Well!

Well.

As is my habit, I will write this chronologically, for if I do not I will surely miss all sorts of details and pieces that would otherwise come together to make a more complete whole. But first I will say: for goodness' sake, Chq'thai, stop blaming yourself.

We duelled and I lost, the morning before our latest adventures; unsurprising, as I've come to realize that the glaive is simply not for me. Perhaps if I could move more swiftly, or even more reactively – but I cannot, and therefore once a melee fighter gets past my blade, my battle is swiftly lost. Back to the sword and shield, for me. I gave Chq'thai one of my leaves as trophies, wound with colorful thread, after I'd been resurrected. (Chq'thai is from the Colorwoods, down south, nearby to my own origin in the deep jungle, where death is for proving oneself, and for sharing with others, and for joy; the joy of death, the joy of life.) That was my first death of the day.

Hm, though, to be precise, it was not the first mission of the day; and even before that, we had news from Xitli.

The ley-taps have all been closed! The party has been going on for days, and though we as a group did not attend, I have of course been coming and going and enjoying the music, the food, the dancing and the conversation; Xitli dared me to drink a concoction so strange it made me hear colors, and I'm afraid that Cashew has snuck away so many treats that she may soon become too fat to fly.

There were strangers in camp, wise folk and spokespeople from all over Lakeshore, come to celebrate and hear the news and decide what must be done next. We also did not speak to them, though I wanted to; alas that we had what felt like a thousand other things that had to be done.

The mana well has not calmed down. All can see the blue glow at night, from off in the direction of the lake. Storms, almost like moving blue shards, cross the land. As far as we can tell, though the Arcs should not return, power still flows into the lake. This worries me immensely. Surely the mana well cannot subsume the whole region?

But we have other problems, too. A troop of Bellmorn soldiers had been sighted, and some of our party went out to deal with them, fearing for combat, for we'd heard last month from Harmini of Bellmorn's encroachments into Eldar and the Weyrwoods. But they wished only to bring aid. Aid and themselves, of course, since they couldn't simply give us the supplies they'd brought; the party was, I hear, able to direct them somewhere they couldn't do too much harm (though as I type this, I wonder that *harm* is the correct word; too much annoyance, too much presumption, too much… encroachment?) and the influx of herbs has been, to see Valen's and Ptolemae's faces when they heard the news, much needed.

We had then more news from Harmini, for when I ventured out with the party, we went to accept Harmini's gift of slime-cages. As the blue mana well continues to grow, we see much blue rash

in our future, and as it's been found that blue slimes can absorb that mana rash, Valen wants to have as many as he can; thus, slime breeding, one of Harmini's specialties.

The visitor from Harmini brought word that the moot had concluded, and hopefully chastised Bellmorn somewhat; they are now in talks, I believe, with Eldar, Weyrwoods, and Belast, who together can push back against the incursions that have been felt against all three. Too, there is word that Bellmorn has a presence up in Coradel, on the other side of the plateau, helping the folk up there fight against a group called Old Syenon, who I have heard are quite evil. All this in addition to their ongoing fight against the Hur. Who has *time* for all that feuding? Ridiculous.

The slime cages were ungainly, but not too heavy; I could carry one myself. But though Otli has come into a ridiculous amount of strength, enough to carry multiple people at once, the cages were still to bulky for him to do more than walk with one at a time. They were also delicate, but by now Beau has a spell that lets him reforge a recently-broken item, no matter the complexity, so it was less a challenge than it might otherwise have been.

On our way back with the slime cages, we ran head-first into a storm; but of course it was not just us in the storm, for within it there was also a hydra, breathing out flame rays and blasts of fire that shattered several of the cages, before Beau repaired them. It was not too much trouble for a party our size, but it perhaps distracted us with its relative ease - we let our guard down, not concerned for what would come next.

(I have to admit that I've taken a break of several days here, in order to determine how I want to write this next section, and come to no solid conclusions about it. But I want this to be written, and so I must write it, ready or not.)

The gremlins that came upon us next tested us to our limits. We all set the cages down for this battle, I remember clearly; it's one of the clearest moments, placing the one I'd been carrying down by the roots of a tree with the others. After that, it all dissolved into chaos. There were already an unreasonable number of gremlins, even if they hadn't been changed by the arcs. Some had spells - some had skills - each of them was able to heal if a spell was cast on them, and they used this ability liberally and with intent. Echo later speculated that something was going on to link their minds, networking them or controlling them; our hunters dissected one, finding that its spine and nervous system had almost fully crystallized.

My first death during that battle was friendly fire. It happens, with pyromancers more than most. I won't say I'm not a bit bitter and annoyed about it, but it's the way of things, that people make mistakes.

My second and third deaths were both to gremlins; and, in part, due to the struggles I've found myself having with my glaive. As delightful a weapon as it is, I've come to the point where I can admit that polearms are just not for me. Back to a sword and shield it is, for the future. One gremlin impaled me, then before I could strike back, completely disembowelled me. After being healed from that, I was hit by a gremlin's spell, and then killed on the ground.

… Now as I write this, I'm thinking to myself - normal monsters do not do that. To kill an enemy on the ground takes intelligence and intent. Hmmm.

Well, the party did end up dealing with the gremlins, eventually. I think we fought something else after that, but I'm not sure - I must have been quite distracted. Or maybe what we encountered after *that* was just too memorable! Next, and last, came the ants.

We think they might have been native to the dreamscape - they seemed a little too metaphorical to be mindscape creatures, but sometimes the boundaries between the two are unclear to me. They came towards us, marching in a line, carrying water; and they had the power to temporarily charm people into joining their line, working with them to carry water from one point to another. We couldn't find the right way to ask them - or perhaps they didn't know - *why* it was so necessary they do this, they just kept insisting it was, and I was distinctly reminded of the dreamscape fish, a few months ago, bailing out the well. The start of a poem came to me; I've included it at the end of this chronicle, as it's taken some time to finish.

During lunch, I (and many others) overheard Lux and Leilani having quite the argument, over I believe whether it's all right to make deals or promises that would help a person without their consent. I decided I didn't want to handle any of that hot mess, and so avoided both of them for the rest of the day.

After we'd finished eating, the group decided to go investigate a strange opening or portal that had been reported in the massive blue shard. I don't remember what we fought on the way; truly, that day's heat was intense even for lakeshore, and we were all rather exhausted and droopy. Oh! And it was at this time that the problem of Ishamael once again came up, with some fascinating new information coming to light. For some background, Ishamael seems to have many personalities within his mind, each having their own abilities and concepts of the world, and he switches between them in roughly ten-minute intervals. Some are mages, some are warriors, some are semis; at least one is actively murderous, and has caused problems. But they all seem to not realize they're out of place; they remember the things that the other personalities do, but do not seem to realize it wasn't them doing it. Except for this one! He claims to be the original personality, who died during the Fall, and tried to play a game with Death; except the game he tried to play was Hide-And-Seek, and so he's been hiding from Death in his own mind. Or something like that?

(I overheard him and Ptolemae talking to Valen later, and Valen seems to think that that mind is no more original than the rest of them! Curiouser and curiouser…)

But in any event, we got to the shard with few enough problems that I don't even recall what they were. The shard itself was bewildering, all foggy and confusing, but one of out party members (who??) was able to lead us directly through to the portal - in fact, to the point where I walked through it without even realizing I was about to do so!

We emerged onto the Shimmerglass Sea.

I do not use "onto" metaphorically here - we were standing two or three feet above it, on seemingly thin air, yet not falling. The "floor", as it were, was perfectly smooth to the touch. We could tell that the mana here was overwhelming, and would lead to more rash or even burn the longer we stayed, so we tried to make it quick; we also worried quite a bit for Sybil, who's more

susceptible to the lake due to the intervention from it she received. The concern, I think, was that if they touched the lake water, they'd melt into it and become a part of it, losing all their individuality.

We explored the lake, trying to figure out what we could about its… well, its everything, to be honest; the mana, the water, the history, the paths and patterns. I don't think we were able to discover much - at least not before we were attacked.

Cormorants, changed by the mana and aggressive enough to take on a party of high-level adventurers, twice swarmed us when we were at our most distracted. And, of course, when we were at our second-most distracted in the aftermath of the second attack, Ishamael once again changed, becoming an assassin and attacking the party. We were able to take him down, of course, but… it was a distraction we didn't need at the time, especially since he (his more knowing personality, that is) and I had just before he changed been talking about whether or not it would be possible to use the lake's overflowing mana to do some sort of worldwide identify, with the help of a set of magic bracelets Echo had made.

But nothing came of it, and we could feel the mana rash getting worse and worse, so we decided to leave, and hopefully return another day, with more knowledge and more distinct ideas of what we could do. (It's during times like these that I miss Joy, who perished last month, and who had such a mind for mathematics and mana-flows and strange ideas that sometimes actually worked…)

As I stayed in town afterwards (as many of us did, honestly, trying to think through the implications of all we'd seen that day), another group went out and captured some blue slimes, as Valen had been asking for. Since we now have the slime cages from Harmini, the hope is that we'll be able to breed and propagate the blue slimes for use in curing all the blue mana rash (and worse, mana burn) that's been accumulating.

And after that - the party! Music and dancing, games and stories, and of course above all else food and drink. A small group of children dared me to drink their "magic potion" (it was mostly mud, pine needles, and a little bit of berry juice). Beau got blackout drunk, so I ended up helping Leilani serve herself some of the food (she has quite bad mana burn on one of her arms, and can't use that arm at all. Hopefully the slimes will help). Leilani's friend Soleili (who I hope is now my friend as well) was quite grumpy about attending the party, which was very funny, but I did manage to draw him into a discussion of the kinds of interesting fish in the Shimmerglass Sea. Aeliana also managed to get fairly tipsy, though not as much as Beau, and some of the scouts taught her and I to gamble. We were quite bad at it! What a delight.

And then… the sunset.

The death from Chq'thai flowed through me softly - as the other three deaths distinctly did not. Weight, and weight, and more weight, in Lady Death's hand dragging me down. The thinnest thread now binds me to this life: Ra's gift of three more months.

Now all that's left to do is spend them, live, wait. And see if, perhaps, Obb is willing to look after my birds.

Fish out of water
Ants in a line
Deep wells of power
Crystal-bright shine
Friends tied together
Life held hand-in-hand
Withstanding weather
Wound deep through the land

Blue storm clouds grow
On a surface like glass
Bright waves come and go
Leaving dreams where they pass
Death comes close to home
As the lake-waters surge
We won't be alone
Though our paths may diverge

Our hearts overfull
We laugh and we cry
As waves push and pull
Rise up over the sky
The world has a soul
It sings now and then
Someday, in some role
I'll see you again!