

SYMBOLS OF THE SUN

IX

*book one :: shadow of locust**"I'm leaving hope for the winter." – Lord Stjepan Nemeck, 42nd Fall 6053*

Moving ahead several weeks into winter, Symbols of the Sun is a time of renewal for Pellern. It has successfully dealt with its most closest and dangerous of enemies at this time. For now Pellern, though it suffers the early bite of winter, will rise to glory through allies established and decisions made.

The battle at the end of Fall with the demon Irish left the city shell-shocked and only now are they beginning to see they have to pick up the pieces. It will not be easy, but their suffering has been great. It is only fitting they reap the rewards of their sacrifice and effort. This chapter ends when Orian, Relian and all other reluctant city-states swear allegiance to Stjepan as the Lord of Miir.

Murain's Rebellion: After the battle with Irish, Murain pulled his men from Stjepan's side, having learnt of the deal for his land as collateral. Lord Murain sees Stjepan not only as an unfit ruler, but an incompetent one who uses guile to maintain his kingdom. Murain's thirty knights though pulled back, have merely been diverted to observe and then capture the Gold & Eog Mines, ceasing production for Stjepan and giving complete control to Murain. Murain's men establish a camp where after noting the best times and places for attack and defence make their move striking hard. Two guards perish in the attack and the remaining twenty are rounded up and pressed into servitude with the miners digging out the precious ores. One guard is allowed to ride back into town, beaten and wounded, with a message: Murain has reclaimed his land. Trespassers will be executed.

Murain continues to work with his contact in the Amethyst League selling his quarter of the eog mined at the mines. He has recently transported a large shipment that is awaiting pickup at the Sya-Wôrim, an ancient ruin in the Ash Woods.

Luse Invarath will not be surprised to hear of Murain's treachery and after alerting Ishraha (whose men were used as information gatherers & scouts) encourages Stjepan to inflict punishment without reprisal. They need the mines and Murain's recent shipment delivery that disappeared along with recent scouts is too coincidental. Luse brings this news to Stjepan himself. They must plan action.

Their troops number considerably less of late, but Luse has been strong in recruiting and training new men to defend Pellern. Some seventy remaining Ahn Sye Nokora, who now follow Stjepan with loyalty unwavering, fifty light cavalry, two hundred swordsmen, one hundred pikemen, and fifty archers. In his castle, Murain in the winter is more unassailable than he could possibly be in summer. The best plan of attack would be to find the source of Eog – Ishraha knows where the eog was last seen going in to the Ash Woods. Murain would discern this from his castle and leave with sufficient force to intercept and prevent any discovery of the tower.

This scenario may go of several ways. Possibilities are here explored.

The Weather: proves a significant factor in any undertaking. It slows troops and horsemen. The constant snow and minor blizzard makes it uncomfortable with all, and difficult to manoeuvre through the foothills of the Mountains of Gold. Morale will be low, more so as Murain's men who decry the soliders begin terrorist like activities to destroy their enemy. These include dragging bloody sack and cloth to the outskirts of any camp of Lord Stjepan's force luring the wolves to attack the camp and hunt down those that break rank. Fire seems to be the only thing to drive them off and then they have illuminated themselves to the archers of Murain's men.

The Ash Woods: Lerstin (Ishraha's scout with the most knowledge of this area) tells them the Ash Woods so named for the ash that fell over this forest from Zinvar as it blazed. It was once part of the great forest that claimed most of the plains of Miir in the past, and its trees are old, and things within old and alien to civilization. Any local knows spiders haunt the woods, but none have seen them and lived to tell the tale.

Tracking will eventually reveal a rough path through the forest that has been cut not too long ago, not much, but enough for a small wagon, whose ruts have frozen under the snow. The Ash Woods consist of old evergreens, scraggy in moss and lichen, creepers and supplejack weave a spiderweb of flora above them.

Unfortunately this path is a planned one, as delivery of eog is done by single file horsemen with packs. The path is nothing but a trap to lure would be investigators into the spider's lair, literally. The forest is dark, almost penumbra, aglow through a bleak grey filter that strips the green from leaves. Snow is still prevalent, though piled not as high, yet some areas show mounds of the frozen water. It's not as slow going as without the canopy, but does take time. A group of Giant Spiders has built a cunning trap about the pathway and are fed and feed on both unsuspecting and reluctant victims. These spiders are lattice giants, building a funnel and a gourd like sealed end in which they feed and reproduce. Unless they are very perceptive they will walk straight down the tunnel of flora into a densely packed area of snow and foliage that has collapsed under the weight. More and more they walk, there is a sweet smell of decay, and then someone should discover one of the scouts who was last here. He is dead, but his belly is open, what is worse, eaten from the inside out... then the fast moving funnel web spiders attack from under foliage and sealing the entrance with them inside the cocoon with many more dead bodies about them, the spiders and their babies, hundreds of them. If surprised casualties will be high.

Giant Spiders

Strength: D12	Agility: D8	Health: D12
Knowledge: D30	Perception: D8	Luck: D30

Melee: D20 bite	Poison: D8
Armour: Exoskeleton D20	

The Giant Spiders climb over their victim using their legs to pin them and then delivering a bite that must be resisted against health, failure leads to instant damage of 3 levels of health.

In the aftermath, if Lirsten survived he will eventually find sign of riders to the north, from there they can make their way to Sya-Wôrim, an encounter that will not prove any easier. Murain and his men at this stage would be on their tail ready to attack from behind.

Sya-Wôrim: was once an alchemical laboratory and outpost, though to which use the Wôrim built it for is lost to history. The tower stands short, its upper most reaches merging with the tangle of the old evergreens. The tower is wide and squat of a sandstone colour not dissimilar from Murain's castle. Its curved stones have eroded over time, rounding at all edges. A solitary arched door leads the way inward. Rich and dark, the wood is studded with metal rivets, huge metal braces fastened on the outside and around the faceplate where portal for a key is.

The tower has a guest and his bodyguard. Orius, a Mentalist works for the Amethyst League, provided the tower and many other gifts in return for his service to be middle man in transaction of Eog from Lord to Merchant with the tower as meeting place. The offer was too good to refuse. Orius accepted his task and has grown accustomed to his new home, as has his dominated pet fully grown Voorg. The Mentalist wears about his neck the Darugh parasite, making him weak physically yet strong mentally (p 78 Atlas 3^d Ed.) – mottled skin of gruel colour, it oozes a slime, opening its solitary eye now and then. He wears it underneath scarves. Orius appears instable, his eyes bulge and skin scrunched up to a pinch at his nose, his bald head is scarred, some recently, he leers. His dress is disgusting, filthy robes and a strange swamp stench lingers about him. He considers himself mentally indomitable, but all it takes is a blade to silence him. Given a chance he can manipulate most minds, and worst, there is the Voorg. Orius considers himself indomitable and his weakness being he is far from it.

Assuming they've successfully defeated the Voorg, Orius will have been preparing his defences, both mental and physical. He awaits them as they approach the only entrance into the old tower. The White Eog is stacked nicely on one side of the ground floor, the stairs curving up on the inside of the tower.

Inside, the tower has had little more upkeep than its exterior. Moss grows on all surfaces, and a decay of vegetation is piquant to senses. Up the stairs one finds only two more levels. The middle area contains a bed, which stinks worse than the walls, crusted with thick trails of slime and mould. Some food in a corner basket is also green, fruit decomposed with cheese and bread encouraging the rot riot. Surprisingly the tower is warm, quite markedly different to outside. The third floor shows a room full of mirrors – full length silvered mirrors stand at ten positions about the tower, all facing the middle. Chalk lines and sigils have been drawn in a complex pattern between them and a central area more cluttered in the co-joining lines and patterns. Geometry of five and ten is strong here. Orius used the mirrors to project his vision beyond the tower and his position in the centre of the room as a conduit for harnessing essænce, his very own temple and practise room. Orius will give nothing information wise to the characters. He meets them with demons pulled from their minds, confronting them with things they are terrified with, or thinks they are. He has the power to cripple and to make his victims cause self-injury.

Voorg

Strength: D4 Agility: D6 Health: D6
 Knowledge: D30 Perception: D10 Luck: D30

Melee: D12 Adrenal Defence: D8
 Armour: D12 – Heavy Fur

The Voorg is nearly unstoppable. It will first attack from above. Its claws and massive strength literally crush a man with a swipe, taking four levels of health damage with a solid swipe connecting. The Voorg fights very unlike its nature, controlled by Orius who mercilessly throws it at them, the Voorg happy to die in the end, whimpering relief.

Orius

Strength: D20 Agility: D10 Health: D12
 Knowledge: D10 Perception: D12 Luck: D20

Melee: D30 Mentalism: D12 Force Spells: D20
 Mental Spells: D12 Subconscious Spells: D12
 Armour: D12 – Mental/Physical Shield

Orius is merciless and will not hesitate to inflict massive pain and suffering in mind to those that would intervene. In any ensuing fight with the Voorg, he prepares in his temple where he does not suffer fatigue. His armour extends about him for five rounds. His first spells are mass minded, and then he deals with troublesome individuals.

Lord Murain: Whatever the cast Lord Murain will meet Stjepan on either the battlefield or in the Ash Woods. Any battle will be bloody and fierce, Murain's knights strong, but again, his overconfidence is his weakness. Xaek is more than a match for several of Murain's knights, his enhanced body and mind no match for them. Xaek is seen as the best warrior Pellern has save perhaps Luse, but that's only because none would say otherwise publicly.

Lord Murain

Strength: D10 Agility: D8 Health: D8
 Knowledge: D8 Perception: D10 Luck: D10

Melee: D8 Riding: D8
 Excellent Armour: D10 – Elven Chain

Murain wear's elven chainmail armour, taken from one of his major conquests when he was younger. The armour though not enchanted, is of high tensile strength against both enchanted and normal weapons. It is light and does not restrict his movement. He wields in combat a cabis (feinting with it as a second weapon – used to full effectiveness when thrown – pg. 64 Atlas Addendum) and a

narrow blade, barbed at three intervals down the edges, a hilt moulded about three dark red gems on each side.

Murain's Castle: the exterior of which is detailed elsewhere is impossible to siege, Murain, an expert in its defence. However, his men in the castle would submit to his death and to the one who defeated Murain, especially if it were Lord Stjepan. They are not criminals. Murain is rich. He has some 30,000 gold in his treasury and enough armour, arms and good horses to equip an army of some 600 strong with fine gear. Foodstuffs enough to easily see Pellern through the winter. Just who would replace Murain as lord will be difficult. Murain's knights will not accept another lord, many taking refuge further on the western coast.

Problems with the Black Dawn: One night Cheon successfully tracks Savon who himself surreptitiously enters a noble's house. Cheon is frustrated, watches but never sees Savon come out. Cheon can't knock and demand to get in and in his frustration goes to see Ishraha about this personally. He tells his boss that as a security and information network it is good that they watch, but if he wishes them to act upon their knowledge of the dangers, then they must have powers and be recognized as having so. Cheon suggests uniform and public notification by Lord Stjepan to their purpose so people will co-operate – naturally some members should and will remain undercover, but they need something to get them immediate access to where those that would harbour danger in the city would have no defence.

If they go back to this noble's house, he pleads his innocence if confronted, but Cheon believes something more, that the house was used as a means of transit, and indeed he finds this very thing out. A series of tunnels complex running underground throughout the stone foundations of their city – not sewers though, for a man is somewhat stooped within, but rooms exist further in. A veritable labyrinth exists here for several layers. There are no documents or records of this and many of the holes in the walls are concealed behind furnaces for the most part.

Dealing with the Emptiness: After some success, Stjepan should look to reoccupying lands and castles with new lords. Jenovar's castle has remained empty, its men slain by barrow wights all where they stood or slept, drained of life, of essence, of blood of water. Then there is another problem to his plans. The Amethyst League propping up Count Hirotha push to reclaim more of the lands closest to their allies, setting up forces to defend and keep watch as outposts – with the demonic threat to Alkartek, Bokpentok acknowledges it must be alert for more threats from the west.

Luse's Plans: Since the last battle, Luse realizes the dangers facing them are not usual ones, coming too strange and surreal. Understanding of the supernatural he sees Pellern must be strong if it is to successfully defeat any future attacks against it, which seem numerous and directed. He pushes to Stjepan a campaign of unity, that those against his rule should be seen as their enemies and severely punished for threatening peace. All those that harbour that dispossess and brutalize others should be wiped from Miir. Among this he talks of how Stjepan is considering courtship. Luse suggests Quetara, daughter of Count Harond of Chelzaria. With the recent word

of lack of support, moreover for their enemy, they could do with unification. They would need to draw on the strengths of the best in their land, recall all who use the essence to positions of defence, collect tax for all four city-states, build Pellern strong.

Lord Dall's Exile: Not long after word of the demon's attack on Pellern reached Orian, Dall's fate struck. It was unexpected, the insinuation of conspiring with Lord Stjepan and working with the Sarnaki to assassinate Bryce Korel. The plot was carefully orchestrated, and though without proof, his rebuttal he withheld and immediately returned to his wife and house. Much to his horror, guards surrounding his home, his wife the casualty of a robbery. Dall could see it was no robbery though, and the threat was made well. He packed up immediately his most cherished possessions, bade his staff to maintain the household and with monies and armed escort left for Pellern.

Their trip north was interrupted thrice by bandits and highwaymen intent less on money and more on murder. Dall's money had been placed wisely, however, his hired men more than a match for the skilled assailants.

Lord Dall makes his way early into the third week of winter, his men tired, he weary beyond belief, their party cold and horses weak. They wearily shamble to the castle, and word is sent to Lord Stjepan of the Councillor's arrival. Dall is grim, but happy to see Stjepan. Lord Imbrus Dall seems thin, and ragged, his face white and weathered. His smile cannot be hidden though, even if his skin looks like it should shatter as it bunches. White robes heavy and fur lined, make him stockier than ever, despite his gaunt appearance. He is accompanied by eight men all dressed in armour, helmets on and visored, they are grim, their uniforms matching, red or stained red with a black dragon rampant on the front. These men consider themselves as professional bodyguards, yet they are nowhere in the league of the Changramai. Strong and agile fighters, they are more than a match for opponents.

Lord Dall has much to report. He welcomes a warm bath and food, but will speak with Stjepan in the night. First he discusses the challenges made to him by councillors. He speaks of Lord Bela who has risen to a position of prominence among the council, there is even speak of making him King, although that is only rumour... but he does not doubt the desire. Bela led the effort against him and while he cannot prove the murder of his wife, he is sure that Bela was associated in some part. Bela sides with antagonizers and Sarnak is definitely looking into expanding their boundaries – both the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Security seem to be closely allied in this push, though there appears to be some antagonism with the Ministry of War. They have nothing substantial. Dall tells Stjepan a war is coming one way or the other. The likes of nothing they have faced. Dall came here to support whom he believes can lead them to victory. How can he help? Dall is wealthy. While not wealthy beyond belief his family fortune totals several hundreds of thousand gold and assets worth much more not just in Orian, but abroad in Sel-Kai where he has several households full of treasures – he extends his personal fortune to Stjepan for the conquest and protection of Miir, stability to a land that has not seen peace for years under solitary rule.

If Dall does stay, if asked to, he will quickly work with Lord Chancellor Mandrador and other officials of the castle. He insinuates himself into the fabric of

the castle, proving his worth instantly. His efficiency is palpable. Dall does not linger over conversations but does prefer to be in on the knowledge, knowing that his support is warranted and moreover respected.

Aria's Return: Aria returns in the skysloop mid-winter, earlier than expected, but with no less good news. Their sloop has weathered the winter will, appearing as if it has just touched the snow, it swoops low and will be noticed by guards who alert their commanders. Stjepan is informed. The sloop docks north of the castle and it is unpacked, save for Aria who with a companion heads off to seek out Lord Stjepan.

Her companion is no less than Saren Xanaari, granddaughter of the Lord of the House, Keliden Xanaari himself. She is here because of the growing tension between her house and that of House Jurgon and others, namely House Jurgon the head of which, Ignatus she murdered without authority. While she sees her exile as punishment it is Keliden's hope that her lack of immediate impulsiveness will calm the aftermath. She is sent to Pellern as ambassador of the house, with Aria, the ship and her men under her command, to make sure the trade with the herbs is smooth.

Saren is an angel, men literally stop in their tracks as she walks by. Of Loari Patrician class, pure of blood and arrogant about it. Her features are faultless, a skin so smooth and ivory, and hair glistening sable free and long to her upper waist, pulled back by the most unimagined silver sculptured comb-piece. She is taller than Aria and more endowed, whereas Aria appears more youthful, this elf has more presence in appearance. Her ears are marked with silver intricacies and greenstone earpieces, highlighting her slender and pointed ears. She is dressed in leather, but the colours dyed in shades of blue and green are remarkable and the style odd and striated in design with flanged and hardened ends, like veritable waves or ripples in water or ocean.

Saren plays flirtatious and in command. She is more outgoing than Aria and less self-conscious. When Aria introduces Saren, Saren takes the initiative. She greets Stjepan warmly in the name of House Xanaari as a partner in business. She then presents him with contract signed and sealed, but... she says, she had to make a change. She had to raise the price negotiated. Instead of 70% of the market price it would be in unfair taste to commit to a partnership of trust, so she has changed their profit to 85%. She then presents him with a bill of monies for the Sel-Kai bank for the first delivery of food - 400,000 gold. All this she does with disdain for Aria, who initially arranged the contract and is now humiliated. Worse, Saren sends Aria to fetch the silver chest. She does so, bringing it back personally setting it down. Saren presents the chest as a gift from House Xanaari to Lord Stjepan. The chest is a marvel of design, so thin is the silver it has been made, yet the intricacy belies its depth, bas reliefs of obscure and fantastic creatures. Within the chest, more wonders. A selection of citrus fruits and coffee beans, several elvish wines in crystal decanters, other animalia sculpture from hardwoods like Dir & Hoen. A personal watch & fob chain made of gold and silver, etched with Lord Stjepan's name in a baroque design of thorns, a looking glass of copper gilded and decorated in whorls reminiscent of the clouds, a musical box - its exterior polished glossing the redwood shine, that when opened shows mirror and spins a crowd of faeries in random order on a metal surface, the faeries removeable, but pull strongly to the surface. A handle winds the

mechanism, the tune that chimes from within is soothing and polyphonic, strange oscillations express a peaceful and majestic ballad.

Saren is no whore, but she knows she needs allies, and since she is staying prefers to be on side with Lord Stjepan, giving her more importance over the castle whole. She abides by few rules and is skilled in evasion and hiding often listening in to conversations in private and suspicious goings on within the castle. She uses Aria and her men and women to investigate and strengthen elven security in Pellern.

Aria's Exile: Aria seeks out Celimé for several reasons. Celimé is her only link now to J'Diema, especially since Saren is in charge now, her powers are effectively stripped, her freedom tainted. She seeks her also for kinship in exile. Aria also realizes Celimé means much to Stjepan and that is a way to get what she wants when she needs. She tells Celimé of the circumstances now, of Saren, and of their stay. She warns Celimé of Saren, especially to not tell of her racial heritage.

Eventually Aria may confide in Celimé. She will spend her time with her often and offer training together. Aria's skill with the sword spans several thousand years. She may speak of her time when she lived on Námar-Tol as a plebeian, her family in service to the Xanaari family for many years. Her marriage was arranged with no less than a noble of house Xanaari who fell in love with her, a patrician noble of pureblood. Her family was ecstatic and she was overjoyed. Marriage is for life and this man she saw was in mind, heart and soul everything she could ever desire or hope for. He was gentle and kind, free with ideas and dreams. Their courtship lasted what she remembers as a short time, but could have been months, maybe a year. Everything was perfect, and union with this man became stronger in her heart. Then her marriage, and on the eve that is when her dreams were uncovered. Her husband she found as she and others ran to the screams coming from the patrician's household. He came out bloody, knives in hands, her betrothed. Then he appeared beside her, the same man bloody across from her, but this one enraged with a legion of guard. Shedding his skin, the murderer showed his true face. He slew the real son and the guards gave chase. She learned later that the son was mortally wounded on the mainland of Emer, with this assassin taking his place for the entire time that she knew him. Her family was disgraced. She left for Sel-Kai and has been in House Xanaari's service ever since trying to right the wrong. She has no love for him still she says, but she does feel guilt, guilt for loving him. And now her future too is managed by others.

The Black Dawn: For every incursion closer to the Black Dawn the Security Network gets, the Black Dawn retaliates in kind. Their slaughter is brutal. For exploring the tunnel network there will be attacks made on all operatives out in the night. Savon and his men fade from shadow to shadow, unable to tail, they the defenceless and butcher them in occult ceremony. This is done with their victim alive as much as possible. Evisceration is performed, hands pinned with stakes to walls or floor. Charcoal and blood mixed is used in crude designs and mystic runes. If Ishraha is out he too will face the attacks though may come away at least somewhat equal.

If he is close, he may see them vanish in their mysterious ways of liquefying the stone, and if he engages them in combat he may see their visages change, flicker in

moments of the combat, revealing a rotting mass of flesh, churning as if something were eating it from below, without teeth it gapes with a black hole mewling sounds of cacophony with bloodied lips – its hands underneath black robes twist and squirm like coils of snakes, yet intestinal, phasing with nebulous haze.

Pellern in Dream: Celimé has been experiencing with her new abilities, losing herself in dream as her outlook and perception change. If ever she decides to explore dream beyond those about her she will find them chaotic, brutal, calm, and abhorrent. At first they make no sense, but the more and more she explores she will see patterns of hidden emotion in these people's dreams. Finding the hidden elements, those at intentionally change by leeching or twisting dreams will be very difficult for her to uncover.

In the communal dream collage that makes up Pellern's world of Dream it is one of stark contrasts and little sense, the place seen as a twisted an evil place by most to live, yet they prosper and peace is upon them. They seem happy in an overt oppression. Picking up on these things is difficult however. More on the darker side of this social dream will impress upon her the more she becomes intimate of both worlds, believing in both. The danger of not recognizing one from the other does linger though.

Beyond this her dreams are of those about her, namely Stjepan and Lord Dall, the only people who sleep on the sixth floor of the castle. With Stjepan she will have the unfortunate/fortunate experience of meeting Halé, who takes an interest in how she can enter Stjepan's mind as well. He can see potential leverage to be gained with her excursions. In meetings he plays himself up as a cautious and untrusting with his reasoning being, wouldn't she be after six thousand years of watching everything you stood to defend crumble?

People as a whole now look upon Celimé as a stranger, alien to them, but one who saved them from death and for that they treat her well, if a little reserved. Luse Invarath remains distant to Celimé – though he knows her sacrifice was great, he cannot deal with her emotions, he too sacrificed in battle, many good friends, many men under his command. Moreover, he must put aside his feelings for the future not of just himself, but of others targeted by the growing dangers against them.

Halé's Environments: The Hall where the fallen of Stjepan's bloodline descend to the original Ahn Sye Nokora of the Emperor. However, Halé projects this, knowing only half of those assembled. There is no ceiling to this place with two rows of fluted pillars rising to a never ending space, between them two long rows of wooden tables with men, warriors eating rotting food, save the last Ahn Sye Nokora. He sits not touching the food with helmet still on. This is a clue. It symbolizes what must be done for Stjepan to survive. The first one was true to his calling, the others since have strayed. Halé can only escape his prison if Stjepan 'Restores the Order'.

Plains of Alkartek, an autumn sky listless in clouds that graze vestigial on the dark red sky. Yet the plains are in light, not hazed in bloody glow, natural light, the sweeping plains are lush with wheat and stretch for as far as the eye can see. About are dotted Ancient Ruins they can explore, some have meaning. Halé is very dominant over every factor that occurs in this place.

Majel's Arrival: Majel is arrogant and confident, perhaps a little too confident. His trip to Pellern to see Celimé is one he does with pomp and flair and law upon his side. Majel's caravan pulls up to the gates and with official letter from Stjepan is allowed entry and the Lord Chanellor soon informs Stjepan of the Envoy from Bokpentok's arrival. Majel Gavant makes a formal introduction and greeting to Lord Stjepan.

His Caravan is a singularly strong and well designed vehicle, less a peasant's wagon than a Lord or King's private travelling vessel. Reinforced with metal plates, embossed with arabesques, make it a formidable vehicle. There are ports inside and windows that can be shuttered. His ensemble consists of six well trained knights and two personal close combat bodyguards, who are both large Pochanti warriors caked in jade petals of armour laced together with steel bands, faceplates of layered jade likewise strapped to the front of their heads. Each carries weapon, though both are near identical in stature, three linked chains with weight and octahedron spiked flails, the other two wide sloping heavy ended blades, more like machetes. With Majel are two officials, who dress in robes of heavy red and gold, stylized like uniforms less than a monk's garb. Both wear silver seals of Bokpentok openly. Majel is dressed in black velvet, jacket and pants into high leather boots, short black cape of silken material from his shoulders where shoulder length black hair shadows the sides of his dark and powerful eyes.

An official will formerly introduce Majel to Lord Stjepan as the Envoy of Bokpentok. Majel will then stride to Stjepan hand extended in friendship and says he has not had the pleasure of meeting him but is glad to do so after all this time. The Envoy finishes, his Count's Advisor Majel Gavant.

Now, Stjepan's main reaction may be to gut Gavant, but Gavant will play this very carefully. For these reasons; The eastern alliance has an army near ten thousand strong, well financed, what could he possibly gain by his death except his own? He has no intention on harming Pellern or anyone within his lands while he is here, fully intending to barter on trade. Orian is strongly allied with Bokpentok, Lord Bela could easily seek alliance with Sarnak to have Pellern removed. What does Gavant want? The Citadel? No, Gavant provided one of the keys so has no intention of getting them back again.

Gavant will seek out Celimé when he can, evading guardsmen long enough to speak to her. She hates him, but Gavant intends to sway her to his side, using many reasons; The serum he gave her was to awaken her abilities, not to subdue her. He tells her he knows of what Ventine did to her when she was young. How? He has seen it happen for thousands of years to all of her kind. Her kind? The Earthwardens. Now, Gavant will probably stop from giving information now, instead waiting on Celimé to come to him, using an excuse to leave her. Gavant has a strong attraction to Celimé and he will be very professional about any seduction. Romantic dinners, presents of fine items such as; riding boots made from the skin of giant lizards from Khum-Khaan, geometrically designed silver and ivory watch, with burning red gems the size of specs inset around its baroque elegance.

Gavant then delivers the truth about Celimé's origins. He talks of how he has followed her for a long time now, always keeping an eye out for her, although he admits he is become wearied by it of late, especially this time. He says Ventine's

abilities to erase minds is unquestionable and resolute, but it doesn't make it any better. He asks her how much of her life she remembers, and more importantly has she had any flashbacks? Just one flashback? He is saddened, asking what it was? Ah, her first moments? He must have used too little a dose, but she is awakening. Perhaps in time she will remember all the lives he has taken from her. Gavant hints she is an ancient creature who has been so controlled by Ventine only recently for the first time in thousands of years she was free of him, they had a bond, HAVE a bond he states stronger than she could imagine. Our stone will remind you more he says, it will enhance the serum I gave you, and he provides a ring made of cavarite that spires in twisting coils of thick flame yet is wondrous and alive, made of the same blue-green of the artefact. Using powerful magic at that moment enhanced by the powerful greater foci about him freezes Celimé's consciousness and digs into her mind seeking information – finding her experience at the artefact gives him proof and period to continue a lie. Just as Ventine is a master of the physical form, Majel is a master manipulator of the mind.

Eighteen Years – Running almost blindly down a darkened alleyway, crashing through piles of refuse, the only beacon the figure silhouetted ahead of you running as frantic calling for you to keep running, you are out of breath and terror is in your heart, the sky is dark locked in night and chill. A wall ahead brings hope crushing down, but the figure crashes to a halt.

"Come on Celimé, here I'll boost you over." He places his hands together to lift you up. As you reach him the sound of scraping on the marble walkway you run and turning to look the beast comes crashing around a corner down the alley toward you. It is a deformity of nature a twisted hunting dog, whose ribs jut out like a barrel, and legs powerful like a cat, hooked claws not of nail, but of metal, teeth likewise a gauntlet of steel, the size of a horse it screams down upon you. Turning you go to boost over and he strongly hefts you to the top of the wall where you have to stretch to pull yourself up, he then takes a short run and joins you just as the beast impacts against the wall, shaking it and nearly both of you off.

Able to breath and relax as the creature fumes and whines in metallic chime Majel stares back at you, his relief almost too strong for him to bear. "Come," he rasps, "We've so much more to get through yet."

Staring out from your vantage you cannot see the end of the city that stretches till all horizons, a ruinous place, deserted by civilization but very inhabited by all things drawn the black tower in the middle of this labyrinth metropolis where dark clouds swarm the spire.

Fourty Years – Majel sobs openly, beaten and near death, hands wedged behind him to a metal embrace of a machine that constricts him. His long black hair hangs about his greased and bloodied face. He does not look up, just stares down lost in his own misery. You stand not far from him, but removed from reach, weak of body to move, but clear of mind to see lying upon a table cold of steel.

Then a sweep of robes, grey, his sweeping moustache long and twisted over his thin wiry beard, aged but gnarled – Ventine. He speaks in strange tongue somewhere past you, unable to move your head to follow. The clacking of toes builds to crescendo and a giant spider streaks past to Majel, only you realize it is no spider but a spider within a man, the flesh clinging to the fat abdomen, and flaps of hands and feet moving with its exoskeleton. It spins a sickly cocoon about him and proceeds to drag him past, his bloodied eyes staring at you, mouthing words "I love you..." his whisper dragged out with his body.

Ventine returns to view, his belly, apron with bow tied. You roll your head to see his mask and tools in hand. "It seems penchant for rebellion always exist, frustrating as it is. The knife shall render and process what must be corrected, for you shall always be one of mine you understand. But secrets free to you, the most favourite Celimé, the most treasured you are. Now, let us remove child. His hand moves down to your belly, a numb sensation quickly becomes warm and not even the drugs can prepare you for the pain and scream.

Gavant seeks out Ishraha. He says he can remove Ishraha's noticeable spikes saying he has seen this condition before, he then asks about the situation of how the spikes came about to make sure he is accurate. When? How? Where? Why? Etc... and then surmises that Ishraha has been struck with a dark channelling, a curse known as The Vestigial of the Eye intended to affect his own shadow, so when Charón came close to Kulthea combined with a strong presence of the Unlife he too would find his body reacting to the pull of the Unlife, a veritable open vessel for it. Gavant says he can remove the curse – Ishraha then will have to realize his deformity has no relation to his recent ailments, though strangely his stats do not change with the recent additions, his bones are still stronger. Gavant will have to operate on Ishraha, telling him to meditate, and then he takes a syringe and injects it swiftly into Ishraha's temple, the pain so intense it burns white through his skull until he blacks out feeling liquid squeezing into his brain.

Now the best thing for the players would be to simply kill Gavant before he can spread his lies and disinformation. He is after all, very over-confidant. His men can always be taken. And war with Bokpentok is inevitable. Killing him would strike a severe blow to Dædekemani progress and would ultimately lead to Bokpentok's instability as a new League member is sent to help, but Count Hirotha would reconsider his commitment to their cause and fear Stjepan, who defeats demons and barrow-wights and continues to survive regardless.

Majel Gavant's arrival was dealt with unlike expected, Majel himself surprised with the success of his lies and half-hearted attempts at jokes that to Stjepan and his entourage saw as fact. Not only did his lies of memory convert Celimé, but they propelled her to ask to share the night with him. Stjepan, after speaking, found himself twisted to Gavant's truth, that war with Bokpentok would be futile and that he must ally with the Amethyst League if he wishes to destroy Sarnak. The session was left with the players determining the best course of action.

Majel Gavant – plays up his act as the tired lover, weary of the chase, who does not shy from his black heart nor lie about it, imparting some sense of nobility to what he does. Majel is not violent, unless pushed, when he can snap like a cobra with the strength and venom to back him up. However, Majel is confident, a little too confident, some might say he's tipped over and that will show in the next memory he sends Celimé. Through the cavarite ring attuned to Gavant he uses it to boost the signal of a powerful illusion, giving Celimé yet another dream, but this time not in his presence.

Luse Invarath – Slapped last session in discussion over Majel Gavant by Celimé, Luse is firmly in control of his emotions now, and sees Celimé as weak, letting her

emotions control her at every moment. He has a job to do, and that job has no time for emotions to control it, else for every second he cannot gauge death or misery that will come if he does not do duty. He has little time for her now, treating her fairly, but without friendship.

Lord Dall – Feels hamstrung, a literal ‘Catch 22’, knowing they have to defeat Lord Bela, but knowing they have to side with the enemy or the enemy will side with Bela disturbs Dall. They could lead battle against Bokpentok, but Dall agrees, the loss of Miirian life would not be good and would leave them in a weaker position against Sarnak. He believes that Stjepan has the quality to lead Miir, though and he supports that with considerable wealth.

Celimé’s Dream: One Hundred Sixty Years – “Here do you see?” Majel beckons to you from his perch precarious some twenty feet above you on the already towering pyramidal colossus climbed. Hesitant to climb any further on the unstable limestone tiles cracked and broken over the ruins of this ancient city, you gaze back below, confirming fears. The ruins of the city are miniscule, where once you walked among the towering columns spaced in strange circumference to sun and moon, and clambered over fallen idols of things better lost to history, now are pinpricks from this central mountain.

To the north, where Majel gazes, still motioning with his hand for you to join with him at the apex, the city faces a sweeping descent of the mountain they built it upon. It is bare of vegetation, barren and void save distant forests to the northwest. Between them and a river that frames your view, the ocean immeasurable save for one feature, a towering single mountain, its zenith lost in fog that creeps all way down the mountain like snow over its green flanks. The sheen of the water glistens in Orhan’s full silvered presence with the sun the ocean flat and calm.

“You can almost see it from here, come Celimé look.” Reluctantly moving from your ledge you pick your way among the shards of tiles and broken rock underneath, reaching Majel on broken tile, slipping into his arms. From there he gesticulates to the uppermost peaks of Votania, and to your wonder and amazement you see what he is seeing – a massive acropolis, an acropolis as wide as the zenith of the mountain itself, miles across, lost in the haze of fog and cloud, but briefly glimpsed. “The Masters of Emer,” Majel sneers. “Ever since arriving they have laid claim to this land in their quest for peace, but really all they wanted was domination. They did not care for the subverted, but crushed them, even those misled or forced into servitude. The Xiosians their personal death patrols. All of Hæstra’s troubles began when they interfered in the balance between the Lords of Essænce and it has not stopped. When they failed they cared not for their people they harboured in safety, and so they hide here. I will be at this place when it all ends, all this indecisive history. I ask you would join me, but I fear you may not know me in that time.” Majel kisses you gently, watches the clouds a little longer then clambers down helping you on your long descent.

Two Hundred Eighty Years – Tense and angry you stalk the obstacle preventing you from your target, some eighty metres behind. Majel is doing his best to fend you off, though he is not in the best shape, bleeding heavily, staggered, but irresolute he refuses to get out of your way. Your kynac is wet in his blood and drips on the cracked, dry earth underfoot, nourishing it. The small sliver of land curves to a point around a sickly ocean crashing and devouring the earth –

most importantly the earth accessible to the portal that shimmers with light, sparking in electric across its shifting scenes. You need to get to that portal.

You lunge past Majel, he intercepts grabbing you by the shoulders and dragging you to the ground rolling, your hands lost below you, coming precariously close to the edge you roll on top staring down at him, his eyes dark, flecked with blue staring back at you. He is weak now, his arms he removes from about your shoulders, dropping them to his side. Defeated, he smiles as you stand pulling the kynac from his belly, his eyes bursting in pain, clutching his stomach he watches you walk to the portal, his voice behind you... "I'm sorry... I'm so sorry..."

An ululation of essence washes over you as you pass through the portal into the chamber beyond. Ventine's hand is swift on your arm. "Welcome home." He drawls, his hand so tight you feel the bones sliver and splinter under his grip.

In the interim between sessions, Stjepan found heart and flatly refused all Majel offered and ordered him from Pellern's lands. Majel, his deeds accomplished succinctly agreed and left, but not before Celimé bid him farewell, and in her moments there Majel could sense her desire for him to free Bryce Korel if he could, though she was not willing to speak it. He offered to do so, by the next perigee of Charón. Majel sees no reason to not do so, as it will continue the fragmentation of Hæstra long enough for their armies from the south to reach the Gap of Uj. In fact he considers that Bryce's freedom will create greater impetus for war among the residents of north-western Emer. Stjepan will have nearly free reign to attack Sarnak as with Bryce's freedom comes Lord Bela's guilt and the collapse of the council support for him. In addition to this Stjepan begins his campaign in earnest, allowing Luse to go to the eastern front to keep watch against Count Hirotha's forces and attempts are made to aid his old allies, namely Baroness Midenna, Celimé sent to her by Lord Stjepan for his own reasons as well as her own.

Sarnak's Defilement: of the Mynistran Temple at Bentara, that resides on the bluff overlooking the town, and the murder of the Bishop there is of great affront to Helberna and the High Archbishop who after counselling with her four Archbishops and their respective advisors she comes to decision. Carân is most vocal explaining the conspiracy with Dall and Stjepan and it is his words that sway the High Archbishop Anteu to her decision: to champion Stjepan as the Mynistran Church's icon and leader in this declaration of war not just on Vornia and Bentara, but on the religion of Mynistra itself. Archbishop Carân himself travels from Helberna to Pellern to relay the word to Stjepan.

The Archbishop arrives via Navigator with two protectors, namely knights in service in Mynistra with some limited channelling ability and vast combative abilities dressed in stylized armour, with broad plated shoulders and flanged helmets riddled with holes, curved to gullets. They accompany the Archbishop dutifully and respectful of their position and location.

Archbishop Carân has changed little, as gangly and thin as ever, golden robes fringed with white silk, the triangle of Mynistra about his neck in silver. Carân greets his allies warmly all, then presents Stjepan officially with the declaration from the High Archbishop to Mynistra, Anteu. (See *handout 9a*.)

Archbishop Carân remains in Pellern to help co-ordinate his priests and arranging for priests throughout Miir to ally in Pellern. If informed about the Black Dawn

operating so openly in Pellern he becomes very concerned and immediately offers his support in dealing with them, working with Ishraha if need be, and providing magical guidance and defence where it has been missing.

Foremaster Reprise: Kedrick Bularis returns to Pellern, returned by the Foremaster council to closer align himself to Lord Stjepan and to observe the growing forces of Unlife that have recently proved a problem for Hæstra. With the growing flowstorms, the Foremasters are becoming itchy. Kedrick's hands on approach while frowned upon by the more conservative of the council, has become necessity in face of a growing worldwide trend in the wake of the Loss of the Northern Eye.

Kedrick arrives incognito, not only his clothes and manner changed, but his very appearance. By all accounts he will appear vastly different than the elf and the young Shay man he has posed himself as (albeit only to Celimé & Ishraha). Stjepan has shown remarkable resilience against the Unlife and Kedrick seeks his role to stabilize order.

Kedrick's veil is as a Sorcerer, born of Orian, exiled through the Katra with his brother who now has joined Stjepan's armies with many of his men. Vilan Xevekiir attempts to be a charming and warm ally to Stjepan and those about him.

Laan, while not as tall as Stjepan, is heavy set of frame, stocky and powerful, long brown hair flows over dark robes layered in shades of grey embroidered with subtle decorative patterns on all fringes. His face is pale, if a little flushed about the cheeks, with pale, almost purple lips. He speaks in a slow southern drawl, though is refined, cultured, and in all manner honourable.

Vilan/Kedrick seeks a moment not too embarrassing (i.e. the Great Hall at feasting time) to prove to Stjepan his worth, albeit in an eccentric and extrovert fashion. He approaches Stjepan, using illusion and magic to pass from servant to guard without raising an alarm until he steps into the open and begins muttering in low voice, sentences ahead of them all. Play it up, it must be seen as a serious attack. Around his hands he deftly twists and tucks upon each other in variation of somatics. A vestigial shadow forming about his hands, tendrils of smoke spinning like a saw, they bleed colour into the air, an azure smoke as the sorcerer walks calmly towards them eyes now too glowing with an intensifying blue glow. Guards ordered to intervene will be shrugged off as they rush to him, the smoke uncoils and strikes knocking the men unconscious. In a matter of motions Vilan will be at Stjepan's side. He deals with other more notable NPC's with spells of binding as the blue smoke unfurls and wraps about them like a cocoon until only Stjepan is left. Vilan easily bats aside any physical attack and incapacitates Stjepan also, then draws a sharp curved and hooked blade from a golden scabbard and moves to the Lord, saying something along the lines of; "Murder of the noble Lord Stjepan would surely break the heart of this new body that is Pellern, something it seems can be achieved by any moderate sorcerer with half an inclination, let alone prodding." He sheathes his blade without threatening and releases the spells, apologizing for the necessity of his actions and introducing himself as Vilan Xevekiir, Sorcerer and Philanthropist with quips like, "I have no title as of yet to embellish my name..."

Vilan retrieves his cane, one he placed down before his 'exercise', a slender shaft of dír ringed with a silvery band near the bottom, and tipped with silvery point,

matching the cane's zenith, a bulbous dull silvered pair of hands clasping a deep blood red ruby the size of a small child's clenched fist – *note: the top has a secret latch to reveal a small collection of various alchemical potions for differing purposes.*

Vilan appears honest with Stjepan and being of nobility treats Stjepan with respect and perfect etiquette to those about him. He claims his reason for coming to Pellern has been several-fold, but the impetus was that of his younger brother, Tefen Xevekiir, a military captain within a conglomerate of dalesmen/miirian mercenaries and soldiers without lords that recently was offered work and to travel to Bornay to amass. He will even mention having been born in Orian, though he says since the Katra he has lived in Relian and north of the Keyten River. He is reluctant to mention specifics but does allude to Bodlea, Danarchis and Præten, his employment? Basically filling voids that otherwise would be filled by those with undesirable intentions to all men, women and children's right to have rights. Vilan touts Order and Loyalty, and is a shining example of his words, but not as cold or distant as Luse's strained nobility. Vilan will not dictate, but merely advise and serve as a powerful ally when needed though the Loremaster will try to keep this to a minimum lest suspicions are raised. If confronted by Celimé that he is the Loremaster he will not denounce her claim privately but publicly, with vehemence and rejection.

Lord Dall knows this man, or at least circumstances about his father, Carlyle Xevekiir, who during the invasion of the Katra at Orian's doors some ten years past was a minor councillor who disagreed with the King's decision and with several other nobles fled once the Katra had secured the city.

Gelbentex: The Navigator (Guide of Vurn-Kye) delivers Celimé from the snowy cold permafrost of Miir locked in winter leaving her to the magical and picturesque sight of Baroness Midenna's castle and the town of Gelbentex. Gone is the bleak wall of the Mountains of Gold who cut out half the light, which during winter leaves life in shadows. About her beside the thin black spire of the Navigator obelisk, the snow is thin on the ground, a frosting over a beautiful coastal landscape. On a cliff side, a cobbled road the Empire winds its way down and then up to Gelbentex. From the vantage on the cliff the sight of the Sea of Votania is awe-inspiring and disturbingly familiar (even if it was Majel's memory and not hers). The calm waters of the gargantuan Sea of Votania stretch for as far as the eye can see, with a low mist hugging the glassy undercurrent up to the distant haze of Votania itself.

Gelbentex is charming with houses built like tiles upon the flanged cliff surmounted by the castle. Row upon row, with breathe for trees and gardens the houses are build on paved streets that would be bare in Pellern at this time of day, but are full of traders and townsfolk. The city though perhaps smaller in size than Pellern is no less alive, with tents and merchant caravans parked in areas about the city, roaming with travellers, minstrels, and swordarms. Two guards on horseback will intercept her some hundred metres from the town. They ride slim ponies designed for speed, and they themselves dressed in leather and carry small arms. Badges over their hearts show a shield with solitary purple tower surmounted by silver, crescent moon on blue background. The moustached officer in charge dismounts and welcomes Celimé to Bentara. He noticed her arrival by Navigator and they have been warned to always keep eye of travellers passing via Navigator knowing the Guild is secure in its

transaction means the officer is not hostile, but helpful. If provided enough information he will lead Celimé through the city to the castle.

The city is clean, the snow cleared early away into the gutters that are wet with the melt from the surprisingly warm and fresh sea air. Fish are already on sale on side carts, not cheap and rickety like in Pellern, but works of art presenting not just fish, but breads, and other foods freshly cooked. The amount of people smiling and the courtesy should be highlighted. The houses are tall and strong wooden and stone dwellings painted in gay colours that lift the mood of the city and give it a strange sense of vibrancy. Gardens and fenced parks are nestled in every street, with evergreens carefully trimmed and maintained. Inns and beerhouses line the road that curves up the cliff to the castle.

It is as if from a bard's tale, Baroness Midenna's castle unlike anything in Miir or most of Hæstra for that matter. So beautiful and crafted it is a work of art almost carved by the very Lords of Orhan themselves. Eight minarets spire from the castle proper, cut from dense granite it shines with a dark luminescence, yet the windows and turrets that flow in such perfect symmetry to the delicate castle are touched with the purple smooth rock of porphyry. Purple and blue long tailed pennants from every spire and raised flying buttress trails in the wind.

The façade of the gatehouse is unbelievable, carved from the same granite and highlighted with the porphyry, a fantastic creature sculpted from the rock into a scene from an enchanted grotto. The snake like being curls about the façade looking protectively behind them, the bark on the trees and the vines that curl about it are intricate beyond description.

Inside the castle and the fantasy continues. Guards are numerous initially at the gatehouse and marshalling the towers and short and curved sweeping walls. A warren of small court areas sectioned by smooth walls of granite and gardens beside the gravel pathways leads to the castle doors proper. Two hulking oak doors arch to a gothic peak; with the granite spreading about the doorframe again like it was a secret entrance to a long forgotten place in storyteller lore. Here, however, two almost ghostly knights stand at either side of the doors, smothered in vines that enter their armour. Guards inform the doormen who retrieve a castle official for Celimé and she is escorted inside by the doormen, in simple garb of purple over black, without arms.

The castle is sumptuous. As she stands within she will be struck by the aesthetic beauty about her. Graceful white marble statues contrast to the black granite that peaks from behind ancient tapestry and drapery. Hallways immediately show frescoes from floor to ceiling giving visual illusion to the castle (illusion of doors and peoples).

An official soon arrives, dressed impeccably in a suit of purple and black, with a silver crescent moon over her heart on the multi-layered robe. She welcomes Celimé to Gelbentek and asks to take her to a room where she may freshen up. The official, Kyla, does all she can so Celimé does not demand to see the Baroness as she is highly busy, Kyla will inform her of that if she presses. Her room is one of the eastern facing spires, one that overlooks the Sea of Votania and the mysterious island itself. She is led by Kyla down the frescoed passages to the stairs they climb. From glass windows Celimé can see their ascent above the city, above the cliff and above the ocean so far below. Finally after several minutes climb they reach her room, a rather deceptive room. Curving from North to South, it faces the east with windows among walls

where furniture just as delicate as the castle's minarets themselves offers luxury and aesthetics. Kyla lets her know he will be her personal attaché while she is here and to call her she only need pull the many velvet cords about the room. Further exploration of the room reveals three sections separated; a washroom replete with private bath, a small entertaining area with seating to fit eight comfortably on a variety of recliners, and a private bedroom from which the washroom comes off, and a small double-bed within, four-posted with spires of tree trunks wrapped with nymphs and other small fantastical creatures.

The following is a list of places in the castle of note:

The Conservatory – in the heart of the castle, under a roof of glass latticed over strong wooden frameworks is a veritable jungle of flora. In an area large enough to stable sixteen horses all manner of large tree and plant, these tended at all times by a man and woman who move about the small gravel path leading through the warm environment, warm and fresh. Several chairs exist about the place and it is often used as a place to escape by many, guards, officials.

The Library – Baroness Midenna encourages learning and her own library is open to the public and her own staff. There is no discrimination towards those that wish to learn as long as they respect the books and do learn. In one of the towers, however, hollow with a veritable column of books separated by rings of levels through which one traverses short flights of stairs to collection to collection. The collection of books here is impressive to say the least. Officials help public and look after the books. Some are on special request only. The library has many a table before windows overlooking every angle of the landscape.

Observatory – The furthestmost spire is more a lighthouse, with its uppermost level framed in a cylinder of windows allowing full 360° view. In the centre of the room, however, is the viewing glass to spy with. Some two metres long, a solid cylinder shank of bronze, but not just one piece, but tens, hundreds, if not thousands of intricate features and dials with one large lens at one end and a small eyepiece at the other. With the telescope on a good clear day one can nearly see the peaks of Votania, north to Helberna and south to Dynax and the Emerald Forest at the foothills of the Forbidden Ridge.

Speaking with Baroness Midenna: will not be one accessed at leisure. Baroness Midenna, though appreciative of Celimé's arrival is extremely busy with Dynax as she takes a more active role in removing the rotting elements of society ruining the city. She will meet with Celimé in one of the aforementioned places. The first day the Baroness can spend only one hour during the day, and then her nights become more available. Celimé is welcome to explore the town and castle with aid of Kyla who can also inform Celimé of other regional matters of small note.

The Baroness is elegant, dressed in a purple brocaded gown, a silver amulet of an eye about her neck, her long black hair in elegant bun and fixed with silver and pearl comb. She welcomes Celimé warmly noticeably surprised, but pleased by her appearance. The Baroness listens to Celimé and her views are quite objective from those back at Pellern, however she will not berate nor lecture, providing advice where sought and help where asked.

The Baroness herself is concerned wholly with Dynax. She is unaware who exactly is in control of the city, with the city in turmoil with Lord Wurlek in prison, overthrown by the Guild Council. But even they argue and fight. Trade has been interrupted affecting Gelbentex even though the main bureaucracy functions within the city. Corruption is rife, bribery and embezzling widespread, and what few agents she has sent to investigate she does so now reluctantly after the first two failed to return. She says it is good the Emerald Forest now grows over most of the Imperial Highway keeping away many, including Sarnak just over the Ridge. For other matters see the following two scenarios.

Shrine of Bæris: If asked, the Baroness cannot think of any shrine to Reann near Gelbentek (Reann in his last dream with Celimé told her to seek him out at a shrine there at night – he did not state his own shrine). The only shrine she can think of, other than the temple to Mynistra within the city itself is an old shrine to Bæris, the patron of young love and its inevitable tragedies, that is just a short ride out from the city. It lies a distance from the road where the cliff's rise begins from the plains.

The shrine itself is difficult to find, overgrown with brush heavy in snow the plains are more difficult than the heights the city dwells upon. Eventually the slate structure can be found, a simple lean to of three slabs forming an entranceway at a sloping angle.

Use example of Shrine of Iloura (Emer – Atlas Addendum p 70). Once Celimé is in and is exploring she will be rudely interrupted by another who has followed her in. Reann did indeed arrange this meeting, for initiation.

Cuesai, a Kinsai priestess of Reann while not an outcast from her Itanian brothers and sisters, is viewed with disfavour through her actions and hermit attitude. She melds with the shadows, her skin lightly browned, and her locks thick and curled, black and wet like the leather armour covering everything up to her jawline, where the leather collar cradles her lower jaw. She is not beautiful, her features more brutish and manlike, but her figure is clearly woman, a row of small black hilts about her mid-drift from where a girdle cradles other bags and accoutrements.

Cuesai received a dream quest from Reann, in which she to travel to the shrine of Bæris near Gelbentex where she would then instruct Celimé in ways of dream, namely on how to use the smokestone – always in a hallowed place, any Lord of Orhan will do. Since Reann has no established priesthood, it is developed through a network of priests who receive communiqué from Reann directly about where to go to teach, who, and often a little more introspective metaphorical information. By no means was it a clear and easy dream, Cuesai had images of only Celimé and her lover separated to guide her with more symbolical references to landmarks within Hæstra, let alone travelling from Uj to arrive and learning of the difficulties the Rhiani Tribesmen face with what they say is an 'Ending/Infinite/Eternity/Cessation Army...' her knowledge of their language far from perfect. She returns there after being with Celimé, completing the smokestone ritual followed by the moonstone dedication.

Cuesai prepares the ritual of smokestone for them to both dream and experience visions. Cuesai will accompany Celimé to make sure she is not lost without reference, for out here there is little dream... and when there is no dream it is often more

confusing and dangerous, for in absence dwells Unlife, absence of life, absence of love, absence of hope, absence of itself.

The Dream: This dream is interactive and should be played out in several scenes as described below: laws of the dream prevail – Cuesai will not be able to relate to all metaphors associated with Celimé but she does know to explore the Dream thoroughly as it is never what it seems.

Outside: Crawling outside through the opening back onto the plains finds them without snow, long grass stretches across everything, Gelbentex does not exist. Cuesai is with Celimé studying her surroundings. The sky is bright and hazed in a copper tinge that is disturbing when looking at the glare. Climbing the hill to the Cliffside will reveal the ocean of the Sea of Votania, but instead of its calm surface it rages in a tempest below them, the clouds striking each other in a gargantuan storm of black clouds lancing with lightning. On the plains with long enough searching they will find a falcon. It lays wounded, wing broken and is weak. It is weak when held and if comforted will notice that its belly is distended and lumpy. Larvae within squirm and press out against the feathers, study in detail will break the surface of the skin and as the blood oozes out and flesh collapses, fistfuls of locust larvae fall out. Closer examination through its organs will reveal an amethyst that when pulled from the viscera soon transmogrifies into a human eye with scraps of flesh about, it blinks with two eyelids, one vertical, one horizontal – and even as it that happens a high pitched whine builds thunderously about the landscape, rolling in toward them, immense pressure builds and comes close enough to kill before a vacuum pulls them into a freefall and darkness before finding solid ground. – *the sea of Votania represents the conflict with the Titans and the damage it will cause – the eagle represents Bryce Korel destroyed by the Amethyst League who at the core of those behind are k'ta'viir.*

Rhiani: They are at a desert oasis, about the sands rasp at the verdant flora growing about a forked river, overshadowed by palms and other nut trees. Overhead the sun remains copper, as unbearable as before. Twelve mares graze at this oasis in total and drink from the small river that passes through this place of growth. Always at a distance is one white stallion with four black bands about all four legs that mates with the horses, their screams of pleasure audible, but never found. If they try to find the stallion, one by one they will come across the remains of each mare, scraped to the bone (devoured) and stripped to a fresh stinking skeleton. Closer examination can reveal brown husks on the ground and the land about the horse barren and eaten as well. Once all horses are dead, save the white stallion that crawls bleeding from the oasis half-eaten into the river and floats away, the oasis is swept up in a sandstorm that tears through the oasis reducing it to nothing but dust, then the sandstorm sweeps about them, unable to escape they are separated for a short time. – *the twelve mares represent the twelve rhiani tribes, and the stallion is Cay himself.*

Dædekemani: Both explore different wilderness. Cuesai finds what she believes to be a giant smashing its head with stones to break itself apart in a labyrinth of bodies, the room ethereal, æ if it were filled with a million glowing insects, translucent and as old as the stone. Then the labyrinth of bodies coming alive, running through, trying to escape, then finally the desert... for as far as the eye can see, behind her the labyrinth no more. Silence, no wind, the air lifeless and dead, the sky empty yet light. There she waited for what she says felt like weeks... until waking.

Celimé finds herself cold on a mountain range, the sky above clear and blue for the first time, the sun warm on her skin though her body is cold among the granite and layers of snow. The landscape spread out from the foothills of the mountains to the horizon is unfamiliar, though it has similarity to terrain of the regions of Hæstra, not that she knows or remembers any more beyond. Climbing down to the ground will reveal the reason why she was up in the first place, literally swarming over the ground a seething mass of black tendrils, snaking over each other in a sea of growth. Even as she watches it claws for any stranglehold, growing into the granite and tearing it apart closing on everything that has surface. Climbing back up will be difficult and hurried and very dangerous (though if she believes that, it will be so). At the top of the mountain a cathedral of a throne stands on a platform of interlocking circular marble that glows with a blue luminosity. On the other side of the mountain range that sweeps to her left and right like a massive wall is a land filtered from vision in a copper haze where the sun glares strongly. Taking seat in the chair sets in motion these things all at once; a powerful looking glass manifests out of the air in front of the chair, forming a framework of *essænce* in a strong blue light filling out into an instrument with the eye piece a mere few centimetres from her head. Peering through, she only need turn her head whilst looking to view the landscape and the chair beneath her whirs into action gyrating and moving to position her. What she sees: to the north shimmering embers cluster about a large body of dark water and south of them huge pyramidal structures burn smokestacks with thousands of people herded endlessly into them, southward more and a land golden in colour, its buildings pure and bright, reflective in warm sun... clean and hallowed, further down the ridge to the south and forests burn, screaming and writhing the trees shake their limbs as they die, unable to move. To the east, a large body of water stretching out to the horizon, broken by a strange archipelago of islands, in the water, dark shadows slowly closing in like sharks on their prey. All this ends as she feels immense lancing pain from her feet and ankle. The black wiry plants of the unlife are growing inside her, they begin to take root in her body. She will feel their tendrils snaking out and feeding on her life as they pass up around her bones of her lower leg coiling upward to the trunk of her body, all about her the black growth taking root, soon her hands... Cuesai intervenes and wakes Celimé with a potion, calling to her. Celimé will feel the shoots burrowing into her stomach and up inside her ribcage toward her heart... then Cuesai's voice calling for her.

She wakes with a scream and noticeable pain, coughing blood, spewing long streams of coagulating bile and blood in red and black streams to the floor in the shrine of Bæris. Cuesai will make her rest (she has taken considerable damage) until first light at the very least and if asked will explain what she saw.

Meeting the Rebels: A meeting is arranged at a farm half a day's ride toward Dynax, close to the Forbidden Ridge. It is a ride that Baroness Midenna accompanies Celimé on with a small contingent of her own men. She is dressed in the same armour of leather as her guardsmen and encourages Celimé to do the same.

The gallop is hard, they only reach the farm some time after midday, the horses exhausted from the forced pace on such treacherous ground. It is inland from Gelbentex along the plains, which while are not as hard as the permafrost, is cold and

icy. The stone farm is large, surprisingly, with a roofed stable built like a long lean-to against the ancient building's foundations. Clearly unoccupied by long-term residents, horses in the stables show signs of visitors, Baroness Midenna is called out to immediately as they arrive called out in a deep unrecognizable voice, "Shun the Isle in the Sea of Mists..." to which Midenna replies... "...for the Masters sleep there still." At that signal the door is opened by a swaggering Vedesis, followed by Daemander, Lurayl. Daemander's face goes from surprise to delight and he rushes forward to greet Celimé, embracing her. Vedesis welcomes the little lady, saying he didn't expect to be surprised thus even if the request to meet was abrupt to say the least. Just as well they are in camp awaiting storm over the Forbidden Ridge to pass, he adds. Lurayl is quiet, but greets them.

Vedesis has changed little; as tall as ever, if a little more slim, his hands gnarled, little flesh on his rigid skeleton. His blonde hair is sparse, somewhat balding, and his face pointed and besmirched in a wrinkled grin. He wears his well-oiled plate shoulder and breastplate, quite a mess of chips and cuts across its surface – crossed sword and scythe etched over his heart hard to distinguish, with chain skirt hanging in shards to mid waist, so oiled, the metal is dulled. A kynac and long kynac at either side slouched lazily, like his general demeanor.

Lurayl is anxious, short and paranoid, he is dressed in clothes compared to his other comrades in armour. His short curled hair has grown somewhat and is worse for appearance, giving the little Sorcerer a look of a Wildman to accompany his dishevelled clothing which may have been of colour once, but is drab brown and grey now.

Daemander constantly smiles, and is unchanged perhaps for that he is slim of frame more now than he was. His hair longer but not unkempt, armour a little rough around the edges, his black cape ripped, but the dragon embroidered still unmarked.

Daemander is happy to see Celimé and does not press for questions, Vedesis is curious, but knows all will come in good time. Lurayl starts the questions asking why they were asked to leave their camp and risk possible discovery by Sarnak's allies for this meeting, it had better be good.

If Celimé tells them Bryce will be returned and how, Daemander will be disappointed then happy, fully trusting of Celimé. Vedesis asks Celimé seriously if she believes that it will happen, if she vouches to him personally, he takes her word for it. Lurayl, however, will not. He rebels, saying they cannot accept the arms of one enemy for another. He will make sure the Amethyst League have little time to impress their ethics upon Bryce by taking their rebels themselves to liberate Bryce. He will eventually ride off. Vedesis and Daemander stay, Baroness Midenna promises to take in those rebels that seek shelter and has men go with Lurayl.

Lurayl, Vedesis & Daemander – Vedesis talks of member's of Sarnak's own community, women who contacted them, suspect of things within their own Ministry of Security & Agriculture. He then outlays some of the Sarnaki troop movement. Sixteen navy war galleons are docked at Bentara, each with forty crew, and fifty extra soldiers per ship, then the Ministry of War has some one thousand men stationed strategically throughout the castle. A legion of Shaitan (100) have set up camp somewhere in the city.

Lord Dall and the Rite of Earth: One night, the hardy Lord Dall goes to see Stjepan to bring to light an ancient ritual performed before the Kings of Orian. Lord Dall cites that when there was no King of Miir, let alone Hæstra, land was passed from Lord to Lord through a complex ritual of the lord passing earth symbolically to the minor lord, with that lord's acceptance came acceptance of the other's rule. The more lords and lands the stronger one was not just politically, but socially. Lord Dall suggests perhaps it is time to reawaken the old tradition, starting first with Lord Denny of Bornay.

Ahn Sye Nomoke: Stjepan's bold decision to name his organization that Ishraha runs under the mantle of security & intelligence after the legendary Hand will not go unnoticed. While not public knowledge, even that small private knowledge soon filters to the hands and ears of the real Hand (NOTE: In the 2nd Edition Master Atlas it states the Order is that of the Serpent. Clearly Terry distinguishes two separate camps that have ties to the original order by fact or fiction. The true Hand being that as described in Hæstra – their true allegiances under the apparent veil of selfishness).

One night Ishraha will return to his security HQ to find a letter and parcel upon his desk. The letter is in a manila envelope and sealed with wax (an imprint of a hand), the note inside see Handout 9e. Upon reading the last word or when he puts it down the letter will burst into flame and incinerate. The package is wrapped in plain brown paper tied with white waxed twine. It is a foot by a foot in length and width and half as long in height. Opening it reveals a small wooden box nailed. Prying open the box reveals it is packed with straw, the straw bedding contains a small metal plate that has five spikes, a pentagram. Each metal spike is engraved with cursive runic designs with a central pentagon unmarked. This magical device is a specialized ward – used on the ground when crossed or neared, the pentagram begins to unfold, harnessing essænce about it (including all sorcerers), the pentagram rapidly builds a geometric cage about a creature not of this plane and then constricts that pattern back into the pentagram, crushing the physical form in an explosion of flesh and compressed bone. It can be used indefinitely, but can be discerned by all but the least aware or unoccupied.

How Ishraha takes this further is up to him but it has repercussions beyond a simple name change.

Gavant's Letter: Celimé sends Majel Gavant a letter (see handout 9. Majel Gavant by Celimé) seeking answers to the lie he infused in her mind. He is surprised by her letter, quite happy to accept the trade off of war with Bokpentok with that of Sarnak for Pellern, for with Bryce's return as Gavant promised, the pendulum swings in Pellern's favour. Gavant was preparing the Amethyst League to once again sink into the various cities and disappear.

Majel sees a chance to manipulate Celimé to an extraordinary level so she fully becomes immersed in his lies. Why is he interested in manipulating her? See last chapter. Majel sees a few potential benefits in playing the long lost lover. He may drive a strong wedge between her and Bryce so much so Bryce will not be an ally of Stjepan. If Celimé does decide to go to Bokpentok, proceed to the following encounter, otherwise Majel will still hint at liaison between them.

Bokpentok: From the navigator's sleek, black spire just south of the city you stand near a massive abbey across the third fork of the Alana River opposite the bank upon which you stand. It towers far higher than Pellern's castle, with long fluted arched windows, stained in vibrant colours of mosaic glass. Triangular in shape, but linear in height, towering to a series of triple spires at each of the three corners, all flaming against the cruel and dark skies overhead. From the abbey one's eyes lead to the brooding wall of mountain from north to south. It twists and buckles stone crevasses and ridges, winding like a snake with buttresses trailing from its wake. Snow covered, its peaks are easily lost in the churn of sky forming a literal wall.

It is a short walk from the obelisk to the Imperial Highway, while worn, in excellent condition. Two riders await in red and gold, their mounts similarly barded in colour. Armed and armoured in plate they bear with them a mount.

These men, guards of Bokpentok assigned to Gavant, have been asked to await at the obelisk (on shift) for a young Ta-lairi women whom they are to bring to Advisor Gavant's house.

Bokpentok is nestled on the northern shore of the Alana River, at a crossroads between three large cities and trade routes. Surrounded by a low stone wall high enough to provide protection for any crouched archer or bowmen, many of whom patrol behind the walls and old siege towers dispersed about the short grounds, the city proper. Mud and snow form a frozen broth treacherous and ugly about it all. Bokpentok slopes at a steady rise toward the foothills of the Spine of Emer crowned by Count Hirotha's castle, an ancient castle by Miirian standards, old in design, square much like Murain's sandstone behemoth. Hirotha's castle has spawned many walls and huge circular towers flank it upon all sides.

Into the city and the military presence is strong, men in red and gold cloth variously attired in arms and armour march in regiments among the minority of city-folk. Bokpentok is a large city, spread out on a vast plain its houses are generous with space and room, unlike Pellern that smothers itself to fit together on the small dais of the Citadel. The peoples here do not seem oppressed, taking the soldiers presence with the trade as they rush from building to building to escape the cold and the snow that creeps in as you head up the slope. Wide streets retain ancient stone inns glowing warmly behind the stones and glass windows, fires burning not only from all houses, but on the sidewalks where guards of the city huddle off-duty. One of the men spurs his horse ahead leaving you to a steady pace through the sweeping city.

The castle is truly dwarfing to one's approach, towers steep and sheer, distant banners of the soldiers upon the parapets are pinpricks of colour against a bleak slate sky. Pulling away from the tower at a glorious height giving a commanding view of the city sweeping out below to the Alana River and the Abbey glowing in the distance. Brought before an estate beautiful if somewhat decayed, surrounded by cast-iron fence of spikes before an entranceway of the same cast-iron wrought into a tunnel of vines before the estate. It curves like a horseshoe save the middle from where a solitary tower rises. Two ancient stone walkways ascend to the stone tier the estate is raised upon. It is heavy with vegetation growing rampant upon every edifice and hanging from the balcony of the stone level that leads to golden doors. The estate's paint flakes, but the strong red gives the estate a regal feeling.

Majel rides in. Returning from the castle after being informed he races into his home, dismounting swiftly and rushing to Celimé, slowing his pace near her, he gazes serious then smiles and invites her into his home.

The house is empty, that is one's first impression. No rugs cover the bare wooden floors, polished once, but now lost in dust and the passage of man, but all rooms, without doors and curtains, ghostly quiet and chillingly cold.

Once inside, Hatum (Wahr-toom), Majel's Pochanti servant appears (note: Majel's pochanti bodyguards are always around, but rarely seen in the house). Small copper skinned boy, yet powerfully strong, his nose hooks to a large lipped smile, dressed in simple tan and white clothing. He takes Celimé's baggage and asks her to follow in a clipped Shay. On the second floor it is much warmer, with rugs lining the hallway between the first few rooms. Her room is on the furthest end of the building facing the front of the building that overlooks the city and the countryside below. The room smells new, and everything within is of high aesthetic taste. The room is quite removed from the emptiness below. Lavish upholstery covers exquisitely carved recliners and tables with full length mirrors and a small wardrobe of clothes. Majel tells her he knew her size, and he thought she might be travelling light. Colours of white, gold and subtle reds, the room is not cramped and feels pleasing. Majel uses his magic to subtly enhance her feelings of well-being. He invites her to the lounging room.

The front courtyard: Also forming a horseshoe before the house is the small area wedged in between the sweeping stone stairs. A birdbath is nestled in a half arch flush with the stone foundations and stone seats are spaced about it. Most unlikely to be used, but pleasant.

The lounging room: A casual room that consists of the second floor of the central tower of the estate with a grand window from near floor to ceiling overlooking the lands far to the south and west. The room is sumptuously decorated in tasteful fashion, but not without comfort. Antique furniture from millennia gone-by is arrayed about the central fireplace that keeps the room cosy.

Majel's room: is bedecked in black and red, in such a way that it takes one's breath away. The infernal aspect of this room is all too palpable even if he plays it down. Candles and incense perpetually drape the room in a mystical gloom. He uses his room for his magic.

MAJEL'S DEFENCE & PERSONALITY

- Back in Sarnak he knew he had a chance to liberate her from Ventine and saw opportunity with Stjepan, using him to not only be considered trade delegate but somehow get her to go with him. The strong bidding by other parties made it difficult for him to make her go easy, so he used his own connections to get her fired.

- His threat to kill her in Pellern was his anger unrestrained and he apologizes. He tells her it has been so hard, to get her out of Ventine's reach and then be hated and feared because of it.

- On the streets of Relian, he had no idea she was to be sold. He knew Stjepan was arriving with Aria, he did not realize they would be late. Again he regrets.

- The scenes of death? Scenes of death? He appears shocked by that saying if only she really knew. He didn't kill her when he injected her with the serum to revive her memory, he doesn't kill any others of those that Ventine manipulates either, he tries to repair his damage. There are far more worse than Ishraha or ourselves out there he says. He plays himself as a liberating doctor of Ventine's mutants. He says

he has been experimenting with reversing the process with those individuals so far gone they cannot bear living.

- He asks her if she has ever wondered why he surgically operates and magically transforms hundreds, if not thousands? Doesn't she see? She knows he can move from person to person right? Can't she see he is trying to create the ultimate shell for his powerful soul? This Ataniel whom he recently took over, is a dangerous man. He was a powerful Changramai monk, ask Ishraha.

Majel is no wimp and he will not play himself as one. He is a dangerous man, but he pretends to hide a core that is a diamond in the rough. He will not agree to dangerous demands that threaten the Dædekemani plan. Majel will bed Celimé if given half the chance and seduces her with guile. It will make his impact with Bryce all the more powerful.

Black Dawn's Lair: See earlier encounters as prelude. Ishraha and his network have been actively scouring for floodgates, tunnels under Pellern and their hardwork begins to pay off. All across the city they find tunnels, hidden in all cases in either the basements of buildings forgotten under old refuse or hidden behind dense vegetation.

Confrontation with the Black Dawn should be met with considerable force as they'll soon find themselves outclassed by these things of the Unlife. Vilan should be a necessity although convincing him to help may be another, but his hatred for the Unlife will eventually convince even himself.

The tunnels interweaving underneath Pellern burrow through the rock above the citadel proper. It is nearly impossible to discern if these tunnels were part of the citadel or not.

Every entrance is small, requiring any man of five foot or higher to stoop at quite an angle as the passage descends to the tunnel loop itself. Eventually they will reach a small room carved from the rock square for the most part save age and deterioration. Arched passageways lead of the room, deceptively large, able to fit a man 12 foot in height if that were the case.

- The air is still down here and warm. Now and then odours will waft like sulphur and other toxic fumes and transparent gases clog the air making it difficult to breathe. Lighting casts little illumination in the large tunnels that all dip near the bottom where they find large pools of acrid and stagnant water. Wading through them is the only solution, kicking through dust, objects bumping against their legs in the murky rust.

- Sound is distorted. Voices echo strangely here, whispers seeming louder along the corridor.

- They find some of Ishraha's men, Divinhadra (see page 8 & 9 above). Black Dawn members phase in and attack. Only enchanted weapons affecting them, or the trap Ishraha retains. Vilan will use impressive magic at every turn to defeat the Black Dawn, but when more than one attack he is hard pressed with them about to defeat the Unlife with nuclear precision. Vilan's eyes burn with blue intensity, his hands dripping in almost smoky wax like substance that he melds into shapes and forms that take effect in spectacular fashion, tearing apart with thousands of needles the very essence of the Black Dawn, banishing them through portals that envelope trap in

a blue glass dissolving the target, bolts that tear through rock and flesh with explosive resonance.

- They will not encounter more than two Black Dawn members before finding the nest.

The Black Dawn Nest: The tunnel that leads down here reeks with a pungent odour of gas. The air cloyes at their lungs and they find it difficult to breathe and feeling seasick will take them over eventually. In the mist of dense gas they swim further into they hear sound and see light. Flashes of fire and sounds like crows. Closer and the fires can be discerned, effusing gas and blasts of flame, pipes from below issue into the room, a twisted orchid. Shadows blur beyond this close mass of industrial pipes that sear flesh. The Black Dawn does not strike until these are behind whoever is invading. Savon awakens their homunculus and with his comrades prepares for the attack. Savon will speak if asked, what he says in reply talks of the preordination of the skies, the precession that will come to pass, the cleansing that will finally begin, that they have already chosen their fate. Savon does not gloat, he is not human, he kills mercilessly and will maim with great ferocity. There are five other members of the Black Dawn and the homunculus that will only attack after several rounds, crawling from its pit.

Black Dawn

Strength: D20	Agility: D12	Health: D4
Knowledge: D10	Perception: D10	Luck: D30

Phase Attack: D10 (Effect – twists reality about flesh, 2 health damage or death if at face)

Armour: D20 – Dimensional phasing

In a pit at the back of this grotto is a shallow pool of a thick viscous fluid, bobbing with body parts and what looks like oil is the homunculus. Originally the nursery for Persch, the Black Dawn have taken over where the demon failed, in crafting a creature out of the remains of the children.

Standing some twelve feet in height the creature is just as horrific in its width. It is a stitch-work flesh construction of body parts... small childlike hands jut from its body, contorted it walks with gait, loping two arms fashioned like opposable claws of bone jutting from the flesh both of different length... its face is a crush of heads, with multiple eyes it stares bloodshot... no mouth, but a basket like face of tiny mouths raw and lipless.

Homunuculus

Strength: D4	Agility: D20	Health: D4
Knowledge: N/A	Perception: D20	Luck: D20

Melee: D10 (damage, the bone severs usually – a strength roll must be made to avoid amputation)

Saren's Agenda: is to find out why it is the kuluku would go out of their way to trade with such a small town in the middle of nowhere. She easily learns of most of her conjectures through street gossip where she excels in wooing men and women both. She learns of the difficulties the city has with The Amethyst League, and the Changramai excommunication, the attack of the demon from the pales that Celimé destroyed. Saren will take all of this in and then under the pretence of getting to know them better she will go to Ishraha and Celimé becoming friendly before surreptitiously injecting the knowledge she has into the conversation for reaction and information.

Constans' Return: Constans appears on the evening of the 38th as the perigee occurs and speaks to Stjepan whether anyone else can hear it or not. He wants to know what Stjepan intends to do about it. He is referring to Celimé and Bryce. Is he going to allow Bryce to not only get his aid for nothing, but take the girl as well? What did Bryce ever do for us, sure, lots for Celimé, but Stjepan plays Bryce like the jealous boyfriend abusing the relationship she has with him. Constans then tells him about Celimé, how she has been trying to get into his dreams at night when he has slept, she has crept down to her Temple and performed her magic to watch him. She never got in, but she hasn't stopped trying. Constans is Stjepan's friend and remains with him until morning advising him. If there is tension with Korel, Constans is furious if Stjepan takes it.

Bryce's Return: Four riders drop off Bryce Korel on the southern ramp to Pellern city, guards rushing to see the package and finding a man whom they helped to his feet. Dishevelled they handed him a few coppers a blanket and send him in the direction of the inn. Bryce is a changed man after some forty days of isolation and interrogation and his freedom was not a pleasant one.

Bryce was easily duped by the letter the Sarnaki came with and it was easy for them to disable him and cause an internal collapse of Bentara in the space of an hour. In the space of the next few hours, troops amassed on the streets murdering what few pockets of resistance remained. Bryce watched as his friends either caved in to the Sarnaki or were murdered before him for not giving information freely. Kimesha spared her own life by committing information regarding Celimé and Ysmine was saved because she was a woman only. Shipped to the Directorate, his crimes of treason against Sarnak and crimes were a joke, but it became quickly serious. The first week was interrogation. They broke him, of that there is no doubt. He was humiliated, crying like a child as they laughed over his tortured frame. Physical and Psychological torture proved the best medicine – and once they had extracted what information they needed he was placed in solitary confinement. It was more than forty days before he saw the light again. And it was to Majel Gavant's gloating face. Freed by several men who stole through shadows in timeless streams, he was dragged weak and malnourished from Sarnak into the hills where in caves thick with roots he was told Celimé wished Majel to free him and return him to her. After a heated

argument, Majel told him the 'truth' – which is not much, just staunch insinuation from Majel but not denying it.

Dumped unceremoniously in Pellern he returns to a woman who he suspects of lies, working with the Amethyst League and the hint at some liaison between Celimé and Gavant. And then there is Lord Stjepan, the man who has had his eyes on Celimé ever since before they met. Beyond this, Bryce feels let down. He believes Stjepan defends against Sarnak not for Bentara but for his own skin, Bryce will be assuaged with strong action only. Celimé can break through his self loathing by being by his side and convincing him, he will slowly doubt himself and return to normal. He still is in shock over the treatment, but he will not openly show it, having lived in a perpetual state of anxiety for half a month. Even Lord Dall finds him difficult, Bryce snapping at him. Bryce cycles through bouts of deep depression. In his dreams he keeps his mother locked in a cage like his father and he is deeply disturbed psychologically.

Majel in Pellern: Majel after some decision has decided to go back to Pellern to further twine Celimé about his finger. His actions, however, are proving more and more risky in the face of all the 'public' attention and his associates have been questioning his methods, yet Majel's results stand him far from death.

Celimé is key to Stjepan, and Bryce stands in that way. With this new impetus against Sarnak, Majel needs to get rid of Bryce one way or another, preferably at Celimé's own behest, to instigate his plans for chaos that will keep the lands fixed internally. Bryce's deep depressive cycles coupled with Majel's false memories will serve as impetus. Though he arrives not long after Bryce, he does so surreptitiously, well aware of Ishraha's network (though not of the Hand's recent contact) and then sends memories to her that make her drift back. These memories include what Celimé said in more of an active fashion, Majel hoping to control her fully.

Four hundred sixty three – A tent, set for war, it is your personal chamber... a massive white and violet clash of canvas all about the central focus, a large map of Emer, Uj clearly marked with flags purple and white in scattered domains beside allies, enemies dictated in stacks of coins. Two guards stand at attention beside the entry flap, that swings open as you briefly study the map again while your handmaiden, an aged but strong Itanian woman tends the fire burning in your tent.

Dragged in is Majel, his face bruised and eye swollen over, wet and dishevelled he is clasped about the shoulder on his ragged clothes by an officer, she salutes you and with commanding voice says, "The prisoner has resisted all interrogation, my General."

Majel heaves on both of his knees, hands bleeding bound by twine behind his back, he stares up at you with his only good eye through his matted, long hair. Lips pursed he stares away, shoulders sagging, head slumped. For the first time he speaks, words whispered the captain demands Majel to repeat with a solid smack to his head.

"Get out and leave him!" You command, the captain surprised with the two guards backs out, your handmaiden soon scuttling in line, gasping with shock as she sees Majel, her recognition palpable.

"Stop girl. What is it?"

She shakes her head looking down, averting her eyes.

"She knows who I am but you don't do you?" Majel asks.

Your fist to his face shatters his nose spewing blood across the handmaiden who quakes in terror.

"You do not ask questions of me. How do you know him girl!"

"Sev... Sevens... Seventy years past, General. He came to capture you."

"Capture me?" You turn to Majel. "I can see reason for treachery in these times of war, but why then?"

"I think perhaps I misjudged. If I had known he... If... I misjudged my timing it seems. Otherwise our meeting would be quite different."

"They say you have resisted all interrogation. We will see about that." You kneel before him placing the sides of your palms against his head, focusing on the thoughts within, seeking them out, channelling your essence to rape his own. What you find is images and memories that sear past your eyes in a blur of years, a blur of years together and apart. This is all new, you sit back stunned, shaking... your handmaiden nowhere to be seen now. Majel looks up at you drained from the ordeal.

"Celimé?" he tenderly asks?

The tension is shattered by a third party.

"No, not quite, Majel. Not as you know her, or should I elaborate, not as you will soon be faced with again."

Ventine sweeps in, his long grey beard he strokes with manicured nails he enters, his own guard outside he trails a hand about your shoulder, resting it and looking over the two of you.

"Such a gentle moment. I wonder Majel, how long you will keep trying? I really do doubt your love for h... this thing shall endure the rapturous and guiltless happiness you so desire. At least amusement is found in small quantities unrequited. Ah, I can smell the lost opportunity, it drips..." Ventine tongues the air and he smiles, his touch paralyzing.

"I'm surprised you kept him alive Celimé. That was the first warning, you see. A few years ago, you would have had him executed without a thought, such a good girl. Yet you danced about his face, passing over prisoners, you felt it, you felt him. No matter."

He turns to Majel.

"Fortitude is noble, some would say in love it trebles. I find it... stupid. Simple word for simple minds."

"Your day will co..." Majel's voice turns to a choke, vestigial hands squeezing his neck. All you can do is watch. Ventine kneels by your ear, his hand locking you immovable.

"What do you think, my child. Your excellence has been commendable in so much I feel some small favour of gratitude toward you. Why not offer this to you now, before we..." He taps your head with his nailed finger of his other hand and grins devilishly. "Shall we let him go..." he taunts. The memories churn in your head, heavy they feel too much to contain and swell. "Why not, delicious disciple. It does after all, keep me in such close contact with you." Ventine closes upon you and licks with his tongue your cheek.

Majel convinces Soneur (Ishraha's noble informant) to take on extra income by allowing Majel to live in a room at his house for a few weeks, paying a hefty deposit of two hundred gold. Beyond that, Majel's generosity keeps Soneur more than happy and out of the house doing what he does best, leaving Majel a noble's manor to his taste. Majel will steal out to observe Celimé, but he will not contact her until the morning of the 40th when after noting Bryce's mood he will either pull her into an

alley in the street or creep into the castle to do so. He will immediately kiss her passionately holding her close to him. There may be quite a reaction, but Majel will tell her he cannot give in now, not when she is remembering more and about to choose another. He tells her though he respects her wishes, if there was a way he could regain her heart he would gladly do it. She may attempt to gain access to his memories like above, but he will be surprised that she remembers that moment saying she was a powerful Mystic then, a Sorcerer with powerful Mentalist powers. He tells her that was when she was in Andaras' armies closing throughout Uj, leading a large command of Vajaari. What happened then? He was imprisoned by Ventine for twelve years and when he was freed he heard that the armies stopped their attacks into Hæstra and he had to begin looking all over for her again.

Majel will go as far as to have Bryce see Majel with Celimé.

Initiation of the Protector: This day will forever change the interplay between Halé and Stjepan and set into motion the downfall of Mynistra before the shadows darken the skies of Hæstra. The dedication ritual on the 40th to Mynistra is one carried about in all Mynistran chapels on that day and time. Lord Stjepan has been selected as their divine protector against Sarnak, usually not a ritual invoked. Sarnak are militarily a stronger threat than Stroane, its trade vital, and its lynching of Bentara of late with the brutal acts of the Ministry of Security (under challenge in their own senate) make Sarnak a threat against Mynistra itself.

At midday the ritual begins with the public invited. It is a cold day, but not clogged in dense cloud, broken to icy, silvery-blue skies, the sun and near full Orhan illuminating the day in a haze of mist and etherealness. People are out early preparing for the ritual that has had all of Pellern talking since the day was announced. Dressed in their best, and warmest, they huddle throughout the city slowly making their way to the unfinished Temple to Mynistra. Even those from Tent City make their way.

Workers have taken a break in their winter slog for the ritual but their progress on the three winged and multi-tiered structure is noticeable. The sleeping quarters are all but finished, less their aesthetic arabesques. But it is the prayer hall that has been completed wholly on the inside. Entered through the wider end of the petal it is perfectly triangular within as a 4:1 triangle, the apex higher than the seating arranged facing it. At the far end a great silver symbol of Mynistra hangs at the apex sparkling from the many fires lining the silver and gold fringed walls. Eight Mynistran priests welcome people four on each side, equal in gender. To all that pass they press into their hands small dried flowers, sweet and exotic in scent wishing them love and wisdom and small papers containing the words for song in several languages.

Stjepan is the last to enter. He is informed by Archbishop Carân that he will carry his sword and be in full battle dress as he enters. He will follow the Archbishop to the apex where Stjepan will face the silver foci. The Archbishop will give a short sermon and then the priests will encourage song. All across Hæstra they will be singing to Mynistra to come to Stjepan. She will send a spirit with only him knowing what passes between them both. He will be blessed.

Archbishop Carân's Sermon: This home welcomes all who pay reverence to Mynistra, or to those who merely seek either of her three tenets, love, wisdom and protection. Not unlike you all, Mynistra too rallies against threats directed towards

these pillars of life, and so it has come to us all that such a time is well upon us. You are gathered here today to join in harmony and unity in support for Lord Stjepan Nemeck, servant to Mynistra, son of the Nemeck line, Inheritor and Blood of Emperor Aldaron's most hallowed defenders the Ahn Sye Nokora. He has been chosen as our protector and this day we call upon Mynistra to bless his noble quest against the threat that is creeping from the south. Atheists shall not destroy our pillars of life. So please, I ask for you all to sing with me the song of the divine protector.

Song: the song carries a strange acoustic in this geometrically arranged amphitheatre. From the back to the front the sound then reverberates back, but compressed and dense filling the air literally in a volume of sound that presses and tickles against the skin. This sound causes the fires to blaze in the wind of the sub-audible tones and the silver shield begins to spark to life as well. Blazing across its surface electricity generates empowered with *essænce* sparking in silvery-white light – that arcs with purpose down electrifying Stjepan in a calm halo, he jerks for an instant and then relaxes standing encompassed by the glow.

NOTE: This lasts only a few seconds on the outside, but longer for Stjepan. Both parties will be separated. *Essænce* users in those few seconds will feel an immense drain on their own stores that literally jerks from their body toward Stjepan.

Mynistra & Halé: Stjepan finds himself on white marble, inside a massive castle built of the same white marble and gold jasper. He is in the courtyard and the sun is shining and he feels very safe and secure. Looking about he sees the sun blazing brightly and then movement as something from it descends to the ground near him. It is beautiful sylph like it is naked yet without true feminine features, but enough to recognize it as a woman. It glows in a pure silvery light and speaks in perfect tones and with wisdom. The sylph can interact with Stjepan for a while. It has one thing to ask of him. Of which three tenets does he best think can defend against the threat? Which ever one he chooses will be left to his own conscience for the sylph will never get to act upon his decision as Halé by accident and then by realizing his ingress too intrusive pushed further finds himself drawn to the power interacting with Stjepan's mind. Halé consumes it.

As Stjepan watches, the sylph begins to jerk and spasm, bleeding red and black colours, it cries surprised, collapsing to the floor as the black and red veins pulse underneath its dying light. It progresses until the sylph is screaming, and even that is swallowed as she is replaced inside out by a dripping carcass of black and red sinew that stands before Stjepan very pleased with itself and Halé says: "Bet the old man never thought of that..." in reference to the Storm Wizard.

Halé has absorbed the power of protection from the Mynistran sylph and consumed her whole, it leaves Mynistra wounded but not unreachable, she has no idea what has happened. Halé revels in his power and tells Stjepan that there are going to be changes. He tells Stjepan that he will go on to conquer Sarnak, and all of Hæstra. The Empire will stand again, he tells him. Doesn't he realize he carries the blood of the Emperor's own race? He tells Stjepan if pushed, it's the only way. The only way their bond can be severed is if the sword and its rightful inheritor restore the Ahn Sye Nokora. Halé pretends to want freedom. Eventually he breaks the bond.

The Priests are very surprised and cannot explain it, but claim it has never been done before so they have no personal record of the ritual, but in textual documents the ritual was never documented.

Joyous song is encouraged and the crowd cheers for Stjepan in loud song and scatters petals of dried flowers as he is led out by the Archbishop where they both spend the time meeting with the gathered congregation.

Stjepan is left with quite a dilemma. Halé is very powerful now but he is always slow to act and tests his power incrementally.

Consolidation of Miir: Stjepan intends to ride out to consolidate his lands. He receives letters from Lord Lystor, Invarath, Mallion & Lamat. Lord Dall will strongly suggest the Rite of Earth for this while he and Bryce go back to Orian to reveal the truth about Lord Bela and regain control of the council. Count Hirotha will submit to Stjepan grudgingly, his lack of choice when challenged by the Amethyst League meant either death or life to his people. Stjepan can travel to meet with Luse & Lord Vaymoris at Lienne. Vaymoris will put his support behind Lord Stjepan without too much problem now. Relian will be reticent rejecting Lord Stjepan's request for consolidation laying claim that Relian has been an independent city for a long time now, avoiding the war with the Katra. Their letter talks about their diversity of population that is no longer historically the heritage of Laan nobles. Lord Lystor replies to Lord Stjepan. Once Count Hirotha cedes, all the Lords agree to the Ritual of Earth in alliance under Stjepan. They agree to all demands of war against Sarnak as well. Hunting the Amethyst League draws blanks everywhere. At Majel's order the entire League in Miir has gone underground and the Lords have no contact with the League weekly 'tax'-collectors. Sutara, Ishraha's agent is sent to Dynax with a script for ten thousand gold to hire thieves and brigands in the war against Sarnak. There may be weeks spent in travel here, play it by ear using the descriptions of locations provided.

Temeris' Men: Twenty Animists arrive with escort provided by Lord Stjepan. Led by Temuk an aged Shay man with a raspy beard and wild hazel eyes, all dressed simply in brown robes they carry bags and about their necks a silver chain with a silvery disc crossed in markings. Temuc is down to earth, speaks plainly in Shay, and listens to Stjepan's wants but tells him how things will be.

The animists are to receive their own private lodgings and tents wherever they go. On battlefields they will require guards to protect them, preferably archers. They can provide aid on the battlefield by entrenching grouped armies by spurring the growth of plants under their command, they can form walls on the battlefield made of earth and plants of whatever is available. They work together or not at all.

Daemander's Return: Daemander returns alone, having ridden for more than twenty days and using the navigator to jump a short distance to reach Celimé ever since he received her letter. Daemander could see he should never have left her side and feels strong guilt for doing so, knowing full well Bryce will chastise him (and will or would depending on when they meet and the circumstances). Daemander is a little slimmer than usual. His clothes are heavy on him, but his demeanour has not changed. Warm

and friendly he has returned to Celimé's side to be her friend and to watch out over her. If he missed Bryce then he will be glad for it in some ways.

Addendum – Symbols of the Sun

Given the remaining winter to weather, and many other factors, it may be prudent to skip the last thirty odd days of Winter to the Spring melt and the next chapter. Stjepan's consolidation can be summed up in the following descriptive passage that relates directly to the characters.

The last weeks of winter rouse Miir from its slumber, shaking off the ice as best as it can from the sleet storms before the spring melt. Pellern has weathered the winter without more casualties, through war, famine or cold and its people are in good spirits if a little anxious about the impending troubles with Sarnak to the south. Lord Stjepan has spent considerable time consolidating strength and creating a coalition of city-states and hired mercenary forces to prepare for a Spring march. Pellern's projects are slow in coming though spring and summer will relieve the slow progress to the gatehouses, walls, and many a new building. Throughout Pellern, the Mynistran faith has bolstered public support for Stjepan, including the Lord in every Holy Day's sermon by the Archbishop Carân who remains in Pellern expecting to travel with Stjepan as he prepares to make his way south.

Bryce and Lord Dall lead Stjepan's push for consolidation, toppling Lord Bela and uncovering his association with the Sarnaki, trying him for both treason and conspiracy against a ruling Laan noble. His hanging was a spectacle viewed by many in Orian so you have heard. Since then Lord Dall as chairman of the council has forged ahead in strengthening ties and defences. While it has not been all success the forces amassed against Sarnak number more than twenty-thousand, with all but Relian as allies in the war.

Stjepan's journey to the Eastern Alliance was one without war, one generating peace and fealty to Pellern and its Lord. The ritual of earth passing from Stjepan's hands to each Lord, swearing allegiance to Stjepan and Miir without reticence. Count Hirotha's support does come, albeit after pressure from Orian and he too swears allegiance to Stjepan promising troops, arms and armour. Bokpentok's strength is in its smiths and beyond that their expertise with siege engines many of whom Hirotha sends to aid the growing coalition for the war effort. Lord Lystor offers support, but his own troubles with the Drake threat continue to plague his land taking cattle and destroying farmsteads close to the Spine of Emer. Relian proves stubborn, ignoring Stjepan with its own force of guard comprised of many of its inhabitants of multi-racial and cultural groups. Relian states its independence once again from Miir and Orian, pointing to the Katra's failure to take Relian as an example of their strength of independence. Their Chamber of Five sends missive to Stjepan explaining such and that any demands upon them will be met with not only force in kind but a trade barrier that would cripple Pellern should they try to take Relian – one of the five, the High Priest of Phaon proclaiming conflict of religion, that Mynistra is worshipped by the minority and hinting at possible attempts of conversion by Stjepan upon Relian. Helberna's support of Pellern is stronger than any, with Mynistra's blessing, all who follow the goddess now look to Stjepan as their torch against the darkness the Sarnaki have initiated in Bentara. Chelzaria's support is arranged with strong

liaison with Lord Dall, Count Harond and his daughter though they can offer little – no troops, just room beyond the city itself that the armies can use.

War is just around the corner, which is all too apparent. Sarnak ever since Bryce's release have been moving their armies. Conflicting reports from Sarnak point to great debate within the Directorate Senate in the first weeks of the war, but their resolution has been unanimous. They condemned the Orian Council and requested for the return of the conspirator Bryce Korel to face justice. Calls for other conspirators are nothing more than a joke in Miir, Sarnak's voice in Orian all but decapitated with the revelations of corruption among the council that is no longer a threat to stability in Miir and Hæstra. Reports from Bentara speak of six War Galleons from the Ministry of Security, with an assembled force of some two thousand soldiers preparing for defence of their conquered city. All watchtowers are reported to have bolstered their defences as well south of the northern passage that leads through the haunted Emerald Forest. Bentara is the only ingress to removing Sarnak.

Some nine thousand mercenaries have been hired by Pellern's deep coffers, most of them still in Bornay, amassing through Relian and across the river Keyten from the Bodlean Dales. While not unified like an army, their motley crew of forces and divisions provides a strong support to Miir's assembled forces that pale compared to the mercenaries. Some hundred knights of the Ahn Sye Nokora and a similar number of Mynistran priests and Temeris squad of Animists are the jewels in Miir for the war. Beyond that forces array in the numbers of some six thousand across all city-states assembled, with half of that number having only seen war once. Experience from the battles with the Katra crosses all camps, but the Sarnaki are quite a different force, more advanced as a society and with better arms and armour, not to forget the legendary Shaitan who one would expect to be in or near Bentara, but there is absolutely no word save for hearsay and fear mongering.

The Amethyst League has disappeared and while each respective Lord has no idea where they went or exactly when, it occurred around Bryce's release. Their activities and all surreptitious contact with evaporated with their lack of presence. The Black Dawn, beyond odd rumours of their activity, are inactive with Pellern being the city where they were most active.

The last week of Pellern sees a flowstorm tear through the southern lands of Pellern, watched from the castle it cascades like aurora, tinting the winter sky in purple and orange colours. It lasts six days, a violent storm that tears the land, closing as far as the Alana Forest before it simply sinks from view. It ushers in the first breath of spring.