



# THE GARDEN

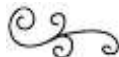
Johann Joubert

# The Garden

by Johann Joubert

“All we have to decide is what  
to do with the time that is given  
us.”

J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*



# Chapter 1

## Clockwork

Meridia. A city as ancient as memory itself. Its skyscrapers stretch like bony fingers searching for the heavens. Meridia never sleeps, its streets are a maze of constant motion, its inhabitants, slaves to the relentless trudge of time. Here, everything and everyone runs like clockwork. Each task is measured by the minute, like the steady heartbeat of man in his prime. Meridia has a pattern, a song, a rhythm and a routine. To live and to survive here, you need to conform, listen and above all, obey the social standards of a proud people.

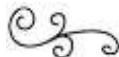


For most of his life, James was content with this blind obedience. He, like so many others, lived out their repetitive lives without question. Everything worked. There was comfort in that.

Each morning, as the first rays of sunlight pierced through the crevices among the buildings, casting long and eery shadows, James would wake to the sound of his alarm clock, announcing the start to his daily routine. He lived in a modest apartment, a cramped space filled with the scent of coffee and the faintest hint of soil from the potted plants that adorned his windowsill. These plants were his silent companions, a small rebellion against the cold and emotionless concrete outside.

It was a city of discipline and expectations rather than smiles and embraces.

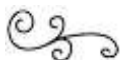
As James navigated through the crowded streets, he ever-so-slightly shook his head at the blur of grey suits and expressionless faces, everyone moving in sync with



the city's silent rhythm. The air was thick with the smell of exhaust fumes and fast food, in stark contrast to the fresh earth and chaotic explosions of colour he often craved for. James was a gardener, like his father before him and his father before that. His job was a solitary reprieve, a chance to bring life, colour and a touch of beautiful madness to the steel and glass that dominated Meridia.

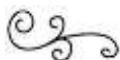
To the average passerby the gardens seemed formal and trimmed, contained as all things in the city, but if you looked closer, you'd find James' signature in the little things. A single flower out of place, a deliberate corner that wasn't quite ninety degrees or a black pebble among the white rocks. It may not seem like much, but to James, these tiny things were his secret defiance of all that Meridia held dear.

Of late, however, these tiny rebellions have started to feel insufficient. His frustration with the monotony of life had slowly been growing to the point where the



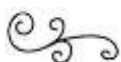
simple beating of his heart was now that of an angry fist against a cage, wanting to break free. There was always a deadline, a milestone, an objective. Someone, somewhere higher in the ranks, imposing some or other time-bound task that was positioned of course, as life. But in these quiet moments of rebellion, where he experienced something else, he realised that life is what was happening without his participation. Life was the fading day and the slow passage of time that happened around him while he was preoccupied and distracted. He was on the outside, living on the perimeter – close enough to see it, but not so close as to be a part of it.

But James knew that no good could come from thinking this way. His thoughts, if spoken, would have severe consequences. While the leaders and politicians of Meridia praised themselves for their inclusive approach, the reality was altogether different. The rules were in fact, made by a select few and absolute obedience was expected at all times. Those few renegades that had spoken up to propose change, had mysteriously gone



missing, followed and whispers of rumours about them relocating to another city. James knew that these rumours were merely a tale and that, in reality, those citizens had met an untimely end. A shiver ran down his spine as his hand dug through the rich earth.

*Don't stir*, he thought as he carefully closed the hole around the young sapling, pushing his thoughts deeper into himself, where no one would see it, and no one would care to look.



## Chapter 2

### Deeper into the abyss

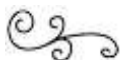
James trudged through the familiar streets towards the same bakery he does every morning, to order the same coffee from the same waitress. It was his daily routine. It felt like every step of his life was closely timed and measured like a task in a project plan. Habitually, he glanced at his wristwatch just before turning the corner to Mrs. Larken's coffee shop, "The Meridian". The warm, inviting smell of freshly baked bread and freshly brewed coffee, drifted through the air. It offered a moment's respite from the grey mist that hung in the air this morning, an echo of his mood. Mrs. Larkin, a portly





woman with a smile as wide as her waistline, waved at him through the glass window. He pushed open the door, and the bell above chimed its greeting.

"Good morning, James! The usual?" she asked. Her voice was friendly, matching her expression. She had the fortune of living out her passion: coffee, croissants and people. James held the view that there were some people to whom everyone just naturally warmed up to immediately. He couldn't really put his finger on the exact attribute that separate these people from others like himself, but Mrs. Larkin was one of those people. Being around her made you feel lighter, as if the burdens that weighed you down were somehow, not so heavy after all. She lacked any pretence, she wasn't particularly pretty, or smart, nor could she really keep a decent conversation for too long, but none of this mattered either way, as she reached for your heart almost immediately, and then squeezed all the life it would give, right from the dwindling embers of your soul.



"Yes, Ma'am," James replied.

He paused for a moment, as if caught between two thoughts and then he added, "this morning however, I'll sit down to drink that coffee, and please add one of your chocolate croissants."

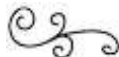
Mrs. Larkin paused in her stride, looked down at her wristwatch and then at the large clock hanging above the entrance door, as if to verify what she was seeing. She calculated.

"You'll be late," she remarked with a note of concern in her voice.

"Yes, Ma'am," James replied, his lips curling upward to make him seem more youthful than he was.

"Well, okay then," Mrs. Larkin replied, and as she turned on her heels to head to the kitchen, she half whispered over her shoulder, "you rebel!"

James chuckled. He wasn't sure if he was being praised or reprimanded. He didn't care either way.



While waiting, James observed the streets. It was a busy time of the day, with everyone heading to where they needed to be. *Heading toward was the wrong word*, he thought. *Rushing was more like it*. There was a strange comfort in having had the courage to step out of the madness for a moment.

*Am I stepping out of or into the madness?* He contemplated to himself.

"I envy you, you know?" Mrs. Larken said as she placed the coffee and croissant on the table in front of James.

He met her glance questioningly.

"I've always loved plants. I like that they grow in their own time and in their own way. No matter what we do, they continue to do as they wish. You can trim them back, cut them down to size, as it were, but you'll have to do it again in no time. They're persistent in being masters only unto themselves."

"I didn't know," replied James.



“Ah, the little things,” Mrs. Larken replied, shrugging it off as unimportant. “We make our bed and all that,” she replied, leaving the idiom hanging in the air like the sweet aroma of a chocolate croissant.

“I love flowers, but I lack the patience. I love the freedom it represents, but I don’t have the discipline required to really make the most of it. Heck, I can’t even keep my basil and mint alive,” she laughed. “If you love the outcome, you should love the process, right?”

It wasn’t a question. He knew what she meant. If you wanted to achieve a goal, you needed to put in the effort. Life doesn’t offer soft landings, nor does it give quarter to the timid. He was surprised. Mrs. Larkin was actually much more expressive than he had given her credit for. *Perhaps, he thought, it was never her inadequacy, and more my lack of real interest. Always chasing timelines.* He could feel the uneasiness stir within him. The voice of reason, cautioning him against *stirring*, was starting to feel like a distant echo. It wasn’t

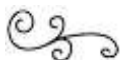


so much him that was stirring, but rather something inside of him, like a voice that had been too quiet for too long.

He snapped out of his reverie to see Mrs. Larken pause from her instinctive cleaning. She was staring into the distance, looking at nothing in particular, yet seeing something that others would not, had they been looking in the same direction.

“Sometimes, James, I wonder,” she said. James knew that there was no point to further enquiry. It was the kind of thing he too, has been thinking about for some time, and more frequently of late. There was no answer, no end to the sentence, just a hypothetical at the end of a thought, or a whisper, or a dream. It was the kind of wonder that children do, when they think about the universe. There was so much that they could not know, that the wondering in itself, was enough.

He left a generous tip and disappeared through the doorway, merging with the grey of Meridia yet again.



## Chapter 3

### Discovery

4am. The summer sun ascended, slowly dispersing the mountain mists that cradled the city in a hazy embrace. James loved the mountains. He would watch the mist rolling over the mountaintops, imagining the earth breathing out slowly after having held its breath too long, or maybe it was a quiet sigh of relief at seeing another day dawn. As he walked to the window to take in the view of the mountains, he recalled his father's words, "Opportunities whisper louder at dawn." It



resonated with him from a young age and so he's been an early riser all his life.

James was excited. He was starting a new project today. It wasn't big, but it was new, and it was in an area of the city that was mostly unfamiliar to him. He liked new. He liked the apprehension, the uncertainty, the possibility. Most people didn't, choosing familiar terrain and predictable outcomes, but James knew, even though he wouldn't admit it out-loud, that he wasn't *most people*. Certainly not most people who live in Meridia.

*Time waits for no man*, he quietly quoted a frequent mantra within the streets of Meridia before slapping his hands together in a sign of resolve.

James surveyed his surroundings. This area of the city was commonly referred to as The Enclave – a city within a city that moved to a different rhythm. To most of



Meridia's citizens, The Enclave was an enigma, something to be avoided. Where Meridia was a tapestry of order and precision, The Enclave revelled in its ambiguity, a place where the lines between the possible and the improbable were delightfully blurred.

His heart raced in tandem with The Enclave. He felt oddly at home, as if every question he ever had, charted a course to this precise moment, this exact place. Basking in the uncertainty, he breathed in deeply, filling his lungs to their utmost capacity, savouring the air as if it were the essence of life itself.

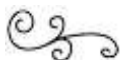
The garden was a lush tapestry of greenery where wildflowers rioted amidst disorderly hedges and vines crept with abandon over weathered stone statues. It was a living paradox, an embodiment of The Enclave's untamed character. Sunlight filtered through the canopy, casting a kaleidoscope of light and shadow that played upon the earth. The dance of shadows seemed to depict





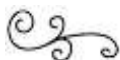
ancient dragons duelling against the sunlight, a convergence of exquisite beauty and paralyzing fear. The shifting light and dark weaved tales of warriors and chariots clashing in a timeless conflict of wills, each movement signifying both a beginning and an end. The air was rich with the scent of jasmine and earth, a fragrance that seemed to hold the secrets of ages. James felt alive, but there was more. He felt a pull, a quiet call that rung in his head like a bell, urging him forward. He obeyed. Further still, his feet carried him into the undergrowth, into the chaos, into the dark where the sunlight didn't reach. He could feel the earth below his feet. Cobblestones, covered in decades of moss and memories.

There was something ancient and surreal about the pathway. A touch of orchestrated disarray in how the ferns spilled into the walkway, and in the way the roses grew fiercely, as if to say that a rose was still a rose, by any name. A hint of deliberate madness was evident in the unexpected bursts of colour from exotic blooms that



defied all logic with their placement and form. It was as if each element of the garden had been carefully chosen to challenge the senses, to create a space where the impossible seemed entirely plausible, and where the lines between reality and imagination blurred into a harmonious and captivating chaos. The path meandered through a serpentine trail that seemed to exist on the periphery of all things real.

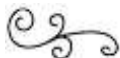
Then, as if emerging from a dream, James found himself before an imposing gate. It was a magnificent artifact from another age, wrought iron twisted into intricate designs, ensnared by the tendrils of time. The gate loomed like an immutable guardian, stretching an imposing three stories high and spanning an equal width. Its colossal frame bore the marks of time, with the once formidable metal now cloaked in a canvas of rust. This aging behemoth, scarred by the relentless passage of years, stood as a testament to the countless seasons it had witnessed, its weathered surface telling a story of endurance against the elements.



Beyond the gate he could make out a different garden when he squinted through the darkness. In stark contrast to where he stood, that garden seemed vibrant and alive, an antithesis to his senses.

With a mixture of awe and apprehension, James reached out, his fingers tracing the cold, metal bars. The gate creaked open at his touch, as though inviting him into a world forgotten by time, a world waiting for someone to rediscover its secrets.

James stepped across the threshold.



# Chapter 4

## An unexpected encounter

James opened his eyes.

Somewhere during the night, he must have fallen asleep next to the road. He vaguely recalled walking towards the garden after entering the gate, but his memories were hazy. It felt like he was waking from a dream. He expected to be sore, testing his limbs one by one, but was surprised to discover that he wasn't. If anything, he felt rejuvenated. This place was a sensory paradox. Time seemed to move inconsistently here, as if it were a butterfly that paused, fluttered and then lingered again,



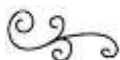
with no clear pattern. No, time did not flow here, it meandered as if, with aimless determination, it was a spectator of those who ventured into this realm. It would pause at will, to observe an unwitting subject until its curiosity was sufficiently satisfied, at which point it would wander towards more interesting things.

There was something ethereal about this place. James felt lighter on his feet, as if gravity were somehow less insistent. Sound, too, seemed to carry differently in the air, as if echoes carried longer than it should.

*I must be dreaming, he thought, I must have slipped and fallen and hit my head. This cannot be real.*

“It takes some getting used to,” said a voice a short way off.

James hadn’t seen anyone there, having been preoccupied with the peculiarity and the improbability of it all.



He turned toward the direction of the voice, to see a man in his late sixties, watering a number of seedlings. Instinctively, he walked closer, having decided there was no threat.

The man turned slowly about.

“Welcome,” he said, “it’s been some time since we’ve had a newcomer.”

The old man had wild and grey hair. Deep lines etched his face, testimony to a life of many seasons. His eyes were a vivid and piercing blue. They held a calm depth of a man who had endured much – perhaps too much – and who cared deeply, yet they commanded authority. He wore a simple white robe, reminiscent of a philosopher from ancient times.

“I’m called Marcus,” the old man said as he extended a hand.

“James,” he responded, taking Marcus’ hand in his own. The grip was stronger than he anticipated.



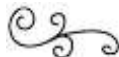
"Where am I?" enquired James.

"Ah," replied Marcus, "the question is both 'where' and 'when'," he said. He paused as if to observe James' response, before he continued.

"No one can say for sure, of course, as the answer to both these questions defy all logic, but there is a consensus among most of us that reside here, that this place is a trick of the gods, played on those of us who had dared to challenge the lives we were given." Again, he paused, silently interrogating James' response to his answer. When James remained silent, he shrugged in approval and continued talking.

"This place seems to be outside of what you might think of as time and space. This garden, well, it abides by its own rules. While time does exist here, it does as it sees fit. I think, sometimes, it plays with us."

Marcus half chuckled at his own words. "Yes," he affirmed towards himself more than anyone else, "we



are here at the behest of something or someone that sits outside of time. We are here and yet we are not."

He paused for a moment, drifting off into some reverie before looking directly at James.

"I sound like a madman, I'm sure," he said.

James just smiled. This man was as much an oddity as the place he was in. Who was to say whether he himself had not gone mad? How does one measure sanity, if not against the backdrop of their surroundings and circumstances? It brought to mind a remark once made by a friend: "What is chaos to the fly is normal for the spider."

James asked the only logical question he could think of. "How did you get here?"

"Of course," replied Marcus, "this is a long story and old men talk better with tea."

It wasn't a question. James simply fell into stride as Marcus started walking unceremoniously away from his





private garden. Mad or not, the confident manner of the old man intrigued him.

“Like you, I imagine, I was once a regular man. Well,” he interrupted himself, “perhaps ‘regular’ is a strong word, but I was a man nonetheless. I was many things, actually. I ruled a mighty nation. Some called me a philosopher. Some called me a strategist. Some did in fact, call me a Madman. I suppose I was a great many things, but above all else, I was hungry. Hungry for a truth that I never found, not in our world, at least. Thirsty for insight, yet I never found the cup that would quench my insatiable thirst.”

For a time, they walked in silence and then the garden opened into a clearing. In the middle of the clearing stood a simple house. A hovel, really. Humble and plain, but homely. A slither of smoke could be seen, rising from the chimney, testimony to the fireplace within.

“Home,” announced Marcus.



Having spent a lot of time around plants, James had learnt the value of listening. It wasn't a matter of being an introvert or extrovert, but rather, he resorted to speak only if he believed he would improve on the silence. Right now, he surrendered himself to listening.

"Tea?" asked Marcus.

James nodded.

Marcus stoked the fire gently, the crackling flames casting a dance of shadows across the room.

"There's something about ruling an empire," he began. His spoke plainly and softly, yet his voice carried the weight of experience.

"You are simultaneously powerful and powerless at once. You command legions, decide the fate of millions and yet, you're caught in a web of responsibilities. You are technically free to do as you will and yet you may never exercise that right. You may be the most powerful

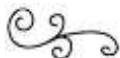


man on earth, but in living up to the title, you are as much a prisoner as the next man. The only difference is that in your case, you are both the prisoner and the warden."

He paused, stared into the fire as crackled and swayed. "To be truly powerful is to be truly lonely," he said, still focused on or beyond the fire.

"Do you believe in God?" he asked.

James wasn't sure what to say. There were times, when it was just him and the gardens he tended, when God seemed an absolute certainty. In those times, he even dared to pray. It was as if God could be found in the little things. But at occasions, when he was among the hordes of people in Meridia rushing from one place to the next, watching their clocks, always chasing a deadline, he was less sure.



Marcus pressed on, as if the question had been rhetorical.

“Assume for a moment that God is real and holds absolute power. From my experience, that would also make him absolutely lonely. It makes sense, then, that he would create us, in His image, with the hope that we will choose to love Him.”

The steam from Marcus’ teacup, held in both hands just below his face as he supported his upper body with his elbows resting on his knees, was playing tricks across his face.

“In the solitary nights when the quiet set in and I could momentarily lay down the mantle, I was just a man – a man haunted by questions of purpose and fulfilment and duty and doubt. I would stare at myself in the mirror for hours, trying to measure the man that I saw.”

“And,” dared James, “what did you find?”



There was a long silence. James could hear the fire, a gentle breeze through the trees and at times, his own heartbeat, pounding against the expectations of the answer.

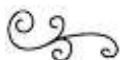
“At first, one sees the vanities. You see what you want to see. You listen to the voice within, and it determines what you see in the reflection. That voice that controls nearly everything about your life. Those who believe they are pretty, will see only that. Those who believe themselves ugly, will surely find affirmation. The same for the smart, the insecure, the powerful, the reflective and so on. You need to get beyond this. These are just opinions, not facts. They are perspectives, not truth. You stare into that mirror and peel painfully and deliberately away at the layers until the voice too, becomes quiet, having run out of things to say. Now, for the first time, the mirror shows the truth. You stand there, completely naked and totally vulnerable, but most importantly, completely unjudged. Now, if you believe in God, you see yourself for the first time as I imagine God saw



Adam moments after his first breath. You see your whole life in one moment.”

James was shaking with anticipation. This man was unlike anyone he had ever met, exhibiting steadfast wisdom and fortitude like a veteran captain, calmly navigating a ship against a raging storm at sea. He dared not speak or even breathe. He simply revelled in the moment and hung on every word. The world could rush on by, storms could thunder and threaten, seasons could come and go and still, he would wait to listen and learn. Marcus spoke.

“In this moment, you understand at last that you have something in you more powerful and divine than you could ever have imagined. In this calm confidence, you find your strength. Sadly, we so often allow the world to govern our thoughts, opinions and actions. We make room for fear and insecurity. We lend our ears to that voice within and many voices without. All of it, noise. Nothing more than distractions. In the end, I asked



myself one question: if this were my last day on earth, how would I live it?"

James wept. The fire became a kaleidoscope of colour through the tears that welled up in his eyes. He felt naked, but alive, as if a veil had lifted.

"Now don't go soft on me," Marcus said with a compassionate smile.

"I've been holding on to so much for so long," replied James.

"We all do that," commented Marcus, "we bottle up what we feel, trudging ever onward to the beat of another man's drum. We don't deal with things, instead, we merely feed the voices in our heads. We give them fodder and they burn brighter and stronger than ever before, making full sentences of half-truths. We should never be ashamed of needing help or clarity. Whatever we bury comes back to life in a different form, but never better."



“The place I come from: it’s relentless and without mercy. It’s like being in the army, I suppose, and our lives are the battles, only, the battles never end.”

“I understand,” said Marcus, “in many ways, life is more like wrestling than dancing, but we run the risk of losing sight of what is most precious.”

“Our hearts,” James volunteered.

“Our hearts,” Marcus confirmed.

“Now an old man needs to rest,” Marcus said, “if you happen past here again, I’d love to hear more about the world and what it had become. I imagine things have changed. The Garden has much to offer for those who wish to learn.”



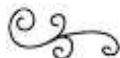


# Chapter 5

## The Shadow

Days had passed since his encounter with Marcus. The Garden was immense, seemingly unending. It was as if The Garden itself were conscious, knowing of and seeing to the needs of those who inhabited it. When James was hungry, he would find fruit. When he was thirsty, he would find a stream. When he was tired, a comforting tree under which to rest.

For the last two days however, James had felt the growing sense that he was being followed. He had no concrete proof, yet occasionally, out of the corner of his eye, he would catch a fleeting shadow—a wisp of

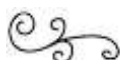
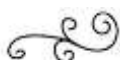


darkness that vanished when he turned to look. Soft, surreptitious sounds would reach his ears: the faint rustle of leaves, the soft crunch of undergrowth, as if something—or someone—were perpetually skirting the edge of his vision, always just beyond his grasp.

He realised that here, in this place, if in fact there were predators, he was at the very bottom of the food chain. He had no tools or weapons of any sort, no high ground or shelter in which to hide. No, man without his tools, was utterly vulnerable and ill fitted for survival.

The air was growing thicker with a sense of foreboding. The skies whispered and cautioned of a storm brewing, having transformed into a canvas of murky greys. Strangely, it hadn't bothered James that he was navigating The Garden with no real plan, until now. Now he was set on escape.

James was exhausted. He was now convinced that he was being hunted, but more than that, it was as if this



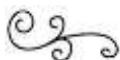
predator was becoming bolder, more desperate, and tired of the shadows. For the last day, he had half walked, half run. He had tried every evasive manoeuvre he could think of, but the shadow, now tangible, visible and terrible, was always there, shrieking and hissing, looming closer and closer.

He knew instinctively, like a man grasping for salvation after tumbling off a cliff, that he could not outrun his destiny. He had to confront whatever was stalking him, directly. Bringing his hurried pace to a halt, he leaned forward, resting his hands on his knees, breathing slowly, his mind a whirlwind of numb terror.

The forest seemed to sense his resolve. Just a couple of strides ahead lay a stout branch, perfectly sized to serve as a makeshift club.

*Bait it, he thought. Wait until the very last moment, jump forward, grab the bat, turn and swing.*

It was the only strategy left to a man teetering on the brink of desperation. Time stretched into eternity as



James stood there, his forehead slick with sweat, his heart hammering against the confines of his ribcage, a wild animal seeking escape. The blood roared in his ears, a testament to his unbridled terror and the burgeoning madness he was all too ready to embrace.

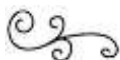
His predator moved with unnatural grace, a ghostly and ghastly figure that seemed both there and not. Its lungs convulsed against the air it breathed, in defiance of this place. Its eyes peered the darkness that had now enveloped the clearing where James stood, pretending to have surrendered. He could feel those eyes fixated on him with an intensity that bellowed of a deep, unyielding hatred. James' heart pounded in his chest, a frantic drumbeat in the quiet of the forest.

As the creature lunged, so did James. Rolling away, he seized the club and, in a maelstrom of primal fury, swung with all his might. The club struck true, the impact resounding through the quiet wood with a



sickening crack. The creature's breath whooshed out from its lungs, its crimson gaze dimming as it crumpled in a heap of darkness. James was no longer in control. He had succumbed to his primal instincts. He moved instinctively, savagely, raging against the darkness of the night, desperately clinging to self-preservation. There was a scent of fire in the air, tugging at his nostrils. He tasted bitter gall on his lips. Time, even in this place, slowed to a grinding halt. His senses exploded. He could feel every groove and knot in the club he still clenched desperately in his hands. He could feel the hesitant breeze brush over his dirt-stricken face, merging there with tears and sweat and earth.

A moment later, he collapsed beside his fallen adversary, its form still and lifeless. His breath came in ragged sobs, his body wracked with the aftermath of his fury. Then, as the adrenaline drained away, a guttural cry tore from his lips—a primal and barbaric yawp that echoed through the forest, a sound born of madness and



determination, a raw expression of life clinging desperately to existence.

James's hands trembled slightly as he fashioned a crude rope, binding his assailant to a tree in a makeshift prison. The creature had survived his onslaught, much to James's relief. Answers were now within reach, but his curiosity about the creature's motives paled in comparison to the disquieting revelation before him.

In the creature's wraithlike visage, James saw something unnervingly familiar. It was like peering into a dark mirror, where the most shadowed parts of his soul were manifested in flesh and bone. The resemblance was uncanny, from the curve of the jaw to the intensity in the eyes—a spectral reflection of himself yet marred by an otherworldly torment.

A mixture of horror and fascination gripped James as he studied the creature. Was it merely a cruel trick of this bizarre garden, or something more? Could this creature



be a manifestation of his own inner demons, a living embodiment of fears he had long buried?

James realized that the answers he sought might not just unravel the mystery of the creature, but also reveal unsettling truths about himself.

He would find the answers, by any means.

The creature stirred, its movements jerking and erratic. As it regained consciousness, a hiss, a blend of rage and pain, escaped its throat. James felt a chill run down his spine, his heart pounding with a mix of dread and anticipation.

"Why are you after me?" James demanded, his voice tinged with fear and anger. When the creature didn't answer, he tried again.

"What are you?" he hissed.

The wraith's response was both a guttural hiss and a manic laugh.



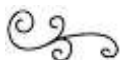
"You may not like what you learn," it sneered in a haunting voice. It regarded James with a twisted semblance of curiosity.

"But you already know, don't you?", responded the wraith. James was unsettled. The voice was, in many ways, his own.

"Speak," insisted James. He left no room for misinterpreting his instruction. This was not an invite, nor was it a negotiation.

"I am you. Rather, I am an echo of you. An echo from a future that never happened. We are the same, yet diverged by a single, pivotal decision. I am the road not taken, a shadow of what could have been, now existing only as a spectre of regret."

James's mind reeled at the revelation, struggling to comprehend the implications. "But why do you hate me?" he pressed, seeking clarity amidst the chaos of his thoughts.





The wraith's eyes, a haunting mirror of his own, bore into him with cold hatred.

"Because you exist. Flesh and bone. Your singular decision denied me that right. I am, forever, this. I am at best a regret and at worst, forgotten," the wraith snarled.

"Your choices denied us life. We are the possibilities that never came to be, and we burn with the injustice of it all."

As James grappled with this harrowing revelation, a sharp, burning sensation tore through his chest. The pain was sudden and brutal, leaving him gasping for breath. His eyes flickered to the side, where he saw another Echo emerge, its visage contorted in a fury that mirrored the first. Its screech tore through the night, a sound filled with anger and despair.

*'Us', he thought, he said 'us'.*



Just before he faded from consciousness, he saw a blinding light erupted through the darkness. It consumed the Echos, burning them to ashes where they stood. Darkness embraced him like a lover, drunk with desire and caution to the wind. As he faded from consciousness, he reverberated between relief and grief.

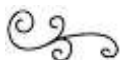


# Chapter 6

## The Magician

“Don’t move,” the man said, “you’ve lost a lot of blood. Your wound is clean, but you need to rest.”

James shifted between sleep and wakefulness, darkness and light. He could make out pieces of his surroundings. He was in a soft bed. The room was small, judging from the movement of air and sound. The roof was thatch, or something like it. The windows allowed a generous amount of natural light, casting a serene glow across the walls and offering a modest temperature. It was simple, but in his current state, it was nothing short of perfect. The room smelt of Jasmine.



Next to his bed stood a modest bedside table, on which a jug of fresh water rested. He had tried to reach it a couple of times when he was alone, but every time he did so, he was reminded to remain still as the pain from his wound would flare up again.

“Eli,” said the man as he entered the room to find James awake. Eli moved with an unassuming posture, his average build neither imposing nor frail. His skin bore the warm, olive hue of one accustomed to the sun, complementing his dark, closely cropped hair. A neatly trimmed beard framed his thoughtful expression, giving him a wise, approachable air. His eyes, dark and deep, held a serene, almost contemplative gaze. He was dressed simply yet with a sense of purpose - a crisp white tunic and a plain mantle that moved softly with each step. On his feet were sturdy sandals, their well-worn soles speaking silently of countless journeys. His presence radiated with humility, and around him lingered an aura of tranquillity, as if he carried an inner peace that could calm any raging storm.



“James,” he replied in response.

“I know,” Eli replied with a knowing smile, the corners of his eyes crinkling. There was something about him – a calmness, a depth that seemed to transcend the ordinary.

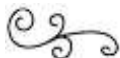
“You’re safe here,” Eli assured him, pulling up a chair by the bed. “Whatever threat there was, it’s gone now.”

James couldn’t quite place it, but the man seemed somehow familiar to him, as if somewhere in his past, their paths may have crossed.

“The Echoes...” James’s voice trailed off, a mix of confusion and fear colouring his tone.

“...are gone,” interrupted Eli gently, with a reassuring smile. He sat down at the foot-end of the bed and continued.

“Echoes are complicated and more so in this place,” he said.



“Our minds crave simplicity. We want to fold things neatly and put them into boxes, because that way they make sense. Nothing about Echoes fit into boxes. What I can say is this: if we constantly dwell on what-ifs, then we become as men who are caught in quicksand, enslaved by circular thoughts.”

Eli cradled a glass of water in his hand, and twirled the water around in a circle, watching it transform into a whirlpool that refracted the sunlight across the room in a kaleidoscope of colour. James stared at the glass, realising his mind was swirling in the same way.

“But how do I know that the decisions I make are the right ones?” asked James.

“You don’t, not always. You choose as best you can and then make the most of it. We’re not always ready for the choices we make when we make them, and yet, things have a way of working out for the good,” replied Eli, with his usual, mysterious smile.



“You weren’t meant to be perfect, James” said Eli, “but having faith in your decisions and in a future - that pulls you from the quicksand and gives you hope.”

Eli looked contemplative, turning his head only slightly when the sheep bleated outside the window. James welcomed the mild breeze flowing in through the window, taking the edge of the midday heat. Eli slowly turned back toward James and their eyes met.

“‘If’ can be a tragic word sometimes. It can impose conditions on our joys and dreams. When ‘if’ is used in this way, it is the opposite of faith. It is this faithless view of our future that enslaves us and holds us back when we should move forward.”

The sheep outside the window were becoming restless, clearly seeking Eli’s attention. He took his staff in his hand and started towards the doorway, looking every bit the shepherd.

“I seem to be needed elsewhere,” Eli chuckled, “sheep without a shepherd tend to lose their way.”



“How did you...?” James began, his memory flickering back to the last moments before the darkness had claimed him. “The Echoes, the light...” he enquired, before Eli could leave.

Eli offered a half-smile, a glint of something deeper in his eyes.

“You get up at sunrise, yes?” Eli asked.

“Yes. Yes I do,” replied James, not sure how Eli knew this.

“Tell me, James, when the first sliver of the sun crests the mountain's peak, what do you see?” asked Eli.

James thought for a moment, then answered, “The world is baptised in light and the mist starts fading,” replied James. Even as he said it, he thought his choice of words odd - odd, but befitting.

“Exactly. No matter how pervasive the darkness, it cannot withstand the sun. That battle,” he paused, his expression transcending time, “was won eons ago.” In





his eyes flickered the remembrance of an ancient conflict, as if he had witnessed celestial battles where skies split with thunderous roars and realms crumbled under the might of unfathomable forces.

“Get some sleep,” said Eli, “tomorrow your wounds will be better. Then we can get some air.”

James slept better that night than he had in years. He felt rejuvenated, as if he were sitting beside green pastures, reading a book beside still waters, while tending to the sheep which were meandering on the edge of the river. His soul felt restored. His mind was still. There were no ‘ifs’, only hope. Hope that in the end, all things work out well, in their own time and in their own way.

When James awoke, there was a simple page resting on his chest.

“Meet me at the river,” the note read.



James moved and was surprised to feel no pain at all. He rolled up his shirt to see a crude scar, but the wound was completely healed. He touched the place where just a day before, there were violent slashes across his flesh. It had burned like the tearing of skin under the lashings of a whip. Now, he was merely sore from too much sleeping. He would carry this scar as a reminder of just how close he came to death and how, in that moment, when death stares at you through the veil, with its scythe glistening even in the darkest night, your life is forever changed.

As James approached the river a mere hundred metres from the cottage, Eli glanced over his shoulder. The sheep were grazing a short distance off, and Eli was holding a make-shift fishing rod in his hands.

“You fish?” he asked.

“Who doesn’t?” replied James friendly.

He fell in besides Eli, to find that his rod and tackle had already been laid out for him.



“Hmm,” he chuckled.

“You said something?”, asked Eli.

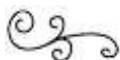
“This place...when you need something, even if you don’t say it out-loud, it always seems to be there,” said James.

“Like something or someone knows what you need before you do?” replied Eli, with his ever-present smile, as if he knew something the rest of the world did not.

“Precisely,” replied James.

He prepared his rod and cast his line into the water.

The two men settled into a comfortable silence. Above them, clouds glided across the sky, steered by the unseen hands of the wind. The breeze, gentle yet persistent, whispered through the reeds along the riverbed, crafting a melody of praise. Nearby, a Poplar tree stood as a silent sentinel, its leaves rustling into a soft applause each time the wind gathered strength, adding to the symphony of nature's song.



“I believe you met Marcus?” Eli enquired.

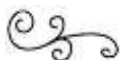
“Fascinating man, that,” replied James.

“He knows a great deal about a great many things,”  
replied Eli.

“So tell me, James, what of your future?”

James was caught off guard. This was a very direct question so early in the morning. He shifted his weight and stared at the stream, where the early morning sun was dancing in the ripples. He wasn’t sure what was causing his discomfort. The directness of the question or the fact that he knew, deep down, that Eli already knew the answer, just like he knew that he got up early in the mornings and just like he knew his name before he said it. It was as if Eli already knew everything about him, and that scared him.

After a long silence, James spoke while still staring at the water, like one does when you’re lost in thought. He weighted his words.



“You already know, don’t you? I don’t know how, but you seem to know,” replied James.

“You’re right. I do,” replied Eli.

“Then why ask?” commented James, feeling slightly flustered.

“Because it’s not for me to know, but for you. It’s not my life, it’s yours. Neither is it my decision. Only you get to choose your future.”

Eli seemed perfectly comfortable with long silences as James contemplated this.

“I don’t know,” James finally admitted, “it’s not easy. Swimming upstream, I mean. There’s an order to things and I’m expected to obey, but it just doesn’t feel right.”

The irony wasn’t lost on either of them as they sat with their fishing lines floating in the river in front of them.

Below the water, where they couldn’t see, was an endless number of possibilities and they couldn’t possibly know what would happen next, yet they



needed to be there, in the water, in the midst of uncertainty, if they had any hope of catching that elusive fish.

"The world," Eli said, "is full of people chasing shadows – wealth, fame, acceptance, power – forgetting that the very purpose of life, is to live it. Each moment is a brushstroke, each experience is a colour. To live fully and faithfully is to paint a masterpiece worthy of the canvas we are given, and we are only given one."

"But," objected James, yanking slightly on his line as if to create awareness for any fish passing by, "but decisions have consequences, as I so vividly know."

A moment passed, then Eli responded.

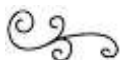
"In each of us burns a flame, a desire to find meaning. Sometimes, if we cannot find that meaning in our world, we need to look elsewhere. We must go where the journey takes us, but we must walk in faith. For some, that is stepping through an ancient gate into a realm



such as this, for others, it is looking inward. Who can say?"

James turned to Eli, who looked at him and smiled warmly. A moment later, Eli pointed to the water.

The tip of James' fishing rod yanked down as the fish took to the bait. James screeched with excitement. It had been ages since he last caught a fish and the memories of him and his father rushed back. He was a child with the world at his fingertips. He laughed and played and loved life. He could have been anything or anyone and then, in a gripping moment, his father was taken away, too early. It is always too early to lose the ones you love. In that moment, James had decided to follow in the footsteps of his father, which saw him foregoing his lifelong passion. In an attempt to fill the gaping hole, he had decided to become a gardener like his father, and to continue his father's work.



The fish splattered on the riverbank, gasping for air, confused and afraid at what was transpiring. James walked forward to release the fish from the hook.

“It’s a big one!” he celebrated. He turned to where Eli should have been standing, but there was no-one there.

He carefully unhooked the fish, its scales glinting in the sunlight, and with a gentle motion, released it back into the river. The water rippled around it while it hesitated for a moment, and then it disappeared.

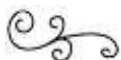
The sheep continued grazing as the sun basked its golden light upon the garden.

He reached down and plucked a long, slender strand of grass from the earth. He placed one end between his lips, tasting the fresh, earthy tang. He lay backwards onto the grass, staring up at the clouds. Memories flickered in his mind, bringing spontaneous, contented smiles to his lips. In the river, a fish leapt, its body arching through the air in a fleeting burst of energy, as if





challenging him to resume the game. But he merely watched, content to simply be in the moment.



## Chapter 7

### The Bard

James extended his stay in the cottage where he had met Eli for a few more days. It was comfortable and he could fish when he wanted to. Every time he cast the line into the water, he would relive some of his cherished childhood memories while creating new ones. Some mornings he lay in bed, attuned to the life around him; the sheep grazing peacefully with the occasional bleat, the birds fluttering by, singing their songs of praise and the Poplars applauding with full appreciation of the world around them, whenever the wind made an appearance.



One morning, he happily succumbed to the strange impulse to shepherd the sheep to a nearby hill that overlooked the vast expanse of the garden. More a forest than a garden, it stretched endlessly in all directions, both inviting and imposing. It was on this day, that he realised that sheep will do as they please if they do not know the voice of the shepherd. Herding them back to the cottage consumed half a day, a task marked by silent brooding over whether the sheep were ignorant of his guidance, indifferent, or deliberately obstinate.

The cottage was a sanctuary to James while his mind was reeling with reflections on his time in the garden, trying to *fold things neatly into boxes*. It offered both variety and luxury, a well-stocked pantry and a fireplace where he could sit and stare at the flames in the chilly evenings. To his surprise, he found some bottles of wine one late afternoon. He pondered his *unauthorised consumption* only momentarily before happily opening a bottle and sipping the *nectar of the gods* late into the



night. He was particularly entranced by the fire's dancing light and shadows that evening and, truth be told, somewhat intoxicated from having no-one to share the wine with and deciding that he cannot desecrate the sanctity of the wine by not finishing the entire bottle – a decision he regretted dearly the next morning as he woke up with a pounding head.

James also appreciated the eggs from the chicken pen he collected on the second day (and every day after that) which made for a wholesome breakfast.

After a week though, he felt it was time to move on. He'd heard it said that *Magic happens outside your comfort zone* and after meeting Eli, he fully believed in magic. He would remember the cottage fondly as a haven within a haven, but all things, even good things, come to an end, and he needed to move. Forward. That was after-all, one of the key learnings with Eli, to *move forward in faith*.

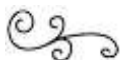


As the yellow sun crested the mountaintops in the east, bathing the world in a golden hue, James rolled out of bed. The sky was a canvass of dark blue, darker grey and deep orange, smeared across the horizon with a dry brush.

“There is no time like the present”, his mother had always said as she rushed to complete her daily chores, urging him out of inertia. This was usually said in tandem with adages like, “The best time to do a good deed, is now” or “Whatever you set out to do, do it immediately, as well as you can and to completion”. He didn’t fully understand or appreciate these motherly pearls of wisdom until he was much older and until it was too late to express his gratitude to her for repeating this day after day, to an unruly and unwilling child.

*If only I could tell her that I love her,* he mused.

He was only half surprised when he heard Eli’s voice in his mind. “Oh, she knows, James. She knows.”



James smiled a bitter-sweet smile and continued with his preparation.

*Should I expect responses to all my rhetorical questions from now on?* James jested in his mind.

“You’re the one who believes that the garden provides answers, even when unspoken,” Eli’s voice replied in his head.

It was both disconcerting and comforting. Even though his friend was no longer physically present, his voice could ease the silence and his wisdom remained always accessible and appreciated.

He packed lightly – the staff from Eli as a memento and a walking stick, the fishing rod for sustenance and pleasure, when opportunity presented itself, a small sack of fruits and nuts from the garden, the last two bottles of wine and all the eggs he could find, carefully wrapped to avoid breakage. He lay everything out on the bed.



*Perhaps not as light as I thought,* he reminisced.

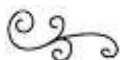
It was time to head home. He realised that it sounded simple enough, but he had no idea how or even if it was possible to get back home.

For a moment, he thought to simply ask Eli.

He was hardly surprised to get a response anyway.

“That would be too easy, my friend. Your life, your decisions,” said the calm voice. It was what he had expected to hear.

In the absence of a clear strategy, James decided to go east, keeping close to the river and heading upward, towards the snowcapped mountains. Their grey silhouette looked ominous yet appealing. Since he loved mountains, that was as good a plan as any. It felt - at least that's what he told himself - that he was moving towards something that he loved, rather than away from something that he cherished.



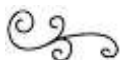
Guessing distance was not James's strong point. The mountains seemed multiple marathons away, but he had time, fickle as it was in this place.

The air was still cool as he stepped outside. The sheep were still sleeping, looking like white puffs of cloud, scattered across the green grass.

*I'm sure they'll be okay*, he consoled himself as he tiptoed past them toward the river.

James had been walking for at least four hours, judging by the position of the sun, only stopping every now and again to drink water directly from the river or to take light rations from his sack. It dawned on him that, while time seemed fluid here, the day and night cycle seemed consistent.

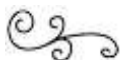
*Perhaps it was designed to give some sense of normalcy, an anchor to reality in an otherwise surreal world*, he thought.





Much of the garden felt foreign, out of time, presenting fauna and flora that had long since, disappeared from what James called ‘the real world’. He considered the possibility that there might also be other worlds, and that the garden was something of a sanctuary for all of them, hence the frequent oddity. There was no way of knowing for sure.

James stopped for lunch. He had only just settled in when he heard a melody in the air. It meandered between hopeful and sombre, minor chords plucking at the strings of his soul. Somewhere, not too far away, someone was playing the lute and singing a song that jerked James out of his timeline and right into the middle-ages. He loved music and this song was filled with passion, lore and longing. James could make out part of the lyrics when the breeze carried the sound in his direction. When the wind turned, the words became inaudible. Intrigued, James swiftly stuffed his lunch back



into his sack and pursued the origins of the melody. In no time, he entered a clearing where he saw a man, not much older than himself, playing the lute while a fire was roasting what seemed like a rabbit, over a makeshift spit. The man acknowledged James with a nod of the head, but continued the song.

James quietly sat down and listened, staring into the fire.

*In lands where the shadows whisper,*

*Under the moon's pale gaze,*

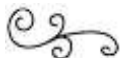
*We roam through the mists of memory,*

*Lost in the echoes of days.*

*Whispers and stories call us to roam,*

*Through valleys of deep and mountains so high,*

*Far, far from the place we call home.*



*Across the seas of promise and sorrow,  
Beneath the starlit sky,  
We search to find tomorrow,  
In every tear we cry.  
Whispers carried on the wind,  
Sing a traveller's song,  
Through forests dark and rivers wide,  
Where now, our hearts belong.  
In the silence of the night, we hear the longing plea,  
For every soul that wanders,  
Is yearning to be free.  
Whispers carried on the wind,  
Sing a traveller's song,  
Through forests dark and rivers wide,*



*Where now, our hearts belong.  
Far we go to distant shores,  
Someday, we'll return,  
But only once we find the flame,  
That lights a seeking heart,  
And then we'll dance,  
And then we'll sing:  
Burn fire, burn.*

When the song ended, the bard extended his hand to James in greeting, clearly impressed with himself.

"I'm called Varrick," he said, smiling openly.

"James," he replied, "that was a great song."

"It's one of my favourites," admitted Varrick.

"Hungry?" Varrick asked, motioning towards the fire.



“Why not,” responded James and the men settled in.

“What brings you to my valley?” asked Varrick, staring at the fire.

*His valley?* James thought, but he shrugged it off and responded plainly.

“I can’t say it was planned, really” James started, “truth be told, I stumbled into the garden. It was more a pull, you know?”

Varrick nodded in agreement.

“That’s how most people get here. Unintentionally. They stay a while, some for decades actually, but eventually, most move on,” he said.

James observed Varrick closely, finding himself intrigued by the bard's unique demeanour. Varrick's presence in the clearing was like a painter's irreverent stroke on a canvas of green. His hair was a wild mane of chestnut curls, hanging just past his shoulders, framing a face that



carried the weight of heavy years. His prominent eyebrows arched expressively as he spoke.

However, it was his eyes that caught James's attention. Set deep within their sockets, they were often shadowed, concealing their full expression and leaving a lingering sense of mystery. Shadows seemed to play across his gaze, making it difficult to discern the full extent of his thoughts and emotions. Something about Varrick's manner, steered James to caution.

Yet, as Varrick spoke, his voice carried the cadence of someone who not only sung of ageless tales, but lived them and this sense of adventure, resonated with James.

"What year is it where you are from?" Varrick enquired. James found it an odd question.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Well, home – my original home - is the year 800AD," he replied.

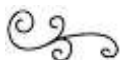


James was stunned. He accepted that the garden existed outside of conventional time and space, but that it actually *bridged* time, was more than he could fully comprehend.

“When I entered the garden, it was the year 2023. I cannot rightly say what time it might be when I go back, given how time flows, or doesn’t, in this place,” James replied.

“I’ve spent many lifetimes in and out of the garden,” replied Varrick, “it’s difficult to explain, even for me, and I have just about covered every inch of the garden and probably more than once. What’s interesting is that, depending on *how* you leave, you could be back at the exact same second you entered the garden in the first place.”

James' mind reeled at the complexity of Varrick's explanation. The concept of time in the garden was as bewildering as it was fascinating.



Varrick smiled proudly. It seemed like he had discussed this exact topic many times before and he enjoyed the authority it afforded him.

“You mean, you can willingly come and go?” asked James, his heart leaping with the possibility of insight that would take him home.

“Yes, precisely. There are ‘gateways’ all over the garden - if you know where to look - but not all of them take you home, I should add. One of those will actually take you back to my home town, in 800AD and another will take you to your home, in 2023. Every time someone enters the garden, a mirror gateway appears. It’s like a rift or a hallway between two worlds. From either end, it will take you directly and only back to the other side of that door.”

“I see now why we put things in boxes,” muttered James.

Varrick frowned, but James shrugged it off as unimportant.





"Inside joke," he said, keeping his time with Eli private.

"800AD! That makes you..." James began.

"...very old, yes," chuckled Varrick, "thanks to this place, of course."

"I have lived in decades and in seconds. I have a million stories to tell, and none whatsoever, for if I were to go back through my own gateway, I would have new stories to tell, but time will be right back where I started. I remember it like it was this morning, because it was and it wasn't, you see?"

Varrick was enjoying this. While James' mind was reeling with the impossibility of it all, he wasn't ready to dive into a granular exploration of time and space.

*If I wanted a headache, I could get there much easier with wine,* he thought.

"That was a particularly good season," a voice said in his head. Eli referred to the bottle that James had finished before leaving the cottage. James smiled. Eli was



essentially eavesdropping on the conversation between James and Varrick. He returned his attention to the bard.

“Fascinating,” exclaimed James, intrigued by Varrick's depth of knowledge and his experiences in the garden, “So you remember everything? Where you grew up, and everything in-between?” he enquired.

“I don't know if it's a blessing or a curse, but yes,” replied Varrick. The rabbit on the spit was still far from being ready, so Varrick took the time to do what he does best – tell a story.

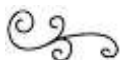
Varrick's journey began in a small, frostbitten town nestled in the cold embrace of a northern country. The town (with a name that James was unable to pronounce), was blanketed in snow for most of the year. It was a place where the chill seeped deep into the bones and the spirit of the people who lived there. Life was merely a quest to survive. Many did not. Food was scarce and nothing came easy. The total population was



less than seventy. From an early age, Varrick felt suffocated by the relentless cold and the monotonous life it offered. He longed for something more than the life he was born into.

At the age of eleven, Varrick vowed to search the world for something better. He journeyed south, always south.

Living off the land, Varrick's skills in traditional labour were minimal, but he honed his ability to survive. He learned to identify plants, to hunt small game, and to find fresh water. In a time where most people were content to live in one place, doing the same thing over and over, Varrick was soon a legend of sorts, a man of myth. The stories travelled faster than he did, and soon, he would arrive in any new town as a celebrity, discovering then, what amazing adventures he had apparently endured and what formidable circumstances he had survived. Instead of correcting people who clearly lived out their dreams through his fabricated adventures, he embraced it. It was then that he started



writing down his adventures and converting them to song. His stories made him the centre of attention and he loved it.

He often travelled with groups of performers, traders, or fellow wanderers who hung on his every word, but sometimes, the pull of solitude was irresistible. During these times, he would venture alone, following the road less travelled. He needed some solace to rid himself of the persona and the wild fantasies of desperate folk who lacked the desire or the courage to change their own lives and to live out their own dreams. He was saddened by the fact that those who did have a dream often lacked the grit and discipline to pursue it.

At nineteen, Varrick fell in love with Anna, a girl from a town where his legend hadn't reached. She saw him for the man he truly was.

"Anna was the embodiment of all the world's grace and beauty. In all my years, I have not met anyone like her," Varrick confessed. His voice softened, revealing a rare



vulnerability. He squinted, as if trying to peer through time.

“Some wounds never heal, James,” he said.

Anna’s father, being a man of rank, refused to allow his daughter to marry ‘a nobody who had nothing’. Varrick, in blind rage and desperation, did the only thing he could think of.

“All decisions made in rage are foolish, James. Every last one of them,” Varrick admitted.

That night, Varrick covered his face in a make-shift mask and dragged large logs across the road leading into town, right on the edge of the forest.

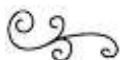
“The point was for the blockade to force any coach or carriage to stop. Once they did, I would storm out of the treeline like a madman, waving my sword overhead screaming and demanding they hand over all their valuables,” Varrick said.



His eyes retracted even deeper. Everything about him plunged into an abyss of despair. What Varrick could not possibly have known, was that the first carriage that would pass that night, was in fact Anna and her mother, returning from the countryside. Now, anyone who has ever been in love will tell you that a mask cannot hide who you really are from the ones you love. When Varrick stepped out of the treeline and demanded that the travellers hand over the valuables, he stared right into the deep blue eyes of Anna. In that moment, both of their hearts shattered into pieces and neither of them would ever be the same again. In one tragic moment, he went from Varrick the Brave to Varrick the Exile.

“Cause and consequence, I suppose,” Varrick said dryly, the pain and regret still clinging to his words like mist.

All the beauty in the world had become a reminder of what he had lost, and something in him broke. He turned on his heels and headed back north, to that town



that had no joy or colour or love and most of all, no Anna's.

He vowed to himself that he would never be thought of as 'too poor' again, and so the long walk home became a desperate exploration of all things valuable. He accumulated extensive knowledge about things that people assigned value to. He learnt about precious stones and relics and rarities. He learnt how some things appeared simple, but with a little effort, could be transformed into something brilliant and highly valued. By the time he arrived back home, he was nothing short of an expert on the topic of valuable items. He could also speak multiple languages and weave himself into or out of any discussion with ease. The man that returned to that town in the north, though broken-hearted, was a man capable of survival and driven by rage and resolution.

"People were willing to pay for my knowledge, for that too, was valuable. So, by the time I got home, I was not



only smarter, but richer...I was respected,” Varrick exclaimed.

Something in Varrick’s deep-socketed eyes betrayed a silent obsession. It wasn’t wealth he really desired, but power - power over people and circumstances. He would never be ‘nobody with nothing’ again.

James heard Eli’s voice in his head: “Power is only required to dominate or harm. Everything else can be achieved through love.”

*That’s deep, Eli,* James responded in his mind, *but what is a man to do when the very thing that could have set him free, is the thing that enslaves him?*

“The right thing,” replied Eli, “a man should always do the right thing. We should never be so thirsty, that we will drink from any cup.”

Varrick was nearing the end of his story.

The rabbit had been entirely consumed during the story. All that was left, was the discarded bones and their





sticky fingers. The sun had elected not to linger and listen, probably having heard the story before. Instead, it continued steadfastly on its journey to the west, now hanging much lower than it did when the story started.

James' mind had wandered at a pivotal point in the story, contemplating Eli's words and taking stock of the fading day.

"...and that's when I saw the faint glow in the water, just below the layer of ice," said Varrick.

"It was...magical. I didn't think twice. I broke the ice and reached for the glowing orb below the surface."

Varrick paused.

"When I came to, I was in the garden," he said.

"Have you ever been back?" James asked.

"Yes, twice, and both times, I found myself back in that hole, cold and wet," said Varrick, clearly unimpressed.



“But,” he said, raising his prominent eyebrows dramatically, “I’ve learnt how to identify other gateways and I’ve been through thousands of them. To me, the garden has become a conduit to different times and different worlds.”

James was about to ask another question, when he noticed the last rays of the sun dip below the summit.

“We’d best find shelter for the night,” he said. The fire had died some hours ago and he was hungry and tired.

By the time the darkness settled in, they had made a fire in a clearing next to a giant oak tree. Varrick had managed to catch a quail with a snare. The bird was now roasting over the flames.

Varrick’s voice rose and fell against the ambience of chirping crickets and the crackling fire.

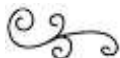
*From the dawn of time,*

*To the end of days,*

*From the darkest night, to the*



*Brightest stars in the  
Milky ways,  
Let the oceans know,  
Let the mountains praise,  
Never has there been,  
And never will be seen,  
Anyone who shines as bright as you,  
With eyes that pale the heavens with their blue,  
There's nothing I admire,  
No words can be more true,  
I'd set the world on fire,  
Just to be with you.  
There's nothing I admire,  
No words can be more true,  
I'd set the world on fire,*



*Just to be with you.*



## Chapter 8

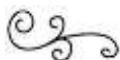
### Captivity

James was roused from restless sleep by the clamour of hooves against the earth, the sharp snorts of horses, and the distinct ring of steel resonating in the crisp morning air. He leapt up and twisted about in pandemonium and shock. His mind was battling to reconcile with the images around him. He could smell the sweat of horses, he could hear their anxious breathing. He looked from side to side, eyes round with terror and confusion, trying to make sense of what was transpiring.



Emerging from the shadows of the forest were horsemen, garbed in attire that demanded authority and fear. Their silver armour glimmered in the morning sun. Their swords were drawn. The two men on the skirts each held a spear, pointing directly at James and Varrick. Their faces were stern, etched with the solemn duty of veterans. James studied one face after another, and he was met with merciless disdain. There was no doubt whatsoever that one wrong move or word, would cost him his life.

The leader of the sentries stood with a presence that commanded immediate respect. Even seated, James could see that he was tall and commanding, with broad shoulders and arms that could rip a man apart. His armour seemed to be part of him, moving with fluid grace that punctuated his authority. James breathed. Slowly. Steadily. Calming the panic within. He glanced towards Varrick while holding his hands in the air. Maybe Varrick knew what was going on. Maybe he



could offer some sense of comfort or clarity amidst the chaos.

But Varrick, in absolute contrast to James, seemed calm and accepting. His hands were also raised, but in what seemed like an embrace, more than defiance.

Their eyes met and James knew - he didn't know how - but he knew. His life was now counted in days, if not hours.

The captain spoke. The language was like a melody, an ancient song that James could feel, but not understand. The hair on his arms were raised, as if there was some sort of energy in the air. Despite the ethereal sound of the language, the meaning was not lost on James.

Observing James' confusion, one of the soldiers, translated.

"You come. You bad. You come. You die," the man said in a heavy accent.



James staggered where he stood, his mouth miming incoherently, his eyes an ocean of turmoil.

The man tried again, pointing at Varrick.

“Soulstealer,” the man said, “you and you. King says you guilty, you die,” he repeated.

James was shocked into momentary silence. He had no idea what the man was referring to, but the repetitive reference to his imminent death, was not something he was willing or able to accept. He mustered all his courage and attempted a muttered objection, but even to himself, he didn’t make any sense.

The man shook his head in frustration and then leapt off his horse. He stepped threateningly towards James.

James half stumbled backwards, an involuntary response to the terror that was clawing its way through his intestines. The man stopped in front of James and held out his hand with his palm upward, waiting. It wasn’t a question, but a demand. James volunteered his hand. The man slapped a golden bracelet around his





wrist. A sensation like an electric current passed through James, and suddenly, the lyrical words became clear to him.

The leader looked directly at James, and repeated his earlier announcement.

“You must come with us. your lives are now forfeit.”

James found his voice, although it sounded like someone was speaking in a dream.

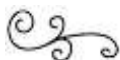
“I don’t understand,” he said, “what have we done?”

The leader coggled his head towards Varrick.

“Soulstealer,” he said. It was the end of any attempt for further conversation.

Another man jumped off his horse to help the first secure leather straps around James and Varrick’s wrists.

Varrick nodded, steeped in a resigned acceptance of his infamy. James, still drowning in confusion, followed



Varrick's example, although his mind was exploding in rebelling and confusion.

Their procession through the forest was a silent march, the natural chorus of the garden dimmed by the gravity of their escort. They stopped from time to time, allowing the soldiers and the horses to rest. The soldiers offered James and Varrick some water, not saying a word and avoiding eye contact. They were still headed east, towards the mountains. Varrick's lute was hanging like a prize on the side of a soldier's horse.

In the late afternoon, with the sun now behind them, James could make out the silhouette of a breathtaking city up ahead. Were it not for his disposition, he would pause to take in the view.

The city emerged as a vision of ethereal beauty, its architecture a harmonious blend of nature and artifice. White towers and spires of the city's castle stood proudly, their alabaster facades gleaming like beacons



against the sombre grey of the immense mountains looming in the distance.

The castle stood at the heart of the city. It was unlike anything James had ever seen. It was a masterpiece of design, with soaring turrets and intricate battlements. For a moment, his attention was diverted from his situation as he gazed upon the city in awe.

As they emerged from the forest, the dense woodland gave way to a pastoral landscape. Surrounding them were sprawling farms, dotted with livestock and fields rich with grain. Sunflowers and maize stood in full bloom, painting a vibrant tapestry of agricultural abundance.

They continued their trudge forward, becoming a spectacle for the onlookers. Passersby gave them a wide berth, scattering to the sides as the column of soldiers marched through, escorting their captives with a grim determination.



As James and Varrick were led through the city, a rich tapestry of life unfolded around them. The air was alive with the mingled scents of fresh earth, blooming flowers, and the faint aroma of baking bread wafting from nearby homes. The scent brought James to the brink of tears as he wondered if he would ever enjoy freshly baked bread again.

The city's inhabitants moved with an ethereal elegance, their tall, slender figures gliding effortlessly as they went about their daily routines. Their faces were marked by a serene beauty, as if they carried lightly on the burdens of the world. Their clothing was elegant but unadorned, made from fabrics that flowed and shimmered in the sunlight.

Even in their scorn and curiosity, their language sounded melodious, its rhythm and cadence more akin to a song than speech. His sadness deepened. He would have loved to visit this place under different circumstances,

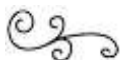


but the leather strips around his chafed wrists, were a stark reminder of the doom that lay ahead.

They walked straight across the courtyard and exited a street exiting the back. The street sloped downwards, the cobbles smoothed out over the decades of use. As they walked, James could see the houses were gradually becoming less adorned, with the wither and wear of time starting to show. He realised that they were entering the poorer quarter and his stomach turned.

He cast a desperate look towards Varrick, but found a man defeated, as if decades of weight were suddenly mounted on his shoulders. He looked older, ancient, not at all like the vibrant bard he had met only a few hours before.

The dungeon doors creaked open on heavy hinges that suffered under their weight. They were large wooden doors reinforced with steel. Guards were posted on either side, jumping to salute at the sight of the party.



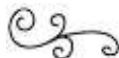
“Sir,” they acknowledged the captain. He responded with a slight nod of his head.

When they reached the inner gates, the party remained behind, breaking formation and the two soldiers that had bound their wrists, indicated that James and Varrick must move onwards.

“The warden will show you to your cell,” said the captain, “Tomorrow, the king will decide what becomes of you.”

He turned unceremoniously and left.

The warden smiled at the two condemned men. There was nothing warm about the smile. It was a sadistic, cold and merciless affair that showed isolated, yellow and broken teeth. He was huge, like a whale out of water, each slow movement accompanied by a laboured wheeze as he fought for breath. James couldn't help but notice that the warden stood in stark contrast to the city's inhabitants they had encountered. It was clear that he was not native to this ethereal place. James



wondered what strange twist of fate had brought a man from another world to this city, and to such a grim occupation.

"We've kept the honeymoon berth fer you two rats," he hissed. He mistook having a captive audience for interest and continued with his unremarkable attempt at conversation.

"By the time we're finished with ye, not even a wench will cast her eyes yer way," he said. James knew the man was trying to compensate for his clear lack of authority. He didn't care. He just wanted to find a dark and quiet corner and sit there, until the end of time or until he woke from this nightmare. Varrick was of no help whatsoever, having withdrawn into himself. He hadn't said a word since they were arrested.

"You're not alone," said Eli. James started crying. In all of this, he had completely forgotten about Eli, Marcus and his life back in Meridia.

"I am," he replied out loud.



The warden stopped his slithering forward and turned his head ever so slightly.

“You are what?” he sneered, eyes burning like lava and saliva splattering from his mouth.

“Nothing,” apologised James.

“I thought so!” replied the warden, a sense of pride streaming across his gluttonous face. Clearly, in the man’s loose relationship with reality, he was convinced that he had intimidated James into submissive silence.

“I know it may not seem so, but everything will be okay in the end,” continued Eli.

James didn’t reply. He was trying to hold back tears, trying not to sob uncontrollably like a toddler torn from his mother’s arms. In this dark, oppressive place, where the air was thick with the stench of decay, Eli’s words offered no solace. For a fleeting moment, he wished he had never met Eli. The Magician who he revered for his wisdom and greatness, now seemed distant and

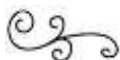




ineffectual. Here he was, enveloped in darkness and despair so profound it seemed to penetrate his very being, and all Eli could offer was empty reassurance. He felt betrayed, overwhelmed by his emotions, shaking and crying, with no-one to see and no-one to care.

"Dinner be served at eight," croaked the warden, "Whether ye be brave enough to eat it or not, matters not to me. Some do and meet Death quickly. Others don't, they meet Death a wee bit later." He seemed impressed with himself and started waddling away.

"Make yerselves at home. It be a long night ye be havin' ahead of ye."



# Chapter 9

## Confession

“You what?!” shouted James. He was stomping up and down in the near dark, confused and livid.

In the sombre solitude of the dungeon, Varrick’s confession flowed like a dark river of regret, like the stuff of nightmares.

“I was young and foolish, James,” Varrick said, “The wounds left by Anna’s father, drove me to madness. I’ve



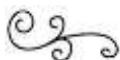
lived for centuries and she's the only woman I had ever loved so deeply. Do you know what that kind of loss does to a man?"

James knew all too well about loss. The loss of his own father had changed the trajectory of his life. The pain never goes away, you just learn to live with it and find a way to trudge forward, stronger and more courageous.

Varrick had been talking for the better part of two hours, trying to explain why the soldiers had referred to him as the "Soulstealer".

"Dinner," shouted a crude voice. Metal plates scraped over stone floors. A scurry of rodents could be heard, dashing desperately to intercept the food before the prisoners lifted the plates. Varrick and James made no motion towards the food.

The hours dragged on as Varrick explained, his voice echoing through long, cold hallways, falling on foreign ears in foreign places. Every now and again, bone-chilling gasps and moans of tortured men, echoed



through the dark, making it impossible to find rest. James couldn't tell whether the torture was physical or that of the mind, gnawing away at the very hearts and dreams of hopeless men. He had heard it said that death was not the moment that your heart stopped, but when you stopped believing in a future. The dungeon was filled with the agony and heartbreak of dead men, dying over and over.

Varrick had been set on a road to accumulate power and wealth. Never again, would he be referred to as a man who *was* nothing and *had* nothing. He would show the world just what kind of a man he was – a force of nature. He couldn't see at the time, how deep this journey would take him down the abyss. After a while, his lute was the only anchor to the real world, a shield against the mad rage that consumed him. It had been a gift from Anna and he had held onto it with all his life.

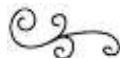


Of everything he had accumulated over the centuries, it was still his most prized possession.

“Almost all people are greedy in some or other way,” Varrick said, “You find out what drives them, and they will hand over the key to their souls to procure what you offer. In many ways, I think greed is the original sin. The lust for more; more money, more power, more praise, more fame. It’s all fake of course, a mirage. If you’re not enough without something, you’ll never be enough with it,” he reminisced.

James was still pacing, his mind reeling with the reality of his situation. He was, as it were, guilty by association. He was imprisoned for being in the wrong place, at the wrong time and more importantly, with the wrong man.

“In those early days, I realised that time was the rarest of all commodities. A man on his deathbed, will hand over everything he owns without a second thought, for nothing other than a couple of seconds more, with the

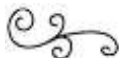


hope of a miracle in those extra moments. The miracle never came,” he said.

“I realised that I too, will run out of time at some point and so my focus changed. I became obsessed with one thing: if time was the rarest of commodities, I would search for a way to cheat death. That way, I would truly be the wealthiest man alive.”

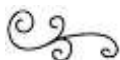
James could hear the regret in Varrick’s voice. Even in the darkness, he could sense, more than see, the sadness that clouded Varrick’s deep-set eyes. It made sense to him now; those deep eyes, for the eyes are the window to the soul and Varrick’s eyes betrayed the prison that ensnared him. This dark catacomb of hopelessness was only now, the physical manifestation of the prison that had enslaved him for ages.

“I heard rumours of a woman who was known only as “The Seamstress”, said Varrick, “She was believed to know of places outside of time and artefacts that prolonged life.”



Varrick had sought out The Seamstress. She was old, simple and unassuming, but with an aura of understated power. He was almost sure that her appearance was merely for his comfort and that, behind those frail hands and grey hair, there was something or someone much more capable than the aged figure he saw before him. Her tiny cottage was located at the edge of a forest. It was simple and unadorned. She was sitting on the pouch, knitting. Beside her, a large glass of wine caught the glimmers of fading sunlight, standing sentinel by her chair. Its companion, a half-full bottle, stood nearby, suggesting a casual relationship with time and leisure. Her gaze focused on the birds playing amidst the treetops. She seemed unsurprised to see Varrick as he mounted the stairs to her pouch.

“There’s a glass on the table behind me,” she uttered, tilting her head. Her voice was like a tapestry of ages – frayed and coarse from the passage of time, yet woven with an undercurrent of potency that resonated in the air. As she spoke, a subtle charge seemed to ripple



through the atmosphere, causing the hair on Varrick's arms to stand on end, as if responding to an unseen force.

"Thank you," replied the young Varrick.

When Varrick sat down, wine in hand, she stopped with the knitting and turned her attention towards him. Her eyes pierced his soul.

"There is the matter of payment," she said coldly.

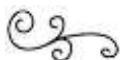
Varrick pointed to a large bag at the stairs to the porch.

"Hmm," she shrugged and chuckled, "That's nice, but that's not the payment I speak of."

A cold chill ran down Varrick's spine.

Before she even said it, he knew. The price he would pay, would be equivalent to what he desired.

"You will die a lonely death. Your death might be centuries from now, but you will die. All things do. You will not be remembered. The history books will have no





record of Varrick. Centuries of life and in the end, you will have nothing to show for it other than regret. This is the price.”

Varrick tried to swallow. He couldn’t. He tried to move but discovered himself unable. He was caught somewhere between despair and fear.

“What say you?” The Seamstress asked.

Somewhere in the chasms of his mind, a voice was fighting to be heard. It was cautioning him against accepting the terms.

“This is not the way, Varrick,” it said, but Varrick shut out the voice and nodded his agreement.

He had come this far. If he could cheat death, maybe there was a way to cheat this prophecy. He would have time to figure it out.

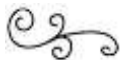
“There is a garden,” The Seamstress continued, “It exists outside of time and space. While you linger there, you will not age – not like you do in this world, but very few



find a home there. While it offers comfort, it is a place designed for things of a different nature. Mortals find peace there at first, and then it becomes a place of torment, for our minds are not able to deal with the serenity and infinity it offers. We were not meant to live forever, not as you mean to live forever. It defies the purpose of our creation. We need,” she searched for an explanation, “We need boxes and for things to fit into those boxes. The garden does not. You will find yourself pulled back into this world. Therefore, I will tell you about The Pacifier. It is one of two relics in this world that can offer you what you want, and it is the only one within your reach.”

The Seamstress spoke and Varrick listened.

Night fell like the curtain at the end of a performance. The birds surrendered their cheerful fluttering to the nocturnal creatures of the forest. The moonlight played a game of hide and seek on the pouch and the clearing below. Varrick wasn't sure whether he was the



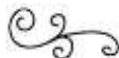
moonlight giving chase, or the shadows being chased. The Seamstress gave clear directions and instructions. He would hold The Pacifier in his hands, within the month.

“There are only two gods in the world,” the Seamstress explained, “The God of Light and the Ember god. The Pacifier was forged in the fires of hell. It is a treasured artefact of the Ember god. It is a tool of bitter revenge. How it came to be in the hands of men, no-one knows. He wants it back of course, but since he is banished by the God of Light for a thousand years, he’ll have to wait, I suppose,” she said.

“What does it do?” enquired young Varrick.

“It steals a soul,” replied The Seamstress in a matter-of-fact way.

“You simply hold it towards your victim and recite the following incantation: ‘Da mihi lucem intra te’. The soul of that person would leave their body and be caught within The Pacifier,” she said.



“What does it mean?”, asked Varrick.

“A direct translation would be that it instructs the light of your victim to leave it’s body,” replied The Seamstress coldly, “Nasty affair.”

When Varrick didn’t speak, she volunteered the answer to the question she knew he was contemplating.

“The body cannot live without a soul, my boy, but there is more. Normally, when the body dies, the soul is freed to move onto whatever life awaits it after this one. The Pacifier denies it that right. Souls are eternal, you see? The Pacifier feeds on the captured soul and the master of The Pacifier, gains time. Time, stolen from the soul of your victim.”

The Seamstress stared into the darkness, dwelling on a thought that brought her no comfort.

“Things like these should not exist,” she said, “but then, neither should greed or hate and yet, here we are.”

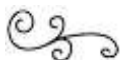


There was a long silence before Varrick rose from his chair. His gaze met hers and he replied, “Yes, here we are.”

Anna’s father lay on the ground. His body seemed dry, old and withered as if life had been sucked out of it by a vacuum. The remnants looked nothing like the proud and defiant man that had stood in front of Varrick a moment ago.

Varrick felt a surge of energy run through him. He felt strong and rejuvenated, godlike, immortal, invincible.

“If only I had known, James,” Varrick said, “If only I had known. If there is something I have learnt about the Ember god over the years, it is that there is no such thing as truth to him, only greed, only madness, only a desperate fight for dominion. He promises one thing and gives another. He promises immortality but steals



the will to live. He promises wealth but takes health in return. He promises fame, but it costs you your freedom. He is a god with two faces.”

Varrick continued his confession. Anna’s father was the first in a trail of death.

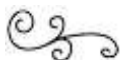
“I went back, you know?” said Varrick, “Back to where I met The Seamstress. Endowed with the power of The Pacifier, I thought that I could change the future that she had prophesised by simply stealing her soul as well.”

Varrick was silent for a long time.

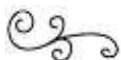
“There was no sign of her, or the cottage,” he said, turning to look straight at James.

“I wonder sometimes, whether she wasn’t the Ember god himself, steering me on this course.” His voice fell away and he was lost in thought again.

James’ heart sunk. If the people of this city, thought him an accomplice to Varrick in any way, there would be no mercy.



Varrick was still speaking, but James' mind drifted off. He had heard enough. He had been angry, sad, confused and now, he was merely empty. Hopeless. A dead man, like the other wailing souls trapped in this dungeon. He wondered what their sins were to be imprisoned in a place like this. His mind turned black, and he drifted into a restless nightmare, falling. Forever falling.

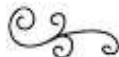


# Chapter 10

## Execution

The public square stretched roughly a hundred meters to all sides. Its ground was a meticulously crafted mosaic of cobblestones, laid out in an intricate pattern that began at the centre and spiralled outwards like a seashell.

At the one end of the square, a makeshift stage had been erected. It didn't surprise James that there was no permanent fixture. The rough-hewn wood and the



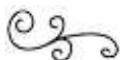


hurried manner of its assembly contrasted sharply with the orderly beauty of the surrounding city. Public execution was not a frequent spectacle.

A sense of foreboding hung in the air, a palpable tension that weighed down the morning. Citizens were standing around, not sure what to do. Their hushed talking was punctuated by the occasional glance and gesture towards the stage. There, two men were on display, their hands crudely tied above their heads, stripped of all but their undergarments.

In the charged silence of the square, the sudden fanfare of trumpets heralded the arrival of the royal procession. The crowd parted reverently as a regal cavalcade emerged from the far end of the square.

The king and queen, leading the procession, presented a sight of unparalleled elegance. They were breathtaking to behold amidst the solemnity of the occasion. Both were adorned in gowns of deep crimson, the fabric tailored perfectly for ceremonial grandeur, though



perhaps more suited to occasions far more joyous than the grim spectacle at hand.

Their crowns were simple circlets that caught the early morning sun, scattering beams of light in a display of majestic glory.

As James watched them approach, a sense of renewed despair washed over him. He imagined a different encounter, one marked by celebration rather than condemnation, where their gaze would be warm and welcoming, not locked in the cold judgement that now met his eyes. He could feel the rope tighten around his wrists as the breath tightened in his chest. He glanced at Varrick who was equally transfixed on the royal pair and equally pale and overwhelmed by the reality of their situation.

The king raised his hand and the crowd fell immediately silent.



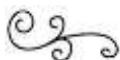
“Varrick, you stand charged with murder. How do you plead?” instructed the king. James still wore the bracelet on his wrist, allowing him to understand the language of the inhabitants. It was not really a question. It was a courtesy extended to Varrick, but James knew, as did Varrick, that the judgement had already been passed.

“Guilty, M ’Lord,” replied Varrick. His voice was soft, almost failing under the weight of the moment.

“Any last wishes?” the king asked, tilting his head to the executioner.

“This man, James, he is not guilty of any crime. He was merely in the wrong place at the wrong time. We have no history, save for sharing a meal. I beg you, let him go. This is my fate, preordained and deserved, but he had no part in any of it.”

The king nodded his acknowledgment but said nothing.



The executioner walked to Varrick and untied his hands. No instructions were needed. In front of Varrick, stood a wooden block. Varrick walked to the block, knelt, and laid his neck over the block.

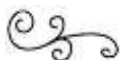
“Forgive me,” he begged quietly.

“I do,” replied a familiar voice, somewhere in the last remaining remnants of his soul.

Varrick was stunned. It was the same voice that had cautioned him against this course, so many centuries ago. The same voice he shunned. Varrick’s life flashed before his eyes. He half smiled.

*I always wondered if it’s true,* he thought to himself. He recalled so much, so vividly. At an impossible pace, his actions since that dreaded day, flashed through his mind, pausing every now and again at the bitter-sweet memory of Anna.

*I never wanted to become this man,* he thought, *I wanted to be good...good for you, good with you.*



The executioner lifted a heavy axe with heavy arms. Varrick could hear the black leather straps over the executioner's chest, moan and stretch at the exertion.

*When I sang my songs, I was close to you, they pulled me back from the abyss, back into the light, he thought.*

He could hear the crowd gasp in unison as the executioner started his downward arc, slicing the air as the axe rushed to end his life.

*I hope...*

The moment was surreal, a vision that clawed at James' mind with menacing talons, ripping into his soul. He wished he were somewhere else, back at the river, fishing with Eli or trying to herd those stubborn sheep back home. Anywhere else.

As Varrick's body slumped lifelessly, his head severed cleanly by the executioner's axe, a chilling silence enveloped the square.



The crowd was a sea of stunned faces, frozen in time amidst a squall of emotion. All life was precious, and the moment demanded sanctity, silence and reverence.

In the eerie quiet, something extraordinary began to unfold. From the vicinity of Varrick's fallen form, tiny sparks of light started to emerge, like ethereal embers sparked from a celestial fire. At first, they were faint, almost imperceptible, but they quickly grew in intensity, swirling around the lifeless body in a mesmerizing dance. The crowd watched, transfixed, as the lights intensified, their movement gaining a jubilant, almost ecstatic quality.

James, along with everyone else, could only stare in awe as the spectacle unfolded. The lights, now bright and vibrant, seemed to be celebrating their newfound freedom, their joy, palpable even in the solemnity of the moment. Then, in a climactic crescendo, the lights

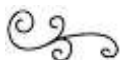


surged upwards in unison, soaring into the sky and vanishing from sight, leaving behind a collective sense of wonder and a haunting memory of their brief but brilliant existence.

Lying next to Varrick's body was a peculiar pendant on a golden chain, its crystal vial shattered, the fragments glinting in the sunlight. Realization dawned on James – this was The Pacifier. The liberated lights were the souls it had imprisoned, now released from their bondage.

James's thoughts turned to the Varrick he had known: the man of songs and stories, whose music carried both passion and a depth. These songs, he now realized, were the testimonies of a man who had loved profoundly, and it was this very love that had propelled him into an abyss of madness and regret.

In those fleeting moments, James's emotions oscillated between love and hate for Varrick. For a moment, he *became* Varrick who, were it not for one decision, could



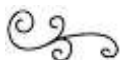
have lived a beautiful life, filled with love and peace. He could have grown to be an old man who watched his grandchildren run around playing, while he held the hand of the woman he loved, watching sunsets and telling epic stories.

*How quickly can one decision alter the course of a life?*  
he thought.

James's heart skipped a beat as he was abruptly pulled back to the harsh reality of his situation. The king's voice, clear and authoritative, echoed across the square, slicing through the heavy air.

"Will anyone speak for this man?" he demanded, his gaze sweeping over the assembled crowd.

A shiver of dread coursed through James. He was acutely aware of his vulnerability, standing exposed before a sea of strangers. His eyes scanned the faces before him, each unfamiliar, each unlikely to come to the aid of a man they did not know. Despair crept into



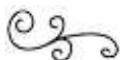


his heart, its icy fingers tightening with an unyielding grip and mad laughter.

From the far end of the square, the large doors creaked open, and a solitary figure emerged.

Clad in a simple white robe, the newcomer's presence seemed to command immediate reverence. As the figure advanced, a wave of silence fell over the square, and one by one, the citizens began to kneel. A collective gesture of profound respect and devotion unfolded, as every man, woman, and child, except for the king and queen, bowed down, their hands stretched forward, their faces pressed against the cool cobblestones.

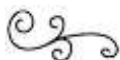
The figure's approach was unhurried, measured, his robe billowing gently in the breeze. As he approached the stage where James stood, bound and exposed, the tension in the air was palpable. The crowd remained in



their reverent silence, allowing every footstep of the approaching figure to be amplified, a duet to James' pounding heart. The figure moved with grace, his large hood casting a shadow that obscured his features.

As he neared, James could feel the intensity of his gaze, even through the fabric that veiled his face. The lines of tears on James' cheeks felt like scars, each marking a moment of the fear and despair that had amassed within him. His body was shaking uncontrollably, his eyes red and swollen, his lips quivering with unspoken pleas.

The figure stopped in front of James, and for a moment that seemed to stretch into eternity, the square was enveloped in a hushed anticipation. Then, with a slow, deliberate motion, the figure reached up and gently pulled back his hood.



James's eyes widened in disbelief. His heart ruptured with untamed emotion. Tears welled up in his mind as a rush of sensation ran up and down his body.

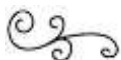
"I will speak for this man," Eli announced, as he turned to address the king.



# Chapter 11

## Nightmares

Eli's advocacy had led to James' immediate pardon. As his hands were freed from their bondage, his knees buckled under the weight of the moment. To his surprise, the king walked to where he was hunched over, standing on hands and knees. In a gesture of unimaginable kindness, the king hung his crimson robe over James's shoulders. As he did so, the king and Eli exchanged a silent acknowledgement.



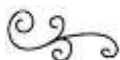
Slowly, the gathered citizens began to rise, dispersing quietly through the gates, returning to the rhythm of their daily lives. The lifeless form of Varrick, a grave testament to the day's grim reality, lay nearby, a haunting reminder of the thin line between life and death that James had just walked. He looked up at the man who saved him. Again.

James lifted his eyes to meet Eli's gaze, attempting a smile. But his mouth was unwilling or unable. It was as if every conceivable feeling had been tossed into a tempest, swirling chaotically, impossible to discern one from another. Eli's smile in return was a beacon of warmth, his eyes radiating an understanding of the turmoil James was feeling.

"We'll talk later," he said, his hand gently squeezing James' shoulder, offering a silent consolation.

The king waived over one of his aides.

"Ensure he is tended to — cleaned, fed, and allowed to rest. No man should have to endure such trials,"



commanded the king, his voice carrying a note of compassion.

He then turned towards James, his gaze softening.

“I’m sorry about Varrick,” he said, “He left us no other choice. Tomorrow, when the day starts as days should, explore our beautiful city and its wonderful people, or sleep off this nightmare, as you please. When the afternoon bell chimes, make your way to the castle. It would be our honour to host you as our guest.”

James simply nodded.

The king's aide led James to a guest wing in the castle, where a steaming bath awaited him. With the sweat and tears washed away, exhaustion overtook him. James fell into a deep sleep before his head touched the pillow.

James sprinted along the rugged terrain at the foot of a mountain, his breath ragged, heart pounding. Behind him, a horde of Echoes pursued relentlessly, their



cacophony of hisses and shrieks melding with the surreal melody of Varrick's song, ringing in his ears as he pushed himself to the limits of his strength. Varrick's voice soared, his strumming and percussive banging on the lute echoing with the fervour of a cavalry charge, each note resonating with the intensity of galloping steeds storming into battle.

*Beware the dawn,*

*The raven's cry,*

*For while we live our*

*Dreams may die,*

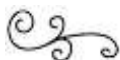
*Beware the day,*

*The Echo's voice, will*

*Bring to doubt your*

*Every choice.*

*Beware the night,*



*The voice within,  
Will set you free or  
Burn your skin,  
Beware the hand that  
Keeps the time,  
Before you know, your  
Life is mine.*

*Now is not the time, Varrick,* James jested, as he tried to push Varrick's song out of his mind.

"Now is the only time, my friend," Varrick cheered.

He felt Eli's staff in his hand. He glanced at the staff for a moment. It was glowing with a mystical aura. James clutched the staff tightly, like it was a lifeline amidst a raging storm at sea. An Echo shrieked unnervingly close

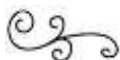




and he picked up his pace, dodging rocks and shrubs and navigating the gravel on the trail as best he could.

As he dashed through the rugged terrain, his breath ragged and his limbs screaming in protest, a symphony of voices vied for dominance in his mind. Eli, his father, Varrick, and Marcus each echoed within, their words a mix of encouragement and counsel. His gaze lifted to the mountain's peak, where an ancient clocktower stood defiantly against time, its clock ticking with military precision. Each tick resonated with the rhythm of his heart, a solemn reminder of life's fleeting nature. James defied the urge to synchronize with this relentless tempo. Every step, became a declaration of defiance against the shackles of everything that would keep him from a life fully lived.

James dodged between jagged rocks and leapt over gaping crevices, running from the Echoes, running from the clockwork precision of Meridia, running from the vivid death of Varrick that haunted him.



Eli's voice was the first to break through.

"You're running away," said Eli.

*You think?* responded James sarcastically, *I'm guessing you have a better idea?*

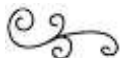
"Yes, I do, actually. Run toward instead," commented Eli with his calm manner.

*Right now, I don't really see the difference,* James responded with his mind, navigating a narrow a pathway, with a perilous cliff to his right.

He focused on the path ahead, trying to put distance between himself and the Echoes. Another voice pierced through the cacophony of his thoughts, calm and steady.

"Choices, James. If you're running away, you're still a prisoner or a prey to whatever is chasing you. Is that what you want for your life?" his father asked.

James slowed his run, with a deep frown forming on his brow.



“No,” he said out loud, “I am tired of feeling imprisoned. I am tired of being a slave to the whim of others.”

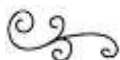
“Then stop running,” said Eli.

“I let myself be defined by my fears,” said Varrick, “and look where that got me. No, our fears should not define us, but rather how we choose to face them.”

James came to an abrupt halt. Before him, rising ominously from the shadow of a massive boulder, stood a colossal Echo. Its form was towering and menacing, with eyes that burned like twin embers, seething with a furious intensity. Wisps of smoke curled from its body, giving the impression of a creature that had just emerged from the depths of a fiery hell. The air around it seemed to crackle with the heat of its anger, creating an aura of malevolence that was almost palpable.

“I am your past and your future!” bellowed the Echo.

Overwhelmed for an instant, James stood frozen. Then, summoning every ounce of his resolve, he lifted the staff

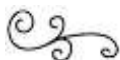


high overhead, defiance blazing in his eyes, matching the untamed rage of the Echo. A primal roar erupted from his core, a wild and untethered cry echoing from the depths of his spirit.

James' grip on the staff tightened as his resolve deepened. The staff responded and started to radiate light, slowly at first and then intensifying rapidly until in a moment, it glowed with a brilliance of the sun at its zenith, casting a blinding light that enveloped the Echoes and the landscape around him in a celestial inferno. Time stopped.

James panted heavily, his breaths slicing through the surrounding silence. He could feel his blood pulsing vigorously through his veins, his heart, thundering in his chest.

"Well done, my boy!" commended Marcus, his voice rich with approval. "The past holds power over you, only if you allow it. You are the man in the arena, never to be



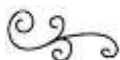
counted among the timid souls who simply accept the status quo. Now you are free.”

James awoke, drenched in a cold sweat. Dawn was still hours away and the castle lay nestled in tranquil silence, oblivious to the epic battle that had ensued and his glorious triumph. He poured himself a glass of water, soothing his parched throat and used a cloth to dab the sweat from his brow.

Reflecting on the dream, James recognized the true adversaries that had imprisoned him: time, regret, doubt, and fear—his personal Echoes. No more.

As he lay down, he heard his father’s voice.

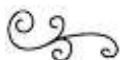
“One life, my boy. Live it.”



## Chapter 13

### The City

James awoke to the sun's first rays piercing the horizon, casting a golden glow across the room. Despite the harrowing events of the previous day and the haunting remnants of his nightmare, he felt an unexpected sense of renewal. James stretched, shaking off the remnants of sleep that clung to him like mist. After dressing swiftly, he wandered over to the window, eager to absorb the view of the city that had granted him a second chance at life.

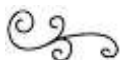


Outside, the city stirred gently to life, its rhythm and pace gradually building with the rising sun. Torches still flickered atop the city's imposing towers, where watchmen stood vigilant, their silhouettes etched against the dawn.

*Why would anyone want to attack this place?* James wondered silently, gazing out at the peaceful city. It seemed inconceivable that such tranquillity could ever be disrupted.

The sounds of the city's morning routines drifted up to his window, painting a vivid auditory landscape. In the distance, a baby's cry pierced the air, followed swiftly by the rush of a mother's footsteps to its side. The creaking protest of wagon wheels under the strain of heavy loads echoed through the streets, a testament to the day's commerce already underway.

Neighbours called out to each other. They leaned out from their windows, exchanging greetings and news.



James was captivated by the camaraderie, spellbound by the sights and sounds of the city.

He took a deep breath, inhaling the crisp morning air, rich with the scents of a city coming alive. It was a new day in a place that had shown him both the depths of despair and the heights of compassion.

Upon entering the kitchen, he was greeted by the lively hum of morning activity. The air was rich with the aroma of freshly baked bread and the comforting scent of brewing coffee. The kitchen staff were a blend of experienced hands and eager apprentices, moving in choreographed chaos of culinary preparation.

Noticing James, the cook offered a friendly gesture, lifting a cup in his direction.

“Coffee?” he asked with a welcoming tone.





"Oh yes!" James responded, his face lighting up. "It feels like an eternity since I've had any coffee!"

"I don't know how you survived," the cook replied with a playful wink. He tore off a generous chunk from a freshly baked loaf of bread, releasing a cloud of steam into the cool morning air.

"Here, take this," he said, handing it to James. "You'll find butter and jam over there," he added, gesturing towards another part of the kitchen. "Feel free to help yourself."

James offered a grateful smile and navigated his way across the bustling kitchen. The room was alive with a symphony of clattering utensils, sizzling pans, and harmonious chatter. Finding a spot along the wall, he leaned back, cradling the warm coffee cup in his hands, observing the lively interaction of the kitchen staff.



After finishing his coffee, James nodded his thanks to the cook and made his way out the door.

James meandered through the vibrant city streets. The air was thick with the rich aromas of fresh produce and spices. The sound of lively haggling mixed with the laughter of children playing nearby, captivated his heart and mind. He felt alive.

*I 'am' alive*, he thought. The weight of this seemingly obvious fact wasn't lost on him. Had Eli arrived a moment later, he would not be here, he would not be a witness to the marvels this city had to offer. Instead, he would be navigating the afterlife.

*Nothing quite like a near-death experience to help you appreciate what you have*, he thought.

At a quiet pottery stall, James paused to appreciate the array of intricately designed vases and bowls, each piece, telling a story, sharing a whisper of a borrowed



adventure. James picked up a vase. As he turned it slowly in his hands, the designs portrayed the adventures of a bard on horse-back, winning the heart of a beautiful woman who joined him on his wild and fantastical adventures. The potter, a cheerful man with weathered hands, noticed James' response to the vase and walked closer. His accent was heavy, suggesting that he wasn't from the city, but he shared the same physical attributes as the locals.

"For you," he said with a knowing smile. James graciously accepted the gift, feeling a connection to his own adventures and the untimely farewell of Varrick.

Further along, the scent of freshly baked croissants lured him to a bakery where golden pastries lined the shelves, their crusts crackling softly as they cooled. The baker, a robust old woman with a contagious laugh, waved him over. She broke a croissant down the middle with a couple of wild tugs, smeared it with honey, and



insisting he try “the best croissants in the kingdom.” As he bit into the soft, warm pastry, James felt a wave of comfort wash over him.

“My thanks,” he said, smiling warmly. The old lady with grey hair and sparkling eyes, unceremoniously closed the gap between them and hugged him. He wasn’t quite sure what to do, but this simple, kind gesture, welled up a surge of emotion that shook him where he stood.

As she finally stepped back, her hand playfully tapped his arm in a motherly gesture. “It will all be okay,” she assured him with a knowing look, as if she could see into the depths of his soul. He was still smiling sheepishly when she walked towards her other patrons, greeting them with the same passionate glee.

*Everyone here seems to be at peace,* thought James.

“They are,” said Eli out loud, stepping into stride next to James. James jumped slightly, not expecting Eli to materialize beside him. He had become accustomed to Eli’s voice in his head, but now, Eli was here in the flesh.



"How do you do that?" asked James.

Eli chuckled softly. "It's a nice trick, isn't it?" he commented, waving his hand dismissively.

"I see you've met Rebecca," Eli said, gesturing the croissant in James' hand. Recognition dawned on James.

"Yes. I think she might be right about it being the best croissant in the kingdom, it's amazing!", confirmed James. Eli started walking and James followed.

"To answer your question: these people have chosen not to lose themselves to the noises and distractions of the modern world. They chose simplicity and gratitude over greed. You'll find, people would live very differently if they simply took the time to appreciate the starry sky at night."

As they rounded a corner, James gasped. In front of them stood a breathtaking cathedral. Its sheer scale and grandeur were humbling to behold. The building loomed majestically, its towering facade a testament to both the



ambition and artistry of its creators and forcing a moment of silent reverie for whichever deity it served. The entrance was flanked by colossal columns, each one carved from stone that gleamed like polished marble in the sunlight. Intricate carvings adorned the columns, depicting scenes of battles between good and evil. The massive doors were works of art in themselves, ornately decorated with reliefs and engravings that caught the light in dazzling patterns.

Stepping inside, James was enveloped by an atmosphere that calmed the turbulent soul. The interior of the cathedral was bathed in a kaleidoscope of light filtering through stained glass windows, casting colourful hues across the stone floors and walls.

“Amazing,” remarked James.

“Is it?”, enquired Eli.



“Don’t you think so?” asked James, perplexed at Eli’s unexpected question.

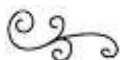
“The building is truly impressive, for sure. I just wonder; sometimes, it seems people get so preoccupied with the things they do ‘for the God they serve’, that they lose sight of the ‘actual God.’”

Eli shook his head, as if to imply it didn’t matter.

The ceiling soared high above, a vast expanse that defied gravity. It was a masterpiece of engineering and artistic vision, with a dome that rose to an astonishing height. The play of light and shadow across the curves of the dome left a celestial impression, a bridge between the earth and the heavens. Moved by the sanctity of his surroundings, James turned to Eli.

“Do you believe in God, Eli?” asked James.

Eli smiled. It was the kind of smile that spoke volumes without a word, a smile that transcended logic and reason.

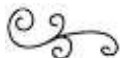


After a long moment, Eli turned to James.

“Without a doubt,” he affirmed, still holding his mysterious smile, but leaving no questions about the sincerity of his response.

“We’d better get going,” remarked Eli, “we do not want to keep the king and queen waiting.”

The two men turned and made their way towards the castle, talking as they strolled through the breathtaking streets of the city.



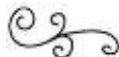


# Chapter 14

## Dinner

The sun was slowly sinking below the city walls, casting the brickwork in a golden outline. In the distance, the mountains were falling into shadow, their contours softening in the early greys of dusk that would soon envelop the city.

James and Eli had meandered through the city towards the castle, where they were to dine with the king and queen. “It’s not often that ‘outsiders’ have this honour,” said Eli, his voice imbued with a hint of mystery.



“Any suggestions?” asked James, feeling slightly out of his depth. “I don’t frequent the presence of royalty.”

“Just be yourself. Always just be yourself,” said Eli. As always, his every sentence held more meaning than the mere words conveyed.

“I’ve been meaning to ask. What or who are you to these people?” prodded James, his curiosity piqued.

“Oh, there’s no simple answer to that question,” Eli replied with a mysterious smile. “Let’s just say they...see the world through different eyes.”

“I heard one of them whisper the word, ‘Creator’. I know this might sound strange, but is the garden one of your ‘tricks’?” asked James, his voice tinged with awe.

Eli walked on in silent contemplation for a moment, then said, while still looking straight ahead, “You can say I had a hand in it.” He turned to James. “Some things are



better accepted than understood. What am I to you?" asked Eli.

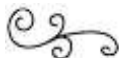
James pondered this. Eli didn't fit into any mould. Even as they walked through the city, the people would bow to him as they passed, as if they held him in the highest regard, yet, reflecting on their time together at the cottage, it was more straightforward, more grounded.

"I suppose the best description is a 'peculiar friend'", replied James, feeling a slight warmth in his cheeks.

Eli broke out in childish laughter. "I'll have to add that to the list," he chuckled, "'Peculiar friend'," he repeated, and that seemed to close the topic.

The king and queen were dressed plainly, wearing the same silver garments as most of the townsfolk.

"Welcome," said the queen, her voice sounding like a melody, harmonizing effortlessly with the tranquil



surroundings. It was clear to James that the royal pair had already indulged in their own private festivity and that he and Eli were seamlessly joining in, a prospect James found far more appealing than any stiff, formal affair.

“Wine?” asked the king, extending a goblet to Eli and James even as he posed the question.

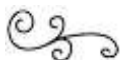
The table had been prepared in the garden, which offered a breathtaking view of the city below. James was still catching his breath slightly from the long flight of stairs, given that the castle was perched atop a hill, with the city sprawling on all sides and framed by the majestic grey mountains. The air was fragrant with the scent of blooming flowers, and the torches being lit throughout the city cast the scenery in a spellbinding light. The queen gestured towards a secluded area in the garden that radiated a mysterious glow. Even to James’ trained eye, the nature of this allure was elusive,



as if a subtle draft of magic infused the air, creating a sense of enchantment.

As the men arrived, the queen stepped aside, her gesture revealing a figure shrouded in elegance and mystery. “The most precious flower in my garden,” she announced with a tone of pride and affection.

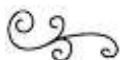
In front of her stood a young woman, whose slender form and graceful poise suggested she was in her mid-twenties, by James’s estimation. She was a vision of ethereal beauty. Her blonde hair cascaded like a waterfall of golden sunlight, reaching beyond her shoulders in delicate waves. Her eyes, a deep blue, mirrored the vast expanse of the ocean, holding within them a depth and serenity that seemed to capture the very essence of the sea.



In her hands, she cradled a flower, the likes of which James had never encountered. The petals, arrayed in a gentle spectrum of pastel hues, unfolded gracefully, revealing delicate layers that shimmered subtly in the evening light. The heart of the flower glowed with a tender radiance, emitting a soft, entrancing fragrance that seemed to weave through the air, enveloping James in a sense of wonder and awe.

“She’s beautiful,” James stuttered, his words escaping in a breath of awe. As he uttered them, he realized his blunder. The air grew thick with his embarrassment. In a desperate attempt to recover, he quickly corrected himself, “I mean ‘it’. ‘It’s’ beautiful,” he repeated, his voice faltering slightly.

Eli, sensing James' discomfort, playfully slapped him on the back, causing both of their wine goblets to teeter



dangerously. “She is, my friend, and so is the flower,” Eli said, his voice rich with amusement.

The king and queen joined Eli in a chorus of laughter, a sound both light and warm. James, meanwhile, stood rooted to the spot, his face flushed with a mix of embarrassment and relief.

“This is my daughter, Seraphina,” introduce the queen, “and the flower is called ‘Auroraphylla Lumina’. It is said to capture the beauty of dawn.”

Seraphina stepped forward to present the flower to James. As he extended his hands to accept it, his fingers grazed hers in the exchange. The contact sent a pulse of energy through every fibre of his body.

As their hands were about to part, James found himself caught in Seraphina’s gaze...



"James? James!" Eli's voice snapped him back to reality.

He turned, slightly disoriented, to find Eli and the royal couple amused by his spellbound reaction. His face flushed with a mix of embarrassment and awe.

*Pull yourself together*, James reprimanded himself.

"Perhaps we should get you off your feet, yes?" the queen jested with a light-hearted smile, gently steering them towards the dining area.

James simply nodded, handing the flower to an aide who appeared at his side.

"So tell me James, how is it that you find yourself in our world?" asked the king, resting his knife and fork on the sides of his plate.

James took a deep breath, feeling the weight of his words settle in the air. He fought the urge to make eye contact with Seraphina, fearing he might lose his train of thought in her gaze.

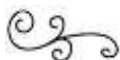




“I come from a place called Meridia,” he began, his voice steady. “It’s a modern city, filled with electricity, cars, and towering skyscrapers. Quite unlike this world.” He gestured to the serene surroundings.

“For a while now, it hasn’t felt like home. Clocks; the whole city is full of them. We wear them on our wrists and call them ‘wristwatches’ because we never stop watching them. We are their slaves, and they are our gods. Even as we create new things, we ensure they too, have clocks, so that we never miss a beat or a deadline. Meridia used to be a city and I was a citizen. Now it’s a cage and I am the prisoner.”

He paused, allowing his words to linger with his audience. The king and queen listened intently, their expressions a mix of curiosity and empathy.



“Our society has rules, some of them explicit, some of them not, but everyone knows that you’re expected to behave in a certain way, whether the rules are written or not. At some point, every second that passed on my watch, became a stark reminder of time lost, a memento of a life I did not choose and a life I was not living. Not really. Here, things seem...timeless. Where I’m from, time moves consistently and rapidly.”

He let his mind wander back to his father, sifting through memories that now seemed too few and too fleeting, cut short and ripped away in a moment.

He glanced up at Seraphina, “We’re all alive, but to live - truly live – that is the rarest thing in the world.”

She smiled. It was a bright sun in a dark universe, breath to a drowning man and a blanket against the cold chills of his soul.

He spoke of his time with Marcus and Eli, of how he had forgotten the simple pleasure of fishing.



"Oh," he added, a tinge of embarrassment colouring his tone, "I hope you don't mind. I may have made quite a dent in your wine collection."

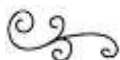
Eli's laughter broke the momentary solemnity. "Wine is for drinking as life is for living."

"And Varrick?" asked the queen gently.

The atmosphere around them shifted perceptibly, a chill sweeping through the air as if in response to the question. The vibrant lights of the city below seemed to fade, shrouded by an unexpected mist that rose like a ghostly veil, dimming their glow.

"For all that he may have done, I still counted him a friend. I only knew him for a couple of hours, really, but sometimes, for reasons I've never been able to explain, people just 'click'," James mused.

"Hmm," grunted the king, "I know what you mean," sharing a knowing look with Seraphina. James noticed



her eyes on him again, and he couldn't help but blush under her gaze.

“We are not only slaves to time, James, but also our passions,” said the king, “given a bad day and a good reason...”

He let the thought go unfinished. James knew what he meant.

He glanced at Seraphina again. She had hardly spoken all night and yet, he sensed that he, like Varrick, would go to the ends of the world for her.

“In some way,” James reminisced, “we are all like Varrick; caught between what we are and what we desire, willing to do the most terrible things – and even rationalising them – just to feel loved.”

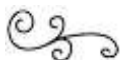
“Ah, love,” said Eli. His voice tinged with a rare determination as he gazed into the candle's flame, “it is at the root of the greatest good and the greatest evil the world has ever seen.”



Eli's gaze lingered on the king for a moment before he finally spoke. "It's getting late," he said, his voice tinged with a subtle hint of urgency.

The king seemed to awaken from a contemplative trance, nodding slowly as if being reminded of an unspoken agreement. "Yes," he agreed, his voice carrying a weight of reluctant acceptance. "James," he then said, shifting his focus to the younger man, "I wish circumstances were different. This world... it has its own rules, and unfortunately, outsiders cannot remain here indefinitely. Your stay has already stretched the boundaries of what is feasible."

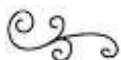
James felt a sudden constriction in his throat, an emotional response to the king's words. Deep down, he had always known that his time in this enchanting world was limited, but now, even more so after meeting Seraphina, he had hoped for more time.



There it was again. Time.

"Tomorrow, we will have breakfast together one last time," the king continued, his tone gentle yet firm, "After that, Seraphina will guide you to your gateway. Your own world awaits."

James turned towards Seraphina, who smiled and nodded.



# 14

## Homeward

Seraphina's laughter was light and infectious.

"No, James, you place this foot here and that hand there. Really, how can a man of your age have never ridden a horse before!" She reached over, her touch gentle yet assured, guiding his hand to grip the saddle correctly.

In the brief time they had spent together since breakfast, James felt an undeniable connection flare up between them. He was already stricken with her last



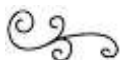
night, but now, he could think of nothing else. Their touch lingered a moment too long, charged with an unspoken longing.

"Okay, okay," Eli's voice interrupted the moment as he rounded the corner, his tone laced with amusement. "If you two keep this up, James will never get home." With a helping hand, he assisted James onto the horse.

The horses were creatures of beauty, their coats as dark as the night sky, glistening in the sun with a restless energy. They stamped the ground with anticipation.

"It's normally a two-day ride," Eli remarked, his eyes darting playfully between James and Saraphina, "but given your...disposition, I expect it might take a little longer."

Seraphina mounted her horse with an effortless grace that made James feel all the more clumsy. "That's how



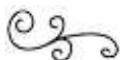


it's done," she said with a playful air, her eyes twinkling with mirth.

James turned to Eli, the weight of parting making his words heavy. "Thank you. For everything," he said, his voice tinged with admiration and awe. "I'll miss this place, and your...tricks."

Eli's smile carried its usual mystery. "We'll meet again, James. Until then," he glanced between James and Seraphina, his smile widening knowingly, "make good decisions!"

James was swiftly learning that horseback riding was an art form, one that Seraphina had mastered with effortless grace. She seemed to move with her horse in a seamless fusion of motion and intent. In contrast, James felt clumsy and disjointed, his movements out of



sync with the rhythmic gait of his steed. By the time they paused by the river, his muscles ached in protest.

Their conversation during the ride had rapidly deepened, tearing through layers of trivialities to arrive at the inevitable topic of affection. “No, I can’t say I have,” Seraphina admitted softly when James inquired if she had ever been in love. “And you?”

James’s response came with a self-deprecating smile. “No, I’ve never had the time.” He quickly corrected himself, “Old habits... What I meant to say is, I’ve never made it a priority.”

Seraphina blushed. “Are all outworlders so forward?” she teased.

“Me? Forward?” James playfully responded. He settled on the grass beside her, close enough to feel the warmth emanating from her, ostensibly watching the

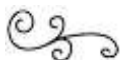


horses as they quenched their thirst at the river. He wasn't really concerned with horses, or clocks, or gateways or rules right now. All his might was directed towards keeping his heartbeat from pounding louder than a horse at full canter.

"I wish..." he began, but Seraphina swiftly leaned closer and placed a finger over his lips, silencing him. "Don't," she whispered, "don't say it."

The touch of her hand on his lips was electrifying, sending James into an emotional freefall, with the wind rushing in his ears, his heart beating violently and his mind raging against the inevitable doom that awaited him.

He impulsively pulled her closer, but a sudden movement caught his eye. He couldn't explain it, but the movement felt out of place and just wrong. He looked at Seraphina, who had leaned in, allowing her defences to crumble. She waited, as did he, for a fleeting second



that felt like an eternity. Everything in him wanted to embrace her, be with her, but he couldn't shake the sudden anxiety that besieged him.

"Something's wrong," he whispered, frozen still.

She opened her eyes, confusion and disappointment showing across her face.

"Why do you say that?" she enquired with a whisper.

"I don't know. Something moved, but there's nothing there. It was like..."

"...a tear," she said, her confusion morphing into anxiety.

"Yes," said James, "like the sky was torn, only for a moment and I could see movement out of place and then it was gone."

Seraphina leapt to her feet, her panic palpable. "We need to go. Now!" she urged.

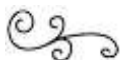


James scrambled after her, his mind reeling with questions. “What’s happening?” he asked as they mounted their horses.

“It’s too soon!” she exclaimed, her voice laden with dread. “What is?” James pressed, but Seraphina spurred her horse into a gallop.

As they raced across the field, the thunderous hoofbeats and the wind’s roar rendered any further conversation futile. James followed blindly, driven by a sense of imminent danger.

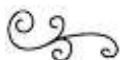
A sinister crack resounded behind them, emanating from the city. James glimpsed over his shoulder to see a black tear in the sky, through which dark shapes swarmed menacingly. Fear gripped him as he urged his horse to keep pace with Seraphina, fleeing the unknown terror that loomed behind them.



The sudden urgency of their escape and Seraphina's relentless riding without pause, transformed their journey into a desperate race against time. Branches whipped at them as they tore through the forest, the horses labouring under their intense urgency.

James lost track of time. The pounding of hooves, heavy breaths of the horses, his own heart racing with fear and confusion—all merged into a dissonant rhythm that urged him forward.

Ahead lay a familiar glade, tranquil and mysterious, where James first awakened in this world. Now, it marked the threshold of his departure, reached far sooner than he had anticipated. They brought their mounts to an abrupt halt right in front of the unmistakable gateway back to James' world. As they dismounted, Seraphina reached for her sword, secured at her saddle.



“What’s going on?” he finally asked in a frenzied panic, rushing towards her. He pulled her towards him, embracing her. She was shaking with palpable fear.

“War, James” she muttered, her voice trembling, “There are rules, even in realms like ours. You’ve been here too long. Your presence has caused a ripple in the worlds between worlds, and it’s awoken a slumbering giant. You need to go.”

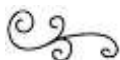
“I can help!” objected James.

“Yes, you can, by going back where you belong.”

Seraphina was crying, torn in shreds between her heart and her mind.

James didn’t know what to do or say, feeling completely overwhelmed.

“We have Eli, so it will be okay, but you need to go now!”



In a fleeting act of defiance against the chaos, James drew Seraphina closer, their lips meeting in a stolen kiss, a brief respite against the ensuing chaos.

And then the air shattered with an ominous crack. The glade was invaded by a dark, swirling madness. Seraphina's scream pierced the air as she thrust James through the gateway, turning to face the encroaching darkness.

As James tumbled through the vortex, the last image etched in his mind was of Seraphina, sword in hand, facing the swarm of dark creatures emerging from the tear in the sky.

*I will find you!* he vowed as the darkness engulfed him.

