

Tome of the Silver Sun: CHAPTER 7: Verse 23

When did the Ollpheist arrive? This question remains unanswerable.

The signs were always there, as if the Ollpheist were one long thread sewn through history. Mysterious disappearances. Unexplained behavior. Grizzly crimes with no apparent motive. Prior to the formation of our Order, authorities believed it was cult activity. But the unexplained events were too widespread. There was no discernable pattern.

Of course, the Ollpheist were eventually discovered. We no longer asked who, but instead asked how and why. Unfortunately, we have very few developments in that regard.

In retrospect, our Scholars believe the arrival of the Ollpheist predates our written history. They were always there, almost detectable like a creeping shadow that disappears once you shine a light on it.

The discovery of the Ollpheist marked the genesis of our Order. Their elimination will be our resolution.

Chapter One: The Event at The Gruel

The City-State of B'Haile sat neatly perched at the base of the Basalt Sierra, a jagged black mountain range running in opposite directions to either horizon. Travelers seldom reached B'Haile given its geographic isolation, but this wasn't the only reason it lacked emigrants or visitors. It was a dead-end. When you reach B'Haile, the only place to go was back where you came.

From the top of the Basalt Sierra, B'Haile looked like an irregular blot of ink next next to its sheer cliffs. Looking closer, it was a massive assembly of black stone blocks mined from the Basalt Sierra. Its walls rose higher than the oaks growing in the meadows surrounding the city. Generations of masons chiseled and smoothed the dark stones and placed them in formation not just to build walls, but also the streets and structures as well.

To an outside, the city looked impressive with multistory dwellings and a sprawling marketplace where vendors gathered 7 of 8 days of the week to sell their produce and trinkets. The defining feature of the city, however, was the Order of the Silver Sun, standing six stories high in the center of the city, a giant-sized obelisk with slitted windows and a broad base. The stones and walls were the bones of the city, but the Order of the Silver Sun was its imperishable heart.

It was from here two men left. They walked for hours under the midday sun, through the meandering black stone streets. The two walked nearly in unison, an organic phenomenon after walking together for so long. Both were dressed in long black jackets to beat back the ever-present mountain wind. The larger and older man, Dalen, strode unaffected by his

surroundings. His fortieth year behind him, Dalen's hair grayed at his temples and he wore spectacles. Yet, he walked with a sturdy determination.

Next to him walked his Tome Bearer, Gorlee, who stood smaller in stature, was bespectacled like Dalen, and otherwise looked unassuming except for the massive wood-bound Tome hanging from a strap across his shoulder. The Tome's thick covers clicked against Gorlee's belt as he walked, sounding like a drifting wind chime.

Dalen and Gorlee reached their destination on the outskirts of B'Haile. The two men spoke quietly for a moment before Gorlee walked down a nearby alley. Dalen straightened his jacket and walked toward the two-story public house, The Gruel. Dalen drew a deep breath before pushing open the heavy door of The Gruel. After so many years of service to the Order, fresh air was no longer taken for granted. The door swung on its hinges revealing a sad landscape of drunks, heads held low as if in collective mourning.

Perhaps they were. The basalt mine closed since the Event of O.S.S. 299, and many journeymen miners lost their living. Dalen felt their pain for a moment. Who wouldn't spend a coin and numb the world off for another day?

And there he was. Behind the bar, Dalen recognized Ged with his long nose and greasy hair pulled back to what looked like a soiled rodent tail. Ged stopped idly wiping the bar and froze as Dalen approached.

Dalen dropped five coramon onto the time-worn bar. Ged considered the coins only for a moment before snatching them up with a practiced speed. The coramon were enough to buy drinks for everyone in The Gruel for an entire month. Although Ged had taken the coins, he did so without considering the invisible strings attached to them. Now hooked, Dalen began to slowly reel.

Dalen was a Sagart, an Investigator of the Silver Sun, and as a Sagart he responded to all manner of despicable crimes, related or unrelated to the Ollpheist. Each Sagart carried a Corona which, like its name suggests, was a silver corona encircling a cross in its center. It was about the size of a dinner plate. The corona itself consisted of a circular series of silver daggers whose points tapered to thin points.

Dalen pulled his Corona from his jacket and held it before Ged's face. Everyone in B'Haile recognized the Corona because it symbolized the Order of the Silver Sun. Ged winced.

Because Dalen never boasted about his authority, he only brandished his Corona within the scope of his duties. He didn't care for attention. Having grown up a ward of the Silver Sun, he came to expect very little of it. His vows required a life of solitude, thus no family to speak of. Even Gorlee, who felt ever-present, left Dalen feeling uncomfortable at times.

Having seen the Corona, the decision rested with Ged whether to obstruct the active investigation of a Sagart and perhaps die on a cold slab of a prison cell. Or, he could cooperate and perhaps live out his remaining days in hiding.

Dalen knew Ged's decision before Ged did. The Tome (with Gorlee in the alley across the street) labeled Ged as a 'loyalist', but this was a misnomer. Ged loyalty lied only with himself; an elite self-preservationist. Any outward display of loyalty to the Ollpheist was secondary to his central philosophy: nothing mattered except his own posterior.

Ged stood silent and processed. Ged would understand that five coramon, an amount of little consequence to the Silver Sun, was enough for him to travel the difficult and expensive road to Chathair. Ged would believe a Sagart, duty bound, would not renege on an agreement, even if unspoken. Reaching some inner conclusion on the matter, Ged reached his wiry arm under the bar and placed on it a ring with three keys.

Dalen's hand swiped up the keys as deftly as Ged had taken the five coramon, and with that, their silent exchange ended.

Upstairs from the bar was an open loft with more pickled customers. Ged's women drifted about inviting stares. Back on the main floor, Dalen walked about until he came to the cellar door which refused to open. Looking back to the bar, there was no trace of Ged. Perhaps more cunning than Dalen estimated, he left without even a change of clothes. Rats and sinking ships...

Dalen and Gorlee may be right about what lies below The Gruel.

The patina of the brass key on the ring matched the door lock. The door pushed aside, and Dalen crept down a dark flight of stairs with all due caution. Inductive reasoning guided Dalen now: the cumulative wisdom of the Tome and all the Events recorded therein. His descent was a matter of evolving probabilities, and he would need to take cues from his environment to narrow the outcomes. And right now in light of Ged's apparent need to leave expeditiously, the odds were high that he would discover an Event at The Gruel, even after all these years of silence. And although Dalen was regarded by his peers as pragmatic, he would die before retreating from an active lead. Thus, he pressed on at his own peril.

A mundane basement came into view as Dalen reached the bottom of the stairs. He breathed in a waft of tangy air, an aromatic cocktail of wilting fruit commingled with expiring meat. He lifted the lid on a barrel of grain to find it covered in mold. Despite its name, The Gruel was not known to serve food. Ale. Women. Stronger ale. The patrons considered anything else superfluous. And so it made sense these provisions in the cellar had not been touched in days, perhaps a week.

Dalen had seen this before, more or less, but it had been so long. This cellar was an artifice. A facade. Sometimes it was a root cellar, other times a servant's quarters. These

below ground places served no other purpose than to display themselves as ordinary, to state there were earthly purposes and justifications for their existence. Dalen knew otherwise. The Tome knew otherwise.

If he were by his side with the Tome, Gorlee could recite the detailed history and current operations of The Gruel. That was Gorlee's function; to compute large volumes of information and data from the Tome and recite it with perfect recall. He trained his whole life for this. He trained his mind, sun up to sun down.

To this end, Gorlee would efficiently describe how Ged kept women to bed his patrons for a modest sum. Prostitution was illegal in B'Haile, but this trade was not uncommon on the outskirts near the wall. It was done on a small scale, discreetly, and because it was an exchange between people of marginal importance to the Order, the Garda found themselves with higher priorities such as chasing cut purses who plagued the merchants. Besides, members of the Garda needed relief for their carnal urges from time to time.

Gorlee would continue on with his treatise of The Gruel. Although it was now an unsavory thing, it was not always this way. In fact (a phrase used often by Gorlee), the Gruel was not its actual name. People coined the name "The Gruel" centuries ago due to its original purpose as a public house. It fed the working class miners and builders the thin porridge while B'Haile struggled into existence. It also housed the sick and elderly, underground and out of sight, and offered hospice services to those whose mortal wicks sputtered out.

Over the centuries, as B'Haile clawed to a level of sustainability, The Gruel re-purposed itself as a tavern, a thing of excess and not necessity, for those living on the fringe, and the hospice and sick rooms below grade took on new purposes as well. No longer intended to relieve the sick and dying, the beds were used to relieve men in an entirely different way.

And now Gorlee would push up his spectacles and tie everything back to their current circumstances. The women of The Gruel were the mainspring of this clockwork, driving the gears and moving the pieces into place. The woman would take the set of keys, lead a man downstairs to this innocuous cellar, and using the same black key in Dalen's hand, she would unlock the tar-black door at the far end of the cellar. Dalen followed the ghostly footsteps of this woman through the door.

On the other side followed a short hallway with several doors on each side. A mustiness was here with a hint of vinegar. Something had been cleaned, or perhaps it covered another odor. Dark basalt stone tiled the hallway and Dalen felt the scrape of sandy grime under his boots. The interior walls were built of plaster lined with cork and curtains. Sound insulation. The doors hung open like mid-sentence mouths, all but the last door at the end of the hall. Dalen approached it slowly, his insides tight with anticipation.

He experienced Events in the past, but it had been years. So many years. After so much silence, why now? Had the Order been lulled into a false safety? He used his remaining key on

the thick door, and as it groaned open, the smell of vinegar intensified with something acrid, something deeper.

The guest room was small and unremarkable with the exception of the young woman tied to a chair. Next to her was a cavernous hole in the floor with massive stone bricks pried out of place around it.

And there it was. The buzzing. Dalen gritted his teeth and slammed his hands against his ears. The painful sound from the hole filled his ears like a thousand yellow jackets. Using his shoulder, he pushed a nearby wardrobe on its side to cover the hole, muffling the sound by half. It crashed down onto the hole which had been wide enough for a man to climb from, or an Ollpheist.

The young woman, hardly more than a girl, sat with her hands tied behind her back. Her body was drained of pigment and wore tattered clothing which looked like a patchwork of rags strung together. Her eyes struggled to stay open. She failed to stir or make a sound even as Dalen cut her bonds.

Before they could leave, Dalen's duty required him to close the hole. He again removed the Corona from his jacket and held it in his palm. Upstairs it shone silver, but under the earth next to this open hole, it beamed a white light. He let the Corona go and it hovered like a floating star, its daggers rotating and glinting in its light. And while it bobbed in the air, he put plugs in his ears and shouldered the wardrobe to the side.

And as unpleasant as the buzzing was, he could never get used to the subterranean smell that accompanied it. It smelled of sour milk and refuse. But there was another element to it, like an exotic spice beneath the surface. The Tome referred to it as foul, but this word did little justice. The sum of these smells was so pungent that even a whiff made the strongest stomach invert.

Dalen steadied himself against the assault on his senses and focused on the Corona, and as he did so, it glided nonchalantly toward the hole. Concentrating, Dalen willed the Corona into the hole and began his work.

Some time later, Dalen emerged from The Gruel with a woman whose weight he supported as they walked. The sun had set and the rain pattered against the stone streets. As they got farther from the hole, she regained strength in her legs. By the time they reached Gorlee, she moved of her own accord. However, the color remained absent from her wet porcelain face.

"They'll have Ged at the gates," Gorlee said trailing off. He was not looking at Dalen, clearly captivated by the oddity of the young woman. "She's—"

"She's in need of help and we must get her back to the Order. We need her in the top of the tower, or I fear she's lost," Dalen said short of breath.

“No, that’s not it...” Gorlee said, more to himself than to Dalen. Uninterested in Dalen’s response, Gorlee pulled up the wood bound Tome and began flipping its pages, more frenzied than Dalen had ever seen. Dalen knew not what possessed him. This was no time for one of Gorlee’s academic diatribes.

“She won’t speak,” Dalen warned. “She’s suffered a trauma and we need to move. Now. This is no time to—”

The mad flapping of pages stopped and Gorlee began to look as pale as the woman. Gorlee turned the Tome toward Dalen to reveal a penciled sketch of a woman. Dalen recognized it as most Sagarts would, a facsimile of an oil canvas painting which hung in Father Sinsearach’s chancery. The portrait was a memorial to his lost daughter, Aislinge.

It was her. The woman in the Tome stood next to him. Certainly, she looked different in the sketch, her eyes full of life. The frail woman next to Dalen stood hunched forward, shivering, her wet brown hair stuck to her face. She stared wide-eyed at no one, gazing lost into the rain which suddenly became a deluge.

“This shouldn’t be possible,” Gorlee shouted over the roar of the rain. Dalen grabbed the book from him, pulling him with it. Dalen read the caption of the sketch in the book.

Event of O.S.S 302. Dalen looked up to see Gorlee shaking his head.

“She’s been gone for 37 years,” Gorlee said, seeming hardly convinced of his own words.

“Take me to my father,” the woman said, her voice like steel. She turned her head and locked eyes with Dalen. “I need to see my father. They’re coming. Like never before, they’re coming.”