Oneirospheres : dream worlds

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Abstract

The weird tale appears in literature across many sub genres, but primarily between Fantasy and Sci-Fi. Though it is not limited to Fantasy or Sci-Fi. It can and has been used in Romance, Thrillers, Detective Fiction, and other more popular genres. The essence of the weird tale aims to disturb the common reader. It is an exploration of the dark, misunderstood side of life; a characterization of the unconsciousness, and the vague forms left over for the imagination in a reality usurped by reason and the ego.

In the stories that follow, it was my intention to bring certain dark things to light without the desire to analyze them, or force upon them ideological interpretations in accordance with specific academic base camps. The last few months I read many dark tales by various authors: some who are known for their weird tales, others who are known for their craft and wrote a weird tale or two. My stories, however, are not the result of these readings. Rather, these readings helped contextualize my stories.

The weird tale challenges readers to imagine realities where imagination and dream are logical, and reason is a blanket character flaw amid the weird. How are perceptions, dreams, and realities connected or influenced by one another, and what are the values of human elements amid the weird—these questions decorate the genesis of the stories that follow.
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Introduction

“The one test of the really weird (story) is simply this—whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe's utmost rim.” – H.P. Lovecraft, from “Supernatural Horror in Literature”

As author of the following three stories, I must explain that it was not my intention to write The Weird and call myself a writer of such a style. I did not set out to conform to a set of literary rules in order to satisfy what could be called a weird tale. I had no desire to surprise readers with the bizarre content or to confuse them by contriving ridiculous happenings. Cliché as it sounds, my intentions were to write what I know. For me, that's the closest balance I can muster between the abundance of imagination and the demarcations of reason. It just so happens that these stories are what many in the world of storytelling would call weird. I’m okay with that.

It turns out that The Weird is not a genre. Not exactly, anyway. One would be hard-pressed to find genres that do not include some element of strangeness. The Weird is everywhere. Go ahead and hide from it. It’ll find you. It is most prevalent in Fantasy and Sci-fi where a stretch of the imagination is required. And especially Dark Fantasy, where reality usually breaks apart and strange tentacled beasts end up lurking in everyday supermarket aisles. Though the weird tale has its roots in the image of the tentacle, it is not only about tentacles. Not anymore. If you have the stomach for it,
even a Hallmark movie has a chance of using The Weird (a low-calorie version at best).

As Paula Guran explains in her introduction to *The Year’s Best Dark Fantasy and Horror 2012*, the Dark is different to different people. “It can be slightly unsettling,” she writes, agreeing with Lovecraft, “a bit eerie, profoundly disturbing, or just generally convey a certain atmosphere” (Guran, 7). Like it or not, everyone is different. Authors included.

Story after story, it stalks behind the words as readers wonder where The Weird will rear its head. It’s in there. Chances are, you’ll know it when you find it.

So, then. What is The Weird? Michael Moorcock, British science fiction author, asks this same question in his forward to *The Weird*, edited by Ann and Jeff VanderMeer. Surprisingly, his general conclusion is the same as Paula Guran’s. However, “it’s subtler and more complex than generic fantasy stories,” he writes. His opinion is that the weird tale’s appeal is exactly because it is designed to disturb. Not all weird tales can be disturbing to so many different readers. However, Moorcock suggests that if one was to look at the weird tale left on its own, one could see how it might disturb (Moorcock, XIII). It is not the result of simple grotesquerie. The weird disturbs us for what we take for granted, a metaphysical North-by-Northwest.

If nothing at all, it is at least a departure from the Gothic traditions of the supernatural tale. Ann and Jeff VanderMeer, editors of the compendium entitled *The Weird*, write that weird fiction, in its purest form, has “eschewed fixed tropes of the supernatural like zombies, vampires, and werewolves, and the instant archetypal associations these tropes bring with them” (VanderMeer, XVI). Instead, the weird tale tends to tread upon the path least trodden. Their work’s gargantuan collection of stories
spans the globe from the beginning of the twentieth century to now and includes a
diverse range of writers. From Algernon Blackwood to H.P Lovecraft, Borges to
Rabindranath Tagore, Ray Bradbury to Shirley Jackson, George R.R. Martin to Haruki
Murakami: The list of writers is impressive, if not diverse.

Guran’s and Moorcock’s words console me and the VanderMeers’ bring me
hope for the weird tale. Had I held my authorial intentions up to the expectations set by
Lovecraft, I’m afraid I’d have failed. But this is precisely why I did not intend to write
what Lovecraft called the weird tale: Horror is not my forte. I believe in happier endings,
if not at least more hopeful, anyway. Thankfully, everyone is different in what they each
consider dark, dreadful, or even weird. And though I intended no dread, it would be
naïve of me as a writer to ignore what dread there is in these stories. Instead of
maintaining the tradition of creating and keeping the dread going, my stories challenge
that expectation by offering resolutions intended to inspire the possibility of
understanding amid the strange.

In the stories ahead, I open new worlds with familiar problems and weird
occurrences alike. Survival, abduction, alcohol abuse, deteriorating relationships, loss of
faith, loss of humanity, loss of self and sanity: each familiar dynamic plays out upon the
page amid unexpected happenings and dreamlike logic. Despite how weird the setting
or action may be, there is always a central human element upon which the story
grounds itself. It is my hope that these human components do more than simply
function in the odd dramatic setting. As a writer, I hope they hook readers as much as
the oddities tend to fascinate them.
Writing the weird is as dangerous as it is necessary. The modern market and literary institutions cannot fully embrace a tale that dives headlong into unmitigated weirdness. The risk is too great, especially where wide readership equals potential profit. The execs historically have required authors to rationalize the weird (by fabricating normality) so that it makes sense to the reader. They seem only to want enough weird to pull in readers and viewers alike. Yet, once writers establish themselves as masterful, these writers are given complete freedom. This is apparent with the likes of Stephen King, Clive Barker and China Miéville, among many others modern names.

The dangers of writing the weird fall along the lines of the contrived. Weirdness is attractive (if not necessary) for any author. The reason is simple: life is not normal. Something weird always happens in life. Writing reflects our lives. Yet, as common to real life as the weird may seem to be, the tale itself harbors, as mentioned earlier, that sense of dread and aims to disturb our commonplace sensibilities.

Though strangeness is present everywhere, there are specifically weird tales that drive the it home in us. Since the departure of weird fiction from supernatural fiction (and decades of gothic literature that brought forth the vampire, the werewolf, and ghosts rattling chains), the weird tale has been shaped and championed by many wonderful writers. And not just writers who only write weird tales, but writers who embark upon and enjoy all different kinds of writing. There is usually one author whose name comes to mind when any of these writers discuss their influences.

When it comes to influences, H.P. Lovecraft is the first name that comes to my mind. Lovecraft scholar S.T. Joshi has estimated that the progenitor of the weird tale
wrote over 100,000 letters of correspondence. That’s five times more than Voltaire, who is famously known for the volumes of letters he wrote. Lovecraft was a pulp writer of the early twentieth century who had no desire for fame or literary mastery in the market. Often criticized for his purpled language by his contemporaries (and beyond), Lovecraft himself was sure he had been born a few decades too late, even referring to himself as an anachronism. He shared his ideas with his circle of friends and writers—including Robert E. Howard, Robert Bloch, Fritz Leiber, Clark Ashton Smith, Howard Wandrei, and August Derleth—and allowed them to write in his universe.

His late Victorian-esque style prose and influence from Edgar Allan Poe fits in his stories very well. They capture darkness and dread unlike any prior tale of the supernatural can even pretend to muster. And like Poe, his unreliable narrators make for fascinating storytellers, especially given the already-weird contexts of their tales. But probably the most important aspect of his tales is his concept of Cosmicism: “All my tales are based on the fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large” (qtd. in Joshi, 9).

Lovecraft is best known for his Cthulhu Mythos (a term coined by August Derleth). It is a series of stories each involving, or hinting at the existence of, extraterrestrial gods from times before time. These gods are grotesque physical beings of immense mental and psychological power whose abilities and intentions are alien; characters are often driven mad by mere proximity to these gods, or mere proximity to
the unknown thoughts of these gods. The story, “The Call of Cthulhu,” is the hallmark tale in this Mythos and demonstrates this cosmic madness perfectly.

The nephew of a dying psychotherapist promises, when settling his uncle’s estate, to burn his files on the “Cthulhu Cult.” Instead, the protagonist, the nameless nephew, finds himself following a trail of strange occurrences around the world. Though they seem like disparate events, they are all tied together by this “thing” called Cthulhu. It starts with the dreams of a young artist, then a strange artifact from the northern tundra and its connection to a savage cult in the Louisiana bayou; then it links to the discovery of an abandoned ship in the pacific ocean where a journal details the horrific discovery made by the crew: a city risen from the depths that looks like the images in the dreams of the artist, but which also housed the sleeping Cthulhu. He wasn’t too happy when he woke up. The tale ends with the protagonist in a mental ward asking his lawyer to burn the files. We know what the lawyer isn’t going to do, thus insinuating the continuation of the cycle.

The function of dreams is important in two of my stories, “Next to Love” and “True North of Music.” Both hint at and explore the connection between dream, perception and reality without making this the main focus of the story. Less so in “Next to Love,” in which Marco’s dream goes untold. I chose to withhold Marco’s dream from the narrative in hopes to keep the story from explaining itself too much. In doing so, I also hoped to create an imaginative gap some readers might feel compelled to leap (either over or into, doesn’t matter).
His jaded father, Calendar, on the other hand, has a dream that characterizes the threat that the spot in the sky poses, and opens him to thinking that his state of being may threaten to create those fatal circumstances. His dream also connects himself to a mystery he cannot explain and doesn’t try to explain. The real mystery for Calendar has nothing to do with the mysteries in front of him. Not readily, anyway. He needs to break away from his regrets long enough to see the needs of those around him. His dream only touches on this.

“True North of Music” is arguably a dream from beginning to end. This doesn’t make it any less real since the story’s own rules remain mildly consistent. However, there is one specific dream that distinguishes itself from the rest of the hallucinatory fabric: the beginning of the tale, which sets the rest of the action. The protagonist Di’Trou Max dreams of being on the beach with his deceased lover who sees a plane in the evening sky and complains of reality getting in the way. Di’Trou thinks she referred to him as being in the way. This is partly important for Di’Trou in the resolution of the action. He is obsessed with his role in the death of his lover but cannot see that it is less about her and more about himself.

The dream is a common literary device with many uses. But when used as part of the setting, or as part of the action, it becomes as real as the world around us, as the people with whom we interact. The story, as usual, sets up its own rules.

The weird tale is in service to the dream and the fuzzy logic that governs it. And like the dream, it allows itself to come into fruition within and around the world as we’ve come to know that reality. The dream and weird tale don’t show us holes in our
worldview. They show us windows wherefrom new qualities of light are ready for us to experience.

Lovecraft’s influence is credited among today’s popular greats. Stephen King calls Lovecraft the godfather of modern horror. As an influence upon my own writing, Stephen King cannot be ignored. Across the universe of his stories and novels runs a noticeable thread connecting them. The Dark Tower Series stands as the central pillar around which all the worlds of his stories revolve. The ambitious plot sends a lone broken gunman, Roland of Gilead, to find the Dark Tower and set things right (the Dark Tower it seems would be the place to do that). A recurring bad guy from some of his novels makes an appearance towards the series’ end. The man goes by different names, but it is clear he is the same man. Randal Flagg, mostly known as the bad guy in King’s paramount novel “The Stand,” is the influence behind The Stranger in my story, “The Hallowed Keep.”

The Stranger characterizes the shadows, the fears of the unconscious mind, but mostly, those things we fear about other people. He personifies the dark. If Randal Flagg is “he who walks behind the rows (The Stand, Children of the Corn),” the Stranger is his shopping-mall version who preys on lost children: he who walks behind the rows of clothes. He moves between worlds like Randall Flagg moves between stories. But unlike Randall Flagg, the Stranger doesn’t seek social power through corruption and manipulation (at least not to the extent in “The Stand”). Dominance over lost children is no less an exerted power, but The Stranger’s function is closer to a soul scavenger,
where Randall Flagg is better described as a higher ranking devil who seeks to wreak as much controlled havoc as possible.

We know nothing of Randal Flagg’s origins or any details, if any, of his life. The Stranger is equally mysterious. Where he comes from, what he ultimately wants, we can only imagine.

Clive Barker’s influence is also apparent in my imagination. Specifically, his *Books of the Art*, and the novel *Imajica*. The first book of *Books of the Art* (an unfinished trilogy), titled *The Great and Secret Show*, is more an influence through its imaginative plot than it is in its characterizations and writing. It breaks many traditional rules in its telling. There is no clear protagonist aside from the transmutable energy that passes from one character (who tries to stop the “bad guy” and fails) into two later characters (who also don’t succeed in stopping the “bad guy”). This transfer of energy is literal in the story.

A likable antagonist, The Jaffe, becomes obsessed with cracking through reality into a place between our world and another called Quiddity. Quiddity is the sea of dreams, and all people visit it naturally three times in their life: when they are born, when they die, and when they dream sleeping next to their first love. The Jaffe teams up with the “protagonist,” Fletcher, and they both seek a man who advances their evolution through a serum called Nuncio. From there, they both sense each other’s true intentions and an epic years-long battle begins, one that Fletcher ultimately loses, but not before passing his “gift” onto two others.
This transfer of energy and killing off of what I thought was going to be a main character inspired, more or less, some of the bizarre details of my character Di’trous Max, who is in strange spiritual company with many of his past lives. “True North of Music” finds Di’Trous hallucinating from sleep deprivation, allowing him to communicate with spirit guardians who are simply expressions of his life force in lives previous to his own. It is a temporal conundrum I hope challenges some accepted ideas. Di’Trous and his guardians are in the service of a deep and hidden source of energy known only as The Archons. As dense as his story is, Di’Trous cannot find the time to talk with his guardians about everything readers want to know (or would appreciate knowing). By the story’s end, the Archons work fast to get their energy ready to occupy Di’Trous’ next incarnation. I hoped this would inform readers that the Archons have been occupying Di’Trous’ soul and past lives for a very long time. I also hoped it would open the possibility of thinking of people’s lives as worlds in themselves.

The idea of other worlds accessible between or beyond the fabric of our perceptual reality runs through many of Barker’s works. This idea runs through King’s Dark Tower, too. It greatly influences how I choose to regard reality and how the idea of “other worlds” operates in relation to our own accepted reality. It’s clear in Lovecraft that these other worlds exist, but the mere speculation of them drives characters mad, and a glimpse of what comes out from them leaves characters lobotomized. Modern Horror and weird tale writers take the “other world” one step further by making them readily available to characters, and bolsters their characters with fortified psyches so that the adventurer can at least survive the first monster. What happens to characters
when they are forced to accept realities that destroy their perceptual expectations and ideological paradigms?

Calendar LaChance experiences this in a way readers of classic weird tales would have placed elsewhere in the story. He marvels at it, when he realizes that the spot in the sky is another world opening in the airspace of his own world (not planet, mind you). He wonders without being consumed with incapacitating fear. For him, his paradigm was crushed when his son, Marco, a gifted healer, falls sick with an overabundance of the energy he should be using to heal others. His world changed when the hopes of his own father went down the drain with Marco’s illness. It is here alcohol and pessimism grip Calendar, and then the spot shows up. One can easily see it happening the other way, where the alien event that changes reality causes the negative change in the character.

On the other hand, Xirix, the protagonist in “The Hallowed Keep,” is thrown into adventure—a maze of shifting perceptions and realities. Yet Xirix manages mostly fine where most if not all adults would have cracked. Being a child, he accepts the vicissitudes of his adventure, since those vicissitudes are influenced by the strangeness of dreaming. Children, in my mind, are still part of that mode of being that is strongly connected toward that which the dream can only hint. Xirix’s reality shifted when his grandfather passed away a week prior to the adventure. In a way, his flight from The Stranger is respite from grieving over his Grandfather’s death, or rather, his grandfather’s death primed him for the strangeness of his journey.
Besides Lovecraft’s Cthulhu Mythos, King’s Dark Tower, and Barker’s stories of other worlds, no other book’s influence has been more indispensible to the mechanics of my imagination than Edwin Abbott’s *Flatland: a Romance of Many Dimensions*.

Written to aid students understand mathematical dimensions, *Flatland* introduces the idea of teaching yourself to see differently. It involves A. Square, the two-dimensional protagonist, who meets a three-dimensional sphere. The sphere tries very hard to explain three-dimensional existence to a two-dimensional being. When A. Square fails to comprehend it, the sphere suggests he try to explain himself to the lines in lineland and the points in pointland. In the end, the book inspires readers to imagine fourth-, fifth- and even Nth-dimensional realities.

It’s that simple. There’s no great dialogue, or tense rising action. It is innocently inspirational without the rancor of being didactic (which it can be, sometimes). In fact, it is likely this innocence has influenced my attempt to make the strangeness of my stories less dreadful and more interesting in an exploratory sense.

It has been my aim to challenge the popular idea of “worlds” as other planets out there, somewhere. There is also the notion that some other worlds are just earth in another “dimension.” In other words, there is no “out there;” the Other-Earth is simply here in this place, but as if different things had happened. My aim has been, and will continue to be, to inspire the idea that worlds are areas of experience and perception that are limitless and ever growing. We are all familiar with the saying, “I’m in my own little world.” There are as many worlds and realities as there are conscious beings to
create and experience them. The worlds in my stories are areas of unexplored consciousness; arguably, a silhouette of the unconscious.

I like to think in the televised age of CSI drama and CSI logic (that crimeshow series that’s so popular these days), where everything has a cause, a reason and an analysis (thanks to Poe’s “Purloined Letter”), that there is a deep thirst for the imaginative and even absurd. Those elements that are most imaginative about my three stories, and most absurd if you are demanding of logic and reason, are those elements that go unexplained. That is on purpose.

In not having my characters struggling for understanding, my stories deviate from one of the more popular tropes of The Weird. If the characters in weird stories try to understand, they fail, thus satisfying that which the weird tale often strives: the limitations of human reason. Being human is daunting enough. “Next to Love” cannot explain the spot in the sky. It doesn’t try because there is nothing to explain. “The Hallowed Keep” equally cannot explain how The Stranger can shift worlds the way that he does. Again, it doesn’t need to. “True North of Music” has many unexplained components that purposefully leave the reader wondering what the heck just happened. In a way, this aligns with the intentions of the hallucinatory narrative. Di’Trous, the protagonist, has no idea what’s going on and has stopped trying years prior. He knows what he needs to know when he needs to know it.

By not explaining the most weird parts of these stories, I hope to inspire readers to imagine on their own, to reach for that next out-of-reach rung on an imaginary ladder. What is that other world and who are its denizens in “Next to Love”? What
compels Marco to that other world? What is the fabric of the universe if a world can bloom in the middle of the sky of another world? Who is the Stranger in “The Hallowed Keep” and how did he come to be so masterful at shifting and walking through worlds? How does his coat capture children? Who or what are the Archons in “True North of Music” and how—dear god, how—do they get inside people’s lives from the base of their soul at the bottom of their totem of past lives? Thinking about that is enough to make anyone’s brain pop, especially if the “past-lives” part is a considerable hurdle.

It is in the tradition of the classic weird tale that the tentacle makes an appearance in “True North of Music.” Lovecraft and his circle of writers brought the tentacle to life over ninety years ago. It stands for everything that is alien to human understanding. The tentacle helps conjure a creature that is detestable to our sensibilities, and helps to align the reader to the cause of the Archons.

Weird fiction, if it has a tradition at all, is a tradition of deviating from tradition. The lines between genres are fuzzy at best. Yet there is always an institution that thrives to organize and categorize the voluminous efforts of the imagination. So be it. Every writer has his or her twist, style and agenda.

The following three stories were written outside of security, and without an explicit interest in pandering to market trends. They are stories that compel readers to stretch their imagination, suspend reality, and to infuriate that logical, rational component upon which modern consciousness has come to rely. These three stories are weird.
In my opinion, all weird stories are based upon one questionably immovable basis: reality as we think we know it. The weird story throws out your reality and replaces it with another. It’s weird for four kids to walk into a wardrobe and enter a new world populated with talking animals, but it isn’t weird fiction, per se. The ingredient typically ascribed to the weird tale is its ability to upset the reader’s comfort, going into areas less trodden, bringing back reports of fresh stories living there. As I’ve said, though my aim was never to disturb, it would be foolhardy of me to be ignorant of what my own stories are doing. They go into dark corners, unveil hidden fears, force characters to look into their pain, challenge them to accept new realities, force them to make decisions before they understand anything, leave them living with the consequences—all while presenting them with realities and entities beyond the accepted norm. But unlike traditional weird tales, my characters find healing; they find courage against the strange, and they find forgiveness. In the vast cosmos, my characters discover that emotions are essential and are often what saves them in the end. I hope these narrative choices are an acceptable deviation in a style of writing traditionally known for their outlandish deviations.


Calendar LaChance crushed the can in his fist and tossed it into the dying fire at his feet. The canker-white flame-eaten logs shivered fireflies into the night. *The stars are hungry*, he thought as, one by one, the sparks vanished between them. Over there were the seven stars that made the Falling Crane; beside it followed the five that composed the Hero’s Hearth, besieged by a hydrogen cloud. Following the subtle red glow of the Hearth was Estrella the Ballerina, whose most prominent star was its heart: Amber Dance. Calendar traced his attention to this one star as he’d done each night since everything had started getting worse—since the spot in the Eastern sky had begun to grow.

Estrella had been his mother’s name. She had been a dancer, too.

Amber Dance, pulsing deep and red, hovered just above the backyard tree tops—a mix of elms, poplars, and a towering white pine or two. Calendar popped open a warm can which had been lying next to him, leaned his drunken head back on the knotted log with a thud, and tried not to think of the end of the world. Deep in his gut, he wished for true healing. He longed for Amber Dance to shine her heart light upon him. That’s what heart stars should have been for—to help people forget, to help them get through these last days without anguish, without regret, or at the very least, with some semblance of courage.

That was not going to happen.
He tossed his head way over the back of the log, finishing what hidden drops clung inside of the can. He crushed it, like all the others, and tossed it at the fire. Next to him, the blue cooler housed his remaining beers. It tipped over when he grabbed it by the edge and tried to pull it closer. The cold deluge seized him.

"Damn," he spat.

He moved with drunken urgency, collecting the cubes and cold cans. He wiped his wet dirty hands on his jeans. When he stood, the ground twisted beneath him, and he trampled through the fire. He waved smoke and sparks out of his face as he looked away, rubbing his eyes. Accidentally, he looked East at the spot.

For days since he first saw it, since he first took a good long look at it, Calendar had turned away from it, not wanting to accept it was ever there. Now he could only stare at it: A brown lenticular spot that seemed to bubble as it grew in the black night. He popped the dirty can open and drank long, his eyes worrying around the anomaly. It had grown. It had spread wider. It had sunk deeper into Isper. Calendar held his fist out to size it up. The spot was bigger.

It was growing faster, and it would be here very soon. What it was and where it came from, no one knew. The End of the World, that’s what people were saying.

“Keep drinkin’,” he told himself, afraid that was all he could do. His face quaked with bottled rage. It didn’t have to be like this. Wiping his mouth on his sleeve, he looked back at the house, to the house of his father, Agon the Bereaver, whose spirit was in its every fiber. His father had tried to make sure Calendar and Annella would have a good home to raise their child, Agon’s only grandchild, Marco. And being a
Bereaver, Agon had tried to ensure that Marco would be a gifted healer. In Agon’s own words: The best Isper would ever know.

That's not the way it had turned out.

Twenty years earlier, his father took Calendar aside and asked him how he felt about not being chosen to be a healer. “One day, I’ll have a child of my own,” he replied.

“That’s right.”

“And your grandchild will be given double the art that I would have had.”

“Right again.”

“. . . making my child the best healer ever, right papa?”

“That’s right, Cal,” agreed his father, pulling him close by the shoulders. “You won’t be a healer, and you won’t be a Bereaver, like me. But I’ll always love you. And one day you will be a great father.”

The fire snapped. Calendar leered at the house.

Upstairs, Marco lay catatonic in bed for the last month, wracked by an abundance of the very energy he should have used to heal others. Givendo, they called it. The end of days was here, and Agon the Bereaver had suffered and harnessed transmutable givendo for nothing, Calendar had been skipped over for nothing, and Marco had horded all the givendo for himself, healing no one.

The dark rear façade of the house stared back at Calendar. The spirit of his father had abandoned him, his house and Isper, altogether. Only the approaching spot in the East would keep its promise now. Calendar, knocking beers back into the night, would carry no one to meet it but himself.
Marco lay in his bed. Annella stood over him in her night gown. He was too old now for her to hold and comfort. She wished she could. Instead, she lowered herself next to him on the bed and felt his forehead, studying his face. A loud crack out back followed by Cal cursing derailed her concentration. Two weeks ago, she would have simply leaned out the window and told him to mind his mouth at such an hour. Two weeks ago, she would have smacked him on the head herself for being so disrespectful to the neighbors. Two weeks ago he wouldn't have had a reason to be the man he had become.

She waited in the dark bedroom. That's all she ever seemed to do anymore. Wait. Waiting for Cal to come to his senses, for Marco to wake from his coma, for the blemish in the sky to end them all—were the last of her days to be spent waiting? “It’ll be okay,” she told herself, reciting Agon. “Take it all in. Let it through. Let it pass on its own. Watch its path as it leaves you. Breathe deeply and find gratitude in the experience. It’ll be okay.” It wasn’t the same without Agon. The words when she said them were only imitation. She lightly rested her head upon Marco’s chest. His heartbeat was weak, his breath slow and shallow. He was getting worse. If he died, she would leap from the Southern wall of Hurdler’s Hill, end of the world be damned.

"Marco," she whispered, brushing her knuckles along his cheek. “I need to see your eyes again.” He continued sleeping.
Calendar dreamt he slept under a beehive that kept growing. It exploded into a gray cloud of combs, and a deafening buzz filled the air. People flailed as they drowned in a stinging sea of hornets. They screamed for givendo and Calendar ran, searching for Marco. Naked and riddled with bee stings, his son cried in a tree, you didn’t have to choose this.

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The world of Isper woke when Solio, the summer sun, poured its light over everything. Most summers, its magnitude was matched only by the laughter of Isper’s children. Not anymore. There was an uninvited color in the air, and the unmistakable notion that something foul was flowing. It was easy to place one's finger on it. It came from the East. Or maybe it came from within. None the less, the spreading of the rising summer sun only made it worse.

The neighborhood was quiet. Houses were still. Yards were empty. Hurdler’s Hill, having stood peaceful and eternal to the Southwest at the town’s edge, seemed ready to crawl away. Nested in red and white pines, its bald stony apex glared in the daylight.

By noon, Annella stood at the kitchen sink running warm soapy water over the green plates with an orange sponge. Suds pooled around the dishes at the bottom of the basin, reminding her of the sea. Outside the window to the backyard, she spied Cal entering and exiting the tool shed. It seemed to her that he was only walking around. His face was locked, vacant even, as men’s faces get when they say that nothing is wrong.
For the third time since that morning, she dried the same load of plates and bowls and pondered if maybe she should do them again. She dried her pruny fingers in a fresh dish towel, folded it and flopped it on the counter. She made sapphire tea for herself and sat in the common room, leaving the dishes out on the counter. Despite the tea, she could not be at ease.

She needed to feel Agon’s spirit. It had been a long time since he moved through their home. Whenever he did, his presence brought her comfort, encouragement, and peace. Cal was lost and getting further from her. Marco was lost and getting further from her. Isper, too, was lost, and there was no turning back. The heat from the tea loosened her tears a little. She did not weep, but it was hard not to feel. She needed Agon’s comfort.

Between Calendar’s two community league pitching trophies, Agon’s copper quill sat in its stand upon the mantle—his gift to her when she and Cal were wed. Meeting him had been worrisome for her. The man had been a Bereaver, after all: the first ever who had had the audacity to violate tradition and skip his child in favor of his grandchild. For Annella, who knew nothing of the givendo arts, meeting him had filled her with self-doubt. Looking into pale blue tea, she thought back to the time they had met. And as she did, the walls seemed to hum.

She had been nineteen at the time, about eight years ago. Calendar was a more passionate, gentler man then.

"You're going to be fine," Cal had reassured her. They walked in the cool grass past the neighboring homes.
"My nerves say differently," Annella confessed. She grabbed his elbow. "Do I look ok? I mean, am I going to wish I didn't wear this?"

Cal had smiled at her in a way he didn't smile anymore. "It doesn't work like that, love. My father won't judge you by your looks. He sees straight into your heart. You can't hide that."

That had not helped her at all.

"What if he sees into my heart and it turns out I'm not a good person? I don't know what I would do, Cal." Calendar smiled even wider, stopping her with his hands on her shoulders."I mean," she continued, "I haven't been the best person my whole life. I spit in a boy's hair once when I was a little girl, and that's far from the worst of it, but what if that's enough?"

The autumn breeze had teased a tress of her copper blonde hair across her face. He drew his finger across her hairline and tucked it behind her ear. "You'll know," he said and he patted his finger on the tip of her nose. "I know."

“But you’re not a Bereaver, Cal.”

He lowered his eyes. “I know. But I don’t need to be to see your heart.”

Her heart rocked heavy as they approached the house that would soon become her home. It looked like any other two-level house. Windows with shutters, weathered wood paneling, shingles, stone steps to the front door, yet no decorations aside from the pansies on either side of the doorstep. The red-berried shrubs under the common room window were kempt, the grass was freshly trimmed and weedless, and the birch trees were sprinkling the yard, as if in approval, with magnificent golden leaves. Looking
at the pansies, she wondered about Cal’s mother, but had learned it was better not to ask about her.

An elderly man stepped from the door and stood on the front step. He wore a dark-red, v-neck wool sweater over a blue button-up shirt opened at the collar, charcoal slacks and slippers. He had a bald top and a close wrap-around band of white hair. His white beard was finely trimmed, his face warm and full of gentle wrinkles that reminded her of delicate water in the Orrian Bay. Seeing him, she felt warmed. All her nervousness had dissipated, all her fears had quelled, and her heart opened as a flower would to the sun. She could feel him seeing into her heart, and she didn't mind; surprisingly, she didn't mind at all.

And she knew why, too—she could see into his heart, as well.

"My"—his voice, which was rich and gentle, met her at the steps—"you are lovely."

She smiled. His heart was warm, wise and open. She was linked into everything he had ever felt. Even all that he regretted. She did not want immediately to over step her bounds and begin investigating his past. Just as she felt she was trespassing, his voice spoke to her in her mind.

“A Bereaver invites others into their emotions so that they can see how they have lived through them. What they have learned, reconciled, and how they have grown from balancing what was previously imbalanced.” She then found that part of him that was deliberately hidden, a part that was deeply hurt, forlorn and full of unanswered questions—a part that had something to do with a star in the sky—Agon became
embarrassed, saying, “A Bereaver also invites others to feel where they have failed.” He moved them inside with a smile and a gesture and they continued to get to know each other over tea and lunch. Before the day was over, he reminded her of that difficult part of himself and said only this: “Someday, my dear.”

The sound of the sliding glass door opening came from the kitchen. Annella sipped her tea. Cal’s footsteps pounded on the tiles until he stood in the jamb looking at her on the chair. They exchanged a long glance before he turned back into the kitchen and she heard him open the fridge. He didn’t have to open it as hard as he did. The sound of glass jars rattling on the chilled shelves reminded her how empty their house had become. He came back to the jamb, leaning against it with his fingers in a jar of pickles. He popped a gherkin mechanically into his mouth, pickle juice dribbling upon his bearded chin.

“Marco stirred this morning,” she said. He only looked at her, chewing. His look was obstinate, confrontational. She collected herself, realizing it was silly to be afraid of anything he would say or do. “He didn’t say anything,” she added, clearing her throat, “but he didn’t have to. What he said last time was enough, don’t you think?”

Calendar fished for another gherkin. He looked up the stairs, and as he chewed, let a heavy, obdurate breath out his nostrils. In that breath, she felt a familiar argument winding up.

“Did he use any givendo?” he asked.

“Of course not.”
“It’s his own fault, you realize.” Cal positioned his back against the jamb. Facing her, he raised his voice, but only a little. “If he’d just stop hording all that givingo and heal someone, god damnit, he’d come around and be—do—what he’s supposed to do—"

“He can’t.”

“He won’t—but that kid,” he said pointing upstairs, “whom my father put so much faith in . . .”

“Cal, haven’t you listened to a thing he’s said? His dream?”

“Said? Who cares what he said!” He yelled without provocation. A noise from Marco’s room drew his gaze to the ceiling. Footsteps heavier, certainly healthier, than Marco’s moved across the floor above. “Who’s up here?” he called. He made it up half way before Annella’s words stopped him.

“Your father would be ashamed of you. After all he did for the energy of this house, the love and care he put into Marco’s ability, the untold suffering he endured . . .”

Calendar said nothing at first, watching his thoughts run up the stairs without him. Then he lifted his face and said, “Marco doesn’t have an ability. He’s broken. And if my father were alive, he’d be ashamed of himself.”

***

When Calendar entered his son’s room he couldn’t believe his eyes. A boy, a healer he didn’t recognize, leaned over Marco on the mattress, his hands surrounding
his child’s head. A blue aura passed noiselessly from his palms into Marco’s temples. Calendar knew enough of the givendo arts to tell that this wasn’t a healing technique.

“Hey!” he roared.

Calendar advanced toward the bed. The healer jumped up in a panic, his eyes flared with alarm. To Calendar’s surprise, the boy dove out the open window into the backyard. Calendar stuck his head out to see how badly the boy was hurt. Part of him hoped that it would be bad.

Instead, what he saw filled him with anger, with shame. How could he have not anticipated what he saw? The healer had landed safely in the arms of his Boobo.

Two and a half times the size of a normal man, with the conventional intelligence of a dog, the strength of a truck and the heart of a best friend, Boobos were a healer’s lifelong committed friend and protector. Every healer had one; as of a week ago, every healer except Marco.

The Boobo lowered the young boy, whose legs, the moment he touched down, couldn’t have carried him away fast enough. His Boobo, however, kept eyes with Calendar as he walked away in the direction of the town square. The look weighed heavy on Calendar’s conscience. Everyone knew what he had done.

As soon as the guardian had passed beyond his vision, Calendar turned to Marco, who remained undisturbed. Calendar’s fingers twitched as he thought about reaching out and shaking his son to wake him the hell up. Annella stood in the door, her arms folded.

“How long has this been going on?” he asked.
“How long has what been going on?”

“You know what I’m talking about. How long have you been letting healers in to see Marco?”

“I haven’t been letting anyone in to do anything.”

“Annella, the reason he’s in this state to begin with is because he’s sick with givendo. Those healers, those kids,”—he pointed to the window—“they can’t heal him with more damn givendo. Don’t you see? They’re making it worse. He absorbs it. He takes it from them.”

Annella paused, hoping he could hear himself. “For a moment,” she said, “you sounded like you really cared. But I know you don’t.”

“That shit up there will be crashing down on us very soon. And people are freaking out. They’re upset, scared, and confused, and healers like that kid can help them be at peace before this is all over. That’s what I care about. But my boy has this ability tenfold—had—and these healers show up to, what, heal him? No, Annella. They give him their own givendo . . . I just saw it happening! Do you know what would happen if people found out?”

“You mean the people who are in the same apocalyptic boat as the rest of us?”

“Don’t patronize me. You know how dangerous people are when they are afraid, when they are nervous and feeling trapped.”

“Marco’s Boobo does. Remember him? Is that how you justify what you did to him? You were scared? Or were you simply drunk?”
Calendar glared at her, the echo of Marco’s Boobo’s last words circling in his mind. He walked up to her and said, “Marco’s not a healer anymore, so he doesn’t need a Boobo.” He set the jar of pickles on Marco’s dresser, left the room, bounded down the stairs. The sliding glass door opened and shut, shaking the house. Out the window, his steps crossed the porch and *shushed* through the grass until what she thought was his stride in the lawn was replaced by Marco’s breathing. She put her hands on Marco’s chest. He was breathing fast and shallow. Then his hand was on hers.

His lips moved, but there were no words.

***

A week prior to Calendar’s and Annella’s argument in Marco’s room, the spot in the East had been only a little brown ring in the sky. Everyone knew it was there. Everyone knew it was bad. It was outside of space, and no matter what time of day or night it was, the spot was in the same place. Ask anyone: a tumor of any size was always serious. This was no different.

Calendar, unsure of how to face the coming days, had sat in the tool shed drinking and thinking. At that time it was the third week Marco remained catatonic in his bed. People were talking about it. It was no longer a mystery to Calendar, who heard their whispers, who saw their sideways glances. What a shame; poor Agon suffered for nothing; so sad, Calendar could have made a great healer. Tensions were getting high, and healed grudges were reopening. Healers were afraid and hard to find. The community faced the notion that they would die in discomfort and fear.
Boobo sat under Marco’s window talking to himself, his hulking frame casting a shadow that might have been a boulder’s. “Uh huh,” he said in a heavy, slow tone.

“Boobo wait right here for Marco. Marco is Boobo’s best and only friend, who will always love Marco, no matter what. Yes, Marco. Uh huh. I always hear you, no matter where you are. Are you playing a game? Boobo wants to play the game, too. Ok. Uh huh, Boobo will wait while you dream.”

After a week of this, Boobo’s thick voice was too much for Calendar to take. He slammed back another warm beer, left the dim of the tool shed and shielded his eyes from the afternoon light. There was Boobo, waiting as if he expected Marco to wake up any moment so they could go about the town together, healing.

Calendar was enraged.

“Annella makes the best pancakes. Uh huh, Boobo repeat after you: the spot is bad for Isper. Boobo believes in Marco’s dream.”

“Shut up, Boobo!” Calendar called across the backyard. Boobo looked up at Calendar, squinting through the hair over his eyes.

“Boobo will always be here for you, Marco.”

“I said shut the fuck up! Marco can’t hear you!” Boobo looked hurt, mad, but he continued despite the fierce glance Calendar shot at him. Calendar went to the tool shed and reemerged with a polished blonde baseball bat.

“Shut up!” He swung into Boobo’s shoulder. Boobo yelled in pain. He grasped his shoulder with a huge hand, standing quickly. “Marco is broken. He’s not waking up. So you get the hell outta here!”
Calendar swung the bat and caught Boobo in the fingers. Boobo hissed and pulled his hand back, waving his fat digits before hiding them in his mouth. Boobo was large enough to flatten Calendar in a single stomp, so Calendar put his weight into his swings, circling the humongous man.

“Get out of here, retard!” he yelled, hitting Boobo in the back. “He doesn’t need you anymore! Marco doesn’t need you!” Annella rushed out onto the porch. Horrified, she begged Calendar to stop. It did no good. Calendar didn’t hear her, or he didn’t care. Mr. Clairwall and a handful of other neighbors in earshot came out to see what was happening. Let them talk! What did he care? He cracked the bat off the idiot’s skull with a loud pop. Boobo began to wobble. He began to bleed. But he didn’t go down.

When it was almost too much, Boobo lunged at Calendar, who instantly fell backwards, wide-eyed and covering his face with his forearm. But Boobo stepped away, clutching his arm, his broad face bruised and blood coming down over his eye. Boobo sobbed, grimacing as he spoke slowly, trying to make out words that didn’t want to be made out.

“Boobo . . .” he said, shaking his head, “will always love Marco, no matter what . . . no matter what.” He hurried off into the trees. Annella flew off the porch at Calendar.

“How dare you!” She yelled, throwing her fists everywhere. “Marco is all he has. He doesn’t have anyone else. You didn’t have the right, you didn’t have the right.” He pushed her off him, wiping blood from his nose. He hid in the shed, in the dark, drinking and listening to his tools tell stories of what they wished they had time to make.

***
The spot was huge in the sky. The smell of brine in his beard, Calendar walked down the grassy lane to the town square. He was still trying to wind down from that look the healer’s Boobo had given him. It was tougher to shake than he thought.

Aster Bennet’s children were nowhere to be seen. They were usually camped out in the willow tree, shaking branches or swinging back and forth from its long leafy tendrils. Gerris and Polina Mink sat together in the shade of their screened-in porch. They looked in Calendar’s direction but gave no indication that they were watching anything in particular. He stopped a moment to look back at them, but ultimately moved on without a wave or a nod. The air felt strange.

Mellister Harrowwind’s cat, Judge and Jury, was hunting something through the shrubs in front of Damien and Sorrow Rickels’ house. Up and down the grassy lane, however, Calendar spotted no one else. Despite the haunting breeze in the trees, the agitation of birds trying to fly away from the East, and the distant yelp of a dog somewhere, it was a desolate day.

Calendar made his way to the general store nestled on the corner of the town square. A handful of neighbors had grouped outside, accosting someone. As Calendar moved up the painted plank steps in front of the store, he could see the small shape of a young girl backing slowly away from the throng. It was Jessipa Cooley, a healer. Her eyes were big and tearful as the group closed in on her.

“Why don’t you help me, too?” lamented Grisham Marly.

“Yeah, what about me? You got something against me?” Barrion Avartok said, a finger pointed to his barreling chest.
“Hey, that’s twice in a row for you!” Calendar couldn’t tell who said this, though he knew everyone in the group. When people started grabbing and pushing each other out of the way, Calendar backed into the general store unnoticed.

He made his way to the back where the hum of the electromagnetic generator tickled his ears. He thought of bees. *I don’t have to choose this*, he thought, looking at the cases of beer through the cooled glass doors. The thought felt intrusive, alien. The glass of the refrigerator door fogged over when he opened it, reaching in and grabbing a case of beer. Hefting it on his shoulder, waiting by the counter where Zarelli Modus usually sat doing acrostics and swatting flies with a plastic purple swatter, he looked anxiously about.

“Zari!” Calendar called. No one answered. The din outside was growing. Calendar grabbed a pencil and left a note on the counter for Mr. Modus which read:

_In case we survive this, I owe you for a case of beer—LaChance._

Calendar stopped again on the porch when he saw how dysfunctional the group had turned. Little Jessipa’s face was strewn with tears. Barrion Avartok had her by the shoulders, lifting her into the air and threatening to shake the givendo out of her.

Just when Calendar reached out his hand to say something, her Boobo emerged from between the buildings and knocked through the gathering like a stone through a pyramid of cans. The little girl’s Boobo, wherever the hell he’d been, arrived in time to grab Barrion around the back of the neck, and with the simple articulation of his monstrous grip, convinced him to drop the girl.
Jessipa’s Boobo scooped her up like a little doll while the adults recovered themselves, complaining of their injuries. He ran away, carrying the healer to safety—if there was such a place.

“LaChance!” Harrison called. “Where’s that ruined boy of yours?”

“Yeah,” Sorrow Rickels chimed in. “He’s still gotta have some talent left.”

“Go home,” Calendar said, lacking the necessary gusto it would have taken to intimidate anyone. “Go home and die with some dignity.” Not believing the words himself, they had no effect other than to goad the group.

“Says the town drunk!” Mr. Clairwall said. “Dignify this!”

Calendar was as much the town drunk as these people were murderers, though the seeds were there, with a taste of the sallow fruit on their lips. The earth, the water, the light—all the ingredients were present. One required only a small push to send them over the threshold.

The brown blot hung heavy over their heads.

They began approaching. Calendar would do nothing to stop them. Dangerous thoughts crossed his mind: why not let them do what they needed to do; why not lead them back to his house so they can see Marco with their own eyes; why not join them and go running around the town looking for healers, too?

He saw himself dropping the beer and joining the group, showing them to all the best healer hideouts. Together they’d drag all the children out, kicking and screaming and crying. Together, they’d grab tools from their sheds and kill all the Boobos who would dare to stop them. All the while the sky would grow darker, the shit up there
would spread wider, the air would feel thicker, and with alien grins cutting across their once placid and peaceful faces, Calendar and company would laugh as the world ended.

He felt lost in a long dark corridor deep in his soul, screaming into the illimitable black he saw there. *Why are you choosing this? You don’t have to choose this. God damnit, Calendar LaChance. You don’t have to choose this!* If the voice was his, he did not recognize it.

Someone in the group had spotted someone they thought was a healer on the opposite end of the square by the post office. Cinity Merézbah was a quiet, imaginative girl, but she was no healer. Calendar made a quick departure as everyone moved dangerously as one in the child’s direction. Everyone except Regicent Palmroy, who watched Calendar disappear into the birch trees east of town square. Calendar found himself at the bottom of his second beer before he even got home from his short walk.

***

Anella washed Marco’s face with a cool wet cloth. He had entered into convulsions and blood-laced snot had leaked from his nose. She washed his groin after he’d soiled himself and then changed his clothes. Carefully, she carried him downstairs to the couch so that he could get some sunlight while she changed his bed sheets. Kneeling on the floor in front of the couch, she folded her hands over his. Exhausted, she lay her head upon his chest, facing the fireplace, and listened to him breathe.

She thought of the beach, the sound of the tide ebbing and flowing, and Marco’s expression when he felt the cold water for the first time. She thought of wind in the trees through the kitchen window and how, when times got tough for her after Agon’s
passing, she found his voice in her heart: “It’ll be okay. Take it all in. Let it through. Let it pass on its own. Watch its path as it leaves you. Breathe deeply and find gratitude in the experience. It’ll be okay.”

Agon’s comforts had ceased to find her heart when Marco first fell ill. In the weeks that followed, she found herself speaking to the walls, groping them, pleading for him to speak to her. Nothing. It was as if he had died twice.

The sliding glass door opened, and she listened to Calendar enter the house. A resonant click followed and she knew he had locked the door behind him. It was getting crazy out there. She had heard people arguing. He moved slowly. He moved quietly. He must be tired, she thought. Was everyone becoming more tired? She was tired, too. When he moved into the room, she didn’t feel compelled to acknowledge him. She felt him walk to the front door, look out the portal window and lock the door. She searched for his image in the reflections off the framed family pictures on the wall, but he seemed to have disappeared between them—a ghost in his own house.

“Cal,” she said, not looking at him. “It’s true. I’ve been letting healers in to see Marco. They come to me. They keep coming to me. They insist I let them in. They’ve been giving Marco all of their givendo. And with it, he’s been getting worse. But you must believe me when I say I thought it would help. I only wanted him to get better. Boobo tried to tell me what’s wrong with Marco, but you know how Boobos talk. I don’t really know what it is, but I know he thinks it is for the best. I want to believe he’s right.”

She felt Calendar move toward her, stopping in the middle of the room. She could feel him standing there, shifting his weight to one hip. “I don’t care what you have
to say anymore,” she continued. “I don’t want to hear anymore about real people with 
real problems and your preoccupation with Marco’s disgracefulness. We’ve had this 
argument a hundred times already . . . Just, don’t. That thing up there is enormous now. 
I’m tired. Let me die peacefully with my son.”

As good as it felt to get it off her chest, it didn’t feel good enough; but then 
again, she told herself, it wasn’t supposed to be.

“All the givendo?” he asked, but the voice wasn’t Cal’s.

Anella bolted up and twisted around, her heart pounding. Regicent Palmroy 
stood just a few feet from her, a long screw driver quivering in his hand. They stared at 
each other. She was scared. From the way the screwdriver shook, she could tell he was, 
too.

“Step away from the boy, Annella.”

“Regis,” Annella’s voice was as steady as she could make it. “I don’t know what 
you think you can do, but Marco’s”—she shook her head—“he can’t give you what you 
want.”

“You gotta understand: I don’t want to hurt anyone, but I can’t go on like this.”

“You have to, Regis. Because if you do anything to harm either of us, I’ll unleash 
the wrath of Agon, the Bereaver, who is in every nail and board of this house.” His eyes 
darted, as though expecting the walls to crash in on him. There was no such wrath, but 
the mystique surrounding Bereavers and healers was such that she knew Regicent didn’t 
know that himself.
At that moment, Marco woke up. Grabbing Annella’s hand he said something in a tired, hurt, little voice, but she missed it. She couldn’t take her eyes off Regicent.

“I’m sorry, Annella,” Regicent said. He moved in, daylight gleaming off the length of the screwdriver.

***

The spot had grown too fast too soon and began to look like a brown ocean rolling steadily in the sky. It was sinking closer down as it grew, becoming frighteningly more convex. The darkened light flooded the shed through the one little window Calendar had fashioned into it years ago.

Calendar looked at the beer in his hand. I don’t have to choose this, he thought. Who was he now after Marco failed to be what Agon had hoped? Was he a father anymore? Was he a husband? “I’m not a healer. Maybe I am a drunk,” he admitted, but it changed nothing. He studied the can in his hand. “I don’t have to be this. I can let go of this.” He closed his eyes and repeated it to himself.

*Go home and die with some dignity,* he’d said. It didn’t seem like something he’d have said, but there it was. The baseball bat sat in the corner. It told him a story about himself he didn’t like. What could you do about it? Nothing, he was afraid. Where was Boobo now? Calendar could only imagine he had run off into the woods to die. That couldn’t be true. Please don’t let that be true, he thought. He picked up the bat and held it in his lap. He rolled it in his calloused palms as though he were flattening dough on his legs. Calendar hadn’t grown up with givendo arts coursing through him; he grew
up pitching baseballs and hitting doubles and singles—and once he made it to third when the shortstop overthrew to first.

He had never taught Marco how to throw a ball. Marco was a healer. Healers didn’t play ball. They healed the injured, the hurt, the dying, and the anguished. They never cured what people could cure themselves, but they always comforted. His own father, for that matter, hadn’t taught him to throw.

“How do you pitch the way you do?”

Calendar thought about it. “I don’t know. I just sorta do it.”

“That was the best explanation Calendar would ever get from him. His mother had told him a better one, but after what she’d done he’d put it out of his mind long ago.

“When I’m a papa one day, will my child just sorta know, too?”

This time, Agon thought about it. “Yes, in their unique way. They will know exactly what they need to do with givendo.”

Calendar thought of his father’s suffering, decades beyond what Bereavers typically suffered. Reconciling all that they had healed in their time as healers, Agon must have been the best. Had Agon known the fate of Isper, would he have made Calendar a healer? Calendar would have already done his time healing, would have already harnessed the givendo and himself become a Bereaver and then . . . Marco would have been a healer anyway, one that wasn’t broken. As he wondered what logic
had emboldened his father’s decision to skip him, Calendar heard a splintering crash from the house.

On the eve of apocalypse, Calendar would be damned if he was to let anyone get away with trashing his father’s house.

He stepped from the shed and looked at the house, wondering. It stood mute. He held the case of beer from the opened side flap as he crossed the lawn, the bat in his other hand. The sliding glass door was locked so Calendar banged on the glass with the tip of the bat, calling Annella. She didn’t answer. The front door had been torn from the frame, and light flooded through the jamb between the kitchen and the common room.

Furious, Calendar ran around the front. The door lay on the floor, the frame splintered and sharp. Calendar’s eyes grew wide at what he saw: Blood on the couch, blood on the floor. His heart raced.

The walls shimmered and hummed.

Calendar couldn’t contain his anxiety. He ran upstairs, but Marco’s room was empty, so was his own. Turning to run back downstairs, he stood face-to-face with his father. He looked just as he did the day Calendar took Annella to meet him.

Calendar felt ashamed knowing his father would try to look into his heart. He wanted to stop him, afraid Agon wouldn’t find it. When he found Calendar’s heart, Calendar found his father’s, and the imbalance between them hurt.

“Your heart is not lost,” his father said. “Your heart is still good. It has a deep shadow, but it isn’t as wide as you think. The blood downstairs worries you. It should.” Calendar wanted to speak, but the feeling of his father’s heart inside of him was
overwhelming. Everything he loved about his father found itself in him: the smell of his tobacco, the texture of his voice, the brush of his beard against his face when he used to hold him close as a child, the warmth of his hand on his shoulder. “There is no one else in this world who can do for Marco what needs to be done. Givendo is about to leave this world forever.” And with that, Agon vanished.

“Father?” Calendar called into the empty hall space. He felt lonelier than ever.

Agon’s voice returned, disembodied.

“You have never been a healer, Cal, but you have always been my son—as much as you have been your mother’s. She believed in a different life for you, for us—a life without givendo. Before she left us, she told me, ‘Next to love, givendo means nothing.’ It was only after she was gone did I realize that she was right. Your son is winding up a big pitch. And he needs you to be there to help him.”

The walls returned to normal.

Calendar dropped the bat under the mantle where his pitching trophies stood, where the bluing copper quill sat. He glanced at the blood, clenching his teeth. Worry moved like a worm in his heart. Afraid that someone he loved may have come to harm, Calendar exited the broken door and ran through the grass toward the sound of people yelling. Above the birches and spilling over clouds, the brown convexity loomed larger than ever.

***
Outside the town square, where people were yelling and fighting, Calendar found Regicent Palmroy crawling in the grass. When Calendar grabbed the him by the shoulder, Regicent shrank in fear. His face was broken and bloody.

“I’m sorry,” he said, choking. “I didn’t mean to, I didn’t mean to . . .”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Have you seen Annella?”

“I’m so sorry, LaChance. You have to forgive me.”

“Forgive you for what?” Calendar grabbed him by the scruff of his collar and pulled him close. “Talk.”

“They said something about Hurdler’s Hill. I didn’t mean to do anything. I just wanted him to heal me . . . that’s all.” Calendar asked him who, searching the man’s eyes. He pushed Regicent, who was too shaken to speak, back into the grass, leaving him to bleed, to cry alone, thinking about whatever it was he regretted. From the look of the sky, that wouldn’t be much time.

Calendar walked through the town square, where just about everyone he could recognize was going crazy in their own way. Mellister Harrowwind, who’d made them a willow wreath last fall, knelt on the ground, her face between her knees and her hands tugging on her hair. “I’m sorry,” she repeated to herself. With a terrifying look on his face, Damien Rickel took an ax to the maple tree in front of the post office. Zarelli Modus shook Weezie Brisko by the throat, telling her to calm the hell down. She dug her fingers into his face, trying to get him to let go of her.

A small group collectively stabbed and beat the corpse of a Boobo by town hall with pitch forks, spades, and shovels while Harper Crane dragged a healer by his little
foot through the dirt. Marco, Calendar thought. It wasn’t, but what if it had been?

Calendar turned sideways, reached into his case of beer and singled out a can. Two trophies under his belt, Calendar cocked his arm back and let loose.

The can arced a little to the right. “Damn,” he said to himself. He grabbed another can and this time he let loose as though letting the air guide the can to its target. The can popped off Harper Crane’s temple, and he folded heavy upon the ground. “Run for it, Kid!” Calendar yelled.

Those stabbing the Boobo turned his way, and Calendar knew he was in trouble. Someone yelled “LaChance!” and even more looked in his direction. Seven cans—he’d better make them count.

Calendar made a break for Hurdler’s Hill, crossing the intersection and cutting across yards. A large group of once-friendly neighbors were close on his tail. He stopped behind trees here and there during their pursuit to deliver a pitch into the mob. One by one, the large group thinned, but not by enough.

He pitched his last can and dropped Walizen Presto, who was an otherwise pretty good kid, just not today. Out of cans and losing his breath, Calendar knew he wouldn’t make it up Hurdler’s Hill. Even if he could, he wouldn’t want to lead all these people to his son, if he was really up there. He pulled himself up an elm and climbed a few branches above. When the group of what seemed like ten or so crowded at the base of the tree, Calendar climbed a few more branches.

Through the leaves and branches he could see the brown ocean. He could actually see inside of it and was surprised when he was able to make out what looked
like an upside down landscape: a world all its own inside the convexity. The air had a 
shake to it as the convexity bulged, the nadir of which seemed to be moving closer to 
the apex of Hurdler’s Hill. Calendar laughed in the green leaves.

“What the hell’s so funny, LaChance?” someone asked.

“You. All of you,” he said letting out a long, tired sigh. “I got away with it. All this 
time, I had my son take all the givendo from all the healers.” He laughed at them, 
hoping they’d believe the lie. “He’s back at my house now, all the givendo you could ask 
for. But I don’t think any of you will be able to get there in time. That sky is looking 
awfully loose.” It seemed he had hit a note with them. He heard at least one of them 
run off. Maybe it was two. He couldn’t tell.

Suddenly, a Boobo crashed through the throng, scattering people as he 
dispensed damages left and right. From his height, Calendar couldn’t see enough 
through the leaves and branches. He heard the clangor of physical conflict: pushing, 
punching, dropping, shouting, yelping, and begging. When the Boobo met resistance, his 
voice roared loud. Many fell wounded and broken. For their own sake, Calendar hoped 
some had had the smarts to run away.

When it was all over, the Boobo returned under the tree. Through the branches, 
he looked Calendar straight in the eyes and motioned him to come down. Calendar 
hesitated. The Boobo’s face was bruised, his arm in a make-shift sling. Calendar 
couldn’t believe it.

“Boobo, is that you?”

“Oh huh.”
Together, Calendar and Marco’s Boobo hiked up Hurdler’s Hill. Boobo did not look at Calendar. Calendar didn’t know how to look at him either. Any questions Calendar asked Boobo of Marco or Annella’s safety went without reply.

Calendar’s amazement wasn’t that the convexity spanned the sky from horizon to horizon in such a short length of time, but rather that beyond the surface of the blight was what appeared to be, as he’d noticed from the tree, an upside landscape. Replete with elevations, hills, mountains, gullies, ravines and rivers, the rolling oceanic surface was a portal to a world of its own. There were cities delineated and organized by hexagons. Calendar remembered his dream. What perplexed him even more was that he could see straight through to where the stars in the sky were beginning to bloom.

Had the day waned so fast? Calendar marveled at how similar it was to searching for someone inside a window, who was hidden behind the reflection of the outdoors on the glass.

Calendar wanted to tell Boobo he was sorry, that he was wrong, that he regretted what he did to him. But he didn’t. Together they climbed to the bald apex, where the convexity was only a few feet above them. Annella sat with Marco in her lap. Her eyes were red, and she stroked Marco’s hair. He was relieved to see they were without injury.

The brown surface rippled like turbulent wind over water. A dissonant buzz rocked the atmosphere, as though two disharmonic tones were fighting for the same space in a musical chord. They all looked up into the strange world beyond the surface
and saw the peak of an upside-down mountain rolling towards them. Atop it stood a circle of people, discolored and separated from Isper by the membrane. Light radiated from their palms. Their faces were long, straight and sharp. Their eyes were large and deep in focus as the peak panned closer. Calendar had never seen the likes of such people.

Marco squirmed in Annella’s arms, tearful. “My dream . . .” he said.

“It’ll be ok, sweetheart. It’s ok.” But it wasn’t. Landscapes from the world above began to bleed into Isper below, like ghosts between dimensions. Solio, the descending summer sun, was the bulb, the brown ocean above was the film, and Isper below was the screen.

“No,” Marco cried, reaching his weak arms. “Help me do this.” Annella stroked his hair and tried to hold him still. But Marco wasn’t complaining; he was begging for his father who was too transfixed with the strange world above.

Calendar stared at the strange people above them, standing on a mountainous ceiling over Isper. As their peak centered, hovering over Hurdler’s Hill, the circle of light-wielders directed their palms Eastward, against the motion of the two worlds. The two peaks locked together like cogs grinding to a halt. A tremendous wind enveloped the circle. Their robes fluttered, their hair whipped; their faces concentrated and stern, their bodies leaned way into the wind. Calendar didn’t know if they would be able to hold out. Meanwhile, in Isper, the air remained strange, and grew stranger still as pieces above bled below.
Beams of brownish phantom light shined upon Isper, and Calendar could make out large structures forming around the town. Towering structures unlike anything he had ever seen flickered and wavered in and out of existence. The alien architecture was incomprehensible.

Above, in the center of the circle of light, there were four prominent figures, of which one was a child, perhaps a little older than Marco. He was triangulated by the other three. Together, they held tightly to this boy, propping him up closer to the wall between the two worlds. They couldn’t have been more than five feet above.

Marco fought with all his dwindling energy. “Let me go. My dream!”

“It’ll be ok,” Annella said, knowing it wouldn’t be.

Calendar’s eyes met Marco’s. They spoke to him but of what, he couldn’t say.

“Dad,” Marco cried. Calendar felt his lips quiver at the sound of his name. “Help me.” Marco could barely lift his arms, reaching for his father.

Above, the child propped upon his aides, reached his hand through the membrane. In the discolored Isperian light, his arm was smooth and wet like black glass; his imploring fingers stretched out in the sky. Marco lifted his arms, trying to reach the glassy arm.

Calendar hesitated, full of questions, regrets and unfinished thoughts, only to realize that none of that mattered in this moment. He watched the two boys reaching for one another, the circle of alien priests struggling with an unfelt energy, Annella ignoring the whole thing, Boobo staring next to him with his head cocked as though listening to something.
Calendar felt a flash of overwhelming urgency. He didn’t know why, but he knew Marco and this child needed to reach each other. He couldn’t explain why he felt certain of this, didn’t waste time thinking about it. He grabbed Marco from Annella’s lap and held him close. She assaulted him.

“No!” she yelled. “Don’t you take my boy from me, LaChance. Don’t you take from me the only thing I have left in Isper.” She tugged Calendar by the arm, pulling him away from the boy in the sky. “Let me die with my son!” Calendar doubted if what he was doing would do anything at all. Marco began slipping from him.

“Dad,” Marco said, his voice lost in the increasing wind. “Please, help me do this.”

Calendar looked at his son’s face and traced the likeness of Agon. He put his hand against his little head and kissed his flushed cheek. “All I ever wanted was to be a healer,” he told his son. “I envied you sometimes more than I loved you. I’m sorry I didn’t believe in you.” Annella kept pulling, fighting Calendar to put Marco down.

Behind the brown ocean, the boy in the world beyond reached intently, his large eyes desperate, fearful.

Calendar called Boobo over. He held back Annella who fought against his grip with all her might. Calendar lifted his son into the sky. Marco couldn’t reach the glassy arm. “Come on,” Calendar said, his face pressed against Marco’s heart. “Come on, son, you can do it.” Marco must have felt like he was lifting a hundred pounds.

Finally, their hands met. In the space of a second Marco hung in the air, in the next, the arm pulled him through the membrane into the world above. Calendar made
out the image of his son cradled safely in the arms of the aides in that strange world.

They set him down carefully. He looked like a fetus to him. The circle of priests let go, their palms going dark. The mountain began rolling again. Annella watched helplessly, wanting to run after the moving mountain. Calendar watched, feeling he had forgotten to say something. Boobo only seemed to watch, his head cocked sideways as though he was still listening.

The convexity filled with a sudden eruption of light with skeins of blue givendo waves running away in every direction. It filled the entirety of the sky. Calendar, Boobo, and Annella all shielded their eyes.

Then it was over. The world that had begun as a spot and grew into an ocean had completely vanished and the stars began unfolding like flowers in the night.

Isper remained.

Marco was gone.

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Calendar sat atop the bald apex thinking for a long time. Boobo sat around the back of a boulder out of Calendar’s sight. Calendar could hear Boobo talking with Marco as if his son was still in Isper. When Marco had slipped out of Isper, Annella had gone cold and rigid, feeling the biggest part of her had been removed. She walked back to the house, through the town where people were looking around at everything, at everyone, as if they realized they’d been ghosts all along. Many cried into their palms. Annella did not stop to comfort any of them. Why should she? What did they have to cry about?
“It’ll be okay,” she told herself. “Take it all in. Let it through . . .” She walked into Cal’s tool shed and took the largest mallet she could carry. She went inside the house and smashed every part of Agon’s walls that she could. She split the mantle and broke the copper quill, along with the trophies. She gutted the wall between the common room and the kitchen and fragmented the kitchen counter. Agon would no longer be a part of her life, no longer be part of the house she used to love. She went to their bedroom and destroyed the mirror, the pictures, the walls, the oak bed frame.

Her arms were on fire.

Every swing answered that one question she had had in her heart all these years: Why didn’t Cal ever talk about his mother. Now she thought she knew. No words could articulate it better than what she felt in every swing of that mallet: the anger, the hurt, the rejection. Agon, she felt certain now, was not the only spirit in these walls. When she got to Marco’s room, two swings in she broke down and collapsed on the floor, the jar of pickles having fallen next to her. She pitched it at the window. She missed and it broke against the wall.

Calendar watched the stars cross the sky. Amber Dance took up her number and pulsed out from behind the horizon. Its old red light felt warm to him. Boobo cried behind the rock. Calendar walked over to him in the dark and told him he should probably try to get some sleep.

“I can’t hear him anymore,” Boobo said.
Calendar’s mind raced all night. The fire he had made began to die and Boobo, who had curled up next to it, muttered in his sleep, reminding himself *no matter what, no matter what* all night long.

Calendar made his way home in the morning. His neighbors in the town square had done the best they could to clean things up, but many still lumbered about, distant and withdrawn, cautious about how to approach one another. They saw Calendar and had to stop whatever they were doing or thinking about. He knew they’d seen the givendo waves. He knew they would know Marco had something to do with why Isper was still here. He didn’t stop to talk to anyone. He had a feeling he would be doing a lot of talking about it soon enough. Not right away, though.

Boobo, somehow, had caught up with him by the time he reached home and went to Calendar like a cautious dog.

“Are you ok?” Calendar asked.

Boobo said nothing.

“Come inside,” he said, motioning to the house. Calendar wasn’t surprised to see the damage. They walked in through the broken front frame; Boobo fit just perfectly. Pieces of the wall dressed the floor and the kitchen was clearly visible between the studs.

Boobo looked at the dried blood on the couch and then looked at his hands. By the broken mantle, his eyes found the baseball bat.

“Boobo gonna go now,” he said. “Find other Boobos, find a place.” Calendar saw him looking at the baseball bat, unable to take his eyes off it.
“Can I do anything to help you?”

Boobo turned his head, thinking—the same expression he would make when listening to Marco.

“Uh huh. Tell them Boobo’s sorry for hurting people. And . . . just let Boobo leave for good.” Boobo left. Calendar wanted to stop him, but after the way he’d treated him, he wasn’t sure he should make him stay either.

“Boobo,” he called after the hulking man.

Boobo turned, his head cocked like he was listening. He spoke carefully, reciting words Calendar just knew couldn’t be his own: “Calendar was wrong in many ways. But the biggest was up there, yesterday. Calendar said sorry for not believing Marco. But Calendar did. That’s why Isper is still here. Calendar believed in something he thought he lost.” Boobo made a face full of complex emotion, turned back and walked through the grass in search of other Boobos.

“You always have a place here,” Calendar said after him, but Boobo made no sign that he’d heard him. Calendar could have spoken louder, but it was hard for him to find the courage, hard for him to believe he was doing the right thing.

He walked upstairs and found Annella in Marco’s bed. She lay quiet and still, much like Marco had. He touched her hand, laid his head upon the bed. The sheets were fresh. He wanted them to smell like Marco, but they smelled only of summer and brine. Calendar cried there for a long time. He was upset to hope that Annella would run her fingers through his hair, or touch his shoulder to comfort him. She did not do either. He
did not deserve it, and he was ok with that. His shame had made him selfish, and it was
time to try to let go of it.

“I don’t know what comes next,” he finally said, swallowing hard. “There’s a lot I
regret. There’s a lot I’ve locked away over the years. In the days or weeks ahead, there’s
a lot I think we should talk about. I hope we can confront our regrets, share those
feelings we’ve hidden away, together. I know you have no reason to. And I don’t blame
you. After what happened, I don’t know what I know anymore. My whole life . . .

Eventually, we can take a deep look ourselves: what we’ve come to fear, hate, or reject.
Why couldn’t we forgive ourselves? We can if we are honest. We can heal each other
this way. I don’t expect you to forgive me because I want you to, but because I’m not
ready to forgive myself. My mother once said, ‘Next to love, giving means nothing.’
I’m embarrassed to think I never knew that. But I know that I have, deep down, all this
time. And I know that I will try to hold that closer to me. Given time, we’ll be ok without
giving.”

She did not want giving. She did not want love. She wanted Marco.

Calendar was unsure how long they were there when Annella broke the silence.

“Tell me about your mother.”

Calendar, sitting on the floor, leaned his head back on the edge of the bed and
waited a long time before he could answer. When he did, his voice was soft and
forthcoming. “Her name was Estrella, like the constellation. She, too, was a dancer . . .”
Xirix could shadow his mother no more. She window shopped, sized up garments and browsed aisles of different back-to-school clothing stores that let their sales run late into the season. All the while, he dragged his feet, trying on this and that. It was torture, but he wasn’t in a position to argue. A few times he spied other children his age, ten or so, enduring the same. To him they acted childishly, whining, crying and complaining. He wondered if it would be the same for them if it had been their grandpa who passed last week. Meanwhile, his mother was being overprotective. If he had so much as turned a corner without her permission, she was calling his name loudly. Shopping, it seemed, would never end. Finally, she tired out and agreed, after many unhonored requests, to go to the toy store. Xirix wanted to use his birthday check from Grandpa Tigris.

They stopped at a bench out front where she inspected his black eye. “Don’t get carried away in there,” she said, wearily. “And don’t be a hero. Every time you see other kids getting bullied, you always end up being the one getting hurt. Tell an adult, alright?” To this, Xirix moaned. He didn’t always get hurt. Karras, that jerk, just got a lucky punch in. She kissed him on the cheek and sent him off. Free from obliging her taste in clothing, Xirix moved briskly into the toy store.

Motorized toys walked on display tables, remote controlled cars ran into one another, and a few children hopped around, swinging plastic swords, shooting plastic guns, riding sown horse heads on sticks. Little biplanes attached by fishing twine buzzed and twirled from the ceiling. Robot puppies barked and robot kittens mewed while
mesmerizing music flowered in Xirix’s ears from hidden speakers. He embarked farther into the wilderness. Like a refugee foraging for food, he scanned the shelves. It had to be in here: The Hallowed Keep playset with limited-edition life-sized golden sword. The other stores he had visited all week had been sold out, and Xirix did not want to waste Grandpa Tigris’s check on some second rate toy. Not when the Hallowed Keep meant so much to him.

There were erector sets, action figures, toy guns, and a whole bunch of girls’ stuff, but the Hallowed Keep playset remained elusive. Karras would probably find it and brag about it in school tomorrow. Karras Marringgo bragged about everything he did or was going to do. Xirix often tried not to let it bother him, but Karras, that piece of crap, he made a sport out of it: “I got to go to the Invaders game last night;” “I got a new bike yesterday and rode it all the way to the lake;” “I saw The Happenstance Prince four times last weekend;” “I got the new Katari Entertainment System with two games;” etc. As much as he wanted to ignore him, Xirix most often found himself trying to put Karras in his place. He knew Karras would brag about getting the Hallowed Keep in school tomorrow. Besides being a bragger, Karras was a bully, too. The way he picked on smaller kids made Xirix’s blood boil. And when he bragged about bullying, that’s when Xirix had a real problem.

The way he had been meandering the twisting aisles and towering shelves, he imagined he was one of those pellets in a wobbling, hand-held maze. Until, at last, there it was. It was the last one left. He clasped it reverently in his hands, pulling it toward him, conjoining it with his mind. The cover showed all the figures: the robed priests, the
magician and the Traveling Knight. Behind the Traveling Knight, the Minotaur approached unnoticed—and of course, there was the mystical Hallowed Keep all around them. The look on the Knight’s face was travel-worn, as though he might give up at any moment. The cryptic magician held the golden sword with which the Knight has been seeking to vanquish the Minotaur. According to the series catalogue, there would be two more playsets to follow. This one was the turning point in the Knight’s adventure.

Grandpa Tigris had loved the tales of the Traveling Knight. “Reminds me of how I met your Grandma,” he once told Xirix. As Xirix collected one playset after the next, Grandpa Tigris had made a habit out of reading the adventure packets aloud, passionately, too. Xirix had to read them on his own now.

Xirix had to fight back his tears. He tucked the cumbersome box between his knees and searched his pockets for the hand-written check. When Xirix couldn’t find it, his heart raced. Grandpa Tigris had written it personally. An Olympic ribbon twirler caught on paper, his penmanship had always fascinated Xirix.

In his sick bed, no more than a month ago, Grandpa showed Xirix his war scars while signing old business. “Yep. Got this one here by a flying garglaxx. Big sucker, too. This long straight one, I got by the devil hiszelf. Beast whipped me with his own damn tail.”

Tigris had been a decorated warrior, a celebrated tactician in his day. Mother explained to Xirix that before he was born, all Grandpa’s stories were about the death, dying, murder and all the other hells of war. But the day Xirix came into the world, all his
adversaries had grown into exaggerated mythic creatures and his battles into harrowing tales in places that didn’t exist.

“Oooohohohoo,” he laughed. “Here’s the one I got from that Kreller in the sand dunes of Monesko!”

“Gandpa!” Xirix moaned.

“It’s true! And this one? This one here is what happens when a Jeminash holds you down with his elephant foot while he heats up the pot he’s gonna cook you in.”

Grandpa Tigris’s warm laughter had exploded into a fit of rusted iron coughs. He rolled sideways, holding his chest, twisting the landscape of sheets into a beautiful but cruel terrain. Papers he had been signing spilled to the floor. When he recovered, he looked at Xirix picking up the papers with serious red eyes. “Sometimes,” he said, just above a whisper, “you can’t run no more. War makes you want to run for the rest of your life, boy—all the horrible things that war is, all the horrible things war makes men do.” Xirix held his grandpa’s gaze in his own. “There are men with war in their hearts. You will meet a few of them as you grow up. War makes men forget that they still have hearts. It is that dark. You can’t cure men of their wars, my boy. You can only run from them until they learn their own damn lessons.” He grabbed Xirix at his bedside. His hands were weak. “I’ve done horrible things. I’ve killed many people. It’s no game. But when I see you, I am happy to be alive. I think of all the men I’ve killed who never got to see their grandchildren . . . After all I’ve done, wouldn’t you wanna run from me?”

“No, Grandpa. I wouldn’t run from you.”
Tigris smiled, revealing a crooked path of weathered marble stones. “My boy, it is you that I run towards. You are the light that clears my heart of all its darkness. I’m sorry for all the things I ever done. I am. But promise me you won’t tell god.” In Xirix’s culture, children were closer to god. Adults asked them to pass along their stories and apologies to god on their behalf.

“I promise,” he said, though he was not sure if his grandpa realized how grown up he already was.

Grandpa Tigris brought the cloud-white bedsheets up to his face. Before long he was shivering in his sleep. He passed a week later. Xirix never told his parents what Grandpa Tigris had said, or how it haunted his mind.

Xirix failed to find the check in any of his pockets. His eyes stung. How could he have been so careless? His mother would kill him for sure. Then he remembered. His mother had it. “I better keep it safe,” she had said. “God forbid you use it on something you don’t need.” Ah, but this was more than a need. The fate of the Traveling Knight who struggled to find his family depended on it. Without the playset, the story couldn’t continue, and Xirix’s journey with the Traveling Knight would go unfinished, unfulfilled. Forever would the knight remain in a stasis, frozen as his story went untold. Xirix could not allow that. Grandpa, too, wherever he was, needed the story to continue. Like Grandpa had done after the war, the Traveling Knight needed to come home.

A voice came from beyond the stacks, sending an icy bolt down Xirix’s spine. “I know the Hallowed Keep is here somewhere.” It was that damn Karras Marringgo. Xirix followed Karras’s voice through the shelves then hurried the other way.
He couldn’t buy the playset without the check, and he couldn’t put the box back in time to get the check from his mother and it was simply too large to steal. With only one option left, he snuck into the girls section—a forbidden land of play dresses, dress-up dolls, and kitchen playsets—where he hid the box under a pile of plush animals. Karras would never look for it there. He wiped his hands on his jeans and hurried off, daydreaming.

Getting home, opening the box, taking the parts out and assembling the Hallowed Keep and equipping his Traveling Knight figure with the golden sword (and brandishing the life-sized one for himself), Xirix couldn’t wait for the Knight’s world to open all around him: the craggy mountains, the shivering slopes, the vaulted skies and the beasts lurking in the darkness that threatened to stop the Traveling Knight from finding his family. Xirix walked to the storefront, dodging kids, with a veil of adventure and anticipation over his eyes.

He stopped, the world of the Traveling Knight tucked rudely away. His mother was nowhere to be seen. He looked up and down the crowded corridor of shoppers. He balled his fists and clenched his teeth. Turning back and forth hoping for a sign of her, there was none.

He waited at the bench outside the toy store, an island amid a streams of shoppers, and counted the seconds. Each passing moment gave Karras more time to find the Hallowed Keep. Meanwhile, Xirix watched the store like a hawk.

“Excuse me,” said the man with the black coat. “But are you lost?”

Xirix’s mother had told him about strangers.
“No. I’m waiting for my mother . . . She is right over there.” Xirix pointed to a random woman who looked at purses in a neighboring store window. The woman, as luck should have it, noticed him pointing at her and looked back at them blankly.

“I think you’re lost,” the man said, sitting down.

“I’m not lost. I’m waiting. There’s a difference.”

The man smiled. He was a white man, but there was something dark about him. He had one crooked tooth that darkened the face of its neighboring tooth. His face was shadowed with a shallow growth of hair, his eyes were dark and glassy like the light of forgotten stars over silent oceans; his hair jumped from his head like ravens trying to escape the tortures of his mind.

“How do you know who I am?”

“You’re a stranger. How could I?”

“But that’s precisely who I am,” he said vaguely excited. “I am the Stranger. I am he who comes for children who are lost.”

“I told you, I’m not lost. That’s my mother . . .” he pointed again, but the woman had moved out of sight. “Anyway, my mom’s in there.”

“I won’t lie to you, Xirix. You’re already lost. You wanna know how I can tell, don’t you? Maybe it’s too soon for you to realize it. You think at any moment your mother will be coming back for you. And she might. She probably will—what do I know? But if she doesn’t come back before you realize you’re lost, then I will be left no other choice."

“No other choice but what?”
“To come get you,” he said, standing up, looking down at Xirix. He was tall and narrow, thin enough to slip between a sheet of paper without getting cut. All around them droves of shoppers walked by, unaware of this bizarre looking man. “If you don’t want that, you better run off and find your mother.”

Xirix knew, because his mother had told him, that if he was ever lost, he should stay in the last spot he remembered them being together. This was the spot. Right here. But he could not be sure if he was really lost. His mother had been here only minutes ago. At that moment, Karras walked out of the toy store with his mother, Mrs. Marringo. Karras, that bastard, carried the Hallowed Keep in his hand. Xirix’s heart sank.

“Nothing left to wait for now,” the man in the dark coat said.

Turning cold, Xirix stood quickly, backing away. How did he know about the Hallowed Keep? Xirix, scared as he was, grew angry at the man. “How’d you . . .” he tried to ask.

The man’s twisted smile disturbed Xirix. To bolster his courage, he channeled the Traveling Knight. Inflating his chest, facing the Stranger, he spoke boldly. “If you are coming to get me, you better be good, because I’m the best there is, Mister.”

The man opened one lapel of his coat. In its shiny inner lining moved the crying and fearful faces of lost children, trapped in the fabric. Xirix stared in horror. “No one who is lost escapes me, Xirix. The moment you become lost, you are mine. I know everything about you. I only need to come and collect.”
Xirix backed away. The stranger pointed a harmless finger at him. When he twisted his wrist, Xirix felt something in him rotate. That's when the whole world turned over like a page in a book. That's how it felt, anyway. Before it could crash upside down on itself, the Stranger stopped.

“Now, run, Xirix. See if you can’t be found.”

His pulse racing, Xirix ran. The tilting world slowly reset itself as he clumsily made his way around other kids with their parents, random adults and dispassionate teenagers. He looked in everyone’s faces, but they all blended into one bland featureless face. He didn’t know what the Stranger had done to him, but it made him feel lost, even though he was sure his mother was just around the corner.

He ran into a women’s clothing store, hoping she would be right there. Row after row, he weaved about. But she was nowhere. Since Grandpa Tigris’s death, she had grown distant, distracted. Could she really have just walked off? He didn’t want to believe that she could have forgotten about him, her only son. But how she could just walk off like that was also impossible for him to understand. She was far too protective.

“Maybe you should try screaming for help.” The Stranger appeared out of nowhere, scaring Xirix to death. “Go ahead. Try.”

It occurred to him at that moment that this could just be some big joke. What if this man was nothing more than Karras’s strange older brother? Did he even have an older brother? What a low trick that would be! But that turning . . . no one could do that. As for screaming, he wasn’t ready to cave in and embarrass himself publicly. “Get away from me!” Xirix hollered.
Xirix made to push the Stranger, who grabbed him tightly by the arm. With his spidery white fingers, he pulled his coat open (it crackled reminding Xirix of peeling bark off a tree). He reeled Xirix in just enough to feel the effects of the fabric. From inside the coat an unknown force sucked Xirix’s face toward the crying sea of faces. Lost voices cried. It filled him with cold pain. The Stranger, however, was careful not to let him be captured by it. Not yet, anyway.

The coat closed, cutting off the pull. The Stranger’s eyes glimmered as Xirix fell back.

The danger was real now.

Xirix screamed for help. Once he started, he couldn’t stop. The Stranger smiled down at him as he crawled backward into a rack of blouses. Empty plastic hangers rattled like little bones. Everyone nearby—women mostly—were oblivious, in another world. Was he dreaming? Had he gone crazy? He screamed louder. When that did no good, Xirix sprinted to a lady folding clothes at a register and grabbed her arm. He recoiled, clutching his hand as though it had just licked a battery. She continued uninterrupted. Before the Stranger could sidle up to him, Xirix ran between the rows, hiding.

“What does it mean to be lost, Xirix?” The Man in the Dark Coat pretended to shop—holding garments up, tossing them aside—as he searched for Xirix. “This you must answer yourself, unfortunately. Could it mean you cannot find familiarity? Does it simply mean no one can find you, or rather you cannot find anyone else?” The Stranger periodically opened his coat, yanking entire displays aside with its force. Xirix guarded
his head as he ran low toward new cover. “Did you know the words ‘family’ and ‘familiar’ come from the same ancient roots? It really makes you wonder. Does being lost mean losing your family? Or does it mean your family loses you? It’s a complicated state of being. You have to admit that. Because, what if I find you? If I find you, then you are more lost than ever. How is that for being found!”

Xirix ran for the entryway back into the mall—what else was he to do to save himself? Maybe he would run into his mother if he ran long enough, or a neighbor, a teacher, a security officer, anyone who could see him, anyone he could touch with his hands and reach with his voice. Someone who cared enough to stretch their minds far enough to see the invisible, reach in and grab him, pull him out of this gauntlet of confusions. The more he ran, the more unlikely it seemed. With nowhere to go he returned to the only place with which he felt any familiarity.

The toy store felt different. The sounds had grown wilder and shadows had webbed the nooks and crannies between the shelves, between the boxes and toys. There was a menacing unseen presence distinct from the Stranger in here. He couldn’t place wherefrom, but Xirix felt watched. Savage children who played, paying him no attention, were painted with jags and spikes of shadow. The planes whirring in circles from fishing line had turned into flies the size of fists. Tied by twine, they beat against the gypsum panels, less out of an attempt to escape and more out of a fevered need to end their misery.

He scanned the mouths of the aisles. Each aisle stretched into darkness he knew hadn’t been there ten minutes ago. Strong, warm rhythmic gales flowed from each. He
spotted the Stranger entering the transformed store. Unseen, Xirix ducked and hurried halfway down an aisle toward the back which seemed to stretch farther than it should have. The breeze grew hotter. The floor felt spongy and wet. He stared into the darkness where it was impossible to make out anything. No way was he going back there. No sooner had he thought this when the Stranger turned the corner, peering down the long aisle. Something, someone, jumped out, grabbed him and pulled him into a pile of wet stuffed animals.

"Be quiet, or we’ll both be dead," a scared voice said in the fuzzy dark.

It was all over. The Stranger had seen him. How long before he would reach in and fish Xirix out? Not long now. He looked about himself. Deeper in, not too far, a strange glow, the kind of glow one’s cheeks make when they put a lit flashlight in their mouth, illuminated the spaces between what he thought had been stuffed animals. Mesmerized, he started to ask where he was when the hidden voice interrupted in a harsh whisper.

“I said for you to be quiet!”

Her accent was singular. Unplaceable.

In the aisle, he heard wet footsteps stop next to him. A long moment of silence passed. It was difficult to see out, but Xirix caught the shadow of movement from his strange line of sight, nothing more. What could the Stranger be doing? He didn’t move enough to make much of a sound, and yet it seemed his coat rustled like dead leaves hanging on a windy winter tree. Xirix thought of the static swirl of children’s crying faces inside.
The Stranger plunged his arm into the pile without warning. Xirix held his breath as he felt the stuffed animals press against him, the Stranger’s arm darting between himself and his hidden savior. It stayed there for an eternity. So long in fact Xirix began to think the Stranger had never reached in at all. He quartered his breathing, afraid the slightest movement would give him away. From the aisle Xirix heard the sound of retreating wet footsteps, though nothing in the pile felt like the arm had been pulled out. Had he been mistaken? Had the Stranger reached in at all? Cautiously, quietly, and after what felt like a very long time, Xirix dared to speak.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Anita,” she said, clearly shaken.

He had never heard such a name before. “What’s happening here?”

“You must be lost, too. I got lost and that man came for me. Before he could find me, I hid in here. I haven’t moved since.”

“How long have you been here?”

After a long pause she said, “I don’t know. Where are you from?”

Xirix told her.

“Never heard of it. I’m not surprised. You’re not the first to come my way.”

“What do you mean?”

“Other kids. All of them from places I’ve never heard of, and all of them have never heard of where I’m from.”

“Where are you from?”

Pensive, she replied, “A place where girls are named Anita.”
He moved the toy animals around hoping to get a look at her.

“ Forget it,” she said. “Just stay still. Or he’ll find us.”

“How long do we have to stay still?”

She wouldn’t answer, or couldn’t. Xirix had already decided that this was not how he was going to escape the man in the black coat—by not escaping a pile of stuffed animals. Anita was too scared to do anything. Xirix feared that, too, would happen to him if he stayed any longer.

“Look, thanks anyway,” he said, “but I can’t stay here with you. This is no better than getting pulled into that man’s coat.”

“He does that to all of them. It makes them scared, makes them run. He likes when the lost run from him. If you leave here, he’ll get you. He gets everyone.”

“He hasn’t gotten you. I’m not letting him get me, but I’m not staying here. Come with me, Anita. We can get out of this if we work together.”

“No!”

“I don’t want to do this alone.”

“Neither do I . . . please don’t go.”

But he did.

Xirix moved slowly through the animals toward the dark aisle with the warm breath-like breeze and the moist floor. Anita’s voice faded the farther he went. “Please, don’t go,” she said, until at last her voice was lost under the heap. It haunted him.

The store once decorated and stocked with toys was now a den of wild, weird creatures. Other children, here and there, whom Xirix knew had not been lost, were
trapped in vines, ensnared by spider webs. The sickles and shards of shadow on their faces blended into the dark recesses where their bodies hid; their gold glittering eyes, open and dead, watched the wake of whatever creatures had drained them of life. Thankfully, the Stranger was nowhere to be seen, but with the dramatic change in the environment, Xirix would not have stayed anyway. What he wouldn’t give for a real sword.

It didn’t seem like he had been wrong when he scanned the shelves for other copies of the Hallowed Keep. He had truly had the only one in his hands. Yet Karras had found it and walked out with it. Xirix peered down the aisle that once housed the girls’ toys. Something leapt over his foot into the growth along the rooted base boards. He squinted into the darkness brushing leaves and vines aside, trying to make out anything that looked like this might be a colorful aisle in a children’s toy store. A shiver quaked through his bones.

A deep gurgle rolled from the center of the dark distance.

Xirix ran to the store front in a fright. Something from the periphery tried to stick him with something, but he avoided it. He wouldn’t be stopping for anything. No, sir.

Xirix was back in the false security of the corridor. The Stranger could be anywhere. The shopping mall took on its regular appearance, though everything was askew, listing as though this was only a ship sinking into the sea. His center of gravity should have been affected, yet he didn’t feel that expected tugging toward the dip. No one else slid along the floor towards the wall. Strange as it appeared, he decided to go with it as though it were normal.
He stuck to groups of people, hoping to blend in, especially with families. He avoided those empty pockets in the foot traffic and wondered why people grouped together in the first place. As he moved along, Xirix scanned the stores for his mother, hoping to end this nightmare. So far neither she nor the Stranger was in sight.

He stalked close to a mother with two children. She held them each by a hand on either side of her. A boy and a girl each, the children were in their own worlds. Standing in their shadows, he wished for the hand of his own mother: Someone to pull him from harm at the last minute, someone to squeeze his hand and point at something afar with a smile or a question. What would she point toward? What would she ask of him? At this point, anything. He didn’t care what it was. He just wanted to be with her.

If it came down to it, he would leave with this woman and her kids (or anyone)—if that was possible. Start a new life if that was all he had to do to survive. Nevermind that he couldn’t touch them, let alone be seen by them. It would be a drag for a while but Xirix wouldn’t mind so much. “Just get me outta here,” he said, responding to his thoughts. The little girl looked back at him.

“Are you a ghost?” she asked. “See mommy, there are ghosts here.” The mother left the girl to her imaginings as she directed her family through the crowded mall.

“I’m not a ghost,” Xirix said.

“Do you have friends to play with when you die?”

“I told you, I’m no ghost. I’m just lost.”

“You look dead to me. Don’t worry. I thought it would look much worse. But you look kind of neat.”
“How old are you?”

“I’m six years old. And don’t you forget it.” Her brother looked over at her around their mother’s back with condescension. He couldn’t see Xirix.

“Listen,” Xirix said, “whatever you do. Never get lost in this mall. I’m lost and no one can see me. I can’t find my mother and I don’t know what to do. You have to help me.”

“I can’t help you.”

Her frankness surprised Xirix, who without hesitation asked her what made her so sure of that.

“Because. I’m on this side and you’re on that side. Sorry. That’s just how it is.”

Xirix felt empty, ready to give up.

“Besides,” she continued, “you already have someone.”

“What? who?”

“That old man behind you.”

Xirix spun around hoping to see Grandpa Tigris. All he saw was the unforgiving stampede of people. When he turned back to ask the little girl more questions, he found she and her family had moved on.

For a long moment, Xirix was more alone than he had let himself feel since Grandpa Tigris passed. The crowd moved around him like teeth grinding up food. He surrendered to the cattle current, letting it take him.

“Grandpa,” he said, buried in the crowd. “If you can hear me, help me get outta here. Show me where to go, what to do—anything.” It was a long while later when the
crowd directed him to an opening. Stepping out, Xirix was face to face with himself. The mirror showed him faintly. Grayed along the edges, Xirix felt like a ghost after all. Yet he couldn’t make out an image of Grandpa Tigris anywhere near him. From his disheveled image, he thought he finally understood what it meant to be lost. Just then, the crowd broke and the mirror revealed whom Xirix was hoping to avoid.

Speaking to a child on a bench, a style of bench Xirix did not recall ever seeing in the mall before, the Stranger flashed his coat open showing the child what fate befell lost children. Xirix snuck around the people, potted plants, and pillars (pillars? When did the mall get pillars?) until he was close enough to hear and see it all. An odd potted plant rested between two benches, and what an odd plant it was. On one side was the Stranger. On the other, what were the chances, sat Karras and his Mother. The boy was younger than Xirix by a couple years, and he was much smaller in build. The bench he sat on was made of glazed wooden beams, wrapped in wrought iron bandings. But on Karras’s side it was a green plastic-coated steel mesh molded and fit with pipe lining. In the mall, or market place—or wherever the Stranger stood—hung plants on ornately carved wooden pillars, their leaves spilling over, just like the hair of sylvan elementals from the world of the Traveling Knight.

Xirix tried to watch the Stranger and study him. Karras, that son of a bitch, proved to be a big distraction. Xirix’s thoughts were far from the Hallowed Keep. Maybe it was his competitive selfishness that got him lost in the first place. He regretted ever wanting it. Meanwhile, Karras went on and on about how great it was having found the last playset, about how lucky he was that the toy store had had the last copy in storage.
Xirix perked his ears when he heard this. Karras hadn’t found the box he stuffed in the plush dolls like he had thought. Not that it mattered now anyway. Karras had opened the box and removed the golden sword. It was nearly the length of his arm. Pretty big, but not great big. He swung it about, warding off imaginary enemies, not as a warrior would, not as Grandpa Tigris had shown him, but as a fool would who had only half-studied the postures in a book. Meanwhile, the Stranger, his back to Xirix, spoke with his hands as the child before him cowered away.

“When you become lost,” the Stranger said. “I know everything about you. The reason you’re lost, usually the best part, is because your parents forgot about you. You’ve been abandoned. And I’m here to collect you.”

The boy cried fitful tears. The Stranger relished them. Xirix could take it no more. He had to do something.

“Hey!” Xirix yelled. “You still haven't caught me yet! You give up already?”

“Xirix, my boy,” the Stranger said. “How nice of you to come looking for me. Don’t move. You won’t want to miss this.”

When he called out to the Stranger, he had hoped to goad the man into chasing him, leaving the boy alone. Xirix was wrong. The Stranger opened his coat, blocking Xirix’s view of the boy. There was a terrible warped sound, a horrific cry, then a sudden silence. For a second, Xirix thought he saw a round bulge absorb into the coat. The Stranger turned to Xirix and, like a magician, showed Xirix the inside of the coat (without the dreaded pull), then he stepped aside showing the empty space on the bench. Xirix clenched his teeth, both in rage and in fear. He wanted to leap at the Stranger and tear
his face off, but he wouldn’t be able to do it without getting close to his coat. But even then, what was he to do?

“Ok, grandpa, now what?” Xirix said to himself as the man in the dark coat crept toward him.

Karras, oblivious to Xirix’s invisible world, swung his golden sword around, striking the edge of the Stranger’s dark coat. A shriek of light escaped the weave, and the man recoiled in fright, his eyes bright with alarm. It was what Xirix had been waiting for. He needed that sword. But before he could go after his childhood nemesis, the Stranger swiped his hand across the air, like he had turned a page in reality, and the familiar part of the mall turned to a world without Karras, god bless the bastard.

“You said that I had better be good,” the Stranger said, his voice having turned hostile. “Remember that, Xirix? Remember why?”

“I remember.” Xirix felt an electricity in the air. It smelled like a showdown.

“Because you’re the best there is. That’s what you told me. You remember?”

“Yes I do.”

“Don’t disappoint me.”

“Come on, already!” Xirix roared.

The Stranger sneered before lunging toward him. Xirix spun around a pillar and ran back the way he had come, so he thought. The halls were filled with people of strange dress. It was difficult to avoid all of them, and each time he knocked into one, he recoiled in strange pain, recalling the sensation of licking a spiked battery.
Turn after turn, he bobbed and weaved, jumped and climbed. The stranger kept pace, his tall slender legs bounding effortlessly; like a black flag over a city infested with pestilence, his coat fluttered behind him. Xirix slid under a bench, avoiding a wall of people that the Stranger simply wiped away with his world-smearing hand.

The man must have been doing something while he chased Xirix, like shuffling worlds in microspaces. Here, there would be one store, then it would change to another, or the mouth of a hallway. Here, would be only part of a hall, then there would be a turn into the floor, or a fountain on its side, or a stairwell going nowhere. There would be a polished cement floor, then slippery green moss; once lacquered porphyry, then lush carpeting, or marble tiling laced with gold. The stranger meant to confound Xirix. It worked. He ran and hid more times than he could remember. His legs were about to fold, his lungs about to burst. He could not continue this way. But he could not stop, not when he knew the Stranger’s weakness and where to find it.

Finally, the toy store yawned before him, its candy-colored lighting, the whistling of toy trains and whirring of robots sang forth. Xirix rushed among the children and toys, climbing over displays on the main floor and darting to the aisle with the girl’s plush ponies, horses and dollies. The Stranger blocked off his exit, and before Xirix’s eyes, the store began to morph into the horror he had witnessed earlier. The walls sank in, the ceiling sagged, the ground moistened, the lights dimmed into darkness and the play of children turned into a savage mirth. Hot breath hit the back of Xirix’s neck and he knew he was back in the throat that was once an aisle of toys. The pile of plush toys was now
a heap of matter with an odd glow. Not the glow of the heap where Anita hid herself: the glow of a golden sword buried deep.

He dove in and rummaged through the unusually dense heap for the box. It was deeper than he remembered. His fingers just barely touched a solid edge. A few more moments and he would have it. Before he could, the Stranger seized him by the feet and shook him, trying to loosen him from the grip of the heap.

“Xirix!” the Stranger said, his muffled voice carried through the heap just enough for Xirix to understand him. “You know what it means to be lost yet? Did you even think about it? Your Grandpa Tigris knew; oh my, he certainly did. People get lost in so many ways, but your grandfather, he takes the cake. Couldn’t you see it in his glassy eyes? Couldn’t you feel it in the weakness of his old hands?”

Xirix’s grip on the box was not complete enough. The more he struggled, the farther the sword seemed from him. The Stranger’s ramblings had exploded into a stir of curses. Xirix’s feet came free from his grasp as a girl’s little roar suddenly erupted in the wilderness behind him. Anita had come out of hiding with a vengeance. He feared at any moment he would hear that terrible warped sound and Anita, or whoever, would be gone. Xirix couldn’t imagine why she would come out, but he had to take advantage of the diversion. He sank his feet to the floor and pushed forward, diving toward the Hallowed Keep.

While Xirix ransacked the box, the Stranger stepped into the pile, tucked himself in, and reached his hand all the way around his neck. Xirix was pulled like a doll in the Stranger’s large grip, and all he could do was clamor, hoping to grab on to anything he
could. The Stranger pulled him out, aborning him into the dark humid throat of the toy aisle. The Stranger grinned wide, his crooked tooth casting a triangular shadow. With one hand he held Xirix by his fragile throat, with the other he opened his coat with a peel of crackles. Xirix felt the gravity within the weave pulling him loose from himself.

Anita was there struggling beneath one of his boots. Anita gasped; Anita fought. Xirix choked, and kicked. Looking down to her, he saw she was agog, not with fright, but with amazement. She was fighting to get his attention. A moment later Xirix knew why. The golden sword in his hand sparked to life as if fed by his realization of it. It in return fed him with an energy he knew, an energy he recognized.

When the Stranger saw the sword, it was too late. Xirix plunged the golden light into his guts and out the back of his coat, its meandering faces losing their definition. Cracks swam the fabric, like a dam about to buckle. From the coat’s back broke forth a tremendous surge, a deluge of dozens of lost children. That lost tide of children washed upon the waiting shores of many worlds. Xirix couldn’t make sense of it. The dark wilderness waned, all of its ferocity dimmed, slowly being replaced by a neutral room.

No longer a toy store, no longer a wilderness, the room turned vast and circular with doors all along the edge. The walls went all the way up to a ceiling of dark sky with a silver sun.

The stranger, wounded and panting on the ground, laughed weakly. “It’s not the coat, you know. You can’t seriously think you’ve solved anything.” As he spoke, the coat reweaved its wounds. The Stranger, however, clutched his stomach where a light escaped between his fingers.
Xirix watched as children regained themselves. Boys and girls of all ages and cultures looked about the place, and as though they just knew where to go, found a door at the edge of the room and disappeared beyond. Xirix knew somehow that each door brought them home. Anita, too, he saw leaving through a door that brought her back to the world where girls were named Anita. She didn’t smile or wave back to him. He couldn’t blame her. She had been lost a long time. People she missed and loved were waiting for her.

The Stranger stood, dusting off the sleeves of a perfectly tailored coat. Not a single rip or tear in it. Though his stomach too had healed, Xirix hoped the Stranger would remember the pain. “As you can see, Xirix, you’ve undone all that I have done. I am beaten. You have earned your freedom.”

He was right, too. Xirix could feel a door in that room tugging at him. He knew what lay beyond it—his world, his home, his mother. He felt himself walking toward the door, thinking of her, of the Hallowed Keep and the Traveling Knight, Grandpa Tigris and stopping Karras Marrinogo from bullying and bragging; mulled cider, pumpkin pies and beautiful autumn leaves in the crisp morning air: he wrapped his fingers around the brass doorknob—so warm—feeling all these things beckoning him home.

“You’ve earned the distinction of being the only child not only to escape me, but who also robbed me of all I’ve ever done. Congratulations, Xirix. Go home to your mother. Go home to your world and live a good life. You won’t have to worry about ever seeing me again.”
Xirix opened the door. The late summer sun shining through slanted overhead windows cascaded upon the people who walked upon the polished rose porphyry tiles of the mall. With glints of copper and gold in everyone’s hair, a sea of light bobbed in strange waves. The only woman not moving with the flow turned toward the open door, and Xirix felt his heart glow at the sight of her.

His mother was forlorn, confused and lost. It hurt him to see her that way. All he needed to do was step forward and bring her suffering to an end. But he couldn’t. He found himself distracted by a thought. He turned back to the stranger who stood at the room’s center.

“Where’s your door?” Xirix asked.

“Gone,” the stranger replied, heavy with grief. He lifted his gaze and met Xirix standing at the threshold of his door. “I lost it a long time ago. Don’t you make the same mistakes I made.”

“What mistakes?”

Unanswering, the Stranger turned, whipping his coat around with a single hand that searched his pants pocket for something unseen. His other hand swiped the air, as though wiping away an illusion, and a new crowded place filled that area. People browsed through baskets of vegetables and fruits Xirix had never seen before. They looked fresh, colorful and delicious. The people, like the wares, were equally new to him.

Before he could walk through the door and back to his mother, Xirix watched the Stranger enter the new world he had opened. With nonchalance, unseen by the people,
he scanned the crowd; A father and son walked toward him, unaware. The Stranger placed his hand atop the passing boy’s head, and before Xirix’s eyes, the child became a ghost. The Father and son parted, both distracted by something. The man in the black coat followed the boy. The portal’s edges began to wane.

The Stranger continued abducting. World after world, the man in the black coat would slip in, slip out, leaving families broken. Xirix squeezed the hilt of the golden sword and began to cry quietly.

“I love you, mom,” he said to her through the door. “But there’s something I gotta do and no one else can do it.” Xirix made for the shrinking portal. His mother responded, her voice clamoring for affirmation, desperate for him to say that it really was him. Xirix never heard her. Somewhere ahead, the Stranger lay his shadow over the boy’s shivering body, cowering before the pull of his coat. Xirix’s throat tied itself in knots, realizing he may never see his mother again. Never feel the warmth of her hugs, the love in her kisses, or the wrath of her maternal discipline. What worlds lay on the other side? Was there anyone who knew him? And though his tears glowed gold from the light of the sword, he hated to think of anyone else suffering when he had the means to stop it.

Xirix quickly carried himself up to the portal when a strong hand landed on his shoulder, stopping him from crossing the threshold. With the sword raised, he turned to strike his assailant. It was Grandpa Tigris. Down on one knee, his warm strong hand on his shoulder, he looked deeply into Xirix’s eyes. “Grandpa?” Xirix said, unsure he was really seeing him.
“Let him go, my boy. He’s no longer a concern of yours.”

“But, Grandpa, he’s going to take more kids, he’s going to ruin more lives.”

“I know,” Tigris said, blinking heavily. His face was younger, healthier. “But you have to leave that for someone else now. You’ve already done what you needed to do. You’re not lost anymore. You don’t have to choose to be lost. He chooses to be lost. You have to leave him be and let others learn how to beat him. He needs to learn his lesson on his own. And that can’t happen if you choose to chase him around. Let him find other teachers on his own.”

The sword itched in his hand. He looked over his shoulder at the waning portal.

“How long will it take?” Xirix asked. “When will he learn?”

“That depends.”

“On what?”

“How long it takes for him to see the Hallowed Keep in himself?”

“The Hallowed Keep?”

Grandpa Tigris tapped his finger on Xirix’s heart. “When you learn how to use this, you won’t need that.” He gestured to the sword. “Now, come. Your real adventure is this way.”

Tigris ushered Xirix across the room to the door whose very existence seemed to call his name. Before he knew it, Tigris’s loving hand was no longer at his back. Swallowed momentarily in a cool light, Xirix opened his eyes and found himself standing in the mall he knew so well. The crowds had thinned considerably, and stores were pulling their gates down for the evening.
Xirix spotted his mother, her face in her hands, bent over sitting on a familiar bench in front of a familiar toy store surrounded by three officers who were taking notes and making calls on their radios.

He called to her from down the hall.

She looked up. Xirix ran to her.

You know the rest.
Di’Trous Max held Mira close, as close as he could, pressing his chin on her shoulder as they both watched the sun set at the end of the beach on the Northern coast. Isolated clouds gleamed with orange edges in the sorbet sky. The wind was salty sweet. With his heel, Di’Trous dug into the cool sediment hidden a few inches beneath the dry sand. He kissed her neck, feeling the vibration of her voice on his lips.

“Look at that contrail.” Mira sighed. A jet crossed the sky, leaving an orange white line. She laid her arms over his as he held her around her stomach. “Hey!” she called out. “Get out of our damn sky!”

He smiled, moving his arms to cover hers from the chill.

“Leave it to reality to always get in the way.”

“Am I getting in the way?” he asked.

“I meant the plane.”

“Yeah, right.” He could tell she was grinning.

He sensed something was behind him, maybe just in the corner of his mind’s eye, a shadow. Or something else. Probably nothing. He knew better, though. “I want to tell you something, but, I’m . . . I’m not really good at this sort of thing.”

She smiled, looking down at his large hands over her elbows.

What was it I wanted to say to her, he thought. There’s something behind me. There’s always something behind me. Di’Trous felt the words form a traffic jam in his
throat. What the hell is that strange feeling coming up behind me? He needed to run, to get as far from that feeling as possible.

“Di?” she asked. “Everything alright?”

“Of course.”

She was silent, unconvinced.

“Here.” Her fingers dug into the sand, pulling out a smooth spiraled shell.

“Whenever you need to tell me something, speak into this shell. It’s a direct line to my heart. I swear it. I wouldn’t lie about this sorta thing.”

He took the shell, brushed it off, and turned it over curiously in his fingers before bringing it to his lips.

“Breaker, breaker—this is Emotional Derelict, do you copy? Over.”

She pushed back into him with a giggle. He tightened his arms around her and they rocked slowly. Di’Trous’s smile waned. The feeling of something behind him pressed hard against his nerves. When the cold sweat swept through him, he knew there was nothing he could do to stop that oppressive sensation.

“Di, is something wrong?”

“I’m fine. Why?”

“Your heart. It’s like it stopped dead in your chest.” She twisted in his lap to look back at him. Di’Trous had turned back himself and was staring at the tree-line at the edge of the beach. Someone approached in the waning light. He squinted, trying to make out who it was. He knew, but he didn’t know. This late, alone on the beach, he
could only imagine the worst. But it wasn’t like that. This was different. “Hey, are you with me?” she asked.

A man, thirty at best, wearing a hoodie and jeans trudged through the golden sand in black socks. Arms folded as tears exploded from his eyes, the man, a gibbering mess, stopped and looked at them. Di’Trous stared back, confused by the familiarity he felt in this person, who, in his bereavement, reached to them as if touching them meant the world.

“I’m always with you,” he replied, distantly.

The man fell to his knees, shaking his head, kneading the sand between his knuckles.

“Di’Trous?” she asked, her fingers beckoning his chin.

“. . . yes.” He realized who the man was.

It was himself.

The other Di’Trous could hardly catch his breath. His face contorted with grief. Dashing sand left and right, he yelled across the beach to the lovers, “When you lose her, you lose everything!” The words shot through him, leaving a cold spot in his chest that grew, spreading relentlessly throughout his body. When the earth opened beneath him, Di’Trous fell. He fell until he forgot he was falling. Everything was pitch black. Only the lifting feeling in his cold guts reminded him that he was falling.

There was a violent pop.

Di’Trous jumped up in the dark. His eyes wide, he clamored about, scanning the darkness for safety, for familiarity. All he found were sweaty, cloying sheets. He stopped
and stared into the blinking red 12:00, unable to make sense of it. I’m in my room, he thought, I’m only in my room. He brought his face into his trembling hands, and wept through his fingers. It’s only my room.

The numbers blinked in the dark. Slowly, Di’Trous remembered, piece by piece, the full picture of his present condition: days without sleep. Yet his sleep disorder was no mistake. There was no disorder about it. Everything was going according to plan. Unfortunately, the plan was not his. It was his calling, they told him. He wanted nothing to do with it. Meanwhile, this was how the Archons activated him: madness brought on by severe sleep deprivation. Sometimes he called them the Dark Archons. It didn’t matter. Either way, he was their pawn.

Di’Trous had tried time and again to defy this activation, tried to fall asleep. It never worked. Never. He had no guarantee that sleeping would stop the activation. Just a hunch. The Archons always seemed to need his mind at the edge of sanity. Still he had to try. This time he had been close. He had reached the station, boarded the train. His thoughts, already the color of dreams and madness, had begun to turn into sleep-dreams. The train had started rolling and for Di’Trous everything seemed to be in the clear. And then the jolt. Like a rubber band, his consciousness snapped back into his body. His ticket no good, sleep had thrown him off in the middle of a strange land. He pressed a button on his wristwatch hoping to get his bearings. The face glowed in the dark, but there wasn’t a crumb of stability for him in knowing what time it was.

“Ten years is a long time ago, Di,” a male voice said in the darkness. Di’Trous looked over, widening his eyes to see a dim, diaphanous silhouette standing in his
bedroom door. “It’s in your best interest to confront this loss of yours now before it consumes you any more than it already has.”

He didn’t have to turn on the lights to see who it was. He knew it was David Esterhaus. Di’Trous needed only to adjust his mind to see the spirit of the fifty-something year-old bank clerk. David was one of his four spirit guardians. And like the other three, David was one of Di’Trous’s past lives. “Back again?” Di’Trous said. it was less a question and more of a cynical observation.

“We’ll always be with you. You know that.”

Di’Trous Max didn’t know what he knew anymore. After ten years of running and hiding, reclusion and avoidance, he knew he could run no more. They always found him, or rather, he always found them. The Harijma. They were everywhere. The Archons wanted them all dead and Di’Trous was their weapon—a soldier in someone else’s invisible war.

“I know, David.” Di’Trous sighed. “I know.”

Delirious, exhausted, and hallucinating, Di’Trous pulled out the shoe-box sized safe he kept under his bed and opened it. Intended for documents, his birth certificate, his passport, etc., the safe contained curious paraphernalia Di’Trous had collected throughout his life: a zinc-diecast toy car (a Vesipa ‘432), a braided bracelet, a chunk of glasslike obsidian, a collectible trading card of Norse Withrom (his personal favorite as a kid), some foreign coins and stamps, etc. Sifting through the old keepsakes, he feared
he’d misplaced it. At last his fingers made out its smooth, spiraled shape. He placed the seashell into the soft palm of his hand, thinking of that day on the beach.

If he listened carefully, he could still hear her breathing next to him. He was right, thinking that he could still smell her hair. Her eyes, her smile, her presence—she shined in his mind, but not without leaving a smoldering trail of remorseful ash. He clutched the shell, burying it in his fingers.

He gripped the edge of his bed as his room tried to throw him sideways. When the feeling passed—how slowly it passed!—he eased his grip and sat back against the bed. Trying to ignore the symptoms of severe sleep deprivation was impossible. The symptoms rewrote everything Di’Trous understood about himself and the world. Until the Archons finished doing what they were doing, the only thing he could do was think about the first time they activated him. He thought about Mira.

The last time he had seen her, she had not see him. “Please,” he said standing over her ten years earlier, her body housing the spectral tentacles of the Harijma. “Please, don’t wake up. Don’t wake up and see what I’m doing to you.” The only girl who ever understood him, gave him a chance, the only girl he ever trusted or opened up to, Mira had been his first and only love. His guardians had told him that he had a choice. He could remain in control and go through with it himself, or the Dark Archons would take control of him and do it for him. Their influence came from a deep place, and there had been no way to fight it. There never has been. There never will be.

He brought the shell to his lips.
“Mira, . . .” he started, but lost his train of thought. Was this about her death, or was this about his loss? He didn’t know if there was even a difference. If there was, he feared there would be no end to his regret. He steadied his mind as best he could. With the thought restructured, he returned the shell to his lips and continued. “If there’s a part of you still with me, stay safe inside this shell. Follow it down to its root, all the way down its deep spiral. If you reach the bottom, if that is possible, wait for me there. If you find a door, or a window, wait for me before you go through it. If there is a carriage or a plane, a horse or a mythical bird, wait before you get on it. I’ll be there.”

“That’s not how it works, son.” David Esterhaus sat at Di’Trous’s desk chair. A rational-minded person would say that he wasn’t really there. Rational-minded people, according to Di’Trous, usually used square pegs in round holes. Next to David was Carmalina, the seven-year old girl who’d died at the hands of her own mother. Spritely as ever, she skipped off into the next room leaving a playful wake of giggles. “What happened to Mira wasn’t your fault. You need to move on from this.”

“Move on . . .” Ditrous said. “That’s all I ever seem to do. Ever since that night.”

“There’s a place for us; there’s a time, too. We won’t always be needed.”

“You mean that time until the next time.” Di’Trous glanced at his phone by the bed stand. “You see,” he continued, his voice dull, his face pale, “no one knows me anymore. I’ve run away from everyone. So why do I have this phone? I look at it and I wonder, ‘who the hell’s gonna call me?’ I wonder, ‘who the hell am I gonna call?’”

David placed his ghostly hand on Di’Trous’s shoulder and squeezed. Di’Trous felt its paternal warmth. He wondered if David would have been a good father. “You have a
job to do. And that job has its price. It’s a thankless job, but imagine what would happen if you didn’t do it.”

“I don’t have a choice, remember?”

“You do. You choose to be the conscious agent instead of the unconscious instrument. You are taking responsibility for your actions instead of being a victim of them. That is more important than you know.”

“It’s bullshit, is what it is. These aren’t my actions! Tell the Archons to go find someone else or I jump out the next window.”

“You know they won’t let that happen.” It was true. For the life of him, Di’Trous could never bring himself to suicide, no matter how bad life was, no matter how easy it seemed he could do it. Over the years, attempt after attempt, something always stopped him. Those damn Archons, no doubt. As invested in him as the Archons were, Di’Trous was unsure.

Di’Trous picked up the phone; the dial tone sang a continuous G into his ear.

“Hello, Universe,” he said. “Please, go suck a big fat one.” As if from a dim light growing brighter, a middle-aged butterfly-collared man with aviator glasses appeared.

“Did I just hear Di’Trous say ‘suck a big fat one?’ Nice, kid.” His name was Loman, and though he did not seem it, he too was one of Di’Trous’s spirit guardians. He leaned back on the desk and lit a cigarette, blowing smoke that wasn’t there. Di’Trous hung up the phone. Placing the shell in his pocket, he locked up the little safe and slid it under his bed.
“I hope the Harijma aren’t gaining your sympathies, kid,” Loman said. “Those suckers are real. No one, not even the Archons, asked for them in this world.”

Standing dizzily, Di’Trous said, “I’ve gone through this so many times, I don’t even want to know anyone anymore. I don’t care if they’re hijacked with Harijma or not. I can’t stand knowing that wherever I go, there’s more of them. And they’re always inside people I know. Good people. This isn’t a thankless job. It’s a nightmare.” He excused himself and left the room.

Di’Trous splashed his face with cold water at the bathroom sink. He looked like hell. His mind ached, whether he thought of his past or not. Regret traced a unique line through him. It formed a shape in him he could neither deny nor identify. A shape he felt was symbolic to some being somewhere in the universe he couldn’t see or feel. Somewhere, he was a sinkhole in a street, an off-note in a dissonant chord, a silent letter in an apathetic word.

He thought of all the times the Archons woke up within him, lighting him up like a halogen, terminating the Harijma and good people alike.

It started ten years ago with a freshman: a close friend named Calloman Lewis. Poor kid was sleeping peacefully despite the ghostly tentacles that swam through him. Any other night, Di’Trous would have been one of a few friends showing up to Calloman’s place with the beer for a night of cards. Instead, Di’Trous had shown up with an army of souls stretching out from under each arm like tidal waves. Calloman had been mere beachrock, Di’Trous’s army had been a relentless crashing tide; Calloman
never had a chance as the Archons, using their strange music, unraveled the Harijma’s hold on him. The process killed his friend, as it had killed everyone since.

This has happened about every nine to twelve months since. Mira was the one he always remembered. Mira he had not seen coming.

Seeing his thoughts, Viavódi appeared and stood behind him in the bathroom. He twisted the brass handle, silencing the rush of water.

“Can’t I go anywhere without you people showing up?” Di’Trous said. She was statuesque. Her skin ivory, her eyes gray; with high cheek bones and a flush in her face, the ancient poetess spoke clearly and elegantly.

“Be it less fair, aye, be it less right . . . that a fair soul be darkened and yet not of night.” She put her porcelain fingers in his hair, giving him the chills; he felt her face next to his ear. “Find you the True North of Music. Follow as it flows, feel it without apology, like the sun singing light among the topologies of the cosmos.”

“Viavódi, for almost ten years you’ve been telling me this. I have no idea what it means.”

“Remember you this: Sarahlia, who was once your guardian before me, spoke ill of the Archons. What have the Archons to fear of banter? If David, Loman, Carmalina and I could utter simple truths, we would. Fettered are these hands, for better, for worse—“

“—in sickness and in health.”

“Di’Trous. Find you the True North of Music.”
He watched her in the mirror as she dimmed herself away, her eyes being the last to go.

“The True North of Music . . .” he said to his reflection.

Sarahlia was a name he had not heard in a long time. Before Viavódi, she had been one of his guardians. Viavódi had replaced her when the Archons reabsorbed the Queen from times forgotten. Sarahlia had spoken earnestly to Di’Trous about the intentions of the Archons, not liking the way they used and abused all of them. In return, they wrapped her in a white astral snake, pulling her back into the depths of Di’trous’s ocean of past lives. It had been selfless of her, and at the time, Di’Trous hadn’t understood. Since that day, knowing that the Archons monitored what they said, Di’Trous couldn’t fully stomach anything his guardians told him. It left him feeling more alone in this than ever. If they couldn’t help him, no one could.

His hallucinations grew worse. In a few hours, the Dark Archons would have him in their grasp and someone, he didn’t know who, would be dead. Di’Trous went to the fridge, popped open a bottle of beer and drank. It was supposed to feel refreshing. It was supposed to help. David reproached him.

“It was dangerous of you, Di’Trous, to hide your energy under an addiction.”

“It worked, damnit. Took longer than a year this time.”

David spread his hands. “And yet here we are. Only now, you’re an alcoholic. You know this is not going to do anything but hurt you more. The Archons cannot be stopped by drinking them away.”
“Like hell,” he said, drinking the rest of the bottle in one go. He held his stomach.

“I told you, I’m done. No more. Go find some other loser.”

Loman, out of thin air, leaned on David’s shoulder and picked at his teeth, examining his finger nail. “Come on, kid,” he said. “Drop the act. You can lie to anybody you want, but to yourself? It doesn’t look too good on ya.”

“I can lie to myself all I want.” Di’Trous started up on his next beer.

“Sure, you can. But you gotta show your hand at the table like everyone else. Don’t you at least want to know that you’re lying to yourself?”

Di’Trous craned his head back. “Fuck off, already.”

David and Loman exchanged knowing glances, spoke words Di’Trous couldn’t hear, and vanished. Di’trous shook his head, trying to put what they had said out of his mind. He found Carmalina in the little common room of his apartment. Everyone else had dissipated. She was playing with a doll. He sat on the couch next to her on the floor.

“What about you? Any wise words?” When at first she didn’t answer, he regretted the venom in his tone.

“Nope,” she sang. “I’m just a kid.” Di’Trous couldn’t help but notice the way she threw the doll around.

The Archons were impatient. The activation happened quickly. And as usual, there had been no way to stop it. Though his sanity was in fragile condition, his mind was exactly where the Archons needed it to be. And because the hours leading up to activation were absolute agony, Di’Trous was ruefully grateful the process was over.
When his mind was about ready to go from geometry to liquid, the Archons seized him in an energy cocoon, lifting him off the ground in a cloud of light; face after face, his past lives escaped like ghost water from a phantom faucet, forming the very cloud around him. He watched helplessly as each ghost of his soul crossed his mind, like voluminous dreams coming back to him. It was even in his body. He watched the light move like glowing worms in the veins of his arms. The deep rumbling of the Archon’s melody spiraled slowly through him, rising over his neck and shoulders like a beast ready to tackle him. Intelligent light searched his body, tracing his outline until the only place left to go was out. The cloud broke, dropping him to the floor. He stood, ensorcelled. Di’Trous stretched his as if fighting off manacles; ethereal wings, impossibly woven of this intelligent light, flexed and arced from his back. He rose above the floor.

To his left and to his right, in the small space of his apartment: two endless tides of soul armies ready to break apart the Harijma.

With eyes not entirely his own, he glided to the door. Loman, Carmalina, Viavódi, and David Esterhaus floated alongside him, having a conversation Di’Trous couldn’t hear. The talk seemed grave to him. He was going to need their protection against the Harijma when the time came.

Outside, the night air swam around him. His face felt like a flare. The world seemed to open for him. Anywhere he looked, he knew that which he couldn’t have otherwise known. Not everything. Simply that which was hidden. Though none of it mattered.
Di’Trous shot down the street, his glowing wings flapping slow and strong. Neighborhoods passed by, left behind in the night. Traffic lights changed for no one. Cars parked along the street cowered against the curb. An alien light shimmered off their curved glossy bodies as Di’Trous flew by. A part of him had to admit it: this felt good.

Soon, someone would be dead.

He had convinced himself he no longer knew anyone. But he most certainly did. Who would it be this time? He hated to wonder. Ghobi Morrelli, the drunken playwright at Chaps Pub with whom he occasionally shared a drink? Corista Farwall, the cashier who worked the second shift at the corner minimart? Basiélle, the bus driver on line two? Maybe it would be closer to home: Hymna, his rep with the landlord agency; Rigel, the head handyman, or Cyan his aide. The more he thought of it, the worse he felt.

He didn’t think he knew anyone on this side of town. Then again, he didn’t know where everyone went after their jobs, or after they were done drinking. He gave up trying to figure it out. It could be anyone. He was closer with strangers than he previously thought. He came to a stop before a private office nestled between an art gallery and a law firm. It bore no sign.

Loman appeared. “Allow me,” he said, and touched the door with a single finger. It opened alarm-free. The striped awning above the door rose with the rush of escaping air-conditioning.

Carmalina and David entered first, Di’Trous followed. He heard the murmuring of distant voices echoing off the cold marble floor. He followed the sound through the
lorry. A security camera blinked with a red light. It was nothing for him to worry about: a bagatelle for the Archons.

Through the winding halls, the voices grew louder as he drew nearer. He dreaded discovering whose voice it was. He wanted to turn around and get the hell out of there. But the Archons ran the show tonight. All the office doors were closed and only the reserve lights were lit. At last he turned a corner and spied a crack of light through a double door: an “H” knocked on its side, or was it a capital “I”? He strafed left, then right. It was an “8” on its side. A boxy infinity symbol.

“Di’Trous,” she said. He reached into his pocket and took out the shell. Holding it in his palm, Mira’s voice sounded closer. “Di’Trou, I’m here. I made it. All the way down the spiral, like you said.” Before he could touch the door that reminded him of infinity, Loman interrupted.

“Kid, listen to me,” Loman said. “We drew straws. I guess you could say I won. Viavódi’s magic trick, that True North of Music she likes to talk about . . .”

Di’Trous listened, half as himself, half as the Archons. The other three watched, pensive. Loman spoke nervously. In a voice both trying to understand, and one that was darkly suspicious, Ditrous asked Loman what he was doing.

“. . . You know, that trick? I guess it isn’t something you just do. Not with something fancy like the Archons at the wheel. They’ve made it impossible for you to reach.” He must have stepped over a line Di’trous couldn’t feel. In a matter of moments, a large astral serpent began coiling around Loman’s feet, working its way rapidly up his spectral self. Same as Sarahlia. “The True North of Music is you, kid. It’s you, damn it.”
But you can’t see it, you can’t feel it. The Archons won’t let you. So it’s gotta happen to you from the outside.” The serpent pinned his arms to his sides. Loman didn’t fight it. Di’Trous noticed, as it wound its way up, it didn’t have a head—a long silky white tentacle was all it was.

“. . . In your condition, with the Archons, you cannot be mortal and still reach the True North of Music.”

“What?” Di’Trous said, unmistakenly himself.

“You gotta die, kid.”

The headless serpent engulfed Loman, his aviator glasses barely reflecting through the opalesque sheen. The roundness of the coiled body filled in, leveling out, sealing him in a single spectral container. It shrank until it was only a spark, which joined the ranks under his left wing. Di’Trous stared back at the other three in disbelief.

“I’m Sorry, Loman,” he said, blankly. “You know I would if I could . . .”

The door stood cold before him.

Di’Trous looked to the left. Under his arced wing an ocean of soldiers throughout history looked his way and nodded, ready. Loman was nowhere to be seen. He looked right, the same: spiritual entities ready to rush forth.

Di’Trous entered the room. It was a conference room: a long table lined with chairs, plants in the corners, a water cooler, reproduced art on the walls. In each seat, an individual turned to see Di’Trous. To his surprise, he recognized none of them.

They were all hijacked with Harijma. And all of them were awake.
At the head of the table, on the opposite side, standing in the naked light of a projector, a man in a suit extended his hand towards Di’Trous as smoky tentacles, which stretched from an unseen node in his body, made waves like snakes on a hot sand dune. “Mr. Max,” he said, but Di’Trous knew it wasn’t the man’s voice. “It is time to face the music.”

Di’Trous didn’t understand. Why didn’t he know any of these people? He always knew those whom the Harijma had hijacked. Why didn’t he know these people?

Di’Trous directed his thoughts down his hand and into the shell. “Something’s wrong. I don’t know any of these people. Where are you?” When he spread his wings off his back, the room exploded with ethereal light. The doors shut behind him, enclosing himself between two oceans, the tentacles of ten awakened Harijma, and something else he didn’t expect. It was Viavódi. She walked away from him toward the center of the room. As she walked, she turned, her appearance altering. Di’Trous couldn’t believe it.

“The True North of Music is the only thing that can save you, Di’Trous.”

It was Mira.

He’d wanted death for so long, mostly to be with Mira; but now, standing before her, the Harijma surrounding them, Di’Trous couldn’t help but fear death would leave him more alone than ever.

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Ten years earlier, an ocean had broken open in the black sky over the University. Di’Trous—soaked in his jeans and hoodie, accompanied by David, Loman, Sarahlia and
Carmalina—crossed the quad around the flooded pond to get to Mira’s Dormitorium, his mind a manifold gelatinous tesseract, thanks to the manipulations of the Archons. Patch-colored Koi struggled through inch-high streams over the paved walkway. The shrunken lobby lights, eaten by the rain, drew Di’Trous to safety. It had been a long, traumatic night. Four of his friends were dead. He hadn’t slept in days. Reaching Mira was all he had left in him. She would help him figure out what the hell to do next.

They had lied to him. Four Harijma, they had said. Four Harijma and that was it: Calloman Lewis, Harvard Mason, Bellissimo Modorno and Jericho Void. And yet there he was, standing over Mira, her body housing a crop of dark, diaphanous tentacles. The storm wrestled against the Dormitorium windows, testing the depth of the Harijma’s slumber. He wept, unable to stop the boil-up of energy coming from the Archons that meant to undo the Harijma that swam through her.

He could live with her being Harijma if he had to. Mira was everything to him. Tentacles be damned. The Archons had no right. They didn’t know who she was, what she was about. There was no one who laughed sweeter, no one who smiled brighter, no one who cared more and fought with all her heart and swore like a sailor when she had to. The Dark Archons had it wrong. They had to have been mistaken. There had to be another way.

The Harijma lazily lapped the air as Mira slept through the cacophony of the storm.

“No. I won’t do this. I can’t do it. I won’t.”

“Di’Trous,” David said, “you have to.”
“I won’t.” With those words, his body seized up. It felt like a truck driving up his spine; like a behemoth pressing in upon him from behind.

“Di!” Loman implored. “That’s the Archons moving through you, buddy. They’re gonna take you over and make sure you do it. They’re going to possess you like a damn puppet and make you watch while they do their business on your girl here.”

“I . . . won’t do it.” He struggled to spit the words out.

“If not,” spoke Sarahlia, who was once a queen in a lavish desert empire, “black stars will shine in the night and the Harijma will rejoice in the song and color of your passing. Do it and be done, Di’Trous.”

Carmalina cried, “Di’Trous, don’t die!”

“The Harijma will live,” David said. “You will not survive the possession and the Archons will use your next incarnation, relegating ‘Di’Trous’ into the soul army.”

Di’Trous’s body quaked with the roar of the Archon’s song ascending farther and farther up his spine. The pain of losing all control and autonomy became too much for him to bear. He had always thought he was brave, that if he had to, he’d have taken a bullet for Mira. Seemed his whole life was spent imagining horrible happenings, and coming to the rescue, Di’Trous would’ve jumped in the way of the out-of-control car, the barrel of the gun, maybe hugging the bomb before it blew. Which never happened.

When it came down to it, the pain was too much. A part of him hoped he could somehow stop the Archons by agreeing. That there would have been a window, a moment; maybe they would have made a mistake. There never was a window, a moment, or a mistake. He hoped, nonetheless.
“Ok,” he agreed, the riot of agonies too much to bare.

The pain stopped and Di’Trous felt suspiciously fine. He caught his breath, clearing his mind, trying not to think about what was about to happen, tried to think of a plan without the Dark Archons feeling it in his mind. But he couldn’t. They were there at every turn. They boxed his thoughts in until there was only one thing left to do. He turned to face Mira on the bed.

Di’Trous steadied his eyes on her, as he had done with Calloman, Harvard, Bellissimo and Jericho. As he locked eyes on Mira, the Archons sent the call through him. His arms stretched out and the thousands of souls that made oceans under each arm rose like tidal waves. The rush of souls stormed forward, a double deluge, and crashed against the lazy black arms of the Harijma, drowning them, eroding them. In the fog of the fight, Mira’s sleeping face twitched. What pains did she feel? What images did she dream?

“Please,” Di’Trous said, tears stinging his eyes. “Please don’t wake up. Don’t wake up and see me doing this to you.”

Then the deep rumble jumped into action and Di’Trous felt the song of the Archons singing up from that immaterial pipe that made him feel like he was going to vomit. When it reached his heart, a tremendous light burst forward, booming in the deepest basso he had ever heard or felt. It pierced the Harijma’s hidden node of origin inside Mira. Its tentacles shook in pain before evaporating into a white ash.

The Harijma was gone. Mira was dead.

Di’Trous has been lost ever since.
The back door of the unmarked office burst open. Di’Trous careened into the brick wall. Stumbling and rolling over the alley floor, his torn wings shed wounded light in his wake. “Mira!” he called after her apparition. She had walked straight through the conference room, past all of the Harijma, then out the emergency door into the alley. Di’Trous tried to get to her, but the Archons insisted on making a stand against the Harijma.

There were too many of them. It all happened so fast.

Pain shot through him. He rolled over and coughed, clutching his stomach. A couple of them had got to him. He looked about himself. There were no visible wounds and no blood, but he knew without a doubt, one of them, at least one of them, had stuck its tentacle through him, plugging in and juicing him up like a patient on a table. He managed to fight his way through, following Mira out the back door, despite the Archons, who must have realized there was no way they were going to win. The Harijma had been waiting.

One by one, they came out the back door after him.

How was she Viavódi? How had she done it? Why? Revenge didn’t seem likely, but the Archons made it feel like the only reality. Di’trous wanted to run, wanted to stay. If he could survive it, he’d have torn himself in two.

Mira was nowhere in sight and she did not answer him. Di’Trous searched for his shell. It wasn’t in his pocket. He rifled through the soggy cardboard boxes beneath him to no avail. The man in the suit in the center of a smoky Harijma hovered toward him.
Dark electricity danced forth, grabbing surfaces as the Harijma filed in behind him. The eyes of their hosts lined with a bright red around a glassy black stared at Di’Trous as he crawled back against the moldy bricks.

“Get up!” David yelled. The Harijma shot David with a dark bolt and the man collapsed, flickering and incapacitated. Carmalina gasped and made herself vanish before they could do the same to her, fleeing to god-knows-where.

Di’Trous stood up, wearily. Nothing he threw at the Harijma had any effect. He hurled soul groups which veered off course like listing ships sailing farther off to sea. He was wounded and alone. He had been dispatching sleeping Harijma all these years, one at a time no less. But these were awake, and there were many of them.

All at once, the weight of ten years came crashing upon him. Tired of running, tired of being a pawn to a force he couldn’t fight, a force that prevented his suicide, Di’Trous fell to his knees, leaned his head back, and looked at the stars. They looked cold and quiet. If he truly was the True North of Music, he didn’t feel it. If he had to die to feel it, this was the only chance he had. Though his company had been spirits of the lost for so many years, Di’Trous couldn’t help but be afraid of dying. What if in death, Di’Trous still failed to understand?

The man in the suit stood over Di’Trous and searched his eyes. The man’s eyes were like avenues. He looked straight through Di’Trous to the Archons, who shuttered deep down within him. The man’s eyes shifted as he changed his focus from the Archons to Di’Trous. “Who does your seeing, Di’Trous? Is it you?”
Mira appeared next to the man. Di’Trous wanted to ask her so many questions, make so many apologies. Seeing her with the Harijma, he realized that no matter how much he loved her, missed her, and regretted her loss as Mira, the woman, she was still Harijma. That meant something to her. And he had taken that away.

“It’s now or never,” the man interrupted.

“Do it,” was all she said.

The man in the suit lifted Di’Trous and threw his body like a sack into the open road. Without his ethereal wings, all he could do was let the force move him. He felt his guts pile up. Di’Trous heard a screech, saw the blinding of a light, and landed heavy in the street.

There was a violent pop.

Di’Trous was dead.

Confused, he looked upon the body lying in the street. A driver from a nearby vehicle rushed to it. A red light blinked at the end of the street. He felt like he’d been there before, like it was all just a symbol he’d read in a book, a word he heard in a strange passing conversation, a melody from a song he heard wrongly through several walls. After adjusting to the new quality of light everywhere, Di’Trous saw, clear as day, tentacles writhing from the body. The body was covered in a dark corona, whose tentacles, like the sun, formed periodic prominences: they stretched out as far as they could, but ultimately a dark gravity pulled them back, forming long black arcs of light. Nothing of it made sense to him.
“Who does your seeing, Di’Trous?” The man in the suit asked with a vibrancy previously absent from his voice. Was that the same man? It couldn’t be. The tentacles that had besotted him were no longer there. The red and black of his eyes were gone, replaced by a verdant shine. He was luminous, beautifully drawn with euphonic inks. The same was true with all the Harijma behind him: divinities, comfortably bright with emergent, peaceful music.

“Now you see,” the man said, with a sagacity reserved for the saintly.

That’s me, Di’Tous thought, looking at the body. Its nebulous feelers whipped through the air. When they crossed his line of sight, he saw how they had made a lens for him, influencing his perceptions. The Archons projected themselves upon the Harijma so that all the Harijma were equally horrific in that lens, their light and beauty instantly turned to sooty, swathing tentacles and black voltage.

“Di’Trous!” Mira yelled. “Hurry. It fears you. You are what it is fears!”

Me? He thought. I’m dead. How could it be afraid of me?

She answered his thought: “It can manipulate the mind, but it cannot manipulate the soul. Look at your heart! Without its influence, look at your heart!”

In his spiritual condition, Di’Trous recognized that he was no longer a body, but a vibration whose heart was every corner of his immaterial being. A vibration whose heart was a string that rang like his own godself had strummed it. And so it was. It blazed with beauty. It roared with wonder. It pulsed with passion and light grew from it in every direction. All around him, in every corner he looked, was a light that sang. Not as oases
in the dark, but as mutual vertices of varying shapes floating in the unseen of the world.

He was an overtone singing on a cosmic sea of sound.

He looked back to where the Harijma had congregated in the alley. They too resonated, like plucked strings that never waned. Even the driver of the vehicle that had stuck him, though clearly not Harijma, radiated significantly. But because of him, Di’Trous realized something profound about himself:

He had been Harijma all along.

Again, the man in the suit said to him, “Now you see.”

He saw. Better yet, he understood. The Archons had infected him so deeply, he saw what they had wanted him to see, did what they wanted him to do, to a degree. He was right to have resisted them, right to have run away, to have become an alcoholic, and to have disowned himself. Everything they had done was against the very nature of his being. Anything he had done in service to them would have been blasphemous, unforgiveable, heinous. Overwhelmed with this knowledge, Di’Trous wanted to forgive himself for the wretched choices he had made in response to the unnatural agenda of the Archons, knowing now, despite the gravity, it had been for the best. But he wasn’t quite ready.

And there they were, still clinging to his body.

_Harijma_, he thought curiously. That’s not right. That’s not the real name. The Archons manipulated that, too. What are we?

In response, the man in the suit’s heart vibrated a shape. It folded into a light. Di’Trous felt it in his being. It sang as the light unfolded itself, like a flower blooming in
his mind. They all spoke this way to him, so that his mind opened like a spring flower bed.

Charisma. We are Charisma.

They fight but there is no war.

The fear of the lie makes them stronger.

No matter how strong they get, it is all based on a single fragile lie: there is no war.

“Di’Trous,” Mira said, pointing to his body. “Go! It’s almost too late! The body is a window to a world the Archons intend to take with them.”

She had been Viavódi this whole time. He could see answers to his questions all around her, like planets around a sun. Lights being born and dying, coming and going like sparks. How had she done it. He knew. Why she had masqueraded one of her past lives as one of his own all these years, telling him cryptically how to beat the Archons. He knew. Finally, in regards to the Archons: he knew what to do as though he was born with the knowledge. The certainty rushed through him like the morning sun vanquishing the night.

“Damn it, Di’Trous! Go!”

There was no war. There never had been. There never will be.

The chain was broken.

Di’Trous leapt into the dark mist cloaking his body, toward the central node from where the Dark Archons sat at the seat of his soul. His journey inward structured itself like a long dark elevator shaft. He wasn’t content simply to let himself drop. He flew
down the depths. Floor after floor, Di’Trous dove farther down into the dark. The force of his dive vacuumed out his past lives, who populated each door he passed in the shaft. They tumbled in behind him—spirits swirling in his spiraling wake. He found his original four guardians easily.

He sensed their sorrow for having been helpless and complicit with the Archons.

All of our hands had been tied, he relayed to them. But no more.

At the impossible bottom was a large door in the floor. He broke through it, fist first like a superhero—so, he imagined—to find himself in the blackness of a storm over a swooping, hilly terrain, which broke off at the coast into a dark ocean. The storm filled with all his past lives. They looked to him, nodded in assent as if they had always known and had been waiting for Di’Trous to say the word. They turned into majestic songbirds, singing in the maelstrom. Below, wearing jeans and a hoodie, his body lay weeping on the shore, its heart empty, cold, and lost—a hologram of his earthly self. It was more than just a body. It was a Di’Trous-sized wound. An unhealed hurt. And the Archons had used it as an entryway, exploiting it for leverage ever since.

_The Harijma lie_, he heard them say. _This is an illusion._

_They are a danger to everyone._

He dove toward the shell of himself in the darkest recess of his soul, a storm full of birds, full of song, pulling up behind him, coiling like a galaxy.

_Because of them, everyone you love dies._

_Everyone you know disappears._
The nearer he drew, the more he felt the Dark Archons’ hold on him. He studied that hold.

*Without us, there is nowhere to go, and no one to turn to.*

*You are alone in this war.*

The closer he got to Di’Trous on the beach, the more he felt the warmth of a star growing inside himself, the music in the measurement of the universe, the shape of worlds blooming from the single wave of a single emotion. The closer he approached, the more he understood how afraid the Archons were of him, how weak their hold was—but only as effective as it needed to be.

*Losing Mira is proof that there is a war.*

*When you lost her, you lost everything.*

Di’Trous smiled. Without the partition the Archons had placed in his physical mind, he remembered who he once was: because of Mira, because of the love he found in himself when she was in his life. That’s who he was intended to be. That’s who he was determined to be. As Viavódi, Mira had told him to find the True North of Music, to *follow as it flows, feel it without apology, like the sun singing light among the topologies of the cosmos.*

It was his heart all along.

Di’Trous plummeted, pulling sky inward, folding the horizons together like a book whose story has come to its end. He plunged into his heart, filling every dark corner with the music of thousands of birds.
The Dark Archons held on to the very end, as is their tendency when all is lost and all they can do is believe their own illusions.

There was darkness. For a long time, there was only darkness and tears.

The sound of the tide. Its subtle ebb, its gently flow.

He cried in the darkness, unafraid to let his tears be known to any who were listening. There was a deep hurt in him he could barely reach. But he had thought of a song, and the tears came to him like he had summoned a monsoon.

He thought of her. The person he had become after losing her. All he had done.

He didn’t know if anything would ever be ok. But he knew now he would be better.

After a time, he realized the sound of water was only his breathing. As he understood this, and brought about conscious energy to this breathing, did light finally begin to shower upon him. A sun he did not recognize rose from a long dark ocean. He could not tell if his breathing inspired the tide, or if the tide conducted his breathing. Neither needed to win in his mind for them to be true. He was content either way.

He pulled his black socks off and dug his toes in the sand. The sand was cool after the long night. He pulled the hood of his hoodie from his head, ruffled his hair and wiped his fingers on his jeans. He leaned back on his arms, watching the sun rising, breathing with the tide. This had been their spot. This is where he had told her he loved her. This is where he had let his guard down. He realized now, that guard should never have been there in the first place.
He sat on something in his pocket. The shell glistened in his hand, in the sun. He looked up to where stars still meditated in the waning dark, then he looked out to where the sun wobbled off the surface of the deep. There is no bottom to my soul, Di’Trous thought. There is no end of the world, no limitations in the cosmos.

Love whispered into the spiral of a shell is no different than a declaration to the universe.

He stood and cast the shell as far out as he could into the water.

Grabbed by a force, he lifted high into the air, high over the cities, the mountains, the clouds; and before he knew it, Di’Trous rose into an elevator shaft.

The world grew out of a fog. His clock blinked 12:00 though he knew it was well past noon. A bright gray light filtered into his room. The storm from the night before had moved on, dragging a thin white blanket over the sky. Looking out his window, he could see a long register of damages across the campus. His body ached. His head pounded.

He turned his head in the direction of a beep. A heart monitor stood at his bedside. He looked about himself. There were no tubes, no wires, yet the heart monitor continued. Everything else seemed in place until he spied a TV hanging from the ceiling. He knew then he wasn’t in his dorm room. He remembered seeing Sarahlia pacing at the foot of his bed. Loman, at one time, sat in a chair under the out-of-place TV, polishing his shoes. David, for a brief moment, sat on the edge of a chair besides Di’Trous, asking for his forgiveness. Carmalina, too, at some point in his dreamy recovery, sat next to his
feet, assembling snap-on building blocks. Viavódi put her fingers in his hair where there wasn’t a bandage. She soothed him, telling him, “You’re going to be ok, now.” Even the man in the suit visited, placing something on the table beside him.

The shadow of a leafed branch silently bobbed across the far wall. Di’Trous stretched his arms out, looking at the crawl of veins under his skin. He breathed deeply, blinked slowly, and yawned indulgently. He was alone. Then the hurt came back to his body, again.

He remembered it all.

The heaviest weight he had ever felt in his life lifted, carrying itself away like a bad planet searching for an unsuspecting sun. Beside his bed, a curtain hung from the ceiling, its folds slack like tentacles put out to dry.

The heart monitor beeped. He remembered seeing different nurses come in to check on him as the hours passed. Eventually, Di’Trous made out the tracks of tubes running along his arm, across his face. Outside, it was no longer the campus. It was no longer the day after a storm that started ten years earlier.

After a few days, when sitting up in bed was still difficult, but possible, Di’Trous reached over to the bedside table. He read the business card in his fingers, remembering the man in the suit. He thought it had been a dream.

That man had looked directly at the Archons. And even though she was gone, Mira had spoken with him. He was living Charisma and he could see and speak with the departed. Di’Trous knew he had died, and though he remembered everything, there was a large portion of memories he could only see from the outside.
The card had a name. It had a number. There was a message.

You’re not alone, it read.

It wasn’t until two weeks later Di’Trous could dial the number. The phone sang in his ear. He dialed a melody of ten numbers. Someone answered.

A sly summer breeze snaked along the trees. The sun was warm and the air salubrious. Di’Trous pulled in next to the man in the suit seated on the park bench. Sunlight shattered off his wheelchair’s metallic frame. People were everywhere: joggers, strollers, dog walkers, Frisbee throwers. It was your typical summer day in a typical summer park.

“You were right,” Di’Trous said.

“So you see how difficult it is to just walk away?”

“I do. These people are not monsters any more than I was. At heart, they are good people whose pain has been exploited.” Here and there in the park were people who housed the dark corona of the Archons. Some were just a dull dark glow; others showed signs of their tentacles in full bloom. Di’Trous had taken the better part of the last eight months to heal, but had kept to himself and simply observed. The Archons were persistent. “No one deserves what awaits them. I can tell you that from experience.”

“I know,” the man in the suit said. “This isn’t just about the people. It’s about the Archons. They are the ones who need to learn. They are the ones for whom we wait”
“I still have a hard time digesting that.” Di’Trous couldn’t help but think of his own distasteful experience. As the months passed by, it became less insipid, and more instructive. Slowly, he came to feel the truth of the scenario as the man in the suit had explained it to him.

“Meanwhile, until our dark brothers come home . . .”

“We do as any who love us would do,” Di’Trous said, thinking of Mira. Had he not been a pawn of the Archons, they never would have met. Di’Trous was grateful for the Archons. And in the months that passed, it was this gratefulness that kept them at bay. They stayed away, but only just outside the door. One day, Di’Trous would make the same sacrifice Mira had made for him, as had so many others. Maybe not for many years later. But Di’Trous knew in his heart he would do it.

“Yes. In the hopes the Archons will one day turn to see the True North of Music for themselves.”