***Blood Faith XVI***

Pereles, Invested Justiciar of the Ward, to Porfirio, devoted servant of Truth

At the time of this letter, news of my death has not yet returned to me, but I rely upon it having reached yourself, and from that reference, I give an account of the events surrounding my supposed death and depend upon you to discern that my destruction at the hands of Gaius was artificed in order to deceive the Council, notwithstanding the only alternative to this explanation cannot but prepossess your mind: that this communiqué is a trap engineered by the Council to lure you from your hiding place.

I return your mind to late in the spring when you sent that dire report and facsimiles of your proofs. Whereupon I received your letter, I proceeded with urgency and gravity to substantiate the outstanding claims it carried.

By grace of the state of heresy which pervades every coven of the *Novus Mundus*, I held the unique (and unforeseen) opportunity to obtain many of those texts which have been banned and eradicated in Europa. In truth, I found success far surpassing what expectations I held at the outset. (In addition to confirming the texts which you have in your possession, I uncovered compelling evidence in the Persian *Zīj* and a fragment of the *Book of Ḥanôḵ*.) I surmise that it was these successes—alas—that elevated my activity to the notice of the Council.

It is from this point in my tale that details stand starkly before the backdrop of my memory; and since the time my concealment began, the following recollections have played across my mind’s stage without recess.

On an evening when I was diverting myself over of a young, relatively unknown inventor who had recently enjoyed some success and therefore was in a spirit of exceptional ambition—which emotion afforded, as ever I find it to do, a most delectable and unique flavour in the blood—To begin again: I was in fact taking the last bit of pleasure I have known to date, and during one particular ebb from the headiness of the experience, I observed that I was being watched. Of course my veins turned cold at once, but since I felt yet not in complete possession of myself, I feigned continued distraction and rather than make homeward, I took my way to an opium den, which establishments are plentiful in the quarter of the city called Chinatown.

My pursuer, no doubt imagining that I was indulging myself over an easier, more tractable quarry—and this time laced with narcotics—waited for me outside. I left by another way and circled round, calculating that my shadow should let down his vigilance, as he surely supposed I was then doing. I dispatched the agent without hesitation, for he bore the mark of our order. Perhaps it was overhasty of me, but my nerves were positively attenuated by weeks of my dangerous pursuit of the heretical documents.

I was not—and am not—certain that the Council suspected any connexion between myself and your late defection, but I could not but suppose that my disruption of their surveillance of myself would lead to anything but an order of extermination. Consequently, I fled the new city of York with haste but not before contriving a means to save myself from whatever *ħashshāshīyīn* they should send after me. In fact my plan was more than that, for the world is not large enough to escape the reach of the potentates which your discovery has unmasked to—…but I almost wrote how many there are of us! I know of no way to offer you proofs of my continued survival but such as may prove our destruction if this letter be intercepted.

Returning to the matter of my extermination, then, how I long for my words to be read and for some soul to sympathise with our terrible reversal! I am staggered to reflect that it was Gaius Messōrius Vēnātor whom they sent for me. I admit that he is the greatest Inquisitor that the Council has at its disposal, but he is a blunt instrument, and I imagined myself sufficiently well-connected and our cohorts of sufficient principle that my disposal must require greater finesse, subtler politics. My humiliation aside, I remind myself contritely that my gambit may well have failed had they sent a more subtil agent, such as that accomplished murderess, *ecsedi* Báthory Erzsébet.

On to the particulars of my salvation, then. Quitting my dwelling in the Novus Mundus, I left behind a mechanism of Grecian invention of the ability to guide the possessor (my pursuer) directly to me. I left behind my brazen head as well and instructed it to divulge the director’s secrets to the *ħashshāshīyīn* under feint of hatred for me. The loss of these two artefacts was extreme but paled in comparison to the desperate risk which must come upon me when my *ħashshāshīyīn* should at length overtake me. Had he managed to catch me up before I reached Hispania Baetica, the rumour of my death would have been fact.

My gambit succeeded insofar that I was not outstripped until my final preparation had gone into place: in the city of Cádiz, I procured an *achaeropoieta* called the Mandylion, which artefact I wore wrapped about my chest and beneath my clothes day and night thereafter though contact with the Mandylion was a source of constant pain. Even now, the flesh of my upper body is disfigured and resembles wax which has melted and spilled down a candle’s sides. I fear that this weal shall never fully be repaired.

Notwithstanding the great suffering its vestiture caused me, the relic did serve its purpose. It holds great conservative power, for it is imbued with the faith of myriads of Catholicks. I suspect its virtues stem from aforesaid adherents’ belief in its association with the Crucifixion—but I digress. When I encountered Gaius Messōrius Vēnātor at sea (for such had been my design), he nailed me to the deck of my xebec with an iron stake, and I, though transfixed, was unharmed by the shaft. I pretended to die and so maintained until after he had set fire to the xebec and scuttled it to the sea floor.

Once submersed, I tore the stake from my chest, and even as the privation of air threatened my death, I exulted that the Mandylion had prevented even the slightest puncture wound (though it had, as I mentioned, otherwise afflicted my flesh). While undersea, I wore the relic like a mantle and held it over my mouth, which allowed me to breathe while yet underwater. I remained so until I was sure of Gaius Messorius Venator’s departure, during which time, the proximity of the Mandylion to the physiognomical manifestations of my Shedding wrought devastation, as you shall see. My lips and gingiva were burned away, leaving me with a terrible, almost beastly, aspect.

Because this injury prevents me moving among the *Homo mortal­­­is*, I have adopted the form of a flittermouse. Of necessity, I have secreted in a small city of Helvetia, called Grindelwald, and must remain a while. Yet this lifestyle takes a toll: I spend my days on a mountain near to the city, hiding in a cavity in the rock, and only come out to feed by night. I long to see my garden beyond the forest again. Perhaps if you arrive there before I do, you will water my watermelons and pumpkins?

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Post script: Please forgive the blemish on the page; my amanuensis spilled a bottle of ink, and parchment is dear under my current hardship.