

Author Note – 12/02/2024

PLEASE NOTE:

THIS WORK IS INCOMPLETE.

Shadow of Thorea started off as a simple idea, one of technology vs Fantasy. I decided to write it chapter by chapter, developing the story as it went along, as well as the character motivations and allegiances.

Unfortunately, over the course of its creation, I decided to give it a hiatus. The first, was so to take a short break. The second, happened after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The third, after tensions arose in Israel/Gaza. These hiatuses happened because it felt morally wrong to write this story while these conflicts were taking place. Its one thing to write a story of fantastical armies, full of magic and creatures fighting, its another to write about a technological empire committing genocide against its less developed neighbours.

Over the course of these hiatuses, I have also unfortunately, lost interest in the story itself. Every time I sat down to continue it, I found myself uninterested, not wanting to continue it. Writing something while bored of the idea, will only lead to a boring story and therefore, a bored reader. So, instead of continuing an idea I do not want to continue, I am bringing Shadow of Thorea to its end.

In this document, is all of the up-to-date writings, (0.0-1.9)  
as well as the initial first drafts of the rest, (2.0-3.1)  
A basic summary of the stories ending is at the end of the document.

I originally planed for the story to reach 5, but no more. I thank those who may have had an interest in the story and apologise for any potential disappointment. At the end of this document is a brief summary of the potential ending that was never written.

Adam

Shadow of Thorea



Sister Megan held her cupped hands out, gently collecting the water that trickled from the fountain and raised it to her lips. She drank and once she was satiated, bowed her head, giving thanks. She stood, stepping back, her head still bowed, until she was five steps away, where she turned and walked away. Walking along the corridor built of white stone, she found herself humming tunelessly, ignoring the sisters who whispered to one another as she passed by. As she approached the garden, the sound of children grew louder and soon enough they were within view, running back and forth, throwing balls, skipping on ropes and general roughhousing. The garden was warm in the morning sun, but the shadows around the edge held onto the cold, biting at Megan through her thin cotton habit. She quickly walked through the shadow to find herself in the warmth of the sunlight.

'Sister Megan!' She heard a shrill voice call to her. Faith ran towards her, the young girl having seemingly endless energy. Megan smiled down at the young girl, who was no longer covered in mud and the coagulated blood of her family. She was clean, recently bathed and dressed in a simple white dress, tied with a thin blue ribbon around the waist. Her light blonde hair had been carefully tied into a ponytail which swung back and forth as she ran. She rushed over to Sister Megan and threw her arms around the older woman's waist. Sister Megan returned the embrace and then stepped back, kneeling to be face to face with the eight-year-old.

'Gosh, don't you just look beautiful!' Megan said with a wide smile, causing Faith to blush a deep red. The breakfast bell rang and Faith turned her head, looking towards it excitedly.

'Go on,' Megan said, gesturing with a small nod towards the door to the dining hall, 'Get something to eat.' Faith nodded firmly and ran towards the dining hall, joining the mass of other children who started to filter through the doorway. Before stepping through the door, Faith turned and looked back towards Megan. She placed her hands together, raised them to her head and closed her eyes.

'I give thanks for Sister Megan and this beautiful morning.' She lowered her hands and opened her eyes, once more smiling towards Megan, who was impressed at the little girl's grasp on the Thorean language, especially for such a young Doran. Faith spun on her heel and disappeared into the dining hall which was now full of excited chatter and laughter as the smell of cooking bacon, eggs and bread drifted out. Megan remained standing in the sun for a small while, basking in its warmth, her face to the sky. She went to make her way out of the garden, passing the library where several monks sat within, scribbling away in large and ancient tomes, then the chapel and then arriving at the spiral stairs that would lead up to Father Bernal's study. She stopped just before the bottom step and peered down at the well-worn stone, which had a slight dip in the centre, thanks to many thousands of feet. A thin, worn rope lined the walls, passing through old and rusted iron rings bolted to the wall. Sister Megan took a deep breath and said a small prayer, as her hand gripped the rough rope and she started ascending the stairs. She counted each step, to a total of fifty-eight, stopping at the simple wooden door at the top. Taking in a short sharp breath, Sister Megan rapped her knuckle on the door in two firm knocks. She waited in an agonising silence for what seemed like an eternity, broken finally by the sound of a muffled voice.

'Come in.' It said. The door handle turned slowly, rust stifling the lock after many years of constant use. The door opened with a loud and piercing creak, causing Megan's teeth to clench together. Passing through the doorway and into the room beyond, Megan bowed her head low and stared at the stone floor.

'Father Bernal, you called for me?' There was the sound of a chair scraping against the stone floor and the person sat within getting to their feet.

'Yes, yes I did. Come child, raise your head.'

Lifting her eyes first and then, her head, Megan was able to quickly survey the room in which she now stood. It was plain, unimaginably so. Bare stone walls framed the room, intercut with a single plain glass window on the left side. There was a wooden desk and chair sat beside a burning log fire opposite the door, while on the other side of the room, was another wooden door. Father Bernal stood behind the desk, his plain white robes draping down his body, starting from the neck. His black hair, though long, was tied in a long plait and was drooping

over his left shoulder, a stark contrast to the white robes. He wore fine white cloth gloves over his hands, which he placed together in front of him in a sign of peace. On his desk sat three thick books, a quill, an inkwell and a yellowed piece of paper, covered in an abundance of black lettering. Megan noted that there were no ink marks on Father Bernal's gloves or robe, though the ink lettering on the parchment still appeared to be wet, having only recently been written.

'Sister Megan, pray tell me, how long have you been with this convent?' Father Bernal asked, carefully stepping out from behind his desk and taking several small steps towards her, his shoes clicking against the stone. As he grew closer to Megan, she could see even more of the wrinkles that lined his face and the impossibly thin pencil moustache that lined his top lip.

'Eight months, Father.' she replied, unsure of where to look, finally deciding to settle on a large stone in the floor, about a metre away from where she stood. Father Bernal's shoes appeared over the stone and a moment later, it was obscured by his robe. Megan looked up.

'In that time, I believe that you have bought us a number of orphans? Rescued from the war to the east?' Father Bernal asked.

'I have Father. By my count, I have returned with twelve Doral children. The war has been a terrible blight on us all, but more so to the children. I pray daily for the war to end and for peace to embrace us all.' Megan said, doing her best not to stumble over her words.

'Yes, we all wish for an embrace of peace and I am sure we will feel its warmth soon enough.' Father Bernal said, turning back to his desk and picking up a small letter, which he seemed to quickly read. 'Thorea is having a time of great prosperity and grace and it is only right that this is shared with the world.' Megan went to speak, to give yet another well wish of peace, but Bernal cut her off as she opened her mouth.

'Tell me child, do you know what is so special about tonight?' He asked. Megan thought for a moment before she shamefully shook her head, her cheeks flushing with colour.

'Fear not. Tonight,' Father Bernal answered, 'is the first Moon of the Eve of Sanctity.'

Megan felt her breath catch in her throat.

'So soon?' She asked, 'I didn't think it would happen for another month at least?' Father Bernal chuckled slightly and turned back to her with a wide smile.

'Yes dear Sister, it is time. It is time for us to gather and pray.'

Megan followed Father Bernal down the staircase that she had previously ascended, both of their footsteps echoing against the plain stone. Megan realised walking down the steps seemed a lot more terrifying than ascending them, making her wonder whether she might have some kind of issue with heights. Reaching the bottom step, Megan took a deep breath, somewhat relieved to be there at last. She followed Father Bernal to the chapel, seeing that the doors were now open and within, were several other sisters, as well as the Mother Superior who was partially hidden in shadow. They had ushered the children after they had eaten their breakfast, where the young boys and girls now chatted excitedly or bowed their heads in silent prayer. The chapel was a wide and open room, with several rows of pews facing the altar at the front. The altar was tall, almost reaching the top of the room and was covered in a thick and solid red wax, more of which dripped down from long red candles above. Sat on the altar, swaddled in the red wax, was an etching, carved from a single solid piece of oak. It was a common etching that could be found throughout most of the Empire, depicting a large fish swimming beneath waves. A couple of young boys sat on the hard wooden pews began to shove one another and a sister had to go and break them up, shushing both of them loudly. Megan spotted and then walked over to Faith, who was smiling at her from the third pew. Slipping into the empty pew behind the young girl, Megan moved behind her and began to braid her ponytail, making the girl giggle. Mother Superior moved to the front of the room, just before the altar, turning to face them all, causing a couple of the children to audibly gasp. She was dressed in a long black gown, cape and hood. Her face was deathly pale, emphasised by her dark black lips and dark sunken eyes. She held her hands out in front of her, both of which seemed to be coated in a deep black charcoal, all the way up to her elbows, where the black faded into grey and then the pale white of her skin. Her voice echoed through the chapel.

'We are gathered to give thanks. Today, we gather to show our faith and our love. Today, we gather to greet our Lord, for he is here, in his eternal glory and divine heresy.'

The children exploded into excited clamouring, excited to see this person that was so widely spoken about. Being from Doral, they likely had little idea what the Mother Superior was saying, let alone what she was talking about. However, they were excited. The Mother Superior raised both of her hands and two sisters approached the doors, closing them and sliding the bolt into place with the sound of scraping metal. Megan found her hands gently holding onto Faith's shoulders, squeezing gently as the candles went out and the chapel was plunged into darkness, causing several of the children to cry out. Faith's breathing increased momentarily, but seemed to calm as Megan held her tightly.

'We welcome our Lord!' The Mother Superior cried out through the darkness, though her voice was drowned out by a low wailing. The altar at the front of the room shuddered and shimmered with a dull light, the red wax wavering and flexing, almost as if it was made of jelly. The wax in the centre of the altar began to melt, dripping to the floor and creating an opening to a hole beyond. Megan stared down the hole, seeing a mass approaching from the other side. An enormous, whale-like creature made its way partially through the hole, wailing and writhing as it moved. Only the front of the creature appeared to be able to pass through the hole at the time, as it came to a stop, still writhing and wailing. The creature, though looking like a whale, was eyeless and had several dozen fins on the side of its long body. Slowly, it began to open its mouth and the children that were originally struck with awe and intrigue by this marvel of Divinity, were all at once engulfed by fear as they stared at the thousands of eyes and appendages within the creature's mouth.

'Sisters! Now we show our devotion to the Great and Mighty Lord! Our Lord of Heresy and Divine being!' The Mother Superior cried out, her hands raised to the sky. Faith turned her head and looked up at Megan, who smiled softly and stroked the girl's hair.

'It's alright, I promise,' Megan said, 'Look, our Lord is harmless. Our Lord wants to share its Divinity with you.'

Megan pointed towards the Godly creature, whose thousands of eyes were looking in every direction of the room, swarming and writhing like a swarm of insects. Faith looked over at the creature, her shoulders relaxing as she saw it had stopped moving and gently whispered to herself, 'Divine...'

Megan smiled and pulled out her knife, then cut the little girl's throat in a single action. The other sisters in the room commenced the same action to each of the children.

'Now we pray sisters.' Father Bernal said, taking his place next to the Mother Superior.

'We pray while the Lord of Heresy feeds and ensures the Empire's victory in this war so peace can be brought to the Heathens of Doral.'

Megan fell to her knees and began to pray and as she did so, she softly wept. Never had she imagined that the Lord of Heresy would be so glorious, so beautiful. It was greater than she had ever dreamed.

The young buck twitched its ears as it drank from the gently flowing stream, moments before raising its head and looking directly at Deon. He held his breath, slowly rising from his crouched position and, with the utmost care, starting forwards, ensuring each step was taken as softly as possible, so as not to startle the deer. Deon reached the edge of the small stream, the tip of his boot barely touching the water's surface, sending light ripples through the liquid. The deer had remained deathly still, staring at Deon, watching with its huge and dark inky eyes. Slowly, Deon released his breath and reached his hand out, palm flat, towards the deer's nose. Deon had been watching this specific deer for a good few days, after having spotted it come to the stream to drink, resolving to eventually touch it. He had spent a few days doing his best to neutralise his scent, by rubbing himself with leaves and berries, as well as working the most likely place for there to be a downwind. After all that work, his preparations were complete and today, he was going to touch this deer. From behind Deon, came the loud snap of a twig. The deer's attention shifted, its head turned and its eyes fixed on something else, something that posed more of a threat than Deon. Deon turned his head.

'Fuck.'

Deon threw himself to the ground as a storm of bullets tore through wood, stone, water and deer flesh. The creature's attempt at making a dying cry was cut short as the metal tore through its throat and brain, leaving it scattered on the ground as little but a pulverised mess. On his hands and knees, Deon scrambled for cover, the closest available being a thick oak tree. For several moments, the wood of the tree was battered, chipped and chewed by the screaming bullets, while Deon could do little but hold his head in his hands and hope it stopped. As soon as they had started, the bullets ceased, leaving a strange quiet, filled only by the water of the gurgling stream. Shouting came from behind the tree.

'Move up!'

'Find him! Dead or alive.'

'Spread out!'

The voices seemed to be moving towards the dead deer, so Deon moved around the tree and climbed the steep bank that led out of the gully and disappeared into the brush. He moved to his stomach and crawled slowly and painfully, stopping still whenever he heard the slightest of noises. He wanted to get up and run, but he knew if he did, he would end up just like that deer. After what seemed like an impossibly long time, he heard the sound of a Huntsman powering-up, the unmistakable low drone, followed by four individual clanks. A few moments later, the ground trembled with the heavy footsteps of the Huntsman walking in the opposite direction. Deon remained flat on the ground for a long while, his ear to the ground, waiting for the light tremors to finally end. Once he was fully confident the Huntsman had truly left, he stood and broke into a run. He found his camp easy enough, thanks to the rock shaped like a pig, then twenty more steps to the tree with no bark on one side, then continue on to camp. Lia and Harka sat in the centre of the small clearing, the campfire between the two of them. The old soldier was stirring a steaming pot with his one hand, while Lia was sharpening the end of a stick into a point. She had wrapped her cape around herself to keep warm, but to Deon, it made her look like an elderly woman ready to go shopping. They turned to Deon as he walked into camp, Lia pointing her pointy stick towards him, while Harka pointed a pistol. They relaxed when they saw it was Deon, then tensed up when they saw how red and puffy his face was.

'They've found us.' he gasped. Both Lia and Harka groaned, as Lia stood and began to pack up the camp, while Harka looked sadly at the pot he had been stirring.

'What a waste of a rabbit.' He said in his thick Doral accent.

'Pour it out. We can eat as we move,' Lia called out from the other side, 'I'm hungry and I'm not going to let that go to waste.'

Harka poured the steaming broth into three wooden bowls and passed one each to the twins. Deon ate his too quickly, burning the roof of his mouth and his tongue, but it was worth it, as the meat was amazingly tender. They walked north, putting as much distance as they could between them and the gully where Deon had encountered the deer. Lia stopped momentarily, allowing Deon to catch up with her.

'Did you see what company the platoon belonged to?'

'No,' Deon replied, 'But they had a Huntsman so I didn't stick around to find out.'

Lia huffed and walked onward using her crude spear like a hiking stick.

'Are you worried it's the Angels?' Deon asked after her. Lia stopped but didn't turn around.

'No, they are likely in Doral already so we aren't in danger from them. But why are you asking me that?' Lia said, turning to face him. He shrugged.

'They are your unit, your comrades. You were one of them. I wouldn't want you to fight your friends.'

'They aren't my friends,' Lia snapped, turning away and continuing to walk, 'Not anymore.'

Harka stopped a small way in front, raising his one hand, dropping into a crouch. He placed his head against the ground, causing Deon and Lia to instinctively hold their breath. After a few moments, Harka turned and moved over to them.

'They are following us. I can feel the Huntsman. They must have picked up our trail.' he said in a hushed voice.

'What do we do?' Deon asked.

'I will go back. I'll try and draw them off, make them follow the wrong trail. I can lose them easier than you two. Continue to the docks, I'll meet you there. If I don't arrive before first light, leave without me.' Harka said. Harka was a lot older and experienced than Deon and Lia, but he also had a false mechanical leg, something that would likely slow him down. Deon opened his mouth to protest but Harkha hushed him. Harka moved away from them, heading back in the direction from which they had just come, his false leg causing him to walk with a slight limp. Deon wanted to go after him, but Lia had touched him on the arm and was pointing.

'Come on, we are getting close.' She said, 'He'll be fine, he always is.'

After a couple more hours of slow and steady trekking, Lia and Deon found the docks. There were three small buildings, all built from logs and thatch, all of which had light coming from the windows.

'Gods, how I would love a soft bed and a hot bath.' Deon said.

'I know, so do I. But, I think that tree looks just as comfortable, don't you?' Lia said, pointing towards the old willow tree that rested close to the water's edge. The leaves drooped down and almost obscured the trunk, providing a suitable hiding place. Settling down in a position where they were hidden from view by anyone not looking for them and where they could still see the houses, the twins chewed on some stale bread that Lia had in her satchel. Wrapping their cloaks around themselves, they huddled together for warmth and tried to get some sleep, taking it in turns to keep watch. No sooner had Deon fallen asleep, the sun crested the distant horizon, rising from behind the Glass Mountains. The light swept over the land and warmed Lia's face, while making the frost-covered grass glisten and sparkle. She looked around, seeing one of two people moving about the sleepy village but little else. She turned and gently rocked Deon, who was huddled beneath his frost coated cape.

'Its first light,' Lia said as Deon's eyes gently flicked open, 'but Harka isn't here.'

Deon sat up, rubbed the sleep from his eyes. He looked around the village, seeing the same few people that Lia had seen.

'What should we do?'

A young girl brought out a load of washing and started to hang it out on a line that stretched to the water's edge. Several children came out of their houses, one by one, until they were all rushing around and screaming, their energy fresh as the morning sun. A number of men and women collected tools and a small cart, ready to go into the woods or to their fields for a day

of hard labour. Deon looked at the water's edge, seeing the small boat that rocked in the water, the sail down, but ready to be raised at a moment's notice.

'He told us to go. We go.' Deon said finally. Both siblings flinched as a figure burst through the canopy of the forest close to them and ran right towards the willow tree. They ducked under the willow tree leaves and came into full view. Harka. He was breathing heavily, all while being covered in a grim mix of blood and mud.

'We have to leave now. It's the Wolves. They are coming.'

The closest building in the village exploded. Wood, straw, metal and mud tore through the air as each building erupted into bright flame, quickly followed by billowing, choking black smoke. The villagers who had survived the explosions screamed and ran, only to be cut down by a rattling of bullets, leaving their bodies to fall into the cold and fresh mud. The ground shuddered more and more as the Huntsman walked through the village, stepping over and on the corpses of the people it had just mown down. Imperial soldiers flanked the monstrous machine, their guns raised, firing at any movement, be it villagers or a stray dog that was barking loudly at them.

'Spread out! Find them! Shoot to kill!' came a voice from the Huntsman.

'What do we do?' Deon asked, frozen in place, staring at the machine. Harka looked at the boat, miraculously still untouched by any of the bullets that had shattered the village.

'I'm sorry,' He said with a sigh that left nothing to interpretation, 'We are going to have to fight.'



## 1.1

There was a common saying within the capital city of Aruthel.

'Be it morning, afternoon, evening or night, the Empress is a person of all times.'

Unbeknownst to the people of the city, Empress Venit; Heretic Absolute, was in fact, not a morning person. She did in fact, despise the morning with every fibre of her being. She hated the cold that hung around before the sun rose and chased it away. She hated morning breath and she hated tangled hair. She hated the smell of body odour that came with staying under the covers for too long but most of all, utterly loathed the whole awful process of forcing herself out of the warm cocoon she had made of her covers and out into the cruel, barbaric day that awaited her. This particular morning was no different from any other. First, she awoke to a beam of light passing through her curtains, shining directly into her face blinding her the moment she opened her eyes. Once she had managed to escape the light, she then had to get up, which always seemed like a gargantuan task. She decided, after a few moments, to take her bedsheets with her in an attempt to hold onto the warmth they gave for as long as possible. The wood floor of her room was unforgiving on her feet, so she hurried from one rug to the other, until she got to the door of her bathroom. She closed the door and turned the hot tap on in her bathtub, letting steaming water flow out and fill the basin. The room was soon swimming with steam, providing enough warmth for her to happily step out of her bedsheets, letting them crumple on the floor. With her hand, she wiped the condensation from the mirror and stared at her reflection. Her red hair was frizzy, in need of a good brush, while her makeup was smudged, as last night she had decided she couldn't be bothered to remove it and went straight to bed. Now, the reflection that stared back at her looked like a terrifying clown from beyond the Outer Void. She laughed at the silly reflection before facing the bath and turned the gold-plated tap until the hot water ceased flowing. After spending far too much time lying in the hot water, fragranced with jasmine and lavender, Venit then found, like most mornings, she had a second problem. She didn't want to leave the warmth of the bath. She stayed in the huge tub, adding more hot water to the basin whenever it grew too tepid, until her fingers were pruned. The exothermic station was pretty much the same. Her body and hair were dry after the first couple of minutes of the hot air blasting up from beneath her, but she set the station off another five times, just for the warmth. The third time of setting it off, she had nearly fallen asleep again, despite being stood up. Finally, an hour and a half after she had woken up, Empress Venit was dressed, her hair combed and makeup applied. No one viewing her would ever have guessed she had been a warmth gremlin skittering from source to source a while earlier. It was also said of the Empress, that she had an army of slaves to do her every bidding. They would bathe her, brush her hair and even feed her with gold and silver cutlery. This was also not true. Venit liked her independence, to a degree. While she did have servants, there were only around ten of them and they usually only did the cleaning and cooking. Venit enjoyed doing some things for herself, like her mother had taught her. She did her own laundry, made and changed her own bed and didn't need any help in dressing herself. She brushed her own hair, applied her own makeup and chose her own clothes, taking pleasure in the little things in getting ready for the day. This morning, she had chosen to wear a long red and yellow dress, fastened in the back with buttons and corset laces, while sporting long sleeves with cuffs that had a piece of string that wrapped around the middle finger. After a time trying to fasten them herself, the Empress was forced to call in a servant to help with the laces on the back, but once that was done, she dismissed them. The dress, or more, the style of dress, had fallen out of fashion in the past year, but the Empress was about to send waves through the fashion community by wearing it once more. She chose to wear a necklace made from a magpie skull, with rubies on each side, as well as earrings of carved whale bone. She had tied her hair into a fishtail braid, with her fringe fastened in place with a white-gold band, adorned with a coin-sized cameo of a millipede. Taking a moment before she exited her bedroom and really started

her day, Venit stared out of her window. The city below was awake, the streets churning with people making their way to places of work or making deliveries, school children ran to class and soldiers patrolled their routes, keeping total order. A Wasp Carrier craft flew across the skyline, closely followed by half a dozen drone fighters. Towards the outer steel wall, a silhouette of a Huntsman was visible, as it slowly walked back and forth along a patrol route, protecting the city, protecting her. A small brown bird landed on the windowsill and hopped over to the glass, singing merrily. It tapped its beak against the glass a couple of times and Venit carefully opened the window, placing her hand down flat on the window edge. The little bird sang its shrill song for a few moments, then hopped up onto Venit's hand. She gently raised her hand with the small bird in until it was parallel to her face. She listened to the tiny bird sing for several more moments, before she took its head in her other hand and wrung its neck. Empress Venit pressed the tiny corpse to her lips, gave thanks and made a small prayer to the Lord of Death. She threw the dead bird back out the window and pulled it closed. The Lord Chamberlain, Oswal Namal greeted the Empress as she entered her dining room for her breakfast. He bowed silently, not saying a word as Venit picked up a plate, piled on pieces of bread, cheese, fruit, eggs and bacon and poured out a large goblet of wine. As she sat down, Venit tossed an orange to Oswal, who caught it nonchalantly, bowing in thanks.

'Go on then.'

Oswal bowed again and cleared his throat, taking out his small notebook, flipping through the pages.

'Progress with the invasion is going...well, as well as we could hope,' he said with his strong lisp, 'The siege of Jarkel of course ended in a victory for us, however we did suffer many casualties and a great loss of vehicles and weapons. The defences of the city were far stronger than we initially believed they would be, a mistake we shall not be repeating, I assure you. However, now that we have pushed forwards and have successfully destroyed Jarkel, our forces can advance from both the north and south, from Liax, closing in around the Temple of Bryophyta. Lynth will be totally cut off and from then on, it will only be a matter of time before we break their defences.'

Oswal licked his finger and flipped the page.

'Of course, the public news networks shall report the battle as a total victory for us, with minimal casualties, by the grace of the Gods. Um...'

He flipped several pages, 'Production output has also been doubled at the Empire Forge, to compensate for the loss of equipment and vehicles, just as a precaution.'

Venit looked at Oswal out of the corner of her eye but didn't say anything. She drank from her goblet and twiddled her finger for him to continue. He cleared his throat. 'Finally, the last Army group and Armoured regiment are now making their way to the Korva Gate, to be at Doral in time for the last push against Lynth.'

Venit remained silent, chewing on her food, enjoying the particularly crusty bread.

'What of the deserters?' She asked eventually, after swallowing her mouthful.

'Um, we have sent the Wolves after them, your Grace, they will not get far. They will not make it out of the Empire's territories, I assure you.'

'See that they don't,' Venit replied, picking up her cup and swallowing the last of the wine, 'Make sure they are expunged from history. No one can ever know that I have been defied like this, by common soldiers.'

Oswal bowed deeply and shuffled backwards out of the room, cradling his orange like it was made of the rarest jewels. Venit poured herself another goblet of wine and chugged it, carefully wiping her mouth gently with a napkin so as to not smudge her lipstick. She stood and made her way out of the dining room, stepping past the servant that waited just outside. She nodded at them and they bowed, collecting all of the uneaten food for distribution to the poor of the city, but not before being pulverised and compressed into blocks the size of a brick. Still, for those who had no food, it was a form of nutrition. Venit walked along silently, passing by lines

of armoured soldiers who stood to attention, armed with shields and large pikes. Venit ran her fingers across the surface of a couple of the shields as she idly walked past, causing the soldiers to stiffen, until she reached the end of the long corridor and the tall ornate mahogany doors. The two guards who stood either side of the door pulled them open and Venit stepped on through. She entered the Throne Room and took the steps up to the gold chair at the top of a plinth that overlooked the vast and grand hall, made of a dark blue stone, aside from the long red carpet that ran down the middle. After fluffing the silk pillow, Venit sat down and began to count. She reached one hundred and then spoke, her voice echoing about the room.

'Send them in.'

'Just two today, your Grace.' Came a voice from the far end of the room. The door opposite the throne, at the end of the long red carpet, creaked open and two small figures slowly approached. As they approached, Venit was able to see their features, a man and woman, both middle-aged but not yet grey. They were clean and well dressed, but what they wore was not the current fashion and they seemed to wear no jewellery. They bowed for a moment before the man spoke, his speech educated, but with an accent not of high society, but that of a tradesman.

'Thank you for seeing us, your Grace, I understand you are extremely busy. My name is Paulie Kupil and this is my wife, Karla.'

'Greetings Mr and Mrs Kupil. What is it that you have come to ask of me?' Venit asked, her back straight, voice firm.

'Well, you see, it's my daughter. She is currently fighting in the war...in your great war. She is a good girl, fiercely smart, utterly loyal to the Empire, loyal to the Gods, but you see...'. The man paused and then cleared his throat.

'She is sick. Awfully sick. Has been since her birth, but she is a fighter. She was top of every one of her classes and had many University offers, including a fully funded scholarship.' He looked at his wife and swallowed, before continuing.

'Five months ago, she was conscripted into your marvellous army and we have heard nothing from her since. I ask, beg, your Grace, please bring her home. She is our only child and she had such a bright future ahead of her. She could serve the Empire in so many better ways once she completes her education, instead of being a mere soldier. I beseech you, my Empress, bring her back to us. To lose her would destroy our family.'

At this point, the woman, Mrs Kupil, had started to sob into her hands. Empress Venit sat in silence for a moment, thinking, drumming her finger on her thigh.

'What is your daughter's name?'

'Gena Kupil, your Grace.' The man replied, as he attempted to stifle a sob.

'Mister Kupil, you have been more courteous and polite in your audience. Therefore, I shall ensure that your daughter is returned to you, post haste. She will be safe and well, so she can continue her education and become someone of great social and financial standing.' Venit said, clasping her hands together in her lap. The man joined his wife and burst into tears, both of them falling to their hands and knees, praising the Empress in name and title. They eventually stood and started backwards, constantly bowing as they walked to the door, which swung closed, leaving Venit to sit in the resounding silence.

'Oswal!'

A moment later, there were footsteps and the old man appeared, still clutching his small orange still, 'Yes, your Grace?'

'Find a soldier by the name of Gene Kupil. Bring her back to the city as soon as you can.' Venit said. Oswal thought for a moment, muttering the name to himself. After a moment, his eyebrows raised.

'Ah yes, Unit 55723B. Unfortunately, your Grace, Unit 55723B is deceased. It died at the initial landings at the Morn Shores and the body was disposed of in an offering to the Lord of Lice.'

'Oh.' Replied Venit, who was inspecting one of her rings on her right hand, 'Well...never mind then.'

It is said of the Empress Venit, that she is kind, caring, compassionate and adoring of her subjects. This is not true.

The ground was coated in a thick layer of ash, which appeared to soften the sounds of Aeth's steps. She walked carefully between the smouldering ruins of buildings and along what was once streets, always keeping her eyes and ears open for the faintest sounds and movements. She doubted there would be anything in this forsaken place, but carelessness is what gets you killed. She climbed up a still-standing half flight of stairs and after moving into a crouch, thrust her balled-up fist forward. The sound of several pairs of feet came running from behind, as her squad moved up to her position. Aeth looked behind her and, after one last check of the ruined city behind her, hopped off the stairs and climbed through the hole within the city wall. Her squad followed and soon, they were walking in the ruined fields that surrounded the city, moving in a single line. They passed through the field where the pyres had been, now little more than piles of ash and burnt wood, remnants of the offerings to the Gods. It didn't take Aeth and her squad too long to reach the base for the Thorean Army, situated south of the mountain Url, nestled next to The Ridge. They passed through the temporary metal gate and Aeth dismissed her squad, giving them leave to go and eat or sleep.

'I'll call you on your communicators if I need you.' She said. She found a spare seat and sat down, resting her rifle on her lap, rotating her wrists and then shoulders, trying to work out the notches.

'Find anything Lieutenant?'

Aeth turned her head, standing and saluting Colonel Rox as he approached. He slowly walked around her, taking the time to closely inspect her armour and then her gun, after he took it from her. He made a small sucking noise with his lips and several 'Hmm' sounds. Aeth rolled her eyes.

'Rox, stop being a dick.' She said after several more of his 'hmms'.

He looked at her dead in the eye, a small smile betraying his stern demeanour.

'Yeah, alright.' He said, breaking into a laugh and passing the rifle back to her. As she took it, he gave her a playful shove and she punched him in the arm.

'Ow, easy lieutenant, I'm still your superior. Come on, this way.'

They walked, side by side through the camp. They passed multiple lines of soldiers following drills as their gunnies screamed at them, while others ran arduous courses and even more fired at unmoving targets. On the other side of the camp, Aeth and Rox passed by rows of cooks, who were busy chopping and mixing, dicing and flambéing. Further behind the kitchen area, were even more tents full of sleeping and resting soldiers, while dotted all around the edge and throughout the camp, were multiple Huntsmen and other armoured vehicles.

'Did your squad find anything in the ruins?' Rox asked as he stared up at a Huntsman that towered over them both.

'Did I find anythi- no I didn't Rox. Of course I didn't. You've seen what we did to the city. It's decimated.'

'I know, but we can never be too careful. The last thing we want is for an underground bunker to open and for the enemy to stream on out.' He said.

'There is nothing. The Angels and I did a full sweep. There isn't anything left, I assure you.'

Aeth said, folding her arms. He nodded, seemingly happy with the answer she gave. After a moment, Aeth spoke again.

'We've been sitting here for at least a week now and we haven't shown any hint at moving. Why Rox? We won at Jarkel and the Doral army was forced back. Why are we sitting on our hands when we have them on the run?'

Rox turned and looked at Aeth, his face a blank slate.

'That's why.' He turned and pointed, towards the Ridge. The Ridge itself was still a good four hundred or so metres away from them on the other side of the camp, but the sheer cliff side was in full view, towering over them. Aeth took out her binoculars and peered through them.

Towards the top of the ridge, a good five hundred metres up, were ten Huntsmen in a line. They slowly inched their way up the cliff, slamming their arms and feet into the rocky surface in a rhythmic fashion. Huntsmen were bulky and heavy, so the fact they were so high up, means they must have been at this for a good while.

'Each one has a dozen soldiers inside. Once they get to the top, the teams will deploy and clear any resistance, before establishing a perimeter. Once that is done, they will drop cables and we will proceed to build a Gateway.'

'I suppose it would help cut the corner.' Aeth said, staring up at the line of machines.

'Once we establish the Gateway, we can hit the Lynth Gate from both sides, allowing for part of the army to move up from the south, while the rest come through the gate. Then, we can hit the city from two fronts, with the full force of our army.' Rox said, staring up at the Ridge.

'Attacking Lynth is going to make Jarkel seem like a merry jig.' Rox continued, his arms finding their way to his belt.

'Jarkel was...unexpected, I'll say that.' Aeth said, still staring at the ascending Huntsmen. In a flash of light, a bolt of what looked like blue lightning jumped between each of the Huntsmen and they all erupted into a ball of screaming orange flame. Flaming metal rained down from the cliff, landing throughout the camp, forcing soldiers to run for cover as the debris crushed tents, vehicles and any soldiers unlucky enough to be too close. The burning steel husks of the Huntsmen plummeted down the face of the Ridge, slamming into the earth with a deafening roar, burying themselves halfway into the dirt.

'Oh shit.' Rox said, his hand finding his way to his mouth.

'What the hell was that?' Aeth said, peering through her binoculars again. She scanned along the cliff face and then the top edge, seeing little more than long grass.

'I can't see anything, no sign of any kind of defensive weaponry or Doral forces. Whatever it is, it must be camouflaged and camouflaged well.' she said.

'Dammit.' Rox said, 'If we can't get up that cliff safely, we won't be able to hit the gate from both sides, let alone build a gateway there.'

Rox took several deep breaths, while his hand found and started to rub his temple.

'I need to think. I'm going to go and check for new reconnaissance data. Maybe they have spotted something on the Ridge. Maybe.'

'What should I do?' Aeth asked, uncrossing her arms, allowing them to hang at her side.

'Uh...We are still advancing on the Temple of Bryophyta, so take your Angels and head there. The advanced teams could probably do with your help.'

'Yes sir,' Aeth said, giving a small salute and walking away; glad to have something to do. After calling them together through their communicators, Aeth's Squad started to make their way through the camp, while Aeth checked her body armour as they walked. They followed a rifle company and armoured personnel carrier out of the camp, so it was slow moving as they attempted their journey south. Once Aeth was happy that her armour was secure, she looked over her AR-55 assault rifle, checking the scope, chamber and magazine, giving herself a satisfied nod when she was happy that it too, was better than the standard. She started to ponder the upcoming battle that would occur at the Doral temple, finding herself saying a small prayer to the Lord of Blasphemy. She would pray to each God at some point on the journey, but she decided to start with her personal favourite. She prayed and asked for protection for herself and her squad and so far, the Gods had delivered, especially during the Assault on the Morn Shores and the following Siege of Jarkel. Both battles had cost the Empire dearly, yet the Angels had not suffered a single loss, fortunately only having a couple of superficial wounds. Aeth considered how strong the defences of the Temple might be, considering how much resistance the Empire found at both the Morn Shores and Jarkel. It was far beyond anything that any of the higher ups had expected, leading to high losses for the Empire, who expected a simple victory with minimal losses. Aeth had to give it to the people of Doral, they were resilient. Aeth's attention was brought screaming back with the sound of shrieking,

shouting and gunfire. She looked up, seeing soldiers running towards the camp walls, which were buckling as something slammed into them from the outside. The armoured vehicle in front of the company before the Angels exploded in a ball of roaring flame, killing a large number of them, while knocking Aeth and several of the Angels to the ground. Aeth pulled herself up, shouting an order for the Angels to take cover. As they ran, Hilna and Isak were both hit by arrows, killing them instantly. The metal wall that was being crashed into fell and from beyond, came a loud cheer as Doral soldiers swarmed through. At the front of the Doral soldiers, leading them into battle, was a soldier riding a tank sized stag beetle, its horns tearing through the metal walls as if they were paper. Aeth raised her gun and squeezed the trigger, pausing as a shadow passed overhead. There was a piercing screech and a boom as mud was kicked up into Aeths face, as a giant red dragon landed directly in front of her. On the back of the dragon, sitting within a saddle, was an armoured knight, clutching a spear that buzzed with lightning. They stared down at Aeth, who stared back. The Doral counter-attack had begun.

Deon had hoped that by recklessly running out from beneath the willow tree leaves and into the line of sight of the hulking machine before him, it would focus its attention on him and ignore the boat that rested by the dock. While the red light on the front of the machine did shift towards him, it quickly shifted back, focusing on the boat. Its cannon fired, turning the small sailboat into matchsticks, with a burst of orange fire and a curl of black smoke. Deon cursed, before rushing through a curtain of black smoke that drifted from the village, making his way through, towards the lone soldier on the other side. He slammed into the soldier with his shoulder, his arms wrapping around his waist. He lifted the man off the ground and brought him back down with a thud, the soldier's back hitting the ground hard. He stirred, so Deon gave him a swift kick to the face and sent him into unconsciousness. Deon grabbed the soldier's rifle and aimed, just as several more soldiers stepped through the black smoke curtain. He opened fire, hitting two and causing the others to shout and scatter. Through the smoke came a low rumble, as the Huntsman started to turn in his direction, the guns on its left side whirring as they powered up. There was a flash of yellow and an arc of bullets tore along the ground, thrashing towards Deon like a whip. Without a thought, Deon turned and threw himself to the ground, landing on his side against a large boulder. On his hands and knees, he scrambled forwards, until he was fully covered, the bullets hitting against the thick rock. Deon winced, as pain shot through his side and to his brain.

'That's a cracked rib.' He managed to mutter, his hand gently holding his side. From the other side of the village, beyond the smoke and fire, came several voices shouting, quickly followed by gunfire. While Deon had run to the right, getting the attention of the Huntsman, Lia had flanked left. There were a couple of soldiers on the side where Lia had run, who had attempted to stop her, by yelling orders and raising their rifles, but little did they know, Lia was not only one of the Angels, she was the best of them. With a swiftness that rivalled her ex-commander, Lia raced forwards and used her makeshift spear to kill one of the soldiers, breaking it in the process. She grabbed the now dead soldier's rifle and used it against the others, hitting one-another, while the third took shelter behind part of a wall. Lia grabbed a couple of grenades off the soldier she had killed with the spear and raced for cover behind a tree, just as the hidden soldier stepped out and opened fire. Lia took shelter behind a thick oak tree and returned fire a few times when there were breaks in the other soldiers' shots. With a gulp of air, which she then held, Lia pulled the pin of a grenade and threw it, before counting until the detonation. The moment she heard the loud bang and scattering of dirt, she darted forwards, towards the soldier who was now shielding their face with their arm. As they lowered their arm, Lia shot them, killing them instantly. Taking the now dead soldier's place, Lia pressed herself against the smouldering ruin of the wooden building and peeked around the corner, in what she hoped was the direction of Deon. The Huntsman had fully turned and was facing a boulder, its guns blazing while bullets peppered the stone. That was where Deon must be, Lia concluded. The boulder was holding strong, but the endless barrage of bullets was obviously starting to chip away at the stone, several chunks already having been broken off. The cannon to the right of the machine, capable of firing a 200mm shell, clunked as it moved into position. Lia broke from cover and ran, firing her rifle at the soldiers whose attention was on Deon's boulder. She killed them quickly and swiftly, aiming for the gaps in their armour, the neck and shoulders. She used the last of the bullets in the magazine to riddle the back of the Huntsman, which ended its barrage against the boulder before it. Slowly, with a mechanical clunking, the machine started to turn towards her, its metal feet booming against the muddy ground. Pulling himself in as tight as he would go, Deon was running out of time. The boulder around him began to break down, as chunks of stone next to his head broke away. His ears rang from the noise and his face was now bleeding, due to being peppered by hundreds of small shards that broke away. There was a loud and terrifying boom, the sound of a cannon being fired, causing



Deon to squeeze his eyes shut and wait for fire to engulf him, but nothing came. A tree, several dozen yards away exploded at the base, before toppling and landing with a hearty boom. From behind the boulder, came another smaller boom, then a droning whine, then silence.

'Hey Deon, are you still alive?'

Deon slowly poked his head around the side of what was left of the boulder, to see Lia stood on top of the Huntsman. Thick black smoke poured out from the pilot hatch and billowed into the light blue sky. All around them, through the smoke and fire, they saw no more movement, allowing them to breathe a sigh of relief. Lia jumped down from the Huntsman, as the dark orange flames started to grow in intensity, quickly engulfing the entirety of the machine.

'We should move away,' Lia said, moving over to her brother, 'That's a keg ready to blow.'

Deon agreed and they rushed back towards the willow tree, managing to get beneath the thick curtain of leaves, moments before there was an explosion in the distance. The tree had miraculously survived the attack, and they found Harka, leaning against the base of the tree, his eyes closed.

'Looks like we need to find another way of getting to Doral.' Harka said, without even opening his eyes. Deon and Lia looked towards where the boat had been, finding only the burning remains, which bobbed on the surface for several more moments, before sinking with a symphony of bubbles. As Deon sighed and stared at the water, Lia pulled a small cloth out of her satchel and moved over to Harka, using it to clean the small wounds on his face.

'What should we do?' Deon asked. Lia sat in silence, thinking as she gently dabbed at the cut on Harkas forehead.

'We should...we should go to the Korva Gate.' she said.

'Are you, bone crunching, bat-shit mad?' Deon asked, turning and staring at his sister, who didn't look back.

'Well,' she replied, 'Unless you can pull a boat out of your arse, what else can we do?'

'She has a point.' Harka said, his eyes still closed as he winced from the dabbing on his wounds. With a heavy sigh, Deon turned and crouched down until he was level with the two of them.

'You realise of course, we will have to pass by Fort Wex, as well as Turnol? Both of those places, as well as the gate, will be swarming with soldiers. It's going to be difficult to sneak through, maybe even impossible.'

'We have to try something.' Lia said with little more than a shrug.

'We can try and find another boat.' Deon said, 'There are plenty of villages we could try and procure one from.'

'After that little display, nowhere will allow you in without an ID and a full scan of your face,' Harka said, 'Besides, I wouldn't be able to go in either way.' He pointed to his ears. Lia grunted as she heaved Harka onto his feet and checked he was stable enough to stand and walk on his own. Harka took several small steps forwards, his limp heavier than usual, but not enough to stop him.

'We need to move. The rest of the Wolves are probably nearby. They are probably well aware of what has happened here, thanks to the smoke.' he said.

'I never liked boats anyway.' Deon said, as the three of them headed towards the nearest line of trees. The three fugitives walked along the dirt paths that intertwined through the countryside, avoiding all the main roads as best they could, knowing there would be a vast number of eyes, checkpoints and soldiers. Occasionally, they would pass a couple of houses, dotted through the countryside, away from the bulk of civilization. They would pull up their hoods and hurry past, just in case there were any beady eyes looking out, ready to claim some reward money. Sometimes they would pass others on the paths, walking their dogs or riding bicycles or sometimes, just on a hike. Those who they did encounter, usually gave them a quick 'Hello' and then moved on, especially when the three had their hoods up and were staring towards the ground. Once or twice, they passed small shrines to the Gods, carved

from wood or stone, partially hidden by vegetative growth or partly buried in the mud. Lia resisted all urges to stop and say a prayer to them, knowing that she and her brother had given up that privilege. The Wolves did eventually catch up with the trio, during a heavy rain storm, forcing Harka, Lia and Deon to take shelter under a small stone bridge that was clad with moss. Knee deep in the stream beneath the bridge, the ice cold water rushed past their legs. They waited in a painstaking silence, until the patrol, consisting of several soldiers, a Wildcat and an apc, moved slowly over the bridge and disappeared down the road. The stones that the bridge was made of seemed to shift as the rain water poured between them as the heavy war machinery above them rumbled past. Lia was forced to stifle a gasp as a big piece of stone came loose and dropped into the racing waters below. As the machinery and soldiers disappeared and became little more than a rumble in the distance, the three fugitives breathed a sigh of relief and started to haul themselves up the side of the bank of the stream.

'I'm freezing.' Lia said, her teeth chattering as she hugged herself.

'We need to get off the road and make a camp and dry these wet clothes.' Harka said, 'We don't want to die of hypothermia before we even get to the gate.'

Moving in their sodden clothing was difficult and heavy, but they pressed on, moving towards the forest in the hopes of finding shelter. The rope creaked quietly in the darkness of the late evening, the swinging bodies lit only by the circle of light from the torch that Harka held. There were five of them, two men, a woman and two children, a boy and a girl. Lia and Deon stood a few steps behind Harka, silent in their observation. It had been an hour or so since the rain had stopped, but before then, the three had managed to find a small barn, with a house nearby. Quietly, they had snuck into the dry barn, hoping to sleep and then leave before the morning and the inhabitants discovered they were there. Within the barn, they had discovered the five bodies hanging from the rafters.

'Go make a fire,' Lia said to Deon, 'I'll talk to him.' Deon nodded and left the barn, stopping just near to the entrance, where he started to build a fire. Lia stepped forwards, towards Harka and noticed his head was bowed, whispering something to himself in Doran. It was soft and slow, with a gentle melody, like a song.

'That was very pretty,' Lia said quietly, 'Was that a prayer to Bryophyta?'

'It was.' Harka replied in Thorean as he raised his head.

'I wish I knew more about your deity.' She said, 'Unfortunately they only teach about the Sect in our schools.'

'I wish you no offence,' Harka replied somewhat bluntly, 'But I wish I knew nothing of yours.' Lia could do little but nod her head in agreement. Harka once again looked up to the bodies, as if he was forcing himself to look.

'What kind of God's desire this?'

Lia stared at her feet, as to her shame, she had no answer for him. Like all Thoreans, she had worshipped the Gods for as long as she could remember not once had she ever questioned their lust for death.

'Did you know the soldier?' Lia asked, after a seemingly long silence.

'No, not personally at least. I may have seen the soldier once or twice at some of the barracks during training, but not the others.'

Lia looked up at the five swinging bodies. Their arms were bound before them, and the rope around their necks caused the skin to turn a deep shade of purple. Dried blood ran down the body of the one soldier, staining his Thorean armour, which was badly damaged from a number of bullet holes and cuts. The others wore simple peasant clothing, stained with blood that came from the rope around their necks. Lia could only assume that the soldier had come to warn his family, only to lead the Thorean army to them all, resulting in their execution.

'My people come to this land peacefully, they join your armies, they fight your wars and they educate you in our superior culture and as thanks, your people invade our home and slaughter us without provocation.' Harka said, with a spit, 'Not even children are safe...'

Lia opened her mouth, ready to defend both herself and Deon, until she realised Harka had not been speaking to her, but the ground. He was addressing Thorea itself. Lia stared up at the bodies, forcing herself to stare at the children. They looked like they were no older than ten.

'Fuck the Empire.' Lia said, quietly. Harka turned to look at Lia, his eyes betraying his surprise at her sudden announcement.

'I never properly thanked you.' He said, before looking back at the dead Dorans that hung from the rafters, pulling out his dagger a moment later. He started to approach them.

'For what?' Lia asked, following his example, drawing her dagger. One by one, they cut down the bodies, carefully laying them down in the bales of hay in the far corner of the barn.

'For saving my life,' Harka continued, 'Both you and your brother risked your lives for me. Now, because of your compassion, you are outcasts.'

Lia gave him a small smile, before looking down to the body they were both carrying. The woman looked a little older than herself and had a sad look on her face.

'The Doran's were our comrades. Our friends,' She said, 'You are right, they didn't deserve this.'

Lia stared up at the night sky, connecting the twinkling constellations with her eyes. She couldn't sleep, not because of Deon's rumbling snoring, but because her mind was far too busy. She shifted her position slightly, looking over to Harka. The old man sat next to the fire, his large glistening sad eyes staring into the fire. Lia closed her eyes, doing her best to slow her mind and get some much needed sleep. Instead, all she received were flashes of memory of the past few months. It had all started with a mass conscription of soldiers into the army, with a minimum of one person from each household required to join up and be trained. Each conscript was given four months of intense training, of which Deon, Lia and Harka had each been assigned a group of their own to train. Mass production of weaponry, armour and vehicles at the Forge had fuelled silly rumours of a threat coming from beyond the stars, or an expedition towards the mysterious Independent State of Senol.

'How could we have been so stupid?' Lia quietly whispered to herself as she reached the moment in her memories where the order had come through. Just over a month ago, every Thorean soldier had received the exact same order, spoken to them through their earpieces. The order, given by the voice of Empress Venit; Heretic Absolute herself, ordered the immediate death of every Doran within the Thorean Empire. Lia remembered the moment of silence that followed the order as Dorans and Thoreans stared at one another. Then, there was a gunshot. As her comrades slaughtered one another, Lia found herself frozen to the spot, staring at the mayhem that was unfolding around her. She was eventually grabbed from behind and pulled behind an armoured vehicle, revealing the hand that had grabbed her, belonging to Deon, who was with an injured Harka. From that moment, they were enemies of the Empire. The mass invasion of Doral had then occurred the next day.



'And so, Gernon finally did bask upon the eminence that was the Lord of Lice and he did weep, for the Glory that was the Lord was also great. Thusly, Gernon did go forth and bring the knowledge of the Lord's down from the Side of Desolation and, upon the revelation of their heresy and might to the people, began the great cleanse, for which aeons were sorted and the Great Empire was begun and for this, we are thankful.'

The priest closed the ancient and heavy tome, gently tapping his fingers on the leather cover three times, the old pages rustling as they settled. Empress Venit bowed her head and gave thanks to the Gods, one and all, finally standing once she had completed her prayers. Keeping her head low in subjugation to the Gods, the priest walked over and gently took her hands in his, 'You are doing beautifully my child. The Gods see your great work in their name and glory. They will reward you greatly, when those who defy their name are extinguished from this world.'

Venit bowed her head lower, as she attempted to fight back tears, 'Thank you Father. I await their divinity with open arms and an open heart.'

The priest released Venit's hands, took a single step back and turned on his heel, before walking away towards the vestry, to which he opened the door and disappeared inside. The door closed behind the priest with a hearty clunk. Venit finally raised her head and looked directly upon the four oil paintings of the Gods that hung above the altar. They were ornate and painted with the finest and confident brush strokes, producing images that were so divine, commoners were not allowed to view them. Venit breathed deeply, steadying her trembling hands by clasping them together. She longed for the God's rewards and hoped, prayed, that what she was doing would be enough to win their favour. Empress Venit; Heretic Absolute, walked out of the palace chapel and washed her hands in the alcohol solution that was in a wooden basin at the doorway. She walked along the hall, keeping her eyes on the detailed red and green carpet, not paying any attention to the multiple oil and water colour paintings that clung to the walls. She passed landscapes of deserts and forests, mountains and rivers, portraits of Dukes and Lords and several past family members that no one really cared for anymore, not even her. Venit didn't raise her eyes until she walked into the dining room, which was all ready for her to sit and dine on her supper. The dining room was tall, with a long table in the centre, with a chandelier in the air above it. Several tall windows allowed natural light to filter through, though the sun had started to set in a deep orange. Several more paintings of landscapes hung on the walls and there was even a widescreen television on one of the walls, though the Empress rarely used it, unless she was expressly bored or there was a nature documentary on. She had a fondness for flora and fauna, especially if it was narrated by that one specific man who had a pleasing voice. Stood to attention all around the room were guards, separated from one another by a five foot gap. Each was suited in fine blue Thorean armour, polished to a mirror sheen and were all armed with halberds and a shield. They stood stoic and statuesque, their eyes only closing for a blink once every minute. The Empress walked over to her high backed chair as a servant hurried over and pulled it away from the table before Venit reached it. She turned and sat as the servant expertly shifted her chair forward underneath her, so the Empress was perfectly positioned at the table. Not too far, not too close and at the exact right height. Venit picked up a silver goblet that sat on the table, already full of dark red liquid. She swirled it, before taking a small sip and letting it rest on her tongue. The wine was crisp and fruity, an import from the southern regions of Thorea. It was a vintage known as Rosarie and a single bottle could cost anywhere from Sixteen, to Eighty thousand Vel. It was one of the Empress's favourites and she drank three bottles a week.

'Begin.'

Light chords of classical music drifted from the speakers that were built into the walls and a

moment later, the door opposite the table opened. A servant briskly walked in head bowed, carrying a silver platter in one hand which was covered by a decorated silver cloche. The servant strode over, making good time and bowed even deeper to the Empress, before placing the plate down on the table in front of her. With a flourish, they lifted the covering and unveiled the steamed lobster, with sautéed vegetables and salmon roe on small circles of bread. The smell hit the nose of Empress Venit and though she didn't show it, made her mouth water. She waved the servant away without a word and picked up her knife and fork, trying to decide what part of the meal she would start first. The servant didn't move. Venit, without looking up, waved her hand again. She decided to give the servant a second chance, as she was feeling kind this day. The servant didn't move, prompting the Empress to do something that few would ever experience in their life. She turned her head and looked at them. Though the Empress's face was calm, people would usually avoid her gaze, or look elsewhere, because though she was loved, no one was worthy of meeting her eye. Looking at the servant, she saw a face of relaxation and calmness, something that few people had in her presence. Venit stared at the servant, realising after a moment, that she didn't know who he was. Her eyes moved to his ears, seeing that they were long and pointed. The servant dropped the silver conche and reached towards their belt and in a swift movement, drew a long bladed dagger. He raised it and with a lightning swift movement, plunged it into the Empress's neck. Blood spurted out from the wound and after several loud gurgles, Venit slumped forwards, her face resting against the lobster, her blood flooding the plate. The servant-turned-assassin leapt up onto the table and turned to address the soldiers who were racing towards him, weapons raised. 'Stop! I have bomb!' He shouted in a thick Dorean accent, raising his hand to show a glowing blue crystal about the size of an apple.

'If this Lightning Stone breaks, it will be enough to level this entire city!'

The guards stopped in their tracks, but kept their shields raised and halberds pointed at the assassin.

'Your Empress is dead, you have lost this war! I demand that the Thorean forces immediately pull out of Doral! Otherwise, everyone in this city shall die!'

There was movement to the assassins left and he turned his head, seeing Empress Venit standing on the table alongside him. Her face, no longer the portrait perfect vision it had been earlier, was something else, something from a nightmare and the assassin was immediately filled with an unparalleled fear.

'What...'

The assassin started, but never finished, as Venit's hands grabbed him around the neck and tore out his throat in a single fluid movement. The body fell off the table and landed on the stone floor with a wet crunch as blood poured from the gaping wound. Venit breathed deeply as she examined the lump of bloody trachea that she held in the palm of her hand, her fingernails dug into the warm matter. After a moment, she dropped the bloody mass and it clattered against one of the silver plates. The Empress carefully stepped down off the table, onto her chair and then onto the floor, picking up a napkin on the way, which she used to wipe the gore off of her hands. Mere seconds later, Oswal raced in, his long robes fluttering all around him and his puffy red face. He had obviously been interrupted during something as he seemed to be in complete automatic mode.

'Your Grace!' He screamed as he ran in, stopping the moment he saw Venit stood alone, over a corpse.

'I'm alright Oswal.' She said, setting down the bloody cloth and picking up her goblet.

'This fool thought his job was a lot easier than it truly was. May the Gods punish him.' She spat at the body, causing Oswal to wince.

'Are you hurt? Shall I get the physician? Your face...'

He trailed off. Venit didn't reply. Instead, she crouched down and prised open the dead assassin's fist, taking the blue crystal. She held it gently between her thumb and index finger, carefully considering and examining each side of the carefully cut stone.

'A physician is not required,' Venit said as she started to walk towards the door, 'But there was a hole in security. This Doran was able to walk through my palace unchallenged. Maybe he was not noticed because no one ever considered a Doran would be so bold as to come here, but either way, these guards failed in their duties. Ensure they are adequately punished.'

Venit walked out of the room, in the direction of the palace laboratory.

'Yes, your Grace.' Oswal replied, bowing deeply until the Empress had disappeared from view. He turned and scanned the room, seeing each of the guards, who stood to attention, their eyes giving away the worry and fear of their punishment.

'I am most terribly sorry, but you have failed the Empress most horrendously.' Oswal said, as he removed his small skull cap, unveiling the very top of his head which was more metal than flesh. The red strip of jade in the centre of his metal scalp started to glow and was quickly followed by a sudden burst of flashing red light. Each of the soldiers in the room screamed and dropped their weapons, clutching at their heads as they dropped to their knees. Moments later, the screaming had stopped and servants entered the room to clear away the mass of corpses. Venit walked down the hallway, directly to the lift that would either take her up to her penthouse, or down, to the laboratory that was underneath the palace. She pressed the button to head down, gently humming to herself as the doors closed and the descent began. In the few quiet moments she had to herself within the metal box, Venit closed her eyes and concentrated. She fixed her face, returning it to the beautiful and immaculate image that the Empire was used to. When the doors opened, the smell of chemicals filled the air, causing her to wrinkle her nose. In the lab, Professor Kemar was busy mixing a solution in a flask, staring at it intensely, her eyes wide. In an instant, the solution went from light blue, to dark green, causing the scientist to swear loudly and stomp away angrily. She raised her head and showed surprise when she saw Venit.

'Oh, your Grace. I'm so sorry. I didn't expect you.'

'Worry not, you are busy and that is what I like to see. I am sorry that whatever you are currently working on is causing you so much stress.' Venit said, gesturing to the green solution. 'Oh this? Oh, no, that's nothing really. An attempt at trying to recreate the health potions from Doral. Without a sample of the actual potion however, it feels a tad redundant. I have requested for a sample to be returned to me several times, however, there has been no response.' Kemar said, picking up the solution and dumping it down the sink.

'Forget about that for now Professor, for I have a more important task for you.' Venit said, holding up the crystal towards the scientist. Kemars eyes grew wide and she rushed forwards, her hands hovering next to the stone, almost as if she was too excited to touch it.

'May I?' Her breath, shuddering with excitement. The Empress nodded and gracefully let go of the crystal, allowing the scientist to take from her. She held it, like it would shatter at the slightest of breaths.

'This...this is a lightning stone.' She said finally, almost as if she still couldn't quite believe that she was holding it.

'It is indeed. I wish to know professor, what use is it to us?'

Kemar turned and looked at Venit, her face opening up with a wide grin, exposing her pearly white teeth, 'Why, your grace, with this stone, my intelligence and a bit of time...This stone could win us the war in a day.'

Every swear word that Aeth knew passed through her mind in a matter of seconds, as she stared up at the huge red dragon that stood before her. On the back of the dragon sat a knight in thick plate -armour, armed with a broad shield and long javelin, their head slowly turning to look directly toward Aeth. The dragon, with a guttural purr, reared its car-sized head and, opening its mouth, expelled a torrent of fire right towards Aeth, who threw herself to the side, choosing to use the swear word 'Shigttthhhh.'

She rolled several times, the world spinning as she tried to put enough space between her and the huge monster. Somewhat dazed, she attempted to get back on her feet and look back at the dragon, as it was turning towards her, flames licking up the side of its mouth like a dozen tongues. From behind the dragon, Doran soldiers poured through the hole in the wall, loosing arrows from their bows, shimmering blue energy from long staffs, while many others engaged in close combat with swords and spears. Aeth spotted one or two with guns, likely ones they had stolen from past encounters with Thoreans. Aeth watched as the Doran soldiers roared as they fought, killing with a fury that Aeth admittedly had to admire, as it sent a chill down her spine. The camp was abuzz with soldiers, running, shouting and shooting, as a loud siren wailed over the top of them, alerting the entire camp to the attack, just in case they had missed the massive dragon. Several of the Huntsmen had begun to power up and turn towards the attackers, preparing to fire and bring the battle to an abrupt end. Snapping back into the reality around her, Aeth pulled her rifle up to her shoulder and fired several shots at the knight on the dragon. Moving quickly, the knight raised their shield, using it to deflect the bullets, metal sparking as they struck. In a fluid motion, the knight then lowered the shield and threw the javelin they held, directly towards Aeth. It tore through the air and Aeth barely managed to throw herself out of the way, the javelin sailing over her head and piercing the poor soldier who happened to be running past. The soldier, a young man, looked down at the object sticking out of his chest, then at Aeth, before falling flat on his face. Aeth turned and fired at the knight again, their shield once again raised. Aeth decided to try lower down, moving her sights to the dragon, though there was little change there, the dragon's scales bouncing the bullets off without an issue. The dragon roared and opened its mouth, exposing hundreds of razor sharp teeth, as a torrent of fire exploded from their gullet. It swept through the camp, engulfing soldiers, tents and vehicles in a roaring heat. Several Huntsmen had now managed to fully activate and were proceeding to the breach in the wall, their guns spinning up and firing streams of bullets. Shouting something in Doran, the knight pulled on the reins on the dragon and the creature readied up, flapping its wings, billowing thick smoke around it. In a swift movement, the dragon launched into the sky, disappearing up into the bright blue sky, now patched with dark black smoke. A moment later, the red dragon swept past, through the air, a trail of fire erupting from its mouth and burning a line of the camp. Several of the Huntsmen were caught up in the torrent of flame, their metal casing melting instantly, the men inside having no chance of escape. The dragon roared and took to the sky again, as the rest of the Huntsmen turned their weapons towards it. There was little doubt it would return.

'Where the hell is the AA?' Aeth shouted, at no one in particular. No one answered her, likely because they didn't know. Aeth's earpiece buzzed, a crackling voice asking questions.

'Lieutenant, what do we do?' It was Thomas, one of the Angels.

'Suppressive fire where you can. We need to close up that hole.' Aeth responded, motioning towards the hole in the wall, where enemy soldiers continued to pour through, thirsty for blood. A staggering number of bodies, both Thorean and Doran, littered the ground as others fought, in a mix of bullets, arrows, magic and blades. The giant beetle that had carved its way through the wall like paper, now lay dead, tipped over and riddled with bullets, the large horn on its front broken off.

'We need to close that gap!' Aeth shouted, waving her arm towards the hole. There was a



turning tank before her, thick red flames belching dark smoke into the sky. She moved around it, firing several shots towards some Dorans, killing them with a bullet each. As she moved past the tank, a broad headed axe swung towards her, forcing her back. A tall, muscle clad warrior stepped forwards, muscle rippling as he held his weapon, a low and deep battle cry coming from his mouth. Aeth put him down with two shots to the chest and one to the head. Through the chaos and fire, Aeth could see several of the Angels, firing from a position of cover, already bottlenecking the Dorans who swarmed through the hole in the wall. Aeth tossed a grenade towards the hole, catching several soldiers in the explosion as they rushed through.

'Get that tank to the hole!' Aeth yelled at a nearby soldier, who perched on top of a tank that was slowly rolling towards them. With a nod, the soldier shouted something down into the hatch and the vehicle shuddered towards the hole. The tank came to a stop at the hole, effectively blocking it, the turret poking out of the camp. The soldier on top of the tank turned his gun towards the enemies outside, while several other soldiers climbed up on top of the makeshift barricade, driving off the last of the attack. Something struck the tank with a ringing clang. It was a long and thin piece of metal. A blue lighting arced around the tank and it exploded, engulfing the soldiers standing on top. Looking to the sky, Aeth saw the dragon descending rapidly, screeching as it plummeted towards them. The Huntsmen that were still active turned their guns upwards, sending thick lines of bullets into the skies, but the dragon was still too fast. It swiftly moved, the rider on top throwing several more javelins down, taking the Huntsmen down one after another in balls of dark red flame. Weaving between the tall and thickening columns of black smoke, the dragon unleashed another torrent of fire to the far side of the camp, then climbed back up to the air. Seconds later, the air was filled with streaming bullets and explosions of flack, the AA having finally come online. The dragon was already far away, turning into little more than a dot in the sky. The sound of battle ended so suddenly, Aeth's ears were left ringing. Slowly, almost as if they were waking up from sleep, the wounded started to cry and scream. Aeth tapped her communicator.

'Angels, roll call.'

She received replies from Thomas, Hir, June, Olaf and Gregory. Hilna and Isak hadn't survived the battle. Aeth would have to worry about replacing them later.

'Alright Angels, help those you can,' Aeth ordered, 'Priority goes to the most wounded.'

Another voice crackled over the communicator in her ear, 'Aeth, you there?'

It was Rox, his voice barely audible over the screaming and poor signal. Aeth tapped her communicator several times, until Rox's voice was clear.

'I'm here. Just saw a dragon closer than I ever wanted to. Are you alright?'

'I'm fine, but it's a shit show here,' Rox replied, 'Too many casualties to count right now. They hit us hard Aeth, harder than we were anticipating. We thought they were on the run, how wrong we were.'

'We let down our guard, we have no one to blame but ourselves,' Aeth replied.

'Agreed. Maybe we should have chased them down and ended it immediately.'

Even though he wasn't there, Aeth shook her head, 'It was a no win situation Rox. Jarkel was a tougher battle than we anticipated and our soldiers were exhausted. We needed to rest and regroup and await reinforcements. We just didn't expect them to counter attack so fast.'

'Well, we certainly need reinforcements now.' Rox said, his voice seemingly distracted.

'Any idea when those are going to arrive?' Aeth asked. She was met with silence, then the sound of a sigh.

'Alright, what can I do?' She asked. There was more silence on the communicator.

'Take the Angels and continue to the Temple,' Rox finally answered, 'Assist the forces that are already there, then maybe we can gain a bit more of a hold on this nightmare of a country. If we can take it, then we'll start closing in around them. We've already taken Liax and they are

losing more and more ground every day. We just need to keep at it. Secure the Temple and then, maybe then, this will turn in our favour.'

'I'll see it done.' Aeth replied, clicking her communicator off. Aeth gathered her squad and commissioned a Wasp carrier to transport them south towards the Temple. The last thing she needed was to be ambushed on the road. As the carrier made its way through the air, Aeth watched out of one of the windows. A pang of fear suddenly welled up in her, the fear of seeing that red dragon flying towards her from behind the clouds. She thought that they would be safe in the air, but with a dragon on the loose, it was starting to feel less and less likely. Quietly thanking the Gods under her breath, the carrier touched down, its rear ramp slowly lowering. Aeth and her squad moved off of the vehicle, the Temple coming into view. The Temple looked like a medium sized teepee tent, bordered by several hedges of dark green. Out of the top of the structure came an ancient oak tree, its branches long and well spread out, creating a natural canopy over the Temple. The entirety of the temple, hedges and tree, were covered by a light green dome which was gently pulsing with light, as if alive. Aeth started towards the nearby Thorean camp, spotting several Huntsmen and tanks pointed towards the temple. She watched as they activated, raised their guns and fired towards the Temple. The shells and bullets struck against the dome, explosions smoking and roaring, the dome appearing to be totally unaffected. Aeth chewed on her lower lip, then turned to her squad.

'Angels,' They all stood to attention, 'Secure the perimeter. Nothing comes in or out without my knowledge. The last thing I want is the Dorans to come and bite us in the arse.'

Her squad saluted, then moved off and made their way to the outskirts of the Thorean position. Aeth walked towards the main command tent, straightening her armour and taking a deep breath before she entered, finding the current commander looking down at a digital tablet, a look of worry on his face. Aeth saluted him and was surprised to see the commander's face drain of colour, while sweat cresting his forehead.

'A week Rox! A bloody week!' Aeth screamed down the communicator. She hadn't meant to shout, but the moment Rox answered, she had just started yelling.

'Aeth, calm down.'

'Don't tell me to bloody calm down. They have been pounding that shield with artillery for a bloody week and nothing has happened. Why are we here? What the hell do you think myself and my squad will be able to do?'

'Aeth...' Rox said, obviously still trying to calm her down. But she wasn't listening. She was staring. Aeth was sitting next to a stream that broke in a tiny waterfall, the water running towards the Temple and passing just to the left of it, under the shield. She looked up to the constant explosions that were tearing at the dome to no effect, the same sight that had greeted Aeth since she arrived and would greet her every day, unless they took down that shield. Aeth stared at the stream again, at the slow flowing water as it passed through the dome. She had walked down to the dome's edge in a pause of the barrage and pressed her hand against it, to find resistance. It appeared that water and air could pass through, but nothing else. Her eyes flicked to a grouping of bulrushes that sat just behind the shield. She blinked, then frowned. Then Aeth was on her feet. She refocused on her communicator to find Rox still speaking, '...once we get reinforcements, we'll-'

'Rox,' she interrupted, 'Get down here, now.'

'Look down there. Do you see those bulrushes? The ones between the flat piece of rock next to the stream.' Aeth said, pointing to where she was describing. Rox turned sharply, staring back at Aeth.

'Please tell me you didn't just make me race down here on a drone, just to look at bloody reeds?' he said. Aeth sighed, forcing him to turn back towards the stream.

'Rox, shut up and look.'

He sighed and peered forwards. Sure enough, just behind the shimmering shield and next to the river, between a flat piece of rock, were the bulrushes.

'Ok, some pretty, or rather average, water weeds,' Rox said, shrugging his shoulders, 'so what?'

'Five hours ago when we first arrived, they were on our side of the shield, on the outside. It's moving Rox. The shield is expanding outwards.' Aeth said. Rox frowned, then looked at the dome shield, pulling out his binoculars to peer through.

'It doesn't look like it's moving,' he said, 'Are you sure you didn't just...see them wrong?'

Aeth couldn't feel a little bit insulted, 'Have you ever known me to notice something incorrectly?'

Rox couldn't deny it, as it was true. Let Aeth look at something like a painting for a few moments and she could tell you every little detail. Rox sighed, 'Alright, let's see if we can try and prove this. I'll order some scouts to place down some sensors, to see if they pick up anything. In the meantime,' He looked around, then pointed, 'See that rock, the one in the shape of an arrowhead?'

Aeth looked, seeing the rock he was pointing towards. It was close to the edge of the dome, just how the reeds had been.

'Keep an eye on it. If it's covered by the dome in a few hours, then we have another problem on our hands.'

'Rock watching, fun.' Aeth said, voice dripping with sarcasm. Rox sighed, then turned and started towards the camp. Aeth could hear him muttering to himself, 'I should have been a plumber.'

Ria held her cup with both hands, the warmth of her tea gently wafting up to her face. She looked through her office window towards the east, over the city and to the wall. From behind the tall and thick stone wall, towers of black smoke rose into the sky from a raging battle below. Several strange metal ships flew over the wall, spitting fire and causing fire within the city below. Moments later, blue orbs of magic struck them and turned them into molten slag which fell onto the rooftops below. Ria watched as one of the destroyed ships crashed into the building next door, causing a boom and causing the entire building to jolt. The shuddering knocked several candles off of Ria's desk, as well as her neatly stacked papers. Ria sighed and started to tidy up the scattered papers, all while keeping her eyes on the wall. She paused for a moment as she saw more movement over the wall, a red dragon descending towards the wall, its mouth opening to release a torrent of fire. A small smile curled the side of Ria's lips, but only for a moment. Another boom echoed through the city, causing several more candles to tumble to the floor. Ria didn't even bother to pick them up, they would only end up on the ground again. There was a rapid knocking on the door and it opened a moment later, Helga entering the room.

'Excuse me miss, we are almost ready.'

Ria stood, then turned away from the wall.

'Thank you Helga.' Ria said as she walked towards the young girl and the door. They left the room together and walked down the hallway, down the spiral staircase and into the hall beyond. Inside the hall, a few hundred men, women and children chattered noisily, clad in ragged clothing, cloaks, hats and coats, while they carried sacks, satchels and everything else they could carry. One woman was holding a cat in each arm. The people stood in long lines, facing the far wall which opened up into several brick archways. Beneath sat several horse drawn wagons, each with a driver and soldier sat at the front. One by one, the people were climbing up onto the wagon, before helping those behind them to climb on. Ria walked along each of the lines, sometimes stopping to chat with the people, sometimes to say hello to the children. Most of the children there seemed to think they were going on some grand adventure. The parents were just tired and scared. As Ria continued along the lines, the building shuddered and shocked several more times, causing the people to scream and cower.

'Don't worry!' Ria called out, 'The walls are still standing. Despite the rumbling, we are safe!'

That appeared to work, as many people seemed to take a breath and continue their talk amongst themselves. Helga came running up to Ria. The young girl was gasping for air, her colour deep red. 'Miss. You need to come with me. Now.' she panted. Ria frowned, but nodded. She turned her head and called out for Henry. The grey haired young man quickly came over to her.

'We need to finish getting these people onto the wagons. Please see what you can do about speeding this up. Maybe see if you can get some more wagons from somewhere.'

Henry nodded, before running off towards the archways. Ria looked back to Helga.

'What is it? Show me.'

Helga led Ria back to the spiral staircase, but this time they continued further up, until they reached the roof of the building. Dragons were rare creatures, only a few having lived in Doral since Ria's birth. She had seen them flying through the sky, but this was the first time she had seen one up close. She wasn't quite prepared for how massive the creature was, its head was the same size as a wagon. Its glittering red scales emitted a heat that was unexpected from a reptile, causing sweat to form on Ria's forehead after only a few moments. She stared up at the creature, covered in thick scales, horns and spines, but she was far from afraid, she in fact felt calm. Atop the creature, sitting in a saddle located at the base of the dragon's neck, was an armour clad knight, a dragon-rider. Turning their body and swinging a leg over the saddle, the knight dismounted the dragon and approached Ria, raising their visor.

'Prime Minister.' Ria said, shocked to see the face beneath the helmet, 'I...didn't expect to see you here.'

'I wasn't expecting to be here either, yet...' She paused, 'How is your evacuation going?'

'Its underway, no problem. It's going slow, but we have a lot of people to evacuate, so it's going to take a few more hours I think. But, Klo, why are you here? Surely you are needed over there?' Ria pointed to the wall.

'Ria, I need you to listen to me.' Klo said, voice suddenly very stern. Ria felt her skin prickle. Her sister was the cheekiest and humorous person she knew. To see her turn so serious meant that something was terribly wrong.

'The city is lost. The wall is going to fall any minute now. We've lost.' Klo said, her voice breaking with the final two words. Ria stared at her, dumbfounded.

'How?'

'We threw everything we had at them,' Klo said, looking towards the wall, 'But they just kept coming, thousands of them. Their weaponry is pure destruction. I have no doubt in my mind that they are going to completely destroy the city. So we need to get everyone out, now.'

Ria heard a small sob from behind her. She turned around to see Helga, her hands clasped to her mouth as tears rolled down her cheeks, her breath shuddering. She stepped towards her and took her hands in her own.

'Helga, get downstairs. Find Henry and tell him, we need to get everyone out, now.' The young girl stared at the wall for several more moments, then managed a nod and raced through the door, her footsteps receding. Ria flinched as a huge explosion tore at the walls, a shockwave tearing through the city, kicking up dust and dirt. Klo's dragon roared and wrapped its wings around the top of the roof, shielding them from the impact of the wave, the building below their feet trembling. The roaring of the explosion faded, leaving only a faint ringing in Ria's ears, the entire city deathly silent. A moment later, clanging bells started to ring throughout the city, the final warning for residents to flee for their lives.

Clang-clang, clang-clang.

Dozens of Thorean ships flew over the crumbling wall, spitting fire into the city indiscriminately. Ria could only stare at them. At the falling wall, black dots swarmed into the city like ants, Thoreans entering the city. Defenders ran towards them, vastly outnumbered but determined to fight for their home. Ria turned to her sister, who was already climbing back into the saddle of her great red dragon.

'Get out of the city, Ria. Save who you can.' Klo said, before her dragon beat its wings and tore into the sky. It turned on an instant and flew towards the enemy ships, a torrent of fire splitting the sky. Frozen to the spot, Ria could only watch. Thorean soldiers poured into the city, killing, breaking and burning, their metal machines following, tearing down buildings. They were like monsters from the darkness. Ria turned and ran back into the building.

Clang-clang, clang-clang

Reaching the hall where all of the evacuees were, she found the wagons still being loaded, albeit nearly full. Henry appeared to have found a couple more, the lines far shorter than they had been before she had gone upstairs. Ria ran to the front of the lines, waving her arms and shouting to the drivers, 'Go, go now! Get moving now!'

A couple of them heard her, nodded and mushed the horses, their wagons rumbling away only partially full. A man at the front of one of the queues shouted at Ria.

'What are you doing? We are still waiti-' She cut him off.

'Can you not hear the bells? The wall has fallen. You need to run.'

Clang-clang, clang-clang.

She knew it would cause a panic, but at least panicked people run, 'They are in the city. They are going to kill you all. Run!' She screamed the last word. People gasped, screamed, shrieked and thankfully, started to run. There was a hideous boom as something from outside struck the archways, causing the first to collapse, then the second and then the third. Stone fell down

upon the wagons and evacuees as they ran and screamed, the roof collapsing down around them. Flames roared and licked at the wooden beams and windows, curtains and furniture alight. Ria's ears were ringing as she slowly stood, the explosion having knocked her down. She looked around, looking for Helga and Henry, unable to see through the fire, chaos and dust. She started forwards as shapes and figures moved before her, her vision blurry, body aching. She found Henry, half buried under the collapsed arches. Helga was nowhere to be seen. Crushed and bloody bodies lie scattered on the floor, while the still living ran and cried as they tried to force open the now blocked doors. Ria made her way over to a shattered window, looking outside to the city beyond. Screaming, crying, fire, explosions, shouting, death, the sound of battle, the sound of the roaring dragon, the still clanging bells. It was chaos. It was hell.

Clang-clang, clang-clang.

Ria stared in disbelief. Thorea had won, the city of Jarkel had fallen.

Clang-clang, clang-clang.

At the start of their journey, Lia had attempted to keep track of the days that had passed, but long hours, sleepless nights and hunger pangs caused her to lose track. The three of them, Deon, Lia and Harka spent almost every hour of every day creeping through trees like wild animals, suddenly bolting from the smallest of noises, be it a snapping twig or clanking of machinery. After fighting off the Wolves at the small village, the rest of the company had doubled their efforts to catch the fugitives, taking the attack personally. They were soon to pass Fort Wex, an impenetrable fortress and the pride of the Thorean Empire's architects. Walls thick enough to support the weight of patrolling Huntsmen, tall square towers armed with more guns than soldiers able to wield them, all armed with anti-air, armour and infantry ammunition and finally, massive flood lights that swept back and forth, illuminating anything that was stupid enough to pass the fort. The result of being caught in the beam of light, was being blown to atoms by the sheer volume of destructive power. Unless you had a Thorean Military transmitter, it was doom for you. The fort itself was run by Grand General Kilmar, an ageing, balding sociopath with sadistic tendencies that bordered on the absurd. He was the kind of man who would force prisoners to fight to the death for scraps of food and then kill the winner just because he disliked how the winner blinked. Lia had only ever seen the Grand General once, thankfully from a distance. It was at his promotion ceremony, where he went from general to Grand, a pointless promotion that meant nothing except on paper, but it gave the country an excuse to have a small holiday, even if it was for a few hours. There were a handful of rumours that Kilmar had demanded the lavish ceremony, something that the Empress was happy to oblige. Reasoning for this was mixed, but it was widely believed that the Empress and Grand General had a relationship akin to a father and daughter. It was often claimed by those who were not scared of facing the firing squad or who were simply mad, that Kilmar would entertain the Empress when she was a young girl by torturing her servants. Lia, Deon and Harka crawled along the ground on their stomachs, hoping and praying that a beam of light wouldn't sweep over them. As she crawled, Lia pondered as to why the General had not been the first to march his soldiers against the Dorans. He hated them with a burning passion, screaming speeches on television and commissioning pamphlets that demanded their eradication. Lia wondered if maybe his Kilmars had caught up with him, or maybe, when he was actually faced with a war, he was actually just a coward. Light swept over them, and the three of them froze. Nothing happened and the light continued on, allowing them all to breathe a sigh of relief. They crawled further and further, until they reached a line of trees that would hide them from the scanning lights, allowing them to stand and disappear into the darkness.

'We made it. That wasn't too difficult.' Deon said with a small chuckle. Lia wanted to smack him in his dumb face.

'Stay quiet.' She hissed, 'They might have patrols out here.'

'We haven't seen any patrols for miles,' Deon said with a shrug, 'Probably too dangerous with those floodlights.' He took a step towards Lia, something clicking under his foot. He froze. Lia stared at Deon, who had gone so pale, his face was clearly visible in the poor light. Bullets tore through the wood of the trees around them, felling them in an instant, the distance roaring of gunfire drifting towards them. In a reaction, the three of them had thrown themselves to the ground, arms covering their heads to protect from the falling trees, wood, splinters and leaves. By a miracle, no tree came crashing onto them, but they were left coating in a fine layer of dust and chipped wood. After several moments, the distant gunfire ended, the entire world turning silent in a jarring change.

'Everyone ok?' Harka called out, flexing his jaw in order to make his ears pop.

'I'm fine!' Lia called out, pushing herself up, crumbling wood falling off of her body. Deon gave no answer. All they could see of him was his hand, sticking out from underneath a mass of

wood and branches, blood streaked along it. Lia ran towards it, dusting the splinters off him and bringing him into view. Deon had been hit three times, twice in the chest and once in the stomach. He wasn't breathing. Harka knelt down next to Lia as she cradled Deon, putting his finger to the boy's neck. He breathed out slowly, then shook his head, 'I'm sorry Lia.' Harka said, 'He is dead.'

Lia stared at Harka, her eyes wet with tears, her mouth gaping open. She shook her head, violently.

'No, no I don't believe you. Check again.'

A high pitched whine came from the direction of the Fort, causing Harka to look up.

'Damn, that's a Wasp. That must have been a sensor, letting them know we are here. Lia, I'm sorry about Deon, but we have to go. If we want to survive this, we have to go.'

'I can't leave him...' Lia muttered, pressing her face into her brother's neck. Harka put his hand onto her shoulder.

'I don't think he would want you to stay. He wouldn't want you to end up a prisoner of Kilner. I don't want that either. We can pray for him as we run, but we must run.'

Lia held onto Deon tightly, looking towards the lit up fortress, the shape of a Wasp carrier moving across the dark skies. In a single action, she released Deon's body, stood and ran into the forest, leaving Harka behind. The older man stood and looked down at the body, 'I'm sorry my boy. I really am.'

With that, he turned and followed Lia into the shadows of the forest.



The trees, tall and broad as they were, seemed to sing. The leaves gently rustled and branches rubbed together, creating a symphony of sounds that had lulled Aeth to sleep as she sat in a slither of the warm sun. Her eyes opened, her brain kicking into gear and waking her, her dream immediately forgotten. Why was she here again? Oh yes, she was supposed to be keeping a watch on the area, not sleeping. If Rox had seen her like this he would tear her a new one. Aeth yawned, rubbed her eyes and blinked, shifting her slumped position so she was more upright and staring right into the yellow eye of a huge red dragon. The air between them was painfully silent as they stared at one another, not moving, Aeth barely breathing. Slowly, so slowly that she hoped that her movements wouldn't be noticed, Aeth reached for the pistol that was strapped to her leg. Her rifle was too far to reach.

'I wouldn't do that if I were you.' Said a voice. Aeth stared at the dragon, convinced that it had just spoken to her. Her mouth opened to say something, maybe to ask the dragon if it had actually just spoken, only for a tiny croak to come out instead. From behind the dragon's head, a person stepped out, the armour-clad knight that Aeth had seen ride the dragon during the attack on the Thorean camp. The Knight's armour was of intricate detail, embossed with swirling plant like designs, that surrounded a spear like symbol. On top of the knight's helmet, they a tall red feather gently flexed in the wind, making them appear taller than they were. On their left arm, they still had a shield, wide and tall, almost like a metal barrel that had been sliced in half. The same spear symbol was embossed on the surface, flanked with several small, pointed spikes, likely to turn a defensive object into an offensive weapon. In their right hand, they still held one of the long javelins that had been able to pierce the armour of a Huntsman, while on their hip, sat a sword. Aeth stared at the knight, who she assumed, was doing the same from underneath their helmet. Aeth flinched as the Knight stuck their javelin into the soft earth, before unstrapping their shield and also placed that down. Turning towards the dragon, the knight said something in Doral. Aeth wasn't able to understand it, her Doral was basic at best, but she was surprised to hear the knight's voice be that of a woman. A moment later, much to her surprise, the dragon reared its head and took to the sky, its wide wings blasting warm air down into the forest. It quickly turned into a dot against the sky, then was completely gone. Aeth had no doubt however, that it would be able to return within an instant. The knight, now turned back to Aeth, sat down, crossing their legs before her, their plate armour allowing surprising flexibility. The knight raised their hands to their helmet and, after turning it slightly with a click, removed their helmet. The knight was young, likely around the same age as Aeth herself, if not maybe a year or two younger. She had ink black hair, tied up to keep it neat and bright blue eyes, likely the blues that Aeth had ever seen.

'Can you understand me?' The knight asked, in Thorean, but with a thick accent.

'Yeah,' Aeth said, 'I do.'

There was a pause between the two of them, in which time the knight gently massaged the tips of her long ears.

'Ok, what's going on here?' Aeth asked. As far as she was aware, she could have been killed immediately by this knight, but instead they were sat before one another as if about to have tea. The knight took a moment, as if they were working out what words to use.

'I saw you alone and I want to talk. There has been too much killing and not enough speaking.'

'Speaking isn't really in the Empire's list of priorities right now.' Aeth said, keeping her eyes on the young woman. The knight too a moment to work through Aeth's words, before she shook her head.

'No. The focus seems to be on killing innocents, .' The Knight said, staring at Aeth with those blue eyes. Aeth kept her mouth shut.

'Who are you? What is your rank?' The knight asked after a moment.

'Lieutenant Aeth Delion, commander of the Angels Squadron.'

The knight took a moment to process that information, likely due to the language differences. 'I don't know what it's like here, but in Thorea it is considered rude to not introduce yourself, when someone else has introduced themselves.' Aeth said, folding her arms across her chest. 'In Thorea, you also sacrifice children, but...' The knight rose to their feet. She slapped the back of her palm against her breastplate and bowed her head downwards, 'I am Prime Minister Klo Ortau, Dragon Rider.'

Aeth felt her face twitch. Prime Minister? Did she hear that correctly? She shifted, the ground beneath her suddenly very uncomfortable, her backside nearly numb. Her back popped as she moved.

'Prime Minister? You are kidding right?'

The knight, Klo, raised her head, before sitting back down in the same spot she had been before.

'I assure you; I am who I say I am.' She said as she reached to her belt, producing a small flask, as well as two shot sized cups. She poured a dark red liquid into both and passed one to Aeth, who took it, but did not drink.

'I just find it strange,' Aeth said, 'That the Prime Minister of a country is riding a dragon into battle. It seems a bit...reckless? Surely a leader needs to be leading the country, not fighting.'

'There is the difference between our countries. In Doral, it is considered cowardly of a leader to send others to fight and die, while they do nothing. A true leader will lead the charge, will fight and die alongside their people. Does your empress do that? Or does she hide behind her walls and her guns?'

Aeth said nothing.

'I know the name and face of every one of my people who are currently fighting against your invasion. Does your empress know your name? Does she know your face?' Klo raised her cup to her lips and drank in one single movement.

'No, I doubt she does. But no one expects it of her. Why do you know all your soldiers? Surely, it is just more effort than it is worth. Especially during war when so many of them are going to die.' Aeth said, raising the cup to her nose and sniffing it. The liquid smelled of roses and spice.

'My people, my soldiers, are not mindless drones or machines. They are living, with families, homes and dreams. In this war, everyone has lost someone myself included. I lost my sister at the fall of Jarkel. But I do not mourn only her, as many thousands of others were lost when the city fell. It is my duty, as their leader, to know them, to remember them, to mourn them. Otherwise, we may as well be led by a rock.' Klo said. Aeth sighed, downed the shot of liquid, which tasted how it smelled and placed the cup down.

'If you wanted to talk to someone, why did you choose me? Why not go and talk to someone higher in rank, who might actually be able to give you answers or at least, a resolution to the fighting.'

Klo studied Aeth for a moment,

'I saw you from the sky and recognised you. You are the one who faced me and my dragon at your camp. You survived, something that few who encounter Pallios are capable of. That makes you special and an excellent person to speak to.' She said.

'I survived because I have seen what your dragon can do and wanted no part of it. You scold us for war crimes, yet your beast melts the bones of soldiers without second thought.' Aeth scoffed.

'Oh, trust me,' Klo replied, 'There is thought.'

They sat in quiet for a moment, the conversation abruptly ending. Aeth quickly thought, then decided it was worth a try asking something. She motioned with her head towards the temple, not visible from where they were thanks to the trees, but the pounding of cannons could still be heard.

'What's happening over at the temple?' She asked, 'What's with the barrier?'

Klo laughed, 'No, I'm not telling you that.'

Aeth sighed. Klo stood, picking up her helmet and holding it under her arm.

'I thank you for your time, for speaking to me. I appreciate that we have not come to any resolution but I never expected that. I can dream of peace between our two nations, but I do not believe it will ever happen. This war will only end with the total annihilation of both of our peoples.'

'Or just one.' Aeth said, 'We are winning after all.'

Klo gave a small smile, before slotting her helmet over her head, 'I wish for my people to be able to sleep safely in their beds. I also wish the same for my enemies, even you. Go home soldier. Go and live a happy life and try to forget what it is happening over here. Your empress does not care for you, nor do your gods. Find someone who does.'

Aeth remained silent, watching as Klo backed up towards her previously placed down weapons.

'You are wrong,' She said, 'The difference between our countries is that we trust our empress. We trust in the almighty power and divinity of the Gods. I am a good soldier, because I obey their commands.'

In a flash of movement, Aeth drew her pistol and fired.

Lia thought her position, crouched behind the solid mahogany log, was safe enough. She was proved wrong moments later as the wood exploded into numerous matchsticks that peppered her face and body. Falling back a few metres, Lia landed hard on her back, the air in her lungs gone, causing her to yelp. Managing to at least sit up, her vision swimming, face stinging, ears whining, Lia tried to remove some of the splinters within her face. Pain stinging.

'Lia!' she heard Harka's voice calling for her, 'Cover her!'

Catching up to the older man was easy enough, but the trees all around them were shattering and falling as they ran. Lia clutched her rifle to her body as they ran, ground spitting up dirt towards them, as the sound of shouting came from all around.

'We are close!' Harka shouted, his eyes fixed forwards as they ran, his false leg barely slowing him. An armour-clad soldier stepped out from behind a tree about ten metres away from them, raising his rifle directly towards the two others. He fired immediately, the bullets from the gun slamming into Lia's armour and sending her falling flat onto her back for the second time within minutes. As the soldier turned his gun towards Harka, the old man raised his pistol to fire, only for the chamber to click, devoid of any bullets. Harka, working with instinct, ducked to the left, circling a thick tree, allowing the soldier's bullets to harmlessly strike it instead. Waiting for the break in gunfire, Harka then stepped out from behind the tree and threw his pistol at the soldier, striking him in the face with its barrel. The soldier fell back with a grunt, lowering his rifle and allowing Harka to close the gap, where he allowed his dagger to finish the fight. Turning away from the dying soldier, Harka returned to Lia, who was sitting up and coughing, trying to breathe normally again. The old man pulled her up by the arm, then along, wordlessly telling her she would have to get her breath back as they ran. As they ran, Lia slowly managed to get her breath back, while the Wolves fell behind. The area of forest in which they ran was dense, meaning the machinery and weapons the Wolves had brought with them were unable to move through. Considering how many men they had lost from pursuing their group, Lia doubted the Wolves would want to continue on without armour backup. Lia was pretty sure the Wolves had a Wildcat, a quadruped vehicle that moved like a giant cat, but they seemed to have not yet bought it forwards. That was beneficial for Lia and Harka, as the Wildcat would have moved through the forest as if the trees were tall grass. Harka stopped before her, causing Lia to bring her run to a stop. They stood at the edge of a tall cliff, far below them river rapids churned and foamed. Lia and Harka looked at one another.

'We won't survive that fall.'

'We have no other choice. They are right behind us.'

'We can go back and swing around.'

'They won't stop and we can't keep running.'

'What if we drown?'

'It's a risk we have to take.'

This entire conversation was had with subtle facial twitches, winks, blinks, eyebrow raises and sniffs, communication without saying words, should it be required while sneaking through enemy territory. Lia sighed audibly, raised her hands and said, 'Alright, fine.'

Together, they bowed their legs and leapt, keeping their legs straight as they plummeted towards the water, arms crossed over their chests. The moment they struck the cold water, the current swept them away. Lia spun and thrashed, the water swatting her about like a fly. There was no way up, the water was foam and giant bubbles, while her lungs burned and limbs struck solid rock. She broke through the surface, gasping, sucking in air, only to go back under a moment later. She couldn't see, she couldn't hear, nor move of her own will. She was totally at the mercy of the river and from the looks of it, it was in no mind to be merciful. Images of Deon swam through Lia's mind. His smile, laugh and vivid imagination, all things she felt like she had taken for granted when they were children. Now, they were gone. Lia's eyes

opened and she immediately started to cough, her lungs expelling water. She sat on the bank of the river for several moments, gagging and coughing as the last drops of river water made its way out of her lungs, which in turn hurt. Several metres away from her, leaning against the trunk of a tree, was Harka, his face screwed up in pain, his left arm pressed to his side, while his right arm was gone. Gasping, Lia rushed towards him, already pulling out what rags she could to try and stem the bleeding, only to see there was in fact, no blood. Instead, wires poked out from his stump. Lia found her head cocking to the side, 'Since when do you have a false arm?'

'Since about when I was thirty.' Harka said. Aeth sighed and shook her head, putting the rags back into her pouch and looking to his side, causing Harka to wince.

'Just bruising, nothing more.'

They sat for a time, catching their breath and allowing themselves to rest. Lia looked around. 'Any idea where we are?' she asked.

'A fair distance from where we jumped I think. So hopefully, that's given us a good head start on the Wolves.' He winced, 'However, I did hear what sounded like a lot of machinery coming from beyond those trees. I think the Gate is somewhere over there.'

Lia stood, dusting off her knees, the mud wet and clay like, sticking to her hands more than she expected, 'Alright then, we are nearly there. Ready for one last push?'

Harka looked up at her, as if she had just started doing an outlandish jig.

'We don't have any weapons; I'm now missing an arm and we haven't slept for fifty-three hours. There is no way we are going to be able to make it to the gate.'

Lia raised an eyebrow at him, 'Defeatism? From you? The once mighty and proud Doran Harka? For shame.'

Harka sighed, then struggled to his feet, 'I hate it when you do that. You know full well that shame works wonders on me. It's going to get me killed one day.'

Lia smiled and took him under the arm, helping him walk along, 'Oh, I'm counting on it.'

Infantry, shock troopers, scouts, snipers, commandos, sappers, heavies, grenadiers, Huntsmen, Wildcats, tanks, APC's, artillery, trucks, Drones, Wasp carriers, helicopters, bombers. Everywhere Lia looked, she could see them. There were thousands of them. Hundreds of thousands and this wasn't even counting the invasion force that was already sweeping its way across Doral. They stood before the Korva Gate, waiting for it to activate and allow them to step directly into the warzone within seconds. The gate itself was two monolithic obelisks, situated a thousand metres apart, sat on a stone floor, accessible by a flight of fifteen steps. In the exact middle of the obelisks was a small well, next to which a figure currently stood. The figure raised the object they held in their hands towards the sky, holding it there for a few moments. Lia and Harka were at far too great a distance to see what the object was, but they still knew. Everyone knew that to open the gate, two things were needed. Another gate at another location for the connection to be completed and a sacrifice to appease the Gods. The figure, one of the priests from one of the many temples, tossed the object into the well and stepped back. Seconds later, an arc of purple electricity thundered from one obelisk to the other. Within moments, a symphony of electricity burst back and forth, crackling and wailing and popping. The sound that the gate made upon powering up, to Lia, sounded as if it had anguish behind it. As if the gate itself knew how great a sacrifice was required for its activation and it was upset to be woken in such a way. In the centre of the space between the obelisks, the electricity started to form a circle, swirling and spinning, occasionally crackling outwards, striking sky or ground. The circle started to widen, growing wider and wider, until the edge touched the stone platform beneath it, the centre of the circle filled with a vague purple mist. After several more moments, the circle had expanded to a giant archway of purple, crackling electricity. The Korva Gate was open. The skies had opened and it had started to rain, thick droplets splattering onto Lia and Harka where they lay, on a small overhang with a view of the Gate and army. The cold set in as the rain soaked their

already wet clothing even more, yet they remained where they were, waiting for the only opportunity they would have.

'Are you sure about this?' Harka asked, his voice low, 'We'll be heading into a warzone.'

'Anything is better than here.' Lia said, watching as the thousands of soldiers started their march towards the gate. Lia managed to get some sleep, about half an hour's worth, as the army continued its march through the gate. It took a few hours, thanks to their sheer numbers, but eventually, the last few vehicles and units were making their way through. The moment the last person or object passed through, they would have about five minutes, then the gate would close. Lia kept her eyes locked on the gate, waiting for the last object, a tank, to pass through. The moment it did, Lia leapt to her feet, shouting, 'Now!'

She leapt down off the overhang and onto the flat plain below, where she then started to run. Her legs hurt, her lungs burned and the rain stung her face as she ran, but still, she continued. She counted as she ran, the giant portal before her crackling and popping. Three minutes.

She reached the steps and jumped the first step. Four minutes. She reached the edge of the purple swirling smoke, the air heavy with the smell of burning sugar, a side effect of the gate's activation.

'We made it,' she panted, looking around for Harka. He was nowhere to be seen. Back at the outcropping, she could see a small figure rising to their feet, their arm raised in a wave farewell. Lia's mouth dropped open as she stepped back. Harka smiled as he waved farewell to Lia, not having bothered to even move, having known he would only hold her back. Four minutes forty-five seconds.

'Silly old man.' Lia said with a laugh as she raised her hand, waved farewell and stepped backwards through the gate.

(FIRST DRAFTS FROM HERE – May have conflicting continuity)

## 2.0

Brother Matthis, though a keen singer, couldn't hold a key, note or even a tempo. Listening to him sing, was like listening to a drunk person try and yodel their favourite opera song, through a megaphone, right against your ear, while you stabbed yourself in the other ear with a bread knife. Unfortunately for Brother Resford, he had been stuck in this position, for the past three hours. Both men sat on the front of a small cart, which trundled along, pulled by a very stubborn and somewhat irritated ox. Resford had a moment of respite, when Brother Matthis belched and started to cough, as if he was choking on his own saliva. The coughing, though also loud and quite harsh, was a welcome break from the singing. Resford, after a moment, felt a tad sorry for the older and larger man, so he gently patted him on the back, hoping Matthis didn't turn purple and fall off the cart.

'Thanks for that.' The older monk said as he sat back up and took the reins once more. He then started to sing once more, much to the chagrin of his companion.

'How much further?' Resford butted in, when Matthis took a breath, just before a large crescendo that he had heard a few dozen times now. Each had been worse than the one before and if Resford was to hear another, he would find the nearest wolf and climb into its mouth. Matthis didn't answer; instead he waited a moment or so, until the cart rumbled past an old and dirty wooden signpost. He looked at it as they passed, his head craning until the last moment.

'Three miles, I think.' Resford stared at the older man's rosy cheeks.

'You...you just read that off the sign didn't you?'

'No, of course not. I know this route like the back of my hand. I've been counting the miles. We have three left.'

Resford opened his mouth, ready to answer back and call the older man a liar, but instead he said; 'I just hope we get there before it begins to rain.'

'Oh, we will, don't worry. I have a sense about these things. We have three miles left, it will take us about an hour to get there and it will stay lovely and warm.'

Resford found out, much to his irritation, that Matthis was only right in one of those claims. The Temple Collective, while in sight, was a dream away, as their oxen decided that was the best time to stop. It seemingly had no reason, no distraction and no injury, it just decided enough was enough and it stopped moving. It then proceeded to stay there, stood in the middle of the road, for the next forty-three minutes. During those forty-three minutes, the skies darkened, rain poured down and lightning split the sky. Both monks were soaked to their undergarments, which did very little for Resford's mood. The rain had stopped by the time the monks had arrived at the Temple Collective, though the sky was still dark and thunder was rumbling in the distance. The temple Collective, sat in the furthest north of the Empire of Thorea, was a large headland, which jutted out next to the Bay of the Gods. Four temples, one to each of the Gods, were built here and were only accessible by those of the utmost faith. Each temple faced a different direction, either north, east, south or west. The Temple to the Lord of Blasphemy, where Brothers Matthis and Resford were travelling to, was located at the far end of the headland and faced west. Resford, having never been to the Temple Collective before, let alone one of the temples, stared at the large buildings as they passed by. The Temples themselves were made of large, black brick. They stretched into the sky, at least fifty foot and were all the same exact Rectangular design. The only difference between each of the temples was the figure that was carved into the stone, just above the entrance. Surrounding these temples, were other, smaller buildings, sometimes protected by a simple wood or stone wall. These were the areas where the nuns and priests of the orders lived and worked,

maintaining the temples and dedicating their entire lives to the work of the Gods. Passing the temple to the Lord of Heresy, Resford saw nuns and children, to his surprise. The temple to the Lord of Death had several sad and malnourished looking bald men standing outside run down shacks. The temple to the Lord of Lice, had no outer buildings, nor people. Resford could only wonder what was on the other side of the door to the temple. He returned his attention to the front of the cart, along the road they travelled and to the large temple that sat at the very end, to the Lord of Blasphemy. Outside of the temple, were three large barn like buildings, with thatched roofs and wooden walls and above the door to the temple, was a carving of a Millipede. As the cart trundled up and the two monks finally reached their destination, they were greeted by the priests of the temple. The priests had walked out in two long lines, their deep red robes covering every inch of their body, from their neck downwards. At the front of their little procession, was an elderly, pale skinned man, who had shock white hair, tied into a long ponytail which hung behind him. He bowed deeply to Resford and Matthis, before smiling broadly, his crooked and yellow teeth showing.

'Brothers, welcome to the Temple to the Lord of Blasphemy.' The old man said. 'My name is Father Innow. How was your journey?'

The two monks shuffled slightly, feeling extremely under dressed in their common and now damp, brown robes.

'Somewhat long, but not too eventful, thank you Father.' Matthis answered, before returning the bow. Resford bowed too, not too sure if he should, but he decided better safe than sorry.

'Wonderful, wonderful. Come, you must be hungry? It's been a very long journey and your supplies must have been simple.'

'Bread, some cheese and dried chicken liver, Father.' Matthis replied.

'We were grateful for that to eat, but a hot meal would be wonderful.'

The old priest chuckled and waved his wrinkled and thin hand as he turned away.

'Come come, follow me then. We will give you a meal and allow you to rest.'

The monks looked at one another, before walking after the priest, towards one of the structures outside the temple. Inside the large wooden building, which had little to nothing on the inside, except a long wooden table with a bench either side, Matthis and Resford were astounded to be served plates upon plates of food. There was roast chicken, duck and pheasant, beef and pork, vegetables that had been boiled, fried, sautéed and baked, freshly baked bread, cheeses of different strengths, fruits, cakes and copious amounts of wine and beer. As the two monks ate, joined by most, if not all, of the priests of the temple, Father Innow sat next to Resford, placing only a few small grapes onto his own plate.

'Tell me brother, why do you think you have been called here?' The older priest asked. Brother Resford took a moment to finish his mouthful of bread and then took a sip of wine, clearing his throat.

'I am not entirely sure, father. Brother Matthis I understand, as he had been in the monastery for over ten years now. He has been very loyal to the Gods and had paid his debt to society, earning his position here. I however, have only been there for over a year. I have yet to prove my exact worth to the Gods.'

Father Innow smiled, his teeth showing once again.

'The Gods know everyone's value, my dear boy. You are just as valuable to them, as anyone else in this room. We know of your hard work, you needn't been so humble. You work hard, day and night; to please the Gods and it is time that you got the recognition you deserve.'

'Thank you Father.' Resford said, before tearing into a chicken leg. After the meal, Brothers Resford and Matthis, who were both now extremely bloated from the meal, as well as slightly drunk from the wine and beer, were guided to their beds, which were at the far end of the large wooden building. There, on sheepskin rugs, over a pile of straw, both men promptly fell asleep.

Brother Resford slowly opened his eyes, surprisingly to mostly darkness and not light of day.



The area he was in was dark, except for a small table in front of him, on which a small candle sat. It took him a moment, due to his slightly blurry vision and the pounding headache he now had, but Resford noticed that he was standing up. His arms were stretched out either side of him and when he tried to move, he found that his arms were locked in place, as were his legs. He struggled as panic began to set in.

'Please Brother, do not struggle. You will not be able to break those restraints.'

Resford looked towards the voice, which came from beyond the candle. Father Innow's face appeared, lit by the orange glow.

'What's happening? Where am I?' Brother Resford almost screamed.

'You are in the Temple of Blasphemy, where else?' Father Innow replied.

'You are here for your recognition.'

The priest clapped his hands together and there was the sound of movement. Several sconces on the right side of the room suddenly lit up with orange light, leaving the left side in shadow. Next to each sconce, stood a priest, in their deep red robes. The room itself was simple stone walls and flooring, with little else in the room, aside from the table and the frame Resford was attached to.

'I...I don't understand.' Brother Resford stuttered. He looked to his body, seeing that he had been stripped completely naked. His arms and legs were held in place against a wooden frame by iron restraints. 'Why am I like this?'

'To appease the Lord of Blasphemy, why else?' Father Innow said. The old man looked to another of the priests and nodded firmly. The priest walked over to Resford and seized his hand. The priest then pulled out a pair of shears and cut off the young monk's thumb. He screamed.

Once Resford had stopped screaming and crying, the priest then cut off his index finger. This cycle continued until only his little finger was left.

'Why...why are you doing this to me?' Resford asked, between guttural sobs.

'The Lord of Blasphemy desires it so. We appease them by this practise and you, being one of their disciples; will please him by enduring this suffering, like the thousands who have come before you.' The old man said, placing his hands together in prayer.

'Please, please stop. Let me go. Do this to Matthis instead. Please, I don't want to die.' The young man begged and sobbed.

'Oh, my child...we already have.' Father Innow said, motioning to the dark side of the room.

The sconces on that side of the room burst into life and chased away the darkness with glowing orange light. Between the several priests and their sconces, stood Matthis. The old man was also naked and cuffed to a wooden frame and his head was slumped forwards. His arms were missing, as were his legs. A priest walked over to the older monk and raised his head. Matthis had no eyes, nose, ears, lips or cheeks. He had also been scalped.

'Unfortunately, he didn't last very long, so, it is up to you. Our next delivery of subjects is tomorrow, so try and stay alive until then, hmm?' Father Innow said. Resford had started to cry and scream again, struggling against the restraints. Father Innow looked at the other priest and gestured towards the young monk.

'Remove the last finger on that hand, and then cut off the palm. Once you are done with that one, start the other hand and then his feet. Leave the limbs until after his face. That usually keeps them alive the longest. The Lord of Blasphemy will be most pleased.'

## 2.1

Aeth had always thought that metal plate armour was heavy. So when she pulled out her pistol and fired at the armoured knight who sat opposite her, she was surprised to how quickly the knight was able to grab and raise their shield. The bullets thudded into the shield, with one ricocheting off and splintering into a tree. Aeth leapt to her feet and fired again, aiming just below the shield, at Klo's legs. Before she could fire, Klo dashed forward, slamming into Aeth's front, sending her flying backwards, her gun leaving her hand and clattering on the ground, stopping just next to a fallen log. Aeth landed on her back and used the momentum to move into a backwards roll, righting herself and drawing her sword. Klo raised her hand to her visor and slid it down over her face. She then too drew her sword, flexing her arm as the sun glistened off her armour.

'We don't have to do this.' Klo said.

'We've spoken enough.' Aeth said, 'Now we fight.'

Aeth dashed forward, moving left at first and then darted right, narrowly dodging the swing from Klo. Her sword was a lot longer than Aeth's, who misjudged the overall length when she dodged. The tip slashed into Aeth's side. Ignoring the pain as best she could, Aeth continued with her movement, circling around the back of the knight. She thrust her short sword at a gap in the armour, at the shoulder. Once again, Klo moved far quicker than Aeth could anticipate, knocking the blade aside with her shield and responded with her own sword thrust. Aeth bought her sword back, parrying the enemy blade and used her body to shunt against the shield. Both women stumbled and lost their footing, falling to the ground. Aeth rolled away, clutching her sword, while Klo had to awkwardly clamber to her feet, using her shield as a hold. Aeth's eyes darted around the small clearing, spying her rifle, which was leant up against the tree where she had been sat. She ran for it, outstretching her hand in anticipation of grabbing it. As she reached it and her fingers brushed the side, a javelin slammed into it, piercing through the side and barrel. Aeth looked back, seeing Klo, who smirked proudly.

'I'll give you some credit; you have lasted longer than most Thorean soldiers.' Klo said, in her strong accent. Aeth gritted her teeth and dashed forward again, feigning a direct attack from the front. Klo bought her shield up to cover her body, hunkering her body down, reinforcing the defence. Her sword, she placed on the top, ready to thrust forward at the attacking Thorean. Aeth thrust her sword into the shield and awaited the responding thrust. She dodged the blade and entered the gap that opened as Klo stepped forward and lowered her shield to thrust. Aeth released her sword and, using what strength and momentum she could muster, tackled the knight. She succeeded, knocking both herself and the knight off balance, falling to the ground. As the Klo fell, her sword and shield slipped from her hands, for which she cursed in Doran, a word unknown to Aeth. Both soldiers struggled against each other, pushing and shoving as they rolled around on the forest floor. Aeth jabbed her fingers as hard as she could into the gaps of the armour, hitting specific nerves, while Klo slammed a gauntleted fist back into the Thorean's face. This went back and forth for a small while. Aeth's face was bruised and bloody, while Klo's body hurt all over. Aeth grabbed the knight's helmet with both hands and struggled against it. After a moment, it popped and came off.

'Ha!' She exclaimed, a second before her face crunched beneath yet another punch. The helmet left her hand as she fell backwards, clattering onto the floor. Aeth had fallen backwards from the last punch making space between herself and Klo. Groaning as she sat up, she saw Klo doing the same. As the knight sat up, Aeth gasped. It wasn't the long blonde hair or the bright green eyes of Klo that surprised her, nor how young she looked. It was her ears. It was at this moment, that Aeth realised she had never seen a Doran without a helmet on.

'What?' Klo said as she got to her feet, noticing how much Aeth was staring, getting somewhat self-conscious. Her ears, well, they were long. They protruded about ten centimetres from her

head, ending in a point.

'What?' Klo repeated, 'Stop staring!' Her hands covered her ears and her face turned slightly red.

'Sorry...uh...' Aeth said, shaking her head to stop the stare.

'Are...all Doran's have ears like that?'

Klo stared back, her face scrunched up.

'Are you kidding? You mean, you have come here, fighting in a war, killing in a war, and you have no idea what your enemy looks like? Are you kidding?' Klo said, shouting louder and louder as she spoke. Aeth's mouth was dry and she was unable to answer. Before she could respond, Klo had rushed forward, tackling her at the waist and sent them both over a large tree root. On the other side, the forest floor dropped, descending down into a small gully. Both women rolled and shoved and punched and kicked, until they forced themselves apart and stood, panting and leaning against either side of the gully.

'Surprised you haven't called your dragon to just eat me.' Aeth said.

'Don't tempt me. I wanted to give you a fighting chance.' Klo responded. 'You are good, I'll give you that.'

'Better than-'

Aeth's voice was cut off by a large shrieking noise. They both looked to the source of the noise, which originated from a cave sat at the end of the gully.

'What was that?' Aeth said, her eyes briefly flicking towards Klo.

'Oh no.' The Knight responded. Several barb ended tentacles wrapped around the outside edge of the cave's mouth and from within, hidden by the dark shadows, a large mass began to move forward. A large hooked, bird-like beak moved into the light, followed by the large mass. The large mass was fleshy pink and looked like a brain, without any skin or fur. The bulky mass floated up as the tendrils released from the cave, hanging loose beneath the large mass. The beak opened and shrieked again, the splitting pain forcing Aeth to cover her ears. She looked over at Klo, who had already started to run. Aeth too began to run, scrambling over fallen trees and rocks, all while feeling the large monster floating after her, bearing down with its barbed tentacles, which groped at the places she had been running. As she ran, Klo whistled twice, in short and sharp bursts. One of the Floating Brains tentacles wrapped itself around Aeth's wrist as she went to vault a tree, knocking her off balance. She landed on her back and stared up at the large creature, its giant beak opening into a pitch black gullet. In an instant, the Floating Brain disappeared, as a strong wind rattled through the forest. A second later, the Floating Brains body landed on the floor with a wet thud, a large bite having been taken out of the temple of the brain. Panting, Aeth watched as the large red dragon landed beside her, its large claws grabbing at the Floating Brains body. Its hooked talons sank into the soft pink flesh, forcing dark blood to seep out. The dragon's jaw opened and clamped around the rest of the deceased monster and after several bites and swallows, devoured it. Sat on the back of the dragon, at the base of the neck, sat a now helmeted Klo, armed with her shield and javelin.

'Surrender,' she said. 'You've lost this fight Thorean.'

The smell of burning sugar was strong, all the way through the gate. The distance from one side of the gate to the other was about twenty foot, through a corridor of swirling purple mist. Taking a deep breath, Lia stepped out of the other end of the gate. The bright sun was a shock after the few minutes of being in the gate. Lia immediately ran to the nearest available cover that she saw, which was a large collection of ammo boxes sat several metres away. Lia peered over the edge of the boxes, seeing the army that she had just followed. The majority of the column had begun to march away, passing by a large ruin of what looked like a city. It was still burning and kicking out tall pillars of black smoke. Lia carefully pulled down one of the boxes, opening the latch and she peered inside. Inside, she found and took out two pistol magazines, which she quickly checked would fit into her handgun. She also took out a personal communicator, which after checking the battery level, found it was fully charged. She closed it and slipped it into her pack. Lia carefully closed the box again and redid the latch, before she placed the box back into its original place, hoping no one would notice until she was long gone. She then noticed another box, with the lid slightly ajar, having not been fastened correctly. Inside, sat several sheathed Thorean swords rested in a cradle. Lia shrugged and reached in, working one out of the small gap. She tied the sword and scabbard to her belt, before carefully drawing the blade out. She admired the sharp edge and once she was satisfied, she slid it back into the scabbard. Lia looked about, seeing a forest close to her position. She decided to wait a few more minutes, allowing the rest of the column to march away. She heard voices and peaked around the boxes, to see two soldiers walking in her direction. Lia moved to the left of the boxes and peeked around the corner and sighed as she threw one of the magazines in the opposite direction of the soldiers. The magazine clattered on the ground and several of the bullets came free, clattering against the side of a tank. Both soldiers turned and drew their weapons towards the sudden noise. Lia ran for the trees. Lia expected to hear shouting and gunfire as she ran, but fortunately for her, she reached the edge of the trees and moved inside without incident. She hid behind a tree, peering back towards the gate, which still crackled and swirled with its purple lightning and smoke. After a few more minutes, the gate fizzled and cracked as the swirling mist decreased in size and eventually, disappeared with a loud pop. 'No way back now...' Lia said, to no one. She watched, as the last of the supplies were loaded onto trucks, which then drove off after the marching army column. Lia took a moment, pressing her back against the tree, before moving down and sitting crossed legged, tucked between the large roots that descended into the earth. She waited until the sound of marching was a distant memory and the surrounding area grew eerily quiet, only occasionally broken by the singing of birds and rustling of leaves. Lia pulled out the stolen communicator and tapped the screen. The menu popped up and she tapped the phone icon. A series of numbers, letters and symbols appeared and she typed in '885429-B'. The communicator trilled several times and then clicked. In a panic, Lia turned the camera on the communicator off. 'Hello?' Said a voice as a blurry face appeared on the screen, before the auto focus kicked in. Lia took a deep breath. 'Hello? Is there anyone there?' Lia tapped the camera symbol, turning it back on. 'Hi mum.' Lia's mother gasped, her hand covering her mouth. 'Oh my God, Lia! Oh my god!' Her mother's eyes immediately filled with tears and she moved her head out of the view of the camera, sniffing as she did so. Lia wiped her own eyes with her sleeve, not expecting the sudden emotions that had filled her. Her mother's face appeared a moment later, her cheeks slightly flushed with colour.

'Oh god, Lia...Are you ok? Where are you?' he mother asked, her voice wavering.

'I'm fine.' Lia replied, ignoring the other question.

'Lia, what's happening? We heard that the Angels had been deployed to Doral, but we expected to hear from you sooner than this. Is everything ok?'

Lia sat in silence for a moment, staring at the tree that was opposite to where she sat.

'No.' she said.

Her mother swallowed. 'Talk to me darling.' She said.

'I love you, ok? Please know that.'

'I know darling. We both do, your father and me. Please tell me what is wrong.'

Lia opened her mouth and it instantly went dry. It hung open for a moment, before she closed it, swallowed hard and tried again.

'Deon is dead. I'm sorry.'

Her mother's face went sheet white. She swayed slightly, before she seemed to grab onto something.

'Mum?'

'I'm ok....How...why?' Lia's mother asked, her voice cracking. Lia found that she had been gripping the root of the tree with her left hand. She was gripping it so tightly; her hand had also turned white as snow. Lia took a moment, contemplating her thoughts, psyching herself up.

'We were defecting to Doral. Am...I still am...I'm defecting to Doral.' Lia said, her voice trembling. She continued to speak, explaining to her mother the atrocities that she had witnessed. How she had watched her comrades and friends murder and be murdered. How she had seen what the Empire had been doing to the 'traitors' and how their bodies had been left to rot in the dark. Lia spoke about how Deon had saved Harka and how the two of them had fled, all while being pursued by the Wolves. How they intended to reach Doral and try to assist in repelling the invasion. Lia finished speaking and took a deep breath. Her mother remained silent.

'Mother...please say something.'

'You are in incredible girl Lia. You are intelligent, a brilliant soldier and are kind. You always try to do the right thing and that is why, I support you.'

Lia broke down crying, moving the communicator away from her for several minutes, while she sobbed, alone in the lush forest. Composing herself, Lia brought the communicator back up to see her father's face, next to her mother.

'He returned home a few minutes ago.' Her mother said. 'I've explained to him.'

Lia's heart continued to race, now fearful of her father's retribution.

'Hello father.' Lia said, the feeling of being sick rife within her.

'Hello Lia. I'm so glad to see you. We have both been so worried.'

'I'm sorry about Deon.' Lia said, wiping her eyes.

'We all knew that joining the army would be a risk and we were accepting of that. He died doing the right thing and I am proud of that. I support your decision to defect, I do. Doral was a good ally and this invasion...is wrong.' He paused for a moment.

'Fuck the Empire.'

'Lio...'. Her mother said, 'Hush.'

'I mean it.' He father said.

'Thank you.' Lia replied. 'But Mother is right. You are still in the capital. You need to be careful and support the Empire, or at least make it seem like you do.'

There was a beeping sound on her parents end and they both turned their heads.

'Oh, that's my delivery.' Her father said. 'I returned home from work early so I could accept it. I'll be right back.'

Lia's father got up and disappeared from view, walking away.

'Lia, I know you can't tell us where you are, but is there anything we can do?' Her mother asked.

'Just...keep a low profile. Stay home for a few days and if anyone asks, you haven't heard anything from me.' She replied.

'A soldier did come by a few weeks ago and ask if we knew where you and Deon were. I assumed that you and your brother had just gotten mixed up into the invasion force somewhere and they had momentarily lost track of you. I answered honestly and he seemed to believe me.'

'Good.' Lia said, 'Hopefully that will keep them away from you for a while. Please, just don't worry about me. I'll be ok. I know what I'm doing and I promise, it's for the best.'

Her mother nodded firmly and smiled, though it was a smile of sadness and loss.

Lia's father walked back into the room, crossing the room that was behind her mother. He walked up behind her and there was the sound of a silenced shot. The camera on her mother's end cracked and was splattered with blood. Her mother fell forward, her head hitting a table on the way down. Lia watched, paralysed in horror as the figure who she had believed to be her father walked around the sofa and picked up the now broken communicator. They wore a black military uniform and a high tech eye piece that Lia had only ever seen on Special Forces. She did not recognise the man, though he had simple features with medium length black hair, tan skin and a short goatee. On his armour, he wore a symbol that Lia recognised as the symbol of the Empresses personal guard. He smirked, before the communicator went dead. Lia threw the communicator against the far tree and it shattered into pieces. Lia screamed and wailed at the sky. Now there was no going back.

The Enichmond was an Alpha Class cruise liner, built specifically for personal use by the Empress, constructed by Derrington Industries. Fitted with the finest kitchens, bedrooms, bathrooms, sun decks, swimming pools, libraries and security devices, the Enichmond was the finest personal class cruiser in the Empire. The thousand foot long vehicle was able to float through the air at a leisurely rate, or at speed, depending on the scenario or the Empresses personal choice. At this time, the Empress sat on the upper rear sundeck, watching as the lands of her Empire passed by a thousand feet below her. Further to the horizon, the Glass Mountains touched the sky, their peaks disappearing into obscuring clouds. Venit looked up to the closest drone fighter, which flew parallel to the cruiser, one of four giving escort to the Enichmond. The drone seemed to hang in the air as it matched the speed of the cruiser. The double doors that lead to the inside of the cruiser, which were flanked by two of the Empresses personal bodyguards, slowly opened and a servant stepped through. They walked across the sundeck, carrying a small tray with a crystal glass sat on top. Inside the glass, was a clear pale green liquid. The servant placed the glass down on a small table next to the Empress, ensuring they got it perfectly on the coaster. The servant bowed and backed away quickly, keeping their eyes on the floor. The Empress picked up the glass and smelt the green liquid inside, admiring the fresh odour of the Doran liquor. Despite the people being savages, they sure do make a fine alcohol, the Empress thought, placing the glass to her lips and drinking. Another servant walked through the doors between the guards and onto the sundeck, followed closely by Oswal, who bowed lower and lower as he approached Venit. The servant held out a tray, on which sat a communicator, which fuzzed and clicked on. Kemar's face appeared. Her hair was tied up in a tight bun and she was wearing ridiculously oversized goggles. Her smile was almost infectious.

'My Empress. I am pleased to announce, the device is ready. I await your go and we can begin the test.'

'Good.' The Empress said, 'Await my signal.'

The communicator clicked off. After a moment, the Empress turned her eyes to her Chamberlain.

'Oswal, what of my request, regarding the...vermin?'

The old man winced as he bowed.

'In progress your Grace. I believe I shall receive confirmation of its completion soon enough.'

Oswal shifted uncomfortable in his clothes for a moment, as he built the courage to speak.

'Your Grace, is this-' he gestured around him, '-such a good idea? While having this weapon to use against Doran, I am slightly concerned about the testing location...'

'What are your concerns?' The Empress asked, sipping her green drink, humouring the old man.

'Well, firstly, the test is commencing on the mainland of the Empire.'

'A good demonstration location, for all to see. Doran and Thorean alike.'

'I...well...yes.' Oswal cleared his throat, 'Then...maybe we could at least move the location, to the sea...or the Line of Descent?'

'The Fields of the Dead are a wasteland that no one will miss.' Venit said, bluntly.

'They Fields are a cultural landmark your Grace. The people of Thorea still view them as a Holy site, where the Battle for the Gods was won millennia ago. They see it as a place of Heritage, which should remain forever undisturbed.'

'It's a bunch of fields with a few skeletons buried in the mud.' Venit snapped. 'People won't miss it if I demand it so.'

Oswal remained silent. He knew he wouldn't win, so he had learned to give up arguing against Venit a long time ago. The large cruiser banked slightly, sweeping past the Mountains and

moving over the Fields of the Dead. The communicator clicked again.

'Your Grace, may I suggest that you have your cruiser fly out over Quigg Bay? The piece of the Lightning stone that I used was small, but I am yet to one hundred percent understand its output. Especially after my...adjustments to its molecular structure.'

'If you believe that would be best, I will respect your intellect Professor.' The Empress replied and tapped on the small screen to her right. Oswal did his best to hide his distain from the Empresses willingness to listen to this so called scientist. Despite his unyielding loyalty to her, the Empress very rarely listened to Oswal or even considered anything he advised her on. There was a beep as the captain and crew received the order from Venit. The cruiser banked again, sweeping over the land of Thorea and out towards the sea. The cruiser made a slow U-turn and finally stopped, hovering several hundred feet above the sea. The Empress stood and looked out towards the Fields of the Dead, which were a series of several large fields, separated by hedge lines and multiple trees. Sat in the exact centre of the fields was a small metal structure, about the size of a pedal bin. A miniature remote drone flew over to the metal structure, remotely controlled by Kemar the scientist. Venit picked up the communicator and held it up. She clicked it and Kemar's face appeared on the screen.

'Is here safe enough?'

'Yes, I believe so,' The scientist replied, 'The piece of the Lightning stone I used is the size of a grain of sand, but I have made adjustments, mostly to its molecular structure. I am hoping that this will improve the overall yield. It is primed and ready for your say. Oh, I would suggest you maybe cover your eyes or at least put on some dark glasses.'

'That won't be necessary,' The Empress said, 'Proceed.'

'Yes your Grace.'

The small drone moved around the metal structure slightly, moving onto the top and then settling in place.

'Countdown beginning, in five...four...three...'

There was a blinding flash which overwhelmed the sun. The cruiser was violently rocked by a shockwave which tore through the sky. As the ship righted itself, an ear splitting boom echoed through the air. Venit blinking away the blinding light, looking towards the Fields, seeing a large pillar of deep blue cloud which pulsed and writhed with lightning. The land beneath the cloud was scorched and torn up and the cliffs by the sea crumbled into the churning waters below. The hedge row borders and trees that were still whole burnt with bright flame. Venit smiled and picked up the communicator, after having dropped onto the sundeck during the blast.

'Kemar, come in. Kemar?'

There was a click and a fuzzy face appeared.

'It worked!' A voice said. 'It worked!'

Oswal struggled to his feet, hauling himself up using the side of the ship. He looked towards the large blue cloud and gasped in horror.

'The Fields...they are gone...'

Venit ignored Oswal and looked towards the communicator in her hand.

'You said, that was the size of a grain of sand?' The Empress asked.

'Yes, yes it was! With the correct molecular structure adjustments.' Kemar said.

'Good,' Venit said, 'Split the stone into four equal pieces. I want each piece to be adjusted and primed for use.'

'Your Grace, pieces of that size...I haven't yet calculated how large the resulting blast could be. It could be...cataclysmic.'

The Empress smiled slyly.

'Good.'



Aeth kept her eyes locked on the dragon, who stared back at her with its large yellow eyes. Should she run? Probably not a good idea, as the dragon, though large, was fast and would easily catch her. Fighting was likely also out, as the moment she could make a move, she would be roasted. So, that left Aeth with one choice. She sat down on the forest floor.

'Ok. I surrender.'

The dragon and its rider didn't move. Aeth swore she could hear the cogs in Klo's brain turning as she thought about the next best step. She had the advantage with the dragon, but Aeth was smart and a good fighter. If she got too close, Klo might lose the advantage and her dragon wouldn't be much help. She stuck her tongue into her cheek as she thought, before looking at Aeth.

'I'm going to let you go.'

'That's surprising.' Aeth said, her eyebrows rising. 'Why?'

'I want you to take a message back to your leaders. Whoever they are. I want this message to reach the Empress of Thorea, no matter what.'

'I'll do my best,' Aeth said, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, 'But I can't promise she will want to hear it.'

Klo shifted in her saddle. 'She'll want to, trust me.'

She took a small piece of parchment and pencil out of her pouch and started to write on it. She then sealed it with a small stick of wax, which seemed to be somewhere between the states of solid and liquid. Klo let it go and it gracefully floated down to the ground, landing just a few feet in front of Aeth, who leant forward and picked it up. She looked at the wax seal, which looked like a growth of thick grass.

'It's Hornwort, before you ask.' Klo said. She kicked the sides of the saddle and her dragon raised its head. It spread its wings out far and with a slight roar, beat them once and ascended into the sky. The downward wind pushed Aeth over, onto her back and got dust in her eye. Soon, the dragon was just a dot moving across the bright blue sky, swooping up and down, roaring as it went. Aeth looked at the letter and sighed, getting to her feet. She took out her compass and switched it on. She changed the navigation from North to Camp. The red arrow pointed towards her left, so she turned and started to walk, in the hope that it wasn't too far. It was late afternoon when Aeth finally reached the camp. She had heard the pounding of the guns for at least half an hour as she had walked through the forest and each step made the sound grow more and more overwhelming. She looked towards her tent, where she had hoped she would be able to sneak in and have a bit of a nap before having to deal with anything. Unfortunately, Rox was stood in front of her tent, arms crossed and with a face like a slapped arse.

'Shit... ' Aeth said, as she kept her eyes on the floor.

'Where the fuck have you been?'

Aeth sighed and gave an exaggerated shrug.

'Would you believe me if I told you I had a fistfight with the Doral leader?'

'No, probably not.' Rox said, keeping his arms crossed. 'I needed you here Lieutenant. The artillery was attacked and we lost a dozen soldiers today, as well as two Huntsmen. If you had been here, at your post, the attack would have been less significant.'

'We don't know that.' Aeth said, waving her hand away.

'Oh, but I do.' Rox said, 'Thankfully the Angels were here and were able to help repel the attack.'

He unfolded his arms. 'I need you to be focused. I need you at your best. Please.'

Aeth looked at Rox, seeing the wrinkles under his eyes and the grey hair on his head and under his nose. He was looking old.

'Ok. Sorry.' Aeth said, looking about. 'Where are the Angels?'

'Not here. I sent them back to the main camp to help prepare the new reinforcements when they arrive.'

'Those are my soldiers Rox, you can't just send them away.'

'Yes, I can,' Rox said his voice calm, 'I am your superior officer and you were AWOL.'

She looked down at the letter that she still clutched in her hand. She held it out to Rox, who looked at it.

'What's that?'

'It's important...I was told, it needs to get to the Empress.' Aeth said. Rox took the letter from Aeth and looked at wax seal. He held it up to his eyes and he squinted.

'Where did you get this? This is the official seal of the Doral Government.'

'I told you. Fistfight, Prime Minister. Letter.' Aeth said. She stepped past Rox and opened the flap to her tent. She ducked through; zipping the flap up from the inside and almost fell onto her bed. To her own surprise, when she awoke the next morning, Aeth had slept well and all through the night. She got up and undid her hair, brushed it and then tied it up in a bun once more. She had fallen asleep in her uniform and armour, so she felt a tad grimy. She decided that she would request a private shower unit later, as well as a clothes launder. She also needed a new rifle. Thankfully, Rox hadn't seemed to notice. He always went on at her about keeping her rifle clean, nearby and...not lost, so she was glad she wasn't being lectured at this moment. Aeth stepped out of her tent and stretched, enjoying the warmth of the sun on her face. She looked over to the artillery, which was, to her surprise, silent. She walked over and saw Rox.

'What's going on?'

'Look.' Rox said, as he pointed behind her. Aeth turned around and saw the shield that had been covering the temple, except the temple itself had gone. There was nothing where it once stood, except grass, sheltered by the crackling shield, which still seemed to be growing in size. 'What the hell?' Aeth said, rubbing her eyes with her fingers, making sure she wasn't seeing things.

'Where the hell did it go?'

'No fucking clue.' Rox said, his arms crossing themselves again. 'My guess, some kind of magic or teleport or something.'

'It's definitely gone? It's not just like, invisible?'

'Nope, gone. We have had soldiers down there all morning, scouring the outside area with every kind of sensory equipment we have. It's just gone, but the shield is still increasing in size and at a much faster rate than before.'

Aeth blew air out of her mouth, puffing her cheeks.

'Well...shit.' She said.

'Hey Rox, what happened to that letter?'

Rox turned, blowing gently on his cup of tea. He walked back over to his small desk and sat down behind it, scooting himself closer.

'I made sure it got to the correct people.' He said.

'So, will it get to the Empress?'

'I'm sure it will, in time.' Rox said, taking a sip of his tea and instantly regretting it as it burnt his tongue. Aeth sat back in the chair opposite him. She had declined the offer of tea and was starting to regret it. Instead, she busied herself with reading through a report written about the Temple, after it had suddenly disappeared.

'I suppose, in hindsight, this does free up a large number of soldiers and artillery for other uses now. Where will they go now?'

Rox looked down at his desk, mainly at the map which sat there.

'Our reinforcements are passing through the Korva Gate as we speak. The forces here, as well as the forces at Jarkel are to join with them and then, we will make a push forward,

towards the Gate of Lynth.'

'Did you ever work out what it was preventing us from scaling the cliffs?' Aeth asked, peeking towards the map.

'No,' Rox said, his voice one of annoyance. 'So we are making a full assault on the gate instead. We'll break through and move onto the capital.'

'You said yourself, that's going to be a tough fight, is it not?'

'Yes, I predict that we are going to lose a lot of soldiers at the gate and five times as many at the city.' He stopped speaking and a smile crested his lips.

'However, there is word that tomorrow, the Empress is to be testing a new ultimate weapon for us to use.'

He leant back in his chair.

'A weapon that will win us the war in a single day.'

Lia had barely slept and hadn't eaten anything since she had arrived in Doral. She sluggishly moved through the forest, keeping her eyes out for anything that she could eat, be it fungus or a small animal. She found a small clear and flowing stream and carefully sipped at the water. It tasted clean, so she drank deeply. She spied a small fish darting back and forth in the water. After a lot of patience and more than five tries, she managed to get hold of it. Without thinking and consideration, she stuffed it in her mouth and swallowed. It took a few moments for her stomach to settle and for the feeling of nausea to pass, but it did. Lia headed deeper and deeper into the forest, hoping it was putting a fair amount of space between her and the army that had just passed through the gate, though she had no idea where she was actually heading. She stopped by a large rock which was covered in vines and a tree's roots, sitting down and opening her satchel, to pull out a small map. She looked at it focusing mainly on the very minimalist detail of Doral. Jarkel, Lynth and Liax were all marked down, though she was pretty sure that Jarkel and Liax had been destroyed. So, she had to somehow get to Lynth, without being spotted by the forces she had betrayed and without being killed by the enemy of the Empire. She sighed and put her hands against her face. She looked up, between the trees, towards the bright blue sky. The air was relatively still and the birds, oh how they sang here. They sang like they were happy. She had never heard birds sing so beautifully, especially not in Thorea. Just below the sound of their song, was the distant booming of artillery fire, but with a bit of concentration, Lia was able to focus solely on the birds.

'Landmarks...look for landmarks.' Lia said. She looked around her, desperately trying to see through the dense and tall trees. Smelling the air which blew through from behind her, she guessed it came from the sea, as it smelt of sea.

'So....Maybe here?'

Lia poked a small forest to the north, nestled between the Mountains Urf and Url. She looked left and right, unable to see either mountain through the trees. Lia stood and hopped down off the rock, taking note of the sea being behind her. She turned left and started to walk.

'Find Url, find the Ridge, find Lynth,' Lia said, to herself once more. 'How hard can it be?'

Url ascended into the sky like a creature, looming over Lia as she looked along the length of the Ridge. Lia was hidden behind a tree, looking out of the forest. There were Thorean soldiers here. A lot of them. Lia sighed; trust her to find the Thorean base camp. She sighed and sat down with her back to the tree. She had to think about her next step. Did she attempt to scale the Ridge? It was high and she had no climbing gear. It was also in full sight of almost every Thorean soldier in the camp, so she would have to do it at night, which, without light to see where she was climbing, made it impossible. She laughed at herself when she considered climbing Url. She took out her map again and let her finger wander about the black lines of the drawing. It seemed her only option, was to travel back through the forest, go around Jarkel and try to get to Lynth through the Gate of Lynth. Not only would this be highly dangerous, but it would take a damn long time. Lia shrugged to herself. It's not like she has any other choice. How she wished to just be able to go home. A stick snapped to her right and before she could react, there was a gun in her face. At the end of the gun, was a face she recognised.

'Lia? What the hell are you doing here?'

Lia raised her hands and slowly stood, the gun not leaving her face.

'Hey Ollie. Long-time huh?'

Lia looked about the forest, spotting two more soldiers, both from the Angels, stood in the forest. These ones, unlike Ollie, wore helmets, which partially obscured their faces, so she wasn't totally sure if she knew them. Neither said anything or moved a lot, so she assumed they were new recruits.

'It's true then? You really did turn traitor?' Ollie asked, keeping the gun raised. Lia shrugged

slightly.

'I couldn't kill my friends.' She said.

'They weren't our friends. They were traitorous scum...like you.' Ollie said.

'I suppose I am.' Lia said, before adding, 'Sorry Ollie.'

Lia grabbed the guns barrel and pushed it to the side. It fired and the bullet sped out, shooting past Lia's cheek. She bought the barrel up, cracking it into Ollies face, sending him reeling backwards. Lia tried to pull it from Ollies grasp, but his grip was firm. He pulled against Lia, causing her to stumble forward. She used the momentum to launch herself forward, screaming out as she did so. She tackled Ollie and both of them crashed into the forest floor. Lia threw a punch into the soldiers face, suffering a similar blow to her own side. Ollie managed to get his foot under Lia and kicked up, sending her flying backwards. Lia used the momentum to her advantage, grabbing the rifle with both hands, ripping it from Ollies grasp as she went backwards. She landed hard on her back, against a large tree root, probably cracking a rib. Ollie was up on his feet and roaring as he charged at Lia. She raised the rife and fired. It was over. Lia got to her feet as fast as her shaky legs would allow, hoping she was fast enough to deal with the other two soldiers. She turned and aimed the gun. To her surprise, they were already dead and, in their place, stood two Doran soldiers. They stood over the bodies, clad in a mix of leather and chain armour, their heads covered with a metal helmet and eyes shielded with a small visor. One held a spear and shield, while the other had a sword and axe. Their eyes stared at Lia, who looked at the rifle in her hands.

'I...uh.' Is all Lia was able to utter, before she decided to drop the gun. She raised her hands, hoping it was a universal sign of surrender. Both of the Doran soldiers looked at one another briefly, before taking a hesitant step forward. The one with the sword and axe bent down and picked up one of the rifles, slinging it on their back. They picked up another after sheathing their weapons and held in their hands. They aimed it at Lia, who swallowed hard. She thought hard, remembering what Harka had taught her.

'Surrender...I leave Empire. Hunt me like dog.' Is what she said, in extremely broken Doral. The soldiers looked at each other again, with the one with the gun nodding at the other. The one with the spear stepped forward, after they had lent their shield and spear against a tree. They walked to Lia and held out their arms in front of her, making a grunting noise and saying something that she didn't understand. Lia looked at his hands, which were clenched in fists and held out in front of them. They made a couple more grunting sounds and emphasised their arms. Lia cautiously put her arms out, like the solider. The soldier took out a set of shackles from their pouch and bound Lia's hands. Once they were secure, they stepped back and nodded at the soldier with the gun. After collecting their spear and shield, both soldiers stepped up to Lia and stood closer than she felt comfortable with. The soldier with the gun took out a small pink crystal from their pouch and held it between the three of them. They crushed it in their hand and there was a spark. It wrapped around all three of them several times, in the blink of an eye. There was a pop and the forest instantly turned into a stone courtyard. Lia looked around, seeing dozens more Doran soldiers descending upon her, weapons at the ready. Nearby was a stable, which housed several houses, as well as a large beetle like creature and what Lia could have sword, was a wingless dragon. She looked up, seeing a large tower, made of what looked like dark silver wrapped in green ivy. The tower glistened in the sun and at the top, sat a large blue crystal which crackled with a blue energy. 'Beautiful.' She said, in broken Doral. She had made it. She had made it to Lynth.

Above the clouds, the sky was bright blue and the sun was blazing. Klo relaxed on the back of Pallios as she soared through the air. Using both hands, Klo unclipped her helmet and removed it, letting her hair loose and shaking it. She gently massaged the tips of her ears and sighed, flexing her shoulders and stretching her legs out. Klo stared at the clouds that passed by below her, zoning out for a small while. Her attention was bought back when Pallios grunted. 'Hmm? Oh, I'm alright, don't worry.' Klo said, patting the dragon's scaly skin. After a moment, Klo sucked it a breath.

'That soldier...Aeth...she was a good fighter. She was smart too. Dammit, she is a threat.' Klo leant forward in her saddle.

'I should have gotten you to eat her.'

Pallios grunted again. Klo took her helmet and put it back on.

'Alright, next time then.'

Klo leant forward and held onto the horn of her saddle and locked her feet into the stirrups.

'Ready.'

Pallios grunted and tucked her wings against her body, after a moment of gliding; she moved her head down and started to descend. Klo held on tight as they gained speed, the air screaming past Klo as they barrelled through the clouds. Passing through the clouds, a city came into view. The city of Lynth. Klo looked past Pallios' head, squeezing her left leg against the dragon's side gently, giving a suggestion for her to change her position slightly. The dragon responded and banked to the left. As they descended upon the city, specifically the large courtyard next to the barracks, Pallios spread her wings and caught the wind, rapidly slowing their descent. She landed softly on all fours, like a bird landing on a twig. She stretched her wings out one final time, eventually tucking them back against her body. She leant down, allowing Klo to slip out of her saddle.

'Good flight.' Klo said, walking around to the dragons head, gently stroking Pallios' large face. The stable boy approached Klo and bowed.

'Hello Heea. Give Pallios a brush down, yeah?' Klo said, patting the young boy on his back.

'Yes miss.' The young boy said, gently patting the dragon and climbing into the saddle.

'Don't eat too much.' Klo said, pointing a finger at the dragon. 'I need you swift tomorrow.'

The dragon grunted and stood, keeping her long tail tucked in close to her body as she carefully turned and walked towards the stables. Klo removed her helmet again and basked in the broken sunlight once more. She looked around the courtyard, particularly towards the training areas. There were a few soldiers practising, some with swords and shields, while others loosed arrows at targets. A man approached from the direction of the kitchen, with a small tray, with a cup and food on.

'Good flight Prime minister?' He asked.

'Yes, thank you Lynn.' Klo said as she took the cup. She took a swig and then picked up the small sandwich that was sat on the plate.

'Can you tell me, when is the council next due to meet?' Klo asked just before she bit into the sandwich. The bread was soft and within she found a good helping of bacon and lettuce. Good sandwich, she thought. Lynn's ears twitched as he thought.

'Tomorrow I believe. They wanted to give you time to rest before they met. They were adamant you were present.'

'How kind of them.' Klo said, failing to not speak with her mouth full. 'Thank you.'

Lynn bowed and turned, walking back towards the kitchen. Klo, though fed, was tired, in pain and in need of a drink. She headed back to her apartment, situated in a building just outside of the barracks. Upon entering, she was greeted by Helios, her ginger cat, who meowed at her angrily.

'I Know, I'm sorry.' Klo said, dropping her helmet onto her recliner. She walked into her kitchen and reached for the cat food, finding it slightly more difficult in her suit of armour. She poured out an amount and went to place it onto the floor; not realising that Helios had weaved himself between her feet, almost causing her to trip over his three tails. He devoured the food and continued to shout at her.

'That's all you're having.' Klo responded, noticing that he had put on a few pounds. She poured herself a glass of cherry wine and sipped it, basking in the refreshing taste. Taking the glass with her, Klo walked to her bedroom and started to remove her armour, placing it piece by piece onto the wooden mannequin that stood in the corner. Klo walked into her bathroom and spent a solid minute debating whether she wanted a bath or shower. She decided a shower would be better, as she didn't want to fall asleep in the tub. Afterwards, she changed into a simple cotton shirt and trousers and after brushing her hair, tied it into a loose plait. She found Helios sat on her recliner and picked him up, taking both him and her glass of wine into the bedroom. She downed the drink, placed the glass on the side and, with her cat in her arms, fell backwards onto the bed, falling asleep almost instantly. The following morning, Helios woke Klo up by poking her face with his paw, claws and all. Klo jolted up, rubbing her face as the cat panicked and ran out of the room.

'Little bastard...' Klo said quietly. She looked out of the window and saw the sun beaming across the city. She looked at the clock at the wall and saw it was an hour after sunrise. The council meeting was in two hours, so she didn't have to rush.

Getting dressed, having something to eat, reading a chapter of her book and giving Helios some attention, gradually took the time. She left her apartment, dressed in leather trousers and a deep blue gambeson, fastened with a leather belt. Off the belt she hung a small dagger and a pouch, which she filled with peanuts. She slipped on her boots and quickly checked her face in the mirror. Her hair was still in a plait and she decided to leave it as it was. She gave Helios one last big kiss on his head and walked out the door, closing it behind her. She walked through the streets, zigzagging through the civilians and tradesmen who were going to and fro. She walked along the main street, finding the Fountain of Bryophyta. She stopped and stood by the water's edge, flipping a single silver coin into basin. Klo placed her hands together and closed her eyes, praying, hoping. She walked away, just as a few small crowds had started to gather and start prayers of their own. Leaving the square, Klo walked along another long street, reaching the steps that led up to the Parliament building. She walked up the steps and, saluting the guards that stood outside the doors, walked through and briskly headed towards the High Council chamber, heading up the flight of stairs on the left side of the building. Inside, the room was the same as it always was. In the centre, was a large triangular table, with six chairs around it, two on either side. On the walls, between high reaching pillars, were portraits of former council members, painted in fine oils and mounted under ornate wooden frames. At the rear of the room, sat between another two pillars, was a statue. The statue was of Brill Janupe, founder of the city of Lynth. Her statue, carved from white stone, portrayed Brill in her armour and wielding her hammer, Yole. Around the table, the four of the six council members were already present and were already yelling at one another. As Klo walked in and stopped in the doorway, she sighed as she watched the leaders of Lynth try to shout over everyone else.

'Guessing you haven't heard?' A voice said next to her. Klo didn't need to look to know it was Symion. He scratched the side of his face, which was now shaved, instead of his usual dark beard.

'Nope. What is it this time?'

Symion stepped forward, motioning for Klo to sit on her chair. As the other council members saw them, they stopped their bickering and slightly bowed towards Klo.

'Prime minister,' Ullie Naxus said, 'Please, sit and we will begin.'

'Something must be troubling everyone if you are all here early and are already arguing.' Klo

said, taking her seat and picking up the report from the table.

'Before I open this, does anyone want to give me a lowdown?' She said, holding the report up in her left hand. There was an uncomfortable silence in the room, until Thul Archea's ears twitched and he spoke, his deep voice booming around the room.

'Master Shade's spies report that Thorea has acquired a lightning stone...and that they have done something to it, increasing its destructive power.'

'Those were banned ten years ago and we disposed of every stone within Doral safely. How did they get one?' Klo asked.

'A splinter faction attempted to assassinate the Empress and failed.' Tulula-Tan said. 'The assassin had a stone on him at the time.'

'The splinter group has now been taken care of.' Thul added.

'So, Thorea now had an incredibly destructive weapon in their hands.' Klo said, rubbing her temple.

'It is also reported that since the Temple of Bryophyta was successfully teleported away, the Thorean army is in the process of regrouping and making a move against the Gate of Lynth.' General Quion said. Klo sat back in her chair and stared at the paper in front of her.

'Alright then. What should we do?'

Her question was met with a silence that filled the room.

'Great.'



Settling back in her custom armchair, Empress Venit looked to the night sky and the quadrillion stars visible to the naked eyes.

'Do you think,' she said, to Oswal, who was busy scribbling down who knows what in his little journal.

'Do you think, Oswal, there are other civilisations out there? Amongst the stars?'

The old man stopped writing and placed down his pen. He gently leaned back and looked upwards, gazing at the stars. He sucked on his teeth for a few moments, before licking his lips.

'I believe so. There are too many stars to believe there is nothing else out there.' He shifted his eyes from the stars, back to the Empress.

'Why do you ask so suddenly?'

The Empress was quiet for a moment. Without looking away from the stars, she reached forward and picked up her cup, sipping at the wine within.

'Civilisations, kingdoms, colonies...empires...' Venit said, slowly and quietly, 'They should all be mine.'

Oswal looked at the Empress, seeing the ambition sparkle in her eyes. He swallowed and returned to his notes. There was a knock at the door and the guards turned, opening it and stopping the person from entering.

'Let her in.' Venit called over. The guards stepped to the side and Kemar stepped through, hurrying over to the table next to the Empress and Oswal. Kemar bowed and emptied her bag onto the table, spilling paper and pens. Oswal sighed as the papers covered his own journal and he was forced to stop writing.

'I've done it.' Kemar said, panting lightly, as though she had been running. She picked up a piece of paper and handed it to the Empress, who looked it over, before looking back to Kemar.

'I have no idea what any of this means Kemar.'

'I've split the stone into four and adjusted them. It's completed. You have your weapons.' Kemar said, her smile beaming. Oswal looked up at the scientist and removed his glasses.

'You are serious? You did it.'

The scientist nodded excitedly, giddy with delight, almost like a child. Oswal looked to the Empress. 'This means, we can finally use the weapons against Doral. We can use it to destroy Lynth. Then, the war will be over.'

Venit remained silent, taking a large sip of her wine.

'Maybe.'

Oswal and Kemar looked at one another, not quite sure as to understand the Empresses response.

'Buy, your Grace, if we use the weapon against Lynth, the Dorans will be forced to surrender as they realise resistance is fruitless. Plus, we will save a large number of our own forces from dying in battle.'

'I don't care about that.' Venit replied, 'We will win the war, even without the weapon. I don't care how many soldiers will die in the process, as long as it is won in the end.' The Empress put down her cup and stared into the eyes of the old man.

'Unless you doubt the strength and abilities of my army?'

Oswal swallowed hard and felt the colour flush from his face.

'Of course not, your grace. Your army is power absolute, protected by the Gods.'

The Empress, satisfied with the grovelling old man's response, picked up the cup again and drank.

'I suppose you do make a good point though Oswal. Maybe the use of the weapon would deter any Doran uprisings after their conquest. I shall give it a consideration. In the meantime, I want

one of the pieces to be sent to the Temples, as an offering to the Gods. Kemar, I want you to create a device which will be able to launch the others to any location, in case I decide to heed Oswalds advice.'

Kemar and Oswald exchanged a look, before the scientist bowed.

'At once, my Empress.' She backed away slowly and turned once she reached the doors, disappearing down the corridor.

'Your Grace, may I be frank?'

Venit looked at Oswald from the corner of her eyes.

'Go on.'

He took a breath. 'Why, after we have had this astonishing break with the discovery of an incredibly powerful weapon, are you hesitant to use it against our enemies? It's a waste! It's an insult to our soldiers!'

The Empress smiled and, to Oswalds utter bewilderment, she gently took his hand in hers.

'My dear Oswald, I understand, I do. But, tell me, how many of that weapon do we have.'

'Four.'

'And after we send the offering to the Gods?'

'Three...' Oswald replied.

'Exactly. And now, dear Oswald, I want you to look to the sky. How many stars are there? How many planets? How many possible civilisations? How many people to bring to heel and rule?'

'I...I don't know...'

'Precisely.' Venit said, patting the old man's hand. 'So maybe, we should keep our best cards for them.'

'You mean, you want to...go up there?' The old man asked, pointing to the sky.

'Yes.' Venit said.

'But...It's not possible your Grace.'

'It's possible.' Venit said, staring at the papers that littered the table. 'With Kemar, anything is possible.'

'So, who are you?'

Lia looked up towards the woman who had asked the question, taking in the building she was now stood within. Lia had been within the city of Lynth for just over an hour. Once she and the soldiers had teleported into the city limits, she found herself in the centre of a large square, close to what looked like a barracks. She had found herself surrounded by dozens of Doran soldiers, armed to the teeth with swords and shields, spears and bows, axes and guns. After a bit of shoving and far more poking of weapons that she had appreciated, Lia had managed to remember the word 'Surrender' in Doran. Once she had been able to utter the word and the two original soldiers had shouted at the others soldiers, they backed off a bit. The two soldiers marched Lia over to the stable and loaded her up onto a cart. The soldier with the gun, a woman, climbed into the back of the cart, while the one with the spear and shield, a man, climbed into the front and mused the horse. No, it wasn't a horse Lia realised...it was a large iguana. The cart rattled as they passed through the gates of the barracks and out into a city street, moving onto cobblestones, which hurt Lia's back as they bumped along. Lia looked up at the city buildings as they trundled past. Unlike the city of Aruthel, whose skyline was dominated by monolithic steel skyscrapers, Lynth housed smaller buildings, made of wood and stone. Buildings had thatched or tiled rooves, as well as simple key iron lock doors and glass panel windows, opposed to retinal scanners and auto-projection glass. The air also smelt cleaner, which was something Lia had noticed as she had first arrived in Doral. They passed a small market, where men and women bartered and traded exotic looking vegetables, flowers, pottery and linens. Children screamed and laughed as they ran back and forth and guards stood out of the way, armed with spears and shields. Lia noticed, there was a lot more merriment in this city, opposed to her home. In Aruthel, people kept their eyes down and never went anywhere unless it as essential. Lia stared at a large fountain as they passed it. It was two long pillars, where water spouted out of the tops and between them, wove what looked like vegetation, but as they got closer, Lia could see it was made of translucent green stone like material. The cart trundled along a street, which eventually lead up to a large palace like building, fronted by a large number of wide steps. The central roof of the building was a large pyramid like structure, which dominated the two smaller pyramids either side of it. It was here that the cart stopped and Lia was motioned to get out of the cart by the female soldier. Lia was escorted up the steps and towards the building. Before the doors, the soldiers escorting her quickly spoke to the guards who stood outside the palace. After a few quickly spoke words and a nod, the male soldier motioned for Lia to step through. The grandeur of the building took away Lia's breath, She felt overwhelmed by the buildings finery, from the gold leaf bannisters and pillars, to the exquisite oil paintings that hung on the walls and the statues of white stone, that were so perfectly carved, the clothing on them looked like silk. A large chandelier hung from the ceiling and on the furthest sides of the large room, were two flights of stairs. The guard's frog marched Lia up the flight of stairs to the right and escorted her into a long room. Along the sides of the white stone room, sat long wooden benches and at the back, was a large wooden podium, behind which, two women and a man sat. Once of the women, sat in the centre, while the others sat at a slightly lower ascension and to either side of her. Lia looked up at the woman in the centre, who looked towards the two soldiers. The male soldier briskly walked to the podium and spoke in a hushed voice. Lia waited patiently, until the woman on the podium nodded and the soldier returned to his position, stood behind her. The woman on the podium wrote some things down, before she cleared her throat. Lia noticed she was quite young, no older than twenty. She had neat blonde hair and her face was surprisingly battle worn, with a good number of scars. Her long ears twitched slightly as she spoke in Thorean, though her accent was thick.

'So, who are you?'

'My name is Lia Jedrece, Private First Class, serving in the Thorean Empires army under the Angels squadron.'

The woman wrote that down. 'Why are you here?'

'I am here to join you. I wish to defect.'

The other man and woman who sat on the podium seemed like they took a moment to process the translation, before looking at each other and bursting into laughter.

'I'm serious,' Lia said, 'I hate the Empire. They killed my friends. My family. I have nothing there anymore.'

The blonde woman hadn't moved. She was staring at Lia with an intense gaze, almost as if she was trying to read her body language. What followed was a lingering silence that was more than uncomfortable than Lia had ever experienced before. The blonde woman turned to the soldiers who were stood behind Lia. She spoke Doran to them so a few moments and when she seemed to ask questions, they answered her. Lia was forced to just stand there as, she assumed, they spoke about her in a language she barely understood. After the Doran conversation ended, the blonde woman looked at Lia again.

'The soldiers behind you, I trust them. They are good soldiers and I know they love and care for their home. That is why, when they tell me they found you in conflict with Thorean soldiers, who you killed without hesitation, I believe them. When they say that you fought with such rage and pain, of which even the best spies cannot replicate, I believe them. If you say you wish to defect to our cause, I believe you.'

All the air in Lia's lungs suddenly expelled in a mighty sigh.

'Thank you. Thank you.' She said, once she took a breath.

'Of course, I cannot just let you free to roam the city. Therefore, you shall accompany me for a while. We can talk and get to know each other.'

The Blonde woman stepped down from the podium and approached Lia.

'You can also meet Pallios, my dragon.'

Lia's face flushed of colour.

'Your what?'

Aeth and Rox looked towards the Gate of Lynth.

'Well...' Aeth said, 'We are finally here.'

The Gate of Lynth stood in front of them, a safe distance away. Made of solid carved stone blocks, the gate was around one hundred feet high and at least fifty feet thick, stretching the entire length from the Ridge to the sea. It had two large towers which flanked the main gate, which itself seemed to be secured with a thick wooden gate, covered by a metal portcullis.

'According to our sources, the gate has a further ten gates and portcullises inside the structure.' Rox said. Aeth sighed and put her hands on her hips.

'Not going to be easy going through there then. Shame we can't go over.'

'Too many weapons on top of the wall...and the possibility of that electricity weapon that stopped us going up The Ridge.'

'Any news on that secret weapon?'

Rox was silent, he looked down, before quietly uttering 'No.'

Aeth turned around and looked at the forces behind her. It was the largest gathering of Thorean forces in the Empire's history. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers, millions of weapons and thousands of vehicles. Since the Temple of Bryophyta had vanished, the Doral forces had not made any more counter attacks against the Thorean forces. Rox reckoned it was because they were getting ready for the assault of the Gate of Lynth and the city. Looking towards the Gate, Aeth could see a great number of weapons and soldiers. Looking through a pair of binoculars, she saw what looked like soldiers on wall mounted guns, as well as a number of cannons. She was also surprised to see a fair number of trebuchets on the wall.

'I suppose they have the space for them.' She said, to the air.

Rox took the binoculars when Aeth offered them. He looked through and blew air out through his teeth.

'This is going to be hard. Thick walls, lots of enemy forces and weaponry that we have yet to see in action. I was hoping the secret weapon was going to help us, but it seems like they are holding onto it.'

'At least they haven't covered the Gate in a shield like the Temple was.'

Rox put down the binoculars and looked at Aeth, his face one of slight annoyance.

'Why would you say that? Go and touch wood.'

Aeth laughed and waved it off, but found herself leaning slightly towards a wooden barrel, where she gently tapped the side.

'I want your opinion Aeth.' Rox said, looking through the binoculars again.

'What on?'

'Once we break the gate, do you think we should stop and regroup? Or, should we press the attack and make our way straight to the city?'

Aeth thought for a moment, going so far as to even take out her map and look at the terrain of the land around Lynth and the Gate.

'Press the attack. Once we destroy the Gate, we want to keep them on their toes and stop them from regrouping. We also don't want any survivors to get from the Gate to the city and let them know of our possible tactics or weapons.'

'Alright then.' Rox said, 'No survivors, continuous attack.'

Aeth looked beyond the older soldier, seeing a large number of artillery, tanks, Huntsmen and soldiers lining up in multiple ranks. The barrels on the cannons were all at the same angle and, seemed to be prepped.

'So, this is it? I guess I'll see you on the other side.' Aeth said, patting her hand on Rox's shoulder.

'This is it,' He said with a heavy sigh. He forced a smile at Aeth and he tapped the

communicator on the side of his head.  
'Fire.'

'Your suit isn't sealed properly.'

Anthony looked down to where the older woman was pointing. He saw what she meant; he had missed one of the zips on his left arm, the one just above the wrist.

'Oh, sorry.' He said, zipping it up. The older woman sighed and rolled her eyes, visible even through the suits plastic face covering.

'I'm guessing you've never done this before?' She said, turning to the truck behind her.

'Uh...no.' Anthony said, checking every other zip and seal on his suit. 'Sorry.'

The woman sighed again.

'Trust me to get stuck with a newbie.'

Anthony found his eyes staring at his feet.

'What's your name?' He asked after a moment. The woman was silent for a moment, before she said 'Olive.'

'Nice to meet you Olive.'

'Hmm.'

Olive walked around the side of the truck and opened the doors in the back. The smell of formaldehyde was overwhelming, even through the hazmat suits filtration system.

'Come on, we have a lot of work to do. Get the door.'

Anthony looked past Olive, to the full truck. Inside, piled on top of one another, were a dozen black bags, full of the weekly offerings.

'Ok.' Anthony said, walking towards the temple. He looked up as he walked towards it, focusing on the sculpture of the God. The top half of a skeleton, missing its left arm and jaw stared down at Anthony as he approached the doors. He took the large ring handle and pulled, the doors being a lot heavier than he anticipated them to be. After a few moments of heaving, they gave and started to open. Anthony was hit by the stench so abruptly, he vomited in his suit. The filtration unit in his suit clicked and whirled into live, filtering out the vomit from his suit. The second thing to hit Anthony, after the stench, was a wall of black flies, which poured out of the temple like a wave crashing over rocks. The sound of their buzzing was so loud, Anthony struggled to think. He put his hands over his head and crouched; fear overwhelming him and shutting down his legs.

'Get up.'

Anthony raised his head, looking towards the voice. Olive stood over him, holding out her hand. He took it and stood, to see the flies were gone. Anthony looked inside the temple, seeing little through the darkness. The slowly setting sun didn't offer much light through the doors, but he could see a large mass of something covering the entire temple floor.

'Come on, we are losing the light.'

Olive walked back to the truck and Anthony followed her. Olive pulled out one of the black bags and both of them carried it to the doors of the temple. Olive went first, carefully stepping onto the mass that covered the temple floor. Anthony stepped onto it and to his disgust, found his foot passing into it with a squelch. They placed down the bag and Olive headed back to the door, each foot squelching beneath her.

'Come on, nine more.' She said as she reached the door.

Anthony looked around the dark room, trying to figure out the shapes in the dying light. He took out his torch and clicked it on, the beam of light shining downwards. A skull, half covered with decaying skin appeared in the spot of light. He shrieked, stepping back and losing his footing, landing in the soft wet mass. His light darted back and forth, seeing bones with decayed skin all around him. There were arms, legs, torsos, heads, all in different stages of decay and decomposition. Beneath him, the floor was a mass of red liquid, a sick mixture of blood, rotting flesh and organs. He vomited again. He looked at the bag that he and Olive had

just bought into the room. He scrambled through the slime towards it and found the zipper, undoing it. Inside the black bag, he found the cold and dead body of a young man.

'Blessed are the chosen ones.' Said a voice. Anthony looked up, to see a figure stood next to him. They wore a long black robe, with a hood up. Beneath their hood, Anthony could see the crow like features of an old man. His skin was grey and his eyes were glazed over, white with no pupils. His feet were bare and sunk into the oozing slime beneath him. The old man reached out with a withered, crooked hand, with long and broken nails. The old man smiled, showing multiple yellow and broken teeth.

'The Lord of Lice welcomes all his children.'



Pallios purred slightly as Klo polished the large red dragons scales.

'Have you ever seen a dragon before?'

Klo looked over to Lia. She was pressed flat against the far wall, like wallpaper. She stared at the dragon, how a mouse might stare at a cat that was stalking it.

'She won't hurt you.' Klo said, flashing Lia a smile. 'I promise.'

Lia kept her eyes on the large creature, whose teeth were the size of kitchen knives and had the ability to breathe fire. She was surprised by the purring that the creature was doing, almost as if it was a large cat. Klo stepped forward to Lia and held out her hand.

'Come on,' Klo said. Lia stared at her hand, then the dragon and then back to the hand. She carefully reached out and took the other woman's hand. Klo grasped firmly and pulled Lia forwards, away from the wall and towards the dragon. Lia could feel heat emanating from the dragon, even more so as she was stood right next to it. She carefully put her hand out, palm flat, hovering just over the dragons scales.

'Will it burn me?' Lia said, staring at her hand. Klo placed her own uncovered hand flat on the dragons scales.

'No. The scales are warm, but not hot enough to burn with the touch. If they did, I wouldn't be able to ride her.'

Lia slowly placed her palm down onto the dragons scales, her heart racing. She breathed a sigh of relief as she felt the warmth and felt no pain. Before she knew it, the feeling of excitement had taken over and both of her hands were sweeping over the dragons head and neck.

'What's her name?'

'Pallios. I named her after the woman who trained me.' Klo said, taking out a small cloth. She started to polish the dragons scales, until they were almost a mirror sheen. Lia looked over to a small table at the edge of the room, covered with other cloths. She walked over and picked one up, returning to the dragon and joining in with the polishing. She noticed that the purring grew in intensity as she polished around the dragons back and neck.

'How did you get a dragon? I mean, I assume not everyone has a dragon. I haven't seen any others while I have been here, only Pallios.'

'I found Pallios as an egg about three years ago. I hatched her, raised her, learnt to fly with her. She has been my best friend ever since.' Klo said, 'As far as I am aware, she is the only one. I've looked everywhere for more dragons or eggs. Anything, but I've never found anymore. I think she might be the last one, though its not going to stop me from looking.'

Pallios made what sound like a sad grunt.

'I hope you find one.'

'Maybe if I do, you could fly with me.' Klo said, smiling at Lia, who blushed and looked away. Lia picked up the small loaf of bread that sat on her plate and took a deep sniff. She hadn't eaten fresh bread, or at least bread made with real flour for years. The Empire prioritised quantity and long life of food stuffs over quality and so most food, especially military rations, had a strong artificial taste. Even the fruit tasted fresher in Doral. Lia ate the meal that Klo had made for her, a beef stew with vegetables and barley, in a thick red wine sauce. She ate it all and sat back in the soft sofa, cradling the bottle of sweet beer that Klo had given her. Helios, Klo's cat was gently purring while asleep in her lap and she found it impossible to resist scratching behind his ears.

'How was it?' Klo asked, walking into the room from the kitchen.

'Teach my your ways.' Lia said, patting her stomach, 'That was...wonderful.'

Klo sat down, on the seat opposite Lia. Helios lifted his head, meowed half-heartedly and promptly fell asleep again.

#### POTENTIAL ENDING PLAN:

- Despite heavy losses, the Thorean Army destroys and passes the Gate of Lynth
- Lia joins Klo and Dorans in defending the capital city from the Thorean Army.
- Aeth and Rox are involved with battle, seeing the intense defensive capabilities of the capital.
- Despite a persistent attack, the Thorean forces are pushed back. Doran forces suffer heavy casualties. Aeth is killed in a fight with Klo and Lia.
- Empress Venit uses the new super weapon against the Independent State of Senol
- This causes a gigantic mantis like creature to emerge and wreak havoc on further Doral.
- Rox dies as he comforts a pair of lost Doran children.
- Oswal and Kemar are killed when the Empresses ship is destroyed by the creature.
- Klo's dragon Pallios sacrifices itself to destroy the giant Mantis
- Empress Venit survives the crash but is consumed by the Gods for failing them.
- With Doral in a state of destruction and Thorea without its eternal leader, the war comes to an end. Klo and Lia work together to try and rebuild.