

GREATFATHER'S CHILDREN:

A NOVEL

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THE STORM

I can't be late, I can't be late, I can't be late.

The mantra repeats itself ad infinitum in Quentin Marsh's mind, carrying with it grave import. The menacing clouds roil overhead, looking for all the world like portents of doom. It won't be long before the storm hits, and the storms in Halvern are particularly fierce.

Quentin takes a moment to stare up at the darkening sky. He shudders, holding his homemade basket close to his chest, the basket almost overflowing with fresh produce. He has to drop the fruit and vegetables off at his dwelling and return to the chapel as quickly as possible. First Messenger Brayon's most recent admonishment lingers in the back of his mind: *There are no more second chances for you. You are dangling by a thread.* Quentin cannot afford to miss another vigil. He cannot even be late.

More than anything else, he wants to believe, to reclaim the childlike faith that Greatfather is said to prize above all else. But Quentin's innermost thoughts seem to him to be always at odds with the image of the Holy One that has been branded into his mind ever since childhood. At least the Messengers aren't aware of this contradiction within him. If they could see his thoughts laid bare, he would certainly be Unnamed in front of the church, a nightmarish musing which pierces Quentin's gut.

A distant growl of thunder spurs Quentin out of his reverie and back into action. *I can't be late, I can't be late, I can't be late.*



He is just a few minutes from home when he is stopped by a small, frail voice. A wispy old woman with stark white hair and a shawl filled with holes stands behind him. She is thin, little more than bones, but her skin is like leather. Quentin wonders if she owns any other clothes. He hands her a radish-- his least favorite vegetable, although the woman does not need to know that-- without provocation, masking the hurry he is in to the best of his ability with a smile. He hopes this will make up for the way his thoughts drifted earlier. Greatfather loves steadfast devotion, but He appreciates service as well.

The woman takes the radish, her smile crinkling her face in a hundred different places. "Hymnmaster Marsh," she says softly. "Would you be so kind as to sing a hymn for me? I can't make it to chapel anymore. That hill is too much for these old bones. But I think considering the circumstances..." She trails off, gesturing towards the ominous sky.

Quentin nods, setting the basket down beside him. Singing in public is not something he is asked to do often, but he is required by Paternitist bylaws to fulfil any requests. The act no longer makes him self-conscious, but he can't help but notice the heads that turn every time. "Of course," he replies, straightening out his deep blue robes. "What hymn would you like to hear? Something short, perhaps?" He knows he is coming perilously close to being curt with this woman, and his need to hurry is at war with his desire to please others.

"How about 'To Him the Victory'?" the woman asks.

Quentin gives her a relieved nod and starts singing. ‘To Him the Victory’ has only two short verses, and is usually sung in conjunction with other hymns. The words come without thought, the delivery precise and tuneful. He tries not to notice the eyes of townsfolk on him, but it is not easy. Soon enough, they all turn away.

Save for one. Tiny hairs over Quentin’s body prickle as his gaze meets that of an olive-skinned woman about ten years his senior. She is partially obscured by an awning, but there is no doubt as to where she is looking. Her skin and bearing betray a foreign ancestry, and Quentin is sure he has not seen her before. After all, he has seen everyone in Halvern at least a few times. The woman’s dark hair is pulled tight behind her head in a sort of bow. Her stare is intense, her expression impenetrable. She makes sure Quentin is the first to break their gaze.

The weathered old woman claps her hands as Quentin finishes. “Thank you, Hymnmaster,” she says, keeping her head down and taking a bite out of her radish. Quentin’s position in the church alone tends to have this humbling effect on people, and it is not something he thinks he will ever get used to.

He glances up across the street again, but the other woman is gone.

The wind pierces Quentin’s robe as he presses onward, its cold pricking Quentin’s skin as though the robe is not even on him. The road turns headlong into the wind, and each step Quentin takes is now a forced one. He keeps his head down, and gusts make his shaggy brown hair flail around his head with the wild, mad gyrations of an Eastern highdancer. Quentin forces the impure image out of his mind reflexively, sending a brief

prayer of repentance up to Greatfather for his worldly thoughts. He focuses instead on Brayon's warning, and on the mantra which he almost repeats aloud: *I can't be late, I can't be late, I can't be late.*

Through squinting eyes, Quentin sees a fight building up ahead. The two brawlers are identical both in stature and temperament, and they circle each other, growling like territorial hounds. The men have removed their shirts, showing the pale blubber beneath that comes from a lifetime of drink. Their hands are balled up into fists, clenched tight and trembling. Quentin does not recognize these men, at least not by name, but he does not have to in order to understand them. Years spent in the ministry have given Quentin a certain aptitude for discernment, and most men who get into fights on the street are hardly complicated. Their splotchy red faces betray how much ale they have recently consumed. Their movements are oddly similar, and Quentin realizes they must have known each other for some time. Only lifelong friends can be so evenly matched in a drunken spat.

One swings a punch, and the other recoils, recovering for just a moment before charging at his rival with a bestial roar. His arms lock tight around the other's stomach, and they struggle, grunting, each one trying and failing to knock the other off his feet. Already, Quentin feels eyes on him again, taking in the hue and cut of his robe and recognizing him for who he is. He must do something about this. He has to be a representative of the church in all things, no matter how great the odds are of him getting a bloody nose.

Quentin sighs and sets the basket down, sending up a silent prayer that no one take it while he is looking the other way. He holds his arms up, wide over his head, palms flat, making himself as large as he can, taking the power stance that the Messengers have taught him in the early days of his seminary. He takes a deep breath, then speaks in his most powerful baritone.

“In the name of the Holy One, stop!”

The two men do at once, changing instantly from wolves to lambs at the sight of Quentin’s robes. The more heavily bruised of the two gives Quentin a deferential nod. “Hymnmaster,” he says, catching his breath.

Quentin supposes he will never be used to the way men such as these look at him now that he is a Hymnmaster. They treat him as a giant, despite his being no less than six inches shorter than either of them. Brayon calls this effect “the transitive authority of Greatfather,” but Quentin knows it is simply a different form of intimidation from the one these two men were using on each other.

“What are you doing?” Quentin asks, uncannily aware that he is the only one in the square making a sound. “*Save all discord for the Day of Judgment*, that’s what the Twentieth Canto says. We won’t have the strength to worship Greatfather if we spend all our time fighting.” Quentin lowers his arms down to his sides, keeping his posture open. “You are both His children, are you not? And aren’t you friends?” The two men nod. “Then don’t let anything stand in the way of that friendship.” A lone droplet of water hits the bridge of Quentin’s nose. He waits a moment for more, but for now there are none.

Soon, though... the flickering clouds above make it clear the storm is very much on its way. *I can't be late, I can't be late, I can't be late*, Quentin thinks. It is time to wrap this up. "Go home, both of you. Be with the people you love. Remember that the bonds between you are the most important thing of all, and cherish them." He looks up at the sky again. "And pray."

"We will, Hymnmaster," the second man promises, even as the sky becomes more agitated. "Peace and blessings upon you."

"And you as well," Quentin says with a nod. He strides back to his basket of produce. He is about to lift it up when he feels a tap on his shoulder.

"Hymnmaster." It is the first combatant, his body now the contorted expression of humility. "May I have a prayer of intercession?"

Quentin pauses. There is no way that this man would know of Quentin's private vow not to pray for others like this, but Quentin is still uneasy nonetheless. The man would not understand Quentin's hesitation, would not understand that nowhere in the *Holy Canticle* is a member of the clergy required to pray for a commoner. And what is Quentin even supposed to say? *Oh, Greatfather, please show mercy to what's-his-name, he's got a bloody fierce temper but I'm sure he means well?* The clouds hang heavy, full to bursting overhead. He has to get home so he can run back to the chapel. At this rate, he will still likely be caught out in the first stirrings of the storm anyhow, but it is better to be wet than absent. Today, he allows himself one lie, and tells the man, "Of course,

my child. But don't hesitate to pray yourself. Greatfather cherishes prayer from even the lowliest of criminals."

The words *my child* never sit well with Quentin, who is five years younger than the man in front of him at best, but to change from the church's patterns of speech would be to invite unwanted questions into his life. "Now if you'll excuse me," he says, "I must make haste to the chapel." The man stands aside, allowing Quentin to take his basket and proceed while stammering an apology.

Quentin does not look up until he reaches his dwelling, a few minutes' walk from there. He gazes upon his house with relief. It is a simple structure made of wood and old stone, one sparse floor with a sparser attic space up a narrow flight of stairs. An old oak tree looms over the doorway outside, the kind of gnarled, sturdy tree that was perfect for climbing during Quentin's childhood days and which from time to time he sees the youngest generation using for the same purpose. The roof is a straw thatch in dire need of replacement, and Quentin, upon glimpsing it, already dreads the leaks which are sure to spring up before the day is through. Still, it is home, and the only place he ever feels at ease.

He lives alone, with no one there to scrutinize him, no one to ask him to sing or intervene or intercede. The bare essentials, designed to keep one's focus on things above, allow Quentin to lose himself in thought on many occasions. He looks forward when all this is over to spending more time in meditation. Not meditating on Greatfather necessarily, but anything and everything else, wherever his thoughts might take him. It is

his time, the only chance he gets to be himself. When he is done, drifting off to sleep is as easy as snuffing out a candle.

His door is slightly ajar. Quentin always shuts it tight before leaving, so he knows straightaway that something is off. He gives the door a light nudge, his hands full with the basket, and sweeps his gaze all around the shadowy living room within.

Because of the clouds outside, the room is almost too dark for Quentin to see, and he has no intention of waiting for his eyes to adjust. As quietly as he can, Quentin sets down the basket by the door and creeps over to the nearest candle. He picks up a match and strikes it against a small sheet of sandpaper until it ignites. He touches the match to the candle's wick, which sputters to life a moment later. Quentin turns around, about to blow out the match, when he stops abruptly, freezing at the sight of the room.

Nothing is disturbed, and nothing has been stolen-- as if there is anything of value to steal in the first place. In fact, everything is exactly as it had been when Quentin had left, with one exception: there is someone else in the room with him.

The match burns Quentin's fingers.

I: SO SINCERE IN HIS BELIEF

Quentin was five years old, and he shifted his weight from foot to foot as the lute played and the choir sang around the sides of the chapel. The song was “Greatfather’s Faithfulness,” one of his father’s favorites. As the melody emerged, a little out of tune, from two hundred different mouths, Quentin willed himself to feel every word he sang.

Greatfather’s faithfulness,

A river within,

Purity true that can vanquish all sin!

Light streamed in through the chapel windows, illuminating the centuries-stained stone. The chapel was laid out in a triangular shape, to focus the congregation’s attention on the altar at the front where the Hymnmaster and First Messenger would lead in turn. The choir lined the walls, their ages ranging from a few years Quentin’s senior to fifty years beyond that, all male. This way, they were all surrounded by worship.

Quentin closed his eyes and imagined that Greatfather Himself was standing atop the polished altar at the head of the room, towering over the congregation and judging the sincerity of their worship. It was as real to Quentin as anything he had ever felt. Greatfather’s eyes, which were described in the *Holy Canticle* as being filled with holy light, passed over each worshipper in turn, until they came to rest at last on Quentin. Quentin scrunched up his face, urging more zeal into his recitation of the hymn.

Greatfather’s faithfulness,

Unquenchable fire,

Burn in our hearts and be our life's desire!

Greatfather looked into Quentin's soul for a moment. Quentin felt this with the clarity that only his scarcity of years could provide, even as he knew there was no tangible divine presence in the room. In that moment, fantasy blurred and mingled with reality, and Quentin was naked before Him, every stolen snack, fuss with his parents, and instance of absent-minded childhood indiscretion laid bare. No offense was trivial in Greatfather's eyes, and in five years Quentin worried he had committed every sin in the world that one was likely to commit.

Greatfather lingered on him for a moment longer, then nodded and moved on to the next. Quentin, trembling, opened his eyes as the hymn reached its final verse and allowed himself to sink back into the mundane reality of the room. His father and mother, one on either side of him, were still staring forward as if in a trance. Quentin was relieved. Still, he didn't want them to know about the crisis of faith he had just experienced. So he did what he always did when he was uneasy-- he sang.

Greatfather's faithfulness,

Shine down from the stars,

May your name light our steps where're we are!

He was singing louder than usual, he realized halfway through the verse, his young, high voice carrying through the chapel. Quentin noticed that there were eyes on him, not his parents, but strangers, people who were no more than stern faces and towering bodies

to him. Even the Hymnmaster, old Adrun, was staring right at Quentin. He began to wonder, for the first time in his life, if he was singing the hymn *wrong*. The thought pierced through his childhood confidence like a dagger, and he decided he would lower his voice immediately.

By the time this thought had turned to action, however, the hymn had ended, and the First Messenger, a kindly looking man named Brayon who was about the age of Quentin's parents, replaced Adrun at the altar. Adrun stole a further glance at Quentin as he returned to his seat, and Quentin made a discovery: the fear of Greatfather staring into his soul had been replaced, for now, by the fear of Adrun somehow doing the same.

Quentin did not remember what First Messenger Brayon had said in his message that morning, only the way everyone had looked at him and what followed.

When Brayon finished the message, Adrun returned to his space behind the altar and led the church in another hour of worship. Greatfather, it was written, cherished the songs of his devoted followers, and every good Hymnmaster made sure to both open and close each service with a lengthy period of singing. Old Adrun was one of the best, according to Quentin's parents, and he ensured that everything was centered around worship. As lunch drew ever closer, the worship began to die down, and Adrun ended the service. Quentin and his parents turned to leave when Brayon rushed in front of them.

"Please, will the three of you come to my chamber?" Brayon asked. "I have something I wish to discuss with you all. It concerns Quentin."

Those final three words set a new wave of fear roiling within Quentin, breaking against the detritus left by the waves he had already experienced today. The First Messenger wanted to see *him*, or at least his parents *about* him, and he was certain now that he had done something wrong by singing so loudly earlier. Why wasn't the Holy Canticle clearer about singing? It could be so difficult for Quentin to be sure when he was sinning.

Quentin's parents were not ones to refuse a First Messenger anything, and in a matter of minutes all four of them were gathered within Brayon's cramped chamber in the back of the chapel. A simple desk, empty save for an inkwell, a bit of parchment, and two unlit candles, lay between Quentin and Brayon, the latter of which scratched a stubbly jowl with fierce determination in the silence.

Behind Brayon was a tapestry, much like one of the ones hung in the chapel proper, which depicted a scene from the Seventh Canto. The scene was "Liamh's Penitence," the end of the chronicle of Liamh. As it was written, "*Liamh wept, remembering his sins, and begged the Holy One for mercy. And He was merciful indeed, for the descendants of Liamh spread far and accomplished much.*" Liamh had been a servant to Greatfather until the end of his days, but he still had not been a perfect man. The tapestry showed Liamh fallen prostrate to the ground, making himself flat, his face contorted with grief and guilt, and Greatfather, surrounded as always by shimmering golden light, reaching out to the man. Brayon would speak of Liamh often in the years to come, and every time Quentin would recall the tapestry.

There was silence for a few moments more, and then Adrun entered the small room, seating himself in an empty chair next to Brayon. Quentin and his parents stood, Quentin half-hiding behind his parents. Adrun ran a hand through his thin white hair before acknowledging the others. “Rawling and Olinda Marsh,” he said, his voice still steady and powerful after hours of singing. “I want to talk to the two of you about your son.”

“He hasn’t done anything wrong, has he?” Rawling, Quentin’s father, asked. The man leaned forward on the desk as if indicating Adrun could whisper whatever grievance he had into Rawling’s ear and the two could keep things between them.

“Nothing of the sort,” Brayon replied. “Hymnmaster Adrun and I merely noticed his... enthusiasm this morning.”

Quentin’s heart sank. Everything was going just as he’d worried it would. They had found him out. He was singing too loudly. He winced at the thought of the spanking he was going to receive later. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I’ll try to be more quiet next time.”

Brayon shook his head. “Don’t think like that, Quentin,” he said. Quentin gulped. He had not realized the First Messenger even knew his name. “There is nothing wrong with singing praises to Greatfather, and that’s all you were doing. It warmed my heart, hearing someone your age so sincere in his belief. As it says in the *Canticle*, ‘*Blessed be the praises of the meek and small, for therein lies the power to make armies flee and boulders crumble.*’”

“He has a clear voice, and a good sense of pitch,” Adrun said. “Important foundations, and impressive in one so young.”

Olinda beamed. “He always does. He sings all the time. Sometimes he doesn’t even *do* anything when he sings, just wanders around the house to the tune of ‘Light from Eternity.’ If he weren’t such a good singer, I think I’d have gone mad ages ago.” She let out a nervous chuckle, and for the first time in his life, Quentin was sure she was babbling.

“Do you like that song, ‘Greatfather’s Faithfulness?’” Brayon said to Quentin, mercifully ignoring most of what Olinda had burst out with moments ago.

“It’s my da’s favorite,” Quentin muttered.

Brayon nodded, smiling. “Good,” he said. “I always like to hear when a family thinks about their faith outside these walls. Serving Greatfather wholeheartedly is the surest way to keep a family pure.” He gave a satisfied nod, making a point he had made many times before. Then he turned his focus back to Quentin. “Do you like to sing, my boy?”

Quentin did not say anything, just nodded.

“I think there’s a bright future ahead of him,” Brayon said, once again speaking to Quentin’s parents. “Any boy who can sing, who loves to worship, is worth his weight in jewels. I can sense that your son already feels the call to a life of worship, and it is our duty as Greatfather’s servants to cultivate that. If Hymnmaster Adrun is willing, he could tutor the boy in how to use his voice, and perhaps in a few years Quentin here could join the choir.”

Rawling bobbed his head up and down, relieved that there was no bad news. “I think Quentin would like that,” he said, ruffling his son’s hair. “Wouldn’t you, Quent?”

“That sounds good,” Quentin said, overcome by shyness and fear of the church elders.

“Fantastic!” said Brayon, obviously preparing to launch into another speech, but Adrun cut him off with one hand, much like he silenced the congregation at the end of a hymn.

Adrun cleared his throat. “I need to speak with the boy alone for a minute.”

Brayon shook his head. “I’ll stay as well, Hymnmaster. Give us a moment, Rawling, Olinda.” He gave Adrun a look that Quentin did not fully understand, but felt loaded with tension. Quentin did not want to be alone in a room with just the First Messenger and the Hymnmaster, but he knew there was no sense in protesting. His parents filed out of the room, and Quentin was soon in the midst of an awkward silence.

Brayon and Adrun had placed themselves at opposite corners of the study. Neither one looked at Quentin. Instead, there was the feel of a standoff between them, each silently daring the other to blink. Brayon’s practiced smile dissipated but Adrun was the first to break.

“I will work with him,” the Hymnmaster said. “Just us. You have no need to get involved with this one, Brayon.”

Brayon scoffed. “Just what do you think I’m going to do simply by meeting with this boy every once in a while? Don’t be paranoid, Adrun.” They were both talking as though Quentin had left the room with his parents, and now he wished he had.

“This is not an official position, and you know it. I’m training him, and for now, that’s all. The last thing that boy needs is for you to get your claws into him. This is about his voice, nothing else, and the church bylaws make it perfectly clear that you have no legitimate claim to get involved.”

“Why, so you can spend hours telling him he’s important, that singing is all that matters?” Brayon hissed. “I spend more time preparing each week than you, and yet still you are the head of the church. Such is my purpose in life, but that does *not* mean that you need to tell the next generation I’m irrelevant. The Messengers and the Hymnmaster need to work more in sync, and if I am able to spend time with the boy, schooling him in the truth, we can build that foundation. You know it, and I know it.”

Adrun threw out his hands to his sides. “The structure for the church is laid out in the *Canticle*, and I’m not going to apologize for being *divinely appointed* to a higher task. He is singing, so he will meet with only me until such a time as he is asked to take on more responsibility. The matter is closed.” He poked his head outside and called Quentin’s parents back in. They came over and stood behind him, Quentin too confused and intimidated to say anything about the conversation to which he had just been privy. He had the uncomfortable feeling that he had just gotten a glimpse behind the curtain into

the most secret workings of the Paternitist church, and what was seen was forbidden to be shared.

“It’s settled,” Adrun said. “I can meet with him starting next week. We will start with the basics, and see where those lead us. Bring him by my dwelling at sundown in five days’ time, but before dinner. Focused worship and a full stomach don’t mix.”

Olinda reached down and hugged Quentin, and the three of them were rushed out of Brayon’s chamber. They left the chapel in a haze, Quentin most of all. That night, as Quentin tried and failed to fall asleep, he could hear his mother downstairs whispering to his father about possibilities and opportunities and honors.

Quentin tossed and turned, feeling special. Hymnmaster Adrun *himself* had singled Quentin out, after all! First Messenger Brayon wanted him to join the choir! These were things he had not known until today he had wanted to hear. He silenced the other, softer voice in his head, telling him the rest of his life had already been laid out, the rest of his choices made for him, pushed the memory of Brayon and Adrun’s argument from his mind, and willed himself to sleep with one last prayer of thanks to Greatfather.

THE STORM

Quentin recoils, dropping the spent match and pressing himself to the wall. A stream of words escape, unbidden: “Whatever you’re doing, please reconsider. I am a follower of the Holy One, and everything I have is His. If you steal from me, it will only be a sin on your head, and on a day like this, we should stay pure, be merciful. There are so many other paths you can choose, paths that would please Greatfather more than this, please!” His voice steadily rises in pitch, an unconscious trait of his that he has hated for years and one which comes back whenever he feels threatened. He holds his hands out in front of him, as though preparing to conduct an unseen choir, trying to keep some distance between himself and the intruder.

The figure in the room steps closer, into the candle’s glow, until at last she is visible. Quentin falls silent, his eyes narrowing. It is the olive-skinned woman he had seen on his way home. The one who had been watching him sing. She is dressed in a raggedy shirt, faded from some shade of blue, and dark brown trousers. The boots on her feet are scuffed and in poor enough condition that Quentin wonders if they are hand-me-downs. A knapsack is slung over her shoulder, and she lets it fall to the floor beside her.

“I didn’t come here to rob you,” the woman says, her voice cautious. “I’m not a thief.”

“Then why are you here?” asks Quentin.

The woman's reply is fast, but not frantic. "I just need a place to stay. A storm is coming, and I have no money. There is nothing I own that I can part with to trade for room and board. I don't know anyone here who will take me in. If I stay outside, I might not see the morning."

That is true enough, Quentin thinks. In this part of the world, the storms can be fierce. Houses are torn apart by the winds, and the waters of the Pyrline River are known to rise all the way to the town square. Some of the Messengers say this is because of Greatfather's passion for the people who live here, others swore it is because the locals cannot keep themselves from sinful pursuits. Either way, it is a reason for the lot of them to pray more fervently anytime the skies grow cloudy. The chapel is built on top of the highest hill at the edge of town so it will not flood, and the clergy weather out every storm there.

Which reminds Quentin. He has to get to the church before the storm hits. The first signs of rain have already come-- the air is heavy, near to bursting, and there is a distant rumble of far-off thunder. But there is a woman in his home, and he has no intention of leaving her here alone.

Quentin runs a hand through his hair, anxious, and begins to pace. "I don't have time for this. There are things I need to attend to, responsibilities I have to fulfil. You can't just come into my house like this. I need to leave, but you need to leave first." He moves toward the door, not turning his back on the intruder.

The woman's face turns stony. "You say you serve Greatfather. Is this how He would want you to treat strangers? When He talked about the '*lowly and fragile*'--"

Quentin freezes. "Don't quote Scripture at me," he says, but there isn't much conviction in his voice. The woman has already won the argument, no matter how long it might continue.

"I am throwing myself at your mercy," the woman says. "I'm not trying to get the best of you, or steal from your home. I am making myself low, and if you knew me, you would know that humility doesn't come easily to me. But if you force me to go, I could die." She takes in a deep breath. "I'm desperate."

There is a roll of thunder in the distance as every one of Quentin's arguments, which would only serve to prolong the inevitable, evaporate. He pauses for a moment as he attempts to find any response that can give the illusion of his being in control. He settles on, "I don't even know your name."

The woman visibly relaxes. "Natalie," she says. "And yours?"

"Quentin. I saw you earlier, when I was singing to that old woman. You were watching me." He has not intended to broach this topic so quickly, but this conversation has gotten away from him and he decides that blunt honesty is perhaps the way to go from now on. After all, it is *his* house. "Why?"

Natalie gulps, a little of the tension returning to her shoulders. "I didn't think you'd noticed me," she replies in lieu of an answer.

“You don’t look like anyone else in this city,” Quentin explains. “It’s easy to remember a face like yours.” He hopes that does not come across as flirtatious. The last thing he needs is for some strange woman to think he is taking advantage of her, especially when the reality of the situation is the exact opposite, and besides, she has to be at least thirty-five. “And I haven’t seen you before today. Your face is fresh on my mind. But you didn’t answer my question. Why were you watching me sing?”

“I’ve spent three days in this city,” says Natalie, “and in that time I’ve encountered a king’s ransom of cold, callous people. No one would open their homes to me. I slept outside. But when I heard you sing, when I saw how that woman talked to you, I thought you might be a Hymnmaster. I asked a man soon after who you were, and where I might find you, once my suspicions were proven right. I thought-- I hoped-- that if you followed the Canticle closely, you would be willing to lend me shelter for the night.” A shadow passes over her face. “Now I see I was mistaken.”

Quentin frowns. Natalie is manipulating him, of this he is sure, but that doesn’t mean that her words do not ring true. She has broken into Quentin’s home, caught him off guard, leaving him reeling as she steers him from confusion to guilt. Still, she makes a point. What would one of the more experienced Messengers do in this situation? They would find a way to steer her out the door-- no, to make her *ask* to leave. Brayon would charm her and overcome her with remorse for her actions (“Do not place your will ahead of the will of the Holy One,” or something like that).

But Quentin is not sure if he wants to be like Brayon anymore. His thoughts turn to the questions he cannot ask, the questions that, if vocalized, can spell the end of his normal life. Is the First Messenger, in his advanced age, such a shining example of devotion? Are his beliefs even pure anymore? Does Brayon care? No, Quentin cannot keep thinking this way. The First Messenger is appointed by Greatfather alone, and as such has to be blameless. Right? Of course, Quentin is aware that the same is often said about him, and he *knows* that to be false. Quentin is struck with the overwhelming desire to rush off to an isolated room and pray, to beat the heretical spark out of his mind if he needs to. These musings are poison.

Finally, he settles on another question. If none of the Messengers are around, no one judging his actions, if it is just up to him, what should he do? Greatfather prides purity of intent, after all. Quentin glances at Natalie's face, at the terror lying veiled just behind her eyes.

Quentin sighs, gathering his resolve. "You were not mistaken," he says. "You may stay here for as long as the storm lasts."

Natalie perks up. "I'll be gone in the morning, as soon as I wake," she promises. "And if there is anything you need done here, I'll do it. I'm willing to work. I can make dinner."

Quentin holds up a hand to silence her. "You don't need to repay me. You were right. This is merely what any true servant of the Holy One would do. I don't have any place for you to lie down, but--"

“I can sleep on the floor. I’ve slept on much, much worse, believe me.”

Quentin does, and he starts to think she is no longer manipulating him. She has gotten what she wants. “It’s settled then. You’re staying here, and…” His voice trails off. All of a sudden, he remembers what he had been in a hurry to do before Natalie had stopped him. “Five Aspects,” he swears under his breath. “Stay right here. I need to go to the chapel. The Messengers are waiting for me there, and I have to pray with them. If there is no major flooding, I should be back in a few hours, but for the time being, I need you to promise me you won’t leave this house on your own.”

“I promise,” Natalie says. “But I’m not a fool. I know full well that I don’t want to be stuck out in that.” Her demeanor softens for a second, like a curtain falling. “And Quentin, thank you for this.”

Quentin shakes his head. “Don’t thank me,” he mutters, ashamed at how close the matter had been. He pulls his robe tight around him, opens the door, and stops. His heart sinks as he takes in the scene outside. A tiny drop of water lands square on his nose, making him scrunch it up unconsciously. The streets are empty, and there is silence all through the city. Quentin peers up at the looming clouds as another drop hits him, this time on his cheek. This is more than the stray droplet that hit him earlier-- this is the beginning of something real. There is no way he is going to make it to the chapel.

It has started to rain.

II: GUARD AGAINST DESIRE

Rawling Marsh sat his son down on his bed, a messy thing in the corner of his tiny, cluttered room, and placed a hand on his knee. Quentin could tell that his father was bracing himself, preparing for something unpleasant. There was an expression of supreme discomfort on Rawling's work-lined face, which the man kept trying and failing to mask behind a façade of collected reassurance.

"Quentin," Rawling began, "you're ten years old now, and that means you are on your way to becoming a man. Our bodies are gifts from Greatfather, and He designed them Himself. He provided ways for us to know where we are in the cycle of life." It was obvious that he was dancing around the point of the conversation, and Quentin wondered how much longer his father would be able to go on like this before he finally gave in.

"When it is our time for Greatfather to begin using us more in His plans," Rawling continued, "when we start to become men, He shows us. This is not just a spiritual change, but a physical one. Do you understand what I'm saying, Quentin?"

Quentin nodded. He thought he did, but at the moment his father was not saying much of anything. It was baffling.

Rawling wrung his hands together. "You may have started seeing and feeling some of these changes in yourself, son. You're growing taller. Your voice is not quite as high as it once was." Quentin looked down at the mention of this. He had certainly noticed

that. He could not sing the same songs he used to, and the clear soprano tones of his voice had begun to feel out of reach. This had been the source of much frustration in his private lessons with Hymnmaster Adrun, and it was a sore subject whenever anyone brought it up. “You start growing hair in places all over your body, from your face to your underarms to your chest, and all the way down to your feet. Your hair is a sign of maturity, so much so that hundreds of years ago, the Messengers used not to cut the hair on their heads to ensure that their sermons would be taken more seriously. Whenever you see hair someplace new, think of the future, of the incredible things Greatfather has planned for you.”

Quentin had started getting hair, but it was in places that did *not* remind him of Greatfather.

Rawling gulped as he worked himself up to the larger point of his talk. “But since He has given you more of the look of a man, He also trusts you with more of the responsibilities of a man. Quentin, as you grow in life, you will find more and more temptations come your way. The older you get, the more stumbling blocks can potentially come between you and the Holy One. You will start to feel desires that you never felt before-- you will know them when they come to you. These... desires are not bad on their own. All men feel them. In the right time and place, they are a gift that can bring life. But to act upon them outside of Greatfather’s divine plan for us is selfish, and it can have terrible, life-changing consequences.” He finally met Quentin’s eyes. “Do you understand me, son? You must guard against desire.”

A fear of some all-consuming, shadowy need clung to Quentin, and a chill passed through him. “What am I supposed to do, da?” he said. “If growing older means I feel things that get in the way of my relationship with Greatfather, if that’s natural, then how can I deal with that?”

“Pray, Quentin,” Rawling replied. “Live a life of prayer. Make the Holy One first in everything you do, and subject your will to His always. It’s like the Seventeenth Canto says, *‘Those who follow My paths will never be led astray.’* If I feel desire start to take hold, as it can from time to time, I go into the closet to be alone with Greatfather. I shut the door and sit there in the darkness. I find that I see Him better when I can’t see anything else. If you kneel before Greatfather, surrender to Him, your life will be what it was always meant to be.”

Rawling straightened up and got to his feet. He turned to leave the room, but before he reached Quentin’s door, he gave Quentin another long look. “You like to sing. Remember the song, son. Remember the words of *‘Breathless Devotion.’*” He shut the door behind him, abandoning Quentin to his thoughts.

May our paths be Your paths,

May our hands be Your hands,

Let our breathless devotion

Purify this land.

May our thoughts be Your thoughts,

May our songs be Your songs,

Use our breathless devotion

To right every wrong.

Quentin's voice cracked as he finished the verse. He glanced nervously at Adrun, hoping the man had not noticed. The Hymnmaster seemed to have grown older in the past five years than Quentin. The years had not made the man any less sharp, however, and Adrun's frown was visible in the flickering candlelight of his humble dwelling. The old wood and stone of the walls seemed to bounce the light all around, casting shadows of dragons and krakens on the dirt floor, an effect it had taken Quentin years to grow accustomed to.

Adrun stood and strode over to Quentin. He nodded. "That's enough for now, boy," the aging man said. His hands came to rest on Quentin's shoulders. "You're becoming a man, you know." Quentin grimaced at the statement, dreading a repeat of his father's clumsy speech from earlier that day. He did not want to hear about that shapeless, consuming desire again.

Instead, Adrun changed tactics. Whether he had sensed Quentin's discomfort or had not intended to continue in this manner, Quentin would never know. "Your voice is changing. Don't worry, though. You'll lose some of the high end, but the low end will make up for that. These next couple of years are going to be tricky, but things will work themselves out. Soon enough, your range is going to be wider than ever before, and you'll be able to sing all sorts of new songs." A rare wry smile crinkled his face. "Better

yet, you won't be seen as a child anymore. People admire a boy's song, but they *listen* to a man's. Do you understand?"

Quentin nodded. He thought he did, at least, and this last part of Adrun's speech had done more to ease his anxiety about the future than everything his father had said put together.

"And then," Adrun continued, "once your voice has settled to what it will be until time takes it away from you, we can look to more important matters." Adrun paused, licking his lips absentmindedly before going on. He appeared to be nervous, an emotion that looked foreign on him. "Namely, training you to be the next Hymnmaster."

Quentin gaped. "The next--"

Adrun put a hand up to silence him. "As much as you and some others like to pretend that I am immortal, I am far from it, something I recognize every morning when my back pops getting out of bed. I won't live forever, and so I've started thinking of searching for a replacement. You have a gift, Quentin, and I am not the only one who sees it. You sing because you love to, and the most important thing when appointing clergy is finding someone with a desire to serve."

There was that word again: *desire*. When his father had spoken it, the word had been a dirty, shameful thing, something to keep hidden away in the darkness. When Adrun used it, it paralleled with devotion. To hear Adrun talk of desire, it was a good thing, even necessary for someone in his position. Could his father be wrong?

“Of course, you will have to be trained first,” Adrun went on, “and that process cannot begin until your twelfth birthday. I have no plans of dying anytime soon. You still have plenty of time to think about it. But *do* think about it, Quentin. I believe Greatfather has plans for you that even you would not expect. Plans that will change lives other than your own. And you are young yet, still uncorrupted by the world. The sort of mind that the Holy One prizes, with a voice that matches. For a Hymnmaster to be successful, he must lead his church in spirit, and your spirit is pure and potent. Your youth, too, is a positive factor. You can lead the church for years, and gain respect that one such as I never could.”

Adrun was still holding Quentin’s shoulders. The Hymnmaster began squeezing them more tightly, hard enough that Quentin nearly winced. He knew better than to show weakness at this point, however. “Thank you, Hymnmaster,” he murmured, his head bowed. “But I don’t know if I would be ready for another ten years. I would need to learn what you do.” Ten years, twice Quentin’s life, seemed an unimaginably long time to him.

When he looked back up, he could see that Adrun was crying. His grip still was steady, and he did not make a sound, but tears rolled down the old man’s cheeks. “Some days, I covet your youth, Quentin,” he whispered. “I know it is a sin, but when I look back at my life I wonder what I might have done with another fifty years. Twenty, even. Greatfather wanted to use me, but why not use me for longer?”

He shook his head as though to clear it. “I don’t have another ten years, Quentin. I may not even have another five. You must learn as much as you can, as quickly as you can. I promise, I’ll be there to help you, as long as I’m able.” He sighed. “But we are out of time. Your father will be here to pick you up any minute. I don’t need an answer now, and I expect you to talk it over with your parents, but be thinking about your future. Be praying about it.”

When Rawling came to pick Quentin up, he left without another word. His thoughts were heavy with everything Adrun had told him, with an internal struggle over the nature of desire, with an encroaching dread of the future. The thing he kept coming back to, that would not leave his head no matter how hard he tried, was the image of the Hymnmaster weeping.

THE STORM

Quentin groans and shuts the door. He makes his way over to the windowsill and picks up the candle, hurriedly moving it to the table in the center of the room. The last thing he needs right now is for his only source of light to burn out. They are going to need illumination before tonight is over.

“Could you help me?” he asks Natalie. “I need to board up the windows, and it’ll take a lot less time if I have help.”

Natalie nods, moving over to the wall where a stack of sturdy boards has been placed. Quentin picks up a hammer and some nails from beside the boards and darts back outside, Natalie following close behind with a couple of boards in hand. Quentin notes with admiration that she is pulling her weight, at least. If she is going to be here for the night with him, it is good to know he can depend on her to do as he asks.

Quentin rounds the side of his dwelling. Once he reaches the first window, he grabs the shutters and pulls them closed, slipping the lock through the metal loop to fasten them. He takes the first board from Natalie’s hands and presses it horizontally against the shuttered window, taking care to line up the edges with the window frame. “Hold the board there while I nail it,” he orders, and Natalie complies without a word.

Quentin grabs his hammer and sets to work. When he finishes the first side, Natalie switches places with him so he can better secure the other end. They repeat this process with the second board, and the third, until the window is blocked up to Quentin’s liking.

The window on the other side of Quentin's house is larger and more difficult to board up, but after a few frantic minutes they are finished. By now the wind has picked up speed, and the sky has darkened considerably. Raindrops, fatter and more frequent than the ones before, spatter on his face, his hands, and all over Natalie as they step back and admire their handiwork.

With another glance up at the sky, Quentin curses himself inwardly for not being faster. If the old woman hadn't stopped him and made him sing, if the two men hadn't been fighting instead of caring for their homes and families as they should have been, if Natalie hadn't broken into his home and persuaded him to let her stay, he would be at the chapel even now, entreating Greatfather to spare every life possible. Whatever that means. However many die will always be the number dead. There is no way for the survivors to know if Greatfather would have allowed more to perish if not for their prayers. Greatfather's will is hidden from the minds of men, and He is silent on such matters. Still, they pray anyway, as there is no sense in angering Him with their neglect.

"Let's get inside, Quentin." Natalie's voice is calm, but there is an air of fear lurking behind it, as if waiting for the slightest opportunity to break free. "The rain is only going to get worse, and I'd rather not be standing in it anymore."

Quentin sighs, nods, and follows her back into the house, closing the bolt on the door behind him. He doesn't want to think about what will be waiting for him when the storm passes. His penance for missing the prayer today is sure to be significant, no matter how good his excuse or how high his standing. As Hymnmaster, he is officially the leader of

this branch of the church, but privately, the elder Messengers still treat him as a novice. Their behavior grates on him, but the clergy are supposed to be unified, at peace with one another. To divulge to his congregation (his congress, as he prefers to think of them) the true nature of his relationship with the other Messengers would be to irreparably damage the church in the eyes of the city. Quentin is silenced by perception.

The simple dwelling is in near-total darkness once the windows are shut tight, with the lone candle in the center of the room providing paltry illumination. Quentin grabs the candle, takes it over to the kitchen, and lights the three candles that are in there with it, one at a time. Soon, he is able to take in more completely his surroundings. Natalie lifts one of the candles in the kitchen and uses it to light a candle by the stairs.

In the dim glow, wild, flickering shadows are cast upon the stone and wood walls, giving the two of them ghoulish appearances, like the demons written about in the *Holy Canticle*. It will only get darker as the storm grows worse, and it will be a long, uncomfortable night before he will be able to let the sun in.

Natalie seats herself carefully upon Quentin's favorite chair, placing her candle in its holder on top of a well-sanded wooden end table. She crosses her hands over her stomach, her fingers interlacing with confident ease, and says, "So, Quentin, why are you looking at me as though I might ambush you any second?"

Quentin blanches. He had not realized that his face is so obvious. "Well, you *are* still a stranger in my house. You have to admit, it would be the perfect crime. No one's in the streets, so there would be no witnesses, and the thunder would drown out my

screams.” He gulps, begging himself to stop talking on the off chance that he is right.

“You could take everything I had and leave town as soon as the storm dissipates, and no one would be able to find you.” He lets out a wild, frantic giggle, of the sort that would lose him years of respect if one of the Messengers heard it, and sits down on his second-favorite chair, facing Natalie.

“Thorough,” Natalie remarks. “Your mind goes to a dark place when you get worried.”

“If you *must* know,” Quentin says, making an effort to keep his voice steady, if not intimidating, “the storms around here always put me on edge. The winds blow in from the sea to the south, and carry with them all manner of furiously bad weather. The wrong combination of wind and rain, and my house could wash away.”

“Then why do you still live here?” Natalie asks. “The storms aren’t as bad further north.”

“That may be true, but the snows in winter are deadly fierce.”

“Have you ever been north to see if that’s really how it is, or are you just regurgitating what you’ve been told by other people?”

Quentin frowns. Ever since he had told her she could stay for the night, she had become more self-assured. *Too* self-assured, if Quentin could say anything about it. The *Canticle* is clear when it says, ‘*The humble heart of a woman is a jewel in the Holy One’s heavenly crown.*’ Meekness can be provided-- is a strength, in fact, something that Quentin always appreciates about the church’s doctrine. But Natalie is walking all over

him, stepping on his good nature to try and keep him cowed. Maybe she wants him to give her money before she leaves him. Quentin decides in that moment that he won't let that stand.

“Whether I've been up north or not is none of your business!” he barks. “I go or stay wherever Greatfather wills, and whatever I sacrifice to do so is not for you to hold over my head. I am doing good work, and if you hadn't noticed, it's why you're here. If you have any problems with that, you can always leave!” At this, Quentin gestures to the bolted door angrily.

Natalie shakes her head. “I'm not trying to belittle you, Quentin,” she says, “and I'm sorry if you think I am. I just wanted to open up a conversation to pass the time. When you said what you did about the north, without stopping to consider your words, it sounded like you had convinced yourself that other places weren't worth thinking about. Well, I've seen a lot of other places, and I can say from experience that there are ones I enjoy more than here. I don't want you to feel trapped in a place that makes you anxious.”

“I am where I'm called to be,” Quentin says, his voice softer than it had been a minute earlier. “From a young age, it was clear to me that this town was where I was going to serve for the rest of my life. Of course, when I was a boy I entertained notions of traveling north, or sailing south across the sea in some vessel, having adventures and meeting new people.” He gazes off into the shadows, into the emptiness of what might have been. His tone is wistful. “But I have a place here. A purpose.”

“A purpose you chose?”

The question is biting, cold. “Choice is an illusion,” Quentin murmurs. “The wind doesn’t choose to blow. The rain doesn’t choose to fall. The sun doesn’t choose to shine. All things were designed and are maintained by Greatfather, and all things are kept in order. There is purpose, His purpose, and it is greater than choice.”

Natalie’s brow furrows. “That sounds like a sermon.”

Quentin shrugs. “I’ve listened to a fair few in my lifetime. Some of them were without a whole congregation hanging onto First Messenger Brayon’s every word. That one was to me, when I started training to become a Hymnmaster. I was twelve.” He chuckles. “That said, Brayon was a bit more eloquent in how he said things.”

III: HOLD MY SOUL ACCOUNTABLE

“The value of purpose is beyond counting,” Brayon said, absently running a hand over a tuft of thinning brown hair. “You must understand this, Quentin. Greatfather plays the universe like a master musician plays a harp. Every one of us is a string. When it comes time for us to be plucked, we have the potential to make music of unspeakable beauty and power. Greatfather gives us this chance.

“Now, we have two options. First, we can allow ourselves to be plucked, bending to His will, thrumming with potentially eternal consequences. Or, we can refuse. We can tighten up, with barely any give, and make a sour note. Those are noticed just as easily as clean notes, but they can ruin even the best piece of music. More to the point, what happens to a string when it is pulled too tightly?”

Quentin waited for the First Messenger to continue, but it didn’t take long for him to realize that he was supposed to provide the answer himself. “It breaks,” he said.

Brayon smiled, the kind of smile that could swallow up all the world. “Precisely, Quentin. The string breaks. Following Greatfather’s will, our purpose, does not just serve Him-- it also benefits us. Our purpose keeps us whole.”

Brayon’s office had changed in the years since Quentin had been told he could sing. The tapestries were still on the walls, but the furniture was all different. The desk and chairs were all made from a finely varnished oak, polished to such a degree that it reflected the candlelight. The First Messenger’s desk was also less cluttered than seven

years prior-- evidently, during that time, Brayon had decided to keep things more orderly. Either that, or he'd gotten a novice to start cleaning it. After a decade of service to the church, a member of the clergy had a great deal more leeway with what was acceptable.

"Quentin, my boy," he continued, "your purpose has made itself clear to you at an earlier age than most. See that as a sign of good fortune, and of the Holy One's faith in your future. You will accomplish wonderful, valuable feats in Greatfather's name if you simply stick to the path that has been set out in front of you. If only I had been so gifted." Brayon rested his hand on Quentin's knee, and Quentin knew better than to recoil from the touch. The First Messenger's hand was foreign to him, but not threatening, carrying with it a noticeable weight. Any threat there had to have been hidden beneath impenetrable layers of good will, anyway. "Should you formally accept, your training in the inner workings of the church will begin straightaway. Your vocal lessons with Hymnmaster Adrun will continue, but they will be somewhat different than before. From here on in, everything we do will be with the intent to sharpen you, in order that you might pierce through the people's thick hides of unbelief." Brayon squeezed Quentin's knee. "So, do you accept, Quentin?"

Quentin took in a deep breath and plunged headfirst into his future: "I do."

Brayon removed his hand, although Quentin could still feel the ghost of where it had been. He reached into his desk and pulled out a copy of the *Holy Canticle*. Physical copies of the book were rare, and this was one of the only ones Quentin could recall having seen. It was handwritten and bound in red leather by the Eastern Order, a group

of celibate monks who devoted their lives to writing the words of Greatfather. “Put your right hand on the *Canticle* and repeat after me,” Brayon said, holding the book out in the space between them.

Quentin had never touched the *Holy Canticle* before, had never even touched a properly bound book before. Putting his hand on its smooth surface, his fingers resting on the leather, made what he was about to do feel that much more real and binding. This was no longer just an agreement, it was a covenant.

“I, Quentin Marsh, pledge upon this day to take upon myself the duties of Hymnmaster.” Brayon paused, giving Quentin a chance to repeat the words before continuing. The First Messenger paused the same way at the end of each successive sentence. “I promise to devote my life to shaping my spirit into Greatfather’s mold.” Pause. “I will lead the church in worship with a pure heart and a focused mind.” Pause. “I will train, learning all about His church and His ways, until such a time as I am called to official service.” Pause. “My thoughts will be His thoughts, my dreams His dreams, and my words His words.” Pause. “So swear I, may the Holy One hold my soul accountable.”

When Quentin had finished, Brayon beamed at him and pulled the *Canticle* away. The book was locked secure inside the First Messenger’s desk once more “Thank you, Quentin,” he said. “You will read the entirety of the *Holy Canticle* during your years of training, and it will build you up more than anything I can say. Take heart in the words of Greatfather, for they will guide you on the path of purpose.”

A few hours later, Quentin found himself at Adrun's dwelling once again, singing. The vocal lessons had been easier for him ever since his voice had settled to a tenor, verging on baritone. "The best register for worship," Adrun had told him. Now, he launched into the chorus of "Perfect Foundation" for the umpteenth time, his voice wobbling on the edge of giving out. Today's practice had started earlier than usual, and would go later. Quentin just hoped that he would do more than sing this one refrain, but the way Adrun kept correcting him, those hopes had begun to wither.

You are the perfect foundation,

On You rests the church's will,

Steady, strong throughout all ages,

And standing forever still.

Adrun put a spotted hand up, stopping Quentin from progressing to the verses. "Wait," he said. "Sing the chorus again."

"Why?" Quentin asked, his agitation barely masked. "What did I do wrong?"

"You're not starting each line on the same pitch. They all have to start the same way. Every other line is different, but they all have to begin on a G." He hummed the note. "Do you hear it? Because that note is the foundation for this song. It's what the hymn is built upon, and if you don't hit it right each time, the whole thing collapses." The Hymnmaster groaned. "Not to mention that it gives the hymn an unwanted sense of irony, which will distract the one person who notices for the entire rest of the piece."

“But if only one person is going to notice--”

“*I’ll* notice, and that makes two!” Adrun barked. His voice had gotten crisper with age, sharp enough to cut. “Quentin, if you truly want to be the Hymnmaster when you come of age and I am gone, you cannot afford to distract *anybody!* The purpose of the Hymnmaster is to facilitate worship, to open up a link between our lowly selves and the Holy One, not to draw attention to our idiotic blunders!” He inhaled a long, labored breath, collecting himself. “Sing the chorus again.”

Quentin nodded, mortified. He had never heard Adrun speak this way. The old man hardly ever raised his voice, and yet now he was near shouting. Quentin started the chorus once more, but he was only half finished when Adrun held up his hand and cried, “Stop!”

Adrun wrung his hands. “Hit the note change harder on the *You* in the second line. You’re jumping down a fifth, and that change needs to be simpler to follow. Don’t assume I know the hymn, lead me through it. Again.”

Quentin sighed, then gave the chorus another try, making sure to land on the fifth for the *You* as Adrun had requested. He finished the chorus and was about to go on to the verse, a sense of relief passing over him, when the Hymnmaster held his hand up.

“Did I say you could go on?” Adrun asked. Quentin did not reply. Adrun scowled. “Did I? Answer me.”

Quentin shook his head. “No, Hymnmaster,” he mumbled.

“Correct. Now, this time, you had the notes down, and there weren’t any glaring technical errors, but there was no heart in it. When you sing, you have to express yourself with the words. Let your joy that Greatfather is our foundation come out in the way you sing. You should be able to do that. You’ve done it before, when you were less than half the age you are now. What happened to the boy who sang with conviction?”

“He didn’t have to sing the same part of the same hymn for an hour!” Quentin snapped. His mind raced. He knew he had crossed a line, that no one in the church would dare to talk to the Hymnmaster like that, but if he stopped now, unfinished, it would somehow be even worse. “The heart went out of this song about fifteen choruses ago. How can I sing ‘Perfect Foundation’ like it’s new fifty times in a row? There’s no conviction here, there’s no joy. This isn’t worship, it’s practice!”

Quentin’s chest heaved as his outburst subsided. Adrun gave him a flat stare for an interminable moment. Then, unbelievably, he smiled. “There’s the fire,” he said. “To sing, you need to have a current of passion flowing right underneath your skin.” Then his eyes narrowed. “But tonight, your joy needs to come from singing the hymn the *right* way. Until you sing it the right way, we’ll keep going over the chorus. If you intend to be the next Hymnmaster, you need to be able to sing the hymns without thinking. Nothing can be allowed to distract you from your worship. By the time we’re finished tonight, I want you to be able to get struck by lightning and continue ‘Perfect Foundation’ without skipping a beat or singing a note out of tune. This is how your lessons are going

to be now, until I feel you are ready to accept the responsibility you pledged to accept today. So sing it again. And Quentin?”

“Yes, Hymnmaster?” Quentin said, rediscovering his meekness.

“If you ever speak to me in that way again, I will make you wish you were struck by lightning. Are we understood?”

Quentin nodded hurriedly, then launched into ‘Perfect Foundation’ with the conviction of a drowning man.

THE STORM

Natalie carries Quentin's basket into the kitchen and begins to unload it wordlessly. Their conversation has lapsed, leaving Quentin unsure of how to revive it. What topics were safe to talk about? Certainly not religion. His hatred of talking about himself rules that out. The storm goes without saying, and besides, it is ever-present in their minds without a single sentence on the matter ever being spoken. Still, Quentin understands he has to say *something*, and so he steps lightly over to Natalie, who tosses him a carrot without looking at him.

"I don't like carrots," she says, "so you're welcome to all of them if you so choose." She reaches into a cabinet and pulls out a couple of plates, setting them down on the counter beside her and dividing between them the produce. Natalie seems to know what she is doing and does not want any help, so Quentin hangs back and takes a bite out of his carrot.

Natalie walks over to the kitchen table, where a candle stands vigil at each end, and places the plates. Quentin sits down at the spot in front of the plate with all the carrots, and Natalie sits in front of the other plate. Quentin had not planned on eating so much tonight, but he doesn't want to ask Natalie to put some of the food back. Besides, he reasons, if the storm worsens, this might be his last good meal in a long while.

Natalie takes a large, loud bite from an apple, the crunch echoing through the shuttered chamber, and speaks. “I’m going to assume you want to know where I’m from.”

Quentin shakes his head. It was wrong to pry into the lives of strangers without due cause. “I never said--”

“I was born on an island a few days’ sail from the southwest coast known as Cyros,” Natalie starts, ignoring Quentin. “My parents, both dead now if you’re curious, had me at an older age than most choose to. They had planned for me, and they loved having me, and I was happy in our little house on the cliffs.”

“You don’t have to tell me this if you don’t want to,” Quentin protests. “I’m not forcing this out of you.”

“Quentin, you took me in on the night a storm came. I have no means of payment, so I decided to at the very least tell you how I came to be here. It might make your story easier to explain to the Messengers. Not to mention that I find stories fascinating, and each of us has a different one. I’m going to give you something unique and personal.” Natalie takes a deep breath and continues. “Anyway, I found out at a very young age that my parents had once been explorers. Before they started a family, they had seen essentially all of the known world, and they had done it together. The Thousand Falls of Thruvia. The peak of Mount Ilene. The Eastern Worldforests. I grew up reading about all of them in books, and my parents in turn would tell me stories about them that gave me a clearer picture than the books ever could, because they had *been there*.”

“Right away, I was struck with the spark for exploration that has chased me through the past twenty-four years. I knew I had to leave Cyros, had to see if my parents’ stories were true. But we were poor. The adventuring had bled my parents and their coin purses dry, and our land wasn’t good enough for farming. They died happy a few years ago, of a fast-acting illness that took them while sleeping. I had always assumed that during their travels they had buried a chest of riches somewhere, but in truth, they had nothing left to give me. If I wanted to see the world, I would have to find a way to do so with no money.

“Fear of the illness pushed me off the island, and the desire to see the world I had heard so much about pulled me. All I had to do was surrender to my passion, and when I looked up *I* was standing atop Mount Ilene. And it was better than any story or any painting I’ve ever seen. I looked down, and the world spread out before me, from the River Wrey to the Sturmian Foothills and beyond. I have never felt smaller-- or larger-- in my life. Yes, I had no money to speak of, but I threw myself on the kindness of strangers, and I came to discover that the people of this world have more compassion than I was ever led to believe.”

“And you did this all... on your own?” Quentin inquires. The idea of being alone in the world, with no chance of salvation if something happens to go wrong, is unfathomable to him.

The flames of the candles seem to leap with excitement, lighting up Natalie’s face better than it has been the whole day. “Sometimes, I had traveling companions,

especially when I knew the terrain would be tricky,” she replies. “But I wasn’t ever alone. I had the whole world as my companion. When I rode through the Center Plains, the wind whispered to me. The rivers sang. The Worldforests were full to bursting with life. Solitude is not the same as loneliness.”

She falls quiet, lost in her head. Her eyes are faraway, and the food on her plate remains untouched. In this moment, Quentin thinks he might be seeing her for the first time. He had first met her when she was desperate, in need of shelter, but she is far from needy now. He has the impression that she is able to protect herself from almost anything, save acts of nature too massive to escape. Natalie *knows* things, Quentin realizes, really knows them. To live things is to know them, he thinks, and she has lived so much more in her life than he has in his.

Quentin allows himself to wonder what he would be like if not for the church. Would he feel so tied to his insignificant town? Would he see more of the world? Would he have so much doubt within him? Would he and Alise--

No. Quentin should not think that way. He had spent years training himself not to think that way, and all that work won’t unravel now. He forces himself not to linger, to ask Natalie another question. “Then why are you here? If you want to see the world, wouldn’t this be wasting your time?”

Natalie shakes her head. “It’s not a waste. This region is where Paternitism originated, and it’s still where it has the strongest hold. Case in point.” She gestures to him. “Every part of the world has its own beliefs, true, but here they seem to have a

greater influence on the people. I was curious. I wanted to find out why for myself.”

Her cheeks redden. “To be totally honest, it’s why I worked to shelter with you. I figured that if we were trapped in a room together, we could get a good dialogue going.”

This leads Quentin to a myriad of new questions, all centered around the mystery of Natalie’s faith. If she is so curious about him, then there is a good chance she doesn’t worship Greatfather. Quentin is unsure what other religions exist outside of Paternitism, or how they conduct themselves. Who-- or what-- do they worship? Where do they meet? Do they have a holy book, and if so, who is permitted to read it? These questions are ones Quentin knows he is not supposed to ask. Brayon would refer to it as “cavorting with heresy,” or give it some other colorful little epithet. But he is alone now, and the door to newfound possibilities stands open in front of him. Natalie entrances him, and his greatest desire at the moment is to figure out how she operates.

There is a deafening *boom* of thunder from some nearby lightning strike, close enough to cause the shutters to tremble. Quentin is certain that he and Natalie have boarded up the windows properly, but the last thing he needs is to discover he has been wrong as wind and rain penetrate his abode.

Quentin clenches his fists and closes his eyes. Then he immediately opens them again. Natalie is observing him with unnerving intensity, as though etching Quentin’s every movement in her mind. “I’m sorry,” says Quentin. “Is something the matter?”

Natalie shakes her head rapidly. “No, no, I just wanted to watch you pray. A man in your position should give me the perfect example of a prayer to Greatfather. Pretend I’m not here.” She folds her hands, seemingly not noticing the storm outside.

Quentin closes his eyes once more, breathes deeply, and wills himself to feel Greatfather’s presence in the same way he has since he was five. His childhood memories have provided a good stepping stone for prayer for years now. He should be spending more time in prayer anyway, Natalie or no Natalie, to make up for his absence today.

Now, however, his strategy isn’t working. Quentin reaches out to Greatfather and feels nothing in return, just an emptiness accompanied by the roll of thunder. “The Holy One is in the thunder,” Brayon had said on countless occasions, but Quentin considers his fear of storms and thinks that that couldn’t be the case. The *Holy Canticle* does not say anything to that effect, at the least. Storms are just things that happen when the sins of an area build up too much, and Greatfather is always there to shield the devoted from His wrath. It is a relationship Quentin understands, if he doesn’t appreciate it.

Quentin opens his eyes and gulps. “I’m having some trouble praying right now,” he apologizes. “Maybe later.”

“Of course,” Natalie says. “Don’t worry about it. Am I being too much of a distraction?”

Quentin holds his hands up as if to shoo away the thought. “I’ve prayed in far more distracting conditions. It’s not your fault. It’s only that... sometimes, I feel Greatfather

all around me, like a warm blanket, and other times I don't. Praying can be near impossible when you can't see the person to whom you're talking." He sighs, letting his frustration and mounting hopelessness seep away. "You're not going to tell anyone this, right? Especially not the Messengers."

"I don't even know the Messengers," Natalie reassures him. "And I don't want you to pray, or pretend to pray, because I'm watching. You should be true to yourself, not me."

Quentin nods, still feeling guilty. "Well, First Messenger Brayon says that doubts are part of anyone's journey through faith, just as long as we overcome them. I've doubted before, and I'll doubt again, but all it means is that I need to be sure of my purpose. Brayon says that when we follow our purpose, we have the blessing of a doubtless life."

"This Brayon fellow has a lot of hold over you, doesn't he?" says Natalie cautiously.

Quentin scoffs. "He doesn't control me. He's wise, is all, and he's spent more time studying the *Canticle* than anyone else I know. I admire him. I--"

A knock at the door stops Quentin mid-sentence. He walks, tentative, to the door, and he is almost there when the knock comes again, a harsh pounding that rattles Quentin's senses. "In the name of the Holy One, let me in!" a voice on the other side of the door bellows. A familiar voice. Quentin's stomach churns as he unlocks the deadbolt and pulls open the door.

A figure enters his home, rain pouring in in sheets and spattering Quentin with unwanted moisture. The figure is hooded and hunched over to keep as dry as he can,

though from his current state he is likely soaked to the skin. The figure pulls back the hood to reveal the face of First Messenger Brayon, droplets of water clinging to his shaggy salt-and-pepper beard.

“Where were you?” Brayon asks.

IV: THE ONE WHO SINGS

“Where were we?” Brayon stroked his dark brown beard as he loomed over Quentin.

“The Five Aspects of Greatfather,” Quentin replied. “You wanted me to recite them to you.” In truth, Brayon had requested this no less than fifteen minutes ago, but he had wandered off on a tangent and Quentin had not gotten in a word since.

Brayon smiled. “Very good, my boy. Proceed.”

Quentin took a deep breath and dove into the recitation. “The First Aspect is that of the Perfect Father. It comes first because it can be found in the Holy One’s name. Greatfather cares for us because He made us, and much like a father, He chastises us out of love and the desire for us to learn and grow in the spirit.”

“Yes,” Brayon said. “Continue.”

“The Second Aspect is that of the Most Worthy King. It comes second as a reminder to us of His stature and our place beneath Him. While He allows other royalty to control vast lands, He is the true ruler of the world.”

Brayon let out a *harrumph*. “I couldn’t have said it better myself.” This was, Quentin longed to say, because he had made Quentin memorize the First Messenger’s words perfectly.

Quentin went on. “The Third Aspect is that of the Unblemished God. Greatfather is the standard bearer for righteousness, and He has lived an eternity without sin. We must strive to emulate His example. The Fourth Aspect is that of the Merciful Host. Although

in our imperfections we should be kept from the paradise of the All-light, Greatfather allows us, if we live our lives according to His strictures, to spend our endless years after death with Him on the All-light's shores. There all of His children shall live in worship and harmony forever.”

“And lastly?”

“Lastly, the Fifth Aspect is that of the Reckoning Judge,” Quentin said, his stomach churning at the words he had forced himself to memorize. “It is the final Aspect because it is still yet to come. One glorious day, Greatfather will return in corporeal form to put an end to this imperfect world and separate the wheat from the chaff. As it is written, ‘*In splendor and terror He shall light the nations aflame with His glory, and it shall be the end of all things.*’ We look forward to His coming, for it will be the end of the miseries that plague us in our sin-tainted lives.”

“Excellent,” said Brayon. “Very good work.”

It had always struck Quentin as strange that Brayon had spent the most time drilling the last Aspect into Quentin's mind. The end of all things, as the Thirtieth Canto had called it, sounded terrifying, even though Quentin would likely not be around to see it.

Which reminded him of a question. “First Messenger?”

“Yes, my boy?”

“I have a question about the *Holy Canticle*. It's about Greatfather's coming.”

Quentin gulped, gathering his resolve, and continued. “The Day of Judgment. I'm confused about when it is supposed to take place, exactly. I mean, I know it isn't

specified, but some of the Cantos don't seem to agree with each other on the subject. The Thirtieth Canto says that His coming will be '*soon*,' but the Sixteenth Canto lists what needs to happen in the world before He can return, and judging by that list, we aren't even close."

A dangerous glint flickered over Brayon's eyes for an instant, so brief that Quentin wondered afterwards if he had just imagined it. "You should be careful, young master Marsh," he warned, his voice low and icy. "It isn't wise to go around questioning the Scriptures. Not wise at all. Such a thing can cause you to be Unnamed in front of the church."

The term was foreign to Quentin. "What does that mean, Unnamed?"

"I forget," Brayon said. "You are still young, and there hasn't been an Unnaming in your lifetime in this church. Be glad of that. To be Unnamed is to be considered poisoned by heretical thoughts. For an Unnaming to even be considered, one must have obviously strayed away from the teachings of the Holy One. For most of the congregation, this simply means mandated counseling with one of the lesser Messengers, but for someone in a position of power to be so poisoned can lead to the tainting of an entire church. Matters must be treated with greater severity, as I'm sure you understand. It is a good thing you come forward with any questions you have to me now, before you are made Hymnmaster." Brayon licked his lips and went on. "When someone is given a position in the church, it is often referred to as a Naming ceremony. You may not have seen one in your lifetime, as the Halvern church has a stable clergy, but it is a grand

affair. The whole ceremony is a demonstration of how Greatfather has taken you under his wing, and in Him you are given a new name to go along with your purpose-- in your case, the title of Hymnmaster.

“An Unnaming only occurs when one has strayed from their Greatfather-given purpose beyond recovery. You are stripped of your title in front of the whole church, removed from your dwelling, and sent from the place you call home. If you are Unnamed, Halvern will never shelter you again. Your name will never again be spoken. Your parents will consider you dead. It is the harshest penalty we can give, save for death, and rare is the occasion when death is required.”

Quentin, with all the bravado of his fifteen years, did his best not to tremble.

“But you are young,” Brayon said, “and you are devoted, so you have nothing to worry about. Your question comes from a pure place of curiosity, isn’t that right?” Quentin’s head bobbed frantically up and down. “Still, you must be careful not to let these questions slip outside these walls. Most of the men and women out there have not read the *Canticle* for themselves, and if you, a Hymnmaster-novice, imply it is a fallible work, then their faith will be damaged, and you don’t want that to happen.” Brayon chuckled. “I do, however, understand your question, as it is one I found myself with at your age.

“You see, Quentin, the *Holy Canticle* is a living document, its words composed over centuries of careful meditation and prayer. It is Greatfather’s way of reaching out to us, even while we are still on this terrestrial plane. The Holy One is not like us, though. His

mind is not the same as ours, and as such, the *Canticle* can be misunderstood.

Greatfather, as you know, exists outside of time, although He dips His toe into the events of the world on occasion to make the ripples that only He can make. So, for Him, there is no contradiction. A thousand years can pass in the blink of an eye to one to whom time does not matter. The Day of Judgment will be soon, just as it was soon a millennia ago, soon because that list is all that needs to come to pass before Greatfather will return. And when you consider His power, is it not possible that He can fulfil every prophecy in a day if He so chooses? His power is limitless, but our perception is just the opposite. Does that make any sense to you?"

Quentin nodded, and in that moment, it did. In the years to come, on the other hand, the conversation would become muddled and confused, and Quentin would wonder why Greatfather didn't just *make sense* for a change.

The sun shone bright in a sky dappled with cirrus clouds as Quentin headed home. His father and mother would be waiting with dinner, and then he would have to rush over to Adrun's dwelling for more vocal practice. He had been getting better recently, and the old Hymnmaster stopped Quentin far more rarely mid-song, but a missed practice would cause Quentin to lose some of the respect the man had given him. "A Hymnmaster must be responsible," he would say. Quentin needed to hurry home, or else he was subject to Adrun's not-inconsiderable wrath.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw movement. A thin, pale-skinned girl with ember-colored hair was waving at him and smiling. Quentin turned toward her and waved back. She was about his age, he knew, although he was aware of little else about her. Her family had moved to Halvern in the past few years, and Quentin hadn't spent much time around those his own age since he started his Hymnmaster training. What was her name?

The girl cocked her head to the side, then changed her wave to one of invitation, motioning him over. Tentatively, Quentin moved toward her. All at once he became self-conscious of everything-- his clothes, his woefully unkempt hair, the patchy stubble on his cheeks-- and he wished he had a moment or two to fix his appearance as best he could. Five Aspects, but she was beautiful. Not in a way that would inspire artists to paint or poets to write, not because of individual features, but because of how she wore them with such warmth. Her smile was a crack that let the sun through, and the moon twinkled in her blue-green eyes. She was alive in a way no one else Quentin had ever met was, full to bursting with life.

Then Quentin realized the girl had been talking, and he had not heard a single word. "I'm sorry," Quentin said. "What was that you were saying?"

"I've seen you around," the girl repeated. "You're always in so much of a hurry, except for when you're at church. You're Quentin, aren't you? The one who sings."

Quentin blushed. "That's me." In that moment, he thought no name the church could give him had any chance of equaling hers-- *the one who sings*. "Quentin."

"I'm Alise," the girl told him. "Can you sing something for me?"

Quentin was not completely sure what the protocol was for a Hymnmaster-novice, whether he was bound to sing to her or not. Either way, he wanted to, wanted to earn that name, to be the one who sang. All he said, though, was, “Sure. What hymn would you like?”

Alise shrugged. “It doesn’t make much difference to me. Sing the first thing that comes into your head.”

It didn’t take long for Quentin to think of one, a song that he had been practicing a lot with Adrun recently called “Name of Great Life”:

*Perfect Father and flawless God,
Creator of all that is seen,
Bringer of judgment and reckoning,
In Your presence we stand awed,
For Your name is the name of great life,
And all greatness is found in Your truth.*

As Quentin finished the hymn, he was already running through Adrun’s checklist of flaws: he went flat at the start of the third line, overcompensated on the fourth and went sharp, and sang the end far too loudly so he could reach the notes without cracking them. Alise did not voice any of these complaints, however. All she did was grin.

“You have an amazing voice!” she said, delighted. “I didn’t realize how good you were.”

“Well,” Quentin mumbled, glancing at the ground in embarrassment, “you did call me the one who sings. Really?”

Alise nodded. “Really. I wish I could sing that well. The only time I sing is in church, and that’s because everyone else is singing and no one can hear me on my own.”

This was wrong. He wasn’t supposed to take credit for his talents, and yet, with Alise, he did not feel so sinful for doing so. She had listened to him and not judged him, and for that he was already more at ease around her than....

He realized that he felt more comfortable around Alise, a girl he had not spoken to two minutes’ prior, than he did around anyone else in his life. Brayon always managed to make him feel guilty, Adrun always made him feel as though he were not qualified for his own future, and he could not say anything to his parents for fear of them reacting poorly. They had all put so much faith in him, and he was terrified that he would only disappoint them in the years to come. But Alise didn’t know any of that. To her, Quentin was nothing more than a boy her age who could sing.

Quentin needed someone like her in his life. The thought dawned on him with inescapable clarity. He wasn’t sure how, but he needed to hold onto her.

He said the first thing that came into his mind: “I don’t have any lessons on Saturday. If you want to do something. Maybe we could sing. Or something else.” He laughed. “I’m not all that sure what someone like you would want to do.”

“We could go down to the river,” Alise said. “It’s my favorite place in Halvern.” So simple. She would let him be around her, and she had ignored his awkward fumbling invitation. “In the morning?”

Quentin smiled. “Before lunch.”

“I’ll be waiting,” Alise said. She narrowed her eyes at him. “We’re going to be good friends, you and I.” Then she winked and turned to return to her home. Quentin watched her go, dumbfounded, until he remembered he was expected back at his *own* home. Adrenaline pumped through him, and he raced toward dinner, propelled by the thought that maybe, if he ran fast enough, it might be Saturday morning sooner.

THE STORM

A bedraggled Brayon pushes Quentin out of the way to enter the house. Without stopping, he whirls on Quentin, shaking his head violently and flinging droplets of water all over Quentin like a dog. A shudder passes through the First Messenger as a blast of wind gusts through the door at his heels, blowing out the flame of the nearest candle.

“I asked you a question,” Brayon says, his tone far from the jovial one he used on holy days. “Where were you, Quentin? Why weren’t you at the chapel? You’ve been Hymnmaster for years, and you know the process as well as anybody. When the sky darkens with Greatfather’s wrath, we meet together. We can’t have a prayer vigil without the Hymnmaster present to sing songs of contrition over us. How is the church body supposed to function without its head?” Brayon lets out a few long, haggard breaths, gathering himself. He clutches Quentin by the shoulders, fingers digging in. His next words come out softer, but no less damning in tone. “This is what I always warn you about, boy. You cannot show weakness, not in front of your congregation and especially not in front of your clergy. You are the spiritual leader of Halvern, and as such, you cannot simply leave important matters to me. Quentin, you receive the praise of this town. Is it so hard for you to be worthy of it?”

The words hit Quentin with the weight of an oxcart, rolling over him and leaving him shell-shocked. Brayon should not have called him *boy*, especially not in front of Natalie.

But the First Messenger is right. Quentin should not be at his house instead of at the chapel, doing his duty. There are responsibilities that outweigh even his doubts.

“I thought Greatfather was the one who receives the praise,” Natalie says.

Quentin groans inwardly, wishing his guest had not spoken. Brayon tilts his head toward the woman, noticing her for the first time in his whole diatribe, then looks back to Quentin, bewilderment in his eyes.

“Quentin,” he says in a flat voice. “Who is this woman? Why is she in your home?”

“Her name is Natalie,” Quentin replies with a measured tone. “She had no place else to go, and she asked if she could stay here until the storm passes. The *Canticle* says we’re supposed to aid the needy. I agreed to take her in, but by the time I had finished it had started to rain, and I didn’t want to be caught outside when the storm was at its worst.”

Brayon’s eyes narrow, shifting suspiciously from Quentin to Natalie and back again. “There was one thing I requested of you, all those years ago. I trust you remember.” Quentin stares back at him in silence, guilt bubbling just below the surface. “What was it?”

“My faith must always come first,” answers Quentin. “No exceptions.”

“None whatsoever,” Brayon agrees. “And that means this could not happen again. You were close to an Unnaming six years ago. Greatfather’s mercy may be limitless, but mine certainly is not. I have no choice but to bring this before the other Messengers.”

“I swear to you, I never saw this woman before today!” Quentin protests. “Nothing is happening here which could cause me to stumble!”

“What are you talking about?” asks Natalie.

“Why are you here, woman?” Brayon says, his tone harsh, severe.

“For exactly the reason that Quentin told you!” Natalie says, her voice rising. “He is your Hymnmaster. Why don’t you trust him?”

“He has to earn that trust. The same goes for you.”

“Let me account for myself, then,” Natalie retorts. “I am a traveler, an explorer, and I was passing through Halvern when I saw the storm approaching. I know how bad the storms can get around here. I came to Quentin because, as a member of the clergy, he would be more likely to take me in, which he did. Since I arrived, all we’ve done is board up the windows and eat a little. What exactly do you think I’ve done?”

Brayon huffs. “I wouldn’t stoop to speak of such things, but--”

“Don’t stop stooping now!” Natalie snaps. “You’ve been nothing but candid around me so far, and I don’t see why that needs to change. I’m not some whore for you to accuse!”

There is a lengthy pause in the argument as Natalie’s statement hangs in the air between them. Quentin remains rooted to the spot, too terrified to move an inch. Brayon quietly seethes, waves of fury passing over him in silence as he regains control of himself.

“I am not here to make accusations,” he says finally. “I just came here to find our Hymnmaster, who is not always in possession of the best resolve. Some days, he lacks discernment, am I right, Quentin?” He does not wait for Quentin to answer before going on. “Will you swear on your loyalty to the Holy One that your intentions are pure? Will you swear on your faith?”

Quentin closes his eyes, inhaling his breath in a sharp hiss. *Please don't say it*, he thinks, wishing there could be some way for Natalie to hear him before she makes a huge mistake.

Natalie cannot hear him, however. “It’s not my faith. While I respect Paternitism, I do not practice it myself.”

Brayon shoots Quentin a deadly look. “Don’t you believe in Greatfather?” he asks.

“As a matter of fact, I don’t.”

“Then what do you believe in?”

Natalie shrugs. “I believe that the world is an amazing place, one worth exploring, and much too big to pin down with one simplistic ideology.” Quentin’s spirit withers within him. He wants to speak up, to tell her to stop making things worse, but at the moment, he finds that speech is impossible. All the while, Brayon’s face steadily reddens. “I mean, we haven’t even seen the edge of the world, or how far the oceans go. What if there’s land on the other side? What if there are people over there, people who have never heard the name Greatfather? There might be someone or something who

shaped this world, but if so, I wouldn't be so presumptuous as to think that I can understand it."

This is all Brayon can take. "This is heresy! Quentin, I'm sure you don't believe this woman, but is she really the sort you want to open up your home to? She can stay with a neighbor while you come with me to our vigil. You don't need to spend another minute around this, this poisonous theology, or lack thereof! What does the Fifth Canto say? '*Surround yourself with those who share your faith, and you shall be as many branches tied together with twine, unbreakable by this misguided world.*' She--" at this, Brayon gestures to Natalie wildly-- "is the misguided world, if anyone is! It borders on madness, not to mention blasphemy!"

"Will you let her explain herself?" says Quentin, finding his voice at last. "We can't just turn away innocents because we don't agree with them!"

"Don't be so naïve as to call this woman *innocent*," Brayon intones. "Her worldview is not simply not *agreeable*, it is perpendicular to ours!"

"Just let her talk!" Quentin shouts. He sighs, letting his voice drop down to a normal level once more. "Natalie, could you maybe tell us why it is you don't believe in Greatfather?"

Natalie shakes her head. She ignores Brayon, looking straight at Quentin instead. "Could you tell me why you do?"

"I--" Quentin says, then falls silent. How is he supposed to answer that? Paternitism is all about faith, about belief that is not dependent upon sight. How can he show

evidence of Greatfather's hand in the world when Natalie could just as easily brush it away as mere coincidence? What constitutes *proof* of Greatfather?

Brayon lets out a low chuckle. "See?" he says. "She has no argument of her own. How can she explain the formation of the world without Greatfather? She can't just wave away matters of the heart by trying to shove the burden of proof back on us. Come on Quentin, let's get to our vigil." The First Messenger spins on his heel and strides over to the door.

Quentin follows behind, wanting to believe him at face value, thankful that he had not been forced to answer Natalie on his own. He trails a step to Brayon's rear, hoping that if he says nothing that Natalie will at least be able to stay in his house while he is gone. Right or wrong, she does not deserve to be left out in the storm to die.

Brayon yanks the door open onto a nightmare. The rain falls so dense and heavily that Quentin cannot see more than a few feet in front of him in any direction, and the gentle slope of the road that runs through the center of the town is now a rushing, roiling river with a beastly current. There is no returning to the chapel, not now. They have spent too long talking.

"Five Aspects," Brayon curses. "We're trapped."

V: LET GRIEF WEAR ITSELF OUT

Quentin finished the final bars of “Unshakeable Holy One” with a confident smile. He had nailed the hymn, he was sure of it, not a note out of tune. Dust floated through the air, dancing in the light that streamed in through the window. The light seemed to almost reflect off his face as he awaited Adrun’s comments.

Those comments were fewer than they had been when Quentin had started his training, and usually far less tense. More and more often, Adrun acted as though he felt Quentin would be ready when the time came to assume the responsibilities which came with the position of Hymnmaster. At the very least, time had mellowed the man. But the comments were not the only things that had changed about Adrun. Over the course of the past few years, Adrun had aged enough for ten. Where once he had been lean, now he was gaunt, his hands were spotted, and his fingers could no longer straighten completely. He sat more often than stood nowadays, and when he stood it was at an odd angle, hunched over as though to protect himself from an unseen chill in the air. His hair, which so recently had been gray, was now purely white, thinning at an alarming pace atop his scalp.

Adrun cleared his throat, meeting Quentin’s smile with his own. “I think you might have this hymn polished enough for now,” he said. “I’ll have to consult with the Messengers first, but how would you feel about leading the singing of ‘Unshakeable Holy

One' for the church sometime in the next few weeks? You could always use some practice before you're a Hymnmaster full time."

Quentin could hear his heart beating a feverish rhythm in his ears. He was aware that something like this would likely be coming his way soon. It was common practice in Paternitist churches to give potential new clergy something akin to a trial run, after all. Still, the prospect of it happening so soon, with so little warning, was enough to set him on edge.

Adrenaline coursed through him as he tried to calm himself down. It was only one song, and it was a song Adrun himself had said Quentin knew well. The fact that he was being groomed to be Adrun's successor was an open secret at best and common knowledge at worst, so Quentin did not have to worry himself about the element of surprise. Even if he cracked under the pressure and made a few mistakes, no one would judge him for them. It was his first time doing something like this, and no one else in the congregation would feel more comfortable leading the worship than him. He had been trained by Adrun. This was his purpose.

He allowed his mind for one brief moment to flick back to an early memory. The only reason he was here right now was because he had sung too loudly in a service over a decade prior. The idea of an incident when he was five affecting him when he was sixteen was almost too baffling to comprehend, but there it was, undeniable and unmistakable. What if-- the question was too dangerous to ask-- his so-called purpose was nothing more than an accident, a pure roll of the dice? What if he had sung at the

same volume as everyone else, or softer, or not at all? Would he still have been taken under Adrun's tutelage, trained in the scriptures by First Messenger Brayon, prepared to be the next Hymnmaster?

No, he told himself. Greatfather's ways were simply beyond human understanding. He was here because he was meant to be here. If Greatfather had other plans for Quentin, they would have made themselves known long before Quentin got this deep in his training.

"Well, Quentin?" Adrun said. "Do you feel ready?"

Quentin took a deep breath and replied, "Yes. I think I can handle this."

Adrun winked. "Good. So do I. I've said it before, and I'll say it again, you have a great talent for--" But his words were cut off by a raucous, racking heave of a cough. The Hymnmaster put a hand in front of his mouth and shut his eyes tight as the cough passed through him, leaving him shaking with tears glistening at the corners of his eyes. That cough was followed by another, stronger one, one which registered throughout his whole body.

Quentin wanted to go over to him, to put a hand on his shoulder, but the thought alone made him feel foolish. The young weren't supposed to comfort the old. That was backwards, wrong.

At last Adrun's fit subsided, and he took a few deep, tentative breaths as he regained his strength. "Well, you know what I was going to say," he finished, his voice raspy and

unnaturally thin. “Your lesson is done for the day. Go home, be with your family, eat an early meal. I can take care of myself.”

Later that day, Quentin was walking with Brayon through the Halvern marketplace. The square was bustling with life, and the throngs of people parted like so much water at the sight of the First Messenger. Brayon might not have been the head of the church, but he still commanded almost as much respect as Adrun.

“When you are a Hymnmaster,” Brayon said, “you must be aware of the people around you. Not everyone in Halvern comes to the chapel every week for services, but anyone in Halvern might. It is your duty as the spiritual head of the church to familiarize yourself with them. For example, Dinara over there--” Brayon gestured to a woman approaching middle age wearing a dress that would be better suited for someone fifteen years her junior-- “lost her husband in a fire three years ago and is now looking for a new one. She has been to the chapel twice in these three years, once for the funeral and another time to seek my advice in finding a suitor. I told her there were plenty of good men in the church. We haven’t spoken since.”

The road left the marketplace then wound up the side of a hill on the outskirts of town to where the chapel sat. The building was scarcely populated for the majority of the week, but today, there was someone at the front door. Quentin could not make out much of what the man was saying, as the man seemed to have been shouting until his voice was hoarse, but what Quentin could decipher were curses directed at Greatfather. Quentin

started forward to say something to the man, to get him to stop somehow, but Brayon put a hand in front of Quentin to block him.

“This man is in the midst of a battle for his soul,” Brayon explained, his voice hushed. “He is cursing Greatfather now, but he might return to the faith later. There is no one here to listen to him, save for the Holy One, so he is doing no harm. One thing that is for sure: if we stop him from this, he will never turn back.”

“What happened to him to make him curse Greatfather like this?” Quentin asked, dumbfounded.

“What would you do if you prayed to the Holy One every day for your wife to be healed and she never was? Would you be praising Him the next day? Grief is a powerful thing, and it can drive a wedge between ourselves and Greatfather. We must not let it fester where it can grow and turn to poison. Let grief wear itself out, Quentin.”

The next day, Quentin and Alise went down by the Pyrline River with a light lunch of bread and cheese. There were bushes of just-ripe berries that the pair collected along the way for dessert, and as the hill sloped down it was coated with blue-violet wildflowers, the finest of which Alise picked and placed in her hair. The riverbank had become their favorite meeting place over the past year, and they went down here at least once a week. It was perfect, just far enough away from town to be quiet, with a tree perfect for climbing whose branches loomed over the river. The Pyrline itself had a gentle current, and on the rare occasion Quentin fell in he had found it easy to get back out. About a

quarter mile north the river turned a bend into a small copse of bushy spruce trees, the antidote for a hot summer's day.

Today, though, they ate their lunch out in the open, munching lightly on the food from the basket provided by Alise's mother. It was exactly the best kind of day for being outside-- warm, but not hot, with a soft, teasing wisp of a breeze and cloudless skies overhead. Alise was as radiant as ever, a dimple forming in her left cheek as she laughed at a joke Quentin had made. The joke was not one that Brayon would find "becoming" of someone in Quentin's position, but it made Alise happy, which was a more than worthy reward. Alise's laugh was not particularly feminine, and was fuller than Quentin's. It started from her toes, gathered in her stomach, and burst from her throat with gusto. It was a laugh that on its own could set Quentin to hysterics.

Alise sighed as she recovered from the admittedly bawdy punchline, flopping back on the soft grass as if the power of Quentin's joke had knocked her down. She lay there, grinning, her chest heaving up and down as she regained her breath, and slapped Quentin's knee. The slap was a mannerism she had picked up almost immediately around him, and Quentin didn't mind the contact. "I didn't know you had that one in you, Hymnmaster," she said, the title taking on a hint of irony when it escaped her.

"Oh, I'm full of surprises," Quentin replied, lying down to her right. No part of their bodies touched, but Quentin could sense the closeness of her leg to his.

Alise did not say anything in return for a long time, staring up at the sky. Even though there were no clouds, there was something striking and beautiful about the blue,

about the light all around them. Alise's smile was no longer one of amusement, but one which sprang from someplace deeper, a place of serenity. She might have wanted to say something about how she felt, but Quentin got the sense that she was feeling something outside of language, outside of her abilities of description.

"Speaking of surprises," Quentin said a minute later, once the time was right, "It looks like I'll be leading a song in the next few weeks."

In an instant, Alise's attention snapped from the sky to Quentin, her eyes meeting his and lighting up. "Really? That's incredible! I didn't realize you were that far along."

Hearing the support from her was all the proof Quentin needed of his purpose. At the very least, his singing could make Alise smile, and that made it right. "Neither did I," he said, "but Adrun thinks I'm ready." His brow furrowed. "I'm starting to worry about him."

"Are his fits getting worse?"

Quentin nodded. "Yesterday he cut our lesson short after a bad one. He said he could manage, but I'm not sure anymore." This was not something he thought he could tell his parents, or anyone else but Alise. With Alise, it was easy to talk. She listened, her blue-green eyes always focusing on him when he spoke. And he could listen to her, too. When he talked with Brayon, or Adrun, or even his parents, it felt like they were trying to steer the conversation to achieve some goal. With Alise, conversations were not like chess, and Quentin could allow himself to relax.

“I’m not sure how much longer he has,” Quentin went on, saying the words he had not even admitted to himself until now. “When he gets sick, it lasts longer, and he never seems to get all the way back to where he was before. I think-- I think he’s having me lead some soon because he doesn’t believe he has much longer.”

Alise gulped, first waiting to see if Quentin had anything else he wanted to say, and then responded. “So you think you might be the Hymnmaster soon.” It wasn’t a question. “Quentin, I know we’ve talked about this before, but are you sure this is what you want to do with your life?”

Quentin shook his head. “It’s all I can do with my life. It’s a calling. I should be proud, or blessed, or filled with joy that I’ve been put in this position. But all I feel right now is afraid. I’m afraid I’ll make a mess of things, choose the wrong hymns, forget the words during a service, botch a prayer. What if I’m bad at it?”

Alise shrugged. “Haven’t you told me it’s not supposed to be about you? You’re leading worship, which should be about Greatfather. You’re supposed to be invisible.”

“You know that’s not how it works in reality,” Quentin said. “I agreed to be scrutinized for the rest of my life, for every little decision I make. I will live where the church decides I will live, I will sing what they want me to sing, and I will pray what they want me to pray. Or rather, what Brayon wants me to pray. But I suppose it’s got security. Once I’m there, I don’t have to worry about making too many wrong choices. There are ten Messengers to make sure my decisions are good.”

Alise squinted at him. “I can’t tell if you’re actually happy about that or not.”

“I’m not sure, either,” Quentin replied. “And it’s not *happy*, per se, it’s more like *content*. Satisfied that this will be my place in life, just like everyone decided it would be eleven years ago. And it’s not something I’ll hate, really it’s not. I’ll be doing something good, something that a lot of people will appreciate.”

“Then do it,” said Alise. “But don’t do it out of obligation. Do it for you.” The words hinted at something approaching a light blasphemy, but the way Alise said it made it better. “Whatever you choose, I’ll be there for you. If you go through with becoming the next Hymnmaster, I’ll be singing on the front row.” She smirked. “Or maybe the third row. You’ve heard me sing.”

Quentin smiled. “We all have different gifts,” he said. “But yeah, it’s not pretty.”

Alise slapped his knee harder in mock outrage, and for just a moment too long, her hand lingered. Quentin was aware all at once of just how close their faces were, almost touching really, close enough that he could feel her breath on his lips. “I’m glad you’re here,” Quentin said, his nose brushing hers accidentally.

“I’m glad I’m here, too,” Alise said with a wink.

“No,” Quentin protested, “I mean it. Alise, you’re--”

He tried to say something more, but her lips were in the way.

THE STORM

None of them have said much of anything since discovering that they are trapped in Quentin's house for the duration of the storm. They are spread out in a sort of triangle, with Brayon sitting at the table, Natalie perched on the second step leading up to the attic, and Quentin standing in a corner of the room. Each has a candle near them, but much of the rest of the room is left in darkness.

Until the house begins to flood.

Quentin does not notice at first. A thin trickle of water seeps in from the street through the inch-tall gap between the bottom of the door and the ground. None of them notice, being as deliberate as they are in avoiding eye contact with each other. Every one of them steals a glance at the others from time to time, and once or twice Quentin notices Natalie's head whip away an instant before being caught staring at him or Brayon. There is silence within the house, but the thunder outside booms loudly enough that they do not hear what little water can make it inside.

Natalie is the first to see what is happening and lets out a soft gasp, breaking the tension. Quentin and Brayon snap to attention, staring at her at once. In lieu of a verbal response, Natalie simply points to the area by the door, where more and more water slips inside.

The Hymnmaster's dwelling is constructed on a barely perceptible slope. Tonight, however, Quentin is able to perceive it, all of the water running back to the kitchen area.

“Get the food!” Quentin says, motioning to the kitchen, forgetting that he is not supposed to be talking at this moment, the argument with Brayon gone from his mind.

Natalie nods, although Brayon hesitates. Quentin and Natalie rush to the kitchen, their feet splashing through water the closer they get. Quentin is struck by just how cold the water is as it soaks through the toes of his boots. The shock galvanizes him to more immediate action. He dumps all of the remaining vegetables, in addition to half a loaf of bread and a mostly complete wedge of cheese he had bought a couple of days prior, into the basket and hands it to Natalie. “Take these upstairs,” he says. “If we flood too badly, this could be the only food we have for some time.” Natalie takes the basket from him and hurries over to the staircase.

Quentin bolts over to the table where Brayon is still seated, his boots making a noise somewhere between a *squish* and a *splish* every step of the way. He grabs an empty chair and hoists it over his head, then looks down at the unmoving Brayon, incredulous. “What are you still doing sitting down?” he asks. “Did you forget we’re flooding? If we leave the chairs and table down here, they’ll soak up the water and likely rot. I don’t think the church wants me to waste what I’ve been given. So help me!”

Brayon yawns. “You disrespected me,” he says. “You would forsake your duties to your church for this woman, this blasphemer you hardly know, and when I called her out on her heresy, you took her side. Is there something you need to tell me, Quentin? How is your faith? A body needs its head to function, and if you are falling away from

Greatfather's graces, you are obligated to tell me so I can find a new one. He won't have much training, but if the spirit's pure, that's what's most important."

Quentin's jaw drops. "I'm not leaving the faith! Time is of the essence, and if we waste any we could lose what few possessions I have. We can't get to the chapel tonight, because even my house is flooding. There is very little we can control. This is something we can. Don't let some disagreement get in the way of doing what we need to do right now!"

At that moment Natalie returns from the attic. "Why isn't he standing?" she asks Quentin, then grabs another empty chair and darts back to the stairs.

"I don't know," Quentin says. "He's being stubborn."

Brayon crosses his arms. "Just apologize to me, and I'll help you. As the *Canticle* says, we need to be '*united in spirit.*' Prove you're united with me and admit you were wrong to side with that woman."

Quentin lets go of the chair with one hand and slams his palm into the table. "Five Aspects, her name is Natalie, and we don't have time for any of this!"

Brayon glances around him, at the water that flows around his feet on its way to the far side of the room. "We have plenty of time. It'll be a long while yet before the flooding is bad enough to be a danger, and the storm might be over by the time that could happen. I think I can wait until you do what is necessary."

Natalie returns to Quentin's side and lifts the remaining unoccupied chair. "If he won't move, you should probably at least take care of what you can," she says.

Quentin shakes his head. "I'm not going to leave him here like this. What if the door breaks down, or there's a wind or a current or something?"

"He can move himself whenever he chooses," Natalie replies. "You don't have to sacrifice yourself for him."

"This isn't sacrifice, Natalie, this is pride," Brayon interrupts. Her name sounds as though it tastes foul on his lips. "Quentin here is a Hymnmaster, the spiritual leader of the church, with all the responsibilities that entails, and yet he is letting pride-- and perhaps your pretty face-- get in the way of apologizing to me like he is supposed to."

The fact that Natalie is a full decade older than Quentin seems not to matter to Brayon.

"Quentin, you need to act in a way befitting your position and purpose. If Adrun, may he lie in Greatfather's peace forever, saw you tonight, do you think he would be proud? It is as though you are *trying* to be a disappointment. Why can't you trust me like you should? As we have clearly seen in the past, your judgment is hardly beyond reproach, and--"

"Leave Alise out of this!" Quentin shouts, dropping the chair. His breathing is heavy. Thunder tolls outside like an enormous drum.

At last, Brayon stands. "Do not speak of your past sins, Hymnmaster," he says, his voice dangerously low. "The Holy One may forgive, but He never forgets. He and I are much alike in that regard." Brayon grabs the chair and makes his way over to the stairs, climbing up them without another word.

Natalie sets her chair down next to Quentin's. After a long pause, she says, "We should probably take the table up first, together. I don't think he'll help you much with that."

Quentin gulps, then looks down at his wet boots. "He has every right to chastise me," he mumbles. "I sinned, and I should have to account for that. Please-- don't ask me anything about Alise." He walks over to the other side of the table, and together, they lift it.

VI: TO TAKE THE LEAP

Quentin did not want to go inside the Hymnmaster's hut. Not today. The clear blue skies overhead served as a contrast to Quentin's mood as he walked to the place Adrun had been given to live by the church, carried by a mixture of obligation and dread. He dreaded seeing the old Hymnmaster like this, yes, but he dreaded leaving him alone even more. Quentin could not abandon Adrun, no matter how dire his condition became. The man had mentored Quentin for over a decade, had been closer to Quentin at times than Quentin's own parents. The two of them had shared a bond over the years, a love for music that entered the realm of the spiritual.

Although Quentin had been preparing for the past year to let Adrun go, it would still be one of the hardest things he had ever done. Each visit over the past few months had only served to make that clearer. Quentin was both relieved and haunted by the thought that there likely would not be many more such visits in his future. Adrun was slipping away, bit by bit, and there was not much left to go until there would be no coming back.

Quentin reached the Hymnmaster's dwelling and stopped. It took him a few moments to gather up his courage, and then he knocked. The door was not answered by Adrun-- for it had not been in some time-- but by a young physician, between ten and fifteen years older than Quentin. Quentin recognized the man at once. "Afternoon, Physic Sander," he said, giving the man a perfunctory nod.

The physician's expression was grim, and a few moments passed before Quentin registered it. Over the past few months, Adrun's condition had fluctuated between healthy and too infirm to move, and in that time Quentin had never seen a look like this from the man. It wasn't sorrow, or anger at Quentin coming at a bad time. It was worry.

"He's lucid," Sander told him, "but he's in a lot of pain. He had some troubling spasms in his back last night, brought on by a coughing fit, and he hasn't been able to set himself right since." Sander eyed Quentin up and down. "It's probably good you're here now."

That last sentence formed into a ball of ice which sat on Quentin's stomach. "This sort of thing has happened before," Quentin said. "He's always gotten better after a few days. What's wrong this time?"

Sander frowned. "Normally, the body is more adept at healing itself than Adrun's has been the past few months. Even a broken bone will mend if you put it in a splint and don't use it for a while. With age, that ability to recover diminishes, and age is something your friend has in abundance. His body is busy fighting the illness, however. He's fighting with all he has, but his body is losing the ability to tend to itself. Coupled with his inability to keep much of any food down, and... he is weakening, Quentin. Between the two of us, he may not recover from this one." The physician sighed. "Go on in, talk with him. You always cheer him up."

The inside of the hut was dim. Too much light hurt Adrun's eyes nowadays and gave him a migraine that left him shaking. The shutters were pulled closed, and the only light

in the room was from a few flickering candles that were in danger of going out at the slightest breeze. Adrun's bed had been pulled out into the center of the room, where his table had once been. The Hymnmaster's home, which had once been so warm and inviting to Quentin, now resembled a mausoleum.

Quentin heard Adrun's wheezing breaths before he saw him. The old man could no longer hold out notes, and perhaps the act of singing itself was beyond him now. If there were still lessons for Quentin to learn from him, the time for study was now past. Quentin had filled in for Adrun during services, with the aid of some of the more experienced members of the choir. Still, he could not help but feel woefully unprepared at the prospect of taking on the Hymnmaster position on his own.

Then he saw Adrun, the old man's chest rising and falling with labored effort. His back was propped up on a stack of three pillows, putting him almost in a sitting position. At the sight of Quentin, Adrun flashed a pained smile, wobbly and threatening to dissolve at any moment, and extended a skeletal hand in greeting. Quentin came over to his side, squatting down by the bed so they were at eye level.

Adrun's voice was soft as he said, "Quentin. It's good to see you." His voice was soft, and so thin that it barely held together. He lay a spotted hand on Quentin's shoulder, drawing him in closer. "How long has it been?"

"Three days, sir," Quentin replied, ashamed.

"Save your 'sir' for the people who can still look down over you," Adrun said, his chuckle turning into a cough that took almost thirty seconds to subside. "My name is

Adrun. I was Hymnmaster, and you are about to be Hymnmaster. We are equals now.”

The thought of that made Quentin want to recoil in terror, but he felt Adrun’s hand on his shoulder, insubstantial as it was, and stayed put. Then Adrun’s tone turned more somber.

“Quentin, I need to confess something to you. You’re soon to be the spiritual leader of the church, so you’ll do. I would rather cough my insides up than confess to Brayon or his sycophantic cronies.”

Quentin’s head whipped around as he made sure the physician had not heard. This alone would be grounds for an Unnaming, and he could not think of anything more awful than for the last thing the congregation saw of Adrun to be his Unnaming. “What is it?” he asked, timid.

Adrun’s eyes grew watery. “I am afraid,” he told Quentin in a trembling whisper. “I am afraid of death, of leaving everything I know behind.” He fell silent for a moment, choosing the right words. “I am afraid that I will die, and that there will be nothing after, that I will simply cease to be. I am afraid I am perched on the edge of oblivion, and that I have prepared my whole life for an eternity that is not guaranteed. I never prepared for letting go, for going into the dark without knowing there is another side. I thought I would be sure.”

Dread returned to Quentin. All his life, as long as Quentin had known him, Adrun had never expressed any doubts. The Hymnmaster had been a rock for Quentin to lean on whenever he was uncertain of his faith. He did not know what to do or say now that their positions were reversed. He searched his mind for any verse that could help him.

“In the Twenty-Third Canto, it says, *‘Death shall not separate Greatfather’s children from Him, for He has granted life everlasting to all who believe.’*” Quentin was paraphrasing, but he got the message across. “I know you, si-- Adrun, and if there is anyone with a guarantee of life everlasting, it is you.”

Adrun shook his head. “Those are just words,” he said. “Men could have written them without divine inspiration. I wasn’t there, how would I know?” He coughed, but he got it under control quickly. “Quentin, I am afraid because of how easy it would be for everything we believe in to be a lie. How am I supposed to fight that?”

Quentin gulped. “I don’t know,” he said.

Adrun sighed. “I’m sorry. I should not burden you with this now. I should not have spent your whole life grooming you to be my successor, not when I wasn’t sure of what I believed, and Quentin, I was never sure. What if I wasted your life?” His fingers dug into Quentin’s shoulder, finding strength Quentin did not know the old man still had.

“You didn’t,” Quentin said, floundering for anything that might help. “You made me better than I was before. That’s enough.”

“But what if I’ve been wrong? I’ve misled you. Not just you, but the whole congregation. I can’t let it go. But it might all be nothing. My legacy...” His voice trailed off into heaving.

Sander grabbed Quentin’s other shoulder. “I think it’s time for you to leave,” he said. “You’re upsetting him.” Quentin was rushed out the door without a chance to say

another word. The door was shut behind him, but Quentin could still hear the muffled sound of Adrun coughing.

The first place he went was Alise's house. A few minutes later, and the two of them were on their way down to the Pyrline. Quentin did not explain himself, nor did he need to. Alise could see he was in pain, and without a word, she went with him. They did not bring anything to eat, and hunger was the last thing on either of their minds.

They had kissed since that sunny day a year ago, many times, but had not done much else. Quentin was terrified by the prospect that the two of them would be seen by Brayon or another of the Messengers. He had been told as a child to guard against desire, and now he finally understood what that meant. Quentin prayed on a daily basis, and every time he asked Greatfather to lessen his desire for Alise, but for now Greatfather had left the control up to him. She was beautiful, and he wanted her. He allowed himself to admit that when he was alone. He thought she wanted him too, wanted him in that same way. Maybe someday they would marry, and act on those desires, but for now they were young, and even at the age of seventeen Quentin was aware of the innocence of youth and the fact that he would only get one chance to be this age. Today, Alise made him feel alive, and that was what mattered.

But now wasn't the time for such ruminations.

They sat near the copse of trees, the branches casting crisscross shadows on them in silence. After what felt like forever, Alise took Quentin's hand and gripped it tightly,

running her thumb over the knuckles. She met his eyes, hers filled with concern. “He was worse today,” she said. It wasn’t a question.

Quentin nodded, holding back tears. “He’s fading. The physician told me he might not recover.” He paused, but a squeeze of Alise hand beckoned him to continue, to let it all out. “He said he’s not sure if there’s an afterlife. He’s scared, Alise, and I don’t know what to say to him anymore.” He was shaking now. “I hope he’s wrong, but--”

“It’s okay to have doubts,” said Alise. “Especially towards the end. It’s one thing to believe, but to take the leap, even when you can’t see the bottom, is another thing entirely.”

“It’s not okay for me,” Quentin murmured. “I’m supposed to lead the church, but I don’t know how. If Greatfather-- if it all was just made up, then I’m not doing this for anyone but me. Then I’m alone.”

Alise reached out with her other hand and turned his face to hers. “I’m here. I’m real. You can always sing for me.” She moved in to him so that their foreheads were touching. “I promise, you will never be alone, Quentin.”

He kissed her then, not the playful kisses that they had shared on sunny days but needful ones, fast and frantic. He breathed her in, immersed himself in life. She was there, at a moment’s notice, whenever he was bored or worried or lonely, and if she came to him, he knew he would do the same. Then those three words, which had been fighting to escape for so long, escaped from his mouth: “I love you.” Then again, to make them real: “I love you, Alise.”

Alise sat back from Quentin for a moment, reading his features, sizing him up. Then she pulled him close in an embrace. “And I love you, Quentin. It’s good to say.”

When they returned from the Pyrline, they passed by Adrun’s home as a shortcut. There were at least five Messengers outside, peering in the doorway in a solemn hush, the tree in front of the simple dwelling casting odd shadows over them. Quentin left Alise and walked over, propelled by curiosity and horror. Just then, Brayon came outside, his expression grim. He saw Quentin standing there and strode over to him.

Brayon kneeled down in front of Quentin, eyes wide. All the answer Quentin needed was there. Quentin shook his head, disbelieving. Brayon closed his eyes and stood, speaking to the whole group:

“Hymnmaster Adrun Derrison, spiritual leader of the Halvern branch of Paternitism and keeper of the faith, has passed into eternity. May Greatfather keep him close to His heart forever and ever. Amen.”

THE STORM

The attic is more cramped than Quentin remembers, especially with the table and chairs up here. The bed has been left downstairs, deemed too difficult to carry up. The attic's thin wooden floor is interrupted frequently by crossbeams, and Quentin is not sure how much weight it can hold. The roof is in desperate need of repair, and there are leaks dotted throughout the claustrophobic space. The environment heightens Quentin's ever-present discomfort, as it appears to do for both Natalie and Brayon.

Natalie, as usual, is the first one to speak. Her habit of breaking silences is fast becoming one of the only constants in Quentin's day. Or rather night, since if Quentin has to guess he would say the sky would have gotten dark by now regardless of inclement weather. "You never answered my question earlier. You almost did, and then Brayon interrupted you, and the storm trapped us and we were put into a frenzy. But I genuinely want to know. Why do you believe what you believe?"

It is all Quentin can do not to groan. His hopes of Natalie's question being forgotten are in vain. Once again, however, it is Brayon who does the answering for him.

"We are in some amount of danger at present," the First Messenger says. "This storm is a bad one. At any moment, the roof could cave in, or the wind could send one of these walls toppling on us. And yet, here you are, making yet another misguided attempt to distract us by having us question our faiths. You never addressed the matter of why you don't believe, and that was asked you first. Do not try to turn the situation back on us

when you are the one most at fault. Is this what you call a debate where you are from, you twisted seductress?"

"I'm not seducing either of you!" Natalie snaps, recoiling. "Is this what you think seduction is? I don't even know you, and more to the point, now you're trying to distract me!"

"I was simply turning your own trick back on you," Brayon replies coolly. "Either way, you are the first who should answer."

Natalie sighs, calming down. "I suppose it amounts to the fact that I can look around the world and see it for the incredible gift it is without needing an explanation. The world is big enough without some almighty being watching over all of us all the time and making sure we don't stray too far out of line. To be honest, I sort of feel as though having a deity cheapens the experience a bit."

Brayon sputters. "How exactly are you supposed to explain the shape of the world and its position in the heavens? If there is no Greatfather, then how do we have mountains or rivers, rain in the summer and snow in the winter? If there is no Greatfather, then why is there a storm raging outside right now?"

Quentin holds onto Brayon's argument, hoping against hope that Natalie has no counter. This is one of his fail-safes: the very existence of the world begs the existence of a creator.

But Natalie is not so easily appeased. "I'm not altogether opposed to the idea of there being a greater force at work in the cosmos," she says. "Everything being just so due to

pure chance seems unlikely to me. But what if the world itself is the higher power? What if there is no sentient Greatfather, and all you are seeing is simply Nature? What we witness each day could be nothing more or less than the gears of the universe turning. That they turn in such a way that I can live and breathe and smell and taste and feel is beauty enough for me.”

Quentin is paralyzed. Natalie is wrong, *has* to be, no matter how poetic her argument may be. Brayon’s responses are the same ones Quentin has heard his entire life, and they make sense to him, but the way the First Messenger gives them rankles Quentin. Natalie is a guest, and Brayon should not attack her so savagely.

It is at this moment Quentin realizes both Natalie and Brayon are staring at him, awaiting his input. Quentin sits in the failing light of the attic, water dripping in unseen corners behind him, unable to say a word.

“Well?” Natalie asks. She must have asked this before, and Quentin had just not heard her until now. Quentin has the discomfiting sensation of being pulled in two directions, Natalie yanking his arms and Brayon tugging on his ankles. He has to give an answer, but there is nothing he can say which will end this conversation in a peaceful manner.

“There has to be a Greatfather,” Quentin says at last. “I’ve felt Him. I’ve been certain of His presence. It isn’t quantifiable, but it’s enough to convince me.” He wrings his hands. “But I want to appreciate nature without trying to see Greatfather’s hand in everything. I would rather the storms be a quirk of nature than for them to be Greatfather

passing judgment on those who have sinned. It would be so much easier.” He pauses, collecting his thoughts, and notices Brayon is glaring at him. “Still. I have dedicated my life to service of Greatfather. I wouldn’t do that for some fantasy. I’m not a liar. I think there’s enough evidence for Greatfather’s existence to be found just by looking at all the lives that have been changed because of Him.” He quiets. His answer is enough for him, yes, but what about Brayon? Quentin is on the edge of being Unnamed, and he cannot afford to cross the First Messenger too much.

Natalie smiles. “I like your reason better than his,” she says, gesturing to a sullen Brayon. “But it doesn’t convince me. All I know is that Greatfather means a lot to you. But a fiction can change a life, I think. There have been a lot of good books I’ve read, books that speak to me and affect the way I see the world. What if the *Holy Canticle* is nothing beyond that? It’s something I could live with.” Quentin’s stomach drops. His prayers that Natalie would be on his side go unanswered. Both she and Brayon seemed to be belittling him. “If the *Canticle* were just something written down by men to make the world better, it would explain the inconsistencies.”

Brayon chuckles. “There are no such inconsistencies in the Scriptures, only those that are perceived by people who have not been graced by Greatfather’s light of discernment.”

“Well, what about this?” says Natalie. “In the Fourth Canto, it says, ‘*The Holy One loves all with an equal love, and He would have His people raise up those in jeopardy and shower them with gifts.*’ But in the Twenty-Seventh Canto, it says, ‘*To all things He*

has given them a place, and none should tamper with His perfect placement.’ It sounds to me like in the earlier verse, Greatfather wants us to give to the poor, but in the later verse, it says the poor are poor for a reason, and we shouldn’t change that. Which one of those should I follow? Which do you? Because I don’t think you can follow both.”

Brayon bristles. “You’re just taking verses out--”

“Of context?” Natalie shakes her head. “I’m doing nothing of the sort, and you know it. I managed to get my hands on an actual, physical copy of the *Canticle*, and I read it from start to finish. Interesting read. So why don’t you make more copies, let other people read it? As of now, they are going on what you tell them each week. There’s no context there. Do you just want to hold onto power?”

“That’s *enough*, Natalie!” Quentin says. “Don’t say anything you can’t take back.”

“You think it’s about power for me?” says Brayon.

“I do,” Natalie replies. “As First Messenger, you are the one responsible for communicating what is written in the *Canticle* to your congregation. The Hymnmaster may be the spiritual leader of the church, and you may be centered around worship, but it’s the First Messenger’s voice that people hear in their ears days later. That’s a kind of power that no man should have, regardless of intentions.”

Quentin puts a hand on her shoulder. “Natalie. Stop attacking Brayon. He has given his life to serve Greatfather, not himself. He trained me. Any questions you have about the *Canticle*, he can answer. He’s the only person most of Halvern needs when it comes to Scripture.”

When Natalie speaks again, her voice is softer, gentler. “I just want to know how you can be sure of everything,” she explains.

“It’s not about being sure,” Quentin says, “it’s about feeling something that transcends doubt. It’s knowing without knowing.”

“That sounds like something Brayon told you,” Natalie chuckles.

“It is,” Brayon says. “I wouldn’t expect you to understand the true meaning of faith. If you’re sure, then there’s no need for faith. Faith is you walking on this floor without thinking about it, even though it could crumple beneath you at any moment. You’re not sure, but you still are comfortable with taking the risk. It’s the same with Greatfather, only He’s much more reliable than the floor. But for ignorant folk like you, there’s no understanding. There’s no true faith.” He gives her a condescending look. “Don’t listen to her, Quentin. She is a temptation of the world, here to draw your eye before kicking your legs out from under you. You are greater than that temptation, Quentin.”

Quentin sits between Brayon, both of them staring at him in expectation, waiting for him to choose a side.

VII: SPIRITUAL RICHES

“Good morning and welcome to our service,” Brayon said, his hands upraised. The morning sunlight streamed in through the stained glass windows behind him, illuminating the triangular structure with a warm, prismatic glow. Quentin stood next to the First Messenger, wishing he felt less out of place behind the altar. “Today, we come together for a time of loss, a time of remembrance, and a time of renewal. It is a blessing to be with you all on this fateful morning, as we look forward, into the future.”

Brayon placed a hand on Quentin’s shoulder as he continued. “As you are no doubt all aware, our beloved Hymnmaster Adrun Derrison succumbed at last to the ailments that corrupted his temporal body earlier this week. While his presence will be sorely missed in this town, he is now at a worshipful rest in the arms of the Holy One, may he stay there forever.” His solemn tone brightened suddenly. “But, as evidence of Greatfather’s perfect will, his successor has finished his training and is now at last ready to be the spiritual leader he was called to be. I present to you your new Hymnmaster, Quentin Marsh!”

It was not entirely true that Quentin’s training had been concluded this week. Upon Adrun’s death, Brayon had told him that experience was the superior teacher and said that Quentin knew enough. No matter how unsure Quentin was of this statement, he was here now, behind the altar and in front of the congregation’s chorus of *amen*. He felt like

a fraud, like his inexperience would show to everyone. But there would be no stepping down now, no chance to take back his vows, not once the church knew his place.

Brayon held up a hand for silence, and the church complied. “Now Quentin will recite the Hymnmaster’s Oaths before you all, and will accept his purpose in the eyes of Greatfather.” He brought out his copy of the *Holy Canticle*, a text Quentin was now confident he knew, and held it in front of Quentin. Quentin placed his right hand on the book, looking straight at Brayon and holding his left hand up. He gulped and took the plunge.

“I, Quentin Marsh, swear allegiance to Greatfather with my life. I swear before His people to uphold the *Canticle*’s teachings in all I do. I swear to lead through worship, so that man’s heart might be swayed by the power of Greatfather. I swear all this upon the word of the Holy One and His Five Aspects, may they endure for all time.” Quentin had spent hours practicing this short speech until he knew it by heart, and he was grateful for this now that he was standing here, so exposed.

Brayon nodded sagely. “And we have heard your oaths, Quentin Marsh,” he recited. “On this day, with Greatfather as our witness, we swear to lift you up and follow you in matters of the spirit. In faith, you will be our guide, for any power you have been given comes directly from the Holy One. So swear we all.”

The congregation repeated, “So swear we all.”

Brayon smiled and patted Quentin on the back. “As appointed by Greatfather Himself, with the discernment of the Messengers of the Holy Paternitist Church, I present

Hymnmaster Quentin Marsh!” Rousing applause followed his words, and Brayon nudged Quentin forward to accept their accolades.

All of a sudden, it was too real. The chapel was too bright, the floor too hard, his legs too wobbly. Hymnmaster Adrun, his mentor, was dead. Quentin’s job now was to fill the gap Adrun had left as best he could. Even after all the time he had spent around Adrun, the old man had seemed almost faraway, an untouchable figure that not even his own fearful murmurings on his deathbed could mar. How was Quentin supposed to take over from Adrun? How could he achieve that level of polish in his music, that level of piety in his life-- even if, as Adrun had indicated, it was not altogether in earnest? The task was insurmountable.

Then Quentin saw Alise sitting in the second row, as close as she could get without infringing on the Messengers’ territory. She was flashing him a serene smile, full of warmth and confidence and assurances. Full, Quentin realized with a great swelling within him, of love. As she had said she would be, she was here for him, here at his most stressful moment. When everyone else expected something of him, she was pleased with who he already was. Quentin was certain things would become more difficult for them, now that he was Hymnmaster, but he couldn’t think of that now. Now, there was only her, only her eyes and smile and a voice that, if Quentin were able to pick it out over the crowd, would be all he needed to know everything would be all right. The future’s troubles could wait. He had a job to do.

Quentin closed his eyes and inhaled. The chapel was still in anticipatory silence. He tried to remember all the days he had sang for Alise down by the Pyrline, the days when she would sing with him, playfully and joyously out of tune. He remembered what she had said to him when he had first met her, two years ago. “*You’re Quentin, aren’t you? The one who sings.*”

Quentin exhaled. “Let us rise and begin worship,” he said, then began “Greatfather’s Faithfulness.”

Greatfather’s faithfulness,

A river within,

Purity true that can vanquish all sin!

That morning, as Quentin led worship, Alise was the only one there.

When Quentin finished the first set of songs, the choir following along as if he had been Hymnmaster for years instead of minutes, Brayon took his place behind the altar. As Quentin sat himself down in the front row of seats, he reflected on what he had done right and wrong so far. There had been no major mistakes that he could think of, nothing which would have tipped off the congregation’s sense of error and distracted them from staying in the spirit of worship.

It was only now, with a full set under his belt, that Quentin could come to terms with just how well Adrun had trained him. He did not let any notes that were slightly off-pitch jar his rhythm, and from a technical standpoint he was in a good enough place to sing the hymns without drawing attention to himself. It was a delicate balance, leading worship.

He had to be proficient enough in the melodies to be able to sing the notes without missing a lyric, but he could not be so flashy as to make the congregation think of him instead of the words they were singing. He had to make sure the choir followed him, but could not be too extreme in the movements of his hands. Striking the balance in front of everyone was more exhausting than he had expected.

Once his mental checklist had been completed, Quentin turned his focus back to Brayon's message for the week. "It has come to my attention," Brayon announced in a voice that he never used with Quentin, something almost false in its exuberance, "that there are those in this church who would neglect their prayers. Let me remind you, prayer is not optional for the true believer. If you aren't praying to Greatfather on at least a daily basis, you need to examine your relationship with Him!" At this, a chorus of *amen* went up, punctuation to Brayon's sentence. "Let me ask you a question: Would you go a day without talking to your wife? Of course not! Would you go a day without talking to your children? I'm going to assume you'll give the same answer! When you were a child, did you let a day go by without talking to your father? You wouldn't think of it! So why would we treat the Holy One, who created the world and everything and everyone in it, who has promised us an eternity by His side, as less than our wives, our children, our fathers? Does that make sense to you? No! Remember, Greatfather is *our* father. That fact is so important, it's one of His Five Aspects! If you would talk to your earthly father, why would you neglect your heavenly one?"

“As it says in the Fourteenth Canto, ‘*My children need only call on Me, and I will answer.*’ Those are the words of Greatfather Himself! They carry power that mine cannot. They carry power that a Hymnmaster’s cannot. If Greatfather says something, that means it *has* to be true. He will *make* it true. Why would you ever let that go to waste? The Holy One offers a relationship that is greater than all others we can have. He shaped the world, and He can shape your life. All you need to do is pray!”

The message wound down from there, and soon Brayon was praying over the church, that they would repent and run toward Greatfather’s will for their lives. Most messages ended like that. As the congregation’s heads were bowed, Brayon waved Quentin back up to the altar. Brayon called for a minute of silent prayer and whispered in Quentin’s ear. “Make the next hymn something slow. I want to go to a few individuals and give them special attention.” This was a tactic the First Messenger used from time to time. If someone was picked out by him, they knew to work harder on their devotion in the future. Brayon never visited anyone he thought was walking along the path of righteousness.

Quentin led the congregation in a rendition of “Host Most Merciful,” a hymn slow enough for Brayon’s liking, and followed it up with “Father of Light” and “Spirit of Joy,” a more upbeat hymn which served as a good finale to the service. Through the final three hymns, Quentin remained on point and in pitch, and the choir followed his every direction. He even improvised a retard at the end of “Spirit of Joy” before bouncing the tempo back up to the usual, just for fun, and the choir did not need for him to tell them

what he wanted them to perform. By the end of the service, Quentin was vastly more confident in his abilities as the new Hymnmaster.

He started making his way over to Alise but was stopped along the way by his parents. Quentin had forgotten them, seated where they were on the edge of the third row. They had agreed for him to be set on this path, but they had not known how to properly support him along the way, and their words of encouragement had become hollow to him over the years. Of course they were supposed to love and encourage him. They were his parents. He was their child. They would be reflected in how he acted. And besides, it had not taken long for his knowledge of music to far outstrip theirs to the point where they were having conversations about his progress on two separate levels.

“That was wonderful!” Olinda gushed, pulling Quentin into a tight hug. Quentin did not smirk, although he knew that was the extent of what she could say about his work this morning. She meant well.

Rawling squeezed Quentin’s shoulder in much the same way as Brayon had over the years. “Son, I knew it then, and I know it now. You have a gift. You’re lucky to have found your calling at your age. And such a noble calling.” This, Quentin could appreciate more. Rawling was not able to comment on the musicality of what Quentin had done, but at least he did not try. Quentin could take those words; they had value.

“Thank you,” Quentin said, smiling and extricating himself from the pair of them. All he wanted was to find Alise and talk with her. He could be honest with her, and he knew she would be honest with him.

Brayon stopped him in his path. “Good work this morning,” he said, pulling Quentin into a vacated alcove along the wall. “Adrun would be proud of you.” Quentin nodded and stared at the floor, unsure of how he could possibly reply to that.

Quentin did not have to, however, as Brayon withdrew from his robes a small cloth sack and handed it to Quentin. Quentin took it and undid the drawstring. Inside were no fewer than a dozen gold coins, more money than Quentin had seen in the possession of any one man at a time. “What is this?” Quentin hissed.

“These are your wages,” Brayon answered. “You pulled together two sets of hymns on short notice, and you did it all while under considerable emotional duress. You should be getting more, but today’s tithes were light.”

Quentin’s eyes darted around, making sure no one else was looking. “This is too much! I thought the clergy were supposed to live by humble means!”

Brayon frowned. “We do. This money is for you to invest however you see fit. You can use it to buy food, to repair your new dwelling, to support a local business, even to donate to the politician of your choosing.” Quentin listened to this speech with mounting horror.

“This money isn’t ours, it’s Greatfather’s!” Quentin protested, aghast.

“And you are now His servant. As am I. This is a payment in return for.. let’s say your abundance of spiritual riches. They will bring in new people to the church, and so deserve an earthly equivalent. Do you understand?”

“I can’t take this.”

“You already have,” Brayon said, eyebrows raised. “I expect to see you for lunch in two days’ time to discuss next week’s service.” And with that he was gone. Quentin stood in the alcove, holding onto the sack of gold, then realized he had an alarming amount of money out in the open and tucked the sack inside his robes.

The chapel had begun to empty, and there was no sign of Alise. Quentin had kept her waiting too long. This wouldn’t do. Quentin needed to find her, to talk to her, and do it as soon as he could. Too much had happened today to go without discussion. He felt the bulge of the coin purse against his ribs, an admission of guilt before Greatfather. He had to figure out what to do with *that*.

THE STORM

Quentin's eyes dart back and forth between Natalie and Brayon in the stillness of the attic, surrounded by the tempest outside. If anything, the storm is becoming more furious, and in that dim, cramped space Quentin feels more trapped than ever before.

"This is your house, Quentin," Brayon says, impatience coloring his terse voice. "You have the authority to remove anyone you choose. If you don't want to turn her out, you can still force her to be quiet. At the very least, silence her with your words. Greatfather sees all, and there is no hiding from Him. Be certain that He is watching you right now. Turn away from this common wench's false theology while He witnesses. Tell her what the truth is."

"I'm not trying to step on your faith, Quentin," Natalie protests. "I'm not here to threaten you in any way. Just because I don't believe in Greatfather, that doesn't mean I intend to take your belief away. Far from it! If belief in an all-powerful deity is good for you, then by all means keep believing. We should all do what is best for others and ourselves, in that order. All you have to do is be honest."

Brayon snorts. "Don't lie, you think it would be honesty for him to renounce his faith, the faith of his father, and his father's father! Paternitism has united the people, not just of Halvern, but of this entire region! In the face of that, how can you say that Greatfather does not exist?"

Natalie shakes her head. “I’m just saying what I feel, what makes sense to me. I had no plans to argue with anyone tonight. But, you know what, considering you’ve been hounding me ever since you walked through the door, calling me a wench and a harlot and a temptress, I think I’ll take you up on your offer.” She clears her throat. “First of all, you didn’t exactly address my earlier qualms concerning inconsistencies in the *Holy Canticle*. I don’t need you to be an apologist, I’d just like for you to have a reason. Second, that phenomenon you just described, of all the people being united in one area? That’s what any religion does. You don’t believe all of those are true, do you? Third, and perhaps most importantly, if Paternitism truly does change lives, then why is it that you have spent the whole night picking petty fights and calling me names? I have a hard time believing any god would approve of that sort of behavior. So call me a heathen, call me a cynic, but I’m just not convinced.”

A stunned quiet falls over the trio once Natalie’s speech is finished. Natalie is left breathless, due to the speed at which the words escaped her mouth. She seems astonished that she has said any of that, but she could not hold the words back anymore.

For Quentin’s part, Natalie’s speech has done nothing to convince him of her point of view. Up until now, she has been the civil one, and Brayon has been the one with the unguarded tongue. Now, they are both on the same level, and still looking to Quentin for some sign of agreement with one of them. Quentin searches for anything that might serve as a distraction, and is overjoyed upon spotting a new leak from the roof. Water

streams down just behind Brayon, coming dangerously close to the wick of the nearest candle.

“Careful!” he says. “The candle!” The first words he has spoken in Greatfather knows how long. Brayon leaps into action, shielding the candle with his body. Although the candle stays lit, the room becomes noticeably dimmer as a result.

Quentin turns to Natalie once the crisis is averted. “By and large, we’re good people, Natalie. You don’t need to treat us as though we’re some mob. Brayon is just flustered today, that’s all.”

Natalie sighs. “He isn’t the only one I’m talking about, not really.”

“In case you’ve forgotten, I’m sitting over here,” Brayon huffs. “Gossiping about someone while they’re in the room is generally considered bad form, by the way.”

“Let her talk,” Quentin says. “You both should have a chance to speak your piece.”

“Thank you,” says Natalie. The tension in the room has lessened somewhat, now that both she and Brayon have had a chance to air their grievances with each other. “As I was saying, there are some things I’ve noticed about those who practice Paternitism that don’t make much sense to me. How do you justify the way the religious folk here flock to any new bauble or trinket that goes on sale? It keeps the jewelers and carpenters in business, but it doesn’t seem to fit with the Paternitist theme of looking forward to a life after this one.”

Quentin shrugs. “I think it’s more about the fact that we’re assured of an eternity. If you knew that once you died, nothing in this world would matter and you would spend an

eternity someplace different, how would you act? Wouldn't you at least consider taking part in as much as you can in the short time you're here? You can't take wealth with you to eternity, so what's the sense in being frugal?"

"You don't seem to be of that mindset," Natalie replies.

"I can't be," Quentin explains. "As Hymnmaster, I'm supposed to be focused on Greatfather. How can I be focused on Him if I'm spending all my time concerning myself with the temporal things around me?"

Natalie frowns. "Can't you see the contradiction there? You, who are closer to Greatfather, think that materialism is a detriment. But the people in your congregation are nothing if not materialist. How do you reconcile that?"

"Religion should not be judged solely by those who practice it," says Quentin, drawing from his years of tutelage under Brayon. Natalie would not listen to Brayon speaking these words, but she still might listen to him, if he keeps his head. "No one is perfect. The *Canticle* affirms that, in case you didn't already know. We are not infallible, and as such, sometimes we make mistakes when interpreting the word of Greatfather. As it is written in the Twenty-Second Canto, '*Do not presume to see as the Holy One sees, to think as He thinks, or to feel as He feels.*' Greatfather is not human, He is something far greater, and his worth should not be calculated by looking at us lesser mortals. Does that clear anything up for you?"

“Not well enough, but you’re satisfied, and that’s what matters.” Natalie stretches her arms up above her head as a few droplets of water hit the floor beside her. “But aren’t you concerned about the damage the storm will do to your home?”

“You don’t have anything,” Quentin answers. “Yet you seem to be happy enough with your life. I can trust in Greatfather’s provision.” Even as he says the words, they feel hollow. “Besides, I don’t place all that much value in *things*.”

“And Greatfather will spare those most loyal to Him,” Brayon interjects. “His plan for Quentin is not yet complete, and until it is, Greatfather will make sure he has everything he needs to succeed.”

Natalie’s eyebrows shoot up. “I don’t care for the idea that we’re just pawns to be used for some unseen deity’s amusement, though. I’d rather have no deity and be sure I have free will.”

“Oh, we have free will,” Brayon says. “All our choices are our own. Greatfather simply has the ability to influence things in ways we do not and cannot see.”

Natalie shakes her head. “That seems like an excuse.”

Quentin senses the conversation becoming more heated, and he cuts in before this can happen. “It’s perfectly fine for us to have debates about matters of the faith. After all, that’s how we grow. As it says in the Ninth Canto, ‘*Do not be afraid to put your faith to the test, for the strongest steel is forged in fire.*’ If we are respectful, we can all improve.”

“Don’t bother quoting the *Canticle* at her, Quentin,” Brayon says, gruff. “Those holy words will just fall on deaf ears. Remember the Twenty-Ninth Canto, where it says, ‘*Those who choose to be blind will not see. So it is with the heart.*’”

“So you’re saying if your argument doesn’t make sense, then it’s my fault?” Natalie snaps.

Quentin groans inwardly. There is no keeping the two of them from the intensity of their argument. It is time for him to put his foot down, although he is not certain it will work with Brayon. “This is my house!” he says. “You are my guests! If you cannot treat each other with respect, you will no longer be welcome here!”

Brayon wheels on him. “I have come to this house since before you were born, boy,” he spits. “Don’t act like you can keep me from here. You forget to whom you speak.”

“Five Aspects, we disagree all the time!” says Quentin. “That doesn’t make us enemies. In case you’ve forgotten, we’ve had our debates ever since I was appointed Hymnmaster! We’ve even debated on the true nature of the *Holy Canticle*, and neither of us were Unnamed. Why can’t we move beyond this tonight?”

“Because you’re standing on the edge,” Brayon says. “You have been neglecting your duties as of late. Even when you are present, it’s not like it was eight years ago when you started. I’ve noticed, and I’m sure there are plenty of members of the congregation who have as well. Quentin, I worry for the state of your soul.”

VIII: THIS IS REAL

Quentin's sat in Brayon's study, watching the First Messenger pace back and forth like a wolf chasing a scent. In his two years as Hymnmaster, Quentin had gotten used to the pacing. Brayon never paced around Quentin when he was younger; he reserved such outward shows for his peers. Since both of them were now members of the clergy, Brayon could from time to time allow the façade to slip a little. The business with the tithes had only been the beginning. Now, a couple of times a month, Quentin was allowed a glimpse behind the curtain of Brayon's persona.

Today, Brayon's pacing was particularly bad. Whenever he reached a wall, he would sigh, make a soft *tsk* sound with his tongue on the roof of his mouth, and turn around. Through it all, he maintained eye contact with Quentin, a sensation Quentin found unnerving.

At last, he pulled to a stop and addressed Quentin: "I have begun to worry that your heart has not been entirely *in* worship as of late." He put a hand out to keep Quentin from speaking. "Don't start up and disagree with me yet. Hear me out. When you started, you were always so enthusiastic. You spent hours running hymns by me, scouring your mind to find the best songs for each week's Message. You worked tirelessly with the choir, as though you had to earn your respect. I suppose to some degree that was true, but your title alone would be enough to sway most of them to your

side. If there were any who doubted your abilities, by the end of the first month they trusted you.

“The past month or so, everything has been different. You rarely seek my advice, choosing whatever hymns you fancy singing each week. The choir has too little time to practice, which would be problematic if we ever sang different hymns. You seem to have twenty-five or so hymns you choose from, and that list runs out in no time at all. What happened, Quentin? Is there something amiss in your walk with Greatfather?”

Quentin shook his head. “It’s not Greatfather,” he said tentatively. “It’s us. It’s our church, and the way we treat others.”

Brayon’s brow furrowed. “I’m not sure I follow.”

“The *Holy Canticle* is not all that long, so last month I decided to read it again. You always talk about how it gives you something new to dissect every time you go through it, and I was hoping for a little more enlightenment. You said once that Scripture is like a whetstone; it sharpens everyone who comes into contact with it. I didn’t want to become dull.”

“I stand by those words,” said Brayon, the faintest hint of unease coming through in his voice.

“As well you should,” Quentin replied. “But there were some passages that made me uncomfortable. Are you familiar with the Ninth Canto, where it says, ‘*Give to the wanting until they can want no more, for Greatfather’s will is to satisfy*’? I ask this because I can’t recall you ever using it in any of your sermons, and it seems to go against

our hefty wages. Why should we pay ourselves so much when there are those in certain parts of Halvern that may not eat tonight?”

“Now Quentin, you must consider both context and implications,” Brayon said. “We are spiritual leaders. Our whole lives are spent connecting people to the Holy One, which is a greater gift than some monetary trifle. That passage is meant for those in the congregation who care only for themselves.”

“Then why not preach on it?” Quentin asked. “Unless, that is, you worry they will take you to task for the staggering amounts of gold you give yourself.”

“You see my humble means!” Brayon protested. “You know I hold onto very little of that money. I invest, Quentin! The Twenty-Third Canto tells us to be responsible with what we are given in this life, and I am!”

“But the *Canticle* never says what a Messenger or a Hymnmaster should be paid,” Quentin retorted.

“The value of currency is not the same now that it was five hundred years ago!” Brayon snapped. “Giving a specific number could leave one generation of the clergy flush with gold and the next in abject poverty! This way, we can live within comfortable, manageable means. And even if your unfounded worries *do* happen to be right, you give back to the poor with your wages anyway! You’re not sinning by anyone’s estimates!”

“And what if it’s not about the amount?” said Quentin. “The Second Canto advises us to, ‘*Let every action be driven by the desire to draw close to Him who gives us life*’! Maybe it’s about the motivation behind our actions? We shouldn’t just be complacent!”

Brayon let out a long sigh, a whisper of air that seemed to go on forever. “It can be... unwise to always view the *Canticle* as Greatfather’s literal words. It is inspired by Him, yes, and is the cause for many a changed life, but the words themselves were put down on parchment by mortal men who used quill and ink, just the same as us. The *Canticle* should be seen as a foundation. It is a solid ground upon which we build our faith, and when the church stands on the principles of the *Canticle*, it cannot go wrong. But it is not the final statement.”

This was the first time Quentin had ever heard such an argument. If this were really the case, why had he not heard this years ago? Why didn’t Brayon tell this to the congregation? It felt wrong, caused a churning in Quentin’s gut. What the First Messenger was saying was a step shy of heresy, and an insignificant step at that. This went against the very nature of Paternitism. Absolute childlike faith, that was what Greatfather required. This was the opposite. Surely, Brayon was just saying this to protect the practice of saving so much money for himself. But Quentin had never heard the First Messenger say something that was so obviously for his own interests.

Brayon had not stopped talking, but Quentin had stopped listening. He had to get out of here. He knew exactly what he needed.

Today, Quentin and Alise did not go down to the Pyrline; they crossed it. On the other side, about a mile’s walk to the south, there was a small valley that was taken up by a smaller village, made up entirely of tents. The village had no name, or at least none the

residents could agree on. No one was in charge, but all were welcomed for however long they chose to stay. To the side of each tent was a garden where each villager grew enough food for him or her to eat. It was peaceful, quiet, and no one from Halvern ever came here.

Quentin had heard stories of the tent village ever since he was a child. They lived in tents, it was said, because the valley flooded every time there was a storm. It was easy to rebuild when there was nothing lost. The valley was fertile, and no crop ever seemed to have much trouble growing there. The villagers were loners, some said, or a tribe of nomads who had given up a life centered on travel, or all one family of inbreeding fools, or a group of Unnamed from another part of the region. Who they were did not matter, not really. They said little and judged less. For what Quentin had to say to Alise, he wanted to be away from Paternitist ears.

They had paid a diminutive man a few coins to rent a tent for the day, giving them both privacy and shade, and it did not take long for Quentin to begin opening up to Alise. “I’m terrified,” he said. “I don’t *want* Brayon to be right, but he knows more about the *Canticle* than I ever will. I mean, if the *Canticle* is wrong, then how strong is my faith? I’ve done everything under the assumption that the *Canticle* is Greatfather’s inerrant words. I’ve told people that. If Brayon is right, I’ve been lying to the congregation.”

“It’s not lying if you didn’t know you were wrong,” Alise reassured him. “That would just be a mistake. But that’s not the point.” She put an arm around him, taking the position of reassurance this time. “Quentin, Brayon is just a mortal man too. I haven’t

read the *Canticle*, but I'm sure there's not a passage in there that says, '*I think this is Greatfather's will, but I'm not completely certain. Just take this all with a grain of salt.*' Brayon can be wrong."

"But what if he isn't?" Quentin said. "What if none of it is real?"

"Then you still have me," said Alise, cupping his face in her hands. "You still have this." She drew close to him. "*This is real, Quentin.*"

Alise kissed him. Quentin could hear her breathing, could feel it on his face as they embraced. He wanted to tell her he loved her, but she knew already. She pulled his body into hers with a need that ran deeper than words. Quentin felt something within him, a feeling no song had ever captured in lyrics, and then she was taking his robe off him, running her hands over his chest, relishing in the sensations.

Quentin's mind reeled at this new experience, and he pulled away. He could hear his father's voice in the back of his mind: "*You must guard against desire.*" Alise, who herself had started to disrobe, gave him a worried look.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"I..." Quentin started. He blushed. "I'm not supposed to give into temptation. I can't just force what I want upon you."

"What you--?" Alise said. Then she giggled. "Quentin, this is what *I* want." The world shimmered in her blue-green eyes, and Quentin did not wait a second longer.

There was music here, too, in the curve of her body against his, in the warmth of her skin, in the way her bronze-colored hair went everywhere. She brought out new melodies

in him as well, harmonies he found delight in reaching. Together, they sang the flushed, frantic song of the stars, and Quentin thought he could stretch out his hand and touch paradise.

THE STORM

“You worry for his *soul*?” Natalie says. “Why would you even tell him that? You’re just trying to make Quentin feel guilty so he’ll do whatever you say. Let him make his own decisions, Brayon.”

Brayon grimaces and faces Natalie. “Quentin is called by the Holy One to be a leader,” he explains. “Leaders must possess certain spiritual qualities. Talent, he has in spades. Charisma, he doesn’t really need. Knowledge of the *Canticle*-- well, that would be a work in progress, but this is not the area in which he is truly lacking.”

He turns to Quentin, eyes steely, his face set from his earlier arguments. “The thing you lack, boy, is resolve. A Hymnmaster must be adept at making difficult decisions, not just about which hymns to sing, but about directions and tithes and building up the rest of the clergy. Quentin, I have been supporting you more than my position requires for eight long years now, through your inexperience, your apathy, and your sin. But I am not supposed to be the center of the church. No one treats me as the center of the church. They treat *you* that way, however. How much longer should I be expected to hold your hand through every trial? You need to learn to do what is necessary, without my telling you. You need a strong position on issues. You cannot go wandering off from a meeting, just because you find the subject matter boring!”

“Is that what all this is about?” Quentin asks. “Are you honestly angry because I left the meeting this morning early? Brayon, they were trying to tell me how to do my job!”

“Since you weren’t doing it!” Brayon snaps.

“But they’ll sing whatever hymns I choose to sing,” says Quentin. “My role in the church is to choose hymns and lead them, and that’s all. I’m not here to take song requests, or to listen to some endless debate about which era of hymns is best! None of that matters!”

“It does to them!” Brayon retorts. “So it should to you. Hymnmaster is not a selfish position. You do not have the authority to say the concerns of one member of the congregation are any less deserving than another. That includes you. It is far past time you started taking your role seriously!”

“Well, he let a stranger into his home to take shelter from the storm!” Natalie shouts. “In my opinion, that matters much more than some debate. If you want to judge the sincerity of someone’s faith, see how they treat people. Quentin showed me kindness today, the same kindness he is currently showing to a man he has known all his life. If that is not supported by your Greatfather, then I’m glad I don’t believe!”

Brayon ignores her. “Quentin, your faith should be as a shield, standing between you and the rest of the world. Putting your trust in Greatfather is the purest form of protection a man can have. Commit to your faith, Quentin.”

Natalie is visibly riled by this comment. She addresses Brayon, leaving Quentin out of the matter. “You can’t use your faith as a shield. First off, if it’s faith, it’s not something you can see, and that would hardly have any practical use. But more to the

point, you can't hide behind your faith. Shields conceal. If you put on your armor every time you go into town, you're hiding your feelings. You're hiding your guilt."

Something snaps deep within Quentin, and he cannot stay silent. He rises to his feet as if propelled by a tightly coiled spring. His next words arrive in a rush, a dam bursting. "Do you think I'm hiding my guilt, Natalie? Look at me! Do I look guilt-free to you? Every time I lead worship, I feel my guilt more and more! Brayon, I know I'm inadequate. I know that I sin, and that I am often unfit to lead worship. I know you carry me on the weeks when I lose focus. Even if you stopped reminding me, my guilt alone would get the job done! Now, I am doing the best that I can. I know I make mistakes. I know my heart is not always in everything I do. Still, I stand behind that altar every week and guide the congregation in song. I hide only what you *ask* me to hide, Brayon! But neither of you has any right to tell me that I don't care!"

The silence that follows seems to be endless, uninterrupted save for the *drip-drip-drip* of the water from the roof of the dwelling. For neither the first nor the last time that night, both Natalie and Brayon stare at Quentin. This time, rather than waiting for an answer, they are trying to process the answer they have just been given. It is unusual for Quentin to respond so aggressively to a situation. Being raised in the Paternitist church has imbued within him a desire to put others before himself, and that means no arguing. But tonight is different. Tonight, he is being fought over, and he will not be some passive observer in these events.

"I never said you didn't care," Natalie says. "I just wanted you to be careful--"

“But that’s my choice to make,” Quentin interrupts. “My mistake to make, if I so choose. I care, and I have faith, such as it is. I should have the chance, for once in my life, to decide for myself.”

“Whenever you take control, you lose something far more valuable,” Brayon warns him. “Control is overrated. There is something beautiful, something sweet in following Greatfather’s will. In giving up control, we make room for His love, and when we let that in, our paths become so much straighter.”

“Don’t sermonize at him,” says Natalie, pointing an accusatory finger at Brayon. “I just want to advise. You’re the one who wants control. You convince people to give it up, and then you take it from them. You want to be powerful, with a sphere of influence that stretches all across Halvern. If people don’t recognize your position the way they recognize Quentin’s, they’ll respect you more, and that’s your victory. If you want to show Quentin you’re the bigger man, you’ll let him make his own decisions.”

Brayon snorts. “He is not capable of such things. If it weren’t for me, he would have been Unnamed years ago, exiled from the only home he’s ever known. How is that me being selfish? Besides, he’s where he wants to be. This is his purpose.”

Quentin is fueled by adrenaline, and says his next statement without thinking: “I may not know what else I want, but I should be able to find out. Even if I can’t.”

Then it hits him: he truly does not know what he wants. He isn’t sure that he wants to keep being a Hymnmaster, but what else is he suited for?

Natalie says, “It can be hard, deciding for yourself. But you deserve the chance. You’ve spent your whole life surrounded by Paternitism. It’s all you know. Maybe what you need is a break from all this, some time to clear your head.”

“I don’t know,” Quentin mutters. His revelation has drained his confidence dry.

“Well, what’s important is that you think about it,” Natalie presses. “Try some new things, see more of the world. That helped me more than anything else I could have done.”

“I don’t know,” Quentin repeats.

“You may not *know* you know, but somewhere deep inside you there’s a yearning, a pull to your own personal calling. It’s not some purpose handed down from on high, it’s just *you*. Take Greatfather out of the equation. If you want to sing, then sing. If you want to travel, then travel. But listen to yourself, feel that pull. Ask yourself for a change.”

“I don’t know!” Quentin barks. “I’m a Hymnmaster, and that’s all I’ve ever been!”

“And you’re unhappy!” Natalie replies. “So maybe it’s not your calling! That’s fine. But stop thinking about it, stop analyzing. Just say the first thing that pops into your head. Quentin, what more than anything in this world do you want?”

The words escape Quentin in a half-shout, half-sob. “I want to tell Alise I’m sorry!” His breathing is heavy as it sinks in-- the truth he has not been able to admit to himself for too many years. A tear threatens to evacuate his eye.

“Good,” Natalie says, her voice softer. “I had someone do that to me a good fifteen years ago, and it saved me a lot of time and trouble. We say the truest things when we aren’t thinking about them. They’re the things on the tips of our tongues, in the backs of our minds, waiting for us to get out of the way. Now, who is Alise?”

“Careful, Quentin,” Brayon says. “Remember how we talked about this.” He is guarded, not as aggressive as he has been, but there is something dangerous just beneath the surface. “Alise was a distraction. We agreed that speaking about her would be detrimental to your walk with the Holy One.”

“Let him speak,” Natalie says.

Quentin closes his eyes and clears the regret from his throat. “Natalie, I need to tell you about the worst thing I’ve ever done.”

IX: GOOD NEWS, OR BAD NEWS

Spring turned to summer in Quentin's nineteenth year without much fanfare. They were light on storms that year, and Halvern was filled with color and light. The days were lively, and although Quentin had his questions and doubts, Alise was more than enough to satisfy him. He was not perfect, nor was his life, but he felt whole.

It was the early afternoon, and Quentin was in the chapel rehearsing the week's hymns with the choir. All of the shutters over the side windows had been thrown open to allow the summer breeze to pass through. As the chapel was located on the top of the hill, the breeze was luxurious, and if Quentin closed his eyes, he could pretend it was the breath of Greatfather.

At Brayon's behest, he had begun adding in some older hymns, songs old enough to predate his grandfather's grandfather. While they required more effort and practice, the choir was more than willing to oblige, now that they felt challenged. And they were taking to the hymns, some of which were unfamiliar to Quentin, with something approaching ease. Today, they were going over a hymn Quentin had heard once at the most called "Everlasting Hope on High:"

*Everlasting hope on high,
Set our spirits free in You,
Holy One and song of mine,
O Greatfather, be our truth,*

O Greatfather, be our truth.

There were four such verses, with no surprises in the melody or rhythm. Earlier hymns tended to be the most straightforward, with hardly any syncopation or large tonal leaps. “Everlasting Hope on High” could be sung in any major key, and Quentin set it at the key in which the choir was most comfortable singing. He figured the rest of the congregation would feel most at ease in that key as well. Though this was just the first day of practice on this hymn, Quentin did not have to spend much time correcting. It was a simple song. Sometimes, those were the best. The congregation could pick them up with little distraction.

As the choir finished the hymn, Quentin noticed Alise standing in the shadows at the back of the chapel. He waved her forward-- their relationship was an open secret, and although the two of them had not talked much about it, the assumption was that he was courting her with the intent to marry someday not too far off. This was an assumption Alise’s parents had no trouble with, as a Hymnmaster would be seen as a fine match. The clergy did not always marry, but when they did it was for life. Alise shook her head, staying put where she was, her arms crossed just below her chest. She was beautiful and obviously nervous. Everything about her closed-off posture reached out to him, and Quentin did not wait long before ending the practice. The choir was progressing so well, he wasn’t worried about giving them time off.

As the chorus filed out the chapel doors, some of them waved to Alise. She did not seem to notice them, her eyes meeting Quentin’s and locking there. Once they were

gone, Quentin went over to her, standing close enough to kiss. They did not kiss, as physical affection outside of marriage was frowned upon by the Paternitist church, but Quentin always appreciated the closeness. A wave of worry passed over him when he saw she was trembling. Was she sick? She had complained to him that she'd had brief bursts of nausea recently. Quentin had begged her to see a physician about the problem, but that wasn't Alise's way. As she had told Quentin on multiple occasions, most things passed on her own, and an extra day or two of discomfort was better than her parents having to pay for a slightly faster relief.

“Are you alright?” Quentin asked. “You're shaking.”

The expression on Alise's face was not nausea, exactly, but it was close. She was preparing herself to vomit, but this time it would be only words. She stared down at her feet, then at Quentin's neck, just below eye contact. Alise was a full head shorter than Quentin, so this was easy. “Can we talk about this outside?”

Quentin nodded. “Of course.” If this did have to do with sickness, it made sense to leave the stone walls of the chapel, where everything had a loud enough echo for Brayon and the other Messengers to possibly hear. It was hardly the best place to talk about one's body.

When they were outside, and partway down the gently sloping hill atop which sat the chapel, Alise scanned the area all around them and finally looked straight at Quentin. Quentin would never forget that look-- the fear, the anticipation, the anxiety all bundled up into one. Behind the look, at its core, was trust, and as soon as Quentin saw that trust

she spoke. “My blood didn’t come this month,” she said, her voice low but peculiarly steady. There was something deliberate about her tone, something Quentin did not yet understand.

He had heard Alise mention her woman’s blood on rare occasion, in the vaguest possible terms, and it was not something he pretended to know the details about. He knew it could be painful, that it came once a month, and it meant a woman was in her childbearing years. Alise had complained about the cramping before, and Quentin thought he knew what was going on now. “Do you think it has something to do with your nausea?” he asked.

Alise blushed, and the faintest of smiles peeked through. “You might say that,” she said, then took a deep, steadying breath. “Quentin... I’m pregnant.”

Quentin was swallowed by the moment. He could hear his heartbeat, his blood pumping in his ears, a low hum rising all around him. The words did not take, simply bouncing off him like raindrops. “I don’t understand,” he said. In retrospect, he wished he could change those words, or at the very least unsay them, but they hung in the air between them now.

Alise took Quentin’s hand. “I said I’m pregnant. Less than a year from now, I will give birth to a child. Your child. Ours.” Her voice was flat. She was explaining it to him, making sure there was no way he could misunderstand. “I... I’m not sure what to do.”

Quentin's jaw moved up and down, up and down, but sound didn't come. He coughed, and that seemed to wake him back up. "You're pregnant? How?"

Alise gave him a wry smile. "I'm fairly certain you know how. You were there." Her smile faded, and she squeezed the hand of his that she had taken a moment earlier. "Quentin, I'm having a hard time reading you right now. Be honest: is this good news, or bad news?"

"I," Quentin started, then paused. He gulped. "I don't know. I hadn't thought about this before. I never really had any reason to. We're going to have a baby?"

Alise nodded, cautious. "That's what I *do* know."

Quentin's mind reeled. He tried to imagine the three of them together, once the child had been born. Alise could live with him in the Hymnmaster's dwelling that no one, save Brayon, ever visited. They would fill up that large wooden table where he usually ate alone. He would never be alone again. When the child grew old enough to walk, they could all go down to the banks of the Pyrline and have a picnic. He could show the child the trees, the birds, the fish that swam in the river, and he could watch that child experience everything for the first time, seeing all of Greatfather's creation with fresh eyes.

Then his thoughts went to the church. He and Alise were not married, and simple math would show that they were not married when they conceived the child. There would be a scandal. How bad it would get was anyone's guess. The people in the church knew how to gossip, and if they viewed righteousness as being on their side, they would

be hard to silence. This might be seen as grounds for him to be Unnamed. He would have no job, no home, and now two people who would depend on him. What other skills did he have? What help could he provide for them?

But maybe... Maybe, if they got married right away, the time difference would be too small for most to notice. He loved Alise, and no accident they had made could ever change that. He had already pretty much spent his adolescence with her. Spending the rest of his life with her was not a hard leap for him to make. He could do this.

“I love you, Alise,” he said, the corners of his mouth toying with turning up. He was going to smile, or laugh, or cry, or fall over, or some combination of all four.

“I should hope so,” she smirked. She was regaining some of her confidence. “But, Quentin, this is a close thing. This isn’t something we asked for, not yet. And with your position in the church, I just...” Her voice trailed off, and Quentin pulled her close in an embrace. It did not matter right now if anyone saw. Alise needed him.

“I want to do what’s right,” he said. “I don’t want you to be judged by everyone in the church. But we need some help. I don’t know what to do on my own.” He frowned. “I need to ask Brayon’s advice. He and I don’t agree on everything, but he knows how to navigate tricky situations.” Quentin thought back to the man cursing Greatfather outside the chapel all those years ago, not too far from where Quentin and Alise stood right now. Brayon had told Quentin not to judge the man, to let grief wear itself out. There was a wisdom that came with age, and Quentin was in desperate need of it. If anyone knew the proper course of action in this situation, it was Brayon.

Alise's brow furrowed. "Are you sure that's the best idea?" she said. "I don't want too many people to know until we have a plan."

"Do your parents know?" Quentin asked.

Alise shook her head. "I was hoping we could tell them together."

"Then could you wait until I've had a chance to speak with Brayon? I'll meet with him in an hour or so, and we could regroup after and talk about how it goes. I want to-- I just-- we have to be careful."

Alise nodded. "I understand." Then she kissed him one final time, without looking around to make sure no one was watching. "I love you, Quentin."

Quentin flashed a tired smile. "And I love you."

Then she turned and walked away, and Quentin steeled himself for the confession to come.

THE STORM

As Quentin tells his story, he can feel the years pass in a current beneath him. He floats on the river of time, borne up by memories of love and guilt and shame. Every hushed admission brings with it blessed relief. He has never told anyone the whole story before, not even Brayon. Why he chooses to tell it to Natalie now, in the middle of the storm, is anyone's guess, but he suspects it might have something to do with him never having to see her again after the flood waters recede. Brayon is another matter, but he is already aware of enough of this for Quentin not to feel so nervous as he fills in the gaps. He is surprised by how vividly the details present themselves. He can see Alise's face as it changes through the years, Adrun's descent from good health to infirmity. He is a connoisseur of memory.

Natalie and Brayon watch him and, for the most part, do not interrupt. An hour passes in no time at all. Time itself seems to be in flux, and Quentin feels himself dragged backward into the past. He wants to let go of the present, to go back to that moment in the tent when he and Alise were whole, to drink deep from that heady cocktail of sensation and emotion just one more time. If he could stop his story there and live forever in that breathless afternoon, he would.

Then, with a start, he snaps back to the present. The flow of time comes to an abrupt halt, and the warm glow of recollection gives way to the harshness of the attic and the wind and the rain. "Five Aspects," he whispers. "It's still down there."

Natalie's eyes narrow. "What's still down there?"

Quentin shakes his head, refusing to answer. "I can't lose it. I can't!"

He rises to his feet and bounds to the attic door. The door swings open, and Quentin can hear the sound of rushing water downstairs. The flooding is bad this time, even worse than Quentin had thought it would be. But that only means there is no time left to waste. Quentin starts down the stairs, hoping against hope, offering a silent prayer to Greatfather-- assuming there is a Greatfather-- that he isn't too late.

"What are you doing?" Natalie calls after him. "Come back!"

He ignores her and turns the corner of the staircase. The encroaching flood lies before him. There is at least two feet of water, maybe three in the house, and more keeps pouring in every second. The storms in this region are known for their rapid brutality, but this is something out of a nightmare. The water churns, a white foam brought about by the current, and Quentin wonders what might be swimming in there. The waters would recede quickly once the storm had subsided, but by then the damage would be done.

He feels Natalie's hand on his shoulder and spins to face her. "I'm fine," he says. "Go back to the attic."

"Are you insane?" Natalie blurts. "Don't go in that! You'll get pulled under or something!"

"I can't let it get washed away," Quentin says, his voice shaky. "It's the most important thing I have."

Natalie glances back upstairs. “Brayon!” she calls. “Your Hymnmaster is trying to get himself killed!”

Brayon’s reply is muffled, but still audible. “Whether he lives or dies is Greatfather’s will. None on this earth can subvert His plans.”

Quentin rolls his eyes. The First Messenger is nothing if not consistent. There is no time left to argue, and nothing will change his mind anyhow. He gives Natalie a lopsided smile, shrugs, and steps into the floodwaters.

“Quentin!” Natalie shouts.

The first thing he notices is that the current is stronger than he had previously thought. Right away, his feet threaten to be swept out from under him. The water is like ten thousand tiny hands, all grasping at his clothes. Too late, Quentin realizes he should have at least removed his outer robe. Everything he is wearing is something for the waters to seize. He keeps a death grip on the bannister as he descends the final few steps, the water reaching his ankles, then his knees, then his thighs.

About then is when he notices the cold. The waters of the Pyrline, so refreshing on a summer’s day, carry with them a potent enough chill to make Quentin’s heart lurch. The tiny hands become talons which pierce the skin on his legs and wrap around bone. But he has to keep going. The water is rising, and this will only become more difficult as the night progresses.

Quentin lets go of the bannister, propelling himself forward as much as he can. He almost trips-- that would send him under, and there might be no coming back up-- but

keeps his footing. He keeps his arms above the water so there is less that can be tugged, holding them over his head for balance. Without anything to grab onto, he is in constant danger of capsizing. He wishes now that they had left the table downstairs, so that he would have some kind of anchor. As it is, he is in the middle of the room, but it might as well be the middle of the river. He can see his destination ahead, resting against the far wall beside his bed: a generations-old desk used by Greatfather knew how many Hymnmasters.

Quentin struggles onward, with everything around him threatening to pull him out. He concentrates on every movement, working to make each as deliberate and strong as he can. *Left foot, right foot, left foot*, one after the other, every step a statement of intent.

At last, he is at the desk. He flings himself onto it, a refuge at last that he can lean on and stay safe. The floodwaters have not reached the top drawer yet, the one closest to him. *Thank Greatfather*, Quentin thinks. He is not too late. If there is anything which affirms faith most, it is being on time. He opens the drawer and snatches from within a folded-up piece of parchment. Grabbing it as though it is his very life, he shuts the drawer and spins around.

All of a sudden, the stairs look a mile away. Walking across the length of this room once has drained him more than his adrenaline has let on until now. Quentin searches for some heretofore hidden store of strength and pushes off again. Natalie is at the other end of the room, a worried expression on her face. Brayon is still evidently in the attic, as he is nowhere to be seen. It occurs to Quentin how strange it is that a woman who does not

know him, who has not seen him before tonight and who has only seen him at his weakest, would be waiting there to support him when a member of his own clergy would not. But that is Brayon's way.

Left foot, right foot, left foot. Something is wrong. He cannot feel his legs anymore. They have gone numb from the cold. He is walking on faith, walking towards Natalie, fervently wishing he could just go to sleep. He keeps the parchment raised as high as his arms will stretch, wanting it to stay dry even if he cannot.

And then his right foot slips.

Cold water envelops his chest, and Quentin's heart seizes again. The hand with the parchment remains in the air, but his free hand reaches out in front of him to break his fall. He turns his head sideways so he can breathe, but even so, water rushes into his mouth. Quentin splutters, willing himself to move, but he is frozen. All his body wants is to slide down. His muscles protest in agony.

He can hear Brayon's voice, though if it is coming from the attic or the inside of his own head, Quentin cannot tell. "Live or die, it is Greatfather's will. We are but His instruments for Him to play as he chooses. You have sinned, and this is your punishment. Surrender to His purpose for you, even in death." Quentin closes his eyes.

They spring open again as he feels a hand around his wrist that is in the air. He glances up to see Natalie tugging him back to his feet. She struggles to remain upright herself, but she is fresher, and her footing is sure. Quentin allows her to lead him the final few feet to the stairs, when she transfers his grip from her to the bannister. He pulls

himself up, first his thighs, then his knees, then his ankles escaping from the water's icy hands. When he is free, he collapses on the stairs, Natalie sinking down next to him. Brayon is still in the attic; the voice was in Quentin's head.

The pair of them breathe heavily in exhaustion for a minute before either of them moves again. Natalie lets out a low, relieved laugh, and Quentin joins in, finally relaxing. "What in the bloody world was so important you had to go down for it in this?" Natalie asks.

"This is," Quentin replies, opening his palm to make the parchment visible. "Parchment doesn't fare too well in water. I--" he coughs-- "I couldn't risk losing it." He gives Natalie a long look. "It's all I have left of her, save for the memories."

The parchment has been folded into an envelope. One the envelope is written one word, in flowing, neat handwriting:

Quentin.

X: BE RID OF THE STUMBLING BLOCK

“Come in,” Brayon said, putting an end to Quentin’s nervous fidgeting. Quentin had been waiting outside Brayon’s chambers for an hour or so by now, a war raging within him. Should he confess to Brayon now, as he had told Alise he would, or should he sit on the news for a few more days until he and Alise had devised some better plan? Then again, what sort of better plan could there be? No matter what, Alise would start to show, and the conversations were guaranteed to be much more heated if he stalled until then.

How much could he trust Brayon? The First Messenger had experience, of that there was no doubt, and the years had given the man a keen insight into matters of the heart. But would he be the man of mercy today, or would his reaction be harsher? Quentin had seen Brayon at both extremes, and if there was some pattern to his moods, sunny skies matching up with a sunny disposition or something like that, he had not uncovered it. Would Brayon be inclusive because Quentin was Hymnmaster, or would Quentin’s position only serve to stoke the fires of Brayon’s wrath? And Brayon was certainly capable of wrath. On more than one occasion Quentin had been witness to the First Messenger’s fiery temper, and every time he had just been relieved that he had been spared. There was something of a predatory animal lurking an inch beneath Brayon’s skin, always threatening to burst free.

But the Messengers were required by Paternitist doctrine to listen to any confession with an open heart. If Quentin introduced what he had to say as such, Brayon would be

bound to hear him out without raising his voice or resorting to violence. Afterwards, Quentin might be Unnamed, but at least that would be in public. Brayon frightened him. Thinking that was almost enough to bring him peace, as if recognizing that simple fact somehow gave him the power to defend against it.

And if Brayon did respond well, if he showed Quentin forgiveness, there was no one better for Quentin to have at his side. The First Messenger commanded respect, and he could sell the congregation any idea. It would be easier to include Brayon from the start, and let the leaves fall where they may.

Quentin took a deep breath and entered Brayon's chambers. Brayon sat behind his desk, giving Quentin the briefest of cursory glances. "Shut the door, will you?" he said. "No sense in boring anyone who might pass by with our business." Quentin was more than happy to oblige. The door slid into place with a muffled *thud* that echoed down the corridor. "Now tell me, what is all this about? I don't think we have another conference scheduled until tomorrow at the earliest. Something in the Eighteenth Canto catch your fancy again? I will admit, it's one of my favorites. I read it anytime I feel alone."

Quentin grimaced, which he hid behind a hand as he scratched his jaw. "It isn't exactly that, sir," he said. "It's more of a... confession."

At the final word, Brayon recoiled. He eyed Quentin up and down, keeping his emotions caged. It was considered an abnormality for the clergy to confess to one another, as they were viewed as able to confess directly to Greatfather Himself. Quentin

did not know for sure if this was true, but he appreciated the privacy. “You know that isn’t necessary,” Brayon said.

“But I want to,” replied Quentin. “I need to ask your advice.”

“Then out with it,” Brayon sighed, resigned. He sank deeper into his chair. “What do you wish to confess, my boy?”

And Quentin told him everything-- how he and Alise fell in love, how he doubted and came to her for support, their visit to the tent village, and Alise’s announcement to him earlier that very day. It needed to be said, the words finally gaining substance when they were released into the air. The confession came out in a rush, the weight of it forcing itself from Quentin’s lips. Brayon listened to all of it, his features betraying no emotion, not making any sudden movements. When the confession was done, there was a lengthy pause, and then Quentin asked, “What should I do now?”

Brayon considered him for a minute, sizing him up as if considering throwing him out the nearest window. Quentin felt one hundredth his height, small enough for Brayon to step on without noticing. He did not know what he had been expecting after he confessed, but it wasn’t this. Brayon usually was one to give a stronger reaction to events.

At last, Brayon spoke. “You understand the position this puts me in.”

Quentin frowned. “You? I’m not sure what you mean, Brayon.”

“First Messenger will do, today.” Brayon folded his hands across his chest, pressing them into his robes, and rose to his feet. “I do not need to inform you that you have

sinned, Quentin. You have read the *Holy Canticle* for yourself, more than once. However, this means you are without excuse. You know that Greatfather has a plan for this... passion of yours. This passion drives you to lead worship better than any man in Halvern. But its physical expression has a time and a place, and that is in the holy union of marriage.

“Quentin, I know how you feel about Alise. You love her, and physical attraction is a valuable part of that love. We are not to act on that attraction until the proper moment. Greatfather’s will is a logical, timely will. Everything has its day in the sun. When you were with that girl, you hid in the shadows. You left town. Why? Because you knew that what you were doing was shameful. You allowed some girl, barely a woman, to become more important to you than your relationship with the Holy One. The walls of every Paternitist chapel slant inwards for a reason, and that is to force us to focus on Him. Marriage is designed by Greatfather to be a reflection of our relationship with Him. We do not give ourselves over to worship until we profess that we are His people. So, too, a man does not give himself over to a woman until he professes before the church that he is her spouse.

“In its proper place, your passion can be a beautiful thing. But you have spoiled it with your indiscretion. You are young, Quentin. It is so easy for the young to lose themselves in one another. Your weakness was in allowing that girl to tempt you, to convince you she was more important and draw you away from your true purpose.”

Quentin stood up. “This is not Alise’s fault, and--”

“Sit back down!” Brayon roared. Quentin did so immediately. “Remember the story of Liamh, as described in the Seventh Canto. Tell me, what was his sin?”

“Adultery,” Quentin murmured.

Brayon slapped the right side of Quentin’s face just below the ear. It stung and made a ringing sound go through Quentin’s head. “Say it again!”

“Adultery!” Quentin repeated.

“That’s right,” Brayon said. “As it was written, he was a man who sought Greatfather’s favor, but he was won over by the promises of a harlot, and he lay with her as a man would his wife. If you are not married, and you lie with a woman, what is it?”

“Adultery,” Quentin said, his voice quivering.

“Exactly. If you act on your desires outside of marriage, you cheapen the physical gift of life which Greatfather has bestowed upon men. That child, which even now grows in that girl’s body, was meant for your future spouse, should you be so blessed by the Holy One! To turn away from that design is to spit in Greatfather’s face! So tell me, when Liamh knew that he had sinned, what did he do next?”

“He repented,” Quentin whispered.

“And?” Brayon’s tone was ice.

A knife made of dread pierced Quentin’s gut as realization dawned on him. “And he... *he left the harlot and saw her no more.*”

“Straight from the Seventh Canto,” Brayon said. “Your memory is as good as ever, *Hymnmaster.*” The title was an insult now, coming from Brayon’s mouth. “We are to

follow Liamh's example, so your return to the Holy One's graces will be in two stages." He leaned in close enough for Quentin to smell the First Messenger's lunch on his breath. "So we're clear, in ordinary circumstances this would be grounds for an Unnaming. But the congregation looks up to you, unusual for one of your limited years. They have finally put aside their grief at the loss of Adrun, and it would be unwise to put them through such grief again so soon. And you have no successor in place. The church needs worship, more than it needs anything. So you will stay, but only after you have done what must be done."

He leaned back, walking over to a closet Quentin had never seen opened. "The first stage is penance." From within the closet, Brayon withdrew a length of rope, three feet or so, with five knots spaced out evenly from end to end. "This is a humility cord. Keep it, as I have another. You will notice the five knots, one for each Aspect of Greatfather. When you are alone and in prayer, strip off your robes and strike yourself with it repeatedly along your back. It will hurt a great deal, and you must use the pain to glorify the Holy One. The humility cord will raise welts, and the next time I see you in my chambers, I expect you to show them to me. Is that clear?"

Quentin nodded, feeling the humility cord in his hands. The knots were firm, and the cord was stiff. He could already imagine the pain he would soon feel.

"Also, neither eat nor drink until this time tomorrow," Brayon continued. "The lack of earthly nourishment will remind you of your need for spiritual nourishment. In a day from now, you will be weak, and in that weakness you will learn anew the truth of

Greatfather's strength. For the next day, be alone in prayer. Atone for your sins." He paused. "More importantly, there is the matter of the girl."

"Alise," Quentin said.

Brayon waved her name aside. "It is of no consequence. Quentin, your first duties are to your God. Your second are to your congregation. That is not to be negotiated. The girl is a stumbling block for you. When her child is born-- her child, not yours-- it will only serve as a greater distraction from what is truly important. You must do as Liamh did, and be rid of the stumbling block. You may never be with Alise again.

"Quentin, I will not Unname you. I will not banish you. But if the girl stays in Halvern, the evidence of your sin will show, and I will be left with no choice." He reached into his desk and pulled out a small coin purse and tossed it to Quentin. "Give this to her. Tell her it is Greatfather's will that she leave. Lie if you have to. Your role here is more valuable to more people than one lie. But she must leave, and soon."

"Bray-- First Messenger," Quentin protested. "I love her."

Brayon scowled at him. "Do not pretend that you are the first member of the clergy to have to make a hard decision. We have all sacrificed something. We have all made mistakes. This is yours, and it is the last one you will be allowed. Do what must be done."

"I can't!" Quentin said.

Brayon chuckled mirthlessly. "Ah, Quentin," he said. "You're just like me. You know what's best for the church. You will."

THE STORM

Quentin stares at the letter. He has memorized its contents long ago, but keeping it close to him is paramount. He needs to take in every stroke of Alise's handwriting. Natalie helps him up to the attic, where Brayon waits, a disinterested expression on his face.

"Do you even care?" Natalie asks. Quentin is too tired to caution her. "Your precious Hymnmaster, who carries all those responsibilities you're so keen to harp on about, could have been hurt or killed down there, and look at you! You couldn't be bothered to so much as stand! Is this what your Greatfather would want?"

Brayon sneers at her. "When Quentin became Hymnmaster, his life was Greatfather's to use or dispose of as He saw fit. I am not so arrogant as to intervene."

"But you--" Natalie sputters. "You have known him all his life! You saw him as a child, helped train him to be who he is today! How could you possibly have seen all that and still be fine with letting him die?"

"I would hardly expect you to understand," says Brayon. "You, who have spent your years on this earth devoid of faith, would be so presumptuous as to call mine lacking? Hah! I trained Quentin to be selfless, to serve Greatfather before all else, and yet he was willing to throw his life away for some bit of parchment. What he did was a selfish action. Should I reward him? I am to be a whetstone, Natalie, not a mattress."

“I couldn’t leave it,” Quentin murmurs. “It’s from Alise. It’s all I have worth anything to me, and I couldn’t let it be destroyed.”

Brayon groans. “What did I say about her? That girl was a stumbling block, spurring you on to nothing but weakness. She was soft. I-- well, I know that I am hard, but I am what you need to grow. Maturation is not an easy task, especially not by Greatfather’s standards. I did what was necessary to make you the Hymnmaster you are today. I doubt anyone in that congregation, witnessing the results, would beg me to do anything differently.”

“Where in the *Holy Canticle* does it tell you to be cruel?” Natalie says. “You are not a whetstone, but a millstone, pressing down on Quentin with all your weight until everything that makes him unique is squeezed into oblivion!”

“And what would the world be like without millstones?” Brayon counters. “The role Greatfather has chosen for me is not one everyone is called to. I know that; I am no fool. But if there is no one like me, the world falls to pieces. So I stepped up. I did what I was called to do. This is my purpose: to make great men out of boys like Quentin.”

At this moment, Quentin feels an emotion he can never become accustomed to, a tearing within him that no word seems to accurately capture the pain of, a sensation of being rent down the middle. “I never wanted to be a great man!” he says, his voice on the verge of breaking. “I just wanted to be a good one. I did not need the whole of Halvern to love me, just the few who matter most. I wanted the congregation to worship without distraction. Greatness distracts. I will never be as comfortable standing behind

that altar, with everyone's eyes on me, as you are. For a long time, I thought that would be the sign I was doing something right. Now, I don't know. I sacrificed for this. And it doesn't bring me joy. I had hoped to find that joy, that goodness in Greatfather, but I feel nothing. No sign that He is there, no peace within me. I had that peace when Alise was still around. Maybe I made a mistake."

Natalie places a hand on his shoulder-- comfort without any pretense of romance. It is a sisterly contact, of a kind Quentin has never truly known. "You don't have to search for goodness in Paternitism," she tells him. "Greatfather does not hold a monopoly on goodness. All of us, on our own, have the potential for goodness within. If an old woman falls down in the middle of the street, I want to help her up, same as you. I don't need the *Holy Canticle* to tell me it's what I should do; I just do it. I don't need some deity threatening to smite me if I ignore her. It's a reaction. Goodness ought to be a part of who you are, with no conditions. If there were no Greatfather, would you think it was fine to let the hungry starve, or to steal from the innocent, or to kill without remorse? I certainly hope not! The existence of a deity should have no effect on how you treat others."

Brayon scoffs. "Greatfather is the cause and focus of our goodness. Without Him, we would just be living for ourselves."

"Why?" Natalie asks. "Is Greatfather the only thing standing between you and chaos? If so, you're a far worse person than I am. You shouldn't need some external reason to do good, just like you shouldn't need a reason to find joy!" Natalie throws her

hands up in the air, exasperated, then turns back to Quentin. “Whether you are Paternitist or not, your focus shouldn’t be on yourself. It should be for others. Live for others, put them before yourself, because they’re right there in front of you. You don’t need to go to church to learn how to help them, you know already! You’ll find joy in the smiles they give you, or the way they thank you. Be selfless, no matter what. You don’t need to despair.”

Something akin to peace settles over Quentin then, and he wants to thank Natalie right then. He’s not sure if her believes all of that, but he can definitely live for other people. He thinks back to some of the church practices, wondering how selfless they really are.

He does not get the chance to say anything, as Brayon is quick to respond. “Selflessness is all well and good, even if you fail to recognize its source. If you take eternity out of the equation, there are certainly worse ways to live your life. But at the end of your days, you’ll see for yourself how worthless it all is.”

“Helping those in need is never worthless!” Natalie snaps. “Where in your *Canticle* does it say a thing like that?”

Brayon ignores that last comment. “Besides, what Quentin did was hardly selfless. He let his own lust get the best of him, and that is all there is to it. Instead of waiting and following the Holy One’s plan for our lives, he was impatient. Adultery springs forth out of greed and covetousness, nothing purer. And the worst thing is how he has let it distract him ever since. He couldn’t just complete his penance and return to Greatfather’s

good will. No, he had to dwell, and all because he was weak. All because he let himself be swayed by a harlot.”

“ENOUGH!” Quentin shouts, loud enough to cow even Brayon. He rises to his feet finding within himself a new store of energy, one that has just been waiting to be unleashed on the First Messenger all these years. “You can call me a sinner all you want. Call me unworthy, even. I’ll take that. I probably deserve it. But I draw the line, now and forevermore, at calling Alise a harlot! You refuse to hear my reasons, refuse to see my side, fine! You have the right! I know I did something wrong. I made a mistake, as you so eloquently put it. But that mistake required the *both* of us, so stop placing my failures on her shoulders when she isn’t even here to defend herself! You seem to resent me for what I did, Brayon, but it wasn’t about you. Believe me, I never once thought of you while any of it was happening! What you seem incapable of understanding, even after all these years, is that I loved her. To be honest, I still love her, which shouldn’t be possible! But here we are. Our actions be damned, but what I felt for her was as pure as anything I’ve ever felt. Five Aspects, I still ache for her. But you don’t understand, because while I may be a slave to my love for her, you are a slave to a far more destructive power: yourself!” Quentin takes a few deep breaths, stilling himself. “There is a storm outside, and if I send you away, you’ll almost certainly die, so I’ll allow you to stay here. But if you say *anything* like that about Alise again, I will throw you out myself.”

Brayon's eyes are fierce, but he remains silent. His shoulders hunched, he stands and moves over to the corner of the attic.

Natalie is still standing beside Quentin. He notices her, seeing that she is rooted to the spot herself. He shakes his head at her, saying without words that he is not angry at her. She softens immediately, and Quentin sits down. He can hear his heart beating inside his head. He has never acted this way around the First Messenger before now, and he is both thrilled and terrified. If word of this gets out, if Brayon decides to tell any of the other Messengers what Quentin has just said, he will be Unnamed for sure. But that thought does not hold as much pain for him as it once did. Brayon has told him over the years just how terrible Unnaming is, but if Quentin can stare down the First Messenger and not be the first to flinch, he can get through this.

“Are you alright?” says Natalie.

He nods and leans in towards her, producing the letter and unfolding it gingerly.

“Alise wrote this on the day she left Halvern,” he says. “It’s part of the end of my story. Do you want me to read it to you?”

Natalie is still guarded, but her curiosity outweighs anything else she feels. “Only if you want to,” she replies.

“I do,” Quentin says, and begins reading the letter he knows by heart.

XI: THE HOUSE OF RELIEF

Quentin found Alise outside, waiting for him where she said she would. She smiled at him, an expression he did not return. The sun had begun to dip lower in the sky, and it was now partially obscured by the chapel's stone steeple. Its shadow cut across Alise's face, slicing it in two as she stood there. Quentin did not want to break her any further. He held Brayon's words inside himself, hating that he knew what was required of him. She looked so happy.

"Did you talk to him?" Alise asked.

Quentin nodded. "I told him everything."

Alise's brow furrowed as she noticed Quentin's unease. "What's wrong? Did he not take the news well?"

"I don't think it would be possible for him to take this news well," said Quentin, and he had to stop a low chuckle in his throat. He had to be strong right now. "He's the First Messenger, and I'm the Hymnmaster, and I just told him that we sinned. There is a certain... penance required." He felt the weight of the humility cord in the pocket of his robes. It felt heavier with the passing of each second. "Exercises I have to do. Things to change. Alise, I don't think I can do this."

"You're getting vague," Alise told him. "Remember, I wasn't there. Just breathe and explain everything so that I can understand. It will be *fine*, Quentin."

“No,” Quentin replied. “It won’t.” In that breathless moment, he was no longer in his skin, but peering down at the scene from twenty feet in the air. He wasn’t speaking to Alise; he was *watching* himself speak to Alise. His own voice was muffled, as if he was talking through water. If he were to get stabbed, he would not be able to sense it. Everything was unreal. “Alise, Brayon told me about Liamh, about how he stumbled and fell away from the faith. He told me what I needed to do.”

And then his voice was a senseless drone. His mouth moved, but he was no longer able to hear. He was numb to all sensation. But this did not stop the pain. He could still see Alise’s face, how her smile slipped away and her jaw dropped, how the glimmer left her eyes and a grayness descended over her features. Quentin could not stop himself. He was no longer in control of his tongue. He wanted to tell Alise that he meant none of what he said, that he loved her and wanted her to stay forever, no matter the scandal and the Unnaming that might befall. He wanted to say that he would love their child beyond how he loved himself. He wanted to ask her to run away with him, because she was all he needed.

But that wasn’t what he said. In the years to come, whenever he thought back on this day, Quentin cursed himself for his cowardice, even though he could not remember the words he used. The words worked. The damage was done. Quentin had noticed during his tenure as Hymnmaster that the words of great hymn writers held power, but was unused to the strength his own could convey. The first time he had felt this power was

when he told Alise he loved her. It made sense in an odd way that this would be the second.

Alise was crying, her tears a mixture of shock, anger, and helplessness. Quentin was the one person she could turn to, and he had betrayed that trust. He was holding out a purse filled with gold coins to her. “This is for your travels, and to get you started once you arrive,” he said, finally able to hear his own voice again. “It isn’t much, but it will keep you fed and clothed for a little while. It’s all I can do.”

Alise scowled at him, then spat. “I don’t want your money. I’m not some harlot that you can just pay off! Quentin, what did that awful man do to you?”

“This is the best thing I can give you!” Quentin said. “If you stay, I’ll be Unnamed, and the scandal will send us both out of Halvern, penniless! If you go somewhere new, you can be anyone. The child could be legitimate. Tell everyone you meet that the father is dead! I don’t care! Just take the money.”

He handed the purse to her, and she pocketed it with trembling fingers. “This doesn’t mean I’ll spend it,” she whispered. “I’m not-- you can’t. Don’t pretend that this isn’t about you, Quentin. If I go, you can keep your precious title. You can still be adored by the town, because they won’t know anything. You’re afraid, Quentin, afraid of change! You can’t bear to leave the only work you’ve ever known. You’re choosing some church over me. But don’t act like you don’t care.”

“Maybe I am afraid,” Quentin murmured. “I want to do what’s right.”

“What’s right? In what perverse world is *this* the right thing to do? This isn’t you, Quentin. You’re loving and passionate, and you would never leave someone out in the cold without the ability to defend themselves! You know better than this!”

“I just want to please Greatfather,” Quentin said without thinking, repeating what Brayon had drilled into him while they were in his chambers. “I am a Hymnmaster now, and I have certain responsibilities--”

Alise slapped him. The pain broke through Quentin’s numbness. “Damn you, Quentin Marsh,” she said, and turned and ran away. Quentin did not try to call after her, and he never spoke to her again. Those were the last four words he ever heard her say.

Quentin went back to his dwelling as the sun finished setting, and he did not meet anyone’s eye along the way. If this was what was right, he still felt unworthy. One day, he thought. It only took one day for all of it to fall apart.

Quentin was awakened from a fitful sleep the next morning by Brayon. He answered the door in his nightclothes, wincing at the rays of the early sun that hurt his eyes. A yawn escaped him, followed swiftly by another as he wished fervently that none of the previous day’s events had taken place. Brayon was unsmiling, sweeping away the notion that any of this could have been no more than a bad dream.

“Change into your robes,” the First Messenger said. “I have to show you something.”

A few minutes later, without eating breakfast, they were off, making their way through the marketplace. None of the stands had been set up for the day yet. Halvern

itself was still half-asleep. It was eerie, being some of the only people in the town. It felt wrong. They were ghosts, and the market was their cemetery.

Brayon walked with purpose, Quentin struggling to match the taller man's stride. There was clearly a destination in mind, even if Brayon had not seen fit to inform Quentin what said destination was. They curved down street after street, passing through parts of Halvern with which Quentin was less familiar. They were headed in the opposite direction of the chapel, so that ruled that out.

"Where are we going?" Quentin finally asked. He did not ask if this was some new form of punishment the First Messenger had chosen to wake him up early to mete out. Quentin had not eaten, as per Brayon's request, and had used the humility cord on himself before falling asleep. There was still a sore spot when he awoke because of it. He also did not ask why Brayon had chosen to meet with him now, instead of later today as he had told Quentin when they last conversed. Quentin was wholly off-balance this morning.

"We are going to fulfill the final part of your penance," Brayon replied. "I trust you have spoken to the girl."

Quentin nodded somberly. "I have."

"Good. And I will assume you have both fasted and used the humility cord, although if you have not, now is the one chance you will have to tell me without fear of retribution." He paused for a moment, and when Quentin did not say anything, he smiled and continued. "This is the least painful part in your return to Greatfather's graces. Your

faith must come first in everything, do you understand? You cannot let temptation poison you and make you ineffective.” He waited again for Quentin to nod. “Once you have been tempted, it is easier for that temptation to regain its foothold on your soul. I know this, as your temptation is the same as that of most of our Messengers. As fornication feels pleasing during the act itself, it is the hardest sin from which to abstain. Do you follow?”

“I do,” Quentin said, unsettled.

Brayon pulled to a stop in front of a two-story house, with a garden all around. It reminded Quentin, with a pang of remorse, of the tent village. “We have arrived,” he announced. He led Quentin down the path to the front door, talking to him all the while. “This is the other, more feasible solution. It is called the House of Relief. You who s and I, who serve Greatfather the most fervently, face the direst temptations. Sometimes, those temptations become too strong to fight alone. When that happens, as it does, all you have to do is come here and relieve those urges in the safest possible space. Needless to say, this is to be kept between the two of us. Do not speak of this to anyone else, not even the other Messengers.”

He knocked on the door and it swung open. The hallway inside was filled with a hazy smoke from blowing out countless candles. The house itself was grimy. It had been painted a generation ago, but most of the paint was long gone in chips and flecks.

Standing in front of Quentin was a woman a few years his senior, dressed in brightly colored, frilly clothes that accented every curve of her body. Her cleavage practically

spilled out of her bodice, and a bit of her auburn hair fell in the crevasse. She was heavily made up, and while she looked tired, she was grinning. “This the new Hymnmaster you was telling me about?” she asked. Her eyes drifted up and down the length of Quentin’s body, and he felt altogether naked.

“The very same,” answered Brayon, leaning in towards the woman with an air of confidentiality. “He is struggling, May, and could use a release.”

May pursed her lips. “I could take care of this one. He looks fresh.” She giggled. At the other end of the hallway, Quentin saw a middle-aged man chasing another of the girls, his bunched-up trousers around his ankles causing him to have to waddle.

“This-- this is a brothel,” Quentin stammered.

Brayon wiggled his finger at Quentin. “The girls here do holy work. I have an arrangement with them. They keep me pure, and they will keep you pure as well. In return, I bless their work in whatever ways I can.” Quentin realized that this had to be where no small amount of Brayon’s wages went. “They are not like us, so it isn’t adultery when we lie with them. Greatfather makes allowances for those closest to His heart. As I have said many times, Quentin, you are special. You remind me of myself, at your age. The same passion, the same urges.” He nudged Quentin forward. “You should go with May. I can say from experience she possesses a unique and delightful set of talents.”

Quentin shook his head, feeling very much like he was going to vomit. “I can’t,” he said. “I think I need to be alone.”

Brayon shrugged. "Suit yourself. But remember, the House of Relief is always available. Just ask me, and I can bring you anytime you feel weak. And so you know, there are girls here for almost every temptation a man could have."

Quentin turned and ran, going out the path and past the gate, down the roads where people had now started to mill, through the market where vendors stared at his frantic sprint. In record time, he made it back to the Hymnmaster's dwelling, passing beneath the shadow of the old tree, and he shut the door behind him, breathing hard, tears springing from the corners of his eyes.

How was this possible? He had trusted Brayon, but this... this was something else. He was going to be sick. How could he have taken Brayon's word? He had to go back to Alise, apologize for everything, before it was too late. But a voice in the back of his mind told him it was already too late. There was no way Alise would listen to him now. He had ruined her life, left her all alone. There was no coming back from this.

He gazed around the interior of the hut, remembering where everything of Adrun's had been. Quentin had rearranged the furniture when he took up ownership of the humble dwelling. It felt too much like someone's home. Now, it felt like no home at all. There was nothing here to comfort him, and he realized that he, too, was alone.

Then he noticed the note on the table. He knew without looking that it was from Alise, that it meant she was gone for good. All he had left were the hymns and the promise of an eternity for which he had no proof. Quentin strode over to the table and picked up the note, the envelope still crisp and new in his hands. He could picture Alise

writing it, and was terrified of what might be written inside. But he had to know. He opened the envelope and began to read.

THE STORM

Dear Quentin,

If you are reading this, it means I have already left. I'm sorry if I was not able to say goodbye to you, but if I was going to leave, I had to do it now, while I still hated you. You made that easier last night. Thank you for that.

I told my parents what all had happened between us yesterday. I told them what you said. They were disappointed at first, but they still love me. I continue to be astonished by how much they support me. They agreed we needed to leave Halvern, especially if you were going to be how you were last night. Can you believe it? In one night, we packed everything up so that we could make a clean break of it. The only time I stopped making preparations to leave was to write this letter. But I had to.

Quentin, as furious as I am at you, I still love you. Something pure and beautiful has passed between us over the past few years, and even after everything, I still feel privileged to have shared it with you. You were my friend when I needed one, and I hope I was the same for you. I will raise our child as my own because no matter what you did afterwards, you gave me life. And that is how I choose to see it: as a gift.

We are moving to the north. If any of us can find work, we are going to try to live in Caronton. I hear it gets cold there, but there are worse things than cold. I plan on telling everyone you are dead, as you suggested. That means there will always be some version of you who never stopped loving me, and I like that thought.

I wanted to tell you this, to write it all down even though I want to scream and cry and tell you all about it, because I hope this is not the end. If you ever leave that man's poisonous shadow, I want you to be able to find me. I will try to stay in Caronton for at least a few years. In time, my love can be raised from the dead, and I am going to need all the help I can get. I hate you, but I miss you already. How strange is that?

It is time to go. There is so much I have left to say, but time wins today. Be strong, Quentin. Know that you hurt me, but anything can heal. Even you can heal from what you have done. I pray you find peace in that soon.

Love,

Alise

Quentin sits the letter down in his lap, folding it shut as he does so. He looks to Natalie for the first word. What she might say does not matter to him now. Reliving everything, along with the way Brayon has acted tonight, only makes him more inclined to trust Natalie.

It has been hours since the storm began, and it shows no signs of letting up. A few more leaks have formed over the course of the night, and water is no longer dripping, but streaming in. The roof will not hold much longer, but whether the storm lets up or the roof gives out first, Quentin does not hazard to guess. Neither are sustainable. The water will soon reach the stairs, and when the water gets that high, it takes Halvern a long time to recover. The chapel will be untouched by all this, of course, as it sits too far up on its

hill to be in any real danger of flooding. The steeple could be struck by lightning, but the builders affixed an iron rod to it almost a century ago to keep fires at bay. Even when the whole of Halvern was in disarray, the Paternitist chapel would be a constant.

Perhaps the storm is a good thing, Quentin tells himself. After all, if everyone found shelter, all they will lose are things. Things only have the value people give them, even gold. It is a choice to see gold as precious rather than just odd. And as the waters rise, they can wash everything away. Quentin hopes the waters would sweep his insecurities, his guilt and shame, aside, carry it off in a current. A flood can be a renewal, after all, a chance to start fresh.

Natalie is, as Quentin had hoped, the first to speak. “I don’t want to fill you with false hope,” she says, “but this sounds like an open door. How long has it been?”

Quentin’s heart sinks as the time adds up in front of him, forming an impenetrable wall. “Six years. It’s probably too late.”

“Probably is not the same as *is*,” Natalie reminds him. “*Never* is always too late. If you love her, how can you stand not to know?”

“Because I don’t know myself!” Quentin says.

All of a sudden, the roof creaks. The thatch is supported by an elaborate cross-section of wooden beams, but there are gaps between the beams, and a large chunk of thatch, a sodden patch about three feet in diameter falls to the ground in an unoccupied corner of the attic. The sounds of the storm are now all consuming, let in by that hole in

the roof. Water pours in, and the wind whips some of it in Quentin's face. Frantically, Quentin pockets the letter as he is struck by the wind and the rain.

Everything is falling apart around him now, even his home. With a bitter chuckle, the sound of which is carried away by a gust of biting air, he thinks that this dwelling has never felt like home to him. It did not when he was seventeen, new to the role of Hymnmaster, and it does not now. All the candles are extinguished by the gale, but the night and the storm provide their own ethereal illumination.

"I thought I knew what I believed!" he shouts, barely audible above the tempest. "I thought I knew who I was! I was so sure of myself! But for the past six years, I have been nothing more than everyone's expectations of me! I am *empty*, Natalie!" The roof creaks again. It sounds as though one of the beams has begun to work itself loose. "What do I have, if I don't have my faith?" Quentin glances up. "If I die tonight, who will I be?"

"That's life, Quentin!" Natalie answers. "It's all uncertainty! We're not guaranteed tomorrow, or a future of any kind! We just have to know who we are *now*!"

The wind calms down a bit, soft enough for Quentin not to have to shout. "Then I'm a man with no identity," he says. "Everything I've done has been chosen for me. I've been following in the footsteps of my future self, and I sacrificed the best thing I had to do so."

From his corner, Brayon speaks up. "Greatfather should be the best thing you have. He should be the best thing all of us have."

Quentin frowns. “What does that even mean? The more I listen to you, the more you sound like all you have to offer is empty rhetoric and veiled threats. I just want to know who I am, really, beyond what I’ve been told is my purpose.” The roof creaks again, louder this time, and the wind begins to pick up once more. “It may be too late for Alise, but it doesn’t have to be too late for this!”

“You are a Hymnmaster!” Brayon snarls, venomous. “That is all you need to know. It is all you ever needed to know. If you want to find your identity, look to your purpose! Outside of Greatfather, our lives *have* no meaning! Be honored: you are a Hymnmaster!”

Quentin looks to Natalie for help, and she provides it. “You are a work in progress,” she says. “We are the culmination of all our yesterdays, all our dreams, and all our goals for tomorrow. We may never be guaranteed that tomorrow, but we can live like there is still the possibility of one!” She puts her hands on Quentin’s shoulders protectively. “This place... this is stalling until you die and hoping there’s an afterlife. Nothing happens here, while the rest of the world transforms around you. Don’t you see that’s madness? Quentin, if you stay here, you will settle. You will be comfortable. But you will never grow, and you will never change, and that is the greatest tragedy I can imagine!” She looks into his eyes, pleading. “That’s what makes us human-- we strive to better ourselves, not because we have to impress some unseen deity, but because we *want* to! Change is the best thing we do, Quentin. It’s the key to our survival. Because what is life if it goes by unlived? Take a chance!”

Quentin nods, understanding. He wants to answer this, to tell her he agrees, or at least he wants to. But Brayon's gaze is fixed upon him. If there is any chance he has of retaining his position as Hymnmaster, it will vanish the second he opens his mouth.

The roof creaks again. As he considers being Unnamed, Quentin realizes it might not matter. This storm is one of the worst he has ever seen, and with his only shelter in a state of shambles, there is a growing chance that he will not live to see the morning. If he is to die now, it is far better that he die honest. He gulps, then clears his throat.

"I want--" he says.

But he does not get the chance to say anything else. It is not the roof that gives way, it is the tree standing outside, whose branches have given Quentin shade all through the lonely years, the tree he climbed as a child, before he ever met Alise. A massive, sturdy branch crashes through the roof as the tree is uprooted from the spot where it has stood watch for generations. Quentin sees the branch heading for his head, but he has nowhere to run.

He closes his eyes and is overwhelmed by the blackness.

XII: NO MORE SECOND CHANCES

Quentin buried his face in his hands, wishing he could be anywhere else. When he looked up, he was still there, sitting in a chair that had been moved behind the altar in the chapel, the Messengers flanking him on either side. Quentin passed his movement off as a sneeze that would not come, scrunching his nose up and down frantically and scratching it with his right hand to pretend he was still invested in the quarterly meeting.

Four times a year, the clergy opened up the chapel for anyone in Halvern to voice their complaints with or suggestions for the church. Most of these suggestions were misguided in nature, and were a waste of Quentin's time. But it gave the impression that the church cared about Halvern and valued its congregation highly. Quentin scoffed at that notion. If these people had any idea what went on inside the House of Relief, or how much of their tithes went straight to the clergy's pockets, the discussion would turn far uglier than today's debate over what hymns should be sung in services.

Quentin was aware that he should be paying closer attention to what was being said, but this issue was raised at least once a year by the more elderly of the church, and nothing was ever accomplished. What it came down to, in the end, was that Quentin was the appointed spiritual leader, so his decisions had to be influenced by Greatfather; what he wanted was, by default, what was best for the church. He had mused every so often about this phenomenon, where everyone assumed he knew what he was doing on such a deep level that he was beyond reproach. He wondered what else he could get away with,

using this defense. Theft? Lies? Murder? If he said it was Greatfather's will, it was not outside of the realm of possibility that he could kill a man in broad daylight and be praised for it.

The only thing the congregation condemned wholly was adultery, which seemed strange when compared with murder. After years of sermonizing from Brayon, these people feared nothing as much as their own desires.

Desires, Quentin thought. His own had gotten twisted and muted over the years. He had tried to deny himself after Alise left, but it was no good. He had only gone to the House of Relief once, to his great shame. He was lonely without Alise, and his loneliness had threatened to overcome him. So he gave in, but he felt filthy afterwards, as if he had defiled not a bed in some brothel, but the altar at the front of the chapel.

"The older hymns are the most inspired," a stooped man by the name of Abel said. "They were written closest to the time of the *Holy Canticle*, and are therefore the purest of intent. We should sing more of those."

An even older man, whose name Quentin could never remember five minutes after being introduced, replied, "The hymns I sang as a boy were from the newer cycle, and are more musical. They are easier to learn, easier to remember, and are no less true than your hymns."

"The older hymns are filled with Greatfather-inspired lyrics, taken straight from the *Canticle* itself!" Abel countered. "Those words have power."

“Not if you aren’t able to remember them!” the other man retorted. “With those hymns, you’re so busy learning the lyrics that by the time you feel confident enough to sing along, the hymn is over! That is frustration, not worship!”

And so the debate went on. Quentin’s focus slipped again. What was the point of all this, anyway? Nothing ever came out of these meetings. Why didn’t any of these people realize that? What they said here might as well be shouted to the wind, for all the good it did. But on it went anyway, like clockwork, four times a year. That made twenty-three since Alise had left. It felt like so much longer.

How were these two men so devout, so consumed with their worship that they could argue like this in perpetuity over something so trivial as which hymns were sung each week? Again, it did not make any difference. Quentin chose hymns that both men would be satisfied with every time, as well as hymns that each might not care for. If either of them got what they so wanted, the worship would lose its balance. No one would win, then. But Quentin could not tell him that. His job today was not to interfere with the discussion. Still, he had never been this concerned about the hymns sung, even when it was up to him to decide. They were all just words. It was the meaning one gave them that granted them power.

A glimmer of red caught Quentin’s eye. Red hair. Quentin’s heart stopped for one brief moment, jarred out of its usual rhythm by shock. Alise. He was sure of it. He offered up his first genuine prayer in years to Greatfather, a prayer of thanks. Today, he

could set things right, he knew it. It was all he could do not to shout, or cry, or surrender himself to joy. As soon as the meeting was done--

The woman turned her head. Her face was unfamiliar to him. Her eyes were not the blue-green orbs that filled Quentin's dreams, but a dull brown in hue. Her nose was too small, her skin too dotted with freckles. She was beautiful, yes, but not Alise. The first row was still empty. Quentin's stomach twisted, and he put his face in his hands once more. He wanted to be gone. He wanted no one to see him. He wanted this to be over.

Quentin stood abruptly. Brayon shot him a murderous look that he pretended not to see. "Why can't you both be happy?" he asked the two old men. They both fell silent, confused by this sudden outburst. "I choose my hymns for each service carefully, so as to offend no one's tastes, but still, you're not happy! I spend hours rehearsing with the choir so that nothing gets in the way of your worship. I meet with First Messenger Brayon every week to ensure the hymns I have picked go along with the week's Message. You don't know half of what I do. But you aren't satisfied! It's just music! All hymns were written to point to the same thing! All of them were written to facilitate worship! As long as you sing with conviction, as long as *your* intentions are pure, what hymns I choose should not matter!

"Do you think that Greatfather cares what *song* you sing? Would you make His cares that small? He hasn't said anything to be added to the *Canticle* in centuries, and nothing in there says it makes one whit of difference what music is used. Do you know what it says about worship? Second Canto: '*Live in worship.*' In other words, it should be a

constant state of mind. If you're already worshipping Greatfather, the words you sing in here are just a bonus! I would like to put an end to this discussion, once and for all by saying that I'm your Hymnmaster, and *I don't care!*" He took a deep breath, calming himself. "Just live your lives as the Holy One wills. That's the worship He cares about."

The meeting fizzled after that. There was no way to follow up a speech like that from the Hymnmaster, and there was no sense in continuing to argue when the Hymnmaster himself admitted his heart wasn't in it. Ten minutes later, Quentin and Brayon were alone in the chapel. Even the other Messengers decided to give the pair of them some space.

Brayon was incensed. He barely waited for the door to close before he went off on Quentin. "Just what, exactly, were you trying to accomplish? You alienated everyone who came today, and barring a miracle, all of Halvern will know by tomorrow! What gives you the right to spew this nonsense at Abel and Vernon, two of this church's most respected members? You were appointed by myself, Adrun, and the congregation! You cannot turn on us like that!"

"You told me I was appointed by Greatfather," Quentin murmured, the realization of what he had done sinking in. "It was my purpose."

"Your purpose is to do what you're told!" Brayon snapped. "Don't give me that attitude. I choose the tone of the service. I meet with you to make sure you stay on track. And I tell you when to be silent! You know as well as I that no one in this chapel a few minutes ago thinks that, but it's true. You get the glory, I get the responsibility. My

purpose is not a flattering one, but it is necessary. Someone has to keep you doing what you must, even when your sin and your hot head get in the way.”

He leaned in close. “Quentin, this is it. There are no more second chances for you. Another outburst like this, another missed meeting, and I *will* have you Unnamed. You are dangling by a thread. Do you understand me?”

Quentin nodded. “I understand.”

“Good,” Brayon said. “Now get out of here before anyone thinks I was shouting at you.”

Quentin left and did not look back, chased out the door by his own insecurities. He was nothing if Brayon withdrew his support. He would have no home, no honor to speak of, and no safety net. He should not have spoken up. But he had to admit, in the darkest corner of his mind, that it felt good to say how he felt for once.

His humility cord was waiting for him at the Hymnmaster’s dwelling, but he had not used it regularly these past few months. It didn’t seem to be working anymore. He should give himself a few dozen lashes with it as a penance. But if Greatfather was really up there, a concept he debated more and more these days, Quentin could not picture Him enjoying His servants harming themselves just to please Him. That simply did not make sense in light of everything else Quentin had read about Greatfather.

As he stepped outside of the chapel, he looked up at the sky, filled with regret and disillusionment. He wished there were some way for him to be sure of everything, to regain the conviction he had possessed that morning, twenty years ago, when he had sung

with reckless abandon. Singing did not bring him joy anymore. It was just a responsibility.

Clouds were forming, rolling in from the south like an omen. Quentin would need to move quickly and get everything in order before coming back to the chapel. Brayon would not tolerate tardiness, not after what he had just done. Now there was a ticking clock, supplied by the heavens, and Quentin had to heed its call.

A storm was on the horizon.

AFTER THE STORM

Quentin returns to consciousness like a child dipping his toe in the river to see if the water is too cold. It is no longer raining, and sunlight streams in through the hole in the roof of the Hymnmaster's dwelling. He realizes he must have slept through the night. And then it all comes rushing back: the storm, the flooding, his struggle to save Alise's letter, his fight with Brayon, the tree crashing through the roof. There are branches from the tree about five feet away from him, but none are crushing him. Natalie must have managed to drag him away from that mess. He wonders what that looked like.

He feels in his pocket. The letter is still there.

And then Natalie is hovering over him, concern darkening her features and then giving way to relief. Quentin tries to sit up, but dizziness overcomes him and he flops back on the attic floor. "Don't try to do anything too strenuous yet," Natalie cautions him with a smile. "A tree slapped you last night."

Quentin winces. "I remember. Did you pull me out of that?"

Natalie nods. "You were slippery in the rain, but I managed."

"You keep on saving me," Quentin remarks. "I should probably be more embarrassed by that." He chuckles.

"Give it time," Natalie says. She hands him a glass of water, and he downs it in one gulp. His throat, which has felt cracked and parched, is soothed. Then she bends down and gingerly helps Quentin into a sitting position. The head rush is almost too much for

Quentin, but with Natalie holding him upright, he soon recovers. He glances around, absorbing how truly wrecked the attic is now.

“Where is Brayon?” Quentin asks, all of a sudden noticing the First Messenger’s absence.

“He’s downstairs, if he hasn’t slunk off already,” Natalie replies. “That louse spent the whole night blaming your concussion on me and my ‘heathen ways.’ He quieted down once he realized I wasn’t listening. The floodwaters receded overnight at an absurd speed. I’d heard about how odd your storms could be, but actually witnessing it-- that was something else entirely. I don’t know how you live here.”

Quentin shrugs. “It’s all I’ve ever known. Which reminds me. Stay right here. I have some business to attend to, but I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Natalie gives him an odd look, but he does not dwell on it. He heads down the stairs, gaining steadiness with each step but still in need of a handrail. True to Natalie’s word, the water is almost gone, though the smell remains. There is about an inch of standing water across the ground, but it is nothing Quentin is not used to.

Brayon adjusts his robes as he steps away from the chamber pot at the other side of the room. It is a strangely vulnerable position for him to be in, and it is not one that is familiar to Quentin. “Brayon,” says Quentin.

The First Messenger spins around, acknowledging Quentin with a raised eyebrow. “So it was Greatfather’s will for you to pull through,” he mutters, sounding almost disappointed.

Quentin takes a deep breath. “I’m not entirely sure how this works,” he says, “but I am officially tendering my resignation. I’m stepping down from the position of Hymnmaster, starting immediately.”

“Excuse me?” says Brayon.

“I am leaving the church,” Quentin explains. “I’m not entirely sure what I believe anymore. I’ve spent my whole life within the shell of Paternitism, and I have come to understand that I don’t have any real knowledge of the rest of the world. I want to see what it is like while I still can, and maybe find myself along the way. I may decide at the end that I still believe in Greatfather, but if I do so, it will be my decision to make. For now, I need to be more responsible to myself and less concerned about what others think of me.”

A weight lifts from him as he speaks, and he feels as if he is a newborn, seeing the sun for the first time. Over the years, the church has become a prison for him, and this is his last chance to be free.

Brayon sneers at him, all pretense of religiosity gone from his face. “You will do no such thing,” he says. “After this past day’s events, I have more than enough evidence to have you publicly Unnamed. You are useful, though, and the congregation likes you for some reason. You will either renew your commitment to the faith, never putting a toe out of line, or you will have your purpose taken from you.”

The words mean nothing to Quentin, passing over him like flies, unpleasant but ultimately futile. “You don’t understand, Brayon,” he says. “I’m leaving the church.

You can Unname me all you want, but I won't be there for the ceremony. The people here in Halvern respect me, and they all *know* me, but I don't have any friends. My parents are so devout, they'll believe anything you tell them about me, and they stopped caring about me outside of the context of Paternitism years ago. I have no meaningful relationships here. All I have is this house, and it's falling apart around our heads. In my case, *on my head*." Quentin is giddy, and he thinks he might laugh at any second. He cannot stop smiling. "You have nothing worth taking away from me. All you can do now is flounder."

"How dare you?" Brayon fumes. "After all that I've sacrificed to keep your reputation alive, the years I spent training you. You would be *nothing* without me."

"I was nothing *with* you," Quentin retorts. "Brayon, what do you know about me, outside of Paternitism? What do I like to do? What is the rest of my life like? You don't know. You don't know me. And I have gotten so wrapped up in my damned *purpose* that there is nothing about me to know. All I have become is a statue you can prop up once a week to sing for the congregation, just like you want. I am a means to an end to you. But I want to be more."

Brayon laughs, a hollow, empty sound. "This is all you are, Quentin. This is all you will ever be. I said it last night: you are a Hymnmaster. It's in your blood, in your soul. Why would you leave this to live a pointless life, as all life without Greatfather is guaranteed to be? In twenty, thirty years you will look back on this morning and curse

yourself for your weakness. But you will have nothing to come back to. No home. No place.”

“I’m sick of you telling me I’m weak,” Quentin says. “You know, I think you *feed* off that. You feed off others’ weakness to make yourself stronger. But you have no life of your own. All you are is the power you steal from people like me, by making us afraid, by making us hate ourselves and feel unworthy. You said we are all Greatfather’s children, all worthy of His love, but you don’t treat people that way. You are a liar, and what’s worse is I think you don’t even realize it. And now that I know that, I feel sorry for you, because without people like me to give you power, *you* are nothing. But it’s too late for you.” He crosses his arms, building himself up to hide how woozy he still feels. “Now leave my house.”

Brayon scowls, but he turns to go without saying another word. Quentin’s heart races as the First Messenger shuts the door behind him. He is a hundred, no, a thousand pounds lighter; he is lighter than the air he breathes. For a split second during that conversation, Quentin had considered trying to convince Brayon to change, but it would have been for naught. Brayon is much like the chapel-- cold, hard, unchanging, and empty without the people of Halvern. He is too rooted in his blessed purpose to change.

For Quentin, however, it might not be too late.

As fast as he dares, he races back upstairs. Natalie is still waiting there, just as he asked. At the sight of his smile, her tension eases. She has been up here worrying about

the conversation he has just gone through, but she should not have. “How did it go?” she asks.

“Better than I could have hoped. I did what I needed to do. He’s gone now.” And it is true-- the world has opened up, full of new possibilities, paths untraveled, all there for Quentin to explore. But there is one path that beckons, daring Quentin to take the first step.

“You’ve done too much for me already,” he says. Even though I’m not sure I agree with everything you said last night, you helped me in ways I might never have helped myself. For that I can never thank you enough. But I just have one more favor to ask of you.”

EPILOGUE

Quentin stares up at the night sky, a grin running across his face. There are more stars here than he could see in Halvern. The inky sky above is full of them, and every one is beautiful. Quentin wishes he could build a ship that would sail those heavens, traversing a shimmering sea made of diamonds and velvet.

Night on the road is peaceful. He and Natalie bought passage on a caravan bound for the north a week ago, and every day since has been pure liberation. The wind is different away from the clustered buildings of Halvern. The sunlight has been unobstructed with the exception of the day they traveled through a forest. This is an openness that Quentin has never known-- no schedule, no obligations, no walls of any kind.

A dragonfly traces a lazy path through the moonlight, its wings mere shimmers that cast wild, frenzied shadows all around Quentin. Quentin had never thought of how bright the night could be, even far away from towns and other people. Once his eyes adjust, the moon and stars are always enough. The dragonfly lands on Quentin's shoulder, and he marvels at its beauty. Its body is so unlike that of Quentin's, and yet, perfectly suited to its needs. If Greatfather did not create this life, then what did? How could the world, in all its untold years of existence, have led to the birth of something like a dragonfly? Its head is too big, its eyes enormous, and it has one pair too many wings. But it all fits together, and Quentin could not imagine any other configuration for its features.

Back in Halvern, Quentin would have considered such an insect to be lesser, but now he is not so sure. Does it think? Does it dream? And what sorts of dreams would a dragonfly have? It can traverse both air and ground with equal ease. What would it have left to want? Even a dragonfly has needs, but in between... perhaps, Quentin thinks, it is all contentment, traversing the skies without even a semblance of a care.

Quentin has spent so many years wrapped up in himself, in his fears and the aspirations of his elders, he has a hard time imagining what it would be like to be carefree. But he is taking the first steps. These last few nights, even though he was on the ground, he was able to sleep the whole night, and now, whenever he puts a hand beneath his eyes, the deep purple trenches of exhaustion are no longer there. He is not quite at peace, not yet, but he is playing at it.

As he looks up at the sky, he wonders what, if anything, is up there. Is Greatfather there, peering down from behind that grand curtain? Perhaps. Quentin hopes so. The thought of there being nothing above but emptiness is too lonely to dwell on for long. If he can stare up, then someone should be able to stare back. It only makes sense. And even if it isn't Greatfather, it is someone worth knowing.

What would the world look like, to some unknown being staring down? Everything, even affairs of the heart, must seem impossibly small. Cities would be nothing but stars, points of light in the darkness. Quentin supposes that is what the caravan looks like, with its carts arranged in a tight circle to ward against bandits, a fire in the center to provide warmth.

It wouldn't be so terrible, Quentin thinks, to be thought of as a light. After all, that is how he was brought up to envision Greatfather. If Quentin is light, he does not have to pretend or be responsible or turn away people he cares about. All he has to do is shine, and the rest is up to him. It is a purer purpose than any Brayon could devise, with his guilt, his secrets, his lies. There is something almost pathetic about the First Messenger, now that Quentin considers him from a distance. Brayon was wracked by his own shames, so much so that he struck a deal with people he would otherwise condemn. He betrayed his own values, and still he went on and on about purpose, as though by convincing Quentin to stay on a certain path he would be able to live vicariously through him.

And what is Quentin's purpose now? He has pondered this ever since he left Halvern. It is not to Greatfather-- it has been to Him for too long-- and it is not really to himself. While he is enjoying his travels, he does not think he could be like Natalie, never having a home or any security. He can see why she is happy with her life, though.

Maybe it is to the truth, to find out what he believes without anyone trying to force it on him. Maybe Paternitism, maybe one of the dozens of other religions practiced across the known world, maybe nothing more than the appreciation of the time he has. He cannot say for sure. The journey is just beginning, and the road is long.

What he settles on, gazing up at the stars, is the same thing that drove him out of Halvern. His true purpose is to follow his passion, to wherever it might lead. All he has to do is listen to where it calls.

Right now, it calls him to Caronton. To Alise.

If she is still there. She might have left by now, or fallen in love with someone else, or any number of possibilities Quentin has turned over in his mind. Even if she is still there, she might hate him, and he wouldn't blame her for that. But just to see her again, even if she forces him to go, would be worth every trial. To see his child-- a child who would be five years old by now, the same age he was when he gave his life away.

He has nothing to lose, and everything to gain. Natalie told him on the night of the storm to live his life for others. He could do that for Alise. He would fall at her feet, apologize until he had no breath left in his lungs, and throw himself upon her mercy. And there is a chance-- a small chance, yes, but one nonetheless worth pursuing-- that they can be whole again, that he can start on the path of mending what he so quickly and foolishly tore asunder.

He perks up at the sound of Natalie calling his name. She is waiting for him with the rest of the caravan, waving him over. Quentin can see the faces of his other traveling companions in the fire's amber glow. The oldest, with a peppery beard down to his chest, looks as happy as Quentin wants to be when he reaches that age. The youngest, a girl of about twelve, leans into her mother's side with the assurance that it will always be there. The rest are of all sorts, a patchwork quilt of humanity that serves as a blessed relief to Quentin after decades of the sameness of Paternitism. He does not know them all, not yet, but he wants to.

It is time for dinner, and then a heavy sleep before tomorrow's travels. They will rise with the sun, its ascension becoming Quentin's daily renewal. The hours of riding will lull him into a mindless trance, as they do every day, and he appreciates the blessing of not thinking. And the next night, they will make camp and wait for the cycle to start all over again, repeating until they reach Caronton.

They still have miles to go, and the road is long. And he cannot wait.

Quentin stands up and goes back to them, back to the fire, and joins the light.