

KING IS DEAD

The image is a vertical poster with a dark, moody aesthetic. The background is a vast, desolate landscape of jagged, grey rock formations under a heavy, overcast sky. In the center, a stone bridge with three large, rounded arches spans across a deep chasm. A small, lone figure stands on the bridge, looking out over the landscape. Above the bridge, a flock of birds is captured in flight, their dark silhouettes contrasting against the lighter, misty clouds. The overall color palette is dominated by dark greys, blacks, and muted blues, creating a somber and mysterious atmosphere.

R O H A N E L L I O T T

Brem tossed another log into the fire, sending sparks up into the cool night sky. He rubbed his hands together and looked over the field report on his lap.

Infiltration was successful. We made it past the border checkpoint without raising suspicion. Let Garris know his letter of introduction worked perfectly. We are now two kilometres inside the Thandorian border. Progress is slow. Enemy patrols have been steadily increasing. We will meet you at Castle Hartlon once our mission is completed. Glory to Gaco!

Brem held out a hand to the flames and muttered under his breath. A rune on his sword pommel glowed deep purple and the fire turned purple to match it. Brem crumpled the report in his hands and cast it into the fire. The paper disintegrated into a purple haze and the fire reverted back to orange.

‘Brem!’ a voice came from behind him. He turned to see Tarloc striding towards him. Brem saluted. It was not returned. ‘Brem, sentry rotation was an hour ago,’ he said. ‘Why aren’t you at your post?’

‘I just completed the field report you requested. I was just going to have some supper.’ Brem said as he looked past Tarloc to the small group of soldiers huddled around a fire. They laughed and talked amongst themselves. The entire group wore thick cloaks kept out the bitter cold. Their armour had the crests removed, as tensions between Gaco and Thandor were the highest they had ever been during peace time.

‘Well, alright. Get some supper then get to your post, Lia’s been on sentry duty for-’ Tarloc was cut off as an arrow came shooting out of the dark surroundings and embedded itself in his throat.

Tarloc’s eyes widened as he clutched at the arrow shaft and slumped to the ground. Brem dove to the ground as arrows flew above his head. Looking at the other group of soldiers, he saw most of them face down in the dirt, arrows protruding out their backs. A shadowy figure appeared behind the last remaining soldier and sliced his throat. The soldier grasped at his throat and crumpled to the ground, his blood seeping into the dirt.

The figure looked straight at him and clicked his fingers. More figures stepped out from the shadows. Brem was hauled to his feet and his arms were forced to his sides by two of the figures. They were dressed entirely in black cloaks with half masks covering their faces, leaving only their eyes exposed. The figure with the bloodstained dagger stepped towards Brem, their eyes hard and cold. They gave a nod and Brem’s hood was roughly torn off his head, exposing his face to the night air. The figure pulled down their mask to reveal a worn, weathered face.

‘Firelight carries a long way in the night.’ The figure’s voice was rough and coarse. He motioned to the corpses behind him. ‘Had you kept them quiet, we might have taken longer to find you.’ Brem was silent.

The figure sighed and motioned down with his dagger. Brem’s feet were swept out from under him and he crashed to the ground. He raised himself to his knees but was held down as the figure with the dagger stood over him.

‘I am Ranger Vildo of the Thandorian Intelligence Services. You are Gacocian, leading armed forces through my country.’ Vildo smiled, waving his dagger in front of Brem’s face. ‘Your countrymen sold you out,’ he lifted Brem’s head up with the flat of his blade. ‘Now, what are you doing in Thandor during peace time?’

'We were escorting the Thandorian ambassador to the border and-' Brem was stopped by Vildo's knife pressing against his throat. Vildo wagged his finger.

'Oh no, no, no. Don't lie to me. I have been in this business too long to bother with liars.'

'I told you. We were escorting-' Vildo sighed and clicked his fingers. The figures next to Brem clamped down on either side of his head, keeping it still. Vildo pressed his dagger against his captive's temple, drawing blood. Brem cried out in pain as his face was slashed, opening up a vicious wound from temple to shoulder blade.

Brem clutched at his face as blood flowed down his cheek, slicking his hands with blood. He looked at Vildo now standing over him.

'Thandorian bastard!' he said.

'There is no shame in death. It is the great equaliser.' Vildo said. 'In another life, we may have been friends.' He raised his dagger. Brem closed his eyes and waited for the final blow.

It never came.

He opened his eyes and looked around. Vildo and his men were gone. In his place stood Lia. Her cloak was torn and she had a rough, blood stained field dressing wrapped around her arm. Brem looked down and saw a glowing rune fade into the dirt. He rose to his feet and dusted himself off, pulling his cloak tighter around himself.

'Lia, what the hell happened? One moment we were all fine, then those Thandorians just appeared out of nowhere.' he said. Lia shook her head.

'All I know is I was waiting for you to relieve me of sentry duty, then a fucking arrow came out of nowhere and hit me in the shoulder.' She tugged at the bandage on her shoulder, wincing in pain. 'I played dead and they walked right over the top of me.'

'Okay but where the hell are they?' Brem asked. Lia held out her hands and an orange portal appeared, showing the Thandorians frozen in place. She dropped her hands and the portal disappeared. She walked past Brem, heading off into the forest.

'We have to get back over the border quickly. The spell isn't going to last forever and after that... it's just a matter of time.'

Gaco and Thandor had been allies before the Great War. After years of war, fractures formed and the alliance crumbled after Vedrana invaded Thandor. Their people starving and weary from the war, Gaco rushed to ally with Vedrana and claim valuable land for their own. The splitting of Thandor was done with powerful magic, leaving canyons between Thandor, Gaco, and Vedrana to form natural boundaries. A diplomatic treaty was reached in the dying days of the war and commemorated with the construction of a bridge spanning the entire length of the canyon between Gaco and Thandor. This allowed for free trade and immigration between the countries for the first time in thirty years.

Brem and Lia were halfway across the bridge when they saw it.

A line of Gacocian soldiers were standing at the far end of the bridge, stopping people and turning them away. The soldier's hands came to rest on their sword hilts as Brem and Lia stopped in front of them. The commander held out his hand.

'Stop right there. No one may enter Gaco, King Raylan's orders.' Brem reached into his pack and presented the commander with his orders and identification papers.

'I have my own orders and I need you to step aside, *captain*.' he said. The commander shook his head. The guards' hands tightened on their sword hilts.

'I'm sorry sir, I have my orders.' Before Brem could react, the guards' swords were drawn. His hand began to stray down to his sword. Lia grabbed his arm, stopping him. She stepped up next to him and raised her arms.

'I'm sorry but we need you out of the way.' Orange lightning danced along her fingertips and crackled out, hitting the guards where they stood. They dropped their swords and collapsed to the ground.

One of the guards was still conscious, his chest heaving as lightning danced along his armour. The guard's eyes were wild and unfocused. He clutched at Brem's leg, trying to stop them.

'We were trying to stop-' his head slumped back and he lay still.

'What?' Brem felt something sharp prod into his back. A hand gripped his shoulder and turned him around.

It was Vildo.

Brem looked over his shoulder and saw Thandorians moving through the crowd, cutting them down where they stood. Vildo grinned at Brem as a bag was pulled over his head, turning his world black.

The bag was torn off Brem's head, the early morning light blinding him as he looked around. The Thandorians were encircled around a tree in silence, looking up at a figure dangling from a rope. As his eyes adjusted, he realised it was Lia dangling from the tree. Her strangled gasps were drowned out by the sound of Thandorian jeers and taunts.

'Lia!' He tried to stand but was held down by two Thandorians at his side. Vildo appeared in front of him, smirking as he watched Lia struggle to free herself. He turned to face Brem.

'You know if we were across that bridge, this wouldn't be happening.' He bent down and motioned with his knife to Lia. 'The Royal Federation doesn't allow for capital punishment, even of mages. Luckily for me, Heaven's Shield has no such qualms.' Brem bowed his head, refusing to look at the scene in front of him. Vildo grabbed his hair and forced him to look at Lia.

'This is what will happen,' he whispered into Brem's ear. 'When I drive you filthy mages from my lands. This is the lengths I will go to bring Thandor back to its former glory.' Brem watched as Lia's movements slowed until she just hung there, swaying in the breeze.

Vildo gave a small nod and the guards released Brem. A Thandorian in the semicircle fired an arrow at the rope holding Lia, slicing it and sending her body crashing to the ground. Brem pushed

past the Thandorians and slid to his knees beside Lia. There was a large bruise over her throat from the rope and her eyes were bloodshot.

'No, Lia. No, no, no.' Brem placed two hands over her chest and started pressing down.

'Breathe Lia.'

He kept pumping her chest.

'Goddammit breathe!'

He leant in and blew air into her lungs.

'Come on Lia!'

He slammed his fist down on her chest.

'Dammit Lia.' Brem slumped back on his haunches as she lay still. Tears streaked his face as he reached down and pulled the orange rune free from around her neck. The rune he had given her after their first mission together... after their first dance together. He watched the glow fade from the rune as he rose to his feet and faced the Thandorians closing in around him. They raised their bows at him, arrows nocked on the string. An orange hue encased Brem's fist and their bows snapped in two. They stared at their weapons in disbelief. He flicked his hand up, purple and orange spikes erupting out of the ground, and impaled them where they stood. Brem walked straight past them to Vildo, ignoring the Thandorians as they bled out. Vildo drew his sword and lunged towards him. Brem knocked the blade out of Vildo's hand with his own. Before he could recover, Brem stepped forward and ran him through. He leaned in and whispered in his ear.

'That was for Tarloc.' He grabbed the dagger Vildo had used to slice open his face. 'And this is for Lia.' He sunk the dagger hilt-deep into Vildo's throat. Warm blood sprayed onto his armour as Brem pulled his sword free and let the corpse fall backward to the ground. A folded piece of paper lay next to the corpse and he picked it up. It was a letter. Brem recognised the handwriting. He folded the paper up and slipped it into his pocket. Brem took one last look at Lia's corpse, slid the rune around his neck and turned away, heading towards Castle Hartlon.

'We need to make sure our supply lines are not cut off so I want you to fortify these positions here and-' The speaker was cut off as the doors to the great hall were thrown open. The figures around the war table looked up as Brem strode in. He saluted and dropped to one knee.

'My King, I have returned.' King Raylan took in Brem's bloodstained armour and ragged cloak. He also noticed the livid scar running down his face and neck.

'Ah yes of course.' He motioned for Brem to rise. 'Tell me, where is Tarloc? He was under direct orders to report to me as soon as you crossed back into Gaco.'

'Tarloc is dead.' Brem said. 'We were ambushed by Thandorian forces. I was the lone survivor.' He watched those around the table react. The king's advisors were shocked by the news. The king didn't react. 'Fortunately, I was able to recover this.' Brem pulled out the letter he had recovered from Vildo and threw it onto the war table. It knocked some figures off the table. Raylan stared at the paper in silence.

'Leave us.' he said. His advisors shuffled out of the hall in silence. Raylan waited until it was just the two of them. 'Vildo is dead?' Brem stared him down. He let out a sigh. 'That is a shame. He wasn't trustworthy but he was useful over the years.' He looked at Brem, the grey in his hair aging him another ten years. 'Well done, Brem. You have done what decades of war could not. You have destroyed Gaco.' Brem shook his head.

'No, this is your fault. I trusted you!'

'Because I saved your life in Halivara? I've saved many lives... I've ended even more.' Raylan leant forward. 'What did you think, when you realised I betrayed you? Did you think I was a madman?'

'I'd thought you'd lost your mind. At least, I hoped you had.'

'That would have made it so much easier. But I was not that lucky.' Raylan gestured to the map. 'For years now, revolution has been growing in Gaco. The seed of an idea had been planted and it festered like a disease. Nothing I did could stop it spreading, so I decided to unite Gaco in the way that only war could,' he leant on the table. 'Once I received your report, I tipped off Vildo that Gacocian forces were in Thandor. Your bodies would have been dumped on the border bridge. The Thandorian people would be shamed and ours would call for blood. I would offer an olive branch to Thandor and we would negotiate another treaty. Gaco gains more territory while bringing Thandor to its knees, securing our southern borders and a lasting peace.' Brem stared at him in horror.

'You're a goddamn maniac.'

'I came to terms with what I am a long time ago.' Raylan pushed the table over so he stood in front of Brem. 'As soon as the Thandorian corpses are found only the bloodshed of war will satisfy them. Gaco will be plunged into chaos.' Brem's hand fell to his sword hilt. Raylan noticed. 'Killing me won't change what you've done.' Raylan stepped forward.

Brem stood where he was, unmoving.

'You performed admirably in Halivara. I don't know if I told you that.' Raylan said.

Brem took his hand off his sword hilt.

'Everything is teetering on the edge of everything...'

The rune around Brem's neck glowed. An orange aura encased them. The rune pulled itself free of his neck and slammed into the king. Raylan gasped as his chest caved in and he fell to the floor. The doors opened as the aura disappeared and guards rushed into the great hall. They were silent as they stared at Raylan's corpse.

'What happened?' One of the guards asked. Brem turned his back on them.

'It's over.'

THE END