against his thigh during the descent of the many stairs that led below.

The basalt walls, finely chiseled and rounded to perfection by loving elven hands, created a mesmerizing scene with its complex patterns that only a gifted mind could truly discern in full. Many had stopped to admire them and search for their meaning, and found that the meaning was most often different from person to person, and sometimes it even changed for the same person when returning to them after wandering the world without, or the world within. He had no time for contemplation, though, so he went past them, hurrying on his urgent errand. Soon enough the walls ended in large decorated wooden arches, carved in the roots of the great

mountain on which the temple was built. The wood of Meuiirthil was like no other in form and substance, the fibrous material of the roots had no similarities with the branches or the trunks of trees, although it grew in the same way. Basaltic black stone was shaped by the heart of the mountain which led to this weird and unique effect: it seemed to be both rock and wood, and it was neither.

The staircase ended abruptly within a vast, oval room, the far wall of which could only be glimpsed. The floor was made entirely of marble, intricately patterned in blue and white, telling stories that began and ended when the world was younger. A beam of sunlight was bent and caressed to shine down this room perpendicularly. And in the middle, a single red-blossom cherry tree, with blood-red leaves contrasting against its bark, black as the night. All elven kingdoms of Av'el'Raan had a symbol-tree which heavily influenced their craftsmanship, arts and culture, with Meuiirthil being no exception.

Beyond this room, and further into the earth, were many paths that could have led him to relative safety. The paths led to the Shifting Planes, and he knew that he could easily lose any pursuers there, but that was not a way out, not truly. He dismissed the thought as soon as it appeared: no lord of his stature and age would ever flee from such enemies. He would not abandon his life's work, too much depended on it. A stand had to be made, a message had to be sent to the others. Here, at the heart of their holy forest, he would do it.

'They've come for you, my friend', he whispered to the tree, taking off his leather, finely sewn gloves in order to touch and feel the bark. 'The time to act...' steps behind him, coming down from the spiraling stairs echoed within the hall of the tree, interrupted him. Iron boots were hurrying down the stair, while focused eyes ignored the wonders around them, and the clattering of steel and mail filled the temple grounds with the promise of battle.

'The beginning of the end', he whispered again raising one hand high and drawing circles in the air. 'Be it for us... or for them!' He

smirked, as his power drew some of the dark energy around the fingertips and immediately sent a shiver down his spine. The arcane flow reacted and bent to his mighty will as sparks and small sonic waves surrounded him with a seemingly liquid aura that shifted to and fro.

The first soldiers appeared within the inner sanctum of the temple, saw him and charged. The bravery of those who fought under the Aquila was said to be unparalleled in the human world, matched only by their iron discipline, and skillfully wielded by the strategic talent of their leaders. Yet, like everything else, the powers of the arcane transcend bravery like the wind blows through rotting leaves.

The elf shaped the immense accumulated cosmic dark energy as he released it, turning it into both sound and light. The booming thunder of the spell and the accompanying illusions hit the humans like a tidal wave, as their minds and bodies were pitched against this sudden and unnatural assault. Some fell to their deaths as their hearts gave way to the resonating crashing noise; others were maimed and quickly fled back up the stairs, while the majority abandoned the charge and regrouped outside, on the summit, knowing full well what they had just encountered.

Not all elves had the power to bend the arcane flow in such a dramatic way, but humans had little to no chance against those that did.

The doors to the inner sanctum of the temple remained guarded by the soldiers, and a makeshift barricade was built as several hours passed.

The Aquila was in full command of the holy city of Meuiirthil and its surrounding areas. Several banners were raised on the main buildings, the Aquila black on a field of white. Smoke from within the city blackened the sky, its riches there for the taking; yet there was no looting. The armies of the Black Aquila were too

disciplined for that, too precise and well driven. They never looted the corpses or the cities they had slain, this practice hammered into their soldiers together with a general contempt for every item of unsanctioned origin. And this was rooted in fact, since the quality of the goods and weapons made under the auspices of the Aquila was indeed excellent, far surpassing that of those made in other human kingdoms, or even by some other races. After the battle was over and the area pacified, its soldiers systematically purged what was left, destroying everything. More so now, since Meiuirtil was the heart of sorcery in all elvendom, so everything here was steeped in the arcane flow and needed to be cleansed.

'Captain' a calm, soothing voice said, 'withdraw your men from the temple. There is nothing more you can do here, you have won the day'.

The captain turned towards the source of the voice and stared in awe, but quickly recovered his composure. He bowed his head in acquiescence, slammed his fist on his mailed chest and signaled his men to leave the barricade and descend the exterior stairs of the mountain-temple.

The paladins of the holy city of Haelva Quintus were renowned far and wide, and to see one on the battlefield was a tale worth telling, assuming you survived the encounter. They formed the royal guard of the High King and were, without exception, extraordinary warriors and leaders of men. They protected his person, lead his armies and carried out any tasks he saw fit to set them to. Born of the union of human women and children of Quintus, they were immediately taken away to be taught and trained, living a life of pious devotion to their creed and duty. Those that survived and grew to adulthood would go into the service of the High King or their patron Emperor-Saint, Quintus. Large and impressive men, tall and strong in their heavy plate armour, the paladins wore cloaks either white, as the rest of the troops, or black with a crimson aquila, to show their many years of service.

As the captain oversaw the swift withdrawal of his men from the temple gate, not one, but three paladins calmly waited until the area was clear.

'You've done well, son of Farlindor' one of the paladins said to the captain as he was following his men down the stairs, 'and your service will be commended' he continued, shifting his gaze from the soldier up towards the summit of the basaltic temple.

All three paladins started to move immediately as the last soldiers made their descent, only the slightest clinking coming from underneath their cloaks, a testament to the fine craftsmanship of their armour.

The elf saw them coming down the stairs, one after another, without fear or haste. Two of them wore the black and one the white. He quickly understood the circumstances, although it came as no surprise. He knew this would happen. The armies of the Black Aquila were always accompanied by paladins. Among many of their talents, they had the power to withstand, and to some extent, to disrupt the arcane flow, like a heavy boulder crashing on a swift stream of water. A boulder that could not be moved, not by normal means of the arcane. Although a cunning sorcerer such as himself could shape the dark energy in a way that could circumvent the paladin's aura, yet everything had a cost. Everyone in the great oval hall knew that, and that the battle had already begun.

The paladins stopped when they reached the level hall and stood shoulder to shoulder with one-another, paying no heed to the wonders at their feet. The elf lord watched their every move, tactfully placing himself between them and the red-leafed tree.

'Lord Fearuin' said the one in the middle with a strong, resonating voice, 'the Empire of Seraclea demands an audience', his voice growing louder when announcing his allegiance.

'You know my name, warrior, yet I do not know yours' spoke the elf

lord, smiling inwardly at this charade of civility after the butchery of Meiuirthil.

Without hesitation, the paladin revealed himself from underneath the black cloak adorned with fine lines of crimson thread. His light blue eyes glinted surety underneath his steel bascinet, above his powerful figure clad in intricately crafted armour. Hanging on his neck was the Aquila, gold against the black seracleean steel of his plate. No regular craftsman ever touched this armour, but loving hands of a true master of his trade had shaped it into reality and laid it before one such as he.

'My name is Luscian Verrus, High King of Farlindor, Ennuy and Londorth, ruler of the noble and holy city of Haelva, firstborn to Saint Quintus, Emperor of Seracleea!'

'Seracleea?' the elf asked. 'Are we not friends of the Empire?' he continued.

There was no answer to his questions, and no move.

'I remember a time when man came to us for guidance and knowledge. What changed since then?'

'Those were the times of our forefathers. Saint Quintus has led his people down a different path over the ages, and the knowledge they sought back then is the fear that brought us here today.'

Fearuin casually moved his hand in the air, dismissing such a ludicrous thought.

'Humanity fears what it does not understand, or it cannot control; it has always been so. We were mistaken back then to help you.'

'And what do you know of it, lord of elves? You shape it and you use it, but you no more understand it than a rock understands a bard's song. But it grants you power, and in your power you lie to yourself

that you are its master, and it does your bidding, and there could never be any other way' said Luscian, his gauntlet snapping in front of him as he clenched his fist.

'I would not expect a warmonger such as yourself to even begin to understand the secular knowledge of my kin' said the elf. 'You come to our lands with steel in your hand, hate in your eyes, and death in your heart. You defile our holy grounds with your sword and fire, yet you pretend to have come to school us about things you could never possibly grasp!'

The paladins stood unmoving, the words of the elf lord washing over them but failing to draw any reaction.

'If you continue down this path, you will destroy our world as we know it. My father has foreseen this. He is already taking steps against it, and so we are here today before you. It is known to us that you would rather give up breathing than stop meddling with the unknown; there is no way around it, we must do what we must do.'

A deep silence followed the High King's proclamation. The elf sighed, looked down towards the beautifully decorated marble floor and reached for his leather-sewn gloves. He then started to methodically cover his white-skinned hands.

'You have your reasons... I have mine' he answered cryptically, not disagreeing.

His hands moved in tangent circles as he drew upon the cosmic dark energies. The arcane flow bent to his will and accumulated around him in an accretion disk. The High King and his paladins charged without hesitation, and Fearuin released the plasmatic energy directing it towards the center of his enemies. Fire quickly engulfed them, but was gone just as quickly, nullified by their psionic powers.

The elf changed his strategy, as he drew more energy around him. The arcane bent and swirled as it fought to go back to its natural state, but he would have none of that, not in his moment of glory, the moment he has been waiting for all his long elven life.

The spell unleashed a colossal discharge that changed every substance in its path. Reality boomed with thunder as it rippled and changed around the charging men, their psionic might struggling against the sheer crushing potential of matter changing its shape around them. Ultimately, the effects of the spell were countered by the psionic aura, creating sparks of lightning that scorched the earth, walls and ceiling, setting fire to the tapestries and the roots of the mountain.

One of the three was knocked away, his air taken from his lungs. Luscian and the other paladin, swords drawn, closed in on Fearuin.

Fearuin grabbed his sword by the hilt with elven finesse, wrapping three of his fingers around it. He knew his mastery over the arcane was heavily impaired while in the psionists' aura, and he wanted to keep the temple as intact as possible. Releasing too much dark energy against the sheer power of will and psionic determination of the paladins might rupture the fabric of the material plane, or worse, as one could never be too certain what would happen.

More so, he knew, getting too close to the psionists would cause him pain, temporarily disrupting the very essence of his nature. It was a risk he was willing to take, in order to break them down in combat.

As soon as Luscian reached him, Fearuin could feel a slight faint coursing through his veins and muscle, and a superficial burn on his skin and fingertips, yet he was the one to strike first with unrivaled speed. A quick thrust with the tip of his sword with pin-point accuracy met the king's chest as he got too close, and with a sidestep he moved away and under the High King's own sword. There was no wound caused by the light jab, yet it strategically placed Fearuin

to his enemy's undefended flank, keeping both enemies in front of him.

Luscian arched a wide swing to his right, faster than any human could hope to see, but the elf was already too far, the sword slashing through the air harmlessly. A series of thrusts and slashes followed, around which Fearuin danced graciously between, too nimble to get hit, yet he was losing ground, as his enemies chased him to the wall behind. Some of his parries and dodges came naturally - he'd had ages to train them, but the raw speed and agility of his enemies proved a serious challenge to his stamina. The swords finally touched when the elf feigned a sidestep. Immediately, electrical jolts coursed through his body, slightly numbing his hands for just a fraction of a heartbeat. It was enough, though, as the High King's strike landed on his right ribs, causing some injury even through the elven mail protecting his side.

The second paladin recovered from his dismissal and threw himself into the fight, as well.

Fearuin dared a risky technique as he pulled himself towards one of his opponents, firmly grabbing onto his cloak. He could see the man's sheer determination underneath his ceremonial silvery mask.

Paladins were known to melt steel and silver and to pour it directly over their bodies, in an act of devotion to their patron Saint. Over their faces they kept silver-crested steel masks, each with individual symbols and markings, every mask unique in its own way. Around their heads they wore basinet helms, a gorget to protect the neck and steel plates to protect their bodies.

Fearuin's trick worked perfectly as he let go of the cloak and slid down and around the paladin. While doing so, the elf grabbed his curved sword by the blade with his free hand and flawlessly half-sworded a hit between the interlinking armour plates of the paladin right beneath his ribcage. The blade did not puncture deeply, but it was more than enough to cause a bleeding wound.

He then deflected a direct blow from the High King, only to feel the same raw power coursing through his body and the numbness which followed. Luscian noticed the blood gashing through his paladin's plated body, his white cloak quickly stained by the wound.

The elf was faster, and struggling to match his speed took its toll on him and his paladins, so he was determined to end this as soon as possible, before the elf could tire them out.

Luscian started to channel his own psychic energies to imbue his sword and, thus, every strike thereafter, hoping to find a flaw in the elf's impeccable defense that he could exploit to end the duel.

Fearuin noticed the change, the smell of burning air giving it away. He immediately attacked the High King with a straightforward jab that marked the target with deadly accuracy. The other paladins had no time to react, and Luscian himself was caught off guard by the elf's sudden increase of speed. His helmet saved him, though, too hard to penetrate with the sword.

The elf closed the distance following his thrust, angling his body so that he could defend against the incoming strikes. To his left, a blow was parried superbly, to his right the slash was dodged, giving him an opportunity to block with his shoulder an impending attack from the High King.

Luscian could not wield his sword properly, its length working against him with the elf so close now. Fearuin's second strike against the High King's helm came in with surprising force, almost knocking him from his feet. The chain that kept the helm in place snapped and the basinet opened unexpectedly.

Luscian's golden curled hair was covering parts of his face, his blue eyes sparkling with pure rage. He backed away and pushed his assailant with all his might, releasing some of his psionic power, shaping it into kinetic energy. The blast was strong enough to rip through Fearuin and disrupt his theatrical sword dance.

One of the other paladins grabbed on to his cloak and pulled before the elf could react. Forced to kneel, his attack on the High King came to an abrupt end.

Fearuin snapped and tore his cloak with a single slash upward; the paladin was prepared and made his own attack against his grounded foe, as the other intervened, placing himself between Luscian and the elf lord.

The High King released his inner strength as jolts and sparks of lightning filled the oval hall. Fearuin jumped away and managed to bring into form the cosmic dark energy of the arcane flow. Luscian's power was immense and instantly smashed against any form of barrier the elf could summon.

The effects of such actions would always be unpredictable, but were inevitably devastating. The matter around them bent and changed rapidly taking various forms in the blink of an eye. The paladins were knocked off their feet. Luscian was pushed on his back. Fearuin suffered greatly from this exchange as parts of his finely-crafted elven mail melted away and fused with the fabric of his cloak, making a sinewy contorted material which seemed to move and shift around him. The melting material burned through his skin and into his body, as the elf screamed in terrible agony.

'Quickly!' said one of the paladins, charging the downed elf.

Fearuin barely managed to put his sword up in a feeble parry before the first strike opened a wound in his chest, his armour providing little protection now. Bending and twisting his body in unspeakable agony, he managed to get up just in time before the other two joined the fight.

He feigned a retreat but sprung towards his enemies, the armour partially holding him back. The paladin missed his attack, the High King's strike went wide as he perfectly executed his dash through them and towards his prey. The other paladin, already wounded,

was ever-so-slightly slower. It was all that the elf needed. He attacked upward, was blocked by the paladin, nudged to the side, letting the swords slightly shriek against each other, and retracted the blade only to crash it furiously behind the paladin's knee, where the armour was weaker.

The paladin fell on his knee, prompting the tip of his sword against the marble floor for support while his cloak was flung to the other side. Fearuin was already behind him, already seeing an opening which only a peerless elven sword master like himself could hope to find. His sword flashed and made its way inside the paladin's armour and into his thorax, killing him instantly.

Upon seeing his paladin fall, the High King released a psionic discharge that threw Fearuin away. The elf's own force spiked almost instantly as soon as he was out of the king's nullifying aura. Having the two inimical forces clash again over it, the floor arched and cracked open in unnatural ways, spreading molten stone everywhere. Fearuin was again thrown back and against the wall, surrounded by liquid blue fire burning his skin and muscle tissue. His contorted face turned from agony to horror as he realized that he had to pour every ounce of his own life force in order to keep himself alive even in this state. And in doing so he abandoned any chance of retaliation against the High King and his surviving paladin.

Luscia stood still, as some of the strain of channeling his own psionic potential to such high level clearly took its toll on him. His clothes caught fire from the static electricity around him, yet he paid it no heed. The other paladin was fortunate enough to have put forward a barrier of his own before the clash. He was knocked to the side, but suffered only from several concussions. He moved in to stand by his king.

Fearuin's unnatural screams echoed through the broken hall. The roots of the mountain had turned from wood to melted stone, pouring down from the ceiling. The cherry tree had been completely

obliterated during the exchange, as the scenery degraded even more.

Luscia realized that the duel would not last too long this way and started marshaling his psionic abilities once again. 'Do it' he said to the paladin through clenched teeth, as his efforts were taking their toll on him with every passing moment. The paladin moved towards his target.

In his pit of terrible agony, Fearuin barely realized what the High King was doing. He felt it around him - ripples within the arcane flow could already be seen as threads from a puppet being cut one after another.

What he had dreaded since the attack came was unfolding before his torment-filled eyes: his life's work, so close to completion, was slowly being taken apart by their duel and was coming crumbling down, piece by piece. With no other choice left to him and death mere moments away, he knew he had to use it, now or never.

The High King stood in the oval hall like a marble statue one would find on altars, depicting a mad painter's masterpiece within the broken sanctum. The other paladin was slowly moving closer to Fearuin, sword in hand and with his own psionic powers to shield him, uncertain of the elf's next move. They all knew they might not survive another exchange of that magnitude.

What the humans did not understand, but Fearuin knew, was that each of those that could tap the arcane flow and survive, that could bend it by their own will so that it creates something out of nothing, all of them, including himself, are but vessels for cosmic forces none of them here could understand. To him, the paladins of Quintus were a deviance, an unnatural construct, an anomaly in the patterns and, consequently, a threat to his work.

With incredible effort he managed to stabilize what remained of his life force, and looked to the walls.

The inner sanctum was a place built with painstaking accuracy, following eons-long calculations and divinations, to serve one true purpose: to attune one's arcane skills to an incredibly high level of feeling, touching, and controlling the cosmic dark energy, thus allowing incredible feats which no sorcerer could hope to perform on his own, not even one such as him, the greatest who has ever lived. He was the last one alive who knew the true purpose of this place; to all the others he had only said it was a grand temple of their people, a place to house their symbol and mark their history; in a way, that was true, of course, but it was so much more than that. Every root-stone in this chamber was so finely shaped by those that helped him build it, that a single dent in the walls could mean centuries of work in order to re-attune it the way he'd seen it in his visions as a child. During their battle, the release of energies had struck the walls and ruined the resonance of the chamber, rendering it almost useless. Almost.

Luscian understood his situation in similar terms, but had no notion of what the elf's plans were. In melee combat, the elflord was superior to them in both speed and skill, yet he had made a crucial mistake in using his arcane against them. The gifts of Quintus had turned the battle in their favor.

The High King could sense Fearuin's own accretion disk growing already at an alarming rate: he seemed to draw energies much faster than anything he'd seen before in his life, faster even than the strongest spell-weavers he had met in Hyperborea. Yet he understood the complexity of the ordeal the sorcerer was going through, so he had enough time to react and oppose it, veiling the sorcerer within his psionic aura, shrouding him from the arcane flow. 'This will be our tomb' he said to himself, as his body reacted immediately to his will, every muscle aching in pain. Small, fiery particles swirled from the High King and touched the floor with electrical discharges. The arcs ruptured the matter around them, and Luscian finally understood the trap the elf had laid for them. Fearuin had used the resonance of the chamber in order to fold the dark energy around them, creating a shell, but also kept himself

connected to it for as long as possible, igniting inside him similar feats of cosmic manifestations. The High King and his paladin were caught between hammer and anvil.

The elf felt the last vestiges of his life force being snuffed out of him. As the sanctum reacted and answered to his tapping, he received more than he could handle. Fearuin knew how the dark energy worked: he saw himself in the shape of an hourglass, some sand would course through from above, but a lot more was still waiting, pushing, wanting to be released. This power that was now inhabiting him was not his own, and this was beyond anything he would ever dream of handling before being ripped apart. It took a moment until he realized what this new sensation was: it was fear, for the first time in his entire existence. He felt anxiety, rage, and heat, everything going through his mind with dizzying speed. He felt invincible and strong, yet weak and feeble; far and wide, yet small and insignificant; eternal, yet already dying. He felt thin, stretched through space and time. A mixture of images and sounds, unknown colors and impossible geometries were going through his mind. And above all, an irresistible imperative to strike now and end it. His wounds vanished in a matter of moments, and in the blink of an eye he was upright, sword in hand. The armour, broken and torn, felt weightless. Luscian's arcs of psychic energy wrapped him entirely. His skin was slowly burning away, its surface being instantly vaporized and turned into ashes. He felt the pain, but it only came to him as a whisper from his material form; he ignored it and moved against the humans.

The paladin clashed swords with the elf and moved rapidly to his side, the sorcerer's blade hitting him right below the chest, but his armour was there to protect him. The elf felt the paladin's own will acting against him, so he took more of what was promised him. The hourglass widened at the middle. The shock that immediately followed blasted the paladin aside, throwing him into the air, ripping him apart. He was torn into several pieces, as his right leg and half of his upper body flew into separate parts of the hall.

Fearuin turned towards his next victim, eyes widened, his voice not his own:

**YOU DARE STAND
AGAINST YOUR MAKER**

The High King in all his majesty, a radiant aura of white and golden electrical bolts around him, could only watch as his paladin was ripped apart by the abomination that was now coming for him. He knelt, leaning on his sword, and bowed his head as he started whispering faintly, his voice growing steadily stronger as the elf approached him, until finally the last word of his litany came out strong and loud as he suddenly lifted his head and looked straight at the enemy of life: ‘...Gabriel!’.

As the litany ended, the hourglass shattered and the sorcerer’s body broke under the swirling dark energy. The veil lifted and the arcane flow snapped back to its cosmic form. The elf was cut off from his weir, his accretion disk shattered as the ripples of space collapsed upon themselves destroying everything within the inner sanctum.

The sorcerer watched as the fabric of his own flesh was swept away by the unleashed powers around them. The feeling lasted an eternity for him: every moment seemed to lose its stable interaction with time itself and prolonged his suffering until he was nothing more than a whisper of chance within the everlasting reverberant song of the void. He was powerless to stop it, as was the High King, both unwilling spectators. Time and space diluted the matter around them. Flashes of light appeared and disappeared almost instantly as the cosmos embraced them, transforming everything into a game of infinite swirling colors and sounds. Then everything came to an abrupt end. The High King remained unharmed and what was left of the elf lord stood as his feet, battered, broken, and dying.

Fearuin felt the cold marble floor easing his passing. He saw Luscian standing above him, uncertain how to proceed, uncertain of what happened. He smiled a broken smile: ‘If only you would know...’

‘What have you done, creature?’ asked the High King in dismay.

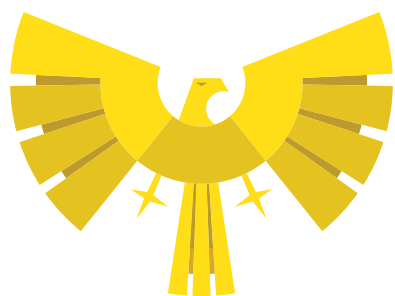
Fearuin tried to speak, but only blood came out instead of words. He tried to reach out to Luscian, he tried to measure the distance. ‘So close, he thought, so very close...’, as his body finally gave way, and was still.

Luscian moved to the side and looked up at the shattered walls of the sanctum, twisted and scarred from this last exchange, pieces falling all around him. The intricate scenes on the wide floor were shattered beyond recognition, the tapestries and the roots of the mountain destroyed in the conflagration.

He knew the downfall of the elven kingdoms had begun with the death of Fearuin, but had to make sure that the deed would remain symbolic even after the troops of the Empire would leave this place. He looked to the volcanic stones that crumbled from the walls and lifted the largest boulder he could find. He approached the elf’s body, raised the stone above his head and crushed Fearuin’s ribcage with it. Luscian then took the white tabard of his fallen paladin, and covered the stone with it, and walked away leaving it like that, a message to all who would come and see, that the folly and arrogance of the spell-weavers was their downfall, and that the Empire had been there to witness it.

After the city was completely destroyed, the Empire of Seraclea withdrew its troops from the mountain enclave, and continued its march south. The lands behind them were left burned and destroyed, the Black Aquila flying over the walls of the holiest place in all elvendom. The war had begun in earnest, and even though the Empire had scored a major and unhoped-for victory at Meiuirthil, the years ahead would have to wade through rivers of blood before reaching the shores of imperial peace.

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