

FOUR | LIFE ON THE WAYFARERS' TRAIL

“The High Council chooses to meddle in our affairs by sending us an untested mercenary who lacks the good sense for urgency!”

The first line of Siddrah’s preliminary report to the council members of the Provenance quotes the gatekeeper of the Akropolis. The caustic words addressed to Siddrah, after nearly six months of travails that began in the city of Naxos, dismissed the journey that carried her to Pallene, Libuwa, and Agrinio before arriving at the fortress located under the shadowy spires of the mountain, Eurynome. The derogatory remark grated on her tattered nerves and stung her pride.

During the final seven weeks, in a caravan with a mix of merchants and settlers out of Agrinio, the trek proved to be particularly harrowing for a young cleric who never before ventured beyond the relatively peaceful districts of the eastern Provenance. A diligent student of the classical powers of healing, who studied under one of the highest ranking members of the High Council, Siddrah completed her apprenticeship in arcane philosophy with an impressive mark.¹ Nonetheless, it is likely that no amount of training ever prepared a person for the experiences endured in travel through the Provenance, the settled lands of the Demesne, to the margins of the Limen, the unsettling territory at the horizon of the known world.

In some sense, the unpleasantness of life in arcane history is difficult to explain and, therefore, beyond empathy for the modern reader. In popular culture, two basic stock images of the early peoples of the Demesne

¹ In the guild papers Siddrah brought with her from Naxos, her apprenticeship certificate carried what arcane linguists refer to as the prestigious “omega” mark. The guilds of the classical powers did not assign grades to the abilities or work of apprentices. Grading is, in fact, a relatively modern invention introduced by early modern universities several centuries ago. Instead, symbols like the “omega” mark indicated the esteem for the master with whom an apprentice studied. Guild rules forbade any master to grant completion for an apprenticeship if the student did not meet the master’s standards. In practice, then, apprentices received only a pass or fail grade according to the prestige of the master.

dominate our imagination. The common trope for nobles depicts the wealthiest persons as embodiments of a carefree and dissipated culture that foretold the end of the Arcane Age. Bedecked in tights and crinolines, or barely clothed in white sheets and sashes, the so-called nobles of the era earned the reputations of jesters who faced no real hardships other than the caprice of love. For the lower classes, popular prejudices prefer to caricature the peasants as a people so vapid as to warrant the station of their lives or beggars so dishonest as to invite the pestilence of their lot.

Popular film often provides a comical glimpse into the lives of our Arcane Age ancestors. Nobles, even when imperiled by a deadly foe, conduct themselves like the “untouchable few” who relished a duel as a chance to evidence their invincibility and to earn vindication for a life of frivolity. The hapless peasants, alone in the woods, defended only by a roof and a hoe, live as if oblivious to the impending dangers of marauders or magical beasts that lurk just beyond the invisible, unprotected property line of their bucolic homesteads. In short, our ancestors seem to us like children at play, making merry or building quaint little farmsteads without awareness of the gravity of life in a violent, fantastic world.²

In fact, the conditions of life in the Demesne during the Arcane Age approached the exact opposite of the two popular stereotypes—“the terror of consciousness,” to quote the clever phrase of Sal J. LeHonre.³ Picture, first, a world saturated with the howling shadows of hungry, supernatural predators and, second, a life submerged in an unspeakable, grim desperation for survival. Then, imagine a people who were wise enough to recognize the former, yet sturdy enough to hope for the latter. Even this description fails to illustrate sufficiently the harrowing life that commoners and arcanists awoke to each morning on the borders of the Limen.

Coerced, sullen, and dauntless—despite the obvious comfort that the eastern capitals afforded—the citizens of the Provenance sallied forth to resettle the cities of the Demesne lost during the Glorious Revolution. A simple hope motivated most migrants: to reestablish communities along the

² Both depictions largely stem from the early years of the moving pictures industry. The ingenious engineers who invented filmmaking lacked artistic sentiments. Moviemakers largely borrowed costumes from the existing theaters and vaudevilles of the time. As a result, early films adopted the *mise-en-scène* and wardrobes of the theater, which lacked any pretense to realism, and of vaudeville, which deliberately created burlesque imitations of its subjects—and, henceforth, the invention of film repopulated the past with every sort of harlequin and buffoon imaginable!

³ See LeHonre’s *The Construction of Arcane Reality* (New York, 829 GA). LeHonre, later disgraced by substantiated claims that he perpetrated sexual harassment in the academy, may have coined the phrase from his firsthand experience terrorizing the consciousness of his female graduate students.

major arteries of trade in the Demesne and earn for themselves a modest living.

Few dared to travel alone, or even in small groups, without thorough knowledge of the dangerous land between the origin and the destination of the long treks through the wilderness. Thus, on behalf of commoners, the People's Council of the Provenance demanded, and received, legislation to reorganize the Hekatomononkheire, the Preternatural Age corps of mercenaries that once held the peasantry hostage to the godheads and the land.⁴

The Heks, as they affectionately came to be known in the Arcane Age, accompanied settlers and merchants who delivered messages, proclamations, and supplies from city to city. On the twenty-third day of each month, the cities provided an armed escort, free of charge, to all merchants and wayfarers—including the wingless arcanists—traveling between two cities.

A dutiful apprentice who aspired to political life and membership in the High Council, Siddrah's mentor shocked her with the news of her immediate appointment as an official attaché to the territorial governor—the Dunastês—of the Akropolis. Since her departure from Naxos, she traveled from the east as the official cleric of the Heks that guarded the goods and peoples moving between the western cities of the Provenance. All the while, she concealed the truth behind her assignment with the traveling mercenaries—the reason for her journey to the Akropolis—from her comrades in arms.

Siddrah admitted privately in her journal that the rationale behind the High Council's selection escaped her. "An injustice appointed me to a nominal post in a faraway frontier settlement," she recorded one harrowing evening during her journey.

Rarely, if ever in her estimation, had the councils sent a young cleric to the outskirts of the Provenance involuntarily. In practice, council liaisons came from members of the guilds who already resided, and often were raised, in the western cities. Citizens of the eastern metropolises knew well that the emotional duress of life along the Limen frequently broke the most

⁴ Not without a rancorous debate in the People's Council, as reported by Nolos, *First Laws of the Provenance*, st. 229 to st. 233. Council members in favor of the bill insisted that commoners deserved an equal opportunity to return to their ancestors' homeland and to establish new lives in the western Provenance. In opposition, many members objected to "standing armies during peace time," recalling vividly the treachery of the common mercenaries who joined the godheads and the noble arcanists against the commoners during the Glorious Revolution. By way of compromise, the legislation restricted service in the city militias to the commoners, as well as replaced the one-armed purse-bearers with a cleric who tended the sick and wounded during the journey between cities.

promising apprentices, that is, those who excelled in the libraries but knew nothing of the magical beasts that ruled the wilderness. In recognition of these basic facts, the High Council routinely appointed adventurers who went west of their own volition, and only after demonstrating in advance the necessary mettle for an official post.

“If the Dunastês regarded timeliness of the essence, as the gatekeeper suggests,” Siddrah later recorded in her journal, “One more reason to have sent druids-in-winged-form⁵ with word of an appointment for one of the many clerics already in the Akropolis!”⁶

Siddrah’s veiled swipe at the High Council suggests the lingering irritation she held for her appointment to the Akropolis—no less than her initial unease with the frightfulness of the Limen or the demands of combat in the wilderness. In her journey from Naxos, she witnessed “a great winged beast descend from the sky” to snatch a rotund, amiable merchant who fell behind the military contingent while removing a bottle of wine from his satchel. In the dark of night, one mercenary “simply disappeared” before daybreak, “leaving no sign of struggle in his makeshift shelter.” These two events she wrote down during the first, and safest, leg of the journey from Naxos to Pallene.

The Heks moved only as fast as its slowest, that is to say poorest,

⁵ Four “druids-in-winged-form” often carried messages between the cities. The practice first began when the godheads supplied two loyal druids to serve as diplomats and messengers in each of the others’ cities. Both sets flew together to vouch for the accuracy of the communiqués. The arcane historian, Sagius II (Puliuin the Grey), *Natural History of the Demesne* bk.3 (Naxos, ca. 10|1), indicates that “double druid” messengers served to inspire merchants’ double entry system of bookkeeping in which all transactions are recorded twice, once on the debit side and once on the credit side of an accounting ledger.

⁶ Collected Papers of Siddrah, Akropolis, ca. 11|7 AA. For posterity, the Councils’ choice to send Siddrah to the Akropolis proved serendipitous. Siddrah seemed to possess a supernatural knack for recalling verbal exchanges. In her journal, her entry for an entire day often recorded, as if word for word, her most inconsequential conversations. Her official reports to the High Council, duplicated in her journal and daybooks (a kind of narrative ledger she used to record a chronology of events during a day), described peoples and events at the Akropolis in such comprehensive—and even tedious—detail that she often seemed to lose the point of her communications. For scholars, though, the recent recovery of her journal and daybooks provides a fascinating window into the thoughts of a practitioner of the classical powers and the life of the social world of the Provenance. The Tityos archive, held by the Commercial Academy for the Study of the Arcane Powers, LLC, supplies much of the material for Siddrah’s role in this history. Further citation of the recorded events and materials provided by Siddrah will be omitted unless a discrepancy with other sources must be noted or an additional explanation will benefit the reader.

travelers. Though larger numbers of fellow travelers added additional weeks to the journey, smaller numbers invited mortal peril. Consequently, the wayfarers erred on the side of size and caution. Siddrah soon learned that the Heks moved clumsily, more often than not, due to “the families, shod in deficient footwear, who led overburdened pack mules on long treks between the cities of the Provenance.” The wealthy wayfarers sometimes made room on their carts for those who lacked adequate mounts or wagons, but the merchants routinely drove carts overladen with merchandise, often causing wheels or axles to break from the wear and tear of the unmaintainable roads of the western Provenance. Two weeks into her nearly half-year journey, Siddrah “already grew weary of urbane travelers who risked all to earn a pittance on the borders of the Limen.”

For the trek from Naxos to Pallene—where the great volcanic forges produced the best metals and precious goods in the Provenance—the merchants and their cartels maintained the roads in serviceable condition, far better than the western turnpikes in any case. Aside from the usual trifles described above, no incident slowed the troupe. The first leg of Siddrah’s journey took only three weeks to complete, permitting Siddrah time to rest in the Ferrous Mountain fortress for seven days before setting out on the next leg of her removal to the Akropolis. Her time in Pallene apparently held little interest for her, one surmises, since the notes in her journal neglected to record any of the events during her stay. Her first report to the High Council carried no news of Pallene, a further indication that the city of forges served as an unexceptional interval in her migration to the west.⁷

Out of Pallene, Siddrah again served as the cleric to the Heks that left for the Central Plains guarding “a small community of families who hoped to start a new life in agriculture near Libuwa.”

On this leg of the journey, as the veterans of the Heks predicted, she faced highwaymen for the first time. She also saw firsthand the horrific choices that the Wayfarers’ Trail frequently presented to the commoners. The veteran mercenaries warned that highwaymen often hid in the fields along the road to snatch any child who strayed too far from the escort. In most cases, the criminals threatened to garrote their prisoner on the spot unless the family paid some kind of ransom in exchange for the child’s release. In other instances, the outlaws simply sliced the abducted juvenile’s throat without any demand in order to make real the threat at other opportunities.

“With some form of wickedness,” Siddrah later observed, “the brigands

⁷ Unfortunately, it was not her first trip to Pallene, the first and most prized city of the dwarfs. Siddrah neglected to add any descriptions or her perspective on the great mountain fortress.

seemed to know which families paid and which families favored their pitiful wealth over the life of a child.”

On the first occasion, a band of about a dozen criminals ransomed a young girl still in the first triskaidecade, or thirteen years, of her life. The parents, who “later admitted [to Siddrah] that they believe their daughter has potential as a druid,” turned over a small fortune in tableware to secure her return. A few days thereafter, a teenage boy, who in modesty separated from the caravan to urinate in private, fell into the clutches of another band of highway robbers. In this instance, the family claimed they had nothing of worth. After they humbly pleaded for their son’s release for several minutes, the standoff ended when the brigands garroted the boy, and then ran off into nearby woods.⁸

About three weeks out of Pallene, slowed by the harassment of criminals and the wayfarers’ persistent complaints about the pace of the march, a team of oxen that pulled a merchant’s cart startled and broke the tongue—the piece of wood extending between the oxen that hitched the animals to the cart. The merchant, who neglected to bring a spare tongue as required by the law, spent over an hour haggling with another merchant who wished to secure the best price for his spare tongue.

After the lengthy negotiation, that ended when “the captain of our Heks threatened to leave both merchants behind,” a wainwright—a wagon maker and mechanic who apparently traveled with the families moving to Libuwa—discovered that a flaw in the second merchant’s tongue needed to be mended before it secured properly to the first merchant’s oxen. A new round of negotiations ensued as the wainwright bartered with the merchant in compensation for services to be rendered. “The merchant paced with angry strides through our small encampment on the Demesne without regard for the needless delay he caused the caravan,” Siddrah noted. Even

⁸ It must be noted that the Heks rarely split into smaller units. As Siddrah later learned, highwaymen and bandits often tried to lure the mercenaries into chasing them into the forests so that an entire caravan could be captured and killed. Thus, the mercenaries routinely battled in a defensive posture against foes that directly attacked the convoys. In a situation, as described in the text above, the captain left the decision to the family to decide the fate of the captured child provided that the family’s choice did not endanger the entire convoy of wayfarers. Siddrah’s entry curses the criminals, for the act effectively decapitated the boy, making it impossible for her to heal what otherwise may have been a nonlethal flesh wound. Interestingly, she also wrote in her journal that the teenager “showed no signs of possessing the classical powers,” perhaps suspecting that the family sacrificed their untalented son rather than surrender their meager wealth to the kidnappers. For more on the age-long conflict between Heks and highwaymen, see Trak R. MacWright, “Travel in the Demesne,” *Journal of the Early Provenance* 7, no. 3 (907 GA): 359–367.

after the repairs started, the merchant further taxed the patience of the captain, "circling his broken cart and complaining loudly about the craftsmanship of the wainwright."

After nearly three hours, "as if knowing that the company grew restive and inattentive," a muscular griffin dropped from the skies above to pounce on the nattering merchant. The force of the flying lioness's landing crushed "the loud-mouthed, brittle man" into the ground beneath her. "On this day, fate seemed to favor the migrants," Siddrah recorded, since the griffin's aquiline claws and beak failed to latch firmly into the merchant's limp carcass. After dragging her prey for several bounds, a shower of cross bolts from the poised mercenaries forced the beast to release her bounty and "to flee back into the blue aether on her eagle-like wings."

Siddrah rushed to the mangled man to discover that the unfortunate merchant continued to breathe, shallowly, if irregularly. Keeping her wits about her, she quickly called on her strongest power of healing to mend the broken bones protruding from the lacerated, bloodied skin of the merchant's upper torso.

"No matter how often I shall hear it," Siddrah entered in her journal, "I hope never to become accustomed to the sound of a body's bones being crushed like the twigs of a tree." She added, in contemplation of her clerical responsibilities to the peoples of the Provenance, "Nor, shall I relish the eerie sight of bones that protrude from flesh receding back into the body to reshape themselves in response to my spellcasting."⁹ In this, Siddrah shared with many nonhealers a peculiar apprehensiveness for the supernatural sight of an injury that quickly healed from the classical powers of clerics.

In fact, the incident introduced her to the life of a cleric near the borders of the Limen. Unlike today, the common folk did not strongly identify worship or religious life with the clerics. To be certain, the commoners venerated a great and generous healer and many clerics, as well, believed in the noble divination of their powers as the godheads had once proposed. Few commoners, however, befriended or joined with clerics to form faith communities. To a certain extent, both arcanists and commoners suspected—under their breaths—that clerics communed with death rather than divinity. More than a few naysayers cursed the healing class as

⁹ The apprenticeship required practice in the artistry of healing, but most tests of healing involved minor, self-inflicted wounds. Apprentices occasionally found themselves called to the fighters' guild to mend stress fractures or to the rogues' guild to stanch the flow of blood from a well-placed shiv, but few situations exposed youthful clerics to the manner in which deadly battle produced a surreal art form from the grotesque maiming and temporary deformity of the body. The frequency of such scenes truly tested the fortitude of any cleric who dared to travel into the Limen.

necromancers.¹⁰

In the arcane conditions of life, death always seemed to be as near as the shadow of one's body. As a result, most people of the Provenance felt no obligation to keep reminders of their fragile mortality closer than necessary. Consequently, when the pioneers from Pallene arrived in Libuwa, five weeks after their departure, the mercenaries and the travelers quickly paid respects to Siddrah, and then vanished into the bustle of the agrarian mecca. The merchant, who otherwise would have died from the wounds of the griffin, at the first opportunity slipped out of the caravan without a word of gratitude, aware that "no kindness or coin ever repaid the debt owed to a cleric."¹¹

The slow pace of the wayfarers and the all-too-frequent interruptions on the journey from Pallene forced Siddrah to linger in Libuwa. Three weeks passed before the next group of wayfarers left for Agrinio. In contrast to Pallene, Siddrah made the most of her stay in the "breadbasket" of the Provenance.

In her journal, she described a city that had become slightly more populous than the eastern capitals and bustled with activity from dawn until midnight. In the latter half of the Arcane Age, many men and women who served in the Heks eventually resettled in Libuwa to farm the plentiful, fertile lands of the Demesne. When the enterprising spirit of the people of the Provenance reorganized their Heks to escort travelers and entrepreneurs on their journeys between cities, the councils promised citizens who joined the forces plots of arable land or unfettered memberships in the cartels of the recovered cities in the west. The volunteers of the Heks needed only one year of service to collect a small pension, but the law permitted mercenaries to serve additional terms in return for larger allotments of land or cartel business.

As Siddrah learned, many novice mercenaries made notches in their crossbows to count the thirteen months of their tours, while "the true veterans" carved several years of service into their weapons. Despite the perilous nature of the duties, Siddrah found that "nearly two-thirds of my unit served three or more tours in order to collect the ripest fruits of their labors."

¹⁰ Incorrectly, that is.

¹¹ Siddrah reflected on the old adage, one of the "koan oaths" that clerics sought to uphold: "When I first learned the saying during my earliest days as an apprentice, I believed it meant that clerics must never charge a coin or ask a favor in return for our services. I sense now it means, we clerics exist on the margins of a world that persists in the trade of exchangeable goods and services." For an early medical historian's interpretation of the oaths of the "koan" guild of Naxos, see Cos, *On Arcane Medicine* (Alexandria, ca. 2539 MA).

For one year's service, those fruits included livestock, one *moirae* of land to plant their seed,¹² and access to the city commons where the municipal mercenaries guarded the citizens' grazing cattle. For each additional year, not to exceed seven, mercenaries received an additional *moirae* of land to till. Unsurprisingly, Libuwa teemed with former soldiers who once served the People's Council since many current and former mercenaries aspired to be simple farmers. Additionally, more than a few fighters fresh out of their apprenticeship rushed from Pallene to Libuwa where the townspeople paid private guards handsomely to defend families working the fields by day or to protect herds in the commons by night.¹³ Fighters, the arcanists who had the most in common with the former soldiers of the Heks, shared in the fabulous, if bellicose, stories of daring feats and near escapes from the many perils of the Wayfarers' Trail.

Despite the benefits, few commoners aspired to a full seven years of service to the Heks. Historians often commit a disservice, to both the commoners who served in the travelers' militias and to the arcanists who ventured into the Limen, by overstating the advantages that the classical powers granted in hand-to-hand combat: confusion created bedlam, wounds caused anguish, the sight of casualties produced horror, and combat ended in battle fatigue.

In isolation, the common mercenary posed little threat, but when disciplined in the right numbers, the commoners combined into formidable military units. The fifty heads and one hundred hands of the mercenaries of the Heks exercised frequently in order to become one of the most lethal forces in the Demesne. Coordinated as a unit, the mercenaries capably felled fully-grown gorgons who wildly charged wayfarers under their care during the long journeys between cities. Little wonder, even to the modern mind, why intelligent foes like the brigands sought first to divide and alienate the mercenaries of the Heks.

Among arcanists, spellcasters judiciously conserved their classical powers for what they called *kairos*—"the definitive or opportune moment"

¹² A *moirae* measured a plot that a common person was able to cultivate with only one's hands. As in many languages, like our modern word, "lot," for the arcane mercenaries who fulfilled their service to the People's Council, a *moirae* meant both an area of land and one's destiny. Hence, as the mercenaries morbidly joked among themselves, "mercenaries who fail to fulfill service / merely receive a different *moirae* ('lot') for life." Brewe, *Naxian Ethic*, 281.

¹³ At the time Siddrah passed through Libuwa, the city leaders divided the territory surrounding the city walls into commons and tillable plots. The population of farmers grew numerous over time, forcing many farmers to walk nearly a league to reach their plots in the mornings from the first spring thaw to the last fall harvest. Libuwan weather was fair, and the tests of combat rarely overwhelming, so many fighters first whet their appetite for bloodshed in the fields of Libuwa.

that determined the outcome of a contest.¹⁴ All the same, before the *kairos* presented itself, wizards and druids, like rogues, often found themselves engaged in close combat when an enemy rushed adversaries in hopes of delivering a quick, deadly blow. Such as it was, spellcasters rarely escaped a conflict without damage.

On the other hand, the combat classes, the fighters and rangers in particular, acquired impressive feats to increase their defenses against an enemy's strike and honed skills to augment the force of their own assaults. Even then, the classical powers provided only marginal returns on the probabilities of victory in battle. The lowliest fighters rushed into the middle of most scrums where the frequency of the attacks negated the advantages of their combat wisdom.

In a word, no one escaped the anguish of injuries or took lightly the wretched, inescapable shadow of mortality.

The Libuwan veterans coped with danger and the horror of personal memories in a manner that the modern world still appreciates. "Most drank heartily in their youth, and drank more heartily thereafter," Siddrah observed. On the other hand, the arcane peoples cherished their freedoms, and their conversations "often preoccupied them in endless debates over the Councils of the Provenance or in the experiment in self-governance that the militia protected so fervently." Deep into the morning hours, "the streets of Libuwa resounded with the responsibilities of citizenship and the honor of defending our liberties from the abuses and usurpation of domestic and foreign tyrants." The former Heks soldiers repeated tall tales of combat on the roads between the cities, until the tavern keepers refused to pour "the treasures of Libuwa's fermented grains" into another emptied stein.¹⁵

After her departure—a reluctant departure from the city of libations—Siddrah experienced for herself the bonds that combat in defense of liberty created in the western Provenance. Her first night on the road to Agrinio, while sitting at the bonfire near the center of the encircled merchants' carts,

¹⁴ This sense of timing encapsulates one of the fantastic differences our modern world has with the arcane world. *Kaironology*, "the opportunities or pregnancy of the moment," possessed far greater meaning for the distant past than our chronology, a sequence of moments or a course of events, does today. More concisely, it may be said: for the arcanes, time opens greater possibilities; for we moderns, time endlessly passes probabilities. For a Metal Age account of *kairos*, see Prichremah, *The Kairos of Time* (Jerusalem, ca. 2011 MA).

¹⁵ Historian of the early Arcane Age republic, J. William Bragahour, discusses the common roots of alcohol consumption and self-governance in his work, *The Alcoholic Social Democracy: A Provenancial Tradition* (New York, 727 GA). Siddrah, who initially regarded herself as a casual drinker, became quite enamored with the local microbreweries and distilleries of Libuwa during her stay.

a middle-aged dwarf sidled up to Siddrah to talk about the long hike before them. Szrah Dehrmick, she introduced herself, a fighter born and raised in Pallene. In the firelight, Siddrah noticed that Szrah's face, neck, and exposed forearms bore an unusual number of scars, presumably from her many battles in the wilderness—nonetheless unusual, Siddrah noted, “given that cleric's spells healed completely without any disfigurement to the skin.”

After several minutes of meaningless banter, the conversation turned to the potential dangers of the forests near the lakes of Agrinian territory. Her right hand firmly rubbing one of the largest, rosiest scars on her left forearm, Szrah warned Siddrah about the chaos of battle and counseled the cleric about the duties of healing in the midst of conflict.

Before leaving Naxos, of course, Siddrah studied the protocols of triage for the Heks at the library for her guild. “Heal mercenaries, arcanists, and commoners, in that order—and commoners, only, when able to prevent death or permanent injury,” Siddrah recalled. Clerics possessed limited powers to heal, especially those who had not yet benefited from frequent conflicts on the Wayfarers' Trail or in the Limen. Like all clerics, once Siddrah exhausted her daily powers, she only provided the comfort that common medical remedies and homeopathic treatment offered, until able to replenish her arcane healing abilities with rest and meditation.

The moment Siddrah spoke up about her duties, the dwarf abruptly stood to share her colorful thoughts on the protocols of clerical triage. Szrah sneered at the cleric, “Only a fool heals a common mercenary while a veteran arcanist—a warrior of Pallene—suffers in pitiful agony.” With that parting advice, the fighter rudely excused herself.

Siddrah gave little thought to the dwarf at the time, still relatively naïve to the personal dilemmas that the protocols of triage placed on clerics. Eleven days later, far beyond the settled lands of Libuwa, about midway to Agrinio where the narrow road twisted through the thick forests, an assault by an aggressive ring of brigands immersed Siddrah in the clamor of battle, initiating her in the moral quandaries that earned clerics their complicated reputations.

Brigands, like most peoples of the Provenance, moved during the day, wisely in fear of the many powerful creatures that owned the night. It suited their needs in any case, because the goods and peoples under the care of the Heks circled their wagons to establish a defensive position at night. On the road at midday, however, the caravans stretched into a makeshift train along the roads, rendering the wayfarers more vulnerable to a well-devised attack.

On that day, scouts at the head of the caravan of merchants and mercenaries failed to spot a massive log ominously floating in the forest canopy about thirty strides from the road. “Secured to sturdy limbs of fir trees by four heavy ropes, two on each side of the road, the log descended like a deadly bob on a massive pendulum,” Siddrah recounted to the

councils. The unexpected, chilling crack of thick branches high above caused the procession of carts to come to an immediate standstill—perfectly positioning a merchant and her family in the path of the swinging log as it accelerated toward its target. Before its victims had a chance to scream, the improvised weapon ripped through the merchant's wagon, flinging her and her family into the dark forest, scattering her merchandise to the winds.

After the log began its deadly swing back across the road, effectively dividing the mercenaries and caravan in two, arrows whistled from out of the underbrush of the forest from one side of the road. The captain stumbled backward in the same moment, “pierced by three arrows as another baker's dozen hit the soft mud all around her.” A hideous battle cry resounded through the forest as the bandits raced from their hiding places in the bushes to engage the startled mercenaries in hand-to-hand combat.

As the assailants rushed from their forest cover, Siddrah recalled her first triage event in these terms:

I dashed to the side of my captain who fell supine to the ground audibly wincing in pain. I quickly appraised the severity of the wounds: one arrow entered her shoulder from a gap in the front of the armor and protruded from her back; another arrow passed completely through her leg beneath the kneecap, severing the sinew; a third lodged itself beneath her breastplate. The captain was dying. The protocols required that I heal her, but I dared not until I removed the shafts of the embedded arrows. I snapped the head of the first and pulled the shaft back through the front of her shoulder, allowing blood to flow freely from the wound.

Before I was able to force the third arrow through the ribs and flesh in her back, a bandit surged at me with his short blade. I grasped for my morning star to defend myself, when the bandit's sword cut into my upper left arm and rendered my favored blade-hand useless. I stumbled and fell back onto the dirt road. The bandit emphatically drew his weapon arm back to deliver the *coup de grâce*, his face contorted in a scornful scowl of triumph.

Just as I surrendered to the notion of an early death, a throwing axe whizzed through the Aether above me. I watched, stunned, when the axe sunk deep into the brigand's head. A critical blow. My foe crumpled to the ground before me.

I caught sight of Szrah Dehrmick charging again into the fray, still glaring at me as she did at the end of our discussion the night before. I jumped to my feet with my morning star drawn in my weak hand, spinning round in fear of further assaults from behind.

I had no regard for the life of the captain in that instance.

After I regained my composure, I returned to the side of the captain. Kneeling, with my weapon handily by my side, I clumsily removed the breastplate and forced the head of the third arrow out of her back. Lodged deep in the captain's chest, I failed to snap the head of the arrow off on my first attempt. I did not wish to lose another precious moment, so I grabbed the tip of the arrow to yank the shaft and feathers clean through her chest. The captain hollered with agony.

At last, I cast my spell, determined to ignore the pain in my damaged left arm. In an instance, several splinters from the arrows' shafts oozed out of the captain's wounds. The visible holes in her chest, shoulder, and knee healed perfectly. Without a second thought, as if the deadly injuries never happened, our leader sprang to her feet to rally her soldiers.¹⁶

With the captain restored and the troops reorganized, the brigands melted back into the lush woods with whatever booty they could carry in their arms. Siddrah marveled at the efficiency of the thieves who collected the merchandise and coin bags from the demolished merchant's cart from the forest floor before sprinting back into the woods.¹⁷

The casualties from the attack were not minimal. Three mercenaries of the Heks and the five members of the merchant's family, including her husband and children, died in the attack. The mercenaries counted twelve other casualties, with a few suffering from near mortal wounds. Four wayfarers also lie near death. In addition, Szrah writhed on the ground, tormented by a dagger sunk to the hilt into her chest just above her right breast.

Siddrah knew immediately that she did not have the resources to heal all of the wounded; at this time, she had only a handful of opportunities to draw on the classical powers each day. Following her training, she healed

¹⁶ Siddrah often provides detailed accounts of battles. In most cases, in her daybook, we find a list of battles, wounds suffered by her comrades, and the type of care she provided. Typically, it is possible to piece together the conflicts from the records and her other sources. From this incident, perhaps for obvious reasons, Siddrah learned to regard battle accounts as an opportunity to measure arcanists' mutual benefits to each other and to use such knowledge to augment her leadership skills over time.

¹⁷ The brigands grabbed what they could before fleeing because it was the practice of the Heks to divvy up the goods of lost wayfarers and burn, if necessary, what others had no room for on their carts. As Siddrah learned that day, leaving bounty on the ground only served to encourage further attacks from the brigands.

two mercenaries who appeared to be closest to death. Two others she tended with a less powerful spell that returned them from the brink, but failed to fully eliminate the damage. For the others, including the critically wounded commoners, she attempted to stabilize their conditions with traditional medical aid to provide what comfort she was able.

During the night, Siddrah lamented, “We lost one of the commoners...thus have I learned to the fullest extent the limits of my healing powers.”

Despite their conditions, the injured mercenaries and wayfarers pressed on. Siddrah fully healed all injured wayfarers only after the fourth day following the aggression. Notably, she mended her own arm last. By that time, “scar tissue already formed.” Many months later, she recorded in her journal, “the recurring ache in my upper arm in cold weather is an unwelcome reminder of my service to the Hekatomononkheire.”

By the protocols of triage, Szrah should not have received the care of the cleric until the last of the Heks had returned to duty. No other healers accompanied the wayfarers and the dwarven warrior, for whatever reason, owned no healing potions of her own. Though her wound proved not to be mortal, the clavicle bone on her right shoulder, in Siddrah’s diagnosis, “most assuredly had been broken by the force of the blade.” As the cleric tended her with common herbal medicine on the day of the attack, “the dwarf glowered at me while she rubbed a scar on her forehead, silently cursing the life she saved only minutes earlier.”

That night, however, under the cover of dark, Siddrah visited Szrah in her tent. Quietly she called forth a healing power inscribed on a scroll—the first scroll Siddrah divined after she earned the title of master cleric, and one she “intended to keep as a memento of the clerical life.” Szrah’s chest wound instantly healed. When Siddrah stood to leave, the dwarf grabbed her forearm and nodded her head with appreciation for the cleric’s lapse in protocol.

The next night, when Siddrah made rounds to tend the surviving commoners who still agonized from their injuries, she saw Szrah Dehrmick sitting alone near the bonfire. As Siddrah approached from behind, she noticed that the fighter had fully removed her breastplate and undershirt. The dwarf seemed to be rubbing the right shoulder where the dagger penetrated during the prior day’s battle. When she came within several strides of the fellow arcanist, to her dismay, the cleric witnessed a gruesome psychosis: Dehrmick was using the point of her battle axe to carve a new lesion in her skin—in exactly the same spot that the brigand sank his dagger.

At that moment, Siddrah understood: Szrah suffered from Blade’s Dementia.

Although the classical powers of clerics healed all wounds entirely,

nothing erased the memory of excruciating pain. Sometimes, the mental scars never healed. Many persons, immediately after their first experience with the classical powers of healing, believed that the pain of their wounds lingered despite all appearances. Over time, most mercenaries and arcanists, especially those injured in combat often, overcame the phantom of pain projected by the mind. A few, nevertheless, could not grow accustomed to the idea that clerical powers fully restored the body when tended in a timely manner.

In extreme cases, Blade's Dementia caused its victims to carve new wounds into their skin to visualize what the mind told them lurked beneath the soft tissue. Szrah—the morbid rubbing and carving of scars—represented an acute case of the affliction. Siddrah quietly backed away, leaving the fighter by the fireside to murmur to herself about the “pitiful agony.”¹⁸

These initial travails of her long trek from Naxos¹⁹—the events, the people, the deaths—“flashed through” Siddrah's mind when the Master of

¹⁸ It seems that fighters were particularly susceptible to Blade's Dementia in the arcane world. As described earlier, the classical powers endowed fighters with better defenses and more powerful attacks, but that class of philosophers had to push the boundaries of their wisdom in hand-to-hand combat. Consequently, fighters endured numerous battle wounds and oftentimes, to quote Szrah Dehrmick's phrase again, “pitiful agony.” The classical powers certainly made the body something more powerful, something more fantastic, than it naturally was. But the flip side of that coin, perhaps, was that the classical powers also, in a more current sense, “dehumanized” the body. Fighters endured severe traumas to the bone structure and organs of the body with such frequency that it is nearly unfathomable today. More noteworthy, when fighters failed to progress in their classical powers, rarely was it due to the innate limits of their wisdom. Rather, the fighters reached the limits of their tolerance for the inevitable physical afflictions of combat. One arcane adage, passed down to the modern world, captures the plight of the classical power of fighters: “Wise warriors smelt their weapons into plows/ the brutes become clerics' oft-smitten puppets.” For a more complete historical treatment of the physical abuses of the body during the Arcane Age, see Uma F. Couchillet, *La Naissance des pouvoirs classiques: Une Archéologie du regard arcanique* [The birth of the classical powers: An archaeology of arcane perception] (Paris, 811 GA).

¹⁹ Unfortunately, about 8 to 10 weeks of Siddrah's travels and contacts are lost. Archeologists failed to discover, among the recovered archival materials, the parchments that recorded her stay in Agrinio and the last leg of her journey to the Akropolis. It seems that the wayfarers from Libuwa made their way to Agrinio in approximately three weeks time. She then spent one week in the city, before what appears to have been a seven week trip from Agrinio to the Akropolis. Her daybook shows one entry during her time in Agrinio: a vague reference to healing an elf. Four weeks later, her event ledger is filled with a list of dead and wounded from another attack, as well as the care and treatment each received. Three weeks thereafter, the parchments of Siddrah's journal renew at the Akropolis.

the Gate to the Akropolis—Ôron, she named him—demanded “more urgency” from the councils’ attaché.

She shared her reaction to the gatekeeper in her preliminary report to the High Council: “After many trials and tribulations along the Wayfarers’ Trail, I bristled at the accusation by this *mixellên*²⁰ that I both imposed on the affairs of the Akropolis and dithered in the execution of my duties to the Provenance.”

She stumbled over her words briefly, seeking to explain that brigands once again waylaid her caravan, apparently by first “stampeding a herd of gorgons into the train of carts and wagons,” causing so many casualties that the Heks set up camp for a week to heal and recover forces before embarking on the last leg of the trip.

Ôron entertained none of her excuses: “Listen, greenshanks, I don’t care for your troubles with some worthless outlaws. There ain’t a one of us here [at the Akropolis] who hasn’t played a little sport with the local banditry. Yaarh! If you must explain someone, defend the High Council member who saw fit to send a bookish *paeon* [‘common cleric’] with legs that never been stained with the blood of the Limen!”

²⁰ *Mixellên* was an arcane term that refers to offspring from two or more cultures of the Demesne. “Half-this, half-that,” in the minds of the people of the Provenance, is the most common translation of the term. In this usage, however, it seems that Siddrah questioned the loyalties of the gatekeeper due to his obvious lineage from a Limen culture. See the entry in Koljin’s *Vocabulary*.