

***We The Fallen :
A Dark Age Resurgent***

Prologue: We have been here before

By Michael J. Grasso

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Without all of the above mentioned, I doubt this work would have ever taken flight.

Preface

It started years ago with some dice, a few loose papers, a pen or two, and a few good friends. As life pushed and pulled us into different worlds, we grew, and so did our stories. This work began during those late nights in dark rooms where pizza grew cold, soda grew warm, and as we became adults, those snacks gave way to beers that went empty.

To the gang that rolled those dice, Together during those weekend adventures, we forged ourselves into the people we wished to be, and I can honestly say I'd have been a much different person had our lives not overlapped. We knew none of this back then, yet with every roll, every botch, and every success, a framework for a great campaign took shape.

"I noticed that there is something ever-present, lurking, just beyond the range of the senses. It hides behind our imagination, but it's just as relevant in our waking life. It's like the standing hairs on one's neck or the faintest scent that triggers a kind of long-buried emotion, like a childhood memory forgotten, a reflex that took root in the most buried corners of our self overriding logic: It's always driving us, and yet we never know why.

So too is this thing I sensed... We focus on something else, and then we know it's there, we try to pinpoint it, and it goes away. But we always, always suspect it right there on the edge of our awareness, invisible, yet just corporeal enough that it can't be forgotten. We can never truly forget after feeling its presence, and we can never un-know its absence. But for in the middle of these two is its domain."

Those were the words I had said in the first session of our great game. But as time went on and our great campaign took shape over the better part of a decade, I came to understand them wholly... That those words weren't just about setting the mood or starting off with a spooky undertone... Those were words that I believed in, Words that I grew to live by.

In this first installment: A Dark Age Resurgent, I took it upon myself to expand on the adventures that the dice gods had begun for us, I may have changed names, likenesses and relationships out of necessity, some of the most faithful characters got moved around, or even pushed back into the notes for my second installment, But I like to think should any of the old gang pick this novel up they will be able to enjoy an old adventure all over again for a new first time. And as for a new reader, I welcome you with open arms.

Our great campaign never had a true conclusion, It had come close a few times, but we never actually got to the ending that I had foreseen, perhaps by re-exploring that middle realm so many years later in the form of a novel we can all find its satisfying completion and perhaps even recover a bit of ourselves that had been chipped away weathering the storms of the now.

For my Mother, who never found respite from her fears or control of her feelings. For my Father, who never knew how to understand other's or express his own. For the big derpy Husky that sat beside me for so much of this work and who only occasionally demanded a pet or a treat. And for my closest friends who kindled the early flames of the great campaign... I will see you all again at the crossroads, somewhere out there beyond those dark woods.

Prologue:

We Have Been Here Before

We are the crossroads.

The thought was a familiar one, an immutable truth. Where he had heard it, he could not recall, nor why it was so sharp amidst the waking fog.

He tried to shake the blur from his mind. So desperately he wanted to go back to sleep, but that vibrant sky wouldn't let him... it punched straight through wisps of clouds to beat down on him. He shielded his eyes with an outstretched hand. It offered only a shred of relief before he had to admit defeat, the bright light would refuse him another moment's sleep.

He smelled morning in the air, a cool breeze carried the scent of wild grass and pollen. It was warm but not humid, and the wind established a balance that could only be described as perfect.

Placing his hands on the ground to either side, he pushed himself up to a sitting position. It took a moment for his sense of balance to adjust, how long he had lay supine? he did not know. He stretched his limbs, the large muscles constricted to allow blood to circulate more efficiently. It further roused him from rest, he then fully opened his eyes.

He picked himself up from the grass and saw emerald green fields, above it a golden sun suspended amid azure sky. An endless sea of tranquility with knee-high grass that stretched far as the eye could see. Here the blades of grass rolled calmly in small ripples across the plain, and like a painting, the green waves then met the blue somewhere near the vanishing point. This was a place of calm, far from the woes of others. It was where forever meets... He was far from anything but him. How he had come to be here? He did not know.

But the sight couldn't be truly appreciated, not while the far, far distance was so blurred. He should have had been wearing a pair of glasses... Perhaps he had dropped them. Standing now, he scanned the ground and a glint of

metal and glass revealed itself not so far from where he'd been. The world turned as he retrieved them and he stumbled. Though they had somehow cracked, the glasses sat on the bridge of his nose, and he could again see. He searched for answers as he tried to gather his bearings, yet there were no obvious landmarks to guide him. Where was he? He did not know.

Again he looked to admire the horizon, but this time something seemed odd... something was not right.

Far off, where the sky met earth there was a single blight, just a tiny smudge a lifetime away, one small dark cloud rising that the others seemed to avoid. As he struggled to focus, the dark grew.

It was then he noticed the cool breeze had quit, the air stood still and its scent was stale, Burnt, Rotten. The heat grew, and was soon unbearable, the dark cloud was nearer, larger, hungrier.

He now saw it for what it was.

Hundreds of thousands of forms in a march.

This was an army, and they marched, marched toward him. They still could have been miles away, but the plumes now reached across the sky, like giant fingers closing around him despite a dead wind. These towers of smoke closed much faster than those marching below... black jaws about to clamp down on its prey.

He didn't want to look at what was coming, it felt like something told him not to... he was hard-wired to not acknowledge such a thing, its simple presence forced him to flinch and try to forget all about it. The revulsion controlled his entire body, he felt nauseous just knowing it was there.

But he had to make himself look. Why? He did not know.

They moved with such precision - each step was sure and millions strong, it brought a growl from the earth they tread upon. All carried themselves tall with pride and purpose, the posture of a person that was uncaring in what they had done and certain in what they would yet do. Their clothes were once white, but now gore-stained from the elements and battle, ruined cloth covered metallic glints that told of nicked and dented armors below. Their boots were caked of ichor and mud, and where they stepped, the green grass seemed to recoil in fear. The weapons they carried were well used and varied like jagged teeth in an infinite gaping maw, the blades were hungry, and their rifles grinned. Banners hovered above the host, and on them were depicted gruesome and dark acts, their colors swallowed the impassive sun.

And they marched with such joy. What sort of person would march so proud in this horde? He wondered. Who would take pride in being part of this revulsion he now felt? He did not know.

No faces, they wore no faces. He could only see burning eyes that spoke of anonymous grins and fury. The ground shook, the roaring march deafened him.

He wanted to run, to be anywhere away from this, But he simply couldn't move, everything felt weak. He tried to take a step, tried to run but failed- for his body was heavy and no longer listened. New Flames spit up from beneath the host with each step closer. Their many, many blades were drawn to the ready as they closed on him... and their march... their march never slowed. He was overrun, the green earth burst into flames beneath him as he screamed.

Somewhere else.

A tangle of branches masked the fading twilight, and stars began to mock the dwindling day. He was lost amid vines and wild growth. He knew that there was once a trail beneath him, but how far had he strayed from it in the retreating light? He used to know the path as sure as he knew his own self, did he still know his way, or would he be swallowed in the darkness?

His arms protected his face as he stumbled through the tangle, there was movement as something startled in the brush. He looked for familiar signs of the path and found none. The panic crept into him. So he wandered, perhaps for hours in the ever swallowing woods with no sign of path, trail or track. Eventually, a fog had begun to build limiting even the scant starlight. Exhaustion gave him no choice but to rest.

He tried to calm his mind. Tried to contain the anxiety of being so hopelessly lost. Perhaps he could backtrack, retrace his steps? Or maybe he should just wait till morning. But if morning would even come in these woods, he was no longer sure. He could forge ahead, straight through the woods, for eventually, the heavy trees would have to break... wouldn't they?

Lightning struck nearby, its crack and boom thudded in his chest, and an orange haze glowed in the fog. He rushed toward it, soon seeing a tree engulfed in flames. It seared those around it, embers fell from the flames transitioning to ash as they met the earth. More lightning crashed above, making the forest bright as day, but only for a second.

The heat from the flames seemed to send the other trees cowering. The branches and leaves tried desperately to recoil from the power of the blaze, the flames were fury and inevitability. With nowhere else to go, he watched as the flames screamed into the night...

Somewhere else.

He walked alone in a crowded marketplace, the people that passed by gave him indignant glances. They wore the clothing natural to their region and culture, he knew he stood out, marked plainly by his uniform and gear as a threat, an occupier, an oppressor. Still, no one challenged him...

They all hated him. But none would dare threaten him openly, they all knew the kind of wrath that would be brought upon them should they attack even one of his kind. So they drifted by pretending to not be offended at his

existence.

He knew all this, yet still wanted to help them. But what could one man do against a clash of civilizations? He checked his weapons and gear, making sure all was in place.

An explosion happened. Debris and flame spat across the market. People were suddenly just not there anymore, body parts and fluids acted as secondary shrapnel for the blast. The wave hit him, and as he tumbled backward, the corpses of the market buried him.

Somewhere else.

She tried to wake them up, but no one listened. She pleaded with them to focus, but she was drowned out by the screaming. They barraged her with confused and trivial matters, old slights and petty complaints accosted her when she knew there was something much more important for them to focus on.

She yanked and tugged away in a haze of exhaustion, it was to no avail. They would not budge in their demands of her, but they still screamed at her. Some begged others accused, and she let the various forms of anger and grief crush her. Still, she begged them to stop, and still they shouted over her. Every one of them demanded her attention which she could not give, and no matter what she told them, they screamed their selfishness at her until she was swallowed by the screams and lost herself within.

Somewhere else.

He heard Silence... saw darkness... knew the waking world was elsewhere. Then Brightness. A Blinding Flash. A spark on the horizon. He watched the lightning travel from one cloud to the next, re-balancing itself with each strike.

Vapors intertwined. They churn and devour each other. They create forms in the exchange. Then they are gone. Rain. Then dark. One cell dies, another replaces it. Then a flash of light... and some part of him knew there were eyes behind its glare.