

The Diary

June 12 – Today marks the third month since Athalon fell. It feels like it's been an eternity. But then, time flows slowly in circumstances like these. And time isn't what it used to be.

We spent the day resting, and remembering Athalon; we at last held a ceremony for those who died in the fall. The simplicity and order of it was relaxing, a chance to forget everything and lose myself in the ritual. Malius said he figured we had covered enough ground to be safe for a day, and that if we kept pressing at the same rate for much longer we'd kill ourselves anyway. I think I believe him.

I made no mention of Carolyn today, no blessing of her memory. She's still alive, still out there. I know she got away. She made it clear. I'll find her.

A crash, a cacophony, cries of alarum. A sickly pale blue glow flickers across the wall, freezing into afterimage the detritus of three years of life. The room is otherwise empty.

Stumbling to the window. Outside, smoke fills the air; the city burns. Another deafening roar, then silence. Slowly the ringing fades, and the screams are heard again. Time to go.

June 14 – Resting was a bad idea. We weren't far enough ahead. The soulless came upon us in the night; if Malius had not insisted we keep watch anyway, we'd all be dead. As it was, Anika was too slow getting to her feet and couldn't keep away. We couldn't do anything for her, couldn't even save her body for a proper burial.

I think it says something that I don't even feel the least pain over new deaths anymore. There have been too many.

Now there are only four of us left.

Out into the hall; it's deserted. A hastily packed bag slung over one shoulder: food, a change of clothes, a diary. Trying to stay composed, to figure out how to get out of this.

Should have about two hours, or three with luck and more risk, before escaping is impossible. First to the infirmary, then, to find Carolyn. Then gathering supplies, weapons, medicines, everything that will be scarce soon.

Into the street and through the pandemonium at a run, dodging the dead, the dying, the insane, and the rubble.

June 23 – We left the foothills and entered the mountains proper today. Four months ago I never could have made a climb like this, but I'm used to days of endless walking now.

Cyril has been talking about the soulless. He thinks he can study them, understand them, learn how to stop them. Stop them from spreading, he is quick to emphasize; the lands around Athalon are as dead now as the Wastes. Maybe if we reach civilization again it will be possible ward them off as he suggests. Maybe he'll do a better job than Carolyn and I did last time. Maybe he can actually convince someone to listen to him in case his wards fail.

Still, time to think is a luxury we've had far too much of recently. There's less conversation, we just push on in sombre silence, staring at our feet as we climb the treacherous path. Nothing seems to be alive here, there is only the wind and the sun, and somewhere behind us the soulless spreading outward. Somewhere ahead, over the mountains, there are people. Somewhere ahead, I will find her.

Arriving, out of breath, at the infirmary. Or what's left of it. Searching. Frantically searching. Carolyn is there, her eyes still bandaged. She can't see.

The city still burning, lighting the night almost to day. Orange and blue light flickering through the streets. Leading Carolyn by the hand, running. Some commotion ahead, shapes flickering through the smoke and shadow; more screams. Ducking into an alley, lying low, waiting.

Heart racing, breath heavy. Still waiting. Need to get moving, find others, find supplies, find a way out.

July 1 – I'm not certain of the date any more. It's been slow going in the mountains, and time is worse. Sometimes hours pass in the blink of an eye, and sometimes minutes stretch on for what should be days. I had hoped that this would be better on this side of the border, but it seems not.

We crossed the Harrowed Pass earlier today, which means we've put the worst of the mountains behind us and are now once again approaching civilization. There have been many groups of soulless out here, though; it seems that they've been in the mountains far longer than anyone would have imagined. We've managed to avoid them all so far, fortunately, although we've had to travel far out of our way to do it.

Talia noticed part of a discarded uniform in the snow; it was bloody and had been torn deliberately in several places. It looked like someone was using it to dress a wound. The blood was at most a week old, which means someone else passed here before us. Someone from Athalon. Someone – my mind insists against reason – who will know about Carolyn.

Alone, now. Pinned down in the ruins of a home. Carolyn waiting with others: elderly, children, infirm. The strong gathering food, supplies, weapons. Getting worried. Too much time has passed. Risking everything. Running back.

July 5 – As I write, in the valley far ahead of us, there is a flickering light; a fire. Some other survivors. If they travel slowly, we can reach them late tomorrow afternoon.

The mountains are nowhere near safe; no one sane would broadcast themselves this near to the mountains. The soulless have at least some base level of cunning – and possibly intelligence; none have survived to tell – and would certainly swarm at any sign of people. Malius thinks it's a trap.

Yet we have seen far fewer soulless since we left the heights of the mountains; it's possible that a large and well-armed group would feel safe with a fire, to raise spirits and warm hearts. Tomorrow I will find them, on my own if need be.

Too late. A block away, the building where Carolyn was, burning. Hundreds of soulless between here and there. Will never reach them.

Limping, now. Can't catch them if they escaped in a hurry. Finding others. Getting out of this alive. Finding her again.
