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Courier of Souls

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Courier of Souls

by

Brian Cochran

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

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in the Department of English

Norman J. Radow College of Humanities and Social Sciences

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Acknowledgements

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A Courier's Choice

Abriel slowed her Dun mare to a walk, tightening the strap on her delivery bag as she glanced at the Orneall Forest checkpoint's sign, barely legible in the golden moonlight.

“WARNING: Class ‘A’ Cursed Zone Ahead

Orneall Forest passage is not permitted without an Lun-Lamp.

Travelers must stay on the road AT ALL TIMES.”

She smiled at the poorly painted, cartoonish illustration of an angry-faced tree looming over a frightened merchant as she steered her mount towards the checkpoint. The small building was in the center of the road, with a large, curved pole jutting out of the top. A strange chandelier hung from the end of the pole—a perfectly spherical glass bubble surrounding the dozens of tiny flames, silver runes inlaid at intervals across the glass' surface. Light from the chandelier cast a golden hue over the forest's entrance, and Abriel couldn't help but stare as she dismounted to approach the door of the small outpost. She knocked.

There was a startled yell, alongside a muffled crashing noise from within. The door flew open to reveal a sleepy-eyed, elderly man with a knife in one hand, holding a lantern lit with a yellow flame, identical to the fire in the chandelier, in the other. An

overpowering scent of cinnamon wafted from the open doorway. Abriel coughed, backing away from the smell more so than the knife being held towards her.

“Oh!” the man said, placing the knife back in its sheath and lowering the lamp. “My apologies. You caught me sleepin’—fell out of my bed. I thought you might’ve been *him*. Not many people travel this road anymore, especially so late at night.”

“It’s alright,” Abriel replied, clearing the cinnamon powder from her throat. “I’m a courier. I have an urgent delivery and need to pass through.”

“Do you have your—” he stopped as Abriel presented her missive. As a courier, the missive allowed her access to most places that were otherwise restricted. The man inspected the document, a look of concern passing over his face.

“Are you sure you don’t want to wait until morning?” he asked, returning the missive. “You’ll be alone. Most travel through in a group during the day. We think that’s when the forest sleeps... whatever that means.” He waved a sharply dismissive hand. “I don’t go in there myself. Couldn’t pay me enough to pass through a Cursed Zone like this.”

“I don’t have a choice,” she said, replacing the missive and mounting her horse. “This is the only route that will take me there in time.”

The man nodded, giving her a pitiful look as he handed her the golden lantern. “Turn the Lun-Lamp back into the checkpoint on the other side.” He withdrew two entire cinnamon sticks from his pocket, putting one in his mouth like a pipe. He held out the other. “Want one?”

“Oh, well I don’t—” she began. He placed the dusty stick in her hand.

“No need to thank me,” the guard said. “It helps pass the time.”

There were small pieces of lint stuck to it, which she was tempted to mention, but Abriel didn’t want to be rude. She pocketed the cinnamon stick, placing her hand against the side of the lantern; there was no heat. “Strange. What should I expect while passing through?”

“Nothing, so long as you don’t draw attention to yourself. The lantern’s warded. Lun-Lamps mimic the light from the moon. Just don’t break it.” He chuckled, cinnamon stick wobbling with each chortle, hanging from his mouth like a long cigar. “You know, sometimes I’m tempted to make off and sell these things. They make Lun-Lamps with real gold. Know how the New Gods live up there?” He pointed towards the moon, the eternally gilded jewel dominating the space above.

“So they say,” Abriel replied, glancing at the golden spherical object floating in the sky.

“They also say the surface is an ocean of pure gold dust, you know. Apparently, that’s where the yellow glow comes from. You think it’s true?”

Abriel shrugged. “Hard to say, but I’m not surprised the New Gods would keep all that gold for themselves.”

The guard’s smile disappeared. Abriel bit the inside of her lip. *Damn*. She usually didn’t blaspheme out loud, partly because blasphemy was forbidden, and partly because

people didn't usually take kindly to her opinions on Gods. Maybe the lack of sleep was making her irritable.

"Sorry," she said, thinking of a lie. "I'm a follower of Mirriel, the Old God." She wasn't, but the fib would be an easy excuse to avoid an awkward conversation. She held up the lantern between them, trying to change the subject. "Thanks for this. Anything else I should expect out there?"

"I guess I understand why a courier would follow Mirriel, considering he made the roads, but that doesn't mean the New Gods are all bad." He gestured her onward, a borderline shooing motion. "But no, you should be fine. You probably won't see anyone the entire stretch. Most aren't crazy enough to pass through at night."

Abriel grimaced, not at the task before her, but at the staleness of the guard's comment. How many times had she heard a version of that remark? She was a courier, not a fool. There was no obstacle that she hadn't overcome before, and the Orneall Forest would be no different. She mounted her horse, a Dun mare with a light brown coat and pitch black hair, and then she made her way towards the entrance of the forest, anxiety dissipating.

Abriel had been a courier for almost nine years, having passed the end of her five year contract several years ago, but retirement wasn't something she ever thought about. After all, she was only twenty-five. What would she do with herself? It had been a long time since she stayed in any one place for very long.

She reached behind her, removing the hood on her waist-length grey courier's cloak and adjusting her hair. Satisfied with the tightness of the ponytail holding up her

shoulder length, wavy black hair, she pulled her hood back over her head. Abriel was shorter than most, with a slightly hooked nose, tan skin—somewhat weather-beaten from many days and nights exposed to the elements—and large, deep-set eyes that made her look younger than she really was. The irises were brown and uniform in color, devoid of lines or flecks that presented anything but the most even of surfaces. As always, her eyes faced forward, perpetually focused on the highway before her with each new step.

“Stay on the road,” said the guard, voice fading behind her.

As she entered the woods, it quickly became clear that she wasn't in a natural forest. The trees were old and tall, with hundreds of branches stretching high, their stems and leaves weaving together to create a tight canopy as if trying to keep all light at bay. Abriel clicked her tongue. *Of course I know to stay on the road*, she thought, the guard's words still ringing in her ears. Roads were protected from Cursed Zones by Mirriel. If she stayed on the road, whatever was in the forest would be no threat to her.

However, that didn't put her mind completely at ease; something about the woods still gave her pause. It wasn't the strangeness of the trees that stood out the most, but the fact that they seemed to have been planted in rows several feet apart, like crops growing in a field. The forest was man-made.

“Of course it's cursed,” Abriel muttered.

The moon shone down on her through meager gaps in the leaves, and she sped her horse to a gallop. Best to get through quickly.

“Papa?” Abriel prodded. “Do we ever leave the road when making deliveries?”

He was lacing a pair of boots next to the fireplace, pulling a thick string through the holes in worn leather. “Eh? You know what our rule is. First, we stay on the road!” His accent was still thick, even after years of living in a new country. Abriel was glad he never lost it.

“But what if you have to get food or go potty?” she asked.

“The rule is an idea, Abriel,” he said with a sigh, putting down the now fully laced boot and turning towards her. “It is both a reminder of who we are and a practical way to remain safe.” He picked up the boot again, pulling a cloth from his delivery bag to wipe away the polish. “Not to mention, the rule helps our deliveries arrive faster.”

“Are there any other reasons?” Abriel asked.

Her father paused for a long moment, staring thoughtfully at the burning logs in front of him, before placing the boot gently onto the ground, rubbing his dry hands together. Smiling, he met her eyes, reached towards her, and poked her on the forehead.

“Hey!” she said, laughing as she jabbed a vengeful, retaliatory finger.

An hour passed before a dark cloud drifted over the moon, gilded light winking out, leaving only the light of Abriel’s bizarre lantern to guide her. She could only see the road immediately in front of her, but the trees transformed in the darkness. Where once they were oddities, influenced by man or perhaps magic, now they were looming shapes,

shadows overhead that swayed and danced as if celebrating the moonlight's retreat, as if they were overjoyed to swallow her into darkness.

A harsh gust of wind tore through the canopy and huge leaves fell all around her, blurring the shapes of moving trees in the dark. But she couldn't take her eyes off the forest, the way the canopy seemed to fuse, creating a striped, dark and angular sky. The way they swayed in unison made it seem like the whole world was shifting around her. Back and forth, in spirals, in motions so precise that she began to lose all sense of direction, to lose her sense for where the ground separated from the sky. Her stomach lurched. Something wasn't right.

A shape moved from within the forest to her left, but she couldn't make out what it was. An animal of some kind? Dizziness came next, and she looked downward, trying to blot out the forest and focus on the road in front of her, but she could barely perceive the stone pathway through the falling leaves. After a few minutes, she started feeling nauseous as she became increasingly unsure of where the ground was. *Is this real? Am I even still on the road?* Years ago, she would have immediately dismissed the events unfolding before her as an illusion, but time on the road had exposed her to delirium, and she was mostly sure she knew the difference. Dehydration, mirages, hallucinations from eating wild plants—sometimes life on the road called for desperate action, and Abriel was certainly no stranger to doing what was necessary. Groaning, she pulled her horse to a stop, unable to hold in the contents of her stomach.

She nearly fell from her horse in a desperate attempt to dismount and find somewhere to vomit. Scrambling towards the edge of the road—she stopped. Her body screamed for release, then she realized there was nobody around and emptied her

stomach onto the road. Why had she stopped? Hair on the back of her neck stood on end and she quickly shot upright again, wiping her face as she stared at the edge of the road, mere inches away.

She had nearly crossed the threshold. All was quiet around her, the leaves had settled, and the trees had stilled. She peered into the darkness in front of her. *Is something out there?* The forest was empty, silent, a dark passageway created by rows of massive trees, stretching onward into nothingness. Then, an inexplicable, purely instinctual compulsion caused her to look up—and she froze.

About three feet above her head, perched atop a branch on the other side of the invisible threshold, crouched like a gargoyle, was a creature unlike any Abriel had ever seen.

The entity was shaped like a human, with skin of twisting, gnarled, and knotted wood. Small stems jutted from every angle of its body like strands of hair, and it had a massive, hunched torso of wood. Two pale blue eyes were set into wide holes, like pins of faint light peeking from underneath a brow twisted into an expression of petrified wooden horror, a long mouth carved into an oval, frozen in a scream. Misshapen hands gripped the branch, and Abriel heard a crunching sound as the hands wrung the branch raw, showering bark.

“You finally stopped,” it said in a deep, echoey voice, as if speaking through a tunnel. “Most do not ride like you, and most have weaker...” it paused, looking to the side as if trying to remember something. Abriel stayed perfectly still. “What are they

called again?" It groaned, smashing a sylvan fist onto the branch. It snapped, and the creature fell, landing mere feet away from Abriel. "Right, stomachs."

Abriel took several instinctive steps backward.

"Do not worry," it said, glowing irises following her movement. "I cannot cross onto the road. Such is the way of things." It reached out a branched arm, allowing a small stem to cross the road's threshold. The road's curse barrier flashed to life in the area surrounding the stem, appearing as a wall of translucent silver light. The stem fizzled under a white flame and burned to ash, the wall rippling like water before fading away. Abriel and the creature observed each other for a long moment.

"Hello," Abriel breathed, reaching to grab the lantern from her horse. The horse backed away, but didn't retreat, alert ears pointed towards the creature.

"No, wait!" the creature said, flinching and covering its face as Abriel held the lantern towards it. "I just want to talk. Please, put that cursed thing back on your horse. I beg you!"

Abriel considered for a moment. What could this being possibly want with her? There was no reason for her to stop on its behalf. She peered at the large, yet somehow pathetic, cowering form and found an unexpected surge of compassion. As she placed the lantern back onto the opposite side of her horse, the tree-like man seemed to calm down.

"Thank you. Those lights cause me more pain than you can imagine," the creature said.

"What do you want?" Abriel asked.

“I want to talk. My name is Orneall. I was a man once, like you.”

“I’m a woman,” Abriel said, unsure whether or not he meant any offense.

Orneall squinted at her, his strange glowing eyes looking her up and down. “Are you sure? My memory fails me of late. I’ve been here so long.” Branched fingers cracked with frustration. “What is a woman? Wait...what is a man?” Heavy, misty breath escaped the mouth set into his head which didn’t move, even as he whispered curses at himself. Two gnarled arms popped and creaked as he grasped his head, squeezing flecks of bark from a wooden skull.

“Are you alright?” Abriel asked.

“What?” Orneall said, relaxing as he seemed to realize what he was doing. “I’m sorry. I was going to ask you for a favor.”

Abriel regarded Orneall. *How can I trust this creature if he isn’t even aware of his own actions?* Either way, she would hear him out. Abriel knew better than most the pain of enduring a curse, as well as its limitations. As long as she stayed on the road, there was only so much he could do to her.

“I’m listening,” she said, folding her arms and leaning against her horse, who huffed and relaxed at her touch, a wave of anxiety escaping through flared nostrils.

Orneall waved his right branch in an arch behind him. “This is my forest. I created it, and I have lived here for centuries.”

“You were the one who planted all these trees?”

“Yes but, please, don’t ask me to recall the details,” Orneall said, pacing, his voice elevating with pride. “I was a sorcerer once, granted power by the New Gods. But I had no talent for using it, so I was weak. But nature...nature was strong. I would plant a forest, make the woods my nourishment, the leaves my source. A fountain of magic power that would never end. The absolute force of life—mine to command.”

Orneall stood tall, raising his arms to either side. Leaves swirled around him like a tornado, vines extended from the trees on either side of him, lifting him into the air. Abriel stared in awe as every tree in the forest leaned, curving towards Orneall as if bowing before a king.

“And though I succeeded,” Orneall said, lowering to the ground, voice quieting as the trees straightened once again. He grasped a leaf from the air, staring at it, shoulders slumped. “I didn’t realize that my true weakness wasn’t my lack of talent, but my ignorance to the laws of the woods, to life itself.” He let the leaf fall, which vaporized as it crossed the threshold. “I only wanted the respect and love of my peers. But much like the protection of the roads, some laws cannot be broken.”

“I’m sorry,” Abriel said.

“Don’t be. Be sorry to those who are good. Those who haven’t shed the blood of innocents.” Orneall lowered his voice, averting his gaze. His form was suddenly swallowed, growing shorter as roots pulled him underground like hundreds of tiny hands. A moment later, he re-emerged on the other side of the road, dirt spilling from his shoulders and the gaps in his body. “I have killed many travelers in these woods. There wasn’t always a road here, or those lanterns you carry. Many are not as wary as you.”

“Why would you do something like that?” Abriel asked, but she could imagine why. Isolation could break the strongest of minds. How many centuries—perhaps millennia—had Orneall been trapped with nothing to alleviate his suffering, his anger?

“It’s strange, but I can never remember why I do it. Each time I try, I’m filled with rage,” Orneall said, claspng his hands together with a sudden, angry clap. Bark fell like powder. “I’ve been here so long—don’t ask me how long. As I tied myself to the power of this place over the years, growing stronger by the day, the New Gods took notice.” He clenched a fist, long fingers contorting into knots of rage. “They became jealous of a power that came from somewhere other than themselves, so they bound me to this land in full. My first curse is to never leave, and my second,” he gestured to his deformed appearance, “is more apparent. But my final curse is the worst of them all.”

His gaze drifted towards the sky, blocked out by overlapping branches.

“Sometimes, it’s hard to remember how the moon used to make me feel, the sight of it. Did I ever really feel the peace I once thought I did? Lately, I feel like I’ve forgotten a dream, ones that fades away with each passing hour of the day. I used to love gazing at the moon and stars more than anything. I would find a meadow and lay down, emptying my mind of the struggles of life. I don’t know why, but I think it made me happy. The other consequences? They make sense, in their own twisted way. The punishments were, well, natural. This one feels personal, even cruel. I wonder which God I angered with my sins. I wonder which one cursed me in this way.”

Orneall lowered his head, rubbing his hands together as he watched Abriel for a reaction. Abriel remained impassive, but maintaining the mask was a struggle. Her words were caught in her throat. It would be such a simple thing to walk away, to ignore

Orneall's forthcoming request, to mount her horse and walk away, letting Orneall drift into the recesses of her memory. Most would do just that, but for Abriel, the mere fact that he was easy to forget forever burned him into her mind.

Abriel cleared her throat. "I'm not sure what I can do to help. I'm a courier, not a sorcerer."

"You can kill me," Orneall said.

When the words hit Abriel, she understood perfectly. His situation seemed inescapable. Orneall waited anxiously for a reply. The creature, the man, was serious. But why her? She felt suddenly angry. Surely it was a trick.

"Why not just step onto the road yourself?" she asked, feeling a pang of guilt as she spoke the words, but she already knew the answer.

"I have tried. Each time the pain is too great, and I retreat."

"There are other ways. Why not try those?"

"I have. They do not work. The forest brings me back to life each time."

"Why not ask someone more capable, more heavily armed?"

"I have. Most would not even speak with me."

Abriel wasn't surprised. Orneall was a visage of pure terror, an abomination in most eyes, but not Abriel's. While he was certainly a monster, in part, he was also just a man.

“And what would keep you from going mad and killing me when I try to do it?” Abriel said. “People have tried before, haven’t they? What’s different about this time? Why won’t you just kill me like the others?”

Orneall hung his head, averting his gaze. Abriel nodded, mounting her horse. *I owe him nothing. He’ll try to kill me just like everyone else. If I step into those woods, I could die.* As she moved her horse to a walk, she looked over her shoulder one last time. Orneall was just standing there, unmoving, eyes fixed longingly on the road in front of him. He had the eyes of a man trapped within himself.

A familiar, unnamed urge called out to her, a compulsion not soon forgotten.

“I’m serious,” Abriel said, sitting down next to her father as he resumed his work on the boots. “Do we ever leave the road?”

“There are only two reasons you leave your assigned path,” he said, a proud smile on his face. “When your delivery is complete, and when your heart *demand*s it. Much like my heart *demand*ed that I take you in to raise you as my own.”

“How do I know when it’s my heart and not something else?” Abriel said.

“Ah, this I cannot teach you,” said her father, placing the pair of small boots against the soles of her feet. Abriel drew in a shocked breath. “These are for you. Tomorrow, you begin traveling with me.” Abriel leaped towards him, and they embraced.

“You will know the feeling when it comes,” he said, squeezing her tightly. He was warm and smelled like the woods. “You will know.”

Abriel pulled sideways on the reigns and spurred her horse to a gallop, steering into the forest. She wouldn't have much time before Orneall lost his faculties. As she galloped deeper, keeping a safe distance from the trees, she tried to measure the space she would need between herself and Orneall to end things. A full-speed charge with her horse was the only way she saw success. She would push Orneall into the road and pin him down until the deed was finished. The act was foolish, but she had to try. Her father would have.

Orneall watched her, stunned, motionless as Abriel brought her horse to a halt, facing him. A gentle breeze drifted through the canopy, wide leaves falling between them. Curious, haunting blue eyes met her own. Orneall was still standing next to the road. His eyes were lost, confused, like so many she had seen in her travels. She couldn't leave him, especially considering that he would kill again.

“Stay right there. Don't move!” Abriel shouted.

Orneall's head tilted to one side. His eyes followed her the entire time she moved. While his face remained expressionless, a sculpture of mournful fear captured in wood, his stance changed. He lowered his arms to his sides and in front of him, knees bent. The trees creaked all around Abriel, swaying violently as if in a panic that another had set foot in their territory. And despite how difficult Orneall was to read, Abriel could still feel it in the space, in the air around her—pure, natural aggression.

“Who...are you?” Orneall asked, growing taller as thick roots melded with his legs, pushing him higher. “And what are you doing in my forest!?”

Abriel drew her seax. The forearm-length, single-edged blade was more of a tool for chopping wood and cutting through thick vegetation than anything else, but like all blades, in the right hands was also a tool of death. Abriel kicked her horse and charged. Moss-covered vines whipped towards her from the canopy above, and she steered just out of their reach, cutting at the ones that got close, the rest of them repelled by the light of the Lun-Lamp hanging from the other side of her mare. Thick leaves rose, stirred by some invisible force, obscuring her vision as she was pelted with acorn-like seeds. Urging her terrified mount forward, she focused on the last place she saw Orneall.

Her horse whinnied loudly, slowing to a stop. Abriel was surprised the horse had held out for this long without bucking her off and fleeing. But the horse's courage didn't seem to matter, roots had wrapped around the mare's legs, trapping them in place.

Time seemed to stand still as the storm of leaves began to separate, revealing Orneall's horrifying form looming over her, upheld by vines, thick limbs of twisting branches connected to roots in the ground that creaked, groaned, rising from the earth. Almost without thinking, Abriel reached behind her to grasp the handle of the lamp and threw with all her strength.

The Lun-Lamp spun as it flew, casting flickering shadows of the runes carved in its side onto the surrounding trees before it crashed into Orneall, shattering. Strange, viscous, glowing silver-yellow oil from the lantern splattered onto him, bursting aflame as the lit wick brushed its surface.

Orneall released a deep, splintering wail, the foliage that upheld him wilting as he crashed to the ground, frantically patting out the flames on his torso. *This is my chance!*

Abriel leaped upwards, landing with her feet balanced on the saddle, pushed off, and dove down towards Orneall. She crashed into him, feet first, kicking with every ounce of her strength. It was enough.

Orneall tipped backward, tripping on one of the wilted roots. Like a toppling tree whining deeply as it snapped, Orneall, weakened by the effects of the lantern flame, fell across the threshold. The road's defenses flashed to life as wood met stone.

He squirmed when he crossed, like a fish in boiling water. Silver flames burned him from the outside, dissolving him into grey ash with every moment. At incredible speed, he stood and lunged for the edge, but death was what he wanted, what the dead demanded, and what Abriel would deliver. She went low, jamming her seax into what she thought was Orneall's knee as she threw her entire weight at his other leg, tackling him. Orneall collapsed face-first into the road. He crawled, inches away from the dirt and leaves before she pulled on what remained of his leg, dragging and dropping his remains directly onto the middle of the road.

Orneall turned over onto his back, his entire body quivering as he slowly transformed into a pile of ash.

"I thought...you said...you were a...courier," he said in a pained voice.

"It's complicated," she said, panting. "Couriers aren't what they were in your day. The world is full of curses like yours. Things still need to be delivered."

Orneall laughed in a way that sounded remarkably human. Then, the forest canopy opened, stems and branches unfurling, now untied from one another. Golden moonlight enveloped them. Orneall gasped. Abriel stood over him, puzzled as she

watched the horrified face of Orneall grow still, basking in the radiance of the full moon. It was as if the pain had faded away. *The Cursed Zone must be weakening as he dies. If I were stronger, could I have saved his life? Could I have broken the curse without killing him?*

“So...it wasn't a dream,” he said. The last of him turned to ash.

Abriel realized, painfully, that she was the last one who would carry his memory.

“Rest, Orneall,” Abriel whispered. Her mare, wide-eyed, walked towards Abriel, now released from the roots that bound her feet. The brave horse sniffed the ash on the ground, confused. “It's alright, girl. It's over.”

Abriel walked towards her horse as the dark clouds finally uncovered the moon. She stared at the golden light for a long moment. What did Orneall love about the heavens so much that made him speak with such sorrow and longing? She watched the moon for a short time, waiting for a sense of peace to wash over her, but she felt only a tightness in her jaw.

With a frustrated exhale, Abriel pulled a glass bottle from her delivery bag, scooping some of Orneall's remains inside and corking the vial shut before retrieving her seax from the ground. Abriel felt something wedged awkwardly in her pocket as she bent over. She pulled the object free. It was the stick of cinnamon from the guard. *I wonder if Orneall liked cinnamon.* Truthfully, she had planned on discarding it the moment she was out of the guard's sight, but she had forgotten it was there. Breaking the stick in half, she buried one piece under a thin layer of dirt. It seemed an odd, pathetic act in the end, but she didn't want to bury his ashes there—not in the forest that became his prison. She

placed the other half of the cinnamon stick in her mouth, the spicy-sweet flavor coating her tongue as she took one last look at the moon.

“Are you listening?” she muttered. “Why cast so many curses upon our world? Isn’t it enough that you live in a land of pure gold?”

Silence.

Abriel sighed, feeling the weight of the hush, of the emptiness around her. Then, she mounted her horse and continued on her way.

Those Who Are Cursed

Abriel tried to ignore the fire wreathed, curse-infused hounds which bayed at her from just beyond the road's threshold, frustrated with their inability to cross. They were lean, with patterns of black and brown over their white fur, the colors nearly invisible beneath a cloak of harsh flame. The nearest one whined at her. She could feel an intense heat, like she was sitting too close to a campfire, which added to the discomfort from the summer sun that was just beginning to dip below the horizon. The procession of dogs had begun several hours ago, and for some reason, the hounds didn't seem to notice the flames they produced, nor did they seem to be in any pain. They seemed to think they were normal.

"Shoo," Abriel said, but her heart wasn't in the rebuke. "I didn't have any food for you five miles ago, so why would I now?"

The pack erupted into a chorus of baying at her reply, fire flaring up around them excitedly. Abriel groaned. Sometimes dogs were just too much. She opened her bag, counting what was left of her rations. There wasn't nearly enough to feed each dog, no matter how long they followed her around. Abriel had nothing to share. *Besides, won't the food just burn up in their mouths?* She looked at the landscape the hounds called home. The forest was a furnace. A hellscape of perpetual flame sustained by a curse, never-ending, and trapped in time. The fires slowly danced from each tree and bush, flaring up in thin tendrils like tiny arms and legs. The unnatural, gradual way each ember

moved over the immortally sustained foliage, which never faded or burned away, reminded Abriel of something she would see in a dream. She wiped a stream of sweat from her forehead, moving closer to the healthy, thriving forest on the opposite side of the road.

A squirrel with acorns in two large, puffy cheeks emerged from the brush, stopping several feet in front of Abriel and her horse. The rodent observed the torched, blazing landscape opposite. The hounds grew still, floppy ears perking up. A bushy tail twitched as the squirrel noticed the hounds for the first time. The small creature paused as if considering, removed the acorn from its mouth, then calmly returned to the other side of the road to bury the nut. The hounds resumed their mournful baying.

“Oh, stop,” Abriel said. “You’ve gone this long without food, right?”

She hadn’t seen any hounds the last time she traveled that particular road, but the forest had always been a torrent of heat and flame, so the sight of the curse-adjacent canines didn’t surprise her as much as they might to someone less traveled. Even if she hadn’t known about them already, strange events just didn’t faze Abriel as much as they used to. It was enough that she knew who she was. A world without curses was a utopia to many, but to Abriel—it felt dangerous to hope for such a place. If the truth revealed itself to her, that was simply a happy coincidence.

“Sorry,” she said to the fiery hounds, closing up her bag. “Maybe I’ll bring some extra rations next time.”

The bisected forests on either side of her eventually broke out into a familiar, open field that gradually inclined to a flat peak where six major roads converged. The

dismayed pack of hounds remained near the tree line, unwilling to approach the crossroads ahead. Abriel patted her mount's neck, glad she didn't bolt at the sight of a pack of blazing, borderline screaming dogs, and they released relieved breaths in unison. Life on the road was stressful enough without having to listen to the hopeless wails of cursed animals for hours on end.

In contrast, the incline to the top of the hill was gradual and slow, almost peaceful, the massive field stretching high enough above the trees that the wind began to pick up, buffeting her dark grey cloak. The slope was almost mountainous in stature, a barren field of grass emerging like an oasis in a sea of trees, opening up to the sky. A stone building sat at the peak, tucked into the final space where two of the six roads converged. The warehouse was built in a Safe Zone, placed there intentionally by the Courier's Guild as a distribution point for merchants and couriers. The other five Cursed Zones, surrounded by roads that stretched for sometimes hundreds of miles on all sides, were too dangerous for long term habitation. Abriel approached the distribution center slowly, warily, craning her neck to look for activity. In the center of the crossroads, a perfect stone circle twenty meters in diameter, there was a caravan in the process of loading and unloading satchels and crates from their wagon train.

The merchants and their guards all watched her as she approached. She nodded, smiling awkwardly at their piercing stares. Normally, she would expect surprised looks in such a remote part of the world, but most of their gazes lingered either too long, or not long enough. Something didn't feel quite right. Another horse approached at high speed from the road opposite her. Atop a glossy new saddle sat a young man with ordinary features, mousy hair cut short enough to expose the shape of his head underneath, and he

carried himself in a way that was familiar to Abriel, a seax hanging from his belt. *He's a courier.* She nodded to him, happy to see a friendly face, but he returned only an exhausted stare as they both pulled into the small stable set into the front of the building.

They dismounted and began tying their horses. "Good evening," Abriel said.

He grunted in reply, averting his eyes.

Abriel shrugged, walking towards the loading bay. An icy chill trailed down her spine and she stopped, glancing over her shoulder. Cold, predatory stares from the merchants betrayed a carefully veiled intention before they looked away, returning to their tasks. There were a few more guards than a trade expedition typically traveled with, especially one so small. Even the merchants had suspicious shapes formed in the lining of their jackets, like they were concealing weapons underneath. Taking a deep breath, she let the storm of adrenaline wash over her. *Whatever is going on, she told herself. I will survive like I always do.*

"Abriel!" boomed a familiar, jovial voice. As usual, his energy tore through her anxiety. She smiled at Terenth, a bright spot in an isolated place, as he waved at her from within the small distribution center. If nothing else, she was glad to see that he was still the foreman. Even with his wooden leg, painted white and carved with images of mountains and campfires, Terenth found a way to move quickly, his old courier instincts still active in retirement.

"Hello, Terenth," she said, entering the small warehouse. Abriel was slightly on the short side, and the difference in height wasn't usually noticeable, but Terenth always helped her remember each time they met. Despite his hunched shoulders, he towered over

her and held out a huge hand, swallowing her smaller one and moving her entire body with the force of his handshake. The emblem of Mirriel hanging around his neck, a polished silver sun, wobbled with each movement.

“How are things?” she said, pulling her hand away. “I finally saw the hounds you’ve been talking about. For a while, I thought you were making them up.”

Terenth laughed, a loud, booming sound. “You’re the last person to accuse me of making things up, after hearing some of your stories.” He shook his head. “Oh, who’m I kidding? They’re all true, aren’t they?”

“Think of my stories as truth puzzles. After all, someone has to keep you on your toes,” Abriel said, grinning. “What’s the story with those dogs, anyway?”

“There’s a burning mansion deep in that forest, so the story goes,” Terenth said, eyes intense with focus as he shifted his tone deeper. “Word is, some aristocrat was out hunting with his dogs at his winter retreat, but they didn’t catch a single fox the entire day. A normal enough occurrence. But see, this aristocrat was a bit crazed after losing part of his fortune.” Terenth tapped the side of his head. “That night he brought the hounds outside, locked them in his barn, and set the whole building on fire!”

“That’s awful!” Abriel said. She felt sick at the thought.

“Don’t worry. As you can see, the Gods took pity on the hounds, making them one with the flames. Then, the fire-hounds burned his house to the ground, along with the rest of his property and beyond.” Terenth rubbed his chin. “I wonder whether or not they burned everything in that forest on purpose. Maybe they didn’t know what they were doing.”

Abriel clenched a fist. "I'm glad the Gods saved the hounds, but why don't they ever break their curses after they cast them? Those dogs could be older than both of us combined and on top of that, they've been out there by themselves. It's almost like the Gods wanted to punish the hunter more than they wanted to save the hounds. How is that justice?"

Terenth gave her an apologetic look. "Oh...I'm sorry. I didn't want to make you upset. I don't get many chances to tell stories anymore these days."

"No, *I'm* sorry. I asked, after all," Abriel said, softening her expression. It happened again. Talking about curses always brought out another side in her, which is why she tried to avoid the topic as often as possible. "Please don't feel bad, Terenth. I just get a little...intense about curses. It really is good to see you. How long has it been since I passed through here, five months? How have you been?"

"I'm alright. Not much happens here, other than trading," Terenth said. "It's a nice place to retire. Peaceful." He lowered his voice. "Although, those merchants outside aren't very friendly. I wish they'd leave. They made fun of my warehouse, called my home a 'rock hut.' Can you believe that?"

"Sorry to interrupt," said the other courier, who had been pacing beside them the whole time, loudly scuffing the soles of his boots against the floor. "But can we speed this along?"

Terenth frowned, folding his arms. "That eager to get back to the beaten path, eh?"

“I just want to get out of the middle of nowhere,” the courier replied. “My routes keep taking me further afield.”

Abriel cleared her throat, giving Terenth a meaningful look. “Maybe we should talk inside.”

They entered the cozy, rectangular, single-roomed home built into the side of the warehouse. There was a mess of crates and boxes stacked up against one wall and a bed, larder, and dining table on the other.

“You two know the drill,” Terenth said, unfurling a scroll.

The two couriers threw their cloaks over their left shoulders, pulling up their right sleeves. They each had a silver tattoo at the very top of their arms, reflecting like dull mirrors against the dusk sun leaking through the window. The ink was created using water from Mirriel’s source. It wasn’t easy for sorcerers to detect magic over long distances without the special tattoos, which allowed couriers to be tracked and reassigned throughout the world without having to return to a designated facility for each delivery. Instead, couriers were rotated throughout the Blessed Domains, the prevailing kingdoms of the world, based on need, resulting in a more efficient system.

Courier tattoos were unique to each person. Abriel’s stressed companion’s tattoo was strange and muddled, possibly depicting a pile of feathers. Her own tattoo, however, was no less cryptic.

“I know saying this won’t help,” said the old sorcerer, smiling kindly, his stark white hair falling around his shoulders, which were bowed and sunken with age. “But don’t be afraid. I have marked many couriers in my time.”

The room was dark, save for a sourceless sphere of white light that hovered just above Abriel’s head. She had been told to lie flat on a table with her sleeve pulled up on her arm, and she did so only reluctantly. The sorcerer was right, his words didn’t help. She didn’t see a single tattoo on him.

After working up the nerve, she finally asked, “What will it look like?”

“I don’t know,” he replied, pulling up a cart with a bowl containing a glowing, silver liquid. There was no needle to be seen. “I do not control the Blessing, I merely activate it. I am only a conduit.”

“What does the tattoo do?” Abriel asked. “They didn’t tell me much.”

“Mirriel’s Blessing of Body has two main functions,” he said, pulling up a wooden chair beside her. “The first is the physical ability you receive. You’ll notice some changes in the coming months. Some growing pangs and soreness. Try not to push yourself too hard. Eventually, you’ll feel more in tune with the physical space around you. More...agile? No, that’s not the right word. I’m afraid I’m rather bad at explaining things, but the changes are as much in your mind as they are in your body.”

“And the second function?” Abriel asked.

“It’s a powerful enough magic for us to track,” he said, smiling through a bushy white beard. “The far more useful of the two advantages, if you ask me.”

Abriel looked away as the sorcerer waved a hand, causing the liquid to lift out of the container in a long string which drifted slowly towards her arm. She gritted her teeth, expecting pain, but was met only with a dull warmth that weaved across her skin. She peeked at the process. The luminescent trail of ink drifted lazily over her skin, forming a pattern she didn't recognize as the bowl of liquid slowly drained. The sorcerer wasn't even looking at her arm. In fact, his eyes were completely closed, and he remained perfectly still save for the twitching of his fingers until the bowl emptied. He opened his eyes and looked at her completed tattoo, a puzzled expression on his face.

“Not what I expected,” he said, his tone solemn. “But I guess it never is.”

Abriel stared at the image, a knot forming in her chest. Courier tattoos were said to reflect the future and life of their bearer.

It was an outstretched hand, palm facing up, fingers splayed apart.

“What's your name, lad?” Terenth asked.

“Faren,” the other courier said.

Terenth followed procedure, as usual, checking their tattoos against the pictures on a scroll, then marking details about their packages on another. He removed a single key from around his neck, unlocking a large safe built into the ground and retrieving a blue box the size of a fist as well as a small, wooden crate. He offered the crate to Abriel, which made the disappointing sound of rattling glass. She accepted the package with a grimace, opening the lid despite already knowing what lay within. Glass vials of varying

colors were inside, medicine for a remote place of the world. She didn't dislike glass because it was fragile, but rather because of the repetitive, loud sounds the bottles made each time she took a step. Nonstop jangling was enough to drive anyone crazy.

“What are you doing?” Faren said. “You aren't supposed to look inside.”

Abriel barked a laugh. *How new is he at this?*

“Everyone looks at them, lad,” Terenth said, grinning sympathetically. “You're the first I've heard that from.”

Abriel thanked Terenth, turning to leave. Faren was a trained courier. If the merchants were after him, he would survive. She paused in the doorway, hand frozen on the wooden knob. She sighed, resting her forehead on the door with a slight thud. He was also a *new* courier, and greener than moss in a jungle. But Terenth didn't seem concerned, so why should she? Someone would take care of it. Everything would be alright. She was a courier herself. She had her own responsibilities. *No. My instincts are telling me something else.*

An image flashed through her mind. A man in a dark grey courier's cloak standing tall, hand outstretched towards her. His presence was warm, safe, like a wool blanket and a campfire. She took her father's hand. The memory still felt fresh, even after nearly twenty years. Abriel took a deep breath. *I am not one who stands aside.*

“You'll have to forget about that rule,” Abriel said, letting go of the doorknob. “Otherwise, you might end up delivering something that can get you killed. The Courier Guild only has that rule to cover their own hides.”

“Then why did they teach us not to—” the courier began, but Abriel cut him off.

“Couriers usually travel alone. You’re going to have to learn to think for yourself if you want to survive out here,” Abriel said. “Today, you’ll learn why.”

“What do you mean?” Faren asked.

“Did you get a good look at those merchants outside?” Abriel asked.

“No, why?”

“They’re all armed, and they were looking us over as we walked in. If I had to guess, they’re bounty hunters after one of our deliveries. And mine—” she jangled the box of vials. “Isn’t all that valuable unless you live in the farthest outer reaches.”

Terenth groaned, pulling up a chair and plopping himself down. “Not again,” he said, tightening the straps on his wooden leg. “I can’t believe I didn’t notice the weapons. People think they can get away with anything out here.”

“Sorry, old friend,” Abriel said. “After we leave, you should escape out the window into the nearby forest.”

Terenth nodded, staring off at the wall in a daze.

Faren closed his eyes tightly, rubbing a hand over his short, coarse, hair. “Well, I guess this could be an exception...” He opened the box to reveal an ornate, garish ring, bearing an absurdly large, purple stone with a seal carved into the surface, which Abriel assumed was used for pressing wax. The golden band was old, but well-polished, not a flaw to be seen.

Faren swore loudly.

“What?” Abriel asked, leaning in for a closer look. The ring was obviously valuable, but not valuable enough for someone to hire a dozen bounty hunters.

“A royal seal of some kind,” Faren said. “Looks like someone out there wants to be able to forge messages.” Faren placed the ring into his delivery bag.

Abriel did the same with her crate, adjusting the straps on her bag to rest the majority of the weight on her back. Centering her weight would help her run and maneuver better if her equipment wasn’t constantly shifting around. “Let’s get out of here,” she said, opening the door to leave.

“Wait!” Faren said. “Shouldn’t we go out the window? They’ll be waiting for us.”

“They’ll be watching each exit, and we need to hold their attention long enough for Terenth to escape. Besides, our horses are out front,” she said. Faren opened his mouth to speak but seemed to suddenly deflate. There was an all too familiar, anxious look on his face.

“How long have you been on the road?” Abriel asked.

“It’s been about three months,” Faren said. “I’ve run into trouble before, just not like this. Most obstacles are—”

“Curses?”

He paused. “Yeah,” he said, staring at his feet.

“Just remember your training. You’ll be alright,” Abriel said. Truthfully, the men outside didn’t worry her, even without a horse. Handling thieves, bounty hunters, and other misguided people was a part of the job she had become accustomed to long ago.

Faren, on the other hand, didn't seem to have the presence of mind that most couriers did. He had the ability—he only lacked the instinct. *I'll have to keep a close eye on him.*

“Let's go,” she said, and they left the room.

They stepped into the warehouse, continuing until they reached the open-aired exit. The sound of weapons being drawn echoed in the warehouse space behind them as three men wearing self-satisfied grins emerged from behind crates, swords held lazily at their sides. In front Abriel and Faren, the wagon train had been repositioned to block their escape, forming a “U” shape over the entrance which cut them off from their horses. Men with crossbows, axes, and swords watched them with feigned disinterest, despite how closely they held their weapons.

One of them, who carried himself with an arrogant, predatory demeanor, stalked forward to the center of the trap he had placed. He drew a long saber with a flourish, a flash of curved metal, before hopping back and forth in place with the point aimed at the two couriers. Something about the way he held himself seemed familiar. *Whoever he is, he's no slouch.* He wore a tight red bandana around his head, his fingers lined with thick gold and silver rings.

“I was wondering if the seal was here or not,” he said. His voice was carefree in a way that Abriel might have considered good-natured, were he not trying to rob them.

“When I saw two couriers in the same place, I knew my hunch was correct. I'll say two things, and I'll only say each of them once. First, my name is Hirche. Second, hand over the ring—this doesn't need to get ugly.”

“We don’t have any ring,” Faren said. “We’re transporting medical supplies. Show him, Abriel.” Abriel raised an eyebrow at Faren. There was an edge of panic to his voice, a shakiness that betrayed the lie.

“My friend,” said Hirche, who seemed genuinely taken aback. “I do you the honor of giving you the chance to live—and you lie to me?” The other thieves shook their heads, tutting and grumbling to themselves.

“You’re right,” Abriel said. “You *have* done us an honor that many might not. Which is why I’ll now do the same by you.” She took a deep breath, knowing full well how her next words would be received. Regardless, she felt the need to say them each time someone got in her way, not because she wanted to scare them, but because the words were true. She squared herself, standing up straight as she took a step forward.

“We are couriers,” she said, speaking in her most authoritative voice. “We represent not only the Courier’s Guild, but the hope of expansion and habitation in this increasingly cursed world. By stealing from us, you incur the attention of powers at every level of governance. Have you not heard of the Treaty of Paths? We are protected by each government of the Blessed Domains. If fast and consistent deliveries aren’t made, then all civilization falls apart. People die. If we don’t abide by the treaty, then who will make deliveries through Cursed Zones? Will you?”

Hirche frowned. “Maybe I will. Do you think I actually care about the machinations of those who desire this ring? I do not. Their petty squabbles over thrones and power are nothing to me. I care only about how much they will pay us to take what they ask for. Treaty of Paths, you say?” He spat off to one side. “Is that supposed to mean

something to me? Me and my men look out for each other, and that is all there is to it.” The other thieves nodded, emboldened as they stood upright with weapons now held at the ready.

“Whatever they’re paying you isn’t enough,” Abriel said, feeling numb. These situations always reminded her of how small and harmless she appeared. Despite the truth to her words and the genuine intention behind them, they often felt hollow, like they were barely worth the breath used to speak them—like she was a mouse squeaking at wolves. “If I can’t convince you to do the right thing, then you should know you aren’t the first to try and steal from me—and you won’t be the last. Please don’t do this. I don’t want to hurt any of you.” She cast Faren an apologetic look, who stood beside her, completely frozen. She could sense his terror as he looked back at her, slack-jawed and pale.

“Do you remember the first lesson they taught us?” she asked. Her question was almost drowned out in the explosion of laughter from bounty hunters around her, all except the leader, who wore a dark expression. But their mockery didn’t matter. Faren was a fully trained courier too, he just needed to be reminded that he was far from a powerless mouse. Because, in actual fact, in most situations—*couriers* were the wolves.

A hint of recognition appeared on Faren’s face, a slight expression of hope. He nodded.

Abriel and her fellow courier trainees had been blindfolded and were being paraded to a staging area for a new exercise. Nausea flooded over her in waves, her nerves afflicted by the collective anxiety of her peers. The instructors had been hinting at

something like this for months. The time had finally come. Daily physical conditioning was draining enough, but things were about to get even harder.

“Stop!” shouted a voice. Abriel swallowed her rising bile, trying to ignore the sounds of her peers as they vomited.

“Since you arrived,” the voice continued. “We have trained your bodies to handle the most strenuous and demanding of challenges. We have tested your speed, stamina, agility, and you have overcome the odds. Tell me—why did we train you to do this? Are your abilities designed to give you the ability to defend yourself, to defeat those who would take from the people? Well?”

Silence lingered. Nobody wanted to speak up.

“Well, do you want to stand there blindfolded all day?”

“To defend our deliveries,” said a trainee.

“Wrong!”

“Listen closely,” the instructor said, his voice quieting. “I am about to give you the most important lesson you will learn in your time here, and you won’t become a courier unless you can prove to us that you fully understand this concept.” The sun’s heat bared down on Abriel, causing streams of sweat to trickle down her neck. Since her father was a courier, she already knew the lesson. Even so, in that moment, she felt the knowledge’s weight more than she ever thought was possible.

“If at any point you or your mark is under threat,” the instructor continued. “There is only one course of action—you run!”

Chattering among the recruits was silenced by the rhythmic beating of loud, almost deafening drums. *Are they trying to keep us from hearing something?*

“When we remove your blindfold, you will see a red flag,” the man continued. “We will not be able to prepare you for every curse or Cursed Zone that you will encounter as a courier. There are too many. What we can do is train you to think quickly, to be resourceful, to adapt to that which is around you, despite the odds. Your blindfolds will be removed momentarily.”

His tone shifted deeper, louder, more serious, adopting a penetrating sense of urgency that sent a wave of anticipation rushing through Abriel. “As a courier, hesitation is death! I don’t care what you see between yourself and that flag! You will attempt to reach your destination without delay, and at top speed!”

A deep, bellowing horn rang out through the air, and Abriel heard the person in front of her make a startled noise, followed by the pounding of boots. After that, all she could hear was chaos interlaced with the beating of drums. A scream from somewhere behind her. *Boom. Boom.* The whine of clashing metal from somewhere to her left. *Boom. Boom.* Was that the snapping of crossbow strings from in front of her? *Boom. Boom.*

A short time later, the horn sounded again, and bright light stung her vision as her blindfold was torn off. Her turn had come. Before her eyes could adjust, she sprinted forward. Abriel was fast, but that was never her greatest strength. Explosive agility was her main advantage, she had always been able to accelerate and change direction quickly. Her heart pounded in her head as her mind struggled to take in what was in front of her.

The flag, she thought in a panic. *Where is the flag?* About a hundred meters in front of her, a thin red fabric atop a high flagpole flapped violently in the wind. Between her and the flag was a structure—a house of some kind? There were high walls on either side of the long space, obscuring whatever challenge the other trainees were enduring. She could sense people all around her but—

Something flew at her from the left and she leapt away from the blur of motion, dodging the swipe of a padded quarterstaff just in time. Mid-dodge, she sensed another presence to her right, and she lowered her weight, ducking another blow. She pushed off the ground, realizing just in time that the surface was slick and muddy. Each step became heavier as her feet were caked in mud, sticking to the ground before she wrenched them free each time with a sharp pop. The windows on the house crashed open. Remembering the sound of snapping crossbow strings, she immediately searched for cover. *There!* A low rock wasn't far from her but maintaining distance from the men chasing her was no simple feat. If she tried to take cover behind the rock, the men behind her would clobber her with staves.

As she reached the stone, she jumped, planting her right foot on the rock's dry surface to dodge sideways. Her mud-caked boot slipped. Abriel barely caught her balance as two crossbow bolts whizzed by her neck. Abriel's hair stood on end as she realized just how narrowly they missed. *I hope those bolts are padded too.* Running horizontally to the shooters in an attempt to be harder to hit, Abriel swung wide around the house. The shooter in the nearest window seemed to realize what she was doing and disappeared, re-emerging from the side of the house to cut her off, quarterstaff now in his hand. Abriel

cursed and changed direction towards the building. There was only one way forward now.

The second shooter, in the middle of reloading his crossbow, looked up in stunned surprise as Abriel, the fresh trainee, leapt towards him through the window, screaming. They crashed into the ground in a heap, rolling across the wooden floorboards. Abriel leapt to her feet, wrenching free of the crossbowman's grip as he snatched at her leg. *Another door!* She ran towards the exit from the right side of the house, snatching a padded quarterstaff leaning against the doorframe on her way out. Weapons collided with muffled thuds as she raised her staff just in time to block the swipe from one of her pursuers, who had already moved to the right entrance to try and cut her off. She deflected two more blows through sheer desperation and instinct, narrowly dodging the fourth as she turned, racing towards the flag.

The instructor who had previously tried to cut her off now stood between her and the flag, which Abriel now realized was behind a sheer wooden wall that rose to twice her size. The instructor handled his quarterstaff expertly while keeping pace with her in the thick mud, trying to keep her from reaching the wall. Abriel didn't want to attack him, especially given the skill and guile he displayed, but she hoped that after seeing the way she attacked the other crossbowman—he would buy into her bluff. Abriel screamed wildly, raising her staff as if to strike. The instructor took the bait, adjusting his stance to counterattack.

Seizing her chance, Abriel located a particularly wet spot of mud and dragged her foot through the muck, kicking towards the instructor in a spray of brown-gray substance that surprised him enough to seize up for the briefest of moments. That moment was all

Abriel needed. She took a sharp leap to her left, narrowly avoiding a reckless, wide swipe from the instructor before rushing full speed towards the wall. Her legs strained from the effort of repeatedly pulling her feet out of the mud. Without thinking, she held her quarterstaff point-first in front of her, planting the base underneath a rock that was a few feet from the towering wall. Lungs heaving, Abriel put the last of her energy into her legs—and leapt.

She felt the quarterstaff bow under her weight, the angle of the world shifting in a strange, unfamiliar way as she felt herself being vaulted higher into the air. *I'll make it! If I can just reach out and grab the edge of the*—her staff went taugt as the base slipped in the slick mud, traveling around the rock and striking the wall, sending a jolt through her arms. The world spun around Abriel as she lost her grip, landing on her back with an audible splat. She skidded to a stop, feet pointing into the air as she hit the wall.

“I can’t believe she almost made it,” said a wry, amused voice.

Abriel tilted her head backwards, observing the upside-down shapes of two instructors holding weapons over her.

“I know,” said the other instructor, wiping mud off his face with his shirt. “Can’t remember the last time something like this happened. Not on the first try, anyway.”

Abriel panted, feeling a wide, toothy grin form on her face.

“Alright, smiles,” said the instructor, offering her a hand. “Don’t get too excited. You failed.” He pulled her to her feet, guiding her back to the assembly area with the other trainees. “Remember, there are no second tries here, same as on the road. In fact,

you won't ever see this course again. Now put this blindfold on. There are still more courses out there. Your day is far from over..."

Abriel and Faren pulled out their seax in a flash, the polished metal glimmering in the final vestiges of light from the sun. Faren dashed to the left, sidestepping a crossbow bolt just in time as he planted a foot into the shooter's gut, toppling him. Trusting Faren to prepare the horses, Abriel feinted a move towards Hirche, who took the bait with a quick swipe of his saber. The attack was precise, pointed, and Abriel barely dodged. *He's good.* Abriel threw herself sharply to the right, heading towards the other crossbowman, who hesitated, unwilling to accidentally hit his leader. Both couriers knew to take out the crossbows first. Abriel brought her seax down hard on the thick, knotty crossbow string, snapping the rope in half as she rammed her shoulder into the much taller man's chest, slamming him against a wagon. He brought his arms together in an attempt grapple her, but she ducked beneath his grip just in time.

Her surroundings were alive, her training kicking in as a nearly subconscious flood of information, processed in seconds. On top of her training, the power from the Blessing of Body on her shoulder blossomed to life as she let out a slow breath. Couriers didn't receive their tattoos until their training was complete. Because Abriel didn't rely on the Blessing to begin with, the effects sometimes made these encounters seem too easy. She perfectly understood her weight, her relation to the world around her, her place in the world. Gravity, direction, speed, balance, momentum, leverage—all of these were now second nature, intuitively and perfectly understood, now parts of her existence that she almost never thought about.

Six wagons, each with two horses affixed to the front. Twelve threats. Ranged threats were now disarmed. Details, weaknesses, and escape routes streamed into her all at once. Her path was clear. *I need to disable their means of pursuit.*

A lantern hung from the pole on the nearby wagon. With a few deft steps, she vaulted to the top of the covered wagon, unhooking the lantern on her way up and balancing her feet on two of the round wooden frames that held the cloth cover in place. She leapt to the next wagon, stepping lightly across each frame as the thieves all shouted in panic from below.

“Reload the crossbow, idiot!” one of them said.

“Hey, Baren, boost me up!” said another.

“Please tell me someone brought a spear. I’m not climbing up there!”

“What about the other one? How are they moving around like Hirche does?”

“More like you *can’t* climb up there!”

“Yelling at me won’t help me reload faster!”

Abriel smiled as she crossed the wagon in the center, removing the glass on the lantern and lighting the cloth covering beneath, which quickly spread the flame due to the oiled waterproofing the covers typically underwent. She loathed to scare horses at all, yet something about using the thieves own trap against them felt right. They would put out the fire eventually, but by then, Abriel and Faren would be long gone.

Faren arrived with their horses on the outside of the circled wagons, five mounted pursuers close behind him. Abriel looked over her shoulder at Hirche, who had somehow

followed her to the top of the wagons, keeping his balance. She shrugged at him and leapt down, landing in her saddle. As the two couriers galloped into the distance, shouting ensued as the thieves tried to gain control of their panicked horses.

“That wasn’t so bad, right?” Abriel said, nudging his shoulder.

“Speak for yourself,” Faren said, wiping beads of sweat from his forehead. “I’m just glad I didn’t have to kill any of those idiots.”

Abriel heard hooves hitting stone from behind them. Hirche was following on horseback, riding hard, face twisted with rage. Four of his men were flanking him on either side.

“You still might,” Abriel said. “I have an idea. Follow me!” They steered off the road towards the burning forest.

“Your idea is going into a Cursed Zone? Are you insane?”

“We’re trained to deal with places like this. They aren’t,” Abriel said.

Rain began to fall, pelting their faces as they urged their horses to move faster, steering into the inferno. Heat hit them like a suffocating wall, but the burn was more muted than Abriel would expect from a typical fire. The heat was less potent, perhaps for the same reason the flames themselves moved so slowly. The skies opened up, soaking them to their cores, filling the forest with a thin cloud of steam as droplets hit burning foliage. Twilight fell, the meager light from the sun and flames creating a glare over the mist. Abriel squinted her eyes, straining to see as she watched the ground in front of her. The in-between state of light and mist left her unwilling to trust her eyes.

“Abriel!” Faren shouted.

She turned. Faren’s horse had stopped, rearing back in front of a large, burning log. Their pursuer increased speed, bearing down on Faren, who was too distracted with controlling his horse to notice the danger he was in. Abriel turned her mare around, kicking her to move faster. The bounty hunter was too close to Faren. She wouldn’t reach them in time.

“Faren, jump!” she shouted.

Faren’s instincts warned him just in time as he gritted his teeth and fell from his saddle beneath an otherwise fatal cut from a saber, which instead whistled through empty air.

Looking over his shoulder at Faren, the hunter didn’t notice Abriel barreling towards him until it was too late. She stood on top of her saddle as their horses moved towards one another at jousting speed. Abriel held a deep breath and jumped into the bounty hunter, tackling him to the ground. The world spun around her as her body was flung out of control, and all went white.

Abriel wasn’t sure how much time had passed since she hit the ground. She shuddered with each breath, unable to take in enough air. A hot rush filled her lungs.

“Abriel?” said a distant voice. She opened her eyes, blinking through the rain which blurred her vision. Faren stood above her, forehead wrinkled with concern. “You have to get up!”

She pushed him away, a weak gesture, but he humored her, stepping backwards. Abriel rolled onto her stomach, trying to push herself to her feet. Something slick made her fall back down, causing her to gasp for breath once again. What happened? Her hands were covered in something. The dry earth and ash of the burned-out Zone had mixed with the rain. Grey mud covered her palm. *Right. We were running from bounty hunters.* She looked up. Everything was orange in the glowing mist. The torch-like trees were massive candles of fire surrounding them, the forest engulfed in orange light, even her opponent, who now stood ten meters away from her, his horse disappearing into the distance as a fiery shape chasing at its heels. Howls echoed all around them as the burning hounds entered the fray, chasing the rest of the bandits on their panicked horses. One of them sprinted past Abriel, a wild look in two wide eyes, inches away from her face, stealing the remaining cool air as it bounded after Faren's horse.

It was as if the world itself was burning in the throes of chaos, and there, in the center of all madness, Abriel met Hirche's eyes.

"Give me what I want," Hirche said. He was panting, but on his feet, saber held to one side. The weapon glistened in the rain, reflecting amber. Water ran from the basket hilt towards his hand, trailing down the long, curved blade before the liquid streamed off the fine point and into the mud below. All it took was a flick of the wrist, an imprecise swing of the forearm to cleave an unarmored opponent with such a weapon. Couriers, naturally, traveled without armor. They couldn't compromise speed and stamina for anything.

"You think you're so superior to me, don't you?" Hirche said, voice barely audible amid the white noise from the downpour, amid the howls of hunting dogs. He

spread his arms apart, smiling widely. “Look around you! There’s no escaping your fate, courier! We’re *all* cursed, don’t you see? You might as well embrace it!”

Abriel caught her breath as the thief removed his cloak and dropped it into the mud. He wore no shirt underneath, and his arms were thick, knotted with muscles and scars. With an angry jerk, he turned his shoulder towards Abriel to reveal a gleaming, mirror-like tattoo on his shoulder.

“He’s a courier,” Faren said. “Deserter. Traitor!”

“I served my tenure with honor, boy!” the former courier snarled. “And what did I get? Enough marks to live a comfortable life?” He barked a manic laugh. “No! I’ll find no comfort until I draw my last breath. You’ve seen what it’s like on the road, both of you! The suffering brought about by curses. This world is kill or be killed. Curse, or *be cursed!*”

Abriel slowly pushed herself to her feet, meeting the man’s eyes. In a way, she agreed with him, understood him. The cursed and powerless had very little hope, but she would never convince him to change—the time for words had ended. Caked in mud, swaying from side to side, she slowly rose to her feet and drew her seax. Her eyes never left her opponent’s.

“I see,” he said. “Then you can join the other naive couriers who defied me.”

Abriel said nothing as both she and Hirche released long, trailing breaths. Neither of them were wearing armor. The exchange would end in moments.

Hirche moved towards her, preparing to slash. Since he was an expert, Abriel didn't bother trying to read his movements. It was time to change the paradigm entirely. She kicked a spray of muddy ash into his face, closing the distance between them in a blur of quiet motion. Even though Hirche only blinked, in that time, she had avoided his swipe and moved inside of his guard in an explosion of speed. She buried her seax into his heart.

He crumpled, head falling onto Abriel's shoulder, saber dropping from his grasp, slowly sinking point-first into the mud. Dark blood trailed down his torso.

"You're right," Abriel whispered into his ear, removing the seax. "I embraced it too."

"A world without curses," Hirche muttered. "Do you ever wonder what that would be like?"

Abriel watched him draw his last breath, unable to fully blame him. *Yeah. All the time.* If her father hadn't taken her in, hadn't shown her how to live with each moment—hadn't shown her purpose, she would have still believed as he did. A part of her still did.

All was finally quiet. Faren fell to his knees, dropping his seax. "How do you do this?"

Abriel stared down at Hirche's body, feeling numb as she wiped her blade clean of blood. "Do what?"

"Deliver packages. Travel. I don't know," Faren said, helplessly throwing up his arms. He laughed, a grim, choking sound. Abriel didn't need to look to see the frustrated

tears run down his face. “How do you not end up like him? I’m starting to think I’m not cut out for being a courier.”

Abriel sheathed her seax, angling her head towards the sky. The cool rain felt good on her face in the hot environment, even as the rain’s intensity grew, falling in thick sheets that chilled her to the bone, nearly drowning out her reply. “I’m not sure. I don’t have all the answers. In fact, I don’t think I have any of them. All I know,” she closed her eyes, pausing to think. Besides some of her courier skills, her father only really helped her understand one thing. “All I know is who I am.”

“Abriel,” Faren tapped her on the arm, pointing.

She opened her eyes, following Faren’s outstretched finger towards a shape that crept towards them, head bowed. It was one of the fiery hounds. A column of steam rose from its body as the flames were reduced by the pouring rain to faint orange embers on the creature’s fur.

Something compelled Abriel. She couldn’t tell if the feeling arose from a lack of caution due to the circumstances she had survived—perhaps some sense of duty, compassion, or otherwise, which now moved her arm closer. The creature remained still, a pair of faintly glowing orange eyes watching her hopefully.

Abriel lowered herself to one knee, and she stretched out a shaking hand.

As her palm touched the bottom of the hound’s chin, the pain was present, yet distant, even as the hound leaned affectionately into her. But the discomfort was nothing compared to the loneliness the cursed animal must feel. In a way, the pain made the burn nothing more than a feeling which lingered, reminding her that, unlike this creature, she

was still free and alive. The small gesture was all she could offer for the briefest of moments, but if she continued, the heat would destroy her hand. She withdrew. It wasn't right. The world wasn't right.

Abriel screamed, slamming her burned palm into the mud in an icy rage, the cool, ashen substance soothing her burns. Why was everything so broken? Why was the world so *backwards*? The pouring rain reduced to a drizzle, then faded completely in moments.

"I don't believe it," Faren said.

"Get used to it," Abriel said. There was an edge of bitterness to her voice as she felt old wounds re-open. "This is the world we live in."

"No, Abriel," Faren said. "Look."

Abriel raised her head to observe the perfectly normal hound that stood in front of her, head tilting from side to side in confusion. *But the rain has stopped. Where are the flames?* The forest was no longer burning, leaving skeletons of charred trees reminiscent of toothpicks jutting out the ground. The blanket of mist dissipated, rising into the air and uncovering the night sky. The dog barked, running in a quick circle before leaping towards Abriel, dragging a long tongue across her face. She recoiled in shock, standing to watch the dog as he bounded off into the distance to join the rest of the pack, which bayed loudly in unison as they crossed the road's threshold, running into the healthy forest on the other side.

Faren limped towards her and held out a hand, a bemused, yet awed expression on his face.

Abriel gave him her hand, unwilling to look at the damage herself. “How bad is the burn?”

“It’s gone,” he whispered.

Abriel looked at her mud-caked hand, somehow unsurprised. Another curse broken. Another wound healed. One of thousands, possibly millions, but one all the same. A small smile broke through, the faintest feeling of joy, mixed in with the deep helplessness she felt. Could she really claim credit for what she had just done? She wasn’t even sure why the curse had lifted. She never was. She opened her bag, checking each vial for cracks. Surprisingly, nothing was broken.

“Faren?” she said.

“Yeah?” he replied.

“Don’t tell anyone what you just saw, alright?”

“What?” he said, the expression of awe giving way to one of fierce disappointment. “Why not? You broke a curse, Abriel. That never happens unless the Gods deem it so. It’s...it’s a miracle.”

“A miracle from who?” Abriel asked, wringing the water out of her cloak.

Faren said nothing.

Abriel staggered towards her horse, placing a hand on the side of the creature’s face, letting the creature nuzzle her ear. “This is where we part ways. Promise me you won’t speak of this,” she said, looking for the truth in Faren’s eyes.

He finally spoke after a painfully long moment, a frustrated range of emotions passing over his face. "I promise," he said, shocked at the words that came out of his mouth. "But only because you saved my life."

Abriel mounted her mare, making her way towards the road. A deep, heavy frown pulled at her jaw.

"Abriel, wait," Faren said.

She paused.

"Are you alright?" Faren asked. "I don't know you, but you don't *seem* alright."

"No," Abriel said, continuing on her way. "I'm not. But I will be. So will you."

The Eternal Chase

Abriel had never traveled so far into outer reaches before. Typically, the colonies didn't dare venture so far from the Core of the Blessed Domains, the highly populated areas where many roads converged and bisected Cursed Zones. This delivery, however, was taking her a few kilometers beyond where the roads ended. A book from the courier libraries had taught her what she would find where the path stopped, but knowledge was very different from seeing the truth with her own eyes. The ground trembled softly as she approached the stone creature, formed from a mass of rocks and sediment held together by sorcery. Two arms, two legs, and one elongated head emerged from what could only be described as a hole in reality. Abriel steered her mount off the road, walking beside the massive Builder as it slowly, methodically constructed new stretches of highway.

The golem held out one hand in front of it, forming a foundation with thin tendrils of silver light that plunged deep into the earth. The ground vibrated, making her horse shift uneasily, pulling deep sediment, pebbles, and rocks to the surface to create the necessary layers that could support the road. With the other hand, it reached into the portal that formed its core. Abriel rubbed her eyes after peering into the void for a few moments. Whatever the spherical anomaly was, it didn't seem like a good idea to stare. A massive, flat tile emerged, held in a misshapen stone claw, and the Builder placed the slab onto the foundation next to two more pieces of the exact same size. A line of light trailed across the point where the two tiles met, and they became one.

All anyone knew about the Builders was that they were creations of Mirriel, the Old God. The roads isolated curses created by the New Gods, who were Mirriel's enemy. Unfortunately, nobody understood Builders very well because their defense system didn't allow anyone to get too close. Most experts agreed that the Builders were drawing tiles from a portal within themselves. How they functioned and where the portal led were mysteries. Even so, Abriel was fascinated, comfortable in her ignorance. What was it like to do one thing your whole life—maddening, or perhaps peaceful?

Abriel steered towards the stone creature. The Builder stopped, standing up as straight as each curved, jointless limb would allow, and a long head turned towards her, watching with two faintly glowing yellow eyes. Abriel moved her horse away, waving even though she knew the golem was automated. She didn't want to test the defenses, but she would have never forgiven herself if she didn't at least interact with one of the Builders. Who knew when she would be out that far again? Abriel's heart leapt as the Builder waved back at her, a long, jointless arm wobbling awkwardly from side to side. Then, as if forgetting she was there, it returned to its eternal task.

Abriel stood frozen in the moment, jaw hanging open, unsure of how to feel. Was the Builder automated to wave back at her? She laughed. *Just when you think the world can't surprise you anymore, something like that happens*, she thought, walking away.

She stopped at a safe distance from the Builder, dismounting and placing her compass, map, and directions on the ground before her, then sat cross-legged. The compass danced across the ground as the Builder periodically reformed the earth into foundations for the road. Going over the directions again, Abriel raised an eyebrow at a

note from the sender which read “*Don’t touch the trees,*” but otherwise, the delivery seemed like it would be another standard hand-off.

The next few hours grew quiet, an eerie silence falling over her as the sound of the Builder faded into the distance. There was no main road to flee to anymore. No protection from curses. Abriel didn’t mount her horse, preferring instead to lead the mare by the reins. She deserved a break. The terrain around them was roadless and open, a vast grassland between her and the meager glint in the distance—her destination. The grass brushed her ankles, shifting in the wind in ripples that reminded Abriel of waves on the ocean.

Night fell as she finally reached the crystalline forest, a Cursed Zone—and her destination. The forest stood as a lonely circle of crystalline trees in the middle of nowhere, glimmering. How long had the Cursed Zone been there? There were no other trees to be seen, only flatlands. Abriel looked at the dark emptiness around her. An isolated, haunting feeling arose from within as she felt the age of the land around her, carved flat by centuries of tearing, unimpeded wind. Something about the location felt right and natural to her, and yet she also felt hollow, the lack of a companion more oppressive than ever. Her mare nudged her on the ear, and Abriel smiled, patting the side of the still un-named horse’s head.

“I know,” she said. “Thanks.”

The glimmer, which came from the sun reflecting off the crystals, faded as Abriel drew closer, replaced by a bioluminescent glow that seemed to originate from somewhere within each tree. Abriel approached one, noting the sudden change in terrain from grass

to uneven rock. Green became stone in a perfect circle that formed the forest, stretching on for miles. The tree in front of her was clear crystal, glowing a faint, almost imperceptible blue-green hue. Branches had snapped off, and many of the remaining limbs held more traditional crystal formations jutting out at odd angles. Otherwise, the shape of the tree was normal, only translucent and solid. She could still see the silhouette of each piece of bark; each knot, root and stem still remained in place like nothing had changed, like no curse had ever been cast. A forest frozen in time, forever transformed. *Maybe I've finally encountered a curse that isn't so bad.* She laughed at the absurdity of the thought.

Overcome by curiosity, and remembering the note from the sender, she picked up a large rock. She tossed the stone gently at the trunk of the tree, half afraid of shattering the tree like glass. New crystals shot forth from the point of contact, cracking the rock into pieces with a sharp pop, showering Abriel with pebbles. She jumped back, noticing for the first time the skeletons of small birds and rodents scattered around the edge of the forest. *Right,* she thought. *Don't touch the trees.*

Abriel trod carefully, giving each tree a wide berth as she guided her horse by hand, whispering soothing words so she wouldn't panic. In Zones where the rules were uncertain, taking your time was tedious and sometimes scary, but vital to survival. Her body would scream at her to move faster, to run through as quickly as possible, and she reigned the urge in each time. That ever-present, troublesome urge caused her to make irrational decisions, to make mistakes. It was better to think, to take her time. Even as her exhaustion brought on an irritable mood which caused her to notice each passing moment, she kept breathing, moving forward, focusing on the intention behind each step.

Naturally, managing her instincts made travel a little uncomfortable, but that was all each Cursed Zone was—uncomfortable. Why trust that irrational voice? That panic. What had reacting ever done to help her?

She paused in a small clearing, brushing aside a bird skeleton to make room to sit, carefully checking the ground for crystal stems, roots, or saplings. As she drank from her waterskin, Abriel looked around her. The soft, eerie glow of the glass-like trees made her feel like she was in a strange dream. Who would choose to live in such a place? Then again, who was she to make judgements? Home had always felt like a distant concept to her. The only home she ever knew was a campfire and her father's presence. *If I ever settle down, it will be somewhere free from curses.* She shook her head, dismissing the thought. It was hard to stop moving once you started. Despite a decision to take a break several months ago, to stay in one place for a few weeks, the thought had made her feel uneasy. What would she do with herself? Abriel stood, continuing her slow trek through dim, blue-green light.

At sunrise, she reached the mining village, which was little more than a clearing in the center of the crystal forest with a few haphazard stone buildings. There were three people next to a cave entrance set into the ground, talking in low voices. Loud sounds of metal cracking stone echoed from within the mine. All three of the villagers turned to look at her at once, and Abriel raised a hand in greeting.

“Sorry to startle you. I’m from the Courier’s Guild,” she said. “I have a delivery for someone named Trabor.”

“That’s me,” said an older man. He wore thick, dusty overalls; his face was gaunt and exhausted. The young man had a small rodent slung over his shoulder, and the younger woman looked to be writing in a ledger of some kind. They also looked malnourished and hungry. Abriel withdrew the supplies from her bag, suddenly understanding why a mining village would need a delivery of crop seeds.

Abriel handed off the delivery. “Where are you going to plant them? It’s a long way to the edge of the forest.”

Trabor scratched the meager stubble on his chin, looking at the different bags of seeds thoughtfully. “Doesn’t matter. We’ll starve without more food.”

“We’re already on half rations,” said the young woman. She looked to be about Abriel’s age, with dark brown hair tied behind her in a messy braid. “Food deliveries don’t come this far out, and the wildlife never survives the forest.”

“I hunt,” said the young man. “But it takes a lot of time to set the traps.” He slung a small animal from over his shoulder. The rodent was tall and brown, with bushy tufts for ears.

“Maybe you should go pick up some food from the Core,” Abriel said. “Why mine here, anyway?”

“Whichever God cursed this place seems to have accidentally increased the amount of precious gems underground. We think it has something to do with the trees being crystalized,” Trabor said. “If we can mine enough gems, we can all retire comfortably. The reward is worth a few years of...discomfort.” Trabor seemed to falter on the last words as if he wasn’t sure he believed them. “But I’m just so tired. I know

how to farm, but I'm getting old. Do you think you could help me get some of these planted before you leave?"

Abriel opened her mouth to give an excuse, only to find she didn't have a good reason other than the idea of farming sounded terribly dull.

"I hate to even ask," Trabor said. "But I don't have a choice. I can't take workers from the mine, or the Miner's Guild will crack down on us. These aren't the type of people you come up short with. I told them we were starving, and they said they would give us a way to live out here. I guess these seeds are their answer."

Abriel closed her mouth. Most of the time, the Courier's Guild wouldn't allow deliveries that enabled or financed the exploitation of workers, but it seemed one such delivery had slipped through. That, and the Courier's Guild wasn't supportive of other Guilds, especially the Miner's Guild, a notoriously cruel organization that regularly worked struggling people to the bone with promises of a better life. *I'll have to inform headquarters when I can.* Meeting Trabor's eyes, she realized he still appeared to have some spirit left in him. Could she really leave them to fend for themselves?

What would her father do if he was there? She smiled. She and her father were very different personalities. He would have already made friends with the villagers and gained their trust. He probably would have offered to plant the seeds before Trabor even asked.

Abriel sighed. Maybe "dull" was exactly what she needed. She could always make up an excuse to the Guild for disappearing. The world was dangerous, after all. She had put off taking personal time for far too long. "I guess I can stay for a little while."

Fifteen years ago...

“Papa, wait!” Abriel said, watching her father walk through the front door of their small house. “Why are you leaving now? I thought we could stay for a whole month. You’ve only been here for three weeks. And why can’t I go with you?”

She looked up at him. Her father, dressed in full courier’s garb—leather boots, a grey, waist-length cloak, and a delivery bag strapped to his back—looked down at her. The image brought on both a profound sense of love and disappointment at the same time. It reminded her of how he looked when he found her, starving and alone on a street corner, begging for food, for help, for anything at all. It was also how he dressed every time he left her behind, even though he hadn’t left her side in weeks. But something had changed. Something was wrong.

“You are right,” he said in his thick accent which never changed, getting on one knee. There were tears in his eyes, eyes lined with permanent crow’s feet from a life of feeling and giving joy. “I am sorry. I did not think I would be leaving so early either, but he caught up to me faster than I realized. You see, I’m being followed by someone—someone dangerous. If I stay here with you, then you might get hurt.”

“But why can’t I go with you?” she pleaded. “We can just move quickly. I don’t mind.”

“If you were with me and he caught up to us,” he said. “Then I could not guarantee your safety. He’s moving more quickly than he usually does. Before you can join me again, I have to find out how much faster he is moving. And there’s already so

much on the road to look out for. Daughter, I know I promised not to leave you behind anymore but...”

“Who is following you, Papa? We can just move somewhere else, then he can’t find us!” she begged, but his face only twisted in pain at her words.

He wiped his eyes with the edge of his cloak, and Abriel lunged forward, hugging him. Whatever was happening, she loved him. She didn’t want him to cry. “It’s ok, Papa,” she said, swallowing her fear. “When will you come back?”

Silence lingered for a long moment before her father spoke. “I do not know. My journey might take a month or more this time.”

“That’s alright,” she said, but her father was still melancholic and quiet. This was the first time she had seen him express any prolonged feeling besides joy. “What’s wrong?”

“I just want you to be happy, Abriel,” he said, mispronouncing her name as he always did. “Do not end up a tired old man like me, traveling your whole life without end. Find somewhere and make the place your home. A real home, not an oasis where you drop by to rest every now and again. Can you promise me that?”

Abriel thought for a long moment. *Don’t end up like him? What’s wrong with being a courier?* All her adventures with her father had brought her nothing but happiness, so what could he mean?

“You will always be at home when you are with me, child,” her father said, placing a hand on her shoulder. “But one day you will grow old like I have. Your

priorities will...change. The road loses luster, and you will be compelled to find meaning elsewhere. Do you understand what I am saying?"

Abriel nodded, a deep frown set into her jaw. Most of what he said made sense, but she was still unsure that she would ever feel such a way. He kissed her on the forehead, then walked out the door. Two months later, her father returned with a beaming smile on his face, like nothing had ever happened. They hadn't spoken of the conversation since, and he never left her behind again.

When she entered the miners' dining hall for the first time, Abriel was struck by the difference between the living conditions of the home and the atmosphere of the people. Cramped, poorly lit, with a thin layer of grey dirt on the floor—a strange contradiction to the mood expressed by the people there, one that puzzled her. As dinner was served, a flavorless soup, Abriel sat next to the braided woman, Ulthey. The town all ate together, discussing basic matters such as the weather and showing off the gemstones they uncovered that day. There was plenty of jovial laughter, and Abriel couldn't help but notice that her bowl of soup was filled slightly higher than everyone else's. Not wanting to make anyone uncomfortable, she ate without complaint, despite the shame she felt. *I'll put some of my rations in their larder when I get a chance.*

"How do you travel out there all by yourself?" Ulthey asked. She hoisted an energetic young toddler girl onto the bench beside her. "Don't you get scared, or lonely?"

The table grew silent, and all eyes turned towards her, even the toddler, who stared Abriel down with dark blue eyes. Besides Ulthey and her child—Trabor, Ulthey's

husband, and four other young couples all watch her expectantly, a dozen people in total. Abriel swallowed her soup and put down her spoon.

“I had a good teacher. My father taught me how to handle myself on the road before I even went to train as a courier,” she said. “Yes, I do get scared, but I also understand that fear usually doesn’t serve any purpose on the road. If you learn to manage your fear, you can master almost anything, even curses.”

“But you don’t you get lonely?” said Ulthey.

Abriel pondered for a long moment. There were times when the isolation was crushing, and others when it felt like a distant memory. She would pass new people each day, meeting someone different with each delivery. In a way, she was acquainting herself with new places, societies, and pieces of nature with every route she traveled. But did she *feel* lonely? The feeling she had on the plains before reaching the forest surfaced in her memory. Trabor peered at her from across the table, hunched over his bowl of soup, a knowing look in his eyes.

“You don’t have to answer our questions, but please forgive us,” he said. “We’re simple folk who don’t see much excitement beyond a few new shiny gems.” The villagers chuckled at the comment, and Abriel felt the tension in the room lighten a bit.

“That’s alright, I can answer. The truth is, sometimes I find myself in vast stretches of land between civilizations. It’s strange. I feel incredibly lonely at those times, but I also feel closer to something. Like I’m in my element. I’m not sure how to explain it...sorry.”

“But where do you live?” said the toddler.

“Wherever I can find,” Abriel said. “On the road sometimes, if there’s a Cursed Zone nearby.”

“Why?” said the toddler.

“The road protects you from curses,” Abriel said.

“Why?” the toddler repeated.

“Um...”

“Alright, Isheem, that’s enough,” Ulthey said, pointing an admonishing finger at the child. “Go sit with your brother—and don’t ask me *why*.” She turned towards Abriel. “Sorry, she’s at that age where she asks a million questions. Are you planning on having any kids someday?”

Abriel was always caught off guard by the question, even though people asked her frequently enough. She shifted uncomfortably. The question was one she avoided whenever possible. In truth, a part of her did want to raise children one day, just like her father raised her, but what would that mean? What would she have to face? Life as a courier was safe—nobody stayed around long enough to hurt her. A stony, far-off look must have emerged, and the air in the room grew suddenly uncomfortable.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to imply you *should* have kids,” Ulthey said. She smiled apologetically, looking around the table for support. “I guess I ask everyone that question. Please, forget I said anything.”

If only that were possible. As usual, Abriel lay awake that night, staring at the stars through the window in the village’s toolshed, unable to think about anything else.

The next day, Abriel found her mind overloaded with information about land-clearing, crop turnaround times, tilling soil, crop spacing, and plans to build scarecrows to keep away local wildlife. How was she supposed to remember so many details about a single place? She ran a hand through her hair, trying to remember everything Trebor was saying about the ground beneath them before his voice suddenly stopped.

“You don’t have to help us, you know,” he said, noticing the bewildered look on her face. “I know I made things seem pretty bad here, but if you decide to leave, we’ll manage.”

“No, that’s not it,” she replied. “It’s just a lot to take in. I’ve been training to become a courier since I was very young, so I’ve never done anything like this before. Staying in one place feels strange.”

“Sounds like a hard life,” he said. “You’ll like farming, I think. Less pressure.”

“Do you enjoy it?” Abriel asked.

He rubbed his chin. “I think so, yes. The work never paid very well closer to the Core because the Domain would take most of the profits. That’s how I ended up out here. I’m trying to make some more money for my children so they don’t have to live the same life as I did. I don’t think most people are built to endure what I have.” He leaned back, arching his head towards the sky, and Abriel heard several pops followed by a relieved sigh. “My skills are ones born out of suffering. I don’t want that for my children.”

“And what if they want the same life you had? The life of a farmer.”

Trabor examined her. “They do, actually. But I can give them that life and so much more if I’m able to send enough profit back. A nice home, medicine, animals to help with the farms...they would be happier with those things.”

Abriel paused for a moment. What was happiness, really? Did she have it?

“Do you think you need a home to be happy?” she asked, surprised that the words came out at all.

“I do,” he replied, tone measured.

“But didn’t you leave your home to come here?”

“Well—” he paused, then chuckled. “You may have a point there. I guess I gave up happiness for something more important. I have no regrets. I wanted to do this.” He handed her a long tool with a flat, sideways-facing blade. “You start on this side, I’ll start on the other. We can get most of this grass out of the way before nightfall.”

Abriel and Trebor tilled the field for hours. They didn’t finish, but Trebor had started grumbling about a pain in his back, so they returned to the village early. When they arrived, Isheem ran up to Abriel, stopping just in front of her.

“Tag!” she said, slapping Abriel on the knee.

Abriel laughed, listening to the familiar sound of tiny feet padding against dirt. Tag was her favorite game when she was a child, but she was always far too good at the game; none of the other kids would even play with her. They simply couldn’t touch her—or escape her, for that matter. Where were all the kids in town, anyway? Was Isheem the only child around?

Abriel made a game of the chase, but it was too difficult to hold back her speed, and she easily caught up to Isheem far sooner than she intended. “Tag!” she said, gently poking Isheem on the nose.

“No fair,” Isheem said, folding her arms. “You’re even faster than everyone else! I thought maybe you were different.”

“I am, but tag is easy,” Abriel said, pretending to be bored as she looked off into the distance. “You just have to know the *secret*.”

“There’s a secret?” Isheem whispered. “Tell me!”

“My father taught me,” Abriel said, leaning down to adjust Isheem’s stance. “Move with the back of your feet when you aren’t flat out running. Bend your knees and keep your body loose. This makes it easier to change direction.”

“Like this?” Isheem said, hopping loosely from side to side. Abriel nodded, impressed. Isheem seemed to learn quickly.

“But the secret,” Abriel said, peering into Isheem’s eyes. Then, she leapt forward in a flash, stopping an inch away from the girl and poking her on the nose again. Isheem teetered backwards, locked into an instinctual reaction, but she kept her balance. “The secret is to look at your opponent’s feet, not their eyes. The movement of each limb must stop before it can make way for a new one.”

“What?” Isheem asked, cocking her head to the side.

“They can trick you with their eyes.”

“Whoa,” Isheem said, grinning widely as she stared at Abriel’s feet.

“Come on,” Abriel said, interested to see how good the girl could get. “Let’s try again. Before I leave, I promise you’ll even be able to catch your parents.”

Three months had passed since Abriel began working on the farm with Trabor. She found a certain peace in the work. Clearing land, tilling soil, planting seeds, digging a well, watering plants—the tasks were sweaty, tedious, and repetitive at best, yet also freeing, natural. What the plants would eventually produce was nourishment, basic and pure, a way to provide for her needs and the needs of those around her. What else did anyone really require? Trabor waved at her from beneath the overhang of the small stable they had constructed. Abriel didn’t feel comfortable bringing her horse in and out of the Cursed Zone, so they crafted a small, open-aired hut out of stone and mud bricks. Abriel had slept in worse. Most nights, she slept with her horse, talking to the gentle-spirited animal, who listened to each word with curious, perked-up ears.

“Almost finished,” Trabor said, fanning himself with a worn-out leather hat.

Soon, she would have to return to the road. *Maybe I’ll just retire early and become a farmer. I could take payments from my departure account with the Couriers Guild, but I would have to retire to do that.* She knocked her gloves together, removing the caked dirt, and walked to the patch of scallions, removing two from the dirt.

For one of the first times in her life, Abriel felt relaxed. While she didn’t mesh with the villagers in the same way her father would, they accepted her as one of their own. They even offered to pay her a cut of the reward for the gems, and they fed her each night. Was this the home her father would want for her? She wasn’t yet comfortable

living so close to a Cursed Zone, but the experience had been a much-needed reprieve, regardless of what the future held. She tossed one of the scallions to Trabor, and they sat down, chewing on them as a snack. The old farmer was looking healthier, now that the initial harvests had been made.

“Thanks again, Abriel,” Trabor said, clapping her on the shoulder. Abriel shook her head, smiling at his strong grip. The savvy farmer was tougher than he let on when they first met. Just how much was he playing up the “elderly old man” routine?

“You sure you’re an old man?” Abriel asked, testing Trabor’s knotty, thick bicep. “Maybe you’ve just spent too much time farming and the sun made your skin go all leathery.”

Trabor laughed harder than the comment deserved. “Come on. Sun’s setting, we’d better get back to town before nightfall or—” His voice trailed off.

“Trabor?” Abriel said.

“Eh? What’s that?” he said, squinting his eyes.

Abriel followed Trabor’s gaze.

A distant silhouette moved towards them, tall and dark, even as it glinted in the light from the setting sun. The infinite grasslands, bathed in golden dusk sunlight, surrounded the figure. It was as if a foundation had been laid on the earth specifically for the newcomer to cross, a golden carpet blanketing the entirety of the earth. She could hear the figure as he drew closer. Repetitive, even, heavy, metallic footfalls pounded against the dirt. Whoever the stranger was, they were moving closer. Something about

them felt wrong, inexplicably and completely wrong. For the first time in months, the wind went completely still.

“You should get back into the forest,” Abriel said in a low voice. “I’ll talk to him.”

Trabor shook his head, stepping forward. “You’ve done enough for us, Abriel. I’m the leader of my people. This is *my* responsibility.”

“Sounds like he’s armored,” Abriel said. “He might be some kind of knight or lord. Just be careful. Is he from the mining guild, maybe? Is he here to collect?”

“I-I don’t think so,” Trabor whispered. “We haven’t missed any payments.”

Not another word was uttered as the armored figure gradually came into view. There was nothing to say, nothing that wasn’t painfully obvious already. Each step drew him closer, bringing with it a creeping dread as he continued to loom over them more and more with each crushing step. When would he stop getting taller? For one of the first times in her life, Abriel felt awestruck, frozen, helpless, and afraid. Worst of all, she couldn’t understand why. The figure stopped several feet in front of Trabor, who stood between Abriel and the knight. Trabor trembled, unable to speak.

The knight was eight feet tall, wearing matte black and polished gold armor that refracted the light of the sun while simultaneously draining it. There was no gap in the plate that wrapped around thick limbs, connected to two jagged pauldrons that bore opposite colors—one gold, one black—a pattern that continued throughout the rest of the suit of armor, save for a flowing white cape which trailed behind the warrior, drifting gently in some phantasmic, unfelt breeze. Intricate runes and symbols shimmered to life

with soft purple light as they appeared each piece of armor, and the knight slowly outstretched each palm to either side of his body.

Abriel's hand instinctively went to her seax. She gasped as her hand brushed her side. The weapon was at camp with the rest of her supplies. *Dammit! I've grown too comfortable here.*

Like a figure set into stained glass, hands held palm-up at his sides as if offering up a prayer, the knight leaned his helmeted head towards the sky, white plume streaming gently over one shoulder. Two gleaming eyes appeared in a sudden flash of purple light.

In one hand, a flail appeared as a burst of violet. Formed from pure energy, covered in sharp spikes, the spherical beater crashed to the ground in front of Trebor, who stood perfectly still. The warrior hefted his weapon, chain uncoiling as the beater rose into the air above Trebor's head. In his other hand, a purple, glowing longsword materialized.

Trebor turned towards Abriel, eyes wide, face contorted with fear. "Run, child."

The knight swatted Trebor aside with the flat of his longsword. Abriel watched in horror as Trebor was flung through the air, leg bones popping audibly. She ran towards him, scooping him up off the ground in a quick motion, slinging him over one shoulder. His body was surprisingly light, and Abriel realized for the first time just how frail he was. The knight stepped towards them, and Abriel pumped her legs, running hard as she felt a rush of air mere inches behind her followed by the whistle of steel through empty space. A long time had passed since she had to run anywhere—but not that long.

She ran into the forest until she found a small cluster of trees, then stopped in the center of them. The knight entered the forest with the same even strides, pace slightly increased. *Come on, touch the trees. Just bump into one of them!*

Without hesitation, the armored figure, who was far too wide to fit between the trees, collided with several branches. Crystal protrusions exploded around the warrior, firing from each point of contact. A deafening crash echoed throughout the forest as hundreds of crystals all shattered on the armor, the clear stones multiplying infinitely, unable to keep up as they were dashed to pieces against the gold and black armor—produced a deafening whine as the hard crystals scraped against the glossy surface. Like a starry night, glittering bioluminescent stones sprayed from the knight in all directions. Abriel instinctively covered her ears, nearly dropping Trebor.

Their pursuer paused to survey his surroundings, seemingly unphased. He casually struck with his flail, dashing a pair of trees to shards with impunity, misting the forest in blue-green remains. With his other hand, his longsword toppled the other trees to pieces in five clean cuts, clearing a path forward. He continued towards them without so much as a scratch.

Oh. Abriel ran.

He was a cursed knight of some kind, lost in the wilderness. He *had* to be. But what kind of curse gave someone sorcery, the ability to summon weapons? Then was he a sorcerer? *I've never seen anyone so tall in my life, and why does he move like that?* The warrior followed her, occasionally snapping branches that lashed out at him with a

barrage of crystals, crushing the trees that stood in his path. His pace increased, rhythmic steps growing faster.

Trebor groaned, shifting his weight as he returned to consciousness.

“Hold still,” Abriel said. “I’m getting us out of here.”

Trebor’s body grew heavier by the minute. Abriel wouldn’t have lost her endurance, even after three months, but she hadn’t carried anything heavy since delivering the crop seeds to the village. When she finally reached the small mining colony, she was starting to feel winded, but she had gained enough distance from the knight to think of a plan.

The villagers were sitting on the edge of the mine, eating lunch. Ulthey’s husband, Jereb, rushed towards her and took Trebor into his arms; the old farmer’s legs swung beneath him unnaturally.

“What happened?” Jereb said, gaping at Trebor’s legs. “His legs are broken!”

“No time!” Abriel said, turning towards the miners on their lunch break.

“Everyone inside! Stay quiet!”

The villagers complied, hearing the urgency in her voice. Abriel rushed into the nearby toolshed where she had left her courier supplies. There, she donned her grey cloak and bag, clipping her seax to her belt. She hadn’t worn her garb in ages, but the grey cloak felt as natural as it always had. Abriel’s head turned as she heard a noise beside her. A tiny gasp followed a crash as a rake and shovel fell over. Ulthey’s daughter, Isheem, was hiding behind a large box of gems, hands clasped over her mouth.

“What are you doing in here?” Abriel asked.

“I just wanted to look at it,” she said, holding up some of Abriel’s jerky, which had clearly been chewed on.

“You can have it, just stay quiet,” Abriel said.

Shifting plate, heavy footfalls, a sense of dread in the pit of Abriel’s stomach intensified as the knight drew closer; she peeked out of the small window in the shed. The knight was walking through town, head scanning from left to right. He stopped in the center, growing still. The flail in his right hand dissipated into purple mist as he retrieved something from a pouch at his waist. The object was silver, round, and small, resting in the palm of his gauntleted hand. Abriel squinted at the object. It wasn’t a compass, but something about it seemed familiar. *I’ve seen that device at headquarters. The sorcerer who gave me my tattoo, he had a shelf full of objects just like that.*

Abriel watched the man curiously. Something about his curse was unlike any she had ever seen; he was otherworldly, almost regal in appearance. The white plume on the top of his head was almost glowing with brilliance, paired with the stark cape that trailed behind him, unstained by dirt, untouched by the crystalline assault. The gold plate was perfectly polished, mirror-like; the black plate was a void, non-reflective. Who was he? His movements were stiff and controlled, and somehow she got the feeling that he wasn’t alive at all. His head rose as he replaced the round item back into his pouch, and then his head turned—toward Abriel. She froze, realization hitting her. The knight started walking towards the toolshed.

He wasn’t after Trebor, or any of the villagers—he was after Abriel.

But why? What had she done? How did he even know where she was?

“Hey Isheem,” Abriel said. “Time to play tag.” Abriel opened the door, pointing to the knight. “He’s it. Run towards the dining hall. Go now!”

Isheem must have detected the seriousness in her voice, because she ran without hesitation, staring at the knight’s feet the entire time. Abriel felt suddenly proud as she ran alongside the small child that reminded her so much of herself. However, Abriel ignored the knight’s feet and looked at the knight’s eyes, which watched her closely. The door to the dining hall swung open, and Ulthey rushed forward, taking Isheem into her arms with a relieved cry. Trebor lay on the table, writhing in pain as the rest of the village examined his legs.

“I’m sorry,” Abriel whispered. “I think he is after me. Something isn’t right. It’s not safe for me to stay. I’m so sorry...”

Trebor stilled and turned towards her. “You have a home here,” he began, voice trembling. “Any time.”

It was the last thing she expected to hear from him. Tortured, mutilated, and possibly dying, he still found time to say exactly what she needed to hear. Tears blurred her vision.

And then, suddenly, Abriel remembered. There was a reason why she remained a courier, why she had become one in the first place. Forgotten people were everywhere, discarded, abused, and suffering. She was once one of them. Regardless of what she wanted, regardless of the need for a home or a desire for family, everything else paled in comparison to her *need* to help those around her. Each delivery brought new chances to

give hope to others, opportunities she would take without hesitation every day for the rest of her life. Her father was wrong—she didn't need a home. She never did.

Abriel outstretched her hand, placing it gently on Isheem's cheek. The child calmly nibbled on the piece of jerky, seemingly oblivious to what was happening. Abriel smiled, feeling alive once again.

"Keep practicing," she said.

Abriel closed the door and didn't look back. Glowing purple eyes met hers, and the knight walked steadily towards her.

"What do you want from me?" she asked, glaring coldly. He...it didn't seem to hear her.

An idea came to her, and she sprinted around the knight in a wide berth. *Time to see how fast this thing can run.* Entering the crystalline forest, she stilled her mind, opening her senses to her surroundings. If she touched a single branch, tripped up, or made the slightest of mistakes, it would all be over. She ran.

Her feet danced across the ground, ducking branches, stepping around trees, hopping over roots, each footfall lighter than the next as she found her rhythm, a silent blur of grey in the blue-green glow of the forest. All the rules, secrets, training, and techniques she had learned over years of relentless practice merged into subconscious action with each step as Abriel's complete mastery of agility was fully unleashed. The knight wouldn't catch her.

Trees crashed behind her as she observed the warrior accelerate to a run, speed increasing with each passing moment. She frowned, irritated with how it effortlessly ignored the onslaught of crystals, bashing branches aside with its sword or simply barreling through them, unaffected.

Fifteen minutes later, Abriel broke out of the Cursed Zone once again, lungs heaving from exertion. Her horse was still tied in place, and Abriel ran inside, untying and mounting her in two smooth motions.

“Let’s go, girl. Run!” Abriel squeezed the mare’s sides, but they were already moving, rushing by the knight as he burst out of the forest in a spray of glassy foliage. “Let’s see if this works.”

Abriel rode, allowing the knight to keep pace with her. The vibrations in the ground started sooner than she expected. The Builder, who was much closer than anticipated, had made significant progress. As she approached the golem, the strange, empty feeling returned as Abriel looked around her. Only her, the horse, the Builder, and the knight existed in the middle of an ocean of flat land. Darkness had fallen, washing the grassland with soft golden light from the moon. Even in this life-or-death situation, she was still completely alone. *No, she thought. I can’t think about this right now.*

Abriel galloped towards the Builder, stopping right underneath two towering legs. It stopped, long head peering down at her as it stood up straight. She stared into the void at the Builder’s center, mere feet away from her face. For a moment, she thought she glimpsed a vast field of stacked tiles with more Builders moving about, transporting

materials. The portal, which before was outlined by a slightly golden color—went a deep red.

The ground shook violently beneath her. Yellow eyes shifted crimson as the Builder's arms and legs of floating stone grew taller, rocks violently emerging from the ground in a shower of dirt and grass to merge with each limb, which grew thicker with each pebble added. Then, something emerged from the portal, sharp and crimson. Metal shimmered even as the object cast a shadow over her, the wide blade blocking out the golden moonlight. A misshapen stone claw clenched the sword, withdrawing it in a flash. Without hesitation, the Builder plunged the faintly glowing red blade down towards her.

Abriel released a slow trailing breath, opening herself to the situation, observing each movement. The point of the blade fell. She moved her horse to the side. The knight barreled closer towards them in the distance, summoning a weapon. As the red blade struck the ground, and the Builder dragged the sword towards Abriel, but she had already moved her mare, passing between the two towering legs. Chunks of dirt flew in an arc as the sword sliced through the terrain. A rocky leg kicked backward, and Abriel moved towards the other leg, raising her horse to push at it with both front hooves, throwing the giant automaton off balance as it tried to skip away from her. Abriel jumped from atop her horse, slapping the mare's rear to send her away from the oncoming danger, a request to which the horse happily obliged.

In a surprising show of agility, the Builder leaped, turning to face Abriel far faster than she anticipated would be possible for such a massive creature, holding the sword above its head in preparation to swing. She gritted her teeth. *It may have me. There's nowhere to run!* Behind it, the knight charged, running between towering stone legs with

a purple energy lance pointed straight towards Abriel. She released a relieved breath, her way out finally arriving. Just like the crystalline trees, the warrior didn't seem to process threats very quickly. *Too late!* The Builder was already mid-downward swing, just as the knight made a thrust towards her. She would have to dodge both blows at once.

Abriel feigned running to her left, then ran right. The knight adjusted his lance to follow her, not buying into Abriel's bluff, but she still ducked under the blow, falling into a roll between the knight's legs. The Builder's blade, originally aiming for Abriel, crashed into the warrior's shoulder with a loud clang, collapsing him to his knees. Abriel stood between the two titans, eyes darting from one opponent to the other. The knight's lance shifted, form rippling with energy as it convulsed, reshaping into an enormous violet greatsword. With both hands, the knight clasped his weapon, twisting and swinging at the Builder's red blade on his shoulder. Like a massive window being pulverized in a second, a hideous sound rang out across the plains as the Builder's much larger weapon snapped in half. The broken red tip spun through the air and buried itself point-first into the ground next to Abriel. She swallowed. Another crimson blade emerged from the Builder's core, which it drew, holding the weapon towards the knight.

The knight calmly observed the Builder's movements and lowered itself into a stance, sword raised above its plumed head. While the warrior was large, it was still only about one third of the Builder's size. Abriel's heart beat loudly in her chest as she stood between the two lifeless monstrosities, waiting for the chance to make her move.

Twisting purple energy spiraled beneath the knight as he leapt an unnatural height towards the Builder's head. The Builder deflected. Abriel ran. If she could remove herself from the situation, the Builder might be able to destroy her pursuer. Her horse scampered

in a circle at a safe distance from the battlefield. Abriel caught up to the horse and hopped into her saddle, galloping away.

She stopped at a safe distance, the figures mere glowing silhouettes in the distance. What she saw was impossible. The Builder and knight leapt through the air, seemingly untethered by gravity. Flashes of red and purple light clashed against one another with incalculable force. Abriel's hands trembled, a sickening feeling arising from deep within. How naive she had been, to dare feel confident and safe in a world where such beings existed. She was lucky to have escaped.

The battle quieted, flashes of light winking out, and she saw a shape in gold-black armor standing atop the Builder's head, shimmering in the moonlight. Glowing, violet, the knight's greatsword was buried in between the Builder's eyes, eyes that blinked, flickered, then went dark. Each limb collapsed to the ground in a heap of rubble; the red void at the automaton's core trembled and exploded, sending out a shock wave that knocked Abriel off-balance. She yelped in surprise. What had she gotten herself into? She was only a courier. Why would something so powerful be pursuing her? The knight emerged from the debris, dual pins of purple light flashing as it stared at her and stepped onto the road unharmed. Abriel grimaced. *The knight isn't cursed, then.*

However, something made the knight pause, movements becoming labored as it moved forward as if pushing against an invisible force. The knight collapsed to its knees, hands clasping the side of its gold-black helm. A miserable, frustrated scream erupted from within, a tortured man's wail that reverberated across the plains. But as soon as the scream started, it was abruptly cut off, the outcry collapsing into a suppressed, choking

groan. Then, in perfect silence, and as if nothing had happened, the knight stood, moving towards her once again.

Abriel turned and galloped away at full speed.

They rode hard through the night, stopping only for intermitted breaks. Her horse could likely endure a prolonged sprint, but Abriel didn't see the need. She was lucky couriers had such well-conditioned horses. They weren't built for sheer speed, but their endurance was legendary. The sun rose over the horizon, the landscape turning into a more familiar green forest. Abriel sighed with relief, kissing her mare on the back of her neck, grateful.

"You know," Abriel said, yawning. "I really should name you one of these days."

Abriel settled her mare into a comfortable speed, then relaxed in her saddle, feeling herself slip out of consciousness. She tied her waist to a custom strap for sleeping on horseback so she wouldn't fall, then leaned forward, eyes fluttering shut. Before darkness took her, a pit formed in her stomach. An image of two roads appeared before her in the state between waking and dreaming. She wanted to take both paths, but they went in different directions. Why? It didn't seem fair. Why did she want connection with others, yet true bonds eluded her so often?

"How about Isheem?" she murmured. "That's a good name, right?"

Abriel fell asleep, dreaming of taking the road she never could.

Curse Breaker: Part I

Power wielded through intent, the source of life, fountain of all things. The two powers will one day be united again. It is inevitable. Though our brothers and sisters have lost their way, take comfort, as the source itself will never fade.

-Last recorded words of the Twin Gods, Syfus and Kailes, before their disappearance

The road bisected, splitting in two paths that surrounded the Cursed Zone in front of Abriel. A woman in flowing maroon robes sat atop her horse, staring into the rippling event horizon, frozen. How could Abriel blame her for hesitating? Abriel wasn't exactly thrilled to be entering the Cursed Zone herself. The air on the other side of the road was an eerie green color, blurry and undulating, almost like the space was entirely underwater. A heavy mist rolled from the slowly shifting border, which stretched far into the sky, disappearing into fog. Something about the way the woman looked into the Cursed Zone seemed terribly sad.

"Excuse me," Abriel said.

The woman flinched in her saddle, turning around to face Abriel. She released a relieved breath, holding a calming hand to her chest. While the woman seemed tightly wound, something about the look in her eyes made Abriel want to trust her immediately. There was an intensity to her, carefully wrapped in an energy that radiated both warmth

and strength at the same time. Maybe that aspect of her personality reminded Abriel of her father.

“Sorry, I thought you heard me coming,” Abriel said, pulling Isheem next to the other woman’s horse.

“Wow. No, it’s alright. I was trying to work up the courage to go in, so I didn’t hear you coming,” she said, wiping sweat from her brow. She was tall and pale, with blonde hair that hung to her shoulders, a silver pendant contrasting against the dark red color of her garb.

“You have to go inside too?” Abriel asked, nodding to the threshold just in front of their horses.

“Yeah,” the woman said, turning to face the wall of bizarre, flowing energy. “But I can’t shake this feeling that if I step inside, I’ll drown.”

Abriel reached her hand across the horizon. “It feels colder inside, more humid, but it doesn’t feel like water.” She withdrew her delivery notes.

“What’s that?” said the much taller woman, leaning in to read over Abriel’s shoulder. “Seems official.”

“Just some instructions for my delivery. I’m a courier. Name’s Abriel.”

“Who the hell is taking a delivery in a place like this?” the woman blurted. “Sorry. I’m Tiv. I’m a scribe on a pilgrimage to receive the blessing of Tennant. His temple is supposed to be inside.”

“An aspiring sorcerer? You sure acquiring the magic of the Gods is worth the risk of entering a Cursed Zone like this?” Abriel asked.

Tiv frowned, furrowing her brow. “Yes. My mission is too important for me to fail,” she sighed. “That, and I’ve exhausted almost every other option. Most of the other Gods have rejected me.”

“Sorry,” Abriel said. She had heard of the way sorcerers sought power. Even the strongest of humans were beholden to the influence of Gods.

“It’s alright,” Tiv said, her gaze lingering on Abriel’s exposed shoulder. Abriel squirmed under the stare. She usually didn’t like to reveal that she was a courier, but the humidity in the region forced her to remove her cloak, opting instead for her sleeveless grey shirt. “Your silver tattoo, did the courier’s guild ever tell you where the ink comes from?”

“All I know is the ink they use helps them track me and makes me more agile, I think. I guess I haven’t really thought about where they got the liquid,” Abriel said. After all, there wasn’t much of a downside to having the tattoo.

“They can track you because the ink comes from the fountain of Mirriel,” Tiv said, nodding with a self-satisfied grin. “What’s called a courier tattoo is really nothing more than one of the two blessings of Mirriel.”

Abriel lifted her arm to observe the tattoo of an outstretched palm, a symbol that was supposed to mean something about her life. Though, what the image meant, Abriel still had no idea.

“You seem to know a lot about sorcery and the Gods. Maybe you can help me with something,” Abriel said, holding up her notes to Tiv, who took them. “You’re a scribe, right? What do you make of this?”

“Inside you will find the Temple of Tennant, God of the lost and purposeless,” Tiv said, reading the notes aloud. “This area is Tennant’s Prime Domain. Reports indicate that the temple is the only constant location that exists within the Cursed Zone.” She paused. “Wait, what does that mean?”

“Keep reading,” Abriel said. “It doesn’t get any clearer.”

“Survivors of this Zone indicate the temple as being the only way out,” Tiv continued. “But only those who are clear of purpose will ever leave. Detailed accounts provide little other overlapping information. We suspect this Cursed Zone affects the senses. Means unknown. Proceed with extreme caution and do not linger.”

“What do you think?” Abriel asked. She watched Tiv, who stroked her chin, a fiercely concentrated look on her face.

“Seems dangerous,” Tiv said. Abriel gave her a flat stare.

“What?” Tiv said. “It’s a curse, right? Those are dangerous.”

“Good point,” Abriel replied, suppressing a smirk.

A harsh gust of wind blew from beyond the twisting, watery threshold, and a thick cloud of white mist billowed around them. For the briefest of moments, Abriel thought she heard faint whispers from across the threshold. The horses stirred, their wide eyes

moving rapidly from side to side. “Shh,” Abriel said, patting Isheem’s neck. “It’s alright.”

“H-hey,” Tive said. “I have an idea. You said you need to make a delivery, right? I need to go and make my offering. Maybe we could, you know...” She gave Abriel a meaningful look.

Abriel watch the scholar, puzzled. What was she getting at?

Tiv slumped in her saddle. “Are you really going to make me beg? Let’s travel together, at least until we finish our business in *there*. I don’t know if I can do this alone.”

Abriel considered. Experience had taught her not to trust most people she met on the road, but Tiv seemed more genuine than most. In a way, she seemed to wear her thoughts and feelings on her shoulder. Then again, Abriel didn’t need help. Unless Tiv was more formidable than she looked, she would probably only get in the way. Abriel looked into the scholar’s eyes. They were wide, pleading, determined, and as difficult as it was to admit, entirely honest and vulnerable. The scribe was right—someone like her *wouldn’t* survive on her own. Abriel sighed.

“Alright,” she said.

“Yes!” Tiv said. “Let’s go!”

Tiv stepped inside, and Abriel hesitated, feeling a pit form inside her stomach. Something about the notes had her worried. *Those who are clear of purpose. I’m clear of purpose, right? I make deliveries. I help people.* She dismissed the thoughts and stepped inside.

Passing through produced a strange vertigo, despite how slowly they entered. Abriel shivered, covering her arms with her courier's cloak. Then, the humidity hit, followed by a scent not unlike the wilderness Abriel expected, yet somehow stale and tinged with something unfamiliar, unnatural, which caused a slight tingling in her nostrils as she breathed in. If the scent wasn't heavy enough, their surroundings were. Everything was covered in a thin, verdant-grey fog. *What's wrong with my eyes?* Abriel blinked hard, reopening her eyes to see the blurry shape of Tiv beside her, whose figure was warped as if underneath a foot of water. The forest around them was sparse, with large gaps between the trees, which were entirely different species from the forests surrounding the Cursed Zone. A bed of vibrant, freshly-fallen yellow leaves covered the ground. Crooked, bent in strange ways, difficult to distinguish, the shapes around Abriel were difficult to perceive.

Tiv groaned. "Ugh. I don't feel so good," she said, turning her horse around. "I think I need to step back out for a minute." But the road behind them was gone, replaced by a sparse meadow. "Oh, hell."

"One way out, right?" Abriel muttered. Squinting her eyes, she thought she saw a white shape far in the distance, untouched by the visual warping. A building, perhaps?

"Do you see that?" Abriel said.

"Yeah," Tiv said. "It looks different than everything else. It doesn't seem as...swirly."

"Let's go," Abriel said.

As they steered their horses forward, the shape of the temple becoming clearer in the distance, silhouettes began to move in the fog around them. A doe, green and translucent, bounded between their horses, a line of grey mist trailing behind. Unlike everything else, the spirit was clearly visible as it hopped away. Isheem moved away from the spirit and ran in a quick circle, shaking her head from side to side.

“I don’t like it either,” Abriel said. “Sorry, girl.”

“Abriel,” Tiv whispered between clenched teeth as she pulled on the reins of her horse, bulging eyes following a pair of see-through green squirrels chasing each other up a tree. “Please tell me you’re seeing all this. This feels like the time me and my sister stole some mushrooms from the apothecary’s garden.”

Abriel chuckled. “You sure they were an apothecary?”

She pulled Isheem to a halt. Was her imagination playing tricks on her, or was the temple further away than it was a moment ago? Continuing for another ten minutes, the verdant, translucent spirit of a man dressed like a soldier wandered in front of them, clearly visible through the bizarre fog. He stopped, craning his neck in their direction.

“You,” he said, his voice a hoarse, echoey whisper. “Do you need a sell-sword by any chance?”

Abriel and Tiv shook their heads in unison. Even Isheem gave a quick, derisive snort.

“Pity,” he said, stumbling away into the mist.

Dozens of green spirits, some on foot, others on horseback, wandered helplessly through the mist, lost and directionless. Were they real? Why were spirits wandering this place? Their expressions were confused, eyes turning from side to side, heads twisting as if they were seeing something Abriel couldn't.

"This place...I feel like we're in another world." Tiv said, fear evident in her voice. She pointed ahead. "Hold on. Wasn't the temple closer a moment ago?"

"Yes," Abriel admitted, her heart sinking as she realized that the temple had, once again, drifted into the distance.

"Maybe breaking eye contact causes the temple to disappear," Tiv said, shrugging.

Abriel exchanged glances with Tiv, then nodded, locking her eyes to the building.

As they inched closer to the temple, their surroundings grew more and more busy. Spirits of all kinds, ages, and appearance spoke to them, wandered alongside them, reached towards them. It took all the self-control Abriel had to keep her eyes forward as a hand passed through her torso, sending chills through her body. Isheem accelerated with a startled whinny.

"Tiv, come here!" shouted a voice behind them. "Something's coming out of the sky!"

Tiv reacted to the voice, pulling her horse to a stop. "Wait, what's happening?"

"Don't look, Tiv. This could be a trick to force us to look away from the temple," Abriel said, stopping beside her.

“You don’t understand. That was my grandmother’s voice,” Tiv said, voice trembling. “She’s been dead for twenty years. What if her spirit is trapped here, or maybe—”

“I’ll look for you,” Abriel said. “Keep your eyes forward.”

Abriel turned to see the speaker, an older woman. She wasn’t green like the other spirits, but she was translucent, intangible as she stared upward into the fog, holding a basket of fruit. Her wrist went limp, red apples spilling over the golden leaves as the basket tipped over. In her other hand, she guided a young girl, perhaps five years old.

“It’s some kind of illusion,” Abriel said, squinting. “I can’t see anything beyond the two of them. That little girl is named Tiv too?”

“Gods above. They’re turning us to stone,” the older woman said, looking at something imperceptible in the distance. She gasped. “They’re turning all of us to stone. The road, Tiv! Get onto the road!”

A crackling sound, aggressive and growing louder by the second, traveled towards them. Isheem snorted, stepping in place nervously. With a desperate cry, the older woman picked up the young Tiv and threw her to the side in a remarkable display of strength. The crackling sound distorted to a harsh snap, and then everything went quiet. The woman’s body became stiff, frozen in mid-motion, skin growing dull. Her face was still, mouth permanently open in a shout of fearful determination, arms forever locked into a throwing motion.

“Gran?” said the young girl, picking herself up off the ground. She reached up to tug on her mother’s dress, but her hand was unable to grasp the stone fabric. Both spirits

dissipated, caught by a sudden wind, becoming one with the mist. Abriel looked at Tiv, who was visibly shaken.

“It’s over,” Abriel whispered, staring back towards the temple that was, thankfully, still in place. “It was an illusion. Let’s just get out of here.”

“That wasn’t an illusion,” Tiv said, moving her horse forward. “It was a memory.”

Tiv was quiet for the next few minutes, and Abriel was locked deep in thought about what she saw. Something was familiar about the way Tiv and her grandmother looked up at the sky. If her theory was correct, what she saw was something Abriel had also experienced first-hand.

A sound, a voice—a familiar, jagged knife, rang out from behind them. Abriel cringed, resisting the urge to shrink into herself as a memory long since forgotten came to life in the mist. Despite the years she had spent away from her original parents, it still stung to hear their voices. What torturous intent was carried in the fog? To show images and create sounds was not beyond possibility, but to look into Abriel’s mind, into her most private memories, stories she had never shared with anyone—that was impossible.

“Wretched creature!” her mother yelled.

“Fool girl!” her father shouted.

“Stay calm, Abriel,” Tiv said, shifting in her saddle. “I’ll look for you. Focus on the temple.”

“Look at what you’ve done,” said Abriel’s mother, her voice strained. Abriel couldn’t see as she kept her eyes on the temple, but she would never forget the mournful tears, the wild twisting of her mother’s face. “Look at what you’ve become. Have you seen yourself? You bring shame to our family!”

“I’m sorry,” said Abriel’s younger self, voice warped, deep, echoey, and inhuman. Abriel hadn’t heard her old tone of voice from the outside before. It sounded more terrifying than she remembered. “I just wanted to look at it.”

“Get out of this house Abriel. No, get out you...you monster!” said her father, his voice carrying an implied threat. On that day, he was enraged to the point where he picked up a knife, holding the point towards her. “You are no daughter of ours! Go!”

The look on his face that day had been full of fear, contempt. Rage. The rejection had nearly caused her heart to stop.

Abriel stood up straight in her saddle, taking a long, deep breath, blinking through watery eyes. *I’m not there. This isn’t real, whatever it is. They were wrong. I’m not a beast.* Her lower lip quivered as she tried to stifle the torrent of emotions rushing through her. She had made peace with her parents, had forgiven them long ago, but she had also been caught off guard. How could she have expected to encounter her old family in a Cursed Zone, even as an illusion of an old memory? *What exactly is this place?*

“They were talking to something inhuman, a creature of some kind,” Tiv said, voice full of concern. “Abriel, that thing—was that really you?” She straightened in her saddle, clearing her throat. “That’s it! To hell with all of this! Come on, Abriel!” She

sped up to a gallop, the hooves of her horse kicking up a small whirlwind of yellow leaves behind her.

Abriel followed, eager to flee from the memories behind her. However, the assault only grew worse as they moved closer to the temple, which resembled an enormous stone gazebo. The building was perfectly round, tall, and formed from thick pillars of marble, the roof a cone of perfectly smooth stone. Old, forgotten voices berated them from all angles.

“You aren’t cut out for the life of a scribe, Tiv,” said a deep, consoling voice. “I recommend returning to the church of Mirriel with the rest of the orphans. Go live the life of a servant—you’ll be happier.”

A strange vertigo consumed Abriel as she glued her eyes to the temple in front of her. So much was happening in her peripheral vision, but she couldn’t look.

“Bring the hounds to the front!” said another voice, familiar to Abriel. “Listen up! She can’t be far. If you find her first, don’t let her touch you. The curse could spread for all we know.”

She tried to shut the voices out, but blocking them proved impossible. Her world was reduced to a tunnel. There was only her, the sounds around her, and the temple.

“Enough! What a pathetic offering,” echoed a booming voice. “My blessing is for the strong, the intelligent, the powerful. Leave now, scribe, and consider yourself fortunate that I allow you to walk away from this hallowed ground at all.”

The world twisted, yellow leaves lifting around them, falling upwards into the sky. She prayed silently to Mirriel that Tiv was still beside her and not lost in the surrounding chaos. *Stay focused. Stay focused!*

“Get away!” said a voice, but Abriel couldn’t pinpoint the specific memory. She had heard a version of the words too many times. “Take my marks. Take everything. Just leave us alone!”

Abriel blocked out the rest of the noise, relief flooding into her as they finally arrived at their destination. Afraid to close her eyes, to even blink lest the temple disappear before her. It took considerable effort to tear her eyes away to check for Tiv who was, thankfully, standing next to her atop her horse. Slow, subdued, the two of them stepped onto the marble floor of the temple, exchanging weary looks as their vision finally returned to normal. Tiv frowned, holding a bleak, somber expression as she dismounted, leading her horse further inward. A man sat in the middle of the circular marble floor, cross-legged and shirtless. He was middle-aged, with dark skin that was nearly covered in tattoos. As they drew closer, Abriel realized that there was no discernable pattern to the tattoos, no deliberate shape; they were gradually shifting across his body as if seeking a structure to settle on, a form they couldn’t find. His eyes were pale and limp, like they had never before seen the light.

“Wait,” Abriel said. Tiv stopped, looking back at her over slumped shoulders. This scribe was a victim of a curse, like she once was. Abriel didn’t like to talk about her curse, the memories of those days filled her with unease, but withholding the truth felt wrong. “Before you make your offering, I want to talk to you.”

“Can this wait? I kind of want to get this over with,” Tiv said, smiling through visible pain. “There are other Gods out there to turn me away.”

“I know what you saw in the sky that day,” Abriel said. “I’ve seen it too.”

Twenty-one years ago...

Abriel tugged her mother’s dress. “Mama,” she said, pointing to the passing palanquin. “Look at her.”

A woman sat atop silk cushions, draped in flowing purple, gold-trimmed robes. Dark tattoos slowly drifted past her sleeves, peeking just above her neckline. *Are her tattoos moving?* Her hair was smooth, pitch black, shimmering, held in place by a silver crown with gems that glittered blue like the stars. The crown was the most beautiful object Abriel had ever seen. The woman’s expression was severe, even as people called her name in praise. But her eyes remained forward, never once turning to the side, head tilted slightly backward. Despite the sunny weather, a single cloud drifted over her, following her everywhere she went, blocking out the light. A small army of soldiers wielding ornate halberds and wearing gold-painted armor surrounded the palanquin, pushing aside the crowds.

“Where are they going?” Abriel asked.

“To the lord’s house,” her mother said in a reverent voice. “Yereise is the Avatar of Kosh, the God of the heavens. She only stays in the nicest place in town.”

A man at the edge of the crowd screamed, attempting to charge the palanquin, but the woman didn't so much as flinch or bat an eye as a dozen guards speared her attacker to death. Abriel stared in disbelief. What was happening to him?

"Look away, Abriel," said her mother idly as she craned her neck, trying to get a better view.

"Is he dead?" Abriel asked.

"No," said her mother, looking disappointed as the guards dragged the body out of view. "He's just...asleep. He'll be fine."

"Mama," Abriel said, pointing to Yereise. "I want to be like her."

Her mother snorted, the typical disappointed sneer forming on her face. "You'd have to be somebody for that to happen. People like us, we're nothing. Get used to it," she said, roughly pulling Abriel away by the arm.

Abriel frowned, head hanging low as her mother led them home, away from the parade. "*You're* nothing," Abriel muttered, angry tears forming in her eyes.

"What was that?" her mother said through her teeth, yanking Abriel's arm. The pulling hurt, but the brief pain wouldn't hurt as much as the beating she would receive from her father when she got home. A sudden, indignant rage overcame Abriel, turning her face red, breath coming in heaving tremors.

"I *hate* you!" Abriel said, jerking free and darting back into the crowd.

"You get back here *right now!*" her mother said, chasing after her, voice drowning out among the cheers of the crowd. But Abriel was too quick. "Abriel? Abriel!"

Abriel followed the procession for the next hour, blending with the crowd until Yereise reached the lord's manor just outside of town. Suddenly, a portion of the crowd drew weapons, rushing the soldiers with vicious screams, while many others threw rocks and jeered. Yereise glanced over her shoulder for a brief moment, the first time she had acknowledged those around her since she arrived, then yawned as she walked through the front door of the manor. A team of servants followed her inside, carrying her bags. Abriel seized her chance, darting past a pair of distracted guards who were too busy managing the angry mobs to notice a small four year old slip beneath their line.

She cracked the door to the lord's mansion, looking for a place to hide. She had visited the manor once with her father, so she knew where to hide. There was a small closet full of coats near the entrance. Yereise and her servants walked up the stairs, disappearing into the lord's now-commandeered bedroom. Without a whisper or a peep, Abriel tip-toed into the closet, hiding behind a long coat, listening with intense fascination to the bustle of activity as the hours passed. Once things quieted down, she eased the door open. The entry hall was finally empty.

She ran upstairs, crawling up the steps on all fours. As she peeked into the lord's bedroom, she saw no one. The chambers were empty. Everything was wrapped in luxury. From the bed to the soft carpet on the floor, no an inch of the room was spared of blue, purple, or silver adornments. But Abriel didn't care, she had only one true desire. Where was it? Where was the crown? A pure silver vanity glittered with sparkling items—items that called her name. She ran inside, climbing onto the stool to observe the treasures before her. And there it was. The crown still sparkled, even in the dim candlelight. She gingerly lifted the smooth silver circlet, placing the regal adornment upon her head. A

small hand mirror, pure silver and adorned with dark jewels, lay nearby. She picked it up, slowly, reverently, and looked at her reflection.

Drawing in a breath, she turned her head to let the sparkles of the crown flicker in the dim light. What she saw was everything she had hoped and more. Abriel felt like a real queen.

“You’re either very lucky or quite foolish, little bug,” said an even, cold voice. Were it not for the refined, deliberate manner of speech, Abriel might have mistaken it for her mother’s voice.

Abriel yelped, flinching away from the voice and falling off the stool. The crown clattered to the wood floor, the mirror slipping out of her hand as she reached out to brace her fall. She spilled onto the floor with a loud thud. Groaning, bruised, Abriel pulled something uncomfortable wedged under her back. It was the crown, bent out of shape and cracked, each indigo gem scattered across the floor like starlight. The moment felt odd to Abriel, to be so afraid and yet so disappointed at the same time was something entirely new. She was in danger, but she had also ruined something beautiful.

Yereise, Avatar of Kosh, rose into the air and drifted towards Abriel, feet gliding just above the ground on a cool, invisible breeze. Yereise’s expression was dark, her eyes devoid of compassion, devoid of life. It was a startling sight to Abriel. How could something so beautiful look so frightening at the same time? She once thought her father could be the most terrifying person in the world, but this—this was different. As their eyes locked, she felt cast aside, powerless, like a tiny beetle trapped on its back. Abriel’s

breathing became shallow, and for some reason she was certain if she moved even an inch, she would die.

“Come,” said Yereise, arching her wrist lazily through the air.

Abriel felt herself lift off of her back, yanked into the air by what felt like a violent, tearing wind, squeezing her in place from all sides as she floated just behind Yereise, who guided her out of the bedroom and down the staircase, unhurried. Several guards who were rushing to Yereise’s aid quickly stood at attention and pressed themselves against the wall to let her pass, the whites of their eyes visible through the tiny slits in their helms. Rushing wind caused the curtains to flutter out of control, harsh gusts toppling furniture as the front doors burst open, torn from their hinges and scattering across the courtyard, embedding in the dirt. All but the Avatar of Kosh’s robes were thrown into chaos by invisible torrents of power. Abriel felt a whimper escape her lips as she was drifted outside.

“Do you know who I am, little one?” Yereise asked, releasing Abriel and dropping her gently onto the stone pathway opposite her.

“Yereise, Avatar of Kosh,” Abriel said between shuddering breaths.

“And do you know what that means?” she asked, her voice consoling, like that of a teacher admonishing an unruly student. Her kindness was a lie. Abriel shook her head.

“It means I embody the ideals of the heavens themselves,” she said, her voice growing increasingly steely with each word as she continued towards Abriel, looming over her. “That crown has been passed on through Avatars of Kosh for countless millennia. Through kings, queens, warlords, and nobles alike. I was granted his power

because of who I am. Because I strive for beauty, serenity. Power. Because I earned it. I showed him who I was. You—” She reached to touch Abriel’s chin, rubbing the beading sweat between her thumb and forefinger, peering down at the clammy liquid with a wrinkled nose before wiping her hand dry on Abriel’s shirt. “Are nothing. And yet you dare to steal Kosh’s symbol of power, despite this fact. In a way, I admire your courage truly, your drive to be better. But tell me, little bug—can an *insect* reach the heavens?” She spat the final words, standing tall, staring down her nose at Abriel.

There was nothing to say as she lay there on her back, numb, taking in the sight of Yereise. The sight of her made Abriel feel faint. Her short life was over. Surely death was all that awaited her.

Thunder boomed all around them, a sound that Abriel could feel in her bones. The sky went dark with smoky, rapidly billowing storm clouds, snuffing out the last embers of the dusk sun in moments. Yereise’s demeanor shifted, and she stumbled backward with a startled cry, then fell to her knees, planting her face to the ground, her black hair cascading into the dirt. The onlookers, including her guards and servants, all frantically mimicked her actions.

“Spare me, Kosh,” Yereise whispered, her whole body trembling. “I am your loyal retainer.” Her trembling stilled.

Then, slowly, Yereise stood, brushing her hair back into place with her hands. Her eyes opened, now glowing indigo, and her former aura of cold serenity was replaced by one of a wise elder looking down at her young grandchildren. No longer did she stare down her nose as she met Abriel’s terrified gaze. Yereise made her feel weak, almost

completely powerless, but this new pair of eyes made her want to shrink into herself, to disappear completely. Abriel stiffened, unable to speak, unable to even think. Yet, somehow, Abriel knew. This presence, this new Yereise, was now a wholly different person.

“Peace, Yereise, my Avatar,” Kosh said in a gravelly voice that seemed to originate from nowhere, yet everywhere at the same time. “Today, I come to reward your faith, and to remind this world what it means to affront the God of the heavens.” The spirit, the God possessing her Avatar’s form, looked down at Abriel. The eyes were empty, pitiless, like icy starlight, completely devoid of kindness as he crouched down to Abriel’s level. “I will shatter you, insect,” said the voice in a chilling, matter-of-fact way, “a thousand-fold over the way you destroyed my Avatar’s crown.”

Abriel looked up at the sky, the last thing she would see with her own eyes for years. It was an image which, despite her efforts, she could never forget.

It was a dark, shadowy hand, reaching through a tear in the sky, no—the world. Encompassing nearly everything, swallowing the very heavens, it descended slowly towards the earth, and a single, enormous finger stretched out, the groan of every joint vibrating the air as the index finger pointed downward. Purple and blue lightning flickered, arching between unfathomably large knuckles, joints, and a shadowy nail which sparked indigo, sending an arching bolt of lightning that twisted through the air in an uneven spiral, crackling and popping as if seeking a home on the surface. Abriel reached her left hand up to protect herself. A horrendous, impossibly vibrant pain tore downwards from her palm as the bolt struck her, carving through her entire body. Her

body froze up, unable to react to the sudden onset of suffering. What could one do against such pure torture except shut down? Abriel couldn't even scream.

As Abriel finished recounting her story, Tiv's discouraged appearance was replaced by curiosity, as if she was seeing Abriel with new eyes.

"After my curse was finally broken," Abriel said, "I couldn't get the image out of my head for years. That finger in the sky." Abriel shivered. "I still dream about it sometimes. I still have to remind myself that things are different. I was a mischievous little girl who saw something shiny, and Kosh ripped my whole damn life apart. What happened was never my fault, and what happened to your grandmother wasn't yours either," Abriel said, taking a deep breath. "Just remember—even if Tennant turns you down, that doesn't mean a thing. Nothing has the power to change who you choose to be."

"Your curse was broken?" Tiv whispered. "How? The only way to break a curse is by destroying the source. You're alive."

"I'm not sure," Abriel confessed. "But that isn't the only way. I've—" Abriel paused, unsure of how much to reveal to this person she didn't know, "I've witnessed other methods."

Tiv's eyes narrowed slightly. "That's incredible," she said.

"Quite extraordinary, indeed," said the man in the center of the temple.

Abriel had nearly forgotten he was there, but his formerly hollow eyes were now glowing green, the dancing tattoos across his body now verdant and shining.

“I am Tennant, God of the lost and purposeless,” he said in a soothing, all-encompassing voice, holding out his arms to his sides. “Welcome to my domain.”

Curse Breaker: Part II

Abriel's heart started racing as she frantically searched for an escape route, but the same flat forest surrounded her in all directions. *A God, here? I should have known. But where do I go? Nothing makes sense in this place.* Besides, she wasn't yet sure what the rules for the Cursed Zone were. Where—or what—was the exit? How could she escape a Zone that manipulated space itself?

“Don't be frightened, courier,” Tennant said in a reassuring tone. “No curses will be cast by me, not today.” He resumed his place in the center of the temple, brushing aside some amber leaves that had blown across the floor. He gestured to a space in front of him. “Please, sit.”

Something was wrong. This God which sat before her wasn't at all what she was familiar with. For some reason, Tennant seemed more natural than Kosh, more grounded in his humanity. But Abriel had seen the world, the way society was cracking apart at the seams each day. The Gods had seen to that. *No matter how kind or differently he behaves,* she thought, unable to resist a glare in the deity's direction. *I'll never forget what you are.* Abriel and Tiv exchanged wary glances, then sat in front of a God.

“Why the trickery with the temple?” Tiv asked. “And what was the point of all those illusions?”

“Everyone finds their way here eventually,” Tennant said, absently pulling leaves out of his hair. “Well, most of them. The illusions aren’t so much a test as much as they are reminders of what drives you. I’ve no interest in bringing those here who aren’t in the right frame of mind.”

“Is that man you’re possessing in the right frame of mind?” Tiv snapped.

“How can you do that to him?” Abriel asked, unable to repress the urge to resist in some small way. “Don’t they feel pain when you take control of someone’s body like that?”

“Yes, I suppose they do,” Tennant replied. “But this Avatar is a willing subject. Though blind, he is able to see once again through my eyes.”

“Why does he want to see this place?” Tiv muttered, watching the green spirit of a sparrow peck at an empty spot on the ground. “I’ve barely been here fifteen minutes, and I’m ready to leave.”

“Ah, but you came here with a purpose, did you not? I have seen it.” Tennant replied.

Tiv nodded.

“Then make me your offering, scribe,” Tennant said. “I am eager to receive it.”

Tiv hesitated, then removed the silver pendant from around her neck. She held the polished metal out, cupping the coiled chain reverently in both hands. “It was my Gran’s. She wasn’t wearing it when the curse passed through. It’s all I have from her.”

Tennant made a thoughtful sound. “A meaningful offering, indeed, but I’m afraid I’m not interested.”

“I have money,” Tiv said, scrambling at the pouches on her belt. “Gold, silver, whatever you want. The necklace wasn’t everything.”

Tennant raised a hand to cut her off, the hints of an amused smile forming on his lips. “Peace. What I’m interested in cannot be constrained by mere matter.” He leaned forward. “Purpose. I want to hear what you would do with my blessing. What gives you purpose, Tiv?”

Tiv opened her mouth to answer, but Tennant interjected. “Wait. Before you answer—be truthful with me. You will not leave this place if you are not honest with yourself. The spirits who wander this place,” he gestured to the distant, stumbling shapes in the surrounding fog, “all came here for different reasons, and none of them will leave until they come to terms with their place in this world.” Tennant produced a disappointed grunt. “I have granted many blessings in my life; however, very few have ever had the chance to use their power outside of my domain. Most of those I have blessed became trapped here, forever wandering in the mists of their own uncertainty. Eventually, they die, becoming the spirits you now see, continuing their search even into the next life.”

Tiv was silent for a long, contemplative moment, eyes flicking from the necklace in her hands to Tennant. Finally, she released a resigned sigh. “Honest, huh? Well, I guess it can’t hurt to try. I’ve come this far. Make my death quick, alright?”

Tennant raised an eyebrow. So did Abriel. What could Tiv possibly say to make Tennant angry enough to want to kill her?

“Alright, here goes. I want your power so I can *destroy* your power. I want to use your blessing to break curses,” Tiv said, a deeply defiant look in her eyes as she stared at Tennant. “You said you wanted honesty right? Fine. Honestly, I’d break your curse and kill you right now if I could. What the Gods did to me, what they did to—” Tiv choked on her words. “To those I care about. To the world. We’re better off without you.”

Tennant observed her for a full minute, remaining perfectly still. Tiv twitched under his gaze, breaking eye contact. Abriel swallowed. What was Tiv thinking, saying something like that? Would Abriel even be able to help her if Tennant decided to punish her outburst?

“Such...” Tennant whispered. “Incredible resolve. You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“I am. Not that resolve matters, in the end,” she said, arching her neck to look at the sky outside of the temple. “When is the hand coming out? Come on, let’s get this over with.”

“As I said,” Tennant said, frowning. “There will be no curses cast today. My curses are not so random and reactive as those of my family. Honestly though, I care not of your petty gripes against me and my siblings, nor of your vain mission to oppose us. Perhaps even we are lost, no?” Tennant’s head turned towards Abriel. “And you, Abriel?”

“Me?” Abriel said. She shook herself back into reality, remembering why she came. Opening her delivery bag, she removed a jar of faintly glowing purple liquid from a padded wrap, passing it to Tennant. “I have a delivery for the temple. There was no name, just a location.”

Without breaking eye contact, Tennant lifted and uncapped the jar, tipping the glass above a round indentation surrounded by runes on the stone floor, absentmindedly pouring the violet liquid inside. “Fascinating that you should be delivering more fluid to the same place as Tiv. Perhaps your meeting was arranged by fate. Isn’t that right, *curse-breaker?*”

He smiled, eyes laughing. She tensed, arm drifting subconsciously towards her dagger. Tiv’s body language changed as well. How much did he know? Could he see into her mind completely?

“Are you talking to me?” Tiv said. She watched Abriel, sizing her up.

“My brother isn’t very happy with you,” Tennant said. “Kosh loves to cast curses, creating new types of curses is like a hobby to him. Personally, I find the process a little boring, with the exception of this place, obviously. Then again, Kosh doesn’t hate you nearly as much as our oldest sister. A human who breaks curses! It’s been a few thousand years since we’ve had one of those.”

Abriel frantically searched his body for a weakness, a place that would stun him, even for a moment.

Tennant leaned back and laughed, shaking his head. “You should see your face. So cold, so *calculating*. It’s like I’m looking at a different person than I was a moment ago. Don’t worry, child. I may be the only member of my family who doesn’t care that you’ve been undoing our work. Because, in a way, I feel that we’ve lost ourselves too. Perhaps you are good for us. I am eager to see what happens next.”

“I’ve never broken any curses,” Abriel lied, but her words weren’t entirely false. She didn’t feel in control when she broke curses. It felt more like handing off a delivery than anything else. “How would I have even done something like that?”

“Fishing for information?” Tennant said, clicking his tongue. “Nice try, but we will continue this conversation in a moment.” He turned to Tiv. “Come here, scribe. Receive both of my blessings. Your purpose is strong enough to merit a tattoo on both shoulders.”

Tiv tore her eyes away from Abriel, drawing in a breath. “What?” she said.

“Yes, yes. Come now. Unlike my siblings, I’ve no need for pretentious ceremony,” Tennant said, waving a dismissive finger.

Tiv stood slowly, eyes wide with shock as she stood in front of Tennant, throwing her red cloak off her shoulder to reveal an open space on her arm. She produced a disbelieving laugh and then swallowed, kneeling to bring her shoulder in front of the deity.

“Thank you,” she said. “I’ve waited my whole life for this moment. Will the procedure hurt?”

“I’m afraid so,” he said. With a quick flick of his wrist, the purple liquid in the bowl twisted into the air, diving forcefully into Tiv’s skin. A misting spray of blood shot out from the entry point, and Tiv screamed, falling onto her back, hand clasped over her shoulder. Abriel placed her hand onto her own tattoo. Her own procedure was entirely painless. Something was different, but what?

“Now the other shoulder,” Tennant said. “Hurry up. I have places to—”

Luminous green eyes peered into the sky as if noticing something for the first time, but Abriel couldn't see whatever he was looking at. His jaw tightened, an anxious wrinkle forming in his brow. “I'm afraid I must leave you. My oldest sister appears to be upset with me...again. My Avatar, Pelam, can complete the process.” He locked eyes with Abriel, a knowing smile on his lips. “Thank you for your services, courier; I'm impressed you have survived this long. Perhaps making deliveries really is your purpose. You may leave when you have somewhere to go...I do hope that day eventually comes.” The verdant eyes went pale white, their light disappearing as the God left his Avatar. Quiet, nearly imperceptible laughter echoed between the pillars of the gazebo.

Tiv sat up and groaned, testing the tender skin of her shoulder, which was covered in beads of blood. “What does that look like to you?” she asked, turning her raw arm towards Abriel.

“They say blessings reveal the life of their bearer,” Abriel said, padding the wound with a bandage from her delivery bag. The image, dark purple in color, appeared to be a vast desert with a singular canyon running through the center. Abriel knew exactly what—where—it was. With great reluctance, Abriel spoke the words she had hoped to never utter again. “And I certainly hope they are wrong. Your tattoo is of the Shifting Causeway.”

“The curse at the end of the world,” Tiv murmured, revealing a frightened expression which transformed into a glare directed at Abriel. She swatted Abriel's hand aside. “How do you even know what that place looks like? Who are you, anyway?”

“I’ve been there. Who am I? Well...” Abriel said. It wasn’t an easy question to answer. Abriel had tried her best to be good, like her father, but often it felt like she was drifting through life with nowhere to go. It worked for her father well enough. “I’m not sure what to say.”

“Are you ready to complete your blessing?” Pelam asked, smiling tenderly. “I promise I’ll be gentler than my master. He’s good at heart, if a little impatient.”

“Give us a moment,” Tiv said kindly, standing up and pulling Abriel away towards the edge of the temple. “What do you mean, you aren’t sure?” she said, lowering her voice so Pelam couldn’t hear. “Tennant called you *curse-breaker*! What does that even mean? Is it true?”

Thinking back to the moments when she broke curses, maybe a dozen times, she could only remember an undercurrent of desire that manifested itself, counteracting the curse. There was no feeling, no strange overflow of power. Nothing. The curses simply disappeared. Why was she able to break them? She had tried to control her ability before, but sometimes the power just didn’t work. A simple roll of the dice, and she had never been able to break larger curses. Maybe Tiv could help her understand. Maybe community was what she needed, even if it wasn’t the one she wanted.

Abriel gave an almost imperceptible nod. “I can break them sometimes. I don’t know why.”

Tiv went pale, jaw dropping.

“And you didn’t think to tell anyone?” Tiv said, grabbing Abriel by the collar. “This could change everything!”

“I’m sorry,” Abriel said, searching for an excuse in Tiv’s furious brown eyes that bored into her soul, but there was no reason she could find. Why *didn’t* she tell anyone? Strangely, this was the first time she had asked herself that question in years. A vast wall stood between her and the answer. “I don’t know.”

The much larger woman released a long, deflating breath through her nose, then released Abriel. “Make it up to me,” Tiv said.

“How?”

“By receiving the other blessing.”

“But why?” Abriel said, stumbling over her words. “How?”

“He, uh,” Tiv began, looking guilty. “Can’t see. You’ll sit down next to him and let him tattoo your other arm. He won’t know a thing as long as you don’t speak.”

“This seems wrong,” Abriel said. “Don’t you want the other blessing?”

“Tennant gave me the blessing of mind,” she said. “That was all I needed to achieve my goal. The blessing of body won’t help me much. Besides,” she said, rubbing her shoulder. “That hurt.”

“Blessing of body, mind? What are you saying?” Abriel stepped back, rubbing her temples.

“Your silver tattoo is a blessing of body from Mirriel,” Tiv said. “It’s what helps you remain so agile, among other things. Tennant’s blessing of body will probably give other physical advantages, but I only needed the blessing of mind for what I have to do. You take the other one.” Tiv stepped towards Abriel, placing both hands on her

shoulders. “If you really can break curses, your survival is all that matters. *Please*, Abriel. You know what it means to bear a curse. The pain, the humiliation, that helpless feeling that gnaws at you from inside. Help me fight against the state of this world. Help me right these wrongs.”

There was nothing dishonest about Tiv’s plea, but Abriel wasn’t ready to trust the scribe. The only life Abriel knew was the one her father taught her.

Twelve years ago...

Abriel sat next to the fire, peering at her father across the flames. He was leaning against a tree, whittling a large tree branch into a shape she didn’t recognize.

“What are you making?” Abriel asked.

“Oh,” he stopped, twisting the branch in the air to look at his creation. “I’m not sure. What do you think?”

Abriel shrugged. “Doesn’t look like much to me.”

He snickered, continuing his task without another thought, humming softly to himself. Since she started traveling with him again, he had returned to his old self: the happy drifter she knew and loved. She’d even seen him break a curse. For some reason, she thought it was a coincidence that he was able to break her curse all those years ago, but apparently not. Of all the people she had met in her life, he was still the most unassuming man she had ever known. No wonder she didn’t suspect him. His startling natural agility, courier skills, and an acute awareness of his surroundings that seemed to

come with little to no effort made it appear as if her father were floating through life, barely lifting a finger to push aside each complication that arose in his path. Coupled with his good-natured, lighthearted personality, it was almost hard to believe someone like him existed, even though he sat before her. And despite knowing him better than anyone, Abriel still didn't understand how he could stay so relaxed all the time, especially about breaking curses.

“Father?” she asked. He made a questioning sound. “Why are you able to break curses?”

He stopped whittling for a moment. “Curses?” he said. “What do you mean?”

“You know, curses,” Abriel said. “The curses cast by the Gods? You know what they are, father. We pass by them every day.”

“Right,” he said, slapping himself on the forehead. “Curses. Of course.”

There it was again. Abriel hadn't noticed in her younger years, but her father was prone to forgetfulness on a level that wasn't quite normal. The first time she realized there might be a problem was when he ordered a bowl of soup at an inn, only to insist to the owner that he made no such purchase. Her father wasn't angry when his memory slipped. He never got angry, but he was confused.

“To be honest, Abriel,” he said, placing the branch on the ground. “I don't know. If I try to control my power, it doesn't work. So I simply let it happen when it happens. I do have to make contact with the curse, but that's all I know. Why? Is something bothering you?”

“No, it’s nothing. But I’ve been thinking. Why not try to break all of the curses?” she asked. “You could at least break some of them.”

“What do you think would happen if I tried?” he asked. Abriel’s mind scrambled for an answer. She knew that tone of voice. He had already thought about this a lot. This was a test.

“I don’t know. You would end up helping people, right?” Abriel said.

“Am I not helping people now?” he replied. “I break curses all the time. I help people in other ways too. So do you, by the way.” He picked up the branch again, making final touches with the tip of his knife. “But you are right. I don’t know what would happen if I tried. I think I am content to simply help those around me. People would want this power for their own purposes. Maybe they would want me eliminated. It is hard to say. Who would I help then? I don’t think I’m smart enough to navigate a world where people know what I can do.”

“But what if you could help even more people?” Abriel asked. “Maybe everything would turn out well.”

“People often do great things, Abriel. They change the world, lead armies, defeat evil, become heroes,” her father said, holding his carving up to the glow, rotating the strange shape in the flickering firelight. “And yet somehow, they are monsters in their own life. They hurt those closest to them. I’ve seen it. *You’ve* seen it. The things I’ve witnessed in my travels,” he shook his head, “Will haunt me until my final breath. What good is being a hero if you cause pain to those around you? If everyone was like that, we

would be living in a world of broken children. We already do, in some ways. What world is there to save at that point? Do you understand, Abriel?”

“I think so,” she said.

“I will never be one who ignores suffering, Abriel.”

He took one last look at his carving, another abstract, and then tossed his work of art into the fire like he always did. His carvings were the only thing he seemed to do for his own pleasure, and he never went out of his way to show them off to anyone.

“I cannot be a curse breaker,” her father said. “That is not who I am.”

He laid down on his sleeping pad, letting out a prolonged yawn. Abriel didn't move. She couldn't help but think about all the other cursed people in the world. Maybe there was another little girl out there like her. One who would never feel the freedom she knew, trapped in a curse she would never escape. Her father watched her through the dwindling orange flames.

“I'm not saying there isn't a world in which I would try to break all the curses,” he said. “But it isn't this one. There is nothing wrong with what we do. Perhaps if I were smarter, I would know another way,” he said chuckling. “Go to sleep Abriel.”

Her father had been wrong before. Maybe he was wrong to keep his ability a secret. She stared at the pool of purple liquid on the floor next to Pelam. Was her father wrong? Could she fight curses in a way that he never could? She could already see her

father's anxieties coming true. Tiv wanted to use her power for some purpose. Could she handle what came next?

"Please," Tiv said.

Abriel considered. *I could just accept the blessing and simply walk away if something seems off. Who will believe that I, a simple courier, can break curses? If she tries to tell someone, she will be screaming into the wind.*

Abriel nodded, and Tiv let out a deep breath.

"I'm ready for the other shoulder," Tiv said, pushing Abriel towards Pelam.

As Abriel sat next to the Avatar of Tennant, she examined the trails of black tattoos that moved across his skin. The poor man. What must his life had been like, to end up the servant of such a despicable entity? Pelam claimed that Tennant was kind, but Abriel knew better. The Avatar was likely trapped in denial, drawn in by the temptation to see again. She threw her courier cloak over her shoulder, revealing the empty space on her left arm. The violet liquid lifted out of the bowl and drifted towards her shoulder. The ink stung when it made contact, like dozens of icy needles scraping against her skin, but the pain wasn't unbearable; something about the way the procedure felt was distinctly opposite to the procedure she received on her other shoulder. While the blessing of Mirriel was warm and soothing, this was the opposite. It was a feeling of raw, precise energy flowing into her.

"Sorry about Tennant," Pelam said. "He can be abrasive. I told you I'd be gentler. There. All finished!"

Abriel looked at the marking, expecting to see the same outstretched hand as on her other shoulder. However, on this new tattoo, the hand was closed.

It was a fist, knuckles closed tightly together.

Abriel dabbed at the pins of blood with a bandage to see if the splayed out fingers were covered up, but the image didn't change. What did the fist mean? How could two images in such contrast with one another possibly reflect her life?

Hot flashes. Chills. Fire and water. Something grinded inside.

Abriel nearly tipped over. Jagged shapes flashed in her vision, like the world had cracked in front of her; purple lines of light passed through her vision, and she snapped her eyes shut, feeling faint as she stood. When she opened them, the world had returned to normal. *What was that?* An anticipation, a strange awareness crept into the back of Abriel's mind, and she remained still, staring at the palms of her hands. *Something isn't right.*

"Thank you," Tiv said, changing places with Abriel and making sure to scuffle her feet to confuse Pelam. "It looks great. Barely felt a thing."

Aside from the guilt at what they had just done, Abriel felt nauseous, uneasy. *What did I see just now?*

"The way out is behind me," Pelam said. "Thank you for your patronage, sorcerer of Tennant. And thank you for your services, courier."

An undulating wall like they saw when they originally entered the Cursed Zone appeared between two pillars of the gazebo. The portal was cast with warping images, a

wall of twisting liquid producing mist that flowed off the horizon like a waterfall. The way out, finally. As Tiv and Abriel approached the edge, Abriel's shoulders felt strange. Starting at her tattoos, mild waves of discomfort washed over her, growing more intense by the second. She wasn't feeling pain, not yet, but the sense of discomfort continued to grow in strength. Abriel thought about telling Tiv, but was unsure what would happen to them if Pelam found out what they had done.

"Anything we should know before we try to leave?" Tiv asked.

"Nothing that will help, I'm afraid," Pelam said in a muted tone. "Your purpose is all that will guide you now."

"You alright?" Tiv asked, a look of concern on her face as she looked down at Abriel. "You look like you've seen a gho—" She looked around her at the spirits. "Bad example."

"I'm fine. The smell is making me sick," Abriel said. "Let's just get out of here."

"Before that," Tiv began, looking uncharacteristically shy. "If I don't pass through. If I join the rest of the spirits here—"

"I'll try to break the curse," Abriel said, interrupting. She was eager to leave. "But breaking larger ones like this hasn't ever worked."

"No. It's not that. I'm part of a group of people. We break curses—well, we try to anyway. Listen, Abriel. This is a secret, but we call ourselves Maltorum."

"You want me to break curses for you," Abriel stated flatly. She cast Tiv a suspicious, doubtful glance.

“We aren’t some fool group of kids Abriel!” Tiv snapped, glaring at her. “I may be...impulsive, but we aren’t all like that. We know what we’re doing. We’re smart. We keep our heads down. More importantly, we’re good.”

Abriel stared at her feet, which were locked in place. Tiv was asking too much. Taking a risk to help others was one thing, but defying her father’s advice had never helped before.

“Either way,” Tiv said, stepping towards the portal. She took one last look at Abriel and flashed a wide grin. “See you on the other side.” Tiv stepped across the threshold.

Another rush of pain traversed down both of Abriel’s arms, and she winced, making a startled sound.

“Is everything alright?” Pelam said. “You may take your time if you wish.”

“I’m fine,” Abriel said, inching closer to the portal. The pain continued, milder, but waves of tearing discomfort still moved through her, like something was carving its way through her arms. Sweat beaded on her brow as she hesitated at the exit. What was she doing? Abriel took a heaving breath as a searing heat rushed over her; she placed her hands on her knees, clasping hard. *Hot. Why is it so hot?* She removed her courier’s cloak, casting it aside. *What’s going on?* She wanted badly to leave, and yet a part of her knew what she may face.

“What happens if my purpose isn’t enough?” Abriel asked. “Does anyone ever find their way out after becoming lost?”

“If your purpose isn’t enough, then you will join the many thousands of residents which call Tennant’s Domain home, and your senses will be dulled to prevent you from experiencing the inevitable insanity that comes from the unending passing of time,” Pelam said, an edge of pity to his voice. “As for making it out. I don’t think many have, but I’m not sure.”

“This is absurd,” Abriel said, holding her throbbing arms against her chest as she watched green shades wander the outskirts of the temple. “What right does Tennant have to condemn all these people? How can you even serve someone like him? And so what if I don’t have lofty goals! Making deliveries is a noble purpose, my father is proof of that! Of all the people I’ve ever met, he is still the only person who has ever cared about me. And I’m supposed to reject his legacy and go around breaking curses? What more could I possibly offer this world after what it did to me? I never wanted the ability to break curses. I never wanted any of this. My purpose is the same as it’s always been.”

Pelam remained silent, merely bowing his head.

“All I need is my horse, my delivery, and my road...” Abriel said, clenching her teeth as she mounted Isheem. She passed through the wall.

Quiet. Calm. Gentle wind brushed her face. *What a wonderful feeling.* As she drifted across the ocean of yellow and amber, listening to the crunching of leaves under Isheem’s feet, Abriel felt an odd vertigo. Each step seemed to take her miles, the world rushing past her in a blur, even faster than it did when riding Isheem at full gallop. When

she tried to speak, something caused her to change her mind. There would be time for words later, there always was. She patted Isheem's neck. *Such a good horse.*

Other souls moved around her. They were out of reach, somehow. A part of her knew what they were yet held no interest in approaching them. Were they...people? Where was she? A feeling pulled at her, a distant ache. Her arms were sore, and lately, the ache had been growing worse. Most of the time, she didn't notice, but the pain had increased over time. Time. How long had it been? Lately, she had no choice but to notice, to feel the throbbing gnaw its way through her body. She groaned, tucking her arms inward. Her limbs were blurry as she looked down at them. Even through the ethereal, dreamlike veil draped over her, she could tell something was different. *What's...going on?*

"I have," she muttered, unable to distract herself from the pain anymore, pushing through the bizarre resistance. "Somewhere to be."

"She speaks!" said a voice from behind her. The entire world twisted around her, rotating itself to place the figure directly in front of her. He was familiar, somehow. Why was it so difficult to remember who he was?

"I see," he said. His eyes were glowing green. "You haven't gotten used to the feeling of living here yet. You will, in time. For now," he snapped a finger.

The world lurched around Abriel, and she felt herself rushing into her own body, into awareness once again as a curtain of perception was pulled from over her eyes. She was still in the forest. Spirits surrounded her, wandering, muttering to themselves. It had

happened. Her worst fears had come true. She was lost. Worse still, each breath brought an ocean of suffering as the pain in her arms, no longer dulled by a suppressed state of mind, hit her at full force. The torrent of suffering was almost unbearable. And as she held her arms up in front of herself, she nearly felt inhuman once again.

Silver, faintly glowing silver veins of light ran from the silver Blessing on her right shoulder and down the length of her arm, all the way to her fingertips.

The purple Blessing on her opposite shoulder mirrored the pattern. Purple lines, pulsing with rippling violet light moved outward from the tattoo. Both tattoos trailed up the sides of her neck and down her back, like an unchecked infection.

Looking down her shirt, she saw the veins from each tattoo meet across her chest. They mangled together like tangled vines, twisting across one another as if fighting for space. Where they met at the center of her chest burned like white coals at the bottom of a campfire. Abriel took shuddering breaths.

“Welcome back,” Tennant said. He was leaning against a tree. “I’d forgotten you were here after getting yelled at by my older sister. She was upset that one of her toys followed you in here and got stuck. Can you believe that? I mean, how exactly is any of this my fault? Serves her right for letting that thing operate without a mind. Have you seen it? You *must* have. Big, hulking knight? Gold and black armor?”

Of course the knight followed her here, her pursuer followed her everywhere. But what did it matter? The knight was trapped now too. Abriel simply stared at the God, feeling numb, even as she sat in a pool of pain, suffering. So, this was her fate. Being

confined to the mercy of a self-absorbed deity for the rest of time, aching with the weight of her own decisions. She truly was in hell.

“What do you want?” she said.

“I’m merely checking in on you,” he said. “How are you faring?”

“How do you think?” Abriel said. She withdrew her seax, throwing it Tennant point first. Metal screamed through the air, faster than should have been possible. Tennant’s form turned to mist, re-solidifying next to the seax as the blade lodged itself deep into the trunk. He pulled the weapon out with visible effort. Abriel flexed her wrist, feeling a strange, newfound strength underneath the ache.

“Hmm, no. That’s not right,” he said, casting her a disappointed frown. “If I hadn’t been paying attention, that may have hit me. How did you throw that with such strength?”

He disappeared and reappeared several times around her, arching his neck to look at her left shoulder before resting on a tree branch far above. Isheem huffed, stamping the dirt with a hoof, apparently uncomfortable with the display. Tennant spun the sharp point of the seax on the edge of his fingertip for a moment, staring into the distance in deep thought, then he dropped the seax. The seax fell towards Abriel, dropping into its sheath at her waist with a sharp click.

“Am I supposed to be impressed by that?” Abriel asked. Icy chills washed over her.

“I couldn’t care less how impressed you are,” he snapped, leaning against the bottom of the tree once again. “What I *do* care about is how you managed to *steal* my blessing. That’s how you got so strong, isn’t it? It wasn’t meant for you. How did you even—” A look of realization washed over him, and he gasped, pointing. “Shame on you!”

Abriel’s vision flashed red. The sound of his voice was so *irritating*. “Shame? *Shame?* You don’t get to say that to me! You don’t get to say that to *anyone!*”

“I say whatever I want, human,” Tennant stated calmly. “I am a God. I do as I please. You, however, will suffer the consequences of your actions. I feel badly for you, really. Few people know that the two powers are incompatible. Because of that, nobody would have known to warn you, Tiv least of all. The tattoo on your left shoulder possesses the violet aura of me and my siblings, the New Gods; your right shoulder, the silver light of our father, Mirriel, the Old God. I’m afraid our powers simply aren’t compatible with each other. They are two opposing energies, eternally fighting against one another by their very nature. Both cannot exist in the same space without war. Your body will soon be destroyed in the crossfire as they battle for control. Don’t feel too badly. You aren’t the first to make this mistake. This world is an old place.”

“Bastard,” Abriel said. “Kill me now or leave me alone to die! The way you play with us, the way you casually ruin our lives at a whim, without a single thought. You disgust me!”

“Hm. Humans are always so emotional,” Tennant said. “As Gods, we don’t feel much.”

Abriel wiped cold sweat from her forehead, then shrugged. “Whatever helps you sleep at night.”

“No, I’m serious,” he said, striding across the golden leaves with bare feet. “Beyond *what* I am, I experience very little. It’s like a piece of me is missing. Did anyone ever tell you the history of the Gods? How we came to be? There are those who still remember, in the right circles.”

Abriel just wanted him to stop. She fell to her knees, reaching her arms below the layer of leaves to feel the cool dirt between her fingers, but the act did little to dull the fire that seemed to burn inside of her. Sweat dripped from her nose, ran down her neck in streams.

“We were once a single being,” Tennant said, picking up a broad leaf. “A part of the entity called Mirriel.” He carefully parted the leaf down the center. “One day, he grew lonely, so he split himself into two beings—one old, one new.” He tore small tips from each half. “Immediately, something went wrong, and the old and new deities fractured. A small piece of each was unable to live apart from a tiny part of the other, and those two pieces became Gods themselves, remaining together for the rest of time. You know these as the twin Gods.” He dropped the tiny leaf-tips, and they drifted gently to the ground, twisting around one another as if dancing. “What remained of the Old God, Mirriel...” He held up half of the leaf with his right hand, releasing it into the wind. “Lived on. He kept his nobility for himself, which allowed him to cope with his newfound state of being. While his other half...the New God.” Tennant sneered, holding up the other half with his left hand, suddenly crumpling the leaf in a shaking fist. “Shattered.” He released

his grip, and a dozen or so pieces were carried away by a harsh gust. “And *I* was born alongside my siblings.”

“It doesn’t excuse anything,” Abriel said. “It doesn’t make your actions right.”

“Oh, I know that,” Tennant said, abruptly shifting to stand over her, a sense of desperation set into his features. “But without Mirriel’s nobility, his ability to *feel*, I don’t even understand how you decide right from wrong. See, I think Mirriel made a mistake when he divided himself. The New Gods are nothing more than beings of a certain nature, compelled by *what* we are, rather than *who* we are. That is why I gave you the chance to leave. Maybe your curse-breaking is what we need to give us something to fight against. Something other than merely existing, playing with our human toys, watching them dance and squirm in the dirt!” He kicked her wrist, dislodging her hand from the ground, and a cloud of dirt sprayed through the air. “Some kind of—” Tennant’s eyes lost some of their fervor, growing dim. “Purpose.”

“Then let me go,” Abriel said. “I can’t break curses if you trap me here.”

“I am what I am, Abriel,” Tennant said with a wry grin. “I cannot let you go if you are lost. I see the struggle inside of you. Something still holds you back.”

She leapt to her feet, kicking at the air where Tennant’s head was a moment before, but he was gone.

“Why *are* you so angry, anyway? What did I do?” Tennant asked holding a hand to his chest, looking genuinely taken aback. This time he was atop Isheem, who still seemed trapped in a trance-like state, her drooping head drifting from side to side. “Let’s take a look, shall we?”

He snapped a finger, and a four-sized window appeared before him. She moved to get a better look. The window was an illusion, a birds-eye view of the events of her childhood. Tennant seemed to be able to view her memories from any angle he wanted to. Her relationship with her parents, Kosh's curse, images of her life all flashed by at blinding speed.

“Oh, I remember now,” Tennant said. “Sorry, it's been a few years since we first met.” He waved a hand through the air, eyes sparkling with curiosity. “Wait! This looks promising.”

Years? Did he say years? Tennant appeared next to the changing image, staring into the window intently as light from the event flickered onto his concentrated features.

The image shifted, then settled on a warped figure, contorted, and revolting. It was shaped like a human, but malformed, and had a single, lumbering arm. The creature's entire body was deep purple, with bulging shapes of musculature and bone structure bubbling from underneath skin that stretched taut with each step taken. Two antennae emerged from the head, with a useless pair of beetle-like wings flapping over each shoulder. The creature was small, the size of a child, and needed to walk diagonally with an awkward gait in order to move. Tennant made a disgusted sound. With inhuman eyes, one larger than the other, the bug looked over a shoulder as if watching for something. Dogs barked in the distance. Angry shouts echoed.

It was her, after Kosh's curse had been cast. The village had started a hunting party after she escaped into the woods. She watched her former self, treading closer to the

memory. She hadn't been able to completely see herself from the outside before, only vague reflections. *I remember this moment. There was a puddle.*

The young, cursed Abriel stopped at an indentation in the ground, looking down at her reflection in the muddy puddle. She recoiled, shocked by what she saw, then slowly inched her head back over the waters. An odd, strangling moan emanated from her misshapen mouth. Her jagged shoulders trembled as she saw what she had become, tears falling at odd angles down her crooked jaw.

"I remember," Abriel said, leaning down to look into her former face, which was permanently set into an expression of pure terror. "This was the first time I saw what I looked like. I was so frightened. I don't even think I understood what was happening to me."

The young girl held her arms out, staring at them like the appendages didn't belong to her. Abriel stared at her own arms. They couldn't be compared in appearance, but Abriel felt the echoes of her past as she watched, feeling the veins carve through her skin. Abriel reached towards the young girl who whimpered quietly. She wanted to tell her that she would all be alright, that her life would change, that her father would come to save her.

"There it is!" shouted a voice. Young Abriel's head snapped towards the voice, and she darted away, the memory fading as she fled.

"Oh. So that's why you're angry," Tennant said. "Kosh really likes to make a statement, doesn't he?"

Pain, like thousands of icy needles, traveled up her spine and into her eyes, her vision flashing with violet lines once again. Abriel screamed. “Shut up!” she cried, then opened her eyes.

The world suddenly looked different. Tiny, nearly imperceptible purple threads of light were cast about like a spider’s web. Abriel would have barely been able to see them were there not so many. Like miniature strings of energy, they connected each tree, leaf, and spirit in the sparse forest, and many of them even linked directly onto Pelam’s body. However, what stood out the most was a feeling that *pulled* her. Abriel struggled to her feet, walking towards a vague sense, unsure and uncaring of what she was doing. What did she have to lose? The dull outline of a road appeared before her, a quiet blue glow barely peeking from underneath the leaves. *Is this real?*

“Where are you going?” Tennant asked, seemingly unaware of what she was sensing. Abriel ignored him, mounted Isheem, and kept moving. “You know I could just look into your mind, right?” A moment passed. “Damn. You’re in a lot of pain, aren’t you? Not much going on up there that makes sense.”

They walked together for several more minutes before Abriel spotted the multi-pillared temple in the distance. Unlike before, the gazebo was now shining a harsh violet, a brilliant color against the dim meadow. That was where she needed to go. The road compelled her forward.

“What? How did you get back here?” Tennant said, shocked. “You shouldn’t even be able to *see* this place again without my permission.”

Abriel kicked Isheem into a full gallop. The horse seemed to snap out of her daze as she reared back on her hind legs, stamping her hooves before darting forward across the meadow.

“I thought about dropping a tree on you or something,” Tennant said. “But I want to find out how you got here. Nothing *this* interesting has happened here for thousands of years. I specifically made the temple impossible to return to after leaving.”

But Abriel was barely paying attention. Having given herself over to the compulsion fully, Abriel guided Isheem to the center of the temple where the pressure felt the strongest. Narrowing her eyes, she could see thousands of the tiny purple threads converge on a single point floating in the air, mere inches away from her face. *What is that?* She reached out, plucking an object out of the space in front of her, an object that she hadn't seen until she held it in her hand.

“Wait. What are you doing? Stop!” Tennant said.

The object was a child's toy. A figure of a small soldier, carved from wood. Intense energy surged through the tiny figurine, converged on the tiny wooden form, and Abriel thought for a moment that she could feel the entirety of Tennant's domain in the palm of her hand. The scope of the Cursed Zone was so complex, so old, so overwhelming. Abriel slowly looked over her shoulder at Tennant. His face was set in stone, green eyes and shifting tattoos shining brighter than ever, and he had a frighteningly calm look on his face. The sky darkened.

“Put it down, Abriel,” he said quietly.

An irrational desire clawed its way from deep within Abriel. Something that shouldn't have been possible, something that her father explicitly rejected. *And yet...*

"I thought you said you wanted me to break curses," she said. "Something about purpose, right?"

"Put. That. Down!" Tennant's voice exploded, the volume of his voice rising to inhuman levels with each word.

Any yet, Abriel somehow knew. She held the core of Tennant's domain in her hands, the starting point of his territory's original curse. The source.

"So. You say I need a purpose, huh?" she mumbled, seeing doubles of the toy and her hand. The burning, the ice in her arms was starting to make her feel faint as she swayed in her saddle. Her thoughts were muddled, and she found herself driven only by a singular desire which pulled itself out of the darkness, crawling to the surface of her mind.

"I'm sorry, father, but I'm not like you," she said, holding the object higher in the air with her left hand, feeling the energy of Tennant's curse flow through her as the purple veins on her left hand seemed to lift, to sway over the surface of her skin upon contact. The Cursed Zone, the object, Tennant's domain. They were connected. She could see the bonds, *feel* them.

Tennant growled, then teleported to her right side, but Abriel's senses were more acute than they should have been, her reflexes far faster than normal, even in her stupor, and she snatched him out of the air by the throat as soon as he appeared. He choked and squirmed as she lifted him into the air with newfound strength. Contorted panic crossed

his face as he clasped onto her forearm with both hands, squeezing hard. There was an inhuman amount of pressure where he clutched onto her, but Abriel felt sturdier than normal. In the brief instant she held him, Abriel felt the God channeling his body to disappear out of her grasp, and she...stopped him. Energy rushed out of her silver-veined arm into the God's body, and the light from Tennant's tattoos flickered. Tennant stopped struggling, eyes going wide.

"You think my purpose isn't good enough?" Abriel said. She took a deep breath, embracing the situation around her rather than continuing to fight. The pain in her arms, the new sensations, Isheem, Tennant, the chaos of the space she stood in—what she needed to do now was no different than any of the other times, than any of the other Cursed Zones. A familiar sense of calm came over her. "Fine. Maybe you're right. Tiv's purpose sounded pretty good. I'll break curses then—starting with yours!"

The silver veins on her right arm flashed silver, retracting slightly as the power seemed to drift out of her body. An idea came to Abriel. If the two powers couldn't exist in the same space, then she would let them battle it out for Tennant's body by pumping him full of the opposing power. The verdant light vanished from Tennant's tattoos as Abriel released a torrent of Old God energy, visualizing the power leaving her body as the energy pulled towards the God like an opposing magnet, then she dropped him to the ground in a limp heap. The deity's eyes dimmed, and a large piece of Abriel's pain evaporated at the same time; she could finally think clearly again.

"What did you do?" Tennant said, glaring up at her with a final flicker of visual light, speaking his last words before his spirit left Pelam forever. "This isn't over."

Pelam reemerged into his own body, tattoos vanishing from his skin like windswept dust. The Avatar frantically clasped at the fading markings as if he could hold them in place. “No! What have you done? I can’t feel his presence anymore!”

“Nothing compared to what I’m about to do,” Abriel said. “He was right. This isn’t over.” Abriel moved the toy soldier, an object of condensed curse energy from Tennant, into her right palm.

She formed a fist, squeezing until her knuckles went pale.

If curses were born from the New Gods, then she just needed to add enough energy from the Old God Mirriel to overpower their original curse. Then, Abriel understood. That was the reason she had been able to break curses. Somehow, she was able to harness a meager amount of Mirriel’s blessing of body to break smaller curses. And only some of them were broken because she sometimes tried making contact with her left hand. It didn’t explain everything, but it was a start.

Exhausted, unsure, and barely aware of how she was performing the action, Abriel dropped every ounce of Mirriel’s remaining energy as she could into the object. The entire Cursed Zone shook, the very air seeming to vibrate as the cursed object shifted from purple to bright blue in her fist. Isheem started moving in circles, ears back. The silvery veins on Abriel’s arm pulled back towards the tattoo, retracting like receding vines as the power left her body. The pain dissipated more and more as the veins were reabsorbed by her tattoo, drained of power.

Abriel focused, pushing until every drop of Mirriel’s power exited her. As the final vestiges entered the small toy, Abriel released her grip, and the toy soldier floated

into the air, glowing like a tiny blue sun. The purple webs of light connecting the pieces of the Cursed Zone began to snap, going limp, and the violet aura of the temple winked out. A rippling, tearing sound rang through the space around her as the temple's pillars cracked in jagged vertical trails.

"F-forgive me," Pelam said to no one in particular.

Isheem whinnied, reared back, then galloped out of the temple in a directionless panic as the earthquake grew violent. Abriel clasped onto the mare's neck, pleading with her not to try and buck her off. Peeking over her shoulder, Abriel watched the toy soldier blink blue one last time, then explode, obliterating Tennant's temple to pieces. Pelam let out a mournful cry that cut off as the blast struck him. Pebbles and stones showered all around Abriel, and the ground stopped shaking. Weight left her body, and all began to darken.

Like trying to remember a dream, Abriel's senses dulled as Tennant's domain began to break, to slowly peel away, to fade into complete blackness, and for a moment Abriel felt as if she was floating in a sea of pure dark and silence. Then, thousands of tiny points of light emerged, forming together into a thick cloud, drifting away on some unseen current. A palpable sigh echoed around her as she heard countless souls whisper their last words of relief before fading into whatever awaited them in the next life. The lost spirits had been freed, finally.

"Good luck out there," Abriel said. "Safe travels."

Then, as if gravity reasserted itself, Abriel and Isheem were dropped back into reality. The void faded back into physical space, trailing behind amber leaves that gently drifted towards the ground, revealing the same sparse forest she had been in a moment ago. The chemical scent was replaced by the earthy smell of damp leaves, of crisp, untouched nature. All was quiet, the mist no longer bound to the ancient meadow as Abriel felt the rightness of the woods around her. She remained perfectly still for a long time, a piece of her too afraid and unwilling to believe she had actually succeeded, but somehow, deep inside, she knew—she had done it. She had broken the curse.

The veins on her right arm had retreated completely into the silver tattoo on her shoulder, the web-like patterns now re-absorbed by the familiar image of an outstretched hand. However, the glowing violet veins on her left arm remained, covering her arm like a strange, misshapen glove originating from the marking of a closed fist. The patterns stretched up the side of her neck, wrapped around her fingers, and trailed down her side.

But the pain was gone, now reduced to only a lingering soreness. She had found a source to receive the bottled up energy, and for the moment, had put an end to the war raging between the two powers inside her. The road was now only a few feet in front of her. Isheem's ears were perked up, and she mirrored Abriel's calm, searching curiously at the new sounds around them. In stark contrast, the forest on the other side of the road was made up of trees of entirely different species, like Tennant's domain had been trapped in time for thousands of years. The trees were capped in white snow.

“Snow? In the summer?” she said. Then she remembered Tennant mentioning that it had been years since they last spoke. “How long have I been trapped here? Tiv! Are you out there?” Nothing. Only a soft, chilling wind answered her. She was alone again.

She twisted and looked behind her—then went completely still in her saddle.

The enormous knight in gold and black armor, her pursuer, was a dozen paces behind her, holding his head with both gauntlets as if dazed. In her confusion, in the dreamlike state she was trapped in, she had completely forgotten about him. Once a constant and lingering threat in the back of her mind, forever chasing her to the ends of the earth, the knight had somehow been reduced to a pawn of the Gods, just like her. And while she had only ever seen him with glowing purple eyes, with their glow gone, their eyes now truly met for the first time. Though difficult to see through the small slit in his helm, the concerned look in his eyes was unmistakably human. Leaves gently drifted through the air between them.

“Where am I?” he said in a gravelly voice. “You...I’ve seen you in my dreams.”

“They weren’t dreams, I’m afraid,” Abriel said.

“You have to stop her, please!” he said, standing to his full height, eyes pleading with her. “Don’t let her take me again! Don’t let—” His gaze flickered purple and he roared in frustration, body going taught as he struggled for control against some unseen force.

Abriel and Isheem galloped away before the knight could start chasing at full speed, and she found herself laughing as the wind rushed past her ears. It was a bitter, senseless sound, but her sickened amusement was overwhelming, too powerful to be kept inside. The knight was a God’s avatar the entire time, or something close to one. What an absurd circumstance she found herself in. How many years of her life had disappeared in what seemed like mere moments? Where was Tiv? What would the courier’s guild think

of her disappearance? Most importantly, how did everything keep getting so out of hand? Would she ever find peace, some semblance of comfort in life? It was all too much. Too funny. Her laughter exploded uncontrollably and didn't stop for several minutes. She breathed deeply, recognizing the insanity of the moment, and slowed Isheem down.

“Enough. I'm tired, Isheem,” she said, wiping manic tears from the corners of her eyes, placing a hand on her loyal mare's neck. “It's time for answers. It's time to go home.”

Resume

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Professional and creative writer with professional experience in the technical writing field seeking publication opportunities in fiction. Adaptable, refined communicator who performs well under pressure.

EDUCATION

Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, Georgia
Bachelor of Arts in English, Minor in Professional Writing

Master of Arts in Professional Writing
Capstone/Thesis: *Courier of Souls*, A Short Story Cycle
Graduate Certificate in Creative Writing

WRITING EXPERIENCE

Virtucom, Inc., Team Lead Proposal Specialist, August 2021—Present

- Writes, crafts, and maintains proposal content library.
- Manages the RFP and Bidding process, coordinating between departments.
- Edits proposals for Bid Desk team and approves proposals for submission.
- Coordinates with departments to enable consistent, effective messaging.

Sauls International, Proposal Writer Intern, April 2020—July 2020

- Created social media content for Sauls International's blog and LinkedIn page.
- Produced marketing materials with Canva for email campaigns.
- Sought out business opportunities by exploring open federal and state contracts.
- Wrote Proposal - Interpreter Management System for James Madison University.
- Created comprehensive guide for future interns about positional responsibilities.

SKILLS AND TECHNOLOGY

- Microsoft Suite (Word, Excel, PowerPoint).
- Canva
- Adobe Creative Cloud (InDesign, Photoshop, Illustrator)
- Social Media platforms (LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram).