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"Who do you say that I am?":

Literary Portrayal of Religious Experience

A Thesis Submitted

by

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ABSTRACT

Literature is one of the primary means through which God has revealed Himself to the world. Christian writers, therefore, should be bold to portray their God in and through the religious experiences of their characters. Evaluating classic and contemporary literature, four distinct methods of portraying religious experience may be described, each with varying levels of flexibility and faithfulness. Works of literature such as fantasy fiction may include any and all of these methods, even while that literature pursues other themes.

In this thesis, an Artist Statement describes the included work of fiction, with its literary context, impetus, and personal significance. A Critical Paper follows, studying and describing the four types of religious experience in literature. Finally, the Creative Manuscript attempts to put these four types into practice in the context of a coherent story, using the beginning of a longer novel.

Dedicated to God our Father,

through the Holy Spirit of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ,

and

to any writer who would make Him known.

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Chapter 1 – ARTIST STATEMENT

The Fall Away is a novel of fantasy fiction for young adults. It takes place at the "edge of the world"—that is, a place where the world's orderliness fades into unlivable chaos—and focuses on both the natives and the sojourners who find themselves there.

This story mainly follows Gale, a young woman and missionary apprentice newly arrived in the little town of Loshinka. As a student of the Skentovite religion, which worships certain men and women living at the center of the world, Gale seeks to encourage this religion at the edge. She is, however, lonely. Finding herself in an unfamiliar culture, away from all her previous comforts and acquaintances, and overwhelmed by the nearness of the edge, she wonders if she should neglect her convictions in order to find a place she can belong. Should she water down her most potent ideals? Or should she accept the role of an outsider and lose any ability to influence this culture for their good?

The story also follows Lan, a young man born and raised in Loshinka among a large, poor family. Being as it is that the Skentovite religion is the cultural norm, he practices it, too—but there is a depth to his experience that most others seem to lack. Even Gale, a lifelong adherent and earnest student of Skentovite doctrine, finds herself wondering what it is that Lan sees that makes her own religion so powerful to him. Yet Lan is struggling with his own question of contextualization. Despite being native to Loshinka, he too finds himself in the position of an outsider as his life and thought diverge from the people and culture around him. Like Gale, he must decide whether to ignore the reality of his experience to fit the norms of his society, or to dig deeper into his lonely walk of faith.

For the purposes of this thesis, the manuscript will contain only the beginning chapters of this novel. This segment, however, should be sufficient to introduce the various characters,

conflicts, and contexts of the novel. If the purpose of this thesis were to decide the questions that Gale and Lan confront—how to be part of a culture while creating change within it—this manuscript would need to include the entire novel, or this novel would need to shrink into a short story. Neither option will be necessary.

This thesis seeks, instead, to explore the question of how to write real experiences of living faith in contemporary literature. With this in mind, provided the main characters are introduced early in the novel (as main characters generally are), this manuscript will encompass more than enough of the story to explore this technique to preliminary satisfaction. To answer that question fully, however, may take my entire life and writing career—too much to include in the present manuscript.

Although this question is most applicable to Christianity and the subjective experience of walking with the Holy Spirit, I believe this novel's world is equipped well enough to explore this question without introducing Christianity itself. The Skentovite "religion" is a pseudo-Christianity, in a way, but only in the same way that an actual world religion might mimic Christianity without accepting its core doctrines. In other words, I intend to portray real and living faith using the tool of an obviously false religion—without pretending that that false religion has the form of a true religion, even in this fictional world. Lan's true experience of a vital faith must rest, not on the tenets of the Skentovite religion (that is, on gods that cannot save), but on an understanding that there is something deeper than this false religion which may yet be found.

To say it a different way: this novel will not contain Christianity as such, but it will contain the living and triune God, if only implicitly. Faith can only be real if God is real—but faith does not need institutional Christianity to be real. The Biblical examples of Abraham and

Noah may prove this to us. (This is not to say that contemporary Christians do not need the Christian church—in fact, because God has established the church and instructed Christians to live as part of it, the Christian church is crucial to New Testament Christians. But we can truthfully say that an individual's faith does not come from the church, and one's faith may be living even if one's life in the church has yet to bloom into full flower.) If it helps the Christian reader, he or she may consider this story as set in a corner of the pre-Incarnation world, when the light of the gospel has not yet broken through the clouds, and when all people must feel their way toward God on the basis of his general, and occasionally personal, revelation.

The story of Gale and Lan will help me explore many difficult questions regarding the life of real faith in a fallen world. This manuscript may not encompass as many issues as the full novel, but I believe it can help clarify a question of vital importance for fiction and literature, and especially that literature which comes from a Christian standpoint.

***

The impetus for this thesis and manuscript comes from my own distress and delight at consuming contemporary fiction, both Christian and secular. In Christian fiction, whether literary and cinematic, writers seem to wear handcuffs. Especially in Christian film, the visuals may be stunning, the audio and music flawless, the acting fair—but when it comes to the writing itself, that *sine qua non* for true worth as a piece of art and entertainment, the work falls flat. In literature, where writing accounts for the totality of the work, this disconnect seems even more painful. The mechanics themselves may be good, with tight dialogue, vibrant worldbuilding, and an interesting plot hook; but when it comes to the characters and philosophies undergirding the story (again, that without which no piece of literature can truly move the human heart), the writer seems to have his or her hands tied. But these handcuffs do not signify the writer holding back

from saying something—rather, the writer is too eager to say something specific, and this ruins the rest of the story.

Christian writers (speaking as one myself) want to share their reality with others. Literature is a wonderful tool for doing so. Unfortunately, our eagerness to explain our experiences as Christians—in stronger terms, to evangelize—overcomes our eagerness to tell a good story. This is not to blame Christians for being more concerned about the gospel than about making good art. The gospel is far more important. It is, however, to point out that the gospel is rarely received where it is inaccessible. Part of sharing the gospel is making it available to those who hear it. If we wish to share the gospel through our fiction, we need to make that fiction good enough that the gospel can shine through it.

At the moment, the gospel in Christian fiction is only accessible to those who already know the gospel—to Christians. This sends Christian fiction into recursion, circling back and only teaching those who already know what it has to say. If one does not already know the gospel, they can expect confusion and disappointment. But if one knows the gospel, one can fill in the gaps of bad storytelling to see the message the author intended. The message that everyone needs to hear becomes a message that only those who have heard it already will ever understand.

Unfortunately, this is not an example of God blinding the minds of unbelievers. This is an example of Christians refusing to remove their lights from their bushels, trusting that anyone who sees a bushel will rejoice because there must be a light beneath it.

Despite the importance of the gospel in our lives, despite the power that we know it has, Christian writers—like cross-cultural missionaries—need to focus on how to preach the gospel faithfully without using it as a bludgeon or turning it sickly-sweet. We must stop patting

ourselves on the backs for delighting in the words of our Lord. Instead, we must make those words available to our unbelieving audiences so that they, too, may delight in them.

This issue is exacerbated, in my mind, when I consume secular fiction. Although secular writers don't know the treasure of the gospel that we have, they get glimpses of it: they create masterpieces that walk through forgiving the unforgivable, surviving abuse, turning from crime, and loving when there is no love to give. Burdened with these weighty but glorious themes, they nevertheless package them in beautiful, rich, and tender storytelling that has done more to drive me toward God than any contemporary Christian author ever has. I see the gospel through their stories, even if these authors didn't mean them that way.

Why not reverse that imbalance? For now, secular authors write stories that are accessible to both believers and unbelievers, but which inadvertently point Christians toward God. Christian authors, however, write stories that are inaccessible to any but believers, which struggle to point even Christians toward God. Why not change that? What if we Christians, with a more glorious weight, knowing the treasure we possess and desiring to share it, could write in a way that is accessible to every audience, with beauty for all, and with special beauty for those with eyes to see? Like the stars, we could blaze with God's glory, pointing Christians toward God and unbelievers toward something more than they know.

This is the impetus and vision behind this thesis. The manuscript itself is only a medium for me to pursue this skill in my own writing, and perhaps to prove to others that it is possible.

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The literary context for this manuscript is, in a way, all of literature—but that is too large for me to have read even a fraction of it. Instead, this manuscript will lean on a smaller selection of works, both Christian and secular.

This manuscript falls within the young adult (YA) fantasy tradition, marked in recent decades by authors such as Laini Taylor, Maggie Stiefvater, and Sabaa Tahir. This genre deals with some of the hardest parts of life—abuse, loneliness, one's own identity—and seeks to provide readers with joy and focus even as they face the brokenness of this world. YA fantasy often deals with themes of community, competence, and coming of age. This manuscript will deal with all of those themes, focusing on two characters young enough to walk through that stage of life themselves yet old enough to see the brokenness of the world with clear eyes.

YA fantasy is an outgrowth of the larger fantasy tradition, defined from its birth by such giants as J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. Today, Brandon Sanderson dominates the genre—in imagination and quantity of books, if not always in quality of writing—with stories that deal closely with religious worship, legends, and righteousness amid chaos. As a whole, fantasy has always concerned itself with conflicts between good and evil, heroes and terrors (occasionally found in the same person), and the exploration of cultures. As contemporary culture has shifted, fantasy too has drifted from clear moral delineations toward tougher questions of right and wrong as they play out over swaths of time. This manuscript will not engage with generic fantasy tropes as directly as it will with YA fantasy concepts, but it will nevertheless contain hallmarks of contemporary fantasy, as it explores new cultures, different ways for the world to exist, and struggles between what seems right and what seems good.

Fantasy itself comes from the broader literary tradition, and especially historical fiction—in which authors must bring modern readers to engage with a past world and culture. Chief among this type of story, for the purposes of this manuscript, is *War and Peace*, by Leo Tolstoy. In terms of mood, structure, and style, this may be the most important part of this manuscript's literary context. While I do not pretend to grasp the intricacies of Tolstoy's style in every respect,

I do intend to pursue it closely as I explore contextualization and religious experience with Gale and Lan. Tolstoy was not always orthodox in his Christian beliefs (occasionally, not even Russian Orthodox), but he nevertheless achieves this portrayal of living faith in a way that few contemporary writers seem to manage. In addition, *War and Peace* deals with heavy and complicated conflicts that mirror—though they do not match—the types of conflicts I wish to explore in *The Fall Away*. Thus, I intend to take inspiration from Tolstoy's work in multiple respects.

In all, I intend in this manuscript to combine the character themes of YA fantasy with the cultural exploration of the wider fantasy genre, couched within the style and religious honesty of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. I hope that this combination will act as an appropriate foundation for exploring the portrayal of real faith within effective fiction.

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The personal significance of this thesis and manuscript is based on the significance of my own Christian faith, and on the significance of evangelism and personal witness within that faith.

Throughout the ages, stories have been a means of drawing others into new experiences. In my life, too, stories have taught me how it feels to live behind someone else's eyes. These stories are the most powerful when they deal with reality—with brokenness and loss, with death and new life, with joy and hope beyond all expectation. My favorite stories have always been those that point me to God for joy in and through the fallenness of the world.

If the best stories deal with true reality, why do so few contemporary stories deal with any real sense of living faith? Why do most contemporary stories refuse to reckon with the meta-reality that is God and His nature? Or, if they do attempt to reckon with Him, why do they do it so badly while pretending as if they do it well?

To me, it seems as though we Christian writers are still unsure whether God is real or not. Secular writers deal honestly and powerfully with heavy topics in beautiful ways, because they know those topics are real. Each topic deserves full treatment. Christian writers deal hastily and shakily with even heavier topics. Why? Because those topics are not real? Because no one will believe in them? Because, after all, our God is as made-up as the critics say?

I cannot believe this. My God is real. Our experience of Him is subjective, yes—it's impossible for me to explain how every Christian should experience that relationship—but so is every other thing writers put into their novels. I want to write stories wherein God is alive, the same way that He is alive in my own life.

That's why this thesis and manuscript are important to me. They are helping me to prove whether, as a writer, I will be able to write reality as I truly see it—and as I think many others see it—or whether I will spend the rest of my life writing silly stories about cardboard characters trying their best without God. Will I be like a secular writer, telling beautiful stories with holes in the middle where they try to dance around the idea of God? Will I be like a contemporary Christian writer, telling corny tales that lose sight of how great and wonderful our God truly is? Or will I be like my Father, creating worlds and guiding characters through the darkest moments of life, while never losing sight of the true hope and joy that can only be found in Jesus Christ?

This thesis is an experiment. I might fail to write as well or as worshipfully as I would like. But I hope that, through this attempt, some other Christian writer will be able to pick up the pen and begin creating true Christian art—for the sake of a world that needs it, for the glory of the God Who created it.

Chapter 2 – CRITICAL PAPER

2.1 Introduction

As Orson Scott Card begins *Characters and Viewpoint*, his practical and inspiring handbook for writers, he writes, "The characters in your fiction are people. Human beings" (Card 4). He makes a blunt statement. Although Card would likely agree that other entities can appear character-shaped—such as a natural environment, a societal system, or an animal—he might also argue that those entities are only characters insofar as they become like human beings. Dogs become personal when they exhibit something like human emotion. A society seems evil when it begins to show a human flaw like discrimination. Ursula K. Le Guin's frozen wasteland in *The Left Hand of Darkness* exudes a new sense of danger when it appears marked by some giant hand—when it says "in enormous letters of black and white DEATH, DEATH, written right across a continent" (Le Guin 237). It is the writer's duty and joy to trace human shapes on what was previously unintelligible. The sea becomes a lover; the cat becomes a child. Above all, that stranger we thought was wholly *other* becomes an intimate friend. All of them are human. The writer displayed them that way.

This raises issues when writers try to portray the Christian God. To Christians, there are many ways in which their God is like humans—but there are far more ways in which He is wholly unlike them. Worse, many Christians believe that to portray their God in only some of His attributes is to misrepresent Him. The Christian God is dynamic and complex, even as He is unchanging and united in a single essence. If God is to be portrayed, He must not be reduced to a human shape, the way a mountain or a horse might be.

Yet, if Christians are to create art that reflects their experience, they must find a way to portray God—or at least, to point toward Him. After all, the Christian God is not simply a facet

of the Christian faith; God is the entire thing. The Christian Bible calls Him "the beginning and the end" (Rev. 22.13), and states that "from him and through him and to him are all things" (Rom. 11.36). In Christian thought, God is the foundation of all things.

Not only that, but Christians believe that God is concerned with the details of the world and their lives. "As Christians we say we live in a *personal universe*, in the sense that it was created by a personal God" (Schaeffer 10, emphasis original). That God is not absent, but immanent. He has not left His creation unattended, but continues to act in the world and through His people—indeed, He is present with His people. Regardless of what they can convey by empirical data, Christians describe religious experiences in terms such as conversing with God, seeing God's work, and feeling God's love.

These phenomena are difficult to portray in literature. For the most part, when a person attempts to talk about religious experiences, those experiences are intelligible only to those who have had similar experiences, or to those are already familiar with Christian vocabulary. This often means that Christian writers' works are only accessible to other Christians. As Christian apologist Ashley Starnes writes, the Christian fiction genre has been "embraced almost entirely by those already professing the Christian faith" (6).

What is the solution? Perhaps Christian writers should give up trying to communicate their lived reality to those outside it—but this is akin to asking an immigrant writer to ignore her prior culture because it is hard to explain. Literature exists to share perspectives. The Christian perspective is one of many valuable points of view, and Christians should learn to share it.

The solution begins with shifting our focus—as we already have—from portraying the Christian *God* to portraying religious experience. While God is impossible to circumscribe in words, we see in the Bible that is possible to describe Him through the way that He interacts with

His creation. Indeed, the most powerful descriptions of God seem to be those that actually describe a human's experience of Him, and then invite the reader to seek Him in turn.

In contemporary and classic literature, writers portray religious experience in several ways, offering strategies to Christian writers for pointing to their God accessibly yet faithfully.

In this paper, I will explore several of these methods by using four books drawn from multiple genres of classic and contemporary literature, classifying their techniques according to two scales: objective/subjective, and observed/involved. It is my hope that, by considering literature that has already portrayed religious experience with varying degrees of success, Christian writers might find new ways to communicate their experience to those who otherwise may never engage with it. In other words, I hope to help Christian writers turn their believing characters into human beings for the world to see.

2.2 Observed Objective – Brandon Sanderson's *The Way of Kings*

Brandon Sanderson is one of the most famous living writers of fantasy fiction. Despite his work's wide range, it almost always includes religion as a major influence, if not a main focus of the story. These religions are cultural, and they allow Sanderson to examine how various societies choose what and how to worship. As is the nature of most fantasy elements, many of these religions have parallels with religions in the real world, but none can be considered an exact match. The Christian God does not appear, except in stories dealing with our own world.

In *The Way of Kings*, the first book of an ongoing epic series, Sanderson describes a religion with multiple near-Christian elements, including a so-called Hell, a god named "the Almighty," and a strong moral system that encourages believers to live this life in disciplined preparation for the next. While this world contains other religions as well, this religion dominates

the culture in which we find ourselves for the majority of the story. All of the main viewpoint characters ascribe to it, if only nominally.

Halfway through the story, one of the primary viewpoint characters has a religious experience: a literal face-to-face encounter with the Almighty. Kaladin, a slave, has undermined his army's assault and cost the lives of hundreds of soldiers. As punishment, his masters have chained him to a roof during a deadly storm (considered "the Almighty's judgment") (Sanderson, *Way of Kings* 602). As the wind whips him about, Kaladin sees everything go black—but not in unconsciousness:

> He opened his mouth to call out into the darkness, but hesitated. That silence was not to be broken. The air itself seemed to weigh less, as did he. He almost felt as if he could float away.
>
> In that darkness, an enormous face appeared just in front of his. A face of blackness, yet faintly traced in the dark. It was wide, the breadth of a massive thunderhead, and extending far to either side, yet it was somehow still visible to Kaladin. Inhuman. Smiling.
>
> Kaladin felt a deep chill—a rolling prickle of ice—scurry down his spine and through his entire body…. He looked down at himself, shocked, then looked up at the face.
>
> It was gone. There was only the darkness. (521)

This is the first of several such encounters throughout the series. Kaladin initially considers this a delusion, but later sees it again: "the aged face as wide as the sky, its eyes full of stars" (648). Eventually, he acknowledges it as a sign of the Almighty having given him certain ancient powers.

Dalinar, another viewpoint character, receives similar visions throughout the book. Though these are less obviously divine, they become so. In the final vision, Dalinar speaks with a mysterious human man who finally reveals his name: "'I am… *I was*… God. The one you call the Almighty, the creator of mankind.' The figure closed his eyes. 'And now I am dead'" (997).

These are not the only encounters with godlike beings throughout Sanderson's series, but they are representative. In the former, Kaladin sees a face that could not belong to any normal creature—it must be a god. But this face appears at regular intervals, with the recurrence of the deadly storm in which he first saw it. It defies normal physics, but seems to obey the rules of a deeper reality. In the latter encounter, Dalinar speaks with an unidentified person who doesn't seem like a god at all—but that figure identifies himself as *the* god of this world, the one who created humankind. Yet that same creator god is dead. Again, this god redefines what is possible by showing visions of the past and imparting previously undiscovered knowledge, but it is bound by the rules of a more fundamental existence.

This type of religious experience I classify as "Observed Objective." It is an experience in which the narrator or viewpoint character *observes* someone else's *objective* experience—that is, it is an experience not beholden to the opinion of the person who narrates it. Neither Kaladin nor Dalinar manufactured their experiences; Sanderson presents them as having actually seen something. Whether it was Kaladin or an iguana that saw the face, the face was there to be seen. Whether it was Dalinar or a porcupine that heard the Almighty declare his own death, the Almighty did declare it. A religious experience of the Observed Objective type is *real*.

Unfortunately, a religious experience of this type is hardly a religious experience at all. It is one, insofar as the characters involved experience something that coincides with their religious beliefs, but it does not reflect a true religious experience as an encounter with the Christian God.

In fact, this type of religious experience—as Sanderson writes it—is exactly what Christian writers should avoid. The Observed Objective type most often takes an experience of God and places it squarely within the created world. Although such a god may seem far more powerful than a normal human being, it is constrained by laws of existence that some other source has defined.

Sanderson's "Almighty" admits this in Dalinar's vision. For one thing, there are multiple Almighty-level beings in this universe. Talking of the being that killed him, the Almighty says: "He is bound by some rules. All of us are…. I have done what I can" (997). Clearly, this is not the omnipotent Creator of the universe that Christians worship. It is a finite and restricted being—further confirmed by its ability to die.

When portraying a religious experience of the Observed Objective type, this conclusion is nearly unavoidable. If the Christian God is portrayed as an empirical fact, measurable and discoverable within our frame of reference, He ceases to be *the* frame of reference for everything else—which Christians believe He is. The Creator is folded into His creation, and suddenly something needs to create the Creator.

This is not to say that the Observed Objective type cannot be portrayed faithfully. C.S. Lewis, in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, does a remarkable job of putting Aslan (analogous to the Christian Jesus) into the world as a character without compromising his identity as God. Yet, as we will discuss, Lewis adds a different type of religious experience as well. By mixing two types, he manages to keep from stripping away Aslan's true identity.

Furthermore, when I call for caution using the Observed Objective type, I do not mean to imply that a "false religion"—that is, a non-Christian one—will always fail to point to true Christian reality. Technically, Lewis created a false religion when he created Aslan. Just as

literature, especially fiction, creates a false and stylized world in order to help us navigate our real world, Christian authors may create false religions to help us understand the real thing. Brandon Sanderson almost does this—and perhaps, compared to his Mormonism, this portrayal of God as part of creation would be faithful ("Why Do You Think"). As a signpost toward the Christian faith, however, his work is reductive and unsatisfying.

If there is a true Almighty in Sanderson's work, it is whatever Being created the one who calls himself the Almighty. That Being will not be visible through an Observed Objective description. Luckily, there are three other possibilities that may offer opportunities for a faithful portrayal of true religious experience.

2.3 Involved Objective – Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*

In contrast to Sanderson and his empirical deity, Marilynne Robinson in *Gilead* presents us with a God who is impossible to pin down, but also impossible to miss. John Ames, Robinson's protagonist and narrator, is a Congregationalist minister near the end of his life, writing a series of letters to his young son. These letters flow from memoir to philosophy, to current events as he sees them. His writing brims with Christian influence to the point that God's existence seems not even to be a question for him, if it ever was. God is present in everything he sees and thinks.

For example, when speaking of "a good sermon" as a "passionate conversation," John Ames writes, "There are three parties to it, of course, but so are there even to the most private thought—the self that yields the thought, the self that acknowledges and in some way responds to the thought, and the Lord. That is a remarkable thing to consider" (Robinson 51). The rest of the section is about baseball. This quote contains the only mention of God in this section, yet it

shows how deeply Ames' faith runs. He doesn't have to work to include God in his musings. God is always there.

This appears again later in the story. The section is worth quoting at length:

> This is an important thing, which I have told many people, and which my father told me, and which his father told him. When you encounter another person, when you have dealings with anyone at all, it is as if a question is being put to you. So you must think, What is the Lord asking of me in this moment, in this situation? If you confront insult or antagonism, your first impulse will be to respond in kind. But if you think, as it were, This is an emissary sent from the Lord, and some benefit is intended for me, first of all the occasion to demonstrate my faithfulness, the chance to show that I do in some small degree participate in the grace that saved me, you are free to act otherwise than as circumstances would seem to dictate. You are free to act by your own lights. You are freed at the same time of the impulse to hate or resent that person. He would probably laugh at the thought that the Lord sent him to you for your benefit (and his) but that is the perfection of the disguise, his own ignorance of it. (140-141)

This is a clear example of Christian belief translating to Christian practice. Ames believes that God is sovereign over every moment of his life, and thus governs even his interactions. Every person is "sent from the Lord." That presence of a third party to this conversation becomes reason enough to consider himself "free to act otherwise" than anyone might expect, as well as from any natural impulses that might arise. This is a simple perspective that John Ames adopts—that God is involved in every part of his life—but it influences everything he does.

Is this truly a religious experience? Granted, nothing in John Ames' life is as dramatic as giant faces and visions of a dead god, as we see in Sanderson's writing. But Robinson appears to

write her religious experience in a different sphere altogether. Whereas Sanderson writes religious experiences as events, Robinson weaves religious experience through John Ames' life. He doesn't have religious experiences; his *existence* is a religious experience.

This is the type of religious experience I consider to be "Involved Objective." While Sanderson's Observed Objective type relies on us observing someone else having an objective experience, Robinson's Involved Objective type *involves* us in someone else's *objective* experience.

Please note that, when I use the term "objective," I do not mean to imply that John Ames' experience is verifiable and repeatable for someone who is not John Ames. I mean—just as I meant with Sanderson's characters—that the existence of God is clear to the narrator. John Ames knows that God exists. It is not that God exists for some people but not for others, and luckily He exists for Ames; it is that God exists in John Ames' mind whether others believe or not. In other words, the label "objective" is not intended to reflect actual reality outside of the story world, but merely the narrator's reality. (This allows me to speak of the floating face that Kaladin sees as an objective fact, even though in our world there is no such thing.)[1]

There is no room for doubt in John Ames' mind. Not only that, but there is no room for anything outside of his religious experience. His conception of God touches everything that he does and thinks, leaving him saturated—or, shall I say, *involved*.

> Robinson gets close to discussing the matter through Ames' pen in another passage:
>
> There are two insidious notions, from the point of view of Christianity in the modern world…. One is that religion and religious experience are illusions of some sort (Feuerbach, Freud, etc.), and the other is that religion itself is real, but *your* belief that

[1] As alternatives to "objective" and "subjective," the terms "definite" and "indefinite" could also be applied. Despite the awkwardness of redefining "objective" for narrative purposes, I consider it the more useful term.

> *you* participate in it is an illusion. I think the second of these is the more insidious, because it is religious experience above all that authenticates religion, for the purposes of the individual believer. (165, emphasis original)

In contrast to both of these views, John Ames' opinion is, first, that religion and religious experience are real, and, second, that *his* belief that *he* participates in it is also real. This is the *objective* aspect. Robinson has created an Involved Objective type of religious experience, which touches all parts of the story with the plain fact of God's existence.

The disadvantages to this type may already be clear. It requires a level of introspection in the narrating character, here provided by both the first-person narration and the memoir quality of the story. For the Involved Objective type to work, the author must be willing to lead the reader through multiple situations in which the narrator compares the events of the story to the objective fact of the character's beliefs. Everything must filter through that conviction. Because of this, the Involved Objective type functions well as a framework for lifelong religious experience in memoir or memoir-shaped fiction, but struggles when attempted with something less introspective and less intimate. It works for a journal; perhaps not for a thriller.

The Involved Objective type allows an entire story to become one continuous religious experience, the way a Christian might describe his or her own life—indeed, as John Ames writes late in his story: "It has seemed to me sometimes as though the Lord breathes on this poor gray ember of Creation and it turns to radiance—for a moment or a year or the span of a life…. Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration" (279). Yet this technique forces the narrator to be a devout Christian, and that will not fit every story that begs to be told. Let us turn to another possibility.

2.4 Involved Subjective – Daniel Nayeri's *Everything Sad is Untrue (a true story)*

In *Everything Sad is Untrue (a true story)*, Daniel Nayeri's narrator is not quite as confident as John Ames. He is Daniel Nayeri himself—originally named Khosrou—writing at the age, supposedly, of twelve. He tells an engaging yet intense story of running from his homeland with his mother and sister, seeking asylum in the U.S., and learning to adapt to the society and culture of a small town in Oklahoma. The story does not deal directly with his own religious experience, but it does investigate his mother's. It wastes no time, but starts with these lines:

> All Persians are liars and lying is a sin.
>
> …
>
> My mom says it's true, but only because everyone has sinned and needs God to save them. (Nayeri 1)

As the story progresses we learn that, while living in Iran, Nayeri's mother converted from Islam to become a Christian. "Not just a regular one…. She fell in love" (195). Nayeri tries to investigate her change of heart then, but can only repeat what she says: "'Because it's true.' Why else would she believe it?" (196) He lists all the things she gave up, but has to conclude that his mother is either insane or honest. The religious experience in this story is not his own, but his mother's.

Through the course of the story, Nayeri discusses several aspects of theology in casual ways, working them in as philosophical reflections as the story progresses. He discusses God's omnipotence, but deftly shifts the question ("Physical stuff is too simple") to focus on God's character ("Is there an idea so big that God doesn't remember anything before it? That answer is love") (74).

Later, he revisits the question of God's character: "Would you rather a god who listens or a god who speaks?" (215) He goes on:

A god who listens is love.

A god who speaks is law.

At their worst, the people who want a god who listens are self-centered. They just want to live in the land of do-as-you-please. And the ones who want a god who speaks are cruel. They just want laws and justice to crush everything.

I don't have an answer for you. This is the kind of thing you live your whole life thinking about probably.

Love is empty without justice. Justice is cruel without love.

…

Oh, and in case it wasn't obvious, the answer is both.

God should be both.

If a god isn't, that is no God. (216-217)

This is plain theology, straight from the narrator's mouth. While Nayeri never outright states that he became a Christian after his mother's conversion, he does continue to present Christian theology as if he believes it—or as if he is trying to see why he should believe it. As he muses to the reader, he seems to argue with himself about whether his mother's radical change of heart is worth imitating. It is her faith, but he is the one working through it.

Like John Ames' religious experience in *Gilead*, Nayeri's story does not contain any separate religious experiences. It is all about a single religious experience: that of his mother. Even as we discuss Persian culture and public schools, and a lot of human waste, Nayeri walks us through his own struggle with his mother's faith. Does he believe it? Does he not? He seems

to—but as with John Ames, his own religious experience is invisible within the story he tells. All we know is how deeply Nayeri feels the effect of his mother's change.

This type of religious experience is what I call "Involved Subjective." Like Robinson's Involved Objective type, this experience is so deeply entrained in the narrator's perspective that it influences the entire story. Unlike both Robinson's and Sanderson's types, however, this Involved Subjective type deals primarily with an experience that the narrator cannot confirm, except through secondhand sources. In other words, the Involved Subjective type *involves* us with another person's *subjective* experience. Nayeri cannot tell us whether his mother's conversion was real or not—he is trying to figure that out for himself. But he nevertheless internalizes it and compares every part of his life to the reality his mother seems to have accepted.

Compared to the Involved Objective type, this type has similar constraints. The author must be focused on the narrator's thought process; Nayeri uses first person narration to do this. Likewise, he uses a similar reflective style to that which Robinson employs—though, Nayeri's story is actually a memoir, where Robinson's is fictional. Nevertheless, the Involved Subjective type is actually more flexible than the Involved Objective. Whereas Involved Objective requires the narrator to be a staunch Christian, Involved Subjective only requires some other character to be a staunch believer. The narrator could be anyone, as long as he or she is struck to the core by the other character's religious experience. In fact, while Nayeri's story is the only nonfiction text I have chosen, it seems to me that its Involved Subjective type would work more easily in a fictional setting than Robinson's Involved Objective. Fortunately, both work—although both are limited.

The final option for portraying religious experiences comes from a novel that few would call limited by anything. It may offer us a wider range of possibilities.

2.5 Observed Subjective – Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*

The oldest text by far in this discussion, Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* is a sweeping drama and a philosophical treatise at the same time. Tolstoy's storylines are too numerous to list here—but since his apparent purpose for the novel was to explore the connection between what humans choose to do and what they actually do, several of his characters undergo religious experiences that affect the way they act and think. While the Free Masons make an appearance in the novel, these experiences are primarily focused on the Russian Orthodox branch of Christianity.

About halfway through the novel, the Countess Natasha Rostov falls ill following a sudden heartbreak. As she recovers, a friend suggests that Natasha engage with the church. As she attends the early-morning services, Natasha experiences something:

> A new feeling of humility in the presence of something sublime and incomprehensible came over her when, at that unusual morning hour, she gazed at the dark face of the Mother of God illuminated by candles burning before it and the morning light falling from the window, and listened to the words of the service, which she tried to follow with understanding. When she did understand them, all the various shades of her personal feelings became interwoven in her prayer; when she did not understand, it was sweeter still for her to think that the desire to understand all is pride, that it is impossible to comprehend everything, that she had only to believe, and to commit herself to God, Who at those moments she felt was guiding her soul. She crossed herself, bowed low, and when she failed to understand, appalled at her own vileness, simply asked God to forgive

> her everything, everything, and to have mercy on her. The prayers to which she surrendered herself most completely were those of repentance. On her way home at an early hour… Natasha experienced a feeling she had never known before, a sense of the possibility of redemption from sin, of a new, pure life, and of happiness. (794)

The passage continues, describing Natasha's increasing joy and eventual feeling of peace and freedom from oppression. Not long afterward, in another moment at the church, Natasha prays again. Tolstoy writes: "And it seemed to her that God heard her prayer" (800).

This is characteristic of Tolstoy's portrayal of religious experience. Tolstoy does not tell us anything that we could confirm about what happened to Natasha. Instead, he speaks of things Natasha "seemed" to hear, and "felt" were happening. Throughout the novel, these experiences remain couched in the language of seeming and feeling, observed from the narrator's third-person stance.

We see this particularly in the character of Count Pierre Bezukhov. As one of the central characters in the novel, he goes through more religious experiences than perhaps anyone else. It is his experience in the custody of the French army, however, that stands out among the rest. When Pierre witnesses the brutality of war and its aftermath, Tolstoy tells us, "Though he was not even aware of it, his faith in the right ordering of the universe, in humanity, in his own soul, and in God, had been destroyed" (1156). Yet in the following chapter, Pierre meets another captive and thinks of him as "an unfathomable, round, everlasting personification of the spirit of simplicity and truth" (1163). Indeed, "subsequently, and for the rest of his life, [Pierre] thought and spoke with fervor of that month of captivity, of those intense, joyous, irretrievable feelings, and above all of the perfect peace of mind and complete inner freedom which he experienced only during that time" (1209).

To quote all of Pierre's religious experience would require quoting the entire novel—I will refrain. But through fireside stories of forgiveness and undeserved punishment, and dreams about the nature of God, he recovers from his moment of shattered faith. Tolstoy portrays all of this in the same terms of seeming and feeling, from the point of view of a third-person narrator.

This final type of religious experience I name "Observed Subjective." As in Nayeri's story, the religious experiences Tolstoy portrays are not the narrator's own, and resist being pinned down—the experiences are subjective. We are constantly in the place of an onlooker, examining how other characters are feeling and how things seem to them, while never completely certain of the truth of the matter. At the same time, neither the narrator nor we ourselves are asked to internalize those religious experiences and work through them ourselves. Tolstoy presents them as parts of someone else's life—interesting, certainly, but no more. In that way, the narrator observes rather than involving himself.

This Observed Subjective type of religious experience may be the most flexible of all, while nevertheless refusing to compromise the distinction between creature and Creator, as so often does the Observed Objective type. Observed Subjective allows a narrator—any narrator—to observe another character—any character—and portray their religious experience, not as established fact, but as reality to that character. The religious experience may be true, like Natasha's assurance of forgiveness, which marks her life from that moment on; it may be false, like Pierre's early obsession with Free Masonry, which he eventually abandons. But the question is not the truth or falsity of the religion behind the experience. Rather, the Observed Subjective type presents a religious experience to the reader, allowing him or her to decide.

This type could occur through third-person omniscient narration with a focus on the psychology of choice, the same way that Tolstoy writes; through close first-person narration with

few other characters, similar to Robinson's John Ames; or through a multi-strand third-person limited point of view dealing with sweeping cultural issues, as in Sanderson's novels. It is also less limited by genre. Since it is observed, rather than involved, it lacks the intensely personal nature of Robinson's and Nayeri's books—but setting aside memoir or other heavily introspective styles, Observed Subjective can adapt to drama, mystery, romance, or most other mainstream genres. All that is necessary is for the observer (the narrator) to avoid giving objective narration about what, exactly, is causing this experience. Like many authentic Christian experiences, these moments are not facts within the known universe, but moments that defy definite description. Christians would attribute these moments to God—Christian readers will do so still—but the Observed Subjective type allows a non-Christian reader into that experience as well.

As a Christian writer endeavors to represent a true religious experience faithfully, the Observed Subjective type removes a significant amount of pressure. The goal is not to convince the reader of the reality of God, nor to pin down a religious experience that every person should have. Instead, the writer is allowed to describe a single religious experience that an individual might undergo, and leave the rest up to the reader. That writer should strive to represent the truth accurately as she sees it, but she need not fear missing something that will forever mar the reader's own religious experience. This experience belongs to the character. The reader must find his own somewhere else.

2.6 Conclusion

These classifications are a house of cards. As I carefully balance the Observed Subjective type against the Involved Objective type, I am well aware that there is a book that rushes in like a hurricane to knock everything down. I mentioned it briefly before: the Christian Bible.

If not for the Bible, perhaps Christian writers would despair at portraying true religious experience. But the Bible manages to use all four types of religious experience in a single volume. At times, we see people undergo powerful experiences with God (Gen. 12.1-9). Elsewhere, we hear from those wrestling with others' experiences of God (1 Kings 17:17-24). We have poems in which writers compare their situations to God's undeniable existence (Psalm 139). We even have moments when God steps into His own creation, obeying (some) of its rules (Luke 4). In the Bible, we have examples of every type of religious experience: both observed and involved, both objective and subjective. All, to the Christian, are true.

Every type of religious experience is available to the Christian writer. In fact, by the Bible's example, every one of those types should be used. Sometimes, the story will require an Involved Objective point of view—the truth of God underlying every part of the narrator's existence. Other times, it will require the Observed Subjective experience—a narrator or main character watching others experience their faith. The story may require the Involved Subjective view: another person's experience impacting the narrator's life at a fundamental level. Even the Observed Objective type, which I claimed Christian writers should avoid, can be employed without misrepresenting the Christian God—if used with great care, as does C.S. Lewis in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by mixing it with the Observed Subjective type.

There may be other factors in representing religious experience in literature. The four books I surveyed here seem to provide a certain framework for understanding such experiences, but the Bible's vibrant clarity suggests there may be many more options. I look forward to reading new creative approaches to portraying the Christian reality for others to enjoy—and I look forward to attempting to write some myself. These classifications are not an attempt to

shoehorn anyone's creative work into a category, but merely to encourage those who want to portray authentic religious experiences but do not know how.

In the end, the questions Christian writers must answer is not whether religious experiences occur in their story worlds—they must answer the same question Jesus asked His disciples during His earthly ministry: "Who do you say that I am?" (Mark 8.29) Who do Christian writers believe God to be? As Daniel Nayeri wonders, do they prefer a god who listens or a god who speaks? Do they prefer a god who is nearby or a god who is far away? The way Christians write will indicate the God they believe.

It is not only Jesus' voice asking that question. The world asks it too: who do Christians say that their God is? What makes Him different from anyone else's god? The world is right to ask—and Christians should have answers. They should seek to know God as truly as they can. Christian artists, in turn, should seek to portray the world as it truly is. That world includes a God who fills every corner and is interested in every life.

I hope that, as the world continues to ask Christians who they say God is, Christians will continue to tell stories of the ways that God moves among mankind—not to make God fit the image of a human character, but to allow a character's religious experience to point to the God who made writer and reader alike.

Chapter 3 – CREATIVE MANUSCRIPT: *The Fall Away*

3.1 Chapter One

Midmorning on the final day of travel, as the tracks began to climb a dull ridge, the train lurched, shuddered, and stopped.

"Hmm," said Prioress Kin. She was wrapped so thickly in her blanket that nothing showed except her eyes, her nose, and a tuft of gray hair. Those eyes flicked from the window to the girl on the opposite seat, who pressed her cheek against the glass, trying to see the track ahead, heedless of the cold against her skin. Her name was Gale. She was the Prioress's apprentice.

"I can't see any problem," Gale murmured.

"Do you see the hill?" asked Kin.

"Is Loshinka on the other side?" asked Gale, stretching her nose up as if to look further. She looked like she was trying to press through the glass and fly the rest of the way to the town.

"It is," said Kin. "And the hill is the problem." She shifted as if to get up, then tsked and sat back.

The train shuddered again. Something scraped against it as the train began to move backward, falling down the slope.

"What—" said Gale, but she stayed on her bench, clutching at the cushion a little as the train gained speed. There was not much speed to gain. The train slid down the slope until the main part of its body rested on level ground, then rattled to a stop once more.

Gale remained in her seat, as if the train were about to spring forward (or backward), but Prioress Kin unraveled herself from her blanket and stood.

"Fetch down our trunks," she said, steadying herself against the door before opening it. She left the blanket on the seat.

"But we haven't reached Loshinka," Gale spluttered after opening her mouth multiple times.

The door shut with a firm click.

Gale craned to look out the window again, but the ridge outside was as devoid of small towns as before. Loshinka was somewhere out there. They had to be close. She pressed a knuckle to her lips to hold back her excitement, but she couldn't keep from grinning.

Gale pushed the Prioress's blanket aside so she could step on the seat. The trunks were unwieldy, but suitable for two women traveling together. She stepped down from the seat with the first trunk and opened it to stuff the blanket inside. The second trunk, Gale's own, thumped onto the first.

It still worried Gale that most of her belongings could fit in such a small case—well, this trunk and the one in the baggage car. Shouldn't a good life fill up more space than that? And hers had been a good life. But here she was, halfway across the whole world, with two boxes containing her only ingredients to make something new.

But how amazing it was! To be here, finally, about to step into the life she had worked toward for the last three years—the life she had always wanted. It felt so strange, but of course it did. Anything wonderful had to start out strange.

Gale shook her head. Kin wouldn't approve of dallying like this—for a missionary, she seemed dismissive of meditation. Gale opened the door and poked her head into the passage. It was full of people, and she had to wait for a burly man to step back into his compartment before she could see to the end of the car. Most of the people were still in their train clothes, empty-

handed, but a few were now stepping into the passage with their trunks and hats in hand, coats on. At the end of the passage, Kin's gray head poked above the crowd. She stood with the officer of the car as he wrestled with the door. At last, he got it open and a new, dull light shone into that end of the car, and Kin began to move back through the people toward Gale.

"Rotting foolish of me," she muttered as she pushed Gale back into the car. Gale pressed back against the window to give her space, the mild profanity ringing in her ears. Kin seemed to want to sit, but the trunks now occupied her bench. She leaned heavily on them, instead. "The first breath is always the worst. They told you that?"

"Someone did," said Gale, assuming Kin meant the outside air and its effects. It was one of those rumors that everyone repeated without believing it was true. She might not have believed it herself if she hadn't read Henizov's essay about it— "The Breath That Brings Death" or something silly like that, then "The Theological Implications of Edgic Miasma." She couldn't remember much except how he overused his fake word, "edgic." Everyone else, when they talked about the edge of the world, just said so.

"Well," said Prioress Kin. She wrinkled her expressive nose and made a fist against the side of the trunk. "One has to move sometime." She began to put on her coat.

The car was already half empty and every compartment door stood open as Gale followed Kin down the narrow passage, carrying her trunk. Although Kin's trunk was still in their compartment, at a word from the Prioress, the officer of the car strode back to collect it. Kin stopped at the stairs down from the car and motioned for Gale to go first. She looked paler than usual. Maybe it was only the light from outside.

By now, the outside air pervaded the passage and had begun seeping into individual compartments. Gale had already gotten her first breath of the "edgic miasma," if diluted. Here,

looking down onto the matted brown grass beside the tracks, Gale got a faceful of it. It was something deeper than a smell, but not quite a taste, either—a combination of moisture, chill, and *heaviness* (Gale had no other word to describe it) that made her breaths seem simultaneously too thick and too thin. The air pressed in around her, but it wouldn't fill her lungs. She could not identify any particular smell, other than the soft, damp grass. It was so *almost* pleasant that it became disgusting.

"It's easier outside the car," said Kin as Gale struggled with her breath.

Gale climbed down the stairs—maneuvering her trunk was an ordeal now—and set it on the narrow platform at the bottom. She dropped to the ground. Landing on a too-solid tuft of grass, her ankle turned, sending pain shooting up to her knee. Gale stumbled, catching herself against the train's outer rail. She leaned there for a moment, panting. Her earlier excitement was gone. Was all of it going to be like this? Was she going to spend her entire four months here catching her breath and twisting ankles?

"The other passengers are waiting," said Kin from inside the train. She couldn't see where Gale was standing, but Gale's trunk still blocked the stairs.

Gale gingerly put weight on her foot—it would hold her, but it hurt—and retrieved her trunk from the steps. Prioress Kin came down the stairs. Just as Gale was reaching to help her down, the Prioress sat on the lowest platform and hung her legs over the edge, then slid off onto her feet. Her coat caught on the metal edge of the platform. It tore as Kin pulled herself away.

"Always happens," Kin muttered. She waved away Gale's attempts to brush off her back. "My trunk, please."

The officer of the car stood on the platform, handing down the second trunk. Gale took it and put it by the first, wincing as the extra weight made her ankle flare with pain.

At Kin's direction, Gale dragged the two trunks further along the car, leaving the steps clear for other passengers to disembark. She and Kin sat on the trunks for a moment, trying to catch their breath. For some time, Gale couldn't think of anything else—nothing else but whether she had made a colossal mistake.

Had it been a mistake to come here, so far from the gods? This part of the world was an aberration, not truly meant for people. She had known that, theologically, but now she felt it in her ankle, in her lungs, and in her growing headache.

The landscape around them, when Gale managed to raise her eyes, had a semblance of prettiness. The land was covered in tufts of gray-brown grass that, from the train windows, had looked like dirt—but now that Gale could see it and step on it, she could see that the thin grass wove together into a sort of mat that covered the earth and twisted into clumps. That same grass ran up the low ridge that had defeated the train. It made a fuzzy outline against the sky.

"I'm sure it's beautiful here in summer," Gale said eventually. The grass just kept going, covering the low hills in the distance.

Prioress Kin glanced at her. Her breath still came in wheezes, but she managed to answer. "It *is* summer."

Gale thought about it and realized the Prioress was right. It had been summer two days ago, when they left Skentova. The climate was different at the edge of the world, of course, but the seasons weren't.

Then… this was how this land looked all the time. Or worse. As Gale looked around again, she felt the rest of her optimism shrivel up. Such a dead landscape. No civilization in sight—nothing but the train tracks, leading up the ridge. Who knew how much farther before

they ended in Loshinka? How close had the train gotten before it left the gods' protective power, before the chaos at the edge of the world forced it to break down?

How close would Gale get before she broke, too?

No, Gale said to herself. *You knew about this. You wanted this.* She forced herself to look around again and decided—against her judgment—that she *did* like how the landscape looked, with its grass and hills and low sky. Not because it was beautiful now, but because it could be. Someday, the gods' power would reach here, too, and cover this entire land with life—good life, fruitful life, far different from this brown grass.

Prioress Kin was watching her, Gale realized. She looked up, trying not to let her thoughts show in her face.

"If you have the breath," said Kin, and had to stop to collect her own. "Collect our things from the baggage car. We can send a porter back for them. But they must leave the train with us." She began coughing and didn't stop.

Gale rose, slowly. Her ankle was already stiff, but she felt she could breathe more easily than before. The air no longer pressed around her, and though her lungs still felt slightly starved, she no longer had to pant. Beneath the smell of grass, she could detect a hint of something rotting, like there was a swamp nearby.

It *would* be beautiful.

She gritted her teeth and began walking back along the train.

3.2 Chapter Two

Gale's first experience at the edge of the world was uncomfortable, but not unique. The literature called it "edgesickness." Gale had read plenty of this literature, trying to find out what her assignment would be like, but the brief descriptions of "nausea, headache, and general

malaise" had not conjured anything dramatic in her imagination. As a lifelong resident of Skentova, the city of the gods, she had rarely been sick, and never significantly so. The gods' power had kept her body in full health. Here, she felt every symptom.

At other times in history, before the invention or practicality of things such as trains, edgesickness had gone unnoticed. For a person to travel from the center of the world to the edge, that person would have to walk, ride, or drive a cart—a journey of at least three weeks, during which the transition out of the gods' presence was gentle enough to allow the body to adapt to the new environment. On the train, having been nearly catapulted out of the gods' influence into the nether regions of the world, Gale and the rest of the train's passengers suffered. Their bodies, though perfectly healthy, were straining to function without a god nearby. It was as if they had gone from a bright, sunlit day into a dark cave—they would adjust, but the initial shock was strong.

Gale only grew more miserable as she found the baggage car, picked out their luggage, and hauled it back up the train toward Kin. She again had that frustrating feeling that the world was no longer continuous with itself—two days ago, she had carried both of these trunks to the baggage car in a single trip, one in each hand. Now, she had to take one at a time, dragging it across the rough grass until she reached the front of a car, then walking back to collect the other.

There were seven cars between the baggage car and where Kin sat. Gale hadn't counted at first, but now she felt each one.

When Gale reached Kin's place with the first trunk, she found the Prioress talking with a short young man. His clothes were nice enough, but thick—probably more comfortable in this dampness. Gale shivered. She hadn't been chilled until she thought of that, but now she was.

“Sol, this is my apprentice, Reshran Gale,” said Prioress Kin as Gale heaved the trunk next to their others. Kin still sat on hers, but she looked stronger than before. “Gale, this is Baruzov Sol, a son of one of the merchant families in Loshinka. I wrote to him before we set out.”

They said their hellos, and each insisted the other call them by their given name, and as Gale turned to retrieve the other trunk from where she had left it, Sol cried, “I’ll get it!” and bounded past her.

Gale sat next to Kin, swallowing down her edgesickness, and tried to think of Sol as anything other than a human version of a rabbit. But when he set the case down and grinned at them, she found it impossible. He was all front teeth and wide-set eyes and round cheeks. She almost expected giant ears to pop up from behind his head.

He was healthy, too—his cheeks held color, he had carried the trunk easily, and he moved with energy that seemed impossible in this part of the world. Gale wondered if it came from growing up so far from the center. She found herself envying him for that health: envying limbs that didn’t tremble, a stomach that didn’t roil with every movement, a head that didn’t ache. It was her misery that made her think so. It wasn’t right. But she, too, had been that healthy less than two days ago, and now she could barely think.

Gale barely thought as Sol bounded away from them up the ridge, then came back leading a donkey with a small cart behind it. She barely thought as he tossed their luggage into it. Once Gale did start to understand, she tried to climb into the cart herself so she could ride—she thought that’s how they would all get up the hill. But Prioress Kin put a hand on her elbow.

“Better to walk,” she said. “You’ll see.”

Gale stifled a groan—her ankle was burning now—but she walked as commanded, following the Prioress up the ridge along the train tracks. Sol led the donkey and cart after her.

The slope was not steep, but their footing was constantly uncertain. Soon Gale had to fall back, and Kin fell back more, so that they struggled up the slope shoulder-to-shoulder with Sol. Even the donkey struggled, the cart bumping and lurching over tussocks. Sol seemed more like he was just out for a walk.

"Is it really different?" Sol asked. "The center, I mean."

Gale turned blank eyes to look at him, clammy sweat covering her face.

Sol seemed to understand that look. "I mean, of course it's different from right now. The train would work, I guess. But the landscape and the weather and the *feel* of it all. I guess I don't understand how it can be as different as the writers say."

Those words got through Gale's ears. "Which writers?"

"Binshiev, for one," said Sol. "What does he mean by 'symmetry of ideal and identity'? I know that the gods change the way reality functions, but what does that feel like?"

"You've read Binshiev?" asked Gale at last. She knew what else he was asking and she knew she had an answer, but she couldn't remember a thing about what that answer might be. She was more surprised to find someone in Loshinka who had read anything of the major theologians of the past century.

Hope sparked within her once again. The landscape might be awful—*Beautiful,* she told herself; *it would be beautiful*—but maybe the people were better. Gale had always imagined Loshinka as a forgotten and forgetting place. People in Skentova didn't know it existed—how many of her friends had asked about her assignment and then said, "Where?" when she told them about it? She had assumed Loshinka was the same way toward the center. Perhaps some of the

merchants would think of it in economic terms, since they traded inward, but she hadn't expected anyone to know Skentova's authors or culture.

Sometimes, in her more honest moments, Gale wondered if she only wanted to be a missionary so she could go where no one knew about Skentova and the gods, and then teach them. Suddenly she was glad she hadn't gotten her wish. How lonely it would be if no one cared about what she cared about—and how wonderful it was to hear someone bring up her favorite topic, so far from home!

"I have Binshiev's *Letters* and an old copy of his *Central Theologies*, but it's falling apart. They were my dad's."

"*Central* is good, but… How old is your copy?" asked Gale. She fell to her hands and knees as her foot caught a tangle of grass. Sol helped her up, his hand firm through her coat sleeve. "Thanks."

"It was my dad's, and… maybe my grandad's." Sol squinted. "I don't know. I mean, it's old."

"The third edition has a lot of edits, based on his visits to the edge," said Gale. "I started with an old copy too, but he makes so many clarifications it's almost a different book. You should check which one you have."

"I guess I will," said Sol. "I probably have the old one, so I'll ask Denevik if I can order a new edition. He's the man to go to for books," he added.

"Don't bother, I have it," said Gale. Her copy was all marked up from school, but it would be readable. "Have you read *Doctrines of Commingling*? By Kyatin? I have that too, and it answers your question better than Binshiev does."

"Is that why your trunks are so heavy?" laughed Sol. "They're stuffed with books?"

"No, I only brought a couple," said Gale. "I almost brought *The Collected Works of Nalisevin*, but I decided against it."

She had thought the Prioress would laugh at that, but only Sol did—and then he asked, awkwardly, "Is that long?"

"The abridged collection is seventeen volumes," she said. "I don't actually own it." She felt embarrassed Kin hadn't liked the joke. And if Sol only had outdated copies of the most basic texts, of course he wouldn't get it.

She shouldn't have said anything. She should have laughed at Sol's joke like a normal person, so that the conversation could keep going. Now they were all silent as the slope started to level off, when they really should talk more. She should ask Sol something. She couldn't think of anything, and as Gale looked up, she lost that thought, too.

The edge of the world lay below them.

3.3 Chapter Three

Below the ridge on which Gale, Sol, and Prioress Kin stood, the land stretched down toward the sea. The water looked like a second sky that seemed to extend to eternity, a shadow of the clouds overhead. There were islands on the sea, little spines and larger mounds, faded in the mist. From those scattered shapes, a chain of nearer islands reached toward a peninsula that stretched from the land, on which stood a yellow lighthouse. It looked like a child's toy.

Beneath the lighthouse, the land of the peninsula fell away in sharp cliffs that flung up fingers of white spray. Gale could see that spray all along the coast in both directions, peeking above the land's edge and drifting out of sight. It was oddly slow. The sea seemed lazy and insistent at once, throwing itself against the land, but knowing it only had to wait and that land would crumble away.

Above the cliffs, however, the land seemed to forget the sea's existence. It was mottled with green, crossed with walls that marked off field from field, pasture from pasture, some with animals, some with crops, some spotted with small and silvery ponds like mirrored beads. It went on and on along the coast.

Gale began to cry.

She didn't mind, really—it almost felt good, with the way her head pounded and her mind struggled, to let something out—but she didn't know why it was happening. She was just… overwhelmed. This land was more interesting than all that grass she had looked at before, but it was savage, inhospitable as everything else. Something about the overcast sky or the weak sun or the mist rising from the sea made the landscape seem colorless, but there were strange hues here and there, like shallow purple, and faded black, and a smear of red off to the right. Gale didn't know what any of it was. She felt she didn't know *where* she was. Cut loose from the gods like the rest of this land and these people, she would have to make her home here. As a missionary, she would try to change things here. But it looked so solid already.

"There's my little town." There was a warmth in Prioress Kin's voice that Gale had never heard before.

Gale turned to look. As they had climbed the hill, they had diverged from the train tracks in order to follow a shallow path. The tracks curved south and over the hill, ending at a platform just below the crest of the ridge, but a narrow road led down to a cluster of buildings. From here, they looked more like shacks—some houses leaned against one another in rows, all of them small, painted in dull colors, with patchwork roofs. Here and there were scattered buildings of different sorts—brick warehouses and taller free-standing houses (which, to Gale, still looked pitiful), and a solid stone structure with a familiar rounded shape. That would be the church.

The entire town was higher than the surrounding land, but below the ridge, as if the settlers had given up trying to reach the top. Smaller, solitary houses dotted the landscape below the town, along a pale road that wound down toward the lighthouse.

"We took the long way 'round," said Sol, "but it's the easy way, and the pretty one. Come on!" He pulled the donkey forward, following the path. It curved along the ridge to parallel the tracks, then joined the narrow road down the hill from the station. Gale wiped at her eyes and followed.

Gale found it easier to go downhill, and she felt both more confident and more nervous at being able to see Loshinka at last. This was her new home—she didn't have to live in a cave or make herself a shelter among all that grass. There was a house here, some sort of place where Prioress Kin had lived all these decades. And if not that, there was the church, a real one, and she could live in a church if she had to. She loved being in the church at home, and she would love this one, too.

But Loshinka was so… *sodden*. That was the wrong word for it, of course it was, but it was also exactly right—Loshinka looked like it had been soaked in a drizzle and never dried out. It was faded, saggy, drenched with that same hopelessness that kept sneaking up on Gale. The houses were so shabby, the roofs (now that they were closer) so warped, the road itself so pitted with holes. They passed into the town and began moving through it. Most of the windows were stretched with cloth, if there were windows. The doors were crazy and often hung on one hinge, or simply stood propped against the frame. A flag hung from one house, so faded that nothing was left but a yellowish stain on the cloth. Or—maybe it was just someone's laundry.

The people didn't exactly give a better impression. Everyone they passed walked with their heads down, talking in low voices if they talked at all—it seemed as if something

swallowed up their voices. Though Sol's clothes were well-made, everyone else seemed dressed in little better than rags. Gale's own coat, a muted red, seemed like the brightest color around. Most of the women wore ratty shawls instead of coats, and their shoes were just cloth. If Gale's shoes were Skentova-made, and the scattered cobblestones on this lumpy street hurt her feet, how did anyone else even walk?

Sol seemed to notice her discomfort, or else he was uncomfortable here as well—maybe this wasn't normal for Loshinka. But she supposed it would feel strange for him to walk through his own town, dressed in what might be his nicest clothes, leading a pair of outsiders and their luggage. It didn't seem as though people were watching them, but Gale felt as though they were trying *not* to. Maybe she was overthinking.

They passed through much of the town before Gale caught sight of the corner of the stone church. She almost started weeping again, this time with relief. There were the holy symbols above the door—the spirals and concentric circles that symbolized various aspects of Skentovite church tradition. They were stylized in a different way than she was used to, but that was okay. They felt familiar, friendly.

The closed doors below those symbols did not seem as friendly.

But Sol didn't lead them across the square toward the church. They stayed on the far side of the square and stopped at a smaller stone building, exactly opposite the church's façade. It was almost as imposing. It was a house, Gale realized, but it stood out among its narrow wooden neighbors. It was nearly as tall as the church building, all of stone, with full glass windows and a solid front door. The stone was the same dark gray as the church and the cobblestones. At the peak of the roof, high above the door, jutted a statue of something with wings and a misshapen beak.

“Welcome to the Storm House,” said Prioress Kin, climbing the two steps and shoving the big door open.

It seemed dark inside, but only at first. Gale’s eyes adjusted to the dim lights burning in shallow bowls on the walls. The ceiling was high enough to keep the space from feeling oppressive, but something about the stone house and the dark wood all around made it seem heavy all the same. Stairs ahead and to the right led upward, while rooms branched off in either direction from the main hall. The house was deeper than Gale had expected, for there seemed to be more rooms beyond the stairs. From one of those, they heard a voice and pattering footsteps.

A girl popped out of the hall, dressed much the same as the other women Gale had seen in the town—a simple dress, cloth shoes, and a light shawl that seemed completely unsuitable for how chilly it was, even inside. She was probably younger than Gale, but not by much, with dull brown hair and bright eyes. Her cheeks were flushed and her hands were scrubbed red.

“Mistress Kin!” the girl cried, and ran up to the old woman. Kin smiled and hugged her, then kissed the girl on the head. Though Gale had only met Kin personally in the last few weeks, she had not expected to see that kind of affection out of the old Prioress.

“And how are you, Ansha?” Kin asked. “How is your garden?”

“You have to see it.”

“I will,” said Kin, “though not today. Not until the sickness passes.”

Ansha nodded solemnly, then flashed back to a grin. “The daffodils are up again!” she crowed.

Kin smiled too, then turned to introduce Gale. Ansha composed herself a little, but still smiled enough that Gale felt welcome in her own right. Gale promised to see her garden, and

Ansha stressed the daffodils several times, before Kin cut them off and began directing Sol with their luggage. Ansha vanished back into the house.

Head suddenly pounding again, Gale followed Sol and her trunks up the stairs toward the room Kin had assigned to her. It was at the back of the house after a narrow hallway. There was a bed. There was a little round table with a little round chair. A pale blue rug sat in the middle of the floor, at odds with everything around it, but working hard in its attempt to brighten up the space.

As Sol set her trunks outside the door, Gale went to the single window and pulled back the curtains. Outside, the clouds pressed in over a wilderness of rooftops, crowded together in various stages of disrepair. One roof had nothing but a sagging sheet to cover a gaping hole. If Gale peered in the right directions, she could sight through the lumpy vista to see a patch of the hillside, or a distant farm, or the yellow lighthouse.

Gale stared at that lighthouse for a long time. It wasn't lit—maybe it would shine tonight. But why should it? Who would go beyond that coast, where they would need such a beacon to get back? She couldn't imagine anything more foolish. It would be faithless, even. To voluntarily go further from the gods than they had to…?

Gale snorted and stepped away from the window, letting the curtain fall again. If that was faithless, then she was faithless, too—leaving her home in the presence of the gods to come out here, farther away than was healthy for any human to go. Would it be different if she crossed that coast and visited one of the islands? She supposed not. It was dangerous—still foolish, perhaps—but maybe she shouldn't assume people were atheists for moving away from the gods. As long as they came back.

As long as she came back.

3.4 Chapter Four

As Gale moved to bring her luggage into the room, she noticed something lying on the bed: two letters, both addressed in the same familiar hand. She started to smile as she picked them up.

"You kept your promise," Gale murmured. Her friend Siean had insisted on finding out where Gale would be assigned—the exact address. When Gale had tried to do the same for her, Siean had shrugged.

"Why do you need to know?" she'd said. "I'll send you something once I get in, then you'll have my address to send something back. Easy."

Loneliness was one of the biggest challenges in an apprenticeship—everyone at the school knew that—so Gale and Siean had promised to keep up correspondence over the months. It looked like Siean had started early. And with vigor, judging by the thickness of the second letter.

The first was simple: a single sheet of paper, where Siean had written in huge letters, *MADE IT TO YELENE. WRITE ME BACK*, with an address. It might be a merchant's address, but it had a note to direct it to the apprentice at the mission house. Gale turned the letter over. Her own address was similar: *To apprentice at Storm House, care of Mr. Slezhin Evra*, etc. Gale would have to find Mr. Slezhin and thank him.

Gale opened the second letter. This was in Siean's normal handwriting, slanted and sharp in all its tails and crosses, but small in the core of every character. *Gale*, Siean began:

> *You haven't gotten to Loshinka yet but I'm writing anyway because I want to. Why did you agree to start your apprenticeship late? Halven's intensive is a horrible reason and makes no sense, except you're Gale and you do things like that. Plus*

Kin wasn't leaving yet and you could travel with her. Makes sense. STILL STUPID. (I hope you learned lots from Halven, I WILL ask you about combinationism later.)

But it's good cause I don't have to wait for you to write me back before I write to you again. I like being pen pals but I don't like following pen pal rules. Send me five letters in a row when you get this to show you agree.

Yelene is amazing. It's not as small as I thought it would be, but it's definitely not as small as Loshinka because no one has ever heard of Loshinka unless they're investigating Kin for theological controversies. Don't think I don't know that I don't [This last was crossed out.] *You're probably writing a paper on her yourself. Maybe. Or else she's as orthodox as everyone else and no one knows. You'd be the one to figure that out. 'Reestablish orthodoxy or die trying'—your mom told me those were your first words as a kid.*

Anyway Yelene is cool. I didn't get to ride the train there with Prior Desin the way you'll get to with Kin, but he was so welcoming when I showed up. His wife is so nice. They're both from Edrinskoe. Their accents are awful. Don't tell them I said that. I should hide this letter so they don't read it.

I'll write to you about Yelene next, or sometime probably. I'll give you a whole Day in the Life of Denev Siean, Most Interesting of Apprentices. That would be so long. But you'd have to read it, because you're my pen pal and you have to. (That's a pen pal rule we should follow. Except you're you, so you'd read it anyway because you read literally everything and remember it all and I'm so

jealous except I'm not. I don't want to remember ANYTHING Henizov wrote. Anyway. I'll tell you about Yelene some other time.)

Here's the real question. How far do pilgrimages have to go to be "real"?

(Did I forget to close my parentheses back there? I totally did. Hang on. So much better. You'd probably burn the rest of the letter without reading it all if I had left that one off. Better make sure I close this one, too.) Nice. Gale approved.

Anyway, tell me about the rules for pilgrimages. Because Prior Desin and his wife often go on pilgrimage with whoever's going that time, but they stop off with their families at Edrinskoe while their pilgrims keep going all the way to Skentova. So, it's like their people are doing the real thing but they're not. I guess that's if pilgrimages have to go all the way.

It's kinda silly for me to worry about my Prior like this, but you're not the only one with a possibly-heretical missionary. I just don't want him and his wife to lose all their reward. It's such a small thing—just visiting family instead of visiting the gods—but that kinda proves where their loyalties lie. Unless, by visiting their family, they honor the gods more effectively… I don't know. What do you think?

I think there's something deeper here. I think the gods know who are actually worshiping them. I mean—if a pilgrim from Yelene goes on pilgrimage just so he can get drunk, right, isn't that worse than if Desin goes back home to love his family and "live where he was created" like all our theologies encourage? Even if he doesn't wander through Skentova?

I'm not saying the gods individually know he's worshiping them. But I think there's some way that they all know, without individually knowing, in a way that it'll all settle out right in the end. Right? Doesn't Binshiev talk about the superconsciousness that transcends individual god consciousnesses? You probably know….

The letter continued for two more pages, wandering from thought to thought in Siean's way. Gale read it, but her mind was already putting together her response.

Pilgrimage was one of the main pillars of the Skentovite religion. The gods existed in a particular place—in the city of Skentova—and so, if anyone wished to worship those gods, that worship should include getting as close to the gods as they could. That was the theoretical reason, but there was also the practical effect: the gods' power was more effective on things closer to it, so pilgrims could literally *feel* their faith increasing the closer they got to Skentova. Their health improved, their supplies lasted longer, and the world began working in their favor. When they reached Skentova, the pilgrims would break out their wine and best food for a feast. Who could be an atheist after that?

There were certain guidelines for pilgrimage, of course, but they were meant for those born nearer to the edge, not inland. Edrinskoe was so close to Skentova that—from a town like Yelene, so far from both—they were almost the same place. Still, it would be wise for Desin to visit Skentova when he could, even if he spent most of his time in Edrinskoe. Nothing could replace the city of the gods.

The rest of Siean's musings, Gale set aside. Siean was always talking about more than just the gods—her parents had some strange ideas that she had never completely left behind, despite their three years of school together. Even if Binshiev talked about some transcendent

nature among the gods, he also stressed the belief that the gods were the pinnacle of reality—nothing higher but the gods themselves. As long as Siean stayed inside that orthodoxy, she could speculate however she wanted.

As soon as Gale finished the letter, she set it aside and began casting around the room for a way to write back. There were no compartments anywhere in the room, she realized—no drawers, no shelves—and there was nothing on the bed or the table. It wasn't a problem. Gale had brought her own paper and ink. She grabbed her smaller trunk and opened it, but as she looked for her supplies, she stopped.

She looked around the room again. Where was she supposed to unpack her things, then?

Gale sighed. Maybe there was furniture elsewhere in the house. She would have to ask the Prioress. She should ask for more writing supplies at the same time.

For now, she would reply to Siean. Gale found her paper and ink and sat back at the tiny table to start writing. She only got Siean's name down before she had to sit back, smiling.

Nothing could have restored her spirits like these letters. Siean's enthusiasm, bursting through every page, reminded her of every moment they had spent together over the past three years—so many classes, so many study sessions, so many meals full of laughter. Siean was closer to Gale than any of her siblings, including her sister. Her questions and thoughts felt like home.

Gale set down the pen as her throat began to close again. She wished Siean were here. Gale might be able to face Loshinka, and Prioress Kin (who, as Siean delighted to remind her, might be a heretic), and the edge of the world, if Siean were by her side. Siean didn't need her—she would have Yelene's hearts within the month, Gale was sure—but Gale needed Siean. She wished she could tell her that.

She would tell her that. Gale picked up her pen again and started her letter, not with reasoning like she had expected, but with feeling. *It's so good to get your letters so soon,* she wrote. *I just arrived today, and they*

She stopped at a knock on the door. Ansha stood a few steps back in the hall, as if afraid to get too close to the room.

"The mayor is downstairs," said Ansha. "The Prioress asked for you."

"Oh," said Gale. She looked down at her letter, but the mayor would probably be a good person to meet. She sighed and stood to follow Ansha down.

3.5 Chapter Five

The mayor was a very tall man. His hair stood out in yellow spikes from his head, pointing in all directions, as if he was growing a bundle of straw. Although he was unshaven, he didn't seem to enjoy being that way, since he kept rubbing at the new hair on his neck, making a scraping sound that mingled with the crackling of the fire. He didn't seem like a mayor.

When Gale entered the room, he was standing by the fire, gripping a handkerchief. The mayor glanced at her and bowed, but turned his attention back to Prioress Kin, who sat opposite the fire in an upholstered chair. The Prioress held something in her hands, turning it in the firelight.

The room was dark except for that fire, but it was warm. To Gale, it felt wonderful compared with the chill that seemed to waft from the stones in the rest of the house. She stepped up to Kin's side. There were several other chairs and a couch, but they were farther from the heat. If she sat, she could rest her ankle, but she felt so cold. She compromised by standing on her good foot.

"But Kavil is willing to wait?" Kin was saying as Gale walked in.

"The other side of Naltenka has kept him busy. But it won't last long."

"In a week, I should be ready," said Kin. "Thank him for me, and tell him I still intend to go." She placed the object on the arm of her chair and rested her hand on it. It seemed to be a bundle of cloths tied together, but it was black and spotted. A sachet of some kind, or a doll? Gale thought she could smell a hint of rot.

"Slezhin, this is Reshran Gale, my apprentice," said Kin. "Gale, Slezhin Evra, our mayor."

The mayor bowed again, just as quickly as before.

"Slezhin Evra?" Gale blurted, remembering the name on her address. She flushed. Better not to yell out the full name of someone she'd just met—especially not the mayor. "Thank you for the letters."

"Pleasure," said the mayor—just that word. For a moment, Gale thought he was bringing up philosophy, until he said, "The Prioress knows how to find me if you have responses to send."

"Oh. Thank you."

The room went silent as Gale tried to think of anything to say and the mayor looked back at Kin. The Prioress stared into the fire, then looked up at the mayor. "And how is our lighthouse keeper?" she asked.

"Levonin always does well," said the mayor. His voice seemed to grow warmer as he said the name, but he twisted his handkerchief harder, too. "No accidents while you were away, except the Koneniev boys and their plugger again. Ven got himself a neat scratch across the forehead. Levonin had it fixed up in a hurry, though."

"And Koneniev himself?" Kin asked. Gale thought she might mean the boys' father. "Before I left, he was saying he'd finally fix that thing."

"Won't pay for it," said the mayor. "Says he's nothing to spare with Nityasha sick again, and especially with Ven hurt now, too. Even though Levonin uses his own supplies and things."

"I'll talk to Levonin," said Kin. "We might arrange something to help Koneniev along."

"He gets touchy fast these days," the mayor warned. "Find a firm step."

"Koneniev was always easy with me."

The mayor shrugged. "I'll give Levonin your greetings, tell him you're back. He'll be glad to know it. Do you want to see him, for the edgesickness?" His glance implied he meant both Gale and Kin, but was only asking Kin.

"No," said Kin firmly. "I have my own methods that will do well for both of us."

Gale thought she saw the mayor hold back a smile at this. But she understood Kin's reasoning. This Levonin, apparently the local healer, might be practiced at healing common diseases, but edgesickness was a reaction to their travels. Time, not technique, would cure them. Still… Gale forced herself to take a deep breath past the pounding of her head, into the shakiness of her stomach. Maybe a local healer's remedies would feel nice.

"But please tell him I will be glad to see him next week," Kin continued. "When will you see him?"

"After this," said the mayor. "My own Evi might have the barking cough, so I'm to the lighthouse next. He cured Ilen of it last year."

Cured Ilen of the lighthouse? Gale wanted to ask, but even her muddled head knew better than to make that joke. Making fun of the mayor's sick children was bad enough, but to make fun of his grammar seemed worse. Either he would understand it and dislike her, or he wouldn't understand it and she might start disliking him.

The mayor didn't look like the sort of person to care about grammar, anyway. He was obviously successful as a merchant, if he was the mayor as well—and he and the Prioress seemed to have a lasting relationship that covered most of the town and its doings. They talked like teammates. It wasn't the way Gale had expected a local businessman to engage with a missionary. More importantly, it wasn't the way Gale thought a missionary should engage with a local businessman, even if he was the mayor. Were they going to speak of the church? Of the Slezhin family's spiritual health? This conversation seemed more like… the local gossip.

But Prioress Kin made no move to turn their talk to more meaningful things. They discussed a few more subjects—a report from someone in the south, a record calving in so-and-so's pasture, the weather (which made it sound like it was always this gray and chilly)—before the mayor began to take his leave. He offered to take the doll away with him again (he called it a doll, though Gale didn't know what child would want to play with something so filthy), but Kin waved him away.

"Just tell Kavil what we agreed," she said. "But please discourage him from removing any more artifacts until I can see it myself. After my edgesickness passes, I'll go."

"Yes, Prioress," said the mayor.

Gale looked at him again. Now he sounded like a servant, no longer a teammate. Even the way he stayed standing while Kin sat—it put her in mind of some ancient throne room. Who was Kin in Loshinka?

"And—welcome home." The mayor looked at Gale as well. "And to you, Miss Reshran. Welcome to your new home."

"Thank you," Gale's mouth murmured, while the rest of her thought, *I hope not.*

"It's good to see you, Evra," said Kin warmly.

When the mayor had left, Kin pointed to one of the chairs. “Bring that closer to the fire,” she said. “Nothing here is nailed down.”

Gale dragged it closer.

“Now sit in it,” said Kin, though Gale had only hesitated for a moment.

Gale sat. When she looked up, she saw a smile on Kin’s face—a real one, perhaps enjoying her own comment. But it was also kind in a way that Gale hadn’t seen from the Prioress before. Then again, she had only met with the Prioress once before they boarded the train together, and their conversations since had been nothing but Kin questioning her. Gale barely knew the Prioress except by reputation.

“And how are you feeling?” asked Kin softly.

“Overwhelmed, and confused,” said Gale. She might as well be honest. “It’s such a new place, and it’s so… dingy outside. In here seems fine, but we’re not supposed to stay in here. But I don’t know what I’m supposed to do out there, either.” She let her head fall back against the chair. “It’s different than I thought.”

“I meant,” said Kin, “how are your symptoms. But I appreciate the emotional diagnosis as well.”

“Oh. I feel pretty sick,” said Gale.

“Of course you do. How?”

“My head hurts. My stomach feels weird.” Gale swallowed, thinking about it. “My throat is itchy, too. And I’m very cold.”

“You’ll probably have a fever tonight and tomorrow,” said Kin. “It’s normal and will pass. Ansha’s soup will help. What about your leg?”

Gale hadn't thought she'd noticed, but Kin must have noticed her limping during the walk from the train. "I turned my ankle jumping down from the car. It bears weight, but it's uncomfortable."

"Take extra care with that," said Kin. "I've seen similar injuries take years to heal. Rest it completely this week, then use it lightly. If it begins to hurt, rest it until it stops."

"Yes, Prioress."

Kin leaned her own head back in her chair, fingering the filthy doll again. "Loshinka is dingy. There is no disguising that. But I trust you will disguise what you think of it, or learn to love it for its own merits. If you do not, you will find yourself alone here, no matter how long you stay." She picked her head back up and looked hard at Gale. "Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Prioress."

"We have the same symptoms, you and I. They will grow stronger tonight and worsen tomorrow, but they will begin to pass on the following day. In about a week, I expect us both to be up and about."

Gale took a deep breath and eased it back out. "My room is so cold. Can I stay here?"

"That's what I plan to do," said Kin, closing her eyes and leaning her head back.

Gale did the same. They sat together, listening to their bodies struggle against the power of the edge, until Ansha called them for supper.

3.6 Chapter Six

Levonin Kens, the lighthouse keeper of whom both the Prioress and the mayor spoke so highly, watched the road from Loshinka and the tall man striding down it. Perhaps he should have been looking the other way, out beyond the coast, toward the islands where nearly a hundred men worked among the dangers of the edge; or perhaps he should have been below,

washing bandages and preparing his supplies in case someone needed him as a healer; but sometimes the most pleasure he could find was in looking toward Loshinka, that little town that so enveloped him without ever reaching him. He was part of it, yet distant from it. He could name the families that lived in those little houses—the Baruzovs, the Deneviks, the Ryenevins, the Konenievs—and could almost imagine what was happening in each one. The Baruzov house would be loud, all six of the children tearing about while the oldest, Sol, marking the accounts at his corner desk. The Konenievs would be quiet, with only Nityasha's cough daring to break the silence imposed by their father. The boys would be out, despite Ven's bandaged head. The Ryenevins would be out, too, all of them, turning the retting ponds or helping gather in the fields or running down to the coast to look into the rocks. They were always together.

Levonin knew them, and they all knew him, as much as they could. But he was a god. That sort of thing had to stay hidden.

As he grew closer, the tall man on the road spotted Levonin and raised a hand in greeting. Levonin waved in response and went below to meet him.

When Levonin came out of the lighthouse door, Mayor Slezhin stood examining the notice board. Everyone who had gone beyond the edge was to write their names or make their mark there, so that Levonin and others would know who was out and who had come back. Only midafternoon as it was, a few of the names had been crossed out, indicating they had returned. Most were still plain.

Levonin ran his eyes over the list. Only experienced men had gone out today, which was a good sign. These men rarely needed saving—they could rescue themselves. Levonin worried more about the boys.

"All three of my teams out today," said Slezhin approvingly. "One of the boys found a lode of lightstones on the other side of some drippers. A little green, he says, but they'll do to send inland. Do you need anything?"

"No, everything is burning bright," said Levonin. "Come inside, friend. The sea breeze is chill today." He gripped Slezhin by the shoulder as the mayor stepped inside, then glanced toward the horizon. No signals he could see. Good. He always had to check.

The big room at the bottom of the lighthouse was bright and cheery, a stark difference from the gray world outside. Levonin wanted it that way. He had plastered the curving walls with the same pale yellow that covered the outside of the lighthouse, then set the high ceiling with small stones that shone with a steady, warm glow. Around the thick pillar at the center of the room, Levonin had built a table big enough to host a Loshinkan family (or two, if they squeezed). Inset into the wall was a brick hearth that spread its heat into the rest of the room, with a hidden chimney to carry the smoke outside. Levonin couldn't take credit for that—the lighthouse had been built that way. But he did enjoy it.

Even with the table filling the center, there was space around the edges of the room. Levonin had tried to suggest different areas by setting up chairs or shelves or putting down a rug—so now there was a sitting area a comfortable distance from the fire, and an open space for children to play if they wished (he had some wooden toys in a basket, too), and a smaller table for writing or eating a solitary meal. Though, sometimes he liked to spread his work out on the big table instead. It was nice to live alone.

The work had been easier than Levonin had expected, despite taking the better part of a year. The lighthouse had been in bad disrepair, almost falling into the ocean, when he found it—and being new to Loshinka itself, he hadn't had any friends to help him. That year had been hard,

but satisfying. Building up his relationships within the town even while he reinforced the lighthouse and made it his own, Levonin had felt like a real person for the first time in years. Funny how being a god and being a person felt so different.

Levonin pointed Slezhin to the sitting area while he put the kettle on the fire. Slezhin seemed unwilling to relax at first, but as Levonin returned and took the chair by the wall (usually the colder one), the mayor sat, stretching out his long legs toward the hearth.

"I don't think my house has ever been this quiet," Slezhin said.

Levonin smiled. "Was it your grandfather built your house?"

"Great-grandfather. Built it with pieces from his grandfather's shack." Slezhin shrugged. "I don't know that my fathers have ever lived elsewhere from here."

"Why would they want to?" asked Levonin.

Slezhin snorted a laugh. Yes, he was the mayor, but he didn't pretend that his town was any better than it was. Honesty. Levonin liked that.

"I've heard Loshinka is the next Skentova," said Levonin, pressing the joke as he got up for the kettle.

"Another place for men to visit and never come back?" Slezhin said. "Sounds right."

Levonin almost dropped the tea leaves into the fire. He focused on adding the tea to the kettle, keeping his back turned, trying to think of what to say to that. "I wish it wasn't that way," he said at last as he turned back, leaving the tea to steep.

"Loshinka, or Skentova?" asked Slezhin, still smiling grimly.

"Skentova." Levonin sat heavily. "Pilgrimage takes more good men than the edge ever does."

Slezhin grunted. After tapping the arm of his chair a few times, he said, “I almost went with Baruzov and Kaliev, when they went.

“It was a big group, all official. So many well-known faces, so many of the leaders. Baruzov was mayor then. I half wanted to go. I wanted to go because he and Kaliev were going, but Solya and I had just had Evi and we didn’t know it then but Rinsha was already coming into it.

“But I remember…” Slezhin narrowed his eyes, staring somewhere beyond his feet, as if the memories were woven into the rug. “I remember such a tired look in Kaliev’s eyes. And Ryenevin’s—it was all through Ryenevin’s face, wasn’t it. This look they had. I never wanted to be that tired in my life. But more than that, even if I was that tired, I never wanted to run from it the way they thought they could.

“I remember thinking that—*Don’t run from this, Nitya*, I thought when I saw Ryenevin. *It’s not something to run from.* He had a babe in arms and another on the way, and his young Lan looked up to him for the world.”

Slezhin stopped. “But I almost ran, too,” he said, finally, in a voice made unlike his own by anger, or grief, or that same tiredness he had seen in the others.

Levonin looked at him. Slezhin certainly looked more tired than usual—his hair disheveled when it was normally straight, his clothes rumpled and worn, his face several days unshaven. Something more was bothering him. It wasn’t just Levonin’s joke that had brought this up.

Carefully, Levonin released some of his power. He imagined it like a breath, something soft and small that he exhaled across the space between them, though he was almost holding his actual breath. *Peace*, he thought as his power went out. *Strength. Clarity.*

Slezhin didn't react. Eventually, he let out a sigh. "Glad I didn't go," he said, looking at Levonin.

"So am I," said Levonin, reaching across to grip Slezhin's hand. He kept the power flowing, just the barest amount. As long as he didn't push it, Slezhin wouldn't notice.

"Going to be some strong tea," Slezhin remarked.

Levonin leapt up, grabbing two mugs and the kettle. The tea would probably be fine, actually—unlike anyone else's in this town, his tea always tasted as it should—but he truly had forgotten.

"I always think you're older," said Slezhin as he sat back with his mug. "Then I look at you again and think, *He's young enough to be my son.*"

Levonin cocked his head. "Brother, maybe? You're not so old yourself."

Slezhin grinned with the mug at his lips. "Been feeling pretty old."

"Well, so have I," said Levonin, smiling back.

It was a lie. No one in this town felt the way Levonin did. No one would, unless he unleashed his power and pushed it hard. But if he did that, it would draw attention he didn't want, and create problems he couldn't handle, and leave Loshinka worse than if he had never been there at all.

Still, Levonin breathed a little more of his power into the room. Slezhin would think it was the tea, fortifying him, or the fire, warming him up. Whatever it was, he needed it.

"Is there a reason you came today, Evra?" asked Levonin when Slezhin had finished his mug.

"The Prioress is back," Slezhin said. "She doesn't want to see you until next week, but she sends her regards. Brought an apprentice this time."

Levonin nodded, considering. Kin was one of the few who knew both him and Skentova well enough that she might be able to connect them. He suspected she knew what he was. But if she did, she had kept his secret—she seemed to have the same care for this town that he did, if in a different way, and as much as she could in her position. Her apprentice, however… He would have to be careful.

"There's something else, isn't there?" asked Levonin, noticing a pensive twist in Slezhin's mouth.

Slezhin shifted in his chair, suddenly looking embarrassed. "Evi has an odd cough," he admitted. "Solya wanted me to fetch you."

"And you waited all this time?" cried Levonin. He sprang up to look for his supplies.

"You know how she is about Evi, thinks a dust speck will make her ill. Ilen was far worse and you cured him."

"I didn't cure anything," said Levonin. "Ilen was almost through it himself when I saw him. Evi is not as strong as he is. Evra, why?"

"I wanted some tea first," said Slezhin with a triumphant look. He grew more solemn, then, and nodded to Levonin. "And I know you can help her."

Levonin met his eyes. Maybe Slezhin and the others put too much trust in him. At the edge of the world, there were some things even a god couldn't fix. Not a god on his own—and if Levonin wanted to stay here, he would have to remain alone.

But he might be able to fix this. Slezhin was a good father, and wouldn't have dallied if he thought Evi was in trouble. She was stronger than she looked.

"I need to fetch some things," said Levonin, and hurried upstairs.

3.7 Chapter Seven

Levonin stopped outside his front door to write on the notice board. Just like workers would write their names if they were going beyond the edge, he had to write his if he was going inland—in case someone else needed him while he was gone. Levonin liked being easy to find. He liked being useful, and writing his whereabouts on the board was his way of telling people he was always willing to be bothered.

Well. *Usually* willing to be bothered. There were some places he wouldn't write down.

Finished, Levonin slung his bag more securely on his back and hurried to catch up to Slezhin on the long road toward Loshinka.

The mayor's house was nondescript in the town. Years ago, when the Baruzovs had held that title for more than forty years, their house had been the Mayor's House, and it still looked the part. But Slezhin hadn't wanted it. His house was old and comfortable, even if it was a little small for their family. And although the Baruzovs didn't quite fill their house anymore, they had plenty of growing little ones and would come to appreciate that extra space.

Of course, both the Slezhins and the Baruzovs were merchant families. If they had enough space or more than they needed, it was because they had the means for it. Most families—like the Olentevs, whose "house" stood not far from the road they were walking now—had only a single room in which to eat, sleep, and live.

Levonin noticed movement near the Olentev's house. One of the older children, working at something on the ground, straightened up to watch them pass. Levonin waved. She waved back and shouted something to them, but they were too far away to hear. The Olentev children all seemed too thin, too ragged, too serious, but once in a while they would betray their youth again. Levonin loved to catch sight of it.

Families like the Olentevs would do a variety of jobs about the town. The children might help their mother with what small farmland or gardens they had—or pastures, if they owned animals—while the older children might find work with other farming families or in the town. Any strong adults, like Olentev himself and his oldest boy, would sign with a merchant to go beyond the edge.

Slezhin employed multiple teams of workers who ventured to the islands. There, they harvested various artifacts and brought them into Loshinka for export toward Skentova. Slezhin mostly traded lightstones—stones that glowed with various shades and intensities of light at all times of day, which were common beyond the edge but didn't exist anywhere else. All the inland towns loved them. They lasted longer than candles and could go anywhere without setting things on fire. Although Slezhin sold other artifacts as well, he made a healthy living on lightstones alone.

The artifacts, however, weren't Slezhin's specialty. Any forager could go out and fill a sack with lightstones, but without the connections Slezhin maintained, and the boxcar he owned on the inland train, that forager would never sell to anyone outside Loshinka itself. And Loshinka could find its own lightstones.

The Baruzovs had a similar business. While Slezhin specialized in lightstones or other simple artifacts, the Baruzovs provided the inland region with more complex tools. They were best known for movement stones: stones that responded to a different gravity than the rest of the world, and dragged themselves in various directions. Some fell upward, some sideways, while others would simply spin or whirl in circles. Baruzov Nitasha and her oldest son, who between them maintained the business, worked with a small team of highly-skilled workers who could identify and extract these stones.

Slezhin's business came from quantity. He employed more workers than anyone else in the town, and exported more artifacts. The Baruzovs, however, relied on the value of what they found. If they could find the right kind of movement stone, and then neutralize it enough to bring it in from the edge, that stone could support their family for months.

Movement stones had so many uses. They could help run trains, hold up an impossible ceiling, or power a very expensive toy. The Baruzovs liked to brag that one of their stones drove a clock tower in Skentova, but Levonin wasn't sure how much he believed that.

As they climbed the hill toward the town, Levonin felt the sea breeze turn from bitter to pleasant. It often happened this way this close to the edge—near his lighthouse, the world seemed inhospitable and bleak, while just a short walk inland it would be picnic weather. Today, although the sky still hung low and gray (it always did), Levonin could feel the warmth of the earth and the life all around him. That feeling only grew as they entered the town.

Loshinka was thriving. The streets hummed with people invigorated by the day. The ladies had cast off heavier coats and boots, going out instead in their shawls and cloth shoes. Most of the men were working beyond the edge, but those who were here met cheerfully and exchanged greetings in low voices. Levonin still thought that was strange. In Skentova—and in Kirskoe, he thought, though it was hard to remember since he'd been so young—people spoke loudly when they were cheerful. The streets were overflowing with noise on bright days like this. In Loshinka, it was different. People preferred to be earnest, rather than exuberant. Their energy showed in their movements, in their eyes, in the fact that they were in the streets at all.

Still, a day like this couldn't hide Loshinka's disease. It was too close to the edge. Even Levonin could see the way the houses leaned on one another, their colors fading, their corners

twisting. Things decayed here, especially things that people had made. The world wanted to reclaim this place.

As they walked, Levonin let his power ease out of him. Not too much—he didn't want Slezhin to notice—but enough to soothe the town's aches, perhaps. He couldn't heal it. He couldn't keep things from breaking, or keep people from getting sick, or get the fountain working again. He was only one god. But he could make Loshinka a little less bleak.

They passed through the square in front of the church. Levonin looked at the Storm House as they went by. Although he liked to be needed, he didn't mind that Prioress Kin didn't want to see him until after her edgesickness had passed. In fact, that was proof that she knew what he was. If her body needed to adjust to a lack of gods, introducing another god at close quarters would only delay her recovery. Better for Levonin to stay out here. Still, he didn't cut off his power as he passed the house. Both Kin and her apprentice would appreciate this world being a little friendlier.

By the time they reached Slezhin's front door, Levonin had already asked him about Evi's symptoms, whether anyone else in the family matched them, and if there were any birthdays coming up that he had forgotten. Slezhin had a whole troop of youngsters, so this visit would be less like a sick call and more like diving into a barrel of fish. Excited fish. Levonin could hear them running around from outside the house.

Slezhin opened the door and Levonin made it halfway up the stairs before the children realized anyone had arrived. Slezhin disappeared into his study. Levonin had to balance himself on the steps as he fielded tackles from the twins, Kina and Kensa, then made it to the top of the steps before Ilen grabbed him from behind. Levonin managed to waddle toward Evi's door with the boy clinging to him. There he paused, listening as Solya told him in more detail about her

concerns with Evi—which did seem valid, despite her usual overconcern for the little girl—and assured her that he would do whatever he could. He asked for a bowl of hot water and a washcloth, then extracted himself from Ilen and eased Evi's door open.

"Good afternoon, sweet lady," he said softly as he crossed the room to her little bed. There were other beds in the room—Rinsha usually slept here, too, and sometimes Ilen—but they were stripped of blankets now. Solya wouldn't want Evi's cough passing to any of the other children. In a family this size—with her parents living downstairs, as well—sickness had to be quarantined quickly.

Evi smiled at him as he knelt by her. He set his pack on the floor, but he wasn't sure he'd need anything. Levonin touched Evi's head and throat.

It wasn't that he could feel sickness. He could only feel where his power wanted to go. It stretched in all directions in this part of the world, but sometimes—especially when he was close by—he could feel specific voids it longed to fill. There was certainly something around Evi's throat. Not much in her chest, which was good. A little in her head, around her cheeks and the back of her head.

Both Slezhin and Solya were right. It was just a cough, not likely to turn into a barking cough like Ilen's last year. But this close to the edge, any sickness could kill. Evi would probably recover from this with enough rest, but if the weather turned sour for the next three days, Levonin could imagine her never regaining her former energy. Levonin could imagine all sorts of frightening things. The edge made them all more likely.

He chattered with Evi until Solya brought the washcloth, then pretended to wipe her face and hands as he massaged his power into her skin. It wasn't healing—not really. But it would help, even if it didn't completely work. Evi would feel better because he had been there, and her

parents would think that he had done something special with his supplies and techniques. Her cough would heal on its own. Evi would go back to normal. Another child kept from dying before her time.

In other towns along the edge, those children just died.

Levonin tried not to think about all the people he couldn't help, and focused on the one he could.

3.8 Chapter Eight

Levonin left the Slezhin house with an urgency in his step. He loved big families like that—he found the children refreshing, their worlds of imagination endlessly interesting—but something about them set him off-balance at the same time. Was it the children's energy, making him want to run and do something himself? Did they have some sense of what he was, something to make him uneasy in their presence? Or was he just a lonely young man, wishing he had a family tearing around his home in the lighthouse?

Maybe it was none of that. When he worked with sick people, and especially sick children, he had to take care with his power. It wanted to flow into them. Levonin had to hold it back, hold it steady, force it to trickle through the sick person's body instead of drowning it. If he used too much, he would overwhelm the body instead of working with it, ruining its ability to heal itself. Children were still growing into their full health; if he broke that health before their bodies matured, they would have to rely on his power for the rest of their lives, or die young.

Some people seemed to think that good things couldn't kill. Levonin disagreed—or maybe, he thought that some things just weren't good.

Whatever it was, Levonin wanted to get away. He strode through Loshinka, heading back toward his lighthouse. There was still an hour or two before dusk—summer was ending, but the

days were still long—and he wanted to be back at the lighthouse when the workers started to trickle back. It was always the transition times, going out and coming in, when people were most likely to fall off of cliffs or have a boat capsize. Levonin wanted to be ready.

If he had thought about what path he should take through the town, perhaps he could have avoided it. But, deep in thought about the Slezhins and Evi, and about the workers beyond the edge, Levonin walked straight into the square in front of the church. When he entered the open space, after the narrow street, his steps faltered. He should have kept going. Instead, he looked up at the church.

It sat like a heap of stones, or like a beast with its claws dug into the dirt, unwilling to be moved. It seemed to defy the edge, insisting that it could not decay like the rest of Loshinka. Levonin didn't believe it. He could still see cracks in the mortar, stains from thousands of bird droppings across its carved façade, and the way its western wall (the one nearest to the edge) bowed slightly inward as if shying away from danger. Levonin despised it.

Levonin started walking across the square again. He didn't know why he had stopped in the first place. He had to get back to the lighthouse, and dallying here would serve no one. No one at all. And anyway, he had written, "Slezhin's house," on his notice board—since he wasn't at Slezhin's house anymore, he should go straight home. *Straight* home.

He glanced up at the Storm House window. The curtains were drawn. No one was watching. The square was empty. The town was quiet—always quiet, in a way, but this square seemed particularly dead.

He had stopped again.

Levonin forced himself to keep walking, to turn his back on the church and *go*, but he only made it three more steps before turning and staring at the building again.

Something was humming inside him. It was the part of him he associated with his power—somewhere in his chest, deep at the bottom of his breastbone. It was the feeling that had grown since Slezhin had entered his lighthouse, since Levonin had stretched his power to soothe Loshinka, since he had felt Evi's sickness. Levonin pushed it down again. It wouldn't stay. It needed to get out. His power wanted to be used.

But it was more than that. Levonin could blast through Evi's sickness and feel nothing but boredom. He could pour into Loshinka everything he had, maybe until the clouds pulled back and the air turned golden, and experience none of it himself. His power didn't affect him. But… he wanted it to.

The hum in Levonin's chest turned to a roar. He wanted both. He wanted to use his power, to really use it—no matter what it did—and he wanted to feel it, to really feel it—no matter what it did. No matter *anything* else.

But something in him was screaming, too. *Go back,* it said. *Go back to the lighthouse. Go back outside the town. Go back*—anywhere. Anywhere but this church.

Levonin took a step in the wrong direction.

It was always this way. It never felt right. It was always the wrong direction, the wrong place, the wrong thing to do, and he still did it. He was going to do it now. He wasn't even inside the church yet and he knew he couldn't stop. Levonin wanted to smash his head against the steps. Instead, he climbed them.

The church doors looked imposing—tall, dark, made of thick wood that was too thick for the edge to rot it through yet. But they opened smoothly, noiselessly. Levonin didn't chance a look back at the square or the Storm House. If anyone was looking, he didn't want to know. He just wanted to be out of sight.

His feet carried him—he didn't want this, he wasn't choosing it—through the entryway. Beyond was a curving hall that bordered the round sanctuary. (Everything the Skentovite church made had to be round. It was disgusting.) Levonin ignored the door into the sanctuary and followed the hall to the right, also ignoring the smaller closet doors to the side. The curve stopped at another door, which Levonin slipped through.

Did Torskev, the priest, keep this door unlocked because he thought Levonin wanted it that way? Levonin refused to ask. He would be mortified if that's what Torskev thought. Except he had been so afraid it would be locked (yet hoping so hard) and had felt such relief (such dread) when he found it open.

The hall beyond was dark, continuing to curve. Levonin eased the door shut and listened for a moment. No voices, no footsteps. He started forward, tracing the wall with one hand, trusting to luck to avoid tripping over anything. He was a god; he always had luck.

First door… second door… third door. Levonin gave it a light push, again feeling that mix of hope and dread. Hope—nasty, despairing, animal hope—won. The door eased open on a dim chamber.

Levonin slipped through and closed the door quickly. He didn't want the light spilling into the hallway and alerting Torskev or anyone else he was here. He was in an antechamber, only big enough for a couple of people, with a bench running along one side and a wide, squat door opposite the one by which he'd entered. Levonin grasped the ring set into the next door, and pulled hard.

The heavy door swung outward, stone scraping against stone. Bright light spilled into the antechamber. Levonin stopped.

It was on the other side. If he went in, he wouldn't be able to stop. But… he hadn't been able to stop since he had entered the square. Hating himself, Levonin crouched and stepped carefully through the door. He turned and grabbed the door's other ring, pulling it closed behind him with a scrape.

Levonin straightened. He was in a circular chamber slightly larger than the antechamber, but instead of a cylinder, like the sanctuary or the church itself, this chamber had the shape of an egg. The floor sloped down into a flat spot at the center, while the walls curved up to meet in a point directly above it. There were no corners. Even the door fit perfectly into the wall around it.

The chamber was covered in stones. On the floor, they were sanded smooth for people to stand on—though it was obviously best to stand on the flat spot. Around the walls, they had more contours, but they were all the same kind of stone, with a mottled yellow-orange color, wide from edge to edge. The stones were placed so that only the barest gap showed between any of them. Those spidery cracks between the stones made Levonin feel even more like he was standing inside an egg.

He had never discovered what this stone was, or where it came from, but he did know its purpose. It reflected.

Levonin stepped carefully down to the center of the chamber and took a deep breath. When he let it out, he let out his power, too.

His heart jumped. It had already been pounding at the thought of what he was doing, and what if someone saw him, and it was so wrong—but now his heart raced, feeling his own power doubling back on him. Levonin didn't feel his power like everyone else did. They might feel calm, or joy, but at this point in the process he just felt energy. It felt amazing and excruciating all at once. He began to push his power, harder, harder. *Go, go, go*.

His power rebounded around the space. It reflected off the stones, sweeping up through the curve of the ceiling and back into him. It coursed beneath his skin, rushing out of him and into him and through him. Levonin felt as though he should be glowing, blazing brighter than the sun, but the room looked just as it had been—only sharper, the colors stronger, the influence of the edge vanishing in the roar.

This was what it felt like in Skentova.

With thousands of gods all in the same city, all they did was pour into one another. There was no edge there. There was no sickness, no decay, not even bad luck to stand against the gods' combined might as it filled the city. Each god felt all of its brothers and sisters feeding it, and each god thrust its power back into the world for its fellow gods.

Levonin had done that, too. He had lived this way all the time. He had never felt that desperate need to release his power, or to feel it flooding into him. It was just there. Full. Perfect. Everything he needed.

He hated it.

But he couldn't stop. Levonin's body shook as he pushed his power harder and harder. It felt like fire, like bliss just out of reach. He had more. He forced it out.

Then came the Moment.

The chamber so filled with power that the air seemed to solidify. It crystallized. It held Levonin close. The agony of desire disappeared, the world seeming to agree with him at last, to succumb to him.

All was changed. He no longer breathed air; he breathed light. Music shivered on his skin. Life herself beckoned him to dance.

So Levonin did.

3.9 Chapter Nine

The Moment only lasted a few seconds.

It felt huge. It felt life-defining, such an event that Levonin would be changed forever. While he was in it, he felt nothing could touch him and nothing mattered. And then it was gone. It was both endless and over in two seconds.

Levonin sank to his knees, hands shaking. The chamber was quiet—it had always been quiet, actually, though the power made him feel music and singing and the sound of the ocean. Nothing moved, but not the way everything had stopped during the Moment. Now the air hung dead. It didn't embrace him; it stifled him.

Levonin felt empty.

He didn't feel angry. He could have—he had tried so hard to avoid coming here again, and here he was. He didn't feel sad that his will was so weak. But… he didn't feel happy, either. Something about the Moment told him everything would be perfect forever, but he didn't feel that anymore. He wasn't full. He wasn't satisfied.

He wasn't really… anything.

Levonin looked at his hands. He hadn't even done anything physical, but he felt exhausted. His arms were too heavy to move. Someday, he would have to stand up. Well… he supposed he could do that now.

He stood up. It was easy. How strange—his legs weren't actually tired. They moved when he told them to. And his hands—they shook, but when he made them into fists and squeezed, they felt strong. After all of that effort, all of that power rushing from him, his body didn't even notice. Levonin relaxed his hands. Were they shaking, or was that normal?

He had to get out of here.

It wasn't that Levonin felt he had somewhere else to be—he couldn't think that far, not yet—he just knew there was no point in staying in this chamber. He could start using his power again and repeat the process, but the Moment was always shorter the second time. And he was tired. The desire to let out and feel his power was still there, but it was so much smaller. He could ignore it.

Levonin grunted as he turned toward the door. How easy it was to go on with his life, now that he had given in. As he passed through the antechamber and out into the dark hall, he remembered the frenzy he'd been in only a few minutes earlier. It was all gone.

This is what he hated. Levonin began to come back to himself as he left that horrible chamber behind. He hated being so hungry for something that didn't even help. Sure, it felt good. But it was like picking a scab—peel it off, and you'll have another one to peel off tomorrow. No, it was worse. It was like stabbing himself in the stomach every time he was hungry. It didn't help, it made it worse, it almost killed him every time he did it.

Was that true? Could that much power be dangerous? Levonin didn't know. Physically, maybe not—his power was all about improving the way things naturally functioned, so his body was probably healthier now than it had been this morning. But that emptiness he always felt afterward—that felt like death. Not feeling anything around him. Not caring about anything in the world. When he felt that way, he stopped being a person. He stopped being anything.

Levonin burst out of the church doors, not caring who saw him. It didn't matter what they thought. He was Levonin Kens, the lighthouse keeper and the healer and the only person in this town who didn't fear the edge. He was a god. No one cared what he'd just done. No one would think it was wrong. If they knew what he was, they would worship him. They basically worshiped him already.

Levonin gritted his teeth, trying to keep from screaming as he crossed the square toward the setting sun. They loved him, and he was *this*. Even if he used his power to reshape the edge beyond recognition, it wouldn't change what he'd done. And what *had* he done? He didn't even know. He hadn't hurt anyone. No one was dying because of him. He might have wasted an hour at most. He could still get back to the lighthouse in time for the workers to return. He hadn't been missed.

None of that mattered. It wasn't about who he could help, or whether the Moment hurt others. It was just that…

Levonin didn't even know. He strode through the town, wishing he could get free of the huddled houses and his own muddled thoughts.

Here was the problem: Levonin hated the Moment. Yet he kept searching for it, again and again, hoping it would satisfy him this time when it hadn't a hundred times before. It hadn't in Skentova; it had no chance here. But he kept going back. He kept killing himself, stabbing himself, ruining himself. As if the world wasn't already ruined enough.

Levonin almost snarled. Then he saw someone walking ahead of him, one of the few on the streets so near dinnertime. Ryenevin Lan, he thought. He would be headed down the hill toward his family's home.

For a moment, Levonin considered slowing his own walk so he wouldn't catch up. But they were going the same way, and Levonin could use a conversation. Something to pull him out of his own head. Levonin called Lan's name and hurried to catch up.

The Ryenevins were a good-looking family, Levonin had always thought, but the edge had never been kind to them. Levonin could see both influences in Lan's face. He was only seventeen or eighteen, with dark hair and striking eyes, but the fatigue in his face made him look

Levonin's age or older. His clothes were thin, worn nearly ragged by long days beyond the edge. Levonin recognized the coat he was wearing—it had been Baruzov Sol's, before those holes got into it.

Despite his youth and his family's poverty, Lan acted the way he looked—too old for his age. His father had left on pilgrimage when he was a child and hadn't come back. Levonin supposed he ought to start calling Lan by his family name, Ryenevin, since he was essentially the head of his house, but he could only think of Lan as Lan.

"What brings you up this way?" asked Levonin once they had started walking again.

"I went to see the Baruzovs," Lan said. "You?"

"Slezhin Evi is sick," Levonin said. No reason to mention the rest of it. "In from the edge a little early today?"

"I didn't go. We had to pull everything out of the retting pools and put the new crop in. It's not really something the kids can do."

"Kinya could probably haul a few sheaves herself," said Levonin. It was a joke; Kinya was barely three, and a sheaf of flax was heavy even before it soaked in a retting pool. "You have to get these kids to work."

"You're right," said Lan. "I should start bringing Rinsh and Banya beyond the edge with me."

"Exactly," said Levonin, hoping Lan was joking, too. Those two were only… five? Six? He didn't want to rescue them.

It felt good to banter with someone. Even though Levonin knew the Moment wouldn't hurt anyone else, he needed conversations like this to prove that it was true. He was still the same

Levonin. People still liked him. If Lan had a sick sibling, or if he got lost beyond the edge, Levonin would be there to help him. That was the important thing.

If, occasionally, Levonin lost the fight with his own desires, maybe it wasn't the end of the world. He still hated it. It still made him feel empty. But he wasn't actually dead. That meant something.

It had to mean something. Or else Levonin was fooling himself, and destroying something important.

"Is everyone well, in the family?" he asked.

"We're making it."

"And work? Are you with Slezhin?"

"No; Denevik," said Lan, sighing. "He wants me to get better boots. He thinks I'm going to slip out there or something."

They both looked down at Lan's boots—probably the best footwear in the Ryenevin house, but they had holes at the creases and one sole was beginning to flap. Several strings tied together served as laces.

"I have an extra pair," said Levonin. "Do you want them?" He didn't have extra—he'd go to Slezhin or Sol and buy some—but Lan was more likely to accept this way.

"I talked to Sol already," said Lan. "I think we figured it out. But thanks."

"My house is closer than Sol's," said Levonin, raising an eyebrow.

"Wrong direction," said Lan, smiling. He stopped at the side of the road, where a narrow path curved away toward the Ryenevin house in the distance.

Levonin stopped, too. "You write your name there every day. You could stop in for tea."

"Denevik wouldn't like it if I'm late. I'd have to get there early." Lan seemed to consider it. "Maybe I will."

"It's open," said Levonin. "I try to be around when you're going out. You could stop when you come in, too."

"Hmm," said Lan, but that was all. Levonin knew that most workers liked to get straight home after a day beyond the edge—especially if those workers had families full of little ones.

"Say hello to the family for me," said Levonin. They both turned toward their homes.

The sun was truly setting when Levonin reached the lighthouse. He met a line of workers straggling in over the cliff, wiping or crossing their names off his board. Levonin wiped his own name off and greeted the others as they came. When everyone had checked in, Levonin scrubbed the board clean for the next morning and went into the lighthouse, mostly okay.

3.10 Chapter Ten

Once Lan lost sight of the lighthouse keeper beneath the swell of a low hill, he stopped walking.

The ground sloped together in a divot here, a spot that would often flood in a long rain. The path ran next to a little gully, hopping over it now and again, as both wound toward Lan's family's house. It wasn't much farther, but Lan didn't want to walk anymore.

The feeling that had been with him all day came pressing back into him. Sometimes that feeling would fade, especially around friends or during hard work, but moments like these—at the end of a pleasant conversation, at the end of a long day, between Sol's rowdy house and his own—moments like these let that feeling come burbling up again. It was always there these days. It was like a bad smell Lan never got used to.

It felt like dragging himself through an entire day and then being unable to sleep at night. It felt like filling a pack with artifacts and having the straps break as he climbed the lighthouse cliff, spilling his work into the sea. It felt like harvesting a field of flax, letting it ret for days, and drawing it out of the pools already ruined, unfit for the thread they wanted to make.

It felt like all that, but deeper, so that Lan couldn't simply take a breath and try again. This was in his soul. Something was going wrong and he couldn't stop it.

Lan looked up the hill. He could see a corner of Loshinka, some rooftops and the uphill part where the road climbed up to the train station. Something glinted there: the train that had come today. They had finally hauled it into place for the mechanic teams to work on it. Sol had had nothing else to talk about—that train, the movement stones they had ready for it, and Prioress Kin, coming back with an apprentice. And of course, beneath all that, the *thing* that Lan and Sol left unspoken: the thought of a pilgrimage, the chance to leave this place forever, the open road to Skentova and a real life. Kin or her apprentice might organize one. Sol or Lan might go.

Lan sat down next to the path so he couldn't see the station anymore.

In Lan's head, his life could go three ways. First, he could stay here forever and shrivel in the grip of this soul-deep futility. Second, he could die early. It could happen in any number of ways, and it might be an accident, but Lan could also wander out beyond the edge without telling anyone, or stop eating, or take a sip from a retting pool. There were ways. This was the edge; it would be easy.

The third way was a mix of the two. He could stay alive, but he could leave his life here. Lan could go inland, like his father had done, like Sol's father had done, like Sol planned to do. Skentova, where no one wanted to leave. Where life was simple. Where nothing was futile.

Where Lan's father had gone, leaving his family to die.

That was the problem with the second and third ways. Lan's family would suffer. Ilina was too young to find good work. Lan's mother was too weak to tend the farm alone. And the three youngest, or the grandparents? They had even less to offer. They were only open mouths.

Lan hated the third way. He hated to call it by its name; "pilgrimage" sounded so simple, so obedient. He didn't want it. If he was going to leave his family, he didn't want to be able to remember them. It was one thing to go and die; it was different if he kept living somewhere else, while back here his family starved to death. Even if he never saw them again, he would hate himself for it. Because he had spent his whole life hating his father. He couldn't do the same thing.

The second way was a little better. (He didn't use its name, either. He didn't like how often he imagined it.) At least then he wouldn't be able to remember. At least then it would be over.

But there was only one real way to live—and that was to *live*. Here, forever. Because there was nothing else he could do. No way to move his family further from the edge. No way to build them a better life—not when they had to feed all eight of them and only he and Ilina could do real work. No way to make the edge stop being the edge. They had to live with it. *He* had to live with it.

Lan dug his fingers into the matted grass by the path. He wished he could turn off his mind. Maybe then he could work for the rest of his life without caring about it. But here he was, caring a lot. Caring, and stuck.

He gripped a fistful of grass and tore it out, hearing the stalks snap one by one.

"I need to get home," he muttered to himself as he began to pull the clump of grass apart. How did grass live long enough to turn dry and brown? Or did it just grow this way, already dead? There were so many impossible things about the edge, even to someone who had lived here his entire life.

Lan took a deep breath. The world smelled like death, with a hint of his own body odor. *Nice*, he thought. At least he was contributing something.

He took another deep breath—neither one seemed to fill him—and threw the clump of grass down, getting to his feet. Lan walked toward home.

The house had a wooden roof and three stone walls, with a small hill swallowing the other side. The roof warped enough that no matter how much Lan plastered it, there was always a draft or a drip somewhere. The stone for the walls had been gathered—so Lan had been told—from beyond the edge, which made sense considering how many of them glowed in soft colors after nightfall, or refused to stay dry, or would whisper to you if you licked them. (The kids liked that one.)

It wasn't a bad house, all in all. It could be comforting sometimes, with its solidness and quirks. Filled with Lan's family, Lan almost loved it.

But it had been his father's. It was hard to ignore that.

He wished he could live with Levonin, in that big old lighthouse. Or with the Baruzovs—they still had some room, even though Sol had more siblings than Lan did. (Though Lan had more dead ones.) But he would have to move his whole family there, and no one had space for that. Nor could he build a new house—not one as reliable as this, especially this close to the edge. This house was their caretaker, their safe place when everything else had disappeared. Lan couldn't give that up.

In a way, the house was like his father's final gift, still helping them along. Lan might have found that comforting if his father had simply died. But this kind of gift felt much different.

There were lights in the windows, but no one outside. Lan made a slow circle around the house, dragging a broken wheelbarrow back to its place, propping a rake against the wall, pulling a dishcloth out of the dirt. These were the casualties of little children trying to "help"—or of someone older fighting to corral such a child. They were good signs. Chaotic children were living children, and when sickness could snatch a child in a few days or less, it always comforted Lan to know his siblings could still run and play. He could hear loud voices from inside the house, too. Kinya and Bansha got quiet when they worried, so he was glad to hear them so carefree.

Lan glanced out toward the edge, where he could barely see the top of the lighthouse silhouetted against the sunset sky. What if he asked to stay with Levonin? He could still work and provide for his family, and come over and clean up sometimes, but he wouldn't have to go inside. Could that be a fourth way to live?

No. The house wasn't the problem. His family wasn't the problem. All their problems weren't the problem. He was the problem. Something was sick in him, and running away, even if he ran closer to the edge, wouldn't help.

Lan completed his round of the little hill and drew himself up, trying to be the older brother, and son, and grandson he needed to be. He made a one with his finger, pointing it at the ground, then pushed open the door and stepped back into his family.

3.11 Chapter Eleven

"Lan's home!" Bansha cried, dropping a stick and running toward Lan. Rinsh, apparently seeing his chance, swung his own stick hard, cracking Bansha across the skull.

The house—already loud—erupted in screaming. Bansha went down, clutching his forehead. Kinya, standing by the table, eyes wide as if she'd never seen such hate, wailed in incomprehension. Mom and the grandparents raised their voices, scolding Rinsh or exclaiming over Bansha or calling, "Fine hit!" That was Lan's grandpa. Rinsh stared at Lan and then Mom, like a trapped animal ready to gnaw off a paw if it would free him from whatever punishment he'd earned.

Ilina was the only one to keep calm. She crossed from the stove to the children in two quick strides. She scooped a hand around Kinya, pushing her toward Mom, then gathered Bansha up. The boy's forehead was bleeding into his eyes. In an instant, Ilina's shawl was sacrificed to the cause, cleaning the cut and wiping Bansha's face. The blood stained the gray weave dark.

Rinsh kept hanging back. Lan took a step toward him, but the boy decided that Mom—with Kinya now in her arms—was a more merciful judge than Lan might be. He made a rush for her chair, but Lan snagged the back of his shirt.

Now Rinsh was screaming, too, struggling to get free. That set Kinya wailing again, and grandma yelling about her headache, and Bansha was shouting something—probably suing for Rinsh's blood in revenge—until Lan managed to drag Rinsh out through the open door and slam it behind them.

Rinsh went silent.

"What did I say about playing swords inside?" asked Lan.

"It was an accident," said Rinsh, probably meaning the lucky hit.

"Was it?"

Rinsh fidgeted. He was a year younger than Bansha, and several inches smaller. Bansha usually won whatever fights they had, and wasn't very kind about it, so Rinsh often had to cheat if he wanted to score any hits. Lan had done the same thing against Ev.

Rinsh still looked like he was about to run. Where would he go? But Lan wasn't going to punish him. The boys had only been playing. Lan had made a rule about swords inside, but Bansha had probably started the game, and all four adults had let it happen—well, all three adults and Ilina, who was basically an adult. Lan couldn't punish Rinsh for protecting himself, even if he did get overzealous at the end.

"Bansha will be fine," said Lan after they'd stared at each other for a few breaths. "You didn't hit him that hard. Do you know what's for dinner?"

"Stew again, I think." Rinsh relaxed a little, but not completely. He never really did. He wasn't one of Lan's siblings. Around two years ago, one of Mom's sisters had arrived with him in tow, her only surviving son. She fell sick not long after. Since Rinsh had nowhere else to go when she died, he'd stayed with them—but he still seemed afraid to let himself into the family.

On some days, that story made it easy for Lan to understand Rinsh. On other days, it only aggravated him more. That little detail—*Rinsh is a cousin, not a brother*—seemed to seep into every conversation, every rule, every fight.

Lan wished he could ignore these things. If he could treat Rinsh like one of his brothers, or forget that his father had left, or ignore that Ev and Solsha and Venya and the others had ever existed, maybe then he could start living life the right way. Maybe he could move toward something, instead of just trying to stay alive. He just needed to forget history. That would help so much.

When Lan heard the noise inside the house die down, he jerked his head at Rinsh. “Come on.”

This time, when he opened the door, no one died. Bansha sat at the table chewing on an old crust, eyeing Rinsh beneath his new bandage. He still held his stick sword. Kinya was in Mom’s lap, examining something. Grandpa was helping Grandma adjust her own shawl, while Ilina was back at the stove, stirring something that did smell like stew. It was the same stew they’d had for a few nights past, the stringy meat slowly getting easier to chew as the broth tasted like less and less.

“Put away the swords,” murmured Lan to Rinsh, then crouched by Bansha. “I told you not to play with these inside,” he said, taking Bansha’s sword from him and holding it out to Rinsh.

“I thought you meant the other room,” mumbled Bansha.

When there were only two rooms in the house, Lan didn’t think he had to specify what he meant by “inside”. He turned Bansha’s face so he could examine the bandage, which he recognized as one of Bansha’s other shirts. The bleeding seemed to have stopped quickly, which was a mercy, and Lan could tell by the smudges on Bansha’s cheeks that Ilina had washed the wound first. They didn’t want the cut to get infected.

All of this because Bansha had been glad to see Lan come home.

“Good to see you, too,” said Lan, giving Bansha a careful hug.

Small hands grabbed his shirt and almost pulled him off balance. Lan turned so he could hug Kinya in return, then stopped as she pulled away, holding up a piece of wood for him to see.

“It’s sparky,” she said, and bit her lip.

The chip in her palm looked like a regular piece of pale wood.

"Sparkly?" Lan asked. He reached to touch it, but Kinya pulled it back.

"Not spark*ull*y," she insisted. "Sparky!" She frowned at him to see if he understood, then pushed the wood chip in his face again.

This time, something bright shot from the wood and almost hit Lan in the face. Lan jerked back, but the wood looked normal again.

"You might need to wet it again, Kinny," called Mom from her chair. "Remember how I showed you?"

Kinya licked her finger, then pressed it against the wood. When she took her finger away, the wet spot she left began to fizzle and spit with yellow sparks, bouncing in all directions. Kinya laughed, turning the wood chip so it fountained upward, then out over Lan's shirt. The sparks didn't live longer than a flicker—they flew less than an inch before disappearing, without a speck of ash.

"Wow," said Lan. It wasn't the strangest artifact he'd seen, but it was unique—and so small, it was unlikely to have any clever use. Not to mention being made of wood. It would rot sooner than a stone artifact. "Where did you find it?"

Kinya pulled the wood chip back toward herself and looked at it, cocking her head and pouting as if she didn't know or didn't want to say. "I just found it."

"No she didn't," yelled Bansha. Lan winced. That had been right in his ear. "We walked to the road and back and Mayor Slezhin gave it to us."

"He gave it to me!" said Kinya, closing her fingers around the wood, cutting off the flow of sparks. Apparently they weren't hot.

"He gave it to all of us, you've just been hogging it." Bansha slid down from his chair.

"No, no," said Lan, not liking the odds between a seven-year-old and a three-year-old. "Finish your bread." He hustled Kinya back toward the other side of the room.

The room was tiny—even if it was half of the house. The table, over which Bansha resumed his reign, dominated the room. That table was too big for all of them anymore. The rest of the room included the stove and several chairs, where the adults got to sit. Kinya climbed back into Mom's lap as Lan went to Grandma and then Grandpa, saying hello even though he'd been in and out all day today. He wanted them both to feel acknowledged. Neither of them had been able to work for years, almost as longer than Lan *had* been able to work. Grandma could barely walk, and certainly not without assistance. Grandpa had enough to do caring for her.

Mom smiled at Lan as he passed. "How was Sol and them?" she asked. She never called them the Baruzovs. She held Kinya in her thin arms, but Lan didn't miss the way her fingers trembled. She had pushed herself too hard today.

"Good," said Lan. They'd been running around like mad the entire time he'd been there, but they hadn't whacked each other in the heads with sticks. Sol was the true oldest of his siblings, but most of them were still alive, so that house was always resounding with conflicts and conversations. It felt like stepping into a world where life was normal, instead of… whatever this was. *Hard*, he supposed.

What would Skentova feel like, if he ever went there? If going to Sol's house felt like a better life, how would it feel to go just a little inland, maybe to Vinishk? And then further? Could it really keep getting better, or was the church lying to them?

If the church was lying, then why was his father still gone?

Lan turned a shoulder so Mom couldn't see what he was thinking. Somehow, despite being days old, the stew smelled fresh as he bent over the steaming pot.

"You can wait like everyone else," said Ilina, giving him a look. She was only sixteen, but in taking over the work Mom could no longer do, she'd become one of the adults in Lan's mind. Sometimes, she seemed more mom to the kids than Mom. Lan supposed the same thing had happened with him—he was dad, even though their real Dad was gone. Look at them. Brother and sister playing at running the house. Meanwhile, it all kept falling apart and these kids kept growing up into lives that had nothing for them. Nothing but new horrors.

"I'm just smelling," said Lan, deliberately taking another sniff before backing off.

"More ways than one," said Ilina.

Lan rolled his eyes as Bansha started laughing, then Kinya. Rinsh was looking out the window—he didn't respond to most jokes.

The house was warm with the fire in the stove bouncing its heat off the stone walls. Lan pulled off his coat and stepped into the bedroom—the other half of the house—to hang it up. The room was just one big mat of straw, covered with rumpled sheets. Everyone had their various corners and nests, though Kinya (and sometimes Bansha) liked to cuddle up to Mom. Crossing the room were multiple clotheslines, hung with various shirts and trousers and other things. Damp laundry would dry sooner in here than out in the mist and weather.

Lan slung his coat over an open spot on a clothesline. They had more clotheslines than clothes now, with everyone gone.

Lan could remember when this room seemed huge, because he had been so small. Even when all the kids had been babies, this bed had never seemed big enough for all of them. Over the years, they had all grown—and somehow, there was always more space. Because his brothers and sisters kept dying, and Lan didn't.

He was barely *eighteen*. In what rotten world was he supposed to bury his brothers and sisters and take over for his father and support this *rotting* family? Why couldn't they all just die, too, and leave him alone?

"Dinner, Lan!" After Ilina called, Lan heard the general shuffle of chairs around the table.

Anyway…

Lan sucked in a breath and went to join them.

3.12 Chapter Twelve

Lan pulled the door shut against the voices.

The world outside the house had grown dark. Through gaps in the clouds, the stars and moon outlined a little of the hills around him, enough to guide him along the gully path. A lonely cricket chirped somewhere to the left, toward Loshinka. Other than Lan's own footfalls, that cricket was the only thing he could hear.

The air was both still and cold. Lan didn't have his coat, since it was in the bedroom and grabbing it would have disturbed the kids, who were trying to sleep. If he had been smart, he should have stayed inside where he wouldn't need it. But staying inside didn't feel smart, either.

That feeling was still growing. He hadn't been able to get away from it during work this morning—not with another failed retting on their hands. His visit to the Baruzovs hadn't chased it away. Dinner and the aftermath only made him more and more restless—like he was staring at the thing that was going to kill him, and wasn't allowed to defend himself. And why would he want to defend himself from Kinya's hugs and Mom's smiles and Ilina's cooking and Grandpa's stories and and and but he did.

This was the only defense he had. He could walk.

Lan crested the road and turned right. The lighthouse glowed a soft yellow into the haze, at the end of the peninsula. How far should he go? Until he didn't feel so hopeless, he supposed.

It wasn't anything that the adults (or Ilina) had said. That would have been easy. If Ilina had snapped at him, or Mom had said something dismissive, or if Grandma had yelled at him for something like she often did—what would that matter? Lan could handle that. Or if they left things strewn around the house (like they had) or let the boys play swords inside (like they had) or relied on him to do the work of three men without a word of thanks (like they had, because that was just normal), he could deal with it. Lan was stable. He was good at surviving. He could speak up, or push back, or protect himself however he needed. And he would, because he cared about this family, and he knew they were all under stress, and if they were hurting themselves by lashing out at him, *he could handle it.*

He could handle it.

He could.

None of that was happening. If it was, Lan would have something to fight against. He would have a reason for this malaise. *Of course I'm feeling bad*, he could say. *Ilina is yelling about ragwort again*. Or *Grandpa brought up Dad again.* Or *Rinsh is being Rinsh.* But it was all… normal. So horrifyingly normal.

That's why he was walking: so that something could be different. If it ever could be.

Lan still felt hopeless when he reached the lighthouse, so he kept walking. It was too dark to write his name on the board, and Levonin wouldn't check it until the morning anyway—no one went beyond the edge at night. Lan wasn't planning on going very far, but then, he hadn't planned to walk all the way here, either. Who knew where he'd end up.

Over his shoulder, the lights of Loshinka burned low and soft against the black hillside. Logically, he should walk that way if he wanted to feel better—he should get closer to the gods. But Lan didn't want that version of better. Back home, things would still be the same. He wanted something that would last. The closer he got to the edge, the harsher everything felt—but the more alive he felt, too. Lan needed to be alive. He was being smothered; he needed to breathe.

Lan reached the end of the peninsula and began to climb down the stone steps.

The sound of the fields had changed to the crashing of the ocean. The chill in the air had become damp, growing watery as Lan descended. The stones were treacherous, some of them holding puddles, but Lan knew this route almost as well as the gully path outside his house. He knew how to respect it.

The wind was calm today, though it blustered somewhat beneath the edge of the cliff. The waves didn't smash against the rocks like they usually did, and Lan hardly felt any spray until he had almost reached the landing. What waves there were must have come from storms far out to sea, rolling in on long swells—enough to fill his ears with the noise of water and rushing things, but not enough to crash onto the steps and sweep Lan away.

It would be a good night to go beyond the edge.

Lan knew better. The lighthouse keeper was asleep; his family didn't know he was here. He could see a star or two through the clouds, but not enough to steer by. The moon had already set. Going out tonight would be suicide.

Well… Maybe option two was fitting.

Lan reached the landing. It was only a ledge, wide enough for two or three to walk abreast. Metal rings jutted from the stone, where chains or ropes led to individual boats bobbing out on the water. On the calmest of days, the water sat several feet below the landing's edge.

Tonight, with the swells, the sea fell away until the moorings stretched tight, then rose until the water licked across the top of the landing. The boats and chains made a low clattering as they all knocked and swung together. Spray fell in a constant mist.

Lan walked toward the other end of the landing, ignoring the water that seeped into his boots with every swell. The Ryenevin boat looked like all the others, lashed onto its own metal ring with a thin vine that hadn't shown any signs of rotting. Lan had found it over a year ago, beyond the edge, and it had served him since.

Lan crouched at the edge of the landing, one hand on the vine, timing the swells. As the water dropped, he felt the vine go tight. As the water rose, he hauled in quickly, pulling the boat to the edge of the landing and stepping in. He sat immediately. The boat fell with the water, Lan inside.

He felt in the bottom of the boat for the oars, but he didn't pull them out yet. Usually he would untie the vine, let it hang, and use one of the oars to punt off the landing beyond the rest of the boats. Then he'd have space to start rowing. But tonight… Was he taking option two tonight?

Lan half-sat, half-lay in the bottom of his boat, letting the swells carry him up and down. It was his decision. He could die. He could untie the vine, push off from the landing, maybe row out to Babu Yichkin so he wouldn't drift toward shore, and throw away his oars. Ilina and Mom would never have to see his body. No one would know what happened until someone noticed his boat missing.

How simple that question was. Did he want to? Did he not? He could play illy-inny and let that decide.

It didn't have to be so complicated, he realized. After all, the family might still need the boat, especially when Bansha and Rinsh grew old enough to use it. Lan wouldn't want to steal it from them. Maybe it was better simply to roll over the side and let himself sink. Or climb back onto the landing and follow it to the place where it narrowed, and jump off over there. The way the water swept through the rocks there, even on the slightest swells, there was no way to swim or climb free.

They might not notice him missing as quickly—the boat wouldn't give it away—but they'd have a better chance of finding his body. Then Levonin would probably bring it to the house and Ilina and Mom would have to look at it. But they'd have closure, Lan supposed.

If Lan took option two, it would hurt his family. He knew that. But he couldn't do this anymore. He couldn't pretend like life was fine. He couldn't go back home—not now, not after he'd come this far out here. Lan rose toward the dark sky and fell toward the dark sea. He was already on the path toward option two. He could only stay where he was, or move toward it.

He'd do it. He was going to die tonight.

As the thought settled in his chest—it felt good to have something to do, something that could *fix* this—Lan felt something strange. It was as if someone was watching him. The feeling was so strong that Lan sat up in the boat, making it rock and twist and bump its neighbor. He couldn't see anyone. The landing was bare, the stairs above dark, and the other boats were empty. Lan turned to look out to sea, toward the Four Flames and the other islands. No lights, no life. Since Lan didn't have a light, no one would be able to see him, either.

Was someone watching him?

It seemed to Lan—if there was someone watching him—that whoever it was didn't mean him harm. He didn't feel afraid; he only felt noticed. And… something else. There was

something about it that he couldn't name that made him feel funny, though not uncomfortable. Just odd.

When Kinya was a baby, Lan remembered times when he and Mom and the grandparents would be talking in the house while Kinya played on the floor. She would be engrossed in someone's shoe or a wooden ball or some doll Ilina had sewed for her. Although Lan and the others would talk about a million things other than Kinya, they were all looking at her—watching her play, watching her think, imagining who she would grow up to be.

Sometimes, Kinya would notice. She would look up and meet Lan's eyes, or Mom's, and stare at them, forgetting about her toy. And of course they'd smile at her, and make faces, and maybe disrupt the conversation to see if she would babble or crawl to them or anything else that babies did. At last, she would smile at them.

Lan felt like Kinya. He felt like he was the baby playing in the middle of the floor, and someone—who? *Who?*—was watching to see what he'd do. And now that he'd noticed and looked up, someone was smiling at him. As if, just by being there, he was making someone happy.

Just by being alive.

Something seemed to collapse in Lan's chest. All his resolve, all his eagerness to *do* something, to pursue option two—gone. He couldn't do it. But all the hopelessness came rushing back, too. When he went home, it would all be the same, the *exact* same, and he couldn't do anything to change it.

Why? he wanted to scream. *Why can't I just die?*

He didn't get an answer.

Lan only felt someone watching him, smiling at him, waiting to see what he would do next. Handing him his life back.

On the next swell, Lan climbed onto the landing.

3.13 Chapter Thirteen

Siean, Gale wrote.

It's been over a week since I arrived in Loshinka, but this is only my second letter to you. I can't imagine your disappointment. I have a good excuse, though: every time I get one of your letters, I have to put off writing back until I've read it; so, if you want more letters from me, you need to write less.

(Don't write less. I really like hearing from you.)

It's also been a boring week. I spent most of it sick in bed. I don't know how edgesickness was for you, but we should compare notes and see whose was worse so that one of us can feel more legitimate than the other. I bet yours was worse but you were too excited to think about it. I thought about it a lot. I'm thinking of sending Halven an itemized summary.

Prioress Kin is still in bed, actually. She's recovering more slowly than she thought she would, and it's frustrating her. She seems to have a lot of work in Loshinka and the surrounding area (especially some town called Naltenka—I can't find that on a map, though, so it must be tiny), so she's eager to get out of bed. But she also knows more about the edgesickness than anyone else in this town, and she says that if she tries to go out and about too soon, she'll make it all worse. It's sad. All of her tricks worked on me, but none of them have helped her.

I wonder why coming to the edge doesn't grow easier over time. It should be like any other sickness or broken bone—they heal stronger, the body more resilient to similar attempts to break it down. But when it's the fabric of reality that wants to break us down, I don't think our bodies have any defense. The only solution is proximity to the gods, and if we had that, this wouldn't be the edge of the world.

I'm sorry, I started theorizing on you again. Strike my letter-writing privileges until I learn to write sentimental mush.

Gale set down her pen. Her previous letter had been a long one, describing the journey to the edge, Loshinka itself, and Gale's thoughts on pilgrimage in response to Siean's question. Writing that letter had taken all of her concentration during the days she was sick, but it had comforted her to have something to study despite her misery. It had always been a joy to read Kyatin—Siean teased her whenever she said so—but it proved even more so out here. It was like part of the center had followed her, even this far.

Today, however, Gale wasn't writing to take her mind away from her existence, but because she was bored. She had recovered, but it didn't matter because Kin hadn't. They couldn't walk around the town or start conversations with strangers or meet that lighthouse keeper that everyone was so centered on. Without the Prioress by her side, Gale didn't feel ready to do any of those things. Kin already knew what to say, where to go, what Gale would need to learn.

At least, Gale hoped she did. So far, Kin had met with several people from the town just from her sickbed, but Gale had been unable to observe since she, too, had been nearly unable to

move. That left Gale wondering if those meetings were actually church-focused, or if they dealt more with whatever other things Kin did with her time.

Because Kin did a lot. Even with Siean sending letters almost daily, Ansha brought far more mail to the Prioress than she did to Gale. And they weren't all from the same sender, like Gale's. Kin's letters seemed to come from multiple places within Loshinka itself as well as from the surrounding towns. As if she were a merchant, controlling and developing avenues of commerce in the town and throughout the surrounding country, Kin sat surrounded by these letters, responding to almost all of them and sending them off, whether by Ansha's hand or by Mayor Slezhin's. The only difference Gale could see: most merchants in Loshinka were not bedridden.

> *You keep mentioning Kin being heretical. I know the stories, but I haven't seen any sign of it yet. Still… how much evidence do we see of her being orthodox? I wonder sometimes if she's anything—if she actually believes for or against the Skentovite Church, or if she just doesn't care. So far, she hasn't done anything missionary-y, and hasn't asked me to do anything, either.*
>
> *Because she's sick, and I've been sick. Fine, I get that. But I always thought, if I were implanted in an area like this and had ministered here for so long, I would have projects to pick up and do the moment I came back, no matter what. I would jump back into it. A little edgesickness wouldn't get in the way. And she really does have her projects—she's doing <u>something</u>, even if I have no idea what—but it doesn't look very… believing, I guess. Faithful. Orthodox or heretical. She just looks like a normal person.*

You're going to laugh at me for all of this. Maybe I won't send it. (Of course I will. You know I can't throw away anything I've written.)

I wish Kin would have talked to me on the train ride out, but like I told you, we really didn't say anything. She doesn't know who I am, and the only things I know about her are the things I've heard, and who knows how accurate those are?

What would you do? You'd tell me to go ask her about herself. That's a very Siean thing to do—go confront a bedridden old woman with demands about her inner spirituality. I worry, though, that I won't want to know about her inner spirituality. It's like her projects—I know she believes <u>something</u>, but it seems that whatever it is has no relation to a vital Skentovite faith. She's a Skentovite missionary that believes with all of her heart in something completely different. That's as much as I can tell. What is it she believes? I have no idea.

Gale stood up from the little table and wandered to the window. The morning sun cast shadows against the rooftops, but it gleamed against the lighthouse. Her eyes found that gap between the gables every time.

Prioress Kin believed in a world that worked. She believed in a world where she could write letters and read them; she believed in a world where the merchants and the mayor would do what she said; she believed in a world where Ansha's cooking warmed the heart and drove away edgesickness. It was the same world that Gale believed in. Some things were just true: rocks were hard, air was good for breathing, and the gods held everything together.

But there was something else about Kin, something Gale couldn't place in any of her theological boxes. In one of her earliest classes, they had discussed various aberrations of the

faith and how they would work out practically in someone's life. For instance, if one stressed one's station—the doctrine that one should live where one was born—it could lead to despising the center and the gods who lived there. Taken to extremes, it could even lead to kidnapping any gods that were born in that area and preventing them from centering. But likewise, if one stressed pilgrimage, it could lead to despising the purposes of the gods. The entire world would try to live in Skentova if it could—and it couldn't. The gods placed people, including new gods, all around the world for a reason. It was all an elegant balance. Regular people should live where they are, but make pilgrimage on occasion; meanwhile, gods are born in random places in order to remind the world of their presence, but they should be brought to the center in order to bolster reality the way they should. These things kept the world stable.

Kin didn't seem to fall into any of these traps. She didn't deny the feasts, or over-encourage them. She didn't prevent church gatherings, or stress them. And with the pilgrimage-station question, although she was famous for failing to send pilgrimages from Loshinka, she didn't do so out because she was obsessed with station. It was like Gale had written to Siean already: Kin didn't seem heretical *or* orthodox. And yet, she did believe in something.

It was as if… as if none of those things mattered. The questions of orthodoxy, the tenets of the faith—it was as if Kin agreed with them, then set them aside. She didn't go against them, nor did she completely ignore them, but she did… dismiss them. They were true, but there was more.

Gale was afraid to press further. But, having spent so little time with Kin, she couldn't be sure that she was seeing everything the right way. Maybe all of Kin's meetings and letters were an elaborate station-heavy campaign, denying pilgrimage and rejecting the faith. Maybe she just

didn't care. Gale barely knew the woman; maybe her conclusions were hasty. But did she want to know?

Someone tapped on the door. Ansha stood like she usually did, half-hidden in the hall.

"Would you like to see the church?" she asked. She had a beautiful, clear voice when she used it—usually, however, she spoke like this, soft and unsure.

"Yes," said Gale. She looked at her pen, which she had been twisting in her hands, and set it in its holder. This was something she didn't need Kin's permission to do, and something she would enjoy: seeing her new church, her new true home at the edge.

Gale followed Ansha into the hall.

3.14 Chapter Fourteen

Of all of the theologians and writers Gale had read in school, few were as useless as Henizov. His only worthwhile contribution to the church (and, arguably, the world) was found in one sentence, and not a very long one: *The edge lives, and despises life.* When Gale first read those words, they overturned how she thought about the edge. She promptly went on a hunt for everything else Henizov ever wrote, but quickly found him to be derivative, dull, and even doddering. That sentence had taken his entire brain—there was none left.

The edge lives, and despises life. That sentence had clarified things for Gale in a way that no other theologian's writing had managed to do. (She would later discover vibrant Kyatin, with his analogic representations and accessible innovations, and, having also read everything she could find of his, would have benefited greatly from discovering him sooner—but for the time, Henizov was her best guide to the edge.) It forced her to reckon with not only the fact of the edge, but its *character*. Theologians often spoke of the edge having a will of its own, but never

wrestled with what that meant. Henizov was the first to put it in plain language and insist that Gale take it seriously. The edge *lives*. It is not a page in the atlas. It is a monster.

Since coming to the edge, however, Gale had realized the truth of Henizov's statement even more deeply—indeed, she had recognized where he had gotten it. He had been here. He had felt the edge's presence all around him. It was as if you found yourself inside a sleeping serpent's lair, except it was awake because you were also standing on its tail, and you had already drunk a glass of its venom because if you were already going to die why not go all the way?

The worst of it, Gale thought, was when she had laid in bed those first few nights, unable to move without aching, unable to sleep. She felt it most when she breathed: a weight pressing down on her, forcing her to use all the effort in her to pull each breath. If she breathed too deep, nausea rose in her gut until she no longer felt human; if she breathed too little, she choked. *The edge lives, and despises life.* She knew it.

Talking, after that first day, had been impossible outside of a whisper. It hadn't been until the sixth or seventh day that Gale had been able to compliment Ansha's cooking, or thank her for bringing the mail. Even so, speaking had threatened to launch her stomach through her throat. Coupled with a lingering headache that seemed to want to push her skull out of her skin, Gale had remained as quiet as she could until after she felt well enough to stand. When she did speak, her voice seemed thin and strained, reflecting those tense breaths and the pain behind every word.

Now, of course, she felt better—better every day, in fact. But when Kin called out as Gale and Ansha passed her room, Gale heard the same agonized effort.

"Miss Reshran, come in here," Kin called. Gale glanced at Ansha, but the girl was already pushing past her to see what Kin needed. As Gale followed her into the room, Kin was saying, "No, nothing. Only a word with Miss Reshran."

The Prioress lay in a thick bed no wider than Gale's, swamped with covers. Her thin body was nearly invisible beneath it all, except for her head bending the pillows, and her feet, at the very edge of the mattress, pushing up through the sheets. Kin's gray hair was braided in two tails, one which fell across the top of the coverlet, one that wrapped around her throat from behind like it was trying to choke her. They reminded Gale of tentacles. As Kin struggled for breath, Gale almost expected one of them to gesture to her.

Instead, Kin's thin hand emerged from the covers and pointed her to a chair. When Gale had pulled it up to the bed and sat, Kin stared at her a little while longer.

"*Words*," said Kin eventually, vehemently. "They take so much to say."

Gale didn't respond. Though they had spoken little since they had arrived, Kin seemed to grow impatient if Gale tried to supply her with words while she was catching her breath.

When Kin eventually did speak, it was in several sentences at a time, interrupted by her struggles for breath. Because she seemed to have a lot to say, Gale simply listened and waited.

"This has gone on too long," Kin said. "It gladdens me to see you up and about, but my expectations for myself seem unfounded. Regardless, there is work to be done in the town. We must begin it. You must be my agent."

"To do what?"

Kin glared at her as she rasped. Obvious questions were also unwelcome. "I am the Prioress of this town. Do you know what that means?"

"You're a missionary."

"Do you know what *that* means?"

"Presence, preservation, pilgrimage," said Gale—the three words that had been drilled into her since she began missionary training in Skentova. They felt tired on her tongue. She agreed with them, but she had parroted them back to instructors for the last three years. Gale hated that they alliterated.

"I should have known," muttered Kin, still half breathless, "that when Saren called you one of her best, she only meant regurgitating a—" She fell to coughing, her entire body jerking.

Gale's face grew hot. She would have snapped back if Kin hadn't been possibly about to die. At the same time, it was mildly flattering to know that Prioress Saren had named Gale as one of her best pupils. Gale already knew as much, of course, but she had never heard it from Saren herself. The backhanded compliment still stung.

As it was, Kin's fit and Gale's anger cooled at around the same moment. As Kin began to breathe more deeply, Gale tried to give her a better answer.

"We're here to remind the people of the edge that the gods exist and are important," she said. "We also try to encourage church tradition, the biggest of which is pilgrimage, which we facilitate. All three are really the same thing—it's all about helping the locals remember."

"Better," said Kin. "Slightly." She tilted her head toward the light of the window. "How do we do that for… 'the locals?'" She pronounced the last words with slight disdain. For the people of Loshinka? Or for the term Gale had used?

"Um," said Gale, trying to think back to her Practical Theology seminar from a year ago. They should have taught that closer to the apprenticeship—but it was important content for younger students to know, too. She shouldn't have thrown away her notes from that class. "We involve ourselves with the church and its services, help the priest with his work among the

people, and support him in his task of locating and centering any new gods. We also engage with the people in the course of our normal lives." She tried to think. "We really just… live here. That's the whole point of 'presence.'"

Kin watched her. Gale ran through a few more suggestions in her head, but discarded them all. She'd said all of the important things. She felt uncomfortable, however, knowing that most of her training over the last three years had centered on the edge itself, not what to do once she got here.

"I could teach a theology class—"

"No one wants that," said Kin, more sharply than Gale thought was necessary.

Gale swallowed her other ideas and waited for the Prioress to say whatever she was going to say.

"I see they still teach the same things, and all still unhelpful." Kin shifted with discontent, then finally turned her face back to Gale. "Denevik is joining us at sundown tonight for supper. You will be there to observe. I assume you and Ansha are going out?"

"Only to the church," said Gale.

"Good. Give my regards to the priest, Torskev, for me. As you return, I have a message for you to send."

This time, Gale waited for Kin to catch her breath. No stupid questions; no upstart suggestions. She could be meek.

"The Olentevs live in a small house with a yellow door, beside the lighthouse road. Please convey my congratulations on the birth of their son."

Gale waited for something more substantial, but that was all. Kin collected herself again, then glanced at her. "That will be all."

Gale stood, replaced the chair she had moved, and left the room. Ansha stood in the hall outside. She ducked into the room to see if the Prioress required anything else.

There is work to be done, Kin had said. *You must be my agent.* Apparently, that work amounted to saying, *Congrats on your kid!* and then running home to dinner. Gale wanted to snort, but the door was still open and Kin would hear her. As Ansha emerged from the room and they went downstairs, Gale thought of something else.

What if Kin *was* acting like a merchant in this town? Not a normal merchant, but an outsider with less oversight from local laws. Could she have some smuggling enterprise here, far from Skentova's eyes? Could she be using Gale as an unsuspecting messenger? Could the Olentev baby be part of a code?

That edged on nonsense. But Gale still had little idea who the Prioress truly was. This conversation had been longer than most—it should have happened back in Skentova, in Gale's opinion—but all it had proved was Kin's dislike of whatever Gale had been taught. What did Kin think Gale *should* have learned? Loopholes in fermentation law?

Gale tried to put it from her mind as she followed Ansha across the square toward the church. None of it was important. She would carry the message—Olentevs, yellow door, baby boy—and she would come back for dinner with Denevik or whoever it was. Was he the one who sold books?

In the meantime, she had her real job to think about. Ansha opened the door to the church and they stepped inside.

3.15 Chapter Fifteen

As soon as Gale crossed the threshold, she began to smile.

The narrow hallway inside the doors curved left and right, encircling the sanctuary. A line of coat stands ran against each wall, like the ranks of the faithful. Ansha stopped to hang up her shawl, so Gale took off her coat, too.

This entryway held the chill of the outside air, but Gale felt the change as soon as Ansha opened the next set of doors. Heat spilled out into the hallway, welcoming them in. Gale took a deep breath. She was home.

The sanctuary beyond was a massive, domed room. A circle of pillars stretched from the ground to the edges of the dome, creating a sheltered ring around the edge of the room and leaving the center open and bright. Lights blazed from the top of each pillar and from the dome's peak, highlighting the circular dais in the center of the floor. On it towered a brazier wrought in twisting black-iron. The rest of the room was empty.

Warmth seemed to flow from that dais. It was only the middle of the week, of course, so the brazier was unlit—but Gale could imagine how it would be on Ensdat. She could imagine the people of Loshinka filling this space, worshiping as the priest stoked that fire into a blaze. She could feel the heat, soaking her to the core, driving away the edge's fingers. Gale would love it.

The brazier was rustic, of course—they were usually more ornate in Skentova—but it fit this town. The sanctuary, too, seemed rougher in many ways. Some of the pillars had chips in them, and the floor was uneven. Of all the lights, about a third weren't lit. Maybe they had run out of oil.

But that—all of it—was only to be expected. Gale began to wander around the circle, just inside the ring of pillars. This was exactly what a church at the edge should be. Yes, it was weathered; yes, it lacked some life. But it was here. It was holding on. An example to the faithful, a witness against the edge, a bulwark of the truth at the border of reality—this was *good*.

This is what I want to be, thought Gale. She wasn't exactly sure what she meant by that. She didn't have the right words yet. But whatever she did out here, she wanted to look like this church at the end of it: battered, perhaps, but strong.

"Torskev?" called Ansha softly. Her voice floated through the space. Gale grinned again. How it would sound when the priest was calling the service! How his voice would roll through those who heard!

A creak echoed as a door on the opposite wall swung open. A man backed through, holding a large basket in both hands. As he turned, the light shifted with him—the basket was ablaze with light. Was it on fire?

"Hello, Torskev!" called Ansha, her real voice coming out. It seemed to sing here. "I brought the Prioress's apprentice."

Torskev set down the basket behind one of the pillars, the light shifting crazily as he did, and came around the other side to meet Gale by the dais.

He was a short but slim man, dressed in a priest's sleeveless gray robe, with a dark red shirt belted underneath. His pants looked more like those of the workers Gale had seen in the streets, and his boots were old and cracked. Despite his creased face and silver hair, Gale didn't think he was as old as he seemed.

Torskev looked at her for a long moment—straight in the eyes, ignoring the rest of her—and then nodded once. "Hello," he said, and turned away. His quick steps brought him back to the pillar where he'd left his burning basket.

"Will you hold the ladder, Ansha?" he called as he bent over it. His arms threw huge shadows against the wall. "I'll be quick."

When he turned toward them again, Gale gasped. He was *holding* the fire in his arms—or… something bright. It didn't flicker, she realized, unless Torskev shifted his grip. But it was too bright to see what it was.

"I should have changed those lightstones weeks ago," said Torskev as he passed Gale. He indicated with his chin one of the pillars and the unlit lamp near its top.

"Lightstones?" Gale repeated dumbly.

"Yeah, look," said Torskev. He had already made it halfway to the pillar, but jerked back toward her, shifting the lights in his arms so he could hold one out to her. Still too bright to see. "Well, don't actually look. Probably go blind. But they're just glowing rocks. We need lightstones like this if we want to keep this place bright."

Gale knew what lightstones were, actually. She had heard of the different anomalies that happened at the edge, and the artifacts that the merchants sold inland. Lightstones were supposedly the most common. She just hadn't expected to find them inside a church.

Ansha had disappeared somewhere, but now returned lugging a long wooden ladder. She was struggling with it, so Torskev dumped his rocks with a disorienting scatter of light and went to help her. Together, they raised it against the pillar, then Ansha held the base while Torskev stuffed the rocks into the pockets of his robe. As each rock disappeared into the cloth, the sanctuary looked more and more normal—except for the man with glowing pockets, and the two spots of brilliant light on the dome that swung around as Torskev walked.

Torskev stomped on the base of the ladder—it shifted, so he helped Ansha reset it—then began to climb. Gale just watched.

This… was less of what she had imagined.

Churches should be bright. That was normal. They should be warm. But that was because of the fires they used as part of their service and throughout the week. The brazier would only blaze on each Ensdat, of course, but the lamps around the space—those should be real flame. Anything else, anything unnatural…

This was wrong.

Except, it was right. Gale had already encountered problems with her own candles after dark. They burned too quickly, sometimes three candles melting down to stubs in a single long night of reading. She could imagine that oil lamps were similar—a normal reservoir of oil wouldn't last as long here as it did at the center. But couldn't they find bigger reservoirs?

Gale watched Torskev reach the top of the ladder (it was very high; Ansha leaned on the bottom with all her weight) and pull a dead lightstone from the lamp. He replaced it with blazing one. Gale tried to imagine him doing the same with a loaded reservoir of oil, or refilling a reservoir that was already in place. He would need a tank of oil, if he wanted to refill it—far too large to carry up that slim ladder. And how often would he have to make that climb? Daily? Twice a day?

Gale thought of the sanctuary lying dark during the week, between one Ensdat and the next. She hated the idea. This church wouldn't seem as persevering—it would seem the opposite. It would look like the edge had won.

The edge *had* won. They were no longer using natural means to create the proper atmosphere. They were using artifacts, anomalies, *abominations*—

Gale forced herself to take a walk, away from both Torskev's work and his basket of lightstones behind the pillar.

They were using the edge against itself. The lightstones helped create the illusion that, in this space, everything was bright and healthy. And it worked—Gale couldn't deny that. But was it right?

Gale had always been uncomfortable with artifacts. She knew people used them—as far inland as Edrinskoe, it was said, trains could be pulled or powered by weird pieces of the edge. Apparently, some rich people had fountains made from rocks that just poured with water, nonstop. They were useful and used across the world. But not in Skentova. For one thing, the purifying presence of the gods overwhelmed anything that acted contrary to the natural order; those stones just wouldn't work. For another, none of it was necessary. Machines worked perfectly and seldom needed maintenance. Candles burned for months if they burned for a day. Springs flowed pure from the ground. It was paradise.

And it felt wrong to Gale that people tried to recreate paradise *outside* of paradise.

This wasn't a popular opinion. Of her friends and classmates, she was one of the few who thought this way—but she could argue it to death. Even though Gale knew that places outside of Skentova deserved pure water and moving trains and light after dark, she also knew that those were gifts of the gods. Skentova had those things, because the gods were there. If, outside of Skentova, things started to fail, well… that was how the world worked.

Sometimes, Gale wished she didn't believe that so strongly. She would love a lightstone to read by, instead of candles that burnt out and flickered and were always too dim. But there was a simple test: if it worked in the presence of the gods, it was good. If it didn't, it was evil. Everything that could live in Skentova was good. Everything that came from the edge, or thrived there—it was against nature.

As Gale walked, she found herself lingering near each pillar, relishing the warmth that exuded from the stones. Suddenly, she had a thought, and put her hand up to the stones of the pillar. Nothing but cool stone—normal stone. But a little higher, along that pattern of smooth pebbles…

Gale pulled her hand away. The pebbles were burning. That was why the sanctuary was so warm, even without the brazier lit. They weren't only using lightstones—they were using heatstones, or whatever those would be called.

The edge was everywhere.

Not only that, but these stones pushed heat inward, from the edge toward the center. It was against all theology and tradition—life flows from the center outward, so the heat in this sanctuary should do the same. This… this was like suggesting that the edge carried the center along. As if the gods needed the edge to support them, instead of the other way around.

This place no longer seemed homey. It no longer seemed safe. Gale felt as though the person she thought was her mother was actually a ghoul wearing a mask. *The edge lives*. She could feel it leering at her.

Gale watched Torskev climb down the ladder, pockets full of dead stones. At the bottom, he helped Ansha move the ladder to the next pillar, then walked briskly toward his basket of light.

It was wrong, and Gale was the only one who cared.

3.16 Chapter Sixteen

Gale waited on the sanctuary floor as Torskev lit the rest of the lamps and Ansha held the ladder. He asked if she wanted to try one, but Gale refused—partially on principle, against the lightstones, and partially because she was terrified of falling, especially with the way that ladder

started bouncing every time Torskev neared its middle. The floor was stone; falling meant death. Gale wanted to live a little longer.

She also wanted to talk to Torskev. He went about his business quickly, as he had promised, but there were too many lamps and lightstones. Once, as he passed her, he asked her full name, and she asked his. Ban was his given name—that's all. Just the letter of the alphabet. It was as if he was one of many options. Was there also a Torskev Nit, or a Torskev Lan? She didn't say that to him.

In fact, Gale didn't get to say much of anything. Except for a snippet or two of shallow conversation they flung back and forth while he was off the ladder, Torskev was focused on his task. And when his task was over, he helped Ansha lower the ladder, then told her to leave it where it was. He would put everything away. He started with his basket full of dead lightstones, creaking back through the door from which he had come.

"I should go back," said Ansha. "The Prioress might need me."

More than likely true. Gale threw another look toward that door, then sighed and followed the other girl out.

She kept following, mechanically crossing the square outside the church, until she realized how low the sun was. Dinner would be at sunset, and Kin wanted her there to "observe" or whatever. But she still had to deliver a message.

"I'll be back," said Gale, and turned toward the corner of the square.

She had only seen maps of Loshinka so far, but she had memorized some key landmarks. She knew this square—she lived here, after all—and the two main roads that extended from the northern corners. One led up the hill, back toward the train station they had never reached. The

other led down the hill, toward the lighthouse. That was the lighthouse road, where Kin had told her to find the house with the yellow door. Simple enough.

But… perhaps it wasn't, Gale realized, as she started down the road. The houses and buildings on either side all had doors, but none of them were yellow. Most were unpainted wood. Those that did have a color to them were so faded that, as the setting sun began to turn the world golden, they all started to *look* yellow. Surely, if Kin thought the yellow door was worth mentioning, it would be distinctive enough for Gale to find it.

Or could the family have repainted their door while Kin was gone? How would Kin know, being bedridden?

Well, Gale would look around in any case. If she couldn't find it, maybe she could ask someone, or else she'd just go back for dinner and ask Kin for clearer directions. Somehow, though, she didn't think the Prioress would approve of her first and only mission being a failure.

Gale didn't want to be a failure. Not this early.

But the doors on the houses were still not cooperating. Gale hurried further down the road, the golden light darkening to orange. The houses began to grow further apart, as if they were losing their grip on the town, getting dragged toward the edge. Between them, she caught glimpses of the coastline and the lighthouse—which was completely yellow. But that couldn't be the right house. Kin would have said so.

The houses grew further and further apart. Gale wanted to run—dinner was at sunset, she was getting farther away all the time—but her muscles were beginning to ache and her head beginning to pound. Her ankle felt fine, she realized, but once she noticed that, she also noticed a slight twinge every time that foot hit the cobblestones. It might not be fine for long.

Still no yellow door.

Down the hill, she saw a line of people walking up the road toward the town. No one else seemed to be on the streets at this time of evening, all inside for their own meals. When Gale saw a man a little closer on the road ahead, she hurried toward him.

"Mistress Gale!" someone called from behind her. Gale turned too fast, almost falling over. It was Sol, the young man from that first day. He seemed to leap to her side, catching her elbow and steadying her, smiling with his round-cheeked smile. In his other hand, he carried a pair of boots by their laces. "I thought it was you. Where are you headed?"

"The Prioress told me to go to a house with a yellow door," said Gale. She was relieved it was him. She hadn't wanted to ask a perfect stranger for directions, even though almost everyone in this town was a stranger to her. She felt a little flustered as well, but she thought it was more because of her shortness of breath and her looming failure than Sol smiling at her. He was nice, but he still reminded her of a rabbit.

"The Olentevs'," said Sol, nodding. "It's further along. I'm hoping to catch a friend coming from that direction." They started walking again. Gale tried to quicken their pace despite her building fatigue.

"It's almost dinnertime," said Gale, partially so they didn't have to walk in silence, but mostly because of her own stress. She might barely make it back in time.

"A bit late to meet a friend, I agree," said Sol, "but correspondence took too long, and I promised I would see him today. I have his boots, you see." He swung the boots up to show her—old ones, well-creased and faded.

Gale didn't respond, not having the breath for it.

They were passing the crowd of workmen now, all climbing the hill from the edge or wherever. Sol greeted a few of them. One of them, heading a cluster of men, stepped toward Sol

as if to say something, then glanced at Gale and touched his forehead instead. “Tomorrow morning,” the man said.

“I’ll watch for you,” said Sol, and the cluster went on past.

At last, she asked, “How far is the house?”

“Still far,” said Sol. He pointed down the road—which now lay open ahead of them, weaving down the slope—to a dim lump almost halfway to the lighthouse. “That one.”

Gale gawked. Why didn’t Kin tell her? Or was that what she meant by “beside the lighthouse road”? But Gale didn’t have the energy to despair. She had to keep walking.

The road leveled off for a moment, joining a narrow trail leading off into the hills. Sol hesitated. “You know the way now?”

“Yes,” said Gale, more shortly than she liked. “Thank you.”

“Maybe I’ll see you on the way back up.”

Gale waved instead of speaking. Heaving as deep a breath as she could manage, she started down the road again.

The house did, indeed, have a yellow door—but that wasn’t obvious until Gale had left the road and walked through the matted grass to get to it. The house itself was little more than a shack—long, but low and weathered. Gale gave herself a moment (and then several more) to gather her breath, then knocked. She drew herself up, trying to represent the Prioress.

The door opened quickly, revealing nothing but dimness beyond, then slammed before Gale could look down at the little girl who had opened it. Gale heard small running feet inside. A few hard breaths later, the door opened again, this time with a woman behind it.

Barely a woman. She might have been two or three years younger than Gale, but her face was sallow, making her look twenty years older.

"Yes?" the girl said, putting a hand down to push the child—Gale hoped it wasn't *her* child—behind her.

Gale's idea of what to say left her head. "Do you… know Prioress Kin?" she asked.

The girl nodded.

"*You're* not Kinushka," said the little girl, before the older girl could push her out of sight again. The older girl hushed her, then turned back to Gale. Her expression was shut.

"Prioress Kin…" began Gale, a little off-balance at Kin having a nickname; "…sends her congratulations on the birth of a son."

If anything, the girl's face hardened further. From behind her, however, another woman—actually a woman, this time—appeared out of the gloom, placing a hand on the girl's shoulder.

"And we thank her for her kindness," this woman said. She was old enough to be a mother, at least.

Gale didn't know what to say next. She looked at the woman, then at the little girl, then back at the woman, avoiding the older girl's eyes.

"Okay," Gale said at last, and fled.

It wasn't actually fleeing—she tried to tell herself that as she walked back up the hill—merely walking away, quickly. But what else was she supposed to do? *Congratulations on the birth of a son*. That's all she had to say, and she had said it. And now it was said. *Congratulations on the birth of a son*. Great. All done.

The sun almost touched the horizon. Gale paused, staring out beyond the edge for a moment, watching the rays cast the islands in shades of umber. The sun seemed to spill as it met the sea, spreading its fire across the water.

She had to be back for dinner. Gale turned toward the empty road and hurried up the hill.

3.17 Chapter Seventeen

It was almost dark by the time Gale made it to the Storm House. She hadn't seen Sol, for which she was glad, in a way—she had no breath to spare for talking. As she hurried back into the town, she noticed lightstones on the corners of the houses and above the doors shining softly into the street. These were not the blazing lightstones that Torskev had used, but more like the streetlamps common in Skentova. Of course, lightstones didn't need trimming like lamps did. They had an abomination for everything out here.

Such was the tenor of Gale's thinking as she at last—at last!—reached the square outside the church and pushed through the Storm House door. The hall inside was dim, as always, but warm light poured from the dining room down the hall. Gale stopped and tried to calm her breathing, so she wouldn't seem too flustered, thankful that no one yet knew she had returned.

Then the heavy door slammed behind her. As its echoes died, Ansha leaned out from the dining room.

"The Prioress wants you," she said.

I know, Gale wanted to say, but she barely had her breath back. She smoothed the front of her skirt and, coat still on, stepped in to dinner.

The dining room was small, only eight chairs around an oval table and a couple of sideboards. The carpet was thick and red, but very worn, especially under the legs of the chairs that seemed to be used the most often. The space under Kin's chair was nearly in shreds.

The Prioress sat at one end of the oval, opposite the door. On her right sat a dark man in a shabby jacket. Gale forced herself to reassess, since everything was shabby here. The jacket was actually quite nice, for Loshinka, only frayed or fuzzy in a couple of places, like the collar and

around the elbows. Gale could see why, since the man rested both elbows on the table, hands folded over his plate. He smiled at her, cheerfully.

Ansha took her seat on Kin's other side, but shot back up as she noticed Gale still wore her coat. Gale wanted to wave the girl off—if it had been a normal night, with only her and Ansha eating, she would have thrown her coat across one of the empty chairs—but they had company. Even Prioress Kin was out of bed. She looked haggard, but still fierce.

Ansha took Gale's coat away and Gale sat in the next space, at an angle across from the guest.

"Denevik, this is Reshran Gale, my apprentice," said Kin. Her voice was hoarse. She must have been coughing all afternoon. "Miss Reshran, one of the foremost merchants of our town, Denevik Zhil."

Gale nodded to Denevik. Was everyone named after letters of the alphabet?

Ansha returned and began ladling food into Gale's bowl—a mix of potatoes, brown meat, and carrots topped off with several rounds of the thin bread she liked to make. It smelled good. It also smelled like the same thing they had eaten for the past week and a half. Today, there was an herb scattered on top.

Gale tried not to despise *everything* about the night, and instead tried to listen to the conversation as she ate.

Denevik seemed to be in the middle of a story about the foragers he employed and an artifact they had found. There was a cliff face, apparently, that squirted water at anyone who touched it, causing much hilarity. With his heavy brows and wide mouth, he acted out the frustration of his foreman, an older man known as Crazy Kyaty, throwing out his arms and

rolling his eyes as he mimicked trying to chisel the cliff face against the spray. It was clear Denevik loved to laugh. Even Gale, in her mood, found it easy to join in.

When he was finished, Denevik took a gulp of water, then rounded on Gale with his broad smile. “And you, miss apprentice! Any interest in seeing the edge?”

Gale glanced at Kin, who paused her fourth attempt to scoop some meat onto her bread with her shaking hands. Kin raised her eyebrows.

“Yes,” Gale said, honestly. She wanted to see it, at least, even if she never went back. And the glimpses she had gotten of the islands in the distance… They were tantalizing. It was a shame this place was so far from the gods. It could be truly beautiful.

“Where?” asked Denevik, biting through half a round of bread at once. His eyes were fixed on her, but they didn’t feel uncomfortable. He had an energy about him that made Gale feel like an old friend already.

“Where is there to go?” Gale shot back.

Denevik grinned, then held up a hand to finish chewing. “I’ll send you a map of it. But for now—” He reached across the table, pinching some of the tablecloth into a line. “That’ll be our coast. You get to be Loshinka,” he said, pointing to Ansha, who smiled. Denevik took Ansha’s glass and set it near the crease—the lighthouse, even Gale could guess—and then began seizing other implements and dishes and arranging them in front of him.

“None of this is to scale, understand,” said Denevik as he worked. He had gone serious. At last, he leaned back—then leaned forward and turned Gale’s bowl so the spoon was facing toward the empty end of the table—then leaned back again.

“Here, we have our part of the edge.” He pointed to a fork just beyond the coast from the lighthouse. “Imagine this is in four pieces—a chain of islands. These are the Four Flames. Easy

to reach, all in a line, bare of anything worth having. Sometimes teams use them as staging spots, or to regroup at the end of the day."

Beyond the fork and a little to the north, toward Kin, stood Denevik's cloth napkin, folded into a peak. "Solzet," said Denevik. "Named after the ghost in the stories. You know them? No? I'll find you a book of tales, easy enough." He pinched the napkin so it stood a little straighter. "Hard landing here, but still close enough to the shore to be picked over. Only independent foragers go here—those without a team."

On the south side of the Four Flames sat a piece of potato, its juices seeping into the tablecloth. "This—" said Denevik, then considered it. With his finger, he pinched off part of the potato and set it slightly away from the rest. "*These*," he corrected himself, "are Mother Yichkin and Babu Yichkin. Mother and baby." He pointed to the bigger and then the smaller piece, making sure Gale understood that the little one was the baby. "Both incredibly fertile. Things pop up there you wouldn't expect. Worth going back to."

He went on, drawing further from the coast and closer to his side of the table, where were strewn knives and spoons and more pieces of food that Denevik pushed around with his finger to make shapes out of the stains. Each one was an island: Sister Enyil, Sister Yilna, and Sister Olenka in a cluster (apparently that was another nursery story that Gale didn't know); the Rock (of all the islands, Denevik said, it least deserved that name); and Naltenka.

"Naltenka?" blurted Gale. She tried not to glance at Kin. Maybe she imagined it, but it seemed that the Prioress tried just as hard not to react. That was the place Kin wanted to visit—she had talked with Slezhin about it. Gale had thought it was a town.

"The Child King," said Denevik, nodding. "You've heard that tale, then?"

"No," said Gale, then realized she'd have to explain why she had spoken up—and she couldn't exactly say, *I think my Prioress is a smuggler and now I'm almost certain*. "I've just… heard of it. From Sol." That seemed plausible.

Denevik raised his eyebrows. "Not many movement stones around Naltenka. Funny he would mention it."

Not so plausible after all. Gale just shrugged.

"It's a good little rock," said Denevik, looking at Gale's bowl, Naltenka's stand-in. He pointed along the spoon, which stretched south. "There's a spit of land here that grows grain faster than anywhere in the world, I'd guess. Slezhin and a couple other fellows split the harvesting, since it happens so often. They hardly need to plant—the crops spring up again so fast."

Gale frowned. "Then… it's not just stones that do strange things?"

"It's everything, miss," said Denevik, then laughed. "Stones and pebbles are the only things that hold together when we bring them inland. With all the foraging we do out there, you're more likely to find weeds that can dance or sheep that sing than find a lightstone lying around."

"Sheep?"

"Surely you've seen a sheep," said Denevik, his smile faltering as he glanced at Kin for help.

"No, of course, I…" Gale reached for her bowl, which still had food in it. She suddenly wanted not to talk. "I just didn't know there were animals out there."

Denevik shrugged, looking at what remained of his map. "I suppose they're everywhere."

Gale ate instead of answering. The edge wasn't supposed to have this much beyond it. How did all of this last, without the gods? Or did the gods somehow sustain this, too?

"Every time I invite you," said Kin quietly, "you ruin my tablecloth." She looked up at Denevik and smiled at him. "Thank you for showing my apprentice."

Denevik grinned back, only a little rueful. "Any day she wants to journey out there, make me a visit. I have a good team, and I'd go myself, easy enough."

Kin didn't speak, holding in a cough. She gestured to Gale, then had to turn away to wheeze into her napkin.

"I do want to see it," said Gale over those uncomfortable sounds. "I'm not sure when."

Denevik waved a hand. "Whenever you like." He, too, seemed unsettled by Kin's coughing, but the fit soon passed, and Kin turned back to them.

"I apologize for my ailments," said Kin. "I still need time to acclimate, and I lack the energy for longer talks. Can I tempt you back in the coming weeks?"

"No one tempts better," said Denevik, regaining his smile. He stood and made his pleasantries while Ansha went to fetch his coat. Kin could only nod, but Gale stood and shook his hand, hopefully like a true host would. Then he was gone, Ansha showing him out, leaving the Prioress and Gale alone at the table.

3.18 Chapter Eighteen

When the front door had slammed shut, Prioress Kin spoke.

"You found the Olentevs?"

"Yes, Prioress," said Gale, bracing herself for a reprimand. She had spent too long at the church, she had taken too long searching for that yellow door, she had been late for dinner—all of these things were true. Gale selfishly hoped Kin would be too sick to be angry.

"And how are they?" Beneath the fatigue, Kin's voice was merely curious.

Gale looked at her and opened her mouth, but she had nothing to say. She didn't know. Why was Kin asking?

"They seem fine," she managed at last.

"Fine," repeated Kin. Now her eyes turned from tired interest to something colder. "Did you even find them?"

"Of course I did!" Gale's face went hot and she ducked her head. "It took longer than I wanted."

"And?"

What did Kin want? Gale got nothing from the older woman's eyes. Gale shrugged and shook her head, both just a fraction.

As Ansha cleared the table and began clattering around the kitchen, Kin made Gale describe her evening, the hunt for the house, meeting Sol, and finally delivering the message. Gale left those final details vague, to see whether Kin cared about a code being passed on. But while Kin didn't seem to care what words Gale had used, she pressed Gale hard on who had come to the door and what they looked like.

"Ilyasha seemed cheerful?" Kin asked at one point. "The little girl, Ilyasha."

"I think so," said Gale, trying to remember anything about her. The older girl had tried to keep her out of sight.

"And Ana? The mother."

"I barely saw her. But she said to thank you."

"Was she carrying a baby?"

"I didn't see."

Kin sat back heavily. She lifted a hand as if to rub her face, but it shook so violently that she let it fall back to the arm of her chair. She closed her eyes.

Gale felt almost as unsteady. She had completely misjudged Kin's intentions. The Prioress didn't care about a coded message or any kind of business arrangement with the Olentevs—she cared about the family. A week ago, Gale realized, she would have thought that was normal for a missionary doing her job. Now she could hardly fathom Kin caring about anyone. She had watched Kin write letters, and overheard her conversations, and recalled her reputation, and Gale had decided she was completely corrupt. And… maybe she wasn't.

"I sent you to the Olentevs," said Kin slowly, eyes still shut, "because Kensi, who you met, is about your age. I thought she might make you a good friend. And, although this was ancillary in my thinking, I thought the Olentevs' poverty would help relieve you of any misconceptions about the edge. I hoped, as you met them, you would understand *why* we came." Kin opened her eyes and fixed Gale with all her disappointment. "I see my efforts failed."

Gale felt small, blind. "I didn't know you wanted to check on them."

"I sent you on a social call," said Kin. "What else would I want?"

"I can go back tomorrow."

"The Olentevs have golden hearts if you meet them with kindness. You may find it difficult to earn their trust now. When I recover, we can go together." Kin closed her eyes again. Her usual intensity seemed to drain away, leaving her just a frail old woman.

Gale opened her mouth again, but there was nothing else she could say. She almost wished Kin *would* shout at her, now—but the Prioress seemed so calm, so reasonable, so resigned, that it tore Gale apart. Gale had wondered if she could trust Kin, but now Kin had learned she couldn't trust Gale.

And it was *silly*. Kin wanted a family update from that little shack. It wasn't a term paper; it wasn't a long book to read by the end of the night; it wasn't even an act of service or charity to be accomplished. It was just… kindness. Simple kindness that Gale hadn't considered.

They didn't speak further that night. Gale and Ansha together helped Kin up to her bed. Afterward, Gale offered to help clean, but Ansha had already done most of it during their conversation. Gale found herself in her room, alone and shaken.

The room's only light came from the window, where lightstones on the other houses shone in. Gale found the stub of candle she had used last night, along with her book of matches, but none of the matches would catch. At last, one did. It flared bright, then as Gale held it to the candle's wick, sputtered out.

Gale sat there on her bed, holding the candle and match, and started to cry.

Everything about the past week had shifted. Dinner with Denevik today—that hadn't been an illicit business meeting, but a plainly fun evening with a plainly fun person. Kin had even said so. She and Denevik were good friends who enjoyed one another's company. Gale had been pleased to listen in.

Kin's letters that she received and responded to each day—were they part of a grand scheme to make money and spite the Skentovite church, or were they simply attempts to reconnect to the town? Was she setting up deals, or just saying hello to her friends? Gale's own letter to Siean still lay on the small table, pale in the dark. What was the difference?

What of Mayor Slezhin, or Sol? Were they coerced and cowed into obeying their Prioress? Were they currying her favor? Or maybe they visited Kin and helped her because she had earned their friendship. Gale thought of the way Sol had helped her in the street. Was he

afraid of Kin's wrath, was he looking for a blessing—or was he just eager to like her, and eager to be liked?

Was Kin just a normal person? Was the edge full of normal people, with normal friends?

Gale threw aside the candle and buried her face in her hands.

Of course it was. People at the edge were only trying to survive—and well they should, when nothing worked properly. They were just trying to live. And why not live alongside friends? Why not love those who struggled along beside them?

There were still questions, of course. Why did Kin want to go to Naltenka? What reports was she getting from that group in the south? She had other plans, other projects than simply building relationships. But were those projects corrupt? Or were they other ways that Kin helped her people, ways that Gale couldn't understand yet?

Gale didn't know *anything* about this place. She didn't know what would help and what would hurt. Kin did. And—Gale felt more and more convinced of this, and it *hurt* that she had been so wrong before—Kin wanted to help Loshinka. That was all. Kin was part of this town, and she wanted to see it flourish.

That's all Gale wanted, too.

Gale stood up and went to the window. The lighthouse glowed at the bottom of the hill with a steady orange light.

"I want to be here," she murmured, pressing her fist into the windowsill. That was true. Someone else had assigned her to Loshinka and Prioress Kin, but she had always wanted to be at the edge. She wanted to live here, to thrive here, to point people toward the truth here. To *help* people here. To help them live, in the fullest sense of the term.

But she couldn't help if she only existed here. She had to be part of this place, like Kin was, understanding it and growing with it. That's what *presence, preservation, pilgrimage* was missing. *Presence* had to mean more than just breathing the air. It had to mean involvement, relationship, friendship.

Kin had that. Gale didn't. Not yet.

Gale wiped her eyes, still looking out at the lighthouse. Its light seemed to fuzz and expand as some kind of mist blew past it, then it shone again as clearly as before.

She was Kin's apprentice. If Kin knew something that she didn't, it was Gale's job to learn. And although Kin was brusque much of the time, she obviously wanted Gale to have a place here. Her mission to the Olentevs proved that.

Gale would just have to obey Kin. Even if she was unorthodox, even if she was a heretic. (Maybe not *then*.) Gale would stop making assumptions about Kin's priorities and start learning what she had to teach.

The lighthouse blazed on. Gale nodded to it, then closed the curtains. She would start by getting some sleep.

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