



The Three Sisters

By: Lundybaerr



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Foreword-

What follows is an accounting of the first time I journeyed with Ingrid and her sisters Eevi and Signy. As I look back it seems a lifetime ago- perhaps it has been. Much of this telling is what I myself witnessed and the rest I am certain is true, as it is from the accounts of my companions. The Introduction was pieced together from the words of many that were there to see how this tale began, including the three sisters, Lord Arden, Brother Lathan, Agathe of Redwater, and myself. There is much to this tale that I did not see, and for this I am both saddened and thankful- for every triumph there was tragedy.

I ask that you, remember that my part in it was small enough. This is the story of the three sisters and their transition from youth to adulthood. It is also the tale of a family, done a terrible wrong and their journey to right it again. It is a story of this place, the valley, the river, the wood, the town, and we that lived there. It is a story of friendship, family, and love. Most of all, it is a story of faith. The will of the Triad is a mystery to most, but I am blessed to know that these sisters' lives were tied to it. I give thanks to Selene, Lady Moon, that this was not to be the last tale of the sisters to be told.

Written by: Brother Lundybaerr
Messus 24.c3, 65th year of the Triad
Abbey of the Lake, Westflood

Introduction-

This section of this account was compiled by me from various sources, all for whom I will vouch. It is the foundation on which this tale is built. It is the story behind the story. It describes a time before I met the daughters of Arden and Orpheus, and the events in and around the 6th Year of the Triad. Many of the people from this story have passed, but not all. The places, at least most of them, still stand today. Triad forgive any bias in the telling.

Setting

The story takes place in the lands of House Lloar, more specifically in or around two locations: Redwater and Westflood.

Redwater

Redwater is the town in which the sisters were born and raised by their loving parents, Arden and Orpheus. It is also the town where their parents became embroiled in a political struggle that would quickly end their lives in heartbreaking fashion and change the lives of their daughters forever.

Redwater earned its name in the time of Krullus. A terrible battle was fought near the site of the town, and the river ran red for many days after.

Redwater is situated on the banks of the Valley River at the mouth of the great Berian Valley. It has always been the winter home to the Berian Woodsmen and their families. More recently, thanks to the efforts of both Lord Eldram and Arden, it is has become their permanent home. It is currently under the rule of Henerick, son of Eldram, Lord of Redwater. Henerick's mother, Thylera, the Lady of Redwater is still very active in the daily affairs of the town and the surrounding lands.

The town is of vital economic value due the major export of raw timber from the Berian Wood. Great rafts of the massive trees are assembled in the Valley River just south of Redwater and floated down to the mills in Westflood when the river is high enough.

The town is surrounded by a wooden palisade of huge Berian trees. Nearly all the structures are wooden with a few exceptions. The remains of an Asos era structure has been

repurposed into an inn known as *The Whetstone*. Its reputation for food, drink, and song reach well beyond the local area. There is also a modest temple to the Triad made of salvaged Asos stone and large river rock.

The largest stone structure in the area is the keep of the Lord of Redwater. Positioned atop a hill several miles to the southwest, the keep has an excellent vantage over the town as well as the river and approaches from the south. The keep is of more modern construction and was built by skilled and highly paid labor. It has never been attacked by significant forces and in fact still appears newly completed. Prior to the construction of the town's palisade wall, the keep provided shelter to many of the residents of the area in times of trouble.

Westflood

The city on the western shore of the Lake of Swords, where the three sisters have spent the last 3 years of their life in the mandatory service of Klain Whiteshield, Lord of Westflood, Regent of the Lake.

Westflood is built on the foundations of many of the ruined manors of the nobles of House Asos. Much of the stone for the walls and major structures was salvaged from the monuments, temples, and libraries of the once proud city of Orenthyr and the smaller surrounding ruined towns.

The city is a major trade hub for grain, lumber, fish, and finished goods. There are many working mills in and around Westflood, reducing the giant rafts of Berian trees into finished lumber.

Westflood has a non-typically religious population for a city of Lloar due in large part to the attitudes and personal beliefs of the Regent, Klain Whiteshield. There is a very large abbey to the Triad, *The Abbey of the Lake*, including a massive temple, library, and structures for housing and educating many of the faithful.

The large number of merchants, traders, artisans, and pilgrims make the population highly mixed.

The City Guard are regarded as protectors of the people and commerce of the region, and they have a reputation of little tolerance for infractions against local laws and citizens. They are one of the largest armed forces between Silarum and Caladria.

The Lands Between

The lands north of the Lake of Swords are known as the Salt Plain. The area was the largest irrigated crop-producing region in the known history of Athia prior to the coming of the Thyrs. When the armies of Krullus invaded the lands of King Asos, not only did they flood his great city, they destroyed the ancient aqueducts, canals, and cisterns of the irrigation system. They even salted the fields, ensuring the land would never again feed the nations of men.

The land is only now beginning to show signs of recovery. Wild grasses, brush, and even occasional groves of trees can be found in the hill country north of the Lake of Swords. Many of the lowlands and valleys are still stained with salt and unable to support much life, but higher ground is again home to herdsman and even an occasional farmer.

Herds of caribou, elk and larger animals are no longer uncommon.

There are two major trade routes between Redwater and Westflood: The Salt Road and the Valley River. The Salt Road is made up of stretches of old Asos road and newly constructed segments joining them together. It is the fastest route north from Westflood to Redwater. The Valley River has long been the trade highway for the region. When travelling south from Redwater to Westflood, no route is faster. Barges do still travel upriver from the Lake of Swords against the strong current using the ancient Pull Road. A construction endeavor unimaginable in the current age, the Pull Road is a series of stone roadways, bridges, and levees, coupled with the favorable terrain on which beast of burden pull barges up the great river. Pulling a barge upriver is a slow and arduous process, but huge loads of goods can be moved using minimal manpower. Barge travel is regulated closely in the high flow season to not interfere with the downstream timber rafts from Redwater.

Both routes are dotted with small villages, homesteads, and occasional roadhouses.

Occasionally to the far west, the Dragon Spine Mountains are barely visible.

Family History

Ingrid, Eevi, and Signy are the three daughters of Arden and Orphea of Redwater.

Arden came to Redwater when he was in his early twenties, as part of the expedition from Westflood, led by Eldram, future Lord of the region. The purpose of the expedition was to reign in the Berian Woodsman under the Lloar banner, more specifically under the rule of the Regent of the Lake. This endeavor would ultimately be successful, and would be credited to Eldram, but all knew, including Eldram himself, that the real breakthroughs were because of the efforts of Eldram's young lieutenant Arden.

The agreements made by Eldram (and Arden) with the Berian Woodsmen would forever change Redwater. The construction of the palisade and creation of a secure town in which the Woodsmen could live with their families in safety, would ultimately bring stability to the region. This stability would allow for the re-establishment of the timber trade so essential to the communities down river.

Eldram was rewarded for this success with a newly sanctioned title of Lord of Redwater as well as the accompanying wealth resulting from the opening trade route. He would eventually bring his wife Thylera and young son to live in the keep overlooking the town.

Arden was credited with opening several new paths into the Berian Wood, finding several lost settlements, and helping to manage wise harvesting of the trees around Redwater. Arden would also ultimately become good friends with his mentor Lord Eldram. The two would often take expeditions in the woods alone together, much to the displeasure of Lady Thylera.

Arden would meet Orphea at a wedding during the time of construction of the palisade wall. A local Woodsmen of some fortune had a daughter marrying one of the palisade builders close to Arden, and so he was invited to attend (along with most of the town). During the typically large feast, Arden became captivated by a woman singing traditional celebratory songs. She was very gifted and very beautiful. He would later learn she was also quite smart and very strong willed. Her name was Orphea.

Orphea's family had lived in Berian Valley for many generations. Her father a Woodsman, her mother a midwife. She was an only child to older parents. She too had noticed Arden, the strong, respected man at the right hand of the new Lord.

At one point in the celebration, after much encouragement, Orphea began to sing a familiar wedding feast song. "The Legend of Ilval and Annon" is an ancient verse telling of two forbidden lovers that eventually find happiness only to end in tragedy. All at the feast were surprised, but none more than Orphea, when Arden began to sing along, trading stanzas, as though rehearsed. The two were lauded as the highlight of the feast. Arden and Orphea would be forever tied to the song and local wedding traditions.

They were married that same summer. The following year, Ingrid was born.

Eventually, Orphea took on the role of midwife, thanks to the teachings of her mother, serving Redwater and the surrounding countryside. Arden continued to explore the Berian Valley, searching for new trails, ridding areas of beast and other fowl denizens. Both had the respect of the population of Redwater and of many of the Woodsmen as well.

Orphea learned to love the winter in Redwater. It was a time when her husband was home.

The family grew to include two more daughters. First Eevi followed then by Signy. Orphea feared that Arden wanted a son, but he would never say so. He loved his daughters and raised them to be strong willed like their mother. He would teach them to hunt and track and survive in the wood. Always saying to Orphea, "I cannot always be here to look over them. They need to know to look after each other."

The springs would come, and Arden's duties would take him away from home. Once even taking him with Eldram on a journey to Westflood for some political meeting. They would be gone for 60 days. Ingrid has memory of her mother crying often during this time.

In the coming summers, Arden agreed to stay closer to home. Eventually suggesting that Eldram take his son Henerick on his outings instead, but there would always be at least one or two he could not refuse.

Orphea was pleased. The young family had years of stability, contentment, and happiness.

Lord Eldram's Dilemma

In these years, Henerick would come of age. A handsome, strong, and smart young man, Henerick was given every opportunity to learn from his father and his retainers. Fencing, fighting, hunting, riding, all were taught and learned.

The trait Eldram tried most to impart to Henerick, wisdom, was the piece he refused.

He became an entitled, cruel, angry young man. Bullying the locals, stealing, using his father's title to get him out of any scrape.

Eldram would eventually press Henerick's mother to send him to her brother in Westflood to get formal education at the Abbey. She agreed and used it as an excuse to leave Redwater for a time.

When Thylera and Henerick returned, he was no better. What he seemed to have learned was ambition. And not surprisingly, lust. He now had a male attendant/bodyguard named Fuhlgar. A large man of similar ambition and morality, always with him to muscle his way out of trouble.

Thylera almost immediately began to press Eldram about arranging for Henerick to succeed him as Lord. Eldram was, at first, excited by the idea and even went so far as to inquire with the Regent about such a possibility.

It would be Arden, and Orphea that would change his mind.

Orphea would eventually learn of Henerick's treatment of the local population of young, unmarried ladies when attending several of them in pregnancy. Orphea became so affected by the accounts given by the young women, she immediately told Arden and demanded something be done- adding that she had noticed Henerick speaking with Ingrid just days before.

Arden wasn't really concerned about Ingrid, but Eldram deserved to know what was happening with his son. Eldram was less than happy to learn of it and became enraged at Arden for overstepping their friendship. Arden made a quick apology and took his leave.

It is unclear what happened over the next few days, but in the end, Lady Thylera left the Keep and Eldram came to Redwater to visit with Arden and Orphea.

The Trip

It had been a long time since Eldram had visited their home. It was large by Redwater standards, but nothing compared to the keep. Eldram looked around the family home with a hint of envy. He first apologized to Arden and then to Orphea, offering her his own purse filled with septems. He asked that she use them to see to the girls she was caring for. He then asked Arden if they could take one of their trips into the wood. He had been thinking of a possible solution to the issues with his son and wanted to discuss it at length. To their surprise, he invited the entire family. Arden eventually agreed and allowed the girls to come along. Orphea elected to stay to check on a pregnancy that was nearing time.

Eldram refused to let any of his retainers accompany them on the hunt, only one cook, and one groom for the horses. They modestly outfitted themselves, hoping to live off the land as usual.

The first couple of days were spent travelling on trails all of them, even the girls knew well. Arden and Eldram debated how to correct the misdeeds of Henerick. Once they reached the deeper wood, progress was slow. They were forced to slay an ursi. Eldram was knocked from his horse. Once it was over, he laughed loudly. Thanking Arden for saving him once again.

They stumbled upon a waterfall in the stream, almost fifty feet high. It was a perfect place to stop. After making camp, Eldram asked the girls for some time alone with their father. Not long after, they could be heard arguing. Eventually Eldram came storming into camp asking the girls strange questions, almost yelling. "Wouldn't you like to live in the keep? To travel to Westflood and beyond? To learn from the best teachers?" Finally, Arden had to physically restrain him. It would all end with the two of them laughing and the girls confusedly joining in.

Once they gathered their breath, Eldram continued, "Is it so bad Arden, what I propose? Is it such a tragedy for you and your family?"

"No, I suppose not." Arden responded.

"Then ask me or I shall not believe you!" Eldram pressed.

Arden then smiled, drew his sword, and yelled, "I demand Lord, that you name me successor!"

"Good. So it will be."

The attack that followed caught them all by surprise. Many arrows from all directions. Both Eldram and Arden were struck. Eldram called to his friend to get his family to safety. "This time I shall save you!" Arden leapt from the falls screaming for the girls to run. Ingrid fired arrows blindly into the trees, trying desperately to hit their assailants. Eldram shouted to them "Come on you cowards!" as several more arrows pierced him as he fell at the bottom of the waterfall. It would become quickly apparent that the arrow that struck Arden was poisoned. He would need help to escape. The girls would spend the next five days, helping each other, dragging their seriously injured father home.

When they finally arrived, they would learn that Orpheia was killed in an attempt on Henerick's life. The sisters were all accused of conspiracy against a Lord of House Lloar. And, Arden was accused of the murder of Eldram, Lord of Redwater.

The Inquiry

For more than a week, the girls were imprisoned within the dungeon of the keep. They received no word of their father and struggled to support each other through the ordeal.

They received a visit the Curate of Redwater, Linden, an Acolyte they all knew well. He was very serious and measured in his account of what was happening. Their father was alive and would stand accused before Klain Whiteshield, Regent of the Lake himself, when he arrived next week.

Lord Eldram's body was brought in to Redwater the day before the girls arrived in town with Arden.

Orphea was killed in their own house for attempting to kill Henerick. Henerick was badly injured. He may be blind in one eye.

Linden refused to hear any of the girls' accounts of events, stating he was to be involved in the inquiry.

The day before the trial the sisters were taken to a different part of the keep and briefly questioned by an Acolyte calling himself Lathan. He was a very serious, tall, thin, pale man. His questions were very specific, and he demanded the girls each answer with yes or no only.

Day One

The day began with introductions of the participants in the Inquiry:

The Regent, Lathan, Linden, Henerick, Lady Thylera, the girls, Arden, a few other witnesses, finally ending with Lady Thylera's brother Toreas, Henerick's uncle, who would be speaking for the Lord's family. Rilen, one of Arden's trusted guides, would be speaking for Arden's family.

Arden was placed in chains at the front of the room. The girls caught his glance a number of times, but they were not allowed to speak with him at all.

Many boring accounts of Lord Eldram and Arden's friendship and working relationship were given in the morning, followed by character witness including the Regent himself on behalf of Arden.

After a midday break, Lady Thylera gave an account of Arden visiting Eldram to speak of Henerick shortcomings and unworthiness to be Lord and the argument that followed. She also testified that both she and Eldram wished greatly that Henerick be Lord one day.

Ingrid was asked to give an account of the night they were visited by Eldram.

Eevi was asked details of their trip.

Signy was asked only two yes/no questions:

“Did your father and Eldram argue on the trip?” and,

“Did your father draw his sword and demand to be made successor?”

She tried to answer both with “no”, but Curate Linden shook his head both times at the Regent, and the Regent asked her to answer truthfully or face the consequences. She eventually did.

Arden would give his account of the trip and the death of Eldram. Many details of which were fuzzy due to the poison still in his system. Many objections and questions were voiced from Toreas.

Another break was taken.

The room was cleared of all audience not directly involved in the inquiry. Lathan then began to pray in front of a small altar that had been hastily set up at the end of the room. Linden and one other Acolyte began praying soon after.

Lathan called a visage of Eldram into being in front of the room. The image of the dead Lord was terrible to behold. He looked like a statue of himself, looking around at the those in the room as if confused.

Both Toreas and Rilen were asked to pass a single written question to Linden. Linden then asked the visage of Eldram each question aloud:

“Did you wish your son to succeed you as Lord of Redwater?”

“Yes” he responded.

“Did Arden or his daughters cause your death?”

"No" he responded.

Clearly shaken, Linden wiped his brow and nodded to the Regent.

The image of Lord Eldram then faded away.

The Regent then spoke,

"So then on the matter of murder, Arden, you are declared not guilty. In the matter of conspiracy and treason, perhaps tomorrow will show the truth. This inquiry is now excused for the night."

Curate Linden would later inform them that the second day would be largely concerning their mother and the conspiracy. He added that the will of the Triad will be also present at the inquiry as the day before.

Day Two

A few minutes before the beginning of the second day, the girls were briefly reunited with their father. Arden looked very sick but smiled as soon as he saw them. He was in chains. There were many tears but, in the end, he demanded they be strong and that they remember their mother as they knew her, not by what would be said there today.

Again, much of the first half of the day was made up of introductions and statements of the conspiracy case to deny Henerick succession to Lord of Redwater. Later were many accounts of the quality and character of Orphea.

Eventually, there would be an account of the evening in question from a local man, Artil, a respected merchant that knew the family. He told the story of how Orphea was at the Whetstone singing when Henerick and Fuhlgar arrived. Eventually, as was common on the rare occasion when Orphea was at the Whetstone, she was asked to sing the "Legend of Ilval and Annon". She eventually agreed and was unexpectedly joined by Henerick. The crowd cheered loudly. Not long after, Orphea left. Soon after, Henerick would also leave. The story caused Arden to protest to the point of being further restrained and gagged. Henerick would then tell a surprising tale of how he saw Orphea walking home and offered to escort her. She would accept and upon arrival at the house, ask him if he needed on more cup of wine before heading to the keep. Henerick accepted. She then threw herself upon

him and they made love in Arden's bed at her request. After sleeping for a few hours, he arose before dawn to make his usual escape before waking the woman of that particular night. He would find his father's purse on the table. He woke Orphea, demanding an explanation. She told him of his father's wishes to take care of the girls he had been with. Henerick denied his involvement and she became enraged and attacked him with a kitchen knife. He called for help and Fuhlgar kicked in the door and ran Orphea through. He immediately sent for help and then cut off Orphea's head that she would not rise to trouble them further.

At the end of the telling, Linden, with tears in his eyes turned to the regent and nodded. A break was called.

Afterwards, when the girls were again called to the inquiry, there was an argument happening between Henerick's uncle, Toreas, and the tall Acolyte Lathan. Toreas was demanding that he be allowed to ask the questions. Eventually the Regent denied him.

What was to happen next would haunt the dreams of the girls forever.

The room was again cleared of all audience not directly involved in the inquiry. Lathan then began to pray in front of the small altar as he had the day before. Linden and the other Acolyte began praying soon after.

Lathan called a visage of Orphea into being in front of the room. Colorless, silent, but undeniably Orphea. Her hair waved about her as though she was floating in water. She looked thin, almost ill. The injury at her neck was not bleeding, but obvious. Her eyes went immediately to Arden who was crying. She smiled.

Linden took the page he was given and asked the following question aloud,

"Did you act in defense of yourself when you attacked Henerick?"

"No" she replied, with look of anger and pride.

Linden then asked the second question,

"Did you willingly invite Henerick into your own bed?"

The visage of Orphea immediately looked to Arden, she began to shake and eventually pulled at her hair and looked as though screaming, her mouth wide, eyes closed tight, silently screaming.

Toreas demanded, "Make her answer!"

And so, she did. With streams of tears running down her colorless face.

"Yes." she said.

And she was gone. Arden had to be removed from the room, Ingrid too was restrained. Never have the sisters been as confused or saddened.

The Regent then closed the inquiry for the day.

Day Three

The morning of the third day began with a visit from Linden. His hair had turned white overnight. He was, like everyone, affected by the events of the previous day. He informed the girls that their father had requested a direct audience with the Regent to discuss confessing to the accusations.

Soon, they were taken to see Arden in his cell. The Regent was leaving as they arrived.

"You have one hour." he stated as he exited.

This would be the last time the girls would see their father. They spent the time talking about how things would change and how to stay strong. There were many tears and embraces. Embraces that would have to last.

At the end of the hour, the Regent returned and gave Arden his word that the girls would be safe. Arrangements had been made to take the girls to Westflood. They would not see Redwater or their father again.

The time between

Three years. The Regent promised Arden he would keep his daughters in Westflood under his protection for three years.

It was in Westflood that I, Lundybaerr, came to know Ingrid. In service to the Regent, I was attached to her unit in support. At first, simply a soldier in the City Guard, she would eventually rise to the status of one of the White Guard- the Regent's personal guards. I was fortunate enough to follow her through each of her stops along the way.

Signy too worked for the Regent, our paths would only cross a time or two. Her youth kept her from direct service, but she was trained among the Regent's own family.

Eevi was assigned to a local merchant, a wealthy one, by the name of Liutulf. She would come to lead his personal guards. Her reputation was unquestionable in her service to him.

At the end of the three years promised to the Regent, the sisters ended their service. But, it worked out that he was able to keep them a bit longer. The Regent refused to allow the sisters to leave until winter's end. When Auctus finally came, the sisters would no longer stay.

I too was ready to see more of the world than the kitchens and tents of his service. I was released at Ingrid's request, and it was my intent to follow her to see how her family's story would end. And along the way, perhaps I would find my place in Athia.

The Beginning

From here forward, this account is my own. I attempted to make entries in my log each day, I was not always successful. I think first, it is important to say that we did try to be prepared for what lay ahead.

Here is an accounting of all supplies I acquired and assembled on the eve of our adventure.

Note: perhaps adventure is not accurate, but I was hopeful. Triad willing...

Supplies-

Axe, timber

Backpacks (4)

Bandage Kit

Bearskin

Bedrolls (4)

Blanket, winter (4)

Bolts (crossbow) 2 score

Chalk (3)

Chest (large)

Chest (small)

Clothes (various, much from Mrs. Skjoll)

Cups (4)

Feed bags (4)

Fishing gear (acquired from Deln at the river bridge)

Flint and Steel

Grappling Hook (stout, made by Hagni the blacksmith)

Hatchet

Hermetics Bag (some contents of my own collecting, hopefully adequate for this trip)

Lantern, open flame

Lock (was assured it is a very good one by Deln)

Mallet

Oil (5 pints)

Pan (1 very large)

Pots (1 large, 1 small)

Prybar (also from Hagni)

Rope (200')

Sack (2)

Sledge (the one I found)

Soap (2 bars) (I hope it is to Ingrid's liking, as the last was not.)

Spade

Tarp (large, oiled)

Tent (if you can call it that, but it is large)

Tools (various hand tools I have collected in service of Ingrid)

Torches (12)

Twine (a big ball, at least 200')

utensils (4 settings of fork, knife, and spoon)

utensils for cooking (various, acquired from the kitchens of the Regent, with permission)

Waterskins (4)

whetstone

whistle (Deln made)

Food-

Ale, common (1 butt) (from Tharbin)

Apples (about 60)

Beets (40)

Cabbage (6 heads)

Carrots (50)

Garlic (a large bunch from Lena's garden)

Hard Cheese (3 wheels)

Jerky (large sack from Skjoll, very salty)

Onions (20)

Oats (small sack)

Potatoes (75)

Salt Pork (2 hind quarters, 1 shoulder)

Feed (5 sacks) (mostly barley I believe, some oats)

Hardtack (large box)

Whisky (1 bottle) (a gift from Nelda at the Cracked Crock)

Water (4 kegs)

Animals-

Magnus- a huge ox purchased from Mr. Skjoll

Vali- my new companion, her keen eyes and ears would be welcome on the road

Horses- three good ones, Ingrid selected all from the Regent's stable (his final gift)

Cart- a fair, 2-wheeler, acquired from the garrison surplus

Funding-

4 and 11 septems

I was concerned with such little money. I would have to make each count.

Auctus 16.1c

I was thankful that Mr. Skjoll was willing to part with Magnus. The ox might have been a stubborn ass, but his strength could not be matched. For a while I was beginning to wonder if we were going to have a cart with no means to move it. With the last of the supply accounted for, I believed we were ready to head out. I had the keen suspicion that when Ingrid said, "first light", she did not mean at the rising of Illios.

Having seen the three sisters, the previous night as they went over their plans, I could not help but wonder how much of their discussion was fueled by emotion, and how much by Tharbin's brew.

I wondered what it was I had signed myself up for. Though Ingrid had recounted the tale of her family to me several times now, hearing the additions from her sisters made me affirm there was far more to the story than I may have initially believed.

The sky was beginning to lighten. I would go hook up Magnus to be ready. I was certain the sisters would be arriving soon.

Triad watch over us-

Auctus 17.1c

Something happened. Perhaps I should rephrase- Yesterday we had an auspicious start to our journey. Setting out for Sil's Farm, our travels were intersected by a river void of bridge. Making an attempt to ford the river put all three of my companions into its icy clutches. When first Eevi fell headlong into the water, Signy was quick to chastise her. But, when she herself attempted the crossing, her horse reared, sending her into the deepest part of the water. She was quickly swept downstream. Ingrid spurred her steed into the icy water and leapt into the stream in an attempt to rescue Signy. As both she and I struggled after Signy, Ingrid would reach her first. By now, Eevi had not only reached the far shore, she had regained control of her horse.

Perhaps by providence we each arrived across the river. Sadly, this wasn't to be the end of our plight. A volley of arrows struck the cart and nearby ground. Above us, atop the ruins of the old bridge abutment, three assailants were nocking another flight. While I attempted to find cover for Signy, the other sisters thwarted the ambush. In the aftermath, the source of the attack was clear. None other than Toreas, Henerick's uncle himself was behind it. Our attackers were found to wear the garb of his personal guard. Unfortunately, one of them did escape on a horse, fast to the west. It was difficult for Ingrid not to pursue, but our situation was near dire. All three of them were wet and dangerously cold. Signy especially. Her face was frighteningly blue when I covered her near the fire, and I feared the worst.

The morning brought a real surprise when she, near frozen the night before, awoke no worse for wear and with barely more than prayers to account for it.

Triad be praised!

Auctus 18.1c

We awoke to a frosty spring morning. After breaking camp, the sisters spotted more tracks of riders, spies, or whomever they might have been. We had to move on, and in doing so, soon ran into a shepherd. He seemed a decent fellow, calling himself Gil. He had lost 2 goats in the night, and he believed it was not the failing of his faithful hound. He inquired as to our destination, which I was hesitant to give. When I did share that we were bound for Sill's Farm, he seemed to know of it, at least. The sisters made promises to avenge his losses should they come across the thieves. We passed on as the winds picked up.

We arrived at Sill's Farm late in the day. Surely, we would have missed it, were not all four of us looking for the landmarks we were given by Gil. I began setting camp in one of the old foundations as the sisters explored the ruined farmstead. They reported the well dry and winds worsening. We bed down at the dry farm, hoping for a blessing at the next rise of Illios.

The morning brought new challenges indeed. Magnus had fallen in the well, putting all of us in a panic. Thankfully with assistance of the horses, we were able to free the great ox from the old well. In doing so, Ingrid discovered the well was indeed not dry. It was capped with a thick layer of ice, but not so thick to prevent her from breaking away enough to replenish our supply. I realize that Hargin is still four days distant. Weather is blowing in- snow and fog. And now, Vali has run off.

Triad help us.

Auctus 19.1c

It was a man on a horse. Admittedly, I wasn't sure this was a good sign. Having already run across a group intent on doing us harm, my sincere hope was this figure was not the first of who knows how many. It was the sound of his horn that told me all what I needed to know. A baggot horn has but one home, and to have been met by a Sentinel of House Cerrak was very welcome on this, such a snowy eve. After our brief introductions we welcomed him into camp. Under the warmth of the tent, he introduced himself as Olin, his horse, Axim.

Olin brings news and warning. With the damp of the snow, the road would soon turn to an impassible quagmire and Olin's experience in this country suggests we would be better served heading east towards Gold Bend. Perhaps passage on the great Valley River will be available, or at least the firm stone of the Pull Road.

Olin told us of Lord Henerick's intent on being married on the night of the full moon, less than 30 days hence. It was impossible not to notice the flicker of ideas in the eyes of my companions. I can only imagine what notions they are cultivating. We bedded down and provided our guest food and a warm spot near the fire. Eevi's voice was enchanting.

In the morning there is fresh snow, well over two hands. We packed up, and with our new escort, head east. As if the slick mud and snow were not enough, the sounding of the Cornohorn brought warning of a mammoth stampede.

Triad save us!

Auctus 20.1c

By the gods the mammoth was fast upon Olin. The sisters rode out to assist in the scuffle but hadn't reached the old Sentinel before he was thrown from his mighty steed. I took Magnus to higher ground, and kept Vali close at my side. The beast was relentless, its cries terrible to the ears. I was not long before the snows were painted red with blood. The war-maidens eventually slew the mammoth. After the carnage was over, Olin was feared lost-buried headfirst in the deep snows. Add to that, our horses had run off and sadly, the great warhorse, Axim, was slain. To everyone's surprise, Olin was spared. His leg appeared badly broken, but by the time I could tend to it, we discovered it to be a wooden replacement.

Signy helped me to collect the horses and upon our return, Eevi had harvested the mammoth's tusk. With the hour late, we made camp not far away from the scene, tended to wounds, and again let Eevi's divine voice lull us to sleep.

In the morning, we broke camp with an interesting conversation of Signy and marriage. One day, even she will find the man who fills her heart.

Olin rode ahead on Eevi's horse, Ingrid and Signy in tow. The road had been beaten by weather and as if the hidden void's tossing of Eevi from the cart was not enough, the appearance of a man with crazed eyes, spying us from the trees was even more disturbing.

Triad watch over us!

I am never surprised by how the gods test us. Within a few miles of Gold Bend, a hollow in the road nearly swallowed a wheel of the cart. Then, the left shaft of the of the cart splintered as Magnus attempted to navigate the narrows between the trees. While with Eevi, we spoke of Redwater, and it was readily apparent she is worried that home will be but a shadow of its former self.

After a bit of effort, the wagon repaired, we arrived in Gold Bend to find our companions had moved on to the Book Box, a local tavern of some repute. Catching up with Olin, he clarified Ingrid and Signy made their way across the bridge and that he would be making his way to the Book Box later in the evening. After a bit more discussion, Eevi and I head there ourselves, only to interrupt an exchange between Ingrid and the barkeep Kaylin. Room and board for the sisters had been secured in exchange for a portion of our mammoth

meat. Turns out the meat was for an orc who was otherwise prepared to skewer an unfortunate local lad. In the end, and to spite the help nearly burning the meat, the orc and his crew seemed sated- no doubt influenced by Eevi's always offered voice.

Wanting to safeguard the cart, I made camp for myself near Olin's post and prayed tomorrow I might rummage up some wood for repairs.

Watch over us Triad.

Auctus 21.1c

I have often considered that as the gods are real, so too are their interests in man. As such I found no reasonable way to deny fate. It would seem that whatever plans we may have had to reach Redwater, our chosen path was not to be. Weather sent us east of our road, and now roads have given way to rivers. Though north be our destination, it seems the gods themselves have their own ideas as to how we should get there. I wonder if perhaps they do not wish us there at all.

Olin caught up with me after I had my camp set up. He warned me not to fell any trees near the village. The folk here still ascribe to the old ways- tree spirits and worse. Even now the gods remind me of the darkness so many of our kin still live within.

The next morning, Ingrid, Signy and I set out to procure some suitable lumber to repair the damaged cart. Sadly, we found one barge gone and the second casting off. It seems our only option is a "captain" Rynar. Our search was interrupted by the sounding of Olin's horn. The ivory has been stolen and worse, Eevi injured. One thief lay dead- perhaps the sole evidence of the god's hand. Ingrid, Signy, and Olin set out to speak with the townsfolk just as Rynar paid us a visit. He wished to buy Magnus but would settle for having him pull his barge with us aboard. We hastily moved away from an angered town.

Perhaps the gods are testing us?

Magnus took well to the barge, although the hard-cobbled road would be hard the great ox's hooves. I would do my best to look after our prized beast. I also got the chance to spend time with barge's teamster, Peth. He was an interesting fellow and certainly had questions of his own about us and our capabilities. He revealed that there was a shortage of horses on the river this early in the season, but he could only speculate on the reason. I did not care for his lascivious glances toward my companions, but I had no doubt they could handle any of his misguided advances.

The river was quiet and the although the going was smooth, it was slow. We rested Magnus around midday. I would become rather fond of these periodic rests while I faced the likelihood I would be doing a considerable amount of walking.

I find it hard to pen what happened next. What first appeared as one horrible tragedy soon cascaded into a torrent of chaos. Olin, pierced by many arrows and hanging by the neck from a great cottonwood, gasped and jerked as if clinging desperately to life. I rushed to his aid, screaming for the sisters. I only succeeded in leading them into a trap. Sick everywhere. What we would eventually learn was the crew of one of the earlier barges were walking dead, set upon us. The battle was but a blur, but suffice it to say, my three companions made short work of the sick while I clambered up a tree to safety.

Worst of all, Olin was not fighting for his life, rather his body struggled to be free to feast on the living. We cut Olin free only after ending his struggle. I have seen many men die- warriors welcomed death, evil men deserved death, this was different. Never shall I forget the sight of his body floating in the calm river- leg missing, the broken arrows, the blood, the anguish on his face, the sadness on the face of Signy and in my heart.

I realize I pray often, and perhaps the noise of my continued offerings is easily dismissed, but for this man, this good and altruistic man, may my prayers be heard- Triad take him and let him rest his weary form until Athia has need once more of his noble soul.

We took him from the river and buried him on a rise overlooking the road and river. Many tears were shed, but none of us spoke as Eevi sent him on with the Song of the Highwayman.

Triad restore me.

Auctus 22.1c

Following our encounter with the sick both Peth and Rynar offered their condolences. Additionally, Peth apologized for his earlier behavior towards the sisters. It was clear that both of them realized just how capable these sisters were. I suspected relations going forward would be more respectful.

It was getting late, and the sisters seemed against having Peth and myself sleep ashore without one of them looking over us. Eevi came ashore. Seeing that Peth's growing admiration for the sisters didn't put him into any "ungentlemanly" circumstances, I set my bed between his and Eevi's.

The night passed quietly save for Signy catching sight of what she swears was Olin's leg floating by. It was a clear reminder that up ahead there may be more unwanted encounters with whatever befell our friend and the earlier barge.

We pressed on in the morning after finding our cart now in need of oiling. The road had been tough on the old cart and as we traveled, we found a section of the road in makeshift repair. Passing through the reeds along the bank, Eevi rode ahead. Her voice called out-movement. It was too late. Bursting through the reeds was the largest boar I have seen.

Gods be with us.

Attacked! Set upon by a sunder of boar, Eevi squared off against the largest of the beasts while the rest of us dealt with the remainder erupting from the reeds. With my most sincere of thanks, Signy raced to my rescue, and just in time as Magnus was about to flee and I risked running the barge aground. I yelled for her to cut the bow rope and her quick response set the barge and our one-ton animal free. Peth, Eevi, and Ingrid went for the free rope of the barge and Signy and I ran after Magnus. With the blessings of divine providence, we were each successful. Better still, in dispatching the angry hogs, our supply was now bolstered.

With Signy's help, we get the meat salted. Working with her is a welcome calm after such chaos. Though Rynar is clearly worried by our continued delays, he understands our need to tend to his only means of security.

Auctus 26.1c

The next three days passed with the blessings of the gods. Erebus kept us safe each night, Illios blessed us with clear and warm skies, and Selene kept the winds and waters calm.

Now as we neared Mud Rim, I prayed for an opportunity to resupply.

At some point in the early morning, I realized we are short a horse. Soon after came the realization that Peth too, was missing. Of all of the horses to have taken, he had to borrow Ingrid's. I was not looking forward to waking her and starting her day with this less than desirable report. I finished making breakfast in hopes a good meal would lessen the sting. As I expected, Ingrid questioned Rynar who seemed to know as much about Peth and the horse as I.

The sisters took a look about while I made sure to take care of a long ignored and large stack of laundry. Alas, they found little trace of Peth, only tracks leading straight into the river. We decided to move on. Breaking camp, we all had hopes of reaching Mud Rim soon.

After a few hours travel, we reached the next town, sizable, and with an amazing feature. A high bridge from the far east shore reached over the town wall and beyond to the canyon rim. Here we split from the barge, and the thinned into groups of two. Ingrid and I saw about the animals while Signy and Eevi looked for lodgings. Ingrid and I were directed to the high mesa west of the town proper where we met the town's Horsemaster. Though we talked of boarding, we learn of a wedding, in two days, but thankfully a local one. However, we were told that the Redwater bride's barge is at most three days behind us.

Gods stay the sister's hands when she passes by.

Auctus 27.1c

Ingrid and I returned to the barge, having discussed both supplies and which route to take from Mud Rim. Upon our return, we found Signy and Eevi still absent. Seeing Ingrid was perturbed by this, I thought it best to offer myself as a means to discern their whereabouts.

I made my way to Trumbo's and arrived to find Eevi signing to yet another captive audience, and Signy at a nearby table, beset with suitors. Who can blame them... Eevi motioned for me to leave and only later do I learn that she didn't intend to shoo me away, rather she was looking for an opportunity for the three of us to return to the barge. The two of them explained that they had met the mayor, a woman named Yaris, while at the inn. They told her of Olin, explaining his murder and by her learning, hoped she might pass word back to Westflood and the Sentinels.

We made our way back to Ingrid, and by my own selfish interest, took the long way past the Shrine of the Canyon. Though I hardly know how to pen what it was I saw, I found it breathtaking.

The following morning, I awoke to what must have been some sending-off ceremony atop the high bridge. I was affected by their grief and by their affection for the river.

After all are woke and fed, we made for Tilden's. There we traded the cart for a yet-to-be assembled wagon. We now needed to come up with 30 septems and 300 feet of good rope- hopefully from Rynar's cargo. It was a good deal, and the wagon should be ready by the end of the next day. We returned then to the barge to inform Ingrid, but our attention was stolen by the Horsemaster atop the mesa, leading none other than a Mormere Steed!

Selene tells us that thing happen for a reason- she watches over us to learn our interests and struggles and when the moment is right, she presents us with a choice. She tests us, and through the chaos of life learns who among us is deserving of another attempt in this great world.

Though I am reluctant to accept, each of the sisters contributed to pay for the wagon. I feared I have both taxed them for the security and protection they provided and now with request of funds for equipment ruined under my care. They are truly magnificent women, and I hope one day I might be able to repay their generosity.

We are visited in the morning by a man named Dalibor. A representative of House Cerrak, he questioned the sisters for some time in regard to Olin and his unfortunate end. Having sated his curiosity, we then set out to collect supply- and wardrobe, for there was a wedding to attend. Ingrid would inquire if 500 feet of rope can be squeezed from Rynar.

I made trades a Hob's, offloading the leather for grain and flour. I also traded the plumb seeds to Rand at Trumbo's for garlic and salt pork. Additionally, he agrees to share one his recipes. I would be anxious for an opportunity to make it my own. From there I went off to meet Rand's sister, I purchased 8 fresh loaves.

As I stepped back out into the street, I caught sight of none other than Ingrid's horse. I found it unharmed and tied in a nearby stable. This may have been my test- or perhaps rather it was Ingrid's. Peth may be there. Would there have be more to be learned or maybe another death to force our quick departure from the good people of Mud Rim? May our minds remain clear, our temptation tempered, and our will true!

Having located Ginger, Ingrid's horse, I made my way to the nearby Eclan Traders to see if I couldn't learn of the fate of the rider. They knew little, or rather they shared little. Their shared looks gave me pause. I thought it best to keep details vague. I quickly returned to the barge to stow our wares. I was then accompanied back to Hob's to collect the remainder of our supply. When we arrived there, I noticed what I can only assume to be the mayor and escorts making their way to the Eclan Traders.

With everything collected and accounted for, Eevi and Signy asked if I might make some adjustments to a pair of dresses, they somehow dug up from the horde of miscellanea that was Hob's. I did admit, with only a bit of tailoring, the dresses would be fine for them. Doing this was a pleasure.

As the day finally wound down, I got dinner made and Ginger up to the Horsemaster. Upon my return, I found people and guards all surrounding the entrance to the inn. The drama on everyone's face should have been indication enough- knowing that the sisters were intent on utilizing the inn for a chance at a bath. Two things became readily apparent with a bit of a look-about and a conversation or two with the gathered crowd. Ingrid had killed two people, and none other than Akard of Eclan Traders was lurking in the shadows with a watchful eye on the events at the inn.

Auctus 28.1c

I made my way back to the barge after confirming that Ingrid was indeed safe. Knowing the younger sisters shouldn't arrive at the wedding empty handed, I set upon baking a fresh batch of cinnamon apple fritters. Eevi set out to check up on her sister and while she is gone, Signy and I again talked of faith. She made the comment that she couldn't be someone of faith such as I was. At first, I couldn't help but deny I was any kind of person of real faith. But, what sticks with me still is what she may have been alluding to- that maybe my devotion to the Triad was something that she herself admired. Triad forgive my pride, being admired by Signy, pleased me.

Ingrid doesn't return until the following morning, touting her room having been offered free of charge and proudly admitting having taken the lives of her would-be assailants. The rest and bath have done her good- I denied it was the slaying of them who would wrong her.

Having agreed to stay with "captain" Rynar, we acquired our 300 feet of rope and we paid Tilden the remainder of what was owed. With the wagon finally in our possession, we had only the wedding yet to keep us from our journey.

Eevi and Signy prepared themselves for the event. Eevi looked marvelous in her dress and is pleased with the gifts I prepared for them, but I suspect a gift of song will also be offered. As I braid her hair, I suggested the ballad of Ilval and Anon, as it is a tradition along the river. Her reaction surprises me still. Suffice it to say, I touched on an uncomfortable subject. Fortunately, Signy then appeared and saved us from the awkward moment. The sight of her in the dress had also surprised me. The small details, which I will not share here, would certainly stay with me long beyond that wedding. With Selene's blessing, I too braided her hair, and added a few flowers I had found near the river. Fit for the fanciest river valley wedding, they made their way to the ceremony.

It wasn't long before Ingrid attempted to convince me to attend. I worried about Ingrid- how she seemed to shutter herself from having any fun in front of her sisters. From afar, we watched the procession over the bridge, and listen to the distant revelry.

As I watched the Acolyte make his way across the great bridge, I could not help but wonder what it must be like to speak to the gods themselves. What does one ask and not risk being

selfish or needy? And for that matter, how does one ask the gods to make their wishes reality? I wonder what my own requests might be- peace for Ingrid? happiness for all of them? fulfillment for myself? I was struck that the Acolyte was not honored by the ceremony- that he was left avoiding the festivities of the newlyweds and their families to return to an otherwise empty town.

Ingrid and I brought the wagon around and instantly, I was compelled to begin figuring out how best to load and organize our things. With just Ingrid and myself to feed, a simple meal of fried fresh fish, hot baked bread, and spiced beans would have to suffice. Ingrid explained the arrangement with Rynar, but I could not help expressing my desire to make Magnus and the wagon my priority. I had a duty to these sisters, and in spite of Ingrid's or Rynar's desires, I would put that first. Promises had been made, and I would not deny what I owed them. More than that, I had become quite fond of Ingrid and her sisters. I decided then, I would not let them down.

I got camp ready for Eevi and Signy's return- turned down bedrolls and made impromptu pillows. Upon their return, the oldest and youngest harassed Eevi for not throwing herself at Egil's feet (apparently the brother of the bridegroom and son to the Horsemaster). I excused myself for risk of saying something beyond my role.

I do however overhear discussion of another conversation between Signy and the mayor. It seemed that word had reached the ear of Yaris from Redwater implying Henerick was less than ideal as a leader of his lands. She went on to report that Redwater was nearing dire straits but with no explanation as to why. Mayor Yaris did also instruct the sisters not to cause any other trouble while in Mud Rim. I felt our impending departure could not have been more timely.

Then before turning in for the night, the 'Lurian Princess' arrived. Countless horses, a three-story barge with escort crafts, and many men draped in mail appeared from the darkness. All of them under the banner of a noble house of Luria. Though I questioned myself, I could not help but worry that what I was seeing was not only Henerick's bride-to-be, but the better part of a very wealthy noble's security force.

I wandered out to have a better look and instead had another chance encounter:

“Approach carefully, for the road and river are being watched. Make for the Spire of the Spring. There, word by message or voice shall come to the sisters. Be assured, Selene knows their heart and feels their loss.”

This was said to me by none other than Brother Tash, Acolyte of Selene, and student of Linden of Redwater.

He also shared that the palisades of Redwater no longer kept the outsiders and bandits out, but rather kept the woodsmen in. He too assured me that this newly arrived bride-to-be was aware of and looking for the ‘Three Sisters of Redwater’.

Auctus 29.1c

I warned Ingrid and while I set out early to collect Magnus and the horses, she explained to her sister what I passed to her. While on the mesa overlooking Mud Rim, I saw Lurian guards attempting to strong-arm the acquisition of the recently gifted Mormere. Eevi, Signy, Egil and Esben diffused the matter, but only for a time.

While making preparations for an early departure, each of us caught sight of Akard, and a Lurian I would soon learn was called Charon, and their escorts carrying an overtly large purse, as they made their way to the estate of the bride's father (Ranuf). The sisters all decided to casually investigate. I finished packing and anxiously awaited in the wagon. Then came the scream- quickly followed by the sight of Egil and Esben leaping from the rim of the mesa down the roof of a nearby barn and down. Was it selfish to pray the sisters were not involved?

Triad protect them!

Erebus tells us to act on our instincts. He teaches that our impulses are divine, and actions birthed by them are our most pure. I believe Eevi acted on those instincts, following her divine impulses towards her predestined fate. I prayed that her fate would be greater than an early death before reaching home.

By the time I reached the Ranuf household, both Eevi and Ingrid are surrounded by Lurian swords and spears. It took the presence of mayor Yaris herself to diffuse the situation. With weapons drawn and blood spilled, Ingrid ordered the sisters back to the wagon. Wounded and bested, the three of them returned. The tale they related of the death of T'var, wed less than a day, filled me with sadness and no small measure of dread. If these Lurians were willing to commit such brazen murder over a horse, no matter how special, I fear what they would do to my companions.

I looked to Eevi and found her far less than fit to travel. I made her a bed in the back of the wagon and hoped it might keep her comfortable enough. I tied Eevi's horse to the back of the wagon as Ingrid emphatically explained that the time to leave Mud Rim had come. It felt to me like we were leaving with our tails between our legs as we departed.

As we made our way out to the Pull Road, I caught my first glimpse of what must have been the princess. That was until she was slapped upside her head by a woman I could only describe as behemoth. The gargantuan woman was repulsive in every way- not just her appearance mind you, but her disposition as well. Her curses would have been more at home in the back hall at the Crock back in Westflood. My attention was soon back on the road, but I would be haunted by the sight of that monstrosity of a barge and the even more monstrous "princess".

Triad be merciful!

Auctus 30.1c

They looked up to her. Ingrid, I mean. I could see it on their faces. Even as we distanced ourselves from Mud Rim and our escort Rynar. I saw it in her eyes- the commitment, the sacrifice. As much as I saw her protective bearing, I sensed too, a dark martyrdom. I feared she sought to shoulder this burden of righting wrongs herself, and it was because of that I felt there had been no greater time for the sisters to come together than at that time.

North, along the river, we ate on the road for lunch. I prepared a blackened breadfish with fried onions, and a whisky-currant bread pudding for dessert. It felt good being on our own again. In the night, I was surprised that Vali had let a racoon onto the wagon. At my call she scared it off before tracking it down and making an example of it to any other greedy scavengers nearby.

In the morning, I smoked the racoon and the fish from Mud Rim. I also stitched up Eevi's shirt. Before I finished, we caught sight of a raft of trees, we assumed from Redwater. We found it manned by sickly bargemen stayed at arrow-point by several armed men. No horses. No ropes. Just polemen and the Valley River. We soon spied two scouts- mounted guards wearing Redwater garb. Needless to say, it offered no comfort to the sisters.

While we stopped for Ingrid to hunt ducks on the nearby lowlands, none other than Rynar's barge appeared and then teamed by Esben the elf. Not one for conversation, he did smile as they approached. I was thankful it was not Peth leading the horses.

Triad be praised.

Auctus 1.2c

We turned in not long after Esben and Rynar arrived. The sisters set watches and I was certain Esben was on the lookout as well. When I awoke, I was pleased to find that I had plenty of time to prepare breakfast in peace.

The day passed in relative quiet, the rhythm of Magnus and wagon was pleasant enough. Eevi seemed to be doing better. She joined me on the seat for a time, before feeling motion sick and lying down again. I convinced myself that it was not my conversation that forced her back to her bed in the wagon.

Ingrid found recent tracks along one section of muddy road. A familiar looking heel print. It would appear, they were not far ahead.

Sometime in the afternoon, we spotted several Berian logs beached on a sandbar. Ingrid cursed the inexperienced raft-men. She was certain the logs were more than a season old. Curious.

The evening is cool and again, the sisters shared watches.

Auctus 2.2c

After breakfast we broke camp and headed northward. Not long after, we got our first glimpse of the trees of the Berian Wood in the distance. We saw them again and again, at every rise of the road. It was soon clear to me how large they must be and how far away they still remained.

Near midday we came upon a grizzly sight. Two men and a horse had been killed recently. The men looked as though they had missed several meals. The horse too, was thin. Nearby we found a partial raft of Berian logs beached at the near shore. I wondered if the two men we saw on horseback following the raft, were not as they seemed. The girls did their best to investigate what transpired there, but all they could determine was the traveler with the pronounced boot heel was still ahead of us and may have witnessed this tragedy.

We settled that evening and enjoyed an herb stuffed carp, caught by Signy, as well as mashed ale beans, and boiled currant pudding. It was then that Eevi gifted me with a wooden plate and spoon with my initial carved into it- just as I had done for the three of them. It was a most generous and thoughtful gift. And, most unexpected. Through all of our trials, these simple gifts, remained a priority for her. I was overwhelmed. I would have to do something special for the sisters.

Auctus 3.2c

Breakfast was hot cakes and apple compote. Enjoyed, I think, by all. The morning was foggy and dim. Soon the fog gave way to rain. We pressed on.

Not long into our day's travel we smelled smoke. I correctly assumed it came from Otz Flat, but I had imagined a warm stove or fire pit of the welcoming inn. As we approached, the scene is quite the opposite. One span of what must have been a long bridge had been collapsed. Rounding the bend, we saw the terrible sight of a burning pile of bodies- two figures standing near them. As we got closer they turned, and their dead faces and glowing eyes betrayed their intentions. The closest of the two, a man I believe, uttered in a low voice:

"Your father brought us here. For safety he said. Once we lived where not even the gods could see us. And now for their lives, you shall give yours."

Dearest Triad please help us!

It was a terrible sight to behold. Anger, sadness, and death all in this sickened wretch. With some difficulty, the sisters gave all of them peace at last.

Otz Flat is no more. In a winter or two, there would be no trace at all, save the stone abutment for the now ruined bridge. Ingrid found an axe among the bodies, a large but strangely light war axe. It was somehow familiar to her, but she could not remember why. Perhaps from the time of her father's dealings the this now ruined place. As I examined it, I discovered etching beneath the soot and dirt- "Yellowtooth" it said. Sure enough, a heavily worn, almost smooth, amber-yellow resonance crystal was affixed to it also. This was indeed a special find. Ingrid hinted at a future use for it...

Having reached the point where the wagon can no longer travel where the sisters must, Ingrid explained that she and her sisters would head off on their own from here. While I'm made camp, Signy managed to catch two perch. I blackened them up with a bit of cabbage, along with a healthy mug of ale, and a sweet treat of candied beets. It would be our last evening together for a spell. I tried to savor every bit of it.

After the sisters finally retired for the night, I prepared a pack for each of them during my watch. Food, warm clothes, rope, a few tools, as much as I could think of. If they were to be without my immediate support, they would at least be supplied.

I prayed Triad, be with them.

Auctus 4.2c

The night passed uneventfully, and in the morning, I had another look at Ingrid's wounds. Having found fresh herbs the night before, I tried once more to remedy her festering injury.

We packed up camp, and with the best of wishes, set out on our separate paths. I made sure the wagon was secure, and with a whip of the rains, Magnus, the horses, Vali, and I were off.

I did not stop for lunch, and for dinner I made Vali and myself the simplest of meals. I decided to bed down under the wagon.

My thoughts for most of that day were of the sister's safety. As I laid there near the river, I thought of each of them in turn. I thought of the look on Ingrid's face, just before a fight was about to start- proud, brave, and confident, and her laugh when things almost go bad. I thought of the calm Eevi's song brought me when Olin passed. But, I thought most of Signy...

I struggled to think back to the days before I met them all at the North Gate in Westflood. It seemed longer than the 20 days it had been. Whatever I expected from this journey, I was thankful for what it had become.

Again, I prayed- thanks be to the Triad and wherever they were, watch over them.

Auctus 5.2c

It was a cool night without the brazier and heavy tent to keep out the elements. The night remained quiet though, and much as I finished the night before, I began the day with a long prayer and meditation to the Triad.

I took the morning to ensure the horses were well. I checked their shoes, gave them a bit of bath at the river's edge, and fed them a good helping of oats. Magnus seemed no worse for wear and with camp collected, in record time, I pressed on.

Late in the day, halfway between lunch and stopping to make camp, I reached the edge of the great Berian Wood at last. To my surprise, I found a large swath leveled. Trees felled, but not limbed. It had been clear cut, but not processed- an odd site. As I passed through the scar, I am struck by the history of the place. No less than four generations of pull road could be found, it was like stepping back to the time before the coming of the Thyrs, to the time of my ancestors. The trees were hundreds of winters old, their lines showed that they had survived more fires than I could count. Older than the age of Kings, predating even the coming of men, maybe older yet. The undergrowth had receded without the once-thick canopy. After some distance, I crossed the old high-water line of the ancient river. It appeared to me that the Berian Valley was once a much larger and wilder place. The tangle of giant roots and stumps made the scar not easily traversed, but I was compelled to explore a bit when Magnus stopped next to rest. The spring thaw had cut deep rills along the scar exposing a great ancient boulder, or so I believed. The stone was in fact, the skeleton of a Berian tree, perhaps from the time of the first. Petrified by the ages, undeniably a long-forgotten tree. The dark grey and amber lines, now stone, told a forgotten history. Was it here when Selene showed her face the first time? Was it here long before that? It was a simple encounter in this ancient land, the land of these sisters, and me, that I would not soon forget.

Further on, I was startled by the sound of a sobbing child. Upon finding the lass, she gave away her mother and brother hiding among the felled trees. They were hungry and more than a little scared. After some convincing, they allowed me to share with them the warmth of my fire and bounty of my supply. Over dinner we began a conversation that

reached deep into the night. The woman, Sholl, her son Mikl, and her daughter Kayla had been attempting to reach Otz Flat.

After explaining matters to her of the state of Otz Flat, and she having related the desperation they faced in Redwater, I presented Sholl with a regrettable choice. She was looking for her husband who escaped Redwater's forced labor to join a camp of like woodsmen. He had left some nights ago and she was to meet with sympathetic souls in Otz Flat who would direct her to the woodsman camp. Her choices were to search aimlessly in the deep Berian Wood on her own for her husband Kjell, or return with me to Redwater where hopefully, further whereabouts of the camp might be learned. She elected to take the night to consider my offer.

Triad grant them rest.

Auctus 6.2c

I awoke extra early to prepare a hearty breakfast for my guests. Bacon, fraze, cinnamon-oat fritters, and hot pork hash are much enjoyed by the children, and I believe by their mother as well.

Sholl reluctantly agreed to return to Redwater with me. After breaking camp, I made the family comfortable in the wagon with the bear skin for the ride home.

It was dusk by the time we reached Redwater, or what is some new part of the town. A new, shoddy palisade had been set up outside the great perimeter of Berian tree walls. Also, a large drinking hall, store houses, smithy, and a few animal pens had been hastily constructed by the good people of Eclan Traders.

Rynar was there, awaiting the use of a wagon to offload his rope. The guards and deckhands seemed less than motivated to assist him. Apparently, there were no wagons allowed into old Redwater. So, with a few discussions with the owner of the drinking hall and Rynar, I found means to secure our wagon and animals. I was confident Magnus would be fine, but I was concerned that our good horses might be too tempting to the locals.

I escorted Sholl and her children to their home, after doing our best to allay the guard's suspicions as to why she was outside of the 'oldtown' walls. Inside old Redwater I saw what must have been a sliver of its former self. Women and children outnumbered men at least three to one. This was certainly not the place described to me by Ingrid so many times.

As the hour was then late, I found my way to the local inn- the Whetstone. I was pleased and surprised to find the atmosphere there up-beat. However, the pleasantness was abruptly interrupted when two guards arrived to make their appointed rounds. I got a meal, a room, and inquired as to where I might resupply. I found myself questioned by several of the locals, and having broken the ice for conversation, had an opportunity to learn for myself a great deal of the recent comings and goings of Redwater and its people.

It seemed strange to sleep indoors. I found myself beside my rented bed, kneeling in prayer. I again asked each of the Triad to look after the sisters. I was consumed with a feeling of worry. I prayed again and again-

Triad watch over them.

Auctus 7.2c

I was awakened before the dawn of Illios by the kicking in of my rented door. Local guards were apparently looking for a missing woodsman. I decided to gather my things and after grabbing a half loaf for breakfast, exited the inn.

Though I had planned on checking in on the animals, my plans were usurped by screams from beyond a gathered crowd. A group of men had pulled Sholl from her home. They had pressed her as to why she had gone missing days earlier, and then asked where her husband was.

I can barely put into words, the events which followed. Fuhlgar, a name I had heard before from the lips of the sisters, had arrived and in a further attempt to get Sholl to reveal her husband's whereabouts, threatened her with Kayla, her daughter. I sensed the worst and could already feel myself praying for help. As the guards held Sholl and Mikl captive as audience, Fuhlgar raped the young girl.

I was powerless, pleading with the crowd and the gods for someone to stop this madness. I was beside myself but more shocking still was learning that this bestial behavior here was now the norm. In the aftermath, I tended to the family as best I could. With a brave smile, Sholl assured me she and her daughter would overcome this.

Needing guidance, I visited the temple. There I met Brother Fortin- Linden's right-hand Acolyte. Though we talked of a great number of things, it took some time before I felt we had reached a point of mutual trust. It was then Fortin invited me to a more private location, so we might continue our dialog. I informed him of all that had led me to his church- Mud Rim, Otz Flat, the groups involved, the sisters and our journey, even Peth. He explained the events at Redwater, Linden, the woodsmen, guards, and the sanctuary the Triad had afforded the townsfolk.

Brother Fortin offered me a room for the evening. It was meager but comfortable. That night he conveyed to me a plan for me to gather the sisters and get them into Redwater with a minimum of risk of discovery. I was confident the church could help the sisters, and the town, and perhaps me too.

Triad grant me peace.

Auctus 8.2c

In the morning I found myself especially rested. Surprisingly so. Even after so late a night filled with words and a day filled with trauma, I was more than ready to get on with the day.

Brother Fortin and Brother Stedden got me ready for our journey. I was dressed as one of the faithful. I thought it awkward at first but was not too surprised to find it comfortable. Supplied and ready, we made our way to the wall. Upon reaching the northern most gate, we were accosted by the guard. They did not fully believe our ruse of fetching mushrooms to feed the poor. We were challenged to cook breakfast for them as proof of our story. Thankfully I had packed some herbs to flavor their pot. The guards were satisfied with the meal, and after this delay they cared little of our passing.

We then made our way to the river, finding the pole-boats waiting as planned. They were long narrow craft with a dangerously shallow draft. It took me a bit to get the feel for the river. We traveled a fair distance before turning up a side channel towards the Spire. Brother Stedden's seemed to finally relax some once we turned up the mostly hidden tributary. The forest was amazing to behold. More amazing still, we stumbled across the sisters themselves! Triad be praised! They were safe and joined by an unfamiliar face. All thanks to the Triad!

Auctus 9.2c

By the gods, they were safe and returned to me. Praise the Triad that they led us to them. I feared my haste to tell the sisters all that I have learned confused them. In desperation, I tried my best to calmly explain myself. It was only when I mentioned the hundred and fifty or more Lurian soldiers on the way to Redwater that they were given pause. I explained as much as I could, as quickly as I could. I imparted my experiences in Redwater- meeting Brother Fortin and the general state of things in their former home. As much as I attempted to prompt and immediate return for them, I nearly overlooked their account of their own journey.

Thankfully they had the symbol- Curate Bendt's artifact was safely in their hands, praise the gods. I was left to further explain how it would serve to protect the sister's secrecy, only to find them questioning whether or not Linden should be trusted.

We eventually made our return towards Redwater, intending on taking the spillway into the sewers beneath the town. As we approached from the north, we were disappointed to find the "Lurian Princess", the obscene barge, had beaten us to the docks.

Triad grant us strength.

Auctus 10.2c

After some last-minute debate, we settled on the spillway as the best chance at clandestine entry into Redwater. The sisters eased their way into the cold river and made their way to the forgotten spillway and then the tunnels below the town. It took more time for Brother Stedden and me to get through the gate and back to the church than I would have liked. The sisters were waiting beneath the lower hall by the time we arrived. When they emerged, I was almost beside myself seeing what... wastes they had to endure in the sewers below. Once in the church, I did manage to finally get them clean. I set out for an evening of laundry while the sisters got a worthwhile rest.

Up early again the next morning, I was offered access to the kitchen and larder of the church. I baked a few peppered venison pies with turnips and cabbage for my companions. The sisters slept as late as their stomachs would allow. Signy related details of an odd dream. I am pleased to be near them again. As if he knew we were speaking of him, Brother Stedden appeared with porridge for the sisters. I invited him in and almost immediately, Signy began to question him about an incident from their childhood when he found her near the river, wet as though nearly drowned. He remembered little but did recall how angry Arden (her father) was. He further related that he was told never to speak of it. He recalled little more than Signy wore a fine dress for Lady Thylera's party and Linden snuck her into the keep in a chest. We were then interrupted by Brother Fortin. He brought news that Rynar had been arrested for transporting and aiding the sisters. Worse yet, he was betrayed by his former employee, Peth.

After much discussion, the sisters decided that Eevi would sing for the midday service. They would also investigate if anyone in town might be capable of looking into Signy's memories for additional details. It would be my duty to look to Rynar's situation and the status of our wagon and animals.

Fortin again met with the sisters, where they made final plans for the service. We were again interrupted by Brother Stedden when he informed us that Rynar had been taken to the keep, the wagon had been confiscated, and Vali had been hurt and run off. With the service about to begin, I resigned myself to looking for Vali once the ceremony concluded.

Brother Fortin lead the congregation, but when cued, Eevi's voice took command of the room. Never in my life have I heard such a song. I am torn between tears and laughter, awe and excitement. It was as though the divine were speaking through her, and I was prompted by providence that not only would things be better, but that I too might play a part. The congregation arose from its knees, wiped away tears, and were met with the very visage of hope as the daughters of Arden and Orphea stepped out among them at last. They were surrounded immediately with amazed faces, outstretched hands, and smiles of relief. Embraces were shared, all are welcomed, and the sisters were gifted many tales of their parents and home.

Importantly, they learned that the approaching Lurian forces had taken Elk Horn and had also slain or otherwise driven out the folk there. They were told that on the barge, more than 20 fighting men are housed. It was then we first learned the names of those we would face: Dionysia- the bride to be, Arisia- mother of the bride, and Kendrisia- granddaughter were all living on the top of the barge. Charon- the father, Guarin- his steward, and Chedomir- his man-at-arms, kept residence near the front. With them too were many servants, retainers, and the soldiers. They alone would be a challenging opponent, to say nothing of Henerick, his family and their allies.

After, I made a quick lunch for the sisters, taking an opportunity or two to share some of my learnings with the Brothers of the Kitchen. We settled on a wild sage hen stew with peppercorn potatoes, dumplings, carrots, and wild mushrooms (Stedden and I could not have returned without them). I accompanied it with a fresh loaf of bread.

We ate, but amidst our meal Fortin asked for me. In private conversation within his chambers, he offered me a place as a Brother of the church. With his offer, a holy symbol of silver, to show his sincerity. I explained my obligation to the sisters and that I was truly humbled and honored by his gesture. He assured me the offer would remain open until I was free of my charge. The impact on me of such an offer did not truly show itself until much later. Many hours have I thought on the moment since. The will of Triad never ceases to amaze.

Brother Stedden arrived, looking more nervous than usual. He informed us that Henerick had sent a contingent of his personal guard to the Spire of the Spring in hopes of catching

the sisters there. It was then I remembered Vali. I set out to find her. Ingrid asked that I keep an eye north toward the confluence in hopes of spotting the woodsmen she awaited. I collected Vali from the makeshift barn in Magnus' pen. She was afraid and injured but happy to be found. Magnus it seemed, would let none near his injured companion. He and the horses appeared to be safe and in good health at that moment.

On my return, I witnessed 20 heavily armed cavalry enter 'Newtown', all Lurian, and five of them adorned as officers. I returned quickly and reported my findings. Only moments after, we were warned that town guards were coming- to collect me and the family I aided.

Triad protect them.

We raced to lady Sholl's home and spot eight of Henerick's guards making their way towards it from several different locations. In a desperate attempt to get the family to safety, the sisters stepped up to thwart the guards, while I attempted to escort the family out. To my surprise, not only were we met by the guards, but one struck Mikl. I could barely contain my anger and lashed out in unbridled emotion at the offenders.

Thankfully the sisters proved more than a match for the guards, and I was able to get the family to the temple.

The Brothers took the injured boy in and hurried him off for rituals and prayers of healing. I found myself wracked with guilt and could barely look the family in the eye as they somehow felt the need to thank me for what it was I had brought upon them. I prayed with all my heart that the Triad would see fit to forward whatever boons might come my way to them.

I instead resolved to make it up to the family, the Brothers, and even the sisters by making a worthwhile meal. I prepared cyser glazed roast duck with mashed turnips and onions, fresh baked bread, and lemon-honey tarts to finish out the meal. With all fed, I slipped away to the sanctuary for some much-needed meditation and piety.

Late in the evening there appeared the lady Agathe. She was alone, and seemingly come from nowhere. She said to me-

"Their time is upon them. Keep them true, for they are Arden's daughters."

She then stepped away, through the great doorway, into the fog. As I contemplated her words, I was compelled to go after her. She had disappeared into the cold. As I stood there looking out into the quiet nighttime streets, a warm light slowly divided the fog from the south. It was again Agathe, this time bearing a lantern. She greeted me with a smile and when I asked her about what she told me, she was puzzled. She had no memory of what I had witnessed at all.

Triad grant me understanding.

Auctus 11.2c

In the morning, I made apple fritters with honey glaze. I was even privileged to make a second batch at Signy's request, that time with fresh pears. To have brought her joy, no matter how small, pleased me beyond word.

When I delivered them to her, she explained to me that her sisters had left us in private so that she might kiss me- or rather Ingrid and Eevi thought that we should kiss. I immediately asked myself if I had made any advances or other dishonorable suggestions, no matter how slight, to seed these ideas. I feel I am unable to reveal the breadth of my introspection here. Suffice it say, it remains my wish that Signy is spared from any discomfort from my or her sisters' ideas. I felt shame that Ingrid, most of all, might think I could take advantage of Signy so.

Our moment was interrupted by more unfortunate news. Lord Henerick's boats had returned with six prisoners captured in the woodland to the east, presumably from the spot Ingrid was to meet them. We are instructed to inform all to attend the execution of the traitors at the keep at sundown.

The sisters continued their preparing of plans. Amidst them, they made their way back to their childhood home. It was difficult for me to imagine them in this house of Arden and Orphea, now abandoned and cold. I feared the sisters, like the town, would fall to despair. It had been just a day since my companions revealed themselves to the folk of Redwater, yet today, the hope that all shared then, was no longer with us.

The better part of the day passed, and we were compelled to join the large procession toward the keep. Line upon line of Lurian soldiers flanked the front of the great stone gatehouse. Along the parapet, many of the newly arrived guests watched from above. Most of them were of the aristocracy of Westflood, friends of Henerick's uncle, no doubt. Directly above the great gate was Henerick himself along with his mother, Thylera. I could see Linden was with them, leaning heavily on one of the keep guards. To their left stood Charon, and Guarin beside him. Below, standing proudly, was the evil Fuhlgar and his close, personal soldiers. Chedomir too, was with them.

As the dastardly spectacle began to unfold, the gate was opened. From within, woodsmen began to emerge. As they pass the gate, Chedomir and a man dressed in Eclan garb, handed

each of them their long overdue wages- in septems. The event startled the crowd, especially seeing the debt paid with Lurian coin. The woodsmen had been held captive for some time and now, in front of the upper-class audience, Henerick's show of their release, along with coin wages, had the desired effect. Once the last was paid, the next act began. The prisoners, accused traitors, were paraded from within. Rynar, Sten (a man identified by Ingrid as a friend), Kjell (Sholl's husband), and four others are brought out in chains. Their condition was terrible, bloodied, obviously beaten, several barely even able to walk. The seven were spread out in front of ten long pole stakes, each with a stove wood pile at its base. It was then that Henerick called out-

"Daughters of Arden, I know you are here! You shall step forth and take your place among these other traitors!"

At that moment, the assembled cavalry stepped down and all of the soldiers drew steel. The noise was terrifying. Again, there were gasps from the crowd as they shifted about, now unable to flee. I prayed to the Lady Moon herself that somehow the drama should play out without such heinous loss of life.

Selene save us!

Henerick continued after his invitation yielded no prize-

"I say you are traitors and cowards! Fuhlgar, there are three empty fires. Fill them!"

It was then that this beast and his soldiers began to push into the crowd, grabbing at random, or so I thought. Agathe and Kayla are marched out against their will towards the other prisoners. And then came Peth. He too struggled as the soldiers beat him down and forced him forward. It was then that Kjell caught sight of his daughter Kayla. His screams would haunt me, as did the site of the guard snapping his leg. The crowd was on the edge of panic.

I had shut my eyes tight. I remember Eevi's voice calling out Henerick for the tyrant and fool-leader he was, but alas to no avail. I remember praying Selene's 'Fear and Ire' prayer. I fear I did so in such a manner as to draw Lord Henerick's attention upon myself. I warned him, for I knew in my heart that Selene herself watched over these sisters, and to

dare spite them would be to stand in the way of Lady Moon herself. I also remember the stymied look on Fuhlgar's face when threatened with the Lady's ire. And then, he was gone. It was then I heard Her voice. Never would I be the same. Never...

Fear and Ire-

Fear not said Lady Moon,
All is not lost, for violence begets violence,
Hate begets hate.
Those who seek to do harm shall always meet harm,
Blood begets blood!
All the more reason to fight injustice said Lord Sun,
Or to destroy our enemies said Lord Night,
No brothers! said Lady Moon,
While you seek to feud,
This endless cycle of pain and anguish,
I shall see it cease!
Raise my ire and be beset with inaction.
Find wisdom in reflection,
Safety in Seclusion,
Gratitude in reprise.
So says the Lady!

A hush fell over all who were there. Only Charon dared to speak after a time. He said something about "enough violence" and "think of your good people". I believe he feared he would have to order his Lurian guards to slay the entire assembled town if things escalated further. As the crowd was allowed to part, the three cross sisters were revealed- both a threat to the Lord and yet hope for his people. This and the disappearance of Fuhlgar shook them all and they retreated into the keep.

Henerick would later attempt to paint the release of the prisoners as mercy, but I believe it was fear- fear of the sisters, and fear of Lady Moon, that ended the horrible event.

We returned to Redwater with the townsfolk. And upon reaching the temple, a ceremony was begun. I would be ordained as a Brother of the temple.

I shall not burden my telling of this story with the details of the rituals I would participate in that night, but I am told, Brother Bruhn kept an excellent account.

Following the ceremony, Ingrid spoke to all those assembled there. I cannot remember her words, so lost in meditation was I, but those gathered were filled with hope and now too with purpose.

Thanks be to Selene.

The sisters decided to pay Rynar a visit at the Whetstone. I could feel their discomfort near me. They felt too cautious to ask for my company, but I would come along. Rynar was set on departing Redwater and none could blame him. In clandestine fashion, he planned to return to his barge, cut the lines, and slip away down river. Without any means or desire to stop him, we all wished him the best. From there we went to Agathe's both to check on her and to again attempt to find another path to Signy's memories, though she pointed us only to Linden. She did however inquire if the sisters had ever crossed paths with Rilen in days past and had they perhaps retrieved their father's sword. The sisters had not. I felt then that it was a deliberate question, strange for the moment. Ingrid had only ever spoken of him once, in her telling of the trial of Arden, when the sisters were forced to leave Redwater. I recall he was a trusted friend of Arden.

We returned to the temple to check upon the injured woodsmen. Kayla was home with her brother, mother, and now father Kjell. His injuries would need time to heal with the blessings of the Triad, he would live. Peth, it seemed, had again slipped away, as there was no word of him at any of our visits.

Finally, we parted company for rest and for me, prayers of thanks.

Selene be praised, Selene be praised, indeed.

Auctus 12.2c

I arose early to begin breakfast for the sisters and my Brothers. I was met by Brother Fortin who seemed quite affected by my sudden connection with Lady Moon. I too am astonished, and humbled, but I was busy with plenty of work as I see everyone is fed. The opportunity to prepare a meal was a welcome calm after the previous day's activity. The calm was again interrupted by Brother Stedden. He reported that Fortin was summoned to the Gate by the Lurians now posted there. When the sisters learned of this, they immediately armed themselves and chased after Brother Fortin, up the street. They caught him just as he finished his conversation with the Lurian officer. Fortin calmed the sisters, but only for a time. He reported the timeline for the wedding had been moved up- it was to happen that very day!

Lady Moon be merciful!

It was then I hatched the idea that perhaps one of the sisters should consider marrying Henerick. Remove the threat through peace, if only for a time. I soon after shared this plan with the three of them- it was not well received. For a long time, we discussed possibilities and ideas about what to do. For a long time, the unknowns and shortcomings in what we had the ability to have done became more and more apparent. Ultimately, we separated with little in the way of plans. The sisters made for Agathe's while I caught up with Fortin. It prompted a fortuitous decision as he had just received word from Linden. He had been passed a note with the partial stanza of an old ritual for matrimony:

“-so may Her blessings,”

“may the face of Illios not be clouded,” -So I have seen.

The note was indeed in Linden's hand. The word “not” was smudged. Fortin and I then formulated a new plan- a storm. There would be no ceremony if “Illios was clouded” by a late spring storm! Brother Fortin's connection with Illios would allow him to cause such an event, for a time. We informed the sisters that we might, under the guise of clergy, get close to Henerick, or Thylera, or perhaps at least Linden. We too considered taking on the garb of keep guards in order that we might have gained entrance there. With our daring plan in place, we waited as our enemies prepared for an impromptu ceremony- one we hoped to interrupt.

We wished each other good luck and went our separate ways. The sisters in disguise, made their way to the site of the ceremony in the company of several townsfolk and my Brothers. Fortin and I made our way to an abandoned house with a second floor and a view of the hill to the west of Redwater. As time for the wedding approached, Brother Fortin did indeed call in a spring storm. To say that his prayers had been answered would be a gross understatement. A late spring blizzard the likes of which I had never seen blew in from the west. Temperatures quickly dropped, and the wind howled. Soon the clouds and then snow would follow, the icy wind pitched the town into chaos. I watched from the high window of the house and prayed for the success of the sister's efforts. It was only moments until anything more than a few strides beyond could be seen outside in the blizzard.

It was the first time I had been so close to an Acolyte of such power. Seeing it firsthand filled me with emotion- awe, fear, amazement, pride, many things. Tirelessly he prayed, and I tried to accompany him, stopping myself only to reopen shutters that had blown shut in an effort to keep the face of Illios on him, even if obscured. His efforts seemed to last for only a few tens of minutes, yet the valley, hills, and Redwater were blanketed with snow as if days of weather had transpired. When he finally collapsed, he was near frozen. Not knowing what else to do, I wrapped him in his robes and helped him back to the temple. In my heart, I knew Illios' gift had made the difference.

Illios be praised!

Back at the temple, the sisters had returned, and Brother Linden was with them. The wedding has indeed been stopped. We were rushed to the kitchen to Linden's side. Sadness clutched me when I saw him up close. Clearly, he was near death, and all of us panicked as we debated what to do. Linden reached out to Signy in that moment. With fear in her eyes, she allowed him to pull her close-

"Save your parents, child."

They would be the last words of the great illuminator. He was dead, but for a moment I felt Her presence. I took the burden of securing his final rest- Fortin and Stedden had not the heart. For this I could not blame them- Linden's passing was difficult for all to witness. Several of my saddened Brothers took him to be prepared for funeration and the rest of us began to prepare the evening meal.

When I finally caught up to the sisters, I offer them a braised rabbit stew and fresh bread. Apparently, Signy could then fully remember the night she was found in the river. Selene be praised, Linden's final act had been blessed. Signy now knew how she had escaped the keep through Thylera's chambers. Ingrid then ordered everyone to bed. We would finalize our plan to utilize this new information in the morning.

Triad grant us rest.

Auctus13.2c

We all, me included, slept late. The sisters were set upon sneaking into the keep via Signy's newly remembered path. I express my desire to accompany them to assist, but Ingrid would not hear of it. To my surprise, both Eevi and Signy argued in favor of my coming along and reluctantly, Ingrid eventually agreed.

While preparing for our approach to the keep, I took time to pray. I asked Selene to look after the sisters in what had to be one of their most daring endeavors. Although I had made them a hearty late breakfast of eggs, goosehash, biscuits, gravy and hot apple cider, my efforts to prepare were quietly sidelined. The blizzard had come at a cost. Jynce, Tyra, and their young baby had perished in the cold.

Brother Fortin was overcome with despair. The loss of his teacher and then hearing the news of these deaths at what he believed was his own hand was too much for him to bear. He leapt from the roof in an effort to end his own suffering, perhaps as punishment for his actions.

I asked Eevi once how old she was when she first took a life. She was 17 when she watched the life ebb from another, by her own hand. I could not help but think that what she witnessed and what I saw in Fortin's eye was altogether different. There was something more there- first a look that was not his own, then the pleading look of deepest regret. What greater evil could there be in the world than forcing one to take their own life? I was convinced that what steered Linden, too steered Fortin and as I knelt with him there in the snow, I vowed to bring all that I had to bear against it.

All of it was a painful reminder of the ripples our actions had and would cause on the people of this town. Selene would indeed help us, guide us, and keep our endeavors within our bounds, so that the wishes of the sisters and needs of the good people of Redwater might be in harmony. But it was up to us to hear Her.

I was left having to address the Brothers in the temple, to redirect their hopelessness and focus them on their greatest duty, to tend to the good folk of Redwater.

Soon after I caught up with Eevi, and as was her usual custom, she handed me a piece of wood as she carved at one herself. I admit, I found the task relaxing- choosing to apply a

skill I have for manipulating wood rather than thinking about attempting to thwart that about which I have more questions than answers. The knife set to work in my hands, and without thought, nearly as if a meditation, I carved. Before long I held three figures, all joining hands in a circle, the three daughters of Arden. Signy and Ingrid would join us soon after.

We were visited by a Herald of the Regent of the Lake. Along with the Regent's arrival, we learned that Brother Lathan is traveling with him. A servant of Erebus, I thought perhaps he was to perform the ceremony now that Linden was no longer among us. Also, with the Regent would be Toreas, and according to the herald, a sizeable escort of Eclan Traders. It was told to us that Eclan owed the Regent 3 full rafts of Berian timber before the end of Auctus. If the deliveries could not be made or similar financial compensation could not be presented, the Regent had the right to name a new Lord of Redwater. Eclan Traders too, was leveraged against this transaction. It seemed there was much more risked on this wedding than we realized.

As I assisted in the plans for Linden and Fortin's funeral, we decided to use it as cover to leave the walls of the town. From there we intended to find Signy's tunnel. Time was not on our side, and with the Regent arriving tomorrow, we had no choice but act on whatever plan we had- find the tunnel, make our entrance to the keep, slay Henerick and his mother. That was the extent of the plan. I now admit, I prayed that Selene might put Fuhlgar too, in our path.

We hid our arms with the recently departed and slipped out of the city as part of the congregation. Brother Stedden did a fine job of leading the funeration and the others pass the sisters gear to them before lighting the pyres. We stepped into the darkness beyond the glow and quickly made our way south in search of the hidden tunnel entrance.

It was not long before Signy found the notched stone from her memory. With some difficulty, we entered the cold river, pressing through reeds until the depression is located. I held my breath until it seemed my lungs would burst. The underwater passage was longer than I expected. When I again felt air on my face, I regret I was not quiet about breathing. Fortunately, none were there to hear me save my companions. We found footprints- someone had entered before us. The condition of the tunnel improved the further

in we went. Soon we reached an intersection and decide to follow the tracks of our predecessor.

As we approached the chamber ahead, sounds of activity could be heard. Brining our flame into the chamber had an unexpected and terrible result. Oil that had coated the walls of the room exploded in a blinding hot flash. We were scattered. As my eyes adjusted, a familiar but charred form fell from the ceiling to my feet.

It was Peth! Ingrid was upon him immediately, hoisting him to his feet and then bashing his head against the nearby wall. She demanded answers and quickly learned that Peth had been arrested at the Whetstone soon after we had been there asking about him. He had been trying to escape ever since. Apparently, the Keep was in such poor condition, it afforded him a way out of the dungeon and into the catacombs. I tended to his burns, mostly his leg. Ingrid reluctantly insisted that Peth had no choice but to travel with us back to the keep. She made no mention of how we came to be there.

After a series of long passages, iron gates, and empty chambers, we entered a place that was not empty. Not at all. There was a mural painted on the wall of a giant tree with branches outstretched like arms. The tree was surrounded by a purple aura and small people with heads of birds. It had an ugly, unholy feel. On the floor in front of the mural were several broken eggshells in small pools of blood. The room was old. Closer scrutiny revealed to me the worn relief of woodsman working in what I assumed to be the Berian Wood beneath the newer mural.

Beyond, we continued until reaching a completely overgrown passage. It was as if tree root had spun themselves in a great vortex to close access to what lie beyond. The gap was barely big enough for Signy to crawl through. The passage was familiar to Peth. We forced our way through, one after another. Crawling, slithering as a snake, it took ages to reach the other end. When we did reach beyond the roots, we found ourselves in a small chamber. I appeared to be the foundation of a tower. A spiral stair led up on the opposite side of the room. The roots had indeed taken a toll on the keep, displaced stones and huge cracks were common.

Not far up the steps, we were attacked! Our assailants were horrifying creatures of nightmares- half man, half bird. Abominations from old times, the beast were frightening

to behold. The cramped stair proved to be a very difficult spot for a fight. I am thankful still that Ingrid was able to save me from becoming supper for one of them. The slaying was not quiet, and from above us came a voice. Looking down from the archway above stood Fuhlgar, bare, save a longsword. I would soon learn the sisters recognized it instantly as that of their father. I don't think I had ever before prayed for a man's death, but for all things there is a first time. The room at the top of the tower was overcome with the great wood that then grew within. The walls, floor, and ceiling were all a tangle of a living Berian tree.

The sisters charged in and quickly although not easily, dispatch the evil Fuhlgar. They then were engaged by guards that too were bested before Thylera arrived. She stood up from what I then could see was a bed grown into the trunk of the great tree. As she raised her hand, I glimpsed wisps of distortion at her fingertips. Magic! Arcane magic of the worst kind. The room fell to sleep. I was only spared the effect due to my distance and to be sure, will of Selene. Rapidly, more guards arrived and seized the sisters. As Thylera backhands Ingrid, cursing her for slaying her lover, I elected to enter the chamber and demanded that she stop.

To my surprise at almost the same moment, a door opposite me burst open and none other than Klain Whiteshield, Regent of the Lake, stepped in. Along with him, White Guards and Brother Lathan. In the moments after, through much chaos, a wave of excuses was brought forth and a symphony of lies was concocted. I quickly slipped back and collected one of the half-bird creatures in order to present it to the Regent and Lathan. As I did, there were more malicious wisps from the hand of Thylera.

The sisters were taken to the dungeons, and I was instructed to follow Brother Lathan. In a very direct and brief conversation with the tall Acolyte, he inquired if I intended to perform the ceremony in light of the recent passing of our Brothers in Redwater. Instead of offering my answer, I instead revealed to him all of our intentions. After a much longer discussion, I too offered my suspicions concerning Lady Thylera and her true capabilities. He then excused himself and left me alone on his balcony. Only then did it occur to me that I was in the presence of the single most powerful and respected holy man in the entire region. I am thankful still that I realized this only after my insubordinate behavior.

From my temporary perch, I heard much going on in the Keep. The bride, is seemed, did not want to be wed at all. Both Henerick and Thylera lamented the loss of Fuhlgar. I shall not say I was delighted by this, but I was not saddened. Not at all.

Eventually, I was joined by Lathan again. Ariam, a White Guard, was with him along with several others. I recognized Ariam immediately, having had her in camp with Ingrid on several occasions. She recalled me also, an unexpected surprise, but a most welcome one under the circumstances.

We descended to the dungeons where I was permitted to meet with the sisters. I tried as best I could to tend to their injuries. They were unsure what to do, but I told them to stick together, and I reminded them that Lady Moon would watch over them. I left what food I still had with me to them and said my goodbyes. As I left the hallway to their cell, I caught a glimpse of the Regent in one of the side rooms. I would later learn that he too would speak to the sisters.

I was released to return to the temple which I immediately did, as Brother Stedden had mentioned that the Regent wished to take services there that next morning. As I arrived, Brother Stedden explained that all of the Lurians had moved to the Keep leaving only local men to guard the walls.

It was late. I was short on time. I had a banquet to cook, prayers to say, and a Regent to council.

Lady Moon help us! Help us all, for we are nearly out of time.

Auctus 14.2c

I contemplated- what does one prepare for a regent? I took a quick inventory of what was on hand in the kitchens. I then summoned three of my Brothers to help with the preparation. Fortunately, some of the townsfolk had come through with a pig, some cabbages and a bushel of apples for the wedding feast. I did not believe the ceremony would miss them.

I decided to go with pork Lormare stew, using some red wine, coriander, caraway, and roasted garlic. To go with it, I prepared some pickled cabbage, some garlic roasted turnips to tie in with the stew, and some sweet quince bread to go along with them.

I was torn on dessert, initially I thought of a honey rice porridge with currants, but since Ariam was to be with him, I felt almost obliged to make apple fritters. With the fresh apples, it was the better choice.

As I cooked, I was left wondering about the sisters. Soon I found myself in prayer to the Lady Moon asking Her to look after them. I hoped perhaps after the Regent left, I might see about what was happening at the keep. I also wondered if Ariam might assist me at getting in.

There was a good deal of unrest in the temple that day. Brothers were squabbling, and I too could feel the tensions of Redwater's fate spilling over into our everyday activities.

Preparations for the banquet took most of the day but were near complete when the Regent and his entourage arrived. He would pray for a long while in the temple, accompanied by Lathan and watched silently by his guards, Ariam among them. At the end of their worship, Brother Lathan left the Regent to his final, silent meditations. I was able to have a few words with him. He explained that even the Regent was concerned as to how things would play out here. I wondered if perhaps even the Regent's position was becoming unstable. The Regent then appeared. He wished to complete his prayers with the starry cloak of Erebus above. I showed them to the observation perch on the roof. As the sunset was fading, I spotted three women and a small man approaching the west gate from over the hill. I made no mention of it, but I knew the sisters would soon have to explain their escape the Regent himself. I left him there to complete his prayers in peace.

I met with the sisters when they arrived. I was most surprised to find Peth with them. Peth! I could hardly believe it- still alive. The meeting was brief, for I had a meal to serve.

The Regent and Lathan were pleased at the invitation to dine with us, no doubt Ariam spoke well of my cooking. I first served the Lormare roast and watched in anticipation as the Regent samples the dish. It was received with great acclaim, and I counted no less than eight occasions of Ariam calling the meal "superb".

The meal was interrupted by a group of Eclan soldiers with intents of returning the Regent to the keep. They feigned fear of his security- Ariam was not pleased. The Regent directed them away saying he had no intention of dishonoring his host by abandoning the meal. He insisted he would return after the evening's festivities were concluded.

Not but a few moments after serving my apple fritters, we were again interrupted by word of fighting on the south side of town. The Regent and his White Guard insisted on investigating. We accompanied them through Redwater's streets to the edge of the 'old town' gate. There we discovered what the commotion was about- the "Lurian Princess" was ablaze. The few remaining Lurian troops had begun accusing folk and attempting arrests. The townsfolk were resisting. The Regent himself addressed the crowd from the back of a wagon. His ability to inspire calm was impressive. He then quickly began to have the townsfolk ushered back into 'old town'. I was clear that the Lurians were relieved at the quick end to the fight. There was little to be done about the barge. As the dock lines burned through, the burning wreck floated down the river, around the bend, and out of site. I remembered thinking how surprised Rynar would be should it stay afloat long enough to meet him.

It was then the Eclan soldiers again appeared- this time insisting the Regent return with them. He agrees but asks the sisters to remain behind and assist with the wounded. The Eclan officer had no stomach to counter the orders of the Regent. I then fetched Magnus and the wagon, we loaded several injured citizens into the back and made for the temple. There the wounded are cared for and we all eventually turn in. Tomorrow was to be an important day.

The will of the Triad be done.

Auctus 15.2c

We awoke the next morning to Redwater surrounded by Lurian soldiers and cavalry, bolstered with the entire Eclan Traders contingent and several troops of personal guards, no doubt friends of Toreas. As the citizens of Redwater began to climb the walls to look out, an air of worry, if not panic swept quickly through the town. It appeared that we were under siege, and far from the keep where wedding preparations were undoubtedly well underway.

Several tried to open the gates but were threatened immediately with close flights of arrows and shouts of caution. The sisters were not pleased, Ingrid was furious. We climbed to the roof of the temple to observe our situation better. It looked nearly hopeless, but Lady Moon is an ally of hope. The sound of thunder was heard from the south. We soon realized it was the thunder of horses! E'Gil led a host of southern cavalrymen into view.

Selene be praised!

The horseman rode down the hill into the valley as the Lurians attempted to form up to resist. The riders circled, racing nose to tail in whirlwind before a great man rode out and dismounted. He drew a curved sword thrust it into the ground in challenge to the Lurian officer nearby. After a moment, the Lurian drew his sword and planted it in the earth in acceptance of the large horseman's challenge.

An arrow was loosed. From Esben's bow atop the gate tower, a single shot sailed far through the air and hit the Lurian through the neck. It was a message, and clearly understood as the Lurians were torn between facing the horsemen or those of us on the wall, confidence then bolstered by the elf's arrow.

As the riders move towards the gate, the Lurians gave a wide path free of resistance for the moment. Eevi was eagerly reunited with E'Gil. I overheard some of his words-

"I thought you said your home was a friendly town."

"I have thought of nothing other than this moment since Esben's return."

"I dreamt again of singing with you."

"Tell me you are well."

It was then I thought it appropriate to put my attention elsewhere, but I was pleased to see her happiness. Triad forgive me, but I liked this horseman. The large warrior that challenged the Lurians is introduced as Lagen. Ingrid saluted his bravery.

A few of us made our way back to the temple where I was passed a sealed message. It was to be delivered by the Regent's personal hawk. It was a request for aid- for troops and support, post haste. The hawk had not survived to make the appointed journey. It appeared the fate of the Regent had fallen to us as well. As I shared this information with others, we also learned that wagons were on the way to the west gate from the keep. The wagons' purpose was to gather the arranged food for the wedding feast. Ingrid ordered the gates open, and that the food be release so long as the promised payment was present. It was, again in Lurian septems.

One of the servants with the wagons delivered to me a message from Brother Lathan. I was informed of the ceremony itinerary, schedule, and location. Lathan also requested one of the Brothers from the temple be sent along with the provisions. Lathan had selected an old and particularly long traditional service for the marriage. There would be many litanies to be sung, and Stedden knew exactly who should be sent- Brother Otar.

It was then that Signy entered. I took the opportunity to pull her aside. Of all three of them, Signy had been the most consistent in her intentions since our journey began. I believed that her focus was exactly what the sisters needed. I implored her to try to convince her sisters that now was the time to act. Our opportunity was about to pass. Selene willing, she would speak to Ingrid and Eevi.

The sisters decide that Stedden and Otar shall attend the wedding, and an escort of horsemen, our newfound allies, should escort them and the wagons back to the keep. The sisters and I intended to hide within the wagons, along with six others. We would pass near the chimney and enter the tunnels below as the wagons made their way toward their destination, hopefully without being noticed. From within, we would bring this saga to an end, finally.

Fortunately, the start of their plan went as intended. We entered the tunnels through the small opening in the ceiling of the oiled room. We passed though the labyrinth of forgotten passages until we finally reached the tunnel filled with the stifling roots. All there were

astounded by what happened then- Esben stepped to the tiny opening, knelt down and whispered something. This alone was startling, but as he stood and stretched out his hands, the roots began to recede. We all followed closely as the brambles withdrew, Esben moved steadily forward, providing easy passage through what we had anticipated to be a serious obstacle. I was beside myself in awe. He was praying! Praying to Selene! I then began to understand how he could influence the trees so. Truly the will of Lady Moon was with us. In the chamber beyond, we were reminded of the damage done to the tower by the spreading of the trees. Through the cracks in the walls above, we saw that Illios had set. The wedding would be under way! We climbed the stair with all haste, bursting into Thylera's room at the top. There were no guards to be found, but there was evidence of some horrible ritual having been performed- blood, feathers, hair, candles. I could not imagine what evil had been done.

At the door, Eevi could hear Brother Otar singing verses from the wedding. We feared we might be too late. We hastily and quietly prepared to burst through into the keep. The sisters silently opened the door and grabbed the guard posted outside from his feet. Thankfully, Otar's voice drowned out the sound of Ingrid knocking him unconscious. I quickly closed the door, but someone on the other side was already testing the lock, I attempted to shoulder the push from beyond but failed. Praise the Triad it was Ariam! Her white enameled armor polished and adorned for the ceremony. Ingrid immediately explained herself and our presence. Ariam was pleased to assist in any way she could. If the wedding was to be stopped, it needed to be quick. They all choose their spots to make our assault. Almost as an afterthought, Ingrid asked me what I was going to do and after a moment I smiled at her and told her not worry. I knew exactly what I must do.

We slipped into the hall beyond and used the crowd and side chambers to get to our positions. From my vantage, I was able to watch as the unbelievably large bride, dressed all in red and gold, made her way toward the makeshift altar and Brother Lathan.

From that moment, things began to blur. Otar was interrupted by another voice, a voice familiar to many of those there, Henerick in particular. It was the voice Orphea, or rather her middle daughter Eevi. The haunting stanzas of the Legend of Ilval and Anon caused the desired effect on those present. E'Gil too joined the singing, as Arden with Orphea, now

he would trade verses with Eevi. As long as I live, I would never forget the sound. I saw Ingrid leap from the balcony, I am sure she screamed her battle cry, but I did not hear it. Not far from me Esben's bow fired, and Signy's too from across the way.

The details are clouded to me still save one- my prayer. I glimpsed the face of Selene, rising over the Great Berian Wood through the balcony to the east. With all the will inside me, I prayed to the Lady Moon. I fixed my gaze upon Thylera. I was gripping my holy symbol so tightly; I could feel blood running down my wrist. I could see the book in my memory, the one I had found while waiting for Master Deneth at the house of the Regent so many years ago. It sat atop a stand on a table, near the great doors where I was asked to wait.

"Reticence" it said at the top of the page. I began to recite those words from my memory, Charge J, Verse Four and as I did, I begged Selene to quiet this mage, she who had so many times abused those I loved, silence her now, for this must end! Let her words fail her, her lips lull, and the calm of your silence befall her, she will have no power here!

As I prayed again and again, I hardly noticed the bloodshed around me, the appearance of the abominated Fuhlgar, or the death of Henerick and his witch mother.

It was done. FINISHED!

Or was it? Ingrid laid on the dais near death, her sisters were with her. The crowd was in chaos but for one moment the crowd fell silent as Lurians along the balcony stepped to the edge and drew. The Regent too, stepped to the edge of the balcony and spoke:

"You will not fire! Lady Moon has risen! Your time has expired, and our contract is broken. Unless payment can be made?"

"Toreas, I am sorry for your loss. I must now as Lord of Westflood and Regent of the Lake, declare all assets of Eclan Traders as well as those of your family are now forfeit under the Third Treaty of House Cerrak and the Council of the Kings. Arrest him!"

Ariam was happy to oblige, quickly putting her sword to his chest.

"You there, Charon, unless you intend to wed your daughter to this criminal, Luria has overstayed its welcome in Redwater."

Charon began to speak but was cut short by Toreas' booming voice.

"Scourge of the forest, servant of the old masters, accept this sacrifice of blood!"

He began to swing his ornate blade at Ariam. It was his last mistake. She spun deftly and brought her own sword across his throat, her white armor now red with blood.

The slowness of the blood flying across the room was unnerving, but when it finally ran down the wall and onto the branches of the corrupted Berian tree, there was a flash as if lightning, but with a sickening violet hue. The sound is deafening as the creature steps forth from the crack, 20 feet high or more, a horrific, living tree! It grabbed Ariam and threw her across the room, she crashed into the wall, not moving.

Brother Lathan alone stood before it shouting-

"Your time is past! You no longer have any power here!"

The darkness of Erebus sealed the crack and the beast began to wither screaming in agony, but far from death. Lathan too was swatted away as if a gnat, crashing into the alter.

Fear and exhaustion overcame me.

I am not sure how my companions did it, but again they saved me. Indeed, they saved us all. The creature was slain, and in death all evidence of the tree in the keep had turned to ashes.

As soon I as came to, I rushed to the sisters, trying desperately to bind their injuries. They would live, by Selene's will they all would live. They had to live, for a reunion was at hand.

By the grace of the Triad, and with the assistance of none other than Peth, Lord Arden was brought up from the dungeon. Badly abused, but alive to see his daughters again. It seemed Regent Whiteshield would name his new Lord after all.

Many tears and smiles and embraces were shared. I was filled with emotion- pride, happiness, relief, most of all thanks.

I soon stepped away from the sisters- my sisters, and their father. I exited the keep and walked to the top of the high hill between the keep and Redwater. Beneath the stars and black of Erebus I would bask in the glow of the Lady Moon Selene. It was by her will they were alive- a debt I would spend my life repaying, gladly.

It was many hours before Stedden found me. Apparently, the sisters were worried. I could see he understood my tears. He smiled, took my hand and helped me to my feet.

“All thanks to Lady Moon” was all he could say.

We walked back to the keep together in silence, all the while looking on the face of Selene.