

Guildbook:



By Beth Fische



"And I pray you let none of your people stir me: I have  
an exposition of sleep come upon me."

— William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*



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## Author's Dedication:

To you, from Grasshopper



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Because of the mature themes involved, reader discretion is advised.

A thousand apologies to Joshua Gabriel Timbrook for misspelling his name in the credits for **Dark Reflections: Spectres**.





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# Ghost Story: A Road of Steel and Souls

*Learn the power of life, that you may use it even in death.*  
— The Lady of Fate, to Charon

## Part 2: Sacrifices





read Siklos, Charon's blade, cast a sinister glow across twelve masked faces as Thusimos held it aloft. "There is the might of Charon: cleft asunder!"

The ancient sickle, a curved blade forged from the souls of Stygia's worst traitors, gleamed wickedly in the crimson candlelight. A product of Nhudri's craftsmanship, the sickle smelled of salty blood and sea, a scent which pervaded the room until one could not escape the feeling that Siklos had tasted the centuries much more keenly than even the most venerable of Stygian wraiths. The heavy blade arched with the grace of an assassin into a long handle ending in a grip that, like Charon's former rule, was wide and strong. Siklos dominated the room; its shadow swallowed the mere figures of the wraiths there, as if Charon himself were present.

Behind the onlooking masks, Lord Ember's eyes widened the most, revealing a momentary recognition which heated quickly into the fiery furnace of an Artificer's anger. "Sandman, how dare you try to fool us with your cheap parlor tricks!"

Thusimos, the ancient bard, smiled behind his mask; Ember was not stupid. "Yet, my Lord Artificer, you of all of us best know Siklos' soul. You know her intricacies, her curves, her subtle in-lays, and the fine luster of her steel. Would you not say that what you have before you is a curiously accurate representation?"

Ember thought a moment, reluctance to agree plainly evident in his hesitation. His craving for control of the meeting as rightful "Master of the Eldest Guild" was transparent to everyone present. "My dear Lord Thusimos — if that is *indeed* your name — to be frank, I have never seen a more accurate fraud. Yet it is your turn to speak; why waste our time on spectacles?"



"Because spectacles, as you so inaccurately call this illusion, will ultimately *save* us time. My Lord Ember, how do you suppose I came by such an accurate representation of Siklos — guesswork? Witnesses? Facsimiles?"

Before the Artificer could retort, the portly Oracle interrupted, as Thusimos had prearranged for her to do. "Rubbish! Everyone knows how secretive Charon was with Siklos. Few even knew what the sickle looked like. They say that because Charon and Siklos were linked somehow, he kept the blade locked away in the armory under special guard until such time as he needed it." She put her hands on her ample hips. "I can't vouch for the accuracy of detail like our illustrious Artificer here, but if Ember says this Siklos is realistic, then there's something strange going on. Has the Sandman *seen* Siklos?" The portly Oracle cast a sidelong glance at Thusimos.

Behind his mask, Thusimos raised a quizzical eyebrow. What was that misbegotten Oracle up to? He'd paid her to hint at questions, not to pose them. Perhaps it had been a mistake to trust her subtlety.

"As a matter of fact, yes I have seen her, and lately, too." An expected gasp from the audience, his part duly redeemed.

The Chanteur, clearly an impostor with an undemourished sense of restraint, nearly rose to his feet. "Then Siklos has been found?" Thusimos glanced surreptitiously at Ember, reading keen interest and concern in those stern, coal-black eyes.

The Sandman, warming to his role, hefted the Siklos illusion and laid the blade flat across his palm. Nursing the pause, he pretended to examine Siklos *carefully*, then gave one sharp nod, as if deciding to disclose important information. As he slipped Siklos beneath his black robes, the illusion disappeared.

"Has Siklos been found? Perhaps, although it is more likely that Siklos has allowed herself to be found." Thusimos paused, allowing the so-called "Guildmasters" to ponder this information. "I caution you that what I am about to say must not be discussed beyond these walls except with the utmost caution. If the Deathlords hear that Siklos has emerged, the race to find Charon is lost."

The Guildmasters seemed to lean forward in their Stygian-steel chairs, their masks carmine under the flickering candlelight. The eyes of some, like Ember and the Pardoner, revealed both grave skepticism and dark concern, while others, the Masquer foremost among them, simply looked spooked. The way Thusimos wanted them.

"Lord Ember, when last we met, you spoke of nightmares that older mortals were experiencing — nightmares of Charon and Gorool, nightmares indicating that someone — or something — had promised Gorool a sacrifice. Yet you, Pardoner, and you, Oracle, do not remember Gorool calling for his sacrifice as he emerged from the waves. This discrepancy concerned me, as dreams *are* the concern of Sandmen. Thus, I began to monitor the

dreams of these Quick." Thusimos leaned with both hands on the hand-wrought table. "Night after night, I returned to them — and indeed in them Gorool demanded his sacrifice. One night, however, just a few weeks after our meeting, I sensed another entering these nightmares, quietly, methodically, patiently altering each dream. He erased Gorool's demand for his sacrifice, and thus the implication that a traitor had betrayed Charon."

Ember's eyes widened behind the cracked, blackened skin that let him cover his visage without a mask. "Then a Sandman has turned traitor!"

The other Guild representatives began to whisper animatedly amongst themselves, but Thusimos raised a quieting hand. "Not so hasty, my Lord! Shortly after my discovery, our Guild apprehended this wraith. Ember, I am sorry to say that he had the sooty hands of an Artificer, an Artificer who happened to know the Sandman's art. These same hands carried the blade of Charon, which our Guild wrested from him. Under brief questioning, he admitted to having betrayed Charon; in return, Gorool promised to give him Siklos. He told us that his presence was an embarrassment to my Lord Ember's Guild, for he, having heard from Gorool himself that Charon had entered the Labyrinth, had determined to follow Charon there and dispatch him with Siklos, Charon's own blade."

"Ridiculous!" Ember, who had been sitting stiffly with his gavel in hand, erupted. "Artificers are loyal to the Guild — everyone knows that. Enough of these wild fairy tales. Who else wishes to speak?"

"I do," whispered a dangerous-sounding voice from the shadows in the back of the room. The Harbinger stood with panther-like grace and quiet ease, her eyes black as midnight. "I do, and I say we hear out the Dreamcrafter. There is more to his tale than meets the ear."

She sat, everything but the lacquered shine from her black half-mask receding into the shadows. An uncomfortable silence fell. Then the Oracle rose with a determined stare at Ember, while addressing the Harbinger. "Very well then, Vagabond. Lord Thusimos, tell us, where is this traitor now?"

Thusimos nodded sagely, as if expecting such a question, secretly grateful to the Guild Elders for permitting him to buy off the Oracle; she had a certain staunch belligerence that bullied others into compliance.

"Regrettably, the traitor escaped with Siklos."

"Pah! What did I tell you about fairy tales?" Ember spat the words.

"We Sandmen are artists, Lord Ember, not warriors; the Artificer knew that when he overcame our guards. But if you want evidence, I must remind you that information about Siklos' appearance is hard to come by."

The Chanteur, feet now propped on the table, added in an inquisitive sing-song voice, "He's got a point there, Master Flame."

"If I may continue?" Thusimos paused. He had done it a thousand times before: give them just enough information to





hang by, let them make fools of themselves, then explain why they're such fools. It was a standard dreamscribing formula, but one, as the "Guildmasters" aptly demonstrated, that still worked. "When this Artificer" — he lingered on the word — "escaped, we followed. And followed — right into the very mouth of the Labyrinth. Yet, we found ourselves afraid, for there on the dusky threshold of the Veinous Stair, Siklos — Siklos! the blade that couldn't be broken! — lay snapped in two, her moans chilling to the ear. Boulders the size of wagons had been cleft in half, and ten-foot gouges like claw marks marred the marbled face of rock near the Labyrinth's maw. The Artificer was nowhere to be seen, but we heard strange clanging echoes receding into the mazes of the Labyrinth far below. Needless to say, we quickly retrieved Siklos and left — and have kept her under our stewardship since."

"So, for the last two weeks you Sandmen have been withholding vital information from us." The Harbinger's voice cut into the conversation like an icy wind.

"Not withholding, no. We are proposing that you, as representatives of each of your Guilds, return and discuss this information with them. To be frank, because the Artificers have already played some as yet undetermined role in this escapade, we are unsure whether or not it is safe to reveal Siklos before discovering what that role was. One question we are asking ourselves — and we encourage you to ask the same

of your Guilds — is whether or not to reforge Siklos. If this council considers it, we must also ask ourselves whether or not we want the Artificers' Guild to reforge her unassisted —"

"These insults are unwarranted," Ember's bass rumble echoed through the chamber, "the envious strikes of defanged vipers. Our Guild has long stood for ethical and honest conduct; to suggest otherwise is ludicrous." His gavel struck the table twice: "I move that the Sandmen's Guild produce Siklos for all of us to see."

"Oh, we have no quarrel with that," Thusimos smiled. "We simply do not want Siklos disappearing when it goes into the forges. I move that we adjourn this meeting until the Guilds have had a chance to discuss these issues amongst themselves."

The Oracle still stood, her hands resting on the table. She shook her head in disapproval. "We need to talk over a few more issues before we adjourn." Some of the other Guildmasters began to grumble.

"Such as?" Ember's growing impatience filled the room like a burning fuse.

"Following the traitor's trail before it grows cold. Finding more evidence against him."

"Choosing volunteers from each of the Guilds to enter the Labyrinth." The Harbinger's cold, silky voice cut in. Her tone



teemed with suggestion: namely, the probability that none of these volunteers would return, that perhaps nothing would come of their sacrifices. It was as if she knew Thusimos' most secret thoughts and yet, for some unfathomable and deeply disturbing reason, was trying to help him. If he were alive, he'd be sweating with fear.

"Aye, to enter the Labyrinth with the reformed Siklos," added Ember.

The Chanteur winked. "Can't wait to get your sooty hands on that blade, can you, Lord Forge?" Ember shot the singer a poisonous glance.

"I suggest," Thusimos interrupted before fighting broke out, "that we adjourn, discuss these issues, and, yes, find volunteers amongst each of our Guilds — as Dame Harbinger counsels — to enter the Labyrinth both in search of the traitor and of Charon. I would add, however, that it would be wise not to assure your volunteers that they will carry Siklos, for we have not yet collectively approved her reforming."

As the room cleared, Thusimos withdrew into a shadowed niche and entered a trance. Every time he slipped into a Dreamscape, he dreamt of the glorious sunlight warming his cold body and splashing the landscape with a dazzling array of colors — colors the dolorous gray Underworld lacked.

Before him, three half-masked Sandmen, the Elders, beckoned for him to enter their amphitheater. Thusimos bowed and passed between the stolid stone benches ringing the open stage.

Each of the Elders, as well as Thusimos, regularly met there in a collective dream. The three "owned" this amphitheater dreamscape, the stage where they performed their plays when the mood suited them. While Thusimos' presence altered small portions of their dreamscape, such as the brilliance of the sun and the verdure of the grass, the amphitheater itself remained a constant, a prearranged meeting place for personal conclaves such as this.

Thusimos bowed again, this time with flourish. "The meeting went well; we adjourned still contemplating the issues of reforming Siklos and following the traitor into the Labyrinth."

The Elders nodded graciously in unison, as was their habit. As if with one voice, they spoke. "Then they are convinced of the traitor?"

Thusimos nodded pensively and sat on a stone bench nearby, the seat of which gave, as if made of straw. "I'm sure that they discuss the question of the traitor even now, although it was clear that many among them were skeptical — as they should be. Still, they seemed ready to entertain the idea of pursuit."



The Elders' dour faces cracked into smiles. "Good, good. We want to keep them occupied while we find Charon."

Phaenos, a gray-bearded figure garbed in white linen and sandals and the tallest of the three Elders, seated himself next to Thusimos. "We've been receiving complaints of Charon's dreams, similar to your own, while you were gone. Slumbering Dreamcrafters and other Shadowland sensitives have been dreaming of Gorool and Charon." The Elder placed a gnarled hand on Thusimos' knee. "We've even received reports that a few Stygian Sandmen are experiencing these nightmares. The Deathlords won't long remain ignorant, though we're trying our best to silence the reports."

"Have you collected the dreams?"

"Indeed. Akhshephat keeps them." Phaenos nodded toward Akhshephat, the thin Egyptian Elder, who graciously bowed his head. "Why, do you wish to review them?"

While Thusimos did not like leaving his corpus unguarded in the secret Guild council room as his mind flitted into the Dreamscape — especially after insulting Ember as he had — his curiosity would not be ignored. "A brief glimpse."

The dreams were all similar: The reptilian horror named Gorool rising out of the murky depths to confront Charon on his puny skiff. Siklos, glowing red with hunger, the might of her dreaming souls pitched against Gorool in high battle. The whirlpool into which Charon and Siklos, then Gorool,

disappeared. And, of course, no dreams of Gorool demanding sacrifices, nor dreams of traitors exchanging Charon for Siklos. A fiction for the Guilds.

That moment of Charon's disappearance concerned Thusimos, however. He recalled the last time he touched Siklos, after he found her washed ashore on the black sands north of the Weeping Bay. His touch must have awakened something in Siklos; not a conscious mind or a conglomerate of fractured thoughts from the forged souls Nhudri destroyed to create her, but the anguished dreams of someone, or something, intimately known to and knowing of Charon. To touch Siklos' dreams was to touch Charon in the last moments of his sacrifice: in her dreams, his journey was not one into Oblivion, but a journey into the horrific depths of his own madness and out again into the peace of self-acceptance — and then out yet again into...nothingness. That was Charon's real disappearance, not the moment when he and Gorool vanished into the gargantuan whirlpool.

Thusimos touched Siklos again in his mind, even as he returned to the Elders' dreamscape. Despite having practiced the Sandman's art for over two millennia, the Dreamcrafter still found Siklos' dreams alien and not altogether trustworthy. Viewed from afar, her dream images were disjointed, a cracked mirror, and as painful as if twisting a broken leg in two directions at once. Viewed close, the images coalesced into a






strangely comprehensible dream about Charon's disappearance. As she balanced in Charon's ghostly palm before the final battle, Thusimos understood Siklos' hunger not to be a craving to rip into Gorool's corpus, but rather to taste of it and to delight. She was bound to Charon and his will, but her secret appetite was to betray him and Stygia. Gorool's flesh was sweet with that taste, for Gorool (the shock of her revelation still rattled Thusimos) was a manifestation of Charon's Shadow. The moment Siklos bit into Charon's demon, she tasted their similarity; she made Thusimos, touching her dreams, taste it. Gorool tasted of monstrosity, and filled Thusimos' imagination with horrors beyond the nightmares even the Sandman had known.

Siklos dreamed obsessively of Charon's battle with his Shadow as they descended, whipped around a frothing, savage whirlpool a mile wide, and sucked down into the sluggish oily currents at the bottom of the Sunless Sea. The blade's dream images filled Thusimos' mind: Charon, tossed like a doll in the whirlpool, yet clinging to Siklos and slashing at Gorool in desperation; Gorool thrashing wildly but still seeking to spear Charon on its razored claws. Charon's mind a whirlpool of emotion, desperation to save Stygia from his own worst mistakes: wraiths blinded to pay passage into the Underworld for lack of coin; the hellish blaze of Kyklops and the forging of the first wailing souls; the slaughter of the malcontents to quiet unrest;

the closing of his eyes to secret experiments on Renegades; the painful compromises with Stygian Senators and the slow erosion of long-held ideals. As the centuries progressed, the mistakes worsened: the banishment of the Ferrymen; the abuse and binding of Thralls; the sacking of temples; the disbanding of the Guilds; the Great Evacuation; the enslavement of wastrels; the determined and habitual disregard of his own conscience about oboli production; the encouragement of the Underworld soul-trade.

Siklos showed the centuries depositing each crime or misdemeanor on top of the other in fossilized layers, until the archaeology of Charon's Shadow seemed a sentient force intent on consuming Stygia and all of Charon's other accomplishments. Thusimos remembered living through Charon's transgressions even as he had floundered within Siklos' dreams. Yet, though he disagreed with many of Charon's actions, he still recognized that the Reaper had accomplished much. As the Sandman dug into Siklos' fractured nightmares, he watched Charon wrestle with Gorool under the Sea of Sorrows, pierced by the Malfean's iron claws and tormented by its thoughts. Gorool pressed the weight of Charon's mistakes into him like a blade into the heart, and Siklos scarcely parried. But from somewhere deep within him, Charon had dredged up memories of his accomplishments, which entered Siklos' dreams like venom: the inspiration of the Ferrymen; the rescue of Nhudri





from the Labyrinth; the stability of the Stygian Republic in its founding days; the genius of the road system; the doctrine of Lux Veritas; the saving of the City of the Dead; the building of the sea-wall around the Isle of Sorrows; the original intent behind the Dictum Mortuum; the stability of the Hierarchy during the chaos of the Black Death; the attempt to ease Stygia's overcrowding by founding Necropoli; and, most important of all, Charon's final decision to sacrifice himself to save Stygia. In that moment of realization, Siklos' dreams registered utter nothingness: Charon and Gorool disappeared, and Siklos, in her nightmares, fell ownerless to the floor of the Sea, her dreaming thoughts groping for Charon's mind.

At the time, Thusimos had not the faintest hint of what had become of Charon, but now, as he returned to the Elders, he had been given a working theory. All the evidence suggested that Charon had incarnated himself in the world of the Quick, sacrificing his rule to save his people — or perhaps to save part of himself. Elder Dreamcrafters quietly speculated that somehow, in a blaze of self-acceptance, Charon had consumed his Eidolon and his Shadow to save Stygia and to save himself: He insinuated his soul into that of a newborn, retaining no memories, no plans — only his dreams (and these, it seemed, only by accident). There, in the Sunlit Lands, he grew up, fell in love, and began to die without any knowledge of the Empire of Death that awaited him. Even now, Thusimos believed, Charon could be out there, an aging man among the Quick, the native power of his spirit broadcasting the last nightmarish

moments of its sacrifice to all those who were dying around him. Even now, the Dreammasters theorized, Charon's second death could mean the lowering of the Shroud and the beginning of a new age.

Thusimos and his Guild believed they had to find Charon before the Grim Reaper died again, before the Deathlords discovered what had become of him, before the Reapers harvested him. It was well that the other Guilds were occupied with the vain search for Charon in the Labyrinth and were distracted by talk of traitors, and the more thoroughly the Artificers were implicated in the whole complex charade, the better for the rest of the Guilds. Still, Thusimos was taking a risk in misleading the others, and he knew it even in the name he had chosen, "Fit for sacrifice." If the Sandmen failed to find Charon or the Guilds became desperate, Thusimos became the scapegoat. It was his risk — his alone.

Thinking of Charon and Siklos, Thusimos returned to the Elders and the amphitheater. The Elders were sculpting dream-birds as the vision of the amphitheater gelled around him. Thusimos stepped into the dream and coughed politely to draw their attention to him. "Thank you, Akhshephat, but the dreams contained little of interest."

Akhshephat turned and smiled, a toothless, watery-eyed, white-stubbed grin, like that of so many old men Thusimos had seen. "So, will you continue your search for Charon, Thusimos?"

With the dark glimmer of humor in his eye, the old bard winked. "Akhshephat, I would do *anything* for a good story."