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NOWHERE KIND

SAMUEL SANTIAGO
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Reviewed and approved* by the following:

Liliana Naydan
Assistant Professor of English
Thesis Supervisor

David Ruth
Associate Professor of History
Honors Adviser

* Signatures are on file in the Schreyer Honors College.

ABSTRACT

This thesis consists of the first hundred pages of *Nowhere Kind*, a story that will eventually develop into a full-length novel or a series of novelas. Primarily, this thesis' purpose was the construction of a good story—intriguing characters, dramatic events, and a believably built fictional world. This thesis is an exercise in constructing a large-scale narrative arc which intersects several character conflicts, simultaneously establishing the conventions of a complex setting. Within, many characters' perspectives are explored through third-person narration. This story is often one about characters' experiences self-confrontation. In a desolate setting with shadows of a world history of catastrophe, the individual reflections of humanity throughout *Nowhere Kind* explore social patterns of encountering and reacting to difference, both internally and externally, while also engaging with structures of tradition and faith. In this story, identities are always in question, whether they are of individuals, their collective society, their bodies of belief, the objects that they own, or the places they inhabit.

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Prelude

With a fierce swing, the old man struck his pickaxe through the shale of the cave wall, revealing a jagged cavity of violet that shimmered in the flicker of his oil lantern. Awestruck, the he dropped his pickaxe. It landed atop the rubble of his endeavour—chunks of gray and black stone strewn with a handful of shattered violet crystals. Shards of crystal lay about his feet which, like his hands—like his entire naked body—were blackened by his lifetime of labor. The chain linking the cuffs around his gaunt ankles rattled as he knelt and plucked up the violet pieces. Holding them in cupped hands, he admired their smooth, translucent figures. Through his whole life in the mines, he'd never seen something so gentle. The smallest piece was half about the length of his thumb and roughly broken at its either end, but the crystalline corners along its length were smooth, barely chipped from his breaking through the shale that had concealed it. He pressed his face into his palm, took the small piece between his teeth and rested it atop his tongue, then threw the others to the floor, scattering them again ovetop the dark rubble. With his tongue, he maneuvered the violet crystal between his gums and his cheek. Then he pressed a finger through his thick beard, which was was matted with dust and sweat, and felt around the crystal's small protrusion.

The window he had carved into the violet world was too narrow for him to shove his haggard old head through, but he saw that the space on the other side was quite open—big enough for him to stand in if he had the opportunity to chip away more walling. He grabbed the oil lantern, then pressed his face against the hole in the wall for a final glimpse into the world of crystals that resided on its opposite side. Holding the lantern high, he watched the luster of the crystals' deep violets. They paled into an opaque and glistening white where they connected to

the walls of the cavity. If he could have seen his own eyes, he would have known that they, too, glistened with color in the flicker of the lantern.

His gaze was interrupted by the loud, steel-booted steps of the Foreman. He turned away from the violet world and looked into enveloping blackness of the mine shaft. Away from the walls, where lantern light had nothing but ground to splash upon, the surrounding darkness appeared infinite. As the steel-booted steps drew closer, the dark infinity receded. The Foreman's beaming glass eyes revealed every detail of the mine shaft—every detail that the old man had come to know through touch as he alone mined the shaft among the dim glow of the oil lantern. In the blazing vision of the Foreman, mine shaft was narrow, and cramped by a low ceiling.

The foreman was a pumper—as all pumpers, his head was veiled by tight, dark leather, and his eyes lay behind glass and gears. It was rare to see a pumper with his eyes turned off; they hadn't quite grown accustomed to the darkness in the ways that their miners had. The light emanating from the Foreman's eyes blinded the old man—even with his eyes shut, the brightness still pained him.

As the Foreman drew closer, the old man heard him huff. Pumpers had wretched, metal snouts—fat hollow cylinders where mouths should be. Some were long, connected to tubes. The Foreman's was stout, and rimmed by small spikes, speckled with brown flakes. It blasted hot steam out from his leather covered face every few moments.

Shielding his already shut eyes with a hand, old man pointed to the cavity which he'd unearthed. The Foreman huffed again; this time the old man felt the snout-steam engulf his head, dampening his dirty beard and singeing his nose and ears, before dispersing into mine shaft's chill air.

When the Foreman looked through the hole into the violet world, it contained his aggressive light. For a moment the cave was dim again and the old man could see. He saw the Foreman's fists tighten as he gazed into the cavity, then heard his leather-muffled voice—pumpers always talked to each other inside their heads. The Foreman grabbed the old man's naked shoulder and shoved him forward. When the old man leaned to grab his lantern and pick axe, the pumper yanked him by the ear. The old man felt a familiarly sharp and terrible pain—the Foreman usually pulled hair. But this time there was blood spilling down the old man's jaw and neck. He brushed fingers over the torn, fleshy gash that used to be his ear, and nearly screamed. Instead, fell to his knees, breathing fiercely through his nose, sobbing. The Foreman clapped his steel boots on the ground and nudged the old man up from the ground, spurring him up the corridor of the mine shaft.

The Foreman's hub lay at the top of the mine shaft, brightened by a lantern that buzzed as it burned colorlessly, not of oil, just as the Foreman's eyes. As they entered, the Foreman turned off his bright eyes. A dozen mine shafts converged upon the broadly carved, high ceilinged room. The old and browned vertical beams of an elevator shaft stood at the far end. Something was coming down—the old man heard the high whine of the elevator car scraping the support beams as it was dropped from unknown heights, suspended by a single, thickly braided cable. The foreman jabbered as the elevator car arrived. Its meshed metal gates slid aside, revealing two other pumpers, one hauling a large drill, the other gripping the handles of a wheelbarrow. The rim of the wheelbarrow was linked to chains which linked to the ankle cuffs of five dirty, naked miners. They began down the old man's mine shaft.

The Foreman gripped the old man's shoulder with his leathery hands, pushing him into the elevator, then tossed him a sooty rag and motioned for the old man to hold it against his

wound. From outside the elevator car, the Foreman pulled the gates shut, then pressed a button and pulled a lever. The old man ascended, knowing not where he was going, what punishment he may face. He hoped it was not the bath pit. Rather than cleansing the miners of the pollutants of their labor, it felt as if the searing bath water infused the darkness of the earth into their flesh.

It was less than a minute when the elevator halted its ascent—the old man was relieved. The bath pit was a few minutes' trip upward. The gates were opened by another foreman. He huffed steam and pulled the old man into his hub. The body of a miner lay before one of the mine shafts, the head of a pickaxe planted firmly in his spine. The shaft was not deep. It's far wall was visible in the buzzing colorless light of this new foreman's hub. The old man was pulled to the miner's corpse; the new foreman placed a boot on its back and ripped up the pickaxe, handing it to the old man and pointing down the shallow mine shaft. As he walked into the new shaft, the old man shifted his hidden violet crystal to his other cheek. He tried not to think of the violet world—not to hope of ever finding another—as he swung his pick against dark stone, returning to the world that he knew and understood—a world in which the only colors were red and black.

The old man mined that shaft for a great portion of his diminishing life. When taken for his occasional shavings, he centered the crystal on his tongue in fear that his shavers would notice the lump in his cheek. About the only time that miners opened their mouths was when exhaustedly gasping from labor, or when they screamed as they entered scalding waters of the bath pit. Almost the only time that the miners ever saw one another was in that hot pit. They only knew their voices to be capable of agony. The old man learned not to shriek. He kept the violet crystal in his closed mouth for countless shaving and bath cycles. Even in the solitude of his

mine shaft, he refused to ever look at it. He wanted to, thinking often about its angular translucency. But, if it ever left his mouth, he was convinced, it would be lost forever.

There then came a time when the old man stuck ore veins seldom and he was hardly able to hoist his pickaxe. He tripped frequently over his ankle cuffs, and he struggled to work through the pain of the bruises put upon him by the foreman's beatings. The foreman hated finding him sleeping, or not swinging his pick. Before long, the old man was taken to the elevator, thrown onto its scratched metal floor, and gated in. Alone in the elevator, he ascended for many minutes. He knew that he was heading well beyond the bath pits, well beyond any level of the mines that he'd ever been transferred to. Wonder nauseated him as he imagined the tortures which awaited him.

When the elevator halted and a pumper pulled open its gates, the old man stood and was faced with an expanse of the like he'd never seen. The world was gray and huge. There were towers, higher than he could understand, higher than had known existed. Their rises, all differing girths, disappeared into a ceiling not of stone, but of smog—a slow stagnation, ash and fumes aglow from the white lights exuding from the raucous buildings below. He'd grown to know every mineshaft he'd ever dug so perfectly—every curve of their stony walls, every lump about their floors, every crack in their low ceilings. Out there, that immense, buzzing, gray world—not with a lifetime could he know it so intimately. Between the towers, the ground was littered with innumerable smaller structures, all buzzing with the same colorless light that shone from pumper eyes.

It was all so loud—so constantly loud. The mines were sometimes loud when the pumpers drilled or blasted, but the old man had usually been isolated with the rhythm of his pickaxe strikes. Now he was assaulted by directionless cacophony. Grinding and slamming and

screaming—the whirl of drills, ten thousand pickaxes striking stone to the rhythm of the whips which commanded them. Looking outward, the old man realized that he was upon a high platform. Directly overhead was a crane. It had a hook like those which were sometimes used in the pulley systems that hoisted mined ore in the mines, but it was gigantic—it looked as large as the elevator car itself. The land before him was a field where his kind labored beneath the bright eyes of pumpers; every direction that he turned, they were countless.

One of the pumpers by the elevator grabbed him and pulled him toward the platform's edge. The pumper gripped the back of his head and forced him to look down, off of the platform. Below was a line: black shoulders and bloody scalps limping and crawling in single file between high fences of spiked chain. There were countless of them. They were just like him, blackened by their labor and broken by their keepers. The discord of the busy expanse ahead became inaudible as panic pulsed through the old man. The pumper then kicked the old man's back with his steel boot and sent him over the edge.

The old man's shoulder cracked against somebody's head as he landed in the Line. The ground was moist and loose, overtrodden by Line walkers. The dirt tasted sour in the old man's mouth. He retched, but kept himself from vomiting, tongue pressing the violet crystal against the roof of his mouth. Attempting to push himself up from the ground, his shoulder stung. The others in the Line kept walking. Some merely brushed him with their soles as they stepped over, but most planted their mucky feet on his back, forcing him back into the mud. Between the trapping steps of those above him, he saw the man he'd hit on his way down—his face was planted firmly into the mud. The Line stepped upon his head continuously and he was quickly enveloped up to his ears. A heel bruised the back of the old man's head, forcing his face into the mud, which plugged his nose. Then, among the constant cacophony of the huge grey world, there was a

distinctly louder sound—a bell. The high ringing of its three strikes shook the old man's bones.

The Line stopped moving.

The old man struggled, but made it to his feet. With what little energy he had, he hopped to get a better look down the Line. Their others' dark shoulders, their protruding spines, their ash-and-pebble-matted, unevenly shorn hair, went on as far as he could see. The old man spun, eyes darting. Through the chain fences at his either side there was little other than dark earth and suffering laborers. The upper portions of the distant towers remained visible, but the old man was trapped in a whimpering and groaning march of the lifelong abused. Then the bell tolled again. After its three rings there remained an eye-stinging ring inside the old man's head. The Line began to march again.

The old man knew not how long he had been walking. He had become one of the innumerable and disposed of, exhausted and mired in purposelessness. As time went on, more and more of the Line walkers collapsed never to stand again. Some of them, who appeared still to have energy, laid down, regardless, to be trampled into suffocation. As the march went on, the mud of the Line subsided and bodies became commonly layered two high. Occasionally a Line walker would attempt to climb one of the chain fences. The old man couldn't imagine why—outside were only more of their kind, slaving away until they dropped dead working or a pumper beat them to death for not digging enough. The pumpers did little other than their occasional machine work, when they heaved and hoed, their leathery heads inflated, then their valves and their snouts would rush with steam. Pumper machines were violent—drills as long as a body, shovels with teeth. Next to those devouring machines, it was lucky when the workers outside of the Line were beaten by fist and boot alone.

When a walker would attempt to climb out, pumpers would rush to the fence and kick them down. Sometimes they used their tools on the climbers. Once, the old man saw five Line walkers attempt to climb out at once. They were downed by a pumper with a spinning saw. Shortly after, the bell tolled and stopped the Line. It beat at the old man's chest so hard that he almost decided to lay with the others. But he stood there in the pain—the dismembered climbers at his feet, adding a slick new layer to the decaying ground of corpses. When the bell tolled to resume the march, the walker before the old man—a short man—turned around and gestured to him. The short man placed the tips of his fingers at his forehead and drew them down, over his face. When his fingers met his chin it looked as if he was almost smiling.

The laborers outside the chains became sparse as the Line went on, drawing toward the high towers, though there were still many pumpers guarding the chain fences. The world around the Line became populated with impossible intricacy. The buildings were of dark metals, inscribed with mazelike geometric patterns, and they were all scattered with blips of light. Their lights were soft—yellow—like the miners' lanterns. The old man wondered if inside those towers, too, were more of his kind, toiling away, digging.

Did the pumpers want this whole place hollow? Then why would they have carved designs into the towers? Surely they were not simply unearthed like that. The old man had never seen anything of such deliberate intricacy in all his mining—but, then, there was the crystal. Rubbing his tongue along one of the violet crystal's corners, he felt, for a moment, at peace.

His peace was disrupted by the bell toll and, when it tolled once more, the now frequent hand-over-face gesture of the short man before him. The old man realized that, upon secondary tolls, many before and behind him performed the gesture, appearing almost happy while doing so. They were under some delusion. Nobody could walk the Line so far without *something* keeping

them going. Whenever the old man thought to lay and die, the violet crystal kept him on his feet. He could not bare the thought of some pumper seeing it fall from his dead mouth and taking it for themselves. The others had found a something in the bell tolls. Desperate to establish any reason for their situation, the bell became a signal of relief. They had been *retired* from the mines—maybe if they braved the Line, something awaited them. They wanted so badly to experience anything other than despair. The old man refused to slip into the delusion that he witnessed the others' eyes. The pumpers had forever treated the old man and his kind like the dirt that they were born beneath. He knew that they were heading nowhere kind.

The Line walkers' stamina were thoroughly tested by the time they exited the land of high towers. Outside the chain fences, the world flattened and was once again blanketed by the sorrowful laboring of the naked and dark. The walker ahead of the short man laid down and the short man rushed to him, frantically gesturing from his forehead to his chin. As the short man reached down and attempted to pull the man to his feet, a pumper stuck his snout through the chain fence and seared the short man's face with steam. Gripping his face in agony, the short man stumbled onward. Though his whole body was shuddering, at the next set of bell tolls, he turned back and made the gesture.

As they marched on, the Line became dense again, and their walking slowed. There were a dozen or so feet between the old man and the short man when they had marched beneath the towers, but they were once again brought close to one another. Everyone in the Line was exhausted, but the short man looked particularly bad. Close to him again, the old man noticed that his feet were bleeding. The short man's arms hung flaccidly when he walked—it was an incredible struggle for him to gesture after bell tolls, yet somehow he continued to do so. The old man watched the short man drag his bloody feet, hauling himself forward at the pace of a miner

hauling a large stone. The short man could barely keep his head straight. It hung down, then slowly perched up, then drooped down again, and occasionally gazed side to side at the horror that surrounding the Line. The short man's head peeked up for a final time, then he fell to his knees and fell forward, face down in the mud. The old man looked up, away from the short man's body. He stopped walking. Forward, down the Line, he saw the crane, its gigantic hook swaying above the line, and underneath, the elevator platform.

The old man nearly stopped. He heard the heavy footfalls of pumpers outside the Line who'd realized his stillness. The old man's knees felt like a rusted-over tool hinge. As he heard one of the oncoming pumpers release steam from their snout, he managed to step forward. He thought his legs may break in two, but he continued his march down the Line, toward the crane.

As the old man marched beneath the crane he hoped that he would be able to walk until the moment that he died. He recalled fainting from the hard labor of the mines and wished that that would happen to him that instant. But the violet crystal hidden in his mouth simultaneously encouraged him to savor every conscious moment that he had, regardless of the pain. He aimed, when he'd inevitably faint, to fall perfectly face-down, so that if the crystal spilled from his mouth, it would return to the earth and be hidden in the mud and corpses that would eventually pile over his own.

The old man's thoughts were disrupted by the sight of sparks overhead, falling from the crane. They were not of industry—they were gentle, swirling down slowly, becoming gradually more luminous as they neared the ground of the Line. Then, among the sparks, descended three ropes of gold, shining in the growing sparks' light. The old man was close enough to grab one. It was smooth and soft. The Line shimmered and the pumpers beside it turned their leather-wrapped heads. Just before the sparks touched the ground, they burst and the old man's world

went white. He felt an arm hug him around the core, then felt himself be hoisted from the darkness.

The old man was in a blinded daze for some time. When his vision returned, he was inside square room, in a structure of crumbling stone walls, where broken pillars scattered the floor like intentionally placed stalagmites. There were three figures wrapped tightly in black fabric. The darkness of the pipe would have made them invisible, were they not wearing masks. There was a grey one with long whiskers and a pointed nose. Another one, brown and with long, arched ears and a small mouth. The final one had hands clasped with the old man—deep orange, with a dark, pointed nose and small triangular ears. The old man then realized that the other masked figures were also clasping hands with those of his kind. He was terrified, but they began moving before his fear could paralyze him.

Silently, the animal-masked figures led the old man and the two others through the miles of desolation at the outskirts of the gray world. The towers were visible in the distance, and the bell was still audible every few moments, but the overbearing clamor had begun to subside. As they drew farther from the high towers, something of even more unimaginable enormity appeared—a wall. Like the towers, it disappeared into the smog overhead, but its breadth appeared infinite. The old man was guided to a pipe that intersected the wall; it just barely too narrow for him to stand straight in. At the far end of the pipe, he saw stinging white brightness. The old man stopped and closed his eyes. His feet settled into the sludge which drifted through the pipe. But the orange masked figure yanked him. The old man resisted as the light at the end of the pipe assaulted him with a biting heat, but the masked figure was too strong. With a final pull, he pulled the old man from the pipe and hurled him into the world of Light. As the old man was flung, the masked figure roared a phrase of unknown meaning to the old man: “Luka.”

The pain brought upon the old man by the world of light was indescribable, but it was followed by the grandest joy of his life.

The masked figure pulled the Light-blinded old man along, across crusty, crackling ground. The old man felt the beginning of an incline—the ground grew soft, it tangled with his toes. Air pushed gently against his body, whistling to him, making him realize how quiet everything had become. He felt as if he was breathing for the first time. As the old man peaked the incline, the white pain of his vision dissolved into cool splotches of color. The orange-masked figure was before him, radiant. Beyond, there was, as far as he could see, green hillsides. Above them were even more hills, bellowing and white with crisply glowing edges, suspended in a pure blue.

Chapter One

Claudia's hands were slick with oil and ash. The damp beds of her fingernails blackened as she scrubbed a lifetime's exploitation off the back of a man rebirthed who squatted in the round wooden washtub of holy herbal waters. The man was old—dark pollutants were entrenched in the small wrinkles high on his neck, beneath where his right ear should have been. His wound was fairly recent, the gash of his missing ear was darkly scabbed. It was difficult to differentiate dried blood from the cursed grime of the Black City. As Claudia rubbed him with rags and hands, she realized that even all the amenities of the Waterhouse would not be enough to totally purge his stains.

“Luka,” Claudia said. “Your new name, by your angel.”

She was two hundred moons aged and, as one of the village neophytes, had washed many rebirthed before. The rebirthed almost never spoke, not for weeks at least, if they survived for so long. She continued to hum “Luka” so that it would stick in the old man's mind, so that in time he could come to know himself.

“Luka... Luka... Luka...”

Claudia did not know the names of the other two rebirthed. They were also squatting in washtubs, both at far sides of the Waterhouse's broad circular belly, each with two unclothed, attendant neophytes doing unto them as Claudia did unto Luka, draining and replenishing the steamy bathwater, scrubbing them, mashing herbs and blending salves for them. The Waterhouse was built at the eastward edge of Deepfern Lake. It was stocked with herbs, flowers, and small animal parts, mostly teeth and bone. The building was plain dark clay, a wide circular hut tightly sealed with its single archway curtained shut by thick leather. Its only open gaps were the smokestacks of the three furnaces built into its walls. Within the Waterhouse it was twilight at all

hours: dim, orange, and misty. The pungency of its contents beat out any stench of ash from the fires. At the center of the Waterhouse, flowers piled waist high, plant stems were bundled to an arm's length, hollowed logs were freshly filled with goats' milk and fresh water. Claudia recalled that the Clerics and the Angels, the townsfolk and all her childhood friends, had always spoken of "a place of melding," a warm unification awaiting the souls that escape death's cold grip. If anything in the world could compare, Claudia imagined, it would be the Waterhouse. Steam swathed her nakedness, instilling serenity through her every muscle as she pulled handfuls of mashed Hostess leaves to mix with water and act out deliverance, to purify and redeem the cursed skin of the man in the washtub who had been born in hell.

Claudia was partnered with Zin, who's silver hair wobbled over his eyes as he shifted his crouch before Luka's washtub, opposite of Claudia, looking Luka in the face. Luka kept his shaved head facing down into the bathwater while Zin offered him warm almond tea. Every time Zin motioned the drink toward Luka's mouth, Luka's jaw seemed to tighten, and his posture further recluded.

Claudia rubbed the jut of Luka's malnourished shoulders with her bare palms, revealing his purer colors. His second skin of grit and oil drizzled down his back and into the bathwater; pale innocence was revealed beneath. His naked skin was not so different from Claudia's. However, his time in the Black City of Sloe had branded him. No herbal solution could reduce the scars of his past. Washing was among the final formalities of deliverance, but the Luka, as the rest of the rebirthed, would have to struggle to become whole. Acclimation was never easy. From the cold to the hot. From the dark to the light. The hardest was usually from pain to peace. Hoisted from Sloe's pits of torture, no amount of ceremony and kindness could repair his soul. Even there, squat in the washtub, Claudia humming gently and Zin smiling, Luka was full of fear.

But fear was not the worst of it. His fear was rooted in doubt. He would look upon the new bright world he was thrust into with so much doubt that the peace that it offered could never fully be claimed. In the washtub, he knew that he was freer than he had ever been, but he looked into the earnest smile of the silver haired boy before him and felt only distrust.

The leathers of the Waterhouse's doorway flapped open, spilling daylight. Three figures stood there, naked and bruised—Al, Lyna, and Kedda, three angels.

Zin looked to them, “The fox, rat, and rabbit finally appear after their long journey. Looks like it was a tough one.”

“We'll tell about it another time. For now, we're taking over with the rebirthed. Javier awaits you in the Hut of Sermons. Dress and head to him.”

As Claudia, alongside the other neophytes, bid soft farewells to the rebirthed and left the Waterhouse, she noticed how thoroughly battered the angels were. Most of their limbs were purpled over. Lyna's right hand was splinted and cased, and Al was missing his right thumb. Kedda bore a scar starting on the outside of his left heel; it ran all the way up to his collarbone.

* * *

Hunched beneath the small weight of his twilight orange robes, Javier walked with confidence in to the Hut of Sermons and planted himself on a fraying wicker seat. Sitting, the tips of his stark white beard folded and twisted in his lap. The robe's hood and shoulders near matched his beard in their sunbleached paleness. Approaching his neck, the deep orange of the robes was worn away like rind scraped away to reveal pale, fruity flesh. Javier looked over his audience of budding neophytes; seven boys and girls—seven survivors—were scattered about the Sermon Hut's dirt floor, clad in simple one-article rags which matched the browns of the soil: Alde, Claudia Elbi, Kian, Lilla, Qiti, Zin. Their young faces flitted in the smoky atmosphere of

the hundreds of candles tracing the Hut's round walls. Javier leaned forward, contemplating the faces of the seven neophyte youths, and his bones creaked with the wicker seat. He wiggled himself into a false comfort and spoke slowly.

“What is your purpose?”

When he asked, seven hands rose through the smoke. He called Qiti, a stout girl with shorn hair.

“To bring the Darknesses into Light, Arch-Cleric.”

“Yes, yes,” Javier waved a hand, tailed by a drooping orange sleeve, as slowly as he spoke. “But what does that mean? What is darkness? What is light?”

As Qiti opened her mouth to continue, the others around her had already raised hands and Javier called “Alde.” He was a muscular boy, broader than all the rest.

“Darkness is within the city, Sloe. Darkness is the evils of the world. *We* are vehicles for of light—the deliverance of hope is our purpose. We liberate those trapped in dark.”

Javier's laugh sounded like rustling leaves. Despite the roughness in his throat, his words had more jump to them now, “And do you plan to liberate the tree frogs from their nighttime croaks? What of the foxes' midnight hunts? Sloe, yes, it's even darker than the night. It's evils... inherited—but think of nothing as inherent.”

Alde sat, quiet, crossing his thick arms.

“*Evil...*”

Javier stroked his beard and lay its tip centered in his lap, looking to Alde.

“A powerful one, indeed—words are spells, young neophytes. Words are spells.”

He lifted his arms and held his fingers flat toward them, jabbing them out with each weighted word.

“Evil, love, hope, and hate... each of you are now thinking something, thinking a great many things that I’ve placed into your mind.”

His hands returned to his lap as he raised his voice to an enthused shout.

“Words are spells and how you cast them reveals you to the world. ‘Evil’—it stirs action. It is a phrase which occupies the hearts of the desperate when uttered from lips of confidence. You, neophytes,” he wagged a finger, “you are at the crux of your young lives, mere weeks before being blessed into angelhood. You are the confidence of the Village. Monitor how you cast your words.”

Alde cast his eyes at his feet, ducking his head through the Hut’s candle smoke.

Javier asked again, “What is your purpose, young ones?”

Six hands raised up. Javier called with a point, “Kian.” He sat beside Lilla, who scowled when she went uncalled. They were the two tallest of the neophytes. Kian bore a crescent scar on his cheek.

“To mediate,” Kian said.

“Aha!” Javier’s bones and the wicker cracked as he stretched his legs outward with enthusiasm, stomping down afterward. “Care to elaborate?”

“The world is of darkness and of light, and until our passing we exist within both. We are communicators, striving to balance to this life.”

“Yes, yes,” Javier said. “Precisely, Kian precisely. But we’ve still some questions unanswered: What *is* darkness? What *is* light?”

“Darkness is... darkness,” Kian said. “I don’t know.”

“Precisely, once again,” Javier clapped once. “Spells, I tell you. Darkness, Light. Good, evil. Words all, and only as meaningful as we make them. Darkness is whatever we say it is, so long as you and those around you believe that what we say whatever we say it is, is what it is.”

The neophytes looked to one another in confusion as Javier continued.

“And as angels—as mediators—you will be as dark as you are light. Agents of balance—not of peace or violence or glory or heroism. Agents of balance and balance alone.”

Javier coughed as he stood, overlooking the neophytes, each of them on the cusp not only of angelhood, but of adulthood.

“Sloe, then,” Javier said. “How does one strive to balance a place so darkened?”

Claudia, a small girl with frilly black hair, called out an answer before any of the others raised their hands.

“You bring light to its dark. Cleanse its evils with forces of good. Balance it by illuminating its core so that the darkness which has seeped into its every aspect may recede.”

“No,” Javier said flatly. “Quite the opposite. We syphon the darkness *out*. And slowly. The trips of the angels bring an ever slighter balance to the world by plucking three folk who are trapped in the Black City out from it. What was birthed in darkness, is rebirthed into the Light. Now, what know you of being birthed in darkness?”

The neophytes were silent.

Javier chuckled at their silence. He pointed at himself, tapping a finger to his chest a few times. Then he pointed behind them to the Sermon Hut’s doorway, its leather curtain pinned aside, opening the hut to the night. A woman was seated in another wicker chair beside the open archway. She matched Javier in her hunched age, but her robes were dyed uneven shades of

green. Wax from nearby candles that had been reduced to hot puddles clung to bottom of her robe, drying into small, color-swirled scales.

“Cleric Millis knows,” Javier said, then pointing to his chest through his beard. “I know, too. The two of us, birthed into darkness—it cursed our skin and rotted our souls. We were kept from Light for so much of our lives. Worked near to death, every succeeding moment a torture.”

A woman tightly wrapped in sparse multicolor fabrics stepped through the Hut’s doorway.

“Oh,” Javier squinted, “Litsa. I did not anticipate any Onlookers joining us. Will Evangeline be attending as well?”

“Afraid not.”

Litsa was lean and long. Standing in the doorway she antithesized Cleric Millis. Millis stared, aimless, through the Sermon Hut’s smoke. She was hunched into her seat, near as wrinkled as her robes, and her skin was as pale as its sun stains. Beside her, Litsa was a richly sun-toned statue. The only creases in her flesh were where they wrapped against muscle. A metal token the size of her palm lay upon her chest, fastened by a leather strap around her neck.

“Evangeline is readying for her journey north with the neophytes.” She stepped forward through the sitting neophytes, ruffled Zin’s silver hair and flipped Lilla’s dark ponytail. “All so big now. Wish I was going out there with you. And a new spire! Blessed Light, you’re a lucky flock of neophytes to be exploring such a thing.”

Javier stared at her.

“O.K., Javier. Sorry for interrupting. I’ll just sit with Millis.”

Javier creaked backward into the wicker, ran a hand through the small knots of his beard, and cast stern eyes over the neophyte youth before him.

“Your last act as neophytes will be to brave this newfound northward spire. Assuming your survival, you will be christened angels upon your return. If you’ve any doubt—now, or inside the spire, or at the moment before you’re christened by the heat of the toxic baths—you may decline angelhood.” Javier’s brow narrowed and his voice deepened. He cast out both hands and their tails of orange robe in a firm but comforting gesture, a caution and an embrace for all the neophytes before him. “Angelhood dictates your candidacy as one of the three to embark upon the annual journey into Sloe. None but angels—true angels, angels not only elected by the Wise Moon, but self offered—can face the poisonous hellfire or the perversions of nature within the shadows of Sloe. To become a liberator in that place you must... meld with that darkness, allow it to shroud your Light.” Javier paused and stared into the neophytes. “Declination is not unprecedented. There is honor in such honesty.”

Elbi raised his hand.

“So,” he stuttered. “What is it, exactly, in Sloe, that’s so unnatural. Other than the darkness. Are there truly monsters?”

“Of a sort,” Millis’s voice cracked from behind them. “Hate and rage overtake things there. The Black City is not stocked with the creatures of common fireside tales, but wrongful contortions of all things with potential for good.”

“Death and ruin and defiled things,” Javier said. “But no demons or ghouls. Sloe’s monsters each and all are human, and their cruelties eclipse the fearful speculations of every myth of unnatural beasts. It was over six hundred moons ago that Millis and I were slaves to Sloe. Six hundred from now, the place will not likely have much changed. But, eventually, the determined duty of angels will bring about a balance.”

Javier stood and began to walk the room.

“You may think of this journey to the spire as your final test for angelhood, but it is not so. Angelhood is an eternal test, especially should you be picked as a raider of Sloe. We speak vaguely of the place, for it is ever changing. It crumbles and reconstructs, erupts and levels flat. The only reliability is the mission: get to the Line, and escort three. Otherwise, those chosen for Sloe must devise their own path. Within the Black City you will confront terrors of all kind, but often none are as cruel as the self.”

Javier noticed the tight-fistedness of the seven neophyte youths before him. He paused a moment, allowing fear and zeal to tangle within each of them.

Then, Claudia’s voice broke through the room.

“Why only three?” Claudia asked.

Before Javier opened his mouth, Alde stood glaring at Claudia, “It has always been three.”

Javier waved for Alde to sit as he leaned forward and hefted himself from the wicker seat. “You are wiser than that, Alde. How do we better ourselves without such questions?”

Alde bowed his head in apology as Claudia went on, “So, then? Why are so many left to suffer?”

Javier stepped toward her, “As I said earlier, Claudia, we syphon the darkness. We do not rupture it. Were we invulnerable, we could act so boldly and storm the Black City—liberate all from its clutches. As black and white as our worlds are beside one another, our every interaction is grey. Sloe is a fearsome force. We must be cautious as not to extinguish what successes the ancestors of the Village have had in dwelling within these hills.”

Claudia shook her head. She stood to face Javier before he could reach her and crouch down to her.

“All of those people—*your* people—are left in the depths to fester? What righteousness is there in that?”

“None, Claudia... there is none. But there is righteousness in *you*. In each of you and what little good you *can* do, whether you are selected to delve Sloe, or otherwise. But never forget that against the world, all your righteousness is minute. In time, your collective efforts, and the efforts of the generations that follow us will become as fearsome as Sloe and overcome its horrors once and for all. But our world—now—is imbalanced. Just because an action is righteous does not make it appropriate.”

Claudia sat. Javier continued.

“On the verge of angelhood, you must realize the gravity of thought before braving paths of darkness. The instruments of darkness within Sloe can tear earth like a boar tusk through flesh, they can blast stone like breath blows a dandelion. Brash righteousness is seldom worthy opposition for raw power. Sloe is a swelling force. It can be combated only with calculation and time.”

Javier stepped to the middle of the room, sharing glances with each of the neophyte youth.

“Over two hundred moons ago, Wise Moons foresaw your angelic futures—and through trial and time, you seven have survived of a flock that once numbered near thirty. You are beyond strength and righteousness. You *persist*. Tomorrow you make leave for the northward spire with Onlooker Evangeline and you will return to the clerical council with relics with which to honor Light.”

Chapter Two

Under the late morning sun, the decorative frays of Evangeline's scant onlooker coverings clung to her arms and lower back, their many bright dyes deepened by sweat. The neophytes, who stood in a line, all facing her, had lost the looseness of their rags. The sweat soaked, brown cloths tightened against their backs and shoulders and in the pits of their knees. Evangeline paced before the line of neophytes at the edge of a clearing among the Northlands tall grasses, back to a black spire which appeared could touch clouds, if any clouds had been in the sky. After the greater part of a week's travel, they had arrived and set up camp the evening prior. The neophytes barely slept, and, secret from Evangeline, Lilla had provoked them into a race.

"Lilla," Evangeline said, halting her paces. "Get out of that stance—stand straight. And pick up your rope. The spire is no grounds for contest."

Evangeline continued her cyclical walks, excited and nervous for her neophytes.

Lilla collected her dropped rope and slung it over shoulder as the rest of the neophytes had. The lot of them knew Evangeline's words were untrue, beyond their plotted race. Their every action was in contest, whether they recognized or ignored it.

Evangeline continued pacing, crosscutting the distant spire's tall silhouette every few seconds, while she resumed lecturing the neophytes on danger, responsibility, Light, and duty. With her every step, the colored frays of her clothing tussled with the tips of the Northland grasses, tickling slightly as they peeled away before resettling onto damp flesh. She kept a stern posture and a hard stride. Her waist length hair was wound into a spiral braid, pinned together by hawk feathers, feathers that matched the bird of prey inscribed upon her breastplate token.

Most of the neophytes were shorter than or at eye level with the grasses. Claudia, Qiti and Zin could see over the grasses only by standing the tips of their toes or by jumping. Elbi was too

small for even that. Lilla, Kian, and Alde stood tall, the three of them nearly matched Evangeline's lean umber. Alde, however, was twice as broad as the others. They called him "Ox." He hated that. Names were a christening, bestowed to children after sipping their first waters from the Grove. Nicknames were a small heresy, an insult and denial. Alde looked to the spire with pride, sure that he would be first to reach it when Evangeline gave the go-ahead. He grinned, imagining his shorter peers losing their way in the grasses. He doubted that someone as short as Elbi could see it at all with the Northland grasses so high over his head. He was wrong.

Even if his belly was flat against the dirt, Elbi could see the Herald spire. It's thousand foot stand conquered all views of the Northland fields—if not its image, its mile long shadow, or simple knowledge of its disruptive enormity, a colorless ascent spearing into the sky from the grassy basin; it had outlasted its Herald constructors of ages past and would likely outlast any history that Elbi, or anybody he knew, would ever be a part of. Elbi would have rather been back in the Village, aiding Millis in tending the herb-rings, or chatting with his Angelic seniors about adventures that he hoped never to have to experience.

"There's no wind to hide your teeth chattering," Zin nudged Elbi in the gut with an elbow. "Don't let Evangeline hear your fear."

"Quiet," Evangeline hissed at Zin before returning to her spiel. The neophytes had been hearing it since before they left the Village, from her, from Litsa, from the clerics, from everybody: "This is a Herald ruin *unexplored*. This is your first time venturing out without an Onlooker or Angle accompanying. Eyes everywhere. Walk softly. If you fall from something, remember, feet first..."

Each neophyte was anxious. With exception of Elbi, they were anxious to get *to* the spire. Lilla kept gradually repositioning herself to spring into sprint. She almost taking off a few times,

when Evangeline paused between sentences. Kian was about to blister his big toe, digging pits in the hard, dry soil as he ignored Evangeline and speculated on what he would find within the dark tower ahead. He hoped for some kind of weapon or tool. He had heard so much about the resilience of the shadow glass Herald constructions were often made of, the dark metal flesh that enshrouded the thousand foot monolith ahead. If they could make timeless towers, why not also some unstoppable spear tips, or an axe that never dulls.

With Evangeline's every pivot in her pacing, Qiti kept count. Occasionally she'd pantomime a march in the briefness that Evangeline was turned away. As Evangeline went on, Qiti rolled her head back in exaggerated agony. It was not long before Zin mirrored Qiti's mocking and the two burst into laughter. Evangeline snapped their way and they silenced and stilled. Claudia was right beside Zin, but she'd heard none of his or Qiti's scolding by Evangeline. Claudia was too fixated on the spire. Like the others, she was anxious to explore it, but the waiting did not bother her. Her eyes were fixed with wonder upon the spire's figure.

It had legs—five of them—enormous and gray, straight and parallel, unflinching to the world and its eons. They were exposed only at the base of the spire, five stilts lofting a mile high obsidian silo. The legs skewered the full length of the spire, granting a permanent steadiness to its loom. Claudia and the others could not imagine how deep they settled into the ground below. The bottom hundred feet of the spire was stripped, its shadowy walling and metal insides long since razed by barky tentacles. Ten foot tick vines formed brown-green spirals that choked the spire's legs. Their slow, upward assault had rendered much of the spire into an uneven crumble. Its black outer walls, toward the base, had been dismantled into jagged skirt. The spire was a crippled beauty—a thousand-foot monument of a lost age's ingenuity, stood on bare bones

because nature and time had breached its skin and torn out all its muscle. But the skeletal remains never toppled, even against the grips of the tree-trunk-thick tendrils which snaked up from the grasses. The vines matched the five pillars' adamancy, but could never rival the solidity of their making. The higher the vines climbed, the thinner they grew, and their disruptions of the spire's dark flesh became less frequent. At the top, the spire appeared pristine, its sun-silencing metals culminating into the fine shadow of a needle's head dividing a blue horizon.

Evangeline finally said what her neophytes had been waiting for.

"Go—run! Find something to impress the clerics."

Claudia snapped from her intrigue. Evangeline's words loosed her and the other neophytes like arrows upon the spire. They whizzed through the grasses despite the weight of the ropes slung over their shoulders, the ground's roughness against their bare feet, and the grasses whipping at their necks and faces. The sweaty stick of their brown rags onto their flesh gave way with each stride, the rags eventually bellowing in the breeze of their runs. Claudia's entranced curiosity delayed her takeoff, but she caught up with the others quickly. She passed Elbi who, after an initial sprint, fell into an easy jog. Then Qiti, who'd dropped her rope and paused to collect it. She gave Zin a light smack on the head, passing by, and he hollered in a frustrated, laughing response. Then the vines appeared more frequently about the ground, growing with more and more thickness as Claudia drew closer to the spire.

Alde and Kian were neck and neck ahead; Claudia pushed herself. She compensated for their long legs with a valleycat's fury, swatting grasses away while ignoring the bubbling heat in her knees and the soreness of her soles. Alde and Kian paused when blockaded by a vine that had grown thicker than they were tall. It was an enormous barky serpent, laying in the grasses. As Kian hefted himself over, Claudia refused to slow her pace, scrambling up from behind him with

a few leaps. She leapt off the top and back into the grasses, over Alde's head as he clambered down the vine's far side. She tucked her landing, holding a hand to her shoulder to keep her rope with her. She tumbled, scuffing her knees and arms, but she kept her momentum. Just ahead lay more vine trunks, all interspersed with massive beams and jagged slates of metal which had fallen from the spire. Among it all, Claudia saw Lilla's ponytail wagging toward the nearest of the spire's legs.

Lilla stood, panting, back against a vine-gripped pillar. It was broader than she would have been able to wrap her arms around twenty times over. The grasses were patchier and grew lower growing beneath the spire. The vines dominated, lending the place a green hue by way of sunlight striking the palm-sized leaves which sprouted from them. All around Lilla stood objects more colossal than she or any of the neophytes had ever seen—unshapely metal figures standing tall and broken, mixed among the ground of the vines and sometimes lofted by them. Beside Lilla, a hollow cylinder stood upright with jagged rusty holes about its faces. She rounded the thing and found a tall, square entryway. Inside, she found a panel with orderly rows of holes. She pushed a finger inside of one and drew it out covered in dust and rust. When she exited, she saw Claudia running coming near, the others sprinting behind her.

“Looks like I won,” Lilla called out to Claudia. “As I predicted last night.”

Claudia ran past her, jumped and began gripping her way up the vine tangled pillar. She yanked her rope toward her neck, ensuring its security on her shoulder.

“Hey!” Lilla cried up to her. She searched for notches to anchor her hands and feet and give chase. Claudia completed the hundred foot climb before Lilla was even halfway. She saw Claudia hoist herself onto a platform overhead. A moment later, her rope cascaded down. Lilla gave it a tug, then held onto it and climbed with her feet.

Chapter Three

The latticed catwalk moaned beneath every small-toed step of Claudia's crossing. Flakes of red-browns and sick greens of the spire's ancient metals clung to the sweat that saturated her wild hair and her clothing. With each bend of the knee or small shuffle forward, she loosened rusty flakes and provoked unstable metallic cries to plummet the thousand-foot depth of the cylindrical chamber beneath her. Through hours of climbing through decrepit chambers of the spire, she'd peaked it, and now stood upon a bridge crossing its hollow center.

The catwalk was barely wider than her arm span. Upon it, she balanced her way deeper into the apex of the spire, the domed peak of its stand over the Northland's amber plains. From inside, she could see the sun trace the cracks between each link, each scale of metallic shadow that formed the spire's smooth exterior. A solitary linke of the spire's outer walling, one shadow-scale, was larger than the greatest trees Claudia had ever hunted under.

The shadow-scales domed a few dozen feet over her head. Deteriorating girders allowed their once parallel perfection to sag and slant. The dome persisted, but it was haphazard with splits like knife wounds that bled breeze and daylight. From outside, those imperfections were imperceptible—it appeared as if the apex was elevated beyond time's grapple, feigning perfection with a smooth skyward arch. But little other than the spire's silhouette retained elegance—its innards had rusted to dust, snapped, collapsed, fallen to the earth and corroded into soil. In its lowest reaches, seldom a thing survived nature's slow violence.

The higher the Northland vines climbed, the thinner they grew, and the softer was their bark. Though they pervaded the spire's full altitude, their presence in its apex was meek—inch-wide strands that narrowly succeeded to produce the leafy offshoots that fed the puffy little rodents that climbed about their porous and thirsty bark.

“Leave me be and I’ll leave you be,” Claudia grunted at the critters, hesitating to look down as she shambled the catwalk. “Just stick to your vines, little guys. Stay off me. Neither of us want to trip and fall, yeah?”

But Claudia knew that they never tripped. Her words and imbalance were no threat to them. She envied the simplicity and ignorance of their lives, bodies dilating with each half-second breath made as they scurried the underside of the catwalk, munching on offshoots of green. Their casual, upside-down meals made Claudia realize the hollowness of her own belly. She mourned her pouch of pine nuts and blueroots, and the waterskin, that she had lost to gravity some way along her thousand-foot climb. Food was long overdue. Claudia distracted herself from the overworked slump of her shoulders and the sting in her muscles through an irate envy toward the vine-eating climbers—their toes gripped with such strength, *why can’t mine?* The frustration gave her energy, but distracted her into fantasy. She imagined a vine-eater sniffing around her foot and motioned to punt it over the catwalk’s edge. Motioning her vindictive fantasy, she teetered, glimpsing the dreary fall. She inhaled fast, painfully, as she saw the base of the thousand feet, barky overgrowth interspersed with jagged sheddings of the spire’s scales and corroded guts. The lethally distant ground was bright with daylight, a clear conclusion to the plunge of dark chamber.

Claudia reined the fear still spilling from her mouth and steadied her body at the center of the catwalk. The heartbeats thudding past her ears began a slow surrender to the whistle of the high gale that rushed the splits between the shadow-scales overhead. Blowing through the hollow dome, the gale reached to strike Claudia but, from such distance, it managed only to whine at her and scare her little steps. The air among the catwalks was calm, but anxiousness could outdo anything.

This is too important. Focus. Forward.

She continued, cautious, over the catwalk and its finger-thin vines, attempting to ignore the rodents that so easily ignored her while they scurried the underside. She brought her breath to a steady huff, but could not help from envisioning the fall to earth; her short rise in comfort and confidence dissipated again into hyperventilation and tricked her balance into dizzying strings of overthought that tangled her footsteps.

Careful, not so fast. But not slow, either. How old is this platform? Am I too heavy for it? Why can't I do this? It's a straight line. It's nothing. Just walk forward like always. Just walk. Walk. Do it. Do it, or die. Walk, now. Easy and calm. Walk. Every step is closer. Closer and— Stop it! Stop running down there! So quick and careless! Damned animals have it too easy.

Claudia refused to again be overtaken by plain frustration. Instead, she concentrated on the taps of the rodents inverted footfalls, considering them as contest. Her footsteps became determined to best rodents' natural ease.

The vine-eaters bore nothing when they climbed, no weighty muscle or fat, no awkward limbs to grow numb in the wind. They were measly—twiglike bones and a body of fur so soft that it felt invisible. They were effortless, suctioned by sticky toes that held firm against storm winds along the open outer corridors throughout the thousand feet. The vine-eaters felt gravity, but it was unworthy of their attention. Upside down, adhered to a pipe by a single foot of only four toes, they gave the depth of the spire no more than an uncaring glance as they lapped for leaves, or maybe a spider that strung its way by. Their confidence was inborn, their perfect mobility, inherited. Yet the vine-eaters were not immune to fear. If one fell, it would experience that rush, the dread of stumbling into the jaws of finality, a thing so alien to them—a misstep—that the bizarreness of the sensation alone would fill them with terror. But they never fell, and,

knowing nothing of the fall, they had no worry. The spire's hollow was simply a space before them, an indiscernible plunge that would be useless to explore because it held nothing other than air. Each time they plastered a single foot to rickety walling and dangled before oblivion, they knew only the satisfaction of a meal.

Claudia continued, feeling imperfection in her every step. She assured herself—*I must. I will*—but steadied breathing and a desperate rivalry with the puffy creatures was not enough to force her body to believe that the catwalk was any wider or more stable rope that she'd anchored after first climbing her way into the spire.

Forward, not down. Look forward, dammit! Angels don't panic. Angels don't fall.

One false step, an unseen break in the latticework, or a vine-eater to distract her, and her final memory would be a velocity-induced death that lasted less than ten seconds. Or, if she was unlucky, the crack of contact and a suffering that would last far longer. As Claudia refused to look down, vine-eaters continued scuttling the underside of the catwalk. She tried to focus on her goal, the lustrous pane at the end of the catwalk which lay through the doorway at the centermost room suspended over spire's plunge. But the sticky tips of the critters' toes slipped through the catwalk's lattice and pressed Claudia's bare soles. The pin-sized wetnesses reminded her lips of their yearn for the cool burst of the blueroots she'd picked from a pondside after waking—or just a kiss of water—anything to wet her mouth. The dryness of elevation was far more maddening than the exhaustion, and the wet pecks of the critters' toes against her soles reminded her: *below*—the thousand-foot pit, the remaining catwalk before her, the importance of what lay at its end, the nervousness in her legs, her potential to fail. She abandoned her envy and her rivalry and submitted to a simple and fanciful desire to become one of the puffy critters—of perfect form and balance, ignorant of fear, neglectful of success and failure. But she had witnessed failure too

often, understood and felt its banes as she entered adolescence. To so many of her kin, she was failure's embodiment.

Red.

So simple, she thought. Then her frustration with the little climbing creatures burnt away and she was full of fury for herself.

Red! A color, a word, and a lifetime of distrust.

Every other birth below the full bulb of the Wise Moon was celebrated. But her moon was red.

More than unlucky, she thought. *Unfair. Unjust. How can people be so bitter and thoughtless... how can things be so cruel?*

She did not realize that unfairness was her best friend, despite its cruelty. It beat her until she was rough enough to last and sharp enough to make use of her lasting. It was why, after such awful tribulation atop the catwalk, a single thought—a single color, red—turned her faltering shuffle over the spire's plummet into hard-set and unflinching strides toward a discovery that she hesitated to accept could even be real. She would risk her life to claim it.

The Northland spire, a structure of the Heralds that bore no touch beyond nature's for unknown centuries, was as decayed and deathly as any remnant of the Heralds—but death was nothing compared to returning to her Onlooker empty-handed or with something lackluster. Claudia would plummet from the catwalk before settling for plain relic—some artifact of pottery or ageless garments. She was going to shock the clerics when she returned home to the Village. Claudia sprinted beyond her six competitors upon entry—thoroughness be damned, she refused to linger and sift through rust and overgrowth. She would search no levels other than the spire's apex, a place so departed from the world, so untouched, she thought, that it had to hold

something worthy—and perhaps some worthiness would seep into her. She was proud to have proven herself right after summiting the spire, when she a little girl across from the catwalk.

The spire narrowed with ascension, each level was a disk tracing its interior edge, giving way to the constant central pit. If not for the persistence of the vines, and the surplus of dung that so many of their leaves had been reduced to, the topmost levels would have been clean. Unlike the clingy rodents, the internal failings of the spire succumbed to gravity, often at a gentle touch. Finally unafraid of succumbing herself, Claudia continued down the catwalk, each stride longer than the last, with no regard of the brutal metals that hungered one thousand feet below her.

Halfway... easy. There's no turning back, there's no need to. This is it. This, or nothing.

The pain in her tired young muscles became encouragement.

That much closer to resting. That much closer to showing them all...

She no longer felt the critters' sticky toes underfoot or heard the windy whistles. Her dry mouth and worry of falling melted away as her chest warmed with anticipation. Her every element was committed to the walk, just as she committed herself the climb; upon entering the spire, she ignored the many metal glimmers, the eye-catching tools and the dulled arts of the foreign time that lay as debris throughout the spire. Those things were for her peers. The other neophytes could wade the ages settled rubble and take those artifacts. She wanted something more. Not an artifact but a monument. She needed it.

They'll see what a red girl can do.

The catwalk fed into a central disk, a room suspended over the pit, the residence of Claudia's monument. When she first reached the apex, the thing stole her attention as she meandered, teetering with exhaustion. It was a flash—the shape of a young girl glided by as she glanced down the catwalk into the overhanging room. When Claudia stepped back to look again,

the faraway girl did, too. She was about as small as Claudia, and had curling dark hair just the same, stuck with dirt, webs, and sweat. A fresh bruise ran down her forearm and a stain of a red trickle traced her hairline to the divot of her eye.

Me?

It was the first time she had ever witnessed her own image with such clarity, despite the gloom in the air and the overall dimness of the spire. One hundred fifty moons aged, she was privileged to confront a mirror—an honor standardly withheld for full maturity. But she, a child, saw her body, head to toe, imprinted perfectly on the silver image beyond the catwalk. She stood looking for minutes, denying the success of her search and the historical importance of her discovery. She did not want to brave the walk because what lay at its other end could not be true. However, minutes passed and her eyes remained there across the way, staring back at her—it was no illusion. The mirror was three times her height, pristine and ornamented; it was a thing greater than her life and it was the key to fixing it.

Proof. Worthiness.

Nearly crossed over the catwalk, her mind settled into reverence, relief, and ambition. The warmth of the approach raptured her. This was the closest to the Light that anyone could ever dream to be. Every problem, every suspicious glance, every moment of self-doubt, every remark of redness, was finally solved. It was simple now. She wished that she could have found the mirror sooner.

“When they look at me from now on, they’ll see *this*,” she beckoned, huffing forward. “All the Light in the world and the Light inside themselves, brought before them by me. I’ll be loved... be trusted.”

Seeing it closer, she suspected that the mirrors the Wardens kept hidden deep in the Grove were not even so magical. It revealed something new to her with every step. Symmetrical etchings weaved about its maroon frame, not unlike the vines that wound the spire's pipework and crept up through its floor tiles. But the etchings were more delicate and deliberate, trailing up to meet a glassy orb suspended by a wooden neck no thicker than Claudia's own. Beneath the mirror pane was a foot high base of stone carved into small stairs, presenting the gateway to a new world. After a few more thoughts of relief and happiness, Claudia was on those stairs, eyeing herself thoughtlessly—the catwalk, the vine-eaters, the winds, the pit, the spire itself, Evangeline, home, the world, all forgotten behind her.

Then it all came back to her with a sudden and alien beauty. The silver pane was transformative. It amplified the light of things, caught rays that sneaked through cracks in the ancient ceiling and let them bloom. Puffs of dust became sun stained waterfalls and, snaking around the round room, the vines' little green leaves turned to scaled bellies, breathing softly as the round rodents scampered over them. She imagined showing the mirror everything that she owned, every person that she knew, and watching the things' and the persons' metamorphoses in the silver. Observing herself closely, a breath stained the mirror with moisture. She skipped backward and fell from the little stairs. Had she ruined it? So quickly? Was it over?

No! It can't—

When she looked up the stain was gone.

She returned atop the stairs and began discovering every inch of her own face in periods as long as she could hold her breath. She enjoyed her lips, disregarding the sting of their dry splits as she poked at them and pulled them around to be greeted by her teeth. She compared their little fractured wrinkles to the endless complexity of her eyes—strings and strings and

strings of color, green with some frazzled ends of blue, tangled up yet somehow also in order. Leaning back, she breathed out, away from the mirror, before dragging a finger down between her ocular circles of tangled order and over the ridge of her nose, dredging a pale stripe out from under her week's collected filth. She looked hard at the grime that collected on her fingertip before eying her pale stripe of skin. In the mirror, she did not feel so dirty. The Red Moon did not curse her reflection—in the silver, she was pure and triumphant. She wiped her hands clean over her ragged, colorless clothing and reached for the mirror's sides, barely wrapping her fingertips to its back.

Help...

She did not want to share, but she knew better. This was an important discovery, one far beyond herself and the fated inconveniences of her birth. Her reverence and rapture sank into plain duty. She could not collect the thing by herself, but she hesitated to leave its side. She withdrew from the stairs and walked the circular room. Its foundation was less stripped and broken than the rest of the spire. Though the ceiling was an open crumble, its supporting beams appeared steady, and the encircling walls were tight together. In some spots, faint colors marked their metal. Yellow, green, and *red*. Claudia ran a hand over the splotches, yellowing her palm, then reddening it, eventually turning it into a grey-black harbor of chips and dust.

Everything, even the things still together... are all so old and ruined.

In searching for excuses to linger, she dreamed of what the place may have been. Before the spire was invaded and twisted by the vines, before its black metal scales were devoured from below the knees, and before its every content turned to rot and rubble, the circular room would have been bright and clean—such was theorized of all the Heralds' creations. But it was

detached from nature, constructed with a lofty dominance that made Claudia doubt the place's capacity for goodness.

Good people—good things—do not need the protection of metal walls, she thought. Good people live freely in Light's favor and bask in radiance. Why did they build it? The question nipped her mind. So high and so fierce, what were they escaping?

As Claudia brushed away the mash of once colorful dust onto the drab brown of her rags, she thought of a term that she had heard her onlooker's use on occasion: war. It was an important word, she knew. But how was it different from "fight?" She wanted to ask about it, if the ancient phrase of violence had any connection to the Heralds and their hulking remnant creations, but Evangeline was the only nearby elder, and Claudia lamented conversation with Evangeline.

When we get home; Onlooker Litsa. I'll ask her. Eva won't help me. She never does.

Claudia looked a long farewell to her mirror self before returning out over the catwalk. She jogged, no longer minding the spire's gape. She descended several levels of the spire by stairways that were wrapped by altitude-thinned vines. In the outermost corridors, what were earlier distant whistles turned to broad gusts through missing births of shadow-scales that formed frameless windows over the sunny plains. But Claudia had no time to admire views. She sped through jagged rifts in the floors. To no avail, broken barbs fingered the air in hopes of catching a knot of her hair or a patch of her weeklong uncleaned rags.

"Help! Anyone?"

Between eager huffs, her shouts echoed down every hall that she passed, dodging ground-lazing vine-eaters and the pitfalls of structural decay that their massless figures obliviously rolled around on.

"Hey! Help! Anybody here?"

Claudia's pleas reached the lumbering shadow of a boy across the spire's two hundred foot wide throat. He was a tall speck across the pit, visible only as he walked through random sunbeam crossings in the rubbly basin beneath a five-story collapse of corridors. Claudia was jealous of the open space above him, regardless of its dead end blackness. The mirror's mysticism lost hold of her as her mind cramped into a box. She disrupted her claustrophobia with a shout.

"Hello! Is that you, Alde? Can you hear me?"

He reared to face Claudia, leaning against a short pillar. He recoiled, sensing its weak fixings. It crashed down behind him. He ignored it and spoke with his head high.

"Who is it? Where are you?"

His voice was heavy and bellowing.

"Claudia! Over this way!" she answered, banging excitedly on the rail before her.

Alde scanned the darkness and locked onto Claudia as she continued.

"I found something, and you're perfect, Alde. Strong! Tall! You won't believe—"

Claudia broke into a coughing fit.

"Sorry," she mustered her voice to cross the pit. "Got anything to drink over there?"

"Nope. Sorry." His words were flat. He turned away and began walking.

"Wait! Wait!"

Claudia vaulted pleas over the pit, but the scratch of her dry voice garnered no sympathy.

He was gone, a shadow melded into the time ravaged rooms and dark halls beyond.

Claudia plopped down, disappointed, suppressing coughs into grunts.

"Claudia?"

Her name sounded behind her from a different boy's voice, out of breath.

She knew before she looked, “Zin! I found something—” but again the energy of her words was sapped by her dry throat.

Zin was short, and especially visible against the spire’s dark by his straight pale hair and a yellow draping around his neck. A thin braid snaked with fraying twine suspended an animal fang, level beside his left ear. The scarf contrasted his loose brown neophyte dressings. Walking to Claudia, he panted more words.

“Here. There’s a little left. Sorry.”

He rested, hands on knees, as Claudia sipped the remainder of his waterskin.

“Blessed Light! Is that blood?” Zin touched her face and found that the red drizzle was dry. “What’s happened?”

“Just a scratch, nothing important. But, I—I need help. Is anybody else with you?”

“No. I rushed up when heard you shouting,” he said. “What is it? You said that you found something?”

“A mirror!” She coughed. “A mirror, I swear! And it’s *huge*.”

“Really?” Zin’s eyes widened and his breathing balanced. “You’re not joking with me?”

“No. Never! It’s at the top, up at the very top, and it is huge. Really! Taller than me, maybe even up on your shoulders,” Claudia held her hands overhead and hopped, feet stirring dust. “It’s perfect. You have to help me carry it.”

Chapter Four

Alde's barefooted clomping down one of the spire's ruined corridors halted as he realized the piles of shattered glass which sloped against the walls. The parallel stretches of windows had long since been shattered into wide square holes. Every glimpse of sunrays reflected by piles along the corners of the hall, or the specks which scattered down throughout the floor, poked him with inadequacy.

Help her? Her! What did she find? Nothing, I bet. Probably Zin and her trying to play a joke on me.

It sickened him to think that he had raced up so many levels of the spire, just like Claudia. Two thirds the way up, after scanning through room after room of dust and echoes, he realized that anything worthwhile left in such a tall, narrow ruin, after so long a time, would have fallen down.

One of the vine-eating rodents scuttled by; Alde whiffed a kick at it and fell backwards, bruising himself against the metal floor, slitting his clothing on a glass shard. The vine-eater scuttled off as Alde stood. He felt a small trickle of blood down his back.

Up there, Alde scoffed in thought, she can't have found a thing other than dust and turds.

Walking carefully down the corridor, Alde peered through the window holes. Their shatterings had more variation than the rooms beyond. In some holes, large fangs of glass remained in the wall with an array of sizes. Other windows had lost their glass entirely. But each room beyond them was the same—replicated boxes, dismal and dusty. Each had shelves built into the wall toward the back of the room beside a tall metal closet (most of which the doors had long since broken off), a wide metal prism risen from the floor which appeared to be a table, and a series of upward twisted, thin metal bars hanging from the ceiling by a chain. Most of the

rooms, however, had not even these features, as their ceilings had collapsed through and buried everything.

Alde's walk down the broken glass covered, replicant roomed corridor was interrupted by a sharp burst of sound.

Elbi.

He must have been a floor below. Alde wanted to stomp at the rising sound. The broken glass convinced him otherwise. Alde was one of the last to finish the climb into the spire. After entering, as he ascended in Claudia's wake, he saw Elbi, trotting around with an odd horn he'd found. He was blowing small honks as he and Qiti searched rooms together. They appeared to be turning every loose floor tile, peeking through every door, laughing with each other.

The two of them, so excited—just like Claudia, banging on that rail like a child unable to wait for dinner—as if this is all a game, something to amuse them.

Alde knew himself not to be so stupid. He knew himself to be under Light's watchfulness and he knew that this was a contest. He would not waste time like Elbi and Qiti. He glanced the dead rooms through their broken windows, and moved past them. That was, until he found a window that remained almost together, with only minor splits and cracks in its glass—and the doorway beside it, unlike the others, was sealed shut by a firm door. Alde's dim reflection was fragmented in a web of cracks. Beyond that, the box boxlike room was vibrant. Through his shattered reflection, Alde saw walls unmarred by collapse or even by the vines. The walls were white, smooth and flat. Despite the sparse lighting of the corridor, the room glowed through its broken window. The shelves in the back had a pair of vases on them. Despite their dust, they shone with a deep green-gold pattern.

Alde was so stunned by them that he hardly noticed that the center table was complete with a set of chairs, each of their arched backrests filled in not by the wicker weaves which he was used to, but wood crossings carved to tangle with one another in rows like a braided rope. His attention could not be drawn by what hung above them, not even by Elbi's honks down below. A maze of twirling gilded metals ending with hooklike upturned tips hung from the ceiling over the table.

He set his hand in the groove of the door. The metal was not bruised or splintered, it was a crescent smooth as stones from a riverbed. He pulled and it would not budge. Disappointed rage shot through him at the thought of lock or barricade. He wished not to disturb the serenity of the room by breaking its window. Attempting to shift the door, he realized that it did not swing, it slid. He slid it open, into the wall, and walked in. He felt the floor bow beneath him.

Elbi's honking loudened and become more rapid, and the floor bowed a bit further.

"Hey!" Alde shouted, "What are you—?"

The ground cracked loud enough to blot out Elbi's last notes. In seconds, from the rear of the room shelving the vases, the floor split open and collapsed. Alde was dropped through, into the level below, which was full of debris and screams.

* * *

Some twenty floors high in the spire, a wide beam overhung the throat by a dozen feet. At its end, Lilla sat in a wooden chair, staring up into shadow, unknowing of Claudia's perilous walk so many hundreds of feet overhead. Looking up the throat dizzied Lilla with its expanse and simultaneous black lack of depth. It unsettled Lilla, but it was better than looking down toward the clearly lit ground's climbing vines and litterings of jagged pieces of torn metal walls and bent beams. She had been doing it for so long that she began to lose herself. Over the past

hour, her neck had eased and her head rolled lightly back on the chair's backrest. Her chair was brutish—hard right angles, the armrests and the outside of the backrest trimmed with circular metal studs. Most were worn dull but some retained a shimmer. The chair was of a finer woodwork than anything home in the Village, and was the most together thing that she'd seen since entering the spire. None of the studs were rusted, the wood was smooth as glass, and its seat was a soft material that appeared to be weaved of red cloth, covered by a crinkly clear layer of a material Lilla had never felt before.

“Hi Lilla.”

A boy's voice sounded behind her. The beam that she and her chair sat upon connected to well of echoes, an enormous room carved with three deep pits that curved into varying depths like uneven, dried lakebeds. Lilla turned her head back to face the boy's voice. It was Kian's.

“What are you doing sitting out there like that?”

“Resting.”

Lilla turned back around and faced the throat. She felt the beam bow a bit as Kian stepped on toward her. Gripping the armrests tightly, she rolled her head back once more.

“Resting at the edge of a few hundred foot dive?” Kian said. “Interesting choice. Why'd you heft that chair all the way out here.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, why did you carry it all through the spire to sit it on a practical cliff edge and risking it and your life?”

Kian saw through Lilla's lackadaisical head. There were small twinges of frustration. She refused to face him.

“I found it here,” she told him.

“You moved it there.”

“I did not, why—”

“Exactly. Why, Lilla?”

Lilla felt the beam bow again, more intensely this time. It wobbled up and down for a few seconds, overhanging hundreds of feet of deadly gravity.

“In the countless ages that this spire has been crumbling to pieces,” Kian began, “there is absolutely no way that that chair has sat balanced on that beam until today—a beam fallen from an empty room of pits with no chairs in sight.”

The beam bowed again. Lilla turned, hunching over the backrest, to face him. He was hopping.

“Stop, dammit!”

Kian hopped again.

“Just testing it. Maybe I’m wrong. Maybe this is a *really* sturdy beam.”

He hopped again. And then higher.

“Stop it, now!”

Kian stomped and the beam creaked.

“I’ll kill you,” she screamed.

She reined in her aggression, preventing herself from lunging toward him and toppling off to her death with the chair. She turned back to face the throat and planted her feet firmly on the ground before stepping out of her seat, then turning again to Kian, picking up the chair and pacing toward him.

She jabbed the air with the chair, “I’ll kill you I swear it.” She said so until she was off the beam, chasing Kian through the room with the pits. She kept jabbing with the chair.

“Hey, hey! Watch it now,” Kian said. He caught a jab and stopped her by grabbing two of the chair’s feet. “You’re going to break it, and then how will you feel.”

“Stop talking to me like that.”

Kian cocked his head.

“Shut up.”

He laughed, “I didn’t say anything.”

“That laugh, like that. Like you know everything. Just stop.”

She pulled the chair from his grip and slammed it on the floor.

“What if you’re picked for Sloe,” Kian said. “You going to sit out on flimsy ledges, watching for hours on end? You going to lash out at your partners?”

She looked away from him and squeezed the backrest of her chair. It was stronger than any wood she’d ever felt before.

“We’re almost there, Lil. No room for risk like that anymore. You can’t show off like—”

“Who’s showing off?”

“Come on, Lilla. *You* stop it now.”

He sighed. She looked back to him with anger and he looked into the pits. In the base of one there was a shallow layer of water. Around it vine-eaters were drinking. A few rolled in it, their frail, finger-thick bodies revealed by the wet collapse of their fur. Kian pulled a translucent triangular prism from the pocket sown on the front of his shirt, waving it to Lilla, who ignored him.

“I’ve got my find. Let’s get back to Evangeline. I’ll help you get that chair down.”

* * *

Alde coughed dust from his throat and patted down his body.

Dry. No bleeding.

He was lucky enough to be lying on a wide chunk of flooring from the radiant room. It had saved his back from being scratched or far worse. As he rolled over, he noticed a thin pipe that, had he landed a few inches to the side, would have speared him. Then, he noticed Elbi.

“What in—!”

Alde’s question was interrupted by a laugh. It was a girls voice.

“Close call!” she yelled.

Her voice was muffled, and coming from beneath Alde. He stilled himself on his chunk of floor atop a greater pile of rubble.

“Qiti! She’s under there!” Elbi pointed. “Alde, don’t move.”

“Alde?” Qiti shouted with a cough. “Great. At least we’ve got somebody strong to get this pile off me.”

“I take it you’re alright,” Alde asked.

“Mostly. A few nicks but no real bleeding.”

Elbi slouched with relief as Qiti continued.

“The big shiny thing from the ceiling kind of shielded me. But now I’m caged in.”

Alde carefully maneuvered down the pile toward Elbi, who stood by one of the sliding doorways. It appeared that they were in another one of the cloned rooms. This one had swallowed the radiant preservation of the other above.

“Just what were you doing down here?” Alde asked. “I could hear that damned horn in the room above, and then the whole place caved in.”

Elbi’s eyes turned down guiltily.

“What did—”

“That was me,” Qiti’s voice shot from the rubble pile. “Big thing hanging from the ceiling—I pulled on it. And I got it, too... but the ceiling came with.”

“Damned fools,” Alde said. “Are you sure you’re O.K. in there Qiti. Because doing this correctly is going to take a long time.”

“It’s a bit uneasy to breathe, and cramped. I’ll be *fine*. We can have ourselves a chat in the meantime.”

“I’d rather stay focused,” Alde said.

Qiti sighed.

“Alright, Elbi,” Alde said, “For now, just sit there and watch. I’m going to start lifting from the pile. If *anything* that I’m not touching moves, shout so and brace it. We don’t want anything sliding around or buckling.”

Elbi nodded and Alde began picking away pieces of metal, some half the size of himself, some the whole size of Elbi.

“So,” Elbi said, “you find anything before this whole mess happened.”

“...Yeah.” Alde grunted as he reached for some split wooden remnants of the chairs he gazed upon earlier.

“And... What is it then?”

“Something I’ll show to Evangeline, doesn’t matter right now.”

Alde continued working at the pile and, after slowly drawing a metal slate away, he was greeted by the distant shimmer of small eyes.

“Hi there!” Qiti said.

“We’ve a ways to go. Keep calm and still.”

She didn't. Through the hole through the rubble pile he saw her shift her arms to show him what she'd destroyed the room above for.

"I said keep still, Qiti."

"Don't worry," she assured him. "See this thing, amazing isn't it."

The shimmer of her eyes was now dwarfed by a crystalline orb the size of her head, resting upon her chest.

"Not impressed?" She patted the orb.

"Focusing on keeping you alive."

She sighed, "Shouldn't try to make conversation with an ox at work."

Alde called Elbi to lift away what smaller pieces. Over the greater part of an hour, they'd stripped away the whole front layer of the pile and had a hole by the ground that they could fully see Qiti through. Elbi tossed his waterskin to her through the hole, then sat to rest his arms, watching Alde continue to work at the pile.

Some of the pipes stuck through the pile were malleable enough for Alde to bend rather than just pull out. He pointed them down to the floor in attempt to reinforce the pile's stand as he continued removing rubble from the top layer. Bending a pipe away, he saw, a few feet within the rubble, one of the gold-green vases. It had cracked longways and had disposed of fine, gilded chain with a hexagonal pendant, dangling in the rubble. Alde reached his arm in. The tips of his fingers could taste it.

"I think that hole is big enough for me." Qiti said. "If I roll over and scoot a little—"

Alde heard her shift, below.

"Qiti, stop."

Her crystal ball rolled out, Elbi stopped it with his feet. Then a hand peeked from the hole—a thumbs up, “See, no problem.” Then her head peeked. Then her body was halfway out.

“Alde, Qiti!” Elbi screeched, pointing. “Catch it. Alde! Stop it.”

The insides of the pile shifted and groaned. Alde lunged forward and snatched the gilded chain into his right hand before reaching with his to steady one of the pipes he’d bent for reinforcement. It buckled. Alde pocketed the chain as the metals of the pile scraped and shifted before crashing. There was a snap and, finally, a scream.

“Please!”

Qiti shouted as Alde and Elbi scrambled. Their meticulous deconstruction became a furious dig.

“Please, no. Please help me. Help me! Get me out, please!”

Her words were wrought with spit and tears. Alde’s reckless tossing of the rubble revealed her right leg, pinned by an arm of the hanging ceiling decoration.

“Elbi, pull her!”

Alde’s muscled burned as he hoisted the pinning metal from beneath the rubble pile. Elbi grabbed Qiti’s hands and ripped her from its clutches. Alde dropped it and the rubble once again resettled with a cacophonous bang.

“We’ve got to get her to Evangeline.” Alde said. “Now!”

* * *

“Almost there! This is the last floor.”

Claudia elbowed Zin invitingly before skipping up the final stairwell. Many of the stairs were unfixed; metal clacked at supports beneath Claudia’s feet as she rushed up to the mouth of the corridor that fed into the dome and catwalks of the spire’s apex. Vines that crept through

gaps in the stair's supports muffled some of the clacks into small thumps. Zin's steps were slower than Claudia's, he struggled to keep pace. He shouted after her, competing with the high winds, which began finally to fade as they ventured inward from the outer corridors and their shedding walls of shadow scale. Claudia turned from the top of the stairway and saw the silken yellow of Zin's scarf glinting against blackness.

"What is that that you're wearing?" Claudia asked, realizing how fixated she had been on the mirror for the duration of their ascent. "Looks soft."

"It is," he stopped midway up the stairs, sat, and breathed for a moment. "It's softer than any other cloth I've ever felt. Found it a floor down just before I heard you call for help." He grinned, "It was deep in a room of stick-people."

"I hate those things."

Stairs clacked and thumped as Claudia came to sit by him.

"They're harmless—can't go after you or anything." With jesting claws, Zin threatened her. "At least, they didn't try to chase me down."

Memories of a faceless figure atop Sun Summit, the holy mountain, filled Claudia with unease.

"The one that Avolt keeps at Summit, I swear I've seen it move."

"*You have not,*" Zin laughed until he coughed. He wished he'd brought a second waterskin. "You let drowsiness and the flicker of the bonfire trick your eyes too easily."

"The stick-person wasn't by the fire—it was on the cliff edge overlooking The Grove during the last initiation... but I lost it in the crowd and it was back in Avolt's tent when I checked again. Avolt himself said that nobody touched the wretched thing."

“He said that it can’t get up and walk around, either,” Zin waved the yellow silk at her face, teasing. “It was years ago, you were a child, seeing things. Stick-people can’t budge any more than a rock can. Scared of rocks, too?”

“I said that I hate stick-people, not that they scare me,” she snatched the cloth from his hands and was quickly distracted. “So smooth and clean...”

Her awe echoed down the corridor’s broken metals and the crumbling offshoots that were once rooms.

“It was wrapped in something really smooth, too,” Zin said. “Tight, but stretchy. And clear. It was weird.”

“What did you do with that?”

“I tore it off.”

Claudia’s pleasant awe faded into frown. She diverted from the silken cloth to stare disapproval into Zin’s face.

“I had to get it out,” he said.

“No, you didn’t,” Claudia threw it back at him. “If you didn’t know what it was, you should have just brought it to Eva. We shouldn’t be touching it with our hands. She’ll be mad at us if it’s all greasy and covered in dirt.”

“Do you actually think that she’ll be able to be mad at anything after she hears about that you’ve found a mirror? We’re going to be heroes, Claudia. And as for the cloth, there’s more where it came from, all wrapped and pretty.”

Zin searched for relief in her face but received only a disapproving head shake before she marched down the corridor. He chased after her, each step either clacking the floor tiles or crunching one of the tiny vines that wriggled beneath them. Before long, the corridor opened into

the wide circle of the apex and the catwalks that impaled its hollow. There was a half-dozen of them intact, overhanging the thousand feet, and just as many awkward metal nubs jutting from walls where others had once been. Claudia pointed Zin's eyes through a doorway across one of the catwalks and into the circular room that capped the hollow. To her surprise, he conquered the catwalk immediately. One glimpse of the mirror—of himself—was enough to send him jogging over the thousand-feet. She followed.

“I look even better than I thought I would.”

He scraped crust from his dry lips, wiped the grime from his face, and brushed back his almost silver hair to examine his forehead and eyes. “Heroes,” he said. “Like Old Al, and Redspear...”

Redspear, Claudia thought. Why's the color so loved with him. It isn't fair. After this... Maybe it will be less of a curse. It will be. She looked at herself in the mirror, *An angel, for sure.*

Zin continued on about heroes, “... and none of them even found mirror! Claudia, we're going to be two of the greatest neophytes—no, angels—of all time. This is incredible!”

Zin leapt from the mirror's little stairs as his mind leapt ahead of itself.

“Claudia! Do you know what this means? Aren't you excited?”

He grabbed her shoulders and shook her until she smiled, then pointed to the tall pane.

“The other neophytes are going to envy us so much. Alde, that damn know-it-all—hasn't found a mirror, has he? We can rub it in his dumb face!” Zin laughed, “Or we can show it to everybody except for him. We could make him sleep with the mules if he wants to see it.”

Getting back at Alde sounded fun, but Claudia thought of all the other faces. The other neophytes, no all the kids in the Village, nudging each other in front of the mirror, racing to see their own faces imprinted in pure silver. She dreamed of how they would light up with joy when

they saw themselves, the world, shining back at them in the mirror, how they would thank her, respect her, listen to and understand her after she showed them the wonder that she recovered from the peak of the spire. She thought of Elbi, who never even asked her about being red. He never shut up about mirrors. On trips to Sun Summit, Elbi was always begging Avolt to take a peek of the Wardens' mirror collection in the Grove but, of course, he was never allowed. She could thank him for being nice to her. She could let him see the mirror first so that he could realize that its majesty was beyond what he ever imagined. Claudia thought of Evangeline.

“Damn her,” Claudia said.

Zin cocked his head.

“Evangeline’s going to hide it. She’ll wrap it up and keep it from the rest of the neophytes. *We’re* not even supposed to be seeing it.”

“You’re right.” Zin’s triumphant smile sagged.

Claudia’s voice shook, “She’s going to be angry that we’ve seen ourselves. She’s going to punish us, Zin. She’ll keep us from angelhood.”

“No, no! That’s not true,” Zin said, reassuring Claudia with a pat. “Eva can be mean but she *is* reasonable. It’s a *mirror*, Claudia. If she’s not overjoyed by it then she is insane. We’ll be alright. But you are right about the others. There’s no way she’ll let them see it. And that means that it’s not coming down from here. Not any time soon.”

“But, if we take it down ourselves, she can’t stop the others from—”

“Don’t tell me you actually thought we could bring this down by ourselves.” Zin interrupted. “We won’t even be able to budge this thing. Have you *seen* it? Its ten feet tall. The base is solid stone! We couldn’t move it three feet before breaking it or it breaking us.”

“But if we don’t find a way—”

“Look down there,” Zin pointed through an archway to the catwalks. “There is no way, Claudia. The only thing that we can do is tell Evangeline about it, and see what happens from there.”

Realism pained Claudia as she recognized her own delusion. Bringing the mirror home, being a hero, angelhood, trust, respect—it was all fantasy.

I thought that—no, I didn't. I didn't think. How stupid am I... to think that this would solve everything. To think that I could solve anything.

As she looked her mirror image in its eyes, impossibility crippled her mind.

She cried.

Zin reached to comfort her, “Sorry, did I—?”

“No,” she wiped her nose on her crusty brown collar. “You’re right.”

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah.” She wiped her tears. “I’m only... disappointed. I’ll be fine.”

Chapter Five

Lilla's hands burned from clutching rope, hanging fifty feet high. One foot pressed down against the rough bark of a vine-trunk while her other held forward against the coldness of the enormous pillar that the vine spiraled. Arcing around the spiral from her either direction were the ropes that the other neophytes had knotted to rails and beams in the metal mess above for their later descent. Though Lilla hung alone, one other rope was in use. Her softly padded, steel studded chair swayed beside her. She ensured her footing and tightened her right grip as she reached left to steady its sway before climbing farther down. As she scampered down her rope, ignoring the wet, red spots beginning to show on her palms, she called upward.

“Kian! A bit more!”

The chair, by its rope, dropped in small stages, each which prompted it to swing a few inches left or right before Lilla steadied it. Sometimes its legs bumped the pillar or its wide wrapping vines and Lilla wanted to scream at Kian, but she knew that nothing could be done. Lilla imagined Kian's hands must have been scratched and bloody, too, controlling the chair's dangle from so high and far away. When she left him, he was practically laying backward, feet pressed against a metal curb that maybe used to begin a stairway, fighting the chair's ninety-degree deferred weight with his muscle.

“Stop now!” Lilla shouted up as the four wooden legs descended upon her.

His grip better stay tight, she thought, stabilizing the descended chair, now only using the unbloodied backside of her free hand. *And that platform... creaky thing.*

While drawing a breath, she leaned back to observe the platform's oblong hang. What was once the spire's tenth floor had, through time, become its first. Even ten stories risen, the vines grappled with strength. The once-tenth level was patchy; uneven chunks close to the

spire's five pillar legs were about all that remained other than skeletal scaffolding unstably caught up in vines.

“Looks that we're past halfway now, Kian,” Lilla shouted, scooting farther down rope, balanced with feet against the pillar. “Lower it some more.”

Lilla felt a rush of air as the chair dove by her, its rope snapping taut as it hung a dozen feet below her. There was a loud clap—she could not tell if it was the chair hitting the pillar, or if something on the chair had snapped.

“Watch it!” Stomping a foot against the pillar, the pent-up pain of Lilla's grip erupted from her mouth as she repeatedly screamed Kian's name, “What are you doing up there? What was that?”

“Sorry...” Kian's voice faded in and out of audibility between grunts. He was struggling and trying to tell her something: “let... leg... now.”

Elbi's face peeked over the oblong platform, his light hair shimmering against the spire's dark underbelly.

“Elbi? Why did—what did you do? Tell him he better hold it tight. Tell him!”

Lilla huffed her words as she hurried down rope toward her chair. When she came near, it dropped again. The rope never pulled taut; it tailed the fifty foot fall in silence through the still air. Lilla rushed down-rope, shouting as she watched the chair land upon corner of the tall hollow cylinder she'd explored before climbing into the spire. One of the chair's leg split off, as did half its backrest which, though severed, clung together by way of its felt embroidery, as if a shattered limb kept together by flesh and tissue. Steel studs scattered, briefly twinkling before being lost among the grass and soil.

Finally aground, Lilla sobbed as she rifled through the grasses. She found two of the scattered studs and tried to press them back into their slots in the broken off leg, kneeling before the mutilated corpse of the chair, gridlines of its fabric stretched and exposed.

Shortly after, Alde's voice tore Lilla's attention from her tragedy.

"Lilla! Qiti's broke her—Lilla! Look at me. Qiti's broke her leg."

Lilla turned away from her chair and looked up. Alde was descending by rope as she was, but instead of guiding a chair, he was guiding Qiti, who was roped around her waist, chest, and underarms. The two of them were nearly to the ground. Lilla let out a high scream.

"Why? Kian! Why did you—why did it fall?"

"Lilla, run to Evangeline," Alde said. Get a head start on us. Tell her that Qiti needs attention."

Lilla looked back to her broken chair.

Alde spoke again. "We can come back for it, Lilla. Qiti needs help, *now*."

When Lilla faced Alde again he was on the ground with Qiti across his arms, lowering her to the soil and unraveling her.

"No, we can't," Lilla said. "It's broken. I can't."

"What are you?" Alde shouted. "A neophyte or not? Get to Evangeline."

Lilla rushed to punch his back as he hunched over Qiti, who groaned as he worked the ropes off of her. Alde caught Lilla's fist as she swung and twisted her arm until she knelt.

"Evangeline. Now." Alde said. "Or somebody might die."

Lilla kicked up dirt before storming off. She picked up the broken leg of her chair and ran out from under the spire toward Evangeline and the camp.

* * *

Qiti felt heat. But, unlike the morning's, this sweltering was not only besieging her, it was erupting from within. With Alde's every jogged footfall, her downfacing gut bounced up from his carrying shoulder. The air that had felt so hot in the morning was now comparatively cool and, with each bounce, formed a second-existent pocket between her and Alde's shoulder. The seconds of coolness teased her with relief, but after that second, she always crashed down, Alde's broad musculature smashing into her gut. With his every stride there was a metallic *clink*—the regularity of it calmed her; alongside the air pockets, they lured her from the pain. But the smash was inevitable, sometimes moving up to her ribs or down toward her pelvis. When she shifted too far she felt Alde's big hands grab at the skin of her good leg in defiance of sweat, pulling her back evenly over his shoulder.

When she almost fell off him entirely, he grabbed both her legs and she felt the heat seeping from her smear his palms. His sweat stung her wound in return. The sun should have burned Qiti, but the heat within her overpowered everything else. With her every slow blink the yellows of the grasses and the deep hues of the late noon sun melded in a bouncy gut-smashing blur as her consciousness leaked away. The sunny air was nothing against the wet fire drizzling from her punctured calf. The blurring grasses blackened and the world became cool as Qiti realized that she could not cry for help because she was choking on steam.

She awoke thinking that she had exploded. The first thing that she saw was a straight pillar of smoke against the clear sky. The world was hot again. It was dimmer, but still hot. Her gut ached, but she was still and stable against the ground. The crackle of a nearby fire splashed dry warmth against her right side, the sun stung her cheeks and forehead. Her calf burned, but it no longer spilled. It was difficult to reach, but she hunched up enough for her fingertips to realize the splint that was wrapped against the length of her leg.

“Stop.”

Alde pressed gently upon her chest until she lay back upon the dirt. Qiti realized that much of her rags were torn off; she was almost bare upon the ground. Some of them, she suspected, were repurposed as bandages. She felt their sweaty dampness against her injury.

“Thank you,” Qiti said. “I would’ve—”

Alde quieted her by pressing a waterskin to her lips. He did not look into her eyes. His free hand delved into his pocket and ruffled. Qiti winced at the resultant *clinks*; the sound pained her gut.

“Only my duty,” Alde said. He removed his hand from his pocket and called to Evangeline, “She’s awake.”

Qiti tilted her head from the fire and saw Elbi displaying his horn to Evangeline. He responded to Alde’s words with a honk and a hop. Evangeline began toward her and Alde while Elbi ran off out of Qiti’s sight.

“How do you feel?” Evangeline asked.

Between long breaths, Qiti began explaining how her leg had broken.

“I know, Qiti,” Evangeline paused her, kneeling. Firelight glinted in the hawk eyes of Evangeline’s breastplate, stinging Qiti’s vision. “The others have told me. All that I want to know right now is if you are feeling stable.”

“It hurts,” Qiti said. “But I’ve had worse, like in Elkwood. Maybe not so much blood before... but at least my bones are in tact. I’ll survive.”

“Qiti!”

Elbi’s voice was followed by a short honk. Then something outshined Evangeline’s breastplate. Atop the dirt before Qiti, Elbi lay the crystal ball.

“Not a scratch,” he said.

“Bless your bright face,” Qiti whispered.

She watched the fire warp into curls in the ball’s reflections. Something began to swell within her again. But it came not from the wound in her leg, and it was warm.

* * *

Without her monument, Claudia descended the spire. Zin tailed her depressed gait. But, with every floor she passed down through, the self-inflicted knot in her gut loosened a bit. Cautiously, confidence returned to her. *My discovery. A great discovery. They’ll be proud. They’ll thank me for it.* She thought about how she would word her announcement when she regrouped with Evangeline and the neophytes: *I found a mirror—We found a mirror—I showed Zin to the mirror. We’ve been blessed today—Light favors us today—Today is the greatest day of my life. Evangeline, you won’t believe this... Evangeline, I’m not lying... Evangeline, please, trust me!*

“Claudia—hey! Claudia.” Zin grabbed her arm. “What’s with you?”

She turned to him and saw a startled face. A kind of disappointment was set into his eyes. Turned forward, she saw the precarious crag of beams and metal slabs she was meandering toward and would have walked off of if Zin had not pulled her to a stop.

“Don’t be upset about the mirror,” Zin loosened his grip on her arm and rustled some of the dust and dirt from her hair. “Like I said before, you found a *mirror*. It’s a good thing no matter what. I’ve been watching you worry about it for the last ten floors, you’ve got to get your head straight.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry. I know.”

She turned to walk and he stopped her again.

“The stick-person room is only one floor below, I think. We can get the other cloths to give to Eva, at least.”

“I’d rather just get out of...”

“Don’t want to face the faceless?” He was quick to turn from reassuring to sardonic.

“They’re terrifying, I know. Unmoving, broken sculptures—the greatest danger of this splintered deathtrap, aren’t they?”

Claudia’s fists tightened, “Fine.”

They walked into a wide room that reached out to the spire’s exterior edge. In her sorrows, Claudia had lost track of their descent, but by the view out of the far side’s lost walling, she guessed they were almost halfway down the thousand feet. She had also lost track of time; she had spent hours climbing up the spire, then down, and back up again with Zin. It must have been early evening. Evangeline planned to be leaving about now. Claudia worried.

But, the mirror. A mirror... a mirror! She cannot be angry with me. It will be fine. Better than fine. Zin is right. Heroes.

The open wall at the far side of the room gave a wide view of the Northland fields—the wind-starved micro movements of the pale, sunbathed grasses culminated into a slow and dizzying churn from the high view. Immediately before her, there was another field—a wide smattering of trash, dilapidated by the high gales and their unknown ages endless howling. Second-long cyclones of debris and dust rose and fell unendingly. Sunlight and shadow streaked the windy chaos in stripes along the floor where the room’s many short parallel walls had crumbled and bent, where garbage was trapped into shoulder high barricades.

Among it all, the stick-people were scattered. Most were long fallen, tall hollow bodies cracked and snapped into black sand and palm sized plates of nothing. Risen over the barricades

of ancient litter, two of them stood back to back with their arms crossed, their black figures glazed by sunrays and tied together by vines that trailed out from the cracks in their bodies like spilled veins. Zin pointed Claudia past the entrance of the room, spitting sentences through the wind through thirsty lips coated with the breeze's grime.

“Watch the left side. Lots of holes in the floor, and the ground nearby is wobbly. Everywhere else is sturdy. The cloth is toward the back. There's a...”

His guiding shouts faded into the wind as he walked farther in. Claudia stood still at the entranceway, staring into the black and empty facial pane of a standing stick-person whose feet were secured to a small circular platform. It was unmistakably a woman. She rested one hand on her hip and held her other gallantly forward, fingers halfway to point, displaying something that had been lost to her for centuries. Time had split open her calves, stolen her left breast and most of her belly. By her ages in the rough wind, scratches wore her hard, hollow skin into dullness. Only small pockets were left smooth, and they patched her over like a sickness. Her less damaged half faced away from the open wall. In those ill, unworn spots, Claudia saw the vague, warped image of what she now recognized as her own face.

“What *are* they?” She thought aloud.

“What?” Zin shouted from within the room. “Get over here already!”

It took Claudia a few steps before she turned her back to the stick woman. Zin noticed but kept from teasing. Even face to face with Zin, Claudia had to shout to overcome the wind.

“What do you think they are?”

“Avolt told me that they may have been skin and bones once,” Zin's face hardened with a false sincerity, as did the words that he threw toward Claudia as if he was a cleric reciting an old tale. “Their souls were sucked out! And everything else too—they're blackened, hollow like the

folk who make it away from Sloe,” He nudged Claudia as he turned forward, loudening against the continual blast of air. “Maybe stick-people are what happens to those that don’t get saved by angels. Maybe if we spend enough time in this place...we’ll turn like them!” He shouted a common rhyme against the wind, “*So sick! Stiff as a stick! See their dark bodies and you ought to run quick!*”

Claudia stayed silent, denying Zin’s success at making her uneasy. He knelt and flicked a stick-person’s detached, empty arm. *Thunk*. Watching him, she felt the noise more than she heard it through the wind’s howls.

“They’re well beyond dead now,” Zin said. “Whatever it was that happened to them. Now, the cloth!”

He broke from Claudia into a short sprint against the wind, straight toward the missing wall that viewed the plains. He jumped right, behind a line of crumbly dark barricades. When Claudia chased around the corner, she faced a thin and empty alleyway that ended with a pair of closed doors that were as colorless and dilapidated as the rest of the room.

“Zin?” she yelled. “Are you in there?”

No answer. She stepped forward, reaching for the handles.

“Zin?” She shouted.

A dark figure burst through the doors—a stick-person. Claudia screamed, jumped back and slipped on the uneven, rubbly floor. She landed on her back and the stick-person landed beside her. Limbs broke from its body and fractured, hitting her body before scattering in the wind.

Claudia’s profanities were lost to the wind while Zin’s closeted laughter somehow overcame it.

“It’s so easy to scare you!” he said, jumping from the open doors.

Claudia was quick to return to her feet.

She shouted, “We’re on a mission! Our first spire! Are you ever going to grow up?” She rushed to punch his chest, “Is there even actually any more cloth?”

She saw the answer in his face.

“Why?” she asked, not wanting an answer. “...moron.”

“Come on, it was a joke. I thought that it might cheer you up a bit.”

The earnesty of his statement infuriated her. “Cheer me up?” she moaned. “Waste of time. I should throw you off!”

She pointed to the open wall and endless amber plains before storming away through the rubble laden floor with the wind at her back as she escaped him and the shattered remnants of the stick-people. She quickly made way down the spire.

“I’ll give you the scarf if you want. To give to Eva,” Zin shouted, chasing her. “I’m sorry, I didn’t think that...”

She ignored him. The flare of animosity determined her: *Keep ahead. Don’t listen. Don’t look back.*

* * *

Evangeline watched as Kian twisted a three sided glass prism around in the air, angling one of its faces toward the early afternoon sun. From Evangeline’s view, seated in the dirt on the far side of a recently restacked and restoked fire, Kian’s chin was being whipped by flames. Kian and Alde had moved Qiti back as they grew the fire, but she remained nearby its side as she rested. Lilla sat far off, hugging her chair leg beside the wall of yellow grasses. Alde sat to the near right of Evangeline. His hands kept returning to his central pocket, fiddling, then retracting

and laying on his lap, as if burdened. Elbi stood near Kian, following the movements of the prism with his head. Evangeline knew the tricks of the three sided prism. She looked forward to the neophytes' surprise. Then it happened, a shower of rainbows sprouted from the prism. Red, green, and blue came to life, bellowing and writhing as they shone on the smoke of the fire.

“See!” Kian said, “Amazing, isn't it?”

Elbi jumped and squealed with excitement while Alde stared ponderously into the flames and Lilla faced away, pouting. Qiti remained half conscious beside the fire.

“Beautiful,” Evangeline said to Kian. “The clerics will be pleased by it.”

“Guys?” Elbi said. “How isn't his exciting you. Look at it. Rainbows! It makes rainbows. Kian, I'm sure that Claudia and Zin will love this thing.”

“And what if they're dead?” Lilla asked. She stood up, gripping her chair leg like a club. “Evening now and not a sign of them.”

“There's no way,” Elbi said.

“You saw what happened to Qiti... or they could just have fallen, like my chair.”

Lilla walked toward Elbi.

“Lilla.” Evangeline's tone warned her.

“It's true, though, Eva. You can't say it isn't. What we do is dangerous. And it's been hours. Knowing Zin, he probably joked around too near to an edge and fell through the throat.”

Elbi's brow creased with anger as his eyes began to tear.

Evangeline sighed. “You all know the dangers of your lives. We have all seen neophytes lost before. And you're not subjected to these trials without reason. If Claudia and Zin have perished, they would not have been capable Angels, let alone raiders of Sloe. However, the day's not over, and we know them to be strong.”

“Strong.” Lilla snickered. “Wish the rest of you were stronger. What happened to being a team.” She pointed the chair leg at Qiti. “Why was I the one who got betrayed?” Her eyes teared.

Kian shouted back, “You didn’t even go back for the chair, you betrayed it. You have no faith in its worth. You gave up, Lilla. Qiti could have died! Don’t you blame anybody here for anything.”

“Settle down! All of you.” Evangeline shouted. “Sit apart and circle the fire. I won’t have you dwelling in sorrows alone like a child, Lilla. Sit down and be quiet. And Alde, what is in your pocket? Why haven’t you presented your find yet.”

Alde remained staring into the fire, a hand fumbling in his pocket.

“Alde!” Evangeline said.

“What? Sorry.” He stood. “My pocket... I found this...” He frowned. “It’s beautiful.”

Evangeline’s frustrations with the neophytes drained as the necklace stole her senses. Its gilding was so pure that it appeared colorless, a body of pure reflection, glistening hair strands of gold that cascaded through Alde’s fingers as he offered it forward. As Evangeline’s hand fluttered to touch its pendant—a flat disk etched with honeycomb hexes—it popped open beneath Alde’s thumb. Within was a fingertip sized globe, rife with a red and furious liquid, churning, as if a miniature sea populated with countless swells, ripples, and whirlpools. The pendant was fixed in Alde’s palm, but the sea careened and cavorted without end.

“Gorgeous,” Evangeline said.

Alde looked at Qiti, beside the fire.

Evangeline touched his shoulder, “You should be proud.”

What will the clerics make of this, she thought. She wanted to take it from Alde’s young hands, pack it into layers of cloth and leather to bring safely southward for the clerics to appraise.

But, this was Alde's discovery. Evangeline had to respect the neophytes' autonomy—she did respect their autonomy—but she needed to show it in order for her neophytes to stay confident and able. Despite that Alde's unseasoned hands might bruise the chain or crack the red bobble during their southward travels, Evangeline stepped away never having touched the most luminous relic that she had seen in years. She gave Alde a congratulatory smile with a stern stare. But still, he was looking to Qiti.

“Alde,” she said. “Would you and Kian return to the spire before it grows too dark and retrieve some shadow-scales. Nothing too large, but something good for the clerics to examine back home.”

“The night,” he said, standing short beside Evangeline. “Avolt told me that the Heralds took night beneath their forges, heated it and beat at it until it was solid. That's where the scales come from. They crafted night as we do wood and rock.”

Kian laughed, “Avolt claims to have *seen* the Heralds, too. Up on that mountain with crazies for company and no food but heart ferns and shade nuts—I wouldn't credit his knowledge of history so much as a hen's.”

“You distrust the Warden in the Day?” Elbi asked, facing Kian again with a hardness in his eyes.

Kian stood and waved in dismissal, “On matters of the night, yes, Avolt has not a clue. The Heralds made great towers—that does not mean that they had forges large enough to smithy night itself.”

“Metal,” Evangeline halted Elbi from arguing back. “And nothing else. Elbi, you know better than to trust Avolt's every story. Masters of ceremony are seldom masters of truth.”

* * *

Claudia maneuvered harshly through collapsing corridors, the splits, clogs, avalanches of metallic rubble, and the vines that screwed through everything. But she was calculated, balanced. *Swing from that bar. Shimmy that beam, but lean back, it wants to fall. Grapple down those vines, the ones spiraling the pipe,* and most importantly, *do not stop.* Zin's trailing voice distracted her, each distant syllable punched her ears until her frustration was overblown and she became defocused. She stubbed her toe on a hunk of stony rubbish while crossing a girder. She jogged a floor without analyzing it and pricked her heel on a barbed shard of tile.

Every few moments Zin echoed back into her mind, selfishly offering things, seeking forgiveness—why couldn't he just keep quiet? *I don't want your damned scarf.* Every time she wished that she could not hear him, she heard him more. After a final stretch of furious determination, she was rewarded with peachy sunlight as she arrived at the oblong platform that hung low and lonely adhered to one of the five spinal beams. Over its jagged edges hung slim brown braids, the six ropes of the neophytes who'd come and gone throughout the day. Below the platform, it was as if a great wave came and stripped away the lowermost shadow-scales and all the spires convoluted, timeworn the innards. Only the dull gray beams and their wrapping vines.

The conclusion of the hundred-foot drop displayed the strong, hydrated vines that pressed wide, barked paths through the grasses, dotted with huge green leaves. Among them, she saw a dot of red. It looked like torn cloth. At Claudia's distance, the ground appeared a cushy mosaic. Other than the mirror, the open air between Claudia and the ground, vibrant with late-day light, was the brightest and most inviting thing she'd seem in a half dozen hours. She wanted badly to jump into it. The vine-eaters, she thought, may be able to survive such a fall if they landed right,

and in the right spot. *They have it so easy.* But Claudia's would have to descend by rope and pillar.

Claudia roped down into the vine-gnarled overgrowth. The openness of the ground distracted her from her annoyance with Zin. The air was still, but, stood atop one of the vines of tree-trunk girth, she could see clearly for miles in every direction. When she finally hopped aground she felt a comfort, crinkling soft soil between her toes. Then she heard Zin rustling down a rope, his feet padding down the thick vines overhead. When she looked up, she saw not him, but the underside of the spire's throat. Zin shouted something but she lost herself in the endless tunnel of darkness, which, to her, was much more threatening when viewed from beneath. When she was in the darkness, she could see everything. Looking down from the apex was terrifying, but it was not concealed; the lit ground one thousand feet beneath was clear to view. However, looking upward, the spire's caving hallways and broken rooms succumbed to shadow after a few hundred feet. The catwalks and the disk at the apex were invisible.

Is it safe? she wondered, then hoped. The mirror was up there, restricted from Claudia by opaque distance.

She heard Zin again, "Just wait for me! Alright?"

There was no time to waste while the mirror sat so high and so lonely, its world crumbling unpredictably beneath. Claudia hurdled over vines that lay thick as tree trunks, running into the wide world beyond the five gargantuan spinal beams. The soil softened further as she left the vine-choked ground. For a moment, the artificial breeze of her sprint relieved her curls of dust and dirt before they straightened against her neck, hampered with sweat. The spire's evening shadow was a straight stripe to the neophyte encampment. Though hidden from sunlight, her skin and rags still boiled, moist and filthy. She was exhausted as she pushed her way through

the valley. Her soiled clothes were nearly as uncomfortable as the neck high tickle and resistant stand of the grasses, but each sensation was also refreshing, a reminder of her return to stable ground. She saw Kian and Alde. They called out to her, and jogged toward her, but she ignored them, keeping forward. Each heel-pound against the soft soil was more excited than the last as she defied her lack of breath and began to shout, “Evangeline!”

Chapter Six

Evangeline stood watching the spire on the edge of camp, where the grasses thickened into a palisade of yellow stalks. Its needle head, enshrouded by the early evening sun, could contest the radiant allure Alde's necklace. However, as all Herald things, its mysteries were dangerous. The core of its skyward stand was pitch as midnight; though, as the sun fell to its back, twilight traced the black body as if its edges were built of cloudy glass. *How could such pure darkness intertwine with light?* Evangeline contested the popular belief that the Heralds were, at some point in history, divine—*true divinity is incorruptible. The divine would not have left dark remainders, because divinity is eternal.* Though she never spoke it, a small admission accompanied her contention: *they surely came close.*

Evangeline watched Alde and Kian's heads bob away to collect fallen bits of shadow-scale. Through the icy black metal never corroded, the scales that fell often split and chipped. Thought of the spire's instability further grew Evangeline's concerns of Claudia and Zin.

It has been hours. What could they be doing? Did they fall? We'll have to go find them, haul back the bodies. Nuisance. It's sad, but it's true... They better not have exhausted themselves and fallen asleep, or have gotten lost in there. They're not that kind of reckless. Would they run away? They're fond of one another...

And then, off from Alde and Kian's bobbing heads, she saw a third, sprinting away from the spire. Moments later, she heard the voice: "Evangeline! Evaaangeeliine!"

Elbi ran beside Evangeline, shouting.

"Claudia! That's Claudia."

Shortly, Claudia broke through the grass palisade.

"...a mirror...the top...perfect."

Elbi hugged Claudia, asking where Zin was. He broke through the grasses as Elbi asked.

“You two are alright. Thank the light.”

“Yeah, alright,” Zin said. “Dead hungry, too.”

“A mirror, Claudia? Did you say a mirror?”

Evangeline pulled Elbi back. “Claudia, Zin, feed yourselves and tell me of it.”

While Claudia and Zin settled down near the fire, Elbi told them what had happened to Qiti. Before long, Kian and Alde returned. A pile of shadow-scales rested between them as they sat. Evangeline and the neophytes listened as Claudia and Zin spoke between ripping at assorted haunches of small game, crunching nuts, and chugging as many waterskins as were brought before them. Zin gave his bright silk scarf to be passed around.

“It’s alone in the room that tops the pit, across the high walkways. The mirror’s big, beautiful. The most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” meaty spittle popped from Claudia’s teeth as she spoke through a rabbit leg. She jolted her free hand over her head, “Taller than Zin and I together, and perfect—untouched. And it was magic! Everything around it was so old and broken but the mirror was ageless. And all of the rusty, broken, ugly spire looked brilliant through its pane. And me...” Claudia anticipated to be reprimanded for having seen herself before her proper time, but Evangeline sat silent, waiting, eyes widened with a rare innocence. Claudia continued, “...I was perfect. I was pure and bright and even though I was covered in dirt I was clean. You have to see it, *feel* it. In it, everything is better.”

Zin’s eyes drifted from Evangeline’s and onto the hawk mounted upon her chest. Onlooker breastplates were among the few works of metalcraft ever constructed in their homeland of The Rise, a massive bluff encircled by a handful dwellings burrowed throughout surrounding hillsides. Breastplates weighed several pounds. They were flat, round tokens of iron,

fastened by leather straps to rest at the center of the chest. They were engraved with symbols—astrological, naturalistic, human, whatever the onlooker themselves deemed significant. The hawk’s dark eyes and fearsome, downturned beak were etched into Evangeline’s breastplate and into her character.

Zin was sickened by her frequent lectures: “The hawk does not sneak and scheme like a cat, and it does not hesitate as do so many of our kind. It knows power. It *is* power. And thus it does what it must, however cruel the task is. You are fledglings. Angels are hawks.”

Zin disagreed. He disagreed the first time that he heard it when he was ninety moons old. *Birds scheme in their high circles, he thought, before they lunge down into the neck of some small animal. They refuse confrontation by clawing into the backs of the defenseless.*

But, every time that he voiced his disagreement, Evangeline argued that the circling, the lunging, and the clawing was strategy—that it detracted none from their strength and honor.

“They do not plot in packs to overwhelm,” Evangeline would say, “They strike *once* with honest power, not deceptive dances or perverse carnage.”

Zin found Evangeline’s focus on honesty dishonest. It was compensation for something that he was sure existed, but could not read from her or understand.

“The topmost floor?” Evangeline sighed, dropping Claudia and Zin’s arms, allowing them to gorge once more. She asked, “What is the mirror’s making?”

“Thick and heavy,” Zin said. “Wood with an odd reddishness to it, carved finely too. It was too heavy for us to try to move. Too dangerous for the mirror.”

Claudia swallowed hard before asking “Can we get it? Tomorrow, in daylight... if all of us—”

“Absolutely not,” said Evangeline. “We have not the equipment or the manpower. There is strategy in the acquisition of such relics, especially if this mirror is of the scale you depicted. A flock of neophyte children alone cannot do this.”

Sighs surrounded Evangeline.

“I want to see it,” Lilla said.

Elbi chimed in, “We can’t leave it by itself. What if—”

“Quiet!” Evangeline clapped once and spoke loudly. “It will be discussed among the clerics and my fellow onlookers. It has dwelled atop that spire for longer than our Village has burrowed by the hills. The mirror goes nowhere—it will be safe.” She eased her voice, “Claudia, Zin, you have made a heroic discovery—that is, if you have spoken not falsities. You were wise enough to bring this information to me instead of risking yourselves or the mirror, and I congratulate that, but our actions must continue with patient deliberation. At sunrise, we head home. Now, neophytes, rest yourselves.”

* * *

Elbi’s waking vision was a twisty black cloud backed by a bed of stars. Something shook his shoulders.

“Hey, hey... wake up—shush,” Claudia whispered.

Her dark curls bobbed in starlight as she shook him. Elbi sat up, rubbing his eyes as she went on.

“Zin and I could barely sleep. Morning’s coming. Before the others wake up, I want to show you something—a pond nearby, and tons of blueroots. Nobody else knows. I found it yesterday.”

Elbi slipped from his sleeping sack. Zin waited for he and Claudia on the far side of the camp clearing, beside the high yellow grasses of the valley, which barely overshot their kiddish faces. The three moved carefully into the grasses. As they distanced themselves from the encampment, their pace grew and Elbi voiced questions with excitement.

“You guys really found a mirror? What was it like, seeing yourselves? Is it like they say—like you said? Did you have visions? Did you feel divine?”

“Yes. You wouldn’t believe it, Elbi,” Claudia lit the nighttime with her elation. “It was another world. It took the wretched, dusty room that harbored it and turned it into gold. And *me*—looking at myself through the mirror like that—it was... freeing. I was so tired when I finally reached the top of the spire, but the mirror cleansed me. Its light filled me and made me powerful. It showed the truth within me, that I can do anything.”

“It was *something*,” Zin thought for the right words. “Like reversed prophecy for her. What gets to me is that it was made so long ago. It proves the world was purer once, that the black spires once had a brightness.”

“How would *you* know?” Claudia elbowed Zin “Zin never even looked *into* the mirror. He just ogled his own dumb face—ooh, we’re getting near.”

Claudia rushed ahead, knocking through the tall yellow stalks of grass.

Walking faster to keep pace alongside Zin, Elbi chuckled with relief and said, “I’m just glad that you and Claudia got out well enough.”

“Yeah, you were worried, from what I heard from the others.” Zin cocked his head, grinning. “No confidence in us to make it out of a spire alive?”

Elbi wished that he could enjoy Zin’s casual attitude, but he turned serious.

“Alde and Evangeline talked of leaving you behind. Told me that if you were dead, your bodies weren’t worth the hassle. Kian said that Eva was just testing me, gauging my reaction—she probably was—but Alde seemed happy with the idea of never seeing you two again.”

“Well, then.” Zin stopped and smiled at Elbi “Not one bit of that surprises me. And if any of us ought to be left for dead, it’s Alde—that tall bastard.”

Elbi laughed, then Zin. Their laughs grew, competing with one another.

“Shush,” Elbi quieted. “They might hear us. What if Eva wakes up.”

“So what?” Zin hooted, “We found a mirror! We’re divine! We’re untouchable!”

He and Elbi kept laughing until they heard a splash from ahead.

“Guys!” Claudia called quietly. “Come on, just up here.”

They caught up and found Claudia with a teal glow by her feet. Thousands of phosphorescent stalks encircled a shallow pond, splashing light blue luminescence along the pale palisade of tall grasses which concealed it. The lucidity of the water rivaled the beauty of the mirror, despite its wavering reflections. The soil underneath looked like another world with its own mountains, trenches, and fields, all blanketed by a softly rippling crystalline sky.

Claudia kneeled and gently grabbed the narrow base of the glowing, oblong bulb of a blueroot, tugging it up from the moist earth. She pinched its little roots free of mud and lay it on her tongue, then pressed it against the roof of her mouth. The small bit of pressure burst it, staining euphoria into her throat, her gums, the roots of her teeth, the back of her eyes, and then her mind. The soggy air of the valley suddenly felt cool as it circulated her lungs; she breathed a deeper breath than she ever had before.

Claudia plopped down in shallow water and reclined into thought of the mirror, of the Clerics who would thank her, of her village that would be so proud. Across the ten generations of

her people who settled beside the the Lake, there were only six unbroken mirrors. Claudia thought of The Grove, the murky woodland at the foot of Sun Summit, housing the cave that concealed mirrors from the world. She longed to go there, to see the six unbroken others, to compare and contest her finding against her people's history.

Meanwhile, Zin and Elbi also indulged and felt the cool rush of the blueroots' nectar. Bursting blueness through flesh and soul, they lay back, water up to their ears in the pond, watching and feeling twilight recolor the world into morning. Each of the three children knew that they should have returned to the camp by now, but none voiced the thought because every consecutive instant was more splendid than the last.

The perfect silence grew into giggling after a little grumble resonated through water that lapped their ears. With a splash, Elbi sat up and looked at Zin.

"Hungry, ay?" He laughed, lightly slapping Zin's stomach before splashing some water at his face.

Zin tucked his head fully into the pond and filled his cheeks with water to blow at Elbi in retaliation; when he resurfaced, Elbi was no longer before him and he heard the abrupt end of a scream. Elbi sat limp at the bank of the pond, opened at the neck by the six-inch teeth of a valleycat. Zin choked as his mouthful of pond water assaulted his lungs through terrified gasps. He jolted up and tripped backwards into the grasses. Elbi's life polluted the water with redness. His collar tore further as the valleycat's furry, gore soaked jaw and claws ripped his limp body away into the grasses. Claudia lunged past Zin, through the crimson water, screaming indiscriminately after Elbi and five hundred pounds of cat. Zin grabbed her arm and they slipped back down into the pond. She fell atop one him and mud splashed over their teary cheeks. Zin

saw a harshness in Claudia's eyes. He pushed her off him, clamped a hand around her wrist, and pulled her up.

“No!” She shook, unable to break his grasp. “No!”

Claudia ducked to bite at Zin's arm as he pulled her toward the grasses in the opposite direction of the valleycat's escape. She tripped, pulling Zin aground with her, and screamed.

“Let me go! He—he—let me—no! Let me go!”

Zin stood again and pulled her arm so much he thought it might tear off. He dragged her through the mud and into the grasses until she stood, and then he yanked her harder, forcing her to run with him before she thought to resist again. As they distanced themselves from the pond, Claudia's fury faded into shivers and sobs that nearly crippled her sprint. The thick roots of the grasses snagged her and Zin's bare toes. They whipped at their cheeks and knuckles. Gripping one another's arms, they were an aimless disruption of their now still surroundings. They tackled their way through the grasses, wailing between seconds of shocked and sorrowed suffocation, unable to escape that sight by the water.

Chapter Seven

Darkness split into pink and blue as Evangeline awoke to the morning sky. Her sleep-sack wrinkled softly as she withdrew. The bases of her feet crunched into the crisp ashes that overlay the campground soil. With foot-taps, she reared Alde and Kian who slept near to her. The boys stood and she moved to wake Qiti and Lilla, who exiled themselves to opposing sides of the camp. Three empty sleep-sacks circled the burned out fire. Upon noticing them, Evangeline spun and scanned the encampment.

“Where’ve they gone to?” Evangeline shouted their names to no reply. She looked to her neophytes, “Claudia, Elbi, Zin—has anybody seen them?”

Then there were shrieks. Claudia and Zin burst from the grasses, tripping over one another as they gripped hands, pulling each other along. They landed before Evangeline, Knees in the dirt, sobbing.

“I’m sorry,” Claudia attempted to stand. She repeated her apology, looking into Evangeline’s face until Evangeline hunkered down to meet her. She grabbed Claudia’s shoulders and asked what had happened. Touching Claudia’s rags, Evangeline’s hands became damp with pondwater and blood.

“Elbi—Elbi,” Zin coughed and panted. “He’s dead.”

Claudia sniffed hard and heaved while she rubbed her eyes, “A cat got his neck. And it took him off.”

Evangeline stood again and waved to Alde, Lilla, and Qiti.

“Five minutes to pack. We’re leaving. Somebody ready the mules.”

She glanced to Zin, looked down to Claudia, “What happened exactly?”

Claudia was silent, her shakes had faded into a still stare at the grasses beyond Evangeline.

Zin began, “We rose before sunrise to get some blueroots from a pond off from camp—woke Elbi to come along, too.”

“My idea,” Claudia muttered.

“We were blissed, laying in the pond,” Zin continued. “Next, the cat had Elbi by the throat. Tore him open, dragged him off.”

Evangeline asked, “Are you sure he—”

Zin nodded.

“Claudia?”

Claudia continued her static stare.

Zin grabbed Evangeline’s arm before it tapped Claudia, “He’s dead, Eva. For sure.”

Claudia looked up into Evangeline’s eyes, “His head’s off. The water is red. I—I—”

“Zin,” Evangeline said. “You must watch after her. Gather your things.”

She pointed at both of them and made off for Lilla, who was beside Alde. Both fiddled bowstrings.

“What’re you doing?”

“We’ve a hunt, don’t we?” Lilla snapped the bowstring.

Alde nodded with a grunt.

“Absolutely not,” Evangeline said. “Not in their fields, where there might be more.” She looked away from Alde and Lilla, over the grasses, “Elbi’s in pieces by now. There won’t be anything to recover, and the cat, or cats, are too great a risk.”

“Even if pieces, shouldn’t we—” Alde paused. “He was a brother. Just weeks from Angelhood. He should be avenged if nothing else.”

Evangeline glanced back to Claudia.

“Everybody, pack it up. We’re leaving for home in five.”

* * *

The grasses such as were around the spire were a rare plot of fertility for the north. Usually, it was an expanse of stone, hot and tortuously dry. The greenest thing to be seen was the moss gripping the undersides of occasional boulder piles. For three days, Claudia and her companions would mash across gravelly Northland ground. In every shift and clack of stony soil beneath her feet, Claudia heard the crack the Valleycat’s biters breaking into Elbi’s shoulder bones. After explaining to Evangeline what had happened to Elbi, Claudia conversed only with herself.

So close... we’re all so close, she imagined her coming christening atop Sun Summit, Elbi’s shadow standing beside her as the Clerics dubbed her an angel. If I ever can be an angel, now. I killed him. I killed him... and they know it. They won’t say so, but they know it. Think me a witch—a red witch.

“Claudia,” called Lilla, snapping her from her violent trance.

Lilla pointed down. Red footprints, a trail of long dashes across the rocks.

“You’re leaking red,” said Alde.

Each of the neophytes had wrapped their feet with cloths from their sleep sacks, but three days marching, in the Northlands especially, flesh dried and cracked. Claudia’s right sole was split diagonally from the ball of her big toe to her heel.

Evangeline turned back. The day was darkening, she decided that it would be best to stop.

This would be their last night in the Northlands and its cruel stony ground. With their sleep-sacks distanced from the others, Zin used some of the dwindling water supply to rinse Claudia's foot before wrapping it tightly. Stains of blood and pond water still dotted both their rags.

"You're not responsible," Zin said.

"What are you—"

"You know exactly what," Zin corked the waterskin he was rinsing with. "Everybody knows what."

Claudia shuddered.

"I—we—can see it in your face... in your walk." Zin came closer to her. "Claudia, I see him too, when I close my eyes. Before I sleep, I hear our screams and I think about what I could have done to stop it. But it's no use."

* * *

The following day led the group from the northlands. The hard, dry land slowly melted into dirt, marked with occasional shrubs, gangly swaths of weeds, and patchworks of low green grasses. The earth moistened as they came farther southward, and became overrun with hills. On the morning of the seventh day, they peaked a slope and spotted home by the miles distant glow of the Luentry—the centerpiece of their village—a glass roofed pavilion capping a hill beside a small lake. More distant was the earthen fang of Sun Summit, a slim and lonely mountain jutting from the horizon, its rise flanked by a marshland of gnarled trees that grew just tall and thick enough to be a visible dark mark on the landscape in the distance. Other than the glass of the Luentry and a pair of clay constructions—the Waterhouse, at the base of the hill beside the Deepfern Lake, and the Hut of Sermons on the opposing side of the hill—the Village was a

hidden thing. It consisted of hovels burrowed into the hills. Viewing the Village from a distance as they were, it was insignificant to the land, veiled within it—with the exception of the Waterhouse's steam. The broad clay Waterhouse was usually inactive for the morning.

As Evangeline and the neophytes hiked toward the outskirts of the Village, there were subtle changes about the hillsides. The shrubs that were scattered throughout the landscape became regimented to the bases of hills, evenly grown in rings around their perimeters. Occasionally, the hillsides had stone-reinforced archways with linen and leather curtains. The basins between the hills were plucked clean of shrubs and saplings, leaving only soft, clean grass. But, the hillside Village's normal noontime bustle was nowhere to be seen. No hunters or tailors walked the basins from one hill-burrowed home to the next. No soilmasons were tilling dirt or trimming the shrubs that capped the hillsides. No children skipped in and out of town with basketfuls of berries. Evangeline grimaced as she walked, and the Village's ritual isolation became evident.

Chapter Eight

In wispy green robes, stained greener from her daily tasks in the gardens, Millis was near invisible, standing at the foot of the Lamb's-ear family's grassy hillock. Regardless, there were none currently about the Village to witness her. The few dozen hillocks, burrowed through into familial hovels, that were scattered randomly around the west side of the lake were silent. None but Millis and the grasses in the breeze moved or made sound in the village of hillocks. She stood rifling through her satchel, looking with her fingertips through its pockets while her eyes rested forward, unfixed and unable, her head tilted slightly back, cheeks gazing at the early morning sun and absorbing its warmth. The meek green of her robes turned deep and translucent as it rested in sweat upon her shoulders and her chest, whereupon it lay uneven due to her missing breast. The robe's thin fabric settled into her wrinkles. Mud splotches formed frequent crusty patches over the robes—collapsing a hillock was dirty work. She hated doing it, regardless of her having to do very little in the collapsing itself. Millis was there for afterward. Not an hour past sunrise, she stood just outside the Lamb's-ear Hillock's archway and listened to men inside buckle the wooden beams that enforced the burrow—the burrow which was once home to a couple, a trapper and a fisherwoman, who had almost graced the village with a second child.

Millis's fingers spotted what they were rifling for—a corked clay bottle, stout, about the length of her thumb, and a coinlike river stone the width of her palm. Now sure that she had the bottle, she withdrew her hands from the satchel and plucked the sides of her hood from clinging to the damp arches of her ears. Her gut was already knotted, and the wrap of her robes would suffocate her did she nothing. Millis loved the touch of the sun, but she preferred the dryer months. The effect of clothing in wet heat reminded her of the Sloe's dark pits, how cramped

they were, how stifling. She pulled her hood fully back and turned to let the sun shower the rear of her neck. She ruffled her short cap of gray hair, wispy as her robes, and stood back to the sun's embrace for a long and comfortable while. The knot in her gut eased.

She ended her tranquil stand with a clap. Pivoting slowly in between, she clapped a few more times until she was sure she faced the hillock. Stepping forward, she knew it to be the proper hillock because of the lamb's-ear shrubs that ringed its base. The gentility of lamb's-ear made it an immediate favorite of Millis's those hundreds of moons ago when she first came into the Light of the surface—a shame that the plant had been so blighted by being the herb-ring of this particular hillock and its family. She knelt and plucked a handful of ears from the shrubs, gripping the most of them in her left hand, retaining a solitary ear in her right, massaging it between her thumb and forefinger. Ages it had been her favorite, and still its intimate fleshiness was unreal to her. She swept the solitary lamb's-ear down her cheek, and its peachlike fibers absorbed her droplets of sweat and a few tears.

Savoring the sweep of lamb's-ear against the bases of her feet as she stepped beyond the ring, Millis began a slow and steady climb of the hillock. The night prior, the Lamb's-ear hillock stood a dozen and a half feet high. Millis's firm march now brought her to its peak after only half as much height. She then stepped into the slight descent of its imploded center, accidentally knocking the side of her foot on a piece of wooden foundation jutting from the soil. She brought her feet to a careful drag and continued until she felt the soil ascend once more. Stepping backward, she approximated the center of the imploded hillock. Beneath her were generations of memories. Now those memories and all the Lamb's-ear family's objects—and all of their ills—were entombed in soil.

With a foot, she dug a wide divot, a few inches deep, into the soil before laying the plucked lamb's-ears around it in a circle. Her fingers once again rifled into her satchel's pockets, withdrawing the clay bottle and flat river stone. Her knees popped as she squatted. She sat the clay bottle in the soil, upright. Standing, she clasped the river stone with both hands, running her thumbs over its etchings. She felt the outlines of a tree shallowly chiseled into its face. To the left of the tree, the stone's skin was unaltered and smooth as it was the moment it was plucked from the riverbed. But, to the right, Millis's thumb pressed against roughness, the stone's face was carved clean off. Her thumb rolled over minutely uneven trenches where, as she was before described to, the under layer of the stone displayed a brighter shade than the stone's surface of gray. Unknown to her, the brighter side of the stone's face dimmed beneath her teardrops. Her thumbs, gliding the surface, smeared the droplets. They dried away in seconds.

She dabbed a foot forward, feeling for the clay bottle in the dirt divot as she held out the river stone, aligning it with the bottle's corked head. She drew her foot back and opened her hands. Her sorrow of the burrow and its broken family was briefly interrupted by the satisfaction of the clay's crunch beneath the river stone. It had been long since her blindness caused error in ritual, but she delighted in her streak of accuracy. Sorrow reclaimed her as she crouched to pick up the stone. Its bottom was wet, splattered with the clay bottle's fertile elixir, which for months had cradled a dogwood seed. She trusted that the seed settled nicely in the soil among the crushed clay and began to brush the divot full with a foot.

She left the Lamb's-ear hillock and began making way toward the Waterhouse, which was always an easy find because of the crackle of its furnaces and its residing at the head of the lake. As she left she'd plucked an extra leaf from the shrubs to occupy her fingers while she walked through the inactive, mourning village.

She was disrupted by distant young voices. They were far off from the Village—
Evangeline and her neophytes, returning. Millis sat in the grass and waited for them.

As Evangeline and her neophytes grew closer to the Village, their voices quieted. They must have noticed the silence and inactivity of the town. After many minutes, as Evangeline and her neophytes rounded the hillocks into the Village, Millis stood and nodded to greet them. The seven pairs of feet crunched on grass until they were a few feet away from Millis, who assumed the quizzical look of Evangeline's face, and those slightly feared of the neophytes.

“A failed birthing. At sunrise.”

Millis held up the Lamb's-ear leaf and Evangeline shuddered.

* * *

Millis brought them before the entry archway of the Waterhouse, curtained shut by leathers and linens, Cleric Javier sat on one of a handful of stone stools. He was bedraggled, from his waist length beard to his orange, sun-bleached robes. By his feet, the robes were browned from dragging through dirt. To his right, similar robes, but blue, lay atop the stone stools. Javier overlooked Evangeline and her neophytes—one less than when they departed—and sighed.

“A morning of tragedies, then,” he said.

Evangeline nodded. Her neophytes and the two mules plopped onto the damp ground. Home at last after two weeks and the Village offered only silence and tragedy.

Javier saw the paleness of Claudia's face. He continued, “But we will speak of Elbi at a later time.”

Javier's bare feet left streaks in the moist, bare earth around the Waterhouse as he shuffled from his stool.

“Millis, I assume your presence means that the rites of collapse and seeding have been completed.”

“Yes.”

She stared forward, blankly.

“The boy’s cremation,” Javier began, “will take place before the burrow in tomorrow’s morn. Oto is nearly through preparing his remains for the pyre. I had to step out of the Waterhouse shortly ago. Lately the wetness and the heat has irritated my breath.”

Shortly later, the leathers about the Waterhouse’s archway ruffled. The gaunt hands of Cleric Oto pushed them aside, revealing his naked body. He was the eldest of the clerics, his skin hung over his bones like Javier’s robes over his body. He cradled the miscarried boy against his chest.

Cloaked in leaves, only the boy’s purple face was visible. It was haloed with a radiant array of flower petals weaved through with stem fibers. The two clerics and he, in his shroud of nature, were speckled with drops from the Waterhouse’s sweltering. But the corpse was slick and glistening, brushed for hours with salves and oils to prepare him for the pyre.

As Oto passed the purple child to Javier, and she and Oto donned their robes from the stone stools, the child’s pungency struck the neophytes. It was no odor of death, but a loving incense that would aid his melding into the eternal Light.

Holding the boy, Javier spoke.

“We go now to place him before his family’s collapsed burrow-hill. Evangeline, cleanse now, with your neophytes. Later, leave them to meet with us in the Lucentry.”

* * *

Noontime rays showered through the Lucentry's pavilion ceiling. Imperfections in its glass blasted the ground beneath with an array of shimmers and shadows that lurched eastward through the hours. Ordinarily, after a relic hunt, an onlooker would return to their clerics and have their neophytes individually present their findings—and Evangeline's recent journey was blessed with rare and luminous findings—but the death of a neophyte and a failed birthing overshadowed Evangeline's return. Her neophytes remained in the Waterhouse, cleansing in its steams and baths. Evangeline stood beneath the sunlight that dripped through the glass roofed pavilion of the Lucentry and discussed her journey with Litsa, a fellow onlooker of the flock.

“Apparently, they were after some blueroots before morning. Valleycat caught them blissed and unaware.”

“It's the same every time, isn't it?” Litsa said, “Ekhart met practically the same end. And Tobet, a few flocks ago—but by a boar. Damned tragic...”

A thinly filed valleycat fang pinned Litsa's hair. When, in her childhood, a fellow neophyte boy named Ekhart had been clawed and bled by a valleycat, she put it down with a few well-placed arrows. She was quick to cut out some of its teeth as souvenirs. Most of them burned alongside Ekhart on his pyre—vengeance was had, but the beast was no villain, it lived and fed only as it was destined to. Among the people of the rise, all life was respected. At least it was in death. So, a half a jaw's worth of valleycat teeth rested atop Ekhart's chest as he burned. Litsa kept one fang to remember him by, and took the valleycat's paw as the symbol inscribed upon her breastplate when she became an onlooker many moons later.

“Elbi was a good, kind boy,” she said. “He wasn't built for it. Born to the wrong moon.”

“Red luck rubbed off on him,” Evangeline said, sitting in one of the seven wicker chairs placed between any of the seven wooden pillars that erected the Lucentry.

“Nonsense,” Litsa said. “You cannot blame her. No one alone is culpable. Inexperience and negligence have always been neophytes’ greatest predators. They want to explore, it’s in their blood—we teach them to do it. You know that these things happen when you’ve a group of twenty kids with hearts for adventure.”

“But you said so yourself: Elbi had not that heart. Claudia inspired him to his death. And the miscarriage of this morning—Jant was Claudia’s birther. She left her red marks upon that mother’s womb, I swear it. The girl cannot be allowed to return for the mirror’s recovery.”

“Have the clerics been informed of the mirror?” Litsa asked.

“Javier knows that Elbi is dead. We’ve discussed nothing else.”

“And here they come,” Litsa pointed down the east side of the hill which the Luentry peaked. Alongside one another, four robed figures plodded up the moist, shrub ridden ground. Though rinsed by years of sunrays, each of the Cleric’s robes held a distinct color. Javier led their climb with a serious stride in his robes of fading twilight-orange. Oto was clad in blue and led Millis, in green, up the hill by hand. The fourth was Inov, shrouded in yellow. There was a fifth, Tovin, but he was absent, exacting duties at Sun Summit.

“Some wild animal, I presume?” Javier motioned to Evangeline as he entered the Luentry. His body creaked into one of the wicker seats alongside Oto and Millis.

Litsa answered, “Yes. A valleycat, apparently.”

“Claudia prompted Zin and Elbi to leave camp,” Evangeline said. “Before morning, they went after some pondside blueroots. Elbi was struck by the cat while blissed. Hopefully he didn’t feel much.”

Oto sneered. “A twilight retreat—well, there’s something. A tad more provocative than the usual goring.”

Millis batted at Oto with a green sleeve.

“We will host the proper services for him tomorrow,” Millis said, “after those for the infant. But you haven’t a body, do you?”

“We were in the grasses. There would have been too much confusion, too much potential loss. We couldn’t recover him.”

“A pyre will burn for him still,” Javier said. “Have you anything of his to use as tribute.”

“His finding from the spire,” Evangeline said. “A horn of sorts. One of the other neophytes has it.”

Inov wiped his forehead with a yellow sleeve.

“How did the neophytes fare in the spire?”

“Quite well. Elbi’s was in better tact than most instruments we’ve found. You’ll have to decide whether it’s appropriate to burn in his stead. Lilla found what was apparently a rather elegant chair, but it fell from the spire and was shattered. Qiti discovered a spotless crystal ball. Zin a brightly dyed scarf. Alde showed me perhaps the most intricate piece of jewelry I’ve ever seen and Claudia... as she and Zin tell me, she found a mirror. A large, wood framed and ornamented mirror at that. In perfect condition.”

The clerical council averted at the words.

“A mirror,” Inov said. “It’s been a decade since the last finding.”

“Surely we must dispatch a team to recover it,” Oto insisted. “Soon.”

Chapter Nine

“I can’t believe that the rope can hold all that weight,” Claudia said. “It really is miraculous.”

Again she stood before the spire’s mirror, beside Zin. This time, near eight hundred feet below where she’d discovered it— it was almost safely on the ground. Claudia watched her standing image behind crisscrossed bindings of white rope as Litsa, and one of men employed for the mission, examined their the mirror’s harnesses.

“Less a miracle than careful coordination. Most impressive things are, you’ll learn,” Litsa said. “This is the same rope that angels employ in rescues in Sloe.”

She pulled away from tightening a knot, ran her fingers up the rope and pointed to the strut that it was bound to.

“If you braid it right and find the proper anchors, it can hold just about anything. Burdens from the Black City, or divine instruments such as this.”

She smiled at Claudia and Zin through the mirror.

“The rope itself is no miracle, but it accomplishes them on Light’s behalf. Do you know why—how it can achieve such things?”

“Because it is pure,” Zin said. “Weaved from the purest fibers from the trees that line The Grove.”

“An important fact, but not the answer for my question. Claudia?”

Claudia thought on it, staring at the thick rope and its many divergent white lines that tied to some of the few stable fixings of the spire.

“Because of the purity of those who wield it.”

“No. Not that either.”

Litsa laughed as she turned from Claudia's reflection to face her flesh. The enthusiastic wisdom of her onlooker eyes became sad as her brow turned down. She spoke apologetically, "It refuses nobody. Pure or corrupt, it is no matter. The rope devotes its all, indiscriminately, to brightening the world—as will the two of you when you become angels."

The mirror was wrapped in ivory X's that culminated into a single, thick braid atop its woodwork, slightly off-center due to the glass orb that crowned it. The central braid was made as thick as possible within the confines of the grips of the hands of the men who held it. Throughout its two hundred feet of length, smaller streams abandoned the braid and were anchored to struts and rails within the spire. The anchors were a security, but success relied predominantly on the men's strength; they would lower the mirror in slow stages. Each few dozen feet, one of the limiting offshoots would be cut from its anchor, allowing the next few dozen.

During the first day of the acquisition, Claudia and Zin directed the team through to the top of the spire; afterward they mostly watched as Litsa planned with the eight men that she and Evangeline had vetted for the mission. Through the second day, the men competed in a precarious and slow tug of war, gripping the central braid, allowing the mirror's weight to sink through the spire's central pit. But they'd never lowered it more than one hundred feet at a time before drawing it to a secure floor to rest, inspect the ropes and tie new anchors—they were forced to do one hundred and fifty feet straight; the vines at the spire's base had stripped the first hundred feet clean, and the lower remaining floors were more unstable than Litsa was willing to trust for a stop.

Now, midmorning on day three, Claudia found Litsa's words of light and divine accomplishment assuring, but she remained nervous. The men working the ropes were mostly hunters and lumberers, they were experienced tool crafters and had lived through plenty of

danger, but they'd never seen anything such as the spire. Claudia was nervous of them—nervous for them. She was sure that behind each of their friendly smiles and devoted eyes, their thoughts spoiled, one way or another: *Am I going to fall? Will the braid hold if I let go for just a moment?* There was no place for insecurity or unsureness in this final stretch. It needed to be perfect.

“Would you like to do the honors, Zin?” Litsa pointed to the mirror.

The ropes were secure, all that remained was for the mirror to be shifted from the edge into the abyss. Six of the men stood ready with rope in hand, the two spares watched the mirror and the anchors, anxious to leap at any issue.

Zin nodded, Litsa nodded back. She waved the offer to Claudia, as well.

Alone, Zin could not make the mirror budge. The rope holding men chuckled before Litsa snapped at them to concentrate. With Claudia pushing as well, it still refused to slide.

With Litsa pushing low, beside the Claudia and Zin, the scraped mirror across the floor, the noise reverberating through the spire, before transitioning into heart pumping silence. The rope holding men jolted forward with the loosed weight, pulled back hard, and dug their feet into the slate metal floor to stabilize the mirror's dangle—a dangle that was nerve rackingly lopsided due to its shifted center of suspension, forced by the crowning glass orb.

“Steady now,” Litsa said as rope passed inched through the men's hands. “Claudia, Zin, you may as well head down now. I'll meet you two there to secure it when it's closer.”

* * *

The mirror slunk down one agonizing inch at a time. It was the final stretch, and the most stressful thing Claudia had ever experienced—even more so than balancing her life across the catwalk. But, the pane's blinding flashes of the midmorning sun brought her some ease. It was a

beautiful thing, shrouded in white rope, dangling and casting day rays through shadow of the spire's underbelly.

"So close," she muttered, determined though she held no power over its descent.

"It's not over yet," Zin huffed. "Could still come crashing down."

"Hey," Claudia groaned. "That isn't funny."

The rubble ridden ground beneath the spire was terribly uneven. Claudia and Zin had, days before, dug out a wide, flat landing of soil. The mirror was so close to the ground that Claudia could have touched it if she jumped.

"Do you know what will be funny, though?" Zin asked.

"What?"

"The looks on everyone's faces when they learn, for sure, that we were telling the truth. That we saw a mirror so far before them. Maybe Evangeline will even thank us, finally," he laughed.

"She won't," Claudia's words were flat. "I don't think that she likes that we found it—that *I* found it. When we left the Village, the look on her face—"

"Evangeline's?" Litsa's voice sounded from above.

By plain, brown rope she repelled down one of the spire's adamant spinal pillars. She landed some feet behind her neophytes.

"Don't pay her any mind, Claudia," Litsa said.

Easy to say when you're not receiving those looks, Claudia thought.

She looked into Litsa's breastplate. At the right angle the round token was as luminous as the mirror. Its flicker burned—when Claudia blinked she saw the breastplate's valleycat image

inscribed on the back of her eyelids. She remembered Elbi, but she stood strong, returning her focus to the mirror.

Litsa continued, “Evangeline was worried about... not being here.”

“Yeah, I guess she would be.”

Claudia wanted to evade the conversation. The mirror was nearly down, she preferred be taken over by reverence and wonder than to talk about the woman who’d always treated her with suspicion.

Litsa’s fingertips reached for the stone base of the mirror. Tapping it slowly, she craned it toward the center of the soil landing base.

“I know that Evangeline is not always the most pleasant onlooker to be around,” Litsa said as she reached up. “She has very strong competition, after all. Evangeline is a... careful woman. She just wants to be sure that our people are safe, that we always act properly, to the best by Light. She knows the determination inside of you, your wit and your strengths. Given some time, her sternness will pass. You will show her greatness, I am sure, and she will trust you. Look at this,” Litsa said, now with a full palm able to touch the mirror’s base. “You’ve already brought undeniable greatness to the Village.”

And then there was a rush—a few hundred pounds of Claudia’s greatness splitting through six feet of air, and a brief crack to conclude it. Through all of the thousand feet, the mirror was lowered delicately, perfectly, but some mistake struck its final ten. It landed upright on its dirt clearing, its base unchipped and its frame unsplintered, but a shattered web sprung from the lower right of the pane, fracturing its once perfect singular image into hundreds of irregularities.

In the intricate chaos of the cracked pain, countless replications of Claudia's shocked eyes looked upon it. Among those countless reflections, Claudia saw also the eyes of the clerical council, of her neophyte peers, of Evangeline. The fractured reflections almost pretty, Claudia thought, as she attempted to deny what was before her.

ACADEMIC VITA

SAMUEL E. SANTIAGO

s.santiago5252@gmail.com

santiago5252.wordpress.com

EDUCATION

The Pennsylvania State University, Abington, PA
Schreyer Honors College

May 2018

Major: English

Minors: Writing and Asian Studies

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

The Pennsylvania State University, Abington, PA

English and Writing Tutor

January 2017 – Present

- Tutored writing and verbal communication to a diverse student body
- Practiced myriad tutorial strategies and pedagogies, from traditional editing to general ideation and thought organization
- Provided a secure learning environment for student expression and academic development

First Year Engagement Peer Assistant

August 2016 – December 2016

August 2017 – December 2017

- Worked as an professor's assistant in first year English classes
- Served as a general adviser, informer, and support figure for first year students
- Regularly aided students with reading comprehension and writing assignments

The Abington Review, Literary Magazine

President

August 2016 – May 2018

- Led critique sessions and revision workshops, as well as one-on-one meetings with students creating art and literature
- Arranged, oversaw, and hosted events which highlighted student art and writing
- Managed and implemented the budget for events and for the publication's printing
- Visually designed the publication for print
- Physically and digitally archived submissions, revisions, and organization information

ACADEMIC SERVICE

Academic Integrity Committee, Penn State Abington

Student Representative

August 2017 – May 2018

- Worked with faculty to uphold institutional regulations and philosophies
- Ruled on disciplinary action regarding breaches of policy and/or integrity
- Maintained and enforced academic morals throughout the campus' student body

ACADEMIC HONORS

Schreyer Honor Society

Member

August 2017 – Present

- Participated in classes focused on research ethics and academic professionalism
- Conducted independent literary research
- Produced a fiction novella as a thesis project

Sigma Tau Delta English Honor Society, Penn State Abington Chapter

Member

December 2016 – Present

President

August 2017 – May 2018

- Organized and led off-campus trips with students and faculty
- Aided the organization and hosting of annual induction ceremonies

CONFERENCES AND PRESENTATIONS

Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association Conference, Rowan University, NJ March 2018
“Intercultural Learning and Campus Activism through Writing Tutoring”

- Directed a presentation and subsequent roundtable discussion with regional tutors and tutoring center staff, reframing moments of intercultural conflict as learning opportunities
- Devised diplomatic solutions for conflicts of nationality within academia

Civil Discourse Retreat, Penn State Abington

February 2018

- Developed communication and interpersonal skills within scenarios regarding sensitive social and cultural topics
- Rehearsed conflict defusing and solution formulation

Association of Writers and Writing Programs, Washington, D.C.

February 2017

- Attended panels and participated in discussions regarding academic and creative writing
- Arranged interstate transportation for accompanying peers and operated within budgeted Penn State funds for lodging and meals

PUBLICATIONS

“Our Dirt,” Fiction, *The Abington Review*

Spring 2017

“The Runner,” Fiction, *The Abington Review*

Spring 2017

“Norfield Church,” Fiction, *The Abington Review*

Spring 2016