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&
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Etrom
The Astral Essence
Part One



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PART ONE - THE CALL

476 AHEF (After Human Empire Foundation)

[MEGACITY]: ... It is the storms of judgement that affect vast areas of the planet with an indecipherable logic. Along with the storms, the war of the Four States continues with no end in sight, while religion is widespread and powerful in all states. It is out of this crucible of destruction that the megacities are born, gigantic urban agglomerations, often spanning more than a hundred kilometres in diameter, in which populations of some 40 to 50 million souls are densely packed. Ninety per cent of humanity live in these megacities, whose energy barriers provide protection from the deadly storms, atomic bombardment and the insidious dark evil. These huge cities are in turn surrounded by the Dying Deserts, ravaged by deadly frost or scorching heat, and rendered uninhabitable by the darkness that strikes anyone who crosses them unprotected.

Within the megacities, the division of social classes is clear-cut and control is absolute. Passes are needed to move from one neighbourhood to another - neighbourhoods sometimes as big as ancient cities - and control over citizens is total. Cameras and state-of-the-art technology allow a clear and impassable class segregation: workers are confined to their zones, beyond the noble walls. The aristocrats, the upper clergy and the upper middle class, on the other hand, live in the golden levels, where primary goods are produced and from where access to the Grail mines is possible. Within the socio-economic structure of the megacities, multiple autonomous power nuclei thrive, represented by various noble and bourgeois houses, or even criminal organisations, which give rise to a new feudal Middle Ages. However, it is from the Grail mines that ...

[FORBIDDEN ENCYCLOPAEDIA - DREAM VOLUME].

[GRAIL]: Mysterious material that appeared from the depths of the Earth after the age of destruction. Its introduction in society completely revolutionised the world's economy and industry. The Grail is the basis of energy production and it is with the Grail that coins used as universal currency are forged. It is around the Grail mines - or other, rare areas rich in important resources, that colonies have sprung up, human outposts that enjoy a certain autonomy and freedom with respect to the large urban agglomerations, but which often live on hardship and

risk devastating attacks from marauders, armies and desert creatures. To date, there are no known Grail deposits in the Null Lands, forbidden areas beyond the so-called 'human borders'.

[FORBIDDEN ENCYCLOPAEDIA - DREAM VOLUME].

[INEXISTENT]: ... and it is because of limited resources that it becomes essential to impose a zero birth protocol that is summed up by the popular formula 'one newborn for one deceased'. This binding regulation - which is enforced by suppressing over-births - escapes the Inexistent, outlawed individuals who have circumvented the zero-birth protocol.

Survivors, exiles, outlaws: they are not registered, thus they have no rights and take refuge on the extreme fringes of society. They live in ruined areas, in sewers, they are hunted down and tortured. It is out of this deep despair that armed groups of non-existent ...

[FORBIDDEN ENCYCLOPAEDIA - DREAM VOLUME].

[MAGIC]: ... reject archaic classifications. However, as a result of the upheavals of the Age of Destruction, some men have developed exceptional abilities that some describe as psychic and others as magical. These abilities, linked to the concept of vital auras, are harnessed by armies to create unusual units of soldiers. These talents are commonly referred to as 'magic' even though official government positions tend to consider this a foolish heretical superstition that must be eradicated. However, there exists an underground esoteric world, made up of sects, groups and individuals capable of performing ancient rituals to evoke supernatural powers, travel to other dimensions and fuse technology with occult sciences. At the heart of these contradictions, between reality and propaganda, lie the activities of the major military industries that have created, more or less secretly, complex techno-magical weaponry.

[FORBIDDEN ENCYCLOPAEDIA - DREAM VOLUME].

"The Abyss, treading hidden paths, advances inexorably. Humanity, addicted and deluded by weapons, fortresses and war, awaits its coming".

[PRAYER OF THE NON-EXISTENT].

Fragments of the Multidimensional Glossary of ONav

... it is essential for independent ONavs, at the height of their multidimensional chaos and inevitable psycho-emotional confusion, which arises from the simultaneous reading of biomemories and dream fragments coming from multiple layers of the unconscious, to recall the formal structuring of reality willingly, supported by security systems disconnected from government networks, following the guidance of Guardian Magister Michail in his famous treatise De Verit...

... It is from this symbolism, that applied to the principle of the individual log files narratively reconstructed by the Bio-AIs installed on primary Neurochips, the location of the protagonists of the individual bio-memories are indicated in three macro-dimensions, as simplified below:

Material Size



CyberOnirical Dimension



Astral Dimension



... such considerations would lead us to conclude that various dimensions “live” around and within what we perceive as reality, on a continuous basis according to logic inconceivable to our mind...

such complexities are often summarised by the narrative Bio-AIs by affixing several icons to the principle of registers, in turn summarising key events of the subject involved in the recording that could be shifted even involuntarily between the 'banal' material reality, the Cyber-Oniric one that sweeps through the electricity dreams, including the private societies of the Four States, and the astral one in which live, beyond space and time, all the most ancient phenomena hitherto defined as mystical-esoteric and magical, as well as...

1. Looking forward to the trip



I am tired, sick, aching, in body and mind, and the world is falling apart. Maybe it's the nature of things, always and forever. Or maybe it is just me that is rotting.

Why are you not here, saving me from the nothingness that devours my soul?

I told you it was no longer possible to fight, but you disagreed, you could not believe and live in the knowledge that there is no longer room, not even in your dreams, for a revolution. You couldn't give up, you went on alone, without fully understanding your purpose. I wasn't able to help you, to take you away, far away, where life could have meant something more than the shit that surrounds us. When I was still connected with the aura I really should have saved you, I should have used the power armour to hit a convoy of the silver guild, and then convinced you to flee to a colony, one of those forgotten ones, where no one wants to go, on the edge of the Null Lands. We could have left with the magister and a few other trustworthy friends, we would have been fine. Perhaps we would have had the resources to build a fortress. Perhaps there, enclosed in our castle, fate, or chance, or both, would have granted us a few moments of happiness.

I tried to avenge you, but I failed there too. I no longer know if vengeance has any meaning, if it can ever really achieve its supposed aims. Perhaps now I am only closer to the gates of the seven hells. The only thing that's certain is that I will never be able to punish, looking him in the eye, the one truly responsible for your death, because he does not exist, at least not here among us humans. Years of research to discover that it was a trivial artificial intelligence of secondary support that ordered your murder.

Eladen, my beloved, beautiful warrior, you have been sentenced to death by a program that has drawn your name at random from the list of 'immoral' citizens. Justice of Fate, that is what they call the killing of those who end up on that obscene list.

I will never forgive you for continuing to fight in secret, for lying to me and

excluding me from your war, I cannot, not after everything terrible and wonderful we have experienced together.

I still can't believe that you hadn't realised that you can't save these masses of people moulded by a centuries-old system that lives governed by itself, a shapeless mirror reflects an old, decrepit, crumbling cog that has no historical memory, but esoteric, faded revelations in its roots. We live in a system at perpetual war, inside and outside its absurd boundaries, a master masquerading as a father who is only capable of raping and drinking the blood of the newborns that are born from his deformed limbs, an insatiable beast of victims, a demented monster that by inertia seeks to control millions of souls despite being lost in the coils of a technomystical delirium devoid of any connection with material and astral reality.

The Abyss, the real, arcane, incomprehensible one, that horror of the dark mystique that the generals of the Blades of Justice believed was just a cunning invention of the Seven United Churches, has reached and corrupted everyone, masters and slaves, victims and executioners. I feel it, it is near, it creeps into the thoughts, feelings and actions of rulers and rebels, to stun them, confuse them and make them unwitting builders of hellish labyrinths filled with despair. Everything is confused, there is no salvation, no bright future to hope for and fight for, there are only fragments of time left to snatch from death and pain.

If I could, if I had the strength, I would raze the megacities of the Four States, smash the pillars of the primary barriers and wait for the end of time to satisfy my anger by annihilating everything.

You would have told me that not everyone deserves to die and that, indeed, there is more to save than destroy on this strange place we call Earth, and that hope lives as long as we have the strength to nourish it, for ourselves and for others.

Would have, would have, would have... useless tangents in a fate that will never be fulfilled. I forgive nothing, not them, not you, not me, and I must go on despite remorse and regret. I cannot give up, let go, I am not a coward and I want to live and die as if you were still by my side. I must find a meaning to this existence that goes beyond survival for its own sake, I must do it, or I will no longer be worthy of even remembering

you.

It's strange, every time I am about to embark on an astral journey I am reminded of more or less the same thoughts, the same emotions and unresolved contradictions, this damned tendency to depression. Maybe it's because I update my will file in case everything goes wrong, maybe it's because I'm still hoping to find a trace of you, even if only the remnants of a mnemonic shadow recorded in dream nets or a simulacrum floating in an otherworldly sphere.

Apart from a couple of pointers to dig up some old grail booty, to this day I can only bequeath debts, enemies and convictions in the feudal courts. Before I die I want to be able to put something decent together, if only for pride's sake. If Eladen had seen the mad path taken by the Blades of Justice, she would have left nothing behind. Maybe she would have tried to help some pugnacious group of Inexistents with great ideals. For now in the will I'll leave everything to Bruno and Marcio, fifty-fifty, they'll certainly make better use of those the shit I hid in the dying deserts than me.

I have to face another journey in which I may encounter my absolute death, ready to erase every piece of my vital essence. This time it is truer than ever, my condition has never been so bad, but I have managed to keep it from the magister. I want and must risk it now, every day that passes I become weaker and more useless.

I should be relaxing, but instead I let anger, pain, worries and judgements make me wander like a madman in the labyrinths of his anxieties. If I had at least some majocaine... but it is almost impossible to find now and I must also fast or the magister tomorrow is able to postpone the ritual, and it must not happen.

I save and close the document on the external biomemory protected by the notary seal. I interrupt the parallel flow of Eladen's files. With some difficulty I get up from the primary control station, deactivate the robotic sniper and go out into the garden.

Night, pitch black, stormy weather. Were it not for the flickering lights of the watchtowers, the ones that still work from time to time, the agency buildings,

surrounded by a marsh abandoned to itself, might have been a comfortable refuge for shadowy demons.

I take a few barefoot steps in the mud, I don't cover myself, I let the water soak into my clothes, no longer caring if the corrosive element from above damage the neural gates on my head or neck, tomorrow I'm going for it all in the astral dimensions and now, before I leave it, I need to feel my body alive again, able to brave the storm here, in the material world. I hope to succeed this time, I hope to regain at least part of what I have long since lost, and not disappoint the magister. Maybe my life can still be worth something.

I strip naked, raise my arms to the sky and enjoy every single, cold, stinging drop of water that breaks on my skin.

I close my eyes, I am nothing in everything and everything in nothing. I am ready, the journey can begin.

2. The recall



I don't understand the real meaning of this. What is happening? Perhaps there was once a direction, a beginning and an end, questions with answers. There used to be a line from point A to point B. Missions, that is, yes, a pragmatic term that could help me. But now... I don't like this condition. I too easily lose myself in thoughts disconnected from the body which continues to perform actions according to commands I do not control, carrying out orders I do not remember giving it. On the other hand, my heart, lungs and other giblets inside have never really asked my opinion on how to behave. I seem to have been going about it the other way round for a while now. Or has it? There are certainly holes in it that I can't explain. I didn't think it could happen to me too, but I think that by now the necromental process has reached the point of no return, short circuits like this will increase. For the first time in my life, I don't want time to flow forward. There is fog in the street, I wonder if I'm the only one who sees it. Why do I ask myself this? Yet I am not dreaming, I am not drunk, and I am not crazy, that is for sure. A concrete, incontrovertible fact. At most I am a madman who cannot go mad. I have known madness too well, I know it cannot have me. I must keep my feet on the ground, in reality. How much time has passed? How much time do I have left?

I'm not wearing proper equipment, the weather is still harsh and foetid, the humidity penetrates my bones. I have to concentrate on the objective data. A vibration shakes my arm, I activate the tactical display, I have received a message from Bruno.

By %--+ we will be outlawed in this sector.*

Shit, the deadline is encrypted. I replied:

Bruno, deadline not received, send me back communication with exact deadline. I have memory problems, maybe it's a necromental flash. What sector am I in? Are you there?

Where are you? I need help.

I send and hope for an immediate answer, but after a few seconds only encrypted characters and the alarm icon appear on the display, signalling an increase in electromagnetic turbulence of arcane origin. I raise my head to the sky, it is almost night, I glimpse the glow of the energy barrier that protects the megacity from furious clouds criss-crossed by swirls of red lightning. How did we ever get used to this spectacle of destruction hanging like a sharp sword over our heads?

The lightning bolts chase each other, sometimes they break, sometimes they meet and tangle, creating dances reminiscent of snake mating. There are days when I have the impression that among those clouds are evil eyes eager for our blood. Three bolts of lightning gather at one point, generating a spear of light that shatters the energy barrier. The thunder that follows makes the earth tremble beneath our feet, but the barrier holds, as it always does, hieratic and indifferent to the rage of the elements, children of the climatic aberrations in the null lands.

The communications display and all passive surveillance systems go off, burned out. This had never happened to me in the city. I must start walking again and find a gap in the fortifications before it's too late. Come on, take the first step. I make it, the road feels a bit slippery but, despite feeling the muscles in my legs pierced by thousands of invisible pins, I manage to move. On with the second, and the third, and the fourth. Maybe I could even run, but better not to overdo it. I move on, the fog descends, I start to make out a few human silhouettes and the shapes of a mining district. This place really sucks, filthy agglomeration of chrome cement, an exemplary monument to the industrialist paternalism of those vulgar dickheads from the gold levels. All they know how to do is build shit and smile for the camera. Garbage on crystal thrones, grotesque representations of a supposed kingship built on mud. The Republic is now a crippled whore violated by microcephalic monsters.

You won't catch me! Fuck you, I didn't expect it and I'm disorganised, but I'm better than you and your shitty feudal guards. Treacherous idiot traitors. I bribed practically the entire eastern side of Sighundia and wrote a mountain of letters with an

adamantine seal to make sure that even the chancellors of the lesser lineages entered my immaculate biography in their records. I have been out of the lost cause business for a century, I have spent a fortune to erase any suspicious traces on the net and in the archives of the Ministry of Peace. Considering the offensive methods we used at the time, if anything had gone wrong I would have been caught immediately. One of the few things I remember well is that my modified Neurochip passed all legal compatibility tests, Bruno and Marcio did an outstanding job.

After the last few crushing defeats, I just wanted to live a little depressed, feel superior to the masses for no particular merit or reason, make useless speeches at the club, swear and slog through this shit life. Nothing, bad luck struck and they triggered an M888 infraction. I don't even know if it's because of some sneaky bastard I should have eliminated back in the day! But then again, I don't even know if I'm officially wanted by the central government. I'm at risk here, I can feel it. I hope it's not a bureaucratic error, because if it is I'm really screwed, hopeless. For now I'm running, then we'll see. The most important thing is to get out of the city. I'm not a coward, on the contrary, I'm one of the few who doesn't stand by and suffer their decisions. And let the rest of the Republic go to hell. I only hope that time doesn't play tricks, my mind holds, and that I don't repeat the mistakes I've made so far.

I wonder if the biomemory is recording correctly, last time I checked it did not transcribe the rem phases and transitions of the emotional states of the deep psyche properly. I am awake now though, so there should be no glitches. Maybe I was cheap, I should have installed a better one, and maybe I should have stopped drinking after the activation.

The other almost certain thing is that the advanced strategic operations on the betting market will have gone to shit. It had taken me forever to get out of that arena shit. But I could feel it, it was all going too well, it couldn't last. It wasn't enough to be born in this lousy century where you don't understand shit. I'd even pulled myself out of debt I'd accumulated in burrow tournaments to pay for treatment for the disease. "You have a seventy percent chance of returning to normal," the onco... onconeurogastrote... whatever the fuck that medical specialty is called... I never got it, and I've been under it

for five years. Or is it three? I don't know. Concentration and memory problems were listed as likely side effects. Or were they? The crazy thing is that my vps accounts are probably still active and the artificial intelligence I had developed is still generating profits. At my last login I was close to a hundred thousand grails and now instead I'm forced to ration these letters of credit...

If those shiny brigade pricks hadn't occupied GW-12 I could have gone to Flavio's encrypted branch. Maybe he even croaked, the poor guy. The commissions he charges are high, but anonymity is guaranteed and he unloads pure grail coins and ingots shielded big time. I've never understood how he puts on that fantastic show in the camera recordings. Perhaps it is precisely because that neighbourhood was too free that the brigades conquered it. Moralistic anti-government scumbags. A good battle of Republican assholes versus rebel assholes must be taking place. As a result I can't go to GW-12 right now which would have been good for me to get money and equipment. Bah, now I don't even know if I can make it that far. Actually I might not be far away, after all if I'm in a mining district as it seems I might be quite close to GW-12, and in my situation it's not really the case to end up in the middle of a war zone overflowing with peacekeepers' men and vehicles.

Shit, to be able to escape I should at least know which way to go. I pick up the pace. I'm pretty sure I know these roads, but I still can't get my bearings, I have the feeling I'm locked in a crazy maze. Could it be that blue stuff I smoked, what was it called? God, this feeling of futuristic space-time projection is unbearable. I think a thing, I do a thing, and before I know if I've thought it or done it, it's already happened. For example, that lamp post. Shit! It has happened again, I am standing next to the lamp post I was looking at from a distance. But I don't remember moving towards it. Or rather, I know I did, but I don't remember it at all. It's like having a superpower that's useless. Calm down, I have to stay calm and proceed.

Where are they? Answer: I don't know and I can't figure it out. For some reason I am in a state of confusion. Of course, the fact that I can focus on the fact that I am in a state of confusion should reassure me and put me in front of the evidence that I am not in a serious state of confusion, or at least it is only partial, controllable. Every now and

then I laugh for no reason. I am stoned and drunk, then. Plain and simple. Maybe I should try to go back to the bar and ask Marcio for a ride. But when was the last time I was in that place? Where did I end up and what am I doing?

```
//NAVIGATION ALERT
FatalisError ( LocusIgnotus* NoObk)
{
    (NULL, obg, 'Coordinates Lost. Jump Unplanned.', +_* |
In_Indicivm);
}
```

Suddenly, the roar of a mech sentry's engines. A group of guerrillas of the Blades of Justice emerge from the intersection running in my direction. Several among them are covered in blood, some, in panic, throw their weapons onto the street. I blink as I recognise Eladen, who in turn sees me.

- Run, Etrom, run! Necrodrones!

A behemoth with a missile launcher emerges from a balcony. He does not have time to place the weapon on the railing when a cloud of electronic needles turns him into a bloody meat pudding. The sudden rush of adrenalin sweeps away the recoil and muscle tremors. I run.

I continue running without turning around. Behind me, screams and mechanical thunder intertwine to create the classic slaughter that accompanies necrodrone patrols. We turn right. The road is closed, barred by a retaining fence. Eladen accelerates and unleashes a glowing dagger. The blade fires and sizzles as Eladen hurls it cursing at the net blocking us. If she does not break through it we are doomed, electrocuted or disembowelled by a necrodrone. The dagger shatters against the metal mesh, opening a fairly wide gap. Eladen passes first, I follow her without hesitation. We enter an area that seems to have been recently bombed. Charred bodies still smouldering, bone fragments and melted chrome buildings are the clear sign of a punitive attack by the artillery of the Ministry of Peace. It stinks to high heaven. Fortunately we are on a

downhill slope. Eladen leads me through a maze of minor roads, cursing at each explosion that seems to narrowly miss us. The red guerrilla group has scattered, only she and I are left to run through dark and shabby alleys. I have no idea where we are and my heart is about to explode.

- Let's jump into this crater!

Said, done: Eladen disappears into a chasm plunging into darkness. This time I stop. I'm out of breath and dripping with sweat. It doesn't seem like a great idea to jump into thin air. My throat is dry, I'm fucking thirsty, and suddenly my head is spinning. An acid regurgitation rises from my stomach, making the situation worse. I hold back the vomit and throw it all back down. I stagger, but don't fall. Why didn't I stop drinking? A little further, the sound of war persists.

- Jump, you idiot! It's safer here, move your ass or you're dead!

A reddish light appears at the bottom of the hole in the devastated asphalt. A deep breath. I launch myself. The plunge into the void lasts an eternity in which adrenalin shoots out of my eyes in fear, but I eventually land on soft ground. Eladen illuminates the area where I have landed with a torch: I am in the midst of rubbish and crawling insects, I think mutant chromatoid earthworms; they are not dangerous, but definitely too big and hellishly ugly. We are in the sewers, in a secondary canal, I think, one of those in which the Inexistents live.

- We still have to run, can you do it?

- Fuck, Eladen, I can't! We've lost them, why do you want to keep running?

- Have you realised what's going on or is your brain too rattled?

- It's one of many rebel defeats, what's new? Rather explain to me where the fuck we are and who you and your friends were fighting against? It's been... days, or maybe months, I can't remember exactly now, but I've been looking for you for so long, thinking you were dead, I couldn't find you, and now...

- I don't believe it, you said exactly what the prophet had revealed to me... what is to come has already happened, we are only meeting as a reflection in time.

- But what are you saying Eladen? Prophet, revelation? I don't understand...

- There is no time now, I have to moving

Eladen stares at me, then approaches and, completely disconcerting me, kisses me. In the half-light, I think I notice a tear on her face. Her hair is long and red like fire, whereas I remember it short and shining blond.

- I will love you, always, even when you no longer believe in anything or anyone. The truth and beauty of what we were are already written, not even death can erase them. Do not yield to the Abyss. - She turns around and starts running again.

- Where are you running?

I pull myself together and try to keep up with her, but as I rise to my feet an explosion causes the tunnel to collapse, and I am thrown back onto the rubbish heap, wallowing in maggots. Dazed, I rise once again, struggling. I can no longer follow her, the rubble prevents me from continuing. She will be safe on the other side. Sure, safe, she's too badass to die. She can't have died. She can't. I'm going after her as soon as I get out of here.

I must start walking again immediately or the abyssals will find me. Most say they don't believe they exist, but in reality everyone fears them like children terrified of the dark. Legends, rumours, superstitions. They exist, they are real, ever-changing nightmares. I don't know how the inquisition controls them, if indeed it can.

```
//NAVIGATION ALERT
```

```
FatalisError ( LocusIgnotus* NoObk)
```

```
{
```

```
(NULL, obg, "Intrusion Semiconscious External Elements.", +_  
| In_Indicivm);
```

```
}
```

I reach into my mackintosh pocket looking for something that might help me, maybe I'm lucky. There is a smooth, cold object. I explore the shape with my fingers, it is oval. I pull it out, it's a small, muddy mirror. I spit on it and rub it with my hand. What a repulsive, disgusting idea. So I spit on it again, angrily, and rub harder, I want to see what condition it's in. Something seems to come out of the putrid slime, my face. I

almost don't recognise myself. The right eye is visibly bigger than the left, but both are bloodshot. Uncombed beard, grown out of proportion. I have a broken nose and scars I don't remember on my temples. The skin is stretched and seems to struggle to stick to my bones. I open my mouth to take a look at my teeth. Ew, the lower arch seems to be drawing the grin of a skull. My gums are bleeding and between my lower incisors a truck could drive through. I look, I keep looking, but I see nothing good.

//>Extraneous Elements in Addition

The image in the mirror changes shape. My face disappears to make way for a scene from an old film whose title I cannot remember. Two old gentlemen in ceremonial evening clothes are waltzing in the middle of the opulent hall of mirrors of the old Hantr castle. The one with the moustache smiles at the other and whispers something in his ear. I hear the joke late, as if there is a synchronisation problem between sound and image. 'Together at last, Reginald, free at last, my love. We no longer have to hide. Here our wives, the gathered churches and our hateful families, can no longer harm us. I am happy, happy! Kiss me, Reginald, kiss me and make me burn with desire!' The old man without a moustache suddenly freezes, spits in his comrade's face, turns and vanishes in a cloud of smoke. The man with the moustache throws himself on the ground and cries in despair. 'Why are you gone, my love? Why did you let them win? Why did you leave me here to watch the horror of life leading me in loneliness to the outrage and filth of old age and death?' Fade to black. Silence, another film begins.

// +++ DANGER! Astral Overlap!

I feel a hand resting on my shoulder, though I don't feel like turning around to see who it is. An icy touch. Maybe I don't want to know who it is. I fear the answer. Fear might even turn into dread, were it not for the fact that new images compose themselves in the mirror which gets bigger, much bigger, and to continue to hold it I have to support it with both hands, straining the muscles in my back and arms as well.

There is a father playing with his son, they are both handsome and smiling. Next to them passes a group of children all dressed in the same way. The son, I think he is no more than ten years old, picks up a stone and throws it at the skinniest boy in the group, hitting him in the head. The father gets upset and slaps the boy. The other children run away. The son has a red cheek, but does not cry. The father runs and reaches the child on the ground, leans over him, and begins to punch and kick him to death. Soiled with blood, the father returns to his son, who is now calm, caresses him and explains that prey must be circled and killed all at once and that if you must hit someone, it is better to aim at the biggest one. The son nods, full of admiration for his father. They embrace and the scene is invaded by a cascade of little hearts as a roar of applause mixed with laughter spreads through the air that begins to smell of sulphur.

The friend at my side digs his nails under the skin of my neck, fiddles with the tissue for a while, tearing it and then leaves. Something tells me I don't want to see his face or know who he is. But maybe I should behave differently. The scrolls, why didn't I think of that before? Damned memory. It is written in the scrolls that such creatures I should confront by forcing them to tell me their name. But I didn't, and it robbed me of important energy resources at this point in the journey.

```
//NAVIGATION ALERT
FatalisError ( LocusIgnotus* NoObk)
{
    (NULL, obg, "PROHIBITED DATA CENTRE. ARREST PROCEDURE.", +_< |
In_Indicivm);
}
```

The mirror acts like a screen gone mad. Shocks, interference and distorted images follow one another until an alarm is triggered accompanied by a classic institutional logo announcing an infringement in progress. "Unauthorised access. You have broken into a protected intangible office owned by the central bank of the three pyramids. Any active action or thought will increase the penalties applied. Pursuant to

2-2-K-L-S-T paragraph 4b3 of 353 A.H.E.F. we are in the process of extracting your sensitive data for transmission to the central ministry of the united networks of the great and glorious Sacred Republic of Sighundia. His aura has been identified with the number... with the number... with the number...'. The alarm goes off and the mirror returns to its original size, no larger than the palm of a hand. I bring it closer to my face to better decipher the images that are composing themselves after resizing. I see a burning cradle with a screaming infant inside, running towards me from a vortex of darkness. For a moment I am paralysed with fear, but then a rush of adrenalin surges through me and I hurl the mirror to the ground. It shatters and dies with a chilling scream. I bring my hands to my ears and close my eyes. I remain paralysed for an indefinite time. I want to get out.

```
//NAVIGATION ALERT
FatalisError ( LocusIgnotus* NoObk)
{
    (NULL, obg, "Compromised Data Flow. Closure with Minor
Damage.", +_< | In_Indicivm);
}
```

- The problem is not getting out, but getting in. And you are not allowed - whispers a voice behind me.

I turn away, as an intense shiver runs through me, freezing the blood in my veins. I am no longer in the sewers of Irba, it is daytime, it is snowing, the light is so intense that I cannot keep my eyes fully open, and a blurred silhouette, a shadow within a shadow, perhaps of a human being, is a few steps away from me. Behind it looms a majestic mountain, at the base of which I glimpse the wide fissure of a cavern with two titanic columns, covered with pulsating runes, soaring beyond the canopy of clouds. Beyond that threshold, in the dark heart of the abyss, is Her. I feel Her.

Despair assails me, I cannot move, I am paralysed by the purest and most inexplicable essence of fear forged in dreams. I begin to sink into the snow. I am naked

and the sharp ice tears my flesh to the bone. I try to scream, to call for help, but not a breath escapes my mouth. The shadows draw nearer and I hear a thousand voices whispering disconnected phrases in unknown languages, until, at the height of the pain in every part of my body, one voice over all breaks through and speaks to me: - You should not be here, this is not your path. Leave and forget, or she will kill you.

3. The first awakening



What dimension am I in? Virtual, dreamlike, astral or material? My vision is blurred, out of focus, and there is only a faint luminescence surrounding me. Everything else is darkness. I am awake, aware that I exist, so it is not too bad. The fact that I have no space-time coordinates should not drag me into the whirlpool of fear. I am will. No tremors, no alarms, no smiling avatar icons from peripheral advertisements, so it is likely that I am not connected to the dream network, or at least not to the legal one. I can feel the heartbeat and vital energies rising. No neural parasites or otherworldly spectres. So maybe I'm not even in a deep net or a mystical hell-sphere. I have to make an effort, try to move. The risk is aura tracking, assuming I am outside the physical body. The alternative is stasis, I could try to return to a state of unconscious sleep. Awakenings mostly suck. I should let the darkness win and wait for outside intervention. If someone loves me, they will come for me.

Hmm, maybe I'd better get a move on afterall. I try to move my head and look at my hands. The muscles, begging for mercy, react. OK, I'm in my shabby material body. My arms respond to the command, but strong chains prevent me from making full movements. I am chained to an unmade, filthy bed. I instinctively want to scream and struggle, but I do not. I don't know why, but I am certain that it would serve no purpose. Calm, a deep breath. The rings of the chains are of ritual silver and on them are engraved magical symbols of containment that pulsate, giving off a bluish light. I close my eyes and concentrate. I am no longer lost in the disembodied transitions, there is no sign of neural connection or network projection. Perhaps the neurochip is burnt out, or it has been shielded ex novo without my knowledge during the crossing of a dimensional gateway.

But why am I always so messed up and in deep shit? That's it, I have to find a way to access the organised memories. I try calling up the emergency interface. Nothing. OK, let's go classic, organic mixed with reverse meditation. My name is Etrom, I was born in Irba, my past exists, my present exists, my future exists. Being and thought must proceed from inside to outside, reconstruct the lines of a path. The symbol of the door of the first sphere appears sharply

in my mind for a moment, then flares up and finally explodes. The formless Kaos withdraws and I can remember my life, or at least part of it, the most recent, I think.

I open my eyes, and although the darkness remains I am finally aware that I am in one place. If my last memory in material reality is correct, I should be in some kind of warehouse, one of Marcio's bunkers, safe. Death, absolute death, with no way out, is near, I can feel it, I can almost see it beyond the energy of the protective circle I see around the bed. I must reorganise my ideas, dig through images, memories and visions past, present and future, or at least those I perceive as such, I must focus on an exact point from which to start again.

Parameters and certainties are only inventions, fragile crutches of an existence enclosed in a shell condemned to extinction. If the senseless end of everything cannot be avoided, whether it occurs here or in the netherworld makes little difference. But it will not be here, not now. I take the path that leads into the infinite well of consciousness and the flow of thoughts resumes form.

I failed again, I could not recover any power. Unfortunately, my mediocre limitations did not take long to manifest themselves in the otherworld, and illusions became nightmares. Attempting to gain access to the astral dimensions by exploiting the energy and flaws in the government's technomistic networks was worth little.

Body, mind and soul could not cope with the transitions, and at some point my illness worsened. But what exactly is wrong with me? Is it dark evil, or something else? I remember that Bruno conducted studies on the quality of barrier filters in our industry. According to him, they were very low, but the data analysed was not official, of course. Who knows whether the government wanted to save grain or was applying a broader programme of medium-term demographic control. The harvests in the mines of all the Republic's megacities are getting low, that's for sure, my sources are usually reliable. On the other hand, I don't put too much faith in the information Bruno has accessed. My friend is treading a treacherous and foggy path, but I understand that he, one of the last, if not perhaps the last magister of shadows, cannot resign himself to the idea that I might die slowly eaten by a nameless disease.

I can't say exactly how long, but I think it's been weeks since the magister has been wandering among the disused factories and underground hideouts of the Inexistent to see if there has been a general increase in the plague and to find a primary cause of mystical origin to isolate and destroy. Sometimes I seem to see him walking all sweaty in Irba's filthiest and most hidden underground passages: frail, overweight, with his bald head on which a good-natured expression

is always painted, going where not even the Praetorian police with heavy weaponry has ever gone, into the forbidden catacombs of the megacity.

I still haven't figured out whether these are delusional images I imagine in moments of high fever or chaotic visions caused by the total loss of control of the aura.

At times I seem to see Bruno and Marcio looking after me. I see my friends washing me, forcing me to get up, take a few steps and eat. I have spent a lot of time hugging the incinerator, vomiting those little, damn worms produced by the cancers in my guts. Sometimes I hate those bastards... my friends. There are times when I think they should have the decency and mercy to pump me full of majocaine and then cut my head off in my sleep. Sooner or later we all die, and at this point sooner is better. Instead, they force me to react, to fight back, and a moment after putting me back to bed, when I am exhausted and cannot resist in any way, they draw invocation circles and start celebrating the healing rituals of De Occulto Limine. Technomagia, with saps and incantations, seems to be succeeding in stabilising me, but not healing me, and their forces are not infinite. But how much grail will they have burned to keep me alive? Best not to ask, not now.

With little money and without my active projection in information and dream networks the risk of the central government recording illegal modifications of our neurochips is high. If I remember correctly the last time I spoke to Bruno about this he told me that he had managed to locate hunters in the first astral sphere very close to my true emanation. If only I were able to connect to the out-of-body navigation console... and instead I have to leave all the burden on the shoulders of my friends, especially Bruno. I would like to know where and how he is now. The only thing that is certain is that when I start to break out in a cold sweat and my stomach swells and burns as if flaming blades are ripping me apart from the inside, he is there. He makes me drink fresh sap and sings the psalms of the sun, and even if he cannot erase the pain, at least he soothes it. He's draining all his energy and I think he's in danger of sinking into arcane sleep... damn all the Dark Gods, why am I in such a bad spot?

4. Exorcism



A vibration spreads through the air and passes through my limbs, which warm up and relax. Clear flames appear in stone braziers not far away and the monitors of an old medical console light up. The surroundings light up and take shape. I was not mistaken, I am in one of Marcio's bunkers, a kind of underground fortress whose walls are forged in thick chrome-steel. In every direction, seemingly stacked haphazardly, are crates of all kinds and racks of conventional, light, medium, heavy, energy, legionary melee weapons and armour, and even a few technomistic blades stored in sacralised casings. My bed was placed in a corner, inside an energy cell. I don't know when, but they must have made no small effort to find the space to place me here and also draw a protective circle around me.

From behind a column of anti-tank ammunition emerge Bruno and Marcio, with dirty clothes and dark faces. Bruno, in his white tunic covered with greyish spots, although still fleshy, seems to have lost weight. Rotten, wearing tactical trousers and the ever-present black short-sleeved T-shirt, instead looks as solid as usual, big belly out and muscular arms in view. When they meet my gaze they change expression and after an initial surprise, smile.

- You bastard did it again! - shouts Marcio, breaking the silence.

- Did what?

- To wake you up, Etrom. We didn't think you'd make it through without a major ritual this time. We actually feared that...

- Damned magister, you pessimist, can't you see he's awake and talking? I told you that an assailant like him was capable of kicking even death's ass. A true warrior knows how to assess another true warrior better than any 'doctor'! - exclaims Marcio, giving Bruno, who is staggering, a resounding pat. Then he embraces the magister and bursts out laughing. Both of them seem to be very careful not to go beyond the confines of the circle of protection that extends beyond the entrance to the cell, but they really seem relieved of a burden that had been weighing them down for a long time.

- OK, uncontrolled joy aside, why am I chained and in a cell?

- What is your last memory?

- I woke up recently with a nice dose of confusion. Blurred vision, nausea, all the usual joys of life. Before you arrived I was just trying to reorganise my ideas. There are more memories following each other in a rather chaotic way. Needless to say, physically I feel like crap, like I've been beaten up for days. But I repeat the question, why am I chained and in a cell?

- When the illness worsened, we recorded a strange variation in the composition of your aura. There is a possibility that demons or abyssal entities have managed to penetrate your life essence. You don't remember fighting in the netherworld?

- Fighting... don't think so. At the moment the most vivid memories, if memories they are, are you two insisting on helping me and you wandering around in the most absurd places in the city. Have I done anything to add to my list of mortal sins?

- No, thanks to those chains we were able to prevent it, at least for now.

- You guys... you even used magic chains for fear of facing some demon eager to possess my broken body?

- The idea for the chains was Bruno's, not mine. If I beat you in the ring, I can single-handedly defeat any sucker wearing your ugly face...

- Rotten, that time I let you win out of pity. You don't deny a little satisfaction to old friends who dispense alcohol. Shall we count the times I made you kiss the rug?

- Look at this son of a...

- I'm glad you want to joke, but I have to interrupt you... we don't have much time. - Bruno turns dark again.

- For what?

- To stabilise you and not lose you. We may not get another chance.

- But we don't even have five minutes for a beer, steak, dessert and a whisky?

- You must keep an empty stomach.

- OK Bruno, it's clear that I'm in deep shit and you have to do one of your usual crazy wizard things, but can you at least give me some insight into what has happened and what is going to happen?

- No. Marcio, please answer his questions. - Bruno turns and heads towards a chest covered with runic plaques that I had not noticed until now. When the magister lays his hands on the lock, the plaques glow, emitting a harsh, high-pitched sound that seems to want to pierce our

eardrums. The suffering is intense, but thankfully brief. The chest opens, I cannot see what is inside. Bruno leans over and starts whispering and gesturing as if he were talking to someone inside the chest. Marcio seems for a moment tempted to peek in, but then, strangely intimidated, he looks away from the magister's operations and turns back to me as usual: - Come on, shoot your questions, you arrogant prick.

- What day is it?

- Fourth.

- The full date, genius.

- Fourth, twelfth of 476. Can't you smell the festivities?

- What the fuck, it's been seven months. I've lost seven months, you dark, cursed devils.

- Amen and praise to you, great master blasphemer.

- Well, I guess this astral journey couldn't have gone any worse.

- Etrom, you above all should know that "the worst" has no limits...

- Indeed, it is always better not to tickle the fancy of the gods.

- Yeah.

- Yeah.

- How is it going in general?

- What do you think?

- Shitty?

- Worse than the aforementioned unlimited worst.

- The venue?

- You're not going to believe this, but that crapshoot I won at dice continues to be trendy.

That guy's article in that bourgeois mega-bullshit magazine has given us a nice mass of rich, reckless customers. The covers are wobbly but resilient and the revenue those grail-filled fuckers generate is not bad, especially in these times of crisis.

- Then it's not all bad.

- You go and serve feudal guards and noble scions, and then you tell me if you are happy about the tips they leave you with contempt. I get by at it cos I can put on a good face.

- Smuggling and shady missions?

- Almost everything stopped, as you can see I have a full warehouse.

- Always because of the lineages that hunt us?

- The situation precipitated. Enmities with aristocrats and convictions in feudal courts, even death sentences, became a minor problem.

- You even look serious and concerned.

- The barriers beyond the gold gates can no longer filter the air one hundred per cent and some areas have been struck by lightning. Not normal lightning, but lightning from real storms of judgement. The central government shut down all outside sectors by issuing emergency laws and revoked the operating licences of all military and exploration agencies. Those who force the controls and try to work manage to take them out in a few days, there are many spies around. The official version of this situation is that the megacity must be preparing for a siege by a large Sakrum army, but my boys in the field have not even glimpsed the shadow of enemy troops within two hundred kilometres. The dark evil, or whatever it is, is spreading, particularly among the non-existent, who are also left without the medical support of the central charities. The Unified News doesn't mention it, but a real plague has broken out, and I believe the worst is yet to come. A few bourgeois independent newspapers have tried to shed some light on what is happening, but the news, the real news, remains as usual in the cathedrals of the inquisition and in the elite intellectual circles of the golden palaces, rotting in the dust, like their vague political and moral arguments.

- And is all this mess happening only in Irba or elsewhere?

- Officially only here, but some secondary sources also report illnesses and storms in other megacities, perhaps even in other states and colonies.

- Great, maybe it was better if I stayed over.

- Better not to be born in this very place and age, perhaps.

- Yes, maybe so. I would like to ask you a few more things, but I have a feeling I won't like the answers.

- Give it a go, champ.

- Have you seen anything concrete about my possible possession?

- After one of your many crises with spasms and vomiting, you passed out and we connected you to a medical scanning unit. Dawn would've been here any minute, I remember because Bruno later explained the importance of the moment. Immediately after the connection, the machines signalled a spike of brain and heart activity dangerously off the scale, which was followed by the alarm of cessation of all vital activity, not only of the body, but also of the aura.

Do you understand? Simultaneously, heart, brain, aura. An absurd thing given that the aural signal is lost on average only thirty-six hours after death.

- So basically I am dead on a material level, and maybe it was a close call to an imminent death within death.

- This I do not know, but what happened immediately afterwards I will never forget. You started spewing smoke and flames from all orifices and I felt the bones of your body crack and mutate, from your eyes ... - Marcio suddenly interrupted his recollections as a powerful scream from Bruno conquered every corner of the room. The magister has uttered a word of supreme command and two orbs of energy, one blue and one yellow, had appeared in his hands. He is sweating, puffs, hesitates for a second and then plunges his arms into the chest. From inside, flashes of lightning can be seen and moans of men, women and indecipherable beings can be heard. Bruno resumes shouting arcane words, waving his arms inside the chest. I am not sure, but I think he is fighting against something that would like to cross the threshold of the material world. After a series of violent blows, thunder rattles the room. The magister stops and turns towards us with bloodshot eyes.

- Best if you leave, Marcio.

- Are you sure you don't need my help?

- The only thing you have to do is be ready for Etrom's transfer to the temple. You're in danger if you stay here.

- I am not afraid and...

- Have you already forgotten what happened when the abyss began to manifest itself?

- No, forgive my pride and recklessness, Magister.

- And if you don't want to make your central control system and your brain melt, I advise you to turn off all cameras and sensors, and not to try to follow in any way what happens from now on. What you saw last time is nothing compared to what might happen today.

- Aren't you exaggerating, Bruno?

- Unfortunately not, Etrom.

Rotten, as I had never seen him do before, he bows. Then he looks me straight in the eye and wants to say something, but he can't, words feel inadequate in this situation. He clenches his fist and shows it to me. We understand each other, old stormtrooper. Then he rushes to a ladder leading to an escape hatch, opens it cursing and disappears.

Bruno bends down and plunges back into the chest with his whole torso, for a moment I fear he might slip and fall inside. Noises of something tearing, flesh, gases and liquids. A horrendous stench of sewage wafts everywhere. With unusual agility and strength Bruno scrambles back to his feet and closes the chest, slamming the lid with such vehemence that some plates break off and shatter on the floor, generating electric sparks. He is completely drenched in thick purplish blood and in his hands he clutches a large, pulsating yellow heart. With slow, measured steps he approaches my bed. Reaching the edge of the ritual circle he squeezes the heart hard, causing a large amount of blood to drip onto the floor. Smoke and flames kick up again, the circle breaks, I sense something moving inside me. Bruno moves forward quickly and pours a few drops of blood onto the chains holding my arms. The rings hit by the blood snap and for a moment I feel like attacking, like ripping the magister apart. I throw myself forward, but then stop, mesmerised by the heart that continues to beat. Maybe it would be good to bite his face off, maybe I should do it!

- Listen Etrom, don't look at me, keep looking at this heart.

His voice convinces me, I do what he says, I don't want his life and his pain now, I want the heart he guards.

- I give it to you, it is yours.

I grasp it violently and tear it apart. Hot liquids and shreds of flesh splash everywhere and sink into my throat.

- And let us hope that your guest likes it enough, and leave satisfied with this rich votive offering. Sleep and rise, sleep and rise, my friend.

5. Blood and defeat



- Come on, Etrom, just a little more effort, drink this sap and open your eyes.

I breathe in, feel the air entering my lungs and feel a great sensation of relief mixed with fright, as if I had been held by something for a long time underwater. A bitter liquid flows into my mouth, it stinks, but I don't spit it out, my throat is dry. I swallow hoping to get some relief. I clench the fist of my right hand. It is numb, but responsive. My head twitches, as if someone is sticking daggers into my skull. Now I am awake. Still confused, but awake. Everything hurts, small uncontrolled muscle spasms remind me once again of the harshness of the last astral journey: I have been on the other side too long. I don't feel like opening my eyes. It smells of piss, shit, ash and smoke. I feel the wet pillow, I have sweated and drooled again. Who knows what time it is. If I complain maybe I can pity Bruno and maybe he'll let me rest another ten minutes. Now I don't feel like facing a full wake-up call.

- You have to make an effort, even if it hurts, open your eyes. If you resist or put it off, it will get worse. And, mind you, when the pain comes, and it will come, remember that I am not your executioner. Focus and remember, return calmly, here and now. You are Etrom, you are body, flesh and bone. Chaos will be tamed, intelligence will resume form, the before and after will make sense, again. Remember, I am not a shadow or your executioner, I am your healer. There is no point in delaying the inevitable, open your eyes.

Maybe he is right, it is useless to have illusions of rest and recuperation, I must take courage. I open my eyes.

- Fucking hell! Fuck, that hurt. Did you enjoy sewing my eyelids shut?

- Yes, of course, between invocations, exorcisms, transfers from one place to another, blood transfusions, biomemory checks and structural analyses, I would even sew your eyelids shut. Every time it's the same story, you always forget how to wake up in the

temple. Bah, at least I didn't get punched in the face today, maybe that's already a good result, considering your past behaviour.

- I could always change my mind about the fist....

I lift my torso: I am naked, covered in numerous wounds and symbols, major arcana, combined to form invocations of command, I think. I look around. We are in the underground temple in the south quadrant of GW-7, not far from the agency, the candles around the altar are almost exhausted. Scattered on the floor are needles, wires, twisted branches and wooden bowls with blood, animal limbs, nails, bones and hair inside. The stone table is occupied in its entirety by the primary tome of 'De Occulto Limine'. Nailed to the walls and around the console keyboards are pieces of scorched parchment. Memory starts to reassemble itself in not always coherent blocks, but this feeling should finally disappear soon. Pain, discomfort, nauseous smells, slight confusion. All normal. No fear, psychic distortions or irrational terrors are far away. Good. Something tugs at my skin and back muscles, I turn around and bring a hand to the affected area. Bruno steps in front of me and with a sweeping gesture detaches a series of tubes from my body from which sparks and liquids spurt out.

- Easy, Etrom, we can't afford to damage the hardware.

What happens now? I would like to smash everything and go and take a shower, if only I had the strength to do so. What is the procedure? It depends on what happened on the journey, on the rituals performed by the officiating priest, of course. And in this case?

- He moves his head back and stays up for a moment with his torso, motionless.

I take a long breath and follow Bruno's directions as he approaches my face with golden pliers. With his rabbit incisors on full display he starts fiddling in various places on my jaw to extract sharp objects that he throws into a metal container.

- Hang in there, it's almost over.

I feel a kind of nail coming out that was driven in so deep that its tip touched my tongue. Bruno is tired, his face is hollowed out by deep dark circles under his eyes, almost certainly caused by several days of waking, and despite his imposing size, he looks gaunt. His cheeks, usually round, shiny and ruddy, are hung like those of a

bulldog and his eyes, green and shiny, now seem to be begging to close. The scanty bushes of hair on his head are ruffled as if they had been hit by a tornado.

After the jaw it is the turn of the skull. Small splinters and electrodes are removed with quick, precise gestures. From the temple, slowly, I feel thin straws smeared with a whitish, glue-like substance come out like crawling worms. The operation produces no pain, but triggers an annoying itch that turns into a jolt that makes me involuntarily contract my facial muscles and toes for a moment.

To finish off, Bruno, after wiping the sweat from his forehead on the sleeve of his ritual tunic smeared with blood, and the dark gods know what else, he sticks a device with two small tubes up his nose, presses a button and sucks up from his lungs mucus and spiky corpuscles that end up in a transparent container next to his feet, naked and battered by infected cuts.

The last operation takes my breath away forcing me to collapse supine on the altar again. I feel lousy, but it's done, now I have to relax and recover the minimum level of strength that would allow me to get up and walk. If the disease has not reached the terminal stage, a shower, food and alcohol await me. I place the palm of my right hand on my navel. I breathe calmly and watch the moving shadows on the large white stone blocks of the temple's domed ceiling. Bruno throws himself down dead weight on a half-drained armchair, slips a hand under his tunic, rummages around worriedly and then smiles contentedly as, like a magician, he pulls a huge cigar out of his sleeve. With difficulty he leans out to reach the flame of a candelabra, and after a couple of clumsy attempts gone awry, finally manages to light it.

For a while we remain suspended in nothingness, in silence. If it weren't for the damned squeaks of the navigation console instruments, I might even be able to delude myself that I was almost well.

- Now tell me, seriously, how is Etrom doing?

- I am not in chains and, barring any twists and turns, I seem to be back in the material world more or less in one piece. I would say great except that everything hurts with every breath.

- Fortunately, it went well. What do you remember about the last partial awakening?

- I was starting to recover, then you kicked out Marcio and then... sudden fatigue and

nothing else, total blackout, as if I had drunk whisky from the Inexistents. I passed out, didn't I?

- Yes, more or less.

- What does that mean more or less?

- We managed to placate an abysmal hunter who had almost reached the main emanation of your aura.

- Are we? Did I do something I should remember?

- No, nothing too relevant actually.

- Speak, Bruno, or I swear, as soon as I find the strength...

- I performed a rather complex ritual and offered a ghostly heart to the pretty fellow traveller who wanted to possess you.

- Ah... and did he like it?

- We are alive and conscious, so yes.

- Great, all normal then. Any news on the progression of my illness?

- I have discovered that you do not have the dark evil.

- Is that why you are smiling?

- Of course, isn't it good news for you to know that you don't have a fatal disease?

- Yes, great, but excluding the worst, what is it then?

- To be honest, I don't know.

- And this is good news?

- Absolutely. If you were afflicted with the dark evil you would have your hours, perhaps your minutes, counted and ticking. In fact, based on the studies and statistics I was able to retrieve from the Ministry of Health's secret archives, you should have been dead months ago.

- I don't exactly feel great though.

- I know you feel weak and sore, but the latest scans show that all the vital parameters are improving, and not a little. There are no more worms in your intestines and the branches of diseased cells seem to have dried up. Your physical immune system has reacted well recently and is recovering. After the last ritual, your aura has also regained an acceptable level of balance.

- So am I healing?

- Generally speaking, we can say yes, although as I told you earlier, since we do not know exactly what illness has affected you, we cannot be one hundred per cent certain. It seems likely to me that there is a correlation between the recent illness and the previous loss of

connection with the powers of the aura, but despite all the research I have done in recent months I cannot understand the exact nature of the hypothetical connection. The fact that I can no longer leave my physical body always makes it more difficult, but I believe that the spread of this variant of dark evil into the extra-aura sectors and the grail famine are also somehow connected to unintelligible astral fluxes, and I hypothesise that you have been affected by them as a carrier of an important hub of mystical energies.

- OK, so in the end, where does my nameless disease stand?

- You are certainly much better off than you were at the beginning, it may even be that you are cured and only have to go through a tedious convalescence. On the other hand, there is also the remote possibility that in a day, a month or a year, you may turn into a pillar of salt. The truth is that you have come into contact with material and astral essences that are too complex to be able to clearly determine your state of health.

- This reassuring condition seems to me almost a metaphor for the uncertain fate that influences everyone's life, after all.

- To follow your usual bright and optimistic outlook, I would say yes. The main thing is that we managed to get you awake and record a marked improvement in the cornerstones of your health.

- What if I go back to feeling worse?

- A rupture of the current equilibrium resulting in the triggering of a new crisis could possibly lead to an exile of the consciousness into a nightmare dimension, with the attendant risks of death in the dark gateways, or a bad cold.

- How can we shift the odds towards option two?

- I have to study, study and study. And then there is the usual paradox that the greatest benefits in material and mystical terms could be had if you were able to reach those astral spheres that could give you back complete control of your aura. Of course, I would like to kill you for not having made me aware of the seriousness of your illness before this last journey, but I still believe that, with a more adequate psycho-mystical-physical preparation and condition, the main path to take remains that of the exploration of the beyond.

- Very good indeed. If we then consider that the last trip was a total failure, there is really something to cheer about.

- Did you not see, understand or retrieve anything relevant?

- Absolutely nothing. I know you won't agree, but this was the last time.

- What went so wrong that you wanted to quit?

- I got lost, as I have done before, in brain memories, emotional desires and ordinary dreams, mine and other people's, almost completely unhinged. On several occasions I have failed to block the techno-psychic interference of external networks. I have wandered in and out of the astral netherworld haphazardly, forgetting to build defences and draw coordinates. I'm too weak and confused, and demons like the one you had to save me from feel it and take advantage of it to feed on what's left of my aura, or who knows what other magical crap.

- The recordings were bad, indeed, but look at the screen: there are two peaks, one central and one final, a moment before re-entry, signalling a clear and concrete astral journey. Do you remember anything at all about those moments?

- Nothing relevant. Perhaps the recordings were corrupted by spectres from the lower spheres to drive us mad with false hopes, that's all. Fuck. We've flushed a mountain of resources down the toilet without achieving anything.

- Maybe not. Maybe some important element is imprinted in your unconscious memory and if we are lucky it will resurface in the coming days. It has happened before. You may not perceive it now, but you may have reached a higher degree of awareness and discernment.

- Awareness and discernment... I am beginning to believe that these are empty words in the mouths of superstitious priests and suburban technomagicians. I should have found one of the sources described in De Occulto Limine, instead I just risked getting lost, or worse. Perhaps there is nothing comprehensible and controllable. There are only dreamlike and technological, human and extra-dimensional networks, chaotically intertwined and overlapping. How many times have we tried?

- This brings us to seven.

- What a disaster. I was never able to impose my will on the directional flows and I never knew if and when I was in an authentic astral sphere.

- You should have studied and meditated more.

- Yes, of course, easy to say now.

- Actually, I always told you, even before this last trip.
- Yes, Mother, thank you for the enlightening rebuke. Tell me, rather, how much did we spend on ritual and medical care in Marcio's hideouts?
 - More or less thirty thousand grails.
- Shit. And how much time has passed in all?
 - Seven and a half months.
 - Great. What about revenues? How did the AIs perform in the middle-class markets?
 - The AIs worked well, the programmers you hired provided me with the strategic upgrades you had designed, and the network robots I installed them on operated on average with seventy per cent success, consistently managing to maintain a risk-return ratio of one to two point three, but then there was a tightening of the laws under the moral constitution of artificial consciousnesses, and the broker scam, and the blackout
 - Wait, stop. Give me another dose of sap before you turn good news into kurgung.
 - I gave you several during the ritual, only four remain. Another dose now would be superfluous organically, it would only take away your thirst and some pain faster. Are you sure you want to waste it like this? If you want I have some herbs that even if they don't have an immediate regenerative impact might stimulate...
 - Are you really trying to fool me with that blessed herb scam of yours? Why do we have so little sap? But for all the fucking dark gods, how many doses of the stash did you use?
 - All of them, plus twenty-one others courtesy of Marcio. In addition to the main exorcism with the heart, I had to cope with situations where you were dripping blood almost every day, you suffered four assaults on your internal organs by abyssal emanations of a higher order. I had to drag them to the plane of Malkuth and sacrifice a dozen animals and metaphysical slaves to quench their thirst. That is also why it seems strange to me that you have not seen or done anything important. You have never been attacked by so many such creatures, they do not roam the lower strata, so somehow you must have reached a greater branch of the astral tree, one in which the sources are hidden.

- I don't know, Bruno, I don't know. I can't think of anything important right now. Screw the sap, let's save it. Is there even a beer or a bottle of pseudo-wine?

- If you want, there is pseudo-water.

- For fuck's sake, what a fucking wake-up call! OK, I'll stick with the thirst, the headache and the recoil. No sap, no beer, we've got nothing at all... in fact no, we've got some shit news to add to the pile of shit that reigns supreme in this damn shit temple. Go ahead, continue with the list of past, present and future disasters.

- As I was saying, despite the fact that the artificial intelligences were executed effectively by the robots, the brokers of the secondary accounts staged a classic fake bankruptcy to clean out the chickens' deposits. On this scenario we were covered, we only lost forty percent of the gains, the rest I managed to take out and put back into the main account. By the way, remember to thank Marcio for that too, he's the one who tipped me off about the brokers' plan in place.

- Well, less worse than I had feared, then.

- Um...

- There, I should have expected that the war bulletin was not over. Come on, what else?

- Baron Alfonso's bureaucrats were able to link and prove to the Ministry of Stock Exchange that you were behind the company's main account.

- Hell no. We spent a fortune on corruption, encryption systems and online document security. How the fuck did they get past all the barriers we had erected?

- I honestly don't know.

- This beating was not needed at all. Were you able to salvage anything?

- No. All strategic funds were confiscated and awarded to the baron as partial compensation for the damages recognised in that old upper chamber court ruling. The ministry bureaucrats were unusually quick and efficient this time. I would have liked to get something back on its feet, perhaps even borrowing from friends of Marcio's friends, but electromagnetic storms began to scorch the grail-sheathed networks, blackouts multiplied, and much of the technological equipment began to work intermittently or melted away altogether.

- Basically, we are at zero while everything else in the world goes increasingly to shit.

- More or less, yes. I kept a few 27 coins and an ingot in the chest under the altar. By burning everything in the self-contained furnaces, I think we can keep essential equipment running, have three hours of air conditioning a day, and produce food and basic medicines for a week or so. Forget the luxury of hot water.

- Fantastic. More bad news?

- We have been served with another death sentence, enforceable in the confines of the feudal quarters of the von Honeskut, and there is not a shadow of a new hire because of the situation into which the entire Holy Republic has plunged.

- Dear Bruno, I guess we must, indeed I must, admit total defeat. I had hoped that by getting hold of some of the secrets of the underworld we would find a way to evolve and get out of this mess, but I have only made things worse. Perhaps the version of De Occulto Limine that I have studied is not reliable. Or, more simply, I'm just not gifted enough for this game and I need to stop deluding myself into thinking I can make a real astral journey.

- I warned you, Etrom. You should have first checked your impetuous temper and informed me of your true condition. Initiation into the arcane arts is far more demanding than one could imagine, or hope for.

- Aah, stop being a shadow magister, you know very well that if I can't get my aura back to the rank it once was. I can no longer use power armor, and without that the society is worthless. We have too many enemies, and they are managing to encircle us on all fronts. We have to go back to the original plan: in order to expand my aura, I have to go back to consecrated majocaine.

- You have already reached your limit. By using it, even one more time, you may suffer irreversible damage. Besides, we've already seen that it doesn't let you achieve the results of when you were a holy stormtrooper.

- Better than nothing, better than this crap of pseudo astral travel in which I still risk dying, but without even understanding what is really going on around me, suddenly swallowed up and disintegrated, in every part of me, by some portal or abyssal hunter. I do not want to find out what it feels like to die as described in the psalms of the prophet Johan.

- I understand that you are tired and scared, but so far I have always managed to protect you from situations that could lead to death in death. Also consider that we no longer have a single gram of consecrated majocaine.

- Yes, but I can get that somehow.

- In my opinion, we should sell some equipment, regroup, find new De Occulto Limine scrolls and try again. The occult path is long and difficult, but it is the only one worthwhile. Despite the mistakes, I am sure you will be able to understand and master it.

- How strange, what you said reminded me of the words of a shadow in the netherworld.

- What did he tell you?

- That where I was was not my path and that something, or someone, would kill me if I did not get out of there. At that moment I was attracted and repelled by a power that I could somehow describe as feminine.

- Can you remember and describe where you were?

- It was cold, there were gigantic pillars... and a cavern in which, deep inside, there was a presence calling out to me... but I still can't bring it all into focus now.

- Does this seem unimportant to you?

- Mmm, like the rest, nothing like the descriptions in the scrolls. It was probably a classic minor demon jealous of its space that used and superimposed my dream memories on its dark emanations to chase me away. That was all, nothing that seemed too different from other situations in this or other rituals.

- We have a lot of work ahead of us on biomemory transcriptions. With all the sap I have given you, mental and physical regeneration should complete its course by tomorrow morning. Right after that you will have to put aside your pessimism and reconstruct every single part of the journey with me. You still have a lot to learn. Any form of distraction or interpretative superficiality is no longer permissible in the places you have reached. You will have to deeply modify your way of seeing and classifying creatures and events of the astral otherworld. This time it is not as bad as you think.

- I don't think I'm going to help you. You can say, believe and do whatever you want, Bruno, I don't want to know any more about astral travel. Help me up. We take a

shower, cold, damn dark gods, and go to the club. I can only feel better when I think that in a while we'll be at a table drinking wine, beer and eating fresh meat to our heart's content.

- But is it ever possible that the only sensible and positive thing you have managed to say since you woke up is about wine, beer and meat?

END OF PART ONE

The adventure continues in:

ETROM

The Astral Essence

Part Two: The Inexistent Arena

APPENDIX I - HIGH RISK DOCUMENTS*

By the Ministry of Peace
of the Holy Republic of Sighundia

*Note Bio_AI Group integrated Plate_CrcRt38C:

**DEVELOPMENTS AND CONNECTIONS EVENTS TO BE MONITORED WITH PROTOCOL
HiGh_fq_97/41D**

Communiqué F-050475
Deconstructed Oneiric Network
Blades of Justice

Death.

If you are not ready to give life and to give death, read no further, go back to enjoying the dreams and commercials of the legal dream network, go back to living non-existent lives constructed by an Artificial Intelligence that plays with your most basic instincts, that moulds and creates insatiable desires, that has allowed you to come into the world only because you randomly fit within the limits of an absurd pyramid chart.

Death is the only thing that really matters, the only truth never to be forgotten or feared. It will not be us, but it will be She who will strike down our enemies. We are the heralds of Justice, shining and terrible, but it will always be Her who will rise above us and show us the way to the only possible freedom in this corrupt world.

What do we want from you?

Your Life. Nothing more and nothing less.

If you want to become a true human being, a heroic Blade of Justice, if you have enough courage to break the chains of slavery that the world has imposed on you since birth, you can and must continue to read our communiqués, you can and must let us edit your neurochip right now {*>confirm edit<*>.

If, on the other hand, you are a filthy coward, close your connection and pray that you have not been tracked by the Ministry of Peace, they will only need to know that you have surfed one of the deconstructed networks to feed you to the inquisition.

May the innate sense of equality, freedom and justice that dwells in the

human soul guide your choices.

Communiqué F-050475

Truth.

I have always looked for it, never found it, not in this filthy world ruled by the nobles, bourgeoisie and cardinals of the inner cities in cahoots with the worst criminal gangs of the periphery to enslave with lies, death and injustice, the bodies and minds of the unconscious majorities.

This system, this society, cannot last much longer. In spite of ridiculous, contradictory birth control policies, the extra-aurean sectors of the cities of the Sacred Republic are overflowing with Inexistents. Demography is a destiny that cannot be governed by idiots glued to filthy hereditary thrones. Human beings are increasing again, primary resources are scarce, and not even the grail, which our masters want us to believe is 'sacred', can save us. Unfortunately, as in the past, the citizens of the subaltern classes, and I don't just mean the most exploited and humiliated workers, such as the miners forced to dig in the heart of the earth to extract the grail (have you ever wondered why human beings and not robots are actually employed?), but all those who do not have gold status on their identity profile, are divided and unaware of the condition they suffer through almost no fault of their own. The masses do not know, and perhaps sometimes do not want to know, of the countless changes they could make to their lives if they could fight together for a great ideal, fearlessly, to the death if necessary. Many of these people, of this great oppressed social group, aided and abetted by the propaganda of the government and the Seven United Churches, inside and outside the official dream-networks, hate and despise the Nonexistent, not

realising that only by allying themselves with them could they unleash the Revolution that the Four States need.

They want to frighten us with ridiculous tales of magic and ancient demons, they deny us knowledge by making the dogmas of Theoscience prevail, but we know that the enemies are them and no one else, they, little men whom chance has willed into bloody classes ready to do anything to maintain their boundless privileges.

Ours is an arduous path, but an inevitable one. If we do not win, humanity will risk extinction because of the idiocy of those who, drunk with the disgusting power of violence and greed, have been unable, or unwilling, to see the horrendous destruction that looms over everything and everyone.

Aware of the terrible situation we are in, ready to face any difficulty, we must proceed with unprecedented method and determination. Many defeats and sufferings await us. Know, however, that recent events are in our favour. As predicted by the founding fathers of Absolute History, a global crisis is an indispensable precondition for positive change in societal structures. We cannot be certain of this, but perhaps it will be our generation that will initiate the hoped-for, glorious and luminous Age of Man.

For all these reasons, now and forever, all we can do is fight, fight, fight.

General of the Revolution

777

Additional Information

In view of the exceptional nature of this quarter, I provide below a quick summary of the most important news censored by the central ministries. The reliability of the sources, which are almost always verified directly in the field or through purified biomemories, averages 83.5 per cent.

Storms of Judgement

The increase in these atmospheric phenomena is much more pronounced than officially declared. The damage to all electronic equipment is extensive.

Event-Related Operational Provisions: We estimate that most of the robotic forces are out of action or under repair, which means it is time to carry out as many operations as possible in the outer feudal sectors where the energy level of the barriers is lowest. Go to your local commands for installation of available attack plans.

War in the East, Battle of Linber

The army of the Holy Republic of Sighundia, contrary to what was claimed on the main official news channels, did NOT succeed in containing Hitland's latest offensive. The enemy reached and captured a large part of the city centre. We advise all fighters present in Linber to avoid any direct contact with both armies on the field. We are convinced that bitter fighting will continue and that this will lead to an interesting weakening of both sides, which are also subject now more than ever to the devastating effects of the storms of judgement. More details and operational arrangements will be provided as developments unfold.

Spreading the 'Dark Evil'

We believe that the recent spate of illnesses, which the population is led to believe is some sort of unprecedented Dark Evil plague, has been created in a laboratory by the central government to relieve demographic pressure and increase the religious faith that springs from fear in these situations.

We believe that as a result of the numerous riots and the wave of fanaticism a cure will soon be administered, perhaps by air via modulation of the energy waves of the barriers, that will stop the epidemic.

We ask you combatants, where possible, to spread our physical newspaper to reveal this obscene manoeuvre to the oppressed citizens. Only by spreading the truth, concrete and material, will we be able to prevent the Seven United Churches from shortly glorying in having successfully invoked Gods' saving intervention.

Other Operational Provisions

- Don't forget to do your weekly updates at a certified location near your area of birth.
- Whenever and wherever possible, proceed with recruitment, create new battle groups in variable formation and strike at the heart of the enemy!

Holy Inquisition of the Seven United Churches Sacred Edict SG-476-7

In accordance with Article Three of the Constitution of the Sacred Republic of the United Nations of Sighundia, prioritised under the Central Ministry of Peace Crisis Management Regulation 761/V

WE FIGHT THE SNARES OF EVIL

Faithful citizens, we live in troubled times, evil walks among us, deceives us with its lies and tempts us with its false promises of justice and freedom. The storms of judgement, as the seven fathers foretold in the books of faith, have finally come upon our cities too, overcoming the lofty walls of our sins. Do not fear suffering and poverty, they are blessings to be embraced, scourges we deserve for our corrupt nature. Theoscience, and all its machinery, however holy and wonderful, cannot save us. It will not be the rulers of the golden palaces or the aristocrats from their castles that will lend us the help we need. Only the God of the Gods can lead our souls to the light, never forget that.

I hereby
SACRED EDIT

In the full freedom that the God of Gods has bestowed upon us and aware of our responsibility to be the Custodians of the infinite exegesis of Good and Evil,

WE ASK

THAT EVERY FAITHFUL CITIZEN ENLIGHTENED BY THE GODS

- Go to one of the Churches of Atonement to replace the Neurochip, even if it appears undamaged;
- On no account interrupt the daily connection to the dream networks of the Holy Seven Churches;
- Denounce directly to our authorities any abuse of power by the noble houses, and in particular any fraudulent campaign to replace the Neurochip in the areas granted to them as a fiefdom. **ONLY** in the Churches of Atonement can you receive a consecrated Neurochip free from Evil. Priests enslaved to the rebellious aristocracy will be **EXCOMMUNICATED** for **HERESY**.

By order of the Seven Fathers and the Chosen One of the Faith, Nicolaus III, in the Seventh, First, 476 A.H.E.F.

Ministry of Peace of the Sacred Republic of Sighundia
Technomistica Security Agency

Note ED-e72-C31

(Summary note Consultant 'Etrom')

Etrom, citizen EZIRB-f05B04A1975, is a former HWD (Human World Defence) sacred stormtrooper officer specialising in hand-to-hand combat with techno-mystical weapons and equipment tied to the expansion of the life aura. Decorated with the Golden Eagle at the Battle of Hantr Castle (7 June 469 A.H.E.F.), Etrom was described by the men under his direct command as: determined, courageous, a brotherly comrade-in-arms, but also, at times, fierce, bloodthirsty, impulsive, indecipherable.

On 12 January 470 A.H.E.F. Etrom left HWD to found a private company to explore the dying deserts. His name was unofficially linked to numerous riots and criminal activities in the capital and the megacity of Irba. The central government has, on more than one occasion, triggered brief X-2 monitoring against him, but no enforcement proceedings have ever been initiated against him (possible protection by high military officials). On the other hand, there have been numerous sentences, including death sentences, that this man has accumulated in the branch courts of various houses of the feudal nobility.

The Holy Inquisition of the Seven United Churches is conducting a confidential investigation into suspected activities of the subject in the dream networks of the Holy Republic.

Notwithstanding all the flaws and potential annoyances this individual may bring to the Republic, we believe that his occasional employment as an external advisor, through the use of

private agencies controlled by us with shadow quotas, may prove invaluable in the current global geopolitical situation and in anticipation of further worsening of the current astral turmoil.

APPENDIX II - FACT SHEETS OF THE FOUR STATES

By the Ministry of Peace
of the Holy Republic of Sighundia



Sacred Republic of Sighundia



Surface area: 3,924,965 km².

Inhabitants: 210,578,852

Armed Forces:

Army: 7 million permanent soldiers

Armoured Forces: 11,098 (Tanks, Power-Armors, War-Robots)

Naval Forces: 5 battleships, 3 aircraft carriers, 30 warboats

Aeronautics: 73 multi-role aircraft

Form of government: Sacred Oligarchic Republic

Greater Grail Mines: 21

Minor Grail Mines: 72

Other Energy Sources: Oil and Coal (Estimated Depletion 5-10 years)

Social Classes (feudal census approximation Sg-lpsC22-472):

- Skrib (100 individuals)
- Nobility (about 1%)
- Bourgeoisie (approximately 10%)
- First-tier citizens (approximately 10%)
- Second-tier citizens (approx. 20%)
- Lower than second-class citizens (approximately 10-20%)
- Without Destiny (approximately 10-15%)
- Existing (approximately 20-30%)

Capital: Sighundia (45,556,158 inhabitants)

Language: Ancient Imperial (primary and religious documents), Sighundian.

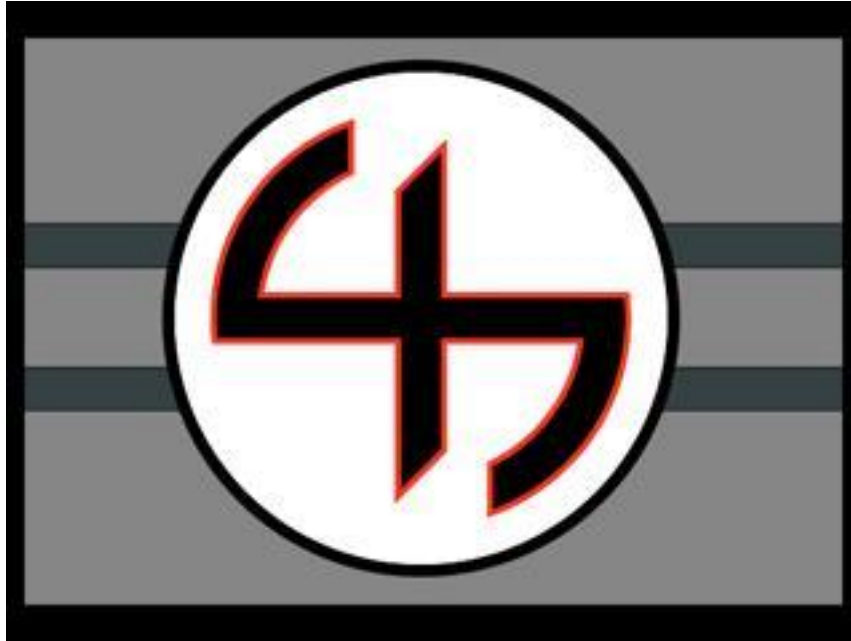
Main Religion: Faith of the Seven United Churches (Cult of Eternal Life)

Coin: Grail/Unite

Primary Megacity: Sighundia, Irba, Wardan, NuParis, Londearth, Belafan, Strengnior, Lex

Controlled colonies: 16

Hitland Empire



Surface area: 7,750,221 km²

Inhabitants: 323,995,654

Armed Forces:

Army: 14 million permanent soldiers

Armoured Forces: 21,348 (Tanks, Power-Armors, War-Robots)

Naval Forces: 8 battleships, 1 aircraft carrier, 50 warboats

Air Force: 112 multi-role aircraft

Form of government: Imperial Dictatorship

Greater Grail Mines: 12

Minor Grail Mines: 107

Other Energy Sources: Oil and Coal (Estimated Depletion 15-20 years)

Social Classes (Approximation Sources HtD987 and Ht455):

-Imperial Senators (120 individuals)

-Nobility (about 1%)

- Bourgeoisie (approximately 25%)
- Free Citizens (approximately 40%)
- Slaves (approx. 35%)

Capital: Konquer (27,324,587 inhabitants)

Language: Ancient Imperial 'Classical , Hitlandic

Religion: Worship of the Emperor

Coin: Grail/August

Primary Megacity: Konquer, Valor, Obedien, Fida, Kultens, Egon, Nemen, Hitland, Metor, Hius, Alatar.

Controlled colonies: 45

Uninon of Ursaton



Surface area: 6,528,772 km²

Inhabitants: 257,751,443

Armed Forces:

Army: 10 million permanent soldiers

Armoured Forces: 15,456 (Tanks, Power-Armors, War-Robots)

Naval Forces: 8 battleships, 50 warboats

Aeronautics: 20 multi-role aircraft

Form of government: One-party socialist state

Greater Grail Mines: 15

Minor Grail Mines: 87

Other Energy Sources: Oil and Coal (Estimated Depletion 20-30 years)

Social Classes (Approximation Sources URS-544 and URS-447):

- People's Guides (1%)
- Military officers (1%)
- Operative people (98%)

Capital: Stalgra (71. 254,875 inhabitants)

Language: Urizonian

Religion: Forbidden

Currency: Rub (also 'smuggled' by Unite)

Primary Megacity: Skest, Staltgra, Kalun, Popol, Egulan, Hiusta, Boboysk, Mecryk, Lenador, Fokun, Golanda, Sowetowe, Badrakan, Lepola, Konfin, Olomad, Persichov, Katradum.

Controlled colonies: 35

Sakrum Theocracy



Surface area: 11,629,091 km².

Inhabitants: 302,051,125

Armed Forces:

Army: 9 million permanent soldiers

Armoured Forces: 15,243 (Tanks, Power-Armors, War-Robots)

Naval Forces: 24 battleships, 4 aircraft carriers, 237 warboats

Aeronautics: 74 multi-role aircraft

Form of government: Theocracy

Greater Grail Mines: 30

Minor Grail Mines: 12

Other Energy Sources: None

Social Classes (Approximation Sources SK-775 and SK-333):

- Elective cardinals (1%)
- Cardinal Fighters (1%)
- Sacred Nobility (10%)
- Soulcasters (20%)
- Laboratores (70%)

Capital: Demiurgod (35,562,458 inhabitants)

Language: Ancient Imperial

Religion: Creed of the Cross

Currency: United

Mega City: Demiurgod, Richall, Neocivitas, Limes, Souten, Allend, Besten, Lucem, Ioia, Perfectio, Pacem, Gloriam, Pulcra, Devotio, Fides.

Controlled colonies: 23

Play the Videogame and Join the Community!

If you enjoyed the novel you might also want to discover the first video game from 2003 and learn more about the creators of Etrom!

To play **Etrom 20th Anniversary Edition** just go to the Steam page:

https://store.steampowered.com/app/2463420/Etrom_20th_Anniversary_Edition/

To learn more about this CrossMedial project and its future developments you can follow us on:

Discord

www.ageofgames.net

Twitter

Facebook

Thank you for spending a small part of your life in the world of Etrom!

Acknowledgements

Since the pages I have written are the fruit of hard work, I would like to express the following thanks:

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- To all the friends with whom I played, ran, boxed, joked, ate and drank;
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And a sincere thank you to everyone who took the time to read what I created and wrote.