

Lady Liadan,

If the seal of this document is unbroken when you find it, then I trust you have received the missive from Ser Carter. Though he is a frightened and damaged man, and rightfully so, I consider he and his companion to be trustworthy figures, having met them thanks to your directions. As such, you should also receive this along with the stone you entrusted to my care some moons ago. It is far better served in your care, as will be made plain in due time.

Permit me to begin this with a confession. You have known for some time that the being you sought, the culprit behind the incident at Toto-Rak of forty years past and the damning of twelve other souls to the embrace of the void was a Padjal. I must now make it known that I am the Padjal you have sought.

You should not feel shame at not realizing - I am sure, with your command of the elements and your ability to see into the aether, that you have seen that I lack any of the corruption of my fellow prisoners. I appear - or appeared - untainted, as I did all those years ago. The reason for this is simple: the twelve souls I offered to the void were not sacrifices. They were shields. The bargain I struck protected me from the effects of the darkness and passed it into them. The madness and, in the case of poor Ursuline, the twisting of forms, was meant for me. As long as they lived, I would remain unharmed, another Padjal in a forest where we are thinly spread, and where the people revere us too much to doubt us.

The death of Syros North has changed this. With his demise, the void that permeated his form has passed to me, and so I may no longer freely walk the forest. This is nothing I had not foreseen. I have known for some time that one of the twelve would meet their end and I would receive the share of my corruption that had been measured out to them. In the past, I expected that this would nevertheless be time enough for my plans to be enacted.

What I did not expect, however, was to abandon my plans entirely. And that is because I never expected someone like you, Liadan. You may consider this document my admission, and my confession - but not, I must stress, my request for forgiveness.

I asked you some time ago what you would do, what your life would be like, if you could not hear the Elements as you do. Do you recall? You told me that in all likelihood you would be slain at the hands of the Garleans, and that for you, your powers were a blessing. I understand, and respect that. I admire it. You have shown a dedication to the forest that many in your profession treat as merely an obligation brought on by their role; so, too, have you dedicated yourself to the people with equal fervor, by the compassion you have offered lost souls like the other prisoners.

It was a good answer, and I cannot argue against it. But I never told you, though I wanted to with great fervor, my *own* answer to that question, for not a day passes when I do not think of it. If I had not been chosen to speak for the elements, I know exactly what I would have done: I would have learned my family's trade, tending orchards with my father and tanning leather with

my mother. I would have grown up with my older siblings and watched my younger grow in kind. I would have found someone to love and raised a family with them, and watched them raise families of their own until my passing into the aether. The world is a disorderly one, of course, and there was every chance that other circumstances beyond being the first child of the Fahn family born in the Shroud, and having the ineffable qualities that attract the attention of the spirits would contrive to intervene. But they did not, and I was ten cycles when I started hearing understand the whispering I heard every day and the demands they made.

When you first realized the threat you faced was a Padjal, we discussed stories of those who might have rejected the gift so offered to them. I would ask you, in all seriousness, if to become a Padjal is any kind of gift at all: for a child to be taken from their families and made something different: unaging, a conduit for spirits as much feared for their wrath as respected for their blessings, and set apart from the forestborn by their devotion and reverence, needed in society but separate from it. Were it not for tradition and the undeniable power of the elementals, would we accept this? The taking of children and making them into something other? Such a thing, I think, would be considered a crime against nature, and I cannot condone it.

I realize this is a difficult thing to ask any devoted Gridanian, and in truth, many of our kind embrace their role, or at least accept it over time. This, however, is something I could never do, nor could my family. They objected, strenuously, and it was for their objections that I was taken from them and placed in another household: that of the Senna family. Whatever the family is like now, it was not a kind upbringing, but rather something of a re-education. I became resigned to my role.

I could not become resigned to the demands of the elementals, however. I could not resign myself to placing the needs of the people below the forest. I could not resign myself to the forestborn's treatment of the weaker among them, of the Keepers, of the Duskwights. And I could not resign myself to the elementals' unwillingness to intercede. But unwillingness is not the word, is it? The correct one is their inability to even distinguish between the Shroud's inhabitants enough to intercede in the first place.

And so I resolved to scorn the Shroud. I plotted, and turned against my fellows. I had plans to breach the Hedge, to weaken the spirits' control over the forest. But I was found out, and in a manner that would cause great embarrassment to the Senna. I was placed in Toto-Rak - another testament to the brutality of man allowed by the spirits without interference - rather than eliminated.

I do not know how long they planned to keep me there. I suspect I was only to be held until the Seedseer Council could find a way to eliminate me without angering the elementals. It did not matter. Within a sennight I had found what lurked in the dark in Toto-Rak. I know not if the years of torture and horror attracted the voidsent, or if it was some lingering thing from the days of Gelmorra. But I found it, and we spoke, and I made my bargain: the souls of twelve prisoners to shield my own and keep me safe, out of time and undying, until the Shroud was better prepared

to change. At that time, I would be released, as would the twelve, and I would be free to enact my plans. If I succeeded, then I and the Twelve would be freed. If I failed, or the corruption that held any of the twelve passed to me, then the voidsent would have a claim upon my soul, and, upon my death, my body.

The circumstances of my return are unclear; I do not believe that Neruhm - who took a part of my name in the exchange, as you will see - intended to release me. I returned to find Toto-Rak abandoned and in ruins, and the Shroud greatly changed. Even if my return was an accident, the timing could not be better. The great disaster I have heard others speak of from five years past has left the Shroud weak, weaker than it ever was. The Spirits cannot enact their will as forcefully as they could. Now was the perfect time to renegotiate the Pact of Gelmorra.

I found Syros North from among the ranks and recruited him as my agent, and left the others to their devices. He was a kindred spirit, broken as he was - another product of a tradition that puts power on those who do not want it, do not ask for it, and are damaged by it. Our plan was simple enough - by certain methods made known to me in the void, we would take items of holy power and concentrated aether and, through them, summon the legendary Toto-Rak. The spirits would submit to my demands, or the Shroud would be swallowed by a thousand maws. I believe your companions slew an abortive attempt at summoning the creature - incomplete, formed as much by Syros' madness as by the legend - some sennights ago. But there were other sources of power - namely, the very stones you have sought. I would find them, and through those I would enact my work.

But all of that changed when I met you, Lady Liadan. I have seen you fight to save those the Shroud would condemn as beyond saving. I have seen you question the wisdom of a government that privileges the status of its noblest citizens and its tradition of governance over the safety of its people. I have seen you raise a hand against the country's elite for the sake of both the forest and its inhabitants alike. And you have given me cause to reflect.

I see, now, that as the Shroud has grown weaker, the people have grown kinder. Toto-Rak is a ruin, a memory of the past that I hope shall remain forever so. The people revere the council of the present time for their deeds as well as their position, and seek to emulate them. The grudges of the past are beginning to fade. This is not the Shroud of two generations past; it does not deserve the suffering I would have wrought upon it if it failed to change.

Further, I see the terrible hypocrisy of my actions - to condemn twelve souls to suffering without choice in order to free others from being made Padjal without choice is a cruelty I can no longer countenance in myself. And so I renounce my schemes, and return the stone you entrusted to me to your care.

You shall not see me again, Lady Liadan, for some time, for there is work to be done and much to be corrected. I said at the start of this letter that I do not offer this as a request for

forgiveness. I do not believe there can be forgiveness. You asked me once, in all earnestness, if even the one who inflicted this suffering can be saved. If I can, then I cannot see it.

I do, however, ask this of you: save *them*. Save the twelve who remain. I believe that Nicolae Lynch's plan will work, and that Neruhm's hold on their souls can be removed with the right magicks in the right place. If it can, then save them all. Whatever horrors they wrought in life do not deserve the hell he would inflict on them when they die. It is too late for Syros, perhaps, but not too late for the others. Even the worst of them should be judged by their present deeds, not the damnation of the void. And every one of them who dies gives Neruhm a greater foothold into the world.

When you have cleansed them, enter Toto-Rak. Find the abandoned wing in which I made my bargain, and eliminate Neruhm. He cannot be allowed to manifest, and certainly not in the body of Padjal. It would become the terrible scenario you feared from the outset - a master of succor and the void. This cannot come to pass.

When you have done all this, then I offer you this: I still believe, firmly, that the Pact can be renegotiated. All I wish to change, now, is to give those who would be Padjali a *choice*, and ensure that no child should enter our company without the right to decline the offer. This can be done without the summoning of legendary beasts or holding the Shroud hostage. If you would join me in this, then we will speak again.

If, however, you feel that this is beyond our grasp - that the Shroud must be, or ought to be the way it is, then return the stones to their rightful places and meet me again. I will submit to your judgment. I will be waiting.

May the spirits whisper sweeter things to you than ever I heard in my life,

O-Rehn Fahn