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Chapter 1 Sample



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The Realm of Regnum Aeternum

Regnum Aeternum (*reg-nuh'm ee-tur-nuh'm*): Hidden capital city of the empire of Grigori Geist, built within an immense cavern beneath the Antarctic ice. Growing population includes two hundred thousand vaucan robots and one hundred million humans, forced to revere Geist by unnatural means

Grigori Geist (*gri-gohr-ee guyst*): Ancient, supreme ruler of Regnum Aeternum, and master of his advisors, the Camarilla

Dietrich Schmidt: The true architect and mastermind of Regnum Aeternum, now defying Geist to free the city's people

Genos Kamara: Vaucan manufactory and birthplace of Prince Ahya and the Archvaucans by Dr. Schmidt

The High Spire: Or Eru Namaru; largest tower and support pillar at the center of Regnum Aeternum. Hourglass-shaped structure dominates skyline of both Regnum Aeternum's city floor and Aether, the vaucan city in the city's cavern ceiling

The Vaucan Race

Vaucan (*vaw-kuh'n*): Semi-sentient, humanoid robots created by Dr. Dietrich Schmidt to construct and serve Regnum Aeternum

Archvaucan (*ahrch-vaw-kuh'n*): Robotic generals and pinnacle of Dr. Schmidt's vaucan race

Ahya (*ah-yah*): The Crown Prince of Regnum Aeternum under Geist, and the seventh and greatest of the archvaucans

Azazel (*uh-zey-zuhl*): Sixth archvaucan and Prince Ahya's six-winged lieutenant; uses staff infused with secret power

Chernabog (*shur-noh-bawg*): Third archvaucan to be completed, and Savitr's twin; hulking, walking arsenal of heavy artillery

Gryphon (*grif-uhn*): The second archvaucan; air and land mobile fortress

Leviathan (*li-vy-uh-thuh'n*): First archvaucan; submersible battleship and archvaucan mobile naval base

Orion (*oh-ry-uh'n*): Fifth archvaucan; master of stealth, carries a boomerang blade that splits into two daggers

Savitr (*sav-ih-teer*): Fourth archvaucan, Chernabog's twin; wielder of two laser-emitted, bladed weapons

The Camarilla

Camarilla (kam-uh-ril-uh): Ancient advisors of Grigori Geist

Aleister Grau (al-ee-ster grou): Hideous, calculating alchemist and schemer

Dorian Forsythe (dohr-ee-uh'n fohr-sahyth): Geist's most trusted aide and second-in-command

Garvery (gahr-vuh-ree): Debonair yet deadly assassin whose gentlemanly manner masks dark talents

Ishtar (ish-tahr): Ravishing woman worshiped as a goddess by Regnum Aeternum; openly defies Geist

Oswald Sinclair (oz-wawld sin-klair): Geist's largest financial benefactor

Tafari Ogun (tuh-fahr-ee oh-guh'n): Commander of the vaucan armies, and veteran of countless wars of centuries past

Locations

Aether (ee-ther): Hanging city of colossal towers in Regnum Aeternum, surrounding the upper reaches of the High Spire

Arx (ahrks): Imposing fortress and training ground for the vaucan military

Cathedral (kuh-thee-druh): Geist's splended hall within the High Spire

Ganglion (ep-uh-sen-ter): Circular room filled with streaming intelligence, used by Geist and Forsythe to plot the world's fall

Fornax (fawr-naks): City-factory constructed within Mt. Erebus on Antarctica's Ross Island, responsible for processing raw materials and secret projects

Invidia (in-vid-ee-ah): Thriving metropolis of elegant skyscrapers that house the financial and commercial district of the city, governed by Forsythe

Lilith (lil-ith): Vast garden of perpetual dusk and dwelling place of Ishtar, who instructs her admirers in sensual arts

Lupercal (loo-per-kal): Subterranean infrastructure used by worker vaukans, its origins and secrets far older than the city itself

Midgard (mid-gahrd): Central region and grand palace of the Camarilla, presided over by Grigori Geist.

Neuerung (noo-er-ruhng): A world's fair of innovations from research centers amidst picturesque heights, and home to Aleister Grau's lair

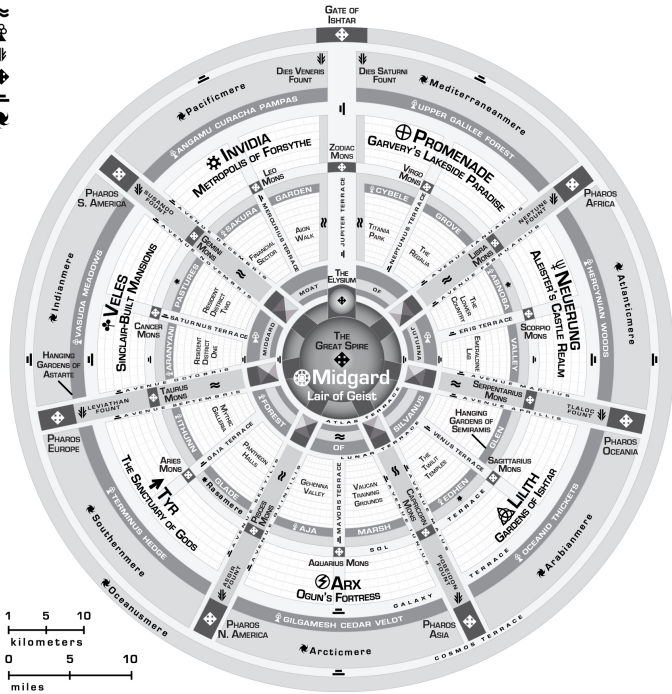
Promenade (prom-uh-nahd): Recreational hub, surpassing the world's best-known entertainment and travel destinations, overseen by Garvery

Tyr (teer): Region of Sanctuaries and monuments honoring deities from modern and ancient religions

Veles (vel-is): Residential region of extravagant estates and palaces, overlooking the megalopolis in privacy and luxury, run by Oswald Sinclair

regnum aeternum

- RIVER ≈
- FOREST 🌲
- WATERFALL ⚡
- MONUMENT 🏛️
- ROAD 🛣️
- SEA 🌊



1. ...To Fight Another Day

Prince Ahya laid eyes on his kingdom for the first time-- desperate to escape it.

The city of Regnum Aeternum lay before him, built inside a domed, circular cavern beneath the continent of Antarctica. Thousands of gleaming skyscrapers, temples, ramparts, and terraces sprang from the city floor, while the region of Aether hung from the cavern ceiling; its suspended towers glowed with blue-white light – imitating the true sky that Ahya had never seen. *Ahya*: even the meaning is own name had been hidden from him by his king, Grigori Geist.

The prince stood on a hanging balcony on the middle levels of the High Spire - an hourglass-shaped stronghold of white quartz at the heart of Regnum Aeternum, and the only structure spanning both cavern floor and ceiling...a grand centerpiece build on cold foundations. Ahya would be expected to expand this kingdom across all continents – conquered not by blood, but the promise of technology. Just like the one-hundred million citizens in Regnum Aeternum, the entire world would soon be pacified – blissfully trading their freedoms for tyranny.

For that reason, he could no longer serve Geist. The prince's only ally, Dr. Dietrich Schmidt, had led him to attempt escape. Not yet at the height of his power, and knowing Geist would not simply let him leave, the prince still had to try.

Straight ahead, the Jupiter Terrace – the city's primary road – stretched out from the base of the High Spire toward the fortified Gate of Ishtar, twenty-eight miles away. A dangerous gauntlet to run.

The prince finally spoke with booming words. "Is it time?"

A gentle, weary voice replied, heard only by him. "It is."

At once, the prince leapt over the balcony railing, falling hundreds of feet before skidding along the High Spire's base as it leveled off toward the ground. Such a fall did not harm him, as he was not made of flesh and blood, but of metal and circuitry, his sixty-foot body shining in gray armor sculpted like the ideal human male.

The prince landed on the Jupiter Terrace, his red eyes burning radiantly—intent on saving not just Dietrich's people, but the vaucan race of which he was the greatest.

Dietrich fidgeted in his armchair at the center of a human quarters housed within the prince's chest. A ponderous man on the verge of his seventies, Dietrich resembled a mad scientist at first glance: disheveled white hair and wrinkles covered a kind face and sagging brown eyes, his tired body draped with a white coat over a black shirt and slacks.

His meager appearance belied the fact that he, not Grigori Geist, was the true architect of Regnum Aeternum.

Around Dietrich, the room's sparse furnishings remained still even as the prince sped across the Jupiter Terrace, hoping to avoid vaucan patrols. Studying the tactical display – a series of floating, holographic maps and readouts revealing the prince's vital signs – Dietrich saw their position now flanked by hundreds of the prince's grey-clad brethren.

"How many?" the prince asked, anxious.

"All Protector-class vaucans have been scrambled."

"My Crypsis ability may conceal us from their eyes."

"Save your strength for now," Dietrich answered, flipping a switch on the chair's armrest; every surface of his quarters dissolved to reveal the view outside. He disliked the Vigil screen; it had always given him motion sickness, and nausea now gripped him at the sight of Regnum Aeternum.

Ignoring the blurred scenery rushing past, Dietrich kept his eyes straight far ahead on the Gate of Ishtar as vaucan soldiers

amassed on its ramparts. He wondered where Geist was at that moment, and whether the king would risk destroying Prince Ahya – or Dietrich – to prevent escape.

It likely wouldn't come to that; though Dietrich intended the prince to be the seventh and final of the Archvaucans – their captain and leader in battle – but the newly-created prince's powers had barely developed, and the enemy force grew before them.

From the amusement region of Promenade to Dietrich's right, and the shining skyscrapers of Invidia on his left, the first wave of vaucans converged above the Jupiter Terrace ahead. Splitting into squadrons of twenty, the thirty-foot soldiers fell into phalanx formation and closed in on the prince and Dietrich, the Protector-class insignia emblazoned on their shoulders; Geist's homeland infantry.

While the prince dashed and leapt around the scattering humans on the terrace, Dietrich grimaced at oncoming motion sickness and focused on the tactical display; more vaucans gathered on the Ishtar Gate, now fifteen miles ahead. All of them trained their weaponry on the prince and prepared to open fire.

"I can reach the gate," the prince gasped, "but I fear it is too well-defended."

"They have numbers, we have know-how," Dietrich countered; "They don't know what you're capable of."

Before them, a vaucan commander appeared on the Jupiter Terrace, speaking in a cold, authoritative voice that filled Dietrich's quarters.

"My lord Ahya," said Dyne, the Protector Supreme, "it appears you wish to leave, which Geist cannot allow. This is your only chance to stand down without punishment."

Through the Vigil, Dietrich saw the prince halt as Dyne blocked their path. Clad in gray with flourishes of white, and nearly as impressive as the prince in stature, Dyne held his powerful arm up, ready to call forth his Protector ranks.

"I have held back my force's artillery out of respect," Dyne declared. "We both know that Dr. Schmidt has sabotaged you and your six archvaucan lieutenants. Surrender him to us, and all shall be forgiven."

The prince said nothing, and Dietrich seethed through gritted teeth, feeling human and vaucan eyes watching Ahya from the fringes of the Jupiter Terrace. *It's not Ahya they need to fear*, thought Dietrich.

"I might command you to call back your forces," Ahya said, with less authority than Dietrich had hoped.

"I am not one of your privileged Archvaucans, Prince!" Dyne hissed, "and I owe no allegiance to you."

Dietrich pressed a button on his display and spoke aloud. "You'd destroy me, Dyne? Your own creator?"

"Ah, Dr. Schmidt. You should know my loyalty remains to Regnum Aeternum."

"So is mine, but to its people," Dietrich answered. "Not to Geist."

Dyne's face lowered to a glare. "Then you are not just a saboteur, but a traitor as well."

Dietrich chose his parting words carefully. "Our fight isn't with you. You decide whether we are friend or foe."

Closing communications, Dietrich saw Dyne direct his troops forward in response. A ray of hope dawned on Dietrich: the prince's Adaptation system would acquire any weapons or abilities that Dyne and the Protectors used against them. *Will it work quickly enough?* he wondered.

"Fly," Dietrich urged the prince.

"Doctor?"

"I know Dyne; he'd be disappointed in a peaceful surrender anyway. Now, fly."

Dietrich watched through the Vigil: the prince broke into a run, and just as he bore down on Dyne, he suddenly leapt upward and stayed aloft, budding wings extending from his back, and soaring in the open air for the first time.

“Well done,” Dietrich said with pride.

Behind them, Dyne signaled the withering assault. Around the prince’s body, blasts of laser light danced through the air, but they missed their mark; the startled vaucans revered Ahya far more than their commander.

“The Adaptation system is holding,” Dietrich confirmed, studying the prince’s stable power levels on his display. “Now, let’s test your Taxis ability.”

“It grieves me to attack my brothers,” said the prince.

“It pains me, as well. When this is over, I will restore them. I promise.”

As the first squadron of Protectors drew close, the prince stretched his right arm toward them and activated Taxis. An invisible, magnetic grip seized the squadron, forcing them into a single file column in midair. Using Taxis once more, the prince yanked the squadron leader toward him, plunged his fist into the vaucan’s midsection, and readied the stunned soldier as a battering ram, engaging the column head-on. Dietrich watched in awe as the prince slammed into the line of vaucans in a deafening series of collisions, each falling one by one like dominoes onto the terrace below.

“Perhaps Geist will think twice about losing more troops,” the prince suggested hopefully, but Dietrich knew better: his display revealed more vaucan forces rising from the depths of the fortress region of Arx, on the far side of the High Spire.

“I’m afraid I asked too much of you too soon,” Dietrich admitted, as laser fire grazed the prince from the gate ahead.

“I am here of my own accord,” the prince replied; he increased his speed, outmaneuvering the squadrons behind him as he careened toward the cannons deployed on the Ishtar Gate. “I need to know, Doctor - why is Brian Renney so important to Geist?”

“I have only guesses. But Geist must fear Brian if he wants you to attack him. If so, we must protect him at any cost.”

The prince fought on, deflecting laser volleys into hapless

Protector vaucans nearby. Dietrich could sense the prince growing stronger with each passing moment and gazed urgently at the open gate ahead, so close now—

Massive artillery shells erupted from the gate's cannons, exploding in front of the prince and enveloping them in a shimmering cloud. In moments, its effect became clear: the cloud was a mass of nanovaucans – the building blocks of the vaucan body – now weaponized, eating at the prince's armor and leeching power from him.

"I'm going numb," the prince gasped, losing altitude.

Dietrich searched frantically for some means of escape. To their right, Promenade's forested border had little vaucan presence...they likely saw no tactical advantage for the prince there. Dietrich did, however: the dense tree canopy would provide cover – and precious time to hide beneath the city.

"Take cover in the forest," Dietrich ordered, but the prince got struck in the back by another blast of light; on his tactical display, Dietrich could see the mist slowly turning the prince's body against itself.

It cannot end like this, Dietrich thought. Not with his capture and death. Not with the prince becoming just another slave. Not with the death of Renney and perhaps billions more.

As the prince descended rapidly, Dietrich caught sight of Protector squadrons circling like vultures over them, just before the Vigil went dark. The quarters grew dim and began to shake violently as the prince's internal functions failed.

Dietrich knew the prince could no longer protect him. As much as it pained him he had to flee. *But what of the prince?*

Dietrich staggered across the quaking room, reached a small console hidden on the front wall, and hurriedly entered a series of commands. He could enact a safeguard he had built into the archvaucans, but he had only seconds...

"What are you doing?" the prince asked weakly.

"Trying to preserve... you," Dietrich answered, steadying himself as the quarters shuddered again. "I can reach the

Lupercal tunnels by the access ducts at the base of the terrace. I'll remain there until I can find you."

"It's not safe there. I can accompany you—"

"You've done more than enough, my friend," Dietrich assured, as the console's red lights blinked; with one voice-activated command, the safeguard would activate.

Before Dietrich could finish, a cry from the prince warned him to brace himself. The crash came sooner, and harder, than Dietrich anticipated; with a sudden jerk, he was thrown across the room, slamming into the bookshelves along the back wall and crumpling to the floor.

Pain shot through Dietrich's head as he tried to move, his vision threatening to go black. Mournful thoughts swam in his mind about his first days in that doomed place, of Geist's promises that had deceived him. All of his life's work had been bent to ill purposes, and the regret of waiting far too long to act needled him as he lay there.

This is not how you are supposed to die, the voice of his late wife, Helen, reassured. Dietrich had left her behind long ago to build Regnum Aeternum, but beyond all time and distance, the memory of her voice comforted him.

Voice...

Willing himself to stand, Dietrich swayed clumsily back to the hidden panel where he had been working, uttering into the panel's sensors one simple statement – a favorite of Helen's that honored her and insulted Geist's pride:

"He gives strength to the weary, and increases the power of the weak."

With the encryption finished, Dietrich sealed the hidden panel and readied himself, still torn over leaving—

"Doctor...you must go," the prince urged, and Dietrich froze with compassion.

"I *will* come back for you," he promised with wet eyes, stumbling to the nearby exit hatch; he could feel the prince crawling on hands and knees.

Pulling the manual release lever, Dietrich waited for the hatch to open, revealing that they had indeed reached the lush foliage of Promenade. The prince's chest sagged eight feet above the forest floor, and Dietrich winced as he fell on rough brush. To his left, no more than twenty yards away, sat the hundred-foot tall steel base of the Jupiter Terrace – and a service entrance, used by the ten-foot, Plebian-class vaucans that kept up the city's inner workings.

Dietrich hobbled toward the entrance, hearing the chatter of the vaucans closing in above the towering trees around him. The entrance door slid open as he approached, and Dietrich, in tears, passed through without looking back, too anguished to witness the prince's capture.

Explosions met his ears as the door closed behind him, along with shouts of surprise and blows being landed – the prince's last stand to buy him time. Dietrich limped down the dark passage, following a track of red lights along the floor to a long ladder that descended into Lupercal – the foundations of Regnum Aeternum that resided in the Earth's mantle.

Fumbling down ladder rungs and dreary passages for hours, Dietrich's descent slowed with fatigue and the unbearable heat of Lupercal's depths. When he had at last passed from metal corridors to jagged rock, Dietrich collapsed in the recess of a tiny, sweltering tunnel. If any vaucans had hunted him this far, he had no fight left in him.

But fight I must. If he could reach the Genos Kamara, the birthplace of the vaucan and likely the one place the prince would be held, Dietrich could yet rescue Regnum Aeternum.

For now, he laid his head on the crude, earthen floor, utterly miserable. The outside world had no idea that its freedom hung by the thinnest thread. Laying on unforgiving ground, he thought of the only man whom Geist feared.

"If he can help us, please protect Brian Renney," Dietrich prayed feebly in the dark—unaware of how great the prince would one day become.