It has been five years now since my brother first entered the Great Forest of Peytaht.

He used to say it called to him, as did our late father before him. From what I now know of its nature, I think they are both wrong in this. I think it was their virtue that beckoned – father’s ambition to discover the secret ‘heart’ of the forest and be the first to reach it, and my brother’s loyalty to the old man and the pride he felt in father’s work.

As I write this, I intend to follow in their footsteps. Not in pursuit of any lofty goals like discovering the nature of the forest but merely to find some clue of their passing and make some final goodbyes to my family before I move on from the chapter and begin my new life. This goal may not be as ambitious as father’s, but maybe the forest will recognise that I do not threaten it, or its secrets, with my presence.

I have made full preparations for this trip in my own fashion. My herbcraft is not equal to that of my brother and I lack father’s endurance and tenacity. What I have done is studied what is available, asked questions of those who have entered before and returned alive, sought advice from those who know a little about haunted forests – Navarr and Varushkan alike – and even questioned a Druj prisoner as to what their people in the Barrens do to placate the forces in the forest to allow their armies to pass through (this latter encounter, I should add, was unsuccessful in providing any information). This discovery has been a journey of itself, since I know now that the woman Gwyny who visited father for many years and entered the forest with him on some of his expeditions, is infact my true mother as I have long suspected. Whilst I was unable to locate her, I have spoken with several of the striding who have known her for many years. I will continue to try and reach her when I return from the forest. There are many questions I need to ask.

What I have then is three years of study to both warn and protect me from the dangers within – journals and notes I have purchased from auctions and borrowed from libraries across the Empire. I ask myself over, am I too much the sedentary scholar for this arduous trip? Should I just retire to a nice quiet spire in Zenith, paid for with the fruits of my research and the knowledge within me? To which I always answer no. I must hold fast. I must say my goodbyes before starting any new life, or else the memories of my old will haunt me as surely as the forest itself does. I must know the truth of this even if that be my own ending.

When we were younger, my brother and I would often accompany our parents into the outskirts of the forest beyond Exile. We never got very far, but we realised one thing very early. The forest itself is alive in some fashion, and resists intrusion with the forces available at its command. Since one of those primary forces seems to be fear, I have requested and received an anointing of courage to supplement the hallowing I have upon my quill. It will serve me well.

If you watch the forest closely from a high vantage point (the highest I could find locally), you notice that even birds do not fly over the heart of it. It was this observation which first led father in his ambition. Everywhere else, the flocks fly in their familiar formations, but over the forest itself they veer and part ways, often in what looks like apparent fear and confusion as if they don’t know why their formations have broken. It was what first led him into contact with nearby Navarr and the deterioration of his relationship with his wife for many years as his obsession with the forest outgrew the passion he had for her.

On first entering the forest on this, my final journey into its interior, I felt the familiar dull tingling, a sense of being watched: the presence of the wood, the gentle breathing of the trees. Despite protestations, I enter alone. We know from previous attempts that a lone traveller can usually make it further into the forest than a larger group.

The forest itself here is a tangle of brush, tree and gloom; the ground choked with stone and gorse. I have with me several days of provisions and some fresh water (enough to get me as far as the river I am already familiar with), my staff and my journal, a pack with camping essentials. I am careful to take only what I need and not weigh myself down too much.

Day 4

Little to report so far until this evening. The trip has been uneventful save for that sensation of being watched, which has a tendency to make me a little on edge and takes away any feeling of blissful solitude I might otherwise have had. Tonight however, I came upon a clearing which even in the dying of the light gave me goosebumps. The trees here are bare, even in the heart of summer, and decked with crude effigies of wood tied with dried vine. They resemble human, or at least humanoid figures. Several pieces of rag adorn these figures and what looks like dried blood. Entering the clearing from this path you can seem them clearly as you approach. Whilst it looks initially like one of the tricks the forest uses to strike fear into those who would intrude on it, the effigies look like they have been made with human hands rather than conjured by the place itself. Perhaps this is some place of propitiation then, where offerings have been made in times past to allow passage? Were it not for the lateness of the day and my desire to move on before nightfall (I am not so foolish as to attempt to rest in this haunted glade!) I would gladly have made considerable sketches of these scenes.

Day 11

I found my first indication today that others had passed this way – more than I thought. There are some ancient ruins here of what might once have been a cottage or similar small building. Only three low stone walls remain so it is difficult to tell what the full size of the place might once have been. There are a number of stone tablets here with writing on them but even in what counts for daylight under the heavy canopy the text is illegible, both being heavily weather with age and covered in creeping ivy and moss. Further in I find some mouldy parchments which are too delicate even to pick up, likewise given up to age and decay. I know my brother and father both kept journals and I spend some time scraping off ivy and moss to discover if I can spot the tell-tale metal clasp shaped like a bell that my father used to seal his journal with. I was not successful but begin to wonder if the only telling of their passing awaits undiscovered in a place like this, or some similar place I have already missed on my journey here.

Day 31

It is inconceivable that I have already been in the forest for over a month. Whole days have been torn out of my journal and likewise from my mind. My memory of how far I have come since I first made steps into the great forest is a blur. Was the progress of my brother likewise impeded? Or my father? Are there, were there, souls wandering across this landscape with no memory of their former selves and lives? My name is Miriam. I write this here in the case that I forget that in the same way as I have forgotten the last twenty days of my life. I have lost my staff and my quill somewhere on the way, likewise my pack. I cannot imagine what it is I have been eating these last weeks since my rations are nowhere to be found. The night is cloudy; there is no affirmation from the constellations as to the time of year. Yet my journal, which is all I have to go by now, shows twenty missing entries between the last one and this. I must abandon my journey now and the hope that I might have said those final goodbyes to my family. The forest it seems will claim another.

Day 32

Another old stone building, this one looks like a tower. I thought myself to be heading back out of the forest south, but I have been travelling in circles all day. It is obvious now I will not make it out again, but at least I have found something. In this place, covered in a layer of thick green moss, I have found fragments of both my brother’s and father’s journals which leave me some clues as to their fate. I have copied them here as the originals are too fragile to lift without disturbing thick clouds of mould and having the pages disintegrate in my hands. I have, finally, one last trick up my sleeve. The river is close by here and I will seal this journal, along with those who have come before me, as a testament and enclose it in my waterproofed leather bottle. By casting it into the river, where it can flow downstream to Exile or beyond, I can only hope it finds its way into a wiser pair of hands than these.

Take heed reader, for this is my fate and that of all those who dare enter the Forest of Peytaht.

**Two years after Gwyny returned from Peytaht without my father, I have taken it upon myself to find him. Those of his notes that remain at the chapter speak of his ambition but give me no cogent clues as to how I might follow in his footsteps. Despite the looks and comments from others decrying what they saw as an obsession rather than an ambition – or perhaps because of them – I’m proud of the old man and loyal to his memory. Sis thinks differently, I know, and doesn’t want me contacting Gwyny. She had been wary of father keeping her company so soon after mother died and the two of them had barely spoken a word to each other in the time she was here. Nevertheless, I have taken it upon myself to enter the wood. It is decidedly too late to effect a rescue mission, but it will secure his place in my heart if I can complete his quest, or at least find any evidence of his passing.**

**I choose this time because Gwyny’s striding will be passing back this way next month for the first time in those two years. I have sent word that I’d like to talk to her and – almost to my surprise – she has agreed. I suspect, given the last conversation she had when she returned and told me she’d left my father alone in the forest, that she would do everything in her power to dissuade me from taking up his mantle. Sis also thinks it’s foolish, but doesn’t want to agree with Gwyny either. She gets more headstrong and less confused with every passing day. If I stay here with her much longer, open arguments will ensue before long.**

**-**

**Meeting with Gwyny was brief and perfunctory, and went much as expected. She is adamantly opposed to risking any of her striding by returning to Peytaht herself but attempted to dissuade me from doing so. She spoke for a while about what I can expect to encounter and how to plan. No fire but fear hides in her eyes as I speak of ambition and adventure. She warns me repeatedly not to go, but then describes at length how to prepare for every eventuality, every possible weather condition, how to tell north from stars, sun and moss alike. There are some things, though, about the forest that she does not tell me. I can see them lurking as a lump in the base of her throat. Whether she will not or cannot tell me I do not know and do not ask. I fear that if she told me, I might falter.**

**-**

**Goodbye to Sis. I expected a last minute rush of resistance, but she barely looked up from her scrolls. I tell her that I will return soon with news, trying to laugh and keep it light despite the apprehension already in my soul. She looks up at me once, with those big, sad eyes of hers. She believes she is saying goodbye forever, as she once said goodbye to father perhaps – or to mother as she lay dying from a poison-tipped Druj arrow.**

**-**

**Only three days into the forest and I confess I am completely lost. Without the advice from Gwyny I would not have made it this far. The ground is stony and hard for the most part, all rocks and briar. More than once I have cut my leg – not deep gashes, but they sting with an irritating persistence and slow me down. My feet are covered with blisters, but my herbcraft is sufficient for me to be able to deal with such minor concerns. I have today seen evidence of human passing, where one of my father’s signature red flags flutters in tatters at the base of a tree. Three more follow in quick succession and my pace quickened. I can spot the red markers at a distance now my eye is trained to look for them, but by the end of the day I realise they have been driving me in away from the centre of the wood and not toward it. I curse whatever malicious spirits have laid this false trail for me and cost me two whole days walking, and resolve to discount such markers in the future, following only the path which leads alongside the river. This path surely cannot lie or drive me in a circle.**

**-**

**I have been following the river path for two days now but have been foiled again in my attempts to make progress further into the wood. I shall relate my encounters here for posterity so that if I ever return here I will know of my previous folly. Firstly, the path followed the river exactly, often switching from side to side and forcing a crossing over a fallen tree or a makeshift stone ford. Then it began to rise and the river was far beneath me so that I could only hear it rushing wildly below and no longer see its course. Then, despite my effort to get back to the river itself – walking along it if necessary rather than following the path – the river simply vanished. I have not seen or heard it now for three hours, even though I have been following it on one of the crude maps Gwyny was kind enough to draw for me.**

**-**

**Last night in camp the wind came in force. Great gusts struck up outside the tent, rattling the pot I had carelessly left over the embers of my fire. I heard voices on that wind, not whispering or beckoning but howling, forbidding voices urging me to return. Outside the tent I saw a silhouette which in manner looked so much like the old man that I stood up and rushed out to greet him, only to have my hopes dashed. There was nothing there save the wind in the trees and the loneliness of the night. I was struck suddenly with such a great sense of foreboding that I ran off at that point, my senses tingling and reeling from fear. By the time morning had come I had no idea how far I had run or in what direction. With the forest already disorienting me I had no hope of finding my camp of the previous night or which way I needed to go to return home and watch admit defeat to Sis. I resolve to set course by the sun and assume the forest would be more forgiving if I was trying to get out rather than in.**

**I am still completely lost, though I’m sure there is a presence now in the forest watching, but not guiding me. It sits on the edge of my vision, playing tricks with my mind, lurking, waiting. I have rested for the nights in what looks like the remains of an old stone house, now covered in moss. It is here that I found several pages of my father’s old journal left in a hollowed-out tree stump. Did he place them here, or is this yet another trick the forest is playing on me? They certainly look like his writing and relate incidents from our past. I will use the last of the night to copy them here into my journal in case they disappear in the morning as a hallucination or other cruel trick of this fearful place. Even in the shelter of the building it is dread cold under a cloudless sky and it would be wise to keep my hands and mind both busy rather than let my tired body succumb to a deep sleep.**

I have had to begin a new journal. Thank the virtues I had the foresight to bring spare parchment with me on this wretched journey! This forest has destroyed the notes I made before and all those, including my friend’s maps, that I brought with me.

Overnight our camp was once again approached by unseen forces. Two of the Navarr are missing and Gwyny is not happy. She wants to abandon the search for the heart of the forest here and now, thinking that we are on a fool’s errand. If even her hardened woodsmen are growing fearful and beginning to tire of the conditions here, I may be on my own very soon. I shall not give up my ambitions so easily and retire back to the chapter and my family.

I will make some hasty notes here now based on those I had made previously, from what we know about the forest so far.

* The heart of the forest continues to elude us. Every day we are faced with increasingly poor weather in all its varieties – harsh rains and hail, flash floods, days of baking sunshine followed by nights of bitter cold.
* The attempts we make to reach the heart of the forest are actively opposed not just by the elements and the effect they have on our ability to travel. Our very morale is sapped; every day we all grow more paranoid and fearful of each other. Critical supplies go missing. We walk round in circles, despite following the sun and the stars.
* We get lost all the time. Where there are paths, we follow them but they lead nowhere or worse – back to where we started. Gwyny and her men are at a loss to explain this phenomenon. They don’t like it at all, I can hardly blame them. They seem contented that there are no Vallorn present in the wood and that satisfies their initial suspicions – they care less about my personal quest and all want to leave.

The forest defies mapping, it defies geography. Constantly we hear things – rustling leaves, something crashing through the undergrowth – and are startled. When we investigate, there is nothing there to find and every investigation delays our progress. Whilst this is telling on the behaviour of the others, it only serves to make me more curious to solve the mystery, to reach the heart of the forest itself.

This morning, when we awoke, the two Navarr on guard were nowhere to be seen. Packs were strewn about the camp, my notebooks either tattered and blowing in the fierce wind or else sodden with the damp and mould that has also affected our provisions. Now, a large number of us must turn back for we do not have enough food remaining to feed the whole party and we have seen no living animals or birds to hunt.

Gwyny seems detached and we argue. She wants to take all her men and return. In anger I agreed. Let those who do not share my ambition leave me to mine. Perhaps I will have more luck on my own, if it is my own virtue being tested by some unseen force then so be it. I will face it alone.

I have walked now for three days through thick undergrowth, trying to find the river that I can hear flowing to the west, or to gain high enough ground to get a clearer view of where I am. Both efforts have been elusive and I have reached the limits of my endurance for today. Provisions are running low, but not dangerously so. I have been able to catch rainwater to drink.

This will be my last entry. I don’t know what I heard last night, I had thought maybe that some of the Navarr had come back into the forest with fresh provisions and that Gwyny had used her tracking expertise to find me. I am sure it was her voice calling out, but when I called back there was no reply. I have been without companionship now for what I imagine to be two weeks, though time itself also seems to be playing tricks on me. When I sleep, how do I know that I sleep only for one night at a time? I feel hungry and thirsty all the time. I don’t even know if I’ve reached the heart of the forest – metaphysically perhaps but not geographic ally.

It is too late for me to turn back, I do not have enough food left to make the journey. I have tried setting a small fire as a signal to my location, but the canopy is too thick here for any smoke to penetrate, even if the leaves and twigs were not so damp as to defy lighting. Rather than waiting for the end, I shall bring it upon myself and leave this journal here as a warning to others who might confuse ambition with folly.