

## YOU WERE A DOLL TO MY DARK VISION

## XI

*book one :: shadow of locust**"The best lies are the ones closest to the truth." – Celimé, 20<sup>th</sup> Spring 6054*

This short scenario will serve to illuminate several factors of the coming darkness in a more revealing light. Ventine, overplaying his hand steps from the shadows putting the Dædekemani into the open, overconfident and arrogant his hubris will most likely be the end of him.

Aftermath: Bentara has fallen, back in the hands of the coalition of the growing 'warlord' Stjepan Nemeck. However, during the war and the march there have been several factors to Pellern that should be brought up. Namely, Nema returns from the jungle to drop off the latest shipment of herbs and pick up the eog, however, to his surprise there is little eog and the news that the mines are now empty presses on his mind. Pellern has little funds left, some hundred-thousand gold enough to continue paying for the war but not beyond it – their resources have run dry. Decisions on how to take Sarnak must be made, the potential disaster of a sea effort must play on their mind but there is another factor at work here. The Sarnaki have heard of the massacre of the Rhiani and that a dark army moves from the south to the Gap of Uj. Sarnak calls back all soldiers and citizens to help defend against the growing threat; Falkenna is abandoned to the momentary joy of the people, all Watchtowers are abandoned, Sarnak sends out words to its closest neighbours asking for aid. The Directorate takes command. Khera and the Order of the First Leaf vanish, leaving much speculation in Sarnak.

The Loremasters: Kedrick Bularis, after realizing the balance is being altered on an entirely new level, contacts the Council with his information and they in return inform him of the dangers they believe are growing not just in the south but across Emer, instability on a great scale. They do however, send to his side two Loremasters to aid against the threat;

- Inubelle Maulin, a tall Loari elven woman, thin, yet elegant. Her long black hair is braided back from her aquiline features where hazel eyes look distant upon all she views. A thin sword wrapped in golden silks that compliment her green chain vertically drops from a golden belt encrusted in jewels at her midriff. Inubelle refuses to speak to any but fellow Loremasters. A mentalist of powerful ability.

- Ceis, half-elven and constantly shifty, watching every move, every person and speaking little. No weapons grace his person yet golden platemail graces his torso and shoulders over which a red cape covers most of his body, clasped with a dragon pendant encircling a yellow cabochon gem that swirls with inner light changing the hue of the jewel constantly. Ceis looks down upon stupid questions but if engaged intelligently will reply with insight and wisdom. A warrior of surpassing skill.

Kedrick at some time will know he has to introduce his own self, let alone these other two, but he will choose the moment wisely and refuses to aid Stjepan in his quest against Sarnak, only against the threat using Sarnak for its own purposes.

Cuesai, Rhiani & Kio Viax: Celimé may contact Cuesai for as Reann pointed out she is able to commune with other disciples of his she has met and shared the Dream with, able to pin point their whereabouts and speak with them. This is no easy task, however, with a successful Channelling roll required and use of Dream Walk. Beyond that another Dream Walk must be performed, one that will be harrowing as stepping into the dream is the easy part, finding Cuesai another matter.

Vornia in dream is a barren, not even wheat grows here, the land lost and forgotten, scorched and blackened with nary a feature beyond the land and listless and ashen sky. All bearing is lost, concentration upon Cuesai, her form in Dream must be first in Celimé's mind and then she can slowly get a sense of location.

Pulling herself to Cuesai will involve a terrifying journey of landscape and images both horrific and beautiful all at once, the sensory overload will threaten her mind and a successful Perception test will cause her physical form to spasm, bleeding from nose, the corners of her eyes and from her ears. She witnesses the mundane turn grotesque, forests bleach as a dark miasma sweeps through them, people dry skeletal and beautiful cities raised in glittering spires of jewels and marbles, massive armies clashing in a sea of flesh and blood, schools of porpoises in bubbles of pure bliss and peace, lusts and depravities, love and tenderness.

Eventually she will come before Cuesai, on the same field when she last met with Reann, except no skeletons this time, just endless bodies of man, women and many a steed spread for miles, stripped of skin, meat and flesh yet still fresh and caked in strips of tendons and blood. The ground is damp, the smell of death all pervasive. Cuesai is among them, she lies among this battlefield near death trapped in dream, her body dead. Bones of those underneath lance her body, through her neck, stomach, chest, and limbs, unable to move. She can speak but barely. She tells Celimé in a disjointed and gurgled voice; Titans, Kio Viax, find him, release from their prison, to kill her, take her life with her Dreamblade.

As Celimé is talking to Cuesai she sees things in the distance, black silhouettes flying against the sky with arched leathery wings scouring the palate of death before them, their heads heavy they hang low scouting for life using prehensile tails to drag bodies from the piles and devour them whole (giving indication of size).

Taking Cuesai's life is not an evil act, freeing her from the dream will allow her to pass into death through the Gates of Oblivion, but it will confer into the sword the ability to detect the Unlife that manifests as a rune of a circle crossed with what looks like scratches upon her blade. This ability is not innate and requires concentration as well as essence. Focusing on the sword for 5 rounds is required.

Celimé must now return to her body.

Towards Sarnak: Bryce Korel is of the same mindset of Stjepan, to sack Sarnak, out of spite and out of necessity in his eyes, he will encourage the soldier to continue their march down the coast through the Wailing Marsh, something many are reluctant to commit to. There are not enough transport vessels to cross the sea, but there are

aplenty in the Port of Izar that could be requisitioned – a rider would take ten days to reach the port, however.

*The Wailing Marsh: A journey that the men feared proves true to their concerns. The Wailing Marsh is a place lost in a dark mist that rises obscuring vision, let alone what one is nearly traversing, the Imperial Highway dipping into pools of warm water where alligators or worse take the few stragglers of the gathered forces. Warm and muggy the progress is slow, and while only fifteen miles in length, the soldiers march before light and it is not until after light that they break the other side. The soldiers' whisper grimly of the ancient battle that now is a watery graveyard for all the souls trapped here, their wailing ululating through the great coniferous cypress trees whose roots claw from the dark waters like buttresses of some massive cathedral. No light breaks their ancient canopy and one cannot be too sure if they move or not. However, once free of the marsh it is soon apparent from the Lords and commanders they have lost just under one hundred men to the Marsh, some simply vanishing. Greeting the forces free of the marsh is the bleak and barren Forbidden Ridge, cancelling half the sky from view where not even Orhan can illuminate. The bay so close, glistening in silvery ripples washes to the white sand where fish and other sea creatures rot, washed to shore.*

Falkenna: (see City Description). The city, however, is empty of its populace save the roaming Knights of the Eternal Return who appear more focused on the East of the city. The Knights will see the army and will be met by several of their own inside of the city. They act much like Xaek, emotionless and short of words. Kitted in plate over full chainmail, with swords, flails, they inform them that the Sarnaki have left and if they wish to know more Grandmaster Vedor is whom they should speak with. Lurayle then picks up his que saying he was the knight who offered support against Sarnak. The Knights say little more of what happened, leaving it to the Grandmaster.

The Order of the Eternal Return: Vedor has taken residence in the Count's manor since the Sarnaki withdrew, using his knights to patrol the city for any stragglers or travellers bringing them forth for execution. The Knights will only allow Lords and respective allies within the manor, leaving the soldiers to do as they will.

Count Dennik's manor has been gutted, the Sarnaki stripped it of nearly all wealth, leaving only the bare essentials and its poor state is noticeable. More knights guard the manor and can be found throughout.

They are lead through corridors of empty pedestals and fittings torn from walls leaving gaping holes. Little of value remains even the carpet is smeared in dirt and blood; passing rooms torn apart and left displaced. The Knights knock at large oaken doors that tower some ten feet deep within the castle and then enter with the assembled Lords, some of the knights waiting outside. These knights barricade the doors or take care of any of Stjepan's men outside. NOTE: These Knights have been genetically enhanced as Xaek has been, strong with hardy constitution but without strong freedom of will.

Grandmaster Vedor awaits them in Count Dennik's old map room. A large room without any windows, illuminated by candles placed on the floor and a massive marble table rectangular in shape. The walls here are of stone and bookcases are shattered, papers scattered among the fragments of wood. A huge map of Hæstra is

carved onto the marble desk's top showing in excellent detail from the Forbidden Hills to Danarchis.

Grandmaster Vedior stands behind the desk his strong weathered hands pressed firmly against the table. Powerful in stature, his arms ripple underneath the chainmail stretched to near breaking, a hulking figure he stands to full attention as they enter. His face is stony, hard worn and heavyset features, shaved bald. A broadsword rests on the table near him. His eyes are strange, hard to focus upon, one blue the other a milky green.

Lurayle introduces them all to Vedior who welcomes them to Falkenna and lets them know that three days past the Sarnaki rounded up all citizens and marched them to Sarnak, abandoning the city and the mines. Their knights, he says, rose up at the last moment but were pushed back into the manor. Vedior should appear a little odd. Xaek stands at the doors with several of the knights knowing well their time is to come soon. Lurayle, after the introduction, steps back from the discussion making his way to Bryce where he prepares to kill his old friend.

Vedior begins the end in a similar vein to this;

*"You may be wondering just how you can stop Sarnak, but you needn't worry, for it has already begun. It began the very first day you went to Sarnak."*

Majel Gavant and Ataniel will be a shock to them all as they literally merge from the air, and once substantial begin their tirade. Ataniel looks as ever, sickly, dressed in the same black robe of the Changramai, his chestnut eyes firmly fixed on them all. Majel stands back from Vedior and Ataniel, dressed from head to toe in fine black velvet, his hair a match though pulled back to a small ponytail.

Obviously this moment may seem like a triumph for the characters but they do not know of the betrayal in their ranks, Lurayle even feigns surprise. Vedior goes silent though does speak now and then as Ataniel begins gloating in his erudite language that drips nonsensically. He can be goaded, basically they are here to die, and while it has been an enjoyment to dance the masquerade of a struggle with them their time has come to an end. Some, he will point out fixed on Majel, have had a little too much fun and immersion in their ways so mortal and meaningless. Ataniel knows they are to die and may be liberal with what he knows.

Bryce will be the first to die as Lurayle drives a blade sharply through his back severing the spinal cord, the Count's hand squeezing Celimé's tightly before he collapses, twitching in spasms soon to die with him. Now why Bryce? Ventine knows it is the best way to keep the surprisingly powerful Celimé in a state of mind he is familiar with in his years of watching over her. Ventine is skilled beyond mere sorcery; he literally sees the code of genetics in the flows of essænce. Bryce is a great obstacle to his and the Dædekemani's plans to fully succeed in destabilizing all governments in Hæstra that will be unable to unify due to the strong divisions between them – as was Andaras' plans. Stjepan is next on their list to kill, but the added advantage of having Loremasters makes them turn attention to them as well.

If the Loremasters are here they realize that these are what is behind much of their troubles and they go on the defensive initially, but the Loremasters will take the brunt of the attacks and will perish before the characters successfully defeat Ataniel or Vedior. As combat begins, Majel Gavant flees his allies, not staying to fight.

This fight will be climatic, Ataniel's power is omnipotent and Vedior is a killing machine, while Xaek, Lurayle, the knights and even Ishraha are used against the characters, Lords and Loremasters. One of the Loremasters should be removed immediately, more as a sign of the Dædekemani's power that even the Loremasters begin to fear.

*Ventine* (Ataniel), beyond the half-elf's strength and resilience, is still as powerful a Sorcerer as ever. If attacked he moves with the fluidity of a Changramai, if a little over confident. His main power is in his spellcasting. Spells like:

- **Banishment** – A random portal spell that banishes a targeted victim to a random plane. The effects of this spell occur with numerous vestigial claws appearing about the victim, grasping him, squeezing skin and bone, dragging he or she literally apart into nothingness... and they are gone.

- **Minor Flowstorm** – a prismatic and violent storm erupts in the immediate vicinity, stirring up a powerful multi-coloured whirlwind that tears through the room, quakes shake the floor tearing it apart and stone from the walls sheers away and spins through the air (luck to avoid) – standing is difficult. Spells misfire 20-50% of the time and magical items may or may not work. Essænce discharges in microbursts and bolts explode about them.

- **Ishraha** will be used by *Ventine*, his spines will explode from his body at a given time that will shear through all and cause immense pain and release to Ishraha. The spikes will impale those closest to him.

*Vedior*, is a specialist in physical combat and is literally a killing machine. D4 in all physical statistics and a D6 in armour make him nearly indestructible. He punches with the force of a piston with fists like steel. Normal weapons ricochet off the sub-dermal strengthening of skin he may only be harmed by enchanted weapons. He uses no weapons just sheer physical omnipotence.

*Kedrick Bularis*, see Master Atlas.

*Inubelle Maulin*, the first Loremaster to perish

*Ceis*, is afflicted by his veins boiling, that they literally see, he screams and uses all the power he can to halt its progress before he dies and does so, but will be in a terrible shape, his skin blistered and burnt, shaking and in shock.

The characters will be hard pressed without a doubt. Xaek and the knights beyond it will be a tough battle.

*Knights:*

Strength: D8	Agility: D8	Health: D8
Knowledge: 20	Perception: D10	Luck: 20

Melee: D8

Armour: D8 Chain + Plate

However, the creation of the flowstorm brings into action a force that has not been seen officially save for few recorded encounters since the fall of the Titans. A Xiosian intervenes at the last moment, the stone walls exploding inwards.

The Xiosian stands taller than any man, dressed in voluminous robes white gold and silver that dance about it like flames as it walks the air, brandishing a strange

silvery sword that pulses with a blue halo, the sword barbed close to the gigantic crosspiece and hilt. Face covered by a sweeping, flanged helmet of the same silvery metal covering all save for the eyes lost in the halo. Its voice booms and echoes from within the helmet "Dyar Jerak Melvin Farok" twists his sword toward the remaining Dædekemani and a sonic pulse issues along the blade from the hilt erupting forward and sending shock waves across the room that tear apart stone, flesh and steel. The Xiosian will then leave, blue smoke coiling about its form until it is a pillar of ambient haze that slowly dissipates.

*Last session saw a convincing victory inspired by many tactics prepared and cleanly executed; an assassin squad headed by Francesca, Ishraha and hardened mercenaries swooped upon the castle before predawn slaughtering all within at great cost to their own sides but disposing of the naphtha, Vedesis leading his rebels swimming down the river to the Galleons scuttling one and between them and the remaining galleons sunk two before the last of the two retreated allowing Vedesis to run to ground the Galleon up river in range of the Sarnaki siege towers and catapults, outside the walls as dawns first light sparkled the steel of the armies they met in fierce battle on the northern gate a demonically charged Stjepan leading their horde. Success was inevitable with some Sarnaki conceding defeat. The armies marched on to Falkenna and none beyond Stjepan, Ishraha, Celimé, Bryce, Vedesis, Lurayle, Xaek, Francesca, and the Loremasters entered the ill-fateful chamber nesting Vedior. Bryce was saved by quick herbal and magical intervention of both Celimé and the Loremaster Kedrick Bularis. Kedrick's distraction proved his undoing as he watched Innubelle torn beyond the Void and Ceis burning alive and prepared a defence against Vedior concentrating upon him. Stjepan took more of the demon Halé's power from the sword in physical manifestation allowing Stjepan to kill Ventine.*

- *Ventine saw Stjepan's power as Stjepan fought him, but more importantly saw the power of the demon within – Halé, a singular demon bound to none with some of the power of a god. Ventine took that opportunity to die in combat using his powers of transmigration to latch onto the demon and infest his consciousness. The demon for all his new and unrealized power never had a chance. Ventine only noticed the demon as it manifested to Stjepan's will, as previously the sword was well hidden – something Ventine will take advantage of. Ventine is the sword's new master, one hidden from the eyes of his former master Andaras, with the strength of a god and a demon, all with the power to act through an influential leader of Hæstra – Stjepan. Ventine realizes to his dismay that he is trapped but has the knowledge of the demon Halé.*

- *Majel Gavant was shocked by Stjepan's power, a power strong enough to cause their physical form quick cessation, a form he spent centuries perfecting. Majel chose the easy way out as both of the Dædekemani fought, vanishing into ether abandoning his kind. Ventine remembers it but sees Majel as weak and inconsequential to his new found individuality. Vedior remembers and takes the information back to the Dædekemani making Gavant an outcast to their community – Andaras will find good use for Majel once the Dædekemani betray the Dart God of Wisdom using him throughout the Second Book as a pawn allied to the characters at times out of necessity against a common enemy.*

- *Vedior's death is absolute. His loss of form through the destruction of the Xiosian causes him irreparable change to his parasitical form – his hour after his host's death is his last as his next form is the last he lives with, a hawk. He flies to Khera and she gains the information out of him and after considering his usefulness to the community snaps his neck. The Dædekemani find no need for further interaction, their plans a success.*

*Celimé's loss was painfully felt by Kedrick who after heated argument among the survivors of the battle took Celimé and Bryce to the Sisters of Eissa. Unfortunately straight into an Essænce void, Kedrick barely able to pull them out before... he can only guess, and once out the Sisters too are without access to their Lord's summons. Cut off from the remainder of the army the next chapter begins removed from each other.*