

A Lesser Battle

By Richard Paul

'You there!' Prince Ythalren said, running up and seizing my wrist. 'Can you write in any of the first languages of the kingdom? Kaining? Vieshkryl?'

'Kaining, my Lord.' I replied, fighting the urge to elaborate the point to excess, explaining my educational history on Tahmath Hakain. Nerves make me ramble and being singled out by the Prince himself in the middle of the street would make a lot of us nervous. The increasingly painful burning sensation on the wrist he held helped me be brief however.

'Good lad, now take these and follow me.' He said, thrusting a small book and pen into my free hand. He didn't do this particularly hard but my hand recoiled and then stung as if he'd struck it with a stave. It's an unavoidable quirk of the prince; he's the grandson of Galvagaith Himself, our God of Pain, and thus it's Ythalren's nature to cause pain to everyone he touches.

I fell into step behind his guards, walking with various retainers through streets I was soon unfamiliar with. We were clearly heading towards outskirts of the Third City, and that could only mean we were heading for one of the trans-dimensional gates, and out of Tahmath Shalvakryne entirely. I looked down at the book in my hand and saw what I expected, the red eyed sigil of the Watchful Shadows of Allyahredd staring back up at me.

The Prince picked up two more people on this hasty march, one was a human who didn't appear busy and was trained in the use of a Brenny rifle, the other was a Vieshkryl in the prime of youth, enough said there.

By the time we left the shining blue walls of the city and stepped into the countryside beyond, Prince Ythalren had broken into a run, we all soon followed, running the short distance to another reality. Now I'm a fairly healthy fellow and certainly no stranger to running, but that paltry jog left me feeling like I'd just run the Storyteller Goddess' own marathon immediately after attending a festival banquet. I can only assume that was Ythalren's influence. Not a helpful thing for those going into battle but the sensations he causes tend to fade quickly enough, at least when the situation warrants it.

No two of the dozen portals beyond the city were the same; some were chaotic spectacles of barely contained energy, some were calm, barely perceptible gaps in the landscape, the one we made for was a ghastly tube of red, pungent flesh, too small to walk through; we had to crawl single-file to our destination, wherever that would prove to be.

'This is a vein of some reality's creator Goddess, I hear.' The woman behind me announced. 'From what one of my shadow friends tells me, this Goddess apparently will reach inside Herself, pluck out a vein or an artery every so often and fling them into the multiverse to build roads between realities. I can only assume they grow back afterwards cause that's a silly way to die if not. Anyway, apparently every drop of blood spilled whenever she does this will seek out a suitable spot somewhere in Her native universe and grow into an entire planet, or something planet sized at least.'

'If that were true,' someone further behind muttered through clenched teeth, not faring well with the gamey stench of this supposedly divine tunnel. 'They would have tried to bring her into the Empire, just think of... well, that's a power we couldn't just ignore.'

Just think of the potential for creating worlds to run away to when the Void finds us and effortlessly devours everything we've built to oppose it with.

No one wanted to say it, in fact it was illegal to believe it, but the thought was always there in the back of our minds and was not easily banished.

Still, there wasn't time to dwell. The exit of the portal was drawing near. Gratefully I slithered out of the fleshy tube and stood up on an outcropping of grey-brown rock on the side of a mountain. We were a long way off the ground below, it was windy as bollocks and there really wasn't room up here for all of us.

'Those of you who are here to fight, come with me. The rest of you know your tasks. Let's none of us waste time.'

The Prince and his soldiers charged down the steep slope of the mountain as casually as you please, and sparing a glance over the edge I could just about see through the mist, and hear over the shrieking wind, the battle below; it couldn't be against the Void's slaves, they wouldn't pluck ordinary citizens off the street for a fight with the true enemy, nor would Prince Ythalren himself arrive so late for such a fray. Deranged Void cultists perhaps? The army of some tyrant whom Allyahredd had judged intolerably rude?

The music of a simple metal pipe sounded from behind me, followed moments later by pleasant and increasingly animated vocals in a language I didn't recognize. This served to snap my wandering mind back to the task at hand. Recalling what I'd learned some years ago about the nature of shadows and their books, I sat cross legged on the ground, as far away from the murderous edges as I could manage, and opened the book, placing the nib of the pen on the first page.

A jet black ink sped from it and throughout the page, soon covering every inch of the white paper. From there it started snaking its way up the length of my arm. I couldn't feel a thing, it was quite literally the passing of a shadow over my flesh. Even when it extracted my soul and took over the management of my body there was no terror, no pain, no unease of any kind.

This shadow was doing as its duty warranted, preparing a story for the unfathomable libraries of Allyahredd. There would be dozens of shadows and dozens of hosts like me scattered all around the area, writing the tale of the

battle in the valley below. The one borrowing my body would tell the tale from my perspective, but to do that it needed my fingers, and it needed the knowledge of the Kaining language left inside my mortal mind. The shadows know more languages than anyone could learn in even an Angel's lifetime but all the same, it needed to know, or remember, how I would write if it was to write from my perspective; last of all, it needed my displaced soul to go down into the valley below to bear witness to the unfolding battle, he would see what I saw and transcribe accordingly.

With the insidious music behind me holding the worst of my fear at bay, I followed the path of the Prince and his soldiers down into the valley, floating as fleshless spirits do, down the mountainside, through the mists and into the thick of the madness below. On the one side I saw familiar looking men and monsters fighting beneath the sigils of Tahmath Shalvakryne and Gith Hakain.

On the other side I saw the unimaginative jet-black banner of the Void's lunatic followers, those not enslaved to the will of the All-Feasting monstrosity and its presumed king, but those who had chosen to follow it of their own volition; those unfathomable idiots and their grotesque nihilism who decide to champion the complete extermination of the multiverse; who expose their worlds and others if they can reach them to the tendrils of the destroyer and laugh as all they ever knew and indeed themselves are reduced to nothingness.

You see incarnations of this same cult spring up everywhere you go in the multiverse, and for the sake of all that lives our response to finding them is to exterminate them before they can instigate any more death and destruction. Though to be honest, half the time the Void has done our job for us in that regard. It doesn't spare its worshippers, it doesn't even spare its most useful slaves for long, its hunger and disgust are too great.

It didn't take long to see that the Prince's forces had the advantage here, long pikes and continual volleys of arrows upon the enemy's human-looking heads were driving the cretins towards the waiting claws and maws of the Vieshkryl and similar carnivorous subjects of King Viynon, who had managed to position themselves behind the enemy, probably by burrowing beneath the ground.

Still, my perspective had not been sought by the Prince simply to declare the obvious fact of a small victory, I was here to tell a story worthy of the library. To that end I took another look over the battlefield and my eyes, or disembodied equivalent, were drawn to a troublingly young looking individual whose species I'd not seen before. She was a short, almost squat woman whose skin almost resembled stone, wielding a pikestaff almost three times as long as she was as easily as if it were a twig.

I reached out a hand-of-sorts and touched her head as she passed by, and from her mind took all that she'd be happy to share with the Shadows. Every citizen of Tahmath Shalvakryne knows this moment is coming sooner or later, just as they know we don't have time to ask for such stories, nor listen to them. By this means of Allyahredd's devising we may thus receive what we need in a moment.

This woman was Obathra, a native of the fallen world of Lithgaklagranth, and she was one of less than a thousand survivors plucked from that world by King Viynon and his armies before the Void devoured it. Through her mind's eye I could see the armour clad hands of the Dark King himself literally pluck her from the ground and hurl her through the portal as hosts of soulless Void slaves bore down on them both.

An hour or so later, as her memories told, Viynon was literally pulling the grief and shock from her head, then burning away her capacity to feel such things again. If you are from the kind of world I think you're from then you might judge this callous or cruel, and you'd be right, it's a damaging thing to do to a person, but never let it be forgotten that we are fighting a desperate war against an unconquerable adversary to preserve the universe from destruction, we cannot afford to waste anything, and that includes time squandered on tears. More than that the very grief and anguish that our king stole from that girl was given over to the smith-priests of Galvagaith, to be refined and reforged into blades or arrowheads to strike back against the Void with. All her pain shall avenge itself.

This was Obrathra's first battle, she'd been judged too young to join the war against the Void-proper so would practice and hone her quickly learned skills against these death-besotted fools and others like them in battle after battle until she was ready for worse.

Rest assured that would not constitute the entirety of her life, assuming she could survive long enough; drone soldiers and meat-minions are the Void's way, not ours.

I took five more stories from five more soldiers moving to bolster our front line and all were far too similar to Obrathra's; ours was an army of refugees and survivors who'd lost almost everything to the Feasting enemy. I admit I couldn't help but feel somewhat guilty beholding the memories of these people, the home that had adopted them was the same one I'd been born into. In many cases the suns and skies and family and friends I'd known all my life were like to the ones they'd lost forever.

That would... could... might all change one day of course, but that's an unworthy thought, especially when there was work to do.

I made my way to where the fighting was thickest, floating over my countrymen who were striding over the black-armoured bodies of the cultists they'd cut down. Over the sounds of clashing metal and final screams came the tell-tale hungry snarls of the Vieshkryll and similar sounds from similar individuals in their ranks. This battle could not last longer than an hour more from the look of it.

As I wandered, I caught sight of a cultist leaning against the mountainside. His arm was gone and he'd bleed to death in moments, but that was long enough for me to touch his head and receive his confession, or his scorn, whichever he would choose to give me.

His was one of the common justifications, his world could not resist the Void and as the people felt its shadow growing near, a desperate belief had sprung from nowhere that they could ally with it and thus be saved. These cretins

had been on the verge of launching a campaign of genocide against a nearby kingdom with whom they'd been friendly neighbours for generations, all in the futile hope that the Void would see this as worthy tribute and spare them.

Moving on to soldiers who had not yet taken their death wounds, I found that several were glad that they'd die here rather than carry out the evil lunacy of their ruler, but most were seized by the same instinctive, almost-understandable need for survival that drove them to seek mercy between the Void's teeth in the first place. One woman, no older than Obrathra from the look of her, was literally laughing as her own people fell about her, and when I touched her head I was gladly handed the full force of her murderous zeal for the march of the Void. *Let it all die, let everything die!*

Why did she feel this way? I can't say for certain, but in life she had very quickly come to hate everything she saw, everything but the constant emptiness of the Void that would obliterate all she loathed, even herself. In practice she found things less enjoyable when a hungry vieshkryll maiden ate her in seven bites.

I found nothing particularly original in any of the enemy's remnants, and with all respect to our own forces I found nothing terribly original in their stories either. I'm afraid on a multiversal scale there are few unheard stories to be found where this great war is concerned; the Void advances and those who live either take up arms against it or for it. In the days that followed this battle, two more were fought in which the Void's fanatics on that particular world were extinguished. Following that, our emissaries journeyed where they could to offer who they could sanctuary in the measureless netherworlds of Tahmath Shalvakryne. It is a scene that has played out countless times before in my homeland and its equivalent realms come before it and it's one that will play out long after our land and perhaps even our deities are no more.

For my part, when all was done, I returned to where my body sat writing in the book and waited for the shadow in my body to finish its task. Then it returned itself to the pages, returned my body to me and, once we'd been dismissed by one of Prince Ythalren's captains, me and those who'd come with me crawled back home through the putrescent vein. Once there I turned the book and pen over to the first librarian I found and went about my business. From the look of the second sun, it wasn't even midday yet.