

BEARER OF THE TRUE SIGHT

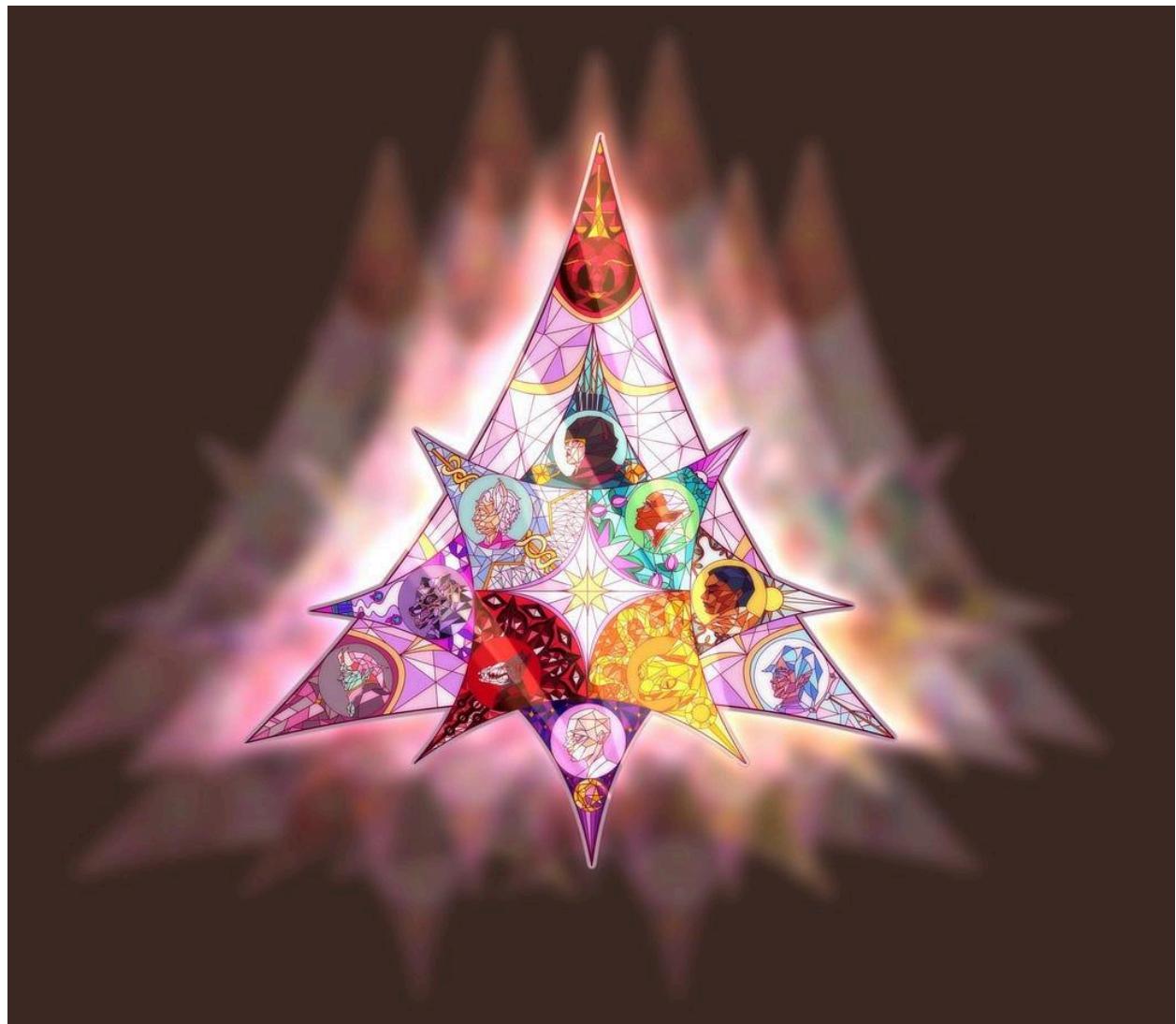
An acolyte's journey in the Ashen Silence

R. Val

To my dearest friend, Dan. I have always been playing catch up to you, but there is no one's shadow I'd rather be in.

“Sorrow looks back, Worry looks around, Faith looks up”
— Ralph Waldo Emerson

Content Warning: Heavy Religious Content, Implied Delusional Mania, Violence and Injury Gore, Drug Use, Heavy Body Modification, Horror



The 11-pointed Divine Star by Moss Sugarmountains

“The gods love the predator as much as the prey.”

The Reverend Father had said that once, in a sermon or a scripture study, Mira couldn't remember. At the time it had seemed another of his many musings. The Father said so many things after all. Now, as the meaning of it grew clearer, she appreciated his wisdom once again.

They found Mira at a trading post just outside of the Gryphon's Head Peninsula. She had stopped to grab some extra rations and a new space heater. She knew right away they were trouble. She paid for her things, grabbed what she could, and when the shots started, she started running.

She didn't make herself an easy target. She ran for a day straight, pursued by them. Two of them, in dark cloaks that concealed their forms. One was short, one was tall. On the second day, they almost caught her. She lost them long enough to sleep, but soon they were back on her trail. She thought for a second they might try to talk to her. The burning heat of a bullet in her right side dissuaded this illusion.

She needed to get away. Some petrified trees stood to her left, too sparse for cover. She rounded a bend. A ditch was coming up on her right. She checked behind her, but no one yet. She threw herself down. The landing was rough and

the hideous pain from the wound in her shoulder almost made her cry out. It took all her discipline to bite her tongue and keep quiet. She tumbled and ashy mud covered her face wrappings and blotted out her vision. Desperately, she crawled her weakened self underneath a lip of the road above that formed a slight overhang from where she lay.

Mira stayed low and repeated silent prayers to herself. She ran her fingers along an amulet of the 11-pointed star of the Divine Council. With her other arm, she clutched her bag jealousy toward her breast like a mother protecting her child. Ichor from her wound seeped into her protective gear and onto the ground below her. Heavy boots beat against the dirt road above her. Voices muffled by rebreathers exclaimed in frustration that their quarry had eluded them. She put her mouth over her own respirator and tried to hold her breath. She couldn't get caught. She was too close to her goal, at long last the end of her journey.

They passed by. She stayed there a while longer. When she was sure the predators had lost their scent, she wriggled herself out from under the overhang and climbed back onto the road. She fell to her knees, having grown lightheaded. How much blood had she lost? The thought flitted from her mind. She stood with a wobble and looked up. The sky above was the color and texture of slate stone. A reminder from the Divine Council that the people of Vian had grown so distant from their light.

She stopped to examine her injury. The bullet had torn straight through. Her understanding of mortal anatomy was strong enough to know it must have barely missed an artery. With some rough bandaging, she managed to stop the worst of it. The gods were good and she would live long enough to get to her destination. However, she needed care quickly, lest it be a martyr's journey.

Next, she opened her bag and checked on her treasure. It was a cylindrical canister sealed by cryogenic technologies. A view window showed the contents within, two pristine eyes. A small indicator light flashed green, indicating it was safe but out of ideal conditions. Even the cold of the wasteland she wandered in was not enough for this frozen container. This was everything she had spent the last year trying to find. She had already sent word to her people that she was returning victorious.

She put it back carefully and slung her bag over her good shoulder. The road branched off to a side trail, which she took to avoid running into her pursuers again. They would try to take her prize from her, but she would not let them. She would not let anyone touch what she had been trusted with.

Fatigue scraped against a wall of willpower in Mira's mind. She had carried on foot for weeks. When the stench of sulfuric salt filtered through her rebreather, she knew that at long last she was close.

Her faith was rewarded when she crested the next hill. The downslope ran into the Grey Sea. In the center of view, perched on an island in the water, was a city whose purple shields shined like amethysts. New Bekton. Home.

Her hymns turned to praise and she jumped for joy before the pain in her wound sobered her demeanor. She pressed on, tripping as she navigated the side road's sharp decline.

By the time she got to the city's gates, she had grown faint. Her bandages had soaked through, staining her mottled cloth overwraps to a muted scarlet. Her willpower carried her there, but dizziness overtook her. She limped into line and kept jabbing her leg to stay awake. No one paid her any mind. Desperate situations at the city's entrance were no strange occurrence.

She wondered if they would just watch as she bled out. No. She couldn't. She was so close. Maybe someone from the enclave could come meet her. Would they even know where she is? How could she reach them? The Divines had protected her journey up to this point. They just needed to keep their hands over her for a little longer.

She got to the front of the line, and a customs agent in cobalt blue sealed armor asked for her identification, business, and everything else they did in the process.

She took her bag off her unwounded shoulder and searched for an ID. When she handed it over, she realized she had smudged it in blood. The customs officer barely noticed. He scrawled some information down on a clipboard. She managed to get out that she was returning home with a delivery. When asked what she was carrying, she remembered the Father's warning to identify it as familial relics.

Of course, he demanded a fee. There were dark spots in her vision as if she was viewing the world through a cardboard tube. She got the money out of her bag's wallet pouch and handed it over. The officer wiped off the scarlet fluid that covered it. Through the haze, she thought she saw him pocket it directly.

He waved her on, and she moved forward as best she could. Her breathing was shallow and fast. She made it inside the opened gate, though not much further. She slumped against a divider near customs, but an officer pushed her back with the butt of a rifle. She hardly even registered the blow. She landed on her back, looking up at the latticed hexagonal city shield that wrapped the sky.

A wry smirk crept across her masked lips. The Council had such a strange sense of humor. To get so close to the end of her journey to die just before its completion.

As her consciousness faded, the words of the Reverend Father came to her again.

“The Council’s Will is not to be comprehended, merely obeyed.”

Through blurred vision, she saw a figure above her, saying something to her.

They shook her, and said again, “Hey, stay with me!”

The world slipped away.

“*My child, why do you hide your face from me?*” spoke the White Rat.

The pickpocket bent low. “I am unworthy in your presence, my lady. Mortals shall not gaze upon the Divine unprepared.”

“*Arise, child Dralia. When we formed you in the heavens we delighted in you. We sang a song of our love for you. Do not hide from us now. Do not deprive us our creation.*”

The Ascension of St. Dralia 2:5–9

Mira did not wake up in the hallowed halls of Atharas, as she had expected to. If this was the afterlife it was not the one she had been promised. Someone was shaking her again. A small middle-aged man with long, rounded ears, and violet eyes with no pupils. An elek, certainly. He wore wasteland gear like hers, but with rounded spectacles and a patch on his shoulder that said Medic, "Hey hey, now. Stay awake, lass. Don't go passing out on me again!" His accent was thick, Northlandic.

She looked down, her jacket and robes had been undone, and pulled down around her shoulder. He had moved her against what appeared to be some kind of hedge. She was too dazed to feel anything, this wasn't happening to her. It was happening to someone else who looked just like her, sitting just below her. The small man put a rag soaked in alcohol on her wound and pressed hard. It burned and sent a shooting pain through her arm, but she was in no state to react.

She realized how thirsty she was. How long had it been since she'd had a drink? "Wa- wa- wat-" She stammered, too weak to speak.

He looked up at her, "What's that, girlie?"

She pointed her left index finger at a flask on his hip. “Wat-er” with an additional emphasis on the -er.

He looked at his flask, “Aye, I can do that.” Holding the wound tight with the hand that had the rag, he undid the flask with his teeth and put some to her mouth. She opened wide like a baby bird, greedily lapping up the liquid.

“Okay, I’m going to apply the healing potion now. Have you had a Yender’s Formula treatment before?” He set the flask down and rummaged through his bag.

“Yes...” This was true but for much more minor injuries. She’d never been hurt this badly.

“The wound is deep and on both sides. This is going to hurt, lass.”

She nodded. It didn’t matter to her.

He took off the rag and uncorked a vial of red liquid. He poured some onto the exit wound and massaged it into the exposed flesh. This time she cried out. The pain snapped her awake and the reality of her situation set in. She started

panicking. “Oh gods, oh gods, oh gods. Save me!” She begged the heavens and the man before her.

“I’m doing my best. Almost there.” He pulled her forward and began to apply the healing Yender’s Formula to the entrance wound. Same pain, same cry out, same pleading to be spared.

When it was done, he reapplied bandages and returned her robes to their normal order. He set her gently against the shrubbery and knelt there with her for some time.

Certain the worst had passed, he grabbed another vial from his bag. This one was solid metal and had the icon of several drops of liquid on it. “Drink this, you lost a lot of your lifeblood.”

Mira took the vial and downed it, though she nearly wretched it up the second after. It had the aroma and flavor of spoiled licorice. Could licorice even spoil? She reached for the flask and downed more water. Her arms fell to her sides and she let out a long sigh. She cried, and the medic looked away to give her some dignity.

When she was done, he took back the vial and flask. “That second potion should help your body regenerate blood more quickly. Take it easy, though. You took a licking.”

Mira nodded, and clarity of thought returned to her. “I understand. Thank you for your care, good doctor.”

“Vili’Mael or Doctor Vili works.”

She looked around. “Mira... May I ask where my things are?”

He slid her backpack from behind him. “Right here. I grabbed it in the ruckus.”

Mira wrinkled her brow slightly, “Did you... open my bag?”

The doctor put up a hand, “No no, not my business. I’m just here to make sure you stay alive.”

She gave a slight smile, “The Council reward the servant’s heart, Writ of Duty 12:5”

He gave her a look, then brushed off whatever was on his mind. “The Divines says a lot of things– or they did, anyway. Do you think you can stand up?”

The pain shooting across her body had settled into a stiff, dull ache in her shoulder. “I... Didn’t think I was going to make it.”

“I won’t mince words, Mira. You almost didn’t.” He pointed to her bandaged right side. “The healing potions did their work, but that wound went untreated for too long. It’s going to be hard to move and it’s almost definitely going to scar.”

Mira nodded, then reached for her bag. It took her a few seconds before she found what she was looking for. She pulled out the cryogenic canister and rotated it in her hands. The green light on the side of the top confirmed the eyes were safe. She sighed in relief and said a brief prayer to The Ascended.

Vili folded his arms and looked at the canister, “Everything okay?”

“Yes... yes, thank you. I was worried my pilgrimage had been for naught.”

“Nah lass, you seem to be in order.”

She turned to him and continued rummaging through the pockets of the bag. She produced a handful of crystal coins. “I’m afraid I don’t have much with which to pay you.”

The doctor shook his head, “Not needed, miss. I didn’t do it for pay. My clinic does fine as is.”

Mira put the coins in his palm, “Let no debt linger, Writ of Order 23:7.” Vili smiled back. Then she put something else in the other hand. A simple beige tract with bold red font ‘WHEN THE COUNCIL RETURNS, WILL YOU HEAR THEIR VOICE?’ She looked into his oversized eyes and grinned, “The gods smile upon you, Vili of the Great House Mael.”

Vili didn’t react to this, beyond setting the coins and the tract down in his bag. He stopped and regarded her. “Are you a priest, ma’am?”

Her freckled cheeks blushed and she shook her head. “An acolyte. I serve the flock of Father Cyran.”

“Haven’t heard of him.”

“We keep to ourselves. The righteous are honed by the fires of adversity, Writ of Service 3:29. We have been faced with many trials and enemies.”

“Aye, well they’re well off with an acolyte like you.” Mira beamed at this. He continued, “Is that why you don’t have any augs? You an RP?”

She forgot how such a plain appearance made her stand out in the city. She twirled a strand of auburn hair on her finger. “No, the Righteous Perfect serve a noble cause, but we believe their complete rejection of the modern sciences to be misguided.”

“And the folks who shot you? They belong to some religious sect too?”

Mira frowned, “I believe so, but they have lost the mandate of the Divines. They serve their worldly interests now.”

“Will they chase you? Don’t want all my work to be for nothing.” Vili started to let out a grim chuckle but caught himself.

Mira paid no mind, “With luck and grace, I have lost them. I will be careful on my return to my kindred.” She looked out at the mass of people coming to and from

the gate. Then she looked toward the direction she was headed, “I need to get back to my flock.”

Vili nodded. “Aye, let me show you the way. I don’t know how well you know West-Gate, I can point you to some food, you must be famished.”

The giants of shadow danced a ring around Dralia. Their voices were as of another world, and so was their language.

They sang and though she did not speak their tongue, she knew what they said.

“Rise, O’ rise you of the Ascended’s favor. Bring unto her the ears of the people. They have grown cold and weary away from the light of their Beloved.”

The Ascension of St. Dralia 4:8–12

A couple of hours later, Mira was sipping a hot drink outside of a Quikbru in West-Gate. It was blue, foamy, and tasted like spiced berries. One might call it an unseasonable brew for the early Spring, but her journey in the cold sunless wastelands gave her an appreciation for the warmth on her palms. She huddled into a ball next to a low wall along the sidewalk, still regaining her strength. Her bag was right next to her and she eyed anyone who dared to get close. Most people steered clear of her warning glare. Oxen without masters.

Before her, the rising skyline of New Bekton ascended layer by layer. Lowtown, the largest and poorest; Midtown, populated by corporate suits and wide-eyed academics; and Uptown, where the city's most powerful elites resided. These sectors were built on top of each other in ring-shaped platforms that culminated in the grandness of the titanic central spire that shot past the cloudline and into space. Above the city and the base of the tower, a dome of purple hexagonal shields glittered. It stretched an entire island, protected from the harshness of the world the gods had abandoned.

Of course, the gods had not truly abandoned Vian. Their grace showed in the diligence of the persistent faithful. Their ingenuity was present in the work of the engineers and architects of this strange new life. So many hearts had strayed from the righteous path the Council laid out for all. They called these thousand-long years The Silence, but to Mira, the gods' voice could not be louder.

She mouthed a verse to herself, “In all things, trust the Will of The Council.”

Father Cyran was expecting her. There was work to be done. She stood up, slung her backpack over her good shoulder, and threw her cup away.

She briefly stopped to ask for directions from a construction worker with four arms. He was pleasant enough, though he mumbled when he talked. She wrote the important steps on her hand, thanked him, and handed him the same tract she gave to the doctor earlier. The worker obliged, though she caught him ditching it in a bin as she walked away. She wasn’t hurt, not every soul was within her power to save.

It was hard to believe she was one of the godless, once. Her world had been transformed when the Reverend Father and his flock came into her life. Mira had never lacked faith, per se. She grew up going to church with her parents, was confirmed at the right age, and all the other traits one associated with a life of religion.

It was just that, though, religion. Structure and practice hollow of belief. She was in university for mechanics when one of the robed Cyranites handed her a beige tract with red lettering, much like the ones she handed out now. She almost threw it out, but it had been a hard semester. Her mother was sick, and she had just been going through a particularly bad breakup. Something, which she now knew to be the Will of the Council, moved her to attend a meeting.

The service she attended was unlike anything she had known from a childhood of sitting in pews in stuffy churches. There were colored lights, dancing, and joy. She had never seen such passion in the hearts of the faithful. She asked a boy with dusty hair and a cybernetic eye why everyone was so happy, and he simply told her “The dominion of the Divine is at hand.”

When Father Cyran stood to speak, she wasn’t sure what to think. His augmentation had already been extensive, which was not necessarily unusual. Yet his outlandish visage was hardly what you’d expect from a public speaker. When he spoke, his voice was strained and metallic. Then the words came from his mouth, and she understood. She had never seen such a command of scripture. Holy words resounded from his mouth and blended like music. Indeed many people hummed along. She realized that these words that made up the Writs were not just the writings of scribes, but the voice of the gods. If their words lived on in scripture, how could they be silent?

Mira never looked back. It was hard at first. The enclave demanded tithe upon entry, and she didn't have much money. She sold her school books, her clothes, her jewelry, anything she could. She knew she would never need them again anyway. She had found her new calling. Cutting off the people in her life was harder, made easier by her mother's passing. Friends and family she missed, but she had tried to get them to see the light of truth. They could not see, their hearts were blinded. They expressed concern for her, the fools. They couldn't comprehend the bliss she lived in now.

More importantly, the work of Father Cyran's flock was too important. There were no empty promises of salvation. They would bring about the return of the Council. They had worked to do so for many years, and completion grew ever closer. The eyes she carried in her bag would be the next step in the final days of the Long Silence. The Reverend Father had assured it, and her devotion to his cause was unwavering.

St. Dralia spoke, "Who are you who aid me now?"

One of the giants bent low to meet her gaze.

“We are the ones who came before. We have watched this world since it was young. Our Creators made us as they made you. Though we are the watchers, not the children. We are the angels.”

The Ascension of St. Dralia 5:1–5

Four blocks down and a right turn put her on Prosperity Street. Mira considered stopping at the marketplace there, but her pockets were light and she was expected back at the enclave. Instead, she turned into Prosperity Street’s metro station and began the descent on a steep escalator.

The station was well-kept, by Lowtown standards. All the lights were working and the grime on the tiles was minimal. Concrete vaulted ceilings greeted the riders on two sets of tracks. One headed north to south, and the other headed east into the city’s heart. She eyed the crowd carefully. There were so many strange, wonderful people. Many modified by alchemical surgeries. She saw wings, shimmering hair, even some gills. Many were still like her, unaugmented and unassuming, enough for her to blend in. Even the blood stains on her robes weren’t too strange in this rough-and-tumble part of town.

She got on the northbound platform and halted. She nestled into a corner next to an advertisement for lab-grown vitamins and tried to make herself small. Next to her was a man with wiry hair across his distended shirtless torso, a bestial snout, and yellow eyes. He was smoking some kind of cigarette. Not legal in the station, but rarely enforced in the new administration.

Bestial eyes glanced at her, and a clawed hand passed over the cig. She accepted, though hesitantly, and while fumbling to keep hold of her bag. After all, the Wrists said to graciously accept gifts from a noble heart. She took a couple of puffs, much to the disgust of people in front of them, and passed it back. The snout bent into a twisted grin, and she returned it. She offered him a tract but he politely declined, and they waited in silence.

The gentle buzz brushed against her mind and flushed her cheeks. Its comforting warmth was like the burning of incense, spicy and calming. She leaned against the ad display and for a second realized how tired she was. It had been a long time carrying these eyes, coming all the way down from Ziyo Point in the northeast. She vowed to sleep for a whole week when she returned to the compound.

The train came squealing into the station and blew a gust of air into her face. She winced and looked around. The crowd pushed up on the platform where they

thought the doors would stop. She took a breath, found strength, and pushed her way forward.

The car was cramped, but it always was. New Bekton's transportation had been overwhelmed since before Mira was born. She grabbed a hand grip from one of two poles that ran along the rows of seats and clung to her bag tightly. She was a woman alone in the city and had grown used to taking care of herself when she was away from the enclave. There was always some threat, something to be watchful for. Moreso now.

The doors closed, followed by a momentary pause. Then the train lurched forward, bumping her into a girl with a mohawk of tentacles on the seat below her. She glared at Mira, and the latter tried to get some space between them.

Mira felt as if she was being watched. The hairs on the back of her neck bristled. She was not gifted with premonitions like some of her kindred, but in that moment, she felt a malevolent gaze upon her. She had been seen by something, or something else was wrong. She murmured prayers of protection. Nothing happened

A dozen blocks away from the enclave, wary paranoia gave way to grim clarity. Her premonition had been correct, almost certainly. Two figures had been following her from a distance since she got off the metro. Their cloaks concealed any more identifiers from her over-the-shoulder glances, but she knew in her heart and soul they were the same people who chased her to New Bekton's gates.

She muttered the Wrists while she pondered her options. She couldn't lead them to the enclave, too risky. She could face them directly, but they had tried to take her life once before and she saw no reason they wouldn't try again. While she would gladly become a martyr for her faith, she still had the eyes. They had to stay safe. She clutched her amulet and prayed for guidance. The clattering of rats across metal scrap drew her attention to an alleyway. It was filled with junk and debris, likely from the renovation of the adjoining tailor shop. It was perfect.

She ducked behind a couple laborers carrying a couch, and slid into the alleyway, hopefully unseen. Immediately she began searching for a place to stash the treasure. A pile of opened crates, a broken drone, construction materials, and... Gods are kind! An old cooler, with perfect insulation. She opened her bag and started to hide the canister, then she heard footsteps at the entrance to the alley.

She turned to see who it was, though on some level she already knew. Two hooded figures, one tall and one short skulked towards her. “What you got there?” the shorter one said, in a cool, smooth voice. Like ice.

The tall one spoke next, “Reckon she’s got something mighty special to protect it all this way.”

The short one looked at the tall one, “Think it’s something the Master would want?” He lowered his hood, revealing a bald head covered in profane tattoos. References to some heathen god that Mira couldn’t identify. A gore-covered hand.

The tall one lowered their hood, revealing the scales, horns, and braided hair of a Primas-ika. “Undoubtedly. Something this precious? Would go a long way in his service.”

They both looked back at her, “So, surely you won’t mind if we take a peek, miss?”

She clutched the cooler in her arms and tried to work up courage. She yelled, “Stay back!”

The shorter one laughed, “I don’t think you’re in the position to be giving orders.”

He flashed steel under his robe, attached to his hip. The same pistol that had wounded her before, surely. “Now last time, you got away, but we’re a lot closer now. Don’t think I’d fuck up twice.”

She was breathing heavily as he drew the pistol, a revolver. Her mind ran through scriptures for wisdom in a time like this, all she could recall was the command to be defiant to your enemies. “I said... stay back.”

Both the dark-robed figures laughed this time, “The bravery! They don’t make disciples like you anymore. Tell me, lady, who do you serve?”

She thought for a second to declare herself a proud Cyranite, then reconsidered. They may have caught her, but she could keep the enclave safe with her silence. She bit her tongue.

“Nothing to say, eh?” The shorter one stepped closer. “Well, let me make this a little easier on you. We’re leaving with those eyes you’re carrying. They don’t belong to you or whatever cloister you serve. The only real difference is if you’ll give them to us or...” the hammer on the gun clicked.

Mira sat there, defeated. Her journey seemed at an end. She could not return to her enclave after so much time empty-handed. She could not face these foul acolytes directly. She was caught, and she accepted her fate. She began to pray out loud.

The shorter one stopped for a second, and eyed her, “Now now, you can tell them everything in person soon enough.”

In a moment of serendipity, the side door to the tailor shop swung open. An old human woman burst onto the stoop, “Who’s making all that-”

She was cut short by a gunshot from the shorter man, who swung around in surprise. Mira couldn’t see if the old lady, who was out of view from her vantage behind the open door, was hit. She saw surprise and fear in the shorter man’s tattooed face. She knew this was her only chance.

Mira was not strong, not even in the slightest. Yet in that moment, the fury of the gods flowed through her, and she charged all the weight and force she had into the man’s torso. Maybe he was still surprised, or maybe she was more mighty than she thought. Either way, he went tumbling back into a pile of debris.

His landing was met with the sickening tearing of flesh and meat into metal. A rogue piece of rebar protruded from his chest, where the heart would be on a normal human. He spasmed and spat blood from his mouth. He looked at Mira and began to utter something in a foul language that she didn't recognize. He was cut short, more red fell from his open mouth and his body went slack.

Mira's hands were trembling. She had never killed before. It was a sin unless ordained by the Council. She hadn't meant to...

The tall one, the Primas-ika, looked at their dead companion, and back to Mira. They let out a furious battle cry, and they charged Mira. Before she could even process it, a barbed scaly fist tore into her face. She reeled back. The tall cultist brought two fists down on the crown of her head. The impact concussed her, and the huge person pushed her to the ground.

On the ground, she received several more blows, punches, and kicks. In the daze, and through the pain, she wondered if this was it. Her chance at salvation was blown. Then she didn't think anything at all. She thought she saw a glint of light, like the one they said those saw on the journey to Atharas. She crawled towards it, and reached for it, ready to receive her eternal reward.

She gripped it and it was cold like metal. It was small but heavy in her hands. Not at all what she expected of the afterlife. She was beyond coherent thought, but her impulses took over for her. She rolled on her back just as the tall one prepared to stomp on her ribs. She found the trigger and fired. The tall one halted. She fired again, and this time they fell.

She lay there a while, pools of blood intermingling. She stared at the purple hexagonal sky, below the rolling clouds that smothered their broken world. If this world had any hope, she carried it in that cryo container. Was she doomed to die here? She was hurt badly, and there was no doctor to save her this time. She considered crying out, but her broken ribs made that an impossibility. Plus, she was a killer now. She could not be caught while she still had a delivery to make. She would have to pay her penance at the compound.

After minutes of effort, she got to her feet. She got her bag, now covered in the Primas-ika's vital fluids. She retrieved the eyes and ensured they were okay. The green light flashed. Mira considered stopping to burn the dead, as was customary. She limped by the door and checked for what she thought would be the corpse of the old woman. The old lady was there, still alive and breathing heavily. She clutched a wound in her hip and leaned against the interior of the door. When she saw Mira, they both made panicked eye contact. The old woman began to shout, and Mira knew she couldn't stay there.

Half limping, half running, she stumbled out of the alley and began to make as straight of a line as possible for the enclave. Passersby eyed the wounded girl in robes, but no one stopped her, not even the cops.

Her strength failed her just as she arrived at the compound's gate.

They had bodies as black as night.

Limbs like the tentacles of a great sea beast.

Smooth, round heads atop necks stretched by the gallows.

Mouth, nose, and ears like slits in leather.

Eyes like the finest rubies, that gleamed through the night.

Their shadows cast long over the young woman.

The Ascension of St. Dralia 6:2–7

Several taps on the good shoulder woke Mira up. Through the haze, she was in pain and felt weak. Her head rested against metal just inside the gates of the compound. Through blurry vision, she made out the smiling face above her, her brother acolyte, Jays. His boisterous voice rose over the ringing and rushing in her head, “Welcome home, Sister Mira!”

She managed to mutter out a “thank you” and struggled to sit up against the solid metal gate. “My bag... I have it.”

“I had no doubt you would not return empty-handed, dear kindred.” He glanced at her blood-soaked robes and facial injuries, “How badly hurt are you? Can you stand?”

“I can, Brother Jays. Just give me a second.” She grunted and groaned and forced herself to her feet with a wobble. Her head swam and she saw white. She was badly off, she needed help soon. If it wasn’t already too late.

“Excellent, Father Cyran is already waiting for you.”

“Of... course.” Together they walked deeper into the compound, going slowly to accommodate her limping. First past the barracks, the kitchen, and the chapel. Then to the largest building, what was once a large warehouse, now the Sanctum.

Outside this most holy of places, a podium had been set up. Others had already gathered and made way for Mira as she went to the front. The doorway was concealed, but in the shadows, she saw a figure shifting. She leaned against the podium, smearing blood on it. All the work of Doc Vili was wasted. She wouldn’t last long and she knew it. In a way, she felt some serene peace with this. She had made it to the Sanctum. That was all she had to do.

From the entrance, a shape ducked out. He was radiant, beautiful, and perfect. She fell to her knees and face in prostration and weakness. “F-father...”

The cracked resonant voice of the Reverend Father met her, “You have done well, my child. Your journey nears its end. Look upon me.”

She raised her head and beheld his form. He was pitch black and wore no clothes. Most of his limbs were like tendrils and bent and contorted in ways that would be impossible for any other mortal. The ribcage had been enlarged and tapered down into an impossibly thin waist that expanded into jagged hips. His head sat

atop a long neck, and his mouth and nose had been replaced by a fleshy grate-like structure that wheezed when he breathed or spoke.

In the olden times, the angels were a manifestation of the Divine Council across Vian. The messengers of the gods, sent to carry their word into the world. Of course, Cyran had not been born an angel. His transformation had been long and torturous and was yet incomplete. His right arm was still mortal, human. Many of his internal organs still needed replacing, and in the front of his head were two normal green eyes.

She opened her bag and retrieved the cryo canister, presenting it in trembling hands to Father Cyran. His long left arm clasped her wounded shoulder and she winced, both in surprise and pain. “The great work nears its end. Soon I will gaze upon you with the true sight, as I will gaze upon the world.”

Mira tried to thank him, but drops of scarlet fell from her mouth and the pounding in her head overtook her. She collapsed and looked up at her congregation through fading vision.

Father Cyran did not come to her aid. No one else did either. Instead, the remade angel stood at the podium and looked to the crowd. He stood tall, dwarfing everyone. His voice was like hot steel passing through resin. “Our sister has

brought us one step closer to completing our glorious mission. My eyes now see the faces of faithful men, women, and others who have dedicated their lives in the service of the most noble pursuit, ending the gods' Long Silence!"

The Cyranites cheered, and the Reverend Father continued. "Soon, I will see so much more. Each of us was made for a purpose. The whole of Vian was. We feel it in our hearts, in our souls. There is no greater calling than service in the name of the gods. You know this, it is what drew you to our humble community. Our great curse is to be deprived of this assurance. To toil endlessly in the sunless wastes of the world the gods deemed unworthy of their light."

He held up the canister, "But their light is not gone completely. My ears now hear their wisdom, and soon my eyes will see the beauty of the Divine!" The crowd erupted in rapturous applause. Even Mira, broken and dying, beamed.

It seemed that the angel Cyran remembered her, looking down with a solemn expression. "Let us not forget the efforts and sacrifice of our good Sister Mira. There is no greater end than in the service of the Divines!" Scattered mournful 'amen's rolled across the crowd. He looked up and raised his distended, impossibly long arm, "Mourn not, kindred. For she will live on in the halls of the Saints!"

The crowd oohed and ahed in wonder. A rare blessing given to so few who passed. Even Mira, half-conscious and slipping away, could not believe she was so lucky. Was she so important? She was but a lowly handmaiden of the Council.

Cyran made a gesture to the medic of their flock, Kindred Arin. They rushed over to Mira's side. It was too late, no healing potion would save her now. Instead, they pushed a syringe of light blue fluid into her neck and pressed the plunger. A cool rush ran through her head and body as the stimulant took effect. Her wounds still hurt, and her blood still poured from her wounds. Yet her pain was lessened and her mind was clearer.

She looked up to the Father, who stood over her. He spoke again, "Find your strength and arise, Sister Mira. Your journey is not over yet."

She complied, forcing what little reserves of strength she had to her arms and legs. She got to her feet once more, to the cheers of the other Cyranites. Through blackened eyes and shattered teeth, she smiled at them. Her family.

Cyran looked to the flock one final time, 'This will conclude our gathering. I will be occupied with the transformation in the Sanctum. Tonight's study of the Writs will be led by Sister Yulna. Treat her with the respect you would treat me. Only Sister Mira will accompany me right now."

The flock obeyed their shepherd and dispersed. Mira's heart was beating fast. She was pale as a ghost, drained of blood. She and the Reverend Father made their way inside the Sanctum.

Incense and candlelight guided their way through the empty halls. They passed custodians, mostly constructs, though a rare few mortals like them. The walls were lined with art and artifacts from before the Silence, reminders of the world the gods made and left behind.

Mira heard the sound of a small drill as she approached the central chamber, the Holy of Holies. Now the walls were lined with body parts and organs, kept suspended in green liquid. So many former attempts, not all of them successful. Building perfection was not a trivial task. They could not compromise.

At last, the lights of the central chamber bathed her broken form. Rows of lanterns and candles, mixed with overhead lights and a surgeon's lamp. In the center, under the lamp, was a man in scrubs and an apron. She thought of Vili and wondered what would become of him.

Father Cyran went forward to the operating table, carrying the canister. She kneeled there and watched as the surgeon began to work. First, the old eyes were removed, and placed on a tray. One eye, and then the other. The smell of cut bone

and chemical solvents mixed with the candles and incense into a confused medley. A wet ‘schlick’ sound as the new eyes were set. Then there was quiet for some time.

The three waited and waited for some time longer than that. Then Father Cyran’s new eyes opened, red and shiny as rubies. He looked first to the surgeon and thanked him. Then he stood up, head bumping against the lamp. He went over to Mira, whose stimulant was beginning to fade. Her breathing had slowed and grown ragged. It was almost her time. She wondered what it was like to die. Though she knew with pride that she would be embraced by the gods.

Cyran scooped her up in his surprisingly strong, mismatched arms. He carried her to the next room over, and as exhaustion took hold of Mira’s body, she couldn’t help but wonder. “F-Father, what... do you... see?”

Cyran’s mouth folds distended into a facsimile of a smile, “My child,” he looked up, “I see everything.”

She slipped away one final time, her work completed.

The angels departed from her that evening.

She made their mission clear, to carry the holy words of the Ascended and the rest of the Council to the people of the world Vian.

Sometimes, one would minister to her the will of her Mistress, then just as a shadow, it would disappear again.

These things were, are, and shall be.

The Ascension of St. Dralia 10:21–25

Mira awoke, though still not in the bright halls of the heavens. Rather, it was dark. Very dark. She tried to move her head to look around, but she could not. In confusion, she tried to move her arms, and then her legs. Nothing. She could breathe, but it was slightly restricted. She felt cables attached to her spine, pumping some kind of liquid into her.

She began to call out, “Hello! Is there anybody there?”

There was a long quiet. She called out again, and then again.

An older woman's voice answered. "Hush, child. You are new here, but this is your appointed place."

Mira was fearful and confused, "W-w-who are you?"

"In life, I was named Raquel, but we do not often hold onto our names, here."

"What do you mean? Where is here?"

The lights turned and Mira screamed. The room was filled with people, Cyranites, cast in metal. Each of them connected to machines like the ones connected to her. Each was locked into poses of praise and prayer. Some with raised hands, some with heads bowed. She realized her own hands were folded together and she was sat cross-legged.

They all exclaimed praise as someone entered their room. Into her vision came the smooth dark head of Father Cyran himself, now with his new eyes. "I am sorry, child Mira. Your wounds were too great to treat. Your devotion to our

ministry was too great to let you pass on just yet. So I brought you here, to the Living Saints.”

“I should... I should have died.” Mira argued. She couldn’t tell if she was grateful.

Cyran’s mouth folds formed a frown, “But my dear, this calling is one of the greatest the faithful can be given.”

Raquel chimed in, “We counsel the Father, and await the return of the gods from here in our chamber.”

“But the gods speak to the Father, that is why we have assisted his transformation.”

The Reverend Father looked at her and clasped the side of her still head, “Do you remember The Writ of Ministry 5:6–7?”

“The words of kindred in good counsel are the words of the gods.”

“I commune with the Divines, yes, but when their Will is obscured to me, I come here.”

“But what shall I do? I cannot move. I cannot even read the Writs anymore.”

Raquel interjected again, “Oh my child we have so many conversations here. Sermons, hymns, stories from our old lives.”

An amen rose from the other statues.

Mira was too shocked to be terrified. “Yes...”

Cyran’s red eyes, which she had carried for so long, gleamed, “I ask that you trust me, Mira. I knew you were destined for greater things since the first moment you came to our service.”

Mira was silent for a while, and then relented, “I trust you, Father.”

This is what became of Mira. Her old life had ended. She would never live again, but she would not die for quite some time. Just as the Father Cyran had transformed, so had she. They still talked from time to time. He did not come to the Saints often, but when he did he sought wisdom. Rarely, another Cyranite would approach them to refill their life support systems, or to join in their hymns. Most of her days were dark and quiet, kept away in the reserves of the Sanctum.

She spent many of her days singing the hymns she knew and even writing new ones. She had all the time in the world. In many ways, she was happy and even filled with pride for her new role.

Of course, she missed her old life. She wondered if her friends were okay. She wondered about her family. She also pondered greater things, like what the end of the Silence would mean for her and the other Living Saints. Surely they must have been close to the end of the thousand years without the Divines. Cyran's work was so close to completion. She kept waiting. They all did. Certain that someday soon, the end to their suffering and the suffering of the whole world was at hand.

For now, the wait went on.