

VOX DAY



OPERA VITA
AETERNA

Opera Vita Aeterna

Vox Day

Opera Vita Aeterna by Vox Day

from THE LAST WITCHKING

Published by Castalia House

Kouvola, Finland

www.castaliahouse.com

This book or parts thereof may not be reproduced in any form, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without prior written permission of the publisher, except as provided by Finnish copyright law.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used in a fictitious manner. Any similarity to actual people, organizations, and/or events is purely coincidental.

Copyright © 2013 by Vox Day

All rights reserved

Cover Design: James Simonsen

Opera Vita Aeterna

853 Anno Salutis Humanae

The cold autumn day was slowly drawing to a close. The pallid sun was descending, its ineffective rays no longer sufficient to hold it up in the sky or to penetrate the northern winds that gathered strength with the whispering promise of the incipient dark. The first of the two moons was already visible high above the mountains. Soon Arbhadis, Night's Mistress, would unveil herself as well.

The brother standing on watch duty at the abbey gate drew his cloak more closely about his shoulders, waiting for the bell that would summon him to Vespers and the warmth of the catholicon. While he was armed with a wooden staff, his only armor was the thick brown wool of the cloak. But this close to the inhuman lands, so near the elvenwood and the Waste of Kurs-magog, there were few brigands and thieves to trouble the stone walls that guarded the brotherhood of St. Dioscurus. One of the lesser orders, given formal recognition by the Sanctified Father only thirty years ago, the Dioscurines were not a mendicant order, but neither did they possess the wealth of the larger, more established brotherhoods.

Movement caught the monk's eye, and he saw a solitary figure appear around the bend of the dirt roadway that passed by the monastery's walls and led the occasional traveler to the nearby village of Mulvico. He was surprised. There were few who came this far north, here in the northeast corner of Sablema, but even fewer who were traveling in a southerly direction. There was little trade with the elves and none at all with the tribes of orcs and goblins that inhabited the Waste.

The traveler was no merchant, that was clear enough even at a distance. He lacked a mule or other beast of burden, and was walking too easily to be encumbered by any goods worth mentioning. Nor, as he came closer, did he appear to be a robber, since he wore no sword at his belt and there was no bow slung around his back. The brother already knew the traveler could not be a fellow Dioscurine, at least not one from the monastery. Except for him, keeping his lonely watch outside, all sixty of the order's monks were already inside the walls, having recently eaten the second of their two daily meals permitted by the Rule of their founder.

The traveler came closer with each long stride. He was very tall, wearing a dark green cloak over a hooded robe, and he bore on his back a large leather pack that appeared to be half-empty. He carried nothing but a long, black walking stick that looked knotted, but turned out to be carved in an extravagantly ornate manner.

His grey robe was brown from the knees down with the dust of the road, but it was woven from the sort of wool the monk would have expected to see a very rich man wearing.

The brother's eyes narrowed and his hands tightened on his staff. But he did not step out from the gates he manned, nor did he call for assistance. Even if his suspicions about the tall traveler were correct, there was no reason to assume he intended any harm, or indeed harbored any desires beyond simply passing by.

And his suspicions were correct, he thought to himself as the traveler turned off the roadway in the direction of the monastery. But what was a solitary elf doing here on the road to Bithnya with winter fast approaching? And what could such an unexpected visitor possibly want with the brothers of St. Dioscurus?

He shrugged. It was rapidly becoming apparent that he would find out soon enough as the elf drew near to the gate.

"Peace be with you," he bowed and greeted the elf in the humble manner he had been taught to show king or beggar. "Be welcome in our house, in the name of Our Immaculate and Ascended Lord."

To his surprise, the elf bowed back to him.

"I come in peace. And I thank you for your welcome, priest of the Undead God. Have you a hostel in which a traveler weary may rest for the night? I have come a considerable distance, and I have coins I believe will be acceptable to your bishop."

A little startled, the brother couldn't keep himself from raising his eyebrows at being addressed in such an unusual manner, but he smiled politely and stepped back to invite the elf inside the monastery's stone walls.

"I am no priest, friend elf, merely a humble monk. This is the chapter house of the Ordo Sancti Dioscuri, and you need no coins here. I am Brother Sperarus. You have come all the way from Merithaim?"

He did not ask the traveler's name. It was the foremost rule of the order to give succor to all who asked it.

The chapel bell began ringing out Vespers before the elf could answer. Sperarus closed the gates behind the elf. The thick wooden doors slammed shut with a boom loud enough to be heard over the bronze clangor of the nearby bells. Then he leaned his staff against the wall and picked up the thick wooden post and wrestled it into the metal supports attached to the backs of both doors, barring them against the night.

The elf had thrown back his hood and was rubbing at one of his pointed ears as the last echoes of the final bell faded away.

"Are you summoned to dine?"

"Prayer," Sperarus replied. "But first I will take you to a chamber where you can wash and refresh yourself. I assume you have not eaten?"

"I have not."

"The evening prayers do not take long. The abbot will come see that you are provided with something to eat. I fear you will find our fare to be on the simple side."

"I should be grateful all the same, Brother Sperarus."

They walked past gardens covered against the coming winter and fruit trees mostly denuded of their leaves, toward a low building made of stone with small

windows covered by unpainted wooden shutters. It was barely more than an animal barn, but the smell of smoke from the fire inside promised warmth as well as welcome.

"This is the guesthouse. You may choose whatever empty room pleases you. We have no other guests today. Three of the older brothers have chambers there, as it is warmer than our cells in the main dormitory."

He went to open the door, but the traveler stopped him. "Don't you wish to know my name and my business?"

Sperarus smiled. "I do. But then, curiosity is one of my besetting sins. As you come in peace, you are welcome here, sir elf, by any name. Should the abbot see fit to inquire as to your business, I am sure he will do so when he comes to you."

The elf nodded. Then he smiled back. His teeth were perfect and white and just a bit more pointed than a man's.

"Thank you, Brother Sperarus. I would appreciate it if you would tell your abbot that Bessarias of Elebrion is here and is most grateful for the hospitality he has been shown this day."

The brother felt his eyes widen. He did not recognize the name, but he had certainly heard of Elebrion. And while it was highly unusual for a forest elf to pass this way, he had never heard of a high elf from the royal elven city ever doing so.



Father Waleran was the second Abbot of Saint Dioscurus. He was proud to be one of the fourteen founding brethren and to have presided over the fourfold growth of the order since its formal establishment by Sanctiff Temperantius III. He was an Amorrann of lordly appearance with black hair greying at the temples. Many of his brothers assumed him to have been born into one of the patrician Houses. In truth, his father was merely a plebeian, although a wealthy one of the equestrian class.

Vespers having concluded, Waleran, full of curiosity, walked towards the guesthouse. What could possibly bring a high elf to Mulvico? Unaccompanied, on foot, and unarmed, no less!

He knocked on the door to announce himself, then opened it and entered. The foyer gave way to the common room, which was warmed by three logs being devoured by flames on a stone hearth. The common room was separated from a small kitchen on the other end by a series of small chambers on either side of the hall that ran from the entry to the kitchen.

The guesthouse was long and low-ceilinged, the better to retain heat inside the thick stone walls throughout the cold winter months to come. It was a version in miniature of the dormitory that the brothers shared on the other side of the walled compound, and if its sparse interior could hardly be described as luxurious, it was warm, and the rough-hewn beds with their chicken-feather mattresses were more comfortable than the canvas cots on which the monks slept.

A door opened from one of the chambers on the right, and a towering figure

peered out from it. It was quite obviously the elf, Bessarias, of whom Sperarus had spoken.

"Welcome, Bessarias of Elebrion, to the Order of Saint Dioscurus. I fear we cannot offer you much in the way of accommodations, but such as we have, we are happy to provide."

Waleran was not especially short, being of average stature, but the elf was a full head taller. His head very nearly touched the ceiling as he walked down the hall towards the common room. He was truly a beautiful creature, the abbot thought, although the shape of his eyes, his ears, and the inhumanly sharp features betrayed his alien nature. He wore his fair hair long, like a woman's, but despite that and his slender frame, there was nothing feminine about him. Indeed, he projected a powerful air of strength and confidence that was surprising given his modest attire and humble demeanor.

"Am I correct in assuming you are the abbot?" the elf said.

"I am," Waleran said.

"I thank you, my lord, for your gracious hospitality. I had not thought to find such welcome in the world of Men."

"All are welcome who come to this place in peace, friend Bessarias. But you must not assume all men to be as we are. Saint Dioscurus was a man of peace, and we strive to follow his example. Others, I am afraid, are less inclined to do so."

The elf smiled. "In this, at least, Man and Elf are all too alike. If you don't mind, Abbot, I should like to know, is this what men call a monastery?"

The abbot blinked, nonplussed. He wasn't sure what he had been expecting, but it surely wasn't that. "Why, yes, it is. Will you take a seat in front of the fire? I am certain your legs could use the rest if you have walked all the way from Elebrion."

They both sat down in front of the crackling fire. Waleran pushed his chair back and edged it around so they could face each other. "Brother Sperarus tells me you have not eaten."

"That is true," Bessarias admitted. "But if your brethren have already dined, I should be grateful for a bit of bread and fruit."

"I think we can do better than that. Brother Jeremias will be here soon with cheese, wine, and a small fowl he is roasting for you."

"How very kind! You have my thanks." The elf cocked his head, then laughed shortly. "You have not asked me why I am here."

Waleran steepled his hands. "No, I have not."

"Nor, I think, do you know who I am."

"I fear I know little more of your kind than you know of mine. My knowledge of the elves is not so much limited as nonexistent. To be frank, I am unclear on the difference between your people of the forest and those of the White City on the mountain. Brother Sperarus tells me you are of the latter variety."

"Fascinating. And why does it interest you so little?"

"The difference?"

"No, my purpose. I was hitherto under the impression men were a restless and inquisitive lot."

Now it was the abbot's turn to laugh. "I did not say I was uninterested, friend Bessarias. I merely did not wish to intrude in matters that are no rightful concern

of mine. I will readily confess to a deep, and one might even say, burning curiosity to know what could possibly bring an elf from Elebrion to our gates. I find it very hard to imagine you were seeking out our humble brotherhood!"

"I am not," the elf admitted. "But I am seeking out something very like it. Do you know of the Tertullian order?"

"Of course." The abbot sat back and stroked his chin, seeking to hide his astonishment at the elf's question. The Ordo Sancti Tertullii was a minor order that was considerably older, though not much larger than the Dioscurines. They were an evangelical brotherhood, considered by some traditionalists to be quasi-heretical, as they were insistent that higher intellectual power was sufficient evidence to indicate that a being possessed a soul naturally united to it. But Waleran had never heard that the Tertullians went so far as sending out missionaries to the elves, or for that matter, any of the various races of Selenoth. "Why do you seek them?"

"I met a man. A monk not unlike yourself. He was brave. He came to the college uninvited. And he had power, power of a sort neither I nor my colleagues had ever seen before. His name was Herwaldus. I want to find the source of his power. I want to find his god."

Waleran blinked, wondering if he had heard the other correctly. A soulless elf seeking God? "And you are seeking this Herwaldus?"

"Oh, no," the elf said, shaking his head. "He is dead. I killed him ten years ago."

There was a long moment of silence. Waleran had no idea what to say. He didn't even know if he could rightly condemn the elf. One did not condemn the bear or the wolf that slew a man, and prior to the last bell, if asked, he would have denied the possibility that a creature such as Bessarias might possess a soul. Even now, the blithe ease with which the elf admitted to killing this Herwaldus struck him as a troubling sign that, for all its gracious and easy manners, what sat before him now might not only be inhuman but soulless and entirely without conscience.

Fear gripped him. He took a deep breath, reminded himself that regardless of what might happen now, his eternal fate was secure, and settled on what he hoped would be an innocuous response. "May I ask you why you would do such a thing?"

"Of course." He was greatly relieved to see the elf showed no signs of being offended. "By the power of his god, he defeated our Magister Daimonae, thus inspiring a certain amount of fear amongst the magisters. They are unaccustomed to fearing anyone or anything, so they naturally decided to kill him. The problem was that they were torturing him to death, and I did not wish him to suffer."

"I see." Waleran relaxed a little. Not much, perhaps, but he felt able to breathe more freely. A mercy killing was without doubt an immoral act, and one for which penance was required, but it also indicated a modicum of empathy, if not genuine conscience. "Naturally. If you don't mind my asking, who are these magisters you say are your colleagues?"

"The magisters of the Collegium Occludum. Until recently I was one of them. The most accomplished of them, as it happens." The elf met his eyes, and for all their strange green-golden color and the catlike-shape of the pupils, the elven eyes were guileless. "At the risk of sounding immodest, my lord abbot, it is said of me that I am the greatest master of magic the elves have ever known. And now that the

Witchkings are no more, it is entirely possible that I am the most powerful sorcerer in all Selenoth."

The abbot couldn't quite manage to stifle his urge to sit back in his chair, away from the elf. Fear rose in him again and he tasted the bitterness of bile at the back of his throat. "I suppose that would explain how you were able to traverse the Waste on your own. Several of the brothers were convinced that either you were lying or young Sperarus can't tell his north from his south."

"There was the occasional incident," the elf admitted, followed by a high-pitched chuckle. Then his pale face grew serious and he leaned forward in his chair. "Abbot, can you help me find these Tertullians?"

His sincerity, insofar as Waleran could tell, was heartfelt. His request was outlandish, and yet was it not written that those who seek shall find?

There was a knock on the door and Waleran came to a decision. "That will be Brother Jeremias with your dinner, friend Bessarias. As to the Tertullians, I think we can do better than that. If you truly seek Him, we of St. Dioscurus can help you find Herwaldus's God. You see, He is our God as well."

To Waleran's surprise, to say nothing of the rest of the brotherhood, their elven visitor elected to pass the winter in their company.

The winter was a cruel one. The snow fell relentlessly for what felt like months, and on the days when the grey, swollen clouds did not threaten to birth more, the sun shone without warmth in a bright blue sky. Waleran was forced to send the younger, stronger brothers into Mulvico twice. The first time they helped the townspeople rebuild four roofs collapsed under the weight of the snow. The second, they brought back on sledges the frozen remains of ten cows killed by the merciless cold in the night.

It was a welcome surprise to the monks, who would dine well, at least to the extent that the Rule would permit, but Waleran knew that the loss to the townspeople's herds was a grievous blow indeed. With the sudden surfeit of available beef, the price of the meat had fallen to one-eighth of what it would normally have been expected to command. He wished there was more he could do for the town, but beyond paying the owners twice what they had asked, there was little to be done except pray.

Bessarias spent most of his days in their meager library poring over theological scrolls, conversing with the copyists, and occasionally joining the younger brothers as they split and stacked wood in front of the catholicon that stood between the dormitory and the guesthouse. He even contributed an illumination to the one hundred fifteenth Psalm, a beautiful silver-and-purple letter N that featured an orc, a goblin, a troll, and an elf all but hidden in the design. And, most importantly, he resolutely abided by his word to abjure his sorceries for as long as he remained with the brotherhood.

After some consultation with the elder brothers and a sleepless night spent in fasting and prayer, Waleran had extracted a promise from the elf not to use even the merest modicum of his magic for any reason, on pain of being asked to leave the monastery. The abbot had thought Bessarias might resist, but to his surprise the elf readily agreed to the condition.

Old Brother Hejorus, the archivist and chief copyist, was initially dubious about their unusual guest, but as Bessarias worked painstakingly on the illumination and it began to take shape, he rapidly became the elf's chief champion.

"I think Hejorus will be loath to let you depart come spring," Waleran commented one night as the two of them sat in front of the fire in the common room of the guesthouse. They had not become friends, precisely, but most evenings found the two of them seated in the same chairs, sharing a decanter of the mediocre pink wine produced in the region and sparring over increasingly arcane matters of Immaculean theology. "He says you have the steadiest hand and the finest eye for detail he has ever seen."

"There is much to be said for leaving something of oneself behind," Bessarias mused. "An illumination, an essay, or even a copy of a treasured text. We elves have forgotten that to a certain extent. Perhaps we live too long."

"If the wages of sin are death," Waleran said drily, "could it be that your people live so long because they live in a less sinful manner than men?"

"Given what I understand of your definition of sin, that seems extraordinarily unlikely," Bessarias said with a laugh. "Which reminds me of the question I wished to pose to you tonight."

"Which is what?"

"I find that I rather enjoy the illuminating process. And I have always found that the ideal way to retain information is to not only read it but write it down."

"That is said to be a useful technique," Waleran agreed. Was the elf truly suggesting what it sounded like he was implying? He scarcely dared to hope.

Bessarias put his hand to his mouth and coughed twice. "What I should very much like to do, Lord Abbot, if you are amenable to the idea, is to contribute a newly illuminated manuscript to your library. However, it will take me a considerable time to copy and complete it, and I do not wish to impose upon your hospitality any longer than you and your brothers can endure."

The abbot smiled. "Friend Bessarias, you are welcome to stay here as long as you see fit. And Brother Hejorus will not be the only one who will be delighted to hear you have decided to prolong your stay with us. Dare we hope you might be willing to join us in communion one evening?"

"Not as yet, Abbot. Not as yet. I am intrigued, that much I will admit, but I am far from convinced."

"Then by all means, you must stay longer. I insist upon it. May I ask what manuscript you have in mind?"

"The Sacred Script, naturally."

Waleran blinked. "There are forty-two books in the canon, plus another three in the approved apocrypha. Which one have you selected?"

"Forty-five, as it happens."

"All of them?" Waleran was astonished. Between the copying and the illuminating, that would take years! He paused a moment to reflect. On the other hand, what was the passage of time to an immortal elf? But immortal or not, it was an arduous task Bessarias had set himself.

"Yes, all of them. I imagine I should know the text rather well by the time I complete it."

"I don't know what to say, Bessarias!" Waleran was deeply moved, and he could feel unseemly tears threatening his eyes. "That is, I am pleased to hear we shall enjoy the benefit of your company longer than we had anticipated. Most pleased, indeed! However, you should understand I would in no way expect you to make any commitment to finishing—"

"How can I not?" The elf laughed, visibly delighted by Waleran's emotion. "If you are correct, there can be no better way to spend my days immersed in the words of the world's Creator. And if you are not, then the world will be richer by one more object of beauty and knowledge, however questionable the latter might be. In either case, how can my time possibly be regarded as anything but well-spent?"

"But you know it will require—"

"Years. I'm rather dexterous, however." Bessarias flexed his long fingers theatrically. "I wager I'll finish it within a decade. There is, however, one condition."

"That being?"

"I anticipate a considerable number of questions arising as I make my way through the text. Are you willing to answer them?"

"With all my heart!" Waleran exclaimed. Then he stopped and reconsidered. "You realize I may not be able to answer all of them in a manner you find sufficiently convincing."

"I should be astonished if you did. I have not yet begun working on it, since I was waiting for your permission first, but will you consider granting me one question on credit?"

"If that gives me one evasion to save for an occasion when I feel the need for it."

The elf laughed and raised his glass in a salute, like a swordsman preparing to address his opponent. "Granted. Now, your sacred manuscript starts with the phrase 'In the beginning,' does it not?"

"To be sure." The abbot smiled and responded with his own half-empty glass.

"But my thought is that, contra the text, the world cannot have had a beginning. That which exists has always existed. It does not exist at certain times and not exist at others. And every incorruptible thing naturally has the capacity to exist always because its existence is not, due to its incorruptible nature, limited to any determinate time. Therefore no incorruptible thing sometimes is, and sometimes is not, whereas everything which has a beginning does not exist prior to its existence. So, either there are no incorruptible things to be found in the world, or no incorruptible thing ever begins to exist."

"That seems a rational dichotomy," Waleran said. "Though surely you are not saying that the world is incorruptible!"

"The world? Let us assume not. What matters is that there are many incorruptible things in the world, such as the celestial bodies and all intellectual substances. To say nothing of what I suppose you would term the immortal soul."

"Can one truly call that which is fallen 'incorruptible'?" The abbot smiled, knowing he couldn't expect the observant elf to miss his devious exchange.

"You know very well that is not the sense in which incorruptible is meant." Bessarias dismissed the sleight of tongue with a wave of his slender hand. "The point is that if there are incorruptible things to be found in the world, and you agree that there are, those things clearly cannot predate the world in which they

are found. Therefore the world did not begin to exist, because it could not have a beginning while simultaneously playing host to incorruptible things that did not. That do not."

Waleran raised his finger in an admonishing manner. "That may be, but you must first note I have agreed to nothing of the sort. It is true that whatever has the power always to be, from the fact of having that power, cannot sometimes be and sometimes not be. But there is no reason we cannot state that, before it received that power, it did not exist."

"So you deny the existence of the incorruptible?"

"Not at all. It is not necessary to prove that incorruptible things never began to exist, only that they did not begin to exist by means of the natural mode whereby things are generated and become corrupted. And, I must say, I find it amusing that you should seek to appeal to the incorruptibility of an object the existence of which you consistently deny."

"A mere rhetorical device."

"Naturally. And yet, can we be certain that the celestial bodies are truly incorruptible? We see them for but a short time—"

"Speak not of the limits of Man! Have you forgotten that I am more than three hundred years old?"

"What of it? Were you three thousand years old, you could still not testify to their eternal incorruptibility—"

Waleran broke off, interrupted again, but this time by a knock on the door that indicated a degree of urgency.

"Come in," Waleran called. Bessarias raised his eyebrows, and Waleran shrugged in response. He wasn't expecting any visitors and the entire brotherhood had attended Vespers earlier in the evening.

It was Brother Sperarus, his face red with cold, bearing a torch in his hand. His eyes were wide with confusion and wild with fear.

"Friend Bessarias, something calls for you from outside the gate!"

The abbot and the elf looked at each other. It was well after nightfall, and although they were weeks past Hivernalia, it was still much too cold for anyone to be travelling the road to Bithnya. Perhaps one of the other magisters had come in pursuit of their missing colleague, Waleran thought. But that seemed unlikely. After all, the young brother had faced Bessarias, alone, with no lack of aplomb upon the occasion of the elf's arrival at Saint Dioscurus, so meeting another like Bessarias shouldn't upset him.

"Is aught amiss?"

The young monk's mouth opened and closed twice, drawing a high-pitched cackle from the elf. Waleran winced—elven humor could be crude and often bordered on the cruel.

"Bessarias, please!"

The elf chuckled a few more times, then the laughter subsided and he cleared his throat.

"Do forgive me, Brother Sperarus. I suspect I understand the precise manner in which the cat has stolen your tongue. Say no more, I beg of you." He pushed himself gracefully up from his chair, took a large sip of his wine, shuddered at the

taste, then nodded at Waleran. "Honestly, I simply never considered how this sort of thing would naturally be well outside your experience. Indulge me for a moment and come with me. I should like to show you something."

The abbot frowned, but Sperarus had visibly relaxed in response to the elf's words, and it appeared that the whoever this mysterious visitor was, he posed no immediate danger to anyone. Waleran put on his cloak and followed the others outside.

"Bessarias!" a strange voice called. It sounded ragged and raspy. "Bessarias, I know you are there."

Sperarus looked at him and moved aside so he could look through the peephole.

Waleran shook his head and held out his hand.

"Open the gate."

The young brother handed him the torch and lifted the large post out from its supports, unbarred the gate. He pulled the right door back, and there, in the flickering light of the torch, Waleran was astonished to see that instead of an elf standing there, a small fox was sitting in what had once been snow, but over the course of the winter had been trodden into ice.

At the sight of Bessarias, it flicked its bushy tail as if in recognition.

"There you are! I have been searching for you for months. I passed these walls three times, but I never imagined you would stop here!"

Waleran stared at the animal in mute astonishment. Now Waleran understood Sperarus's strange behavior. The poor lad must have thought he was going mad! To his surprise, the elf's only reaction was to shake his head and sigh. "What do you want, Mastema?"

"I want things to be as they were. I want you to return to the Collegium. I want you to give up this nonsensical search for the nonexistent and take your place again among your fellow magisters. I know you took that monk's death hard, Magister, but this is lunacy!"

"Get thee behind me," Bessarias muttered under his breath.

"How is it that it talks?" Waleran couldn't help asking the elf.

"I might ask the same of you, priestling!" the fox snarled at him in a more contemptuous manner than anything he'd heard directed his way in decades.

Waleran stepped back, startled.

"It's not a fox," Bessarias told him. "Or rather, what you hear speaking is not the fox. That is only the body it wears at the moment."

"Look at them—now you've frightened them," the fox sneered. "Do come away, Bessarias. You can't possibly learn anything from cretins such as these!"

"Exorcizamus te," Waleran began the traditional ritual, as he attempted to find his courage, "omnis immundus spiritus—"

Bessarias gently placed his hand on Waleran's wrist. "That's not necessary, my dear abbot. There is no need for brute force when a simple request will suffice."

He folded his arms, and his long hair rustled as he shook his head.

"This will not do, Mastema. My affairs are my own, and I do not answer to you, you answer to me. Now begone, lest I request the good abbot here to complete his banishment spell."

Waleran nearly choked upon the elf's words. An exorcism was a sacred rite, not a magical spell!

Regardless, the little fox demon acquiesced.

"I will go, if you insist."

"I do insist," the elf confirmed.

"Very well. But I shall return in a year's time. And if you are still here, I shall return the next, and I shall keep returning until you come to your senses and agree to come back to the Collegium. You are missed there. Without you, there is no one to keep Gilthalon in his place."

"Ah, at last your true concern is revealed. Do not trouble yourself. The Collegium has survived much worse. Now go!"

"One year," the fox insisted, glaring balefully at the two monks. Then he was gone, vanished into the night's shadows.

"Was that a demon, Father Waleran?" Sperarus spoke for the first time since they'd reached the gate. There was deep fear in his voice. "I can't... It was... I can hardly believe it! So they do exist!"

"Of course they exist," Waleran rebuked him a little more sharply than he intended, in part because he too was finding it hard to credit what they'd just seen. "Did you think the various stories about them in the Sacred Script are merely myths?"

He pretended he didn't notice the amused smile that crossed the elf's lips.



The years passed. Waleran's hair turned grey, then white. Brother Hejorus died and was buried. Bessarias succeeded him as the de facto chief archivist, although a brother by the name of Gilbertus was given the formal position. In reality, the young monk, who was barely out of his teens, acted as the elf's assistant, and Bessarias went about his unofficial duties as conscientiously as any of the brothers in the monastery went about theirs. His manuscript grew, vellum page by vellum page, illumination by illumination, although when the end of the tenth year arrived, he had completed only thirty-seven books.

And each year, the demon returned, calling out for its erstwhile master. Sometimes it came in the form of a squirrel. At others, a rabbit. Once it even appeared in the shape of man and attempted to gain entrance through subterfuge, although its inhumanly staring eyes alerted the brothers to its true identity. Each year, it waited patiently until Waleran arrived to inform it that while Bessarias was still at the monastery, he remained unwilling to see it. Then it would depart at once in silence. He almost felt sorry for the demon. Its loyalty would have done credit to any servant less purely evil. At times he wondered what Bessarias could have done that had so powerfully bound the foul spirit's allegiance.

It gradually became apparent to the entire brotherhood that the elf was in no hurry to complete his task. Bessarias might not have found that for which he was searching, but nevertheless, it seemed he had found something in their quiet com-

munity of monks that soothed his soul.

His soul. The abbot didn't even hesitate to permit himself to think of the elf in those terms anymore. He found it impossible to imagine that any creature as intelligent and civilized as the elf did not possess one. Those thoughts might not pass muster with the Congregation of the Doctrine, the Sanctiff's intellectual army of formidable theologians who were charged with the awesome task of maintaining theological purity throughout the Church, (and especially within the fraternal orders as they were notoriously inclined towards falling into various heresies of one sort or another), but the Congregation was a very long way from Saint Dioscurus.

Waleran had taken to scribbling notes during their post-Vespers conversations, then using them to compile the arguments, pro and con, that each had presented to the other. They covered a massive range of topics, from pure scriptural interpretation to speculative theology, philosophy, and even an amount of legal theory. Man and elf discussed whether notional acts could be attributed to the divine personas, whether the goodness of the will depended on the intentions or the ends, if it was correct to lay ambushes in war, and if the Immaculate was both a wayfarer and a comprehensor.

Waleran was in his chambers putting the final touches on his summary of their five hundred and eleventh discussion, which concerned the validity of the Three Penances, when there came a knock on the door.

"Enter!" he called, being careful to place his quill away from the vellum so it would not drip ink and soil the page.

It was Bessarias, his face obscenely unlined and his eyes wholly undimmed by age.

"My Lord Abbot, may I have your permission to travel to Ligornalia? I require more red ink, and our supplies of azurite are almost exhausted as well. More gold leaf would also not be amiss, as I have something rather spectacular planned for the initial T in the Apocalypse."

"Of course, not that you need my permission. Gilbertus is perfectly capable of overseeing the copyists in your absence, is he not?"

"It's not for me that I require the permission. I should like to bring Brother Umbrus and Brother Guigues with me, as well as a pair of mules. I intend to acquire a considerable amount of goods that will require transport. We are down to the last four bottles of drinkable wine, and the thought of going back to that dreadful pink soured water is more than I can bear."

"Does the concept of mortifying the flesh still mean nothing to you?"

"The flesh, Father, not the palate." The elf chuckled. "You cannot tell me you have any more desire to curdle your tongue with it than I do. And does not Samuelis teach that we must not consort with foul spirits?"

"Or mediums," Waleran arched a hairy white eyebrow at the elf. "And you know that sort of spirit is not what the prophet meant."

"I find a certain flexibility in translation can prove useful at times. Come, it's winter, you know you don't actually need either of the young men."

"They have their spiritual responsibilities to consider as well as their material ones, my friend."

"I shall be your proxy and ensure that all the appropriate rites are performed at

the correct bells.”

“Prayers, Bessarias.” The abbot sighed. Even after all his time with them, the elf remained an unrepentant heathen. Perhaps the Tertullians had it wrong after all. “Prayers to be prayed, not rites to be performed.”

“So I can take them?” The elf placed his hands together and half-bowed. “Praise your god! My lord abbot, I thank you for your trust. I shall not let you down.”

Waleran laughed. To be honest, the thought had never crossed his mind. With the possible exception of Brother Elmuin and Brother Zacho, with him fellow founders of the order, there was no one in the abbey he trusted more. And yet, how absurd it sounded, even to his own ears, to be sending two young brothers on a twelve-day journey to Ligornalia under the spiritual guidance of a soulless, inhuman creature who was known to have consorted with demons. God did indeed work in mysterious ways.



Although it had been years since he had last been on the road, Bessarias did not find the journey to be a difficult one. He quite enjoyed the company of the two young monks, neither of whom seemed to find his companionship to be the least bit remarkable. Of course, he had been at St. Dioscurus longer than either Umbrus or Guigues. The former was a foundling raised by the local nunnery, and the latter was the fourth son of a Sablemese knight who already had an heir as well as two spares. But if neither young man appeared to have a particular vocation for the monastic life, neither did they chafe at its restrictions.

Through their innocent eyes, Bessarias was able to find delight again in even the simplest things. The construction of a stone bridge over a frozen creek. The curious eyes of the people in the little towns they passed by. An owl swooping low over the evening campfire. The way in which the icy crust on the snow dazzled the eyes when the insipid sun came out from behind the grey winter clouds.

Thanks to a heavy snowstorm on the third day, it took them seven days to reach the small Sablemese coastal city that was a minor destination for elves from Kir Donas and the pagan men from the wealthy southern islands. There, Bessarias was able to acquire everything he needed, although there was rather less sepia available than he would have liked. Therefore, he bought a small barrel of iron gall ink, an extract of oak apples mixed with the residue of nails boiled in vinegar, which would serve as a substitute. The wine, from Illyris Baara, cost him more than he would have liked. He realized that if he did not finish his manuscript within two years, there was a chance he would have to arrange for more gold to be delivered from Elebrion.

The thought displeased him. It concerned him a little that on the demon's most recent visit, it hadn't even spoken to the brother at the gates but had simply crouched on its stubby little legs—it had come in the form of an ermine—and stared at him for a long, silent moment before turning away and disappearing in the darkness of the forest across the road.

Perhaps he would speak to Gilthalon and ask him to banish the wretched spirit to the nether planes, where it belonged. He could do it himself, of course, but he was loath to break his promise to the abbot. There had been times, particularly when working on a difficult detail of an illumination, when he'd been tempted to resort to magic. But resisting the desire gave him a strange feeling of pleasure he had not known for many years.

They spent six days on the road back. The weather held throughout except for an overcast sky and a brief flurry of snow on the morning of the last day. The occasional flake was still falling when they came within sight of the monastery's familiar walls. All three of the travelers, five, if one counted the mules, picked up their pace at the sight of home.

But as they came closer, Bessarias sensed that something was wrong, though precisely what that might be he could not say. Even though it was too far to hear anything, there was something about the roofs and chapel tower that rose above the walls that seemed lifeless and empty. Then he realized what was missing: there was neither sight nor scent of the smoke from the friendly, warming wood fires that burned throughout the day in every building except the catholicon.

"Get off the road," he ordered Umbrus and Guigues. "Take the mules into the trees."

"What's wrong?"

"Do it!" Bessarias hissed, and the young monk shrank before his fury.

Bessarias ran up the road, and as he turned the corner, he saw the gates were unmarred but open. He knew a moment's relief before he passed through the walls and saw the first signs of the bloodshed he feared. Brother Sperarus, no longer young, lay dead in the snow, his face frozen in the rictus of violent death. Beside him lay his staff with dark green ice encasing one end of it.

Goblins.

There were dozens of bodies in the dormitory — torn, mutilated, and partly devoured. Most of the rest were in the refectory. Brother Rullus was in the kitchen, pierced by three short spears, but with his meat cleaver still in his hand. A pair of goblins, one beheaded, lay in a large pool of coagulated green blood. The three elderly brothers with whom Bessarias had been sharing the warmth of the guest-house had died side by side in the common room, apparently unresisting. They lay face down. Were it not for the blood that had spilled out from their bodies, one might have thought they were praying.

Dead. They were all dead. The entire brotherhood. Rage filled his heart as he realized what had been bothering him about this seemingly pointless massacre. Nothing was taken. Nothing was burned. Beyond the obvious signs of the struggle, everything was in order. This was no simple goblin raid. This was a cold and calculated mass murder where the death of the monks was the only objective. And Bessarias knew precisely who was responsible.

Besides the two young brothers waiting in the woods outside the walls, there was only one more for whom he must account. Bessarias first checked the lord abbot's chambers, but there was no sign of him there, except for a spoon and a wooden bowl with a little porridge encrusted inside it. Waleran was a very early riser, so the attack must have come in the pre-dawn hours, well before Lauds. Bessarias closed

his eyes and shook his head. He knew where he would find the abbot. Or rather, he knew where he would find Waleran's body. Of all the brothers, the abbot was the one man Mastema would be certain not to spare.

He walked slowly towards the catholicon, weighed down by a heavy heart and the certain knowledge of what he would find when he entered it. One of the two thick wooden doors was open, and he entered the vaulted room with its brightly painted ceiling that contrasted so incongruously with the stark grey stone of the floor below. Waleran lay crumpled beneath the dead god mounted on the wall, a terrible wound to the back of his head. Bessarias could tell by the position of the old man's body that he had been praying. But for what? For the safe return of Bessarias and his two charges? For the salvation of Bessarias's inhuman and possibly nonexistent soul?

Bessarias looked up at the preternaturally calm face of the god suspended gracefully from the tree, his arms upraised as if he were an entertainer acknowledging the crowd. He glanced at his fallen friend, then back again at the carved simulacrum of a man dying.

"He lived for you. What in your sanctified, sanctimonious name did you ever do for him? If you are the savior of Mankind, why did you not save him?"

His magic, so long repressed, rose within him, lifted by the tide of his seething anger. He wanted to hurl all the fires of Hell at that simpering bastard who stared down at Waleran's body with such outrageous indifference. He wanted to turn this temple to a useless, ineffectual god into a lake of glowing crystal glass. He wanted to summon an army of evil spirits to him and bathe in the green stinking blood of goblins. He could do any of those things. He could do all of them.

But Bessarias did nothing, even as his power swelled and flickered in the air around him.

If there was such a thing as a soul, if the incorruptible not only had a beginning, but could begin with something so insignificant as a single human life, then somewhere, somehow, Waleran would know of it and the knowledge would grieve him. Bessarias was still within the walls of Saint Dioscurus and his vow still bound him. So instead, the sorcerer slowly lowered himself to one knee and did something he had never done before. He did not lower his head. He stared directly into the painted face of the pathetic wooden god as he addressed it in a voice full of scorn and fury.

"I don't know you. I don't believe in you. I have no use for you, you sad wooden fraud. But my friend served you with all the loyalty you could ask of any Man. So, if you exist, if you have any power at all, I ask this one thing of you, one thing only, and then we are done. Let it be as he believed. Give him that promised life beyond the grave. Welcome him into your Heaven. Walk with him in your golden streets and give him the answers he could not find here."

The dead god didn't answer. It stared impassively at him until at last Bessarias could no longer hold its blank, lifeless gaze. He turned his face to the side, raised a hand to his eyes, and wept.



There were few more honest pleasures in life than seeing the awe in a young scholar's face upon his first visit to the Libellian Archives, thought Aurelius as he turned around to witness the reaction of his young companion. Maintained by the order known colloquially as the Black-Finger Monks, it was the central archives of Holy Mother Church, charged by the Sanctified Father himself to be the primary repository of all Man's knowledge.

The great room that inspired such awe was the *Cella Mundus*, which stood at the heart of the large building and was very nearly the size of the nave in one of the great cathedrals. A massive fresco was painted on the ceiling, a vast blue sky populated with hundreds, perhaps thousands of angels. It depicted the ascent of the Immaculate Triumphant from Earth to Heaven.

But the columns that rose up from the green-veined white marble floor were not decorated with frescoes or colorful tilework, as one normally found in a cathedral. They were giant bookshelves, each encircled by a spiral staircase that allowed the seeker to climb towards Heaven in the pursuit of knowledge. It was a crude and obvious metaphor, perhaps, but judging by the stunned, wide-eyed reaction of Marcus Valerius to the sight of more codices than existed anywhere else in all human Selenoth, it would almost surely be lost on the young man.

At only sixteen, the Valerian was too young to take vows, but given the lad's love for learning, Aurelius would not be surprised in the slightest if he was drawn to the *Ordo Sancti Libelli*. It would not be permitted to him, of course. As a scion of a House Martial, the boy would be made an archbishop as soon as he declared his vocation. But until then, his father and uncle were content to let him indulge in his theological studies to his heart's content.

"Is it true the *Sacra Chryseae* is here, Father? Can we see it?"

The monk chuckled. Everyone who visited the archives wanted to see the famous Script, which was bound in solid gold and inscribed in letters of pure silver, commissioned by the Senate at the end of the Unholy War in order to give thanks for the defeat of the Black Sanctiff, Gnaeus Avidius Libanius.

He pointed to a mass of nearly one hundred men, half of them wearing cowls in the black, brown, blue, or in one case, purple, that signified their orders, all gathered round an elaborately carved stand on an elevated platform. There were several bishops, and even one archbishop, who were waiting, with varying degrees of patience, for their turn to view the sacred object.

"It's right there. But I suggest we save that for another time. I can show you something I find even more remarkable, even more beautiful, and we won't have to miss our dinner to see it."

The young Valerian tore his eyes away from the crowd of ecclesiastics with some reluctance, but he grinned as he nodded his acquiescence. He chattered happily away as Aurelius took him by the hand and led him toward the northeast corner of the room. They walked past various Scripts on stands, most of which were large, leather-bound volumes that had one or two priests poring over them, marveling at

the careful artistry that had gone into glorifying the eternal word of the Almighty God Himself. Aurelius stopped before a vacant stand, upon which lay open a short, but exceedingly fat codex. It was open to Liber I Paralipomenon.

"Behold the Sacra Incognita." Aurelius gestured grandly towards the little Script. "It appeared mysteriously in the Ninth Century, although some claim it is older than that. No one knows the identity of the monk who inscribed it, and you will note the singular term, monk, as it is remarkable for having been penned by a single hand."

"A single hand?" Marcus exclaimed. "But that must have taken the copyist nearly his entire life!"

"A life well spent, in that case. Come, what is even more unusual is the small illuminations that head each and every chapter. Look at the figure that is etched in the gold leaf. Do you see it?"

"It is a face!"

"Exactly. It is believed that they may represent the illuminator's fellow monks whose names begin with the letter upon which they are etched. There are thirty-six of them in all, and no two faces are alike. One of them is very likely the copyist himself."

"Do we know which of the thirty-six it might be? Did the illuminator leave any clues?"

"Sadly, no." Aurelius raised a hand to forestall any expressions of disappointment. "However, there is one theory which I suspect you will find very interesting and to which I myself am tempted to subscribe. You see, the Sacra Incognita was discovered in the same cloister in which a certain theological treatise is known to have been written."

He was pleased to see recognition dawning on Marcus's face. The boy had always been quick, and Aurelius always enjoyed seeing how rapidly he put the clues together to reach, if not the correct conclusion, at least a credible one.

"Oxonus was a Tertullian... You think Oxonus might have illuminated this codex?"

"Very good, but not exactly." Aurelius held up a finger. "There are seven major personas in the Summa, if we exclude Oxonus himself. And recall that we don't truly know who Oxonus was. It is merely the scholarly convention to call him after Oxonia, the town nearest the chapter house. We know the identity of the Philosopher—"

"Aristoteles."

"The Theologian."

"Augustinus."

"The Poet and the Master."

"Vergilius Maro and Petrus Lombardus."

"The Doctor and the Expert."

"Aelius Galenus and Domitius Annianus Ulpianus."

Aurelius looked expectantly at the boy, whose eyes went vacant for a moment as he searched his memory. Then they came to life again, and the priest knew his student had the answer.

"The Wayfarer!" he exclaimed triumphantly, disturbing a pair of nearby monks, one of whom loudly sniffed his disapproval. "We don't know who the Wayfarer was!"

"No, we do not." He ran his hand along the faded bindings of the *Sacra Incognita* as sensuously as a man ever caressed a woman. "We do not know his name. We do not know when he lived or when he died. We know absolutely nothing about him except the statements that Oxonus attributes to him in the *Summa*. But does it not strike you as a little strange that two such exceptional, even timeless, works should spring from the same cloister at virtually the same time? It may be nothing more than a coincidence, to be sure, one of those cosmic jests that only the Creator can truly appreciate, but I imagine that in the *Summa*, the keen and agile mind of the illuminator is preserved, while somewhere in the *Sacra Incognita*, the true face of the Angelic Doctor is revealed."

Marcus Valerius nodded appreciatively, his eyes alight with the fire of intellectual ambition. He looked up at the great pillars and the thousands of codices they contained, then reached out and ran a finger lightly over the gold leaf and the grey-black ink, faded with age. His brow was furrowed and his face was grave beyond his years as he tapped the gilded letter.

"This is immortality, Father. The body dies, the soul ascends, but the mind lives on forever through these words. Thank you for bringing me here. I shall never forget it, not if I live one hundred years."

"You are most welcome, Marcus Valerius." Aurelius smiled affectionately and ruffled the boy's hair. "It gratifies me to see you recognize the import in these dusty relics. Now, let us see if we can find a copy of the *Summa*. I shall be very interested to see if you can come up with a more convincing response to the third objection of question six, article five than the Philosopher managed."

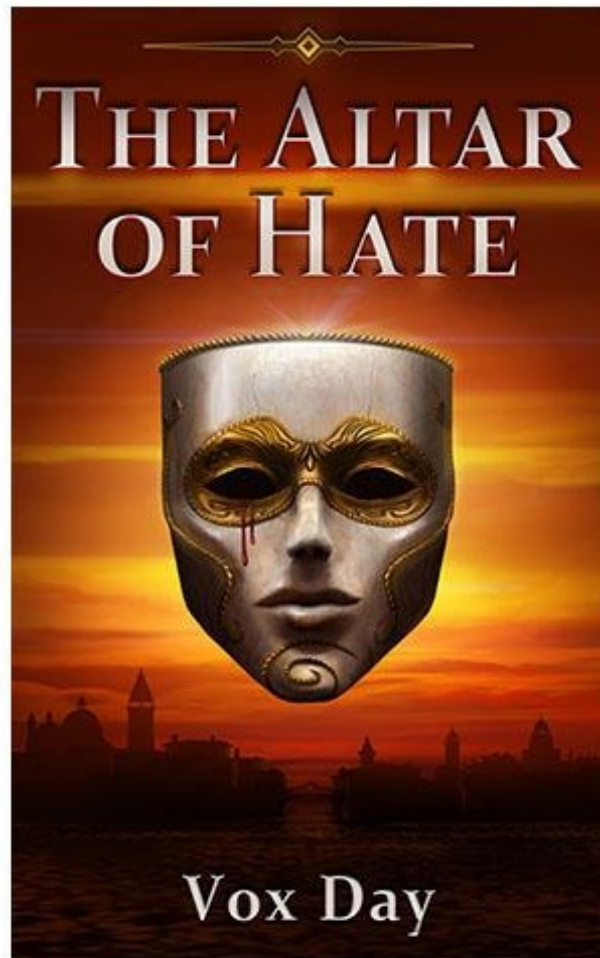
The two men departed on their manuscript hunt, leaving the codex unattended. Unbeknownst to them both, the face of Abbot Waleran, gone to his eternal reward some three hundred years ago, stared up at the triumphant Son of God from inside the golden boundaries of the lovingly detailed letter that headed the twelfth chapter of *Liber I Paralipomenon*.

Closing Time

The Altar of Hate

"Only an author of the first rank could achieve this."

"One feels the uneasy eyes of the abyss staring back..."



A collection of short stories that are eldritch, esoteric, and ultimately uplifting.

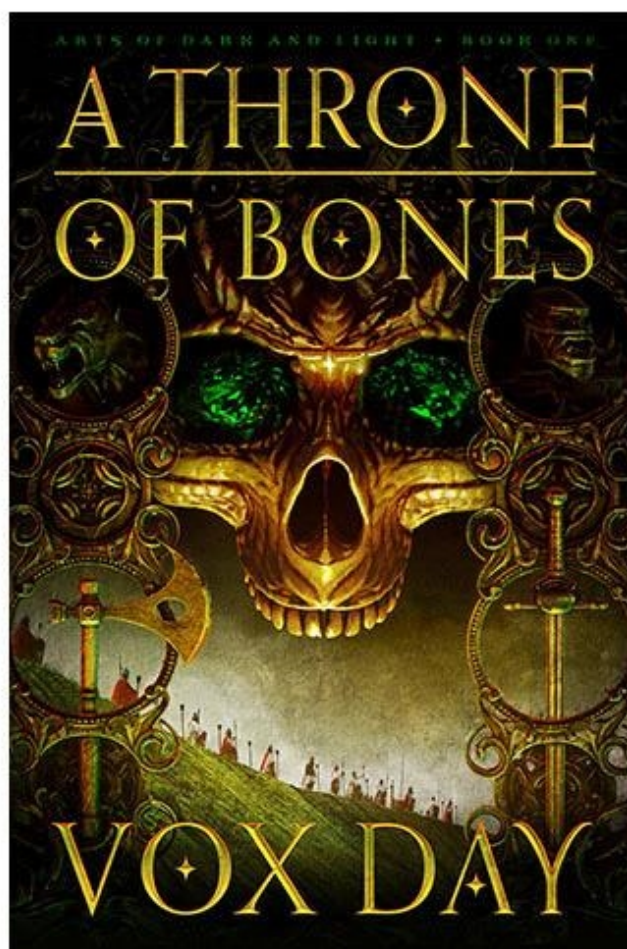


Kindle
\$3.99

Praise for A Throne of Bones

“the most promising new series in epic fantasy”

“one of the best SF/F novels of the past decade”

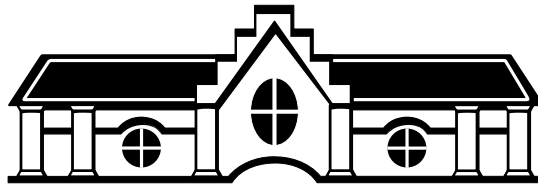


THE LEGIONS MARCH

854 pages. \$34.99 hardcover



Kindle
\$4.99



CASTALIA HOUSE

FANTASY

Awake in the Night Land by John C. Wright
A Magic Broken by Vox Day
A Throne of Bones by Vox Day
The Wardog's Coin by Vox Day
The Last Witchking by Vox Day
Summa Elvetica: A Casuistry of the Elvish Controversy by Vox Day
The Altar of Hate by Vox Day
The War in Heaven by Theodore Beale
The World in Shadow by Theodore Beale
The Wrath of Angels by Theodore Beale

SCIENCE FICTION

Big Boys Don't Cry by Tom Kratman
The Court-Martial of Ratha Flower Wood by Tom Kratman
The Stars Came Back by Rolf Nelson
QUANTUM MORTIS A Man Disrupted by Steve Rzasa and Vox Day
QUANTUM MORTIS Gravity Kills by Steve Rzasa and Vox Day
QUANTUM MORTIS The Programmed Mind by Vox Day

CASTALIA CLASSICS

The Programmed Man by Jeff Sutton
First On the Moon by Jeff Sutton

NON-FICTION

Transhuman and Subhuman: Essays on Science Fiction and Awful Truth by John C. Wright

TRANSLATIONS

Särjetty taika
Uma Magia Perdida
Mantra yang Rusak
La Moneta dal Mercenario
I Ragazzi non Piangono
Sveglio nel Paese della Notte
QUANTUM MORTIS Тежина Смрти
QUANTUM MORTIS Der programmierte Verstand
Grosse Jungs weinen nicht
QUANTUM MORTIS L'Esprit Programmé