

ON WINGS OF SILKEN CARNAGE

XIII

book one :: shadow of locust

*"I know why my father kept the sword locked up, he was protecting me."
Lord Stjepan, 6th Summer 6054*

This chapter signals the final pages in Book One: Shadow of Locust – it has been a hard and tragic road for the characters used as pawns in a power struggle beyond their reach or comprehension and while they are aware now of their susceptibility they are powerless to stop the impending genocide. The Loremasters themselves find their reaction too little too late, the Dædekemani's plans well ingrained and well organized despite minimal set backs from the characters. Ventine is no more but the collective geneticists have already faded from view leaving their creations to bring about apocalypse – one that even the dark god, Andaras, did not expect betrayed by those he sought to control.

The evisceration of Hæstra (from Sarnak to the Keyten River) is absolute and one that affects Kulthea. The plant of the Unlife begins to spread slowly but surely taking root in all living matter rendering them inert. The Unlife spreads over the next year these poisonous roots – living in Hæstra will be suicide as the Murlogi sweep through the plains under an almost impenetrable darkness, clouding the skies of these lands – the spores of the plant like a vast cloud of volcanic ash protecting those in support. Yet they do not achieve total desolation – the Emerald Forest resisting valiantly and the river Naiad Kellus sacrificing his life to form a wall where the Keyten runs preventing the spread northward into the Bodlean Dales.

Eclipsing the Sun and Moon: Imperceptibly Charon drags forward chasing the rising sun that approaches midday while Orhan's quarter sliver cuts from the west on angle conjoined to the orb of the sun. Charon is full, ashen and closer than ever to the lands it will soon cast into darkness. All eyes cast to the heavens and life within Sarnak has slowed to a crawl, everyone looking ever upward spellbound and mortified by the closing eclipse. All life appears to notice the impending change, animals are restless and even the Bay of Izar has taken on remarkable qualities, a deep fog rolling in tinged in silvery-metal light almost as if tidal forces had created a great wave pressing against Sarnak's very walls. Charon glows a deep red as it nears its perigee, near the sun so close. It takes but a few more minutes until the third moon's corona casts a black line across the sun and Orhan. The blinding white light of the sun smears a ruddy hue and the atmosphere of Kulthea rapidly changes as the moon crawls to cover both planetary bodies.

The thick fog sweeping the Bay of Izar turns bloody, the ocean churns and one can literally hear and see waves pulled by such a massive conjunction crash against the walls of Sarnak, foaming spray like bubbling blood from a fresh kill. And as Charon crosses the centre of the sun eclipsing not just the sun but also Orhan, the seas calm... and not a sound passes, not even the breath and life of the city that holds silence close to its heart as day turns quickly into night – but not night of perpetual darkness. As Charon follows both sun and moon a fiery halo burns

and bleeds across the sky in a corona that showers Kulthea in a haze of dark red. So deep are the shadows that buildings and people fade from view, swallowed by the celestial event... with silhouettes tainted in the uneasy lamination.

Birds and people quieten as the eclipse signals the Darkside Zenith, and as the orb of the dark moon heralds a new beginning not even a breath or one's own heartbeat can be heard – so total is the cessation of light. Then from far away the sound of the ocean returns, in a fast rushing, an unleashing of forces – an outpouring of noise that builds in a ferocious intensity.

Uneasiness builds within all living things, yet to essence users it is more terrifying for as the noise builds so too does the charge of anti-essence about them. Sickened to the point of collapse the energy coagulating under the gaze of the dark eye of Charon discharges randomly striking across the sky in veins of lightning exploding with impact against the Forbidden Ridge illuminating a dark black cloud rising like the plume of a volcano into the air, but with more ferocity the storm drives the clouds unnaturally about Charon and spreads across the heavens blocking the view of the very dark moon itself.

Day turns into nightmare.

Screams are heard before the battle is met, the roaring sound behind them amplified by Sarnak's position among the mountainous ranges. Before the front line of Sarnak south of the River Urij portals pepper the ground, opening in black elliptical pools that dance with red coronas just like the dutiful parent moon above. From these portals step monstrosities that defy explanation or understanding, vestigial horrors some with forms like man, many without. The first line of defence are slaughtered, left in shock and disbelief before the parodies of life twisted in conglomerations; gangrenous flesh oozing acid that, crystalline claws that glow with inner light, atrocious and aberrant they stalk forward, some as tall as the mightiest of siege towers built by the Sarnaki, crushing tens of men under foot and tearing down the closest of defences. Their numbers are not endless and the portals fade and reappear across the land, from the mountains curtains of red unfurl across the sky, dark shapes witnessed in the distance descending, hunting for any life.

Those in the city run for their lives, seeking refuge in any building, causing panic in the red glow of the city. All soldiers meet the demonic charge after the initial shock and the casualties build as men and women meet the small horde of malevolent entities. The sound of battle creates rhythm to the ululating outpouring of dark clouds from further up the River Urij, thickening the air in a membranous web suffocating the sky, closing about the eye of Charon. Hundreds, if not a thousand troops are lost before the prodigious demons, but their sacrifices are not in vain as wave after wave hurled at them, not to forget ballista and catapult inflict heavy casualties – unfortunately on both sides. Soon the armies have shattered the initial wave and the portals are closed behind the putrid corpses of the demons by Sorcerers aligned along the parapets of Sarnak to the south.

NOTE: Depending on where the characters are placed, they may have to actually roleplay out their actions due to location. Description is served here for an all encompassing effect.

Overhead the sky rages in a torrent of red lightning through the ever-expanding cloud that now even closes Charon's halo. With fires raging across the battlefield from the lightning the strikes downward discharging the essence silhouettes become phased and strobe from motion to motion. From tunnels deep in the Forbidden Hills Murlogi stream in their thousands, which

from your distance appear as scuttling rats as they launch an assault planned for years. Some fifteen minutes and the first of the dark inhuman's reach the defences of Sarnak – yet for all their numbers the defences hold as screams and guttural cries fill the air in a new surge of sound. Again and again, by sheer numbers the Murlogi surmount their own bodies in their never-ending charge to push through the Allied ranks. Progress is slow and at stalemate, Murlogi swarm from the north and to the south of the city seeking ingress to the Amazonian stronghold. Galleons struggling with the storm launch flaming pitch engulfing hordes of the snub-nosed, foul breeds preventing them from employing ladders and other machines of war they carry in hurried gangs. From the estuary beyond the lighthouse smaller galleons launch ballista of hundreds of arrows in each shot over their troops at the depth of the swarm.

After a good half hour of combat that builds mountains of bodies to the south of the River Urij, the goblins begin to falter – their numbers still heavily outweigh the defence yet they seem to be in rout. Something from behind them cuts a noticeable swath in the lights of the strobing storm, the noise of the cloud soon eclipsed by a massive sound like a downpour or beating of many wings.

The Murlogi fall, unable to evade the cloud that swallows them, and soon even the fleeing soldiers of Sarnak and Miir who run for the War Docks to cross the river, panicked and terrified as much as those they had just battled. Soon all the soldiers are pushing to get through, men and women pushed from the bridge to drown in their heavy armour in the River Urij – those lucky. The sound of rustling is louder than the dark ashen cloud that continues to spread from far up the River Urij, yet the undulating form that sweeps across the recent battlefield is something far removed.

Soldiers pour through the gate barrelling down the Rose District in utter fear for their lives, none stopping to let any know what is coming. Then, all at once the seething mass vanishes leaving silhouettes of a small rabble of some few thousand men, women and children walking slowly across what is now a sea of bones freshly picked. The cacophony of a million rustlings all but fades back to the shore like roar of the cloud plume. The Charn Raiders walk like the undead, plodding ever forward with little motion save the determination to advance.

The sky spasms in arcs of red lightning and even the cloud of ash blanketing the sky has new guests – a vast, writhing sky of wormlike creatures with leathery wings fight for the right to reach Sarnak first. For as far as the eye can see they scour the heavens, this seething mass of ebon winged beasts. Now and then they descend, fighting with one another for stragglers of the Allied armies, picking up the lost in deformed claws, brutally tearing them limb from limb in an airborne fight over the Charn Raiders.

As the Charn Raiders walk slowly through the earthen defences they hold their position on the trenches muddied not with rain, but with blood. Pitch and magic is used against them, but the attacks are feeble and have little impact on the few thousand of primitives. Then, simultaneously they all bring their hands forward to clasp to their chests from what appears in prayer – if only it were. From the smallest babe to the eldest they pry open their chests, cracking their ribcage open like a book, opening their mouths in silent cry – from within the rustling begins and pours from each of the assembled – a vast swarm of voracious locusts ever-pouring descends upon Sarnak and the sky rains in Gogor.

The locusts will attack and consume those still on the southern side of the bridge and on the bridge first. The locusts will take ten minutes to devour those there before continuing to the city. The Gogor hunt men and women throughout all of Sarnak,

picking up victims using their prehensile tails and claws to rend flesh from their kills that they scatter into the city streets.

It should be apparent that this is a fight that cannot be won, and even Kedrick flees. The city of Sarnak is gripped in panic as people take to ships trying to flee by both sea and air; horses carry the lucky few northward of the city. Hundreds of those running are trampled to death by horses and their fellow citizens – it literally is a selfish scramble for survival.

NOTE: Nassain will be with them in this moment defending and accompanying them as they flee. Lord Invarath will not have led an army but instead have stayed with Stjepan to co-ordinate the men. Vedesis and Daemander will be close to Celimé. Chimon, Ishraha's closest ally and friend will be at his side.

This moment should be played out as the Gogor descend. The characters should be faced with the momentous difficulty of navigating through the city streets evading horses with and without rider. Do they stop to help the wounded and dying? Body parts rain down upon them and Gogor will be a real and serious threat as they try to slaughter without care for status – they smell their victims and that is all that matters. If they dally too long, the Charn Raider, now crossing the bridge into Sarnak provide the locusts with entry into the city. They attack and burrow into any organic material with a carnivorous ferocity. The length of an index finger and even longer the insects soon overrun the city but do not attempt to kill the Gogor.

Whether they head for the Navigator Obelisk that is located near the Directorate Headquarters or House Xanaari's compound is up to them. The obelisk is far closer from the south of the city, but as they will find out it is a vast struggle of hundred trying to call Navigators to escape. After only a few Navigators realize the danger they will not come when the Gogor start picking off tens of stragglers in the crowd with every descent. To reach the obelisk they will need to kill other people in struggle to reach it – an action that will require hard emotion. Escape via Navigator to take them out of reach will be expensive, and would easily bankrupt Pellern's funds, if it had any.

House Xanaari is further from the south and will be hard to reach. SIGHTS, SOUNDS, SMELLS, all should play a strong part. Leave no room for complacent or calm thought – those that do should receive harsh result. The characters may die here unless they are swift and wise.

Saren and her crew are nearly ready to cast off when they arrive, Saren one of the last to be on the ground fleeing with scroll cases in an open knapsack. She is not cold-hearted and knowing the need for Stjepan to help the House find the assassin she will let him accompany and if he asks up to five others. If he pushes the case for others, delaying their flight a Gogor will descend and attempt to make off with one of them. More than six extra men will slow the sleek skysloop.

Waves of Death: Fleeing Sarnak on the skysloop will not be as easy as it seems. For every one man beyond the six extra (including Lord Stjepan) there will be an attack by a respective Gogor.

The skysloop shoots out on the powerful winds generated in the air by the flowstorm, winds buffet across the deck making standing impossible for the untrained as the sloop angles sharply upwards narrowly screaming past the shrieking Gogor carrying screaming men and women

into the sky, torn apart as the Gogor fight to rend and tear. The swarm of locusts below extends from the southern gates to the Directorate Headquarters, shredding life in its wake. Ships fighting with the ocean flail helplessly, driven back by the storm onto the walls of Sarnak crushed helplessly against each other, easy pickings for the Gogor. From the northern gate thousands stream yet they crawl in comparison to the approaching locusts and Gogor who now give chase to the many airships finding sail on the powerful winds. The bulky merchant caravels and airbarges lifting into the sky are haplessly assailed by the Gogor who pluck crew and tear sails. A massive caravel loses its momentum and with its sails torn and spins out of control, tumbling its crew overboard the caravel careens and impacts the northern gate, sealing the fate of those within and under in a hail of rock and explosion. Smaller caravels light with load power beyond many, but it is the Ayrohirdhan Pani who is the only one to swiftly make the miles it to the foothills of the Forbidden Ridge with a swarm of Gogor in fast pursuit.

As the skysloop gains height it loses advantage to the descending Gogor who will attack sails and crewmen without bias. Saren has everyone pay their way, defending the skysloop as best is possible. Without the extra load, only two Gogor will they have to face that reach the stern of the ship. Death is expected to be near or greater than 99% of the entire population at Sarnak. Those lucky to escape via Navigator, and those on airship are the few who can survive – NPC's will be as much targets as the PC's.

Gogor

Strength: D6	Agility: D6	Health: D8
Knowledge: N/A	Perception: D6 *	Luck: N/A

Claws x 2: D8	Poisoned Tail: D10
Armour: D30 Hide	

The poison must be resisted with two successful health rolls at current stat or until ten minutes kills the character. The poison is debilitating reducing one physical stat by a dice per round.

The skysloop manoeuvres the treacherous Forbidden Ridge unable to ascend above the Forbidden Ridge lost in the growing cloud that fills Hæstra faster than even the sloop can manage. It is some eight hours before the Forbidden Ridge is finally to the south of the fast moving sloop having crossed Falkenna swarming with Murlogi and the Wailing Marsh alight in strange lights dancing under its canopy. All the while, the sky has been black in low hugging cloud with no sun or Orhan, even Charon is removed. Beyond the Forbidden Ridge the winds die down, the flowstorm left behind slowing the sloop.

It takes twenty more hours until they catch sight of Pellern. They may rest and roleplay in that time, reflect on the horrors they have seen and the knowledge that the darkness follows them and outruns them.

Pellern in Flames: The sloop trails the Imperial Highway, once source to all that was peace and right in Hæstra. The dark smothering cloud continues its race, outrunning the sloop, stretching for miles; no light breaks the dense cover making it impossible to tell if it is day or

night. Miir below is mostly lost in shadow save for the fires that burn scattered in isolated pockets or the illumination of the storm as it discharges across the horizon. After more than a day you estimate, you are able to see Chelzaria, pointed out by the crew. It burns. Like an inferno the city is ravaged beyond compare, Castle Harond burns in a mountainous pile of rubble and the city spread out from it. The sloop veers to the east to avoid directly passing over the city but from your height and speed there seems to be no movement, and perhaps that is just as well given the devastation.

Half a quintar later and Pellern comes into view. Once home, bastion of all that you strived for, now lays in rubble and fire like in Chelzaria. Black smoke churns in thick, viscous clouds, silhouetted against the horizon, which for the first time shows a break in the dark storm that obscures the sky. Castle Pellern does not stand, half of it collapsed off the raised stone completely upon the Navigator Obelisk. The glow from the flames shows men and women though, running through the streets and even as the sloop approaches, cries are heard, gesticulations in your direction. Saren gives order and the sloop sharply veers away from Pellern striking out northeastward.

Stjepan may disagree and demand to be let down, but Saren refuses and if pushed she will order the ship to sweep past at maximum speed.

The sloop tilts and tightly curls back to Pellern, descending with rapid speed, increasing all the while the sails full, bulkhead straining with the downward pressure. Sharply arcing, the ship veers away yet again as they cut across the eastern parapet of Pellern and for a few seconds the real scope of the devastation becomes apparent. Thousands upon thousands of Lugrôki hurl spears and rocks as the sloop comes close, screaming like pigs the grotesque and powerful beings give pathetic chase to the ship. Behind them a city levelled, rows of spears giving the first glimpse of the real folk of Pellern, impaled and left to die, others cooking over the massive fires where large crowds of the cannibalistic race fight and kill each other for the taste of burning flesh of humans.

Race for the Keyten River: A few more hours later and the Keyten River comes into view, not obscured by the cloud that has lost most of its initial momentum and now crawls its way northward. Twilight is a blessing from the perpetual night, just to feel and see the Sun and Orhan lifts a mood of gloom from the crew and ship, basking in the fading light. The great river that separates Miir from the Bodlean Dales is wide as it is deep, the skysloop descending low to evade cross currents of strong winds howling from the west around the arm of the Mountains of Gold. The banks of the Keyten are abundant in life – both flora and fauna flourish. The sun sinks far to the west, spreading a violet light across the moors north of the river where fog rises.

No one is prepared, when the sloop crosses the river, for the being that literally rises out of the depths before the sloop that Saren calls for immediate halt. A giant of a man forms from the waters of the river itself, pulling its self up with hangs churning in the translucent element. Powerful in design the man is one hundred metres tall from the waist up that joins with the river – his voice booms scarring off many birds seeking rest for the evening, flocks of them scrambling from the nearest trees.

This is Kellus the Naiad, a powerful being of faerie kind. Kellus can see the advancing cloud and has heard and felt the changes about him. He stops them from crossing the river, moving faster than they can to intercept – Saren will eventually

give up. Kellus demands to know what it is that chases them, what it is that is to the south.

His body and face ripples in the moving liquid and it is hard to discern his features. If informed of what has happened and about what the cloud brings he thanks them letting them pass and sinks down into the river.

As you pass the tributary and strike out across the moors of Bodlea, there is a sound of thousands of waves crashing upon the shore. Looking back, you see the Keyten River rising across its length in a vast wall of water that streams upwards into the sky for as far as the eye can see, the sun's last rays catch in the reflection of the waters and as the light fades so too does your view of the river and of Miir and the lands you once called home.

Denouement: In the coming days and weeks word spreads about Emer of the massive destruction at the conjunction of the moon Charon over Orhan and the Sun over Hæstra. From Sarnak to Stroane, from Votania to the Keyten River there has been no word and few escaped, but what few did have carried the tales of the invasion by locusts and Gogor under a vast cloud of darkness locking the lands in perpetual night. The cloud appears to have stopped its advances, halted by the Scorpion Ridge and Morbek Highlands to the South and penned into Miir, Vornia and Stroane by the Mountains of Gold and the Spine of Emer – the assault north would have been successful save for the sacrifice so it is said of the great Naiad, Kellus, who gave his life to create an impenetrable wall out of the Keyten River.

While Hæstra suffered greatly at the alignment of the heavenly bodies, the eclipse was only in that region and while flowstorms sprung across all of Emer, no genocide in the sense of what happened passed beyond. People everywhere are stunned by the news and trade from those lands has ceased with Airships now taking extreme measures to circumvent the barren lands.

No word or help comes from the Lords of Orhan, or the Loremasters, all quiet regarding the disaster so total in its devastation. Foolish explorers are seen entering the lands hoping for plunder, but all who enter never return. There is no hope for return, the clouds remain perpetual.

The locust cast its shadow from the first day you all met in Sarnak, both Khera and Gavant bidding for perhaps the only thing that could have saved you – the eog. It has consumed everything you fought to establish and nearly all those with whom you allied as friends. Its deception spanned many thousands of years, yet your involvement was new in its eternal lifetime. Now, it has no need of you and without ties you are cast to the very winds the elven skysloop rides, carrying you forward to Sel-Kai.