



The Portrait Chronicle

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The Revere



The story you are about to read is meant to be enjoyed along with the three music releases from the band *The Revere*. The releases are titled ***The Great City (2010)***, ***Ashia EP(2011)*** and ***Behold, the Sea Itself! (2014)***.

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THE PORTRAIT CHRONICLE

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Part I



The Great City



Chapter 1: “Sleep is a Celebration”



“Why bother?” wondered the Old Man from beneath his white linen sheets. It had been days since he’d slept

through an entire night; why would tonight be any different? He groped over the bedside to douse the candle on his nightstand and collect his sleeping cap. Total darkness settled over the room as the Old Man yanked the cap over his sparse, whitened hair.

He grumbled to himself as the TICK TICK TICK of the ancient wooden clock worked its usual madness into him. In his mind, the sound was like a demon's laughter taunting him each night. What he needed was for something—*anything*—to change in his life...or at least in his room. But, instead, it was just the same as every other night: a headache, the darkness, and the incessant ticking of the clock. Accepting this miserable routine once again, the Old Man grumbled, "Why do I even try for sleep anymore?" He lifted his bloodshot eyes to the heavens and rolled them with exhaustion.

But even as he muttered his frustrations into the darkened room, something new and different did begin to take shape. The ticking of the clock became a rhythmic toll that sang through the bedroom and into the Old Man's heart. This night—and only this night—the sounds of that clock began to lull him to sleep rather than lure him to insanity. The

TICKS became a song and the song became a lilting waltz that carried him swiftly away from his bed.

Yet, those few moments of blissful rest were short-lived as usual. His eyes, once again, shot open as he grasped around for a near corner of the blanket. Instead, he pulled back only clumps of grass that shed dirt and earthworms all about. Confused, the Old Man lifted the hunk of earth to his eyes and inspected it as best he could in the dull moonlight.

Moonlight? But hadn't he drawn the curtains as always? That was when understanding dawned on him; he wasn't in his bed anymore. Nor was he in his home at all...nor any home for that matter. He sat up as quickly as his antique bones would allow.

A dew-covered field, green even in the dark of night, unrolled before him. The meadow carpeted a gentle hill between him and a huge, fancy manor a short distance away. The Old Man pulled himself up to his feet and dusted himself off; he was still dressed in his night robe and hat. Then he began his shuffle across the grassy expanse toward the mansion. It took only a moment for the Old Man to realize that he was not alone here.

A woman with two small children skipped past him, the little ones holding hands and singing happily along with the

distant music. The Old Man glanced around as he walked; there were dozens of others migrating across the field in the same direction. As a nearby couple passed by, the Old Man caught a glimpse of them against the moon; he could see right through them. He glanced around and saw that the same was true for all the others. Ghostly beings, every one of them. The Old Man looked down at his own hands and realized that he too was not quite solid. He wondered for a moment if he had died in his bed and this was his journey to paradise.

So, the Old Man quickened his pace until he arrived at his destination. His knock on the decorative wooden doors echoed mightily around the porch like a cannonade. A startled blackbird took flight from the eaves above the Old Man's head and disappeared into the night sky.

After only a moment, the double-doors swung open wide, spilling the glorious music out into the world. A dashing gentleman with a pin-sharp mustache and an inviting smile now stood in the doorway, head tilted in greeting. The greeter's garments were, by far, the finest evening wear that the Old Man had ever seen.

"Welcome!" the well-dressed gentleman shouted, just a bit too loud to be completely proper. "Come right in and make

yourself comfortable. Dance, feast, enjoy yourself. Should you require anything that is not readily apparent, feel free to beg my assistance. I am your host for this evening and I am at your service.”

The Old Man blinked and smoothed the wrinkles on his face. “Thank you,” he replied almost more as a question than a response. As though cued by the Old Man’s arrival, the music gathered to a crescendo. It continued to build, like a wave raging across a calm sea.

The Old Man was uplifted by the music; it became so overwhelming that it was almost painful not to dance. The Old Man hadn’t felt like this in years. His age seemed to melt away as he gave in to the beauty of the scene around him. The music was an unstoppable wave and the Old Man was swept away upon its crest. He danced and laughed and spun and stepped; he was like a young man again. He lost himself so quickly in the fun of it. Real fun! If this was truly heaven, then it was all that had been promised and more.

But then, as quickly as the atmosphere had ignited before, so it doused now. Hundreds of instruments—strings, woodwinds, horns, percussion—all ceased at once, as though synchronized to one device that had switched off. At that point, most of the guests began to move to the long

tables situated on either side of the ballroom. The Old Man took a minute to catch his breath and dab the sweat from his brow.

The Old Man wondered if the aromas wafting through the ballroom had been there the entire time he'd been dancing or if they'd just popped up to draw his attention now. He made his way to an open seat at an otherwise-full table and sat down. Before him were a dozen silver platters heaped with a king's array of meats and gravies. He dove in without hesitation or restraint.

As he ate, the majestic world around him faded into the background. The food was so delicious that it took all of his focus to savor each bite. When he had finally eaten his fill, he leaned back against the cushioned chair, closed his eyes, and exhaled deeply. When he opened his eyes, a new sight met him.

A woman, strikingly real, sat across from him. She was not ghostly like the others. Her dress, a flowing gown of red and purple, was from outside of this ballroom's time. In every way, this woman was out of place. Yet she looked quite comfortable where she was. The woman had no food in front of her, no drink, and clearly no interest in anything

other than the Old Man's face. She was staring intently at him, studying him.

The Old Man studied her right back. Neither had spoken a word yet, but there was an energy passing between them. The Woman was beautiful like a sunset through a line of trees is beautiful; a glimpse of something singularly radiant but mysteriously obscured. Even as he stared into her eyes, the Old Man couldn't even begin to guess her age. Her hair was neither dark nor light. Rather, it seemed to capture all the colors of the spectrum in its shimmer. And her eyes burned with that same enigmatic fire. The Woman appeared unknowable...surreal.

"Hello." As she spoke, the rest of the ballroom seemed to vanish. The woman smiled fully. "This may sound strange, but I'm glad that you came. I'd hoped to see you here tonight."

The Old Man tried to respond. "You...uh...me...I mean, do I know you?" he stammered and stumbled over his words.

She laughed warmly, "No, you don't know me. Not yet, dear man. But I do know you."

"Because you're an angel. I knew it the moment that I saw you."

The woman appeared to mull that idea over in her mind. “Let’s not place labels on one another just yet, my friend. You are not dead...nor are you a ghost of any sort. And this is not the end of your journey. In fact, your journey is just beginning.”

The Old Man’s head began to swim as the patter of raindrops began to echo through the hall. “I don’t understand any of this. What journey? What am I doing here?”

The woman reached across the table with a gentle hand and touched his cheek lovingly. “You’ll learn all of that in time. But before you go, you must understand one thing. You are the one that has to lead them...you are the guide. I don’t expect that to mean anything to you right now. But, when you wake up, you will understand so much more. Follow your instincts, you will know how and where to go. And, most importantly, always listen for me.” She paused and sat back in her own seat. “Now it is time for you to go. They’ll be waiting.”

He meant to ask who, but the sound of the raindrops against the roof became a cacophony in his head. The pulsating rain began to work an odd spell over him; louder and louder and louder until it was almost too much for him.

He closed his eyes against the sound as the harsh droplets became the TICK TICK TICK of an ancient wooden clock.

When he opened his eyes, he found himself, once again, surrounded by darkness and his meager white bed sheets.

At home again in his bed, the Old Man pondered the odd dream. Had it been anything more than his imagination?

But there *was* something more in his mind...something that wasn't there before.

He knew where he was supposed to go. The old inn at the forest's edge.

Chapter 2: “The Old Man and the Inn” and “The Woman”



Kori edged forward in the ragged chair as the inn’s main doorway creaked open once more. It was obvious which people were there under normal circumstances and which were there because of the dreams. And if it was obvious to Kori, it was obvious for everyone else too. How embarrassing to be in this place for such a foolhardy purpose. Yet more continued to come.

This newest arrival was an Old Man—noticeably confused—wearing a tattered cloak and leaning upon a stick. It didn’t look like the Old Man needed the stick to support him so much as he needed it to complete his nomadic appearance. Kori knew straight away that this Old Man was the one that the woman had foretold. The Old Man was the guide.

Kori wasn’t the only one to recognize the Old Man’s significance. A hush settled over the inn’s entry hall as the others turned to stare at the newcomer. The Old Man seemed not to notice. Kori, however, took this moment to appraise those gathered with him.

Directly across the room was a dark-haired, dark-eyed, dark-mooded young woman. Though her attention had been drawn to the Old Man like everyone else's had been, she seemed unimpressed. Earlier, Kori had heard her introduce herself to the matron as Sorell. He quickly committed that to memory: Sad Sorell. Sorrowful Sorell. Somber Sorell.

As Kori sat, feeling bad for Sorell for some reason, two young men stood up from their seats and hurried over to the Old Man. The two were almost certainly brothers. It was clear that they were related but the age difference and chilled expressions pointed to something deeper; they weren't close. The brothers either barely knew each other or knew each other too well. Either way, there was animosity between them.

The elder brother—the one with the curly blonde mop on his head—scooped in front of the younger one and grasped the Old Man's hand first. "It's a pleasure to meet you, good sir. You're the one that I was sent here to find, aren't you? You are the guide?"

The Old Man smiled broadly, his whole face wrinkling in the process. "Yes, I am the guide. I'm glad to meet you too."

The elder brother sighed with relief. "Oh, thank goodness. I was starting to fear that I'd gone crazy...had come all the

way here for nothing. Anyway, I'm Felix." The man named Felix reached a second hand in to reinforce the handshake. "There was this woman in my dreams that told me to find you here. And now here you are. Strange isn't it?"

The younger brother decided to interject. His approach was less polished than his brother's. "Hello, I'm Asher," he blurted out. "I...uh...I don't really dream. Well I don't remember them at least. But I do believe in miracles and visions. I hope to devote my life to the word of the Lord someday." Asher stopped talking and looked around as though he'd lost his thought, then recovered it. "I think that this woman that Felix saw was an angel. And she led us to you. It's an honor."

The Old Man, Felix, and Asher started walking toward where Kori was sitting but were intercepted by yet another dreamer. This one was a lovely lady, well-dressed and expertly formed...almost synthetic. "Hello gentlemen." Even her voice sounded measured and practiced. She presented her hand, palm-down as though showing off jewelry. "Perhaps I do not need to introduce myself? Perhaps you are familiar with my work on the stage?"

The Old Man shrugged his ignorance and Felix smiled weakly as if in apology.

Asher studied her face for a moment. “You do look familiar. What do you do on the stage?”

She looked offended...outright insulted, in fact. “I act in the dramas. And I sing as well. Surely you’ve seen posters and paintings with my likeness? I am Claire Smyth. My name rings in the ears of the cultured?” She sang those last words with such haughty assurance.

Asher nodded half-confidently, “Yeah. Yeah, I think I’ve heard of you.”

Felix moved two blonde curls hanging in front of his eyes to roll them at his younger brother. “Please,” he whispered. Then he turned and walked to Kori’s side and sat in the seat to his left. “Hi, I’m Felix. Did the woman send you too?”

Kori nodded in answer to Felix’s question. “I’m Kori. This is a pretty strange situation, huh?”

Felix laughed. “The strangest. At least you’re little brother didn’t follow you here like a lost puppy. Been trying my whole life to shake that kid off. He does everything I do and then pretends that he does it better.” Felix threw his hands up, “My apologies. I didn’t mean to fire off like that.”

The Old Man, Asher, and Ms. Claire Smyth eventually made their way to where Kori and Felix were seated. Even

Sorrowful Sorell uprooted herself and joined the others. Each of them pulled up one of the ugly chairs and formed a small circle, with everyone's attention focused on the Old Man. But before anyone had a chance to begin, a tall muscular man stepped forward, seemingly out of nowhere, and added his chair to their group. This stranger appeared as if from nowhere; a shocking feat considering the man. A dark-skinned hulk, bald headed, and muscled. His clothing was tattered and a tattoo wound up one arm and down the other.

The sudden addition of this large fellow drew everyone's eye away from the Old Man. They all stared unwittingly at this stern-looking man. He gazed back at them wordlessly.

The Old Man raised his hand in greeting, "Hello, friend. Have you come here because of the woman too?"

The dark man nodded almost imperceptibly. "I am Lesedi. And I am here to journey with you, guide."

The Old Man smiled warmly and greeted Lesedi with equal warmth.

Felix gestured to the Old Man. "Good sir, would you like to tell us why we're here?"

The Old Man cocked his head and narrowed his eyes as if trying his hardest to hear something that was simply too far away to hear. “No,” he said at last. “Not yet. We’re still missing one, I believe.”

Just then, the inn door swung open again. Kori immediately lost his breath as this newcomer entered the room. She was beyond stunning, beyond beauty, beyond anything that Kori had ever laid eyes on. Her golden hair—not blonde or yellow or light brown, but genuinely golden—fell comfortably over her shoulders like the petals of a newly bloomed rose. This gorgeous creature only smiled apologetically and swept her hair back over her shoulder with a sweet flourish. “Hello. I...uh...I’m Marielle. Are you all waiting for me, by any chance?”

Kori wanted desperately to answer her; to have some communication with this wonder of nature. But as he went to speak, her soft gaze flickered over to him briefly and he lost his nerve. He felt as though he would never be able to speak again or even move from that very spot.

Luckily, the Old Man filled the silence that Kori had created. “Yes, Marielle, it would seem that we’re all here for the same reason. And you are right on time. Come sit with us.” The Old Man gestured toward an empty chair.

Marielle nodded her appreciation and made her way to the seat that happened to be squarely beside Kori's. As she settled into her chair, Marielle glanced up at Kori. "Did I miss anything?" she asked with a genuine look of concern.

Kori mustered up every ounce of courage that he could just to keep his eyes fixed on hers; he wondered if he'd ever seen eyes that color before...or even seen such a color at all. "No," he managed to stammer out, "we really just sat down. I'm Kori."

He could feel the blood pounding in his head, the beads of nervous sweat appearing along his hairline. He'd known this girl for no more than five minutes and she was already playing havoc with his emotions...and, oddly enough, he liked it.

But that was the last that they spoke to each other that night. The rest of the night belonged to the Old Man; the one that was to be the guide. Once everyone had arrived, the Old Man began speaking of the journey ahead. As if possessed by some divine spirit, he foretold an adventure the likes of an ancient storybook. The Old Man talked and talked for hours into the night; it seemed that he knew very little on his own, but somehow gained the knowledge as he spoke. Every so often, the Old Man would fall silent, close

his eyes, and cock his head to the side as though listening to something inaudible. Then he would open his eyes, energized anew, and begin spouting off his next tale of wonder and awe. Stories of enchanted forests, unforgiving mountain crags, and creatures from worlds unknown. These were not premonitions or predictions of the journey ahead necessarily, but the myths and legends of a long-forgotten adventure. The possible dangers and wonders before them were unimaginable.

The unusual fellowship listened in rapt silence as the Old Man spun his mystery into the earliest hours of the morning. None of them seemed to tire at all, despite the time gone by. There was an odd magic in the air; it felt familiar to each of them, like something out of a faded memory. But this was the day that the line between reality and magic would blur as they ventured out into the world beyond.

Chapter 3:

Sorell: “With All of You Here By My Side”



The forest canopy spread out before them like a bright green sky. Sorell couldn't recall the last time that she'd felt this close to genuine excitement. But she still hung toward the back end of the group. Sorell had always been an observer of life; in many ways, it was the only way that she really lived at all. She watched others and experienced life vicariously through them. Sorell could already see the furtive glances between that doe-eyed boy and the sweet blonde girl...there were sparks there. She could see the tragedy behind Lesedi's eyes. She could see the hope and faith in the Old Man, the resentment in big brother Felix, and the purity in little brother Asher. Sorell watched and knew every one of them in her own way, and yet she had never spoken to a single one of them outside of introductions. And there was, of course, one of them that she knew in a very different way.

Claire Smyth slowed down and settled in beside her. “What are you doing all the way back here?” Claire asked.

Sorell's stomach tightened as she attempted to meet Claire's eyes with her own. "I...uh...I'm just thinking about some things. That's all. I like to keep to myself, if you please."

Claire held silent for a moment and Sorell's hope that the conversation was over swelled. But Claire pressed further and continued to ask questions and pry for answers. Sorell didn't respond at all. She had nothing to say...nothing other than memories that were too hard to share. Sorell had to steel herself against those old feelings and bury them, as she had been doing for most of her life. Since the last time that she had seen Ms. Claire Smyth.

Little Rella was small for a five year old; all of the other girls and caretakers around The Redrush Home for Girls were very quick to remind her of that. But today was the day that Rella was going to meet her new family. And what a family it was going to be! Her new mother was going to be the famous Claire Smyth. Miss Getty, the headmistress of the orphanage, had just told her this morning...and it wasn't even a joke! The real Claire Smyth was coming today to spend some time with Rella. And then, after a few weeks of getting to know each other, Ms. Smyth would be taking her

home forever. The adoption papers had already been signed.

Claire Smyth came early that day. She spent hours and hours with Rella, pretending and making up stories, dancing and singing, talking and playing. Rella had never laughed so much in such a short amount of time. Claire did not leave the Redrush Home until well after sunset.

“You do know that you’re coming home with me in a few weeks, don’t you? They told you that?” Claire asked as she slid a note into a colorfully knit purse and handed the gift to Rella.

Rella’s face was one big smile. She couldn’t even speak without simply chirping with excitement, so she only nodded enthusiastically.

Claire looked relieved. “Good. I was hoping that I wasn’t spoiling something for you. This bag is just a little gift to welcome you to my family. You can read the note after I go; it’s a quote from a wise gentleman that I once worked with. Stunning words. Unfortunately, I have to leave now for an event. But I will see you again in a few days. We can play some more then...and maybe I’ll have another gift for you.” Claire winked, hugged Rella, and then went on her way.

Rella hungrily yanked the note out of the bag and opened it.

Rella,

Life is like the sea; it may seem at peace on the surface, but there are always currents below that swirl and guide. But both sides are part of one sea and both are necessary.

Claire (Mommy, if you'd like)

Sorell remembered that day so clearly; how could she ever forget that? In many ways, it was the day that she'd stopped being Little Rella. It was the last time that she'd felt that excitement...until this journey.

"So," Claire ventured again, "what is your story, Sorell? Where did you come from?"

Sorell stopped in her tracks and allowed her gaze to meet Claire's. "You really don't know? I sort of hoped that you were just pretending—acting or something. But you honestly don't remember me at all." Tears burst from Sorell's eyes; she had been trying so hard to keep them in, but simply couldn't hold anymore.

"I'm sorry, I encounter so many people. I just don't recall." Claire looked stricken.

Sorell wiped her eyes fruitlessly and sniffled. "I grew up in the Redrush Home for Girls. This is the first time I've ever

gone more than a stone's throw away from there. Does that mean anything to you, Claire Smyth?"

Claire's face went pale. "Sorell. Little Rella? Are you that same little girl?"

Sorell nodded fiercely. "Yes! You left me there! You held me in your arms and told me that we were going to be a family! And then you disappeared!" Sorell tried to compose herself. "I have imagined this moment every day since then and yet I feel somehow unprepared. How could you have just left me there after that?"

Claire staggered back and settled against a tree. "Oh god," she whispered. "I always wondered what became of you. I never wanted to hurt you; not that sweet little girl. My marriage fell apart and I just sort of...redirected my life. I'm so sorry."

Sorell's eyes popped wide. "Redirected? I spent my life trapped in that home, watching people live their wonderful lives from my window; I was completely alone in the world. And worse yet, I saw you every week in the papers; sometimes announcing your new lover, sometimes celebrating a charity, and sometimes just to guess about your next major life event. I read every word just so that I could be closer to you, hoping that maybe there would be

something about me in those articles...that you were coming back to adopt me. But that headline never came. I suppose it was silly of me to hope like that. I was just a stupid child who didn't know that you had *redirected*."

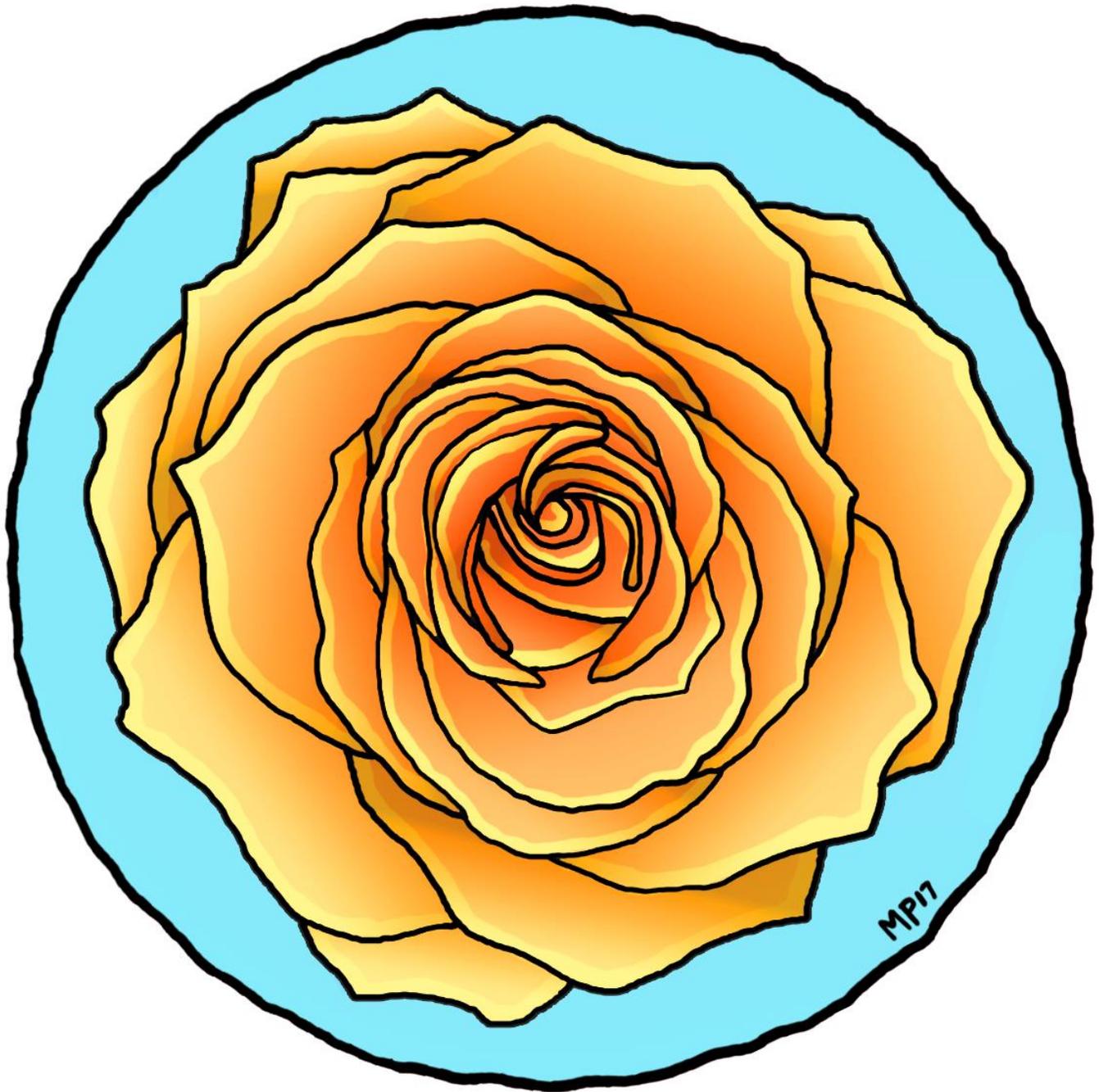
Claire Smyth was now sobbing into her hands, mumbling apologies and begging forgiveness. Sorell was too busy sobbing into her own hands to notice.

The Old Man approached and rested a calming hand on each of their shoulders. "I don't think that it's a coincidence that the Woman called you both here. You two were almost a family once, but life led you each down a different path. Now you're back together. This odd journey of ours may be more important than any of us understands. We need to trust each other, believe in each other, and care for each other. We are all family now...none of us has to be alone anymore."

Everyone nodded and moved closer. Claire reached out to Sorell and took her hand. "He's right. I may not be your mother but I can do my best to be your friend. Can you forgive me?"

Sorell wanted so badly to answer, to hug Claire, to accept her. But it was too much for her right then; all she could do

was squeeze Claire's hands in her own. It wasn't much, but it was enough for a new beginning.



Chapter 4: “The Rose” and “The Valley”



The company emerged from the forest after two nights. The treeline broke away very sharply, revealing a valley of

untended orchards and groves. But Kori wasn't paying much attention to the scenery; he was too enamored by the gorgeous girl that had chosen to walk beside him. Marielle seemed to just float along the green valley like one of the butterflies or a flower petal on the wind. Kori tried hard not to stare at her. Though, every now and then, he got the feeling that she was looking at him...but that was probably just his imagination.

They had already spent two days and two nights within the forest and had been along the valley now for a few hours, but not a single word had passed between them...only glances with unclear meanings behind them.

Just as Kori was getting up the gumption to finally say something—for about the hundredth time since they'd left—Marielle gasped and chirped an enthusiastic “Wow!” Then she disappeared from his side and hurried over to a patch of bright flowers.

She cradled the blossom in her hand and looked back at Kori. “Look at them. Aren't they the most beautiful things you've ever seen?”

Kori pried his gaze away from the actual most beautiful thing he'd ever seen and looked at the flower in her hand. “I see. They are pretty.” He said uncertainly.

Kori took a deep breath. “You are a million times more beautiful than anything in this field. Do you know that?” He could feel his face burn red with shame, but he just couldn’t help himself. It was too much to bear in silence.

She didn’t look at him for a long minute after that; she just continued to stroke the flower and stare at the colorful patch of land in front of her. Then, after what seemed like forever, she reached out a soft hand and touched his, “You’re very sweet. But you hardly know me. Why say such things?”

Kori nodded with desperation. “Because I...just...I felt compelled to speak the truth. You’re right though, we hardly know each other. I suppose I hope to change that...if you’re willing?” He took a big step backward and extended his hand. “My name is Kori and I am a tinker from a village in Drosston.”

Marielle’s face lit up and she perked into an attentive kneeling position. “Well, hello Kori. I’m Marielle from the pointless village of Belladonna.” She laughed and furrowed a brow, “What the heck is a tinker? I’ve never heard of that.”

Kori grinned mischievously. “It’s a lot like an inventor. The short answer—without showing schematics and tools—is

that I make things. Everyone in Drosston has an odd vocation; it makes us useful to the kingdom. Otherwise, we would find ourselves without protection and order. Our country isn't looked upon well. We are...um...different."

Marielle looked confused.

Kori glanced forward down the road and watched the rest of their fellowship winding slowly across the flowered field. "Drosston is a hidden place. It's closed off from the rest of the world."

Marielle crept closer to him with a curious smile, "Hidden? Why?"

"Truthfully? My people are cursed...have been for ages. It's said that one of Drosston's earliest rulers was a cruel and, more importantly, vain man. He went mad and started believing that physical appearance was reflected in the prestige of his nation. So he actually had his soldiers round up the deformed, the elderly, and the ugly and he had them executed. Once everyone in his kingdom was perfect, he believed that Drosston itself would be perfect." Kori shook his head slowly. "He was very wrong. One of the victims of his massacre was apparently a witch of sorts. She cursed Drosston and anyone born within its lands. Now, my people grow uglier with every impure act. Every lie that's told,

every act of selfishness, every cruelty...these things become permanent blemishes on our faces for all to see. We are a nation of hideous, unrepentant people and we are not proud of that heritage.”

Marielle covered her mouth, “That’s awful.” Then she looked off to the side as if contemplating something too difficult to understand. “So,” she said almost absently, “So, you’re cursed?”

Kori nodded.

Marielle stared at him blankly for the longest moment he’d ever felt. Then her entire appearance softened to its former sweetness and she smiled; it weakened Kori’s stance to look at her that way. She reached up and touched his cheek.

“Kori, you have kind eyes, strong features, and an adorably bashful smile. I don’t see anything ugly in you. I guess that tells me everything that I need to know about who you are, doesn’t it?”

Kori smiled uncomfortably. “Life has been easy for me. No real troubles or conflicts to speak of. It’s been a simple matter to keep myself from the ugly parts of life...so far.”

Kori twisted up his face, “I suppose that I’ve assumed the same of you because—honestly—you are the most breathtakingly gorgeous thing I’ve ever laid eyes on. But I

must remember that you don't share my curse so perhaps you haven't had it so easy?"

Marielle shook her head, "Not easy. No. Not terribly interesting either, I suppose. My mum died when I was young and my pa did his best to raise me right after that. He was a good man. A great man, I'd say. Then the water in the well dried up. Then the cattle got sick. Then half the crops wilted. Then...then...then. It felt like a curse, Kori. The kind that twists luck against you. My father lost everything in one year...including whatever faith he'd had left. Then the blight came for him. Oh, he was tougher than most, but it's a strong sickness. It was strange caring for the man who once cared for me. We grew closer during that time; I'm fairly certain I was his best and only friend at the end. Hmm, maybe he was mine too. Silly old man. I loved him."

Kori took her hand. "When did he pass?"

"Just before the Woman visited my dreams, actually. It was like she knew that I needed a new purpose. After all, I'd spent years tending my father's bedside. He was like a child by the end and I was all he had. His care made me stronger each day but, truthfully, consumed much of my life. After I lost him, I needed something to tether me to myself. The

day that I realized that became the night that I dreamed of the Woman.”

They grasped hands tightly and walked side-by-side through the floral valley, sharing every story that they could recall.

Chapter 5: “Giants I: The Incline”



The valley gradually heaved itself upward into a sloping hill. That was when the flowers started to become rarer and far less colorful, the grass began to fall away into rocky slabs, and the sweet scent of the valley turned to the acrid moisture of granite heaps. Before any of them knew it, they were struggling up the switchbacks of a mountain.

The valley that they'd spent days crossing was now just a smeared palette of color beneath them; the dense forest that they'd cut through now appeared as only a billowing green smoke in the distance that curled back toward a more civilized land. It was like gazing down upon a strikingly vivid map. As they climbed higher and higher, they watched as the view grew further and further...and eventually darker and darker as night set in.

At the Old Man's request, they struck camp on a deeply inset shelf, still far below the clouds that masked the summit. Sorell unrolled her sleeping mat just beside the steep edge, hung her legs over, and peered down into the abyss below.

“Hello,” a voice interrupted her thoughts. “Sorell isn’t it? Do I have that name right?”

It was Asher. He was definitely younger than the others; closer to her own age. And he was a gentle looking boy who appeared stately and almost noble in his own way. Not snobby necessarily, but soft. Not the sort that one would expect on an adventure like this.

“Yep, that’s me. Sorell the orphan alone.” Sarcasm was her most comfortable greeting in any situation.

Asher smiled abashedly. “Just saying hello. If Sorell the orphan would rather be alone, I can say hello into the wind?”

Sorell scuttled over a bit to make room for him. “No no...it’s fine. Take a seat if you want. But you’d better not be trying to seduce me or anything. I’m not interested.”

He laughed almost to himself. “Don’t worry. Let’s just say that you are not my type.”

Sorell thought about that remark for a moment. “Hmm” she ventured, coming to her own conclusion. “Do you mean...because I’m a woman? A girl?”

Asher nodded his confirmation.

Sorell pondered on that a bit longer. “But you said before that you’re a holy man of some sort; doesn’t your god hate people like you?”

“My God doesn’t hate; people hate. My God rejoices in love of every kind and fosters that in all of us. Who we love and how we love them is no one’s judgment but our own. God sees only love. And, to clarify, I never said that I was a holy man; I claim only to be a man of God.” Asher settled himself down next to her. “I know what it’s like to have family troubles...and to hurt. I can see it when you look at Claire; both love and pain in your eyes. I just wanted to make sure you’re okay.”

“It’s hard to explain. In my heart, I’ve always loved her. She was the closest thing I ever had to a mother. I never hated her after she disappeared from my life; I just wished for her even harder. It made me a very lonely person...and angry. Angry at Claire for changing her mind, angry at myself for not being good enough, angry at the world for forcing me to watch her happiness from afar. Very angry, but never hateful. Not toward Claire.”

Asher nodded thoughtfully and touched her hand. “What will you do now?”

“I haven’t decided yet. Maybe we do need to just start fresh. Maybe she’s right; maybe we can be friends. I honestly don’t know.”

Sorell heard an uproar of laughter from around the campfire. She looked over to see Asher’s older brother, Felix, entertaining the others with some story. Felix was handsome; blonde curls cropped closely around his chiseled face, bright blue eyes, and a shimmering smile that could win an army from battle.

“That’s my brother: always playing to the audience.” Asher shook his head and glared off into the darkness below.

“Felix thinks that I don’t have a mind or dream of my own; thinks that I just follow him through life. Suffice it to say that my big brother doesn’t much respect my decision-making ability.”

Sorell squinted uncomfortably, “Because of your romantic preferences?”

“No actually. That’s probably the only thing about me that he does respect...at least it’s my own. Felix doubts my faith. Not because he doesn’t believe, but because he does. He was always a very pious man of the Lord, believe it or not. He’s different now, of course. As with most things in life, I followed in my big brother’s footsteps. I always did...do.

Felix is a great man: heroic, charismatic, honest. I've always admired him. So, like him, I studied the scriptures. When I decided to devote my life to the word of the Lord, Felix turned on me. He said that I had even managed to steal the Lord from him. I still struggle to make sense of that." Asher paused and rubbed his chin, "He changed after that. Abandoned the good work and became a lady-charmer. He ran away from the life that he'd chosen because I ruined it for him. I still love my brother...but I can only pray that he still loves me."

A sudden whooping sound trickled down from the cliffs far above their camp. The raucous good-natured fun had fallen to a hush and the travelers shifted their eyes warily along the crags above them.

The Old Man rose to his feet and gestured for Sorell and Asher to join the circle. They did so without hesitation. Felix sighed, "I didn't like the sound of that at all. Sounded like an animal...a big one. And I can't pretend that it sounded friendly."

Lesedi quickly crafted a firebrand and started lighting small, controlled fires around the campsite. Once he had finished and the whole area was bathed in flickering firelight, Lesedi

nodded gravely to the group. “Stay within the light. It keeps out the wilderness and the cold. I will hold watch.”

Chapter 6: “Giants II: Felix”



The next morning, Felix was the first to wake. He made sure to quickly rouse the rest of the company as loudly as possible.

Felix grinned and winked slyly at his new pal Kori across the dregs of last night’s fire. Kori had been curled up closely beside that cute blonde. Felix approached as Kori swatted at his own sleep-matted hair. “Rise and shine, buddy. Sorry to wake you from...well...that.” Felix gestured toward Marielle, who was still barely awake. Felix flashed a toothy grin and clapped a palm on Kori’s shoulder. “I hope I didn’t interrupt anything fun.” Felix winked again and walked over to hoist his backpack.

Kori stammered uncomfortably, “I’m not sure what you think is going on, but Marielle and I are—”

“Whoa!” Felix cut in, “Don’t get in a bunch about it. I just meant that you and *Marielle* are...you know...getting physical. She’s your project. I understand; I’ve been there. Probably would’ve been *there* if you hadn’t laid claim first.” Felix nodded toward Marielle.

Kori reached out and grabbed his wrist forcefully. “Felix, try to have some respect for the lady. She’s not a project and we’re not getting physical.” Kori was speaking quietly through clenched teeth now. “I like Marielle...a lot. And I think she feels the same way. So, watch your tongue or I’ll tie it off for you.”

Felix stared, dumbfounded, at the young man before him. Then he smiled broadly. “You, Kori, are a strange fellow. I like you kid.”

Kori released his arm and shook his head. “Kid? You’re like the same exact age as me.”

“Eh, I call everyone kid.” Then Felix pointed subtly over to the Old Man, “Except him. I call him anything but kid. Am I right?” Felix started laughing and shoving Kori. “Come on, kiddo, enjoy life a bit. Look around; we’re in the middle of nowhere, on our way to nowhere...and we’re following the only guy in the world who outdates this mountain. When life gets crazy, you best get a little crazy back. It’s called adaptation.” Felix gripped Kori around the shoulders and shook him just a bit. “Now, let’s talk about Marielle.”

Kori smiled with a clear hint of embarrassment. “Felix, I don’t know that you’d understand. I honestly think that I’m

in love.” Kori laughed and rubbed his forehead. “What a ridiculous thing to say so quickly.”

Felix was suddenly very serious. “No, kid, there’s no timeline for love,” he whispered. “It happens when it wants to...and it only lasts as long as it wants to. It’s like fate or something.”

Kori squinted and lowered his own voice. “You sound like you actually know something about love. But that can’t be,” he teased back.

Felix nodded slowly and then hiked over to the rest of the group. He shouted over his shoulder, “Better link up with your girlfriend; we’ve got a long road above us.”

Shortly after they’d broken camp, they came upon a deeply set cave. Felix lashed a rope around his waist and handed the other end to Kori, then quickly yanked it back out of Kori’s hand and gave the rope to Lesedi instead. “No offense, kid,” Felix said to Kori without a care, “but big man here is built like a sycamore.”

Lesedi nodded. “I will hold fast.”

Felix entered the cave and began working his way back through its depths. He shouted back, “If you feel me tug the

rope twice hard, it means it's safe to come in! If only once, cut the rope and run!"

*

The group waited a while for any sign from Felix within the cave. Finally, there were two sharp tugs on the rope in Lesedi's hands. The Old Man, as their guide, led the way into the cave's darkness after their friend.

As the pitch black of the cavern broke away, the travelers found themselves at a campsite. Felix stood up from his place around the fire; he had been seated as part of a circle of men. These strangers had a primitive look about them. The mountain men all had bulging cords of muscle running throughout their bodies, hulking frames, and low-hung postures. Each of the men had a beard that extended well below the breastbone and hair to match.

Felix met them at the entrance to the hollowed out antechamber with a big, charming grin on his face.

"Everyone, come meet our new friends. They call themselves the mountain men; this is their chieftain, Gorr. They've agreed to give us shelter for the night, food, water, and some information about the road ahead."

Gorr and the Old Man spoke about their homes and lives for hours into the night. Lesedi joined their palaver after all the

others had gone to sleep; of course, he didn't say very much as usual.

"Gorr, your hospitality has been most appreciated. We have been traveling for weeks now and struck many camps along the way. Mostly, we forage for nuts or berries; sometimes Asher and Felix will hunt with inconsistent results. It has been quite trying but also quite rewarding. We cannot offer enough gratitude to you and your people. This night has been most pleasant." The Old Man bowed his head in thanks. Lesedi followed suit.

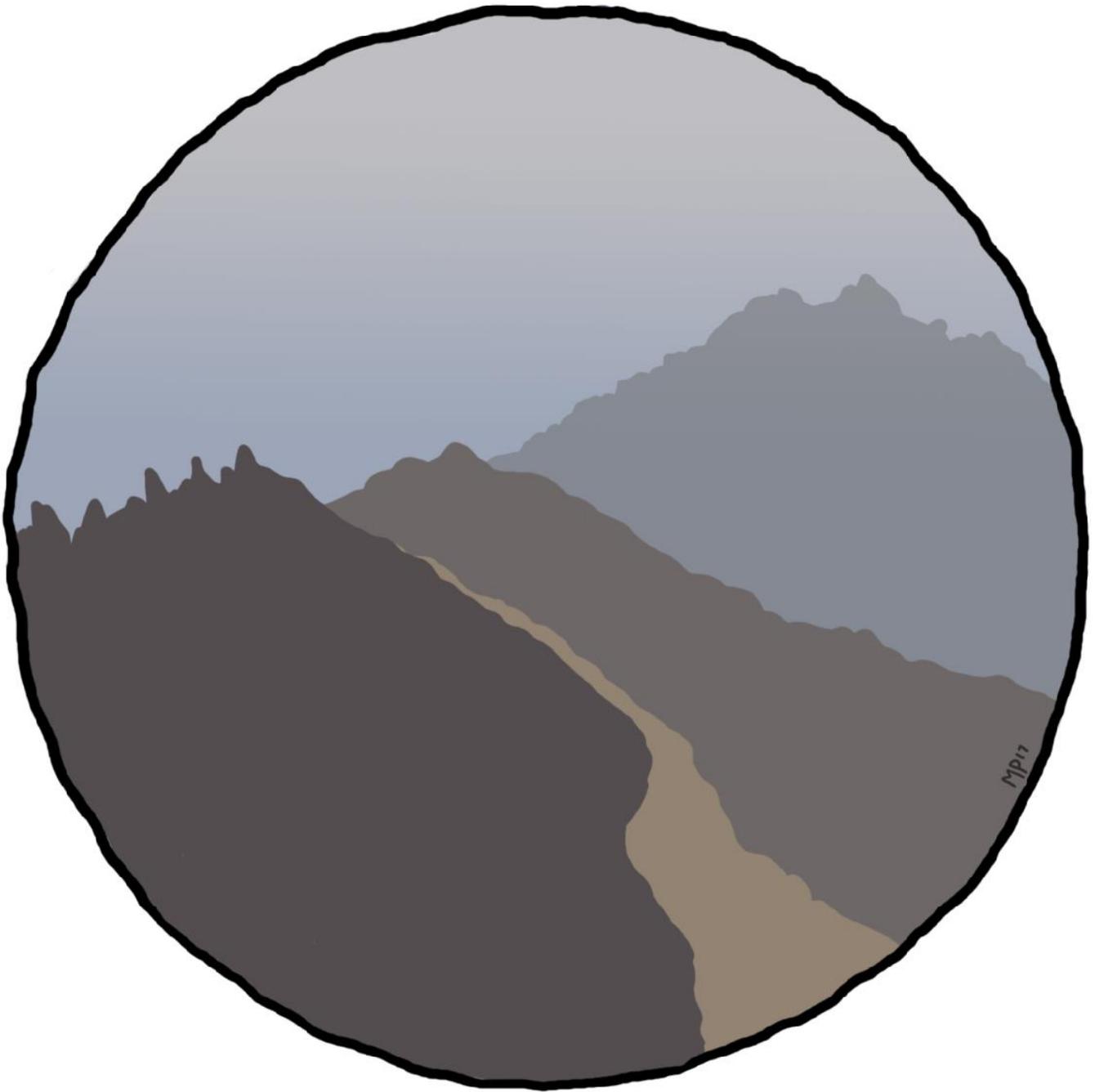
Gorr bowed his head in return. "Our honor to shelter you. May your journey be safe. But take care; many dangers await."

Lesedi nodded, "We will certainly be careful, friend. What can you tell us of these troubles ahead? Do you know of them?"

Gorr closed his eyes and tilted his head back with a whispered whooping sound. "Mountain men. Not us...others. Above. Not helpers. Not wise. Not good. The above mountain men are the enemies of women. Enemies of life and goodness. You should not go above, friends. Go through. We can show the way through. All the way to the other side. Yes?"

The Old Man paused and listened to the song in his mind then hung his head low and shook it slowly. "Thank you, Gorr. Knowing what lies ahead is very important to us. But the path that has been chosen for us is also very important. The Woman has called to each of us specifically and has set a path of trials and tests ahead of us. Unfortunately, that path does lead us above to the mountain's summit."

Gorr nodded sagely. "We understand the importance of journey. Friends, travel well...travel safe." Gorr bowed his head and retired to his bed slab; the Old Man and Lesedi did the same. The next morning, almost before the sun had risen, the travelers left the cave and set their course for the summit.



Chapter 7: The Mountain Men



The summit finally came into view shortly before sunset as an eternal sheet of snow began to rise up under their feet.

Colors were just beginning to smudge their way across the cloudscape around them.

Felix settled into step beside Kori and Marielle. “A few years ago, I met a girl. I meet a lot of girls; it’s sort of a hobby. I only really knew her for a few days...but I knew that she was different than the others. I was in love right away, you know? But I didn’t know how to say it...hardly knew how to feel it. She—Aquila—was only visiting my town for the week; she had come from somewhere overseas for a short trip. I wanted to ask her to stay...but...the words just wouldn’t come out. I tried so many times, but I couldn’t say what I wanted to say.”

Marielle took Kori’s hand. They looked into each other’s eyes and smiled with a silent promise. Marielle then looked to Felix, “What did you do?”

Felix shook his head with a sad grin. “I wrote her a letter. Aquila was supposed to leave the next day and I needed my real feelings to be my last words to her. So I put everything into that letter. Everything. But when I went to her the next morning, all I found was an empty room and a distant ship on the horizon. She had already gone. I never got to say my piece...never got to tell her. I sat there on the pier for hours after that, reading and rereading that letter.” Felix took a

deep breath. “Some days I can’t even remember her face; just that little dot of a ship disappearing across the horizon. I’ve never forgiven the sea for carrying her away from me.”

In the emotional aftermath of Felix’s story, he took a moment to survey the world around him. He quickly noticed that the others were pointing at something just over the crest of the summit. Felix, Kori, and Marielle moved to join up with them. As they approached, Lesedi turned to intercept them. “No words. Move with care,” was all that the soft-spoken man said. The group crouched low and peered ahead.

The foul scene that played out then turned Felix’s stomach. There was a bonfire lit at the epicenter of a snowy plateau and ten frightful silhouettes encircling it. The figures all wore animal furs—if anything at all—and very thick beards and hair.

The Old Man whispered, “The other mountain men...just as Gorr warned.”

Suddenly, one of the mountain men leapt into the heart of the flame, clutching fistfuls of what looked like black feathers. The rest of the clan fell back from the fire and to their knees. A keening sound began to rise up from the wild men. The sound slowly gained a rhythm...and then became

a chant. The man in the fire began to burn yet he did not cry out. He only stood with hands outstretched over his brethren, seemingly unmoved. The chant became a melody that seemed to transcend the original voices that had produced it.

As the chant intensified, Felix had to look away. That was when he noticed the other oddities around the campsite. Birds. There were hundreds of crudely built cages stacked around the snowy expanse, each containing a number of blackbirds. Yet not a single one of the poor, caged creatures made a sound. They just stared hauntingly at the mountain men's bonfire.

Felix understood the scene just a moment too late; this was a ritual sacrifice. The man in the fire was not holding black feathers; he was holding two live blackbirds. And as the chant of his brethren reached a crescendo, he thrust the birds down into the flames below. The fire turned prismatic in color for a moment and rose around the man within.

After the colorful flames receded, the mountain man stepped out of the fire. He was unscathed, though he seemed to be glowing dimly as though his insides were emitting light. The renewed mountain man lifted his eyes and hands to the sky as the winds began to churn into a

whirling cyclone. Then the mountain men, all together, began to dance over and around the fire, still chanting. The glowing man blew a strong breath into the sky; the cyclone rushed away from him and down the mountain side, off to some unknown destination.

The birds broke their silence and shrieked their anger at the mountain men. The sound of the birds' cries only added a sickly harmony to the song of the savages.

Felix was dumbstruck. Terrified. He looked around at his companions, almost as a plea for help. When his gaze met Lesedi's, Felix noticed tears streaking the man's face.

Felix reached out a friendly hand for Lesedi's shoulder. "You okay?"

Lesedi shook his head grimly. "A blackbird should never be caged or harmed. It is a creature of the Soul. A life that tends to the lives of others." Lesedi twisted his upper lip with disgust, "This is evil work."

Claire gasped and turned her head away with the dramatic flair that only an actress could muster. Felix looked back over the rise; a second mountain man was now collecting two more blackbirds into his hands and gazing excitedly at the bonfire.

“No,” the Old Man moaned. “Not again.” He clasped at his own eyes. “The Woman; she is weeping for these poor creatures. I can feel her sadness at the core of my own. Gorr was right. Lesedi is right. This is evil.”

Felix stepped to the front of the group. “Then let’s do something about it. We’re on a quest from an angel...or something like an angel. And she—the Woman—wanted us to come this way. Maybe we’re supposed to stop this madness.” He reached out his hand, mustering his best heroic smile, “Who’s with me?”

Everyone just looked around at each other, unsure of how to respond. They were obviously afraid.

But, just a split-second before Felix was about to retract his outstretched hand, Asher stood up beside him. “Do you mind if I tag along once more, big brother?”

Felix grinned and rolled his eyes. “Not my first choice, but I’ll take what I can get.”

Then Sorell stood up and moved to Asher’s side. “If you can do it, I can do it.”

Claire then stood with blushed face but without comment. One-by-one each member of the company joined the cause.

As the second mountain man stepped into the fire, a new sound overtook the chanting. It was a battle cry of sorts. All eight of the travelers charged up over the summit edge and towards the unsuspecting mountain men. There was no plan, no weaponry, and no training for this. It was faith alone driving them.

The mountain men fell into confusion. Just as the chanting ceased, the man within the flames was violently consumed by them. The birds, released from his grip, rose with the smoke and flew to safety. The mountain men collected their wits quickly, though, and braced for combat.

However, the Old Man and Marielle had broken off from the group and were freeing the other blackbirds from the cages. So as Felix, Asher, Claire, Kori, Sorell, and Lesedi charged into a fight that they were underprepared for, an abyss opened above them. Even darker than the night sky, the flocks and fleets of blackbirds descended onto the mountain men. The savages yelped with terror as they were overtaken and driven into the caves and outcroppings. But the blackbirds fought even harder to force justice upon the mountain men.

As chaos ensued, Felix and his companions joined together and moved, as a unit, to the far side of the plateau. As they

climbed down to the ledge just below the summit, the sounds of the battle became distant. With victory and righteousness brimming inside their hearts, they moved swiftly downward. As luck would have it, the party's fevered actions had landed them on the other side of the mountain peak and closer to their destination.

This side of the mountain was less steep and less rocky than the other; it made their climb down much quicker work. And as they dropped below the cloud cover, their hearts flew at the sight below. The Great City stood below them with the Endless Sea just beyond. It was a glorious view.

The travelers managed to reach the base of the mountain by sunset the next night. They camped—hopefully one last time—at the point where the rock bled back into grass.



Chapter 8: The Blackbird
("The Time, the Light, The Heart")



The Old Man was the first to wake that morning. He took care not to wake any of the others; not this morning. They had come so far and done so much. Today the group would arrive at their destination...the Great City. He let them sleep a bit longer; there was no telling how their lives would change once they entered those gates.

But the eagerness that sprung through the Old Man also worked its way through each companion. They arose to the sun shortly after he'd pulled his shoes on. They were a strong bunch...a good bunch. They all quickly rallied around him—as they always did—and awaited his directives. The Old Man marveled at the fact that they still did this, despite being able to see their destination clearly ahead. Did they even still need a guide?

Just as they set themselves to move out, a blackbird landed on the tree stump beside the Old Man. “Thank you,” it said in clear and well-spoken words.

A collective gasp issued from the group. The Old Man smiled softly and nodded. “You are quite welcome, little friend.” Then the Old Man rubbed his chin. “Forgive our ignorance but we’ve never seen a talking bird before this.”

The bird laughed lightly. “We are very careful with words...since they hold such power.” The bird looked from

person to person for a long moment. “She is real, you know. The Woman.”

“You know of her?” Asher blurted out.

“Oh heavens yes! She is real and her song fills us all. You need only listen with your heart. We blackbirds hear her always; we soar on the melody and carry it with us. Follow and you shall know it too.” The bird flapped his wings in place as several more of his kind flew from the rocks and the fields and the trees to join. “You risked your lives to save ours. We owe you quite a debt, kind travelers. For now, let us escort you to the city as friends. But we cannot follow further than that.”

“Oh, the city is the end of our journey,” Claire said foolishly. “We’ve traveled all this way. The city is our destination.”

The birds remained silent for a time and then rose into the sky in formation above their heads. They all traveled this way across the fields until they met the road. Then followed the road to the city’s gates. There the bird landed once more on a nearby tree and watched on wordlessly.

The Old Man reached out and grasped the gate’s pull-ring. With all his might, he tried to pull the gate open. It wouldn’t budge, but he did not relent.

The bird spoke as the Old Man continued to pull. “The faith of one man alone is like having only one eye. Yes, you can see in front of you, but it takes at least two for true depth. And after that, the more there are, the clearer the image.”

With the bird’s wisdom still ringing in their ears, every member of the party joined the Old Man at the iron pull-ring. And all at once, the door to the Great City slid open.



Chapter 9: “Rest” and “The Great City”



The city was alive; hundreds of people lined the streets, singing praise to the sky and dancing wildly. “Hooray for the

travelers who have come on the wings of blackbirds!” they shouted. “Rejoice in those that fear no evil!” Several citizens sprang forward to relieve the travelers of their packs and provisions. “Let us give you proper welcome,” they said with accommodation.

The Old Man blushed at the attention. He had known, somehow, that they would arrive in this place. It hadn't necessarily been a vision from the Woman. But the moment that the city had come into view from the mountainside, the Old Man knew that it was just where they needed to go.

There was much celebration in the city streets that day. Even after their exhausting journey, the Old Man and his companions happily joined in the festivities. It was all for them after all. Who could have known that they'd be ushered in like heroes simply because the birds had flown with them? Though it did seem a fitting end to a journey of such mystique and wonder.

As the Old Man slept that night, he found his mind called away to a different place entirely. He was briefly back at the place where he had first met the Woman. He found himself seated in the same chair across from her once more. This time there was no food, no music, and no celebration. The Woman's song rang in his mind as it filled the area with

beauty and calm. The Old Man could almost see the melody; each note rippling across this dreamed reality. But her lyrical presence did not bring congratulations or thanks or rest.

Instead, the Old Man learned of the journey ahead that still remained. The Great City was merely a waypoint—a gateway to their real path. The guide's work was just beginning and he would need to lead them all again very soon. This city would be their last taste of civilization for a long time.

The dream was clear enough to him. They would have to confront the greatest mystery in all the world...they would have to take to the sea.

As the vision faded back into the normal dreams of the mind, the Woman's song echoed one word again and again.

“Devona.”

Part II



ASHIA

Chapter 10: “I Will Arise at the Sound”



Three days had passed within the walls of the Great City as the travelers enjoyed daily celebrations and nightly comforts. The citizens seemed infinitely appreciative of their guests and offered praise and luxury at every turn. The group had journeyed so far and experienced so much since they had left their homes and, though the city’s extravagance was odd, it was also very welcome. And the travelers reveled in it. All except for Lesedi.

But the Old Man kept watch over all his companions, so he knew exactly where to find Lesedi. The solitary man was down at the end of the pier, staring out over the tides as usual. But today—since it was the last day before their journey must move onward—the Old Man forced his company on Lesedi.

“What are you seeing out there, my friend?” the Old Man asked gently as he approached.

Lesedi did not even flinch at the Old Man’s sudden appearance, as though he hadn’t even noticed. After a

moment of silent contemplation, Lesedi did answer. “I believe I am not seeing anything, but rather looking for something.”

“Ah,” the Old Man breathed deeply, “That is a very different thing, isn’t it?”

Lesedi nodded almost imperceptibly. “I must tell you something. And it must be told before we disembark.”

The Old Man urged him on with a soft expression.

At that, Lesedi delicately revealed the tale of how he was called to the inn that day...how the Woman had reached him.

*

Lesedi didn't know where he was or how he'd gotten there. His eyes were stinging from salted waves and angry winds. The only sight was blue; the deepest and darkest blue that one could imagine. A sea. It was as though the whole world was this sea, both above and below. But, somehow, he knew that he was not alone. There were things beneath him. Monstrous and ancient things. Things that chilled the Soul of a man.

But then a voice rang out to calm the waves. The things shrank away to a distance and Lesedi was left to float in peace...comfort even...as her voice sang to him.

She was suddenly there floating beside him. A woman who seemed to be the very embodiment of kindness and beauty. Her hair shimmered every color and no color, her eyes did not so much look upon him as cradle him. Her voice an eternal song. "Lesedi, do not be afraid. Endings are beginnings too. But my heart breaks for what comes next, my precious Light. Be so strong." Then she vanished.

But, although she was gone now, her song remained to echo through him. "You are the light in the sea, the luster in the shadows, the beast's enemy. You are the strength of them all, the brightness in the shadow, the beast's down-fall." And it was over...

Chapter 11: “Silhouette”, “The Captor” and “Ashia”



Lesedi awoke softly, somehow both comforted and frightened by the words of the Woman. His eyes remained closed as he wondered at the meaning of those words. He could not wait to tell his lovely Ashia; she would know what to make of the mystical dream.

The salty smell of the sea in his mind had now been replaced by the smoky scent fire. Lesedi allowed his eyes to slip open as he rolled over to hold his beloved. But Ashia was not there. It was then that Lesedi began to notice the sounds around him. Screams of chaos poured in through the window. Lesedi sat up bolt straight, leapt out of bed, and rushed out the door in panic.

The village was ablaze, women and children scrambling for safety. But where was Ashia? Lesedi staggered through the streets, frantically searching for his love. It was almost impossible to see; acrid smoke hovered

over everything and blood and flame smeared the streets.

At last, Lesedi caught the eye of his neighbor. The man saw Lesedi and covered his own mouth. The look of pity that fell over the man was gut-wrenching. Then the neighbor pointed to something silhouetted against the firelight a short distance off. It was low to the ground and still. A body.

Lesedi's whole world seemed to slow as he approached that silhouette. He knew what he would find. And as he knelt down beside Ashia's body, Lesedi's world crumbled like the embers of his village. He looked up in a daze and, once again, caught the eye of his neighbor. The man pointed to the treeline, just beyond the smoldering village boundaries. Lesedi looked just in time to see a gang of men disappear into the woods. Without thought, he dashed after them in a grief-stricken stupor. Lesedi broke the treeline in a matter of seconds. He drew his knife as instinctively as the beat of his own heart or the breath in his chest. The raiders did not have the time to even notice his

presence before Lesedi was on them. His rage was an entity of its own; a monster that reached into his body and took hold.

Lesedi's knife found its mark. Two men were cut down in an instant, then the next two fell just as easily. The last one—a brute with a black mark across his back—turned and darted further into the woods; Lesedi pursued with malice. The murderer made it only a few paces before Lesedi was able to pounce again. This time, Lesedi pinned the man to the ground and leaned in close with his blade pressed against the murderer's throat. "You'll never know how much she meant to me." Then he slid the knife strongly across the man's throat, opening it violently.

With the raiders dead, Lesedi returned to Ashia's side. For a moment, his grieving heart hoped that his vengeance would have somehow brought Ashia back to him. But, of course, it did not. Killing those men only created a new sense of sickness in him. This sickness was as unwelcome as the pain of his lost love.

He held her body close. Ashia seemed so different now, so lifeless, so empty. Lesedi's tears flowed freely over her beautiful face. She had been his happiness...his life. How could something so pure and bright be taken from this world so quickly? He whispered to her, "I will love you always, my Ashia. Always."

The wind picked up and swept the smoke and ember across his nostrils as though mocking him. It carried the screams of the village and the fire and rubble around him in a whirlwind, chortling in his ear. "She is gone," the wind laughed its sick taunt, "Why waste your love on the dead?"

Lesedi only held Ashia nearer and tried to ignore the mockery of the wind around him.

*

The Old Man wiped the tears from his own eyes.

"After I settled my love into the ground, I followed the Woman's song to the inn." Lesedi's eyes never once left the horizon. "I journey for Ashia now. Truly, my life ended that day...yet my purpose had only begun. I

knew that my path would lead to the Endless Sea. That is my destiny. I do not know how, but I must be the light in the darkness...the beast's enemy." Lesedi, for the first time since the Old Man had arrived, pried his gaze from the horizon and looked at his own hands. "My fury and hatred made a monster out of me. What if I cannot be the beast's enemy because I, myself, have become a beast? What if I cannot be the Light because I am too consumed by the darkness?"

The Old Man pondered that for a long moment. "I wish I had that answer, my friend. Perhaps it all comes down to hope and faith."

"Perhaps that is all any of us ever really have." Lesedi paused, as if contemplating his next words carefully. "I fear the Endless Sea. I am one of a very ancient people. We remember the ages that most others have chosen to forget. In the old times, the gods of this world roamed the lands and the skies with pride. But mankind grew impudent and forced the gods into the seas. These ancient deities are said to still dwell in the depths. Men are not welcome upon the waves. It is

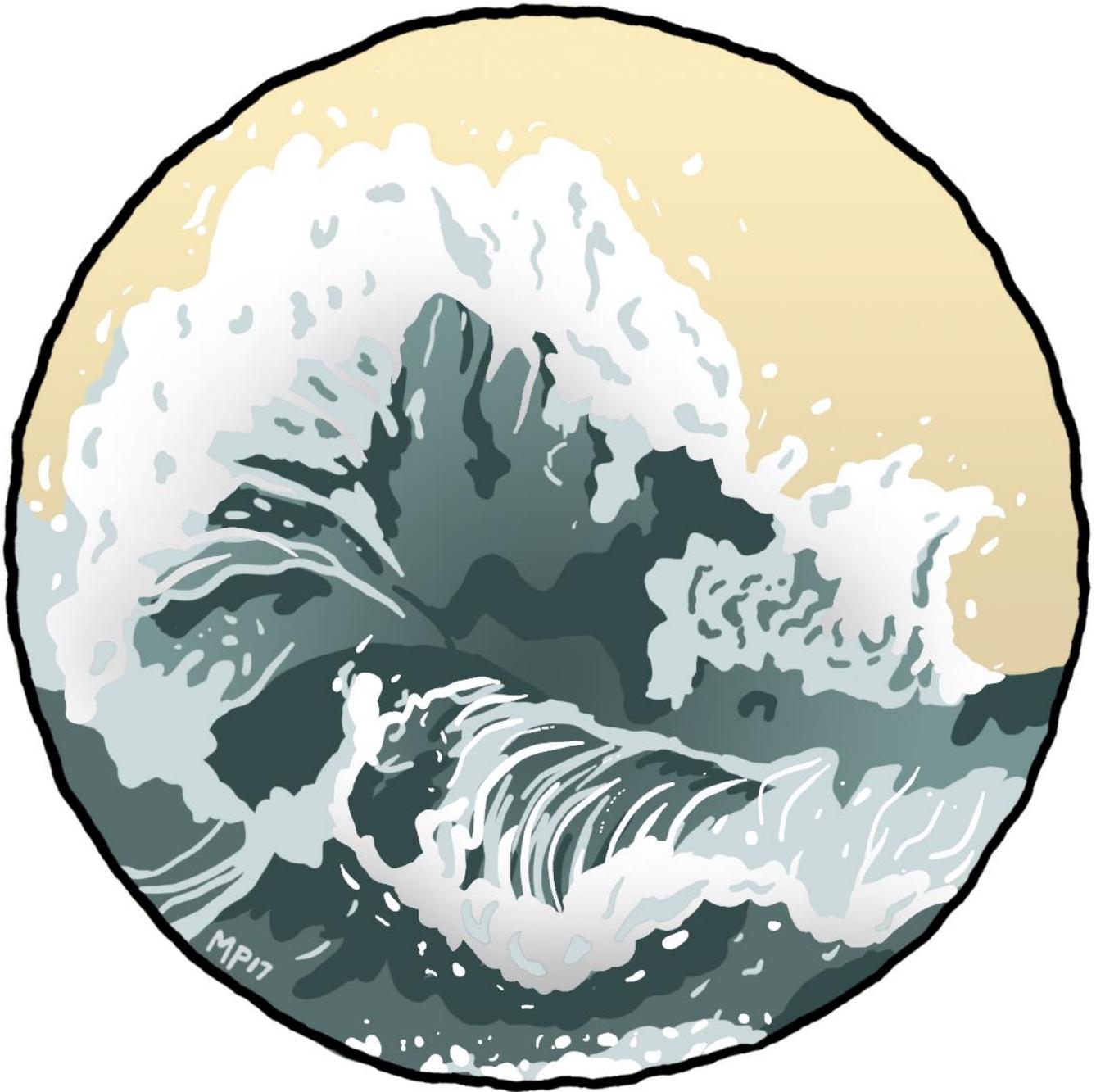
sacrilege...and it invites wrath from below. Only the pure may stand against the gods; it would be unwise to venture into their domain.”

The Old Man had no response for Lesedi’s warning. What could he possibly say? So, Lesedi’s shuddering prophecy was the end of their talk. Lesedi and the Old Man stood in silence, gazing out at the horizon for hours after.

Part III



Behold, The Sea Itself!



Chapter 12: “Behold, the Sea Itself!”



The time had finally come. Five days had passed as if in an instant. Now, the eight travelers stood on the pier

stretching out from the city, as the fishing trawler was loaded with supplies and belongings.

The Old Man shuffled up to the adolescent boy that was hefting most of the load. “Good day, young man. Will you be joining us on our journey across the sea?”

The young boy stopped moving and just stared at him.

“Don’t pay him no mind.” A very heavy man appeared over the railing, sporting a patch of multi-colored beard but not a scrap of hair on his head. “That’s my boy, Brutus. He don’t speak at all. Barely even thinks to be true about it. Right Brutus?”

The boy, again, only stared. Then he continued hoisting the crates onto the boat.

“Ah, he’s a good boy though.” The fat boat captain made his way down the ramp and extended his meaty paw toward the Old Man. “Captain Berton Evinrude. Friends call me Bert.”

The Old Man accepted Bert’s hand and received a strong handshake in return. Bert pulled him into a fierce hug and then held him at arm’s length. “Rightly

good. You're a tough one for a feller your age. Respectable indeed. Come a long way, have you?"

The Old Man nodded with a small grin. "Yes, Bert, we have certainly come a great distance. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Bert grunted and hurled another sack of grain over the side of the boat. "So, I been hearing silly talk about some search for Devona. But you don't seem like the nutso type who hunts after imaginary islands. So, where are we really going, if you don't mind my bother?"

The Old Man smiled, "Captain Evinrude, we *are* going to Devona."

Bert froze in place and looked the Old Man over. "Devona, eh? So, we're really going on with it? Well, there ain't no charts for finding myths...lest you've got some maps."

The Old Man shook his head sadly.

Bert contorted his face in thought. “So, this is an honest-to-goodness treasure hunt in the raw? We just go on faith and instinct?”

The Old Man nodded.

“It’s a crazy plan, to be sure. But, luckily, me and Brutus ain’t scared of crazy.” Bert wiped his brow and looked at the sky. “Might want to get your folks settled in; we can break port before sundown.”

They may have been ready to leave port, but the Great City wasn’t done with them yet. The citizens turned the travelers’ departure into another grand event. Music in the streets, dancers, vendors, food, excitement, and beautiful words of kindness from the people. The fanfare of their last day in the city actually managed to rival that of their first day.

But as the celebration wound down, the small boat set away from the pier and carried the travelers onto the Endless Sea.

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Chapter 13: “Down at the Water’s End”



For those first few days, they spent their time learning how to assist Captain Evinrude with whatever duties were necessary to operate the trawler. He was a fine captain but, on such a long and aimless journey, the help of a crew was a necessity. Those early days were packed with labor-intensive work and well-earned sleep.

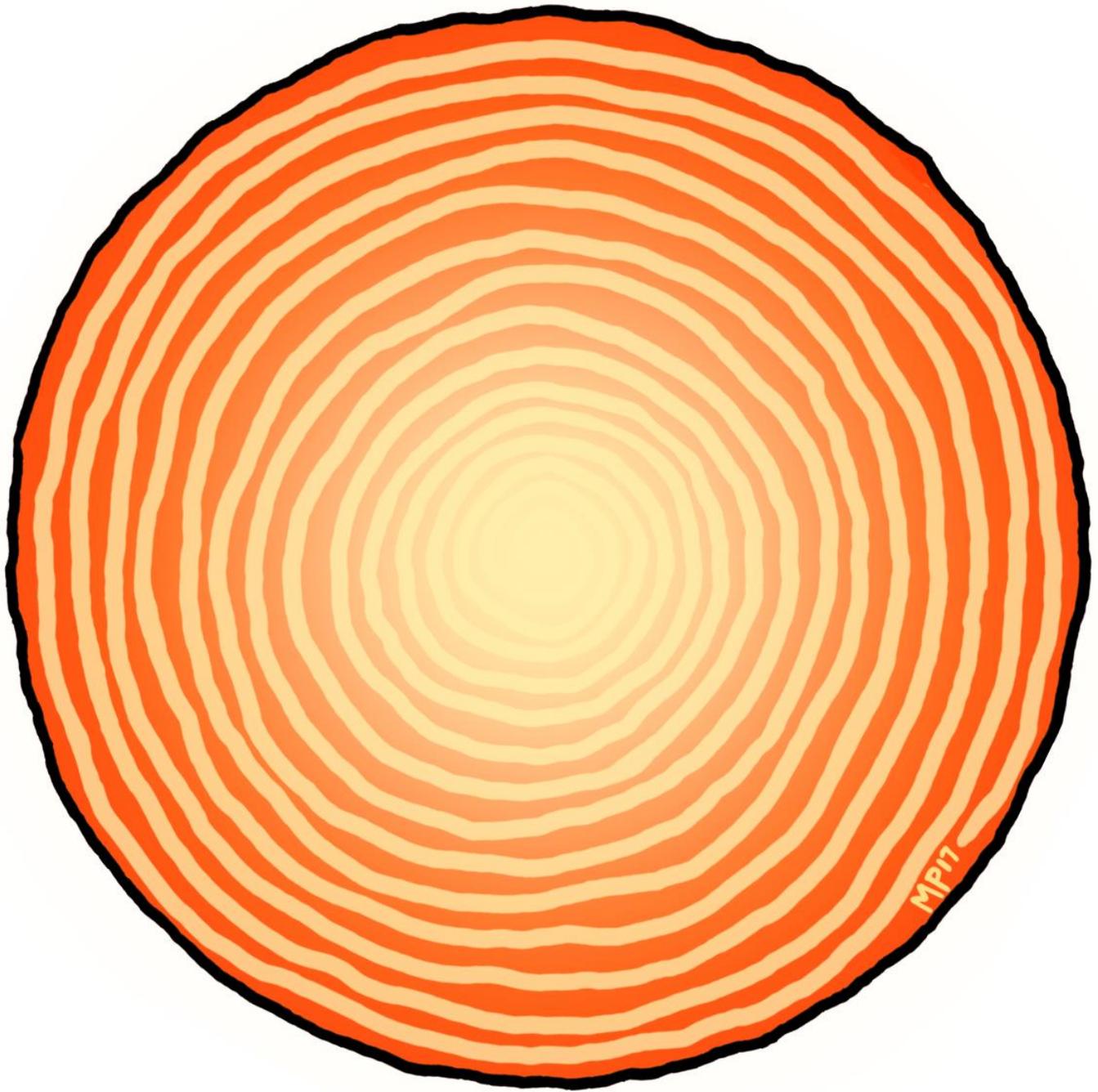
Claire sang for them frequently. They were songs of a different life and a different past, songs with foreign words and concepts. Her voice was quite nice and it blended softly with the steady drone of the sea around them. Claire’s lyrics slowly but surely became stories and memories of a place that none of the others understood...though they loved to imagine.

Sorell sat closer than the rest. She kept a forgiving and appreciative hand on Claire’s knee throughout each tale of wonder, sitting like a child listening to a bedtime story. Perhaps it reminded both of them of the life that could have—maybe should have—been.

This activity continued each day for weeks and, possibly, months. But there was tragedy in her life as well; lost loves, betrayals, even an attempt on her life. And Claire relished the chance to weave her tapestry of intrigue.

Their lives went on this way for months. Soon enough they had all become skilled men and women of the sea. They could each track weather patterns and star paths and spot surface currents. They each knew the inner workings and shortcomings of the vessel; the captain had taught them well.

But they awoke one day to find that none of that mattered anymore. Suddenly, Bert's charts no longer matched the sea or the stars. Everything had changed. When the sun rose high in the sky that day...it never set again.



Chapter 14: “Bring My Soul Back to the Earth”



After what seemed like an eternity on lost waters, madness started to creep into them. Hallucinations

took the place of dreams and the lines between real and imagined seemed to blur. The sun never moved in the sky, night never came, weather never changed, and the sea itself held completely still. It was like the world had frozen in time...and that time was harsh and constant. The unforgiving heat created salty vapors that choked the travelers and dried their bodies from within and without.

It had become difficult for the Old Man to keep his eyes open against the flare of the sun in recent days—if, in fact, days existed anymore. He found himself trying to flush the white starbursts from his eyes as Lesedi approached.

As always, Lesedi sat beside him without words for a long while. When the Old Man also said nothing for a while, Lesedi finally offered his own thoughts. “You are not happy?”

The Old Man laughed out loud at that. “Do I really read so plainly, my friend? No, Lesedi. It is not a matter of happiness or unhappiness. It is an unfamiliar sort of

loneliness that I'm struggling with. Honestly, I'm not sure how to even explain it to you."

Lesedi nodded deeply, "The Woman is no longer with you...with us."

The Old Man nodded sadly. "I'm afraid you may have been right about the sea, my friend. This place seems like damnation. It gets harder with each breath to keep believing that it will not be eternal. It scares me."

Lesedi stared him fiercely in the eyes. "It is natural to feel fear. But it is wrong to let fear dictate belief."

Just then, a loud holler echoed across the deck, followed quickly by a splash in the water. Both the Old Man and Lesedi leapt to their feet and hurried to the side of the boat. There they found a most unexpected sight: fun.

Felix had grown tired of the heat and, in spite of it, dove fearlessly into the water. Until then, no one had been bold enough to try it. The sea was unknown and frightening; its mystique kept the travelers hidden within the boat. But Felix wasn't the sort to be restricted or imprisoned. So, they all watched in

wonder as their friend dipped beneath the surface and paddled around the boat, refusing to let the Endless Sea restrain him.

And Felix was laughing; it had been quite a while since any of them had mustered the mood to laugh. The Old Man suddenly found himself, among others, now laughing along with Felix. A few of the others began to strip down and dip their toes and feet into the water.

“No.” Lesedi’s face had gone stony and wide-eyed. He reached his hands out to stay the others. “This must stop.” Then he moved closer to the edge and spoke directly to Felix. “You must get out of the water. Now.”

Felix acted as though he hadn’t heard Lesedi’s advice. He only continued to laugh and tread water just beyond the boat’s small ladder.

Lesedi’s voice rose to a boom, “Get out of the water!”

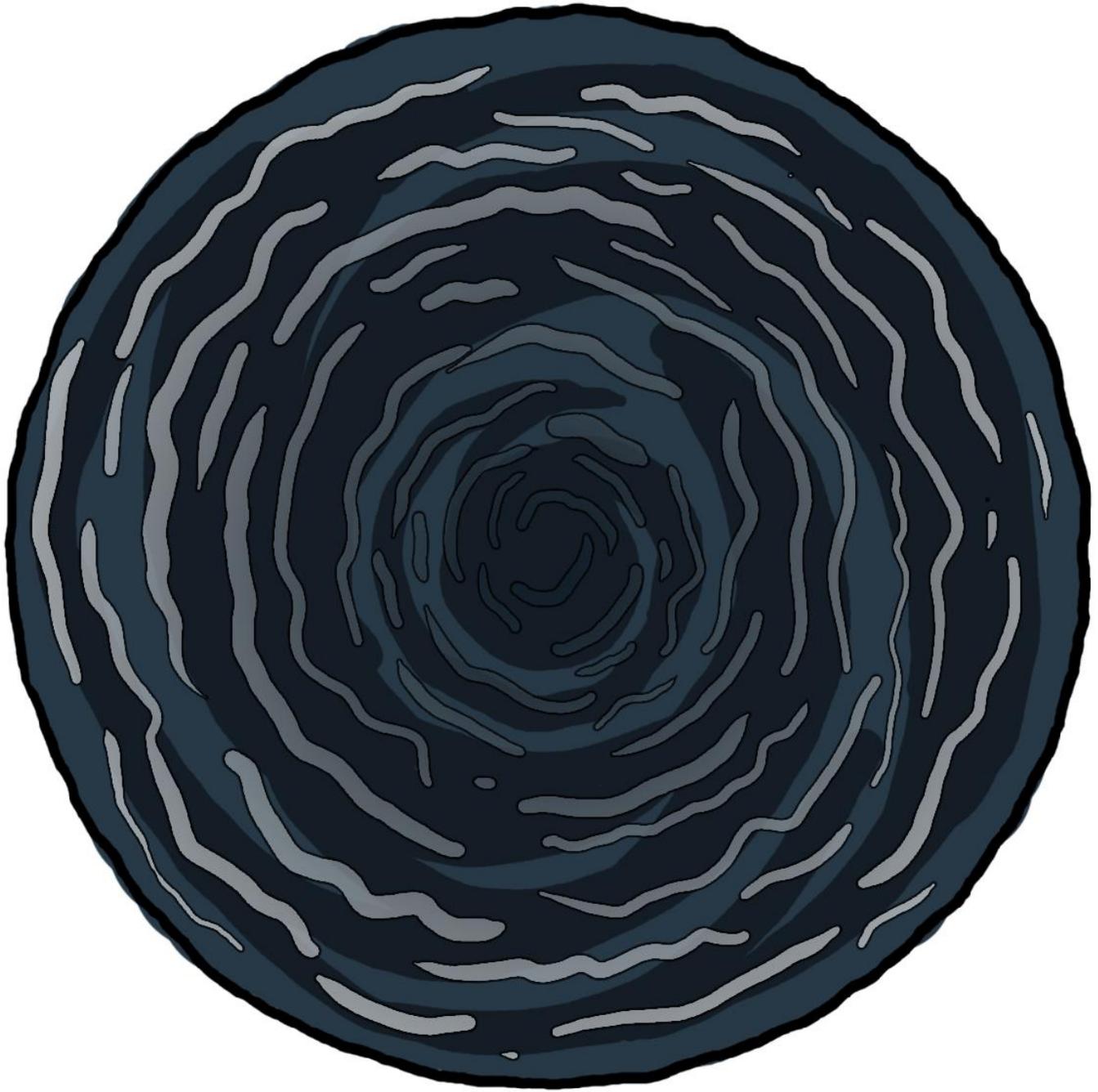
Felix’s smile twisted into an annoyed expression of challenge...but only for a moment.

Right then, Felix's eyes darted to the surface of the water around him with a look of shock. "I think something just moved under me."

The Old Man quickly echoed Lesedi's sentiments, "You should get back in the boat now."

Felix was already grasping for the bottom rung of the ladder. Within seconds, all companions were pulling Felix back up onto the deck. There was a silent agreement at that moment: no one would ever go into the water again.

At least not by choice.



Chapter 15: “The Vortex”



The time for navigation had passed long ago—perhaps even centuries ago. There was no direction or even

movement as far as any could surmise. So, the Endless Sea simply did whatever it would with them. Whether they drifted, stopped still, or plowed ahead at full clip, it would be at the will of the fates and the sea. And so it went for ages and ages without change. Until something happened.

Marielle awoke to the sound of strong, whipping winds. She opened her eyes carefully to protect them from the sun; this had become second nature to them all. But the sun was not there. There was only dark cloud-cover above and a deafening roar all around. Marielle jumped to her feet and roused the others as fast as she could. As she pulled the Old Man to his feet, Marielle was able to see the culprit of this odd weather. A cyclone.

It reached down from the clouds like a twisted finger and plunged its fury into the sea. Then the wind itself became wet and violently threw darts of water in all directions.

As her companions scrambled all over the deck, desperately adjusting rudders and riggings to escape

this storm, Marielle was frozen in place with a single thought: This cyclone was not natural. Those savages up on the summit of the mountains had used evil magics to conjure whirlwinds just like this one. Could this be that very same storm? With the skewing of time on the Endless Sea, Marielle knew somehow that it was possible...almost certain that it was.

Then something impossible happened, as if to confirm Marielle's suspicions. As the cyclone's cruel finger reached down into the water, it pushed all of its energy downward and whipped the sea into a vortex. As this happened, the whirlwind became a whirlpool. Captain Evinrude grabbed hold of his son, Brutus, and leapt overboard into the roiling sea and tried to swim away. Marielle lost sight of him very quickly as the whitecaps became waves and the ripples became swells. It was clear that the seas now served the vortex.

Kori took Marielle's hand and pulled her along to the wheel. "We have to get this thing turned around!" Kori

threw the throttle into reverse. Luckily, they had all learned how to operate the boat's main systems.

Marielle rushed to the anchor. "If I can get the anchor to catch, maybe we can stay put until this thing runs its course or moves on!"

But neither of their hopes came true. It was too late. The vortex had grown so wide beneath the surface that it was all around them. Their boat was already within its grasp. Within seconds, this hungry force had pulled them down into its hidden depths. The whirling sea churned and grinded until the trawler was torn to splinters within its core and the entire crew sucked into oblivion.



**Chapter 16: “The Island King”
and “The Turning”**



Felix's eyes snapped open, expecting to see chaos around him; the last thing he remembered was the sea chewing apart the boat and swallowing the debris...companions and all. He should've been dead. They all should've been dead. Felix rolled onto his side and coughed up a stomach-full of salt water. He gazed blearily across the beach of a palm-forested island and saw that his friends were all alive and with him. Though disoriented, it looked like most of the others were beginning to awaken as well.

But that was when Felix noticed the presence of another. And, despite the strangeness of everything that he had seen on this journey, this other figure was perhaps the strangest sight of them all. A man, wearing nothing but vine ropes and leaves, sat nearby on a stump. This man had painted his skin with muds and minerals to depict images that seemed to make no sense. He wore a headpiece crafted sloppily out of huge tree fronds and twigs. And, perhaps most alarmingly, this tribal character wore a pair of cracked and bent spectacles on the end of his nose.

The others, now awake, began to pull themselves from the sand and shells. Groans and cries rang out as they all began to discover the injuries that they'd incurred from the ordeal. The group, as a whole, was battered and bruised.

“Good morning to ye all. Rise up if ye can indeed. Rise up. We've much to speak on.” The odd islander spoke with a strange tittering voice. It was almost as though there was a laugh hidden behind each word.

Appropriately, the Old Man was the first to speak.

“Hello, sir, we are—”

“—I know who ye are,” The man interrupted. “Ye were called to by the mysterious woman, were ye not? Eh?”

The Old Man nodded slowly.

“I thought it true. Those called by her always end up here. For this is the paradise ye were promised. And I, I am yer king now. This is my domain and ye are all my subjects. Fear not, I tell ye true when I say this is paradise.”

All the travelers were standing now. This Island King stood up from the log that he'd been crouched upon and held out a staff of some sort. It looked like the spine of some large animal with a number of shells and rocks tethered to the end of it. "Answer true, now wanderers. Will ye swear fealty to me, your Island King? Will ye join my kingdom in the palms? Will ye enjoy this lost paradise?"

Felix noticed that the Island King's voice had that strange quaver to it again...but it didn't bother him. It was actually quite soothing, comforting, inviting. Felix didn't really know why, but he trusted the king. "I will!" Felix stepped forward, staring dumbly into the Island King's eyes.

Then Claire shouted "I will," at almost the same moment as Kori, both of them also looking deeply into the Island King's eyes. Marielle clutched Kori's arm, "What are you doing? This feels wrong, doesn't it? Why doesn't the Woman meet us if this is our destination?"

The Island King climbed down from his perch and approached Marielle. As he laid his hand on her shoulder and met her gaze, he said simply, “Ye will be happy here; I give ye the word of the king.” Marielle, now looking into his eyes, nodded and bowed her head. The king then repeated this action with Sorell and then Asher and then Lesedi. Each of them, in turn, came to the same decision and relinquished their allegiance to the Island King.

The king rested his hand on the Old Man and began to speak—but the Old Man pulled away and averted his gaze. “Do not touch me, Island King.” The king recoiled slightly from the Old Man’s affront. The Old Man turned back to him, taking care not to make eye contact. “I’ve been warned of men like you...demons with the power to persuade. Your honeyed words will have no effect on me, I promise. I carry the song of the Woman within me.”

“No, ye don’t. I can smell an empty Soul when one sinks foot in my sand. What ye think is an angel or goddess is nary but a dream...a hope of something

better. Ye have found it here; that is why ye don't hear the song anymore. Ye don't, do ye? She's been silent since the sun rose up, eh? Since ye entered my realm. As I stated rightly before, this is the paradise that ye seek. And I yer king."

Lesedi stepped forward and spoke, "This king speaks true. You have told me yourself that the Woman's song has abandoned you."

Then Felix stepped up beside Lesedi, "You've led us a good long way, just like you were supposed to. But a guide needs to recognize when he's reached the end of the journey."

Marielle pulled Kori forward with her, "Look at all we've done. We've seen evil and conquered it; we've been together for an eternity under the sun; and we've almost died...all of us. To get here. And now we are here."

Kori squeezed her hand, "There is nowhere else to go. No boat and no Woman. If this isn't where we were supposed to end up, then I cannot imagine how to carry on. Can you?"

Claire and Sorell came forward together, “Many of us have found precisely what we were looking for. We are happier now than ever before,” Claire said as she looked to Sorell. Sorell nodded her agreement.

Asher shrugged, “I’ve been in search of paradise for most of my life and I came on this journey to pursue that faith. I believe that this is what we were all promised in the scriptures.”

The Island King grinned and attempted to catch the Old Man’s eye again; the Old Man avoided the gaze once more. “Ye still refuse? Even with the words of yer own kin?”

“They are bewitched by a devil. Their words are not their own and I will never follow you, Island King.” The Old Man turned and jogged off along the beach as quickly as his old bones would take him.

The Island King shouted after him, “Ye will find that there is nowhere to go. There is only this island...and it is mine!”

Chapter 17: “The Exile”



It had been hours since the Old Man had watched the Island King lead his friends into the jungle. Not one of them had even looked back in doubt; they were all so enamored—no—enchanted by the Island King. He despaired at the hopelessness of it, settled himself onto a large rock along the beach, and stared out into the sea. As his hand smoothed over his eyes, tears began to eke out through his fingers.

He hadn't even noticed how much his clothes had dried until the tide came in and wet his pant legs all over again. The Old Man opened his eyes and blinked the blurriness from them as he glanced down at his submerged feet. There was something else there too, however. Swept against the very rock that he was seated on, there was a small triangle of canvas, half sunken in sand. It looked to the Old Man like the corner of a painting of some sort. For whatever reason, he felt compelled to pick it up...so he did just that.

As the Old Man's hand closed around the bit of canvas, he felt a surge of warmth spread from that hand to his arm and up throughout the rest of his body like an electrical pulse. But this pulse felt wonderful, as though the Old Man had grown somehow stronger in the process. Fresher. More alive.

He looked at his hands; still wrinkled and antique as they had been that morning, he grasped the canvas tightly. The ocean breeze kicked up mightily as it whipped around the Old Man's place on the beach. The salty breeze against his face caused the Old Man to close his eyes for just a moment. But in that moment, a realization sank over him: this hum of the waves, the buzz of the breeze, the thump of his own heartbeat in his chest. These sounds were no longer dissonant tones, but were one force united in rhythm. It was a song...and there was a voice in that song. The melody lifted him and empowered him. It was the Woman; her guiding light and music soared within his very Soul once again.

This feeling of might and truth suddenly became more than that...more than just some fleeting sensation. It became part of him. All of him. And just like that, he knew that he had to get his friends back...had to save them. Because, deep inside that song was a warning. His friends were in serious danger.

The Old Man followed the Woman's song until he found the trail that had been left by his companions. Knowing little about tracking and even less about this island, the Old Man hurried into the palm jungle after his friends.

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Marielle felt an uneasy churn in the pit of her stomach; something felt wrong about this. Why was she following this Island King? They knew nothing about him. And how could they have just left the Old Man back at the beach? She squeezed Kori's hand and hoped for some response...but he just kept walking. This time she stopped walking and drew back on his hand.

“What’s wrong? Why are we stopping?” Kori asked without any inflection or emotion.

“This is all wrong,” she whispered. “Don’t you feel it? It’s like a daze...like we’re just acting out a dream or something.”

Kori nodded. “Of course. It’s all been like a dream right from the start. The Woman, the mountain men, the birds, the Endless Sea. Why should the Island King be any different?”

“But the Old Man—”

“—chose his path poorly,” the Island King interjected, staring coldly at Marielle. “I already explained the truth of it, haven’t I? Ye will be at peace here.”

An odd calm washed over her. “Y-yes...y-y-you did say that. I guess I j-just forgot for a minute. I’m sorry I slowed us; we can keep moving.”

The Island King grinned, “Hardly a need for it. We’ve all but arrived; cannot ye hear the waves? Why, it’s just through those palm fronds; go on, lead yer people into my kingdom.” Marielle and Kori walked forward,

parted the foliage, and stepped into the sunshine. The rest of the travelers followed them onto a rocky beach. Marielle marveled at the island paradise before her. There were causeways webbing out into the sea with wooden structures, ladders, and stairs dotting the constructed landscape. Immense palm trees reached up above it all and housed small—but livable—huts. As most of Marielle’s companions loudly cheered and celebrated their new home, Claire did not. She only mumbled something to herself. Marielle moved closer to Claire to hear her words.

“Where are all the people?” was all that Claire said.

Marielle turned back to the view of the Island Kingdom and took one more, deep and focused look around. Claire was right; for all the huts and dwellings and walkways, there were no other living Souls in sight. None.

The king crept up right behind Marielle and whispered, “Welcome home.”

Then, with a loud holler from the king, the coastal city erupted with life. But not human life. Only slightly

taller than adolescent children, but hunched and bent in stature, the creatures crept out from every nook and cranny that the kingdom had been hiding. Even the rocks and debris on the beach seemed to come alive and unfold into little goblins. They were sallow-skinned and bug-eyed with long nails, unkempt patches of hair, and teeth that looked to have been sharpened to carnivorous points. They were monsters that slunk and crawled, climbed and swung, snarled and hooted. And there were hundreds of them.

“Take them to the Parapet!” the king’s voice cracked unceremoniously over the jeers of his twisted subjects. Within seconds, all of the travelers had been bound in thick vine ropes and were being dragged out to the most distant sea-top platform. As the creatures hauled them further along the wooden causeway, the beach settlement vanished into the mists and sea spray. They were now on a lone boardwalk with waters raging below them and fog obscuring the world around them. At last, the causeway opened up into a large circular platform, far out beyond the point where the waves

broke. Veiled in mist, a massive orange stone stood at the platform's center. It stood many times taller than a man and crystalline in structure. Marielle stared at the megalith and thought, for a moment, that she saw it pulse with a dull light.

“Welcome to the Parapet, my children.” Though Marielle could not see the Island King, she recognized the chilling titter in his voice.

“Do not bother to speak nor ask a thing; it will not serve ye well here. This is where the heart of my kingdom beats. Old blood pumps in and new blood pumps out. Eh? The Woman calls! Oh she calls and calls, doesn't she? Beckons ye forth on a journey...as she did to us all long before ye washed up bedraggled on my shores. That's the ticket, isn't it? Ye set out on her quest of quests and brave the dangers, hold the faith, keep the path. Aye, but that path always leads ye here; just as it led all these hopeless babes to my sands.” He gestured around at all the creeping creatures. “And just as the Woman's siren song claimed even my attention eons ago. But I was not

worthy, was I? No, never good enough for her. None of us were. This is the island of her forgotten promises.” He growled like a feral animal, but then quickly reclaimed his regal demeanor. “Only the worthy pass this point. And I...I am king here. I decide worth. Pains me to say it, so it does; but ye don’t measure up. So, in a way, ye did find yer destiny. And ye’ll go no further.” The Island King clacked his scepter against the pulsing crystal—the Parapet—and giggled psychotically. “Ye all belong to me now.”

The Parapet began to glow fiercely, burning its orange to a searing red. “No worries, children. No more questions; only answers. The choice belongs to ye all now. Touch the Parapet and join the ranks of my people...or have yer skulls dashed upon the rocks below. The clock, it ticks away; can ye hear it?”

Two of the creatures took hold of Marielle’s arms and dragged her forward. Marielle struggled and kicked out at her captors. She could hear Kori causing a scuffle on her behalf somewhere in the mists. The Island King moved forward, touched her shoulder, and told her to

calm down. It was a suggestion...a command that she simply could not deny. Marielle knew that he had bewitched her, knew that she was not in control, but she could do nothing to protect against it. She could only submit to his wish. The creatures pulled her close to the Parapet, until she could almost feel the light against her cheek. Then she felt the king's rancid breath against her ear, "Choose."

"Let them go!" a familiar but shockingly powerful voice roared over the crashing waves. "You are king of nothing! You rule no one! And your sad little play at make believe has come to an end."

The king stood upright and glared through mists at the source of the insults. The Old Man stood proud and strong. Marielle gasped as she looked upon him, though she wasn't entirely sure why. But something was very different about the Old Man. He was vibrant...alive...mighty.

Marielle's was not the only breath that had been stolen by the Old Man's rejuvenation. The throngs of twisted, deformed creatures were suddenly

dumbstruck. They immediately stopped whatever atrocities they had been committing and fell to their knees, bowing to the Old Man as though he were a deity.

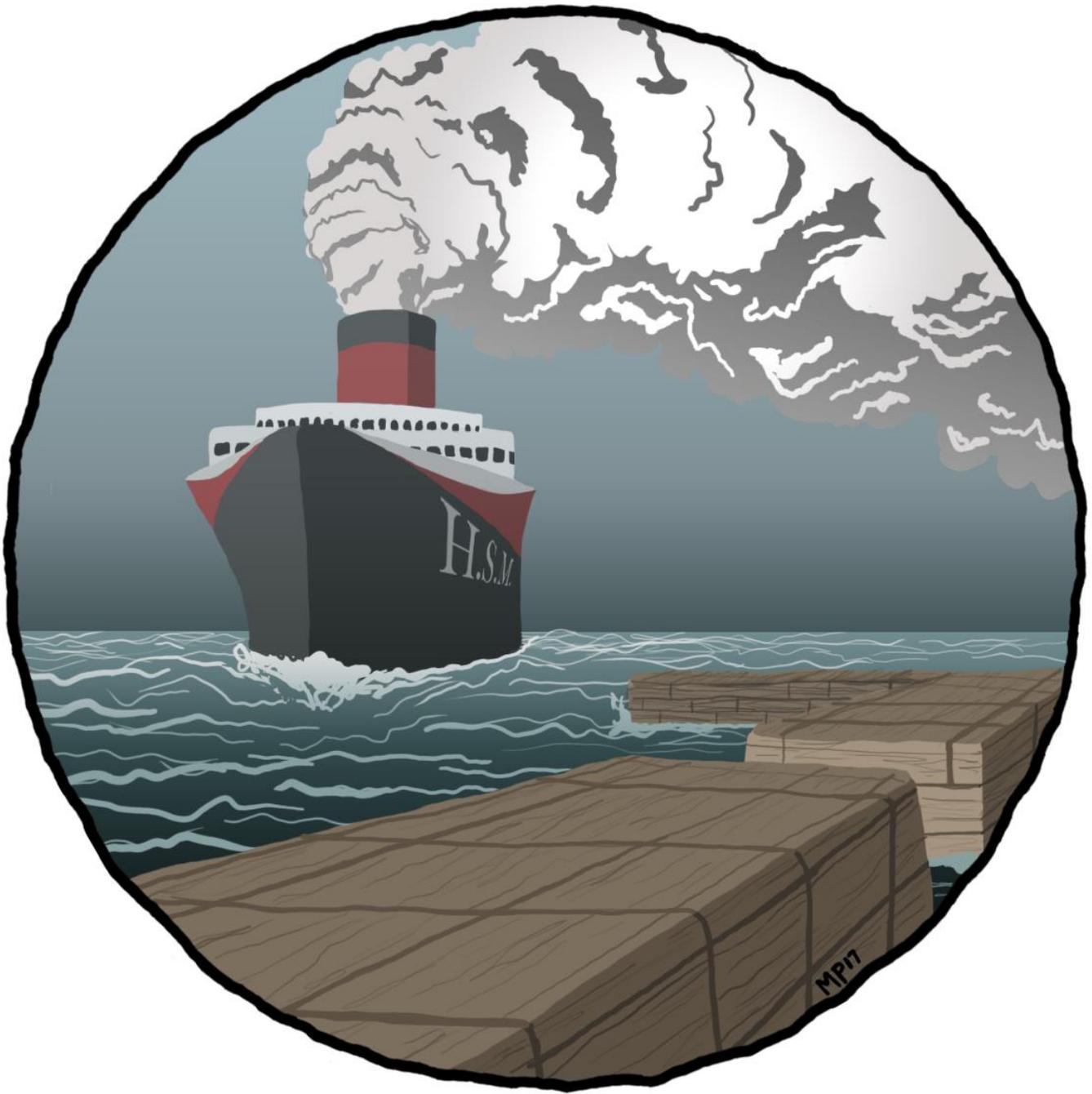
The Island King flew into a rage. “Stop that! Devour him, my children! I command ye!” he shouted until he was hoarse, eyes bulging and veins popping like chords in his neck. But the creatures seemed to not even hear him, so enamored were they with the Old Man.

Without action from his minions, the Island King rushed at the Old Man with his scepter raised as a club. The king was so fast, so wild, and so rage-filled that no one could stop him. Not even the Old Man had a moment to raise his arms in defense. The king had murder in his eyes.

Just as the scepter came smashing down to destroy the Old Man, a cracking sound rang out across the Parapet. It echoed with a deafening cannonade that quickly joined the sound of the surf below. The Island King’s scepter fell from his hands before it had connected with the Old Man. The Island King himself staggered

backward and clutched at his own chest; there was a bleeding hole there, through his heart. Something had pierced his whole body from front to back. The king stumbled once more and then dropped. A moment later, his dead eyes stared vacantly into the sky above. The dreaded Island King had been killed.

As the stunned travelers stared through the mist for some sign of the king's assassin, the hull of an immense ship emerged from the whiteness, the words H.S. Mightier marking its bulkhead.



Chapter 18: “The Ship”



The ship was like a city upon the sea; infinitely more sprawling than any vessel the travelers had imagined.

Kori spent hours on that first day inspecting the mechanics, the machinery, and the weaponry that the H.S. Mightier had to offer. He disassembled everything that was permitted and then reassembled whatever he could figure out. He loved the magic that hid in function and construction. In that regard, even the ship itself was a marvel. The H.S. Mightier had apparently begun as a fleet of smaller ships, according to Admiral Earl Morton. Over the years, those ships had built up connections, conduits, and tethers to the other ships, ultimately creating the floating wonder that now ruled the waves.

Regina, Admiral Morton's Boatswain's Mate, rubbed sand between her palms. "It's good to feel solid ground beneath us again; it's been a very long time for some of us. Though this particular island is certainly...unusual. These monsters are native to this island?"

Asher frowned lightly, "I don't think that's quite it. I'd say that they are *unique* to this island. And I don't believe that it was ever their choice to be here."

“And that is why you are staying on this island?”

Regina looked confused.

“In a way, yes. I’ve been identifying myself as a man of God for so long that I sometimes forget that comes with responsibility. I’m not like the others in my party...I wasn’t called to this journey. I’ve never been quite sure why I’m here; maybe I’m here to discover a purpose. It feels right to me. Purposeful. These creatures are not monsters, Regina. They were people once; people exactly like us. Called by an angel in a dream and then led astray by the Island King’s madness. The difference is that we were blessed with a guide who never lost faith. But these creatures...they had no such guide. Perhaps I can be that for them. Human or otherwise, they still have lives and homes and feelings. And now they are free to build their own world. Maybe they just need someone with a good heart to guide them.”

Regina nodded with understanding as Sorell approached. “What about you, Sorell. You a woman of God?”

Sorell laughed, “Not even a little bit. I’m staying because my friend needs support and he’s the bravest person I’ve ever known. So I can be brave too and do this with him. Honestly, I’ve been searching for a family my whole life. Calling these creatures family may sound strange but I know what it’s like to feel trapped and alone. For a very long time, I felt like I was on my own little island. It was a nightmare and all I needed was for someone to care. So I guess we can all grow together.”

Regina breathed deeply. “And I assume that’s why your mother is staying with you as well?”

Sorell and Asher exchanged glances. Asher answered, “Yes. That is exactly why Claire is staying with us. This is going to be our new home and our new family. For better or for worse, this is our destiny to pursue.”

After some tearful goodbyes, the H.S. Mightier left port from the island the following day with Kori, Marielle, Felix, Lesedi, and the Old Man in tow. Admiral Morton claimed that he knew the location of the lost land of Devona and that he would take them the rest

of the way to their destination. All seemed right in the world at last.

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Chapter 19: “Beast”



“Hey, lovebirds! You got room for a lovethird?!” Felix came jogging across the deck toward them, big charming smile shining in the sunlight. “I just talked to the Admiral, finally. That man hides from me, I’d swear it.”

“I can’t imagine,” Marielle grinned mischievously. They had been at sea on the H.S. Mightier for almost two weeks now and Felix hadn’t allowed Admiral Morton a moment’s peace the entire time.

Felix winked his approval of her sarcasm. “Anyway, the Admiral officially charted the creatures’ island. Drew it onto the map with the vertical and horizontal lines and everything. He named it Asher’s Lot. Isn’t that something? My little brother has his own island. And he chose that on his own; didn’t follow my lead or anything.” Felix’s face drooped from its usual charismatic mask to something that looked almost regretful. “He thinks I hate him, you know. Wish I could tell him that I’m proud.”

Marielle walked over to Felix and hugged him. “It’s never too late. You said it yourself: the island is charted now. Asher’s not lost; he’s found.”

Just then, the piercing scream of an alarm sounded out over the entire ship. Kori, Marielle, and Felix all clutched at their ears to muffle the sound.

Immediately, the entire ship came alive with activity. Mothers cradling crying children as they rushed to the lower levels of the city-ship. Soldiers pouring out of the barracks and bringing their battle stations to ready. That echoing crack rang out again and again from points along the upper decks; it was the sound that they now recognized as gun fire. The H.S. Mightier had erupted into chaos.

They hurried to the deck’s edge and gazed out at, what was once, the sea beneath them. But it was no longer the view of serene waters that it had been before. It was as though the sea had been cast aside and replaced by the darkest and deepest abyss. The laws and forces of the world no longer seemed to apply as a black chasm bored up from the depths, creating a

fierce tide around its summit—the surface of the water. It was this unnatural roil that held the H.S. Mightier suspended in place.

Marielle screamed as the entire ship, truly a floating city that housed over two thousand people, shuddered and began to whine against the force of the waters. Kori made no sound; he was transfixed on the depth of the dark abyss below. It looked endless, eternal...but not empty. Despite the oppressive black, Kori could see—or sense—movement in there. Kori's hair stood on end as that sense of movement crept upward toward the surface, toward their ship.

There were simply no words to convey the scene that unfolded. As the ship's defenders fired their weapons down into the darkness, the beast that lurked within slithered into view. As immense as the H.S. Mightier was, the beast was a match and then some. Its central body was a long, purple spade, plated with jagged walls of shell. Hundreds of bright yellow eyes drew lines up either side of the beast's diamond-shaped form.

Marielle yanked very hard on Kori's arm as he stared, dumbstruck, at the monster. He was frozen in terror and barely had even the ability to think coherently. Marielle slapped him, "We need to go, now!"

Kori spun around and, seeing the fear in his love's eyes, snapped out of his trance. "Where can we—"

Marielle screamed and pointed above Kori. As she tried to back away, she fell and twisted her knee. Kori looked up and saw a forest of purple-blue tentacles looming over the ship, each of them the size of an ancient tree trunk around. The tentacles crashed down upon the ship and began to constrict. Structures fell and fixtures exploded in flame or spark. People onboard shrieked as dozens of others were crushed instantly.

Another cluster of tentacles crept up from beneath the city-ship's hull and began to worm around the substructure. The ship's frame groaned under the pressure. One of the armor-plated tentacles aligned just above where Marielle had fallen and then began a

thunderous descent toward her; she screamed “Kori, I love you!”

But instead of running to safety, Kori rushed to Marielle’s side and dove under the falling tentacle with her. He held her tightly as they closed their eyes against the horror above them. The tentacle smashed down upon them both with the force of a thousand hammers.

Yet the beast’s appendage recoiled immediately and raged up above them as though it was a creature of its own. Kori and Marielle lay there on the deck of the crumbling city-ship, unharmed and astounded by their own survival.

*

The deck of the ship was a battle scene. Bodies lay unconscious or dead, strewn about the vast surface; the world was heaving and pitching, filled with the screams and panicked cries of the ship’s citizens. It seemed as though nothing was solid enough to be real and no noise could be heard over the cacophony of all the other noises. It was chaos in its purest form.

The Old Man could see the massive tentacles dropping violently across all angles of the ship's hull like a net constricting around its quarry. He lost his breath for a moment as one fell shockingly close to Marielle and Kori a distance away. Though it looked like it'd crushed them outright, he could see that they were unharmed as the tentacle lifted away. He could see Felix climbing up to join the gunmen at one of the heightened lookouts.

As Felix vanished from view and both Kori and Marielle climbed to their feet and hurried to cover, the Old Man continued his surveillance of the area. A puff of flame suddenly bit out at him from a nearby barrel as a wire connected with it. The Old Man spun away and crouched as low as he could manage behind a stack of wooden crates. He could feel the aft of the ship begin to lose its hold on the sea below as the beast crushed and started to devour the front hulls. It would surely suck the entire H.S. Mightier into the depths if the ship's buoyancy gave out. The Old Man covered his mouth as the realization struck him. "Oh God," he whispered, "Lesedi."

He quickly peered out and around, searching frantically for his friend. It didn't take long; Lesedi was the sort of man that was not easily lost...even among the madness. The Old Man could not stifle a gasp. Lesedi stood unhidden, unprotected, and seemingly unafraid. He stared defiantly toward the beast at the front of the ship.

*

Lesedi had scrambled and hidden just like all the rest. But, as the wind whirled around his head, he was quickly reminded that he was not actually like all the rest. He was not supposed to run and hide. He had been given a purpose by an angel...and that was his only purpose now. It was this reminder—this constant message—that the wind gave him with each gust.

Why do you still love Ashia? The wind would ask.

Why do you waste your love on her? She is gone.

Why do you pine for what can never be again?

Lesedi had born this mockery each day since Ashia's passing. He had grown to despise the wind and the air

for its callousness. But as he beheld the destruction and ravenous appetite of this beast, Lesedi came to a new understanding. The wind had never been chiding him, never once. It had simply challenged him to answer truthfully...which he had never done before.

That was when he decided to leave his hiding place and open his Soul to the woman's song. The Old Man was certainly their guide, but the woman's song sings through all things, alive and dead. *"You are the light in the sea, the luster in the shadows, the beast's enemy. You are the strength of them all, the brightness in the shadow, the beast's down-fall."*

Lesedi stood tall among the chaotic backdrop. Flames burst around him and debris fell past him as the ship began to cant forward sharply toward the beast's churning maw. Lesedi, though, stood strong. "I love her!" he shouted into the wind. "I do love Ashia! And I always will! I do not waste my love; I give it freely each moment of each day! Love does not die with a person; it remains among the waves and the stars and the

Souls of the living! Love is purity! Love is the brightness in the shadow and the strength of us all!”

Lesedi breathed deeply, inhaling the wind as it encircled him. It continued to ask its badgering questions, and now, Lesedi answered each time with his heart. He closed his eyes and pictured his love, Ashia. Her smile, her laugh, her embrace, her soft voice in his ear. Then he opened his eyes again and bolted directly toward the beast.

The thundering tentacles whipped around the ship, toppling structures around him as he ran. Yet he did not falter once, nor did he even glance from his target.

*

The Old Man shouted out as Lesedi launched toward the fore of the ship and the beast that was perched there. His voice was dampened and lost in the chaos around him. The Old Man wanted to chase his friend, tackle him, and pull him to safety. But he knew what was happening; it was the woman’s song beckoning Lesedi forth. The Old Man felt tears slip from his eyes as he whispered to himself, “The beast’s downfall.”

He recalled briefly Lesedi's words on the dock of the Great City as he had spoken about the ancient gods beneath the sea: "Men are not welcome upon the waves. It is sacrilege...and it invites wrath from below. Only the pure may stand against the gods; we are unwise to tread upon their domain." The Old Man wondered now, what could make a man pure. Love? Sacrifice? Selflessness? Only for a moment did he consider how Kori and Marielle had not been crushed just moments before.

The Old Man wept openly as Lesedi's pace slowed to a calm and purposeful walk. Then, as though in a dream, the Old Man swore that he could hear the wind whispering amid the beast's fury. Lesedi's eyes closed as he strained to listen. The Old Man saw a gentle smile cross Lesedi's stern lips as his eyes reopened to the monster before him.

The beast's maw gaped open as debris shattered around it, a bellowing roar thundering out from its gullet with a dull blue glow. The Old Man could see Lesedi breathe deeply one last time. Then, without

another moment's hesitation, Lesedi marched forward into the beast's horrible mouth and did not slow until he had disappeared into the darkness.

A rapid pulse of red light shuddered through the beast, emanating from its core all the way out to the tips of each tentacle. The H.S. Mightier rocked and tumbled back from the monster's grasp as the tentacles released their holds on the ship. The waves that had been a roiling tumult, now turned back on the beast as it let out a high-pitched scream of agony. The red pulse continued its work within the beast, each time creating another shriek of pain. Within a fraction of a moment, the beast fell slack and sunk away from them into the black depths below.

The sea went silent and still as the inhabitants of the city-ship came together and mourned for those that had been lost. A song poured out from the masses to the heavens above. They prayed their gratitude off on the wind, hoping that it would lift the wings that carried Lesedi's Soul beyond.



Chapter 20: “Devona”



According to the crew's advanced calendar system, it had been two months since the beast's attack. The inhabitants of the H.S. Mightier had come to respect and honor the small band of travelers; this was in no small part due to the sacrifice that Lesedi had made. His death had saved the lives of thousands. And Admiral Morton, the ship's master, promised to make good on his word to deliver the travelers to Devona. According to the admiral's charts and calculations, by speed and by star, this was the day that they would reach their destination. Regina packed them each a satchel of provisions and explained that Devona was not a city or even a village as far as they had seen; it was charted as a barren desert island. An island devoid of life. Both she and Admiral Morton warned against it; claiming that its waterless expanse would spell death for them. The Old Man thanked them kindly for their concern, but insisted on Devona as their destination nonetheless.

The admiral was as good as his word and his charts had been accurate. As he had promised, they arrived at

Devona that very afternoon. Unfortunately, it seemed as though Admiral Morton had been right about everything; the island of Devona was a wasteland. There were sea rocks cresting all around the shores. The H.S. Mightier could not come anywhere near the island to make port. And, despite the fact that Morton had mentioned nothing of rocks, he did not seem surprised or bothered one bit.

“So, that there be Devona, as you’ve been seeking.” The admiral handed a looking glass over to the Old Man casually. “You can keep that, good sir. The dinghy too. You’ll need her to get you from here to there. Ain’t nothing personal, o’course. We can’t ever pay the debt o’gratitude that we owe you. And the sacrifice that your man made. Lesedi—it’s a name o’light. Named true enough, he was. We’ll honor him rightly; I swear it.” Admiral Morton looked into the breaking surf, noticeably distracted, then, just as noticeably, snapped himself back to attention. “Anywho, I mean to say that I can’t get this beauty any closer to that dead island of yours. She’s a mighty sprawling city-ship

o'course...but she stretches deep too. If I take her any closer, she ain't never licking the waves again."

The Old Man nodded regretfully, "We understand. This is where we part ways, I suppose."

The dinghy met the water with a gentle swoop and its sleek wooden frame was immediately swept up in the tide, pulling and pushing it ever closer to the rocky shore of Devona. As they approached the rougher waters nearest to their intended port, the rocks beneath the surface became more present. The dinghy was very suddenly crashing and scraping and dragging over the myriad dangers below. It pitched and leaned, hurling its passengers side to side. As Felix and Kori tried desperately to steer the vessel, its movements continued to be led by the currents. They slammed against one of the crags and Marielle almost tumbled over the side. She was pulled to safety by the caring hand of the Old Man. The provisions pack that she'd been tending was not so lucky. In one fluid—almost graceful—move, all of the supplies that the crew of the

H.S. Mightier had kindly packed them, were heaved into the depths.

Such a tragic event should have led to misery. But, having known real hardship, the travelers did not see it that way. Instead they all broke into fits of ironic laughter as they continued to punch a clumsy route toward land. Eventually, the pummeled dinghy finally managed to carry the four compatriots to the island of Devona.

*

They had found a way to laugh about it earlier. But four exhausted travelers—regardless of sense of humor—without provisions, wandering a barren desert island was a death sentence. And they all came to realize this very quickly. The days were fiery and delirium-inducing. The nights were frozen and deeply biting. Their food was non-existent and their water all but used up.

For the first two days, they kept moving all the time, heading into the heart of the island. But then hunger and thirst became two more, unwanted, companions.

The breaks became more frequent. The pace slowed to a crawl...sometimes literally. Eventually, though, the four friends stumbled upon something a bit different. It wasn't a structure or a city or a person. It wasn't even a landmass. It was a small, ever-so-slight, mound of stone. It was barely distinguishable from the ground around it...but it was different from the sand and that, somehow, instilled a sense of comfort. They settled themselves onto this odd bit of terrain and slept in silence, the sun falling colorfully in the background.

The Old Man smiled softly as Kori and Marielle held each other lovingly, likely even in the face of death. He wondered for a moment if there had never actually been a Devona; never a destination or an adventure. If the woman was a mirage or a hallucination. If it had all been a series of coincidences and tricks. Even if all those things were true and the whole journey had been false, this scene was worth it. True love had bloomed here. That was magic enough for any quest. Love was always worth any cost. Lesedi had known that.

“So,” Felix’s voice broke the silence, “this is where it ends, huh?” He crawled weakly across the stone and hung his legs over the side. “At least it was fun. A *real* adventure, right? No regrets, and all that. And this is a nice place to...well, you know. And we couldn’t ask for better company. Thank you all.”

Darkness, like a death shroud, set around them. But before it could completely take over, the black pall began to ripple and hum and glow. The four sat up and stared at the anomaly. The air was moving; not like wind, but like it was making way for something. As though something was about to force its passage into this world from another.

And then it did just that.



Chapter 21: “The Portrait”



The swirling effect that had begun just in front of their faces now crept out in all directions. It pulsed and

undulated all around them. Soon, as the final glimmer of light faded from their eyes, the world peeled back and the travelers found themselves seated on a flagstone in the center of a town. It was lit from sconces at every door and lamps at every corner. Large clay and stone spires lifted up from all sides and protected the ornately decorated homes within. Glossy wooden rooves and soft multicolored flags adorned everything in sight. All the metal was gold. All the stones were polished. All the lights burned bright enough to frighten off the night.

The Old Man's eyes had teared without him even being aware of his own emotion. Through the blur, he could see a fountain-pool at the town square. It was being fed by a series of waterfalls, cascading down from a nearby mountain...a mountain that had also not been there before nightfall.

"Devona," the Old Man whispered almost instinctively. As the word escaped his mouth, people began to pour out of the buildings. They gathered together and

smiled at one another as though greeting for the first time after years apart.

“Look, over there.” Marielle was pointing at a bonfire being lit just outside of a huge brick building. This particular building was clearly the center point of the village. Once the Old Man’s eyes settled on its lovely brick façade, it was as though something lost had unlocked within him. He could see that the entire village had been constructed around this single structure. But it was so much more than that; somehow he just knew that the island of Devona itself had also formed around this point. And the sea had pulled itself in from all sides to meet the shores of this island. And the other landmasses of the world—perhaps worlds—had grown and risen obediently to orbit this one spot. This building, whatever it was and whatever it represented, was the central point of everything. Maybe of existence itself. The Old Man was shaking as these realizations...these certainties washed through him.

The four friends climbed to their feet, somehow no longer hampered by weakness, hunger, or thirst. Compelled to move forward. Everything made sense in this place, though it wasn't knowable by any human standards. Somewhere deep within their cores, there was profound understanding as they opened the door of the building and stepped within.

The Woman was there in the main hall, waiting. "Welcome, friends," her voice sang out like the most melodious song, "to where the dreams of men and women come from. Welcome to where all things are known while the world sleeps. Welcome to Devona. I am so happy that you made it."

Kori pulled Marielle close to him and wrapped his arm around her. She lovingly took hold of his arm and kissed it. Marielle smiled at the Woman and, as the first to grow the courage to speak, she asked her question. "Thank you for having us. But...why us? What makes us special?"

The Woman flipped her hair aside and allowed her eyes to glitter upon them. "What makes you all so

special is that you are here. My dear Marielle, *everyone* is chosen. Everyone is called to this journey at some point in their lives. Not everyone heeds the call. And the few that do, often lack the fortitude to stay the course. I believe you've met several of the less stalwart followers scattered along your path? The Mountain Men, The Island King and his minions, even the inhabitants of The Great City. There have been so many called before you and there will be an infinite number after you. But only a handful are strong enough to find their way to these halls. You did...you all did. That is what makes you special. It wasn't because of what I did; it was because of what you did. Together and on faith alone."

The Old Man stepped forward, tears streaking his face. "I...I feel like I know you somehow. I imagine it's the feeling that a man would have after returning from war...to see his family again. I've never felt such joy." The Woman smiled and a perfect tear formed in her eye. "Yes, dear man, I feel it too. Your journey and

mine were always meant for this moment. Take my hand.”

As his hand closed around hers, the feeling of her luminous skin set something within him ablaze. The Old Man reached back and took Kori’s hand. Kori took Marielle’s and Marielle took Felix’s. The Woman led them ceremoniously through one final door...to the heart of the building and of everything.

The room burned with intensity. The entire ceiling seemed poured from stained glass which cascaded down the walls. Lights flickered in staggered synchronicity from unseen sources. And everything in the room...in the city...in existence bent slightly to serve the room’s centerpiece. A lone portrait.

The Old Man found the portrait to be much like the Woman: indescribable and impossible to fully understand. It had no real face or features, not even what anyone might call shape or size. The portrait seemed to have every color variation in the spectrum in every brush stroke. It was glorious and enchanting. The travelers stared forward at this wonder,

dumbfounded yet entirely at peace. The Old Man's eyes drifted down to the portrait's lower right corner; a piece of it looked to have been torn away and missing.

"What is this amazing picture?" Felix stammered out.

The Woman put a gentle hand on his back. "Felix, there are no words to answer your question even halfway. Because, truthfully, the Portrait itself is the answer. It is the answer to all questions asked and unasked. The truth behind life, behind death, behind wonder and imagination. Behind love. To truly gaze into the eyes of this portrait is to truly *know*. There is no more need for uncertainty or worry or fear. Clarity stands before you on this wall." The Woman walked around them and touched each on the shoulder. "It is this that has led you here, my friends. Home at last."

The Old Man reached into his pocket and ran his hands along the piece of canvas that was tucked away there. It had been badly weathered by the sands and seas of the Island King's shores, but the Old Man had felt its importance right from the start. Could it be? He drew

out the scrap and approached the portrait cautiously. He held it up and pressed it softly against the torn corner; the piece fit perfectly. The whole of the portrait began to hum and glow as it mended itself. The Woman began to cry at the sight of it.

Kori and Marielle held each other closely as they gazed into the majestic portrait. They saw love. And, moreover, they understood it in its complexity and its beauty. The feelings washed over them and bound them together, heart and Soul.

The Woman folded her hands in front of her and breathed deeply. “Will you stay?” She took a moment to look each of them in the eye. “It is, of course, your choice. If you do stay, you will be a citizen of Devona for the rest of your lives. You will live here among us and become servants of truth and knowledge.”

“Do...we have to stay in Devona forever? Like, we can’t ever leave?” Marielle asked quietly.

The Woman scrunched up her face playfully, “Not quite. Everyone is free to leave Devona at will...very free, in fact. When they travel forth from Devona, they

go as agents of wisdom. Observe all that is. Become the eyes and ears of the Portrait.”

Kori chuckled slightly. “Do we need to cross the Endless Sea and battle monsters each time? Because I’d much rather just hunker down here if that’s the case.”

The Woman laughed outright. “No, certainly not. You would fly, of course. You would leave as a wonderfully free blackbird. I know that it may not be a familiar form to you, but it is perfect in its own way.”

“I want to stay,” Marielle blurted out. “This is my destiny, I think. Everything’s been leading to this. I want to be a child of Devona. I want to be free and filled with knowing.”

Kori nodded. “The bird thing will take some getting used to...but I go where you go, my sweet. And, honestly, I think that staying is what we are meant to do. Let’s make this our home. I love you and I want to share this place of love with you for the rest of our lives.”

Marielle threw her arms around his neck and kissed him fully and sweetly.

The Woman looked to the Old Man with questioning eyes. He laughed, "I am staying. Not a moment of hesitation. In my heart, this place has always been my home somehow."

Felix was silent for a long time...until the woman turned her gaze on him. "I...I don't think that I belong here. Not yet, at least. I had something a long time ago," he looked over at Kori and Marielle, "and I let it slip away. I don't think that I want complete understanding or truth if I, as a man, am incomplete. Maybe this place will be my destiny too someday. But not today."

Marielle took his hand, "So, you won't stay with us?"

"I don't think I can. Not without Aquila. She's my destiny now; I have to find her."

The Woman led Felix into the next room, promising to help him in his quest to find Aquila. The Old Man, Kori, and Marielle laid their hands on the portrait and gazed

into its form, pledging themselves to the service of wisdom, truth, and love.

And after a few days, as Felix's ship left port from Devona, he looked to the skies and smiled as three beautiful blackbirds whirled above him, skimming over the waves, free and happy.

The End

