

Day 6.

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Home Again, Home Again

Harlan is still gripping a woodsman's axe with a dead man's grip, his fingers white and tense.

Tala runs to him and wraps herself around him. Harlan opens his eyes and realises his sister is here. He starts to cough up blood, but says "Told you I'd find you". Salus performs first aid on Harlan, she realises his wounds are catastrophic but somehow he has survived. Although in severe shock he is oddly strong. As she heals him she sees a faint blue light running through his veins. As he heals he finally lets go of the axe. Aethlwynn runs to Tala. Harlan looks to all of us, thanks us and asks what he can do for us. Guru asks what happened to him and Harlan replies that the roots came from below, up through the ground and that there were far many everywhere. Aethlwynn asks where this happens, Harlan replies "The watchtower; it started with the pulse". He looks terrified and says "Like the world's heartbeat". Guru asks him "Who else was here?" Harlan replies that Jon, Elias and Merrin didn't make it, that they were taken. Aethswold asks "Taken where?". Harlan answers "They went straight down like something underground. took them" Guru looks round the compound but sees nothing.

Aethlwynn reminds them of the pit near the sled; Harlan says "That's where they were taken".

Aethswold and Sebastian see Harlan's left hand begin to twitch, almost rhythmically, as though he's matching something beneath the ground, something that feels alive but alien to us. Something that doesn't seem like possession. Guru looks for a magical link with the hand tremor and can perceive that something is in Harlan, an incredibly brief blue flicker within him that fades. It stays the same as we move Harlan from the Watchtower. Guru continues to monitor using sustaining his detect magic, but this doesn't behave like a spell as the pulse originates in his chest but seems to answer to something far away.

Harlan repeats that he doesn't know how he got there but he felt something take him underground, then next thing he knows is that he was here. Guru is worried that he is transforming and is concerned about taking him back to the town.

Guru looks for Magic on Tala and sees nothing. She has no magical aura and he cannot detect any blue pulses. Guru then decides to investigate the small lodge by the Watchtower.

Aethlwynn gently asks Tala why she ran out from her house and what scared her so much she had to run away. Aethlwynn also reminds Tala that she said she heard voices and asks what they were.

Tala says that she can't remember leaving the house and the next thing she remembers is being in the hut and the door being kicked in. Aethlwynn gently asks again about the voices. Tala looks to the old forest but says she isn't sure, at first she thought it was Harlan calling her, then she heard voices of a woman and child crying for help. She can't hear anything now. Aethlwynn asks what the last thing Tala remembers - it's being put to bed by her mum.

Aethlewynn looks at Tala's feet, but she seems to be physically fine. Perhaps a little too fine as she shows no ill effects after being barefoot in the snow all night. Her clothes seem only faintly damaged and there are no signs of her being taken underground. Aethlewynn continues to watch Tala but sees nothing more than a frail, scared, little girl.

While Aethlewynn talks to Tala, Guru looks in the hut. It has been damaged recently. He finds a flint and steel, 2 torches, 50ft hemp rope, a small kettle, dried venison (4 rations) 2 waterskins (but the water could be stale) and a wooden axe. There are 3 minor healing potions, unfortunately one is cracked and not usable. Under a broken bunk there is a locked footlocker which he drags outside. Guru and Aethswold use the wooden axe to open it and find:

2 sets of quilted armour (DEX MOD 3) 1 set of leather armour, a heavy winter cloak bearing the Moonrest Insignia, a small pouch with 12 silver coins and 34 copper coins as well as sealed wax packed labelled "To Elder Saelin if we do not return".

After one quick look around the site we prep to leave the wind drops instantly and the snow starts to fall silent. All bird song drops. Harlan stops speaking, looks towards the deep forest. Without warning there's a thrum, which is more of a sensation, we feel the pulse under our boots. Something huge has moved under the earth Harlan's eyes widen as he screams "No" another thrum bursts out. He makes a dash for Guru, he feels much stronger than he should be he cries "it's here" and the blue veins ripple across his body.

A again addresses the forest again. "As we have found our own, it looks like one of ours is also one of yours, can we leave in peace? This isn't coming from the forest it's coming from below. Harlan regains himself for the moment. He looks at Tala and mutters her name, he kneels beside her and says "... as he coughs more blood up. "he says don't follow the then looks down as he says it's waking. The ground under Harlan explodes up with black roots and they rip Harlan apart pushing his body into the frozen air. A tries to protect Tala from seeing this. He hangs suspended in the air, his body convulses and his hand starts to claw at his stomach and chest at first his blood runs red, then turns black. Salus tries to hit him with a divine lance. Guru also embraces Tala. The divine lance is topped by the roots, but they recoil violently. Tala tries to reach Harlan, we try to pull her back. She cries "Please don't" and for one moment everything stops. Harlan regains focus. He says "sorry, please save my sister" He looks at peace, but the roots continue to hold him aloft, but they draw him deep into the darkness.

Guru picks up Tala. A says "you have taken back your own". The roots drag Harlan into the ground, it's about a minute before he is enveloped and is no more. The clearing falls silent again and snow falls, the ground trembles like slow breath. The forest exhales and deep within the forest something answers, deep and seems to be from every direction at once. Again the blue light begins to pulse again, racing away like veins from the clearing in every direction. A small narrow wound remains in the soil, the black roots weave around themselves and we see a blue light pulsing through them. Aeth sees the pulse resemble magical energy but though living tissue. Salus sees it is like arteries, so seem to resemble human blood. She seems it seems to resemble no known faith. The energy seems more biological. The roots are not like a tree roots seem more like a nervous stem. Aeth notices the roots are not still, they move very slightly like shallow breathing. Guru's detect magic shows the entire clearing its radiating primal and occult energy as well as an unknown

energy. Tala is crying and muttering he promised he'd bring everyone home. She falls quiet and whispers its listening because its stopped making noise. A also hears this.

We head back towards the town. About 100 yds out we hear a deep low note, ancient. The trees seem to carry the sound, the mournful call almost like a long horn call. Guru feels Tala freeze instantly and she turns to the forest gaps "no not from the old grove, not one goes in there any more". We follow the path back feeling oddly unfamiliar, the silence in the forest is overwhelming. Seb glances back to the watch tower, for a brief heartbeat the tower seems higher than before. Seb wonders if he's seeing things. We go past the sled, and keep heading back. Back at the previous site of a root attack the remaining thick black roots seem to give under our boots as though alive. We continue back.

We are close to Moonrest Haven and we hear a distant ringing of a bell 1-2-3 pause then repeated. It's obviously Moonrest. Tala starts to panic as she hears Elder Saelin's emergency bell. She says it "hasn't finished". We leave the forest and follow the hunter's path, we see one of the hunter marked stones has cracked and the roots are running through the stone.

The bell continues to ring as we get closer. The woods distant and silent watching in the distance.

Closer yet we, the gates are open and all faces on the palleads turn towards us. We are greeted by Bran as we enter through the gates. He asks "where's Harlan?" Aeths replies he was taken by the evil in the forest. He bows his head towards Tala. The news spreads - parents pull their kids towards them ES and 2 council members run to us. She already knows but asks "no-one else" She sighs and says "then the forest has claimed them" Tala is still quite determined, but runs to ES and collapses in front of her "She sobs" I'm sorry it's all because of me> Harlan tried to save " Me ES places a hand on her shoulder.

The bell stops ringing, but the silence feels heavy. Yselle runs up to us and starts to examine us, she sees the black marks and asks if any of it came back with you " A says not that I know of . Y whispers this isn't over. A whispers to Y "Tala said that too" Es says " best we go somewhere quieter" we head to the LONH House with Y. ES asks for a debrief A will tell everything she knows. One starts to pray at the transformation. At the mention of the horn sound from the woods one of the older council members mutters "haven't heard that since I was a boy. ES says "enough for tonight, we will mourn those that have not returned. No one will enter the whispering woods" You have done more than we have asked. ES asks all the other council members to leave,, "she says she's never had to bury a man the forest refused to give back" she asks Y is she can tell anything from what's on our clothes. Guru hands over the sealed package. She reads the few lines legible as it's been soaked in blood. "She says she knows the handwriting, and opens it carefully. She quietly reads "the pulse beneath the old pines is not an animal. if the bell rings again burn the lower paths. She says "This was written by Garrick one of the the leaders at the watch tower, not a man to panic. If he wrote this then he truly believes there's no coming back " the lower paths have not been used for years, burning them would mean cutting off anyone who is still out there.

She asks us - before I condemn half this island to the flames is there anything that can be done. Y runs her finger over the blood and says, This was not written after the attack who wrote this had time and knew something was coming.

