Graham McNeill

BLOOD & IRON

YOU ARE MY HAMMER AND WEAPON OF WAR:
with you I break nations in pieces; with you I destroy kingdoms

Jeremiah 51:20

TRENCH CRUSADE™

Blood & Iron

Trench Crusade fiction
by Graham McNeill
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Four hours since they'd barricaded the church doors against the plague-fiends, and Cleric Kadir was somehow still alive. The man sat on the cold flagstones in a pool of blood, kept upright only by the heavy crucifix bound to his back.

Leonid sat on the pew facing Kadir, watching him bleed out with every laboured breath.

A lung punctured at the very least.

Blood pumped from the shrapnel hole punched in the man's breastplate, causing the scripture acid-etched into the bronze to gleam like the illuminations in the holy books bound at his waist. It didn't look that bad an injury, but Leonid hadn't located an exit wound, which meant the metal had ricocheted on bone and was lodged somewhere in Kadir's chest. Even if that didn't kill him, the fragment had almost certainly been anointed with some blasphemous concoction straight from the gutters of Hell itself.

Kadir's groans of pain came in waves as he drifted in and out of consciousness, a whimpering, animal sound, before he remembered what he was.

Then the cleric's iron will clamped down on his pain.

"It's nothing," Kadir hissed through bloodied teeth. "This agony is a blessing, Lieutenant Kovalenko. I welcome it. Through suffering I draw closer to the Almighty."

"As you say, Cleric Kadir," said Leonid. The cleric was the closest to Heaven of them all. Did he feel the breath of God upon him as his

lifeblood ran out? Leonid almost envied him that. The man had refused to let them help him, even going so far as to draw his three-barrelled Trinity revolver when Leonid and Anastasia tried to cut the blood-soaked ropes securing the oaken crucifix.

Kadir coughed, his whole body shuddering, his beard wet with too-bright blood.

"Pain is fleeting," he said, as much to himself as Leonid. "Salvation is eternal."

"Amen," replied Leonid.

Kadir reached down and unhooked a book from his belt, staring at it for long seconds, as if crossing some Rubicon within himself. He let out a sigh then held it out, his hand trembling with effort.

"The Testament of Sanction," said Kadir. "The last exhortations of the Saint Vitus war-dancers before the Fall of Rijeka."

Leonid accepted the book, its leather cover wet with blood.

"This copy was blessed by the Third Meta-Christ himself," continued Kadir, his words fortified with acceptance. "I now pass it onwards. Death closes in, Lieutenant, and you will have need of the Saviour's light before the end. Take it, and see to the anchorite."

Leonid nodded and pushed himself upright, glad he wouldn't have to sit and watch the man die gasping for breath and choking on his own blood.

"God be with you, brother cleric," he said, turning away.

Leonid limped down the short nave, pressing his palm against the carved columns supporting the cracked roof. The stone was moist and warm to the touch, as if the building itself was rank with sickness and sweating out a fever. He snatched his hand back and wiped it dry on his oil and blood-stained fatigues, repulsed by the sensation.

How had things taken such a disastrous turn?

Not even a week out from the Odesa Oblast, fresh-faced recruits newly mustered in Berezivka; new boots polished, blue uniform jackets with the golden yellow piping still stiff with starch and delousing powder. An uneventful crossing of the Black Sea to Trebizond, then

bundled on three half-tracks for the journey south to New Antioch. The mood had been good, the hymnals rousing as they bumped and juddered along cratered war-roads.

Upon reaching the turn for Gezköy, Cleric Kadir had decreed they would halt and offer prayers at the Surp Minas church, just to the west of Erzurum. Leonid concurred, the idea of spending the night in a place of sanctity more appealing than continuing onwards through the dark hours of the night.

The townsfolk rushed out to meet them with desperate cries of supplication. They spoke in a tongue Leonid didn't recognise, but he didn't need to understand them to know something was very wrong.

They pointed towards the church, beckoning with frantic urgency just as ululating shrieks split the air like a curse.

Incoming!

The first shell landed in the heart of the town, shredding a score of men and women in a storm of flame and fury.

A second obliterated their lead truck and crippled the following one.

Thunderous blasts hammered the earth as foul, emphysemic smoke spread from the cratered ruins in roiling clouds and chunks of stone and dirt rained down. More shells followed, filling the streets with red-hot shrapnel and howling plague-fog that moved with inhuman purpose.

It sought mouths open in fear and screaming for help.

It wormed its way down the throats of men and women, instantly rendering them down to maggot-ridden meat. Healthy organs liquified to mulch. Flesh sloughed from bones bursting with cancerous marrow.

Screams of agony turned to soupy blurts of vomited gruel as the townsfolk fell, riddled with uncounted plagues woven in the crucibles of Hell by the servants of Beelzebub.

Seeing what had to be the church of Surp Minas ahead, Leonid yelled for his soldiers to mask up and seek shelter within. The walls and roof of heavy stones, carved with holy icons and beatific saints, would be better protection than the thin metal skin and canvas sheeting of their trucks.

They fled for the church as the full dread power of the pestilential smoke revealed itself.

The townsfolk ravaged by the toxic fumes dragged their rotten-meat carcasses upright, wreathed in clouds of buzzing flies, their bellies splitting open with distended tumours and spilling froths of maggots at their feet.

Their moans of torment cut through the din of the barrage; rasping, wet, and rancid.

Leonid could barely remember the ecstasy of fumbling as he struggled with the rubberised seals of his gas-mask, half-running, half-crawling his way through the shambling host of the plague-born towards the church. Barely a handful of his soldiers made it inside with him, the last two dragging the mortally wounded Kadir behind them.

They'd expected an immediate assault, but it hadn't come.

Instead, the diseased hell-fiends circled the church, calling to mind motion-films he'd seen of warriors of the Sultanate pacing the pilgrim circuit in Mecca before the eternal sandstorm had locked it away. The droning of flies was constant, an inescapable hissing sound that wore his nerves to bare wires.

Lucaz, Balazs and his twin brother, Gedroi, covered the eastern windows with their rifles; Romain, Elsa, and Anastasia the western. At first, they'd taken pot-shots at the plague-born, but Leonid had ordered them to save their bullets.

"Hey, Lieutenant," said Lucaz. "The cleric...?"

Leonid shook his head and said, "Any more movement?"

"Nothing new," said the soldier. "God's mercy, I almost want them to come at us."

Leonid shared the man's sentiment; anything to puncture the drum-taut tension straining his sinews.

"They'll come soon enough," said Leonid, raising his voice so the others could hear. "And we'll be ready for them. We'll show them how the Varangian Oathbound fight!"

Lucaz grinned, hammering a fist to his chest, and Leonid felt the sentiment curdle in his soul.

When the enemy did come, he knew they didn't have enough ammo to last more than a few minutes.

He turned and took a shallow breath of the stagnant air filling the small church, wincing at the spoiled reek of carrion dust in his lungs. Wan light illuminated the painted interior where the stone walls and roof had been punctured by shelling, the atmosphere thick with motes of dust and the reek of putrefying matter.

The war-ravaged landscape of the Levant was no stranger to the smell of ashen bodies and fly-bloated flesh, but the pestilence beyond the walls was something else, something unnatural.

Leonid didn't know why the infernal plague that had wiped out the townsfolk hadn't reached inside the church to claim them, but suspected it had less to do with the holiness of their sanctuary and more with the dying machine slumped at its heart. He had studiously avoided looking at it until now, loath to see a machine of such divine holiness brought so low.

He'd only ever seen a shrine anchorite once before, a giant of stone and steel marching the holy road to Roma with a mad procession of ragged men and women following in its wake. It had been an armoured war-altar and a holy behemoth of battle. The terrifying war-machine, with its steepled helm, armoured torso, and weapons that were the bane of demons and the Heretic legions alike, had seemed invincible in its towering glory.

Leonid had never forgotten that sight, nor the terrifying zeal of its pilgrim followers, their sanity shattered by apocalyptic revelations.

A shrine anchorite could stride through all the storms of Hell unleashed and remain untouched. But this one was dying, the monk entombed within barely holding onto life.

Like Kadir, it had been mortally wounded, though what had brought it low and how it had come to this place was a mystery. Perhaps its presence was a miracle, a gift from God? Or perhaps they had been sent to save it?

The cleric might once have offered up a divine rationale, but he had no answers left to give.

The anchorite's painted hull-plates and reliquary panels were corroded and rusted through, as though they had aged a thousand years, but

Leonid could just about make out images of a martyred saint pierced by arrows. Blessed fluids oozed from the anchorite's internal piping like rancid blood and four wooden crossbows hung around its neck, symbolic of something Leonid didn't understand. The anchorite's colossal mace – a weapon that would take a dozen men to lift – lay discarded by its limp arm, the blessings upon its haft illegible beneath a coating of rust.

The rasp of shallow breaths drew Leonid's gaze to the blessed and wretched figure hung from the great wooden wheel fixed to the anchorite's other arm. Near naked, save for a broken helm and shoulder guards of corroded metal, the stigmatic nun's mutilated body was horrifying and inspiring to look upon. The flesh of her arms and legs were milk-white from blood loss and purple-yellow with bruising and the scars of holy wounds, the bones within having been long-ago shattered to fragments before being woven through the spokes of the wheel.

Not an act of excruciation or penance, rather a sacrifice willingly made.

One could not serve New Antioch without devotion, but this was true faith at its most brutal.

He saw the agony in one bloodshot eye through the broken visor of her helm. The fire of divine fervour that had inspired her to set her flesh upon the anchorite's frame was now almost extinguished.

"The pilgrims' blood?" she said through red-stained teeth. "Does it still... flow?"

A dozen exsanguinated corpses in mismatched coats and robes lay twisted beneath the wheel, their conical iron capirotes as rusted as the armour of the anchorite they had followed in devotion. Red-flecked transfusion pipes linked each corpse to a blood-bellow that had once pumped their vital fluids into an infected gash just below the nun's breastbone. Purified within her sanctified flesh, it had then been transfused to the dying monk within the anchorite.

"No," said Leonid, seeing the pipes were empty. "Their veins are dry."

"They gave their all to sustain the anchorite," she said, her head drooping and her voice little more than a whisper. "And mine own is spent..."

Leonid knew little about the Stigmatic Order, save that they were said to venerate the Third Meta-Christ, a being so far beyond his conception that he could not even picture what they might look or sound like. He lifted the book Kadir had given him and flipped through it, not knowing which passage to pick, so just selecting one at random.

"'Put on the armour of God,'" he read, "'that you may resist on the evil day and, having done everything to hold your ground, fight on in His name. Stand fast with your loins girded in truth, clothed with righteousness as a breastplate, and your feet shod in readiness to deliver the gospel of war.'"

The nun lifted her head as she completed the verse. "'For our struggle is not with flesh and blood but with... the principalities, with the powers, with the world rulers of this present darkness... with the evil spirits... set loose from Hell...'"

Her head sank back to her bloodied chest and Leonid knew she was dead.

He made the sign of the cross over his chest as a cry went up behind him.

"Lieutenant!" shouted Anastasia. "I have movement."

Blurred shapes lurched through the septic fog lying heavy over the town, hunched things with misshapen heads and gory ropes of intestines dragging from split bellies. Over the iron sights of his rifle, Leonid saw mewling things that stumbled on bloated, necrotic limbs and suppurating flesh trapped in an endless cycle of decay and regrowth.

He pulled the trigger and one of the diseased things fell, its head exploding in a shower of bloody gruel. It dropped to one knee, the hellish pestilence within fighting against the mortal wound. Eventually, it collapsed, a froth of oily black fluid spilling from the spongy ruin of its skull.

Leonid felt the bile rise in his throat, recognising that the man he'd shot had been one of Gezköy's townsfolk, his body perverted to the cause of Hell by the infernal pestilence.

"God forgive me," he said, taking aim at another figure and pulling the trigger.

The sound of gunfire was deafening within the church, each of his surviving soldiers aiming, firing, and racking the bolts of their rifles with the iron discipline of Varangia. Leonid had trained them well, each soldier taking care not to empty their ammunition in the first few seconds of the firefight.

Balazs was the first to die, falling from his firing step with a scream of horror. His cheek was red and bubbling. He clawed at his face as infernal caustics melted skin and muscle from his skull. His cries of pain gave way to a choking gurgle as his throat dissolved to liquid and his limbs convulsed in his death agonies.

His brother dropped to his side, screaming his name.

Balazs reared upright, his face entirely eaten away, eyes melted to liquid. He vomited a stream of acidic bile into Gedroi's face and fastened his teeth on his twin's throat. Elsa put two bullets through the side of his head, but it was already too late for Gedroi. He slumped to the tiled floor, eyes wide with disbelief as arterial blood hosed from his neck.

Leonid had no time to mourn as a bullet ricocheted from the brickwork of his vantage point. It sprayed him with stone fragments, slicing across his forehead. Blood dripped into his eye and he wiped it away with an angry oath.

When he looked back outside, he saw a pack of emaciated, skinless hound-like creatures with needle-like proboscis for faces and swollen bellies that rippled with grotesque, parasitic movement. They should have been lumbering and slow, but they loped towards the church with horrid speed, stuttering and jerking like something on a motion-film cut together out of order and running too fast on its reel.

Leonid shot one in the abdomen, and it fell with the piteous shriek of a scared child, its belly bursting open to spill a churning mass of writhing maggots and bloated larvae. It screeched and thrashed as its entire body sagged like a tyre with the air let out. The putrid stench was unbearable and it was all Leonid could do to keep from vomiting. He racked another bullet into the breech and blew the thing's head off, finally silencing its wailing shrieks.

Two more of the diseased hounds bounded forward, eager and snuffling as they lowered their faceless snouts to lap the monster's bubbling demise with long needle-tongues. He shot them both and three more of the risen townsfolk before the clip pinged empty and he ducked back for a fresh one.

No sooner had he moved from his firing position than a torrent of noxious gasses and viscous gel-like pus sprayed through the gap. It spattered the tiled floor and ran down the wall in bilious yellow ropes, hissing as it dissolved the plasterwork and saintly images. The braying of horns echoed from beyond the church walls, the rising notes of a triumphal march, a mocking echo of the rousing martial tunes played at the unfurling of a regiment's colours.

Leonid snapped a fresh clip into his rifle and took a quick glance through the hole in the wall, searching for a target worthy of such fanfare. He saw nothing save the occasional gleam of alchemical firelight through the jaundiced fogs.

"The door!" shouted Lucaz as the whole building shook with a thunderous impact. Leonid turned back to the entrance as the heavy timbers of the door splintered and a wet, purulent fist, swollen with tumours and woven with black veins of corruption, smashed the heavy wood apart.

Leonid swung his rifle around, but lost his grip on the weapon as a twisting surge of nausea drove him to his knees. He tasted blood on his gums and felt a building pressure in his ears. Paralysing terror clamped his heart like a rusted bear-trap as something vast pushed its grotesque bulk through the broken doors. He reached for his fallen rifle, but the weapon was already rusting solid, corrosion spreading across the metal of the bolt and breech, the wood splitting like a rotten log.

The thing that stepped inside the church was notionally humanoid, but bloated to gargantuan proportions, a nightmare straight from the Seventh Circle of Hell. The towering monster was stretched to inhuman proportions by suppurating tumours and pulsing swellings that squirmed like anguished faces trapped beneath its rugose flesh. The meat of its corrupt body had swollen so profoundly that it had begun to absorb its verdigris-stained armour, the bubonic flesh of its psori-

atic claws completely enveloping the haft of the deathly curse-woven axe it carried.

Its lipless mouth chittered with malefic hellspite, and Leonid's ears bled to hear such blasphemy against the Lord of Creation. His skull filled with the buzzing of millions of blood-feasting flies.

Eyes that shone with unclean light flickered behind a horned half-helm. It reeked of corruption and open wounds, a mass grave made flesh and granted obscene locomotion.

Leonid puked blood and bile over the floor. Hot blades of pain stabbed his gut.

Through the noise filling his head, Leonid heard shouts of hatred and barks of gunfire. He looked up with blood-filled eyes to see Elsa and Romain blasting wild shots, all fire discipline forgotten in the face of this nightmare. Their bullets smacked its wet flesh, blowing off chunks of rotten meat and pale fluids, but slowing it not at all.

The monster's outline flickered and suddenly it was right in front of them, faster than should have been possible for something of such bulk. Its axe rose and fell, the corrupted blade shearing Romain from collarbone to pelvis in a single blow. The beast plucked Elsa from her feet in a pus-dripping fist and lifted her to its gashed mouth as easily as a man might lift a babe in arms. She screamed in terror, but didn't stop fighting, even as her flesh blackened and blistered at its touch.

She slashed her trench knife through the rancid meat of its forearm, but her defiance couldn't last.

The monster's mouth hinged open, impossibly wide, revealing row upon row of yellowed teeth, an endless maw of Hell.

It exhaled a billowing cloud of stinking fog, the distillation of all the plagues known to man.

Elsa's body instantly disintegrated, the flesh peeling back from her bones and falling in wet slops from her dissolving skeleton. The monster dropped what remained of her body, and turned back to Leonid with a rictus grin.

And whatever terror had rooted him to the spot vanished, replaced with righteous anger. His rifle was useless now, but he still had his Re-

deemer service revolver. The monster's shadow loomed over him as he struggled to rise, fighting through the agonising cramps in his gut to draw his gun.

He looked up and blood-vessels ruptured in his eyes as he pulled the trigger over and over again. Pale, milky fluid burst from the wounds, but still the monster gave no sign it had been hurt at all.

Leonid pushed himself backwards, fumbling for more bullets, even as he knew it was hopeless.

The floor of the church shook with booming footfalls, like the hammer of God striking the earth.

He looked up through red-misted vision to see another gigantic form charge past him, the buzzing in his head drowned out by a choir of arcane machinery and glorious hymnals.

The shrine anchorite swung the colossal mace in a crushing arc, bringing it down on its foe with the sound of a slaughterman's hammer on a bovine skull. The monster's chest exploded and reeking fluids sprayed from the impact, hot with feverous infection.

Where the plague-lord was a vision of Hell, the anchorite was the wrath of Heaven made manifest.

How could the anchorite be fighting?

The Stigmatic nun and its pilgrim followers were all dead...

Then he saw a vision that would stay with him for the rest of his life.

Cleric Kadir lay upon the great Catherine wheel alongside the dead nun, a pulsing red pipe running from the hole in his breastplate to the monk curled at the heart of the armoured battle machine's shrine. Kadir's blood and songs of praise had bought the anchorite a moment's life with what remained of his own, a gesture of such courage it defied belief.

The anchorite swung its mace again, caving in the plague-lord's flank and tearing out through its belly in a welter of gristled meat and glutinous fluids. It screeched in fury, but didn't fall, its vile flesh already reknitting with horrid vigour.

Before the anchorite could swing again, the monster's axe swung up and slammed down on its shoulder with a deafening clang of metal on

metal. The anchorite's iron armour split apart, rusting instantaneously at the weapon's touch. The blade cut down through its chest, lodging just above the monk's opened shrine.

The monster sought to pull its weapon back, but before it could, the anchorite swung its enormous Catherine wheel around and brought it hammering down on the festering creature. The ferocious blow drove it to its knees, its shoulder crushed and its torso pulped to ruin. The injury was surely mortal, the damage catastrophic, yet still its chattering teeth yammered curses as the rank meat of its corpulent flesh ran together like streamers of molten fat.

"Kill it!" screamed Leonid. "Finish the bastard!"

But whatever last vestige of strength Kadir had given the anchorite was spent.

The holy machine stumbled sideways, crashing into one of the carved pillars and falling to one knee. Kadir's hymnal ceased and black smoke belched from the overtaxed machinery at the anchorite's back.

Leonid willed it to rise, offering prayers to the Almighty for its salvation.

"Please," he begged. "Get up! In God's name, fight!"

But the holy machine was done, the gears and motors within broken beyond repair.

"Hold faith as a shield, to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one," said Leonid, reciting passages from the book Kadir had given him, a book he had not yet read. "And take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God!"

As if in answer to his prayer, the plague lord's body erupted in flames, its body rippling with pellucid blue and yellow fire that set about devouring its flesh with ravenous appetite. The beast screeched in agony, its flesh sizzling like burnt fat in a skillet, unable to resist the lethal inferno. Its flesh ran like putrid wax, the muscles and bone of its skull melting in the awful heat of the flames.

"The Black Grail has no business here."

The voice came from behind the plague-lord. A woman's, heavily accented and melodic.

Standing in the doorway of the church and lit by the flames consuming the town, she was masked and hooded, armoured in filth-spattered bronze. She raised a cannon with an ornate, flared barrel and thick pipes that coiled to a golden tank at her back.

"Go back to the pits of Jahannam, servant of Shaitan," said the woman, and pulled the trigger.

The cannon's roar was like the booming of artillery.

It obliterated the beast's upper body in a hail of incendiary shrapnel.

Leonid fell to his side, clutching his ears as the monster's death scream filled his head.

He lay there for what felt like an eternity until he eventually tried to open his eyes.

They were gummed with blood and tears, so he wiped his face with his sleeve. He rolled onto his side and spat a mouthful of coppery phlegm. The ringing in his ears began to fade and he heard heavy footsteps moving around him.

The armoured woman knelt beside the dead monster, the smoking cannon now slung at her shoulder.

"In the tongues of Hell, it is known as a Lord of Tumours," she said, feeling his gaze upon her.

"Are you sure it's dead?" asked Leonid. "I saw its wounds heal before my very eyes."

She nodded and said, "Beelzebub's chosen has been cast back to Jahannam. They are powerful foes, but fortunately for you, they do not much care for the fires of al-kimiya."

Leonid climbed unsteadily to his feet, taking an involuntary step back as he recognised the crescent-moon symbol etched into her armour and saw a strange, hunchbacked creature with leathery, pockmarked skin and black orbs for eyes lurking close to her.

Hard-faced men in flowing purple robes moved to flank her, wearing bronze warplate and bearing ornate, long-barrelled muskets and curved tulwars. They stared at Leonid with undisguised contempt. He knew that if the word was given, they would cut him down without mercy.

"You are of the Sultanate," he said, his voice cracked and rasping.

"I serve at the pleasure of the great Sultan of the Iron Wall, yes."

Leonid took a breath to gather his thoughts. The forces of the Iron Sultanate fought the legions of Hell, as did the forces of New Antioch, but what peace there was between them was unspoken, fragile and oft-times inconstant. He heard shouts outside, barked orders, and bestial roars, dull barks of gunfire, and the hungry crackle of flames. Looking around the ruins of the church, he saw Anastasia and Lucaz with their hands up, bewildered and wary at the sight of these strange soldiers.

"First Lieutenant Leonid Kovalenko, Varangian Oathbound," he said, standing to attention and giving her a crisp salute.

She inclined her masked head, accepting his respect, and said, "I am Sutayta Al Shahda, Jabirean alchemist of the House of Wisdom."

"The monsters beyond the walls? You killed them all?"

"Those Who Believe are burning away the last of them as we speak."

Leonid turned as she and her guards brushed past him to join a trio of robed men wearing peaked helmets with visors wrought as bulls. The three of them walked back and forth across the floor of the church tapping the cracked tiles with heavy, bronze shovels. Now and then, they would stop to press their heads to the floor as if listening for something.

"You have my eternal gratitude," said Leonid. "We would all be dead but for your intervention. How did you know we needed help?"

"I did not," she replied. "Your presence here is of no importance or interest to me."

"Then why are you here" he asked. "The Iron Wall is many miles east of Erzurum."

She held a hand up to silence him as the three bull-masked men suddenly started speaking with great animation. Sutayta spoke in the language of the Sultanate and they immediately began to dig. They worked in perfect synchrony, clearing out broken tiles and hard-packed dirt with the expertise of seasoned combat engineers. Leonid watched as they dug deeper into the ground until one gave a short bark of elation. Working together, they grunted with exertion as they hauled out a long, dirt-covered box wrapped in heavy chains and secured with a number of archaic padlocks.

"Is that a coffin?" asked Leonid, horrified at this desecration of sanctified dead.

Sutayta spun on her heel and drew a long and exquisitely-crafted pistol of gold and inlaid ivory.

"What it is and its profane contents are of concern only to the House of Wisdom," she said, drawing back the hammer and aiming it at his head. "Tell me you understand that."

Leonid hastily nodded and said, "I understand."

"Good," said Sutayta, lowering the gun as her men dragged the chained coffin from the church. "You fought well and I would mislike having to kill you."

"So what happens now?" asked Leonid.

"I will leave, and you will forget you ever saw me," she replied, pausing beside the fallen anchorite with a mixture of interest and disgust. "One of your half-tracks is still functional, so you should make your way to New Antioch with the remains of this... machine. Set the flesh of he who resides within upon your city's walls, for you will soon have need of all the protection you can muster."

"What do you mean? Is there an attack coming?"

"When the cultists of the Black Grail spread their filth, the Heretic legions are ever close behind."

"But the anchorite is dead," said Leonid.

"You inter them alive?" she asked, shaking her head. "And you call us savages..."

She shrugged, already putting the matter from her mind, and said, "Fare thee well, First Lieutenant Leonid Kovalenko. We shall not meet again."

And with those parting words, Sutayta Al Shahda, Jabirean alchemist of the House of Wisdom marched from the Surp Minas church of Gezköy.

When he was sure she was gone, Leonid let out a shuddering breath, painfully aware of how close they had come to death at her hands.

Anastasia and Lucaz fell in beside him, pale and drawn with fear.

"What do we do now, Lieutenant?" asked Anastasia.

Leonid straightened his uniform jacket. "We do what she said. We take the anchorite and our fallen to New Antioch. And then we join the war against Hell."