

Survival I:
Slaughter At Ghastar
A Novella From The
Era Of Darkness

By
Ian Thompson

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Preface

Era Of Darkness is a tale of Emeran – a world divided by hatreds, mistrust and conflict.

When hordes of scythe-wielding demons emerge from beyond the great Wall of Light, Emeran is plunged towards annihilation. Villages and towns are eradicated. Armies are crushed by dark magic, terrible siege weapons and sheer brutal force. The invaders do not seek to conquer, to expand territories or to make their enemies submit to new beliefs or monarchs; they seek to destroy every living thing.

In Era Of Darkness, witness the war through the experiences of diverse characters and races. Two royal sisters, one a warrior, the other a mystic. Soldiers and officers, fighting and dying across the continent. A farmer traumatised by loss. A coward seeking redemption. An avenger driven by awful bloodlust. Pacifists forced to make a terrible choice. And many more...

This is a new tale from the Era Of Darkness. As the demonic army swarms across the land, a handful of simple villagers must unite in order to have even a slim chance of survival. What will their fate be?

Side Note:

On Emeran, the names of races are also the names of nationalities. Grammatically, then, this gives a question... are they referred to as 'graex' or 'Graex', 'callis' or 'Callis', 'human' or 'Human'? I've chosen to capitalise, others may not have. I like the emphasis and distinction this places on the peoples of this troubled realm.

Ian Thompson

Prologue: The World Of Emeran

“A Brief Chronicle of Emeran by a humble monk

“Three thousand years ago, the natives of this world were perishing under the scourge of a terrible plague. Flesh-withering sickness raged across the lands, afflicting each and every race. Efforts to cure the plague – or even to control it by quarantining entire cities – proved utterly futile. People believed that Armageddon was finally upon them...

“Our Human ancestors came to this world on huge, mystical sky-chariots, fleeing a distant land of their own which had been ravaged by war. At first the tormented natives of Emeran regarded these outsiders as a threat. However, the Humans freely offered their own medicines and healing knowledge, and in a matter of mere weeks, they had devised a cure for Emeran’s lethal blight. Within a year, the death-tolls were diminishing. Within two, the world was safe from the ravages of plague... The Humans were embraced as friends by the peoples of Emeran and given a new homeland to build and thrive upon.

“But kinship and peace can change like the weather...

“After five hundred years, a world war had begun to rage: every race across the continent against the others. Petty disputes had grown into hatreds; arguments had birthed conflicts, which birthed battles; people had turned from constructing towns and cities of beauty to building weapons of hideous destruction. Again, Emeran seemed to be on the brink of total disaster...

“This time, the Unseen Gods themselves intervened. Weary of the sight of blood and the clamour of war, they destroyed the weapons, separated the races of the world and threw up great walls of shimmering light. Gigantic prisons, hundreds of miles across, were thus created for all the peoples of Emeran. The Humans were given plains grassland. The Graex, an area of desert and mountain. The Callis, open forest. The Veres, swamplands. These and every other race were sealed in a terrain suited for their needs and comforts, whilst keeping them from attacking their neighbours.

“The Imprisonment was a period of penance and prayer. The endless horizons of fiery light that encompassed each people acted as a brilliant symbol of their wrong-doing and of the anger they had evoked from the Unseen Gods.

“More centuries passed and the races learned peace in their solitude. Eventually, the Unseen Gods began to let down their magical barriers. After generations of separation, the peoples of Emeran were united – all but one... Around the Northern Pole, the hub of the known world, a great circular wall remained and imprisoned the last race. No-one could remember who these people had been. Yet clearly, they had refused the ways of peace and were damned to live in solitude forever.

“Now, half a millennia after the Time of Reunion, the Northern Wall of Light still shines like an eternal beacon. Knowledge of what the wall represents has been lost to many and replaced by rumour and superstition. The Human mystics called the Believers of Light have based a religion upon the barrier: thinking it is the passageway from life to the Otherworld. More naive Humans call the hidden zone Hel, named after a fiery realm of suffering in their old land. The Graex travel north with their dead – passing the bodies into the wall to incinerate them. Other peoples have sacrificed victims by hurling them into that fiery barrier.

“It is a desperate age, much akin to the time before our Imprisonment. Humans and Callis have risen to become the greatest powers on the continent and they are on the verge of a devastating final war. Border-conflicts rage like fires out of control. Entire villages and towns are sacked. Trade caravans are slaughtered. Farms are destroyed, their crops and livestock stolen or burnt... Villagers pray for the intervention of the Unseen Gods, only to find their pleadings unanswered. When they cry, ‘Have the Gods deserted us?’, priests reply that the Unseen Gods are determined to allow the peoples of Emeran to resolve their own differences... Mystics threaten that we are on the verge of an apocalyptic Era of Darkness... Warriors simply continue to harvest death and destruction...

“As the First Monk Sadis wrote, the future is a woman of two faces: one of terror, another of beauty. She will show us the one that the Unseen Gods deem right.”

1: Assault

Dawn came with screams in the village of Ghastar.

The sun was barely a green sliver on the horizon when the first sounds of calamity and destruction erupted.

By midday, the village would be exterminated.

By midnight, every building would have been torn down and shattered apart.

* * *

Minutes before the attack.

Three thousand people slept in their homes, in anticipation of a day like any other... A quarter of them should awaken soon to go to work, either out to the farmland surrounding Ghastar or inside one of the many businesses of this prosperous, expanding village. Within an hour, the quiet of night should be replaced by a rising bustle of activity: people travelling; deliveries being loaded or unloaded; craftsmen working metal, stone, wood, pottery and glass; and, along the eastern side of Ghastar, the building of a new street which would herald the settlement's growth to town-status. The stores, taverns and other establishments should open sometime after. The garrison of fifty soldiers – assigned both as police and as protection against Callis incursions – should be the focus of shouts, clashes and roars as warriors trained. Throngs of children should head dutifully, if unwillingly, to school. The chaotic hub-hub of urban life should continue until dark, when it should gradually dwindle until the taverns and brothels shut their doors...

Today would be different. Predictable routines would never even begin. The inhabitants of Ghastar were to meet the Apocalypse in a head-on collision.

There had been unease in the village for several days, but it was not a disquiet of fear – rather of curiosity, idle chatter and bold opinions. For many centuries, the distant northern horizon had been permanently aglow with the Wall of Light, which cordoned the North Pole of Emeran. Three nights ago, that glow had vanished. Everyone wondered and speculated about what might have been set free by the barrier's fall...

Today they would find out.

* * *

At night, four three-man teams of soldiers patrolled beyond the outskirts of Ghastar. Their job was to spot threats approaching the village. Two years ago, such patrols had alerted the garrison of a raiding party of Callis warriors – the intruders had been vanquished before they reached the streets of Ghastar. Nine months ago, a group of Human bandits had met a similar fate.

Tonight, the four teams lay in butchered heaps. The dozen men would never warn of the horrors they had so-briefly seen.

Under cover of darkness, the new invaders approached the village. They closed-in upon Ghastar's northern edge and spread silently around the east and west sides. No orders were issued. No words spoken.

The three thousand sleepers knew nothing of what was to come. Few of them were even disturbed by the strange hissing roars that flew from the north.

It was the explosions that awakened everyone – the explosions and the screams that followed.

* * *

Four great drops of glimmering black fire arced down into the garrison compound. Each pierced stone walls with the might of a giant sledgehammer before detonating with mammoth fury. The earth shuddered. Explosions boomed loud enough to shatter windows right across Ghastar. The main building of the garrison disappeared into clouds of shrapnel... And anything that might have survived was consumed by raging dark flames.

More deadly ammunition fell from the sky to strike elsewhere in the village. One missile dropped through the roof of a two-storey house and the structure burst outward as if it had been an over-inflated bladder-balloon. A four-storey warehouse took a hit to its northern facade: when the blast that followed disintegrated the front of the second level, the upper half of the warehouse slumped forwards into the street – an avalanche of brick, wood and tile. Another missile sank through a large structure to erupt in a storeroom containing flammable liquor... Black fire ignited the stockpile and

there was another roaring blast. Soon, greenish flames were rising a hundred feet above the village...

Villagers' dreams turned to instant panic. Now the surviving people of Ghastar were awake, and both terrified and mystified by what was happening. Some feared an earthquake. Some thought a terrible fire had broken out. Some, particularly the children, merely covered in bed and prayed to the Unseen Gods.

They could not know that this was just the beginning of the onslaught.

Even if, through the bedlam of noises, they could have heard the strange new sounds which entered Ghastar, they would never have understood.

Swoop-swoop... Swoop-swoop...

* * *

Many citizens on the outskirts of the village were literally slaughtered in their beds.

They had awoken, swamped by fear and bewilderment... and never had time to act.

Doors to their homes were smashed open with inhuman strength.

Monstrosities rushed into the houses and exterminated anything that lived.

Screams from the dying warned people living a little further away. Some of these villagers had time to rush out into the street, hoping to help... They found the cobbled thoroughfares swarming with hideous twisted forms... Utter horror brought hesitation – whereas the creatures attacked in the heartbeat they saw new prey. Curved blades flashed in the light of the burning village. More Humans were screamed and fell...

Within minutes, the combined cries of the dying, fighting, fleeing and terrified villagers were obscuring the roars of blazing buildings and even the reverberating crunches of collapses. The screams grew louder and more awful, sweeping into Ghastar from the north, east and west as the intruders massacred, house-by-house, street-by-street...

As if in reply to the screams, there came a rising clamour of voices to the middle and south of Ghastar... People on the streets, looking out of windows and even climbing upon rooftops – seeking an answer to the mystery of what was happening or trying to organise teams to deal with the crisis. Unfortunately, the bolder citizens of the village thought to meet the disaster with buckets of water to put out flames, not knowing that only weapons might save Ghastar...

It would be several minutes of confusion before word of what was really happening started to spread. People who fled their homes fast enough to save themselves from immediate murder, ran crying warnings to all they passed.

“Demons! Demons have come to slay us all!”

* * *

The sun spread its new daylight across a village torn by destruction, carnage and pure unadulterated terror.

The garrison grounds were a scatter of blazing craters – strewn with rubble and barren of life... A dozen more great blisters of impact, explosion and fire marred the face of Ghastar... Buildings near the north, east and west edges of the settlement lay smashed open. Blood ran from some of the broken doorways. Many hacked, decapitated or bisected corpses littered the nearby streets...

And the invaders were swarming deeper into Ghastar, speeding insect-like.

To the south of Ghastar, an exodus had begun. People fled in small groups from the screams and sounds of butchery. They had nothing to defend themselves with, no provisions – merely a desperation to be away from the raging Hel which Ghastar was becoming.

Perhaps one in a hundred had seen something of the invaders. Many thought the attack was a full-scale invasion by the Callis. Others were too terrified to even try to think...

2: Act Of Compassion

As she ran, Vina kept crying out, over and over: “What’s happening? What’s happening..?”

Vina was one of the multitude of villagers fleeing south out of Ghastar. She was very tall and skinny, a gangly scarecrow of a fourteen-year-old. Her dirty, ragged clothing added to this appearance, since she was from the poor area of the village – a member of a family which could barely earn enough to feed everyone in it. Having suddenly arisen from sleep in panic, her strawberry blonde hair was wild around her head. The big blue eyes in her narrow face now looked huge; they virtually bulged with fear.

The girl’s family had fled onto the streets and been engulfed in an avalanche of villagers running away from the north end of Ghastar. Vina had been knocked to the ground. When she managed to stand, battered and bruised from careless feet, her family were gone – swept away by the Human tempest. All Vina had been able to do was join the panicked evacuation. She had soon began to cry to those around her – “What’s happening?” – but no-one answered.

All she had known was that whatever was going on, it was bad, worse than her young mind could fully comprehend.

Snatches of overheard information only added to her terror...

“There were screams in the next street—”

“It’s an invasion. They’re killing everyone—”

“My whole street was ablaze—”

“Where are the soldiers?”

Drifts of smoke cut across Vina’s path as she progressed – confirming the notion that there were fires in Ghastar. *So why, she wondered, wasn’t the village putting them out? Was there really another danger?*

They reached a wide crossroads where there was a strong breeze blowing from the left – from the east – and on the wind, Vina heard a noise amongst the chaos. For a moment, she thought the high-pitched melodies were strange singing... Then she knew. It was screams. Awful, soul-tearing screams.

May the Gods help us... And my family, wherever they might be...

There were four major roads leading south out of Ghastar. Two ran roughly parallel and southeast. The widest ran straight south. The fourth angled away southwest.

Vina fought her way through the throngs of villagers and headed onto the southwest-bound road. Her reason was those screams carried by the breeze – they had been from the east, and she wanted to be as far as possible from whatever had caused them. By chance, this route also proved to be the least favoured by other escapers. The volume of traffic diminished from a street-wide mass to clumps of runners...

Shortly after this, she spotted the four friends. What made her run alongside them and attach herself to the group was a simple fact. One of them wore a soldier’s armour and had a scabbard hung at his waist. Vina’s survival instinct suggested that this six-foot tall, broad-shouldered young man might be able to protect her...

Nidel might have been a big, well-muscled nineteen year old – strong, ruggedly handsome and tough-looking – but he was probably more afraid than the girl who he found running next to him. What Vina had been unable to see at a glance, was that his soldier’s armour was of glazed wood and his scabbard was empty. He had signed up with the garrison a week ago, and today would have been his first day living and training there. Nidel had never even held a weapon in his life. On the single occasion his father had taken him hunting, the sight of a slain voxan had caused him to be violently ill. After a series of failed career-starts in trades from smithing to wood-cutting, Nidel had been forced to join the garrison by his father. “It will make a man of you” his father had hoped... Ten minutes ago, Nidel had looked out of his bedroom window to see the garrison transformed into a blazing wreck. Any thought of ‘being a man’ had left him – he just wanted to be *alive*.

His father hadn’t been so selfish in his desires. Nidel’s father was a member of the village militia. In a snap-judgement, he had ordered Nidel to take his sister and mother south out of Ghastar – while he and the militia dealt with the attack. Only minutes later, Nidel had lost his mother on the chaotic streets. She had been split away from Nidel and Dandel by the force of the crowds. As she was drawn down another street, he heard her cry back to him: “We’ll all meet up outside Ghastar! Get Dandel to safety...”

The young man had kept Dandel close to his left side after that. He had shoved away anyone who threatened to separate them. Sometimes the siblings held hands, sometimes he had an arm across her shoulders. Always, he protected her.

Dandel, like Nidel and her mother, had lustrous, jet-black hair. Whilst Nidel’s was in an army crew-cut, hers hung halfway down her back. She was a notorious over-eater and this had produced a

plumpness to her figure that her brother often teased her about. He also enjoyed being a full head taller than her. At sixteen, Dansel caught the eye of all the young men who saw her. The roundness of her face probably added to her natural beauty; the green of her eyes was pure and vivid; and, until today, the happiness radiating from her features seemed eternal... Presently, of course, she looked – like everyone else here – an image of fear and confusion. The long dress she wore was torn and dirty; her knee-high boots were scuffed; and her face held an expression of abject loss.

The other two members of the group were neighbours of Nidel. They had met outside Nidel's home and decided to stay together. Tanner was a stout, squat man of fifty. His most prominent features had always been his immaculate grey hair and full beard, and his endless boasting. According to Tanner, he had done everything and been everywhere, at least twice. As his name suggested, he was a trader and tanner of animal skins; Nidel had briefly apprenticed with him and failed dismally in that business. Despite Tanner's many stories of battles with the Callis when he was a soldier – often he hinted at being a retired Captain of the Royal Guard – he was fleeing as fast as his short legs could carry him. The man's face was bright red with exertion and he laboured over every breath. Tanner had no family except for the brother who sped at his side. Lul was the opposite of Tanner in many ways: taller (at average-height), slenderly-built, quiet-natured – almost to the point of seeming impolite to those he met – and quick-thinking. Lul managed their business, from ordering, to stock-keeping, to making payments, and was very good at his job. He was also happy to busy himself assisting the labourers, something his lazier brother rarely attempted. It had been Lul's idea to stay alongside Nidel's family when they met. The reason, which he would never admit, was his secret, unspoken affection for Dansel – though he was ten years older than her and had never summoned up the courage to say a word to the girl.

“Can we...” Tanner gasped hoarsely, “...catch our breaths... for a moment?”

There was a silent agreement. The five runners angled to the left and halted against the side of an old disused warehouse. Tanner bent over double and whooped-in great lungfuls of air. The others rested their hands on their thighs and breathed more steadily. Dansel noticed the lanky addition to their group. Under other circumstances, she would have been amused that this girl was actually taller than Nidel. The fact that the girl was clearly poor meant nothing to Dansel – even at just fourteen, she valued all people equally.

“You alright... miss?”

Vina ground her teeth for a moment, then replied. “I lost my family... I'm scared...”

“I know. We all are. I'm Dansel. This is my brother Nidel and our friends Lul and Tanner.”

“I'm Vina.” There was a new, added near-hysteria in Vina's voice – a fear she might be told to leave the group.

Dansel managed a smile. “You stay with us. We'll get away and then help find your folks.”

Relief sent streams of tears down Vina's face. “Thank you.”

Nidel looked at Vina and then at his sister. There was an instant when he considered scolding his sibling for adding a burden to their own troubles. He relented and said nothing. It was in his nature to give in.

Nearby, Lul put a hand on his brother's shoulder: “You okay?”

Tanner grunted between gasps: “Of course... Strong as an ox...”

The younger brother shook his head. He set about pulling off his boots and putting them on properly. Before the brothers had left their home, they had hurriedly dressed in shirts, breeches, coats and boots; Lul had succeeded in putting his boots on the wrong feet.

A great, reverberating crump rang out behind them. The five villagers looked back along the curving street into Ghastar. A cloud of dust and debris was rising amongst the plume of smoke that crowned the village. Some larger building had collapsed – or been brought down.

The pause in their running allowed them to take in their surroundings again. People were still streaming down this street. Many were walking or hobbling after having fled faster from deeper into Ghastar. A few had paused like Nidel's group. Some forced themselves to run on. But the cries of fear, questioning and panic had almost ended: villagers simply didn't have the strength to run and cry out at the same time. Their minds had realised that every breath was fuel for their escape and could not be squandered futilely.

This also allowed the noises from further away to drift in. The five companions stood and strained to hear everything they could, frantic for a clue to what was happening – and more, in the frail hope that it might soon be over and things might revert to normal.

The roars and cracklings of fires were a chilling background noise, strongest from the direction of the huge warehouse blaze and the distant ruins of the garrison. There were still cries of panic and pain – from all directions deeper into Ghastar, too many to count or even focus upon. And the

newest sounds were the clamours of conflict where militia men met the invaders: weapons clashing, warcries and more terrible screams. Nidel and Dansel knew their father was amongst the militia somewhere in Ghastar; he might be fighting for his life right now... he could even be lying dying or dead on the cobbles...

From further away, towards the north, east and west edges of the city, where no living villagers remained, was another sound. A weird, swooping harmony. Was this some kind of instrument used by the attackers to signal their forces?

“We’d better keep moving,” Nidel said nervously. He eyed Tanner. “We can walk for now, run when we’re able.”

“Aye,” the stout older man agreed. “Let’s put miles between us and this place.”

They started up again. Dansel kept to Nidel’s left and Vina to his right. Lul and Tanner strode behind them.

The group had reached the very periphery of Ghastar now. They left the final cobbled street and emerged onto a rutted dirt path. Houses were only seen every hundred yards or so. Lush blue grass was first seen in clumps around them, then larger and larger growths. Trees were found to stand near the roadside in rising numbers. These were the local hapish trees, with ebony-coloured bark, vertical trunks and an overhead canopy of thick branches and broad, blue diamond-shaped leaves. This road led through the northeastern edge of a large woods. The further the villagers were from Ghastar, the taller the hapish grew – many towered at forty feet already.

Some of the other villagers fled into the trees left or right, seeking shelter or hiding places. Nidel and his companions remained on the road, since it allowed them to travel faster. They seldom passed turn-offs onto side-roads now, and there were fewer and fewer signs of habitation.

One junction had a turn-off onto an almost overgrown track. There was a sign nailed to a tree beside the turning:

‘Tygis’.

Under other circumstances, Nidel, Lul and Tanner might have laughed at seeing the name. Tygis was an old loner who lived in the woods. He was a big man, taller than Vina and as burly as a wrestler. Once a month, Tygis came to Tanner’s workshop with skins he had gathered whilst hunting; despite Lul’s protestations, Tanner always underpaid Tygis for his wares. The loner might be huge in bulk and perhaps in strength, but his wits seemed to be dull: he hardly spoke and he never tried to quibble for a better price. Once Tygis was gone, he often became the butt of a joke. Lul actually felt sorry for Tygis – the man’s mane of long grey hair was marred by a scar across the right side of his skull and that wound might have addled the man’s brain. Maybe he had family somewhere and had forgotten them. All he seemed to do was subsist from the woodland and trade skins for money to buy liquor and occasional visits to brothels. What kind of life was that for a normal person..?

“Do you think the old fool knows what’s happening?” Lul asked as they reached the sign.

His brother shrugged. “Why would we care?”

Lul frowned. Nidel carried on walking past the sign with Vina beside him. Dansel stopped in her tracks.

“We’ve got to warn him,” she said, “Tell him to get away.”

Tanner shook his head. “I’m not wasting my time on the village idiot.”

Lul stopped beside the teenage girl. “No, she’s right. We can’t just let him die.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Tanner spat, “Do you really care if he survives? What does it matter?”

Though usually non-confrontational, Lul stood his ground and looked Tanner right in the eye. “It matters to me. He’s a person. Another Human.”

If Lul had seen the look Dansel gave him for his support, his heart would have soared.

Nidel had stopped. He and Vina turned.

“Dansel,” he said timidly, not wanting to suffer her wrath, “we don’t know how much time we have...”

She was hands-on-hips now, full of determination.

“Then let’s hurry and warn him rather than wasting time arguing.”

Tanner frowned and ran a hand through his beard. He realized that the young woman would never be swayed in her argument.

“Aw... shit.”

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