

Unbound

journal

Fall

2 0 2 2

somewhere, away
the cars and collared
e's a place that's still mine,
barefoot on the mountain face,
ng, and no one would mind—
old never bothered
me, anyway.

I am egg-bound
coiled,
a yolk-sipper.

I sleep
powerless,
half-dreaming

until
your bitter hand
cracks
my shell.

I point
a claw
and pound

through shards
of white and
milky
membrane

to breathe,
breathe in
smoked
air.

I feel
you
watching me.

Snakeskin
dries on
my forearms.

“The Hatching”
Charlotte Roberts

I flex
my spine
and unfold

two wings:
veined,
like the dip
in an ear.

I breathe again,
breathe in,
breathe the world

my belly
swells
to burning

and I burn,
burn
the twigs

of the nest,
of your hard
rod and hand.

I am earth-bound,
unfurled,
free.

A large, hand-drawn red oval with multiple overlapping strokes, creating a scribbled effect. It frames the title text.

“The Hatching” Charlotte Roberts



“She Who Was Forsaken” Prayerna Babu

“tears”



Stephen Swanson

“Tidal Shift” T

The Coast has a way of alienating you from everything else. The coarse, gray-brown sand stretches for miles both ahead of and behind you, fading into a horizon of mountains floating on fog. In places like Cannon Beach, you rarely see where the ground ends and the mountains begin, only fog with floating giants on either side, and miles of sand in between. For me, it has always been both an appeal and a drawback: walk as far as you can, see as much as you can, but, in the end, you hardly made a dent in covering the length of the beach. It's like that line from *The Phantom Tollbooth*: follow the line forever and you will find Infinity. It was this hypnotic infinite that kept me from watching the ocean more closely, and almost led to my death.

When I was ten years old, my parents took me on a weekend trip to Cannon Beach as a reward for having scored especially well on my state testing. Further proof, they said, of the academic superiority of homeschooling. Our hotel room overlooked a short seawall made of man-sized basalt boulders. I thought they were rolled there by the tides, like the lines of foam and seaweed and scalloped streaks of black volcanic sand. Years later, I would realize they were man-made, cut from the surrounding mountains that were once themselves below sea level, loaded onto flatbeds, driven down the mountainside, and dumped and rolled onto the beach in massive heaps to block the same waters they came from, to protect the things that men made.

Tiffany Palumbo

Each change of the tide wipes the coast clean, reclaiming beached moon jellies and sea nettles and mermaid's purses and fully-grown pine trees. I never knew how those trees ended up in the water. Maybe the sand they were rooted in was eaten away by the surf until they couldn't stand on the cliff side any longer and fell, tumbling, crashing, spinning, into the sea. Maybe they rolled off a logging ship making its way from the mouth of the Columbia River into international waters and beyond. Whatever the cause, by the time they got to shore, they were always a tattered mess of what they once must have been. Every branch, root and piece of bark had been stripped off, leaving a water-logged, salt-bleached, thirty-foot corpse that even the hottest beachside bonfires could not burn. Some monuments are strong enough to withstand the eroding sea: Haystack Rock, or the sentinel-like basalt towers that pepper the edge of Tillamook Bay, each one topped with scraggly, stunted pines growing out of their wind-carved, salt-crusteds tops. Sometimes, even a dock post or two will last a while, if it's big enough—but only if it's sheltered from the brunt of the waves.

After we had lunch and checked into our hotel, we decided to take a walk on the beach. These are not the lazy, sun-drenched beaches of Florida, where I live now. You can't stroll the shore any time you want, splashing your feet in an ocean as warm and tame as bathwater. Every savvy beachgoer in Oregon checks the tide chart to see when it's safe to explore. They know that, at the Coast, the difference

“Tidal Shift” T

between low and high tide can mean life or death. The water can be half a mile out, pounding sand no closer than Haystack Rock, or chomping away at the seawall with angry, yellow, foam-capped waves, spraying seawater onto cars and boutique shops selling taffy and hand-blown glass. My father had checked the tide chart. It was the early half of low tide—we should have been safe.

My mother carried my infant brother on her ample hips, trailing slightly behind my father. He was a small man, only 5'6" and beer-bellied, but his gait was brisk, and steady.

“Tiffany, wait!” my father shouted. I was about fifty yards ahead, his words almost drowned out by the waves and wind. “Don’t get too far ahead!” I waited for them to catch up, in the meantime playing on the seawall and digging moats around the boulders that the high tide’s waves had pried away from the pile. Our hotel was half a mile behind us—I could still see our room’s patio and the tiny, warped curls of dark wood shingles covering the two-story building— but it felt like we had walked miles to get here, that we had tread sand until our calves ached and our thighs seared. But were still no closer to the next estuary, or low cluster of beachgrass-pocked sand dunes. The boulder I was playing on was low, but broad, and I had deduced through my exuberant moat-digging that most of its body was hidden deep within the sand—a geological iceberg. I had climbed on

iffany Palumbo

top of the one furthest out, digging the toes of my filthy, formerly white Keds into the sharp corners of the volcanic rock. A small curl of sickly yellow sea foam rolled towards me. I can reenact the scene from *The Little Mermaid* where the waves crash against the rocks! I thought. I wanted to get the scene just right, so I only paid attention to the foam, and not to the thick belt of water that was pushing it forward.

The foam touched the face of the rock, and I was nearly knocked backwards with the full force of the wave. The cold hit me like a medicine ball to the chest as seawater filled my mouth and lungs. I had almost regained my balance when the second wave hit, wiping me off the rock completely. The water was shallow, maybe four feet deep, but I was only four feet tall, and the mini maelstrom meant that my attempts to stand upright were undermined. The sand was sucked out from under my feet, and I was constantly fighting to break the surface.

Each time my head broke above the water, my body screamed at me to yell for help and to take in great, greedy gasps of air. It expected me to do both when I could do neither.

“Hel—p m—”

“Tidal Shift” T

Nearby, a young couple sat on the seawall, watching me disinterestedly. The man—faceless, though I still remember the look on it—held an infant on his back. His companion sat primly next to him, her white canvas shoes set close together. They sat less than five feet away, watching me drown with faces devoid of any emotion. I called out to them for help again and again but they just sat there. There was no one else nearby. For years after, whenever the story came up, my parents would shake their heads and frown.

“I think they may have been the spiritual reason why you almost drowned,” they said. Our home was a deeply, fundamentally Christian one, and, while we did not believe in ghosts or guardian angels, we very much believed in the concept of demonic possession. My parents believed—still believe—that that young couple with the baby were somehow directly linked to the devil’s attempt to kill me. My beliefs have changed drastically since then, and, while I know the idea that two adults and one infant sent by Satan to trigger a sneaker wave and watch me die was truly, embarrassingly ludicrous, I couldn’t completely discount it, either. Logically, there is no way that young couple were demonically possessed. Logically, there is no way—even if they were possessed—that I would be spiritually significant enough in the eons-long game of good versus evil to

Jiffany Palumbo

warrant such extreme measures. Logically, it is impossible. But their behavior was so frighteningly illogical that twenty years later, I still cannot comprehend their lack of response. I cannot understand why two people—especially two people with a new child of their own—would watch someone die with the same detached, passionless expression people have when they watch paint dry. I can't explain it logically, so I have to ask myself: what is the alternative? Maybe there was some cosmic significance in that moment, maybe they were time travelers, or the spirit of the erupting volcano offshore as it hungered for a human sacrifice. Maybe they were just psychopaths.

The tide began to suck itself back into the ocean, and I abandoned any attempt of swimming against the current. Experts say to always let the current pull you out to sea, then swim parallel to the shore to escape the riptide, but this was years before I'd heard that. The complete futility of trying to resist the thousands of gallons of icy water crushing my chest and dragging me away shouted down the instinct for self-preservation that screamed its way through my body. I knew I was in the ocean's hand, and that the way out was not through force, but by random chance.

“Tidal Shift” T

A new thought suddenly filled my mind.

“Grab a rock.” In the level, echoing voice one usually likens to God, the command filled every space of my mind. It was all I knew, all I could think about, all I was—it’s reassuring strength nearly calmed me.

I reached out through the water, my eyes squeezed shut and my cheeks ballooned like a puffer fish. The rough texture of a boulder slipped past my fingers before I even registered what it was.

“Well, that’s it for me.” The voice commanded with equal intensity how I messed up my last chance. As a ten-year-old, I accepted in that moment that I was going to die. That rock would be the last thing I ever touched. It didn’t bother me—I had accepted my death and was strangely calm. But still, inexplicably, I swung my arms through the current, searching for another rock, another chance. The water felt smooth and wavy between my fingers—like a piece of malachite I once brushed up against at a museum. The hand of the ocean continued to pull me out to sea. My hands trailed past a second rock.

“Grab a rock.” With renewed faith, the voice returned, filling the entirety of my consciousness with its command, and this time, I could obey. I dug my fingernails into the boulder’s chipped surface, used the flow of the wave to carry my arm around it, and held on. I

Jiffany Palumbo

tucked my face into my shoulder and waited for the water to recede. When the first wave hit, my parents were nearly knocked off their feet. When my head slipped under, my father leapt out of the waist-deep water and bounded from rock to rock until he reached me. Now laden with water, his button-up t-shirt stuck to his swollen gut, his dad jeans sagged and threatened to fall, his Nikes squished with each step.

From his perch on the rocks, he could see me holding my rock, my hair swirling with the ocean's current like thin brown kelp. He reached into the water and grabbed my jacket collar. He tried to pull me out of the water, but the adrenaline that flooded my body made me stronger than him now.

Eventually, the wave retreated, and my father pulled me up to him. I fought him at first. My body realized I was out of the water, and took in greedy gulps of the air, but my brain was still stuck in the sucking, swirling pool.

"It's okay, it's okay, I'm here." He wrapped his arms around me tighter than I liked. My mother ran up to me, my infant brother bouncing on her hip and looking just as worried as she. I was confused by his statement and tried to reason his reassurance with my experience. But I saved myself...

“Tidal Shift”

myself...

Without warning, I broke down into a hysterical fit. Seeing that I had not become another piece of flotsam, the couple on the rocks got up and left.

I would not go into the ocean again until I was fifteen and at summer bible camp. A friend would only go in if I went with her. She was never a risk-taker, and maybe I did it because I didn't want to feel weak. Maybe I felt braver having someone next to me in case I almost died again—at least I'd have company while I drowned. I don't know. So, in that way that teenage girls do, we clutched each other's hands and ran into the surf until we were up to our hips in water, and we swam until our chests burned with the cold, and the deeper, hotter pain of a growing sunburn.

'Tiffany Palumbo

“again and again”

He only has her
left in the silence between winter and spring,
where autumn colors are a past tense.
His calloused hands glued around her waist
so as to not lose track of her,
or to find a sense of comfort, in the cold.

She has no choice but to stay.

They stand upon whispering grass.
He towers over her, digging in his heels
like he never wants to forget
the taste of the soil
or the serenity of her hands in his.
Her skin glistens in the moonlight,
they dance through their own solar system, whizzing past falling stars and burning
stones.
Her skin glistens in the sunlight,
basking in the silence of stillness.
They never leave the patch of grass,
through hail storms
and downpours of their Mother's tears,
and afternoon picnics with blooming dandelions.
The serenity remains until it is time to go
as if *all things must come to an end.*

This is the decay of his last sycamore leaf
in her yellows and reds and bright, bright green.
The same love story he has ever known,
and the only one she'll ever have.

So he holds tightly, in resisting her pull,
with the force of a giant made of stone.
Tears traverse down his chest and water the soil below,
retaining moisture for the next year of growth;
for the wind will take her and the earth will hold him.
And she has no choice but to submit herself
to the detriment of the rest of the leaves
that skim the sidewalk, then become the earth
again and again.

Sydney Severn

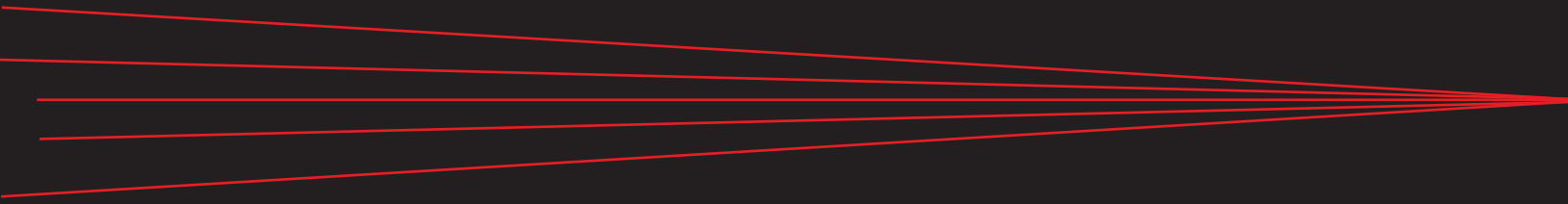
It was not a clock that
Told him that another had
Passed, but the brown bottle
Falling to the floor,
Which, on waking, he forgot
He'd placed there, empty,
Teetering on the edge
Of the nightstand, waiting
For the brush of a hand
To slip, and when he
Peered out the window he
Could feel the new one
Had come along,

“At the End of the Year”
Anakin Welp

**Not from raucous
Cheers far off, or a television
Announcement, but a clear
Silence, playing taps
For the wasted old one,
And for the waste to come
Full of enterprising thoughts,
A sound which drifted over roof-
tops
And trees and water and
The sleeping masses,
All still in dreaming sleep,
Which he could not share.**

**“At the End of the Year”
Anakin Welp**

“The Knights Dilemma”



David Xu

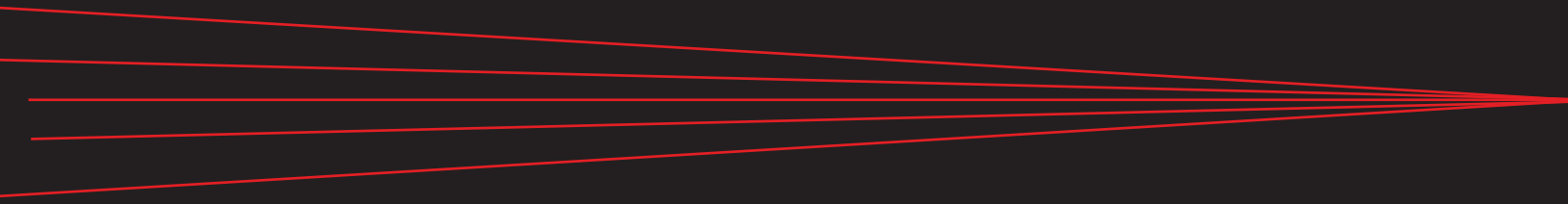
Albert first killed a man when he was almost nineteen years old. His compatriots say it was in self-defense and that he should be proud, but it never eased his mind.

It happened while awaiting orders on the battlefield. Enemy cavalry broke through the front lines, and a horde of armor and steel charged right towards Albert's position. The other squires, tasting the fear of imminent death, ran away. But not Albert. Without the order to retreat, running away would bring disgrace upon him. He was duty-bound to stay and fight. Picking up a sword that was left abandoned on the ground, he stood to meet the first enemy who ran to him. He swung and cut down the life of the brave soul who ran headfirst into battle. He killed a second man not long after when the sight of Albert's bloodied tunic standing over the fresh corpse roused another soldier's vengeance. He lost count after the third man, who screamed out his fallen comrade's name, before the confusion of the battlefield became just a haze.

When he regained consciousness, Albert found himself lying in an infirmary. He was surrounded by not only the injured, but other knights and soldiers standing at attention by the foot of his bed. Albert received their admiration and praise. According to them, his counterattack was the deciding factor in the battle,

and it was a true miracle he lived. Rumors and exaggerations were soon exchanged among those present. “He killed a dozen men, all by himself!” “He must be truly blessed by God to have survived!” “He’s an angel sent to lead us!” “With such a holy ally, we shall be victorious!” Albert’s admirers saw him as a saint and gave him the moniker of ‘Holy’, but he could only give a subdued response as the fervor surrounding him swelled up.

“I don’t deserve your praise,” he said to his onlookers, “I’m just doing what any would-be knight should.” He didn’t enjoy killing the men he did, but what choice did he have?



Compassion and doubt were reckless, even fatal, on the battlefield. All he could allow himself to feel was the crushing grip of a steel handle. The taste of bitter saltwater flowed onto his lips, but he couldn’t tell if it was tears or sweat that ran down his face. The experience of the battle shattered any notion of innocence in him. He didn’t understand if he truly was as holy as the others claimed, and the hope of forgiveness before God felt like an impossibility.

Returning home from the battlefield, Albert received a hero’s welcome. News of his bravery spread quickly, and King Mendac personally invited him to an audience at his castle.

Preparing for such an honor as to be summoned by the King, Albert looked at himself in a mirror. The chainmail armor he would present himself in was repaired, and the bruises he sustained on his face were all fading away. Even his brown hair which was usually kept long had been cut short and styled by a barber. He should be pristine – no – he did look pristine. But he didn't feel pristine. Although the blood upon his white tunic was washed off, it would never stay clean again.

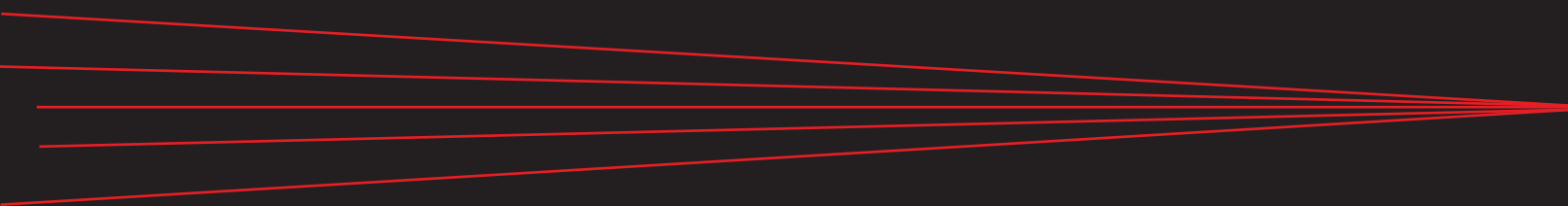
Albert arrived at King Mendac's castle and waited before the royal court. As he did so, he heard whispers of praise from the other members in attendance, such as barons and chancellors. "He's just like his father!" "He must have the blood of warriors!" They would say. Leaving a trail of bodies while losing himself in the madness, the royal court found him an ideal soldier. He was praised as being brave and courageous for the moment which brought him conflicted feelings of both pride and shame.

But even as the immediate battle was over, a battle at home still had to be fought. Praise for Albert was overcome by discourse over political issues plaguing the kingdom. "The war efforts have gone on for far too long! Our lack of resources has demoralized the citizenry!"

“Famine and rioting are at the cusp of our doors!” “What has the Church been doing? Some citizens are threatening to break off and create a new sect!” “The power of rule within the Mors-fidei is being questioned! The people are demanding answers!”

The sound of a trumpet rang through the court, and the dissonant voices hushed.

“All hail his royal highness, King Mendac!” The Master of Ceremonies’ shrill voice yelled out.



Everyone stood to attention as a grizzled man adorned with a purple mantle approached the throne. He sat down, then raised an arm to signal the court to be at ease.

“My dear subjects,” King Mendac’s voice commanded the room. “I know well of your concerns for our kingdom. I too, know the pangs we are suffering through. But do not be disheartened. I have gathered you all here with a solution in mind, for standing within our midst is a hero. Albert Lamanthu, will you please step forward before the court?”

The heads of every present turned towards Albert, and the

pressure of so many powerful people judging him was almost too overwhelming. He stepped forward, approached the throne, and kneeled.

“Your Highness, King Mendac, I am at your service,” Albert stated.

“You have served Morsfidei well, young Albert,” said King Mendac. “Your accomplishments on the battlefield have not gone unnoticed. Everyone in Morsfidei has heard of your bravery, calling you by the moniker of ‘Holy’.”

“It is an exaggeration, Your Highness, and I do not deserve your gratitude. I am merely doing my duties and what is expected of me as your subject and as a knight-in-training.”

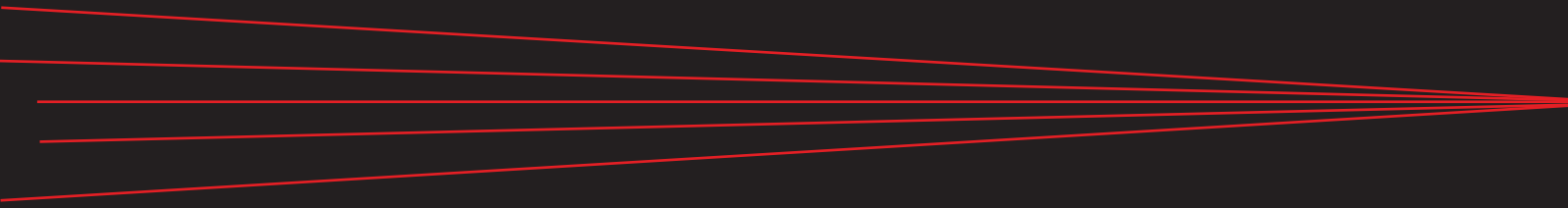
“So you are. Tell me, Albert. How much do you wish to be a knight?”

The King’s question piqued Albert’s interest. Was he to be knighted today, by the King no less?

“It is my one desire to become someone worthy of serving you, Your Highness. I will do anything to earn knighthood un-

er you.” With Albert’s answer, King Mendac smiled.

“It is good to hear of your true loyalty and enthusiasm for protecting our kingdom.” Said King Mendac. “But despite all you have done, I believe it is still too soon for you to be granted the privilege of knighthood.” At those words, Albert’s heart was sundered by disappointment. What more would he need to do to satisfy the King? “But do not be so discouraged, Albert,” King Mendac continued. “There is something you can do, a final test to become a knight.”



“What is it, Your Highness? I will do anything for Morsfidei if it is within my capacity,” asked Albert, lifting his head in anticipation.

“The priests foretold me of a heathen, a devil, in a faraway land: A sorcerer who practices in black magic! He is the one who has cursed our lands, poisoned our crops, and caused us endless war and strife!”

“What are you asking of me to do, Your Highness?”

“I am asking you to find this sorcerer and kill him to save

our kingdom. Only then, when you have completed your quest, may I grant you the knighthood you seek. Do I make myself clear?”

“Are you sure about this, Your Highness? Will killing one person really solve our kingdom’s problems?” Albert asked. Curiosity burned at the front of his mind. His King was sending him on a quest to kill someone: an assassination. This kind of work was not fit for the likes of proud knights.

“Are you questioning my authority, Albert?”

“No, never, Your Highness,” Albert hastily replied.

“Then will you accept this quest?” King Mendac asked.

This was the opportunity of a lifetime for Albert; to be personally asked by your King to save the kingdom with a guarantee of knighthood when it’s over. It didn’t sit well with him that he would have to kill once more to achieve his dreams, but he had to take the step forward.

“It will be done, Your Highness. I will not disappoint you,” Albert answered, hiding the hesitation in his voice.

“Then I am declaring my proclamation! I command you, Albert Lamanthu, in the name of Our Lord and mine, to venture out East and destroy this foe!”

The royal court erupted in applause.

*** * ***

Riding atop his horse, Felix, Albert began his journey to save Morsfidei. Making his way eastward, Albert asked his fellow citizens if they heard of a sorcerer and their magic. The common folk had heard rumors of magic’s existence, but they had

nothing definitive for Albert. All they could give him was their gratitude and support. The King’s proclamation made it so every town he ventured through there were people who knew his name. “Holy Albert! Holy Albert!” The nickname stuck as he passed through. “Save us! Bless the bounty of our next harvest! May God help you grant us salvation!” He could only ride on as he passed by the crowds. “*How could I grant you salvation,*” Albert wondered, “*When that is what I seek as well?*” Albert traveled with extreme haste. The more who knew of his quest, the greater the burden of expectations grew upon him. He journeyed on without rest. Through day and night. Rain and sun. Thunder and darkness.

He traveled with such determination that not even the wind could catch up and whistle his name upon its lips. Albert made astonishing progress and left far behind the familiar territories of his kingdom to venture into foreign lands.

* * *

Speed came at a cost, as it left Albert short on both supplies and energy. Albert found himself in an unfamiliar forest with the sun gone away and suffered from exhaustion. He contemplated his situation as Felix trotted along the forest's path. The rations he packed were good for only a week or two at most, and he didn't consider how long his quest would last. Would it take months, even years, for him to find this supposed sorcerer? How will he know it was the right one? If he was wrong and he returned to a home still in turmoil, would it have been all in vain? There were so many questions he should've asked before leaving, and now he had only Felix's hooves to answer back to him.

As the night air started to grow colder, Albert ventured across an open clearing and saw the formations of a hill that wasn't blocked out by the trees. A large tower rested upon this wind-swept hill. Its height dwarfed the nearby forest, and its presence should have been obvious to anyone who surveyed the surround-

ing tree line. Albert wondered how he didn't see it from afar before but was glad he stumbled upon it now. Maybe someone was home and could offer him aid. Even if there was no one, the tower would at the very least serve as shelter for the night. Approaching closer to the tower, Albert saw that it was cylindrical and built of stone and wood. No windows decorated the outer walls. As if to compensate for such a deficiency in the design, the top of the tower was covered by an enormous glass dome. Albert dismounted Felix and tied him down to graze before stepping up to the front door. The door was wooden, and a ring-shaped brass door knocker adorned it at head level. Albert reached for

the knocker and banged on the door twice. He waited, and for a moment there was no response. He considered reaching for the knocker again until the voice of a woman shocked him from the other side of the door.

“A visitor? At this hour? Oh for the-Who is it?”

Albert felt the agitation emanating from behind the door. He considered the fact that whoever was home would only get angrier if just any old stranger woke them up, so he decided to identify himself as a proper knight. “*I’ll be knighted soon enough, anyway,*” Albert thought to himself, “*What’s the*

harm in using my title now?” He cleared his throat before answering.

“I am the Holy Sir Albert Lamanthu of Morsfidei. I have come to-”

“Holy? Don’t tell me you’re here to convert me or something?”

“No, ma’am! I have not arrived at such an improper hour for such trivial matters! I have come to your tower to beseech your aid. My day has been long, and my horse is tired. I ask you, in my hour of need, to allow me to rest here for the night.”

“...That’s not any better...”

“It will just be for the night, and come morning I will leave, not treading further upon your hospitality!”

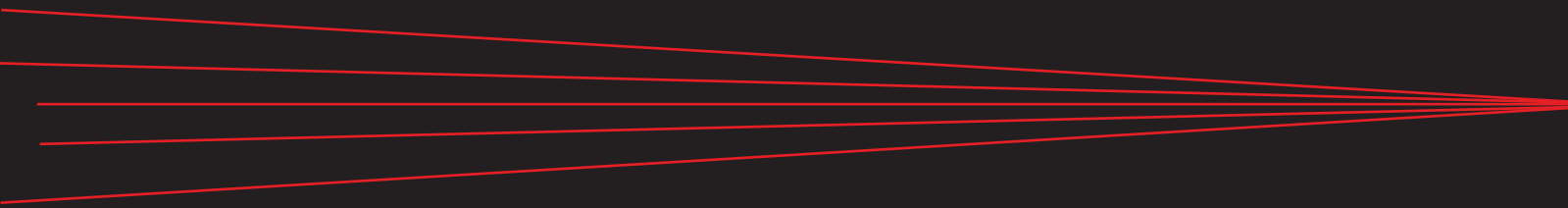
Another moment of silence passed before the woman responded again.

“Fine...only until morning. Might be fun to have company every once in a while.” The sound of a click and several latches moving drifted from the other side.

“Come on in, sir knight. The door’s unlocked.”

Albert, stepping inside, was welcomed by a cozy atmosphere. A lit fireplace sat in a far corner and the air was filled with the aroma of something warm and savory. Albert was reminded of just how empty his stomach felt.

“You must be hungry,” The woman’s disembodied voice rang out, “You’re lucky I still had some leftovers for dinner. Help yourself to some, then meet me upstairs.”



Albert felt a strange tingling in his ears when he heard the woman speak. It wasn’t what she said, but how he heard her say it, that felt odd. The woman’s voice felt like she was speaking right next to him, yet he couldn’t catch sight of her anywhere. The inside of the tower seemed to be much bigger than it looked from the outside. An enormous spiral staircase ran along the entire circumference of the tower and reached up to an upper floor that Albert couldn’t fully see. But the hunger Albert felt meant he had other priorities now and he set aside his wondering for later.

Albert followed the scent of food and came upon a kitchen to

find a large pot left dangling over the remains of a cooking fire. He took off the pot's lid to peer at the contents inside: soup. It was still warm, brownish-yellow in color and slightly opaque. There were two ingredients inside that Albert could see, and he could only describe them as white cubes and green sheets.

Albert poured himself a bowl and sat down to eat. It tasted salty, more so than he was used to. But it was also delicious beyond his expectations. Returning home from the battlefield was one of the few times he had something of quality to eat. Before then was the soldier's diet of hard breads and vegetables, and after was the bland rations for the journey. He didn't know what exactly it was he was eating, but the sensation blanketed him in the warmest comfort he had felt in a long time. After finishing his bowl, Albert considered going for seconds but restrained himself from being too gluttonous. There would be time for more eating later. Right now, his host was waiting for him, and he had to properly greet her.

Climbing up the stairs, Albert understood why the tower had no windows. All along the inner walls, reaching the peak of the tower, were shelves littered with books. Books of varying sizes adorned every inch. The collection came in a multitude of colors from plain browns, to wondrous crimsons, to vibrant lavenders.

The sight almost created the illusion of paintings in a gallery as Albert ascended. If he had not seen the stones packing the building's exterior, he would have imagined the entire tower was built using bookshelves in place of bricks.

Albert arrived on the upper floor and caught sight of more wondrous things. The bookshelves before, while impressive, made the tower feel stuffy and almost claustrophobic. But here was the enormous glass dome he saw earlier and standing under it allowed him to look out into the night. It was exhilarating, like breathing in the cool fresh air. The moon was framed as a jewel

right above, with the stars joining in to decorate the sky. At the center of the room, under the gaze of moonlight, stood a young woman. She wore a long blue dress that dragged against the floor and complimented the night sky. Her black hair was tied up in a bun with a pin sticking through to keep it in place.

She spoke, "We finally meet face-to-face, Sir Albert. You may call me Morgan. Welcome to my humble abode." Albert felt that the use of titles like 'Holy' was hollow when the townsfolk called him, but listening to Morgan say 'Sir' was invigorating.

He cleared his throat before responding. “Good evening, Madame Morgan. I prostrate myself before you and apologize for inconveni-

“Ut-tut! Please, no need for such formalities. I quite dislike chivalry. Don’t you ever get tired talking like that?”

Albert, momentarily stunned by Morgan’s candor, paused before finding his voice again. “Sorry, force of habit. I’ve spent a great deal of time having to talk to people who think they deserve everyone’s respect. I just wanted to apologize for having to ask for your charity in such an impromptu manner. I also wanted to thank you for the soup, it was delicious.”

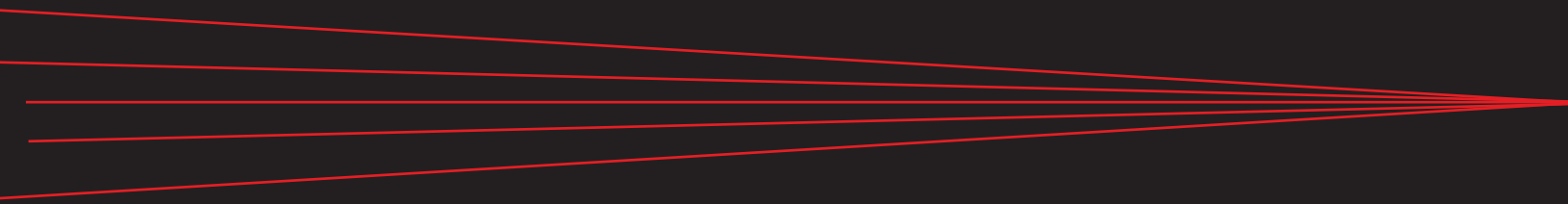
Amused that Albert’s speech has turned more casual, Morgan replied, “It’s nothing, really. It is rare for me to receive any guests, and I’ve been thinking I should have some company for once. I’m glad to hear that you enjoyed my cooking, simple as it was. Please, make yourself comfortable and ask me any questions on your mind.”

Albert contemplated the last thing Morgan said. Any questions? In his upbringing to prepare for knighthood, he was taught to respect the boundaries of the ladies of the court and never intrude too much on their privacy. This was a rare oppor-

tunity to ask a woman anything he was curious about. He began with something basic. “Do you live here by yourself? No one you need to explain why you have a stranger spending the night?” “No one. I live alone in this tower, and I quite like the solitary life. I don’t need to accommodate myself for anyone. Except you, of course.”

“Then what is the purpose of this tower? What do you even do here, a hermit isolated from society?”

“It’s so I may observe. This place is my observatory, and you can



call me an astronomer of sorts. My work has not been to people’s liking before, but I still offer my services on rare occasions.” The vagueness of Morgan’s answer piqued Albert’s interest. He pried further.

“I am not familiar with such arts. Do you wish to see into the heavens and witness the visage of God”?

“No, no, not quite something so cliché. I have more important matters than that.”

“More important than God? How can that be?”

“That’s where you and I are so different, sir knight. You look up into the night sky, see the stars and only think of heaven’s domain residing above. I gaze into the vast darkness and wish to peer further beyond such a place, for surely there is something even God would hide from mortal eyes. Are the heavens not just a cage, separating us from cosmic beings and horrors beyond our comprehension, who may just be watching back?”

“Her answers sound almost heretical,” Albert thought to himself, “Doesn’t really matter to me, but at least the priests back home aren’t hearing this.”

“I don’t imagine there is anything else out there but God and his domain. If there are such beings other than him out there, then are you not afraid?”

“Of course I was afraid. But that is why I find myself able to live. I see things and learn more about them. If there’s nothing I could do about it in the first place, then what purpose is there to ever worry at all?”

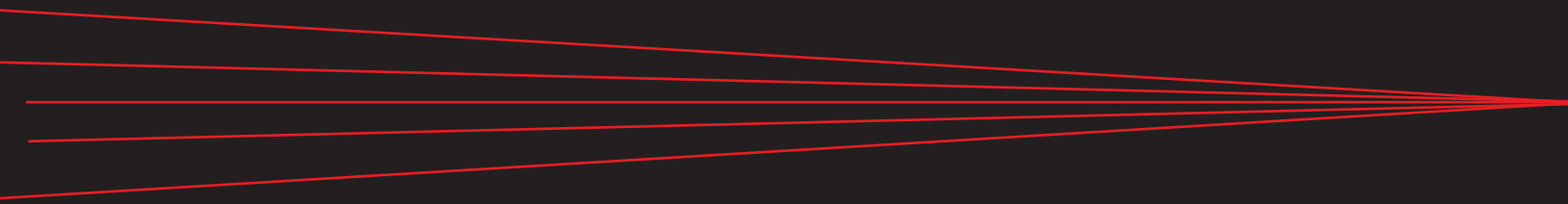
“So, what is it you do with your knowledge?”

“I create things.”

“I create things.”

“Just...things?”

“Not always, but eventually. Most of the time I just write some ideas down in a journal and save it for another day. You’ve likely walked past a dozen or so of my own books on your way up here. You know that soup you ate? I learned the recipe from a nation further east of here. They use plants that grow in the sea as their ingredients, you know.”



“Sounds quite fascinating. I’ve never ventured far from home. Your tower is the furthest east I’ve ever been in my life.”

“Oh, that reminds me. You’ve been asking me so many questions now, I think it’s only fair that I ask you a few.”

“Go right ahead.” said Albert, realizing he’s been too uncourteous in the conversation.

“You said you were from Mortified or someplace, right?”

“Morsfidei.”

“Real mouthful. In all my travels, I’ve never been there. What’s it like?”

Albert thought about his answer. His home hadn’t been in the best of conditions. The devastating wars, great famine and civil unrest that was waiting to boil over. He couldn’t give an answer that would seem nice.

“It’s a swell place. Just like any other, really.”

Morgan looked straight at him. “You’re hiding something, aren’t you?” Her sudden words alerted Albert. “What do you mean?” he asks.

“I can usually tell if somebody is hiding information from me. I told you I liked to observe. It’s fine if it’s uncomfortable for you to say it out loud. I can make it easier if you’ll allow me to read your mind and glean your memories if you’re okay with that. You could think of it as payment for lodgings, no?”

A chill coursed through Albert. Who was Morgan, really?

“Morgan,” Albert blurted out, trying to not sound too afraid, “Do you know something about magic?” Morgan took her answer in stride. “Oh-hoh! So you know what magic is? Seems I don’t need to do too much explaining then. Do I know anything? Quite a lot, actually. I practice it a little here and there. Nothing you should be worried about though. What I’ll try on you I’ve done before on plenty of people.”

Albert’s throat felt like it was going to choke. “Are you a witch, Morgan?”

“A witch? I consider myself a good cook, but I don’t really deal with potions or cauldrons. The correct term for me would be sorceress, I believe.”

Albert caught his breath at the word ‘sorceress’. He instinctively unsheathed his sword and pointed it at Morgan. “Morgan, should I be considering you a threat?” he asked with trembling determination. Morgan furrowed her eyebrows as she said, “Is this a joke? Where is this coming from?”

“This is no joke. I am on a journey to slay a sorcerer who has cursed my kingdom. Now you’re asking me to trust a

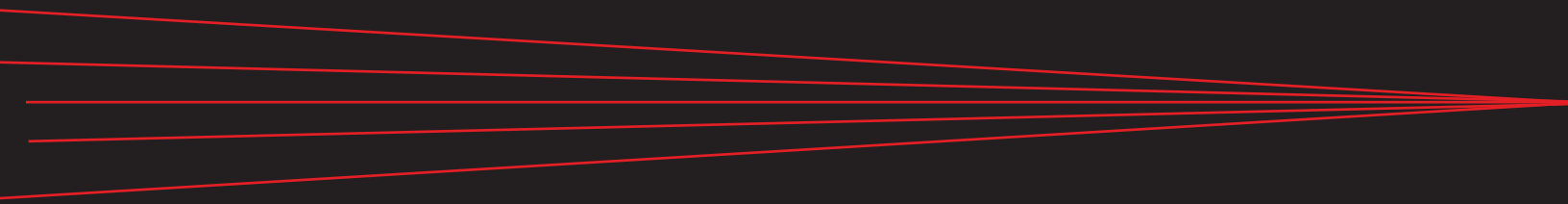
stranger to cast unfamiliar magic on me? Morgan, what are your true intentions? Do you have anything to do with the suffering of Morsfidei? Answer me!” Pure paranoia laid across Albert’s face. He had been too carefree stepping into a stranger’s home. Was this tower a trap? Was Morgan expecting him all along? He felt as if danger was now all around him.

“Sir Albert,” Morgan snapped, with veiled anger in her voice, “I know nothing of this ‘curse’ and I will not be threatened in my own home. You are now treading on my hospitality. I can overlook this transgression and still shelter you for the night if you put away your sword and apologize. But right now, you are hanging by a very thin thread. Now please, meet my request before things get too violent.”

“Is she trying to intimidate me?” Albert thought, *“I don’t know what she’s capable of, but I can’t back down! If I do, she might attack when my guard is lowered!”* He doesn’t want to kill Morgan. He doesn’t want to kill anybody. But if the choice was either him or someone else, he had to make the decision to fight and survive. He opened his mouth again and further confronted Morgan. “I’m not sure I believe you. I ask again, are you a threat to me?” With a look of disappointment on her face, Morgan sighed, “I warned you.”

Morgan reached to the back of her head. She took out the pin in her hair and it untangled over her back. But where Albert expected her hair to just reach to her shoulders, it first reached her waist, then her legs, then her feet...

Her hair wouldn't stop falling. The image made him flinch. The hair piled onto the floor and pooled in a tangled mass that drizzled over itself like melted chocolate. The hair continued to morph into an enormous shadow that clung to Morgan. Then, the mass moved. Within seconds, the entire room was obscured in the shadow's sheer darkness. The shadow spread out and



carpeted the floor, painted the walls. It reached up to the glass dome and snuffed out the light of the moon. There was nothing that illuminated the room anymore. Even in the harrowing darkness, Albert could perfectly see Morgan. She stood still in the center of the room with a chilling calmness in her eyes. The pin Morgan was holding transformed into a thin, lengthy stick: a wand. She held it up and pointed it at Albert.

Morgan sighed, "We were doing so well too. Good night, Albert."

Albert straightened himself to appear more confident. “I will not be deterred by this trickery!” He yelled, “Answer me, Morgan!” He charges at her.

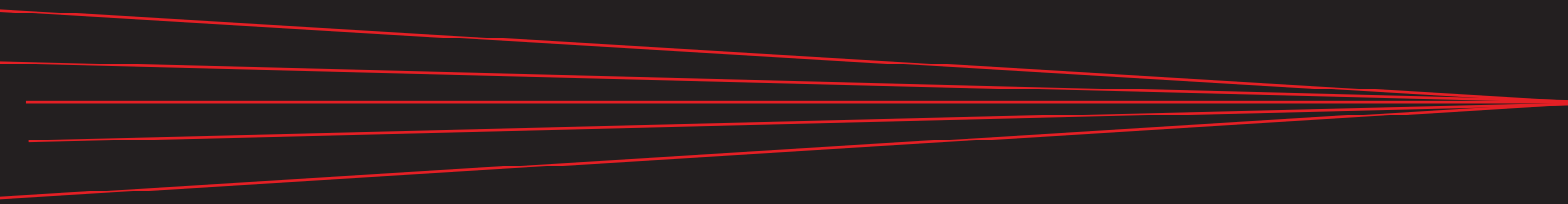
“I said, good night!” Morgan’s voice reverberates across the room. The tip of her wand glowed before emanating a blinding light that engulfed Albert’s vision. The light burned with the brilliance of the morning sun, as if God’s own radiance shone down to judge Albert. All he could do was close his eyes.

*** * ***

Sir Albert always wanted to be a knight, or at least that was what he believed. His father wore the armor to serve the king, and his forefathers before him laid down their lives for the same crown. He did not remember who his father’s fathers were, hearing only tales of their bravery and chivalry. But he did remember his father and the same tales of gallantry playing out before his eyes. His father was his own hero. Albert remembered the shining armor he wore, symbolizing the beacon for all other knights to follow. He remembered the parades that welcomed soldiers home, with his father taking center stage as crowds serenaded him with flowers and cheers. He remembered his father telling him the greatest honor for the men of the family, and any man

in the kingdom, was to serve and fight for king and God. But he also knew such a great man was not invincible. The constant warfare Morsfidei waged meant his father was always away, fighting one campaign or another. The few times he was home, Albert remembered the tired look in his father's eye whenever he took off his helmet, the shimmer in them dimmed from the stress of fighting for years on end.

The last thing he remembered of his father was seeing him returned home without any more fanfare. His father came back from one final battle that stole away what little light was left in



his eyes. His dead body was battered and bruised, the armor he wore with such pride now torn apart and shattered into pathetic pieces. Having been laid to rest, he would never again receive a hero's welcome.

* * *

Albert felt the sensation of wood on his back when he regained consciousness. He was on the floor, and couldn't see anything around him. The utter darkness persisted in the air, and he surmised he was still in the same room. He stood up with his sword at the ready once again.

ised he was still in the same room. He stood up with his sword at the ready once again.

“So, is that it, then?” Morgan’s voice pierced through the shadows. “This is what’s been occupying your mind? Some vague quest by your king to save the kingdom? A desire to uphold family tradition? It’s a true wonder how your bloodline survived this long if everyone was so adamant to fight and kill.”

“It is a knight’s greatest honor to serve his king.” Albert retorted and scanned the room for Morgan.

“Did you believe yourself to be a ‘chosen one’, sir knight?” Morgan said in a mocking tone. “That you alone are the destined enemy to some sorcerer? Or maybe even to kill me?”

“I have been ordained by God and my king to save my kingdom.”

“If your king sends only one man to save his kingdom, he is a fool. If your king sends many, then you aren’t anything special. Your king is doing what he’s always done: sending you off to die.”

“I will not hear this poison from the likes of you! You who delve into such forbidden sorcery! It’s blasphemous! It’s unnatural!”

“Oh, lecturing me on piousness all of a sudden? If it exists as something apart from you, something that can be learned, then I would hardly call it ‘unnatural’. It is another thing that exists in reality, just as much as you or I. If anything, your sense of justice and faith is far more farcical than what magic could ever hope to conjure.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“How? Because I’ve read your memories, remember? You’ve been lying to me this entire time! You’re no knight, and you’re not the faithful kind at all. Despite the title of ‘holy’, your conviction to the faith is barely tangible. You didn’t even say grace before you ate my soup.”

Albert couldn’t deny anything she said. He was a fraud and she saw through everything about him. Her words continued to pummel down on him.

“Do you imagine yourself saving the world? Your kingdom is just one of so many others, what’s the point in shedding all this blood over a strip of land? You don’t even comprehend how futile either of our lives are in the grand scheme of things, do you? The universe did pretty well before either of us existed, and it will do just as well without us.”

Albert stayed silent.

“I’m not getting through to you, am I? Then maybe your own memories will.”

At those words, the room began to shift. Splotches of the black shadow changed colors, with areas above becoming blue or white, and pieces on the floor a mix of brown and green. Then the shadows became slowly clearer. Silhouettes and outlines of people and soldiers. A bright sky. The sound of clashing steel. And the sight of a cavalry charge straight at him. Albert found himself returning to his nightmare, back onto the same battlefield.

His heart pounded. “What the hell is this?”

Morgan’s voice rang out. “I told you before. I observe, I learn, I

create.”

The cavalry continued their advance.

“*They’re just illusions!*” he told himself. It didn’t help. Everything here felt the same as before. The same sights, the smell of blood, the ceaseless yelling. Even if he knew what he saw wasn’t real, fear pushed him forward to repeat his actions. The sword in his hand. Instincts kicking in. Swinging with reckless abandon and cleaving into anyone around him. The first kill, the second, and every kill right after. The images around him felt light, like

he was cutting through air, but the burden of repeating everything was just as heavy as the first time.

But something was different now. Something Albert doesn’t quite remember doing. He finishes his rampage and finds himself falling over, his hands and knees touching the ground. “*Why aren’t I getting up, why am I stopping now?*” He thought. He felt something wet drip from his face, down onto his hands. But it was not blood or sweat that fell, but tears. He remembered now what really happened, what he tried to suppress that his subconscious had now unearthed: he was crying. Albert wept among the corpses he created. From how

many other children just like him did he take away a father? How many years of living, laughing, loving—wasted—because of his decisions? How heavy the blade was in his hands. How bitter the saltwater tears tasted.

Maybe this was to be his recompense. To relive this guilt for the rest of his life. The illusion faded, and Albert returned to the dark observatory. His sword was still in his hand, without a trace of blood anywhere. He lifted his head and saw Morgan in front of him as she approached with her arms by her side.

“Had enough already?” she asked and stopped an arm’s length away from Albert.

“Are you really here or is this just another illusion?” he said, getting back up and readying his stance.

“If you believed I was an illusion, then why don’t you just strike me down like the rest?”

Albert’s hands crushed themselves under their own grip. All he had to do was kill once again. Whether this was another illusion or the real thing, what did it even matter? The problem in front of him would be over either way, wouldn’t it? He took his sword