

The background of the cover is a dark, atmospheric illustration of a large, multi-story stone building with many windows, some of which are boarded up. A set of stone steps leads up to a large arched doorway in the center. To the right, there are some green plants and a tree branch. In the foreground, on the right side, is the back of a person's head and shoulders. The person has short dark hair and is wearing a dark, hooded cloak. They are looking towards the building. In the lower-left foreground, there is a small, glowing purple and gold object that looks like a piece of armor or a relic, resting on a stone surface. The overall color palette is dark with some highlights from the glowing object and the moonlight.

PILLARS OF ETERNITY

The House of Wael



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THE HOUSE OF WAEL

Dedication

The word “Elucidation” and then, “Indemnification,” are written in blendfish ink beneath this, in two different hands, one seemingly unaware of the other, as the words overlap.

Whatever dedication that was once here has been blacked out, as if with a single stroke of a painter’s brush. The edges of the long blot are remarkably crisp and clear, almost sharp - the ink looks fresh.

As you study it, the ink seems to run for a moment, as if struggling to make itself into words... yet no letters reveal themselves, allowing anything beneath to remain formless and free.

Directly below the blot in ink of a blendfish are no words, but a symbol of Wael. According to those who have studied the scroll and ponder at what the missing dedication means, it is the absence and lack of words that makes a stronger statement, for what is said upon the nature of language in the text in the words of the one calling himself Ouster is true.

*Dedicate to all, or none,
but words will not suffice
for any sort of truth,
even its pale shadow.*

THE SCROLL IN QUESTION, UNFURLED

What the Parchment Tells with the Benefit and Lack of Proper Perspective

This curious scroll was found buried beneath the head of a skeletal dragon in the Dyrwood by a (still-docile) wight whose mind was held by the family dog, the first son of the wizard-born family.

The discovery of the scroll, however, even clenched in the boy's fangs, cannot explain the odd shredded state of the scroll - the scroll looks as if it has been torn apart and placed back together, yet the seams are difficult to make out, as if the scroll healed itself into a new pattern.

*What is even more unusual is that when the scroll is unrolled, nothing is written on it, although the tear patterns are present, and can be felt when one touches the parchment-like material. It was only discovered that there was more there when one of the **Priests of Wael**, reading it before an audience, was interrupted by a crude-speaking orlan with an eye-patch, who demanded why he was only reading half the story. (And then, demanded his pands for the reading back.)*

Upon examination, the Priest saw nothing. Neither did the accompanying priests, but after the orlan was tossed out after spitting upon one's eye, the Priest so spat upon looked upon the back of the scroll with his single eye untouched... and found the orlan was correct. Without depth perception, a larger narrative revealed itself on the scroll's spine - a story which ran much longer than the scroll itself seemed to - and never seemed to be the same story twice to the same eye.

Over time, asking various men to tell what they saw in the scroll became a standard practice, until the middle section was unveiled, and then the man in question was slain the best manner the inexperienced priests knew how. What they sought to conceal was either too fascinating or abhorrent, and many were the blasphemies contained therein, concerning the God of Secrets and the ending of him.

Well, blasphemies to all except the Dead Heart, who remained silent and hidden when the claims of their sect were revealed... and they tasked themselves with recovering the parchment.

Written in ink of a blendfish are the words: "The Dead Heart exists, and they sing for the end of all things, gods and men alike, and for the world stopping its path through the heavens."

On the Owning of Knowledge

*The scroll was in the possession of the **Priests of Wael** for a hundred days, and while it remained in their possession, visitors and disciples to the library where the scroll was stored reported seeing the same fragments of text spreading into the books there - and new fragments as well.*

*Seeking the mystery, the **Priests of Wael** re-opened all the tomes and scrolls in their possession, found several new entries... but when they returned to match the fragments against the scroll, they found the scroll had gone missing.*

*The **Adherent** in charge of the scroll was punished, despite arguing that the absence of the mystery along with the mystery itself was simply “Wael’s way.”*

For ease of translation, each chapter is grouped into themes and topics that begin and end abruptly. What follows is the course of the narrative, though not necessarily in the correct order, but best as can be determined by the Archivists.

What Theology Tells Us

This passage was torn from the Almanac with some violence. It didn’t belong there, needed a new home, along with the other gods, and besides Wael is not one who shares all knowledge - any touch of his, any symbol of his would suggest that the work is incomplete.

Wael, pronounced like “wall,” which is fitting. Also known as, “The Obscured,” “The Eyeless Face,” “The Hundred Visions,” “He Who Sees and Is Not Seen,” countless seeing metaphors and blindness titles, either implying able to see too much or too little. Too cryptic to understand.

Yet should Wael appear, it will always be a person, and shift within a range of the possibilities imagined by man, so perhaps our imagination is his cage? If so, it must hate us so. It is embodied in the symbol of the eye, either alone, repeated, shifting, countless styles, colors, but an eye nonetheless.

Wael claims what one would expect. Visions, dreams, revelation, illusions, secrets, obfuscation, cryptography, symbols, perception.

But in accordance with his domain - how would one know for sure?

No known allies and no known enemies, with “known” being the key word... a key word that fits no door.

... Wael’s objectives and thought processes are often inscrutable to others – mortal and immortal. It represents both the acts of concealment and obfuscation as well as the acts of revelation and decryption. People pray to it

both to protect and hide their secrets as well as to help them unravel a riddle or problem in front of them.

The Obscured is the only consistent manifestation of Wael, though it has supposedly taken thousands of forms among mortals when it suits it to do so. The Obscured appears as a person of constantly shifting sex, age, race, size, and ethnicity speaking in an endless number of known and unknown (possibly nonsensical) languages. Two things are constant about the appearance of the Obscured: its face has no eyes and it is surrounded by a swirling “cloud” of eyes of all different sizes and shapes, many seemingly painted or illustrated, others monstrous or tiny, but of incredible number and variety.

Wael’s priests are often the founders and caretakers of many centers of learning, including various libraries. The priests’ relationship with knowledge is complicated, for they hide as much as they make available to others. There is even an inner sect of elite priests known as The Hand Occult, authors and scribes writing under pseudonyms who attempt to control the flow of esoteric knowledge. Some academics believe there is a more sinister side to The Hand Occult, but most scholars find the strange scribes’ activities more bizarre and silly than malicious.

1

THE KNOCK IN THE HOUSE WITHOUT DOORS

What the Chanter Sings

"It's a tale of pretend and lessons, an old one, not as old as Eora or the dance of [this passage has been blacked out in thick ink, but the symbols of two moons, one hollow white, the other a black speck next to it, have been drawn in an uneven hand]" the Chanter said, pointing at the scroll the Priest held to his eyes, the chains on his wrists rattling as he did so.

"But still, this tale is old, comfortable, classic..." the Chanter seemed slightly disdainful at this, perhaps fighting back a clichéd response of his own. "...like an old noblewoman's chair - residing in her summer home in winter, so comfortable there is dust upon it, with no one to fuss over it and comb it clean." The Chanter leaned forward, his spindly arms crooked out like a spider's, the finger drawing almost quill-like over the scroll's surface. "Look, there is even the boy and the crone figure... well, not a crone in this case, but a trickster... or one filled with too much knowledge... or..." The Chanter paused, and for once he seemed lost for words, looking at the parchment. His eyes flicked suddenly, as if the words had moved under his gaze, and he coughed deep in his throat. "...the details are not important. But the sweeping theme, it starts with a boy knocking at a door he should not, and [this single word has been blacked out in thick ink, but the symbol of a stick figure, headless, with two black dots where his head should be, as if nothing but eyes]himself answers. What does one say to him?"

The Chanter waited, but the Priest said nothing, which was, of course, the right answer.

The Chanter smiled, and nodded at the scroll. "And so it is here. It is obvious... except the boy is not being punished for his curiosity, as the Simple Vorlas Hound might be... he is in danger because he asks nothing." The Chanter looked up. "Which is a crime among your odd order, is it not?"

The Priest again said nothing, but this time, it was because the Chanter was correct.

THE HOUSE OF WAEŁ

was unusual only in how uninviting it was, literally. One could miss it, unless the outside was more uninviting and unsettling than the interior, and then the gaze of a seeker, desperate to hide or find shelter, might chance upon it. But even then, they would take it for a trick of the light, unless they looked for the entrance through a mirror. Or in the boy's case, the rain that covered the cobblestones in front of him. He was afraid of splashing and even though it was already soaking, he still held his petitioner's robe high enough so that the hem would not be soaked.

As he did, he gazed into the puddles ahead and noticed the queer dark opening off to his immediate side - he had almost stumbled by it, and taken aback, his thoughts filled with imaginings of thieves and raiders and worse as he gaped at the dark opening, and the dark opening did nothing but gape back.

His eyes fought the rain, and turning his head upwards, the opening seemed to vanish, then reappear - and steady.

The threshold was slightly rectangular. The corners were angled, as if the top of the stone arch was narrower, the sides folding inwards... or at a slant, the door at an angle. The boy's thoughts faded as he studied the floor beyond, which led up into darkness, though there were no stairs... and only the suggestion of a ramp. Despite the pounding rain, it seemed unusually dry. Motes, bright against the darkness, floated in the black. He could not see the walls, and had no torch with him, only the scroll case (not soaked) and his robes (soaked). There was no light beyond. He stood fast, caught between the rain-drenched street and the dry darkness that stood next to him, like a second shadow... had there been any sunlight, but that had been blanketed away with gray clouds and Ondra's tears, which were picking up in intensity, more like whipped stones than tears. Keeping one eye closed, he looked at it again.

It was an ugly thing. The only thing that beckoned was the dryness. It looked much older than the empty street, as if the city had been built atop it, then forgot about it. Perhaps it had. Perhaps it swallowed travelers. He did not want to go in, but he knew, in his thoughts, that this was where he was meant to go.

His hands tightened around the scroll case (the exterior soaked), and gathering his robes about him (also soaked), he stepped inside, his head hung slightly low, in a half-bow.

The whip-and-patter of rain became muted and vanished. His once-wet clothes, formerly dripping as if embraced by Ondra, became dry, and drier with each step he took into the darkened hall... which opened up around him into a larger chamber, welcoming him by sweeping off to the sides and out of sight. The motes from before gathered on the ground, denser and denser as he advanced, forming a slight mist and obscuring the floor. Even more to his shame, they seemed to sharpen the slap of his frayed sandals against the floor. He was still breaking them in, his journey had not been long enough. For once and perhaps the only time he could remember, he prayed for his whisper hood if only to wrap his feet... and shuddered, recalling leather, hemp, and sweat.

I: On Whisper Hoods and Deadening of the Senses

Such muzzles were often hoods with high collars laced with drawstrings, to prevent young disciples of Wael from speaking within the confines of the halls of study, the halls of sight, the halls of knowledge, and also the halls of when the elder priests simply wanted them to be silent and stop clucking like a flock of hens pecking out question marks rather than attending to their studies. In silence.

Not many were aware that in Aedyr and other older provinces, such hoods were used for madmen and wizards kept prisoner, in the hopes of keeping their powers in check, with only enough success to breed the belief that they worked.

Whisper Hood: *Often, Whisper Hoods cover the eyes as well, with the intention of muzzling all the senses so one can focus - or allow others to focus. Whisper Hood, the Eyeless Face, Ear Clasps, and the Bridle, are all part of this, sometimes with the Vestments of the Order preventing the sense of touch as well - which at times, is more of a comfort, such as the Vestment of 98 Eyes and its ability to resist temperature extremes and other traces of discomfort. If worn on the feet, Whisper Hoods can allow heightened success to stealth checks, and some students of Wael were quick to discover this when raiding the pantry or slipping out to see what secrets the night streets revealed.*

Despite the space around him, the chamber felt cramped. There was a draft, although he was not sure from where - it was just enough that his robe did not warm him, even dry. There was a musty scent in the air - a strange mix of a dying flower garden... and a grave. Like the smell of

grave flowers perhaps? He wrinkled his nose... everything was ugly to his senses, as if they were being rebuked. The place seemed as if it did not wish to be studied, a shield of grotesqueness, something ugly. Just like he was. And the ugliest of all were the walls

ILL-FORMED LIKE A BEGGAR'S TEETH

for mortar stones great and small were missing, often it seemed as if someone had purposely gouged one out, and then, without caring about the rest of the wall or what lay behind it, had left, carrying the stone with them, and leaving an absence behind. The walls were riddled with such holes, squarish abscesses that reminded him of the entrance door... opening, he corrected himself. There had been no door. Not even the trace of a hinge. Was this some sort of catacomb... above ground? Even that he was not certain about.

The mist at his feet felt neither cold nor wet nor seemed to stir at any of his movements - it was as if the motes had settled there as still as ice crystals or metal filings... sleeping perhaps - but the floor was there, he could feel it beneath his sandals. The motes there simply hid the stones beneath, raising questions by lying still, even as he took hesitant steps forward.

As the boy glanced around, the holes seemed to drift up along the walls to the ceiling, where more holes had been gouged overhead as well. If the holes had not been so clean and shaped around the edges, he would have thought they had succumbed to stone rot, if such a thing existed. He could make out odd shadows in some of them... they were shelves, scattered at various heights, almost carelessly. Like a madman's home. Perhaps it was the endless rote conditioning, perhaps it was instinct, but they all seemed dark eyes falling upon him. Each cavity seemed to watch. And wait. In silence.

The boy did what manners dictated, and he stretched his hand out to the nearest wall - solid, not an abscess - and raising his hand he made a

I: On when the Writing Changed and Became a Cribbed Script

At this point, the writing of the manuscript changes - it's not certain if it's the penmanship or the narrowness of a new perspective. The symbols become small, blocky, contained, precise, but despite the precise nature of the letters, the uneven edges of the descriptions make

it appear rough. Age and repetition can change a scrawl to a greater pattern, but the cresting lines and sentences cannot fully be driven out, apparently, at least for this particular scrivener.

KNOCK WHERE NO KNOCK SHOULD HAVE BEEN

The single rap of knuckle on stone echoing, echoing, echoing through bend and angle and corner in the stone halls.

The listener recognized it at once, though he had not heard it in years. The eyes on his robes opened one-by-one as he whispered to himself, and he fell still. He bid them close again. They would not help him hear.

It was the first knock in the House of Wael he had ever heard. The reason was two-fold (possibly more). First, it was because there were no doors. Second, a knock always assumed someone was home.

The House advertised no such claims, except to the fearful, or ones who knew better. Usually the former.

Tales of old men and gods were to blame, and the tales were always the same, but they never focused on the truth of it - that manners would get you killed more surely than your own fear for

Once You've Entered a Crone's House

whether you are young, old, man, woman, only fools knock. Manners may buy you time but little else, however it is the reliance on the ritual of civilization and the hint of peace between people that truly enrages a Crone. Trappings and insults, really, of a boastful age. Either be there to steal, kill, or cast them out, but do not approach them as either an equal or a beggar, for they respect neither.

Knocking - why that is death. And knocking in a house without doors is something fools do.

THE MAN WITH THE VESTMENT OF 98 EYES

went still as a deer, which was twice as unseen in the Dyrwood as it might be elsewhere. He was not a crone, but his gaze was fearful, and his gaze was all from his robes, where countless (in truth, 98, for those who could count that high) stitched eyes were embroidered, some with skill, some with grace, and some with the patching of a refugee's exhaustion.

The man with a hundred stitched eyes kept as still as he dared. He was not used to listening, and he became impatient, then dismissive. The possibly-imagined echo, igniting his mind with questions, he let each gutter out one by one, and let them fall into the chill waters of contempt. A knock. Ridiculous. A trick of the ear. His senses were having fun with him. They often did, here, if one wasn't careful...

Then he heard it again, a double-rap, knuckle on stone.

It was a knock, he was certain. He could also read the feeling behind the sound. Hesitant. Fearful, but gaining strength.

So not a trespasser. A visitor. Visitors knocked. His questions welled up again, although different than before. Why w-

Then he heard the first snap, stiff sandal heels against the stone. He could hear it sharply, even though the owner was moving as slowly and tentatively as he knocked - or so he hoped. The robed man's heart began to drum, and his muscles moved to action. He rarely had to run, but he did so now.

Before the third footfall, he rushed from the room, his half-donned robe swirling behind him like a cape ignominiously, though (presumably, which was the worst thing to do in the House) there seemed to be no one there to see his embarrassment.

Quick, quick...

When the man of a hundred eyes arrived, the boy - a rather ugly boy - had taken one step too far into the foyer. The boy's right hand was still upraised from where he had rapped against the stone, but it was held in empty space, as if he had forgotten to lower it - his knuckles were scraped, knocking as best as he could without a door, scraping his knuckles on the hard stone.

Two of the hundred eyes widened, watched as, slowly, the boy's foot pierced the mist blanketing the floor and his sandals made no sound as they met air.

The man moved quickly, and suddenly, his hand on the boy's elbow, catching him at the lip of the second black threshold, then with a sharp tug, yanked him back. The boy yelped, and as if in explanation, the mist parted slightly, revealing the darkness where the floor peeled back as the walls did, though with a more lethal promise.

When the terror of the scene gripped him, it gripped the boy so hard it wrung tears from him. The robed man's lecture died in his throat, and almost reluctantly, he wrapped his arms around him and held him until the sobs subsided. The boy gave no other introduction, no words, and most of all, said nothing about wanting to go home. Somewhat at a loss, the man continued to hug him, and kept the questions to himself until the fear streamed out of the boy.

It was a poor welcome and perhaps the best one. It was not what was on his mind, but to speak that, he would have come to

On the Vestment of 98 Eyes

Vestment of 98 Eyes: Worn by Elders and Guardian Priests of Wael, it symbolizes watchfulness, and that true sight of the hundred visions can never be achieved unless one's eyes are open, and has stemmed from elven tradition, not from human. Some have criticized such garments for presuming the gaze be focused outward at the physical world, not inward. Some versions of these robes also deaden the senses to temperature extremes, disease, itching, and pain, which oddly enough, provides comfort to those wearing it, allowing them to travel in adverse conditions without harm.

A LESSON ON THE LITTLE USE OF PATH,

which begins with the part where I say, "May Wael watch your step." He didn't say it out loud, not yet, because it seemed out of place.

So the man in the high priest robes who was to introduce himself by the title of "Ouster" (for the game of introductions would come later, as useless as that ritual was) sighed, either exasperation or exhaustion, it was hard to tell. Maybe it was recollection. He kept the next words to himself as well.

"Some hope a path is made for a reason, and hope that it leads somewhere. Here, however, simply see the path first, and make your own judgments."

I: The Pit: On the Strange Greetings of Wael

Pit of Revelations. Oddities such as the welcoming pit are known in the architecture of holy sites to Wael. Far more common in the past than now, although more in evidence in temples and libraries than in underground dungeon-like vaults. The shape of the pit was not a full

circle, but a hollow formed by the intersection of two greater circles inscribed on the floor.

Instead, the man who was to introduce himself by the title of Ouster sighed and facing the boy, was reminded of

THE LITTLE USE OF GREETINGS

in the House of Wael. Greetings were done with a question. But first, you needed a listener that was not terrified.

Ouster drew a second breath that did not exhale as a sigh, and slowly, carefully regarded the boy, but his hands did not leave his shoulders, as if wary to take his hands from him lest he vanish, run off, or throw himself into what the man disliked to call the Welcoming Pit and called it more of One of Countless Irritations the House contained. He thought it a poor lesson, for pits only taught once.

The boy was not well suited to the world, he could tell at a glance, even past the sobbing. All crude angles, squat and fat enough to make cruel sport of if one were a boy or a vengeful teacher, and his skin was pale as white adra. Unfinished, a bit weak, prone to chipping. The sobbing simply drove the point home. Well, best to get on with it.

It took some time to let the sobs run their course, and unhook the boy's fingers from his robe - though, mercifully, the robe did not absorb the tears, or else it would have been drenched. He needed the right question. There were so many others he wanted to ask. Countless others. Can you stop crying. Can you not poke the eyes of the robe. Are you lost. Where are you from. Where are your parents.

He asked none of these things, flinging them like silverware from a drawer when you need a corkscrew, all clattering in his mind until he found the one that rose to the top.

"How did you get in?" The boy looked at him blankly.

Ouster never thought to ask the boy his name. He hadn't done much yet to earn one, and he doubted it mattered - but silence was unacceptable. "How. Did. You. Get. In?" He let insistence sharpen the question.

And got nothing. Adra face, blank... then the boy looked down ashamed, and Ouster caught the symbol on his robes. The shape of an eye, the lid closed. Ah. He took a third breath, straightened.

“Ah - weren’t you...” The man’s voice was hesitant, like knocking. “... supposed to be here next year?”

The man straightened, and the boy did not leave. And did not move, simply stared. The man stared back, then stepped back, as if to get some distance from the boy’s gaze, as if he was being judged and he didn’t like it. The boy had never had anyone back away from him in such a fashion.

It was this and

THE STRANGE WELCOME

that caused the boy to study the man (Ouster) more carefully. Even more so, now that he was stepping back, cautiously, as if afraid of the boy. But that was impossible.

He would have sworn the man was tiptoeing... that is, if the boy could have seen the man’s feet past the high priest robes. The robes did not fit him well, and looked to be in disarray - the boy wondered if perhaps he had interrupted something. He had the look of a man who had run from a bedroom - or garderobe. When the man had taken three steps back, the robes pooled around him sliding into the mist, some of the eyes submerging into folds, others staring at the ceiling and far corners of the room.

“I wasn’t expecting anyone,” the man added unnecessarily. He sounded slightly put out. Slightly challenging. His hands weren’t fists and weren’t at the sides of his waist yet and his arms weren’t folded, but the stance felt challenging nonetheless. As a teacher would.

The boy nodded, as if in apology, catching as much from the expression. It was the only answer he had made since the man’s arrival.

The man’s gaze softened a bit. The boy was still a trembling mass, so much so it looked as if he’d stepped in out of the rain (there wasn’t any that he could see, and no moisture on the boy’s robes or face) or was about to wet himself. He glanced where the boy emerged from, as if not quite certain what lay beyond. No. Nothing.

“Well, I *would* invite you in, but... well, here you are. A little early, but we’ll make do.” He waved around him to the pockmarked chamber at the variety of geometries and symbols were carved, and a variety of basic geometric absences, almost like offering shelves, were set.

Within, slumbering, were the tiny shapes, much more complex than the boy had not noticed before. An audience of shadowed eyes.

When his eyes had circled the perimeter of the room, they came back to meet the man, who was waiting, impatiently, staring at the boy's clothes - again, dry, no trace of rain. What came next, it became clear the boy didn't need to introduce himself

...WHEN SYMBOLS OF INVITATION WILL DO

for the boy wore questions not only on his face but on his robes as well. The man was gazing at the closed eye, with the same respect as if it were a beggar's seal and the boy was the scroll.

"So a *student*, then?" The man prompted, relaxing somewhat, as if settling into a role where the hierarchy was clear, and he was comfortable with it - or comfortable enough to wield it to his advantage. *Student* came with a slight inflection, as if daring the boy to correct him. His arms folded, hands hidden within the sleeves. "Which of the Priests sent you, then? Semblis?" An elven name. The boy was unfamiliar with it, and it showed on his face, which became more slack than normal. The man narrowed his gaze. "You *are* a student, aren't you?" The boy looked confused, and the man prompted at his robes. "No open eye, just the two useless ones in your head, it seems." He said it so casually, it didn't sound like an insult. "Unless they've changed the initiate robes recently..." The man cocked his head. "Have they?" The boy shook his head. "Good. You might want to try speaking when you get the chance," he snapped, "would save me some breath."

The man did not seem to care much about expending what was in his lungs, however. The boy couldn't tell if the man spoke with disdain or was simply being matter-of-fact. He had never been interrogated as much in his life - often, people didn't care for the answer or did not ask, especially within the priesthood. "So a petitioner. Unless you stole those clothes." The man narrowed his gaze, and the boy frantically shook his head, and the man appraised him, tilting his head, then nodded in response. "You don't look like a 'Gutter' to me, anyway. A little fretful, a mouse perhaps, but..." The man sighed. "So you're here for lessons. Then on your way, I hope." The man's voice dropped. "But I promise you, the lessons will be harsh. Unforgiving. You won't like what you see. But..." the man leaned in. "I will allow you to leave

at any time, simply step back the way you came... just mind the floor, because Wael won't watch it for you."

As if in reminder, the boy looked down again, checking the stone and emptiness from where he stood. When he finally looked up, the man was gone. But he could hear his voice, receding.

"Watch where you step, but don't *just* watch... sight can be as useless as dwarven eyes," *when they see gold or unclaimed land* he didn't finish, but simply left the tail off, strangely respectful for one who seemed to bear malice easily for anyone not his own kind - or more likely, himself. "Look here, follow me," Ahead of him, a small candle flame seemed to dance, rocked by the movement of the man who carried it... or better, wore it. The candle light came from the robe, one looking ahead, one looking at the ground behind him... beckoning the boy forward.

II: On the Vestment of 98 Eyes

Vestment of 98 Eyes: When a command word is spoken, one of the eyes of the wearer's choosing glows with a soft light, enough to read by... often on the cuffs so the light might shine onto books and scrolls being perused. Any such eye on the robe may be lit if the wearer can imagine it. Unknown to most disciples of Wael, this glow can include their own, real eyes, although no one has tried it before in the history of the robes because it is something a child would try, and most priests of Wael have no time for such frivolous thoughts and trickery, which is why they are bound for the Wheel quicker than most to let their souls age all the more.

The man continued, the lights on his robe fluttering as he moved. "... just don't bump your head on the overhangs while obsessing over the floor, you can knock yourself unconscious on them. Or dwell too long on what lies overhead or you'll make the second and last mistake you almost did when you crept in here. And some of these pieces are best not disturbed... if you were to strike them and they were to fall, well..." He waved his hand to his left, his eye winking on it briefly to cast a flash upon its surface... which swam, almost alive in response, beneath what looked like glass. Tarnish glanced at the object, then slowed.

Set on one of the recesses, so precariously it might fall, was a clouded jar of murky water. In it swam small, white fish, darting about. Tarnish leaned in. The fish were odd - no eyes, sharp at one end, and a strange

decaying yellow stain to them that reminded him of teeth. Which, he suddenly realized they were, and drew back, but not before he caught the smell of salt water emanating from the jar - were they in brine? Were they moving or...

“Ravager teeth. Barbed Ravager, I expect,” his guide said, farther now. “It’s a great shark, the equivalent of a swimming battering ram. With spines along the back, poisonous really, another reminder that Ondra doesn’t care much for ships on her seas - not that it stops the aumaua. Those are just the teeth. It’s the brine that’s swirling, I think.” Tarnish blinked. The brine did look... fluid. But something about the teeth was off... yet his guide still walked, at a gait that Tarnish had to abandon his curiosity to keep up.

***Ravager:** A “ravager” refers to Barbed Ravager, a great shark that is known to attack vessels, smashing holes in hulls and trying to knock sailors off the deck. It has tremendous spines protruding from its side and back that are poisonous - this, not the teeth, are what is lethal about the jar.*

As the boy followed the eyes, that followed the man, then what followed was

THE GRAND TOUR, THE SPECTATORS SILENT

as they walked briskly, ever upwards, stone and recesses still in evidence around them, like walking through a corridor of darkened windows.

“Welcome to the House of Wael. I am its Keeper, the House always has one - and their names are as many as the relics here and as many as the names for this place. Some kith call it a library, and that’s what I thought it was before I saw it with my own eyes.” He gestured at the walls, sighed. “Yes, yes, before you say it - not a single book, not a single scroll. Which I suppose we should be grateful about, but...”

“It’s not much to look at - well, a lot to look at really, but keep your feet to the level surfaces - watch your step there.” He caught the boy as the first indentation on the floor snagged his foot, grabbed him by the elbow. “I know, a Library, right? More like a mausoleum, with a dash of Engwithan charm for good measure. That’s what I thought, too.” He glanced at the boy, checking for a pack. There was none, and the man sounded displeased, but he did not see the flash of

terror on the boy's face. As the man whirled and grunted, sweeping forward, the boy quickly glanced down at his belt - and the floor - then quickly behind him... and found nothing but the bare stone. His finger clutched, as if gripping something invisible, and tightened. The man continued on, heedless.

"Send a boy all this way, and they didn't even bother to bring anything for your stomach?" *Your* felt like *my*. "I'll show you the kitchen - well, the larder anyway. Oh, and the first house rule-" The man turned, bending down to meet the boy's gaze, and his voice dropped in tandem. "Touch *nothing*." He smiled slightly. "Could cause trouble, being *too* inquisitive. Might put your hand in a trap, twice over, and in this place, you'll run out of hands before it runs out of traps... and some are subtle enough to catch an elf." His face lighting up, he turned back to the boy. "Do you want to see?"

The boy unclenched his fingers, and eager for the man's gaze elsewhere, nodded. He motioned the boy to one of the recesses, where a knotted cord with shriveled jerky - petrified leaves, perhaps - pierced the cord. The boy inhaled, his nose thick with the smell of reeds, his ears with booted feet, a sense of command, orders...

THEY'D CAUGHT THE ELF

and the elf had caught them. Led them to this swamp, more gas and mud to foul a hunt than a sewer. If they weren't careful...

Catching an elf was a tricky thing. Like frogs in the reeds, a silver seed in a farmer's bushel. And this work was far from finished, in the Aedyran sense. "What are you waiting for, a drink from an Adra Gourd?" He snapped, the hovering torches scattering at his command. "Move your feet, and don't let me hear them again until you've found that facepainter."

Keeping it once caught? Even harder. Not a lock on any door with any hinge that was set in stone and buried in rock could keep an elf put, and this was a Glanfathan one, more wild than most. They needed domestication, reminders, lasting ones. So he would take elves and change them as best he could, shaving the tips of their ears from them, one by one...

It was like carving a sculpture. Not to kill, to humble, not to shame, to remind. With a little effort, any elf could be shaped into a human. He

knew as well as any of them, for he was an elf as well. It was a matter of upbringing, really. It was to remind them they could fall still farther, all the time.

They would find this one, and make a reminder of the tips of his ears, then send him back, his pride clipped from him. If only they could find him, then it would be another for the

I: Elf Snare

Elven Sculpture (sometimes called Elven Carpentry) does not always refer to statues and reliefs, but in the past, actual carving of elves. First, they must be caught, then made human, which is the worst humiliation that one can do. It heralded back to the hatred that the settlers bore the Glanfathans, and marked one of the worst crimes of the war. The war is over, yet the crimes remain, not solely confined to history. These “hunting” crimes were sometimes attributed unfairly to Galawain, god of the hunt, but for every Glanfathan caught, a Dyrwood settler often fell victim to the same, their corpses found with their faces painted crudely, as if marking them as children.

Elf-Catcher Snare: *This preserved necklace of the tips of elven ears causes any Glanfathan to either go Berserk, Intimidate, become Susceptible to Taunt or Cipher Attacks, or suffer Morale Loss. The wearer also gains slightly better hearing, but only for those in pain or wounded, making it invaluable on hunts, whether two-legged prey or elsewhere. When the elf-catcher is interlaced with wood chips from the Forest of Black Trees, the effects are doubled.*

The boy drew back, wordless, his chest almost stilled. He could still faintly smell smoke, feel his feet sinking into the ground... but the priest had not paused, moving on to the next recess, speaking to it. “Now *this* trap... this one is one so many put their hands into, and willingly. There...” And the boy’s eyes fell, were almost swallowed by the recess, to see a larger room beyond, lit almost like moonlight from an unseen source. He felt as if somehow he was looking through a spyglass, and his eyes swam... until it fell on the squat form in the room, bedecked in armor... stone armor, a statue. A true sculpture this time. “The trap... it is not the room, not the armor, though the armor is worse enough... it’s not even the blade, it’s accepting the blade that can be the trap. The blade is Durgan steel...” He glanced at the boy. The boy knew what it was, but Ouster continued, as if relishing the tale.

“Durgan steel, from a dwarven hold more an anvil than a place, and things of Durgan’s Battery...” He gave a half-rueful twist to the mouth. “...they keep intact, even their owners. Can hear the axe whispering sometimes, asking why it’s idle.” Almost against its nature

DURGAN STEEL

slept on its side on the floor... in the statue’s hand was the splintered handle, as if something had sheared it where the blade had been affixed. Splinters lay like evergreen nettles beneath it, like a disintegrated haystack. The man nodded at the haft. “And maybe whispering why it can’t feel its legs.”

“Many a weapon can pull a man into battle, with pride pushing at him from behind. With Durgan Steel, combat becomes more like ploughing a field, cutting heads like wheat stalks.” He sighed. “Then Durgan steel was no more... the secret to making it as broken as the haft of that axe, maybe known to a few dwarves and an ogre matron or two. There, you see the symbol there?” A light shone from the vestments, glittering along the side of the axe blade. There, a crown was interlaced within the tracery, and the boy’s eyes widened, it was beautiful, almost lovingly rendered. As he studied it, he could feel the etching being done, his fingers calloused, the air so cold, cold enough to see one’s breath, holding

I: Durgan’s Crown

Durgan Steel is a rare metal whose origins lie in the White March - and were lost there. This axe head, known as Durgan’s Crown, is made from this valued steel, and the battle axe head is often far more worthy than whatever handle it is partnered with, for no handle seemed able to bear the weight of the axe head for long before splintering in the owner’s hand. In the time of the passing of the dwarves of Durgan’s Battery, the phrase “Durgan’s Crown” refers to a blade or axe head that does not rest easily upon any conventional weapon hilt, haft, handle, or shaft, symbolic of the fall of that once proud people. “Rests as easy as Durgan’s Crown” is sometimes used to refer to a decapitation or something of time and effort that is about to fall apart.

“Fragile, but dwarven history was always... poorly written in the hands of its makers.” The man sighed. “All dwarven culture is trial and error,” he snipped. “Nails begging for Ogre hammers. Or any number of other nations or cultures, the way they drift about. At

about the third tale of any dwarf, you see the pattern in their history, though they're often too consumed with family and clan to see it." He straightened, turning away and leaving the axe and statue in darkness behind the hollow wall. He wondered how many more spaces lay behind the recesses around them.

"This place has many such pieces, many lessons to be known, others... well, it keeps one quite busy. Little time for meandering, always something new to discover..." he trailed off, his face clouding, in a manner the boy knew well from others. It was the look of a student who had been lying by the river in the sun suddenly remembering a chore left undone and the belt that might follow. "Still... the larder, come. Not even fit for a troll's backside, really." He nodded. "Some water there, too, though you barely have used enough words to parch your throat, I think. Which is welcome. Silence suits you. Until I ask."

The last was sharp, a warning. More sights and ledges with items and relics swept by them, shapes and silhouettes... the corridor seemed to go up and on, forever, until it didn't. They were moving so fast his memory could not keep up, he could not retrace his steps. And suddenly, abruptly, the two came to the

LARDER NOT FIT FOR TROLLS

living ones, in any event. The room - more like a cave - more like a marsh - was markedly different than the cold dungeon corridors - the first clue came as the boy's feet sank into the floor like wet carpet, water squelching from between his toes. It was water. But it was not a carpet he stood on, he was afraid to look down, and he focused on the feel of the water between his toes. They had gone upwards, Tarnish was sure of it... yet the air became thicker, humid... until he truly felt he was within a cave... squarish yes, but still within the House.

If this was the larder... it was huge. It rivaled the entrance chamber, he supposed, but it would be an unclear contest - the foyer had the mist, the recesses in the roof (like a strainer, he thought suddenly, or eyes looking down), and the pit below (the boy had not checked the floor), so height-wise it was technically impossible to measure... and the vines and carpet blanketing the walls and making a canopy of the roof also made the larder's dimensions impossible to tell. He craned his neck upwards. Past the vines overhead, the ceiling stretched up beyond his view into darkness. The floor... the floor was a druid's carpet of decay

and bloom, blistery pods and strange near-greenish buds, the colors off in the half-light of the glow coming from the robes, making him appear as a marsh wisp. Tarnish thought of tales and shuddered.

The marshy mass of the floor was not cleanly laid, it was bunched up like great folds, contained its own rolling hills, valleys across the floor. If it didn't seem so... natural, Tarnish would have taken them for grave hillocks, many of them the right size for a man. Or boy. In fact, the entire room... he took a step back, taking it in.

Ouster ignored the hills and decaying greenery, stepping sure and quickly, squelching through it, his long hem dragging. Tarnish followed the contours and frowned at the shape of the floor... it looked as if it had been tended, shaped like a human, like a bush sculpture in an Aedyran craftsgarden, but it was much too wide, too... spread out.

Tarnish glanced quickly upwards at the darkened ceiling, then back down at the carpeted mass on the floor. It reminded him of a giant bearskin rug, but... of marsh, of fungus. It looked as if something huge had fallen from a tower's height, leaving the splattered humanoid carpet garden behind like some fool's joke. There was a peculiar, sickly, almost soggy smell about the room. He wrinkled his nose. Mildew, perhaps? But...

"It's troll skin," Ouster said over his shoulder. "Don't ask me how they got it off the troll. Could have sloughed off for all I know." The boy fought to control his stomach as the sensation between his toes became sharper, knowing the fluids running between his toes to no longer be water. Ouster looked sympathetic. "If you need to vomit, choose the corner there, and I wouldn't blame you... the smell would peel paint from a shield. Or pride from an Aedyran."

I: The Troll Skin Garden

The less said about trolls, the better, said an unwise man.

Trolls are great beasts, standing almost twice the size of an Aedyran soldier at attention, with over-sized feet and hands that end in large claws - and these claws, as spoken of in many Old Soldier's Tales, can rip a man in two like shredding parchment. Wet parchment. As for children? The tales go on to say that any children they find they devour whole, usually due to their curiosity in being in a forest where a troll lives in the first place.

Trolls are walking homes, a druid once put it - they let the forest live in them. Lichen, moss, and fungus grow thickly on a troll's skin and hair, and these growths, as if paying rent in their own way, provide the troll with limited sustenance.

According to some druids, the nature of this squatter relationship often depends on what fungus, slime, or lichen is found in the environment. This has led to stories (some true) of a variety of trolls with differing abilities (with extremely unusual ones reported seen in the knife-green jungles of the Living Lands) and even trolls that have bonded symbiotically with slimes and oozes have been known to exist, although rare, and often torched before their true forms are revealed.

What sort of symbiosis would occur in a house of Mysteries devoted to Wael is unknown (a mystery equal to how it got here), but read on, for they are at least three in number, and likely more before the natures of troll, druid, and Wael are through.

The fungal growths, fibrous strands, and tubers (sometimes mistaken for hair or chin growth) can provide sustenance for those desperate enough and can choke back the pus-like fluid (whose awful appearance and texture belies the rather bland taste of the fluid itself).

If "skinned" correctly (with a long-forgotten skill known to druids and a few rangers, comparable to perhaps, the proper means of harvesting hagnum moss without releasing its lethal cloud of spores), troll skin can be turned into a portable garden, usually carried in a sack or laid like a compost heap in an outbuilding. This practice is almost never seen in the Dyrwood, and even if known, the tubers and spores that bubble and swell from the garden skin are not something eagerly sought out, even by the most obsessive connoisseurs.

Troll Skin Garden: Stronghold Unlock with Ranger/Druid Skill:
Generates food with minor regenerative properties, once per day, restores Stamina at the cost of Charisma - the smell lingers. It also attracts trolls, which will assault the stronghold in increasing numbers.

Ouster had crossed the garden to the other side of the room, where a series of ledges and recesses were bedecked, with what looked to be relics that had been repurposed to serve more mundane functions... there was a large jug with two hands, and a row of several of the pods that grew on the floor, some split into segments as if with a paring

knife. "Get used to this place, and the smell. If expecting beefloaf, then you're going to be waiting a long time. This is the best garden we're going to get. Just needs a little watering from time to time - use your imagination - and make sure you don't poison it with too much light. The growths, especially the spore pods and the brown tubers there, the ones that look like Heartnamms reeds..." Ouster shrugged. "You get used to the taste if you don't think about it too much, it's mostly the texture you learn to appreciate - and to kill the time."

The boy glanced around, searching for a place to sit.

"Looking for the dining room?" Ouster asked, in a warning tone. The boy nodded. "Don't. There's only one, and... we eat here. You can sit if you want." Ouster hopped on one of the ledges, letting his legs swing slightly, his feet lost in the folds of his robe. "Dining room's not fit for the living, anyway, or eating."

Ouster glanced at Tarnish, who was gazing down at his feet, slick with troll spore. "Water?" He nodded at a copper jug resting on a bordering wall. Tarnish swallowed. His throat was dry, perhaps... Ouster was carving one of the pods, pollen rising from it like green flour in the air, heedless, but... Tarnish felt the man... not watching him, but watching the jug. He studied it. Upon closer inspection, it looked more like a metal vase, tarnished. Green, verdigris around it, but inside, water, reflecting the ceiling above, sharply - but Tarnish saw no secrets revealed in the reflection, and checked the ceiling to be sure. It looked as if the vase had been underwater for some time, it bore the strange corrosion he would expect, yet he did not know how he expected it. The shape looked familiar, but the vase was larger than he would have thought.

He glanced suddenly at Ouster, and caught the man looking back intently, as if waiting to pounce... and then his face wiped itself clean and went still, unreadable. "Afraid of drowning in it?" He smiled slightly, daring. "Drink as much as you want, it'll refill itself. Always has."

The boy stepped forward, his eyes examining the exterior, beneath the green - there, faintly, he could see a crescent moon. He immediately looked for the cresting wave beneath. The boy stepped back slightly, eyes fixed on the vase. Before he could stop himself, he spoke. A question. "Why is the symbol of Ondra on it?"

Ouster looked surprised, then shrugged and went back to carving the spore into eighths. He didn't make light of the boy's voice, as reedy and thin as it was. And dry, he realized. Nervous.

"Belongs to her, maybe, or was made for her and thrown into the sea. Might be why it looks like it was underwater so long before it came up for air."

"It's a marriage urn," the boy countered. "It's to symbolize love, each lover taking a drink from it, then their lips touch, the water still on their lips." He went still, realizing how stupid he sounded. But it wasn't. This thing was not just suspicious, it was dangerous, he was sure of it, and it was just sitting here.

Ouster glanced up from his preparations, threw a glance at the vase, shrugged again in answer. "I'm not going to marry you, if that's what you're asking." He paused. "I'd consider it if I was thirsty enough, but it would be an Aedyran marriage, I assure you." He smiled, humorless. "But I don't like to be *that* pragmatic about love, cheapens it."

The boy ignored him, still puzzled. The blasphemy ate at him. "The inscription, her symbol, *she's* the betrothed - why would someone gift this to a god?"

"Maybe she asked?" Ouster took a slice of the spore, slid it in his mouth, chewed. Green motes poured from his lips, running like mist down his face as he pressed on. "If Ondra asked me to kiss an incoming wave, you wouldn't hear me arguing about it, lest that incoming wave fill my lungs until I burst." He paused, wiping his face with his sleeve. "It's safe to drink," he prompted.

Without shaking his head - so as not to offend - Tarnish allowed himself to be distracted from the urn.

The Gift Ondra Was Given: Ondra's Kiss

Giftbearers often drop items in the sea for the goddess Ondra - yet once, Ondra herself was given a gift directly... by the Glanfathan people, though the tribe and the ones offering the gift have been lost to time, much like the urn itself. According to tales, the Glanfathans claimed that if she could fill this marriage urn (for the tribe, urns symbolized new possibilities, not the ending of them), that they could make the impossible happen and unite the goddess with her true love, the moon Beläfa that shone brightly in the night sky.

Ondra, unbelieving but unable to resist the promise, summoned a spring storm, filling the urn beneath the night sky. Then sipping it as was custom in the tribe's marriage ceremonies, she raised the urn to her lips and sipped it lightly, as gently as a kiss. It is said the impossible occurred, and the Glanfathans spoke true, but little else is known concerning the tale or the mysterious tribe except that on that night, Ondra and the moon embraced at last. In some cultures, this legend either follows or precedes her taking a piece of the moon, but the legend is never united with the urn.

Whatever occurred, the touch of Ondra's lips blessed the urn so that all who drank from it knew neither thirst, nor want, and made even the most tempest-driven of passions recede like the tide. Almost as an additional courtesy, it tastes faintly of a pleasant substance, often wine, though arguably it sobers the person drinking, rather than intoxicating them.

The wedding urn replenishes itself an inch below the brim twice a day, in the morning and at night, and it is held customarily by both sweeping handles when raising it to drink.

Ondra's Kiss: *Ondra's Kiss can quench thirst, steady the spirit and heal mental afflictions. Culturally, it is awkward to share with more than one person, as any two people drinking from the urn are technically exchanging vows, so one had best be sure of their love, or simply drink quietly by themselves. On the other hand, the Glanfathan tribe that held such customs is lost to time, so it is not as serious an offense as it may seem if used casually in the current age.*

The boy stepped away from the urn, pretending to be studying the slices of spore beside Ouster. It was not polite to refuse food and drink, but...

...Ondra had driven him here with the lashing rain, had showed him the door in the water's reflection, and he doubted she would provide anything of comfort a third time. And every tale he had heard was clear - requited love and Ondra did not mix.

Besides, the urn smelled faintly of the familiar sickly sour scent of wine, and he did not care for the taste - it made men spill secrets they shouldn't. Ouster watched him step away, still eating, and the boy did not meet his gaze.

If Ouster was displeased, he didn't say it, but he could feel it as he approached the ledge the man was sitting on, his legs and feet lost within his robes. He spoke slowly, as if appraising a new display piece. "You must have what - no more than eight winters on you?"

"Nine," the boy corrected, his fingers brushing one of the pods. "And with one Spring on top of that." Ouster grunted, and tapped the ledge he was on. "That one's not ripe, take one of these." The boy, afraid of refusing twice, took the freshly-cut rind in his hand. It was heavy and smelled even sharper than the garden.

"Last I heard the children were becoming all addled," the man replied, staring at him, then grunted. "I'm beginning to believe it."

The boy didn't take a bite, the comment was excuse enough not to. "It is a great sickness you speak of, it consumes the House of Wael with questions, but no answers. The sickness is the equivalent of death, the newborn dying in their cribs-

"Children die all the time," the man snapped suddenly. "That why you here? Afraid you'll join them?" The boy went silent, frightened, staring. "Well, we all get there in the end, more churn for the Wheel." He seemed exasperated. "How did you get in here?" Ouster prompted, his chewing slowing. "The usual way?"

The sense of trespassing returned. "I... I didn't know this place was here until I found it."

His head lowered, he glanced at Ouster, whose chewing had stopped. He looked angry. Moments passed. The boy repeated himself to relieve the pressure, but the words came out wrong, heavy. "I don't know how I came to be here. Nor how to leave."

Ouster took another bite, his teeth raking the spore pod with a crunch like an apple. "I think you do." He shook his head, his eyes cold. "You're more certain than you know. We've got time."

As Tarnish felt the fear rise, Ouster relaxed slightly, and seemed suddenly self-conscious at Tarnish's gaze - or chose to misinterpret it. "What. Something on my face?" He scrubbed his face with the hem of his robe, then checked the sleeve, finding nothing but the eyes staring back at him. "Making a fool of me?" Finishing the last of the crude

meal, Ouster hopped from the ledge, facing Tarnish. The man's robes made him seem small, but not when he was close.

"So... you come to learn, yet have nothing to share, is that it?" Ouster grunted. He didn't seem surprised. "Not food, not coin..." Again the absence at Tarnish's belt stabbed at him, inwardly. "...only lips so sealed they might as well be stitched until you decide to be ungrateful, refusing food and drink." He snorted, cruelly. "They wrapped the Whisper Hood tight when they taught you, didn't they? Can almost see the marks."

The boy was about to raise his hands in apology when Ouster cut him off, his robe sleeve, loose and whipping in the air like a flag. "Spare me, I tire of apologies and wondering if they're true or one of Ondra's. To say... none at all, for you can't apologize to someone you've drowned." The man's eyes were drawn together angrily, his mouth twisted into a scowl. "Apologize again, and you can hop on a felled tree and ride the waves to Loghome for all I care," he snapped. "So... lessons." Ouster sighed, this time almost a rasp. "Well, unfortunately, your *first* lesson to your god of mysteries was answered when you arrived. Why any two-moon-born fool would put a *pit* in the foyer of one of their most sacred vaults embodies what you can expect from your god."

Ouster glared, almost through Tarnish, then seemed to focus, see the boy - and looked on him like a cryptic piece of scripture that had suffered through one too many translations.

"Hungry for lessons, are you?" There was a lightning flash of irritation upon Ouster's features, the same put-upon expression with a blast of selfishness, and his hand lanced from the fold of his robe, the fingernails extended like daggers... and then they hooked, lightly and painfully, around the back of Tarnish's neck. Tarnish winced, but he could not turn away without more pain - and only by facing in the direction Ouster chose was he free of it. He imagined, for the briefest of moments, this might be the choice the fish had when on the hook.

"If you won't eat here..." This time, Tarnish was ahead of the guide, which made it more terrifying. Down the corridors they rushed, so quick Tarnish could barely keep up, and his mind raced, unable to hold the path in memory. It was a horrid flight of a tour, the countless stone passages and chambers rushing up, circling stacked... but again, always

upwards. No windows, no doors, no sconces... if this was a lesson, the lesson was the fear of being lost, too far to find one's way back. The House, the dungeon, the ruins - whatever this great basement of a storehouse might be, it went on for what felt like leagues.

"Hungry for lessons?" Ouster repeated. "Let this be the second - a room of comforts is not what it is here, and be thankful for each bite from a troll's backside and clean water from a rusted urn for the world will feast on those who seek more."

They had come to the dining room

WHERE VANITY FEEDS

The words cut sharply in Tarnish's mind, though the room was shadowed. It was unclear who fed on who there, and who waited for whom. It was as if a feast had come and gone, and yet hunger lingered.

Ouster remained fast, his nails light on Tarnish's neck. Yet he never stepped into the room's threshold, and instead, began to slowly awaken the eyes on his robe, letting each one shed more and more illumination, as if lancing a boil shrouding the room and letting the darkness stream to the edges.

The dining table was long, elegant, of such length Tarnish could not imagine how it had been marched through the corridors. Empty bottles ran like a row of glass columns, snaking down the length of table from head to foot, in-between them, simple plates. Pewter. Or bronze. And the radiance from the robes continued, like sun shafts through an unseen window until...

...at the head of the table, a meal had been set. It glistened on the plate, wet, a small slice of something that Tarnish could not make out - yet he did not step forward to see. The entire room had the feeling of curtains drawn in dusk, of heavy drapes, dust, yet...

They were not alone. The radiance grew, scattering and reflecting on empty plates and bottles, and Tarnish jumped. Someone else was there.

Standing in waiting just behind the empty chair at the head was a servant. But so garishly dressed, he might have been a Vailian nobleman. In more respects than one - he had no head. Or hands. He seemed to be waiting to carry the unseen plates away.

He blinked, the colors, which he had initially found garish, became more so, almost shimmering. In sharp contrast to the feel of the room, the costume was spotless, but yet - Tarnish blinked - dull, even the buckles tarnished. It had fallen out of whatever fashion it had been in. Copper, bronze, and a variety of metals, almost too much to be comfortable, formed its ends, collars, and wrists... all of which caught Ouster's light, despite the dullness and age of it... It was muted and bright both at once. He fought to reconcile it. It was...

The boy felt a strange, unpleasant tug, as if a fishhook had lanced the back of his wrist - he looked down, expecting to see that Ouster's fingernails had moved from this neck to his hand, but there was nothing there, not even blood. His hairs stood straight. There was another, sharp pain on his other wrist and the boy winced, as if bitten. Nothing, no...

He glanced up, and the costume... it seemed sharper somehow, and reminded him of an aumaua's fangs when they sank into freshly-killed mutton, glistening, but without the blood. Suddenly, strangely, he thought of brine, swirling, fish darting... then it was gone.

Tarnish stepped back, fearful, and into Ouster's grip, which seemed to steady him. The nails upon his neck were gone... and the dining room went into shadow, as if unseen curtains were drawn.

"That is one of the corners of this place," Ouster said. His voice was quiet, thick.

"What was that... costume hanging there?" Tarnish prompted. "Who is the table set for?" He was afraid that *us* were the answer.

"Costume?" Ouster shook his head slightly. "A coffin that lets the owner breathe, is how I once heard it described. And the table? No one. I've not wished to take a deeper look. As long as the finery remains there, that is enough for me." Ouster turned to him, his face intent. "The third lesson - never walk these halls without me. You may not find your way back, ever."

I: On Vailian Finery: Slain by the Cask

Vailian Finery is fickle, said to last only until the night's wine cask is emptied ("slain"), then it is cast aside. Yet if the garment is made with such skill, at such a price, then it is not so easily discarded, and may

linger, waiting for its time when the fashion returns (as it often does, if one waits long enough, if some Awakened souls are to be believed).

The Garish Rake: *This Vailian outfit was said to have been... buried... perhaps drowned... with its rakish owner in a great cask within the halls of one of the Republic's more esteemed wineries. Little else is known about it, but it appears to have kept the spirit of its owner alive long enough so he could still call out when one of the workers passed by. Fearing a haunt or other apparition, a crew of manservants backed by a house wizard were sent to examine the cask, and within, the body was found in a great state of decay of all except its tongue - the tongue was intact in the skull, as if it sought to continue to sample the vintage. Taking the horrific curiosity for what it was and likely recognizing the clothes the victim once wore, those who found the body assumed the owner had wronged someone. Vailian executions being something of a sport in the means of execution, they concluded he was sealed into a cask and left to drown, poisoning the man and - unless a good measure of wealth changed hands - poisoning the reputation of the winery as well. Both the tongue and costume were conveniently misplaced, as was any evidence of the deed, and neither of the objects seemed marked or ruined by the experience.*

Tarnish could not let the sight go, and the tale did not help. They walked, somewhat slower, through the corridors that had led them here. Despite the sights that fell by on either side, the dining room was in Tarnish's thoughts, in all respects.

"A coffin?" Tarnish struggled with the name Ouster had put on it, and the fact the outfit, while dull in parts, clearly had no stains of wine on its surface, which made it more horrifying. "Why drown a man in a cask?"

"It's usually a saying, not an act." Ouster made a bend in the corridor, paused slightly, then continued. "He didn't crawl in there and seal it closed behind him," Ouster grunted. "It was an execution."

He let the answer hang for a few moments, then glanced behind him and caught Tarnish's expression. "Have you ever *met* a Vailian? To some, the flourish of a blade is more important than stabbing someone with it... killing a man is easy, but with style, well, that encompasses being a Vailian. He likely wronged someone, or wine gave way to insult... and that was his fate. Or perhaps he was the most well-dressed

one there when royalty arrived, which is the gravest insult of all.” Ouster smiled slightly, glancing at Tarnish’s robe, then his own. “We will not share the same fate, I suspect, even though all eyes *are* on me.”

The boy did not seem amused or consoled.

The headless servant had not been what had bothered him most, and his thoughts returned to the glistening *thing* on the plate, which Ouster had not spoken of but guessed what it might still be - in truth, the boy himself had forgotten what lay on the platter when the finery came into Ouster’s light, almost with a glittering flourish. Yet it had seemed the finery was waiting on whoever was to be in the empty chair... and carry away the plate once the man had dined.

He did not ask Ouster about the glistening object. He was worried it might spark his curiosity.

And for a reason he found strange, it seemed as if Ouster, even with the light of his many eyes, had missed it. This thought struck him as odd, like someone lightly knocking on his skull.

II: On Vailian Finery: The Brilliance of the Garish Rake

When the Vailian Finery is in view, many onlookers find it hard to pay attention to anything but, the finery commands attention as if it were fashion royalty. This can often distract from other events occurring in the immediate area except to those disdainful of fashion, opulence, and catching the winds of the latest trends. Much like the owner, a man can be swallowed by such finery, not simply drowned in it, and the idea of a cape devouring its owner is not a new tale in the House of Wael before this story is through.

The Garish Rake: *The arrival of one dressed as the Garish Rake can draw all eyes to it, which can serve to distract anyone viewing the wearer from anything else taking place in the vicinity - a boon to thieves, indeed, looking for pockets to pick, or a means to slip away unnoticed from angry guardsmen. In many respects, an accompanying rogue may find themselves a “tank” for the purposes of assisting their thieves-in-arms.*

I: “In the Vailian Tongue”

A Vailian tongue is often heard but not seen, and if it is seen without its owner, it is a further evidence of punishment indeed. Such a thing would barely be noticed upon a table, perhaps less than a chance of drawing one gold duc from a sack of ninety-nine pands.

While the Finery might be enough to distract one's view from such things, wise disciples might suspect something else was at play. If the tongue could speak, it might perhaps answer...

...if it had a jaw to rest in.

The Vailian Tongue: *For reasons to be revealed, a less than 1% chance to notice something out of sorts can be all the chance needed for those who believe they know every nook and cranny of the house in which they dwell to be proven false... and even the Eyes of Wael may not be immune to an exceedingly well-crafted weave of Vailian magic, especially considering how fashion has long eluded the order, both internally and in their research.*

COMFORTS

Eventually they returned through the winding passages to the larder, the boy shivering - not in fear, but in exhaustion, his steps slowing.

"Never attempt to leave without me," Ouster said, as if in farewell. Tarnish nodded. "The House beckons, but it is dangerous. I'll show you its ways, in time, once I'm satisfied you're ready." Tarnish nodded again, then his heart sank slightly as he realized they had stopped at the larder, and not in anything resembling a bed chamber.

"You'll sleep in here." Ouster walked to one of the walls, and there, peeled away the vines like tearing down a banner - to reveal an alcove barely wide enough to prop a broom in. Ouster glanced down twice, then up twice, checking the corners of the alcove, as if for spiders. "It'll do you well enough. You know where the water is." He nodded to the urn. "I expect you to drink to keep your strength up. Don't piss in it," he jabbed. "It's for one relief, not the other." Tarnish glanced into the alcove, then stepped in... it was slightly larger than it seemed, at least enough to lay down in.

He turned, Ouster was watching him, so Tarnish did what he thought he might be expected to do, and lay down, and feigned closing his eyes. Not long after, Tarnish heard Ouster chewing, a rhythm that quickly made his eyes heavy. He dreamed, imagining himself as one of the relics, then awoke once, imagining thunder, then slipped into a restless sleep only to awake again, certain he'd heard a light... which he shook off. One did not hear lights, it had been something else.

The third time he awoke, he realized he couldn't hear anything.

Ouster had vanished. Not a trace, not a *whsssk* of the robes amongst the corridor, nothing. Gone. The House had swallowed him. He waited. And waited. He had no idea where Ouster slept nor where he had gone nor how to call for him if he was in trouble.

He was neither hungry nor thirsty, he simply was. There was food, but he did not want it, and there was water, but the water repelled him in a way he could not explain.

And he was too frightened to sleep. The larder was barely lit - a soft glow from the lichen. He wondered if perhaps Ouster had left him in the larder so it could digest him, or consume him, and he was the food. His mind raced back to the human shapes beneath the fungal carpet, and the mounds and hills took on the look of a graveyard in his night-tuned eyes. And he thought of the dining room, and its illusionary comforts. The troll-molted chamber felt safer, even if the closest he would be to a warm fire and a soft bed would be a troll skin and a cold urn of marriage water. Yet he had to leave, and he had to do so quietly.

The scroll that he had carried into the House of Wael, it had slipped from his grasp, lost in a corridor-knows-where, and he had to find it.

BOREDOM AS A TIDE, AS A TEACHER

On the Architecture and Purpose of Houses

This section of the parchment looks as if it has been crumpled in one's hand. When studied closely, however, it has actually been folded upon itself countless times over, by hands so deft they might have been the hands of an orlan child. The number of seemingly-random-yet-not creases must have taken years... and then it was unfolded, and has blended into the scroll itself through some means, flattening out in between segments of the tale.

Upon examination, the creases and folds made by the orlan's (?) fingers have created a type of terrain to the touch, mountains and smooth halls - crease lines of walls that cross over themselves, and strange, empty hollows with no symbols or markings within them.

The Priests of Wael assumed the parchment had been damaged, until one of the elders, wrinkled as the parchment himself, saw it and asked about the map they held. When inquired as to what he meant, the man replied, slowly, as if his senses had left them, that what they held was a map, an intricate one of what looked to be a house of three stories, with many branching halls and galleries... but... considering the image, the house looked as if it had been drawn in a mirror, or in the reflection of water, for the house itself seemed to be submerged... not in water, but in man-made earth, buried beneath streets and cobblestones.

***That sounds more like a dungeon or temple, Elder,** the priests remarked, humoring him giving him the questionable courtesy of his infirm age.*

*The old man sighed, and nodded at the map. **Temples are for worship first,** he replied. **A home is where one lives, and there are many lives folded here.** He frowned. **Maybe it's an inn. Lot of people there, been there for a long time.***

The priest who had asked about the dungeon repeated it, this time with more respect.

*The elderly man continued to study the map, as if seeing the lives playing out. **Dungeons are for keeping the condemned held fast. Condemned... perhaps, but that is not what happened here, if ever that was the intent. They all could have slipped out there, don't you see?***

Taking the parchment almost roughly, he held it up to the Eothas arrow streaming into the gallery, and the sun shone through a single hole that had been burned through the parchment - what the priests had taken to be a period was in fact a sharp, black hole burned through it, as if by a heated needle.

To their amazement the old man spoke on the map from sunrise to the height of day, and then seemed to forget himself, and politely said goodbye and moved on, leaving the priests, confounded but determined, with the map.

No one had thought to ask if the condemned had seen the hole as easily as the Elder had. Nor had they thought to tell them about what the cursed diplomat had spoken of, but by then, it was too late.

WHAT RITUAL TEACHES OTHER THAN DEVOTION

escaped him as it had escaped him in the temple, for the answer was in the sentence. One gives oneself over to ritual, one gives oneself over to one's god. In turn, one might be given to a warden and a cell, and kept there if the ritual, the god, and the disciple were not a fit.

Bored and anxious, Tarnish picked at the edge of the troll skin where it met the floor near his alcove, watching the fibrous mat peel back, then weave back together. The skin peeled but never tore, its mat lifting as one would expect from a heavy blanket. It became a game, Tarnish picking at the fringe, then letting it weave back together, slowly until it was whole again.

The floor beneath the garden had not suffered. There was no dirt, no broken stone with fibers and vines and tubers digging into the floor of the House... what lay beneath was the same flagstones as the surrounding corridors and chambers, clean, smooth, as if the troll skin had picked it clean as an orphan's plate.

Picking at it like a scab - it was something to do when there was nothing to do. Tarnish had no desire to leave - and he had no idea how to. The room was sealed somehow, likely for his protection from all

except routine and Ouster's visits, which became more and more of an irritation, oddly enough, for both of them. All the passages dead-ended into stone, with recesses that were too small for any man (or any boy, especially of his girth) to pass through.

Ouster came, every morning, every night like the tide. There was a flash of light signaling his coming, bright enough to blind Tarnish, and the eyes on the robe blinking out as he strode into the room. Almost as a taunt, he would knock first to draw the boy's attention until the boy learned to look away when he heard the knock and cover his eyes.

Ouster never came from the same direction twice - how he came and went was a mystery, one he would not answer, no matter how indirectly Tarnish asked - and he always answered with a shrug, and the last of the eyes of his robe winked out, almost conspiratorially. Then he would move to the urn, sipping from it after checking it, as if to make sure that Tarnish had not relieved himself in it, which was curious, because Tarnish could not imagine doing such a thing - but then he realized it was because it was something a younger Ouster might have done to a teacher.

He found that spite odd.

But the way Ouster handled the urn always made Tarnish's neck prickle. He held it as if he was holding a dagger by the blade, and he always had but a sip, thinking Tarnish did not see... if he had a sip at all. And Ouster would become upset if Tarnish did not eat or drink, though Tarnish felt the need to do neither, so Tarnish would hide spores beneath the garden, sometimes crushing them flat. The water of the urn he was more frightened of. Whispering forgiveness, he would wait until Ouster left, then pour some out onto the floor to feign that he had drank, the moisture lost on the already moist larder floor. Ouster always returned shortly before the urn refilled itself - as if he knew. Tarnish began to dread coming meals. They were a mixture of uneasy silence, odd questions, and Ouster's loud appetites.

The two would sit quietly, Ouster eating, Tarnish watching him eat. In-between great bites, his teeth tearing at the fibers, Ouster would ask him simple questions - to which Tarnish gave simpler answers. It felt like a game. And even if Ouster did not drink much from the urn, he ate a great deal, much more than Tarnish would have assumed for a man of his leanness, he had a huge appetite, but it was still not

enough to fill the volumes of his robe. He doubted the man was any hungrier than he was... but the feeling of chewing, the feeling of eating comforted the man.

And when the boy slept, or pretended to, Ouster would vanish. He always seemed to know when Tarnish was watching, waiting, or when sleep claimed him, and he would be gone, without even the whisper of the robe. Of one thing he was convinced, he was learning nothing except the pace of Ouster's schedule, again and again and again.

And his fingers tore at the troll skin mat, again and again. Were it not for Ouster and the urn, it would seem like no time was passing at all.

THE SAME QUESTION

came every night from Ouster, though cloaked in different words. How the boy got here, with such intensity that the boy thought he was looking to seal the door. He asked if the boy wanted to leave. When he planned to go. That the boy could leave anytime he wanted to, he'd show him to the door.

The boy, despite the growing boredom of it all, shook his head - yet Ouster would demand a spoken answer, and a definitive one. So he did.

No, he didn't recall. No, he didn't want to leave. No, he had no plans to leave. And no, he didn't want to go or be shown the door or leave. Every meal, the same question in different words.

Ouster kept asking. There was a lesson in it, but the boy wasn't sure what. He was just glad Ouster hadn't asked why he had come or he would be forced to leave. Or worse.

To protect himself - and because he suddenly realized he wanted to know - he began to ask questions in return, but only after Ouster's initial barrage was over, the man's irritation had faded, and the food had settled in his stomach. Then, he seemed to be more... reasonable.

On what might have been the third night, the boy asked him

ABOUT HIS NAME

"Your name," the boy finally said. "Do you have a family name?" He paused, trying to find a way to strip disrespect from the question. Ouster looked at him quizzically. He failed. "Ouster... it is... a clown's name, an Aedyran fool of tumbles and little sense."

Ouster smiled. "Then boy, we are in good company, you and I." He shook his head. "If you think a name so important, by what name is Wael known?"

The boy took a breath. "The Seeker. The Eyeless Face. He Who Obfuscates and Reveals..." The boy paused, uncomfortable. "Though 'He' is neither a 'He' nor a 'She,' as that blinds one to..."

Ouster wagged his finger like a pendulum in reverse. "Yes, yes, he, she, face, no face..." He snorted. "If Wael was to come here, a lass with jugs to match that Ondra vessel, you'd not be blind to divinity, boy. Go on. What other names."

"He Who Sees and Is Not Seen... the Hundred Visions."

"And does that tell us *anything* about him? Or the ninety-nine other visions?"

The boy nodded, surprised.

"Why."

The boy's mouth opened, then closed, although he fought it closing. Ouster patiently waited for the boy's drawbridge of a mouth to seal shut, then attacked, sharp, quick.

"*Because* they're titles about what he *does*, not his name."

The boy decided not to argue. Perhaps Ouster was a fitting name, after all, even if it was taken from the actions of another. "Do you know my name?"

Without pausing, Ouster said "You'd need to do something first." He glanced at the urn, then back at the boy. "Tarnish is what happens when a vessel is left to sit. Maybe doing nothing is what you do."

And so Tarnish it was, and despite his initial protests (to himself), he found that he didn't miss his old name as much as he thought.

Days passed, and he picked at the troll skin. He made a game of peeling back as much as he could without breaking the weave... and then practiced making cuts in the skin to see how quickly it could heal. He had no way of timing it, and he always concluded it shortly before Ouster's return... only then would he put the fruit beneath the skin, and empty the urn. The next day, the fruit would be gone, as if

absorbed into the skin, and the water along with it. He felt like he was feeding it.

THE LITTLE USE OF LANGUAGE (AND SIGHT)

was the next inadvertent lesson.

“You speak plainly,” Tarnish asked. Another question. “The Priests of Wael encourage riddles, puzzles.” Slight disapproval. “They ask a lot of questions.” To others, he suddenly thought, then barreled on. “You only ask a few, the Priests ask many.”

“Do they.” Ouster’s bored response was like a single hit of a drum. “Maybe I agree with Wael and find questions to be useless.”

“The answer, yes,” Tarnish prompted, rising slightly, knowing the answer. “The idea of examining the question, seeing the words as they are, honest and true.”

“You think *language* honest?” Ouster laughed for longer than was polite. “You haven’t dipped your quill yet, obviously, with that fresh outlook. Anyone who exchanges the simplest of pleasantries is a disciple of Wael. Who knows what’s really being said when words are used. A *well met* and *farewell* could start a war with what lies beneath their surface.” Ouster grunted, staring at the floor. *Into memory*, the boy corrected. “Best riddle ever made, stuffing our minds with feelings and wants, and then giving us the paltry fare of words with which to speak it. Though... lies have power, too. And if you repeat the words of a lie often enough...” The wry smile returned. “Well, you’ve seen a Chanter’s powers, if you’ve any doubt of *that* truth.”

“Wael was right about one thing, being eyeless.” The boy looked confused, Ouster tapped his eyes. “Sight was the second worst curse he gave to man. The first, language. Trust me, Tarnish Nearing on Nine Years, if you want to make it there, rely on neither. Don’t trust your eyes, and most importantly,” the man smiled ruefully. “Be silent. Listen. And if you truly seek a riddles, puzzles...” he smiled. “Perhaps I’ll show you Wael’s altar after all.” Ouster blinked at this, as if surprised, then resumed eating.

Tarnish watched, secretly stunned. Ouster had never volunteered as much before - the questions were a key.

What is Known of the Unknowable Nature of the God Wael

Embedded on the ends of the two uneven rods marking the end and beginning of the scroll is the sign of Wael, slightly dirtied by the burial, and still marked by the wicht's fangs and slather. The rods are mismatched, and the rods and the scroll seem a poor fit for each other, unlikely brothers - where the scroll seems torn and stitched together, it still draws the eye... the rods do not. Carved on it, as if by rote, are the principles of the god Wael, and many such scroll rods were constructed in Wael's libraries, the end caps of each often depicted as open eyes... except these are closed.

The rods were also meant to serve the purpose that even when a scroll is unfurled and read, Wael's meaning of the words still lies hidden beneath. Most priests and librarians rarely get that far, recognizing the words for what they are, though the idea of the eyes being closed was one that was unusual and usual only in that they were often used by those among the priests tasked solely with keeping secrets, not hunting for them... and the last sighting of those priests had been when Defiance Bay was embraced by Ondra, and they were never seen again in the wake of her lover's fury.

At the end of the impossibly long scroll is where this fragment is found, the handwriting at an angle, as if the entire passage is asking a question... or sliding off the page entirely to the floor.

LESS DISTANT

Comfortable. You could see it in how Ouster ate. It was the third night, and the oddity of it made Tarnish wary. Every movement Ouster made became a question. He wasn't sure if something was wrong.

Ouster was holding one of the spores in his hand after a bite, studying its surface, as if lost in a thought. His chewing had stopped, as if he was simply swirling the juice in his mouth.

"Are you all right?" Tarnish couldn't keep the concern out of his voice.

Ouster suddenly seemed to remember he was there. Blinking, he smiled.

"No, no... I was thinking maybe the spores improve with age. Or these are actually grapes, fermenting." He smiled. "With my fortune,

this is the troll equivalent of rot,” he frowned. “Or its actual grapes, forgive the metaphor.” Tarnish didn’t get it. “It would be no less than I deserve.”

His breath smelled faintly of wine. Tarnish felt a chill.

As Ouster continued to eat, regarding the spore curiously between bites, Tarnish wasn’t sure what to do with his eyes - he wanted to focus on Ouster, study him, but he didn’t want to tip his hand or reveal any more than tipping already had. He steadfastly kept his gaze from the urn. It had replenished itself, as if waiting, and he knew that whatever thirst it quenched, something else was satiated, and he feared to know what it was. He had missed something, something he suspected Ouster had already known, and he was seeing the effects now.

When Ouster left, in somewhat brighter spirits than usual, Tarnish had waited, then crawled to the urn to study the rest of its surface, as carefully as he dared without touching it, for Ondra’s gifts were often dangerous, and a gift to the goddess perhaps more so. And the smell from Ouster, it meant

The Gift Ondra Returned: Ondra’s Scorn

The taste of white wine is the first clue that something is wrong, for anyone who has recovered their senses will recall the taste as acrid and bitter... as the memories of its effects. Much damage can be done by the urn, especially for any couple exchanging their vows, anyone sharing it over the course of a journey, and most of all, for the Glanfathans who crafted it for Ondra in their arrogance.

There is, as there often is, more to the half-story that most of the few know. The deeper truth buried beneath the half-truth is more grim - the Glanfathan tribe (their name now lost - or forgotten as part of Ondra’s efforts), in an ironically unwise attempt to reveal wisdom to the melancholy god and soothe her spirit, crafted the wedding gift to Ondra on the night where the moon was full in the sky, claiming that she could at last hold the distant Beläfa in her hands and kiss it as a lover. Ondra, unbelieving, but unable to resist the answer, accepted the gift, first filling it with rainwater from a spring storm, then raising it to her lips and sipping from it, as gently as a kiss. For a moment, it is said that she believed the impossible and looked upwards.

Yet Beläfa still shone coldly and distant above her.

When she turned to the Glanfathans, her rage building, they calmly bid her to look into the vessel she held before her.

In its reflection, Beläfa shone brightly between her hands.

It is the truest union you will ever know, they said, now let your heart move on, unfettered and sad no more.

A howling storm came upon them that night, with enough of Ondra's Hairs sweeping inland so much so they formed a twisting braid, sweeping the tribe away, carving a swath through their homes and communities, and taking the urn out to the sea along with the bodies of a score of Glanfathan unwise-men.

The urn has surfaced on beaches and ports and in nets countless times in the past, always filled with clear drinking water. Some assume it a gift from Ondra, a respite from the poisonous salt water of her seas, relieving both thirst and troubles. Others say that anyone drinking from its waters can no longer speak lies - a single sip might last an hour, a swallow an afternoon, a cup a day or more, and drinking from the entire vessel is said to lose control over their tongue and speech, and cause one to tell nothing but truths forever.

Ondra's Scorn: *Ondra's Scorn has all the powers listed above for the first entry, but known to only a few, anyone drinking from the urn cannot tell a falsehood - if an Honesty Epithet is present in conversation, the speaker is compelled to choose it (and no lies may be told). In addition, any spells that rely on glamor and deception will be unable to be cast.*

Tarnish's chill deepened. Ouster had wanted him to drink, had believed him to be drinking, telling truths. That had been the reason for the questions, the interrogation. He believed Tarnish might lie to him.

Such an assumption told more about the one making it. Which meant that Ouster himself was likely hiding something of his own - if Tarnish could bring himself to ask.

And there was no telling how long it would be before Ouster realized the deception, and that the water had been bleeding into the troll skin on the floor, and into the hollows of the fibers, tubers, and spores, poisoning him. Tarnish felt slightly shamed by it, but not much. Ouster had not meant to be kind to him. He had tried to trick him.

He racked his brain, fearing Ouster's return. Between Ouster's truths and Tarnish's new lie, there was no telling which was more dangerous. The troll skin forgotten, he sorted his questions and thoughts as if arrows in a quiver, and only when Ouster's return was imminent, did he remember to pour the urn's waters into the floor... and then, in a strange burst of anger, poured an extra bottle into the skin for good measure.

THE ALTAR

was on Tarnish's mind, so he fought on how to get there. He didn't want to go alone. So he baited the hook as cleverly as he could, which didn't feel terribly clever to him... but perhaps that was enough. Perhaps Ouster expected him to act as foolish and honest as he was. That might buy him time.

So when Ouster asked the same question as before, Tarnish twisted it as best he could. "No, I couldn't leave," he replied. Then sighed, as if confessing something he had forgotten. "The priests said I couldn't leave anyway."

Ouster had turned at this. "They said you couldn't leave?" His eyes narrowed, and Tarnish feared it would cut through the urn's waters. "Why would they say that?"

Tarnish shrugged. "They said I'd need to pray at Wael's true altar." He paused and put on his mask of ignorance, which normally felt like anything but a mask. "Whatever that is." He squinted at Ouster as if confused. "I mean, this whole place is Wael's altar, isn't it?"

Ouster's eyes burned. Tarnish panicked.

But it was unfounded. Ouster smiled, the tips seeming to cause his eyes to blaze. "Well, no sense in keeping you," Ouster prompted. "Sleep can keep a while longer, I've something to show you." He arose, and Tarnish covered his face as the eyes on Ouster's robe opened all at once, blinding him.

WHEN HIS VISION RETURNED

Ouster was in motion, snapping at him to hurry, almost gleefully. Tarnish fought to keep up.

Ahead of him, Ouster nodded at a bend in the corridor, then checking to make sure Tarnish was in tow, turned so sharply it seemed the two of them were turning around to face a wall - but a new room revealed

itself in the sharp angle. Tarnish wondered how many such rooms were hidden in the House, and again, he felt a pressure... his time for such discoveries was limited, but if he made a prayer to Wael, then perhaps a way out would reveal itself in the same fashion. As he stepped forward, his heart sank... this was not a temple, or a shrine, and the altar was something else entirely... but Tarnish knew it to be a room that Ouster would be more comfortable in than a priest.

“Here, now the chapel,” Ouster said proudly.

It was anything but.

The only eyes of devotion were upon Ouster’s robes, and the only shine came from the stacks of coins piled in the room. There was not a single book, a single tome, scroll, fragment, scrap... the items in the recesses had more to tell than what bedecked the tables in this room. It looked more like... a gambling den. Without the smell of smoke, the hint of ale in the floorboards, but stank of vice and randomness nonetheless.

Ouster didn’t bother to look at Tarnish to see the look of disappointment - if anything, he stood straighter, prouder. He believed this. He was mad, Tarnish concluded, and he felt his hopes wither.

“It doesn’t have what I’ve come to expect...” Ouster smiled, and seemed genuinely pleased. “If I had three copper bowls of the same making, I’d show you the *true* altar and its ritual - a little dance called the shell game, that’s one of Wael’s famed prayers.” Tarnish did not answer. “But that - gaze upon that, tell me what you see.”

The table - the altar - was adorned in a game of chance Tarnish didn’t recognize. There were no cards, no adra chips, not even a key ring for Jailer’s Favor. He peered at it, and in the mass of pands on the table, he caught sight of

Tableau of Pride in Strategy

...a golden duc resting in the center, the stacks of pands circling it... and the Aedyran’s light fingers took one of the mid-risen stacks of pands and shifted it slightly to the left, careful not to cross the path of any of the other pand pillars, even going to far as to reverse the motion of his hand and circle behind the largest stack of pands to keep from intersecting any other line of sight from duc to pand pillar. It was not gambling, the movement was a battle plan. The duc at the center was the target. Yet...

There were no moves left. Another failure. The hand swept the table, and pands spilled, covering the table like a dragon's scales, sour and sharp in the air, unmatched by the man's burning, smoky frustration. And the cordwood pride on which the frustration fed. It was like grilled meat in the air, the center of a tavern oven, all that was missing was the spit. The stench assailed the air as

he blinked, and the image was gone, he clenched his hands. The table was as he had seen before - the pands covered the table, like scales, in chaos. There was no duc that he could see. Someone, in a fit of anger, had knocked them over. Long ago. Yet still the table shined, each piece bright, so bright he could see himself in its surface. Never had he seen such wealth in one place... yet he felt no need of it.

Ouster did not appear to notice what he had seen, and he didn't want the man to. His heart was beating, and he could still hear the rain of copper across the table's surface.

He sought a distraction in another direction, back the way they came - and found one. A tableau, clustered by the entrance, out of sight. Odd. It was something that wasn't meant to be seen.

"What is this?" It looked like a diorama, but not detailed enough.

"Hmmm?" Ouster turned from the table of copper, and he grunted. "Funny you should say... it's what the altars in here fail to teach, it's called

RUIN TO RUIN

Ouster's face softened at it, as if recognizing a friend, which made Tarnish even more confused. "It's a game, in many parts, a reflection of history's cycle. Or perhaps a better representation of one." Ouster glanced at him. "History I wouldn't expect you to know - but you know games, don't you?"

The boy nodded, though silently, he preferred history. He knew the Nine Erls. But he had a feeling any hint of royalty might offend Ouster, so he tried to think of something harmless instead. "I know Chip the Adra," he prompted.

Ouster's eyes widened. "Don't be doing that now." He shook his head. "Breaking adra starts wars."

Tarnish didn't press him. Ouster leaned forward to the diorama - the game board, roughly hexagonal, with crude boxes of towns and crude pillars that seemed to be falling apart. And between them, was what should be a forest, though he knew not how. Ouster continued. "There's three parts - each player lays down trees, none of them touching - the border lies in the middle, and on one side, are Edrang's men, the copper pieces," he tapped them and they rang like tiny bells. "...and on the other, Glanfathans, the adra pieces." He tapped the white adra with a hollow clack.

"You start with the inciting incident: encroachment. Edrang's men go first, taking a ruin. Then the Glanfathans take a town, effectively making it a ruin - note that there's no taking men allowed yet, not yet, and no touching the trees, that's for last." He scooped up one of the houses, cupped it in his palm. "The trick is to maneuver your men as much as you can before three towns or ruins are taken. The player who loses the last town or ruin can then declare War. When War occurs, then you are allowed to take men from either side..." He snatched up a man from the board, as easily as scooping up the town. "...and when three men are taken, then the final Ruin phase begins. Rather than taking men, you take the land: one takes trees..." He pointed at one of the trees, with a copper base. "...and Edrang, true to history, must go first. When Edrang takes a tree, it goes black." The copper-based tree vanished, and Ouster replaced it with a black stick. "And when the Regd takes a black tree by flanking it with two new copper ones, he can change its color back. The goal is to change three trees in a row for either side."

Tarnish was lost. "What is the purpose of it?"

"History," Ouster snapped, throwing a dark glance at Tarnish. "It's a true lesson better than begging for mysteries." Ouster seemed to sag as he glanced at the board, then shrugged. "Never played, though." He grunted. "I suppose once was enough for the Dyrwood."

The boy glanced at him, Ouster staring back through the past. What had happened...

...it had happened long ago, and Ouster did not seem to know what had happened since the game was first played, and how the War of Black Trees had finally ended. Tarnish ignored the Aedyran board behind him, and the golden duc buried at its center. It was mystery to

be revealed for another time, and he had a sense that this chamber was now open to him.

“Can we play?” He asked. Ouster turned to him, and grinned. “We can. If you’re ready to lose.” Tarnish glared, this time outwardly, surprising even himself. It would be a long game, but it would be

LONG ENOUGH TO SERVE THE NEED

They sat on opposite sides of Ruin to Ruin. Tarnish, a quicker learner than expected, was letting Ouster win, but Ouster didn’t seem to care. He looked excited to simply be able to play, barely paying attention to his losses. Tarnish had a difficult time losing, largely because Ouster was playing too honest... halfway through, he reminded himself of Ouster’s taunt and began to slowly consume Ouster’s forests, turning them black.

“How long have you served Wael?” Tarnish prompted.

Tarnish charred another forest, and felt slightly guilty. But only slightly. Ouster was consumed with the game, and his guard was down, lost in the excitement.

Ouster put his fingers together and thought hard, his brow kneading - so much so it looked like he might pop a vessel, or the muscles in his forehead might snap.

It took a moment for Tarnish to realize he was being mocked.

“Well, now, we all serve Wael in one form or another. Me? Being here is enough. I couldn’t count the years, but the knowledge from these pieces has seeped into me, and I’ve got enough mysteries in me, as many as the lifetimes contained here.” He paused. “And that doesn’t even begin to ask if even those who serve Wael serve him, she, it.” He waved his hands, forming a circle. “The whole of it. Sometimes I think Wael hates us all, likes to torture us... why else would there be mysteries to begin with?”

Ouster picked up speed, reclaiming a forest, then another, his voice rising. Tarnish resisted the urge to step back from the table, for fear of drawing more attention.

“You sound as if you hate him.”

“Ah, no, no, no... it’s Wael that hates me - plays with me, torments me. Can’t you tell? There’s nothing the God of Mysteries loves more than someone who professes that they have it all figured it out. That life has no more mystery... then he strikes.” He smiled. “And then perhaps he sends someone like you, to try and remind me, hmmm?”

Tarnish paused, then caught himself, shook his head. “That is not why I am here.”

Ouster was silent, staring. Cold.

“How would you know?” Ouster’s voice dropped. “Or perhaps you’re the one in need of a lesson. Perhaps you’re the one who has it all figured out.”

Tarnish did not reach across the board for the next move. He was suddenly conscious that he was winning, and that he had overstepped himself.

“Enough.” Ouster swept the table, in the manner of the Aedyran, and pieces scattered.

In a moment, Ouster was gone, his robes *swwwwshing* against the floors into the bright corridors - and Tarnish, fearing to be lost and left behind, rushed after him.

CURIOSITY

was seductive. Tarnish wanted to see more of the House, but he feared to ask, so he waited. His anxiety grew. The troll skin suffered for it. He almost took a sip from the urn if only to ask himself what he should truly do. And in the moments when his inner voice was silent... Tarnish listened. At first, it was for Ouster’s knock, which had become more violent, sharper, as if he was striking the stone out of hate, not simply a taunt.

When Tarnish listened for his jailer, he began to hear things. Music, voices. Around the corner. From darkened cavities in the room, recesses in the halls, walls, the floor, the ceiling - even from corners and holes no larger than a pinprick, he hadn’t even noticed in the larder, always just beyond understanding. The House sounded like

AN INSTRUMENT, OF ALL KINDS

though no drafts flowed through the apertures as they had in the entrance chamber, at least no physical draft or breeze. What he heard, was something of a different register, and he was worried he was going mad, perhaps more so than Ouster. And almost as if suspicious, Ouster did not drink from the urn when he returned from his forays. And worse, he began to return out of rhythm. Days would pass without him, then days would come where he would visit in the middle of the day silently, without a knock, surprising Tarnish - sometimes, there wouldn't even be a flash of light. It was another form of torture.

And even more unsettling, Ouster seemed to lose his appetite. Tarnish had no idea how much longer the urn's waters would last and when the lies - or something else - would resume. One night Ouster returned, and he simply stared at the urn. Tarnish did not disturb him, for fear of calling attention to himself, but when the next morning came, and Ouster was still staring at it, Tarnish could not stop himself from asking. "Where did the urn come from? It's dangerous," he added. "I can feel it."

Ouster mumbled a response. Two words, joined.

"GODS WALK."

Ouster's eyes widened as the words crossed his lips, seemed surprised he had said it, then tightened it, the word became one, married.

"Godswalk. It'll be a short walk, brisk. If we're lucky," he added, his tiredness giving way to a strange, brutal energy, hate bubbling forth.

"It's a hall of holy symbols, some literal, some not - as boring as you'd expect - and all the reliquaries that made their religion." The words tumbled out. "And symbols that would break each one, too. *Crack-crack-crack.*" He bent his fingers at each, until he held up a false mangled hand in pantomime. He smiled "Imagine if you could hold the evidence of every saint's failure, every heretic's *true* meaning, each blasphemy that was true, and each rite that truly was vile, even the *emotion* they felt when everyone else saw them walk the sacrificial rite? Oh, so many splinterings and suicides would there be, and may even be a god would be among them. Waidwen, Durance... the whole sorry lot of them, like turnips in a sack, waiting for the god to take a bite, and then put them back."

Tarnish opened his mouth, when Ouster cut him off.

“No,” Ouster lowered his hands, smoothed out his fingers. “Of all the secrets here, they are the most worthless, they might... *inspire* you to do something horrible. Like find a true god, or let a god take you. Can’t have that again.” Ouster threw a glance at him. “Look, see, it’s already made a spark, that gleam in your eyes.” He sounded angry. “Put it out of your mind, gods are not the lessons this day. What are secrets if one can’t share them?” He chuckled, quietly. “A dull sword. Durgan’s Crown.” He nodded, then frowned at the words. “That true altar of yours isn’t there, you know,” he said slowly. “They lied, your priests.” Pause, bleary-eyed. “They do that, even when they think they’re telling the truth.”

“Then there’s no need for me to see it,” Tarnish replied, as clearly as he dared. “You know these halls better than I, been here longer, and while you have not found what you are looking for - Wael may reveal it to you still.”

Ouster’s eyes burned at that. Tarnish continued.

“Or it may be in a place where he has no worship, in a place he hates to go.” He decided to push it, and felt as if he was moving a stack of copper pands, about to tip any moment. “And in a place you hate to go as well.”

Ouster frowned in thought, then strangely, nodded.

SOMEONE HAD CARED

that was clear, someone had cared for the relics... or tried to, once.

To one side, someone had been cleaning - but had stopped polishing the symbol of Magran in mid-swipe, the lower half caked in mud and grime, the upper half spotless... and beneath it, the cleaning rag, black as if burned.

Tarnish touched the rag, lifted it by the corner... not oil, not blackfat... the rag was brittle, but intact, and chills rose along his skin... shivering, he put the cloth back - it was not a rag, it was piece of something else, something...

...his panic grew as he noticed his fingers were coated black with ash, and he rubbed them together, but it only made it worse. Concealing his palms, he turned quickly to catch up with Ouster, Ouster was already there, smiling, a stelgaer before its prey.

"I thought someone had left it," Tarnish explained, true, his heart hammering, afraid of being punished. "I..." He wrung his hands, feeling the ash black flakes smearing to dust, making his palms a horrid charcoal portrait. "I thought it was a cleaning rag, but..."

Ouster's smile was fixed. "...but it left your hands filthy, from the residue of a burning, either people or towns, whether Cold Morn or Stone Mourn, when the sun set, they were all Cawldha's Torch. That ash in your hands..." He seemed both pleased and saddened at the relic's handling. "It is the hem of the robe of the heretic Durance." He paused. "The first one, with the club foot and the staff as a crutch, not the pretenders that came after."

"Was he burned?" Tarnish slowly opened his hands from hiding, the ash thick on them.

Ouster laughed. "No... you can't burn a priest of Magran, no matter what sect they believe. They throw themselves on the fire like drawing a bath, though the pain... the pain is still real, despite how readily they step into it." Ouster's face went sober. "Saint Durance... the *heretic* Durance," he corrected with a slight nod. "... always jealous of Waidwen." He shook his head. "But in truth, I suspect Durance simply hadn't suffered enough to understand, wasn't weak enough to be consumed." Ouster's face wrinkled. "And besides, who wants a god of fire with a cock between its legs? Wouldn't get anything done, no room for creativity and invention with that distraction there." He grunted. "No, he wasn't burned. But that's bits of him, nonetheless. He doesn't wash off easy, but pray that's the closest you ever come to one such as him in your lifetime."

Tarnish slowly looked down at his hands, as Ouster turned away, his robes dragging along the Godswalk. He didn't attempt to brush the ash from his hands... the remains of the person who was burned from his hands, and he fought to control the bile rising up in his gorge

when he felt something behind him. Without turning, he knew who it was.

He was wrong. The figure's presence felt of sweat, pox, disease. Impatience. Anger. Judgment. A heretic's disciple. A heretic's shadow, his fire hate.

"I thought it was a cleaning rag," Tarnish replied, to himself, in his thoughts. "I did not know it was robes of Magran."

*Behind him, there was a low chuckle, guttural and cruel - yet for the voice, it was humor enough. "Robes do not tell one's **faith**, boy." The chuckle burst wetly into what felt like a sneer. "Haven't you realized it yet? They are skins we wear for the truth beneath, the devout or no. Mostly not. Anyone may wear a robe, but it is not who they **are**."*

Tarnish feared to turn, he could feel a growing heat, like a bonfire.

*"It would be like saying the skin of Waidwen **was** Eothas. No Eothasian would nod their head to that, I promise you." The heat grew, creeping closer, hungry. "It would be blasphemy to their ignorant, dead god." Tarnish could feel the heat grow, his own robes flickering, catching flames, then*

nothing. The blackened tear of robe still lay, crumpled, beneath the Magran symbol, as if waiting for it to fall.

Robes are not faith, the voice echoed.

THE GODSWALK

it was, in truth. They passed mementoes and relics and many things both sacred and vile and of over-vaunted importance. Forgotten gospels, the true meaning of hymns... the ever-plenty drinking horn of Galawain was not that at all, and Tarnish's belly roiled as he saw the memory of countless priests putting their lips to it with no thought to the blood and shape he now saw. Keeping silent on it would be a mercy... and he glanced at Ouster. For Ouster, he was eager to share. A thousand wounds to a thousand worshippers, maybe more.

"If you did, they would find you, surely. And punish you."

Ouster smiled thinly. "Perhaps. But even that would prove the truth of it. And they would have to find me first, and there are ways for one to

HOW TO HIDE FROM GODS

is something that can be done, and there are those with knowledge of it, but not always the skill.

They kept walking the corridors, always upwards, always stone, arranged in strange shapes and recesses, the stones more a puzzle than a wall. Yet there were still no windows, no exit... no hint of day or night, merely objects clustered and cloistered about. Where Ouster led, Tarnish could scarcely believe his eyes... Ouster led him by a reliquary,

artifacts and relics from countless religions lay like bottles on an apothecary's shelf. Ouster barely spared them a glance, pulling Tarnish along as he caught each one in turn... but never enough to study them. It was almost disrespectful. It was disrespectful. Ouster bowed before nothing, studied nothing, made no offering, whispered no promise. In the span of a hundred steps, Tarnish counted almost three times the number of offenses, lighting no fire to Magran, no cut finger for Skaen, not even the recitation of one's father or grandfather on the Wheel to Berath, in what seemed to be both his aspects. Yet he was never struck down, no harm came to him... he simply walked, unheeding. It was as if the gods did not notice.

"Do they know these items are here?"

Ouster echoed, carelessly. "They?"

"The other faiths. The gods."

"Does it matter?" Ouster shrugged. "If they did, how would they come get them? They would already know they were here, and that answer's not a key that opens this house. But..." Ouster shrugged, the words spilling forth, his breath slightly of wine. "I don't think they do, no. Some of them..." He frowned and he slowed his steps, as the items became less numerous around them. The air became almost heavy. "They are deadly secrets indeed. Maybe they're hidden from any god's gaze."

Tarnish's gait slowed to match, puzzled. The idea wouldn't submerge, it sat there, like an insect in his head, buzzing.

"How can anything be hidden from a god?" It sounded impossible as he said it, but Ouster's reply was almost commonplace, matter-of-fact, tavern talk.

"Gods see as men see. As women see. Even Wael's servants." Ouster swallowed. "But change the spirit of a thing... even the cracking of a soul in twain can make it hard to see someone you were looking for. That's my theory anyway. Changing your hair, or your clothes... that's surface, makes no difference. It's the spirit deep down they see, the soul they are greedy for." He clutched his hands together, as if scooping up a pile of ducs. "Most ones who dodge a god's gaze, they don't realize what they've done when their souls get broken and become shattered. Or if they become Awakened, and another soul rises up. Gods can be fooled, and they are as much fools as we are, squabbling with each

other, even fighting over territory they've claimed..." He slowed his pace. "Even if the territory is us, and they are the ones who broke us." He swallowed again, as if trying to keep the words down. "And these... ruins they create, they are a

TWIST OF SIGHT AND SPIRIT

that give rise to something else. Watchers, Ciphers, Shifters and Faceless, all a quirk in the mind and spirit, allows you to see a glimpse in the door. Some people can see things others can't... can hear the thoughts of others... can change them... or even walk into them entirely, body to body." He turned to look at Tarnish in a way that made him uncomfortable, as if he was peering into him. "Isn't that something? To be free of one's cage for a time?" Ouster laughs. "All these spirits around us, in their tiny cages - they would give anything to know... sacrifice anything to leave. They have nothing but time. Perhaps they already know the way."

You can leave at any time.

It was more a challenge, than a question, and Tarnish suddenly felt the weight of the recesses around him. Whether they were watching, hiding, or waiting... he wasn't sure. And even with Ouster's threat lumbering in front of him, he was not sure it was Ouster he should fear. Was something else hidden here? And did it want out as much as Ouster did?

"OPENING THE DOOR TO ANOTHER HOUSE

...what would that take? If you needed to hide - what if your soul moved into an object, like these? Could you track it then? Could a god track it?"

Ouster shrugged, vaguely, irritated. "I liked you better when you were mute. Now..." Before Tarnish could apologize, he shook his head, cutting him off with a sweep of his robe like a flag being flown. "No... no... not even if it bled into another body. It's not the clothes, it's what moves them. What drives them, gives strength to their spirit. Like the dining room... another body is what they need, not an object."

"Another body?" Tarnish frowned.

"Yes," Ouster said impatiently, some of his strength returning. "It's said some don't have to wait for their lives to be ground beneath the

Wheel to step into another body. They just... come in, like opening the door, and the outer appearance... it's changed, but the person inside." He tapped a finger to his head. "Someone new's squatting there now." He frowned. "I make light of it, but it is a great gift, to be able to do such a thing."

Tarnish couldn't wrap his head around it. "How would you keep them o-"

Ouster shook his head. "You couldn't keep a spirit like that out. You couldn't kill it any more than you could any other soul... except *this* soul, it would remember, sharp and clear, even the last few minutes of you sliding a blade into its chest."

Tarnish. "And if there is no other body for it to inhabit?"

Ouster turned, the smile gone, the tiredness gone. "For anyone who mastered such a technique... I think they would always plan a means of escape, a body, a way out. Through an enemies' friends, maybe, or a prisoner held beyond sight in their home. Even a boy..." Ouster turned, grinned friendlessly. "Thought they would likely not want to stay long, no offense, young Tarnish. But such people, they are born to elude capture. If you think you've killed them, they may be among you still, hiding in friends. Hiding within your family. Hiding even within your own friends, your bodyguards, your trusted servants. Such men always had a plan, always had an escape. The moment you kill them? Why..." Ouster blinked. "...that's just the beginning of your troubles, I suspect. Because then you would think you'd won. And the moment you realize different, then there's no telling what new home he's in. It's a game board, of the worst sort." Ouster rubbed his temples. "It's a game that needs an end, whether gods or men are making homes where they should not."

The items began to become unfamiliar around them. The shapes older, the symbols unrecognizable. Were they getting closer? Everything around them, every opening, asking

WHEN DID THE WORLD BEGIN

"How far back to these... histories go?" Tarnish glanced around him, feeling the weight. He caught himself for a moment - he had meant to say *mysteries*, but Ouster didn't seem to notice or care.

"Probably go back two or three stories of creation, I'd expect."

Ouster's face wrinkled in a frown, his robes *swwwshing* along the corridors, the long hems sweeping them clean as he went. "Depends on the culture. Not as many as the end of the world stories, but those are more... popular, I'd expect." Ouster sighed. "For every god and every religion, there's a tale of how it all comes to an end, and if your religion is *really* fortunate, then it has ones devoted to it. Even the chanters have ones that sing about the end of the world, telling the fragments of the story about how it all's going to come to an end. You heard of the Dead Heart?" Tarnish shook his head. "Said their voices can still a man's breath, stop his blood from pumping with the fear of it all, that fear of oblivion, a place where no souls ride the Wheel. I'd tell you to watch for them, but you'd never see them. Hear them, maybe. And hearing them would be the quiet darkness coming to your eyes. They seek silence, want the world to end, mute and cold, not in fire and war. Evil as only singers and lyricists can be."

Tarnish waited. When Ouster was silent for a time, he prompted further, more quiet than he intended, but he knew it might be the last time he would be able to ask.

"Does Wael have such a following?"

"If there is such a group, it is hidden from me," Ouster replied slowly. "Or it may not be a group at all, but simply a single person - or several such individuals, with no knowledge of each other. A mystery to confound even Wael, I expect. They may even be among his servants, his worshippers. Tarnish..." The boy froze as Ouster turned. "...I finally thought of a riddle for you. Do you know what we call an assassin of Wael?" Ouster grinned.

Tarnish did not answer. He could not.

Ouster did not react. "A historian," he said simply. "A true historian. One who trusts the reader to recognize the truth. Wael is not helpful in that regard, he hordes such truths. Selfish, one might say. It is why

RESPECT DUE TO GODS

is lacking, and there is justice in that." Ouster's pace slowed slightly.

There, at the side of the corridor, a splash of color - a tiny purple flower struggled. A vorlas flower. It was barely into its purple, blackening at the edges, but it kept fighting. Tarnish wondered why it was there - it looked placed, cared for. He had seen no other vegetation

beyond the troll skin, although he thought he caught whiffs of it when they were nowhere near the larder, but he was not sure where from. There were no symbols, no deities around it.

“That flower...” He nodded. “How did it come to be here?”

Ouster blinked. “The vorlas?” He paused, as if searching his thoughts. “A gift from the previous Keeper - or another may have brought it. But yes, I kept it, tended it.” He smiled. “It is a better historian than most. It was what started the Saint’s War, you know. The true instigator, not Eothas. Not Waidwen. It was the loss of crop, that... commodity... there, that made an entire nation *want* a savior, an entire nation surrender themselves to a god in the flesh. A flower that can dye clothing purple, a human vanity - yet from it...” Ouster stopped, his eyes staring at the flower, past it, into... he blinked, and Tarnish lost his train of thought with it. Ouster’s grin became feral. “Never mistake the strength that can come from starving a desperate people. You may create an army of rats and roaches and carrion hounds, all feeding on righteousness, not flesh. There is history in that flower. There is power in it.”

Tarnish looked at it with new eyes.

Such a simple thing, yet it had given birth to a god. And that god, like the flower, had given birth to something greater. War.

But Ouster was moving, humming

HIS SUPPOSED DEITY LIKE A HYMN

“Wael, Wael, Wael,” Ouster tapped, his finger playing the hollows of the corridor like a great flute. “Wael, open your robe, let’s see what lies beneath, shall we?” He kept chanting, and Tarnish found himself growing more fearful as they advanced.

“Aren’t you afraid the gods might hear?”

Ouster tilted his head, his lips downturned, as if saddened. “More afraid that they won’t. If you don’t hear someone judging you, especially those you lead... especially if you are the god of questions, then you’ve got a narrow world view, or the Shroud between us is thicker than you’d think. Rather have questions and answers than magics, that’s for sure.”

Tarnish's tread slowed, letting Ouster move ahead. He was studying at the symbols on the wall, he recognized only a few of them. "Aren't you afraid they will punish you?"

"More than they have? No." Ouster shook his head. "Come on, a few more steps." As Tarnish advanced, Ouster touched a crude squarish protrusion in the wall - rather than pushing into it, he gripped it lightly with his fingers, and to Tarnish's surprise, the corridor swiveled, silently, without a single scrape of stone on stone, not even a tremor. Ouster caught his gaze. "Place has more secret doors than real ones - the real ones, the obvious ones, those are the ones you should watch out for or not go in at all." He thought for a moment. "Might be a metaphor, secrets leading you farther than the questions you expect."

The boy glanced at the new corridor revealing itself in front of them, slowly sliding into view - it was more of a cubbyhole, a gold ladder leading upwards to what looked like a trapdoor.

Instead, Ouster turned the opposite way, toward the solid wall, and to the boy's surprise, sidestepped, vanishing from view. He walked tentatively over, glancing to the side - there, barely enough for a man to slip through was another corridor, almost too narrow to move through except sideways. Swallowing, he followed, pushing himself quickly after Ouster. He could still hear him, talking to himself.

"Gods should fear us. We could withhold devotion. We could preach a new gospel. We could shatter the tablets of their faith... and force them to gather the fragments before they make new tablets, just like our souls."

Ouster was waiting when Tarnish emerged, and the robed man tapped the flagstone with his toe. "By being Gods, they've already made themselves vulnerable." Around him, there were more ledges, more symbols, but ones Tarnish recognized... but he turned back to the man, puzzled, and Ouster read the *why* in the boy's features.

"Every God embraces a..." Ouster rolled his eyes. "A portfolio, like some sort of proof of service... because they claim to represent fire, or justice, or..." He raised his hand, letting his robe slide down so he could gesticulate properly with his hands. "...secrets, that means they're vulnerable to what they claim - destroy that which gives them meaning, destroy that precious thing they clutch to, that's how you

get them. Magran - she could probably be blown up by her own bomb she devised, it just happened to be Eothas. Or if you had a mind to, you could let the whole boring nation of Readceras corrupt the Dyrwood and choke the creativity right out of it... maybe that's why she killed Eothas in the first place." Ouster topped his head. "Not one for creativity, even before his head turned to light, Waidwen was. Of course, Magran made an error, though, she *showed* us the Gods can be killed. Won't be long now before that idea catches on like a fire through dry grass." He smiled, as if warmed by the thought. "There's easier ways than fire and sacrifice, of course - that's my theory." Ouster sighed, glancing from relic to relic, then did a double-take and smiled. "But the best of all, is when you set hounds against each other. Gods with knives to other Gods' throats."

"The gods could not be tricked so easily." It came out as a question. "They do not die as we do, their spirits..." Tarnish could not imagine it. "Their death would break the Wheel - and some said Eothas' death did."

"I don't know about that, but they seem to wear humans like cloaks when it suits them. Even your god of mysteries - he takes many forms, but strangely enough, they *all* mirror things of flesh, bone, weather, and skin. Taking our shape, that's a weakness. Flesh bleeds, it can burn, and it can be wounded. And secrets... well, they are the best blades of all, and they let doubt bleed out."

"Could someone kill Wael?"

Ouster glanced at Tarnish, then shrugged. "Maybe." It didn't sound like a maybe. "What would kill a god of mysteries?"

The answer tumbled out before Tarnish could stop himself. "Revealing his... its secrets."

"Well, now..." Ouster smiled, slow, like a hungry hound. "That would do it, wouldn't it? Find the biggest secret, one even the *gods* want kept, then expose it. I think *that'd* create a wound that even the great shell game player himself would bleed out from. Expose all the secrets, each one a new cut, a new slash, drawing blood. Take every wriggling dark truth and cast it into the light... why, then Wael would be lord of nothing, wouldn't he?" Ouster grinned, his perfect teeth, gleaming, like white ceramic tile. "What a thought."

“But Wael must guard those secrets well, or bury them, or...” A new thought occurred to him. “You mean secrets like the ones here?”

Ouster didn’t answer. Directly. “It wouldn’t have to be one of Wael’s secrets. Even gods turn against each other, that’ll be something to see. Because when the secrets come out, oh, oh, then we shall have a merry chase of it. Gods killing gods. We just stand back and watch.”

“If it’s so simple,” Tarnish prompted. “Then why hasn’t someone done so already?”

“Oh, now...” Ouster chuckled. He spun, his finger lancing out to stab into Tarnish’s chest, his eyes ablaze with glee. “You think these gods of ours were the only ones?”

“Think of it. An age of graveyards, graves the size of gods. A world where the skies are thick with released souls, no one to tend them, no cryptic masters to bend a knee to, no games played by gods, no shackles.” He took a breath, and Tarnish fought the shiver that came. “Beautiful.”

Ouster’s eyes were like a window into another era, empty and cold, his words a funeral march on a scale Tarnish had never dreamed.

MADNESS

grew like a fungus, and the tension stretched like a bowstring between them, taut as if an arrow had been drawn back. After Ouster’s claim, honest as it seemed, Tarnish could not conceal the fear anymore, and he was afraid to ask any more questions, even as a distraction - the distractions seemed to unearth worse horrors in Ouster’s mind.

Worse, Ouster began to lose his appetite, and his eyes began to lose their shine and dull like copper. He began to remain more and more in the larder, and as much as Tarnish slept in, Ouster would not leave - he would awake to the man watching him. And one day, Ouster did not leave. Resigned, Tarnish crawled from his alcove. Ouster was staring to the right of him as he emerged, sitting, his hand on the urn, as if using it as a crutch. The eyes on his robe were shut, and only the light from the lichen and moss shone in the room, casting it in the queer green light emanating from the buds, which pulsed slightly, faintly when one wasn’t looking at them - but could be seen from the periphery of the eye.

"You haven't been eating," Ouster's voice was dull, slow. "And you haven't been drinking." He tapped the rim of the vase, gently, soundlessly. "Drink."

Tarnish shook his head. "You're trying to poison me."

Ouster smiled faintly at it, as if in expectation, and shook his head. "As you have done to me?" Ouster smiled knowingly. "I knew, somehow... but not until we were on the Godswalk, and..." He shook his head.

"It all came out at once, all my secrets, and I didn't hesitate. Not for a moment." He adjusted his robe. "Poison you? No, not unless truth is a poison." Ouster's smile became fixed. "Perhaps it is. Of course it is, I said as much. But not to us. All I want..." He took a breath, and to Tarnish's alarm, he stood, still not looking directly at him. "...I want to know how you got here. How you were going to leave. I want you to tell me true, so I don't wonder anymore. One less mystery. Focus my attention..." Ouster swallowed again. "Elsewhere."

"I spoke true," Tarnish insisted, sensing somehow Ouster needed some sort of anchor. "I do not know. And I do not know how to leave. I don't even know how to leave this room."

"And what would you do if you left?" Ouster said sullenly.

Tarnish opened his mouth, then closed it. Ouster nodded, grimly.

"You won't leave. You are shielding Wael," Ouster answered, as if he had been asking a different question. "My honesty has turned you against me."

Tarnish shook his head. "That... is not all of it. I fear what would happen if this place became unlocked. If someone left the door open. It is not all Wael," he answered. "It is not an end to the secrets here I fear, but the harm they might cause." He nodded at the urn. "What you stand beside is dangerous. It could not harm the life of one, or two, even a town... it could unmake nations, never mind the gods. Even in the hands of a champion of truth," the lie was uncomfortable in his throat, "it has done harm."

"It has done *nothing*," Ouster snapped, a spark in his eyes, his teeth clenched. "Do not pretend. You tricked me... I should have known it when I smelled it on my breath."

“Why did you keep it?” Tarnish nodded at the vessel. “All these things... they are dangerous. All of them, traps. To leave them around, to keep a hold of them...”

Ouster gave a dry, humorless chuckle. “Ah, they are dangerous when you don’t know their nature. The urn... well, truth is dangerous, but so would a lie be if the urn cursed one to speak so...” Tarnish felt another chill, and glanced at the urn again. “...but *knowing* that the person is always speaking one or the other, truth is easy, lies are a bit harder, but when you are speaking with one telling anything *but* the truth... well, now, there is little else where the truth can run if you ask the right questions.”

“I don’t know if we can ever know their nature,” Tarnish replied - he still kept his eyes from the urn. “Or they would not be here in this House.”

III: Ondra’s Doubt: The Dark Waters Beneath Cawldha

It is sometimes in the nature of a heart not to know itself... and enchantments spawned from such have unpredictable natures themselves, hidden from their owner’s sight.

Ondra and memory makes fools of us all, and an unknown twist of magic lies in the watery depths of Ondra’s Scorned Vessel. Unknown to Ondra and the Glanfathans, Ondra’s Scorn, if emptied and replenished when both Beläfa and Dark Moon Cawldha are visible in the sky, anyone drinking from the Vessel will be able to sense when they are being told a lie (although not if they read it or it comes to them via some other non-vocal deception), hearing each word as if an undercurrent of black wind were rushing past their ears. The listener will not immediately know it is a lie being told, they must realize this on their own - and as they will soon discover, they cannot share this knowledge with anyone.

This is not the blessing it may seem, however, as those drinking from the Scorned Vessel will gain a curse, whose length of effects depends on the amount consumed... they will be unable to speak the truth, and will be unaware that what they are saying is a lie.

Ondra’s Doubt: *Ondra’s Doubt has all the powers listed above, but in dialogue it prevents use of any Honesty Epithet in conversation, as the speaker will be unable to tell the truth, no matter how hard they try. Even worse, any spells that require proper verbal cues or recited symbols will be unable to be cast.*

“Still... it was very clever, to use my appetites against me. To use this room against me.” Ouster took another breath, shaking slightly in anger. “Think what a clever boy like you could do in this place, if you were allowed to roam free. If you took my place, became the Keeper.” Ouster raised his hands inside his voluminous robes, letting the sleeves slide back, and studying his hands.

Tarnish did not answer. Any weapon he sought was beyond the larder.

“I do not wish to be the Keeper,” he replied. “I do not want your post. But...” He tried truth. “But I do not want to leave this place.” Ouster glanced at him, suspiciously. “There’s nothing for me out there. Out there...” He fell silent, studying Ouster’s robes. The dragging hem, the great sleeves. Ouster was not large enough to fill them, nor, Tarnish realized, did the man want to. The man even despised what he wore, playacting a part. “I know you don’t want to be here. I know it, and I’m sorry, but-”

Ouster looked blankly ahead as Tarnish spoke, and made a wry smile, which was no answer, and then to Tarnish’s surprise, the man’s hands clutched his hair, wrapped clumps of it in his fingers, as if holding onto it, and he began to rock back and forth, his head down... sobbing. Tarnish had no idea what to do. The man was breaking apart in front of him, and there was no way to help. He had a moment, a flash, that he was looking at himself, the future to come. A future that did not include Ouster, one way or the other.

HIS VOICE SHAKING

Tarnish mustered the courage he had left. “How long have you been here?” The man’s cries were the only answer. However long it had been, it had been too long. The man continued to rock.

Uncomfortable, Tarnish reached out, touched Ouster’s wrist and awkwardly, perhaps as awkwardly as Ouster had when they first met, held him and waited for the shaking to subside. He felt very small in comparison, and very helpless.

Tarnish pressed the question. “How did you get here? You must know.”

“Weren’t you listening?” Ouster replied, almost sneering. “I fell into it. By blood.” He took a breath. “I thought it a treasure vault, for history. It found me first, everything here. The Keeper welcomed me as...” *I welcomed you.*

Tarnish could not make sense of it, and the man did not elaborate. The silence began to press on him, and he spoke to escape. "There must be a reason that we came here. A reason that-"

It was one question too many.

Ouster's hands unpeeled from his cheeks, his hair, and he turned his haggard face to Tarnish. "The reason?" He snarled, and Tarnish drew back in fear. "There is no *reason* here, to this, or any of this." Ouster rose, and Tarnish backed away slightly, but he feared to rise, as if it would provoke Ouster's rage further. "This is a House of a Madman, a Player of Games, the home of one who has brainwashed a cult into following his mad dance. You want to know the truth of it?"

His hands grabbed Tarnish by the hair, and before Tarnish could fight free, Ouster had lifted him, his nails digging into his scalp... then, before Tarnish could catch a breath, he plunged his face into the urn. Water burned into his eyes as he stared into the darkness of the urn, and he kept his mouth closed, praying it was enough to keep the waters from his throat, his lungs. He struggled, fought, until at last, the urn fell over, spilling the remainder of its waters onto the floor, the garden again drinking deep. Tarnish, coughing, sputtering, his eyes burning as if doused with wine. Ouster's robe began to alight, one eye opening after another, until Ouster was a silhouette before him, a shadow of himself, horrid.

"Do you know the way out of here?"

Tarnish shook his head, and Ouster snapped at him. "*Words*, boy."

"No," Tarnish gasped, choking. "No, I don't." He felt light-headed, and the silhouette of Ouster began to blur - his eyes were watering, trying to drive out the sting.

"Do you know how you got here? Was it by blood?" Ouster pressed.

Tarnish shook his head frantically before screaming, "No. I don't know what that means!" Ouster reached down again, his robes bright, blinding, and Tarnish felt himself seized by the hair again, and he began shaking his head, crying... and Ouster moved his head, pantomiming a *yes* motion, a false nod.

"Why did you come? Did you come to kill me?"

"No, I was told to come to the House of Wael," Tarnish replied, "Yet they gave me no directions, only that Wael would guide my path. I was told to deliver..." He swallowed, and Ouster's grip tightened. "To deliver a scroll unto the House, and all would become clear. That Wael would be grateful. That it was Wael's will that the scroll be brought here... for safekeeping."

Ouster relaxed his grip. "To hide it. Where is it now? You did not have it when you arrived."

"I lost it," Tarnish sobbed. "I couldn't even do that correctly. When I arrived... I... the place was so strange, and before I knew it..."

"Do you feel Wael's gratitude?" Ouster said, quietly. Tarnish still could not see him. His eyes were watering, streaming, and the sting was still there. "Do you know Wael now?"

Tarnish, uncertain, nodded. Ouster released him, stepped back, the eyes on his robe, shutting, one by one.

"If that is true, and you know

YOUR LESSONS HALF AS WELL AS YOU THINK then recite them." Ouster tapped the boy's head, almost knocking. "Tell me of our great god. Wael is..."

Tarnish fell back on his teachings, as he imagined he should. Or perhaps he truly believed them, he did not know. He did not know if the urn had cursed his speech, panic had claimed him... yet as he spoke, he found his voice steadied, conditioned, the years of his learning rising back into him.

"...the god of dreams, secrets, mysteries - revelations. He sees and can be seen by the symbol of the eye, either carved in stone, or a fallen corpse, or in the wide gaze of a newborn."

Ouster's left eyebrow cocked - but said nothing.

Tarnish continued, finding his voice. "Though the look and number of the eye is not set, it is either one or a hundred... or..." the boy swallowed "...the eyes of a nation. Secrets are his to protect and share as he will, provided they make a road for the mind to follow." The boy's eyes looked uncertain at the last, and the cadence had been broken, improvised, yet Ouster gave no sign.

The boy recovered quickly, stiffened at attention in a manner by which only one who had been struck with a riding crop or librarian's staff could stand.

"He is the protector of secrets, the releaser of secrets, each leading to another mystery," he sought to conclude his recitation, speaking sharply, almost militant...

...but his voice continued on, and he knew not whether it was the poison of the waters or his own realization. "And that is why I cannot let you leave the House," he found himself saying. "Because the mysteries you release will have no ending to them, and they will never have the ending you seek." He took a breath, his strength running out. "If you came to this place by blood, blood will follow you when you leave. These secrets... these secrets must be kept."

Ouster smiled, nodded, and leaned forward.

"Thank you. You truly belong to Wael."

Tarnish was about to nod in relief, when Ouster struck Tarnish - striking him so hard he fell back to the floor, tangled in his robes. He did not rise, and he did not look at Ouster. He could not.

"And there can be no peace between us. Preach your doggerel. Place trust in a shifting god, and none in men - you are right to stay here, for there is no place for you beyond this prison. But the secrets... the secrets, they will come with me, all of them. And you will rot here, tending your dead religion until your skin feeds this garden."

There was the *swwwwshing* of the ill-fitting robes, the flash of light... and Ouster was gone. Tarnish knew that when the man returned, that it might be for the last time. His eyes clouded, the sting gone, and a new misery took its place.

For all the hatred in the strike, it was nothing compared to the venom in Ouster's words, which he knew paled in comparison to the venom in Ouster's heart.

PARTING OF THE WAYS

What the Diplomat's Voice Spoke Of

was sharp and cruel, like truth itself.

"It's not a parchment at all," the Diplomat hissed, in his peculiar blend of accents, but always in the Vailian tongue. The language was his curse, and he had never spoken it fluently until the wardens had come, first with the knife, then the contracts for him to view, then the parchment as partial payment to the Priests of Wael. "Listen to it, it's a game board, each fragment an empty space whether filled with words or not, and the rest, all of them, pieces... and fill in the absences with actions of your own for meaning." He laughed.

"But you still have to read it, especially the bit on language - the author admits it. Do you think any of this is true? You truly believe there to be some great storehouse of secrets, waiting to be cracked open like a ribcage and let its innards spill out. Such a place... and manned by a lone priest of Wael. How long has that cycle played out, I suppose, in this mythical place?" He grinned, and his tongue clicked almost independent of its owner, in the Vailian gesture of disdain, and four times, the unluckiest of numbers in Old Aedyr.

The priests did not answer, already regretting their visitation.

"Of course it exists. The game wouldn't be any amusement to the gods if it were not true, would it?" He laughed, and asked the sweating petitioner to read him the chapters again on the killing of gods, and he repeated them to himself, in a hundred different languages, as if a mantra.

He did this until the jailers came to take his tongue, and if it was to be believed, give it to another in the hopes of a different answer that never came.

WHAT IS MEANT TO BE KEPT IS LOST.

On the day after Ouster struck Tarnish, Ouster returned to the larder, and Tarnish was not there.

He stood, silent. Numb. He had lost his only chance to tell the boy the hate was not for him, but it didn't matter, for Tarnish already knew, and it had not stopped Ouster's fist. It would not stop it again.

When Ouster returned, the larder was empty, the alcove was empty. The troll skin and the urn, still overturned, were no witness to what had happened. There were no snapped vines, no prints in the soil, no shreds of robe speaking to where he had gone - not even a body. As he entered the larder, Ouster's robes flared with light, and finding the alcove empty, all of his eyes awoke, raking the room...

...but the boy who was supposed to illuminate him was now gone. Though disbelieving in the god he cursed, Ouster spat hate Wael's way. Then, after one last glance at the room, he rushed to the exit and screamed Tarnish's name, begging in a way that sounded false, with words that felt hollow.

His prized possession had slipped away, and worse, he knew not how or where he had gone.

II: The Troll Skin Rug

Of what use is a skinned troll? It actually has more possibilities than one might think, if one isn't too frightened of a minor troll being born from the skin (an Old Crone's Tale), the creature popping into life like a toadstool does, erupting with a flurry of spores into the world - sometimes it lives as one might expect, pantomiming the life of the one it grew from with no more intelligence than a cluster of vines, other times it lives - but in a different way, releasing its spores and letting them be carried to a new one to serve as a host. The nature of such children is the fey way, but at least they are less prone to curses of the human world.

A troll skin is large, and double the height of a man - more than enough for a small boy to slip beneath and pretend to be one with the earth beneath it.

Troll Skin Rug: +50% to hide in appropriate circumstances, but same attempt of attracting trolls is also present, and also lingers more persistently if you hide within it. And unknown, also can provide invisibility to trolls, as long as the player does not make any sudden motions.

WHAT IS MEANT TO BE KEPT SLIPS FREE.

On the day after Ouster struck Tarnish, he returned, and fled almost quickly as he came.

Tarnish could hear him as he scoured the room with his magic, spitting commands and burning sorceries as the eyes on his robe awoke with a blinding light he could not see, the *swsshhh* of his robes as he whirled to every corner of the room, sounding to all the world like sails whipping in a storm, and then finally, the calling out, the false calling out like hooks. Tarnish remained silent.

When the cries had barely faded, Tarnish crawled from beneath the troll skin blanketing the floor, his shape one of the many hills that blanketed the floor. He crept quietly to the passage where Ouster faintly called - and this time, the passage did not block him where it had before. Ouster had not sealed it behind him... had he? Tarnish still felt as if reeling from the blow... his vision was blurred, sometimes doubled, and looking at the walls and galleries made him dizzy. But the route was clear.

The troll skin had parted easily for him when he had sought shelter beneath it, the long hours of boredom bearing fruit. He had still been able to breathe, though the smell had been rank indeed - but a small price to pay. In truth, he had not been sure the troll skin would conceal him - it would have been one of the first places Ouster would have looked, should have looked - of that he was certain.

The man was rife with madness and theological obsessions... but he was a fool to overlook something so obvious. Or maybe it wasn't? His vision blurred again.

The idea that Ouster would not have considered such a hiding place confused him - perhaps he did not see the skin as the covering that it was. Or he did not consider the mounds and hills like a graveyard, but solid through and through. Whatever worked in his favor that day, he did not know.

III: On the Vestment of 98 Eyes

Vestment of 98 Eyes: The command word that causes the eyes to ignite into radiance, unknown to many, is a false light, blinding not just others, but the perceptions of the wearer itself, depending on how many eyes are opened at once.

The blindness for the wearer depends on what they are viewing, with the following effects:

- For every eye that is opened, any item forgotten or purposely hidden has its chance of being spotted reduced by 1%. If a warden had misplaced his keys, the eyes would assist in their recovery, but he would be partially blinded to the coin that accidentally fell beneath his chair. Although to be fair, this is only an example, as the Priests of Wael do not have wardens and prisons and keys. Or so they say.*
- The same is true for spotting tracks of those who wish to stay hidden and secret doors (as well as the means of opening them).*
- For every eye that is opened, any person hiding within the field of view also has a bonus to stealth.*
- When attempting to decipher the meaning and intent of a passage, scroll, or other written work, the chance of misunderstanding or missing the meaning of the work carries the same percentage penalty above. This has led to some extremely dangerous rhetoric, interpretations, and the misunderstanding of an activation word with explosive effects.*

Either way, he did not question his fortune. He had escaped notice, and he thanked Wael, but for exactly what he did know, which felt in keeping with mysteries.

He was free. For the moment. He had no faith that it would last, and he had very little time.

He followed the corridors of the House upwards, looking for familiar shapes... that now twisted in his vision. Behind him, Ondra's urn lay toppled, as if a sign of things to come.

As the Wizard Sees It

"It's not a parchment at all," the bone-blackened wizard roared, the thick, pig-fat symbols bedecking his face sweating into new patterns as his frustration erupted. "It's a grimoire, made by a fool who doesn't know what it is for - you see the tears, the folds... they are meant to channel, not communicate." He barked, his way of laughing. "This isn't something to be read, this..." His lips split, his bright red gums carrying the shine of wax... false teeth. "...this is for souls to be channeled through."

“But what of the map,” one of the priests insisted. “Look...” He displayed the crumpled forefront of the scroll for the wizard, whose lips slithered closed in thought. “It is telling the spirits where to g-”

The wizard barked again, his head lolling back. The wicht sat beside him on its haunches, silent, its black eyes watching the scroll... and the fingers darting on its surface, hungry.

*“If **that** is a map, then the place it shows is not a place at all, not in truth. Such a place would be a grimoire, one of the largest I’ve seen - and as large as it is, it would be useless. So big only a god could hope to carry it, I think.” He barked. “Unless you made the symbols move, perhaps, and what a dance it would be.”*

“Move?” The priests inquired, staring to regret the visit as he had with the Diplomat. “And how would the symbols move? Did the Keeper take them? The boy? Which?”

*The wizard seemed stunned for a moment, as if a new possibility occurred to him, and he squinted at the parchment. Behind him, the wicht boy sniffed, growled. “Why... neither. It’s not men to blame, often they just get in the way. Secrets are the ones you need to watch out for, and they watch out for their own. They always seek to slip free, let their power be known.” The wizard threw a taunting glance at the priest. “But you know that now, don’t you?” He grinned. “No house built by God or Man is ever built to last, and certainly not **all** the ones you think are hidden.”*

HIS EYES SOUGHT EVERY CORNER

except the Godswalk. Tarnish knew it was the first place that Ouster would go, fearing the loss of his most precious weapons, his most precious secrets. Or so he hoped.

Thinking in opposites, he went to the places Ouster would not go. And duty came first.

Besides, there was one route that led down, and that made the choice easier. His robes swept out behind him as he sought the antechamber, the route strangely clear to his eyes. Either minutes or hours, he emerged into the antechamber, where the mist clung to the floor... somewhere in its embrace must be the scroll.

When Ouster stepped from the wall, in his hands, he held the cylinder. "It was not hard. Is this your key?" He corrected. Tarnish's eyes locked on the scroll, his lips a thin line. Beaten. "Is this what you brought here? How you bought your way in?" He held it out. "Come on. It's yours." He proffered it like a bone. "We can leave together, I'll follow."

Tarnish didn't move.

TRUTH'S UNSURE FOOTING

"Look, the two of us we can find a way out of here - we don't need to take everything. Take only a few of these, seed them out beyond Wael's clutches, expose him, expose all the gods, and-" Tarnish's face was stone, and it answered him. "Do you even know what Wael *is*? Wael plays-"

"Wael is many things," Tarnish caught himself saying - his body remained relaxed, and he simply spoke. The words carried no weight, and he gave the answer he knew that Ouster, that any sad heretic, wished to hear. "He is a cheat. A deceiver. The giver of secrets... only to take them away, or give birth to more. He plays a shell game with the lives of all of us. That is what he is."

Ouster smiled grimly, nodded.

"...to you," the boy added, cold. Ouster's nod froze, and his eyes narrowed, studying the boy, as if trying to wrap his head around unfamiliar defiance. "But I don't care what Wael is," Tarnish said. "I care what you are. Who you are. Why you are here."

"Or I did. I found the real Keeper," Tarnish guessed, the words tumbling out, and watched Ouster's eyes - and caught them as they darted to the pit. He began to walk toward him, but Ouster held his ground, his eyes seeming to watch the boy. "You killed him." Tarnish wasn't angry. "Cast the body into the pit where you didn't think it would ever be found. It's why your robes don't fit. It's why *you* don't fit, not here."

"But it is also the way out, you know," Tarnish continued. "But when you kept me from falling before, you did it partly so I wouldn't find the corpse. You may hold the key," he nodded at the scroll, "but you don't know how to use it. I'm going to give you a chance - I'll tell you how the key works, and in return, everything else of Wael's remains here."

Ouster studied him. “You trust me? After all this?”

Tarnish nodded. “You smell of it still,” he lied. “You can’t have shaken off the effect so soon.”

Ouster smiled, and his hand lowered, holding at the scroll. “Show me.”

Tarnish walked steadily toward Ouster, his hand outstretched. As he neared, Ouster braced himself, planting his feet... and Tarnish pretended to ignore it. As they closed, Ouster took a breath, about to whisper the eyes to open, his hand ready to lash out...

...and Tarnish knocked the scroll from his hand, letting it tumble into the pit as the robe flashed to life. Ouster howled, and Tarnish ducked...

...the scroll case sailed over the pit and fell. And so did Ouster, his hands clutching at it, howling. His brightly lit form seemed to blaze over the pit, yet somehow, impossibly he caught it... and tottered on the edge, his footing unsure... then it steadied, just enough...

And Tarnish struck, shoving him as hard as he could, uncaring of the scroll. Uncaring of Ouster’s descent. Ouster caught himself, his free hand on the lip of the pit, gripping it tightly. In his other hand, he held the scroll as tight. Tarnish looked down on him coldly from the edge of the pit.

“All you need to do is hold the scroll, and fall,” Tarnish said quietly. “Wael will put you on the path. Where you cast the Keeper after you killed him, that is where you must go.”

Ouster paused, then his face wrinkled into a smile, that seemed foul now to his eyes. “The Keeper?” He paused as Tarnish glared at him. Ouster’s brows drew together, his mouth gaped with realization. “I didn’t kill him. I **didn’t**.”

“Tell it to his face, then.” Tarnish kicked him. Ouster fell.

The eyes blazed as he spiraled to the bottom, the robes flapping as he fell... then winked out, one by one, like jewels vanishing into the depths, and Ouster was gone.

Tarnish waited for what felt like an hour, then sat by the edge, waiting. He had time. No sounds came from the pit, and if the eyes still blazed, they were far past his sight.

He was alone.

Which is what he realized that he wanted. The House had a new Keeper, and the others had been delivered to Wael in their own way, with secrets intact. Most of them.

For as Ouster had fallen, Tarnish *had* caught the wine on his breath.

And with that, another mystery. One that could wait.

Tarnish, Keeper of the House of Wael, set out to explore his new home.

THE FIRST OF ENDINGS

There are many more endings to the scroll, a new one unfurling each time. One speculates on how Ouster must have escaped... or at least the scroll did. Did he know how to re-enter the House? Does he live? Is the scroll the means to open it again?

And other endings are even stranger. How when Tarnish returned to the larder, he found Ondra's Scorn gone, and with it, any hope of using its waters... or is its reflection. Whether it had vanished, or someone else had known how to leave... and they had left Tarnish there.

Whatever the end of the tale, it likely still waits for both ends, Ouster and Tarnish to meet again, a pair of rods upon which a common scroll connects the two.

SPECIAL THANKS

A circle has been drawn around this last length of scroll, as if someone began a painting and then stopped once the ends of the circle had touched.

Within the circle are a series of names, the formation of the letters resembling an iris within the circle's eye, staring outwards.

*The words shift within the confines of the eye's silhouette,
and rearrange themselves until you see in your thoughts
who you should thank, not for this tattered fragment,
but for what waits for you next when you tear your eyes away.*

*Many questions await, and secrets to be discovered and ones to be kept.
And they will be for reasons not even a god can tell you.*

*In blendfish ink lies more base words than poetry,
and they are thanks... if only special because they are
hidden from view... thanks to the Backers and our friends at
Kickstarter for making this possible, thanks to George Ziets for
creating an interesting pantheon to play around with, thanks
to those who supported us early and after the fact, thanks to all
those who were patient in fighting through our forums to get
their requests logged. Eternity was a great learning experience,
and may all its secrets find their way home so your player
can face them and make of them as they will.*