

Intro

The Theren

Lieutenant Zeregut

I had never been in a battle that claimed such an amount of souls before. No, I had never been disturbed so by war. I had quelled a few bandit raids, yet they seemed as minor skirmishes compared to the carnage before me. In this battlefield, I must confess, my valor dwindled and my morale was that of a boy who has taken arms for the first time. The sky thundered with such force that one would believe that Luminor himself was furious. The field was full of corpses found in bizarre and repugnant conditions: Some bodies were torn open and sliced in all ways imaginable, and others were completely incinerated, riddled with holes, twisted in gruesome angles, or turned inside-out. Bones, organs, and limbs adorned the bloody scenery. The corpses were the fresh paint of a nightmarish canvas, a masterpiece produced by a twisted, evil mind. Most of that mess was the bodies of my men.

Our enemies suffered heavy casualties, indeed, but they had quite the advantage over us. They were taller, sturdier, and they were our equals with blades. Those weapons, however, were a mockery compared to their true armament: the enemy could produce sorcery, an ability supposedly reserved to our ancestors, the Primordial Seven.

Fire and hail rained on us as we advanced, with wavering valor, towards the sorcerers; some of my men burst into flames where they stood, as if the flames were summoned around—or worse yet, from within—them; our archers' arrows were stopped by conjured shards of ice and rock above the battlefield; boulders would join to form colossal man-like figures which bashed and stomped on my kinsmen (one of those gargantuan effigies crushed about thirty of my men right in front of me. I escaped such doom only by Luminor's will); the wind and the rain cut through our skin like a volley of thrown daggers, and those were some of the few afflictions that the enemy conjured against us. There was no easy way to approach the enemy, and no possibility of coming victorious.

"Your Greatest, the enemy has flanked us to the left! If we do not fall back...argh!" A soldier yelled at me before he was pinned to spikes which used to be the ground where he stood. I ran as fast as I had ever done so, for the ground began chasing me, transforming into the very spikes that had killed my ally.

When I noticed that the spikes were chasing me no longer, I took a brief second to catch my breath. In an instant shorter than a second, several men gathered around me. They all seemed as hopeless and desperate as I was; each one of those men was a reflection of my emotions, and, as I truly

looked at some of them, they actually sported my face.

“Your Greatest, Tarim is lost. We *must* fall back!” said one soldier before a blast of bright-blue, liquid fire felled a large group behind him.

“Your Greatest, there is no hope unless reinforcements arrive soon!” said another. I knew not why they were calling me such, and before I could make sense of it, I turned and saw an entire legion surrounding me.

“Your Greatest!” Another bright blue explosion burned many of my men.

“Your Greatest!” A winged creature of smoke swooped down and devoured more.

“Your Greatest!” More blasts, more rocks, and more creatures killed my allies.

“Your Greatest!” “Your Greatest!” “Your Greatest!” “Your Greatest!”

The incessant calls for help made my morale plummet further, and my best defense was to cover my ears, close my eyes and yell, “I am not your Emperor!” Everything went silent, and I waited a few seconds (or hours, perhaps) before I opened my eyes... The enemy had left, but the mangled corpses of my allies were reaching out to me, calling to me with voices as broken as their bodies.

“Help me, Your Greatest,” said a man whose fingerless hand was trying to get ahold of me.

“Save us, Your Greatest,” said another whose hand (which was trying to grip me, as well) was nothing but bones.

“Save us, Your Greatest,” skulls, mangled and charred faces, and destroyed limbs covered my entire body, muffling my shrieks of fear and leaving me with nothing to breathe but the blood and carrion of their bodies...

Suddenly, I was alone in a vast, dark emptiness that seemed to span the entire world: No bodies littered the nonexistent ground, and the thunder had seized without a sky to produce it. I was unable to move, and though I assumed my bewilderment and confusion had rendered me paralyzed, I realized that an unnatural force had taken control of me. Then a voice spoke, a voice worthy of that empty void that now surrounded me, a voice that sounded as if a legion of creatures bred in the Theren, where the souls of wrongdoers and sinners were entrapped after death, screeched at once. It spoke in a dialect most ancient, a language which I had never heard, but I understood the voice as if it was speaking either Natus or Ilustris: “You are but flesh, an incomplete spirit; you shall bear witness to my return before your body turns to rot. Let me save you the pain of your impending mortality. Let me touch your soul that it might be spared the agony of your flesh, which will be otherwise caressed by endless wrath. ”

The voice then took shape, and although it was but a shadow, I could discern that it was a man four heads taller than me. It wore a hood which concealed any facial feature (can a shadow sport a face?), save for two green flames that burned fiercely in place of eyes. The shadow also sported a cloak that was torn in numerous places and an armor which appeared to have been forged in the Theren. Suddenly, the frail cape was replaced by a flame, green and unnatural as the eyes; the twisted faces of people in eternal torment spouted occasionally from such flames. I had to be in the Theren, indeed, for I could imagine not another place that could hold such horror. "I am Eternal Tyranny, he who defied the Father, the Creator Sun. You are flesh, tender, and Wordless", the shadow said, and his sordid cackle joined the chorus of shrieks, creating a tune that no man should bear listen. I wanted to scream, to make it stop somehow, but it was all I could do to remain where I stood, oppressed by the paralyzing hex placed upon me.

As if Luminor had heard my pleas, out of the sky (or where the sky should have been), fell a spear at my feet. The shadow flinched, even though it was well out of reach, and the tormented voices became silent. The spear was unlike any I had ever seen: The hilt seemed to be crafted in gold, and it was shaped in the form of the imperial symbol, the Crimson Eagle, a bird of myth whose crest was a bright red flame. The eagle stared upwards with its beak wide open as if it issued a battle cry rather than a screech, and its wings were spread, ready for a glorious flight.

Such majestic detail was bested by rest of the weapon. The pole was made of the finest of woods (perhaps fashioned from a tree that does not exist in the mortal domain) and slivers of flame spiraled around it, coming to life at the bottom of the hilt and dying as they reached the blade, which was made of a metal unknown to me. My body became lighter and I felt free of the malediction cast upon me. I understood it was the power of the heavenly artifact that had rid me of it, thus, I knew I had to use it against the shadow. However, when I reached for the spear, the chorus of agonizing voices cried once more, and the shadow shrieked, infuriated. I retracted my hand, covered my ears, and curled up, feeling more like a helpless infant now than in the battlefield. The agonizing voices quieted, and the shadow spoke: "The Father of the False Flame favors you, flesh. But he favored many before you, many whose blood has been spilled in tribute to me. Spare your blood and choose my favor; I shall have your soul regardless of your choice."

I did not reply, but I did regain my valor; my devotion to the Creator Sun, Luminor, allowed me not to let anyone who spoke ill of Him remain unpunished, even if such entity was the foulest or most evil of all. I stood, afraid no longer of the shadow before me, and grasped the spear

with both hands. I tried pulling it up, but the weapon did not budge.

“What business have you with such weapon? What seek you to accomplish with it?” I turned my head left, still holding the spear. There was an old man who sported a white robe and a cane made of fine, polished silver (or a similar precious material) standing next to me. The man stared at the entity in front of us, and he serenely scratched his long, gray beard.

“I seek to best the abomination before us, old man.” I returned my attention to the spear and tried lifting it once more. The spear would still not budge. I pulled as hard as I could, but the spear seemed to become sturdier the more I tried. Smoke emanated from the weapon as if something was burned by the fires spiraling around it, something that smelled like flesh...I shrieked and tried to take my hands off the spear, but they had become stuck to the shaft as if my very soul knew that no matter how much pain I had to endure, a worse fate awaited me if I did not claim the spear.

“What seek you with this weapon?” The man next to me asked once more.

“I already told you, old man, I seek to defeat the abomination before us.” The shadow laughed. I pulled as hard as I could without bearing any mind to neither my pain nor the old man.

“What seek you with it?”

The heat was unbearable, but I could imagine not the torture that awaited me if I gave in to the pain. “I seek to kill the enemy!” I replied, desperately, without turning to look at the man.

“What seek you with it?”

Though my hands seemed unharmed, they were burning as if the marrow on my bones was melting away. I yowled, but I was still determined to gain the spear. “I seek to kill the enemy, old man! Might you help me retrieve the weapon, or will you ask me once more...”

“What seek you with it?!” The old man bellowed, and everything (although there was practically nothing) quaked as the man’s echo stormed through the void; even the shadow flinched.

“Nothing, I seek nothing.” I whimpered and fell to my knees. My hands were still glued to the spear, and the pain was such that I had not the energy to yell in agony any longer. “I pray that Luminor guides me as I charge blindly against those who oppose Him.”

“Very well, son: Take the weapon.” Soon as he spoke the words, the pain was gone and my hands were no longer stuck to the spear, yet I held a firm grip on it with my right hand. I finally turned to look at the man...he was gone.

When I returned my sight to the shadow, there were two fiery eyes right in front of me. The evil entity was at arm’s reach (at his arm’s reach) and it had knelt to meet my gaze. I stood in a jolt and jumped backward,

but the shadow grabbed me, and in my disorientation, I dropped the spear. I tried to wriggle free of the shadow's grip, but its clasp was as if I was pressed between two hills.

"So, you have chosen your loyalties, and thus, a swift end. May the False Flame not abandon you, as he has done thousands." The shadow flung me down with all its might, and I fell through bottomless darkness. My scream became the only sound as the shadow and its dissonant cackle became distant above me. I was not going to know solid ground again; I was destined to fall through this void forever.

I awoke panting and inspected my chambers. Something was amiss. The base of my lamppost was at level with my sight, along with the legs and bases of all of my furniture, including my bed... It took me ten long, dull seconds to realize I had fallen out of bed and now I lied on cool, hard flooring. *Solid ground*, I thought, still hazy about the details of my dream. I could remember clearly that I was falling through a dark emptiness, but other details soon escaped me. I stood up, walked past the end table and opened the glass door that leads to the balcony. It was dark still, perhaps a couple of hours before dawn.

I thought about taking a stroll through town to clear my thoughts, but when my gaze found the lighthouse, I was enticed to stay in the balcony to admire such an intricate, yet attractive, edifice. The outer construct was quite a marvel: The lighthouse stood about twelve stories high and it was designed to look like two hands, one male and the other female, bound in a matrimonial ceremony. The metals designed to look like the ceremonial laces wrapped around the lovers' hands during the Oath of Unity served as outer stairs which spiraled opposite to each other and led to each of the lighthouse's floors, where archers and scouts were posted. At the top of the lighthouse, where the fingers connected only on the tips (as it is customary during the Oath of Unity) two spheres of the luminous metal, Alestium, circled around the base of the palms. The male palm faced the castle and the female hand faced the waters, so that the gaps between the fingers irradiated the spheres' light into the sea, and not into the city. The inside of the tower was a construct that I did not quite well understand, for I never had an affinity to mechanisms and tinkering. I did understand, however, that the base served as a windmill which caused an enormous gearwheel to turn, and attached to it was a pole which led all the way to the top and to the rotating base where the Alestium spheres were lodged. It is truly a wonder that men can create such things using both creative and methodical approaches; the fact that man possesses both qualities is one of the many reasons that make me believe that the Creator Sun, Luminor, exists. How else could we understand the exact measurements to make a complex

mechanism and yet hide it within such aesthetics, if not inspired by a God?

AUTHOR'S NOTE (NICK LUMEN)

I have never done anything else in my life as well as writing. It may sound like a bold statement, but I don't mean to imply that I'm *Pulitzer Prize* material. What I mean is that writing is my only true passion, and this is my freshman attempt as a novelist. This novel is quite far from great, and I only hope, like any other novelist, to do better with each subsequent work. I'd like to thank you for taking the time to read this sample chapter, and I beg you: please be brutally honest, or brutal, with your reviews. I want to know what you think as a reader, because as such, I know that going through the trouble of buying a book and setting aside some time to read it will make for a bitter experience if the book is not entertaining, captivating, or worthwhile to any degree.

So please, in the name of whatever drives you forward, with your own passions and dreams in mind, let me know what you think about this story, so that I know how to better entertain you, because I write not only for myself, but for all of you.

My sincerest debts of gratitude go to each of you. Dream Ever Yonder.