

*The Light That Was Holy*

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A star burst with light over the black pre-dawn sky, bringing color and daylight across the continent. Bewildered witnesses woke their families to show them, but night had returned as quickly as it left. All that remained was the star, shining slightly brighter than the others around it. And there it stayed, continuing to shine as the other stars made way for the pale blue morning sky.

A worshipper named Godrin walked the long trail that led up through the pines. He was once a devoted member of the cult that lived in the shrine his ancestors built at the top of a seaside cliff, selected for its unequaled view of their holy object. The star made the end of a sword in the constellation, the focal point of the cult's iconography and worship. It had captured their forefathers' adoration for generations even though they were pagans, unaware that the constellation's figure was in fact the same god as the Empire's, something that was so obvious now.

Godrin stopped to regain his breath. The walk wasn't any easier at his age. He continued on, wondering if he was the only one making the trip, the only one who remembered, the only one who recognized this sign.

He neared the top of the path. Instead of an empty shrine, he turned around the last thicket of pines to find a man drawing at an easel with an entourage around him, watching his hand as he drew. The man noticed Godrin's arrival behind him and turned and raised his arms in a warm gesture Godrin did not return. He introduced himself as Dairn Alton and waited with his followers for the old man to react to the name. He did not. "Cartographer, cataloguer of sights and tales," Dairn added, waiting. Godrin did not react to this either. "You must know my writings. I've been through every port of trade on this continent. I've dined with the royal families, when I'm at liberty to accept their

invitations. Just last year I returned from mapping the islands of Edur after five months at sea.”

“I bet you saw the dragons there too,” Godrin said.

“The locals described them to me in great detail. They dive down in the waters and eat entire schools of fish at once.”

“And now you’re here to catalogue the tale of the star worshippers.”

“Yes,” Dairn said. He saw the disapproval in Godrin’s face and softened his tone. “I set sail for here as soon as I saw the star that night. This is an important time in history. *Your* history.” Dairn’s assumption about his past was correct, but Godrin hid his reaction. Godrin looked over at the easel and its charcoal drawing of the shrine—the man had captured it. The low open walls, the lookout tower, the view of the shore beyond.

Godrin walked on past the group to the shrine’s small courtyard while Dairn followed behind at a respectful distance. The floor and inner walls of the courtyard were carved with straight lines all converging to a central point. The room was a map of the night sky, with the holy star at the center of it all, its beams of light stretching outwards. Every star in the wall was marked with a small pocket to place a candle, many still holding the stubs of wicks and melted wax, blackened with age.

“It must have looked beautiful at night,” Dairn said from the archway.

Godrin ran his hand along the etches leading across the wall. “It does.” Behind the converging lines there was a worn relief of the constellation’s figure holding out its sword, its features softened from the years of wind and rain. “The sword is a symbol,” Godrin said. “Not for power or domination. It’s a stalk, an outreach. Piercing the barrier. If you’re writing about it you should include that much at least.”

Godrin kept distance from Dairn and his acolytes until early morning the next day, when he went to Dairn’s tent to wake him and lead him to the cliff overseeing the sea below. The long grass grew up to the cliff’s edge before dropping down to a steep gray

rocky wall. At this height, the ocean waves were robbed of their strength, no more than three arcs of white foam depositing onto the shore in a steady cycle, far below. Godrin's gaze moved up the sea to the horizon, and there it was: the star. Godrin whispered so softly Dairn wasn't sure it was meant for him to hear. "In Spring it's only just visible. It starts in the early early morning. But here it comes now. Charging its sword in with the dawn." Dairn looked over the old worshipper—he showed no morning grogginess, and must have been awake for hours before. Dairn looked back to the star, trying to see what the old man saw in it. It was a star, lasting much longer into sunrise than the others, but it was still only a star. Dairn noticed something and spoke. "It's dimming."

"From the initial burst of light? Yes."

"No, I mean, even from yesterday morning."

"What?" the old man asked, his pupils shaking as he squinted at the star.

"No it's...probably nothing," Dairn said. "I met astronomers that say the light takes time to reach us, like the sound of thunder from a lightning strike or a cannon blast from a far hill. If it's fading now, this all might have actually happened...I don't know."

"Is that what they say in Edur?" Godrin asked, a fire entering his voice. Dairn was caught off-guard.

"No, I—"

"I see it up there, don't you?" Godrin asked, finger pointed defiantly.

As the day progressed the star tilted back under the horizon and Godrin and Dairn split ways. At noon the cataloguer and his followers welcomed three more men arriving from the village, worshippers like Godrin and not many years younger. Godrin didn't recognize nor wish to speak to them, but the wind carried their conversations to him in fragments anyway. Phrases like "before it's gone," "to thank it," "to celebrate it being here," "a lifetime," "beauty." They spoke in past tense about life at the shrine and the people who used to visit. They had accepted it, Godrin realized. For them the star was already dead.

But what would the constellation be without its endpoint? An empty hilt raised upwards. An extended hand, grabbing at nothing.

Godrin walked a distance off from the shrine, holding himself against the trunks of the pines when the ground sloped and the brush thickened. There was a meadow, somewhere just a little further. He used to lie in it to meditate on his life's questions, a need he had not outgrown. He eased himself down onto the ground, making trouble for himself later, he knew, but he needed it now. Why did the star call out to him—the world—like it did, just to die afterwards? The star's whole existence up to that point, all a prelude to that short moment of beauty? It exchanged its life for a shell of light to grow out to the farthest reaches of the heavens, so all the cosmos could know it ever existed. That it had been there for it. That the cosmos was capable of creating and housing something so perfect.

He slept.

Godrin emerged back from the woods before nightfall. Dairn came up to him alone. "We've finished taking our drawings and rubbings. We're packing our things to leave at dawn tomorrow. The other worshippers were helpful to us, but I don't think they lived around this like you did. If there was anything else you wanted to tell us, we will write it."

"There is nothing. Good night, Alton." *I pray it means something to someone out there*, Godrin thought. He turned to his side away from the man.

That night Godrin dreamt he was on the star. The surface was ethereal, a suggestion of itself. He felt a weight lifted from his bones and joints. He moved his feet. The sky was black but the ground was white like a field of snow on a bright day. The horizon was small and round and felt closer than it did on Earth. A figure appeared before him. Its features were obscured by flowing white cloth and an aura of soft pulsing light.

The figure reached to its side and extended a long white blade towards Godrin, flashing bright colors like mother of pearl as it turned. The end of the blade began to shift and change form, widening to make a path that reached to the ground before Godrin's feet. The figure beckoned warmly. It had a perseverance and kindness to it Godrin recognized from his whole life. Godrin made his first step onto the path, then his second. His legs carried him forward with an ease he hadn't known for years. He quickened his pace and smiled.