

SAMPLE CHAPTER

IMPERIAL VISIONS

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Chapter Three

Encounters Unlooked For

He came to just as he had that morning, with Piotr shaking him, the Rotliendand's pale face a few inches from his own. Still thrashing from the intensity of the vision, Thomas struggled back to consciousness. Despising his own weakness, he forced himself up, ignoring Piotr's efforts to restrain him.

"Bethed Dereszda! Kill yourself then!" muttered Piotr as Thomas staggered to his feet.

The first thing that Thomas saw was the body of the dead soldier. It lay stretched out where it had fallen, blood still oozing from the bullet hole in his chest. The corpse was only a few feet away from him.

Queasiness surged inside him. He retched, emptying the contents of his stomach upon the dry bed of the gully. He, Thomas Maynard, had killed this man. The world seemed to spin, the dizziness all but overwhelming him. For one terrifying moment it seemed that the vision would take him again.

Fighting it, he rallied, despite the urge to gag once more. He had killed a man. Shot him down without warning. Shame filled him; he felt like a murderer. As if from a great distance, he heard Piotr speaking to him and clutching at straws, he forced himself to concentrate.

"It was done well," said Piotr. "You kept your nerve. I had tracked down the *tarathin* and dispatched the pilot, but this one had already left. You saved yourself, and me."

Thomas felt warmth at Piotr's praise and hated himself for it. Concentrating upon the words, he asked about the only aspect that seemed to be somewhat removed from death. Anything to keep his mind off that subject.

"What did you do with the *tarathin*?"

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“I killed it.” Thomas gagged again. Piotr looked at him pityingly.

“Can you fly one?” he asked. Thomas shook his head.

“Neither can I. So what should I do? Let it loose? It might have flown straight home. A skilled neuromancer could have extracted our location straight from its mind. Leave it to starve? I am not cruel without reason. Killing it was a mercy.

“Now move. Your shot may have been heard – we can lose no time. We must walk through the night and may Our Lady of Silence conceal us.”

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The next morning they found the chaplain. So changed was he and so unlikely the meeting that at first Thomas failed to recognise him. Even when he did, it seemed a delusion, a waking dream brought on by his deathly weariness.

For it had been a hard night. They had gone far, wearily forcing themselves onwards when their entire bodies were craving for rest. Oddly, Piotr’s final biting words had done more good for Thomas than the previous praise: the criticism, even though for a different reason, helped to assuage his guilt. However, any guilt was soon forgotten in weariness. There is a time for soul-wracking, but when body and mind are being forced to their limits and beyond, even a saint would find it hard to dwell on matters of conscience.

With no moon, their progress was even more arduous. Even Piotr began to show signs of flagging. Tired feet stumbled as they picked their way through the darkness. More than once Thomas fell, sprawling over an obstacle that he had not seen. Befuddled, he lay there, idly wondering why his legs were no longer working. Why wasn’t he moving forward any more?

The fourth time this happened – or was it the fifth? – Piotr called a halt. For a few brief hours they rested, sleep enveloping them instantly despite the discomfort of the bare ground.

Immediately it seemed, Thomas was being woken again by Piotr. The sky was only just beginning to lose its pitch-blackness. As was his custom, the Rotliendand had risen at daybreak. Forced awake, Thomas dragged himself to his feet, knowing in his heart that his companion was right. They must put as much distance as possible between themselves and the events of the day before.

However well his mind might know this, his body told a different story. Limbs protested; the few hours of snatched sleep had not even begun to undo his weariness. So, stumbling onwards like drunkards through the grey light of dawn, the two continued their slow progress across the arid hills of Erd Gellin.

It was then that they came across the chaplain; in the queer half-light when the day had broken but the sun not yet risen above the horizon. The man’s clothes were tattered, his body filthy and his face had a look of desolation: a far cry from the spruce appearance he had

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invariably presented in the Residency. With a shock Thomas realised what he himself must look like.

“Reverend Lawrence!” he called. The chaplain had not yet seen them. At the sound of a human voice he froze, shrinking back like a startled rabbit. Thomas saw him turn round warily, his whole body poised to bolt.

Slowly, recognition dawned in the chaplain’s eyes.

“Thomas? Thomas Maynard? Andur be praised!” The chaplain was weeping, tears pouring freely down his face as he half-ran, half-stumbled towards them.

“How did you escape? Wait – don’t answer yet. Do you need food?” The expression on the chaplain’s face was answer enough. Without hesitation, both Thomas and Piotr drew a piece of flatbread from their scant supply and passed it over.

Ravenously, the chaplain tore into it, huge bites disappearing almost without chewing. It was clear that he was half-starved. Thomas reflected that, save for Piotr, it might have been him in such a situation. He owed the Rotliendand his life a dozen times over.

“Andur be praised,” said the chaplain, finishing the bread. “I can’t say how good it is to see another Triune face. I thought no one had got out alive. How did you escape the massacre?”

“Piotr carried me out. We’ve been on the run since then. But how did you get away? And how did you get here ahead of us?”

“By the grace of Andur I was away at the time or I would have perished with the others. I’d gone to Krithia, a little town around three days’ travel north of Iskarn. I wanted to speak to the priest there; he’s a godly man, not so wrapped up in saint worship as most of these heretics. I had hoped he might be able to tell me something about those tales of beasts in the countryside we’d been hearing about for so long, whether there was any truth in the matter.”

“Did he?”

“Nothing concrete, no, but he swore by his hope of redemption that they weren’t just tales. In recent months Krithia has been swamped by refugees from the countryside. Many people are too scared to live outside a town any more. His description of what he’d seen horrified me. He told of terrible wounds; limbs torn away or withered in flame and acid; cruel claw scars stretching the length of a man’s torso. The people report demons; winged monstrosities and bestial, goat-like fiends. I fear that the worst we have heard is true.”

“Demons and drogkhar,” said Piotr. “It is as we feared.”

The chaplain looked taken aback that Piotr had spoken. Clearly puzzled as to what to say, he responded by ignoring the interjection. Piotr, naturally, was unperturbed.

“The priest saved me. I told you that he was a godly man. The day I arrived in Krithia, a message arrived from the Archons. The *tarathin* landed only a bare two hours after I arrived – I dread to think what would have happened had I been just that bit slower in my journey.

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“The Archons had commanded that all foreigners be immediately imprisoned. The priest and the mayor of each village were responsible for enforcing the order. Fortunately for me, this particular priest considered his duty to Andur more important than his duty to a corrupt temporal authority. The message contained a description of the massacre at the Residency – though they put it somewhat differently of course – so he knew what would happen to me if he turned me in.

“Of course, the whole village knew I was there of course, so there was only one thing to be done. He hid me in the ossuary and told the mayor that I had escaped. You should have seen the consternation that caused! Even from inside the ossuary I could hear the commotion, for it seems that the writ had threatened doubled taxes on any village that allowed a foreigner to escape. The whole village turned out to look for me, scouring the countryside. Of course, they had no luck – and fortunately none suspected the priest of duplicity. When nightfall came and even the most dedicated of the searchers were calling it a day, he smuggled me out of the ossuary – and sent me on my way.

“That was two days ago. I’ve been wandering ever since – I haven’t dared to approach any habitation due to fear of being turned in, so I’ve been living on what I could find, which isn’t much.”

“Where were you heading?”

“I don’t know. Geography was never my strong point. I was just trying to go somewhere – to get out of Erd Gellin, or meet someone from the Residency.”

“We were lucky to meet. Had we been a trifle slower, or your village of Krithia in a different direction, our paths would never have crossed.”

“An act of divine providence indeed. Today, if I have not totally lost track of time, is Sodtar, the day of rest. Even if we may not rest, we should at least set aside time to praise and give thanks to Andur, praying that he may continue to guide us through our plight.”

Automatically, Thomas glanced at Piotr. What would his companion think of this use of time? To his surprise, he saw that Piotr was nodding approval. Thomas had forgotten the piety of the people of this continent of Laurentia. Though their practice of Andurism might have some differences to that of the Empire, their devotion outdid all but that of the most ardent of Scriptualists – amongst whose number, he reflected wryly, could undoubtedly be included the chaplain. The great works of the Awakening, the insights of Sinclair, Russell, Laverick and so many others, had yet to percolate to this Dark Continent, burning away the mists of superstition and delusion with their new light of natural, moral and arcane philosophy.

Given Piotr’s acquiescence, nay, eagerness, Thomas lent his assent without qualms. After all, Anduranism was as integral to the Triune Empire as honour, duty and loyalty to Triumvirate and Empire. A cornerstone of culture and civilisation.

The chaplain opened the service. This preaching in the open air seemed somehow to suit his temperament more than the heavy, sombre atmosphere of the Residency chapel, steeped, despite its newness, in the shared centuries of tradition. Idly Thomas wondered what Piotr

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thought of this, accustomed as he must be to the grandeur and formulaic liturgy of Canonical worship.

Yet even before the chaplain had finished the opening prayer, his words were cut off by a distant howl, an eerie, keening ululation that, though so faint as to be on the edge of hearing, nevertheless seemed to tear at the listeners' very souls. Startled, the chaplain stopped, breaking off in mid sentence. Again, the howl rang out, joined this time by another and then by more.

"Run!" cried Piotr, his pale face even whiter than usual. Grabbing his pack, he appeared ready to bolt on the instant. His behaviour chilled Thomas to the marrow. This was Piotr, the man who, alone, had been able to evade the mob at the Residency, who only a few hours ago had calmly shrugged off their killing of two Gellinese soldiers as of no account. What could have brought him to such a pass?

"But the service..." protested the chaplain.

"Forget the *retheszik* service! There will be time for that later, if we are still alive."

"You forget your place! Thomas, will you allow your servant to speak to me in such a manner? The worship of Andur..."

"Listen to me, Imperial!" Piotr's taut face was bare inches from that of the chaplain. "Continue your service if you wish, but your flesh will be torn from your bones and your soul from your body if you remain here longer. You would do well to take heed when those more knowledgeable are speaking, but the choice is yours!"

On the verge of losing control, the Rotliegenden turned, spitting at the ground. He set off at a fast pace, running westward with a swift jog trot. His companions would follow or not, as they pleased.

"Do what he says," said Thomas, likewise setting off. Behind them, the chaplain was also coming, unwilling to be left alone even if he was not convinced of the danger.

To his astonishment, Thomas found himself not only matching Piotr's pace but gaining on him, terror giving wings to his weary legs. As he drew level, a renewed chorus of unearthly howling broke out behind them, closer this time. Snatching a breath, he turned to Piotr.

"What are they?"

"*Rahvashda* – demon wolves. They have our scent; that last call confirmed it." The strain and fear was evident in his voice. Thomas felt his heart go cold. *Rahvashda* were true demons, not merely some beast that had wrongly gained the appellation.

"How can we outrun them?"

"We can't," said Piotr. "But I think the River Yedisan lies not too far this way – I hope. Pray that I am correct! It's little more than a stream, especially at this time of year, but it may serve."

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“What if we don’t make it?”

“Then we die.”

They continued running, a steady lope that ate up the yards between them and sanctuary. Behind them staggered the chaplain, just managing to keep up, though remaining always a few dozen yards behind. They dared not slacken their pace to accommodate him: only the sight of them ahead allowed him to run so fast. That and the chorus of chilling howls behind; more frequent now, and louder, closer. The very sound drained one’s blood of all hope.

Without needing to speak all three quickened their pace. They were cresting a ridge now and beheld the Yedisan before them, a thin trickle, a few feet wide, lined with olive trees and sycamores. This was their hope of salvation?

“Into the water!” cried Piotr. “It is our only chance.”

Scrambling down the steep banks they splashed into the river, the swift-flowing water barely covering their knees. The baying of the *rahvashda* spurred them on. Seeking out a low-hanging branch, Piotr hauled himself up into a tree.

“Follow!” he said.

Thomas needed no urging. Grabbing Piotr’s outstretched hand he scrambled up. The strength in the Rotliendand’s wiry arms stunned him as he was pulled up with seemingly little effort. The chaplain followed after him. Obeying Piotr’s commanding gestures they climber higher and deeper within the branches. The thin foliage seemed a pitiable small concealment.

“This may suffice,” said Piotr. “Fortunately we are downwind of them or our scent would have given us away. Be deathly still – their eyesight is poor in daylight, but their hearing is acute.

“We have done what we can. Now all that we can do is pray that the Blessed Ruth, Our Lady of Silence will have mercy and conceal us.”

“I will pray to no false goddess,” protested the chaplain. “Ruth shares none of the divinity of her Brother...”

“Pray to whomever you will,” hissed Piotr, rounding upon him with dagger drawn. “But be silent or I will cut your throat!” Wisely, the chaplain held his tongue. It was probably the first time, Thomas reflected, that anyone had managed to silence him on such an issue.

The baying was louder now, shrill yips interspersing the deeper howls that now came almost constantly. Huddled low on his branch, Thomas’s fear was magnified by the dread of the unknown. The exams for the Laurentian Service, though gruelling in their requirements for detailed knowledge of Laurentian history, culture, geography and religion, had been rather less demanding in terms of knowledge of demons. His time at Chelmsthorpe, where he had read classics, had also inexplicably failed to cover the subject. Soon enough he would know far more than he had ever wished to.

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Now he saw them cresting the ridge, less than two hundred yards from the river. Great wolf-like beasts speeding along their track faster than a horse could run. Wolf-like yet larger, far larger. To Thomas's eyes they seemed huge, the size of a lion or more, rippling forms of muscle, sinew and tooth. Despite their stature they flowed over the ground like water, all but unhindered by obstacles or gullies. Andur, they could leap the puny rivulet before them in a heartbeat!

Intent on the destruction of their prey the six demonic beasts rushed ever closer. To the water's edge they raced, following the fugitives' scent as unerringly as any bloodhound. There they pulled up short, snarling and coursing up and down the bank, seeking a new trace. They were close enough now that Thomas could see the fiery light of their eyes, the fell demonic glint that spoke of a cunning and intelligence far greater than that of any mere beast. What were they waiting for? They might fear water – that was one of the few facts about demon-kind that Thomas knew – but forget the other bank, one bound could take them into the trees themselves. Thomas had passed through fear now; all that was left was a strange calm, a dull resignation to the end that he knew was near.

A *rahvashda* leaped. Thomas closed his eyes. He was lost. The rending teeth of the beasts would devour him. There was nothing he could do. Then the howls redoubled, the growls of a moment turning to the baying of an animal that has found a scent.

But the teeth never came. To his astonishment, rather than being torn limb from limb Thomas heard their cries diminishing into the distance. He dared to open his eyes. The *rahvashda* were no longer beneath him. Then he saw them, the pack single-mindedly heading westward at speed. Thomas breathed again. They had escaped once more, by the grace of Andur, but how many times could their fortune hold?

For a long while they lay there, pressed close to their tree branches. Only after the last sound of the *rahvashda* had long since died away did the three fugitives dare to stir, levering themselves down from the olive tree that had sheltered them.

“What happened?” asked Thomas. “Why did they leave us so suddenly?”

“They picked up some other scent,” said Piotr. “Some luckless peasant no doubt.” He spat. “His misfortune has gained us a precious few hours of grace.”

“You think then, that they might come back?” said the chaplain.

“No doubt. Unless I stop them. Now silence, both of you.”

Reaching into his jerkin, the Rotliendan pulled out a securely tied, small leather pouch. Opening it, his strong fingers probed inside before drawing out a solid lump of turquoise, as big across as the end of his thumb.

Thomas felt a shiver run through him at the sight of the flawless gem.

“You're an arcanist?” he asked in astonishment.

“A mage, yes,” replied Piotr, the slight twitch of his eyes the only sign of his surprise at Thomas's remark. “You recognised the gem – are you talented yourself?”

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“No. My studies included a brief grounding in arcane philosophy – or magic, as you call it here – but no, I’m not.”

“A pity.”

“You studied in Linnarson?” Even as he spoke, Thomas sensed that it was the wrong thing to have said. Piotr’s demeanour indefinably hardened.

“I never had that privilege,” Piotr said, the edge to his voice unmistakable. “But I am sure that my skills will suffice. We have some small pool of knowledge in the northeast.

“Now silence. You must not disturb my concentration.”

Sliding out of the tree Piotr squatted down on his heels, the turquoise cradled before him in the palms of his hand. Rock-steady, his eyes stared into its green depths, his whole body and mind locked in focus upon the gem.

A few feet away Thomas watched him, hardly daring to breathe. He had never been so close to an arcanist in the casting of a spell before. The petty tricks of the students at Chelmsthorpe did not count. Gemstones, at least gemstones flawless enough to be used for arcane philosophy, were far too rare to be wasted by students: they learned their skills on poor imitations, of no real power. This was true magic, gem magic.

The chaplain stood by his side, similarly transfixed. Together they watched, spellbound, as their companion continued his mysterious work. The turquoise, initially dull, began to pulse with an inner light. At first the glow was so faint that Thomas thought it was bright, throbbing in a steady rhythm.

Piotr was chanting now, a faint, barely audible sound at the edge of hearing. Thomas strained to listen but the words were unintelligible to him; rasping, guttural phrases far removed from the mellifluous strains of Evvenyae or the stately, dignified tones of Dalradian that Thomas had always considered to be the languages of the arcane. Instead the harsh vocalisms continued, punctuated by sharp clicks and fricatives so alien it was hard to believe that they issued from a human mouth.

The chanting came faster now and Piotr’s voice became louder, more urgent. Sweat beaded on his forehead. His limbs, formerly steady as a stone, began to tremble as he reached the climax.

A final shouted word and it was done. From east to west the landscape rippled, seemed to shimmer. For a heartbeat Thomas felt as if his soul was being dragged from his body. Then the moment was over: he was himself again. Before him on the ground sprawled Piotr, gasping for breath.

The Rotliendand looked utterly drained, fatigue writ upon every line of his face in a way, the remnants of turquoise dust trickling through his fingers. Casting the spell, whatever it had been, had clearly exhausted the man in a way that even the two days of gruelling travel had not.

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Strangely mellowed by this evidence of humanness in his companion, Thomas offered the Rotliegendan his hand in assistance. Gratefully Piotr took it, wearily pulling himself to his feet.

“My last turquoise,” he said ruefully, brushing the last of the dust from his hands.

“What was it that you did?”

“Hidden our trail. If it works. Any signs of our passage will be hidden; no trackers will find us by fair means or foul. Instead, any who try will see the trail heading east.”

“How long will it last?”

“At least a day. More if we are lucky.”

Thomas marvelled, and said so. He had never heard of any arcane philosophy – or rather magic; he may as well get used to this continent’s nomenclature – that could achieve something of that nature.

Piotr shrugged, brushing off the praise.

“You are right – few know how. It’s an *isp’t’e’ran* spell. Their mages are adepts of the arts of defence and protection.”

“An *isp’t’e’ran* spell?” said the chaplain in astonishment. “You’ve studied in the Elder Alliance?”

“No, thanks be to Andur.” He shivered. “By His grace I have been spared that ordeal. The spell was taught to me by another Rotliegendan; I know not whether he himself had studied there or if he had got it, as I did, from another.

“I would not have liked to go there. I met a gryphon once. That was not so bad, barring her sheer size and physical presence, and as for the *mokshtar*, I cannot speak for them. But the *isp’t’e’ra*? They are...” He broke off, shuddering. “Utterly alien. Callous, totally cold.”

“Cruel?”

“No, not cruel. They have that advantage over humanity; they do not fight or kill for pleasure. In both the Variscan and Pelagic wars they fought on the side of the righteous. But they are merciless nonetheless. No man can withstand their tortures, should he have information that they desire. They wage war to win, taking no prisoners, save it benefit them in some other way.

“Nor are they less harsh on their own kind. I have heard it tell that a party of *isp’t’e’ra* will slay their wounded companions in a retreat, even if there was a chance of survival, if that would maximise the chance of the most surviving. Neither would those slain protest. Individuality truly has no meaning for them; neither does pity, nor cruelty.”

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Interesting as this interchange might be, a more pressing concern was troubling Thomas. The *isp'te'ra* had been covered in his studies, though it was reassuring nonetheless to hear the books confirmed. Nevertheless, here and now the immediate took precedence.

“Regarding your spell,” he interjected, taking advantage of a pause in the conversation. “Won’t any following arcani... – mage,” he corrected himself, “be able to sense the residue and be able to unravel from that which way we have gone? I’m sure the Gellinese will include mages in those hunting us. Although it buys us some time, as soon as one passes they will be on our tail again.”

“You have indeed studied,” said Piotr. “But here you are wrong. I have shadowed the residue – no mage will detect its traces, whether man, demon or even *isp'te'ra*. Those of us who follow Our Lady of Silence know many things that others do not.”

The chaplain began to open his mouth, but promptly shut it again at a sharp look from Thomas. The man was not entirely a fool.

Though only a few minutes had passed since the spell, already Piotr was getting to his feet, his iron-hard constitution demonstrating itself once more in the speed of his recovery. Only the pace that he set, a hair slower than normal, betrayed his weariness. The hiding of their trail had given them a breathing space, but no more – the three of them were still deep in the heart of enemy territory. They would need skill, endurance and, most of all, luck, if they were to reach Elaran alive.