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The citizen's almanac: Surviving calamity

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The citizen's almanac: Surviving calamity

by

Connor White

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Creative Writing and Environment

Program of Study Committee:
David Zimmerman, Major Professor
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David Hollander

The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2019

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ABSTRACT

The following is the first 173 pages of a fantasy novel, tentatively titled “The Citizen’s Almanac”. It tells the story of scientist Brenan Harte as he learns about arcana, a powerful substance that powers his world, as well as the mysterious network of ley lines that arcana uses to travel underneath the world’s surface. Harte survives a planet-wide cataclysmic eruption of the ley lines, and attempts to uncover how such an event happened, as well as precautions they can take to prevent another from happening in the future. While fantasy, it is low-magic and instead deals primarily with the politics of the continent as well as the smaller stories of how those affected continue to survive in a rapidly changing world.

While the full story is much longer, this section represents the first third of the first book in a trilogy. It is told in epistolary format, featuring a number of characters’ POV as well as footnotes from the book’s fictional “editor”. As such, they are part of the narrative itself as opposed to citation. I will also include visual materials in the final project, including maps and drawings of the places and things Harte encounters. It is my hope that this project resembles the diaries and histories of ancient, medieval, and frontier texts, similar to the work of Roman historian Polybius, famed explorer Marco Polo, and American mountain man Jim Beckwourth.

Primary Characters

Brenan Harte

Nora Sele

Katrin Roth

Jaun Staudenmier

Hellene Vanberg

Roald Torstein

Neelie Anouk

Belric Waltham

Margarette Deurse

Prologue

Dr. Katrin Roth

The history of humanity is nothing more than a history of war and its frivolous pretexts, written by the winners to obscure the past and solidify a ruthless grasp upon the future. The boundaries we forge to stop war are ironically the very engines that spur its return, trapping us in a cycle we unknowingly, yet voluntarily chain ourselves to. War is the great lie that halts our evolution. To tear away this lie and free ourselves from its eternal corruption, we must go to war once again. Our war shall be one of contradiction, as we seek truth and reject the perception of truth. Our war shall be one of redundancy, for it is a war against war itself.

Ours is the final war, the Axiom War, and you are its novice soldier.

We created the Citizen's almanac to guide you. In its pages we expose the architects of deceit, those you know as Liars, and memorialize the events and leaders that gave their lives in pursuit of the Truth. The almanac consists of the most comprehensive and influential bodies of work by Brenan Harte, the founder of the Axiom Rebellion.

Portions of the almanac detail Harte's series of experiments and essays concerning arcana—the enigmatic force that defines the world of Sententiae—as well as the complex network of ley lines that ferries its power across the planet. In his time, attempts to understand arcana were considered wasteful, hopeless pursuits, its study restricted by the Liars. Harte was the first to reject this censorship, and his experiments were vital in exposing arcana's internal logic. In doing so, he laid the foundations to better use arcana's

power and influence for the prosperity of all. If you are to learn the Truth, you must know the rules that govern it.

The bulk of the almanac, however, chronicles the Harte Expedition, the now-legendary journey that radicalized its foremost members, revealed the conspiracy to obscure the Truth, and opened the door to our liberation. While the expedition first sought to understand the design and origin of the Harte Events, also known as Calamities, its ultimate purpose underwent total upheaval once the extent of the Liars' machinations came to light. If Harte's experiments revealed the rules that govern the Truth, then these journals—written by Harte and his comrades—explain how and why they were hidden.

Please be aware that this is only a small portion of the story. As new documents and texts are still being uncovered, our understanding of Harte's progression from subservient academic to charismatic revolutionary becomes clearer, and we pass that knowledge onto you as accurately as possible to replicate its success in radicalizing him. Any changes or additions on my part will clarify or elaborate what Harte is discussing, and will be explicitly referred to as such. With our guidance, you will see that we are an unwilling herd, enslaved by cruel shepherds.

But you have the power to change, and the core of the Truth is this: you've always had that power.

~ *Katrin Roth*

On the definition of Arcana

From the desk of Brenan Harte

Arcana is the lifeblood of Sententiae, a ceaseless gift from the stars above. It nourishes our planet, powers our cities and technological wonders, and guides our society from barbarism to higher purpose. Yet despite the extent of its influence, we are little more than conduits for its power. We can redirect it in a variety of ways, but it cannot be wholly controlled in the ways we truly seek. It is the one element that resists our authority.

We know that it is colorless, odorless, and shapeless. We know that it travels via the ley lines that cover our planet like the roots of some great tree, permeating both organic and inorganic matter with relative ease. We know that comes from the endless void that surrounds Sententiae, gathering into the swirling masses commonly known as stars. We know these things and a handful more, but I am no longer content with such scraps of knowledge, for what spectacular discoveries lie just outside our realm of understanding? I have watched monarchs and titanic monsters alike be shattered in their reckless dealings with it, inspiring a humility and fear that keeps us from looking any closer, content to manipulate it but never unearth its secrets. I reject that fear. The power of Arcana is great, but its potential is far greater, and it is my wish to discover that potential and usher in an age of prosperity and progress the likes of which Sententiae has never seen.

I am the mortal, seeking to tear down a god.¹

¹ Harte's arrogance is the result of a privileged, aristocratic upbringing. It is his most grating quality, but also his most dynamic. Have patience.

On Seismic Activity

From the desk of Nora Sele²

The sheer power of Arcana, along with its fluid grace and racing speed, produce large, consistent vibrations, which in turn creates measurable, and consistent, seismic activity. Most of the time these shockwaves are small, incapable of breaking through the natural barriers that protect the ley lines, but occasionally they become strong enough to be felt on the planet's surface. These shockwaves are responsible for earthquakes, tidal waves, avalanches, volcanic eruptions, and other destructive natural forces. While they are disastrous to the peoples of Sententiae, I believe they serve a greater, more vital purpose, that they are in fact a key aspect of how the ley lines function.

Arcana is a highly volatile substance, breaking apart both organic and inorganic matter with ease, and our world is spared this volatility mostly because the Arcana moves through the ley lines too quickly. Were the flow of Arcana to be stopped, however, I believe that its destructive potential would continue to build until it reached planetary, catastrophic proportions. The seismic activity is actually a mechanism meant to prevent these more powerful surges. By periodically releasing excess pressure, the ley lines' structural integrity remains intact, allowing them to continue ferrying Arcana throughout the planet more safely.

I'm reminded of the human heart and its complex, delicate network of veins and arteries³. A healthy heart pulses regularly to keep blood flow consistent, and energy is

² Nora Sele was the only member of the Contributions Academy whose knowledge and research concerning the ley lines rivaled Harte's. I have juxtaposed these brief passages so you might see how similar they were. Though much of Nora's work was destroyed in the months leading up to the Axiom Rebellion, a scant few essays have been discovered among private collections. This is one of the more comprehensive.

³ Many of us in the Axiom Rebellion relish the coincidence of both Harte and Sele arriving at the same biological metaphor to illustrate the ley lines' composition. To us, it is evidence that while the Truth is often obscured, it is always evident.

needed to produce those pulses. If Sententiae is the heart, Arcana is the energy *and* blood. Thus our world is one of roiling, turbulent blood, and what we consider chaos is in fact necessary, violent, discipline. To carry the metaphor further, the heart must continue beating at all times to keep the body alive, and any obstacles that hinder or obstruct the heart have deadly consequences.

Consequences that I believe have already occurred.

Almost every people throughout the Tempered Realms⁴ possesses its own handful of religious, apocryphal texts that discuss the origins of our planet, referring to a great calamity that forged our planet. They speak of fire and torrent, entire peoples crumbled to ash or buried beneath oceans, and overwhelming death. The vast majority of scholars dismiss these descriptions as hyperbolic, merely exaggerated records of disease or genocide that have been warped by time. But it is their internal consistency that gives me pause, as well as the contradictory nature of civilizations existing at the same time as such a cataclysmic event. It's possible that these are merely mistranslations, and indeed the majority of the texts were composed in dense, archaic dialects, but there are just enough missing pieces to encourage me to suggest another possibility: that the world of Sententiae was not *made* in this great event, but *re-made*.

Our own history has well-documented examples of cultures that gradually disappeared, through warfare or famine or isolation. Is it so hard to believe that there were others lost to time, but with their dissolution being immediate and violent? If this cataclysm was as far-reaching as the legends say, their metaphors taken literally, then

⁴ The Tempered Realms is the colloquial term for the continent of Rodin, referring to its industriousness and frequent warring. There are at least four continents, but current geography stonewalls further exploration, and the natural dangers present along the frontier dissuade all but the most reckless of explorers. Harte will come to understand that recklessness.

entire civilizations quite literally slipped into the earth or the bottom of the sea, beyond our reach and thus our understanding. It means our Sententiae is in fact a *new* Sententiae, and that for some reason, the mechanisms within the ley lines failed, or at least failed to prevent catastrophe.

And so I am filled with a terrible dread, where every path I choose leads to a horrifying conclusion. If the legends are true, we have the barest understanding of our history, but if they are just exaggerations, than I am a zealot, more willing to believe in mythology than the pursuit of scientific understanding, the very epicenter of my culture. I will not abide by such ambiguity. Somewhere in all this mess, the truth is waiting⁵.

In the coming months I will begin my work at the Contributions Academy in Daun, studying the ley lines' seismic activity and developing instruments capable of measuring it. If I am successful, we will have a greater understanding of why the ley lines work as they do, and we might be able to mitigate or even halt these periodic surges, thus sparing innocent societies from continued tragedy. If I am right, we may calm the world beneath our feet. Perhaps this is indeed all myth and hearsay, but I would rather prevent annihilation in obscurity than be proven right about its existence. The alternative, illustrated by the passages of these unknown prophets, is monstrous:

"We have been shattered into fractals, pitiful remnants that must scatter to the wind and ash left as our inheritance, lest fury be called upon us once again. The world has been made in death, and the violent birth of mountains. Seas have split and roil now. Waters burn, fires are icy. The world has been made in futility and the screeching of children."

"Hubris is our mother, and Apathy is our father. We have been born from their gifts."

⁵ Often obscured, always evident.

These words are poetic, but they carve my soul into pieces. I feel I cannot be whole again until I know for certain whether or not such a sermon is true.

Chapter 1

Calamity has blossomed like the bloodiest flower. Nora's predictions, which I dismissed and condescended to, were true all along. There is no room in my heart for self-righteousness amid all the grief. Calamity has befallen our world, and I am its herald.

Our research into the machinations of the ley lines, atria, and their seismic capacity led us to the conclusion that such an event was at risk of happening again, and every opportunity Nora took to press me for action rings in my ears like a death knell. She shared with me all the legends, of lands being swallowed, drowned, seared with fire and choking ash, and in my hubris I refused to consider that it might be the truth. I quieted her, spoke of protocol and decorum, as if that matters now as the entire planet burns around us. To see a legend made real is horrifying.

Reports are still flooding in, though the Empire is tightly regulating the release of information to keep the people of Daun from tearing themselves apart in a panic. The Dijwenian lowlands to the west are flooding as the Gelid sea encroaches further and further from the northern shores, drowning farms and generations of rural families. For every village lucky enough to be evacuated, another three are lost to the ocean. I have even heard rumors that the Herstellen Isles are beginning to *sink* beneath the Gelid. Like bloated corpses, they are claimed by an apathetic, watery abyss. Were Nora beside me now, I would throw myself at her feet, desperate to make amends for lowering her opinion in the face of my own. I would tell her I am sorry, and how much I loved her, even in my arrogance.

Even as the dominant power and intellect of the Tempered Realms, the Auten Empire must be overwhelmed by all this. Refugees are pouring into the city, surrounding

its walls; the few shepherds and gamesmen on the slopes of Mount Lauenmark have described vast camps outside each of the major gates, their cookfires sparkling like stars. Administrators are attempting to increase housing by redirecting maintenance projects, but they expect to be outpaced by new arrivals within a span of days. By then, I have heard, the refugees will spill onto the streets of the surrounding townships, unable to find work or solace, and it is likely they will turn to desperation in order to survive. Were I in their place, I am sure I would do the same.

Other Contributors call this cataclysm a “Harte Event,” a title I despise. There are those who seek to attach it to my name in recognition of my research, but I am only reminded of my failure to Nora, and there are others who I believe mock me this way. They feel I failed as a Contributor, having disregarded tradition in favor of my own preferences. Whatever their opinion may be, the Harte Event has spread across the Tempered Realms, and likely to the whole of Sententiae. If this is truly my fault, perhaps it’s what I deserve.

But I will reclaim this Harte Event because I will not allow my legacy, Nora’s legacy, to be consumed by this monstrosity. If I am to be its herald, I cannot linger here. There is work to be done.

In our time together, Nora once spoke to me of a dream she wished to enact upon the world. With our technology, we began to map the network of ley lines beneath our feet, but the majority of the Tempered Realms is without this knowledge, and indeed even our own is likely outdated as the ley lines have rearranged themselves. Nora’s dream was to embark upon an ambitious expedition, to chart the entire network of ley lines throughout the Tempered Realms, and to closely study our continent’s greatest ecosystems for additional clues as to why some regions are more harshly affected than others. In the wake

of this Harte Event, a total upheaval of our natural order, there is an excellent opportunity to learn the secrets tucked away in our corner of the world, and place them at the beginning of a new era in the hopes that generations however far into the future will be spared what lies immediately ahead of us.

I will submit a request for funds. The extent of the Harte Event's effects must be catalogued in-depth, the new arrangement of the ley lines uncovered and accurately mapped. If it's accepted, I resolve now to journey across the Tempered Realms to see Nora's dream come to fruition, and to share my knowledge of Arcana and the ley lines so that even the humblest of farmers might prepare their descendants. I will inscribe the names and stories of my failure upon the most permanent of surfaces. I failed to herald this disaster; I must now herald in its healing, for as long as it takes.

And for Nora.

Response to Funding Request

From the desk of Ctr. Dcr. Jaun Staudenmier⁶

Dcr. Harte, most esteemed Contributor and Citizen,

After consideration of the nature and logistics of your request, the Imperial Directors of the Treasury have unanimously voted to grant all necessary funding for your research and travel, under certain non-negotiable conditions specifically imposed by the Emperor himself. While additional compromises may be established in the future, our immediate needs are as follows:

⁶ This document came from Harte's personal collection. Official missives from the Empire are usually difficult to intercept, so all correspondence between Harte and Staudenmier is of vital importance, giving us glimpses into Imperial motives, as well as giving us substantial text to cross-reference with other potential Imperial documents.

Personally, I've always hated how stiffly formal he is. It's excessive and needlessly mouthy.

1. You must remain a passive observer. The Treasury Committee believes too much direct influence will damage the purity of your research, and have cascading consequences as the Tempered Realms deal with the aftermath of this great tragedy. The Committee will be willing to grant a measure of autonomy at your own discretion, however, so long as it remains infrequent and comparatively inconsequential.
2. Detailed reports of your encounters are to be delivered on a regular basis, as well in the event of any extraordinary discovery. If we are to respond to this Harte Event adequately— as your proposal insisted—our awareness of its ramifications must rival yours. Preparations will be made so that ley line communications⁷ are made available to you whenever possible.
3. You must assemble a company of assistants and additional Contributors to both aid your research and provide their own expertise. While you have a large degree of autonomy in deciding the individuals within this company, the Committee requires a Historian, Biologist, Linguistics Interpreter, and Cultural Anthropologist to be among those selected. This core staff will allow you to record and analyze the effects of this event under the most appropriate disciplines.
4. Finally, Auten interests *must* be maintained. While the charitable nature of your research cannot be understated, any action that disrupts the Empire or

⁷ Auten technology pioneered the use of sending messages through the ley lines, a bizarre and powerful communication system available only to the highest-ranked Imperial officers. This communication network allowed the Empire to take control over the majority of territory throughout the Tempered Realms.

the lives of Citizens must be avoided at all costs. Diplomatic tensions will be distinctly more tenuous than ever before.

We believe these requests will adequately balance Imperial concerns and the sanctity of your research's purpose. If you wish to protest any of these conditions, please submit them in writing within an acceptable timeframe for review. Please begin identifying potential candidates for your company, and the Committee will see to it that they are properly vetted, interviewed, and prepared.

We at the Treasury Committee believe this to be a great opportunity, Dcr. Harte, for both your own contributions, as well as the benefit of all Citizens and residents of Sententiae alike. Go with curiosity, go with discipline.

Go, with our blessing.

Dcr. Jaun Staudenmier

Chief Officer of the Treasury Committee, in service to the Anhalt Empire

I felt conflicted, reading the letter over again. Without Nora it felt like a hollow victory, and I am sure she would have fought against many of these conditions. She was enchanting, then, indomitably-willed against anyone who would say no to her ideas. Many Dwellen fall in line in their attempts to take back their Citizenship, but Nora furiously believed that sacrificing your character is too large a price to pay for social status. I had begun to believe that the reason she wanted to earn her Citizenship back was to prove to the epicenter of Auten society that individualism had an indomitable place in our society. I will never stop loving her for her belief in that idea, no matter how difficult it made our lives. She had a strange serenity about her; everything would turn out okay if you were

willing to leap head first with her. It always had before, until I finally convinced her to be cautious.

Now that she is gone, I feel trapped between what I know and what Nora believed to be right. Nora was the very reason I might have had the courage to embark on this expedition she dreamed of, and now I find myself forced to begin it without her at all.

Thankfully, she left me a handful of options, always just that little bit prepared as she needed to be. She managed to cover all of Staudenmier's requests without even being aware of what they were. Clearly Nora knew better than I the importance of an expedition like this, and paid attention to colleagues who, in addition to being masters in their fields, were sympathetic to her cause. It was well-known among the Academy how popular Nora was with students and assistants and support staff, the true custodians of the Academy and its prestige. I am not surprised she cultivated a number of friends and confidants. I will list them here:

The first is Hellene Vanberg, a legendary field biologist and advocate for wilderness preservation. It was she who pioneered our vast stretches of forest and alpine wilderness, and developed then enforced a code of law for maintaining Imperial order even in the remotest of places, including a small militia of survivalists that scour the forests and mountains for poachers, escaped convicts, and anyone else who would dare harm the tracts of land set aside in the name of the natural world. She is excitable, boisterous, and oft-covered in a film of fresh earth. I can see why Nora was so fond of their time together.

The second is Belric Waltham, a linguistics expert and polyglot. Belric distinguishes himself from the formal diplomacy of Contributors in similar fields because of his unique fascination with and proficiency in local dialects and working-class slang. He even holds a

particular fondness for obscenity, having collected a sizeable number of profane words. Nora and I often heard him in the halls of the academy, muttering some insult in another language to avoid being chastised.

Though his expertise in language will be of monumental importance, I am concerned with his lack of field experience. Belric is quite sickly, frequently battling illness and maladies. Such frailty will risk slowing the expedition, but no one else rivals Belric's qualifications. Nora always believed he would rise to the occasion if called upon to serve a greater purpose, and I am willing to trust her instincts.

The third is Margarett Derse. Before she was assigned to my lab, Nora assisted Margarett with her analysis of historical texts, and I'm sure helped cement Dcr. Derse as one of the finest historians in the entire Tempered Realms. She is one of the oldest Contributors, having been admitted to the Academy the same year Dcr. Staudenmier was, though her wit is as potent as ever. Though she loathes politics for its habit of obscuring historical fact in favor of securing power, her distaste also means she will settle for nothing less than the truth. She is perhaps the only Contributor with an active arrest record, having been caught numerous times breaking into private collections to cross-reference documents. Normally such offenses would result in expulsion from the Academy. In Margarett's case, this only demonstrates how profoundly influential her work has been.

Neelie Anouk is Nora's fourth recommendation. A woman of only 20 years, she is one of the youngest Contributors to join the Academy, a product of her cruel and manipulative mother, an Other who desperately sought to return their family name to honor. Neelie succeeded, but immediately distanced herself from her family when she was

accepted. I am sure that was a difficult choice, but the young have more time to heal from such traumas.

Neelie herself relishes the attention her work receives, especially because of how it frustrates many of the older Contributors, who criticize her research as idiosyncratic rambling. But Neelie Anouk is a fine anthropologist, having spent the ages of twelve to nineteen traveling throughout the Tempered Realms on a number of archaeological digs. She still has a great deal to prove to the world, and I am hopeful her desire for recognition will not outweigh our noble goal.

And last, another personal friend of Nora's is famed explorer and monster-hunter Roald Torstein. He bears the great height and constitution of the Sjolbardi people, as well as their naval expertise. He also possesses a remarkably warm—albeit stubborn—disposition, which I hope will support morale. It comes as a sort of dissonance to see such a gentle, soft-spoken man to be well-versed in the hunting of *arcana monstrum*, or monsters, but the plethora of scars demonstrate his wealth of experience better than any academic record ever could.⁸

Interviews have been scheduled to better attest their suitability for the expedition, but I have no doubt in Nora's judgment. She had a remarkable way with people, finding the best and helping them become better. She should be leading us, saving the world from this fresh catastrophe.

I know she would have succeeded, whereas I can only hope to survive the attempt.

⁸ These five individuals, alongside Harte and Sele, represent the core cast of the Harte Expedition. Finding these prophets of empathy and bravery was perhaps Nora's greatest gift to the pursuit of Truth, and in the coming travels, you will see both their own accomplishments, and how they aided Harte in his transformation.

I have not written for several weeks. Preparing the expedition has consumed my life, though I prefer it to wallowing in my own mind. Dcr. Staudenmier approved all of Nora's recommendations for our staff (and provided a few of his own), and they are currently undergoing training that will acclimate them to the journey ahead. I join them when I am able, but often my time is more valuable plotting our course across the Tempered Realms, overseeing the design of specialized arcanum-infused instruments for our field experiments, and drafting proposals for diplomatic assistance. It is necessary, isolating work, though I suppose this time of year is best suited for it.

Winter has been less severe so far compared to years past, an obvious effect of the Harte Event. Temperatures are warmer, and snowfall is less frequent, though I have heard that along the northern coast, it has in fact accelerated to the point of burying entire villages under ferocious blizzards, families freezing to death in their homes. I often feel helpless and trapped here in the capital, planning and organizing the expedition in relative comfort while our own people die believing this is divine intervention, revenge for an unknown disrespect. Each day more rumors and news from every corner of the continent come flooding in, as we all struggle to cope with sudden, titanic shifts in our environment. Still, it is a miracle we were not obliterated entirely as the legends often spoke of. I believe that our survival is based on what Nora searched for, and so I have resolved myself to find the answer. My fascination with Arcana is now competing with a sort of reckless hatred; most days I battle with my guilt, and many times I succumb to it, wallowing in my failure. If I had written those days, those pages would be bleak and devoid of joy. I have picked it up again in an attempt to better honor Nora's memory. She would not have allowed feelings of loss and grief to rob her of finding purpose and joy in this work.

Dcr. Staudenmier has been a firm friend in these torrential weeks, personally seeing to my wellbeing and easing back on his expectations for me at the Academy, even though I did not ask for such preferential treatment. Perhaps he too sees the vast potential of Nora's Expedition, and wishes to ensure its completion? Regardless, I have needed his companionship and professionalism. We met again just this afternoon to discuss the logistics of the expedition, and Dcr. Staudenmier believes we will be able to embark within a matter of weeks, as Spring seems to be arriving sooner than usual, with merchants from the southwestern lowlands speaking of fresh buds on a scant few trees, and the streams ripe with snowmelt.

For the first time since Nora's passing, I felt a moment of excitement flicker within me when he shared this news. All my plans and proposals sit in various stages of completion or the bureaucratic process, outside my ability to do anything more. Hearing such defined terms make it feel real, and though even the greatest success will never bring her back, it will honor her memory in a way that might bring me peace.

And should I fail, then at least we will be reunited.

I noticed this journal is nearly filled, and I am not compelled to finish it. Instead, I often think of how these pages might have turned out had I not fallen in love with Nora, or if I had not been accepted to the Contributions Academy in the first place. It feels like a different life, distant and hazy.

My application to the Contributions Academy has been accepted! I could scarcely believe it when the letter arrived earlier this morning. My proposal to study Arcana and the ley lines must have impressed them. The Auten Empire is undoubtedly the greatest political

power throughout the Tempered Realms, largely because we have begun to harness the power of Arcana. The Contributions Academy is arguably the greatest institution of study, the pinnacle of scientific and arcane achievement throughout the world, and so being added to its ranks vindicates my hard work and diligence in the service of fellow Citizens⁹. As this is the beginning of what is sure to be an extraordinary academic career, I have decided to keep a diary, so that my story might be preserved in its entirety. It might even be a collectible someday, the prized possession of a noble or influential scholar.

And yet I am as terrified as I am excited. The Contributions Academy is a place of enormous prestige, but also one of dizzyingly high expectations. The rate at which Citizens are accepted is often lower than the rate they are expelled, putting even more pressure on the few Contributors who are capable of surviving such a competitive environment. To make matters worse, I am the first Citizen in my family in three generations to be accepted to the Academy, and should I fail to perform, I will never hear the end of it. Mother gave her life to defend border territory from reactionary dissenters, and Father doesn't seem to care about getting his Citizenship back anymore, so the legacy of our family falls to me.

Breathe, fool. You earned this. They only offer positions at the Academy when they believe you are capable of exceeding their rigorous standards, and I am nothing if not capable. Nonetheless, perhaps a walk might clear my head, and indeed this will be the last opportunity I have to idly roam the streets of Audry before I leave for the Daun, our illustrious capital, as the letter stipulated that I am to arrive tomorrow morning to meet with the

⁹ “Citizen” is a popular term in the Auten Empire, denoting those they deem as productive members of society. While it does not discriminate across lines of class, race, or lineage as is otherwise commonplace, it uniquely persecutes those who cannot contribute according to Auten standards, which continuously grow. As a result, Citizens must improve constantly or be forced into second-class citizenship. These “inferiors” are known as dwellens, and serve as the primary workforce of the Empire.

Admissions Board. I best commit my home to memory, for it will be the last time I can look upon it for a number of years.

I cross the river Indwer and take my usual place atop one of its many shaded hills, eager to open the strange package that was attached to my formal acceptance letter. Inside is a revolutionary piece of Auten technology, developed by famed Contributor Albrech Erfin: the Stenographer, a tool given to each Contributor for use in their research. Though its composition is a tightly restricted Imperial secret, its mechanisms are a wonder to behold, resembling a sphere of delicate machinery nearly two feet across. A Stenographer detects the voice of its owner and transcribes whatever is said on parchment that is placed within the body of the machine. This frees up Contributors from the tedious task of writing and recording everything, leaving more time to conduct actual research and experimentation.

Many believe the machines are either powered or activated by sunlight, as exposure to the bright afternoon sun is what compelled my own. It broke free of the protective leather straps, and rose to hover just above my head via some unknown form of propulsion. It extended two small mechanical arms, where my journal would rest, and a panel revealed itself just above. Following the instructions provided to me, I placed my hand upon the panel, and felt a considerable warmth from within the machine, reacting to my touch. I spoke a number of words, and the panel glowed brightly, before retracting back into the body of the machine¹⁰. I placed my journal upon the outstretched arms, and I am speaking aloud right now, the Stenographer's internal quills copying my words flawlessly! It is a remarkable thing

¹⁰ Though the technology is still largely restricted, we have learned that Stenographers recognize their owners voices based on the genetic material deposited in its first use. Think of it like a hound recognizing the scent of its master.

to behold. To further test its accuracy, I have decided to describe what lies before me, so that I might have a perfect portrait of Audry to recall upon should I ever feel homesick:

The last days of summer cling to this village like the beads of sweat tickling the bottom of my neck, its cobbled streets shimmering in the afternoon humidity. Audry is pleasant enough, the wealth and skill of its artisans providing for Citizens and Dwellens alike, but the work of craftsmen pales in comparison to the experimentation and revelations of the scholar, the purest application of intellect. The mills and workshops here are content to merely exist, adhering to common prospects but never seeking to truly push the boundaries of their work. It is an environment of contentment and stagnation. I don't think less of anyone who chooses this life, but I demand to see and experience more, and that is what distinguishes me as a Citizen. Perhaps when I return, I can advocate for higher standards, so that Audry will continue to produce Citizens of note.

Word of my acceptance into the Contributions Academy must have spread through the city; several admirers spotted me here, and approached to congratulate me on my success. I thanked them warmly and sincerely, for were it not for their own hard work, Audry would never have been a place capable of helping me realize my potential. That has always been the crux of Auten culture: we are an ecosystem, a network of cooperation that uplifts and sustains one another, ready to encourage those who are capable, and minimize those who are not. It is why we have expanded our influence across much of Sententiae, uniting many of the Tempered Realms underneath our ideals, where they might flourish under supervised autonomy, free from the infighting that so regularly plagues our continent.

My dream is to see that infighting abolished, the grudges that fuel it abandoned in favor of cooperation and the sharing of our knowledge and technology. The harnessing of

Arcana, even in the rudimentary forms we utilize today, has catapulted our society to enlightenment and peace. Why not spread it across the whole of Sententiae, and truly realize our potential? I asked these questions and more in my Contributions Academy admissions request, so surely they are receptive to this goal, and see in me a figure capable of accomplishing that goal under their tutelage.

I steel myself for the journey ahead, for these are the years that will define the rest of my life, and the legacy I leave behind for the betterment of others. To anyone who may read this, however forward in time you may be, remember this intent: intellect is wasted without application. What is the point of learning anything if you do not intend to use it for the good of all?

Chapter 2

This morning is decorated in birdsong and the purling of frigid water. Dcr. Staudenmier was right; Spring is on the horizon, as even the cyclical nature of the seasons struggles to cope with our Calamity. We stand at the gates of Daun, ready to embark on our expedition. Like the Event that hastened its creation, it has been dubbed the Harte Expedition, and I am just as opposed to that as I was before.

Most of the preparations have been made, and we have enlisted some of the finest Citizens and Dwellen alike to complete the monumental task. Hellene, Belric, Neelie, Margarete, Roald, and I make up the academic core of experts and leaders, alongside a host of soldiers and laborers who will act as support. We have also procured the services of Bernherd Wahl, a retired Military Contributor renowned for his revolutionizing Auten defensive strategy, to serve as captain of our guard and guarantee our safe passage. Seven wagons hold the bulk of our supplies, while what remains will be dispersed between pack horses and our own steeds.

We will attempt to travel an average of fifteen miles per day, farther if there is little to study or record, and additional stops are allowed so long as there is good reason, and if the majority of our core staff agree. Our first destination is the free city of Dijwen, pronounced De-when for anyone foreign to the Lowland pronunciation. Once another state of the Auten Empire, it established its independence nearly 70 years ago, and our cultural similarities make it an ideal location to evaluate how our most immediate ecosystems are adapting to the Harte Event. There have been scattered reports of unrest outside the city, but as our peoples are linked by a vast history, I don't expect any problems.

I consider myself privileged to be surrounded by so many effective and learned Citizens and hardworking Dwellen. But as my Stenographer writes these passages as I sit upon Vindi, I am filled with terror that I will fail to lead them. Bernherd or Hellene seem better suited to this, and yet they will look to me.

How many leaders, great and small, feel the way I do? Will such doubts keep us alive, or hasten our failure?

Auten Empire #1

It has been many years since I have traveled through these silvery pines. I remember my mother taking me along on a number of trips into the forest, largely for her work, but occasionally for pleasure as well. Ancient groves such as this seem timeless, and indeed less affected by the Harte Event than I initially feared. The core territories of the Auten Empire have fewer ley lines than most other regions of the Tempered Realms, slowing growth, but sparing them from the worst of the Calamity.

Still, the ecosystem's disruption is visible if you look carefully. The Audwulf pine, from which this region received its name, is a hardy species, resistant to both drought and bitter cold. Many of them possess streaks of brown, evidence of rot. Hellene seemed greatly perturbed by this, and I suspect she will be the most affected by seeing firsthand the damage to our world. She often called this forest home, spending weeks in the wilderness studying migration patterns and the ebb and flow of native species. It was only recently that she was compelled to return to the capital to begin preparations for the Expedition, making this the first time she has seen the forest in a month. Though I sit a short way back from her within our caravan, I can see the discomfort in her posture.

Another difference is the frequency we meet fellow travelers, most of them refugees. They are hoping Daun has the resources to help their families recover, and they have all wished us success and wellbeing once they learned of our mission. I fear they will be turned away, as the capital is already swarming with new arrivals. I imagine this is happening all throughout the Tempered Realms, as lost souls seek the comfort of looming stone walls. Were it up to me, I would open the Citizen's Ring to established merchants and artisans in the Worldly Ring, and then allowing the refugees to take their place. I will not return to the capital for many months, and I wonder how much it will have changed by the time I return. I can remember the time I first looked upon the city and all its splendor. The future seemed impossibly bright.

The following morning, I looked upon the few possessions that will accompany me on my journey, my stenographer hovering silently behind me, waiting to detect my voice and begin the day's writings (I must admit, announcing everything aloud in order for it to be recorded will take some getting used to). New Contributors are encouraged to abandon most of their belongings the night before, leaving them behind in order to focus on what lies ahead. But I was never one for the sentimentality of idle collecting and hoarding, since maintaining these luxuries took time out of the day that I instead devoted to study, one of the many traits that led me down this path. It lessened the sting of leaving at such an early hour. New Contributors are encouraged to leave their homes while the rest of the city lies asleep, so that they are not compelled to stay by lingering attachments or dissuading friends and family. My mother would have been the most likely candidate for a stunt like this; we were always close and supportive of one another's endeavors, but in the end she was a committed Citizen. I miss

her terribly, but it makes leaving Audry behind a little easier. I cut free my past, and stepped onto the road.

There is little to describe on the road, since dawn is still several hours away, and I have only a small lantern to light my way. Still, there is something beautiful about the forests around me; the Audwulf Wood covers nearly a third of all Auten lands, its mighty pines standing nearly 150 feet tall. Many find them intimidating, especially at such a dark hour, but they have always given me some measure of comfort. When I was a child, my mother told me that each tree was the reincarnation of a Citizen, and that the mightier they stood, the greater their contribution to the world. To see so many giants looming overhead illustrates the achievement of our people, and how I might stand with them someday in the next life.

The terrain soon began to rise, and the path wound back and forth, climbing a steep bluff that I recognized all too well from the stories, even in the gloom. What awaited me at the top is a sight I have longed for since my earliest years: Daun.

It lay sprawled out far beneath my feet, its fires and lanterns dazzling below just as the stars twinkled overhead. Continuing the tradition¹¹ I timed my arrival at the city to coincide with the rising sun, and barely spied the finest sliver of red light, helping shape the jagged outline of towers and spires. It's a bit silly, all these superstitions and rather obvious metaphors, but as I stand atop the bluff, looking down at my future below, I admit I understand why the tradition continues to this day.

¹¹ Auten tradition dictated that all new Citizens accepted to the Contributions academy should leave their homes and families at night, without ceremony, and arrive at the central road that leads directly into the valley Daun rests in just as the sun begins to rise, symbolizing leaving the old life behind and embracing the new one. It's said that new students who time it correctly are destined for great things. Harte was in fact destined for great accomplishments, but not the ones he might have been thinking of in this entry.

The city rests in one of the wide, fertile valleys adjacent to Mount Lauenmark, a once powerful volcano now named for our current Emperor. It is perhaps the only natural feature on the continent that rivals Daun's glory, dominating the horizon at nearly nineteen-thousand feet. Legends state that at one time, the volcano spewed not molten earth, but concentrated Arcana, describing it as iridescent and plasmic, desiccating anything other than the bare rock that barely contained it. This was almost certainly exaggerated by the original inhabitants of the region. These days, Mount Lauenmark features a snow-capped peak year-round, and some of the most beautiful forests on the continent. As I look upon both it and the city that lay at its feet, I wonder if someday, our capital will rival its preeminence.

From an industrial standpoint, however, Daun is as impressive as great natural force, and as I approach its impenetrable gates, I hear the sounds of industry roar into life. The factories, mills, and workshops here are far superior to those back in Audry, each the very pinnacle of their respective disciplines, and their smokestacks break suddenly from the historic rooftops, exhaling plumes of fragrant, pastel smoke. On holidays, these smokes are artificially dyed, covering the sky in brilliant viridian or the deepest violet. Here, the smith is as respected as the scholar, despite the sheer differences in their work, simply because their presence in Daun demonstrates that they are the best of the best. Each represents the ideal Auten Citizen, heralds of innovation and continuous reinvention.

The city itself is divided into three primary boroughs, each radiating from the center of Daun, where Emperor Lauenmark and other Imperial staff cooperate to administer our vast territories and populace. The second ring, housing the Citizens, is awash with gardens and manors and influential institutions such as the Contributions Academy. It is this ring where I will make my home and begin my studies. The final, outermost ring is home to all non-Auten

persons as well as the Dwellen, who are given the opportunity to reclaim Citizenship in exchange for a number of years devoted to public service. I would assure the reader that the Empire's reasoning for keeping non-Citizens in this ring is sound,¹² as for the Citizens and Imperial staff to be truly committed to their work, they must be free of any and all possible distractions, including whatever succulent gossip these travelers bring from the outside world. Citizens are welcome to visit, however, so long as these visits are scheduled and visitors are escorted by a Warden, Daun's constabulary body. While the Imperial Ring is the most illustrious, and the Citizen's Ring the most productive, the Worldly Ring is our most exotic and romantic, as here all the cultures and peoples of the Tempered Realms mix freely and openly, where the sharing of ideas and customs coincide with Auten prosperity. I look forward to exploring its winding streets and crowded markets, sampling the senses of the outside world. But for now, I push through the bustling crowds (keeping a close eye on my coin purse), and make for the Citizen's Ring. As a brief aside, I am impressed with my Stenographer's ability to pick my voice out from all the others; I can speak quietly to myself even here, and still it transcribes everything I say without error. I long to understand the arcane forces behind this, but only senior Imperial staff are allowed such knowledge¹³, so at the very least, I have a long way to go before I could attach myself to such prestige.

The Citizen's ring is far quieter, its walls especially deep to disperse as much sound as possible. Here there is a far more potent sense of privacy, with many buildings given space between one another, and its Citizens keeping their conversations low to minimize

¹² Quite the opposite. For all but Imperial sycophants, Daun's division is highly controversial, as advocates for equality argue that those in the inner rings receive preferential treatment, counter to the official policy that mandates all denizens of Daun be treated equally.

¹³ Unknown to Harte at this time, the criteria for being allowed such knowledge about the Empire's inner workings were far more restrictive than he could have imagined. Not only were selected staff chosen for their subservient personalities, they were forced to undergo highly questionable ritual modification that dulled their minds into subservient mush.

disturbance. I see a number of other Contributors and their Stenographers, gliding across the cobblestones and sharing notes with one another, their mechanical companions furiously writing just behind. Many have been given personal touches to help their owners more easily identify them, such as colored ribbons or additional parts for holding books and other materials. It is this ring that I will call home, and already there is a sense of familiarity within me. This is truly where I was always meant to be.

A.E. #2

We have arrived at the Fringes, a region where the forest begins to thin as the land slopes downward towards the lowlands that make up the bulk of the Dijwenian state. Here the Harte Event's power is more visible, with many trees uprooted, splintered, or drowned in mudslides. The geology here is less stable than what surrounds Daun, and that lack of stability has quickly spread to the villages and farms that managed to dredge up a life here. We passed through several villages, some of them abandoned entirely, but most had transitioned to salvaging the remains of their homesteads, establishing camps in torn cloth and broken beams. I suggested to our troupe that we visit one of these camps to observe how locals are coping with the stress, and a majority agreed. Arrangements will be made to alert our Dijwenian delegation of the delay, while we examine closely how the agrarian class of Auten society has fared in the wake of disaster.

Upon our arrival to the nearest camp, having been directed by a local hunter, I opined that the camp looked ransacked, wholly unsuitable for humane living. The tents are haphazardly scattered between what pines still stand, wherever a patch of firm ground might be found. I inquired to the hunter about these conditions. He explained that after the

first, most powerful quake, many smaller ones have since followed, forcing the camps to constantly rebuild or seek out more stable ground. This particular group, he said, had mostly resigned themselves to suffering these conditions only as long as they are able to harvest the fallen wood for reconstruction, including for his own farm. The boy is named Petre. He is only nineteen, 17 years my junior, but he has a wife and young child. I feel worlds apart from him, and I wonder how many more families have been uprooted—literally—in the aftermath of this.

It is a temporary place, but there is a bucolic quality to this camp once the sun sets and its rough edges hidden in the dark. Perhaps it is just a misguided, irrational piece of mind struggling to find sense in all this, but seeing families like Petre's fighting to survive inspires a sense of hope. While we collect data from the surrounding area, perhaps we can help the camp improve its conditions, so that Petre's child might look upon the stars because they are dreaming of the future, not because they live in squalor.

A.E. #3

It is late morning, and most of the people in this camp have long been at work. While most of the inhabitants merely seek to collect enough fallen wood or salvage to rebuild their homes elsewhere, Petre tells me there is a growing faction within the camp that wants to instead store the wood collectively until the damage in the surrounding villages has been properly accounted for, after which it might be distributed to aid resupply and reconstruction. I found such an idea very noble, but from the disgruntled murmurs, I suspect that many cannot look further than their own immediate survival, a compromise of priority I can understand if not entirely stomach.

The work itself is quite dangerous. Aftershocks continue to rattle the area, and numerous workers have been buried under the shifting earth. It is a slow process to dig them out, especially since those within the camp are untrained in such delicate work. To compound the problem, Hellene informed us that based on a variety of tunnels and disturbed earth in the area surrounding the camp, a family of lodge moles has infested nearby, most likely seeking new territory after their previous burrows were destroyed.

For those unfamiliar to the eastern half of the Tempered Realms, lodge moles are roughly the size of small dogs, averaging forty to sixty pounds. They make their homes deep underground, using their acute sense of smell to locate the fresh root growth that forms the bulk of their diet. Normally such a large family's territory would radiate out from their burrow, careful not to destroy too much new growth; Hellene believes it is likely that the Harte Event has thrown their behavior into disarray, compelling them to take and hoard as much food as they can find, a process which destroys whatever patch of forest they currently inhabit. Hellene and Roald argued until midday over how they might study them: Hellene favored setting bait and observing from a distance, while Roald's instincts as a hunter preferred trapping and dissection. As I am unfamiliar with the field of biology, I left them to find a solution on their own, and sought out Petre, who has been an invaluable source of local opinion and information, being candid about both the work here and his life before the Harte Event.

For example, I have learned he is from Rotenurte, a nearby city that once could have rivaled Dijwen. The story, now nearly 100 years old, is known to most Citizens, and even to many outside the Auten Empire. I will dictate it here, for any reader's need of context:

Herrn (Auten: Lord) Roten ruled the city, then known as Rotenhouse. He launched an attack against Dijwen, arguing they were too open to foreign intervention and failed to preserve Auten culture. He lay siege to Dijwen for nearly a month before word spread to the surrounding territories. *Lehns* Dagna, Lady of the Dijwenian region before it became independent, mustered her militia to dismantle the insurrection and prevent the outset of civil war. As the superior authority, Lady Dagna broke apart the siege, captured *Herrn* Roten and returned him to his keep under house arrest. He remained there until the Emperor himself¹⁴ traveled from the capital to pass justice. To both Lord Roten and Lady Dagna's surprise, the Emperor had them both executed: Roten for inciting internal strife, and Dagna for assuming the Emperor's wishes and acting without official Imperial directive. Rotenhouse was renamed Rotenurte, meaning Roten's Judgement, as a monument to the Lord's poor choice. His familial line was cast out of the nobility.

I share this story for the revelation that followed: Petre's own lineage is drawn from that same blood. His family line torn down into disrepute and the abuse of drink; I imagine that it weighs heavy on the conscience. I asked if he might be interested in returning his family's name to its previous status, but Petre seems convinced (and quite paranoid, really) that with education and wealth come trouble from the greater, primal dangers of this world. "Safer to be a small man," in his own words. I felt strangely sad, seeing the descendant of a once-proud house compelled to leave his name in ruins. In a moment of charity, I invited him to join our company as a hunter. Not only would he provide stable

¹⁴ All Emperors are stripped of their name upon death, which creates a sense of mythical power surrounding the title. Because specific Emperors are no longer tied to their actions in life, eventually they become immune to criticism, since no one can remember which Emperor made any given decision.

work for his family, but as news of our expedition grows, it might help him return the Röten name to good graces.

He seemed delighted by the proposal, and offered to take a few of us on a hunt to give him time to consider it. Roald overheard this last portion of the conversation and invited himself along. I sought out Hellene, herself a skilled survivalist, and the three of us decided to depart the camp for one day to track potential game along the Dijwenian Fracture, an escarpment that runs many miles along the spine of the Fringes. This escarpment also houses a minor ley line according to our maps, and so this area will be of great interest even if Petre is unsuccessful.

It has been some time since I've gotten the chance to explore the wilderness. I never held a very high opinion of the outdoors before I arrived at the Contributions Academy, and if my research hadn't forced me outside, I likely would have been perfectly content whittling away my life in the laboratory. Nora was the one who really showed me how beautiful and full of discovery the natural world could be, and now I wonder how I ever lived before the thrill of an open sky or great forest. It was away from civilization that we conducted our best work, such as our discovery of Arcanum, the resource we can now use to detect and measure arcana's presence all around us.

Several months¹⁵ have passed since I gained admission to the Contributions Academy, and they have been little else but sleepless nights and aimless days. I was so cocksure about my ability to make a seamless transition, and I now understand why Dcr.

¹⁵ We skip over the entries Harte composed during this period, due to their lack of engaging content. Most of it is anxious rambling as he struggles to cope with the standards of the Academy. There are also several logs of dreams, all of which would be highly inappropriate to share here.

Staudenmier was so amused by my confidence during our initial meeting. Results are expected on a consistent basis, and if these results suffer several rounds of regressive or stagnant data, your funding is adjusted in favor of more promising Contributions. It forced me into a delicate balance between what little resources I already have and developing experiments that will yield tolerable outcomes. This has been especially humbling considering I was convinced Dcr. Staudenmier gave me a higher than average stipend. Now I am beginning to think he merely let me believe that so I might be more enthusiastic. It was a kind gesture, but a curt reality.

Thankfully, Nora's experience as a Contributor was invaluable in helping me adjust. It was her constant suggestion that I rein in the scope of my proposals, and I am embarrassed to admit that it took several weeks before I accepted her advice. Surely she understands that it is hard for a scholar to compromise in their grand visions for the future? She likely understands better than I do, being relegated to Dweller status. As thanks for her patience and willingness to endure me, I hope I can return the favor someday, and advocate for her to be granted Citizenship once more.

And so I have fallen into a rhythm, another suggestion of Nora's that minimizes stress by minimizing surprises. Each day I awake at sunrise, reviewing the notes compiled by my Stenographer, while Nora prepares our lab, clearing debris and fine-tuning our instruments. The bulk of our stipend is used for access to our own personal font of Arcana, provided by the installation of pipes that can withstand Arcana's turbulent nature. This system pumps Arcana up from the ley line that runs beneath the Academy itself, directly into our workshop via the Stenographer's maintenance station for our experiments.

My initial goal when applying to the Academy was unlocking the secrets of Arcana's internal logic: where it comes from, what it consists of, and how we might use its power to the greatest extent, among many other questions. While these humbling first weeks have forced me to consider that such projects are years away, they have provided a valuable framework for Nora and me to start smaller, specifically with my Stenographer. I do not possess the Imperial clearance to be privy to its construction, but its very nature does provide some interesting conclusions. It is powered not by water or fire or air as much of our technology is, relying on a "charge" of Arcana. I have hypothesized that this charge is contained using the same materials as the infrastructure that transports Arcana into our lab, but as Stenographers have security measures that prevent tampering, I have no way of confirming this. Instead, I developed an initial round of experiments that sought to compile a list of materials that could similarly deflect or even retain an arcane charge.

All basic metals failed immediately, with even the smallest portion of Arcana ricocheting around our lab like a frightened bird. Gold, silver, copper, iron...each of them failed to retain a charge, and unlike the alloy that my Stenographer consists of, neither were they resistant to its penetrative power. Iron held out the longest, but eventually the arcane bounces around its containment with such frantic energy that it eventually shears through the metal itself, and Nora and I are forced to take cover until the Arcana dissipates into the atmosphere. We attempted to add water and vapor into the housing, hoping the additional matter would dampen the Arcana's power, but all that did was irritate it even further.

What eventually worked was solder. An alloy of tin and lead, I suggested it several weeks ago for its dampening qualities. Once solidified, the solder was as useless as all the other materials we tried, but in its heated, melted form, Nora and I discovered that a charge of Arcana was unable to penetrate through, instead being absorbed and eventually violently redirected¹⁶. When we reported our findings to Dcr. Staudenmier, he was highly impressed, and offered to increase our funding should we find a way to develop a housing of molten solder that can be shaped into housing for an arcane charge. That's where we're stuck. It was Nora's suggestion that we are trying to capture lightning in a bottle. Except the lightning is magic. We are trying to capture magic lightning.

The sheer ridiculousness of such a statement. We decided to shelve these experiments for the time being, and focus on the other aspect of Arcana's place in Sententiae: the ley lines. I will first discuss their basic function and composition, in the hopes that within these explanations, we can find the answer to our current predicament.

These titanic pathways transport arcana throughout Sententiae, primarily underground, but also within deep ocean currents and high above in the thinnest atmosphere. It is along these pathways that our society has been shaped, as their influence nourishes local ecosystems to their absolute peak, and indeed provides a source of energy for the entire planet.

¹⁶ This is largely due to the fact that Arcana is more easily repelled via matter that more closely resembles its own composition. In everyday terms, solid matter is the least likely to successfully contain Arcana, followed by liquid, gas, and finally plasma, which is the closest to Arcana itself.

In the simplest of imagery, imagine the ley lines are equivalent to the body's own veins and nerves. These avenues transport arcana in the way nerves send signals to the brain. In place of the brain, Sententiae's "core" is composed of a self-sustaining, unimaginably violent storm of Arcana, generating enough force to hurl Arcana currents across Sententiae. The largest, most distant lines also support secondary cores—which I have designated as "Atria", to further the living organism comparison—and it these secondary engines that help the Arcana reach each line's terminus. As the Arcana approaches its terminus, the arcana begins to seep into the soil and surrounding atmosphere, where size is diminished to maintain pressure. Any remaining Arcana is ejected at the terminus in extremely dangerous concentrations I have designated "Bellows," and here it gradually dissipates into its most common state.

Any remaining arcana not absorbed by organic/inorganic material is instead robbed of its charge over time, and the lack of an anchor forces the inert Arcana up and outside Sententiae's atmosphere, redistributed to any number of star systems closest to Sententiae's place within the void. There the arcana can replenish its charge, as the frictionless, matterless space of the abyss lacks anything capable disrupting Arcana's natural violence. This is what gives our stars their unrivaled destructive force.¹⁷

Mount Lauenmark is widely believed to be the remnants of one of these Bellows, and so Nora and I have decided it is the best location to conduct a series of field experiments. The locations of the Atria are entirely unknown to us—due to any would-be

¹⁷ Yes, we live on an enormous mass of molten rock and stardust, which hovers silently in the seemingly-endless void that surrounds Sententiae. Considering other theories about our material existence, this one seemed the least ridiculous. It is important this not distract you from more immediate Truths.

explorers being desiccated long before they might ever get close to a possible location, and active Bellows are just as dangerous. Mount Lauenmark thus presents our best opportunity to study how the ley lines are capable of holding Arcana in such concentrations without destroying the natural elements around them.

It is a beautiful day of mid-autumn, with the upper slopes displaying the last shades of plum, burgundy, and sienna, while the foothills and forests surrounding Daun burn in a fiery array of yellow and orange. We are accompanied by several other Dwellen staff, who are transporting our equipment on pack mules, making the ascent far easier (though I admit I am in terrible athletic shape regardless). We brought with us an instrument capable of detecting minute traces of Arcana, resembling a tuning fork that produces a sound when these trace elements are absorbed. While our own bodies are capable of passively absorbing Arcana¹⁸, we are not sensitive enough to the amounts received to be able to detect them without specialized equipment, and detecting absorption without such equipment almost always means you are about to die from overexposure. So tuning fork it is.

By midday, we arrived at a system of caverns that likely once served as secondary Bellows, and then as passageways for magma. Such tubes are safer and easier to reach than the main chamber, itself deep within the base of the mountain, but in exchange it will also likely be more difficult to find enough evidence pointing to how the Arcana was safely transported. We immediately noticed that the cave system was uncommonly uniform,

¹⁸ Despite the importance of living tissue's ability to absorb Arcana, Harte does not spend much time on the subject, instead focusing on arcana and ley line composition. The application of force will always be inefficient until the nature of said force is wholly understood. This is one of Harte's many Truths.

evenly spread through the rock, and once again calling to mind the comparison to a system of nerves. While portions of our bodies hold denser concentrations, nowhere is Arcana completely absent. It was Nora's suggestion that we treat this coincidence more seriously, and use the uniformity of the tubes to try to isolate a section of the mountain where the "nerves" are at their densest.

It did not take long before we stumbled across them, a jumble of interconnecting tunnels and chambers where trace amounts of Arcana still appeared to flow. But in the gloom of these lifeless shafts, there appeared to be little other than bare rock. I sat there in the dark for what felt like hours, through every lesson and note I possessed about Arcana, before finally arriving at one of its most unique qualities: it is famous for being colorless, similar to untreated glass, and yet even the purest, thinnest glass can be detected by the way it diffuses light. I recommended we burn through our entire supply of oil at once, hoping that the sheer illumination would produce an effect strong enough to reveal something.

And I was right.

For the briefest of moments, as our makeshift bonfire made its brightest light, I noticed something clinging to the walls of the cavern. How could I have not seen it before? It is what aids the tunnels in giving their uniform appearance: a slight, almost unnoticeable residue clinging to the rock, similar to a protective coating. I suspect this is the result of small accumulations of uncharged arcana over an extremely long period of time, similar to how water and wind might eventually shape towering spires or the deepest canyons.

Here, the Arcana has solidified into a brittle, nearly invisible substance that defies our current understanding of Arcana's plasmic nature. I now theorize that because this residue is identical to Arcana except for its solid state, plasmic Arcana passes harmlessly through. To make a comparison, consider ice and frigid, liquid water. Lacking a difference in temperature large enough to melt the ice, the liquid water can instead only smooth and shape it. The ice will last until the water is warm enough to melt it away, and so perhaps the Arcanum will remain until a sufficient current of fluid, charged Arcana once again runs through these passages.

It took a great deal of time and effort scraping away in utter blackness, but eventually we were able to break free several pieces of this residue, which I have now classified as "Arcanum," due to its solid structure. Most of the arcanum fractured into the smallest dust, blowing away into nothing, but enough made it into our vials for further study. Nora and I could barely contain our excitement as the Dwellen guided us out of the caverns using a system of twine we had laid out beforehand, and in the glinting evening sun, I held a vial into the light, our hearts swelled with pride.

Lightning in a bottle.

A.E. #4

We saw firsthand how life on this planet struggles to cope with the changes left behind by the Harte Event. The local ecosystem is in total disarray, with only opportunist species truly benefiting, seemingly at the expense of everything else.

Numerous groves of pine, birch, and cedar lay tossed about as if a storm tore through, and many of the birds that made their homes in the upper branches and hollow trunks are nowhere to be found. Have they left to find new patches of forest that remain intact? They will be forced to compete for space and resources, and may simply die from exhaustion before finding a new home, according to Hellene. To see a bird tumble from the freedom of the sky...it is a terrible thing.

Thankfully the escarpment is not entirely deprived of life. We stumbled across a series of strange holes, each driven sharply several inches into the dirt, and within these holes we found faint remains of burrowing beetles, worms, and other invertebrates. All three of my companions agreed that this is the work of a digging rook, a species distantly related to other corvids. The rook uses its strong, sharp beak to prod loose earth as it hunts for food, but even my basic understanding of the animal is that its beak is not long or wide enough to disperse this much soil. Was this the result of new behavior?

We received our answer moments later. We followed the cliffs for another half-mile, coming upon a small, black bird clumsily attempting to sift through the drying mud of a creek bed. It vaguely resembled a digging rook, but even from where we stood, we could see that its physiology had altered.

These creatures are known as *arcana monstrum*, or simply “monsters.”

Because Arcana effortlessly passes through organic tissue, all life on Sententiae has learned to cope with Arcana passively absorbed into the body. Usually this process is small and consistent, but in cases where tissue is rapidly exposed to large amounts of Arcana, the body violently mutates. Plants, animals, and even humans struggle to efficiently disperse

the excess Arcana, and the exposure becomes toxic. Common effects include hyper production of hormones, rapid muscle/bone growth, sterility, and madness.

In the case of this digging rook, its wings had deformed beyond flight, the bones gnarled and feathers stringy. The most remarkable change, however, was in the shape of its beak. It was much larger than average, and additional growths had gnarled the beak into a twisted shape that seemed to aid the bird in pushing through the dirt. While in most cases the process of becoming a monster is lethal, this is not guaranteed, as it is also impossible to predict. Some creatures change little, while others are driven viciously mad by pain and confusion. This rook seemed to retain its senses, but I suspect the uselessness of its wings will eventually kill it. Nonetheless, I christened it the Gimlet rook, and attempted to sketch its form as best I could.

Hellene seemed distraught over the creature's poor condition, and it's no secret she abhors the suffering monsters endure. Roald, however, was hired because of his skill in identifying and eliminating monsters that pose a threat to the expedition. Petre, meanwhile, merely wondered aloud if such a pitiful creature was still edible¹⁹.

We left the rook to its foraging, and continued on for something more substantial. Petre detected the tracks of an Imperial Elk, and we followed them away from the escarpment deeper into the forest. These sumptuous deer are highly-prized for their meat, antlers, and pelt, and mounted heads or racks are considered standard decoration among Auten elite. The tracks ended at the sight of another landslide, leading us to assume that the deer had been buried alive. It is sad to see a noble creature killed this way, but there was little we could do. By then, the sun was beginning to set, and Petre reluctantly admitted

¹⁹ They are not. Please do not attempt to hunt and consume monsters.

defeat. We retraced our steps to the escarpment and camped on the most solid ground we could find. Our night was spent among friendly chatter and endless questions about how much the world has changed. Petre seemed especially inquisitive once he learned I was the very same Harte after whom this Calamity is named. He was convinced that I would know exactly what caused it and even how to reverse the effects. I felt like I had personally failed the boy. He did, however, decide to accompany us on the expedition, bringing his family along. Roald expressed concern about this decision on our way back to the camp earlier this morning, stating that this expedition was no place for a child. I can understand why he might be worried, but I doubt we will ever be in direct harm unless we wander blindly into the wilderness.

I spent the remainder of the day compiling our findings into the first report that would be sent back to Dcr. Staudenmier. We will send it back through the ley lines upon our arrival at Dijwen, and compose the next report when we depart from there as well. Though our stay here didn't amount to much, I am happy with what we managed to find. Hellene took extensive notes of the alterations to the local ecosystems, while Roald collected a number of glands from the lodge moles to develop a tincture capable of masking scent. Belric and Neelie have been speaking to many of the camp's other laborers, and Margarete has outlined the primary texts she hopes to review once we reach Dijwen. Everything feels as though it is coming into place.

Nora, I hope this is what you wanted. Our circumstances are dire, but this is the work you have always dreamed of. It wasn't until we found Arcanum that you even had the opportunity to entertain this grand dream of yours, as without it we would not have

developed the instruments that can detect arcane charges, even deep beneath the earth. It was a pivotal moment for us, both as academics and...

Well, everything else we managed to become in the brief time I knew you.

Nora's and my discovery of Arcanum has electrified the Academy; many fellow Contributors have come to see for themselves, some incredulous, others encouraging, but all of them enamored with what is surely to be a momentous occasion in Auten academic history²⁰.

The long-abandoned passages of Mount Lauenmark have become a flurry of activity, as Imperial staff establish outposts to protect this new resource, and other Contributors gather samples for research projects of their own. Nora and I, however, have earned the right to be the first scholars examining this strange substance in detail, and all other experiments have been temporarily shelved until our initial findings are published for the Academy's own use. We have been examining our small samples of Arcanum for several days now, learning something new each time.

The substance could perhaps best be described as inert, uncharged Arcana. It appears to be capable of transferring or even carrying arcane energies, but is dependent on the portion of energy redirected through it and the duration for which the sample must maintain an arcane charge. The residue was very difficult to remove from the inner walls of the passageways under Mount Lauenmark, and I suspect this will remain true even with specialized excavation equipment. It is extremely brittle to the point of crumbling into

²⁰ Truly, the discovery of Arcanum was a spark of enlightenment across the whole of Sententiae for all time, let alone a singular empire.

dust under the softest touch, and much of our initial sample was prematurely destroyed while we struggled to transport and contain it efficiently. In addition, Dcr. Staudenmier informed us that after a full scale sweep of the caverns within Mount Lauenmark, only a handful possessed enough of the substance to be safely collected, at least until a better extraction method is developed²¹. While its fragility does pose additional concerns about its usefulness, the potential of this “Arcanum” substance is unrivaled to anything else I have ever studied.

Another unique attribute of the arcanum is its ability to “recharge” and return to its plasmic, highly volatile state. This is comparatively impractical, however, as the amount of Arcana reclaimed from such reactions is miniscule, and until we become aware of additional reserves of Arcanum, it is best we minimize experimentation that would destroy valuable samples.

But despite these many obstacles, Nora and I attack each day with a vigor I might have scarcely imagined when I first arrived at the Academy. A single discovery has granted us recognition, additional resources, and most importantly, a sense of surety in our places here. I must admit to you, reader, that in my most private moments, I was often overcome with feelings of mediocrity. Despite the support of my assistant, my superiors, and my family and friends, it is easy to let your mind slip into those darker corners that remind you unrelentingly of your failures and shortcomings. But Nora has been a positive influence, if only indirectly. I do not know what her body of research consisted of when she

²¹ Such an improved extraction method has yet to be found, leaving the collection of Arcanum a very costly, dangerous undertaking. What few mines have been unearthed are guarded zealously, and potential sites are subject to constant violence as interested parties vie for control.

was a Contributor (though I suspect it concerns the ley lines and arcana much like my own), but watching her consistent and enthusiastic efforts in our own research demonstrates how one cannot abandon their pride just because you fall. Nora is a Dweller, yes, a designation that carries with it some social stigma, but what truly defines a Dweller is their willingness to ignore such naysayers, and continue their work not just to reclaim Citizenship, but for the good of all. Much like my mother Altra. I know that Nora will eventually be reoffered her Citizenship, and I will gladly serve as her sponsor before Readmissions²² when the time comes.

In a similar manner, I have also found a modicum of kinship with Dcr. Staudenmier himself! He is nothing like the hard-nosed, fanatical, ruthless lapdog that many others (specifically former Contributors) have described. It is likely they are jealous of the authority he wields, or are simply vengeful he advocated for their removal from the Contributions Academy. It is true that Dcr. Staudenmier's standards are relentlessly high, but they are also well-tempered by a lifetime of experience in academia. He is well aware of internal politics, common obstacles, and personal failings that might delay progress, and he has been willing to compromise and adjust so long as we demonstrate a sincere effort to overcome these issues. I have, however, witnessed a handful of interactions with a few Contributors who attempted to hide their lack of success, and Dcr. Staudenmier's anger is a humbling power to behold. Each time their Citizenship was immediately revoked and their records flagged to prevent them from ever regaining Citizenship, even

²² Here, Harte is referring to the Readmissions Committee, one of the endless Auten bureaucratic institutions, and another way for the Contributions Academy to exert authority on Auten society as a whole. Any Dweller seeking to regain their Citizenship must be approved by the Readmissions Committee, and as you might expect, grudges and personal politics dominate the conversation.

in the event of Dcr. Staudenmier's death. Such Dwellen are scorned by the entirety of Auten society, forced into the lowest of our social classes. Their names are scrubbed from any Imperial texts, their successes attributed to others, and their very identity claimed by the Empire. Even the caste itself lacks a name. Such persons are derisively called the "Others"²³, the slovenly, discarded remnants of decent Auten society.

Watching Dcr. Staudenmier enact such bold punishments is a humbling sight, and a vivid reminder to remain honest.

Nora and I met for lunch today in the gardens surrounding the Academy, and I speak to you now with considerable warmth. She has finally confided in me the body of work during her tenure as a Contributor: studying, measuring, and ultimately preventing the seismic activity associated with Arcana and the ley lines.

While the power of Arcana spurs innovation and nourishes our natural world, it is not without its drawbacks. The ley lines are under constant stress as they struggle to contain such considerable force, and occasionally this stress results in ruptures at weak points along the ley lines' structure. Similar to other natural forces, Arcana will take the path of least resistance, and so these ruptures are immediately subjected to a torrent of power. These new passages cannot handle the sudden influx of energy, and as a result, are violently expanded or destroyed. This is often how new Bellows are formed, as eventually the pathway will reach a stasis in which it can adequately support the flow of Arcana, but

²³ Supplemental texts concerning the Others are difficult to come by, as the very nature of this social caste prevents academics from openly studying or discussing the phenomenon. To exist without recognition is capital punishment among the Auten people, and yet to others it is the sweetest of freedoms.

most often this simply results in earthquakes surrounding the affected area, many of which are highly destructive. This constant battle between power and containment gradually alters the entire network of ley lines, as older maps of their rough geographic locations do not resemble our modern counterparts.

This has a number of effects. First, the natural world must sometimes adapt to a rapidly altered ecosystem, as Arcana leaves one region and enters another. Fertile areas receiving additional Arcana become the lushest of paradises, while turn barren and withered by comparison. The inverse is also true, with frail landscapes becoming outright inhospitable as Arcana decimates what little life clings to the soil. Other harsh regions are allowed to heal when their own levels of Arcana return to a more sustainable percentage.

As you can imagine, all this push and pull has a dramatic effect on the path societies and cultures evolve. Thriving peoples are suddenly brought to poverty and desperation, while others are lifted to greatness. The balance of power throughout the Tempered Realms is thus frequently upended, causing internal strife and diplomatic tension. This is the true source of the Auten Empire's success, as it was our Imperial wisdom that sought out the most stable geographic locales for our cities and strongholds. While we cannot take advantage of plentiful Arcana, neither are we denied its complete absence, and this stability allowed us to slowly but consistently improve our standing throughout the continent. It was the Auten people that first realized the power of stability and consistency.

But even we are not entirely free of risk, should the ley lines undergo a more systemic and far-reaching change. Many believe that the world of Sententiae—as we

know it—was in fact the result of a planet-wide restructuring of the ley lines, a titanic shift in the balance of power. Every people throughout the Tempered Realms possess hints and shadows of it in their mythologies and theological texts, though the lack of serious academic study puts this theory under intense pressure. Having read a little on the subject itself, I came to the conclusion that it was much more of a social upheaval than a literal geographic one. Ley line quakes were almost certainly involved, but I suspect the catastrophe often mentioned in the legends refers more to the eruption of a continent-wide war as competing powers sought to take advantage of the vacuum of power.

Regardless of legends, stronger seismic activity is theoretically possible, and such an event could once again tip the scales of power throughout the Tempered Realms, and that is what inspired Nora to make this her area of focus. It is not necessarily the balance of power that spurs Nora, but the safety and prosperity of not only the Auten Empire, but everyone across Sententiae. It is a remarkably noble goal, one that reminds me of my mother's selflessness. Nora and Altra would have gotten along, I'm sure.

After Nora left—returning to our lab to catalogue which equipment needed maintenance—I remained in the garden, contemplating our research. They are not such distant fields, the more I think about it. A greater understanding of Arcana's internal logic would surely provide a full explanation for how and why the ley lines generate such destructive seismic waves, and studying these quakes and their effect on the natural and civilized worlds might grant me insight as to how they are likely to function in any given ecosystem.

Nora has been so generous with her time and knowledge; it is only fair I should reciprocate, right?

And so I approached her later this evening, after our research for the day had concluded, and made the following proposal: Nora and I would combine our research, studying the seismic activity of the ley lines so that they might increase our understanding of the rules that bind them. She was immediately ecstatic, and in a moment of overpowering enthusiasm, rushed to my side and held me close. I remember her voice breaking, so thankful was she to have another opportunity to continue her work. We remained in our lab well into the night, drafting our proposal for Dcr. Staudenmier, sketching potential experiments, and selecting locations for field experiments. Never before have I relished the company of a colleague so warmly. We spoke and laughed and planned not just as partners in the pursuit of knowledge, but as friends.

Nora is my dear friend.

I speak to you now, reader, in the early hours of the following morning, having remained long after Nora retired to her private quarters elsewhere in the Citizen's Ring. I am content, and awash with enthusiasm for the coming months. My research has been important, yes, but I admit I often worried it lacked enough focus. I believe Nora has provided that focus, and that by examining the ley lines, we can stop potential catastrophe, and begin to harness the true power of Arcana. A sun is rising. I feel its heat.

Chapter 3

Dijwen

The Free and Imperial City of Dijwen, they've started calling it.

It is the last city before the Borders, that vast mountain range in the center of our continent, separating my people from the other great power of the Tempered Realms, Ginostra. They were the ones who stole Dijwen out from under us, if you believe such gossip. Yes, the Ginostrans have long been influential within the city and indeed the rest of the Dijwenian territory, but they did not march soldiers to the gates of the city, did they²⁴? It passed peacefully into independence, the first Auten territory to do so. In the wake of the Harte Event, however, I worry that such small monarchies such as this will be the first to fall. As we approach the eastern side of the city's outskirts and look upon the vast sea of tents and idle wagons, I wonder what sort of interesting times we have fallen into.

Like Daun, Dijwen seems to be drowning in refugees. Normally this agriculturally rich region would be able to support such an influx of hungry mouths, but initial reports of the Harte Event's damage included vast flooding along the Dijwenian lowlands, destroying the land's ability to produce food. Dijwen itself hoards large reserves in the event of famine, and I imagine they will burn through it all and more as they struggle to feed everyone. Bernherd, our captain of the guard, recommended we stay out of the city proper in the event of such unrest, and as our wagons shamle past the hungry masses, I can understand his paranoia. Still, it feels wrong of me to sit here writing while innocent lives are thrown

²⁴ As a matter of fact, the Ginostran Empire engaged in a decades-long war of sabotage and political machination in order to gain control of the city. Superficially, Dijwen became an independent state, but it was ruled by a rotating cast of puppets, comparatively minor players in the obscuring of the Truth.

about. We have been graciously allowed to stay in the summer cottage of Dijwen's newest monarch, Audwulf Volker. We will meet with him there as well, to discuss how our two states might collaborate on reconstruction.

This new king, Volker, seems an adequate choice. Once the Dijwenian ambassador to the Auten Empire, he now fashions himself a Free and Imperial Monarch, an exhausting and derivative title²⁵. He is less beholden to Ginostran interests than previous monarchs, which is itself largely the reason he was elected. Some of my fellow Contributors would argue this was only meant to soothe flaring tensions in the area as Ginostra and Aute fight over dominance. I would not be surprised if our neighbors through the mountains are wondering if the balance of power will shift in their favor.

While our caravan was escorted to the cottage, Neelie and I took to a road that circles the city, looking to better assess how the Harte Event manifested here, and how Dijwenian farmers are faring. The initial reports were correct, as we could see the Erboine river delta had become mired in stagnant water and rotting vegetation. Many farms abandoned animals they could not herd onto higher ground, leaving a potent stench of rotting flesh hanging in the air. Neelie is furiously taking note of everything around her; like me she is insatiable when it comes to comprehensive records, her own Stenographer hovering just beside mine, yet flawlessly copying only what she dictates. It looks as though the bulk of this crop will be lost, and until the waters subside, new planting will not happen. Many of these farmers will have to leave their land behind, and head for either the city or whatever patch of dry land still remains.

²⁵ It is remarkable that Harte avoids the irony of his own people's long-winded titles.

I wonder what this girl thinks of it all. She is only twenty years of age; seeing such extensive trauma must settle heavy on the mind.²⁶

Dijwenian flooding. Blood in water?

From the desk of Ctr. Neelie Anouk²⁷

The Dijwenian people are being swept away by the damned ocean. Every time I see another farmer trapped on his roof, huddled around a pig and some chickens, I'm reminded that this is what living through the end of days looks like, a total collapse of society.

But only if we fail. If we succeed, a partial collapse.²⁸

I'm not surprised that Dijwen is suffering, since the city's elite has always seemed more interested in Ginostran economics than their own people's wellbeing. It is despicable. Harte is convinced the Dijwenians will *surely* unveil their official response to the Event, but I am convinced that Harte is naive about the national preference for self-interest. He's always been a company man, loyal to the authorities that be. It's why Staudenmier likes him so much²⁹. But Nora fell for him too, so maybe there's more than I'm seeing. He's doing a decent job at leading the expedition, at least. I'll see if that lasts once we run into real danger. Otherwise I'm hiding behind Roald.

As our wagon tops this hill, I can see the neighboring village of Uddendam, which has been completely inundated with the Erboine river despite the levees constructed farther upstream. They were a local landmark for quite a long time, renowned for their

²⁶ Quite the opposite. Neelie Anouk represents an indomitable spirit of youth, understanding the true value of perseverance. In this way she is a Prophet.

²⁷ Many of Neelie Anouk's materials were discovered alongside Harte's, and provide valuable insight into how the cultures and religions of the Tempered Realms combated the Harte Event. Please keep in mind that Anouk's writing is very different from Harte's: like Nora, she believed in simplicity.

²⁸ As well as her particularly bleak sense of humor. A coping mechanism, I suppose.

²⁹ It is amusing, perhaps, to consider that Anouk recorded all this from the same wagon where Harte composed his own entries.

construction, and now it's all pissing in the wind like a beaver trying to dam the ocean. You would think that Dijwen would know that repairing the levees would speed up efforts to reclaim some of the nearby farmland, but as I asked a passing merchant, it seems that the people of Uddendam have been forced to rebuild on their own. As the man described it, everyone is pitching in to help, which may sound heartwarming but hurts the farmers even more so in the long run. If the levees are repaired shoddily with inferior materials they'll just break again the next time someone sneezes in their direction³⁰. I tried telling the man that the workers should be warned, but he dismissed me once he saw the wagon's Auten design.

The Ginostrans poured obscene amounts of work into turning this city against us. I should have expected this kind of response.

As we complete our circling of the city, I did see one custom soldiering on despite the chaos: the Line Hunt. If you're unfamiliar, children coming of age are taken on a hunt by the family's matriarch/patriarch, and should they be successful, it's said the children's lives will be prosperous and happy. While I will defend these traditions as necessary for morale, I hope they're being realistic. They aren't going to kill anything out there.

We've returned to the spot we began. Once again, I think occupying a mansion in the middle of a planet-wide disaster is dangerously selfish. And yet, when I see the many desperate eyes watching us go by, I am happy for the walls and locks. Maybe I'm driven by self-interest just as much as everyone else is.

³⁰ Unfortunately, Anouk's prediction was correct. A particularly powerful, delayed aftershock tore through the Dijwenian lowlands just weeks after Harte's expedition traveled through the area. For a second time, the newly planted crops were ruined, and mass starvation began to follow.

Dcr. Brennan Harte

After Neelie and I returned from Dijwen's ring road, I caught Hellene and Roald just before they were set to leave on a hike along the Erboine river, to better assess the damage to local species. I offered to accompany them, since our meeting with Volker was not until after supper, and though I detected a moment of hesitation, they agreed, and waited for me to procure my own set of clothes for wading in the shallow water. Though the delta has flooded, the water nearest the bank only rises to our knees, making movement tedious but still possible. Many of Dijwen's farms sat *below* the level of the river, in the fertile plains nestled between the rolling hills. Now they seem an archipelago, countless oases of dry farmland.

I admit that Hellene and Roald's opinion of me has been weighing on my mind. I am sure I saw them share a look of disappointment, but I am not enough of an oaf to ask them outright. Despite how much it frustrates me, I can see where their doubt comes from. I seem a frail bookworm compared to their robust experience with the outdoors. On the other hand, compared to Belric and Margarete, I am as strong as an ox. I feel separate from them all, distinct in a way that makes me a poor leader. I find that every decision I attempt to make is haunted by the specter of what Nora might do in my stead. Should I adhere as best I can to her methods and opinions? Or has my very presence as the leader of the expedition forced us on another path?

Erboine River Valley

From the desk of Dcr. Hellene Vanburg³¹

These ecosystems are in total disarray. The wetlands surrounding the river are rapidly draining, and the Erboine cannot handle the higher waters. Fish and invertebrates are being swept out to sea, and the enormous flocks of waterfowl that call this region home are nowhere to be found, likely scattered across whatever pitiful creeks and ponds happen to be on higher ground. Of particular note is the complete absence of the Udden Shelduck along the shorelines of both the river and coastline eighteen miles further southeast. Not only is that is the very bird this town is named after, it was also the species that filled the bulk of my thesis concerning migration patterns from the mating grounds along the Sjolbardi peninsula. This “surge” of Arcana, or whatever Harte is calling it has surely devastated the natural world the whole way over. My heart splinters for the millions of creatures that will suffer due to our reckless machinations with magic.³²

Roald, bless him, believes many of them have possibly survived due to arcane mutation, but I will vehemently disagree with his use of the term “survive”. I remember that waddling rook Harte was so enamoured with. He was happy to gawk at it, drawing about in his journal, but the animal’s wellbeing was secondary, and I suspect it has already died, since a flightless bird is almost certainly a doomed bird. Perhaps others “got lucky” with their mutations, an idea I refuse to consider with that briny, lovable oaf. Magic is

³¹ Though I understand the difficulty in reading so many authors in the same text, it is vital that you familiarize yourself with the character of these other Prophets, who fulfill Harte’s quest for the truth in their own way, and help facilitate his growth both as an academic and as a person.

I will return to them on occasion, so that you might better understand their motivations at critical times in the expedition.

³² In these passages, note Hellene’s fondness for even the plainest of species, and her strong belief that the use of Arcana as an energy source is ultimately what caused the Harte Event. Though the Truth is far different and much more complicated, her mistrust of Arcana was an important distinction compared to her peers.

spectacular, yes, but we must stop seeing these monsters as creatures equal to their natural counterparts. The suffering these animals must endure outweighs any “useful” mutation. I will strongly recommend to the Uddendam people, many of whom are the worst affected by the flooding, to seek out pristine examples of their local species for careful breeding, so that healthy populations might bounce back sooner than the next 200 years. Otherwise they might as well pack up and abandon these fields to the encroachment of swamp.

Meanwhile, Roald is digging through the mud trying to find mutant shellfish, while Harte is chattering with the townsfolk as if they are just as much victims of this calamity as the natural world. As far as I’m concerned, the societies we’ve built on the back of Arcana have been on borrowed time since the beginning. Arcana is a natural force as destructive as wildfire and as impossible to predict as lightning. It was foolish to think we could harness it for our own use, and now the wilds are paying the price.

Nora should be the one leading us, I think. Harte is a good enough man, but he lacks a firm sense of direction, and seems more concerned about his reputation among the staff more than he does the success of his own mission³³. I don’t think that’s going to change until he sees the forest for the withering trees.

Spring - River

From Roald Torstein

They asked I write for this. Hate writing, especially with these machines doing the writing for us. But I don’t like talking almost as much as I don’t like writing, so there it is.

³³ Hellene is the most outspoken about her mistrust in Harte’s ability to lead, and she is not wrong. Towards the beginning, Harte did not have the disposition necessary to adequately control such an important mission. It would have to be tempered in the fires of sacrifice and trauma.

There is good game in these fields, if you know where to look, even under all this water. Too many farms, though. I feel for the people here but this is what happens when you try and tame the world. It fights back.

Found another mutated rook on a hike with Hellene and Harte, similar to the one we saw earlier. Like the last one it can't fly, and its beak has grown. Better for feeding, but disastrous for survival. They are easy pickings for even the laziest of dogs. If I had to guess, an entire flock was struck by an Arcana current. Likely the whole flock will die.

The Erboine is murky and rushing. I laid nets to study the fish I'll catch, if they're not dead too. I worry that waste from the city is seeping into the water. Should inspect the sewers for leaks. Collected a number of mussels, too. They can live through anything.

Taste good with a little sea salt.³⁴

Dcr. Brennan Harte

Our meeting with Volker went terribly. He arrived at our cottage just after sunset, and from his slurred speech and clumsy posturing, I suspect he was drunk, though we did not dare accuse him of this openly. He was dressed in the most opulent furs (which infuriated Hellene), and lavished his hands with jewelry. He came off as a bizarre character in a peasant's story, a king so selfish and extravagant that no one would think he was real.

³⁴ Roald is the last of the new voices I will introduce to you. Be at peace; his writing is sparse, and devoid of decoration. Over the course of this almanac, you will see that he is a man of action, if few words. He is also the most charitable of the Prophets with his time and expertise. Finally, like Hellene, he believes that the Harte Event is a response to an imbalance in the natural order, and holds more affection for the wild places of Sententiae than its cities and monuments.

Erboine mussels taste better with rock salt.

And yet there he stood before us, seemingly more concerned with his personal wealth and how it appeared to others than he was with helping his people.

He first dominated the conversation with the story of his rise to prominence, how his grandfather inherited the prestige of a great house nearby, and how they have slowly cemented that prestige with his being elected monarch. Though he stumbled through the name, I recognized the house his own had replaced: he was speaking of Lord Roten's family, and I wondered to myself how Petre would react, seeing his family's noble status claimed by such a fool. Thankfully, the boy was elsewhere.

We attempted to steer the conversation toward gaining access to Dijwenian records concerning the ley lines, but all Volker wanted to talk about was the rumor circulating among the working class that a rebellion was forming to usurp Volker's throne and take back Dijwen for the Auten Empire. He cursed and raved, and struck us all as paranoid and hateful. He seemed completely ill-equipped to handle the idea that he will always have critics.

None of us said so, but it was painfully clear that this meeting was lost; we were not going to get any valuable information or diplomatic concessions, at least not until he sobered up. We cut the meeting short so that he could return to his apartments in the city, and then evaluated how we might adapt our approach.

I spoke with Petre later that evening, finding his conversation as a humble hunter much more engaging than Volker's pompousness. He visited the people of Uddendam, using his first wages on a nice meal for his family. While he was there, however, he learned that Volker was telling the truth: a rebellion was being discussed among the most disgruntled farmers, who see their new king's inaction as unacceptable. Petre spoke highly of these

men and women, and of their desire for direct action to better help the people of Dijwen. I supported his enthusiasm, but cautioned him against anything that could be construed as violent. Tensions are immeasurably high already, and destabilizing a small state like Dijwen will only entrench further the unwillingness of larger realms to help. This deflated Petre, but I believe my advice will be well considered³⁵.

I now sit at the desk in my own quarters, reviewing what my Stenographer has composed. It is a small but warm room on the eastern side of the cottage, with a fine view of the city. Even at this late hour, I can see the fires of the refugee camps burning all around the city walls, and I wonder how many of them are like Petre, dreaming up revolution. Volker has revealed himself to be an utter buffoon, yes, but he is still the elected monarch of the realm, and unity is more important than rotating through leaders until a suitable one is found, as any replacements will potentially be just as bad as Volker, without his considerable diplomatic experience. Ultimately I believe he is capable of rising to the challenge, especially if we are there to guide him. Nora would have had no trouble correcting his embarrassing behavior. She never cared much for the sanctity of authority, always pushing back and speaking up. I was too meek at the time, but it was always what I admired the most about her, and one of the reasons I fell in love with her.

Nora and I have been working furiously in recent days to accommodate the complicated array of conditions exacted upon us for our proposals to study the ley lines' seismic activity. Dcr. Staudenmier has been especially demanding, at least in comparison to the majority of my dealings with him, but I cannot disagree with this meticulous nature.

³⁵ Harte believes his advice to be of value to the poor and those most affected by the Harte Event. In such violent times, the words of the privileged taste as bitter as ash.

He has requested all upcoming data to be submitted directly to him for Imperial Review before publication, and that all further field experiments are conducted with Imperial guards for our own protection; apparently our success has fostered malcontent with some of the other Contributors, as well as among the academic community at large. I first received such news with great anxiety, but Dcr. Staudenmier assured me that such risks are a natural part of the supremacy of the Contributions Academy, and that being targeted merely indicates our success.

Nora is not as receptive to these imposed conditions, finding them restrictive and counter to the independence that invited our success in the first place. I can see why she might see additional supervision as stifling, especially because of the scrutiny a Dweller seeking to reclaim Citizenship would be under, but our relationship with Dcr. Staudenmier is nothing but cordial and mutually beneficial; I see no reason to think that will change just because our research has expanded in scope. Nevertheless, I frequently find myself attempting to calm her flaring emotions, though perhaps it is more accurate to say that my own are stifled in comparison.

It never seemed important growing up, being so emotive. My mother was a serene woman, honest and warm yet disciplined, and my father preferred the simplicity of isolation to navigating innumerable social contracts, and so I was thus raised in a house of restraint and pacification. But there is something electrifying about Nora's enthusiasm, curiosity, impatience, and humor. It keeps morale high and mitigates tedium, though it is also frequently distracting. As these passages are composed, I think of how often she has shown up in these journals, and how much she has influenced me, despite my being her

superior. In many ways the opposite is in fact true; my intellect is broad, but it is Nora who provides us focus, providing the framework in which our research is placed.

It is an endearing contradiction. Nora has fine-tuned our work at the Contributions Academy, and yet I am increasingly preoccupied with her.

I am beginning to worry. It is easy to see what is happening, and yet impossible to muster the courage to hold back. My free time is pressed into a sieve, funneled into what Nora might think of this or say to that, and my daydreams are awash with our next experiment or discovery. She captures my attention when we are together, and entices it when we are apart.

I am falling in love with her.

This revelation consumed my mind, forcing me to excuse myself from the lab. I now idly wander the gardens in the Citizen's Ring, frantically attempting to sort through such complicated feelings. Nora has become a dear friend and esteemed academic partner, and would I risk such an arrangement for decidedly selfish, personal reasons? If I do, and share with her these affections, both possible outcomes would almost certainly impede our work. If she shares these feelings, we would almost certainly be distracting one another. If she does not, I risk souring the partnership that has fostered such consistent progress.

I will attempt an exercise Nora showed me last month. With her usual candor, Nora told me that I speak too rigidly, too formally. She argued it clouds my judgment and

resolve, and that there is clarity in simplicity. If I am to understand these feelings, they must be presented plainly:³⁶

“Nora is a wonderful person. She is kind, passionate, and driven.

I am hopelessly in love with her, but if I tell her how I feel, I worry that our work at the Academy will suffer, or worse, she will reject me.

(This is exceedingly difficult. How do people talk using only small words??)

My mother always taught me that it is better to be sad and doubtless than it is to be happily uncertain. But my mother is gone, maybe because of these very same opinions.

I will tell her. If I kept this to myself, I would be driven mad.”

I am looking over my Stenographer’s notes, and am embarrassed to admit how pompous I sound. If these journals are going to be privately owned some day, must I really make them so meandering and dense? It’s best I simplify, though I am also embarrassed to admit how hard this is. A formal education is a difficult habit to break, it seems.

I decided to take the remainder of the day off, giving Nora a hasty excuse that I felt ill. Having already exhausted the Citizen’s Ring, I decided to explore the Worldly Ring, in the hopes that in all the organized chaos, I will be left alone.

Despite the noise, it’s easy to speak to my Stenographer here, as everyone is so busy they have no time to watch me seemingly talk to myself. Having privacy in such a crowded area is a wonderful discrepancy, and the cacophony of sensory input is surprisingly

³⁶ This is the first instance Harte deliberately attempts to simplify his language for clarity’s sake, beginning a long process that would make his writing easier for the common people to understand. He sought to bring the Truth to as many people as possible. I admit I myself struggle with phrasing things simply. There’s a stiff comfort in the complexity of language.

conducive to thought. Maybe that is just because it is a change of pace? Regardless, I weigh my options. Personal relationships within the Contributions Academy are not forbidden, though they are widely considered risky due to the rigorous standards. There is also an unfortunate social stigma among Citizens and Dwellen who are romantically attached, though as my mother married a Dwellen, that's not something that concerns me. Our family already has a reputation for stepping outside the boundaries of typical Auten behavior. Maybe I can find a sense of pride in continuing the tradition.

Is it wrong to languish over this? Is this not just another example of my habit of painfully drawing everything out? Why not just tell her, and let the future unfold how it may? I have overcome a great many obstacles in my life to get here. Surely I can survive another.

Dijwen #2

Today I found myself pining for academia, the robust debate and innovation. Volker canceled another meeting we had scheduled inside the city, citing security concerns about one of the guards, but we can only assume the lump is wandering drunk around the corridors of his castle. It seems we may have to look elsewhere for Dijwenian leadership. I did not know what to do with my morning until I heard that the esteemed Rue Visser, a local expert on Arcana and the Dijwenian lowlands' network of ley lines, would be giving a free lecture outside the city. It seems that she caught wind of our expedition and decided to assist us, freely sharing her knowledge of the ley lines so that we might be more prepared should catastrophe strike us again. I snuck in after the lecture had begun.

I found her candor refreshing, if a little inappropriate. The cadence was lively and enthusiastic, and she spent the bulk of her time discussing a hypothesis about the Dijwenian Fracture. Similar to our own about how the lines move slowly underneath Sententiae's surface, Visser argued that the ley lines are capable of detecting minute changes in their surrounding environment, and use that information to semi-consciously decide where they might be best rearranged. As Arcana is recycled, making its way down whatever ley line it has been thrust into, its unique composition of energy and matter sets off what Visser described as a chemical response, similar to that of our own body's immune system. If the Arcana is found to be weak, or even too violent, the ley lines begin a slow, steady adjustment, so that the Arcana can replenish its energies in more balanced environments. It is a fascinating idea, and indeed geologic records seem to indicate smaller ley lines moving throughout any particular region, if only a little at a time. Perhaps it the potential energy in these adjustments that can eventually produce a Harte Event? It's possible, especially if other ley lines fail to adjust in time, or a ley line passes through a fault line or across a continental plate.

Visser ended her lecture with a far more radical notion, more of a guess, in my opinion: that there are additional Harte Events preceding recorded history. While I am not unwilling to consider the possibility that such an Event has happened before, the rate at which ley lines move indicates they are an extreme rarity, even measured in the vastness of geologic time. But Visser seemed to assert that they were a far more frequent occurrence than our current understanding would allow, and that our world's defining characteristic is its ability to rebound after a Harte Event with comparative speed. I could not consider such a thing with any seriousness. If Harte Events are as common as Visser says, then evidence

of their existence is extraordinarily well-hidden. It seems as though Dijwenian science, while robust, is a little too fraught with superstition as well.

I decided to meet with Visser after her lecture to discuss our clashing opinions. To my surprise, she vehemently disagreed with my hypothesis that Harte Events are relatively new on the world stage because of our increased use of Arcana as an energy source. Though she agreed that our using Arcana has likely accelerated them, she insisted that there are traces of many other Harte Events that simply haven't been found. When I asked what evidence she had produced to support such a claim, she could not provide anything definitive, and for the first time, I am happy my name is attached to the Calamity. Perhaps it's best, since it might prevent additional, exasperating theories such as this one from muddying the waters of true academic study.

Visser noticed the doubt on my face and became offended. It was not my intention to rile her, but if a scientist cannot suffer criticism, especially when their methods are lackluster, than perhaps they should seek out another profession. Nora and I formed these opinions together; I will not allow such ill-conceived "science" to besmirch her name³⁷.

I left our meeting frustrated, and sought out Petre, who was once again conferring with the farmers from Uddendam at a local tavern. He seemed distracted, and asked if we might convene another time, hunched over some crumpled piece of parchment that he tucked underneath an arm as I approached. I was disappointed, but I suppose I can't expect everyone to be at my beck and call. I decided to instead look for Margarete, who had ventured inside the city to study some of Dijwen's materials concerning the ley lines. In her usual fashion, Margarete sidestepped protocol and simply persuaded the librarian to allow

³⁷ It is interesting that Harte refused to consider Visser's theory. It will be some time before Harte is willing to acknowledge that there are those who will gladly hide away the truth of history if it cements their hold on power.

her access to the restricted materials, using her status as a member of the Contributions Academy as leverage. I found her among several dozen books scattered around the room, sitting in the middle of them like a rat building a nest. And yet this is easily Margarete at her most comfortable: surrounded by literature, spinning some complicated web of information. I decided to wait until she took a break, though I don't know how long I will have to wait. Nora once told me to wait until the books have formed a complete circle around her.

Cross Referencing Dijwenian Texts

From the Desk of Margarete Derse

The Dijwenian records of pre-Harte Event history are scant if not removed entirely from what few archives are publicly available, and only go back as far as the colony's founding. I cannot possibly conceive the illusions of grandeur one must possess to knowingly squirrel away histories that precede your turn as monarch. It's something a child would do, and if last night's dinner is any indication, that Volker sod is as childish as they come. Compounded with Staudenmier's incessant rules and Harte's watching my every move (I think he's sitting behind me. Why didn't Nora ever tell him how annoying that is?), uncovering any and all mentions of potential Harte Events is going to be my greatest challenge. I invite such challenge, but I can admit it is maddening at the same time.

For example, there is a great deal of Ginostran propaganda in these texts. The loaded rhetoric makes it hard to discern the local history of the ley lines because everything is forced through some economic lens, such as how ley line activity has affected economic

development. The Ginostrans always have favored lining their pockets; if I have to read one more entry about the tragedy of losing banking information, I will set this book on fire.

Thankfully, there is valuable data to be found, in their census records. I have noticed a large influx of Ginostran refugees settling in the Dijwen region on a schedule roughly correlating with periods of increased seismic activity. It's not very definitive, but it does reaffirm Harte's suspicion that the Event is not the first. I will ask the archivist here to make copies of the dates I select, so that I might corroborate them with other texts in the future.

I admit that Harte did not impress me to begin with, but then again, neither did Nora, and she was one of the best of us. It is a great shame she never received her Citizenship back before her death. I would have liked to have seen the heights she might have reached. Maybe Harte is capable of that as well, but he'll have to abandon his doubts if he's going to get us through this³⁸.

Dcr. Brennan Harte

Margarette and I spoke for a brief time after she had finished her work, though the only thing I managed to learn about her was that she hates being called Margarette. Instead she insisted I use Mardie³⁹. The lack of formality seems a bit strange, especially since I hardly know the woman, but if this will help thin the ice between us, so be it.

³⁸ It is interesting to see how the other members of the expedition doubted Harte's abilities, despite his own self-confidence displayed earlier in the almanac. There is no sense in wondering if Nora Sele would have done better, though.

³⁹ From this point on, Mardie will be the name used for any other references to or materials by Margarette Derse.

I still feel detached from it all. It was in part my research that led to this expedition, and it is I who has been chosen to lead it. I have had months to prepare, and yet all that time feels utterly useless in helping me. What must someone do to learn how to be a leader? Where should they go?

Where should *I* go?

And so I wandered, back out of the city and along the ring road once again. Maybe retracing my steps will grant me a small piece of clarity. This might be a good opportunity to try Nora's exercise of using simpler language again.

During our short time in Dijwen, several problems have come up. Volker, the monarch, is useless, and my colleagues do not look to me as a leader. The Harte Event's effects on local ecosystems is much more widespread than I could have imagined, and it is almost certain that the politics on the continent will deteriorate even more, making the future of our expedition uncertain. What can I do now, to solve one of these problems?

Maybe—⁴⁰

There is light on the horizon, and shouting voices, coming from Dijwen.

Is it a fire?

No. Something's happening.

How do you put into words the madness of the world?

I saw Dijwen fall into chaos. There were crowds beating on the gates, tents outside the city covered in flames. I wasted no time racing back to the cottage to inform the others,

⁴⁰ I have edited in the appropriate punctuation. Remember that Harte is dictating these entries aloud to his Stenographer, so certain circumstances need additional clarification. In this case, Harte witnessed something that interrupted him mid-sentence.

and we packed our things as quickly as we could. Often I heard shouting outside the cottage, and I wondered if a mob would storm this house and kill me where I stand, without even knowing who I was or what I was trying to do. They might simply see this house and assume I'm working for the man they wished to see torn to pieces. Instead Bernherd's soldiers defended the cottage, scaring off anyone who wanted a closer look. Thankfully our distance from the city spared any bloodshed in our defense.

That's what this was about, we've heard. That the farmers of the surrounding villages were tired of waiting for Dijwen to act when it became clear to them that the city had no intention to. Volker's public appearances in the last several days merely set into motion malcontent that had been festering for months. And so they began to assemble, peaceably at first. But as their pleas were ignored, the poor quickly turned violent, hurling stones and flaming wood over the city walls. Wild rumors were circulating by the time the caravan was ready to leave; many said Volker attempted to address the crowds from the safety of the city walls before someone loosed an arrow into his head. Others claimed he was dragged out of the city and publicly beaten, hacked to death by farmers' tools, while even more believed it was someone else in the monarch's stead as Volker slipped out of the city through a system of tunnels. It was difficult to hear so many different versions of the same event, not knowing if the truth is more or less horrifying.

Bernherd is leading us to the west towards the Borders. There we might find safety and a place to send word back to the Empire. Morale is good considering the circumstances, but I cannot stop thinking of how lucky we actually are. Another appearance in public with Volker, being housed in the city instead of that cottage, anything that could have been different could have been what doomed us. And how many were unlucky, trapped in the

outset of chaos before they could themselves make sense of things? I see now that the Harte Event will have far deadlier consequences than I could have ever imagined.

And I feel the weight of the blame all over again.

Nora, I miss you most of all. I would not be second-guessing everything if you were still here. The only thing I know with certainty is that I can never lead this expedition in the way you might have. It was always supposed to be you. But I cannot run anymore. I must face the fact that Nora is gone, and she is not coming back. It falls to me to discover why this is happening, and what we might do—if anything—to stop it from happening again. The entire world is likely counting on us whether or not they know it, and I can't be distracted by petty appearances or grievances. Nora saw something in me, and though she departed this place before she could teach me what it was, it was there all the same. She saw it that night on the slopes of Mount Lauenmark, when we confessed our love to one another. It feels like only the briefest of moments now, but I remember standing on the top of the world that night.

The song of my heart has become a duet. Standing upon the mighty mountain that uplifts the heavens over Daun, I confessed my love to Nora, baring myself in that great cold. She did not speak for a moment, and in that moment I feared I had pressed too far, but then she took my hand in hers. I felt the calluses between her fingers like the softest fabric, and in that gasping night, she shared my affections. We scarcely noticed the cold as we looked down upon Daun, trying to make out the alleyways and garden squares that defined our courtship. Hearing her high, melodic voice and warm, graceful laugh warms the spirit in unfathomable ways.

I do not know how long we sat on those frosted peaks, basking in the timelessness of the moment. I only remember arriving at my own quarters, the totality of exhaustion gently over me, eager to claim whatever few hours of sleep remained. Even then it eluded me, as my waking mind refused to relent, conjuring memories of Nora that made my heart flutter, knowing now that she feels the same. Whenever I might finally drift into that shapeless place of dreams, I hope she is doing the same. I resolve to make myself worthy of it.

Reflection - Dijwen

From the Desk of Katrin Roth

Harte and the rest of the expedition had been gone for nearly a month before the events of that night were unraveled properly. It was in fact Petre, the hunter Harte invited onto the expedition, who had been the catalyst for the violence which eventually claimed hundreds of lives, including Audwulf Volker, monarch of the Free and Imperial City of Dijwen.

Though Harte did not know it, his words to the boy about his lost heritage lingered the dark recesses of his mind, turning apathy into potent rage. By the time he was introduced to the Uddendam farmers, he felt that his family might have been spared the chaos of the Harte Event if his ancestors hadn't lost their birthright. Taking it upon himself to reclaim noble titles for his family, Petre launched a peasant revolt outside the city. It would not have succeeded without the poor decision of Volker, who did indeed attempt to calm the crowd upon the city gates. Whoever fired the arrow was never found, but the situation quickly deteriorated as soon as it happened. Using makeshift ladders and lengths

of rope, the farmers scaled the city walls against demoralized guards, who were not properly trained in riot control. In fact, many Dijwenian guards turned on their state, assisting the farmers in causing mayhem throughout the city, and looting many homes and businesses. You need not be told the vile details, but the Dijwenian Riot is but the first example of the savagery people willingly return to in the face of extinction.

And should we blame them, against such fear and divisiveness?

I am speaking to you directly for a number of reasons. I believe that you, the reader, should be aware of the events that transpired after Harte's departure, so that you might see what may befall an entire city based on the words or actions of a single person, even indirectly. These cascading consequences illustrate the necessity of restraint, and demonstrate that even the best or most innocent of decisions can be overturned quickly. I also wish for you reflect upon what you have read so far. Though the Truth remains obscured at this point in time, the actors pushing against its hiding were already in place, and indeed many of them have existed throughout recorded history. Consider how many opportunities to uncover the Truth have been lost, because of any number of random alterations that disperse the conditions necessary for the rebellion to take root.

Why was this time different? Harte's insatiable desire for the betterment of others? The incorruptible nature of his friends? Nora's tragic disappearance? There could be one thousand and one reasons, and those of us within the Axiom Rebellion are still seeking that Truth, along with many others, it is our ultimate purpose: to uncover truths, especially those that are so well established, they are written in bone and rock and the oral tradition, so that all might have them at their disposal, to make their choices as freely as possible. The War we wage is simply the vehicle through which we pursue this goal.

Harte's journey has only just begun. There will be death and suffering, but also joy and discovery. One of the many Truths he uncovered, and committed to heart, was that you need not sacrifice joy and love and laughter in the face of evil or seemingly insurmountable odds. They do not hinder you; they uplift you, fill you with a power that cannot be chipped away. They grant you the power to change, and the intelligence to know how.

Do you remember what I told you at the beginning? Look back.

Change. It is our most human nature, one of the deepest, most sincere Truths of ourselves. The more we know, the more we change for the better. It is why we fear the unknown most of all, because to change against the unknown is to sacrifice your current self, without knowing what you will become.

And it is my hope that you, like Harte, are beginning to change. That is why you have chosen to read our almanac, chosen to believe in our cause. You desire change, and if you are paying attention, you will.

Chapter 4

Brenan Harte

We have been hiding like rats in the foothills of the Borders, waiting for our Ginostran delegation to arrive. It's been several days, and I am beginning to fear they will not come. We've scarcely moved ourselves, dipping into emergency rations to avoid exploring the area for forage or hunt game, lest we run into someone who sees our caravan as a target. The routine numbs the mind, but it is preferable to putting lives at risk.

Normally we would not need an escort, but the Borders are an incredibly dangerous part of the continent, untamed and home to countless monsters, animal and human alike. Heavy mists linger in the valleys, and fierce storms ravage the craggy peaks. It is humbling country, with few daring to venture beyond the foothills. Only the vilest criminals and the strangest of loners isolate themselves in the deepest stretches of the mountains, but many who do so are never seen again, having presumably succumbed to the risks. The Ginostrans discovered a way to circumvent these obstacles. Long ago, they discovered the remnant tunnels of a ley line system that ran underneath the mountains, forming a subterranean road that they could use to safely travel from one end of the Borders to the other. While the primary entrance for this side of the mountains is well known, the system of tunnels is a maze of interconnecting passages that are impossible to navigate, and Ginostran guides do not carry maps to preserve the secret, instead committing the correct pathways to memory. To make the path even harder to discover, the Ginostrans regularly collapse tunnels and reopen others. The path, known as the Deep Road, is impassable without a guide.

Of course, this all means nothing if the tunnel system has been disturbed in any way by the Harte Event. If so, Ginostra will be entirely cut off from the rest of the Tempered Realms.

With little else to do in the day, I tried learning more about my colleagues, where they came from, and what drove them to accept such an unorthodox assignment. It seemed the stress of these early weeks tightened their lips, save for Roald, who was happy to share his past with me

As you might recall, Roald is a native of Sjolbard, a peninsular realm characterized by deeply-cut fjords, cold water reefs, and inhospitable tundra. Roald tempered his wilderness skills out there, taking well to the Sjolbardi traditions of sailing, diving, and trapping. This natural talent eventually led Roald to joining the Erobrer, a legendary group of Sjolbardi sailors and explorers attempting to explore the peninsula's most northerly reaches. Joining the Erobrer is an enormous feat that carries prestige and social status, even to non-Sjolbardi. I inquired politely as to why Roald left such an esteemed group for the Auten Empire (especially considering the oft-rocky relationship between our two realms), and I was shocked to hear that he was exiled.

You see, the Sjolbardi navy possess a great many secrets concerning the northern seas of the Tempered Realms, from the richest fishing grounds to the safest waterways. To reveal any of these secrets is considered treasonous. When the Erobrer discovered an Auten whaling fleet that had gotten lost in a storm, Roald could not abandon them to die of starvation or exposure. As their own vessel could not carry everyone, Roald opted to betray the laws of his people and safely guide the whaling fleet back into familiar waters using Sjolbardi charts. Though the other members of the Erobrer protested his expulsion, the

Admiralty (chief ruling council of the realm) as well as the court of public opinion could not be swayed, and Roald voluntarily went into exile to preserve the group's integrity and honor⁴¹.

I found myself moved by Roald's willingness to sacrifice his reputation for moral duty, and resolved to spend more time with him when the opportunities present themselves. If I am to lead this expedition, I must look to my colleagues for the virtues they themselves espouse, and adopt them as my own.

After another two days of sitting on our hands, Hellene was ready to disappear into the forest. She is a restless woman, despising idleness. She pushed that we head for the entrance to the Deep Road, where they might better contact our Ginostran delegation, or at the very least see for ourselves if the road is still in operation. Bernherd, true to his defensive nature, pushed against this, but Margarete joined Hellene in dissent, and soon a robust debate erupted among us. Eventually we agreed (some of us begrudgingly) to send a few of us ahead as scouts to check for the safety of the underground pass. Hellene, Bernherd, and several soldiers volunteered.

They did not return for several hours. I was beginning to worry when they appeared suddenly back in camp, a stranger in tow. Through Belric's translation, he introduced himself as Mnata (a single name in the Ginostran fashion), a former guide for the caves who explained that while the road is open, many of the entrances are being watched by various bandit groups hoping to take advantage of travelers fleeing in either direction. Mnata then

⁴¹ Though Roald would never learn this, in fact the Sjolbardi public fought vehemently against his expulsion from the Erobrer, criticizing the ruling as cruel and subservient to outdated tradition. The feuding between naval advocacy groups and the Admiralty is now well-documented.

revealed that he knew the location of another entrance to the Deep Road, a relatively new chamber that had been shaken free in the wake of the Harte Event. He would be willing to guide us through for a fair price.

We convened once again to consider the man's offer. Belric, Neelie, and Hellene did not trust him, believing it to be a trap set by one of the bandits groups he claimed to be steering us away from. Bernherd, however, spent a number of years posted along the Borders, and conceded that it was a well-known "secret" that many guides kept secret tunnels as a way of ensuring their jobs. There was no way of knowing if Mnata was telling the truth or not, but we could not stay here. It became a tie, with myself as the deciding vote. I remembered my resolution to lead with greater confidence, and elected that we accept Mnata's offer. Our status as emissaries of the Auten Empire would dissuade petty thieves, never mind our highly trained guards. Opportunistic bandits are cowards by nature; they will not strike anything that has the capability to strike back.

On our way to the tunnel's entrance, I asked Mnata why he was directing travelers again when he had introduced himself as a *former* guide. He provided a shocking revelation: after the Harte Event, Ginostra initiated a series of isolationist policies meant to restrict the spread of refugees and more importantly, news of any trouble brewing within their borders. Ginostra is famously secretive, but even this seemed extreme. Mnata agreed, and decided to resume guiding travelers independently—highly illegal in Ginostra—to expose their attempts to hide and force them to participate in what he hoped would

become a continent-wide effort to rebuild. He's quite the idealist, and well-suited to serve as our guide, even if he is being paid well. I am happy I made the choice to believe him⁴².

The entrance to the Deep Road was hidden behind a waterfall, on a path of rock barely wide enough for our wagons. A shivering blackness waited for us, and though many of us had never traveled in such a way, Mnata assured us that while dark, the tunnels were devoid of any natural hazards or dangerous animals, and that so long as we listened to his instructions, we would safely make our way through to the other side of the Borders.

As we crossed into that darkness, I struggled to push down the doubts whispering in my ear.

It's said that the road's true danger lies within. I never gave much thought to the saying, but now that we have been down here for several hours, I feel that madness is constantly lurking in the endless shadow, eager to snatch whoever cannot cope with a life of cold rock and damp silence.

And we will be down here for four days. It feels ridiculous to call this a safer route.

Many stretches of the Deep Road must be completed without torches due to flammable gas pockets tucked away in many of the cave walls. Instead, Mnata makes use of lapisolium, a rare stone with the ability to emit a soft, blue light after being exposed to heat and sunlight. I assumed that the stones were mere decoration until they began to glow after we disappeared into the caves. They create an illusion of a ghostly figure leading the way through. Occasionally we encounter another group of travelers, and for a moment I fear we

⁴² Unfortunately for Harte, while his trust in Mnata's expertise was well-founded, the latter's motivations were less than altruistic. According to travelers' accounts, a guide matching Mnata's description took increasingly dangerous fares for increasingly ludicrous prices, until he was finally caught by the Ginostrans and executed.

will be arrested or sent back, but tradition dictates that no one may be interfered with while they are on the Deep Road, lest they lose their way. Instead, we pass them in silence, each group focused on their guide. Many who fell victim to the road's insidious nature claimed that these were in fact the spirits of those who could not find their way out. I do not believe in such things, and yet I find myself averting my eyes when they shuffle past us.

Sleep comes half-heartedly. It is impossible to tell when it is day or night, so instead Mnata counts his footsteps, allowing us to break for meals and rest when he reaches appropriate numbers. There is something monastic about his counting, and I cannot help but admire the level of concentration needed to successfully navigate such a terrifying road. I only wish we could stop for a moment, and examine the walls of the Deep Road for signs of Arcanum. The substance is highly sought out, and could serve as a valuable bargaining chip. Unfortunately Mnata is inflexible and insists we cannot linger here; I am not inclined to argue.

I will write to you again once we have arrived on the Ginostran side of the Borders. If I do not, then at least you will know where I died, and not to come looking for it⁴³.

Ginostra #1

Just as sailors kiss the ground after a long time at sea, so too did we relish the brilliance of sunlight as we emerged from the Deep Road into the Monacean Highlands, a lush, yet jagged region that runs along the eastern border of Ginostra. Mnata keeps a hidden entrance on this side of the road as well, and showed to us on our maps a trail that

⁴³ Though the Deep Road has fallen out of common usage in our time, its historic use serves as a reminder that despite our harnessing of Arcana for our benefit, ultimately it shapes the world we must adapt to in order to survive.

will eventually lead us to the village of Monac at the base of the mountains, where we might connect to the main road leading to the Ginostran capital. Mnata will not accompany us, in case any Imperial agents are looking for rogue guides, and after collecting his payment he returned to the anonymity beneath the earth. As I watched him leave, I considered the harsh nature of his life, and the conviction that one must hold to endure such a life with poise.

Though we are exhausted, a majority pressed that we continue forward onto Monac, where we might find soft beds, warm meals, and most importantly, peace of mind. I will write to you again soon.

Ginostra #2

Ginostra is not just an empire; it is also the name of the capital city, a centerpiece of their illustrious achievements, if you believe the sycophants. And yet, as we drew close to the capital and its towers came into view, the greatest of Auten monuments fell utterly short in comparison. I stood before a marvel, a paradise, utterly incapable of adequately describing its splendor (though I'm sure I'll try).

I could not look away, nor did I feel compelled to.

The first thing I noticed is the overwhelming sense of luxury emanating from the city, shimmering in the sunlight even at a great distance. Ginostra is also known as the Gilded City, based on a popular legend that the first foundations were laid in pure gold. The Ginostran *Empire* (I will make this distinction from now on for the reader's benefit) is well-known for its vast mines of the precious metal, and as the dizzyingly-tall spires of the capital move ever closer, I admit I am willing to believe the legend.

We arrived at the city gates to rigid lines leading to a number of soldiers guarding the main gate. I asked Belric to translate what he was able to pick out, and apparently the process to be allowed into the city has become exhaustive and riddled with traps meant to prevent refugees from entering. Instead, Belric told me they are sent to any number of smaller villages surrounding Ginostra. It doesn't sound like a bad system, and yet I am reminded of Mnata's warning that the Ginostran Empire is willing to sacrifice peace for security and order.

Once we had drawn close enough to the gate, a number of soldiers hurried away from their posts, blocking our path and leveling spears towards our wagon. We remained there for nearly an hour, until a man dressed in fine, cream-colored robes appeared, introducing himself as Pakse. He claimed to represent the delegation meant to welcome us on the other side of the Borders, and that their absence was due to concerns here in the capital. Now that we had arrived, however, Pakse would be happy to escort us through the city as planned. My first impression of the man struck me as foppish, anxious, alert, and humorless⁴⁴. He made no mention of the obvious fact we used an illegal guide, and his explanation for the delegation's total absence did not satisfy me. A glance toward my colleagues revealed that they didn't either. We were, however, now trapped in diplomacy and its stifling protocol. Now that the Ginostrans were aware of our presence in the Empire, we would have to carefully consider our behavior if we were to succeed with this portion of the expedition.

According to our initial agreement with Dcr. Staudenmier, we will be allowed to take stock of the Ginostran response to the Harte Event, interview citizens instrumental in the

⁴⁴ It is interesting to see Harte's initial reaction of Pakse, considering how their relationship would evolve over their time in Ginostra.

empire's response to the calamity, and collect data from their archives, all under Ginostran Imperial supervision. While most of the others are unhappy with these restrictions, I maintain that—in light of the recent changes to Ginostran policy—these concessions are a small price to pay for a window into what few, if any foreign agents are allowed to witness.

Despite my colleagues' doubts, the opportunity to explore Ginostra somewhat unfettered is a great boon. Most trade and diplomacy is held outside the Gilded City, and only a select few non-Ginostrans in recorded history have been allowed into its walls for study. While the Auten Citizen in me is suspicious of their motives, the academic is quaking with anticipation.

My enthusiasm is blunted as I think of Nora. She deserved to see this place.

*Ginostra #3*⁴⁵

I would like to mention that the city is *not* in fact built on gold. Rather, it is a dusting of pyrite upon the architecture. Tacky, but effective. I suspect this stems from a need to demonstrate Ginostra's wealth to the rest of the Tempered Realms. When Pakse—who will serve as our primary emissary and guide through the city—looked away for a moment, I collected a small shaving from a building's cornerstone to examine more closely, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't enjoy sneaking it past Pakse as well.

Though the buildings themselves are not built upon gold, the success of the empire certainly is. Its excavation in the winding mines is highly dangerous, but equally as

⁴⁵ Please note that all entries during Harte's time in Ginostra were initially written in Autecit, a coded language used by Contributors to protect their materials during stays in potentially hostile realms. Ginostra has long held a well-deserved reputation for espionage. While Autecit is incredibly time-consuming to translate back into a more common dialect, we cannot understate the value of Harte's passages here. Information on the Ginostran Empire is even harder to come by now, and these scant entries provide a priceless look into their cultural motivations.

profitable, meaning there is never a lack of willing laborers. The Ginostrans have wisely used these reserves to amass land, resources, and political clout to stunning success. More cunning, however, is their use of pyrite as a stand-in for true gold. In countless negotiations, trade deals, bribes, and so on, the Ginostrans replace a percentage of the gold with pyrite. Despite such blatant dishonesty, they hold such a monopoly of the precious metal among the Tempered Realms that we can do little else but write off the loss as a cost of business. Over so many years, I can scarcely imagine how much wealth this has spared the people of Ginostra, and how it instead lifted their capital to such glorious heights.

The luster is dulled by the attitude of the city's inhabitants. Pakse is relentless, hounding our footsteps like a clingy child. He has been especially resistant to our attempts to contact Dcr. Staudenmier via ley line communication, dodging our questions and taking us on an endless stream of "cultural" tours of Ginostra's many gardens, monuments, and historic squares. "This is a paradise of our own making" we heard him say nearly a dozen times. His groveling for the Ginostran realm is exhausting; I almost wish for the silence of the Deep Road again⁴⁶.

The Gilded City stands apart from other capitals in that it consumes the vast bulk of Ginostran resources; even the city itself is staggering in size, taking several days by wagon to cross from one end to the other. As Pakse is more than happy to point out every opportunity he gets, the reason Ginostra is named for both the city and realm is because the capital is the sole focus of the Empire's efforts. Many other colonies and villages exist throughout the realm, but they are not allowed imperial funds for maintenance or defense. Instead, the Ginostrans have structured their entire society to cater to this unique system.

⁴⁶ An amusing thought, considering Harte's willingness to fawn over his own homeland.

Similar to military conscription, all denizens of the empire are required to “rotate out” to ancillary civilization, spending a number of years in more modest quarters to collect raw materials for the capital. They must do this for several years before they are allowed to return. Upon the completion of this contract, all citizens are granted a pension and permanent apartments in the city. Some Ginostran choose to remain outside the capital, however, favoring the adventure and diversity of the frontier. Those who prefer such an arrangement are given special status by the empire, and often these voluntary exiles are selected for important diplomatic, military, or economic positions further afield, so that while they are still cut off from imperial money, their placement is likely to grant them a more comfortable lifestyle when compared to their peers.

It’s a fascinating if bizarre system that places so much emphasis on the collective that I’m surprised any one Ginostran is able to make a name for themselves, though I suppose that’s the entire point. It is the greater good carried out in the fanatical way, with all the benefits and drawbacks associated with such an intensity.

I have been spouting Pakse’s rhetoric too much today. The city is impressive, yes, but I will not give that weasel the satisfaction of believing it is without flaw.

One of the first things I noticed when we arrived in the Ginostran Empire was the strange sense of calm that hung over everyone we met. Many of them did not seem worried about the Harte Event, believing that the Ginostran Empire is more than equipped to deal with it. This was a departure from the anxious chaos that pervaded Dijwen, and I attempted to press several of them as to how they expect the Ginostran Empire to respond. They would not elaborate, saying it’s not their place to question the effectiveness of the local governing body, a small group of appointed representatives known as the Serene Council

(as best as Belric can translate, anyway). Despite their infuriating unhelpfulness, Neelie in particular is pressing us to follow their cultural norms as best we can to avoid being ostracized before we gather any useful information. I understand her reasoning, but our patience is thin. Mardie is already grinding her teeth.

But there *is* some progress to be made today. We will be escorted to the Serenium, a sprawling, exquisitely designed complex in which all diplomatic activity within the city is conducted. Like many of their most celebrated buildings, the gold and white stone make for a breathtaking visage in the early morning sun. The Serenium stands atop a hill decorated with flowers and sculpture, all organized into swirling, organic patterns. Ostentatious, but appealing. It conjures to mind peaceful resolution, progressive reform, and diligent diplomacy.

Ah. Be careful, won't you? You are beginning to sound as submissive as Pakse.

We will not, however, meet with the Emperor nor any of the Serene Council. Another of Ginostra's traditions requires keeping the identity of these councilors a secret to everyone except a small number of Imperial staff. This is done to prevent outside influence on the Councilors' morality and judgment, as well as threats against their lives; this ensures their decisions are utilitarian and unclouded. Despite what such a system would have you believe about the prestige of these rulers, the secrecy means they are treated just like anyone else would be. We might very well have met them on our way through the city and wouldn't know it. They are free to live their lives openly. I do at least like the sound of that. I wonder if our own Emperor Lauenmark would enjoy that kind of anonymity⁴⁷.

⁴⁷ Quite the opposite. Scholars have exhaustively demonstrated Lauenmark's narcissism throughout his reign.

Never mind the fact that he named a *mountain* after himself.

Instead of the Emperor or Serene Council, we will meet with the Foreign Relations Committee, or FRC. Pakse is a member, and the committee is headed by a woman named Cinis. She sits with the other members Tamasak, Iskantar, and Vojen, along a long table fashioned into a semi-circle, itself placed atop a gilded dais. I was asked to keep my Stenographer outside the chamber, as the Ginostrans are unfamiliar with such technology and so I will resume this entry after our meeting. In the meantime, I will lock it away with Bernherd and several guards, just in case; I noticed Pakse glancing at it more than once.

Our negotiations have concluded, and I am grateful to be free of such stifling bureaucracy!

While Cinis, Pakse, and the other representatives were well-educated and perceptive, they seemed to delight in frustrating our every attempt to discuss the Harte Event, which they dubbed the "Great Change". They claimed that Ginostra avoided the calamity with only small damages, despite the many rumors I heard concerning the violence and chaos befalling the outlying colonies. They refused to discuss such things with us, and were fiercely protective of their tradition to hoard imperial funds in the capital. Cinis claimed that "[their] way of life is as much at risk as the lives of those who brave our wilds and distant pearls". (I am tired of these sickly sweet words) Their willingness to condemn the rest of the population shocked my colleagues and me, most especially Neelie. She argued fiercely that while traditions can help people weather difficult times, preferring tradition over the very lives of those who practice them is outright madness. Roald agreed, gently pressing the committee that flexibility is the best solution. Both of them were eventually thrown out of the chamber, and the rest of our meeting was mirthless and ill-

spirited. Pakse assured us that despite their insolence (the irony astounds me), no harm would befall them while we were guests of Ginostra.

Eventually, we were able to procure official approval for exploring the immediate area around the city, surveying damage and local response. All materials, however, must be reviewed and edited by the committee before they will be released to us, including my personal journals. I was not satisfied with this arrangement, but those of us who remained in the Serenium agreed that this was the best we could get. Upon our departure, I sought out Dcr. Anouk, but according to a nearby guard, she had left the complex, disappearing into the city. Despite my frustration with Pakse and the FRC, I am willing to believe them when they say we will not be harmed. But that is the only trust I am willing to give them.

I have been shown to our apartments in the city, a luxurious estate with private gardens and a retinue of servants. I asked Pakse—who is once again accompanying us throughout the city—why such a place was abandoned. He merely said its previous owner had passed away, and I admit that this unnerved me. I took to my rooms feeling disillusioned. In my own homeland, wealth and knowledge are distributed freely to all those who deserve it⁴⁸. Here it feels permanently out-of-reach. I am not satisfied.

Ginostra #4

Today we are touring the northwestern portion of the city, alleged to be the only section that was affected by the Harte Event. One of the city's main rivers, the Sunbeam, has altered course further up in the Monacean Highlands where its headwaters lie, leaving this

⁴⁸ There is a great deal of naivety in this statement. Prosperity *appeared* equal, but only by Auten standards, which are themselves restrictive and designed to obscure the Truth.

area without immediate access to fresh water. Everyone must venture into the mountains for fresh water, as the other districts of Ginostra are unwilling to spare their reserves. Without the river and the irrigation needed to support these farms, everyone living here will replant elsewhere. Having personally seen what food shortages can do to the stability of a realm, I implored Pakse to take this seriously, and look into sending people into the mountains to attempt to correct the river's course. He ignored us, however, reminding us that terrace farms are a promising alternative regardless of the ludicrous costs needed to establish productive farms in this mountainous region. He has utterly exhausted my patience, and we try to abandon him with every turn in the hopes of a precious few seconds alone.

But I have discovered a way to circumvent his presence.

He is willing to grant us reprieve so long as we have no written materials on our person. What he does not know is that I do not need to have a journal on-hand in order to document what I observe, not when I possess a Stenographer. Their unfamiliarity with the technology is a great advantage. I elected to keep it locked in one of our caravan's chests, and I speak aloud whenever I am close, allowing the Stenographer to continue working. Though it will soon run out of power, I believe the trade to be beneficial, as I can spirit away unedited materials out of the Ginostran Empire's territory without their knowledge⁴⁹. I will be able to recharge my Stenographer at a later date once we are free of these oppressive conditions. It is a liberating feeling to know you have bested censorship, if only in a small way.

⁴⁹ This is perhaps the first time Harte willingly subverts foreign authority. He will soon realize the value of this, and why those in power will go to such great lengths to prevent total freedom of information.

Neelie finally appeared when we returned to our apartments at midday, having spent the night alone outside the city. She claimed to have been followed by Ginostran agents, a charge Pakse vehemently denied. To make matters worse, an argument broke between us when I pressed Neelie to remember her own words, when she cautioned us to adhere to Ginostran cultural demands while we can, as the information we might glean about the Harte Event is too valuable to leave to political squabbling. Neelie became incensed, however, and withdrew into her quarters. I wanted to speak with her, but Roald and Hellene suggested I allow her time to make peace with our circumstances. At the very least, I am grateful they did not take her side: it shows that while slowly, I am making my leadership known among them.

We decided to attempt a compromise, and proposed the following to Pakse: he would accompany us on an excursion into the Monacean Highlands, merely to examine some of their cornerstone species and discuss how they might be affected by the Harte Event. We would carry with us no journals or writing implements, and Pakse would select the location of our trip. To our delight, he agreed, if only half-heartedly. I suspect his orders were to keep us in the city at all costs, but even he understands that repeatedly disrespecting the Auten Empire, especially in these strange times, could have far-reaching consequences.

Roald and Hellene accepted the invitation immediately, and even Neelie appeared when we were ready to depart. Mardie and Belric, neither overly fond of camping, elected to stay behind and manage the expedition, while Bernherd would continue to watch our supplies and materials.

What I dictate to you now is my best recollection of that venture into the highlands, and a profoundly sincere conversation among us.

After the sun began to disappear beneath the distant waters of the Separate Sea, we made camp along one of the many forested ridges of the Monacean Highlands, our packs mere feet away from perilous drops. Once we had finished dinner, an awkward silence hung heavy in the misty air. Taking a chance, I offered a sincere, if bold, attempt to connect with my colleagues, asking their opinion of Arcana, and whether or not they believed that our using it is what caused the Harte Event.

Roald and Hellene immediately agreed, arguing that the natural world must not be disturbed, and that our continued survival hinged on lessening our reliance on powers we scarcely understand, let alone control. Neelie believed that, while using Arcana for the betterment of our people is not inherently wrong, it is *abuse* of the ley lines that led to their violent response, though she could produce no evidence to suggest what might have caused the Event instead. Pakse did not participate in our discussion, but I noticed a strange expression resting on his usually unreadable features. He seemed contemplative, as if this was the first time he was truly listening to us.

Roald in particular holds a strange, yet endearing hypothesis: Arcana, while mostly pure energy, also consists of countless fragments of biological life that drift in the Arcana like leaves along a river's path. I initially agreed with this sentiment until Roald pressed further, advocating for a collective consciousness composed of these fragments, a "soul" of sorts, that provides direction and purpose for the ley lines. I found the idea absurd, as any sort of innate intelligence would surely not have destroyed its own ecosystems the way the Harte Event has. Rich and poor, near and far, all are at the mercy of arcana's power, and

there is little sense of reason in what is destroyed. I do not see any force that destroys good and evil alike to be capable of maintaining sapience. Hellene attempted a compromise, that while biological life does not impart a soul to the ley lines, it does provide substantial genetic material that the Arcana can use to respond to external stimuli. Roald and Neelie, for the first time, disagreed, and offered that we were not considering the entire picture⁵⁰. I struggled to understand this, as the ley lines seem to reach across every corner of the planet; how is the entire planet not the largest picture I have available? I spoke of our entire world, and of a planar force that bends it to its silent will.

From how high in the cosmos must I sit to see what they see, to understand what they so fiercely believe in, even without the stability of evidence? They could not provide an answer, but the wisdom in their voices gives me pause. There *must* be something I'm missing.

If Nora were here, would she have agreed with me or them? I am ashamed to admit the answer frightened me.

But despite these complicated emotions, I still found myself content as we drifted off to sleep that first night. I have always lived my life in pursuit of truth and scientific fact, and yet these grand displays of faith only cemented my respect for my colleagues. No, friends. Though our methods and opinions differ, we share a common dream, and I have long since dreamed of such fellowship. I truly believe that so long as each of truly wishes to heal our world, the Harte Event will not be a force of societal decline, but a rallying cry for the enduring, indomitable spirit.

⁵⁰ Do you remember the phrase Hellene used when describing Harte while they were in Dijwen? "He must see the forest for the trees."

Each carries with them a deep love, and over the course of our brief stay in the highlands, I was blessed with the opportunity to understand that love, to marvel at the courage and strength it offers them. Roald, for example, is fiercely protective of all life, arcane or otherwise. He cares for the tormented *arcana monstrum* with a patience and empathy unrivaled, regarding the suffering of monstrous creatures as something to pity rather than strike down. He tells me that *Arcana* rips life from the natural order, and that we must not see these lost souls as monsters but as innocents incapable of adapting to the raw power *Arcana* sees fit to thrust upon us. They did not ask for this torment, and it is our responsibility to protect them, even if they should hurt us in return. What fascinating love. Hellene mostly shares these views, though she differs from Roald in that she holds no great love for monsters. They are tortured, I remember her saying, but they still threaten what remains of the natural world, and must be exterminated quickly to prevent them from endangering anything other than themselves.

Neelie is a different sort. While she cares for the natural world, she was quick to offer that our cities and monuments are just as natural as towering trees and vast canyons in their own way. Intelligence has not separated us from nature, but merely shunted it to another, less physical space. In other words, Neelie advocates that we have born a new environment of the mind, as much an ecosystem as that of rock and tree and water, and that isolation is the equivalent of a terrifying beast or infectious disease. It kills, in a way far more subtle than spear or sickness. It is the slow infection of evil, selfishness, and apathy, which Neelie argues is the greatest of all evils. A ship that sails in the wrong direction can alter its course, but a ship that remains fixed will only rot for nothing. And it is this desire for action that spurs Neelie's great love for the histories and culture of this world, how

instinct has—over time—resulted in a countless array of beliefs and traditions, and how each of these variations ultimately lead back (in theory) to universal truths, such as love and will⁵¹. These truths must be preserved, and in doing so, all else will fall into place.

I apologize to you, reader, for being forced to listen to me recount the forming of friendships as if they are as important as our ultimate duty for this expedition. I merely wished to share with you a brief moment of joy on what has largely been an exhausting and often dangerous experience. Perhaps you will find it as comforting as I have, wherever in time or place you might be.

Ginostra #5

Our time in Ginostra is coming to a close. The riots in Dijwen delayed our expedition, and the inaction and suppression of the FRC has exhausted our patience. We will instead move onto Thrymmat, an archipelago far to the east composed of a vibrant collection of independent city-states and associated territory. Not only is Thrymmat a cultural crossroads for the Tempered Realms, it is also home to some of the most seismically active ley lines on the continent. While I am scared for the Thrymmati people, sitting in such a hotbed of geologic and political activity, it is also our best chance to discover valuable information about the cause and effects of the Harte Event.

Pakse has been unusually subdued in the last few days of our stay here. I assumed it was because he was concentrating on censoring our expedition, but as we began the process to charter our ship to Thrymmat, he pulled me aside for a private conversation. To

⁵¹ Neelie was the most perceptive of the Prophets, understanding the depths of universal truth, and that by allowing them to flourish unfettered, we continue on the path of evolution.

my surprise, he indicated that he was beginning to understand the depths of his people's censorship, and seemed agitated and anxious, repeatedly moving us throughout the docks along the river whenever someone drew near. This behavior struck me as fearful. He suddenly handed me a small book, bound in torn leather clasped with a heavy lock. He informed me that he took this tome from the private library within the Serenium, and that it contained important information for our mission. I was drowning in questions, such as how he expected us to open the unlock the book without its key, but Pakse could provide nothing further. He took my hand, and pulled me close, telling me something I would never forget:

“Something is wrong with this world. Someone, somewhere, is using their power to lie to us all. I do not know what this book may contain, but I know that the Empire would name me a traitor for giving it to you. That must mean it is important. Take it, and fix what is broken.”

He left me, there. I stood on the dock terrified and alone, and for a moment I wondered if I should drop the book into the river, to dismiss Pakse's fear as another trick. But something inside told me to believe him, and so I quickly placed the book into my pack, returning to the safety of my colleagues. I explained to Belric that he and I had been given a new project, and we will begin once we are safely out of Ginostran waters.

We spent the remainder of the day preparing for our voyage. I sent reports to Dcr. Staudenmier, collected my writings, and compared our notes. Our ship, the *Shimmer Drake*, is a beautifully-crafted ship, swift and gentle. The afternoon sun blessed us with warmth, and yet I was consumed with discontent. I could not stop remembering the way Pakse looked at me. What is lying behind the cover of this book, and why is it so important that he

was willing to betray his homeland for it? That question knocks about my skull in every fleeting silence.

Nora, I feel our fortunes are changing. I hope you are watching over us, keeping us safe. I miss you terribly.

Chapter 5

Pakse's gift has proven to be much more complicated than I could have imagined. Not only will the process to remove the book's lock require specialized instruments, but as a loose page fell to the deck of our ship, Belric and I discovered that it is written in an extinct Ginostran script, near-indecipherable. Belric is unwilling to give up just yet, and maybe it's true that the other pages are written in more familiar languages. It will be some time before we are able to see for ourselves, and I struggle to find enough patience. In the meantime, I have deposited the book in our strongest chest, watertight and bound in reinforced steel, and there it will rest for now, taunting me with whatever secrets it may hold.

It will be several weeks before we arrive at the Thrymmati Archipelago, and in the meantime we will survey the tropical waters and coastline along the southern expanse of our continent, noting changes in geography or biodiversity. I will also use this time to revisit my notes, editing and cross-analyzing what we have learned thus far, which is not much. At the very least, seeing how the Harte Event has affected a variety of ecosystems will give us the chance to discuss countermeasures that can be sent back to Dcr. Staudenmier and the rest of the Contributions Academy, so that they might enact them in regions of the Empire plagued by natural disaster. This time on the *Shimmer Drake*, though valuable for record-keeping purposes, will not be the most liberating: Neelie and Hellene are especially disgruntled about being trapped on a ship. Roald would be if not for his extensive time among the Erobrer, and Belric is confined to his quarters as he attempts to develop a constitution capable of life at sea. Thankfully, our original proposal discussed

daily tours onto nearby coasts or island systems for study, and that is hopefully enough to keep everyone placated until we arrive at the Thrymmati port of Ampali.

I have long wanted to see the radiant isles of wine and pleasure. As I mentioned earlier, Thrymmat is the great crossroads of the Tempered Realms' various cultures, located in a swirling mass of trade routes and diverse ecosystems. The City that Flows Freely, they call it. To make its location even more ideal, the continental portion of the realm sits on a particularly large ley line, and the lack of a centralized government should make studying it much easier than in Ginostra. Legend states that the volcanic chain that formed the islands was once massive, arcana-laden Bellows, similar to Mount Lauenmark. Regardless, Thrymmat is no doubt an epicenter of seismic activity, and will likely have suffered enormous damage. My enthusiasm for our next stop is tempered by the life and history that has most certainly already been lost, and I pray we do not sail into a nation of graves.

Pisten Strands #1

As the Ginostran coast disappeared beyond the western horizon, so too did our last glimpse of civilized society, at least for a time. On our way to the Thrymmati archipelago, we are traveling by ship through the Pisten Strands, an enormous stretch of coral reefs and tropical forests littered with small, autonomous colonies and roving bands of pirates and smugglers. These political havens are overflowing with those who prefer total independence over integration into society, and each village's territory shifts constantly as they squabble among themselves over resources and influence. As far as I am aware, the

region is mostly lawless⁵². It is a dangerous yet flexible stretch of the continent, surely an excellent place to monitor the effects of the Harte Event on both the wild and urban space. To protect the *Shimmer Drake* and our expedition from piracy and other dangers, we have enlisted a small fleet of Ginostran warships to escort us to Ampali. Despite the ample security, many of us are on high alert, as an attack would be devastating to our resources and morale.

Thankfully, these first few days have been peaceful. Much of the coastline is tightly hugged by the Borders and its subranges, and I know we are all grateful that we can travel safely past them above ground. The weather is bright and warm, though there does seem to be evidence of a storm in the last few days, judging by the debris that litters the sea and distant shores. I have been assured by our captain that we should not expect any dangerous weather, being late spring.

An unexpected benefit of this rare storm is its stirring up of a considerable number of specimens for dissection and study. For three days, we have been hauling a number of recently dead fish, crustaceans, and corals onto the deck, and I have delighted in whiling away the morning hours examining the carcasses for signs of mutation or other affliction. What we discovered almost immediately was what appeared to be a light dusting of a mutated algae-zooplankton hybrid organism. It appears mostly symbiotic, occasionally parasitic. The algae converts sunlight into new growth, and the zooplankton feed on their hosts' dead skin or other biological waste, which in turn anchors and fertilizes the algae. In several cases, however, the accumulation of this waste is caught in the algae, and it appears

⁵² As a matter of fact, Harte is wrong in this instance. The communities of the Pisten Strand merely adhere to a different cultural norm than the rest of the Tempered Realms. They do not acknowledge social classes or national borders, and instead pool their resources for collective good. For such an isolated way of life, the system functions well.

to have congealed upon the animals to a point that made simple locomotion far more difficult. This has mostly affected predatory species, as in the case of herbivores it appears to be a constant, near-self sufficient source of food. These specimens are likely able to concentrate more energy on avoiding predators and mating, resulting in a population surge. I am sure we have only scratched the surface in just how fundamentally our planet has been altered, and I hope all ecosystems are capable of bouncing back as easily as these seem to.

In a few days, we will be making landfall at the Bygone Cape, where our captain tells us rests a stunning array of ancient ruins. If they are Ginostran, perhaps we will find an artifact that will help Belric and me in translating the book Pakse gave me. As far as I am aware, there has never been a sanctioned archaeological dig in this region⁵³, and so we should hopefully stumble upon a number of historical and cultural treasures. Neelie will be especially pleased.

She and I thankfully mended our relationship during our excursion into the Monacean Highlands. I feel she is beginning to understand the position I have been placed in, just as I am beginning to understand her own unique perceptions of the world. I am grateful for our friendship, and for the brilliant weather that lifts our spirits. The waters seem especially calm today, almost subdued. Perhaps it is just my unfamiliarity with ocean currents, but it seems like the waters around our fleet have grown shallower as the day has progressed. Perhaps the Harte Event has shifted the tides? I will confer with our captain.

⁵³ There has. The Pisten Strands once held a vast collection of cultural artifacts, but they were systematically collected and hidden from public knowledge many years ago. Only now are we beginning to understand the extent of the archaeological history that has been stolen from us.

Pisten Strands #2

How many times will my spirits be crushed under the weight of my own arrogance? We have seen first-hand the destructive force of the Harte Event. I write now not to chronicle our journey, but to ease the vicious grief that threatens to swallow me whole.

The waters seemed so calm and nurturing. But on our fourth day, without warning, the winds began to shift, and we felt great tremors beneath our feet, rocking the ship and indeed the very ocean. It receded around our ship, running us aground on a small reef. We were unable to return to deeper water or dry land, and soon we saw the ocean return to us in great fury. A titanic wave rose high above our heads and smashed into our little boat as if it were a toy. Again and again these surges battered our hull, and many were crushed or drowned. Even over the din of thunder and cracking wood, I could hear their screaming. But the storm would not abate until we were reduced to splinters, latching onto driftwood like barnacles, and praying that we either washed ashore, or died a quick death.

Neelie is gone.

I... I cannot escape failure. Why must it always be another? I would gladly give my life in her stead. I held her hand as tightly as I could, but the storm demanded her life, and took it in earnest. I could not even hear her last words before the ocean dragged her beneath it, and that silence burns.

I do not remember what happened after; the storm must have thrown me into the sea, and by some horrid luck, I would wash ashore and survive as the younger, stronger, and more resolute of our expedition are taken instead. I awoke on a sandy beach strewn with flotsam and jetsam, feeling a great pain in my leg. A long bloody gash cut into the sinew, and it smelled of death and tepid seawater. I remember crying out in agony and loss,

hoping for death. I later awoke with Hellene and Roald at my side; I was grateful at least that they survived. I do not remember much from that horrible night. We made a fire, huddling around it like scared children. We wept openly for the loss of Neelie, and for the unknown fate of many others. I could see their faces in the flames, hear their voices above the crash and pull of a calming sea. By nightfall, the storm had abated, but our torment had only just begun.

Pisten Strands #3

Throughout the night, Roald and Hellene combed the beach, looking for survivors. Each time they brought back someone new, and yet each time they also brought word of another who'd died, as bodies lay strewn across the beach. I could only sit here, the wound in my leg preventing me from helping them. Roald fashioned a splint and bandages out of some of the wreckage, but they are of little comfort, physical or otherwise. I wish for death constantly. It is only the news of my friends that keeps me going. Belric survived, as did Mardie, though like me she is wounded, and her chances are slim. I care for her when I can, and bury myself in these pages when she manages to snatch some fitful rest. I do not sleep. I do not feel that I deserve rest, and every time I close my eyes, Neelie stands before me. Even then I feel like I cannot face her.

By the late morning, the discovery of survivors had slowed, and we were forced to consider that those still unaccounted for have likely died, including Bernherd. We numbered close to forty when we left Daun, and now there are only twenty-seven. Roald, Hellene, and I invited everyone to discuss how we would proceed. Many wanted to continue searching for survivors, but Roald pressed that we did not have the resources to

look for anyone else, not while we were still in danger. It was an unpopular choice, but he insisted we salvage as much of the supplies as we could before leaving the area to find shelter. Once we were more certain of our safety, we could continue to look for whoever remained missing. I said nothing during the entire affair, feeling their eyes upon me. Were they ashamed, angry, or was this what they expected of me all along? They must still consider me some sort of leader, for when I voted in agreement with Roald's plan, that was the end of it.

There was little left to collect; the storm smashed the bulk of our supplies to pieces and claimed them for itself. We recovered a small amount of food and water, as well as some of the weapons and armor. The chest that contained Pakse's tome, my Stenographer, and my private journals also survived, due to its hardy construction. But as they brought the chest to me, I felt disgusted to look at these items; they felt like luxuries, petty items that could have been discarded in favor of another life. But they survived instead, and I decided to make the most of them. At the very least, they would honor the memory of those we lost, as a sacrifice that I would not allow to be in vain. I was given purpose, if only for a time.

We set off for the east, hoping to find a bluff or cave or crumbling ruin to take shelter in. As we marched, Roald and I discussed the future while Hellene scouted ahead with some of the remaining guards. We decided it was prudent to abandon Thrymmat for now, and instead make for the neighboring kingdom of Solquessa. Though the history between our two realms has been shaky at times, there is currently a mutually beneficial military treaty between Solquessa and the Auten Empire, and it is our hope that they will be willing to take us in until we can send word home to explain what has befallen us.

But until then, we march.

Pisten Strands #4

I write from one of the many ruins that pepper these beaches. Death has seen fit to accompany us a while longer. We had not made it more than a few hours down the coastline before stumbling upon the bodies of two scouts we had sent ahead. An arrow flew, I heard a shout, and I realized we had been ambushed. They appeared to be nothing more than common thieves, hoping to slaughter us and take whatever we carried. With so many tired and wounded, they quickly encircled us, and for a moment I was sure death would claim us all. But Bernherd appeared, with several of his soldiers, and the surprise resistance managed to demoralize the bandits, who abandoned us and escaped back toward the west. Our joy to see them alive was blunted by the few more we lost in the battle, and our dread for the future pressed us onward. Eventually, we came upon these ruins near the Bygone Cape, and now we hide here, scrounging for morsels and fearing every sound that whispers in our ears. I hate what this has done to us, how it has laid my inadequacies bare for me to confront. Even if my leg was healed, I have no training, no experience fighting to the death. I would be helpless, deserving to be abandoned. Though my wound will be healing for a long time, I promise to the reader, should I have perished in our most vulnerable moments, that once I can stand, I will learn how to fight. I can no longer afford not to.

Never again will I watch the deaths of my friends so meekly. Instead I will enact death of my own.

At Roald's suggestion, we stole away from the ruins in the middle of the night, putting more distance between us and our assailants in case they chose to make another attempt. He has risen to the occasion, wholly committing himself to our safety and wellbeing. He is the first to rise to search for food, and the last to fall asleep. He carries Mardie when he is able, and scouts ahead when he is not. I miss his boisterous nature and gentle kindness, but I will be forever grateful for the grim resolve that has taken its place. The splint he made for my leg is helping, and he assists Hellene in making poultices and tonics from the few herbs we have managed to find. I encouraged everyone to follow his advice, and learn what they can from his example. Should we reach Solquessa, I would gladly offer my reputation as he did in his past, to make sure he is welcomed as the hero we have all come to see him.

It is the evening now, and we have not seen the bandits again. Guards posted at our rear have found no signs of anyone following us either. Perhaps they decided we were not worth the trouble, after Bernherd's brave and timely rescue, or perhaps they just stumbled upon what was left of our ships, helping themselves to whatever few provisions still survive. It does not matter why they might have left us in peace; I am grateful for it.

We took refuge in another abandoned structure, and thoroughly searched the area for any traps or aggressors. We did not find any, but some of our group did return with others: representatives of the Seastrayed.

The Seastrayed are that loose coalition of pirates and smugglers operating in borderless waters, preying on anyone who would venture into their territory. Most of the Tempered Realms consider them little more than a nuisance, though were they to ever to

organize themselves, they'd likely overtake Sjolbard as the most powerful navy on the continent, without question.

And they have decided to organize.

The leader of their group, a harsh woman known as Elenya Narrord, offered to treat with us, and escort us to a village known as Opportunity just a bit farther down the coast. According to Elenya, she forcibly annexed the colony to provide her band of Seastrayed with a port of call, as well as a foothold on the continent. She is part of a growing faction who seek to legitimize themselves to the rest of the Tempered Realms, discarding piracy and smuggling in favor of work as naval escorts, mercenaries, and privateers. In exchange for escorting us to Opportunity, and providing protection, shelter, and supplies, Elenya demanded that we send word back to the Auten Empire explaining how they came to our aid. We would advocate for an official Imperial proclamation honoring her and the Seastrayed, and declaring them an ally of the Empire. With her terms presented, Elenya left for her own camp nearby, giving us a chance to discuss her proposal.

I could scarcely believe what I heard. The Seastrayed are little more than stateless criminals, condemned and ostracized from decent society. They were once from Aute, my homeland, made scapegoats to spare the Empire an embarrassing political squabble⁵⁴. Betrayed, these first few sailors escaped into deep, treacherous waters, where most assumed they perished. To everyone's surprise, they survived, and quickly called upon all manner of disgraced and discarded to join their cause, offering a chance for revenge.

⁵⁴ The embarrassing politics Harte is referring to involves the Auten Empire being caught participating in the trading of slaves, a practice outlawed across the Tempered Realms by unanimous decision. The Auten Empire chose to blame those few sailors rather than expose themselves.

These days, we are well aware of the fact that the Empire made extensive use of slavery, but it is disquieting to know how long they kept it hidden away from sight.

Through the years the Seastrayed have grown in size and influence, though their frequent infighting keeps them from organizing politically (at least until now). For a Seastrayed to so brazenly approach an Imperial expedition and demand such ludicrous concessions...even in the wake of our trauma, I would not be taken for a fool. It would dishonor the memory of those who gave their lives.

And yet, Roald spoke in their defense. Hellene, Belric, Mardie, Bernherd, and I all wanted to press on to Solquessa instead, and leave this woman to her desperate play at politics. But Roald, who has saved us time and time again, would not relent. He revealed that they once sailed together as members of the Erobrer, that Elenya had been his most ardent defender, which too cost her a home. Despite her association with the Seastrayed, Roald argued, she was a decent person at heart, and though the terms were not in our favor, they would be honored.

I admit that I felt trapped between my duty as an Auten Citizen and a companion to Roald. I could not fathom Dcr. Staudenmier approving such autonomy for our expedition, let alone Emperor Lauenmark approving these demands. But perhaps, in light of the Harte Event, we can longer turn our noses up at potential allies, especially those who seem to seek unity in the way I have sought since the expedition's inception. Allying with such a powerful, unscrupulous naval force could prove beneficial, and while other factions of the Seastrayed likely pillage and destroy even now, if Elenya is attempting to stamp this out, are we not obligated to help her? Is it not our duty as people of the world to help put a stop to indiscriminate piracy and murder?

Ultimately, Roald's testimony was enough to convince the others, and we reluctantly agreed to Elenya's terms, though we seek to counter with extending her services as naval

escort all the way to Solquessa. I myself demanded that full accountability for this decision rest upon my shoulders should this backfire, and I will compose a letter for Dcr.

Staudenmier explaining my reasoning once we are safely surrounded by civilization again.

Roald was sent to convene with Elenya and the rest of her “delegation”, who agreed to our counteroffer. She has sent word to Opportunity as well as the rest of her ships, which sit just outside the village in open water. Roald instructed us to prepare to leave tomorrow morning.

I write these passages now, as sleep continues to elude me. My head swims with tension and uncertainty. I never could have imagined the events that have transpired, and in a way I marvel at how upturned the world has become. Enemies become allies, chaos erupts without notice, and all of us lie in the center, desperate to survive. I think of how much suffering there is in the world right now, and how should I fail, that suffering will come to pass again, however far in the future. I think of Nora and Neelie, and of the failures I have already endured. I cannot allow any of this to happen again. I cannot. I will not let it.

I will survive, and I will win.

Pisten Strands #5

Elenya made good on her word to escort us to the village of Opportunity, the closest thing to civilization we’ve yet encountered on these savage coasts. The entire colony seems to be lashed together from driftwood, stone, the trunks of palms, and whatever happens to wash ashore. There is very little in the way of genuine comfort; many of the structures swayed back and forth in the late-morning wind. But it is still paradise. To feel safe again, and to know that my friends are safe again, is more comfortable than the softest bed.

Elenya and the rest of her delegation brought us to the center of the village, towards the only structure that seems to be reasonably constructed. The stonework resembles some of the ruins we have passed through in the last few days, so I assume they used another to form the foundations. I imagine there might have been additional structures, but they were torn down and distributed to the rest of the village. Elenya instructed we wait outside while she conferred with the council, and while we waited, many harsh voices bickered back and forth in a half a dozen languages. Belric attempted to keep up, but could only catch a word here and there. It was nearly an hour before Elenya finally invited us inside to make introductions.

The council was five in number, and consisted of two Solquessans (identical twins, to be exact, with the angular features common to the region) and a rather frail, sunburned Sjolbardi. An Otvaran, from the Ubezish Calderas, glared at us from the back, but the fifth figure I could not place, their physique and vestments utterly unknown to me. I could feel my sense of curiosity percolating. They did not offer their names, and explained quite harshly that our presence as members of the Auten Empire was not welcome, but would be tolerated under Elenya's instruction. We would be allowed to take care of our sick and wounded, and be given supplies in exchange for work around the village like strengthening their defenses. Elenya's flotilla served to keep bandits and pirates at bay for now, but legitimate walls were needed if the peace was to be maintained, and Opportunity saw our arrival as the perfect...well, opportunity to extract free labor.

From our negotiations, it was clear the Solquessan siblings harbored the greatest animosity towards us, which struck me as odd, considering our current relations. The sisters' voices oozed disdain, and they departed the building as soon as we finished, having

exhausted their patience of our presence. The Sjolbardi and Otvaran were of little interest, their opinions tepid and straightforward, perhaps because they were still reluctant to engage in politics. As for the unknown figure, I moved to speak with them. Even their sex was not immediately discernible, as they possessed androgynous features, short-clipped hair, and a soft, even-tempered voice. I cautiously approached them once the rest of the council had dispersed, and inquired about their homeland.

To my surprise, the Stranger rebuked my innocent questions, refusing to divulge even a single detail. They seemed insulted I would even ask, and unfairly demanded I not pick them apart as a child would poking a carcass. I was taken aback; surely my questions were not offensive. Perhaps it is part of their culture, to dislike such questions? It seems to indicate a sort of isolationist civilization, as anyone from the Tempered Realms would have said as much by now. It is also likely that the Solquessans shaped the Stranger's opinion of us. My mind swam with reasons for their behavior as they swiftly made their exit. A few of the villagers escorted us to our meager, yet generous accommodations, and it is here that I compose these entries, infected by my own curiosity.

Are they an uncontacted people, from the unexplored continents of Sententiae? Or is this another mutation brought about by the Harte Event? Perhaps it is even a combination of the two, as a new people burst into being after a tribe or nomadic band was caught in some great arcane wind⁵⁵. My mind races with possibilities, and I am thankful for the distraction, though the questions prickled me for the remainder of the day. I resolved to approach the Stranger again soon, and explain that my intentions are only in the pursuit of knowledge.

⁵⁵ All of these potential answers are right and wrong, in their own way. Pay very close attention to the Stranger, emphasis mine, for the represent a turning point in Harte's understanding of the world, as well as himself.

But is a task for another day. Roald and Elenya believe we should remain here for at least ten days, maybe twenty, depending on the rate which our sick and wounded are able to recover. Mardie suffers the worst, but she improves day by day, and her wit is as sharp as ever, despite the rasp in her voice. We might be forced to remain here longer, though, if our attempts to build walls, trenches, and guard towers fail to materialize, and Roald has said firmly that he will not leave until our agreement with Opportunity is concluded. I am frustrated with these circumstances, but he is right. Now is not the time to worry about our expedition's schedule, but the people who nearly died in its service. I found a measure of relief when I learned Elenya possesses a Missive Bird⁵⁶, a domesticated species well-adapted to carry letters and other important documents. I will send word to Dcr. Staudenmier via Solquessa, where ley line communication is available. I cannot imagine he will be expecting the contents of this letter, which I will share with you here.

~

Dcr. Staudenmier,

I write to you from the Pisten Strands, that sliver of coastline running along the southern edge of the Borders. While the Imperial schedule laid out in my proposal puts us squarely in the Thrymmati archipelago, we have come into a significant, tragic delay, and I imagine you have already guessed its cause.

An "aftershock" of some sorts resulted in a catastrophic storm just off the coast, destroying the majority of our ships and supplies. Far more tragically, several esteemed Citizens gave their lives in the pursuit of this expedition, including Dcr. Neelie Anouk. Their

⁵⁶ Missive Birds are the primary form of communication apart from the Auten Empire's use of ley line communication. They are a large, apex species with no natural predators, and highly intelligent, being trained to remember a number of routes that connect the majority of the Tempered Realms.

bodies could not be recovered, as bandits ambushed and chased us further east. We now take shelter in the community of Opportunity, a collaboration between the locals and—to perhaps all of our surprise—a “delegation” of Seastrayed. They want to establish diplomatic relations with the Auten Empire, and see our predicament as a tool for political leverage. Elenya Norrord, their leader, approached us with the following offer: should the Empire establish official relations with the Seastrayed, they will serve as our escort to Solquessa, and provide us with protection from any further harassment. It is their hope that an alliance with the Empire will grant them legitimacy, and easier access to future relations. I know nothing of this woman, but one of our own has personally vouched for her character, as they possess a shared history. I am inclined to accept their opinion, but of course I did not make any political arrangements without first alerting our esteemed Citizens to the circumstances.

I hope this message finds you quickly, and you are in good health. Please alert us of an official Imperial response should you become aware of one.

Dcr. Brennan Harte

Pisten Strands #6

This wound is beginning to frustrate me. Every time I attempt to stand, Hellene or Roald or even Mardie insists I sit back down until it has healed enough. Sleep is fitful and unsatisfying, and there is little I can write about while our expedition is focused on these construction projects. I can manage hobbling around now and then when things are quiet,

but I never get very far before someone finds me and hurries me back to my bed. I feel like a child, being herded around like this, my only comfort being they care enough for me to look after my health.

My luck changed, however, when I managed to escape the village one evening. Using a piece of driftwood as a crutch, I stumbled upon a pond nestled in a grove of palm trees and sandy hedges. More surprisingly, I found Elenya there, practicing dramatic flourishes with a rapier. Intrigued by the delicate style, I made my presence known. To my delight, Elenya did not shy away from conversation, and in fact seemed to appreciate the company, if only because I was impressed with her skills. She told me that she was a sickly child, and could not participate in the robust training regime other Sjolbardi children are given. Rather than abandon it entirely, Elenya sought a style that suited her constitution, one that favored flexibility and a careful eye over raw strength. The rapier was the perfect choice, and in capable hands I have seen it exploit the smallest of openings. Victory by one-thousand cuts, I heard a colleague put it once.

I felt a strange confidence roiling inside that night, and perhaps only to feel less constrained by my wound, I blurted out a request for her to teach me. There is decent time to learn between now and when we arrive in Solquessa, and I hoped that taking me as a student would help Elenya feel more at ease, as a sign of respect to her own burgeoning diplomatic status. She was clearly taken aback by my request (my physique is not what you'd call athletic), but she delighted me again by accepting immediately, and in fact offering my first lesson right there and then.

She demonstrated a number of common stances, each of which flowed into one another in a way that reminded me of dancing. My first task, she decided, was to practice

these stances until I could move through them with the agility and surety that rivaled her own. My first attempts were embarrassingly crude and clumsy because of my leg, and though she seemed to enjoy my oafishness, she spared my feelings by keeping silent. Eventually, however, the pain became too great, and I was forced to stop after only a few minutes. She offered to draw out the poses in my journal so I might practice in the moments I have the strength. If our paths should split sooner than expected, at least I will have the very basics to practice.

I admit I found even this short lesson thrilling, and filled with purpose. Not because I am swinging a sword, but because of the sense of responsibility it grants me. With enough time and practice, I hope to be able to rise in the defense of my friends, and be able to act when all I could do before was run or hide. I feel like I am learning to fly. Nora, if you could be here with me now. I imagine you could never have expected me to take on the path of the warrior, but then you always told me how I continued to surprise you. I am beginning to surprise myself.

Eventually, Elenya and I fell into a convenient routine, rising at dawn before the others had woken, and practicing until I could hardly stand. Elenya always arrived before me, and I admit this display of enthusiasm helped me feel more at ease. Though the pain fought back with every step, I refused to withdraw, and in fact I found the frequent stretching helped improve blood flow to my wound, unwinding the knots of tension that often settled in overnight. These sessions relieved the pressure weighing on my spirit as well, as with every scrap of progress I manage to capture, I felt a little less frail, less afraid, and more like the leader I must become. The past few days have been illuminating concerning the limits of my abilities, and I am no longer satisfied with them. I don't think I

will ever be as finely-trained as Bernherd or his soldiers, but simply not feeling like a liability is enough for now.

Unfortunately, it never seems like we have enough time to practice. The mornings come quickly, and I have to hide in my cabin lest the others discover what I am up to and admonish me for ignoring their advice. But I cannot help it; it is invigorating, and in a way I think it helps me process Neelie's death. I could not stop it, and that will shame me for the rest of my life, but at least I can learn from it. She would have wanted that, I think. She still haunts my dreams, often floating ethereal above my head. Should I attempt to reach out, however, I always feel the icy gasp and crushing weight of the ocean come crashing down upon me, and I awake breathless and sweating.

Since I am unable to help with construction, and am quite useless when it comes to defensive strategy, Bernherd has taken the lead in helping the people of Opportunity improve their fortifications. Meanwhile, I am still looking for ways to occupy my time here. Today I spoke with the council, thanking them for providing us refuge. Their response was measured, but polite, a marked improvement. To further soothe the tensions between us, I offered my influence as an Auten Contributor and Citizen. If the Seastrayed—and by extension this village—are looking for legitimacy, then perhaps my relationship with Dcr. Staudenmier and the general Auten public would help, as the more people from my homeland they have on their side, the more likely it is that the Emperor will see becoming allies as beneficial. They agreed, and so I took to wandering the village, slowly and with my crutch underarm, to describe Opportunity to you, the reader.

In spite of stronger construction materials, the village's cabins are solid enough for the usually calm weather, and indicative of a variety of cultures taking residence here. For

example, many of the homes closer towards the water are placed on stilts, high enough to avoid tidal flooding without sacrificing structural integrity. This is very common in Thrymmati coastal towns. Several of the larger buildings' thresholds are carved with ornate runes, as done in Sjolbard for decorative and religious purposes. Eastern-facing walls have been painted dark colors to absorb the morning light, and light colors on the western walls help cool their interiors on the hottest days. Opportunity is a complex if oft precarious patchwork of cultures and practicality, and I found the hodge-podge collection very endearing. It reminded me of the Worldly Ring within Daun, a cacophonous-yet-vibrant display of everything the Tempered Realms has to offer. I am sure Neelie would have loved this place, uncovering how so many cultures live in harmony.

Just off the coast, the clear waters provide a window into the plentiful reefs and sea meadows that provide a large portion of the village's food. A local fisherman even took me out on his boat, and provided me with the use of his bathyscope, a remarkable device that makes viewing marine life much easier and safer. While there appears to be extensive damage to the reefs, upon closer inspection the damage seems to be superficial. The Harte Event shook free many corals, but their colonies of polyps have miraculously managed to survive, likely because of Arcana's nourishing qualities. The fragments of the corals have drifted to the sea floor, giving the reef a more horizontal quality that favored slow grazers and roaming predatory species. Bottomfeeders, meanwhile, struggle to find the crevices they relied upon for survival. While the food chain has been temporarily upended, it is already displaying signs of settling down into this new stasis.

More interestingly, however, was the presence of numerous open water species, such as solar-finned grouper, schools of threadfins and Heironym's snapper. Hellene

theorized that a submarine ley line altered course, adjusting itself closer to the continental shelf, and forcing the species to seek less turbulent waters. As I watched through the bathyscope, I saw several dusk squid, so named for their crepuscular habits in favor of these easy, midday hunts, gorge themselves on fish before settling down on the sandy bottoms, using their camouflage to rest without interruption. I found it all very reminiscent of our own circumstances on land: chaotic, favoring flexibility and opportunists. The algae blooms I mentioned previously, for example, are thriving in these calm shallows, and readily attach themselves to any debris they find. Unlike anchoring to animals, these blooms have time to settle and provide foundations for other species, including more coral polyps. Though there are very difficult to spot, with the aid of the bathyscope I have detected the beginnings of an entire new colony, a marvel which I am sure is being replicated up and down these shores. So long as they are not shaken loose, the reef will heal in time, and in fact find new ways to thrive. It was a remarkable display of nature's adaptability, and I found myself awash with relief as we made our way back to the village.

By then it was early evening, the temperature comfortable under shade. Many of the buildings hoist old nets or other sheer fabrics between them, providing walkways of sorts that help keep the heat at bay. The people here prefer to eat their meals outside to enjoy the weather, hauling furniture out from under their homes so that the nights may be filled with conversation and enticing odors. They have warmed to us over for the most part, as we stumble through the barriers of language and custom with endearing sincerity. Belric in particular is widely popular since he speaks most of these languages, and I am happy to see how much his spirits have brightened. Mardie is recovering well, and we expect her to be in good health within a manner of days, though the experience has unfortunately left her with

a frequent cough. I think what entices me most about this place is that despite the fellowship most of us find in our country, here it is measured only by the individual. It does not matter if you are from the Auten or Ginostran Empires, the realms of Dijwen or Solquessa. Here I am merely Brenan, and there is great serenity in that simplicity⁵⁷.

Tonight I was invited to dine with Roald, Elenya, and Bernherd. They informed me that the construction of a wooden palisade along the village's western border is proceeding well, and in fact the storm had washed ashore more of our supplies, which have been put to good use. I was distracted, however, when I noticed the Stranger approaching our table. I hoped this would be the chance to make amends, but unfortunately they chose a seat on the far end of the table, and I am sure it would invite too much attention if I moved any closer. I decided to wait until after dinner to approach them.

It did not go any better than the first time. I began with a sincere apology for offending their sensibilities, insisting I meant no disrespect. Though they accepted with a curt grace, the Stranger sternly offered that any further attempts on my part to question their origins would be met with violence. I was dumbfounded at the insistence on abandoning this topic, and failed to present an alternative conversation before they left to visit with other tables. I admit I watched them for a time, hoping for a sign that they might warm up to me, but they hardly glanced in my direction. I am denied answers once more, and now I fear it is an avenue that will be forever closed to me. This soured my mood, and I composed today's entries from the quiet of my cabin, hoping for sleep to take me soon. Perhaps training with Elenya tomorrow will help distract me.

⁵⁷ Here, Harte is beginning to understand the value in demolishing arbitrary borders, and allowing each person to judge one another based on their character rather than preconceived cultural biases.

Pisten Strands #7

We are nearly recovered, both in mind and body. It has been nearly twenty days since we arrived in Opportunity, and I am now grateful that Roald pushed for this much time. Mardie is up and moving again, and my own wound is nearly closed, though I am still plagued with frequent aches and tightness.

The palisade along the western end of the village has been completed, and construction on another for the eastern side is underway, moving quicker than before thanks to some of our guards holding positions as carpenters and masons before their military service. They have also fashioned a gate and two rudimentary guard towers for additional security. Many of the locals have been instructed in basic defense by Bernherd, and they are displaying good progress. Our work here has helped warm relations with the council considerably, with the exception of the Stranger, who still avoids us whenever our paths cross. The others don't seem bothered by this, making my own interest in them feel inappropriate and relentless. I try to push them from my mind, and focus on Elenya and her Seastrayed, who are the true political players here, overseeing the village's wellbeing and using the council to carry out their wishes. I am beginning to understand Roald's willingness to believe in their cause. For many years the Seastrayed have been dismissed by the people of the Tempered Realms as little more than vermin, scavengers chased out of decent society to fend for themselves upon the savage isolation of the open ocean. And yet they have sought nothing but peace and prosperity here, far from the potential riches and thrill of piracy. Though Elenya tells us many of the Seastrayed still prefer the old ways, they are gradually being overtaken by those who are tired of running.

Since the Stranger will not satisfy my curiosity, I turned to Elenya, teasing out additional details about her people during our training, which has transitioned to light sparring in light of my healing. Rumors abound of a colossal city of ships, lashed together to form the “capital” of the Seastrayed. Elenya confirmed this, and though she stopped short of sharing its current location, I learned a great deal about its structure. She describes the city as a feat of stubbornness against harsh seas and little variety in the way of food and pleasure. From the smallest rowboat to towering warships, the city is lashed together through a complicated array of gangplanks, bridges, and ropeways. Vital services such as medicine, banking, ship maintenance, and foodstuffs are marked via specific flags atop the masts, while painted stripes further down those same masts help sailors navigate the watery labyrinth, similar to how wilderness trails are marked.

I also asked about how property is managed, considering the nature of each ship’s use as both a home and “road” to the other services. To my surprise, Elga informed me that the original Seastrayed charter decreed that ships would no longer belong to a single individual, but rather become the collective property of the entire fleet in exchange for its amenities. This does not apply to personal belongings, which are usually kept on board designated storage vessels, or within the hold of whatever ship the sailor prefers to claim a bunk in. Through a process that sounded mind-numbingly complex, ships used on voyages rather than housing or business are regularly rotated in and out, with a small, permanent collection of the largest warships serving as permanent anchors to the rest of the fleet.

As for their current politics, rather than attempting to gradually shift public opinion, Elenya and the others fighting for legitimacy have instead used their united front to forcefully command splinter groups to remove themselves from the safety of the fleet, or

face arrest and even execution. This sounded like a violent option, but Elenya reminded me that it is still a colony of criminals, herself included. Most defectors chose exile, unable to draw up enough support for any one group, and having joined the Seastrayed merely out of convenience. There have been a few who attempted to retaliate against Elenya and the others, and though she would not divulge their specific fates. I cannot imagine they were peaceful.

My most pressing question, however, was how the fleet is faring in the wake of the Harte Event. She assured me it avoided total destruction, although many of the older ships had started to sink or break apart in the frequent storms. The key, she revealed, is that because the city lacks any kind of solid foundation, it can bend rather than break. I marveled at this, and my mind raced with possibilities of how our own cities might be constructed in a similar fashion to protect against future seismic activity⁵⁸. It has been a few months since Elenya last visited the Seastrayed city, spending the bulk of her time acquiring followers and seeking out villages like Opportunity that would be receptive to her cause. Progress has apparently been slow, as this was the first time she actually succeeded. In a display of trust, she confided in me that allying with us was considered a gamble by the rest of her crew, and she worries many of them will abandon the cause if it does not pan out correctly. I perhaps overextended my authority when I assured her it would, and I worried about making such a claim long after we finished our training for the morning.

Thankfully, I did not have to wallow in uncertainty for very long. From the window of my cabin, I spied a Missive Bird coming from the direction of Elenya's ships, and one of

⁵⁸ Many people in coastal areas did in fact begin to move onto the water as a way of avoiding the earthquakes that plagued regions close to ley lines. Many Seastrayed factions were vital in providing resources and experience.

the councilors arrived soon after, its message in-hand. It was a response from Dcr. Staudenmier, who had the following to say:

~

Dcr. Harte, most esteemed Contributor and Citizen,

I hope this message finds you in good spirit and health. Our Citizens mourn the loss of Contributor Anouk, and I assure you arrangements are being made to compensate and counsel the deceased's families. I personally knew Neelie, having served on her admissions committee, and I am sure her absence has markedly affected the effectiveness of your expedition⁵⁹.

Your information regarding the Pisten Strands communities is currently being processed by our diplomacies board, and while I have pressed for expedition, the Harte Event has slowed the bureaucracies considerably in recent weeks. I will elaborate momentarily.

This proposal by Elenya Norrord has spread rapidly through the Contributions Academy; I cannot count how many Contributors have stormed into my office to voice their opinions, which are controversial at best. Though I have no doubt in your Contributor's support of this Seastrayed pseudo-diplomat, I will admit that this is not a popular idea. Seastrayed pirates have been ravaging our southeastern coasts, disrupting trade and rescue missions throughout the Gelid Sea, particularly among the Herstellen Isles. The delegates from the islands are now threatening political deadlock—regardless of its status as an Imperial Act of Treason—because of your proposal. Emperor Lauenmark cannot risk internal division at this time, and so additional conditions must be met before we can entertain your associate.

⁵⁹ Harte did not notice at the time, but this may as well be a direct insult concerning the expedition's success.

We have thus drafted a list of precursory demands that must be met before proper negotiations begin, and are as follows:

- 1. All activities of piracy, smuggling, and general violence must cease in Auten waters.*
- 2. All actors in aforementioned illicit activities must be named and exiled from the Seastray "colony", preferably into direct Auten custody.*
- 3. The protection of your Expedition must be carried out despite the lack of an official alliance.*

I did not personally advocate for the third condition⁶⁰, but I was shouted down at every opportunity. Elenya Norrord and her delegation must escort you to the Solquessan capital of Dzouscan for resupply and the replacement of personnel. As a personal kindness, please consider this missive as an official agreement from the Empire to compensate all Seastrayed delegates in their protection of your expedition, including against loss of life.

Now, as to the political difficulties I mentioned earlier: Imperial opinion is that the Harte Event presents an invaluable opportunity for border expansion. While the nonaggression pact with Solquessa remains intact, our shared neighbor of Vijon has been selected as a prime location for a new Auten Protectorate⁶¹. Though the Vijonnais are unlikely to accept a peaceful resolution, we are prepared and willing to enact forceful regime change in order to improve the safety and financial security of their people in these turbulent times. Our records indicate that Vijon's efficiency has been in decline for some 67 years, and with the arrival of the Harte Event, supply chains and economic activity have all but collapsed.

⁶⁰ He did, as internal documents would eventually reveal. Staudenmier was a master of political manipulation, and did not hesitate to use it to his advantage. Additionally, as the Herstellen Isles were some of the most-heavily damaged of Auten territories, there was little to be gained from piracy.

⁶¹ Beneath the formal title, this amounts to conquered territory. Pay close attention to the reaction Harte has when he receives this news. It is one of the pieces that shapes his transformation.

We believe that the establishment of the Vijonnais protectorate will allow us to correct these political weaknesses, thereby strengthening the security of the Tempered Realms, and better serving all Citizens here and afar.

A Solquessan delegation will await your arrival in Dzouscan, where you will be able to rest and steel yourself for what lies ahead. You and your fellows are doing good, noble work, and we at the Contributions Academy are making sure it will not go inadequately rewarded.

Dcr. Jaun Staudenmier

Chief Officer of the Treasury Committee, in service to the Auten Empire

~

I admit the contents of this letter surprised me. Demanding such concessions before formal negotiations is against protocol, as the strength of the Auten Empire is more than enough to imply its willingness to honor agreements. They will almost certainly anger Elenya and the other Seastrayed, who do not and I believe *should* not feel any responsibility for the scum who carry on plundering even in times of disaster. I do not relish this conversation.

And there is the matter of Vijon. It is a relatively small but vibrant realm sharing a border with the Auten Empire as well as Solquessa, and they have long held out against encroachment on their borders thanks to mountainous territory and effective guerilla tactics. On one hand, Vijon's failure to support itself has long embarrassed its neighbors, and having personally seen what happened to Dijwen, I am pessimistic about any small realm's ability to weather a post-Harte Event world. But on the other hand, it strikes me as...amoral to establish a protectorate now of all times. While perhaps minimizing the chaos with a swift regime would be better for the lives of Vijon's people, they have always favored

independence, and would almost certainly fight back. I am sure Emperor Lauenmark has carefully considered the ramifications of this decision⁶², but I elected to keep this information to myself, lest it spread and cause even more damage. While I do not entirely follow their reasoning, I am still a loyal Contributor⁶³.

I did not want to delay sharing the rest of the news with the others, and informed our core group of Dcr. Staudenmier's response. As expected, Elenya was infuriated by the conditions imposed, but Roald surprised us all (he is getting quite good at that) by taking my side over Elenya's, despite their shared history. He argued that we should have expected a dominant, well-established political power to start negotiations from a place of authority, especially with an entity that does not technically exist yet, both as a display of influence and to gauge how the other entity responds. Without knowing what was going to happen in Vijon, he added that the Tempered Realm's resources are thinly stretched as it is, and it would be highly unlikely the Empire planned on doing anything hostile. I felt a rush of guilt, knowing the opposite was true, but I did not speak up⁶⁴. I could never have imagined such political acumen from Roald, who built his life in the wilderness. It seems he's far more aware than he lets on, and for a moment I was sad to think he would keep this from me, though I quickly realized my hypocrisy and assured myself that he has his reasons as I have mine. It was because of his involvement that Elenya eventually accepted these terms later that day. She and her Seastrayed will serve as our protection until we arrive at Dzouscan, the Solquessan capital, and from there we can reevaluate negotiations.

⁶² He had, but not for any reason other than expanding the Empire's power. As Harte will begin to see, power means little if all you rule are the ashes of what remains.

⁶³ For how much longer?

⁶⁴ This would be a costly mistake, though not for some time.

Considering how the Seastrayed have made enemies out of...well, all the Tempered Realms, this compromise is one of the better outcomes we could have hoped for.

We then met with the councilors of Opportunity to discuss our agreement. Though the eastern palisade and two additional towers are still under construction, we agreed to a compromise: Elenya, being the foremost authority here, announced we would sail for Dzouscan in five days' time, completing as much of the projects as we can. We will also leave behind instructions composed by our carpenters of how to finish and maintain these fortifications⁶⁵. There were some dissenting opinions, especially as the news spread through the village, but for the most part the people here have come to enjoy our presence, and understand the necessity for us to resume our mission. I admit I am most personally excited for Elenya to accompany us longer, as I enjoy her company and willingness to teach me. In her I have seen an indomitable will much like Neelie's, and I admire her dream to uplift the Seastrayed from of the crimes of their past toward a peaceful, prosperous future. Considering how much uncertainty has plagued our world, this shift is welcome among us. For the first time in weeks, I am truly hopeful, though I have not forgotten the grief that still burns inside.

Pisten Strands #8

It is our last night in Opportunity, and a feast is being held to celebrate the occasion. Despite the tragedy that placed us here, we have made the most of it. I hope that tonight

⁶⁵ The colony of Opportunity made the best of these defenses, growing in population as more along the Pisten Strands sought the safety of its walls. Over many years, it has evolved into a thriving port of call, though its association with Harte's Expedition has attracted unsavory attention.

will give everyone some modicum of closure before we sail for Dzouscan and continue our mission.

We have all gathered on the beach for the festivities, which will begin with a number of dances for the village's entertainment. My academic side is excited to watch as all the cultures and cuisines that have taken root here coalesce into a single celebration; many traditions will be on display, including the Thrymmati Dance of tides, in which participants stand waist-deep in the shallows while dancing in a way that resembles the push and pull of the water. With each wave, the dancers slap and chop the tides, sending briny fireworks of seaspray into the evening air. It is a marvelous demonstration, despite the performers' lack of formal training and ceremonial dress. It is perhaps a purer essence of the dance, free from foreign expectations.

Next came a Solquessan tradition, a feat of endurance and pain tolerance known as Firetreading. Having witnessed a few in my time, I am familiar with them. First, the performers (Searskins) douse themselves in a thick, viscous mixture that adheres to the body, primarily the bottom of the feet, preventing burns. They then create a stage of sorts on a bed of hot coals, ringed with burning fires. The mixture—its composition entirely unknown to me—protects the Searskins and allows them to perform acrobatic, almost militaristic motions that call to mind the ferocity and power of fire. The searskins stomp their feet and clap their hands, expelling air pockets from the protective coating, which then decorate the air with shimmering sparks.

I was entranced by the stark differences, yet remarkable similarities between these two performances. Fire and water, each revolving around pushing and redirecting the elements, much like my own wish to harness Arcana to its greatest potential. The

Thrymmati and Solquessan people differ on a great many things, but the similarities in these two dances represents an ultimate kinship, one that flows like water, and illuminates like flame.

Once the opening performances were finished, the feast began in earnest while songs and epic poems rang out in the night air like the warbling of jubilant birds. A staggering, bountiful array of seafoods and local produce displayed themselves upon our tables. Fried dusk squid, roasted potato and slender onion soup with sea salt, wild rice and shrimp, brushed with palm spice. Otvaran ashberry pudding, Dijwenian mince pies, and many other dishes from all across the Tempered Realms dazzled the senses and replenished the spirit. Hellene was participating in a drinking contest, while Roald dazzled some of the village children with a story from his days as a monster hunter. Mardie was lost in a discussion with a fellow historian from Thrymmat, while poor Belric sampled as many food as his weak stomach would allow him. I collected as many recipes as I could, and the next time we have the opportunity to sit down for such a meal, I hope it will remind my friends of these happier times.

Across the beach, I spied the Stranger. Perhaps it was the wine swirling in my belly, but I was overcome with a desire to confront them, to share at least one cordial conversation with them. To my delight, they invited me away from the feast so that we might speak in privacy, though I quickly realized it was merely to get us away from the others. The Stranger suddenly struck me across the face and I fell to the sand, dazed. They knelt down and snatched my collar, pulling me close, and unleashed a torrent of insults and

vile comments in a language I had never heard before⁶⁶. I remember their final words to me: “I will never become another of your specimens. You and your kind have cost me my people, and would it not bring even more death, I would kill you here. Open your eyes before your masters discard you as they did us.”

For a moment I thought I saw tears. They left, and I remained, stunned.

I laid there for a few moments, trying to process such anger. Was it directed at me? No, I quickly realized this was directed at the Empire, but surely they were not capable of the evil this Stranger seemed to accuse me of? Our people have brought about an unrivaled era of progress and stability. Breakthroughs in medicine, science, the application of Arcana...what right did this harpy have to accuse us bringing death upon an entire people? I felt enraged, as angry as when I had lost Nora. I gave this *alien* every opportunity, and each time they chose barbarism and secrecy. Well I will not entertain their mockery of my people any longer. Wherever this Stranger might hail from, I am now certain it is an inhospitable, isolationist backwater beneath decent society⁶⁷.

I swept the matter from my mind, and returned to the feast to concentrate on celebrating with my friends. They understand what the Auten Empire is, and the good they do for the Tempered Realms. They understand the value of our current work, and the lives we will save because of our sacrifices. They are who I must keep close.

It was well into the night before I could return to my cabin to compose tonight's entries, which I do now. I am happy our expedition's final memory of this place will be a

⁶⁶ The implications of an unknown language would elude Harte for some time, and calls to attention how easy it is for those in power to maintain the status quo simply by letting people believe what they've always believed.

⁶⁷ Please note that this anger is not because Harte truly believes these things about the Stranger. Coming to terms with your homeland being the cause of such hatred is difficult to process, and Harte does so poorly to begin with. As he himself has said in the past, however, one of his best qualities is his ability to listen and change. That will prove invaluable here.

good one (I do not intend to tell anyone of my last encounter with that foul stranger), with good food and company to send us off. I am not happy about what it cost us, and who cannot share in our revelry, but our resilience will honor their memory. From my window I can see the stars dazzling above, and I am sure that tonight I will dream a happy dream.

Chapter 6

We departed Opportunity early this morning in order to reach the sheltered cove where Elga had anchored her ships, while favorable winds still swept eastward just offshore. They were of fine Sjolbardi craftsmanship, with billowing sails tinted blue to better hide our presence. Watching her crew scramble to prepare the ships was a treat of naval expertise; each Seastrayed carried the load and knowledge of five regular sailors, their motions swift and sure. Elenya told me this is because she specifically chose fellow Sjolbardi for her personal crew. We set sail not two hours later, and I write these entries from atop the fore castle, imagining what lies ahead rather than dwell on what lingers behind. The wound in my leg will serve as a reminder to never become as complacent as I was before the storm; Roald tells me there will be a scar.

As we sailed towards Dzouscán, we saw numerous wrecks and large amounts of debris littering the coastline, likely from the same storm that decimated our own ships. One stretch, however, remained comparatively undamaged. It laid along a vast forest of mangroves. While the wind and torrential rain tore through the shrubs themselves, we could see much less evidence of catastrophic flooding. It seems as though these mangroves, long known to be a valuable nursery for young fish and marine mammals, are capable of withstanding great change. Perhaps additional plantations across the vulnerable regions of our coasts would stabilize local habitats? Hellene and Roald seemed to agree, so I made a note to add that to our growing collection.

Towards midday, a pod of rare Vibrissian whales appeared to us, perhaps confusing the shadows of our hulls for kin. Known for their large, bioluminescent barbels, the whales

are perhaps one of the most adaptive species of Sententiae, primarily due to the vast territory they roam in search of food. If one fishing or mating ground is destroyed or becomes too crowded, they simply move on to another. Additionally, Vibrissian whales have remarkable memories, and periodically visit these damaged habitats to inspect whether they have improved. It gave me an idea for a remarkable experiment: if we could attach specialized arcanum equipment to their dorsal fins, meant to measure changes in the percentage of arcana present in the water, we might be able to study the more far-flung reaches of the ocean and how the Harte Event has affected them.

They did not linger for much longer, and soon departed south towards open water. But before they disappeared, I noticed another whale (a large male, guessing by the size of its dorsal fin) careening towards the others. At first I assumed it was merely catching up to the rest of its pod, but as it drew closer, I realized this whale was much different from the others. While vibrissian whales average twenty to thirty-five feet, its engorged dorsal fin instead hinted at a colossal size of approximately fifty-five to sixty-five feet long.

And then it attacked.

To our horror, it set upon the pod's young with staggering ferocity. Though they were a distance away, the great waves shook with violence, and in one moment the larger whale breached above the water, crashing down upon a calf that had separated from its mother. Moments later, the ocean began to bleed. We all stood nearby, watching with grim fascination. Clearly this whale had been mutated by Arcana, and it was an especially violent example of how frequently sudden exposure can drive them barking mad. We inquired to Elenya if she might direct the ship closer once the carnage subsided.

The mutated whale was tearing into the calf's flesh by the time we arrived, callously discarding whatever it couldn't hold in its jaws. From our vantage point, the extent of the creature's mutation became clearer. The sudden growth tore the whale's usually tenacious skin into stratified ribbons, and many of the exposed strips blossomed red with damaged blood vessels and exposed nerves. Its dorsal fin had hardened considerably, standing rigid in the water like the masts of our ships. Most pitifully were the condition of its teeth. Vibrissian whales regularly replenish their teeth over a period of six months to coincide with the start of the mating season, lest they become infected or dull. Though we caught only glances, its dental cycle seems to have rapidly increased. Many of its most front-facing teeth were beginning to rot or were littered with algae and a small few sessile arthropods. Those towards the back seemed to be coming in far too early, and the sudden competition in space within the gaping maw left the whale's gums overfilled and bleeding. It is possible it sought out this meal not only as a way of sustaining its increased appetite, but also potentially as a way to force out the teeth that are usually discarded naturally.

It tolerated our presence for only a few moments, likely seeing us as interrupting its meal and invading its territory. The whale chased after us as we once again turned eastward, battering against our hull, but as the winds held strong it quickly abandoned its pursuit. Hellene breathed a sigh of relief, believing it was simple luck that the whale came across the calf before us. I watched the blood and gore from the ship as long as I could, subdued by such gruesome colors. Though our time along the Pisten Strands have been an exercise in the "adapt-or-die" mantra that seems to increasingly define our world, I am happy we will soon arrive in Dzouscan, where we can better focus without worrying of being torn to pieces.

Solquessa #1

The sun remains low, with only a sliver of daybreak beginning to crash over this great blue horizon. I am happy our time at sea is at an end, as I was beginning to feel caged. Our original mission along the Pisten Strands called for small, frequent expeditions on shore to study the wilderness and the effects the Harte Event enacted on local flora and fauna. With our ships destroyed and supplies lost, we turned to Elenya Norrord, a fellow Sjolbardi like our friend Roald, now a member of the infamous coalition of pirates known as the Seastrayed. She leads a charge to realign their place in the world, and I cannot understate the generosity she and her crew have shown to us. Now, in the earliest light, I believe I spy the rocky cliffs of the Solquessan coasts and my spirit is uplifted. Solquessa has long been an ally of sorts with the Auten Empire, sharing much of its history and culture with our own, before it diverged approximately 220 years ago. I will entertain you with some of these differences until we draw closer to Dzouscan, Solquessa's port capital.

Solquessan culture revolves around a certain practicality, much like our own, but particularly in the military sciences. Rather than possess a standing army beholden to the realm itself, Solquessa favors the training and exporting of elite mercenary bands, which is in fact their primary system of income. This system works in favor of the realm in several ways:

1. By producing the most elite soldiers throughout the Tempered Realms, these mercenaries are in constant demand, and any affront to Solquessan interests risks losing access to these incomparable soldiers
2. As they focus their services on border violence, the Solquessans can protect and monitor their own boundaries without an "official" royal presence, which

reduces local tensions. Maintenance costs are also reduced as the soldiers pilfer from insurgent supplies for food and medicine, though this is also just standard procedure

3. Much of the mercenaries' spoils of war is heavily taxed, providing the Citizenry with ample wealth and many cultural artifacts for public display. The Mercenaries themselves are rewarded with grants of land, political leniency, and unrivaled renown. Should a warrior attain fame in the Tempered Realms, they are usually Solquessan, or more rarely, someone who *defeated* a Solquessan

The Auten Empire has long taken advantage of these seasoned fighters, with several of our most valuable protectorates having been shaped with Solquessan assistance. To protect these shared interests, the Empire established a long-standing treaty of nonaggression between our two peoples so that we might enact our separate interests and refrain from interfering with one another's. There are many foreign critics of such an arrangement, with many of the most vocal erroneously comparing us to childish bullies. As the comparison crossed my mind, I was once again reminded of the Stranger in Opportunity, themselves a petulant bully who insulted my people for reasons unknown. Still, I cannot stop thinking of the poison in their words; they often wander back whenever I have a moment's peace. I will not let them get the best of me, not when there is work to be done.

Ah! I can see them: the Dzouscani Spires, shearing the horizon like a jagged blade. They were built of the local corralium, an attractive stone with a dazzling red and pink hue

that is especially magnificent in the redness of a low sun. They help clear my mind, and allow me to focus on what lies ahead.

Unfortunately, we were delayed *again* after Elenya's ship smashed into an exposed reef. Apparently it was not here before, which explains why we ran into it in the first place; I am sure the Harte Event has upended much of the rockier shores here. It took nearly an hour before Elenya and her crew managed to dislodge the hull, maneuvering the other ships ahead to pull us free, and by then there was considerable flooding within the orlop deck. I assured her that their compensation for escorting us here would take this last obstacle into account, even if I had to personally collect the funds myself. In the meantime, she sent word via Missive Bird of our impending arrival. Elenya has become a firm ally, and I can now count on the sincerity of her advice just as I do with the rest of my colleagues. It has been especially heartwarming to see her interact with Roald, who has gotten the opportunity to revel in his naval experience once again. I suspect he always felt a little lonely, being the only Sjolbardi on our group, and though Elenya will be with us for just a few days more, she has reinvigorated him in a way that I have not seen since before our troubles along the Pisten Strands.

At last we reached the port, where the herald of Solquessa stood billowing in the ocean breeze: a ruddy halberd on a field of viridian green. Several soldiers waited for us on the docks, and one of them—the apparent leader—stepped forward, introducing himself as Poruch Hussar, commander of the elite Solquessan cavalry division, the Zaszpon. I was flattered that Solquessa's queen, Velga Gdyni, would send such a high-ranking military official to welcome us to their shores. Poruch once led the Bloody Kites, one of the fiercest and most successful mercenary bands in Solquessan history. Though they have since

transitioned to tracking and bounty hunting in order to adhere to our nonaggression pact, it was Poruch who cultivated the reputation of the Bloody Kites as one of stunning efficiency. I am sure this will extend to his position as our liaison while in Dzouscan.

The man himself seems cut from a monolith of stone, towering over even Roald. He is clean-shaven, customary for Solquessan military, and dressed in vivid, richly-textured garments that demonstrate his prestige. Most compelling, however, was the scar around his neck. I meant to inquire politely as he escorted us to our apartments, but he seemingly noticed my curiosity and offered the story himself: an unsuccessful execution. Having been captured by a rival mercenary band turned marauders, Poruch escaped only because his second-in-command, Salamar Kleist, sacrificed himself to draw attention away from his captain. Poruch informed us (several others gathered around once the story began to entice) that he keeps this scar uncovered to honor Salamar's act of bravery. Despite my best efforts, I struggled to suppress my admiration, and earned a few teasing glances from my colleagues.

We soon arrived at our accommodations, a stately complex hidden among the bouldered forests that covered the western end of the city's outskirts, and where I currently write. The forest showed considerable damage among the undergrowth, with many of the boulders dislodged, crashing down the hillsides and destroying a number of farms, mills, and unfortunate souls caught in their path. Many of the trees (primarily arid evergreens such as cedar and cypress) were unearthed as well, revealing a complex network of tunnels, roots, and spectacular fungi. I invited Hellene and Roald to join me in collecting samples after we had settled into our rooms, which are well-sheltered from the frosty winds blowing in from the sea. Before leaving us, Poruch informed us that we have

been invited to dine with the Queen herself later this evening, to discuss our expedition and how we might be assisted. I will conclude these passages for now as I wonder what to wear. Yes, that is insignificant and perhaps vain, but after the grueling weeks my friends and I have endured, it is nice to worry about something so petty.

Poruch arrived some time later to escort us to the Corallium Hall, where Queen Velga would receive us. It turns out I did not need to worry about my clothing for this evening, as there was a sizeable collection of Solquessan robes delivered to our rooms. Poruch explained that rather than worry about etiquette, we could simply choose what best suited our tastes and fittings. I settled on a luxurious, plum-colored robe, Hellene chose a deep, twilight blue, and Belric selected a calming lavender. Elenya and Roald, meanwhile, agonized over the necessity of proper attire. The Sjolbardi are a practical people, and saltwater tends to ruin the more expensive fabrics. But as we are not roaming stormy waters, they will have to swallow their pride so as not to offend our hosts. Eventually they begrudgingly accepted an evening in discomfort, and Roald selected a somber grey, while Elenya went darker still, choosing black and burgundy. We made a motley tapestry.

The Corallium Hall is a spectacular example of Solquessan architecture, rising out of the harbor and decorated with coral inlays. As we arrived, I discovered to my dismay that much of the southerly structures had collapsed into the sea, and while reconstruction seemed to be well underway, seeing another cultural monument so heavily damaged weighed on my heart. Much of the castle still stood, and the chambers that remained unscarred were marvelous to behold, with towering windows and high, painted ceilings. Every wall was lined with exquisite murals and artifacts of Solquessan military endeavors,

although I suspect a majority of these armors and weapons are simply decorative antiques, untouched by battle. The most interesting details, however, lay in how the halls were *illuminated*. I had long heard rumors that Queen Velga feared and despised fire (and in fact a horrific blaze had destroyed one of the Gdyni family's summer manors), and it was almost immediately apparent that the castle lacked any fires or even candles for light. Instead, there were vast quantities of lapisolium, the rare and beautiful mineral that, when exposed to heat and sunlight, emits a soft yet brilliant blue light for a number of hours. While the Corallium Hall was initially designed to amplify the reds and yellows within its roseate stonework, the lapisolium instead produces something more akin to violet. It is an otherworldly, staggeringly beautiful sight, regardless of the color.

Poruch noticed me this time, and explained that the Harte Event had caused heavy damage to many of the local reefs, breaking loose large quantities of lapisolium, and that by treating the mineral in iron boxes designed to focus light and heat upon the stones, the entire castle complex can be lit without lighting a single fire. Seizing an opportunity, Queen Velga decreed that all Dzouscani would receive a set portion of lapisolium for each household, replacing the need for wax or firewood except in the coldest winter months. The surrounding forests have been subject to far less commercial activity as a result of this compromise, and I am told their health in the wake of the Harte Event is rebounding miraculously. It was great news to hear that such precautions were being taken, and I could see that my colleagues felt the same.

Queen Velga herself awaited our arrival upon the dais located at the southern end of the banquet hall. While the deep romance of dusk usually decorated this glass, it was instead the castle's reconstruction that dominated our view, although Queen Velga proved

distracting in her own right. Dare I say ostentatious? Every fabric was luxuriously plush, fringed with lutrine fur. Solquessan dyes rival the Thrymmati in sheer variety of strong color, and perhaps the Queen saw fit to put as many of those on display. There was still a sense of elegance to the prismatic nature of her dress, and no two colors sat close enough to one another to clash. But truly, the evening began colorfully.

I remember little of our actual meal, so consumed was I with the Queen's description of how the Harte Event had affected her realm. Many of the Piriniac Mountains to the northeast (a range they share with both the Auten Empire and neighboring realm of Vijon) had been constantly assailed, with many of the most fragile cliffs and peaks demolished as the ley line quakes set off avalanches and landslides. Many of the regions' cities among the foothills have been buried, entire villages lost to the earth, while those on the upper slopes that managed to survive the worst of the damage now find themselves isolated from the supply chains originating here in Dzouscan and abroad, forced to use stores of food normally reserved for siege conditions. Often it feels like we are under siege, by the very ground beneath our feet. It humbles me to consider how powerless we truly are against it.

Solquessa's mercenary bands have also suffered, unsurprisingly. Entire companies lost and unaccounted for, the chain of command shattered in others. Disagreements have begun to arise as the citizens demand aid from these soldiers but are unable to pay for their services due to their wealth quite literally disappearing overnight. Queen Velga was most anguished, however, concerning the rumors that mercenaries seeking compensation have turned to infighting and looting their own. Not only would such actions shatter the reputation of Solquessan's chief economic engine, but violent tensions like these spread

like infectious parasites, depriving those they touch of every scrap of compassion. I have seen such savagery firsthand, at Dijwen and Ginostra and all along the Pisten Strands. The Tempered Realms are known as such not only because of the frequent wars that plagued our early history, but also because of the comparison in smithing: in the forging of a sword, a balance must be struck between rigidity and flexibility. If the sword is too rigid, it is likely to shatter, and if it is not rigid enough, the edge will not cut as effectively. Our continent is delicately within that balance, but the Harte Event threatens to shatter it entirely. It reminds me of the Otvaran adage: “from parent to child, passes three: wealth, health, and enmity”. Like the Arcana that flows underfoot, so too do these grudges and the willingness for violence.

It was apparent that Queen Velga cares greatly for her people by the fervor of her words and the strain of her features. She strikes me as remarkably focused, and indeed not a moment after our meal had concluded did she invite us into another room to discuss how our realms might benefit from cooperation. A great table stood in the middle of the room, illuminated by lapisolium embedded in the ceiling in the arrangement of some of our most visible and steadfast celestial bodies. On this table lay an exquisite map of Solquessa, its evergreen forests, glacial plains, and far, craggy peaks. Queen Velga suggested we headquarter ourselves in the cultural city of Zvalamanta to the northeast, as its roads are the best repaired, and its comparatively central location will allow us to access additional townships with relative ease. The Torrenacio Gorge is of particular interest, as it was largely formed through the activity of a ley line that nearly breached the surface before it tunneled back into the rock many hundreds of years ago. Its ecosystem is permanently

altered as a result, and should provide valuable evidence towards our understanding of how arcana-laden environments react differently from those mostly left unaltered.

Our troupe is enthusiastic about the days to come; it finally feels like we're making headway in our expedition's mission, and each of us has work to do. Though she is still recovering, Mardie offered to transcribe tonight's meeting for us to refer to later, and she did a marvelous job. She and Belric will work to create a schedule that makes the best use of our talents. For the time being, we will remain here in Dzouscan to survey the local area, while Elenya waits for her compensation, and the both of us await Dcr. Staudenmier's next letter.

I hoped to speak to Queen Velga one final time before we left for the evening. To my disappointment, Poruch had insisted the Queen retire for the evening to remain in good health, and that any considerations be brought to him instead. I found this peculiar, but did not press the matter in case it soured our welcome. I came upon Belric next, and inquired if he had made any progress in translating the tome Pakse gave me before we departed Ginostra, as he had taken it upon himself to protect the book during our time on the Pisten Strands. Poor Belric compounded my dismay by revealing that while the book's lock had been broken without destroying the book itself, it had also been damaged in our fighting with the bandits, and that many pages had been sheared or damaged beyond comprehension. The remaining pages are apparently exceedingly difficult to parse, their structure and vocabulary archaic and dense. I thought to send word to Pakse, but as I remembered his expression when he handed me the book, I decided that it would not be wise to send a letter discussing his own illicit activity. Regardless, Belric has managed to begin constructing a word key that he believes will be instrumental in accurately

translating the prose, although progress is apparently viciously slow, with only the most common words (such as “the” and a scarce few verbs) translated thus far. Belric was well known for his great focus among the Contributions Academics, but I suspect our journey has been particularly hard on him, specifically our time in the wilderness, something he was never accustomed to, even after he had completed training to be allowed to join the expedition. As he left to return to our rooms, I resolved to include him in tomorrow’s outing with Harlan and Roald.

I also decided to seek out Elenya, and found her waiting outside with the others. As our mutually beneficial arrangement reached its conclusion, I asked what she might do next. Always honest, Elenya confided in me that while she still seeks to help establish her fellow Seastrayed, her time among our expedition has shuffled her motivations. She’s something of an idealist, and sees in us a way to do great healing upon the world at a time when unity is more important than any singular person or even realm. And so she is wondering if her time might be better spent continuing on as one of our company. Our camaraderie and her warm history with Roald would allow her to integrate very easily, I imagine, and her vast collection of maritime knowledge would surely continue to be useful. The selflessness of this woman burns in my cheeks, as I shyly admitted that another reason I wanted to speak with her involved my hope that we might continue training together.

She agreed to think on these options, and to continue teaching me while we still have time.

I am very happy to hear that. I’ve found that hitting things has a way of clearing the mind, and there is much to do.

Solquessa #2

A soft rain was falling when I awoke the next morning. There is a glistening, somber beauty to it. Hellene, Roald, and I will be exploring the surrounding stands of evergreen, taking more samples and adding to the compendium. I have invited Belric to join us on this little excursion, under the hopes that it helps him get used to being outdoors, in case we ever find ourselves stranded again. In the meantime, Mardie, Bernherd and Poruch will be in charge of organizing our resupply, as well as meeting with Elenya to discuss how we might best compensate her and the rest of her Seastrayed for escorting us. Then we shall all convene together to discuss our stay in Zvalamanta in a few days' time. Our morning is one of peaceful productivity, and I am grateful for it.

Belric looks a patchwork of laborers, having borrowed all of his traveling clothes and equipment from our own guards and workers. It does not paint him in a particularly rugged light, but Roald, Hellene, and I have agreed to refrain from the good-natured teasing that has become common on such trips. If Belric is to keep his head and grow into these wilds as I have, he must be treated gently. His studious nature masks a neurotic core, a seeker of perfection and alignment in times of chaos and uncertainty. He confided in me once, as we traveled on the Deep Road on our way to Ginostra, that the air of calm he appeared to exude was in fact a sheer, rigid fear. I believe today will be his first step into overcoming those fears. Drier weather would have been more appropriate, but we must strike out nonetheless.

The local terrain is treacherous underfoot unless you're constantly looking down; there is a maze of roots, sinkholes, and burrows in the thin soil that would upturn any cart or draught animals, so we are forced to trek across these bouldered hills on foot. The mud

is already several inches thick in exposed areas, while the most densely wooded groves form a sort of natural mesh that keeps the ground comparatively stable, and so Roald will lead us through these stands as we crest the nearest hill.

Almost immediately we notice the telltale signs of one of the region's most industrious of species: the tumble beetle. Fully-grown they are nearly the size of my hand, and its coloration ranges from brilliant copper to a stately, muted umber. They received their namesake from a penchant for excavating stones from the upper slopes of these hills, coating them with a waxy substance they exude from special glands near the beetle's maxilla, and pushing them downhill. Many have even been observed to roam the slopes in large groups, using their combined strength to dig out larger rocks, and push them as well. Gravity accomplishes the rest, upturning hidden burrows, smashing through fallen tree limbs, and exposing any food that sits just beneath the surface, including other unfortunate beetles making their way up to partake in the very same ritual. The Harte Event seems to have driven the beetles into something of a feeding frenzy, with the seismic activity shaking loose/unearthing a larger number of rocks opening up opportunities for more frequent, larger feedings. The specimens we have come upon are much larger than average, and they display a more robust intelligence. We took up perches in a nearby pine, dangling in the lower branches, and watched as a group of beetles scrambled over the rock fields, overlooking their usual targets for larger rocks further up the hillside. Not only did they push it free of the mud in shorter time, but in multiple instances, the beetles seemed to select rocks that would eventually smash into even larger ones, lessening the effort while doubling their reward. It is a remarkable demonstration of the productivity within the insect world. Hellene in particular was overcome with fascination, clambering from her

perch and through the mud so that she might watch more closely. The tumble beetles did not take kindly to this intrusion of their territory, and promptly abandoned their work to chase him off. Regardless of the beauty of the natural world, a swarm of rat-sized beetles marching towards you is a horrifying sight, especially when said beetles are hissing and spurting liquid from their jaws as a sign of discontent. Hellene quickly regained her sense of self-preservation, and hurried back down towards the relative safety of our perch.

To my surprise and enjoyment, Belric had erupted into a fit of laughter, clutching the trunk of our pine as he wiped tears from his eyes. He confided in us that frequently regretted his decision to come along, and that today was the first day he felt truly at peace with his decision. As much as he missed his study, his books, his ever-expanding wealth of knowledge, there was something to be made of today here with us, and he expressed that pride as best as he could. He might have elaborated had the beetles not continued to follow Hellene, they were now only a short distance away. It was clear they had no intention of tolerating our presence any longer, so we dropped to the muddy earth and stomped away as quickly as we could. Belric quickly turned back to fretting, now soaked in sweat and mud, but there was a surety in his steps when we made our way down the hillsides later in the day; there was a new air of confidence. He even shared with us one of his favorite profanities: “*qurva*” a Solquessan obscenity without exact translation, with the closest being “one who lays with herds”. As we arrived upon the outer Dzouscani neighborhoods, I could not resist myself, and tested my new word. A nearby woman clasped her child’s ears in disgust, and hurried back into their home. Belric laughed a second time. I think that is a worthy trade.

When I met with Mardie and Bernherd to discuss our supplies (Poruch had left when Queen Velga requested his assistance), I noticed another air: one of frustration and disrespect. As my two fellows described it, Poruch was much less of an accommodating host to them both, curt and impatient and consistently disapproving. This did not equate with our first meeting, and I inquired why he might have been in such a foul mood. Perhaps there is a relation between this and Queen Velga's calling for him? None of us could produce any evidence, so I insisted we table the matter and focus on the health of our expedition, which was much better news. I was delighted to hear that our total resupply came in well under our allotted funds. The supplies themselves will be periodically delivered over the next several days, in addition to a small Solquessan aid caravan that will accompany us to Zvalamanta, where it will continue on towards the mountain villages. Bernherd will coordinate our journey with whichever Solquessan mercenary band is hired as escorts, and he also informed me that armament repair is underway and on schedule. It feels like an utter turn of fortune!

Elenya joined us later, having brought the terms Poruch and Mardie discussed to the other Seastrayed, the details of which that Mardie shared with me beforehand. Elenya and the other captains would receive thirty thousand Imperial badges, while every subordinate receives six thousand in addition to a daily stipend for living expenses during our stay in Dzouscan. While protective detail does not usually designate these higher payments, the importance of our expedition as well as the extenuating, dangerous circumstances prompted a more robust agreement. Should they choose to continue escorting us all the way to Thrymmat, payments will be adjusted but remain in their favor. Our only snare in the negotiations was our insistence that if Elenya decides to carry on with us, said

payments would not be in lump sum badges but Imperial Credit, which spares us from literally carrying enormous amounts of money with us. It won't do us any good if word spread that our flotilla is something of a floating bank.

Our final piece of business was how long to stay in Zvalamanta before returning here and sailing for Thrymmat. While I favored a longer diversion, wanting to help those trapped in the Piriniac Mountains (as well as study the Harte Event's effects on alpine ecosystems), I was outvoted by the others, citing costs and delays. I understand their reasoning, but ever since I began training with Elenya, I have felt the need to contribute more directly. It's been harder to focus on the grand scheme of things when so many individual problems could be solved with a little bit of our help. Perhaps when I hear back from Dcr. Staudenmier, I can discuss with him expanding the scope of the expedition so that we might more directly help the afflicted communities we pass through.

Two days later, I received an answer from Dcr. Staudenmier. He asked that I refrain from sharing its contents while the Vijonnais Protectorate is still in the delicate stages of planning, and I admit I felt slightly uncomfortable at the prospect of remaining silent. After our experience in Ginostra, the withholding of such important information strikes me as counterproductive, especially since the Auten Empire thrives on honesty and transparency. I must also admit that I am increasingly dissatisfied with the idea of another protectorate in the first place. It is ill-timed, with our resources as thinly stretched as they are.

His letter also contained a shocking development, one of great personal sorrow. Dcr. Staudenmier informed me that Pakse, our Ginostran guide and liaison, has been imprisoned and charged with treason. He is slated to be executed. The news affected me

strangely. There was no great love between Pakse and me, as his attempts to censor and frustrate our expedition's success left our time in Ginostra mostly unhelpful, but it was painfully clear that he took a great personal risk in giving that book to us. Now he is paying for that with his life. I planned on imploring Dcr. Staudenmier to advocate for Pakse's freedom, but perhaps I knew deep down that the Ginostrans would never cater to the whims of their rival, not when we have so little stake in their affairs. This all feels like a conspiracy, and I wondered if Pakse's actions, at the time meant to help us, will cause even greater problems for the expedition. I decided that before I composed a response, I would invite Belric to my quarters so that we could try and uncover *something* about this mysterious book. Pakse's sacrifice must be honored.

We agonized over the text for hours, comparing it to excerpts of every language of the Tempered Realms, but as the Border Mountains have long served as an isolating force of culture and language, this form of Ginostran is too distinct from any of the others. Over the course of the morning, we marked words or passages that distinguished themselves on the page, in additional flourishes and larger text, for example. It is likely these excerpts are places, names, or anything that would have to be specifically referred to for clarity. Comparing them to a set of Ginostran root words might unravel their ambiguity.

It wasn't until midday that we uncovered something worthwhile. The tome's binding, damaged when the lock was torn free, was in a state of fragile disrepair, and Belric and I had attempted to leave it alone to prevent anything else happening. But upon close inspection, I noticed what looked like an additional marking hidden behind the binding. It pained us both greatly to do so, but the possibilities were too great to ignore. Carefully, we peeled back the pages from the center binding, and cut away the excess material. A small

symbol lay stamped into the binding: a wheel, with figures in place of its spokes holding up the outer circle. We both recognized this symbol as that of the Thrymmati, for cooperation of its many governments that lead the archipelago. Each island is distinct from one another, economically, politically, and culturally, but they are united in working for the betterment of their people. While the symbol is no longer in common use, it is a constant presence in the Lyceum, Thrymmat's oldest institution of higher education, and truly the greatest academic complex across the Tempered Realms. While the Lyceum is primarily an academy for Arcana, physical science, and history, it is just as renowned for its exquisite library, the largest such collection of precious tomes and rare documents. While the presence of this symbol does not explicitly reveal any truths about the book itself, it does offer the possibility that additional texts that might help us translate could be found in the Lyceum⁶⁸. Belric and I were frantically excited, and we agreed that it would be in the expedition's interest to organize a visit to the Lyceum to uncover what Pakse was trying to tell us. The secrecy surrounding it all has convinced me that this tome will be useful in furthering our understanding of the ley lines. The Lyceum itself is said to be built upon one, saturating the entire island with potent arcane energies. While access to the Lyceum's collection is strictly regulated, we can scrounge together enough clout to persuade the institution for a tour. It would involve a detour to Octymos, the most isolated and sparsely populated of the Thrymmati islands. Technically it is not on the schedule, but I am convinced it would be a great boon for us to stop there.

I thanked Belric for his help, and invited him to join me for dinner. We whiled away the evening in spirited academic discussion, sharing stories of our time at the Academy.

⁶⁸ If Harte and Dcr. Waltham had not come upon this symbol, the Truth might never have been uncovered. It is an example of how every revolution requires a modicum of luck.

Belric seemed relaxed for once, as if months of tension was washing away. He left for his own room just a moment ago, and my mind drifts towards Pakse again. Did he betray his homeland, or did Ginostra betray him? Is there any reason to be loyal to a realm that will discard you the moment it is convenient for them? I wondered if my own people would cast me aside. It's because of that Stranger; I cannot tear them from my mind, nor the pattern of malcontent they have called attention to. Nora was beginning to doubt the Empire, Pakse decried us as authoritarian. The Solquessan sisters on the Pisten Strands avoided us, and the malice of the Stranger's words still burn brightly in my memory.

There is something I have not yet seen, or perhaps I willingly ignored it. Not anymore. If the Empire wants my loyalty, they will now have to earn it.

Chapter 7

Solquessa #3

Today we will leave Dzouscan, and make for the cultural hub of Solquessa, the vibrant city of Zvalamanta. The city was founded along the Conqueror's Course (Solquessa's only major river), and its lack of political clout forced the city to seek its power elsewhere, finding it in the way of artisan goods and chivalrous tradition. While Solquessa's mercenaries have long abandoned their valiant, romantic origins in favor of modern techniques, the old ways live on in Zvalamanta, and the few companies that headquarter here observe those ways with fierce discipline. They are sponsored by anyone of wealth, and serve as moral guardians of the city and its surrounding villages, townships, farms, and temples. Tournaments are held regularly, and the most popular and well-known are known as the Summer Ballads, a yearly event attended by warriors all across the Tempered Realms, with Solquessa and Vijon the tournament's most fervent supporters. We will arrive at Zvalamanta in the early days of the Ballads as participants train and attract guests while the city becomes flush with art and entertainment. We will not be able to linger until the festivities reach their peak, but I am told the air of festivity that erupts across the countryside before the tournament is spectacular all its own. Such a lively tradition should surely benefit the morale here. Some might argue that it's poor taste to press on with the Summer Ballads amidst the Harte Event, but Poruch informed us before we departed that Queen Velga was considering a decree that the sums generated at the Ballads would be donated to rescue and reconstruction efforts, a noble and wise decision.

It is a three day journey to Zvalamanta, and in the meantime, I am composing my response to Dcr. Staudenmier. The words come slower this time; I feel the need to be cautious about what I share. Dcr. Staudenmier and I have been firm friends and allies in the Academy, but I must acknowledge that his position requires him to be more concerned about the Empire as a whole, while my priority is the success of this expedition. I must present myself as such, even if that means our relationship suffers for it. I am sure he will understand⁶⁹.

While I write, I take in the beauty of the country here. Vast glaciers once covered these gently rolling hills, leaving behind dozens of tiny lakes and streams that provide plenty of fresh water for the forests, meadows, and fields to make use of. The largest of these lakes, Vitori, accounts for nearly fifteen percent of Solquessa's territory, and is fed by the headwaters of the Conqueror's Course. A great deal of our road follows its shoreline, and we see that the water is uncommonly low. Hellene thinks it is because of the avalanches Queen Velga mentioned, while Roald added that the vast system of caves beneath Solquessa, known as the Conarnaeu Caverns, had also likely been affected by the Harte Event, opening the earth to swallow some of Lake Vitori's splendor⁷⁰. I would love to visit these caves, and one of the larger entrances can be found in nearby Torrenacio Gorge, so I might have the perfect opportunity.

It is night now, and we have taken shelter along a long embankment near the river. After we had eaten, I felt like sparring, and looked for Elenya. By now, most everyone is aware I have been sneaking off; apparently I am not nearly as stealthy as I had hoped.

⁶⁹ Only too well.

⁷⁰ To some degree they are both right. In recent times, Lake Vitori has lost nearly 60% of its water. While the primary cause is the altered courses of a number of mountains streams, a few rifts into the Concarneau caverns have resulted in flooded chambers.

While Roald chastised me for risking further injury, he and the others seemed to approve of my commitment to combat training. Perhaps they are beginning to see me as more than the frail academic. They wouldn't if they knew how often Elenya and my's training consists of her finding inventive ways to trip me.

While stopped to catch our breath, I asked if she had made a decision about staying with us. She seemed quiet, bashful even. I worried that I had pressed too much too early, but she revealed that she had in fact decided to stay, and was only embarrassed as to why: Roald. I can't believe I hadn't noticed! The two of them were usually found together. Elenya shared with me that they had nearly pursued a relationship during their time together in the Erobrer, and that his exile had come about before they had the chance to confess their mutual feelings for one another. It was a miracle they reconnected, and Elenya told me that she did not intend to let the opportunity pass by a second time. My heart swelled with joy. Elenya is worried that it is inappropriate to pursue romance when other things seem so pressing, but I assured her that there is nothing wrong with securing your own happiness, even as you work to secure it for others. I realized Elenya was the only one in our group who had never met Nora, and I shared with her how our own love blossomed. I was happy to be of help, but even now I feel the pangs of loss when I mention Nora's name. I wonder if that will ever change.

We arrive at the outer reaches of Zvalamanta in the late morning of the following day, bathing the rolling farmland in golden light as it scattered into crystals among the cypress groves. This land is home to some of the finest vineyards among the Tempered

Realms, rivaling both Vijonnais and Thrymmati wines, though as we cross through the area, it is clear the harvest is failing.

Though we would usually take up a residence outside the city, every room in every tavern has been reserved for months, as attendees of the Summer Ballads flock to the area. Instead, Poruch has graciously allowed us to stay in his own home, as the Hussar family has long been one of Zvalamanta's oldest lineages. As we entered the city proper, it was clear that despite the hardships, everyone was still in a celebratory mood. Bright ribbons of vermillion and veridian danced across the rooftops, and the air was filled with lively, albeit nervous conversation. I spoke to a nearby woodworker—carving nobles and warriors out of wood—about the city's expectations of this year's event. The man did not seem enthusiastic, worrying that many of the regular participants would choose to remain close to home instead, providing aid to their local villages. I reminded him that all the inns were still full, and he seemed confused. His attention was called elsewhere before I could ask why.

A woman named Ibarra would serve as our host while we stayed in Poruch's home. She has long served the Hussar family, and was more than happy to prepare the house for our arrival. The house is old, but well cared for. It will more than serve our needs while we are in Zvalamanta. My room has a particularly beautiful view of the Piriniac Mountains, their peaks shimmering white with snow even in the early summer. There appears to be less snow than usual (based on many paintings I have seen of these mountains), and the signs of avalanches are visible even from here.

Suddenly, the snow began to shift, and I quickly realized that another was taking place right before my eyes. Boulders the size of homes broke free from the mountain sides,

catapulting themselves onto the lower slopes. As they broke into smaller pieces, snow, ice, and mud burst into the air, forming thick plumes of debris. Yet what surprised me the most was not the chaos unfolding in the mountains, but the apathy of those beneath my feet.

Zvalamanta continued about its business as if nothing was happening, only glancing towards the mountains whenever another chunk of snow shook free. I implored Ibarra to explain why they cared so little. Grimly she explained that these landslides have been increasingly frequent, especially in the deepest valleys. Ibarra also explained that most of the people who lived there have either already been evacuated or were buried alive.

I felt great sadness hearing this. Disaster should never become commonplace. The dismissal sobered me, poisoned the festivities around me. This was not a place of hope and normalcy, but an apathetic distraction. And yet, could I blame them? I myself found comfort in silly parties after the dangers of this journey had muddied my spirit. It is wrong of me to demand that anyone else be held to higher standards. At one point in the midst of total destruction do we decide it is better to save ourselves? I imagine such a difficult question has passed through everyone's mind at some point in recent months. Perhaps I should accept the fact that everyone has their breaking point. It seems that the people of Zvalamanta have already breached theirs.

Solquessa #4

The Summer Ballads have become a dirge of anarchy. Two days into our stay in Zvalamanta, a horde of survivors from the villages of the Piriniac Mountains appeared outside the city walls late last night, surprising everyone who had written off the mountain villages as beyond saving. They felt betrayed, and upon discovering that the city had

proceeded with its holiday, flew into violent rages, burning farms and homes outside the city. Having witnessed such violence once before in Dijwen, I begged our group to leave the city the moment we are able, but Ibarra assured us that it was safer to remain behind the walls. Queen Velga was sending additional troops to keep the peace, and they would be able to break up the fighting. I did not know how Ibarra knew this, but she insisted we stay.

We felt no such inclination, and gathered our things. I would not risk the lives of my colleagues again⁷¹.

We traveled eastward for hours, passing farms and quiet villages that slept on, unaware of the bloodlust that was setting in only miles from their homes. When things are quiet, I am sure I hear the tolling of bells. Perhaps it is the sound of a city realizing its mistake only too late, as it is torn apart by the desperate and vengeful. How quickly the air of festivity was replaced with depravity. I wondered if the people of Zvalamanta ever thought about the consequences of their apathy, and I found myself growing angry.

I have seen firsthand the extent of the damage, and the total upheaval of economic and political normalcy that the Harte Event has unleashed upon the world. I have also seen too many times a slowness to react from our leaders and prestigious class, borne from a desire to protect order at the cost of life. How can I truly condemn those who could no longer bear their lives being tossed aside? Am I not just like them, as I insist we leave it all behind to save ourselves? Despite all my posturing in these last several months, I am no better. Were I a citizen of Zvalamanta, I might very well have been one of those dragged from their beds, beaten to the cheers of a crowd, and paraded around the city as a

⁷¹ This was a wise decision. Zvalamanta was met with a surge of violence similar to Dijwen. It was not, however, randomly sparked. Controlled violence is a powerful tool, and hidden within was an overt attempt to trap the Harte Expedition.

monument to our failure. I have spent this entire journey under the assumption that as my work is dispersed among our leaders, it will pass to custodians of peace and prosperity. But I have constantly seen those guiding hands instead shrink back in disgust, pretending that even now as our world is unmade and remade again, tradition keeps its talons closed around our throats. What is stopping these queens and councils from rejecting these truths in favor of one more suitable to their survival, or simply ignoring it and hoping it quietly slips away?

Every ruler has failed to act. I cannot reject the likelihood that my own homeland will do the same. I think of the Vijonnais protectorate, and my blood runs cold. The Auten people are calculating, yes, but I have dedicated my life to them under the premise that our work at the Academy was for the betterment of all. But as time presses on, I realize that the progress I so desperately seek is likely nothing more than a carrot being dangled above me, by the Academy and by the Emperor himself. I am likely just a tool to be used and discarded.

The Stranger's words rush to me. "Open your eyes before your masters discard you as they did us."

Something *is* being kept from us. Nora saw it, Pakse saw it...what am I missing? What continues to elude me? Perhaps the facts I truly seek are not out in this world, but are tucked away, hidden from view. I resolve to reach the Lyceum, and see for myself if there is something to be made of all this suspicion and doubt. It stands apart from any government, any fickle ruler who would change the facts for their own needs. Surely if there is a place that will reveal to me what is happening, it is the Lyceum. But if it isn't, I am paralyzed to consider what options I will have left.

Knowledge is power, and I am a fool to have forgotten that controlled knowledge is the greatest power of all, depending on who wields its chains.

Solquessa #5

I have not written in some time. As lawlessness spreads across Solquessa, my enthusiasm for these journals has waned, and indeed there has been little time for writing. We traveled all day and through the night before Bernherd relented, allowing us to rest in a small cave we spied a short distance from the road. We have seen many travelers on the way, and warned them of what awaited them in Zvalamanta. Most chose to believe us, but many others dismissed our words as gossip and continued on. I wonder if they desperately hoped the Summer Ballads continued, eager for any distraction even as we attempted to dissuade them.

In lieu of writing, I instead flung myself whole-heartedly into training with Elenya, and have pressed for Bernherd and his captains to instruct everyone else in basic combat in case we run into any more trouble. Mardie and Belric fought this decision, and I worry it cost me their respect, but I would rather secure their lives than worry about my reputation.

We are heading towards the Pass of Argonau, a wide valley that separates the Piriniac Mountains into distinct ranges, and serving as a three-way border between Solquessa, Vijn, and Thrymmat. I am certain the outposts are on high alert, but this is still the safest path. So long as we keep moving, we will be alright.

Betrayal! No sooner had we arrived at the border than our wagons were suddenly surrounded by armed guards, led by Poruch Hussar. He revealed that *we* are being blamed

for the violence in the Zvalamanta, and as our possessions were seized, he falsely accused of us doing the same in Dijwen and Ginostra. He claimed that we were in fact sent by the Auten Empire to sow discord throughout the Tempered Realms, and used the recent invasion of Vijon as proof. He paraded about, pointing to our “actions” as a grave infringement of the nonaggression pact between our two realms, a pact he would now seek to dissolve⁷². I remember hearing little else of what he said, as my ears rang with anger and fear. I no longer knew what to believe in. Had the Empire betrayed us all? Was Solquessa just using us for their own benefit? The only thing I was sure of was that my own failure to lead led us down this path. I could not even apologize to my friends and colleagues, as we were quickly separated, and taken into different rooms of a large building set on the border.

There I was interrogated. Why were we going to Zvalamanta? What was our association with known Seastrayed pirates? Why were we documenting vulnerabilities of the Tempered Realms to benefit the Auten Empire? I refused to answer them, despite being beaten, and I was thrown into a holding cell, isolated from everyone else. I do not know where they are, or if they are even still alive. As some small gesture of mercy, my captors allowed me my journals, but now they feel less a comfort, and more of a reminder that had I spent less time buried amidst their pages, I might have seen this coming. I write now only to occupy my time, and to perhaps better understand why I have failed.

⁷² This was in fact a deliberate effort to detain and discredit the Harte Expedition by Solquessa. If you might recall Queen Velga and Poruch’s strange behaviors in Harte’s journals, recent texts have revealed that Solquessa long harbored resentment towards the Auten Empire, and used the Harte Event to try to upend their long-standing treaty.

I have now been here for at least seventeen days, though they blend into one another so easily I worry my sense of time is beginning to falter⁷³. Each day is one of rigid conformity and menial labor. We are roused at dawn and herded onto the main yard, some 100 feet long and 40 feet deep towards the mountains. Each day, a number of prisoners are called to step forth, and taken back towards the border offices, where their request for asylum might be granted, or a reasoning for their expulsion conjured out of thin air. Regardless of whatever might occur behind those closed doors, those asked to step forward are not seen again. Each day, I listen for crumbs of news as guards and refugees shuffle about their routine, and I have managed to gather that this system is allegedly temporary, a draconian measure to halt or slow the influx of travelers from poor, violence-stricken areas into wealthier, peaceful regions. Solquessa had assumedly managed to avoid internal strife until now, and decided to use our capture along with the violence in Zvalamanta to justify political imprisonment and forced labor. Each day, our tasks are the same: we haul boulders from the mountain sides back to the yard, where they are crushed into gravel for roads. We fell trees to replace rotting posts along the palisades. We feed and water the horses, pigs, and chickens, maintaining their pens and disposing of their waste. The guards consider this labor a fair exchange for our meals, cots, and safety from violence, but we all know it is in fact subjugation, slavery under the guise of protection. Each day, one or two of us are driven to desperation, and attempt to escape into the forests that fringe the valley and coat the lowest slopes of the surrounding peaks. A few have succeeded, but many others are immediately caught by guards and charged with dereliction of duty, treason, or

⁷³ The Pass of Argonau is now one of the most insidious prison camps on the continent. Harte is lucky that his time here was before the camp expanded and took on its primary role of harboring and interrogating suspected war “criminals”. Many of our soldiers have died in that camp.

any number of flimsy allegations. They too disappear from our ranks. Each day, after the work has been completed and our poor rations appropriated, I return to my bed, in a room shared with nineteen others, to write until my hand bleeds, desperate for distraction until fitful rest takes me. Each night, I dream of my friends.

One day, I was asked to step forward, and for a brief moment my heart fluttered with hope; it seemed anything would be better than being left to wither. But instead of freedom or death, I instead received a letter from Dcr. Staudenmier:

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Dcr. Harte,

I am immensely troubled to hear of your imprisonment. When we had not received word from your expedition in Zvalamanta, I utilized through every channel, seeking to expedite a formal inquiry. We learned of the violence in the city, and the accusations levied against your company, and are furiously searching for the appropriate diplomatic response, though I am afraid to admit that this only extends to fellow Citizens, as foreign nationals do not fall under our jurisdiction in matters of prisoner exchange or release. Let it be known, however, that we are working tirelessly, and I will send word of their progress the moment I learn something of note, assuming I am allowed to share this news. These circumstances are quite fragile and reactionary, and I am sure you understand that we must be careful not to further inflame tensions with our ally, the Realm of Solquessa.

I am troubled, however, that the materials you send back to the capital and Contributions Academy have grown increasingly critical of the Empire and the noble purpose of this expedition for which you yourself advocated. I should not have to remind you how much good the Academy, and by extension the Empire itself, has accomplished under our

work, and I shall implore you not to forget it in these uncertain times. These materials have unfortunately damaged your reputation and caused a rift among your fellow Contributors, negatively affecting how quickly they are willing to seek your release. This malcontent has only been compounded by your association with Pakse, executed for cultural treason against Ginostra, as well as Elenya Norrord of the Seastrayed, who have continued to prowl our eastern coasts, preying on innocent Citizens.

Therefore, your release is now dependent on a number of conditions, which I will list for your here:

- 1. You are to disassociate yourself from anyone who seeks to destabilize the Anhaltian Empire and the peace of its Citizens. Failure to do so will result in the confiscation of all currently published materials, and all additional publication will be placed on indefinite hold.*
- 2. You are to replace these dissenters with Academy-approved Contributors for the remainder of your expedition.*
- 3. All incomplete or future materials must be approved by these Contributors before it is sent back to Daun for dissemination.*
- 4. A more disciplined route has been chartered for the remainder of your expedition, and should these other conditions be met, it will be delivered to you. Failure to adhere to this course will result in the confiscation and halting of published materials.*
- 5. Finally, you are to refrain from seeking access to the Lyceum of Thrymmat. Such materials cannot be properly reviewed by Imperial Contributors, and as such the potential for misinformation and unsubstantiated rumor is far too*

great. Failure to follow this particular directive will result not only in the confiscation and halting of published materials, but expulsion from the Contributions Academy, and criminal indictment.

Brenan, I write to you now not as a member of the Treasury Committee and Contributions Administration, but as a dear friend. It was you who predicted the arrival of the Harte Event, you who pioneered our understanding of arcana and its effects on organic and inorganic material, you who revolutionized the study of the ley lines and its atria. You are still regarded as a hero of the Anhaltian Empire and Citizens everywhere, and yet I desperately fear that you have lost sight of how your talents are best utilized. You are compounding uncertainty instead of relieving it by posing such reckless questions about authority and the administrations that selflessly govern in these chaotic times. Your mind is brilliant, your aspirations noble and pragmatic, but it requires a stern, experienced hand to focus that brilliance into utility. Without our help, you might as well shout into the abyss.

I do not wish to speak so harshly to you, but I am compelled all the same if that is what it takes to remind you of your duty as a Contributor and Citizen of the Anhaltian Empire.

I have instructed your captors to allow you additional comforts and freedoms, and to facilitate your response. I cannot move forward with your formal release until such response dictates your agreement to our terms.

Sincerely,

Dcr. Jaun Staudenmier

He can throw as much dense, bureaucratic language at me as he likes; I know what this is. It is just an opportunity to wash his hands of the whole thing. Clearly I have disappointed the Empire, and they hope to reel me back by dangling my freedom above me.

He and the other Contributors are the ones who sit in plush, isolated offices, and they believe they are the ones to shepherd the world out of this cataclysm? Most infuriatingly, he has utterly abandoned Roald and Elenya and anyone else not from Aute under the cheap excuse of “protocol.” I am beginning to realize just how much of a good little errand boy I have been for them. I state this with conviction, regardless of my fate: I refuse these terms, now and forever. I will shout into whatever abyss they may lodge me, so long as I may do so in freedom and service to those who I now see will be forever secondary to those in power, influence, and wealth.

I spent the remainder of this day in numbness. I had desperately hoped this letter would contain knowledge of where my friends have been taken. Hellene, Belric, Mardie, Bernherd, Elenya, Roald, and so many others. Instead I am as shrouded in darkness as ever. It is this lack of knowing that tears at me most of all, my journals the only thing that keeps my sanity afloat. Where have my comrades been taken, if they are indeed still alive? How long will I be imprisoned? Is my life’s work, what should have been my greatest accomplishment, doomed to obscurity, ruined by infernal politics? I carry through these despicable days holding onto an increasingly bleary hope that they will endure, even if I am starved, beaten, and thrown to the wilds to rot.

If my life is to end here, I must press this final wish onto whoever might come upon these diaries: morality and decency cannot be protected with good intentions alone. Those intentions must be carried out into the world as actions of peace, community, and selflessness, even as death looms overhead. I will not give up, even as I stand alone and stripped of worth. I accomplish my mission, even if it costs me the rest of my life.

But first, I must find a way out of here. They may have taken my friends and resources, but they could not take my mind. Let me put it to good use for once.