

OBU 2016 SCRIBLERUS



The Scriblerus is a publication of the Chi Delta Chapter of the Sigma Tau Delta International English Honor Society. It takes its name from the Scriblerus Club, a group of writers organized in London in 1714 by Jonathan Swift. The selections are chosen from the student editorial staff and an outside panel of judges chooses winners in the poetry and fiction categories. This journal proudly displays the winners. This year, after a one-year hiatus from publication, is the first edition to be posted online.

A Note from the Editors

If we had to pick a theme for this year, it would be “Getting it Done.” After a one-year hiatus, members of the English Department and Sigma Tau Delta were very eager to see this publication return. So much so, that two independent commissions were taken up and then merged. We also took on the goal of online publication for the first time. While there were many challenges in getting the publication revived, reviewing submissions, and publishing with an online platform, we’re proud to say: “we’ve made it.”

The poetry and fiction in this volume draws from a wide variety of OBU’s students: students who took Advanced Fiction, Introduction to Poetry, Introduction to Creative Writing, a few independent submissions. Academic Majors that are represented range from Creative Writing to Psychology and even Computer Science.

As we move forward with the *Scriblerus* we hope to include even more of OBU’s students in the design, writing, and publication. As for now, this volume is formatted, edited, and published, and all that’s left to do is add the Tolkein quote:

“It’s the job that’s never started as takes longest to finish.”

– The Fellowship of the Ring

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Poetry

First Place Winner:

Little Brother
Kirstina Ward

We lost you when you were two.
For twenty minutes we searched,
only to find you huddled
between dresser and wall,
giggling at our panicked faces.

The summer your voice
became the color of a coyote howl
you wandered into the mesa
and turned off your phone
I know, because I listened to the voice you shed
in April tell me you were, “currently unavailable.”

“Please try again”

This time—no matter how often I checked—
the corner between dresser and wall
remained vacant.

Second Place Winner:

Daddy is a Marlboro Man
Kirstina Ward

Real men smell like nicotine.

Buds shoved into pockets
of stone washed jeans
to be pulled gingerly out
by pudgy fingers
on laundry day.
Leaving leftover leaves
crushed into nail beds.

The scent is strongest in winter.

The curl of smoke alive
in the white of morning sun
as your coarse hands shake
me awake,
the sting of your breath
more bitter than the cold.

I find you in

the delivery man
ahead of me in line at Staples
who smells of Marlboro Reds
and nods to me as he takes his change
and slides it into pockets to rest
beside the remains of his last smoke.

Third Place Winner:

But Why Would You Move to Oklahoma?

Elyse Kusakabe

They ask what a fish-shaped dot in the
middle of the
ocean has to do with a
landlocked pan-shaped prairie

They ask in accents I thought I'd hate:
with a clicking k
like a quick knock marked by a ticking clock,
harsh in throats.
And with a short e bending into short i
intense
when
pen
gets
put to paper because
they never hear it.

It must be so different.

They ask
 What is there for you here (of all places)

Books on my shelf:
the thick Canterbury Tales
 Holly listened to me recite
the ruined blackness of The Road
 Elise and I cried on
Nortons in reds and blues where
 Kaitlyn's pencil marks talk to mine

Each spine settled
one leaning against another, against another
 against another

Crisp Poetry
Sarah E. Anderson

Come one and all,
The academically serious and the intellectually curious,
And tell me why a dead man,
quiet as soft spoken gossip,
gray as a clay jar,
isn't just a stale dead man?
Why must the gust
of wind whistle a tune of beauty
and the muse
prove as pure as a new bird
with old words
heard clearly with a well-versed ear?
And, yet, here I am, shouting
"Banana!"
over and over again in my room,
praying for inspiration.
Here I am,
whispering, "Crisp."
because of the way the word rolls out of my mouth
and falls onto the page.

In a Dusty Museum
Sarah E. Anderson

Black polished curves,
Hollow body,
Voiceless gaping mouth,
Six still strings,
Incarcerated for its age.
Longing for the touch
of a musician's hand.
But with no notes to sing
inside a glass coffin.

Aunt
Jeff Baldie

The night was painted deep blue when you left me
with tears smeared halfway across my face.
Memories from the time we danced, you were flipping
your hair like a mad woman, played on our static television.

Someday we may walk together again on the streets of gold
like we did on the La Jolla beach collecting sea shells.
I still remember when you played in the sea weed
draping it over yourself like the queen of the ocean might.

I remember playing in the ocean,
as you lay dying in your hospital bed,
not knowing you would leave me.

My mom sat me down on the rough unlevelled patio
and the crickets sang their song
while I deafly listened to her tell me of your departure.
All I could bring myself to think about were the smiles we shared
on the distant day at the beach.

iProblem
Bo Bradshaw

All these people are worried about being on fleek.
They try to impress each other
with brand name clothes and
fire kicks

Posts on Insta or Twitter present their absolute best.
Everyone fronts and don't show their true selves.
Insecurities are hidden and
Covered with filters and edits.
#Goals

Get off your phones and take out your little white headphones,
Talk to someone face to face,
let them hear your song.
Live life away from the motto;
"An Apple a day keeps the doctor away."

My Truck
Bo Bradshaw

Sun scalding,
I crank down
the windows.
My sun-faded hat
sits on the dash.

Antifreeze drips
out of some leak
that I can't find.
It runs smooth
as can be though.

...

The white Chevy,
dented and scratched,
trucks on
through the snow.

Its small cab
wraps me up
like a big over coat.
"Blue Christmas"
coming out the speakers.

...

I pound my fist
on the worn out, grey
steering wheel.
And refuse
to go inside
the funeral home.
My screams at God
fade.

I sit in my truck.
The cliché rain begins
To fall on the cracked windshield.

Address of a Sitka Raven in Winter
Abigail Chadwick

Years past I was born by a moonlit sea,
A place of homely beauty, always wet.
So unimpressive to a vast degree,
At least to those it has not truly met.

The hem of my dress swishes on the floor.
The thin black fabric drapes around my feet.
The tightening of my waist makes me feel sore
And yet I must maintain myself as neat.

The house feels small and cold, and there seated
Upon the snowy deck the raven sits,
With no respect for mourners so greeted
With the thank-you-for-comings and food bits.

Outside the frosted window pane, it stares
At snowy banks and laughing pairs of heads.
It sits in silence and solemnly bears
The yammering and jingling of children's sleds.

The world moves on, the raven stays silent.
Looking on cool indifference it waits, then
Waits some more, it almost makes me violent.
I want the end, so I can live again.

I wait for a sound, a buzz, a beeping
A caw, a scream, a silent weeping, but
I hear no sound for the world is sleeping.
For here at night it's keeping with its strut.

The raven's feathers glide across the ground.
The draping wings see Father's final breath.
The tightening wings produce no final sound,
Address that's barely suitable for death.

They strut with pride the ravens of that town
And perch on every tree and house they find,
But silently they wait and look on down.
It drives me past the edges of my mind.

Conflicting Sirens of Fukuoka, the Manzano Mountains, and Sitka
Abigail Chadwick

Wisteria petals quiver—purple, white, shifting
In the air. “Come,” she whispers
Black hair swirling as she bows
“Step forward. Take a chance. Trust,
That life can be good again.”

“No,” the mountain cries, “don’t go.
My roots are deep and you
Are rooted here.” His dark hand
Reaches for me, dragging me back.
“I won’t ever let you go.”

“Shut it out,” the ocean calls,
The salmon swimming through her hair.
“You’ve no more reason to listen
To such drivel. You are free.
He cannot hold you there now.”

Salmon swimming. Salmon spawning Salmon rotting.
Hand grabbing. Earth shredding. Boulders rolling.
Wisteria petals. Black hair. An opportunity.

I will not be distracted
Jessica Chadwick

I will not be distracted by your lips
Which so attract my own. Instead I will
Comfortably sit, drinking tea in sips,
Ignoring your admiring gaze until
(insert something about him talking here)
My foot won't go to find your shoe again
When we sit away from the cold frontier.
(rhyming words: then, ten, ben, men, pen, freshman...)
And when you leave me at my door, you will
Forget to say 'good-night' to me, no tears
Will stain my dorm room floor. (nearly had it!)
(I didn't know what to put here at all)
(add for meter) But what am I to do,
When all I want is to kiss you? (add foot)

Game Room
Jonathan Dent

I would sit, my back to the faded green couch.
Some days with a friend, but often not.
My dad would have been home then.
The bulky Dell desktop monitor would flash sporadically,
An image of bright flowers remaining under my eyelids.
So quick though, that I think it is only me.
How many times did I deliberate about the flowers,
When I could have asked my dad about them?

Silence

Ruthee Gilmer

The lampposts line the empty, grey sidewalk
Standing silently like soldiers. Their long
Bodies leave thin shadows that lay across
The concrete, creating a dark ladder
Endlessly leading to more silent streets.

The tree trunks line the brightening orchard
Warm reds, yellows and oranges slip in place,
Coating the ancient trees in pale sunlight.
The rows of rustling trees whisper. Casting
Shadows onto whimsical grass-lined paths
Endlessly leading through silent rows.

Shadowy soldiers line cold concrete streets
While oaken trees grow on a sunlit path.
Both in their proper place. Both lining their
Own empty paths. One cold the other bright.
The nights owns one, the day claims the other,
Both pointing to their own kind of silence.

There Are Age Spots on My Soul
Victoria Groce

My eyes saw beauty back when I was five.
Looking in the mirror now at twenty,
I find age spots on my soul like black dye.

I used to admire strangers' smiles;
There was something in them that was pretty.
Beauty was once easy to find with these eyes.

The first spot came when I first tried to lie.
The second when I stopped feeling guilty.
Those spots blemish the soul behind my eyes.

When I was younger I did not realize
That souls can age with sin. I miss terribly
When I found beauty behind my own eyes.

A spot grew for believing my own lies
One more for believing society.
These age spots grow and grow and my soul dies.

The largest blemish came from fear. As I
Grow, its darkness smears my soul. It's ugly
Where I once found beauty behind my eyes
Now age spots have marred my soul like black dye.

Sonnet 130 by William Shakespeare
Trudy Hammonds

Homeboys Text

Hit me like a camera flash,
Axe Cologne buried deep in his
“Real Men Wear Pink” cotton shirt.
I wheeze it in, holding tight to his muscled hug.
His halo, a snapback, taken off for a hair flip,
Brown and greasy hair slid, messy over his forehead
like cheesy stuffed crust
On a veggie pizza.
Homies T-pain ringtone rung loud enough
That even grandma heard it.
“Define the relationship.
Oh us? We’re just friends.”

Depression
Madison Jones

I drive to feel like I am moving though
I have no destination, only this
Forsaken road, an endless loop around
The city block, past lonely stores with signs
Flickering out, and by deserted parks
With broken swings. The darkness drapes itself
Around the town, a tight black cloak that turns
Familiar strange.

 The morning has been lost
To me. The sun does not rise up to chase
The night away, the starless sky looms down,
The road continues on.

 I am a kite
A tree has caught, the string ensnared in branch,
The body taut with strain, still searching for
The sky. In time my car will stop, the kite
Fall to the ground.

A Single Memory of Grandpa
Elyse Kusakabe

The tangerine Grandpa gave me:
peeling back the dented orange skin,
leaving pieces on the ground
For those five years I knew him.

Sitting in the wheelbarrow where he'd push me
while he took a break from raking
sweet brown avocado leaves,
I held out the tangerine,
peeled,
still sheathed in a stubborn
white membrane.

"Do it for me."

Laughing, his eyes
disappearing into brown
wrinkles, age spots

"You peel 'um,
Bumbye you get lazy"

Later, to my mom,
"What's bumbye"

"By and by"
sharpening words into good English.

Bumbye,
I separated the tangerine pieces,
peeled the next layer,
white flakes
falling.

Playing with Explosives
Kelsey Lambert

You light the fuse on yourself and there's a
high-pitched squeal as you soar over our heads.
You tell me he tasted like salt
and cigarettes and how the seatbelt
left a bruise on your hip.
You boom, flash, and fizzle, illuminating the night sky.
You say that he's stopped texting back.
Charred bits of paper and cardboard float
to the ground.

White Shoes (or Innocence)
Hunter Sanders

White shoes don't shine for long
Like a November snow or
a newly favored song.
I cry for white shoes;
The world is full of scuff.
But I hate white shoes
For their potentiality
For their mortality;
Futurological
Post-umbilical
Scuff

Dust
Morgan Schaefer

The streets in Port au Prince are tense and loud,
the people crowd to sell their goods and smiles.
They grin with rice and beans on heads in bowls
Their homes are crumbling into dust,
the city full of blue and yellow homes.

My feet are slipping off the rock. I reach
the tiny crack of rock and cling on tight.
My body slips and scrapes against the slab.
The blood of torn and chalky hands cannot
defeat the lack of strength, I grab the top.

These eyes have seen the dust, which covers streets
and mountains, dirt has seeped in crevices,
and becomes unknown. Disregarding breath,
that made it complete flesh, and one unit.

Apple Blossom Tree
Trae Simpson

I saw an apple blossom tree today
while in the park. Its rosy petals, pink.
The tree paid me no mind as I walked by.
Only for the sun did she dance and blink.
I sat under the tree, but she did not
shed any shade for me. I asked her why,
She did not care that the sun was red hot.
Her leaves shook and boughs heaved a heavy sigh.
The tree began to reach as the sun set
to catch the last rays of warmth that give it
life. Now snow and ice are all that she gets.
I recognize this scene and will admit
the only thing this apple blossom tree
cannot have is what it wants, just like me.

Wreck on I-40
Anna Smoot

I wasn't the one driving that night
when the wheels rose like two derelict suns
like my mother's voice fluctuates when I am in peril.
I had time for flashbacks and visions
but instead I heard her—

Be Safe.

Her voice whirled around like the tires
flinging that refrain through my mind.
The instruction in her tone squealed
and snarled like rubber on wet asphalt
as my promise to be safe shattered
like broken headlights on slick pavement.

4closure
Erin Wilson

i saw aunt ronnie stuck to the floor
lookin like a grease stain
her cheek 2 carpet
:/—<—<

u know what i mean?

she picked a corner n the house to crash
using bed sheets as walls btwn the trash piles
lookin homeless

i mean there wasnt even electricity @ our house n e more

& other ppl were there
but we had 2 talk real quiet

The Garbage Pickers
Erin Wilson

Across my street I see a naked child.
He giggles, stepping through the trash his mom
had poured out from a dumpster down the road.
An empty minivan with windows taped
is waiting, engine on, until they find
their future treasures in discarded junk.
I watch the panther pack as they begin
to pilfer busted bag entrails and laugh
a primal howl. The carnivores then start
to pick its bones for valuables, to eat
the meat inside its wrinkled, plastic skin:
they take a golden blouse that's stained with bleach;
an orange and yellow floral pillowcase;
a Buddha figurine. Now satisfied,
they place unopened bags into their car
for them to be picked through another time.

Fiction

First Place Winner:

The Stars of Heaven

By Stephen Briggs

The angels arrived at the town throughout the day until sunset. They came from all directions, with the only thing flying faster than them being the rumors spread in the town. Each company of angelic warriors that came to the temple spoke with the Archangel, received their orders, and then took flight again on patrol.

The last company came after nightfall. With crimson swords leaving streaks of light across the sky in their wake, the company of Justice flew in an arc above the temple.

“Go meet with the others in the temple,” Sardon said from the front of the formation. “I’ll report to Wisdom.”

The rest of the company broke off and flew in a spiral down to the temple. Dancing fires from within the great building cast an orange glow out into the night. Even in the sky, Sardon could hear the clanging and banging of metal on metal. The temple forges were hot, but by the sound of the angels’ hammers, their fervor was hotter.

Sardon flew up higher and over the town, searching for the green streak of light amongst the stars. In a few moments he found it, standing on the roof of the highest tower of the town hall. Sardon angled himself and glided the rest of the way.

As he neared the tower he lifted his body upwards to a standing position. Although he landed with ease, the weight of his armor cracked several shingles as he touched down.

“I never worry about you finding me,” Archangel Ardnoth said. His voice was deep, resonating, and twisted metallically behind his visor.

The Archangel was a shadow against the night sky. From between the plates of his armor, the green glow of his divine essence shone through. His sword was strapped to his side, a fiery green sabre forged by the light of the stars.

Ardnoth did not turn when he spoke; he maintained his watch over the town.

“Justice should never stray far from Wisdom,” Sardon replied.

Sardon’s steps thundered across the rooftop as he made his way to stand beside his commander.

“What do you see?” Ardnoth asked.

Sardon looked out over the city. He saw hundreds of glowing windows staring back at him. He saw figures moving in the streets. He saw the half-moon hanging just above the horizon line of the earth. He saw silhouettes by the thousands: shadows layered upon shadows, each one hiding more within its darkness.

“I see the world of men,” Sardon replied.

Ardnoth gave a grunt that Sardon knew to be a laugh.

“And they say justice is blind,” he said.

“And what do you see?” Sardon asked.

“I see the same as you. But it’s how I interpret it that makes the difference.”

Sardon was silent for a moment, and then said, “You called us here for a reason?”

Ardnoth nodded, “I did.” He turned to Sardon. “Can you feel it?”

Sardon *had* felt it. He felt it since he had first flown over the city. It was a weight that clawed and pulled at him while he flew in the air. It was a presence, like the feeling one got when walking through an unwelcoming crowd: the suffocating silence and the eyes that stare. It was invisible, but it was very much real.

“Corruption,” Sardon said. “It’s all around us.”

Ardnoth nodded. “They will try to take this town soon.”

There was silence between the two angels. Sardon turned back to look out over the city. Likewise, Ardnoth resumed his watch.

“I’ll go out in the streets and scout out what I can,” Sardon said at last.

“I’ll send the companies of Fury and Retribution as well,” Ardnoth said.

“Have Mercy and Peace watch over the priests, they’ll be in the most danger.”

Ardnoth nodded. “Stay safe, brother.”

The streets that night were as dark as Sardon’s mind. Between the buildings his heavy footsteps echoed back and forth off the cobblestone paths. His large frame elevated him above the doors of the town and he stood at eye-level with most of the windows. He could see far down the empty street, down until it forked and went in opposite directions at the end.

The scimitar on his left was just a faint red glow, barely managing to fight off the natural shadows of the night.

As he passed an alley, a high-pitched and warped voice spoke: “So the angels have finally come.”

Sardon stopped.

The voice continued, “And here I was beginning to think you were going to let us have this town without a fight.”

Sardon turned and looked down. The speaker was a human woman. She stood at half his height; her hair was a tangled web of knots and her clothing was ripped and torn. Scars rested on her arms like scarlet snakes, and the ends of her fingers were bloody. Where there weren’t scars there were bruises, or at least enough dirt to cover her marks. Her eyes were a faint blue, like the mist on top of the ocean just before dawn. Although just a few feet from her, Sardon felt as though the two of them stood on either sides of an impossible divide.

“What do you want, demon?” Sardon asked.

“You can call me Malbach, and I have everything I need right here.”

Sardon drew his sword; the red scimitar left streaks of light in its wake as he spun it in the air. “If you came alone to kill me, you will be disappointed.”

“Oh, but I’m not alone. You are not among the stars where you were born. You are in the world of men. We are all around you.”

A faint tinkling sound, like coins being dropped on the ground, came from behind and to the right of Sardon. Wings flapped above him. Not the metal plated wings of an angel, but a deep and heavy flapping of flesh. The stench in the air putrefied to sulfur. Without looking around, Sardon knew he was surrounded.

“I’ll ask you again, demon, what do you want?”

Malbach smiled, cracking her lips as she did so. As she spoke a small trail of blood dribbled from her mouth. “I have come to make an offer for your loyalty.”

Sardon glared. “There is nothing you can give me.”

“But there is!” Malbach cried. “I came to offer you power. Legions, I offer, would be yours to command. I extend to you the chance to be more than a soldier serving in the shadow of your commander; I offer you the chance to command the shadows themselves.”

“And what of that do you think appeals to me? I am *Justice*. You would have had an easier time seducing one of Fury, or Retribution.”

Malbach took a step forward. Sardon pointed his sword to her chest. The shadows around them hissed and clicked and cried in anger. Malbach stopped and raised her hands, and at her command, the demons were silent.

“But I’m not trying to seduce you,” Malbach said. “You’re already convinced. You of all the angels know the evil that haunts the heart of man. You of all the angels know that when you slay demons in their defense, you are merely trimming the branches and leaving the roots.”

Malbach put her hand on Sardon’s sword. She pressed against the blade but he held it steady.

“And what of Wisdom?” Malbach continued. “Who is he to command Justice? Man has wisdom, or claims it, and yet from town to town their justice differs, as fickle and flighty as though it were subject to the wind itself. But you, you of all the angels know why man can’t find justice.”

Under the demon’s pressure, Sardon’s sword fell.

“The guilty can’t understand their crimes,” he said. “They point fingers when they are all to blame. They gouge their own eyes and cry foul at the world. They are the source of their own destruction.”

Malbach stepped closer to him and put her hand on his chest.

“So judge them, angel. Let true justice be done.”

From her touch blackness sprouted and began to weave its way through Sardon’s armor. Dark cackling voices chattered from all around him. From behind Malbach, twisted and warped beings stepped out from the shadows. Their skin was rough as though constructed of broken bits of rock. Tumorous bulges covered their joints and warped their grotesque beings further. One was like a man but crawled on all fours. It looked at him with glowing yellow eyes that stared above a lipless mouth. Another creature with wings tattered and torn and bleeding, stood on the tips of a dozen claws and cocked its head at him. Another humanoid, a giant that could meet Sardon’s gaze eye-to-eye, had arms as thick as the pillars of the temple. The ends of them were rounded off and hardened with callouses and tumors that made its arms into a pair of clubs.

But these beings of darkness never left the shadows. They bowed as Sardon entered their presence.

As Ardnorth walked among the forges of the temple, he could feel the blaze of the white fires reaching out with their hot touch even through his armor. The angels worked in the heat of the blaze, mending and reinforcing their armor and sharpening their swords. The marble interior of the temple echoed with the ring of hammers and screeching of grinding stones. But beneath the hammers’ song, there lied a grim countermelody.

Sardon hadn’t returned when he left for patrol that first night. Ardnorth had hope that the commander of Justice would still show up, but he had to prepare for his fears.

“Dromad, come here,” Ardnorth said, shouting to be heard over the noise.

Dromad looked up from his grinding stone, then stood and strapped his sword to his side. Ardnorth walked outside to the courtyard of the temple, where it was much quieter. Dromad followed.

“There’s no doubt you’ve noticed your commander’s absence,” Ardnoth started. “Until his return, I am appointing you to lead the company of Justice.”

Dromad bowed his head and said: “As is your will, Archangel.”

Ardnoth could all but hear the question that lay on Dromad’s tongue.

“Speak your mind,” Ardnoth said.

Dromad kept his head bowed. “I wanted to ask if I could send a party to search for Sardon.”

“It’s too dangerous.”

“But sir—“

“I can’t risk any more of the company,” Ardnoth said. “We are not just dealing with a sprout of corruption in this town. The demons have put down roots; they are strong.”

Dromad hesitated and then said, “I understand.”

“Look at me.”

Dromad looked up. Ardnoth raised his wings. Encased in steel plated with gold, the wings made a noise like clockwork as they moved. Dromad followed suit. The two took off in a gust of wind, one after another. They didn’t go far; they flew above the temple until the city spread out in a vascular network. The meandering crowds circulated the streets below, pumped by an unseen heart through this great creature’s veins.

“I have been keeping watch since the first night we arrived,” Ardnoth said. “I watched as Sardon left, and I have been watching for his return.”

“I didn’t mean to imply—“

“I take no offence. Your concern for your captain is admirable.”

“He trained us all.”

“And if he was a good mentor, then his students should be ready to continue without him.”

“Sir, do you think something happened?”

“Look at the city.”

Dromad did, but Ardnoth sensed no understanding in the young angel.

“It’s a big city,” Ardnoth said. “And while some people have faith, every dark heart is a nest of shadows. Just as the stars themselves are surrounded by darkness, so are the righteous in this city. These people need you. Do you understand?”

Dromad took his eyes off the city and looked at the Archangel. At last he said, “Yes sir.”

Beneath Ardnoth and Dromad, the crowds of the city continued to move as one amorphous being.

At last, Ardnoth dismissed Dromad. As the young angel flew down back into the temple, the script on his armor shone silver in the afternoon light.

Ardnoth whispered a prayer: “When the fires come, may his heart stay true.”

Ardnoth walked up behind Captain Mina and put his hand on her shoulder. She had her arm on the anvil and was welding a hole in her armor that a demon’s claws had torn open from their last battle. All along her arm were gashes and scrapes through which her blue essence shone unprotected.

The angels hadn’t had the time to properly recoup from their last fight. Ardnoth’s heart hurt at the sight of their injuries.

The arm that held the hammer stopped in midair as Mina felt Ardnoth’s touch. She looked over at him.

“When you’re finished, we’re meeting outside for prayer,” Ardnoth said.

Mina nodded and brought up her hammer again.

Ardnoth went around to all the angels in this manner. Every one of them was nursing recent wounds. They needed time to truly heal.

But that was another thing they did not have.

When Ardnoth had finished going around to the troops he went out into the hall. Already there were angels waiting for him. Captain Trista and Feldan from the Company of Faith; Marlo and Drune from Conviction; Michael from Retribution; and Sarah from Penance.

More angels came from the forges. All the divisions came out. Nine companies in total, eleven members in each; Ardnoth made one-hundred to complete the legion. But without Sardon, they stood at ninety-nine.

As the angels came out, they gathered in a layered circle. There was no order in the circle, captains stood both beside and behind their troops. For the next hour or so, all the angels, even the Archangel, would be equal.

“Captain Trista, will you lead us?” Ardnoth asked.

Trista stepped forward into the center of the circle.

“Give your souls to me,” she said to the troops. She stepped out of her armor, separating her formless soul from the metal, and leaving the shell standing like an empty cocoon. All around the circle the angels stepped out of their armor and drew closer, forming several layers around Trista. Their essences touched and melded with one another as they did; their light, shining in every color, illuminated the temple in one blinding white glow.

Speaking in the angel’s native tongue, Trista began the ancient dirge. Her voice was a cool and full-bodied soprano. As she sang her song echoed from the roof of the temple and bounced back to be paired into a chord with itself, creating an otherworldly harmony and melody that filled the room and spilled out into the streets.

At last, Ardnoth joined in. His bass laid a firm foundation for the flighty soprano. As the two of them sang, the rest of the angels began to glow brighter. One by one the rest of the legion began to sing. Together their voices shook the walls of the temple, the coals in the braziers burned brighter and sprouted into flame, and the clawed and fanged shadows outside drew away.

But other shadows played behind the eyes of the angels. The prophetic prayer Trista sang revealed itself to the gathered.

Ardnoth saw darkness, a roiling and bubbling ocean tossed and turned by winds filled with screams and howls. Above the ocean were stars, each one shining bright and shooting streaks of light which fell from the sky like meteors into the black depths.

Then, from the ocean, an enormous black and tarry hand reached up. The stars in the sky focused their light upon it and it grasped at the empty air while recoiling in pain. It began to sink, but before it was all the way under it launched itself to the sky and grasped two stars. Despite the fury of the sky, the hand sank with its captives.

Trista stopped and the images faded. The rest of the angels looked at her, and then to Ardnoth.

“What does it mean?” Cravon, the captain of conviction, asked.

Ardnoth stood assaulted by the eyes of his legion. The weight of their stares was a greater burden than that of his armor. He was silent as he played the images over in his head again.

“I don’t know the details,” Ardnoth said. “But it’s clear we win. No matter the cost or the darkness, we will win.”

Trista nodded, then stood. The rest of the angels joined her.

“It is behind Wisdom we stand,” Trista said. “And by Wisdom, we will never fall.”

Ardnoth nodded. He concluded their meeting with: “Tend to your armor. Finish your repairs. Care for yourselves as you would your brother or sister; we are each as strong as those beside us.”

As Ardnoth gave his orders the troops marched back into their armor. This time their light shone brighter. As they took to the forges the sound of their hammers replaced the song of their prayer and every swing struck harder than the last. They burned their fires hotter, and they continued to pray as they worked.

But instead of joining them in the forge, Ardnoth went into the depths of the temple, to pray on his knees, alone.

“Justice, Penance, Retribution, fly!” Ardnoth shouted. In a synchronous gust that blasted at his back, the three companies launched into the sky. Their armor shone with an unnatural light, a radiance armed with ferocity. The companies waited in the sky like a flock of hawks ready for the hunt.

“Virtue, Conviction, Righteousness form the line!” Ardnoth could feel the ground shake as the heavenly warriors rushed down the temple steps bearing shields as thick as a town gate and almost matching them in height. They dug their shields into the earth with a thrust, each angel a few yards apart. A translucent golden wall formed between the angels, marking the battle line just before the entrance to the temple.

“Mercy and Peace, wait behind the line. If people come, make sure they get through.”

The companies of Mercy and Peace drew lances and spears and marched to take up their places behind the shield wall.

“Wisdom, draw your bows.” As Ardnoth spoke the rest of his company, standing on either side of him at the top of the steps, drew out long golden poles. Ardnoth reached to the top of the pole and attached a glowing yellow string. He pulled down and, with a grunt, bent the bow into shape.

In front of the angels, a mile away, a wall of darkness cut down the middle of the streets.

The wind blew in the angels’ faces, and it brought with it unearthly screams. Ardnoth had held off gathering the people of the city for fear of provoking a premature assault, but the demons were making their move now.

Monsters and nightmares, the greatest haunts of the heart of man, came rapidly. The beasts that flew did so with bat-like wings and with screeches that tore through the streets and up the temple steps. Long, large snakes whose bodies were covered with iron-hard scales that pointed into daggered quills slithered with tremendous speed. Ardnoth knew greater horrors lay behind the dark cloud, beasts who could cleave the pillars of the temple into rubble, who were spurred on internally by an eternal fire.

“Draw!” Ardnoth said. With him, the company of Wisdom drew back their shimmering bowstrings, and arrows coalesced between their fingers.

Ardnoth stared down the length of his bow and picked out one of the winged demons who currently led the charge. He aimed the arrow then gave the command to strike.

The golden shaft flew without an arc, cutting through the air and leaving a blinding trail of light briefly burned into the night. The shot flew straight through the demon and it fell from the sky in a screech.

The rest of the company soon followed. Arrows flew in rapid succession, each one finding its mark among the demons. In the sky or on the ground, no beast was safe from the company's torrent.

As the demons continued to get closer, Ardnoth drew an arrow and began peering through the throng, searching for the one he feared he'd find.

And there he was. In armor of blackened bone, with scimitar in hand. Sardon's voice, shouting at all the demons and pressing them onward, was a roar that rivaled any beast of the wild. His arms were distorted with muscles and the tumorous bulges that marred the other demons.

Ardnoth aimed his bow at the commander of shadows and let fly a golden shaft. Though it shot straight at the demon, Sardon knocked the arrow aside with his scimitar and looked down from the sky with a cruel smile.

But at that moment the demons crashed into the golden barrier at the foot of the temple. The sound of the collision was deafening, and the demons crushed in the impact roared like animals caught in its terrible wake. The angels of Virtue and Conviction shouted as they were pushed back, their feet scraping lines in the dirt.

"Strike!" the captain of Penance shouted to all the angels in the air. The sky-bound warriors threw themselves at the winged demons. At the collision, blood spilled from the demon side, while metal wrenched and rang on the side of the heavenly warriors.

Ardnoth shot an arrow at an air-born angel pressed by a pair of demons. One demon fell from the sky with a hole in his chest, while the other fell headless by the angel's blade. Ardnoth turned too late as another angel, covered in claws and teeth, was torn asunder, his armor ripped open and his divine essence disappearing in a flash of light. Ardnoth said a prayer for the angel's soul and drew his bow alongside three other angels.

At once they released their arrows and the demons fell from the sky with laughter.

Dromad flew with the company of Justice in a sea of swords and claws. His own sword sliced through every demon near enough to reach, but it wasn't enough. The pack that came upon them took delight even in their own death. Their other-worldly screams and roars hammered against his hearing in an unrelenting gale. Arrows flew past like shooting stars to intercept demons around him and those coming for him, but still he could feel claws scrape against his armor. Every demon killed brought another one to strike. Dromad felt as though he held back the weight of an avalanche, and his body was quickly growing tired.

Hearing a roar from behind him, Dromad spun around and bared his sword.

A flash of red light blanketed his vision. The force behind the blow brought him down in the air. When his vision cleared he made out the familiar red scimitar. The beast that held it was a behemoth in black armor made of bone. Jagged and broken edges jutted out at the joints of its armor and a red fire burned from within its body. The being's presence caught up the light of the battlefield and created a penumbra of darkness surrounding him. Dromad looked into the helmet of his former captain and found only a deep darkness.

Without pause, the demonic commander began to hack and slash at Dromad. The angel parried each blow of the onslaught, but it was all he could do to keep up.

Then, with a roar that could shake rocks from a hillside, Sardon launched himself onto Dromad. The demon's towering bulk overpowered the angel's wings and the two fell from the sky. As they fell Dromad could feel the demon's clawed hands ripping into his armor.

Dromad fell to the earth in the middle of the demonic pack. Sardon's grip on the armor was torn from his grasp and he rolled off to the side. Demons ran by the two of them, completely ignoring Dromad as he struggled to stand. The fall had splintered the back of his armor so that it stuck out like steel spikes.

Dromad caught a woman out of the corner of his vision. She stood still, as though she had been plucked from time and was waiting for the clock to start again. Her eyes were pale blue and they were covered with a glazed expression.

While Dromad looked, Sardon made his way to his feet. Dromad tore his eyes away from the woman only to see Sardon spinning his scimitar in front of him.

"So you're the captain of Justice now?" Sardon spoke. His voice vibrated throughout Dromad's armor. "The youngest of the angels is chosen to replace me. An interesting decision."

"We don't always understand Wisdom," Dromad said behind clenched teeth. "But he sees all things."

"He sees all things?" Sardon said. He lifted up his arms and looked around him. "He sees *all things*?"

He stood over Dromad, "What about me? Did he see me? Did he tell you about me? Your captain, delivering Justice by the hands of demons."

Dromad's heart turned to stone. "This isn't justice," he said. "This is evil."

"I taught you everything you know about justice." Sardon said. "And everything I knew was wrong. They say justice is blind, but it is only blinded by the light it serves. Here in the darkness, I see perfectly."

Sardon put his sword to Dromad's chest. "I'll give you one chance to renounce the light. That was all I had."

The sword touched Dromad's armor and darkness sprouted. As it twisted and twined its way through his armor. It was a fire running through his being. He couldn't stop it any more than a man could stop poison in his veins. He could feel himself succumbing to it, his vision began to dim, and demons emerged from the darkness to stare at him.

But the silver gilded words on Dromad's armor shone even beneath the darkness that snaked through him. He could hear the voices that had once prayed over his armor from within him. He could hear the priests of Moldan, their voices permanently reduced to a hoarse whisper from their constant prayer. He could hear the priestesses of Lican, smooth like cave walls sanded down by water. And he could hear the voice of Ardnorth praying a prayer spoken just days before.

Dromad abandoned his grip on his sword and reached up. He wrapped his hand around the crimson blade.

"I see only darkness," he said. He pulled the blade down into him, breaking through his armor and exposing his essence to the world. "But I die in light."

In a flash which ripped the watching demons to pieces and flung both the woman and Sardon onto their backs, Dromad was gone.

Almost as soon as Sardon got back to his feet, a streaking comet of light shot through the right of his chest. He roared and looked for where it came from, but couldn't make out anything. Another comet came hurtling out from the black cloud and ripped through him. This time he saw a silhouette of light against the black sky.

Ardnorth fell and landed with earth-shaking finality. He looked at Sardon and the green light within his visor shone like a fire burning bright in the night.

Sardon gripped his sword, but he knew the Archangel could draw the bow before he could even take a step.

“How did you fall so far brother?” the Ardnoth asked. His voice was low and ragged.

Ardnoth’s words pierced deeper than his arrows. Sardon had no defense; he was guilty of all that he saw around him.

Sardon dropped his sword.

“I am sorry brother.”

“So am I.”

Wisdom shot one last arrow and the demon of Justice fell. The fires that lay inside of Sardon consumed him, leaving not a single piece of armor.

Ardnoth turned to the woman.

“Looks like I won today,” the woman said. Emboldened by her words, more demons came near her. But Ardnoth advanced nonetheless.

“You are in a different form from when I last saw you,” Ardnoth said.

“And I will most likely be again on our next encounter.”

“Why keep up this fight? Every angel kills hundreds of your kind. For every city you take, we take it back again.”

Malbach, with a smile filled with daggers said, “It does not matter to me how many demons you kill. And I have not come to rule the world of men.” She brought her hands above her head and shouted, “They say the angels are as uncountable as the stars in the sky! But Wisdom, you of all the angels know that though the stars are uncountable, they are not innumerable.” She pointed her finger at the angel. “I have come to sweep the stars from the sky. And tonight, I took two of the brightest.”

Ardnoth drew his sword. One demon flinched towards him and lost his head in a trail of emerald light. Before the head ever hit the ground, Ardnoth took the head off Malbach.

The demons began to flee as Malbach’s laughter filled the air.

Ardnoth sheathed his sword, walked back to Dromad’s armor, and knelt on the ground. The demons ran on both sides of him, their thunderous steps shaking the earth. He gathered the pieces of Dromad’s armor up in a pile. His fingers traced the claw marks that raked the edges of the breastplate, and he placed his palm over the hole opened wide in the center.

“No one will ever fill your armor,” he said. “But I won’t allow it to remain empty.”

With the armor in his hands, he walked back towards the temple. From his lips a hoarse prayer trembled out.

At the sound of his voice, the silver words of the armor glowed, and across its surface the words of his prayer took shape.

Good People
Kelsey Lambert

Chapter 1

“I’m sorry,” Jackson said, eyes fixed on the ceiling. He didn’t dare look in Holly’s direction. “It’s not you, I promise.”

“What’s the problem then?” Holly snapped. “I’m laying here spread-eagle and you can’t get it up? It sure as hell seems like I’m the problem!” Jackson felt his cheeks getting hot.

“I just have a lot on my mind, I guess...”

“Whatever. I’ve got homework to do.” The springs in Holly’s mattress creaked as she stood and began gathering garments off of her floor. Jackson flinched as she tossed jeans, boxers, and a sweaty t-shirt in his direction. “See you later.”

Jackson squinted as he stepped out of Holly’s dimly lit house and into the afternoon sun. The August heat was finally beginning to give way to the cool breezes of September. Soon the leaves would be falling and Jackson would be back in his pads, spikes in the turf, doing what he did best.

Jackson rolled down the widows of his single cab Dodge Dakota and turned the radio up. What the hell was wrong with him? Holly was hot. Like, really hot. Like, legs for days, curves in all the right places, Kate Upton kind of hot. And now he was going home with his tail between his legs because apparently he wasn’t up to the task. How often does a guy get the chance to hook up with a girl like that? And he blew it.

He pulled into his driveway and slammed the door of his truck. The house smelled like food, maybe something Italian. His mom made the best garlic bread. His stomach rumbled as he took the stairs two at a time up to his room. He kicked his shoes off and flopped down onto his neatly made bed. A stack of clean clothes that he hadn’t noticed toppled over, spilling onto the floor. He reached under the bed to retrieve a pair of socks, and his hand knocked into something solid, which rolled out of reach when he tried to grab it. Jackson hung his head over the edge of the bed and peered underneath. A small orange cylinder with a white top lay on its side next to his runaway socks. He reached down and grabbed the pill bottle. How did that get there? He hadn’t had any antibiotics for years, and even then, his mom kept them in the kitchen so she could make sure he was taking them. He looked at the small white label.

HARTLEY, CHERYL. TAKE WITH FOOD EVERY 6-8 HOURS OR AS NEEDED FOR PAIN.

His mom had a prescription for pain pills? Why had he not known that? He pushed himself up off the bed and walked down the stairs into the kitchen.

“Hey mom—”

“Jesus!” Cheryl jumped as Jackson spoke behind her, nearly dropping the lasagna she had been pulling from the oven. “I didn’t even know you were home!”

“Sorry,” Jackson said, laughing as his mom set down the hot dish and clutched her chest. “Hey, is this yours? I found it under my bed.”

Cheryl’s eyes widened and she snatched the pill bottle out of Jackson’s open palm. She fumbled as she tried to force it into her pocket, and it clattered to the floor. “Yeah, thanks.”

Jackson raised his eyebrows as his mom bent over to retrieve the pill bottle from the tile floor.

“Why do you have a prescription for Vicodin anyway?” Jackson asked.

“Just from an outpatient procedure I had awhile back. Nothing serious.” She turned back to the oven and spoke to Jackson over her shoulder as she pulled out a loaf of garlic bread wrapped in foil. “Would you go get your sister? Dinner is ready.”

“Ouch!” Alex yelped at the sudden pain in her ears. Jackson chuckled as he stood there twirling her earbuds around in the air, faint music still playing from them. “What do you want?” Alex said, snatching the earbuds back out of her brother’s hand.

“Mom says dinner’s ready,” Jackson said, smirking. “We all know you’re hungry.” Alex felt the blood rush to her cheeks as her brother strutted across the room with all of his athletic grace. He got the looks, she got the brains. Too bad her GPA wouldn’t score her a boyfriend.

She got up from her place at her desk and stood in front of the full-length mirror that hung on her closet door. She raised her shirt past her bellybutton and pinched the lip of fat that poked out over the top of her jeans. She looked herself in the eyes and repeated her mantra. *Skip dinner, be thinner. Skip dinner, be thinner. Skip dinner, be thinner.*

Alex made her way down the stairs and took her place on the far side of the dinner table, an empty chair at the end to her right. Her mother set a glass baking dish of lasagna on a trivet in front of her. The hearty smell of pasta and herbs filled Alex’s nose, and she made herself focus on gulping from the glass of water in front of her.

“Jackson, would you like to do the honors?” Cheryl asked.

“I’m good,” he said without looking up from his phone.

“Alright. Heavenly Father, we thank you for this day, and we ask that you bless this food to the nourishment of our bodies, and continue to bless this house with your great mercy. In your holy and precious name we pray, amen.” Cheryl picked up a spoon and began dishing up the lasagna.

“That’s enough, Mom, thanks,” Alex said.

“Are you sure? We’ve got plenty.” Cheryl moved her spoon back towards Alex’s plate, then finally shrugged when Alex assured her that she had enough. “How was practice, hon?” Cheryl asked, glancing at Jackson.

“Fine,” Jackson mumbled through a mouthful of bread. “We got a couple freshmen into bull in the ring—I don’t even think those scrawny little suckers’ balls have dropped yet. One of them cried,” he said, barking out a laugh.

“Watch your mouth!” Cheryl snapped. Jackson smirked and Alex rolled her eyes. She’d like to see him make a comment like that when Dad was home. Now that he was a senior he thought he was a man or something. As if. She pulled a hunk off the piece of bread that her mom had handed her and rolled it into a ball. She squished it into the napkin in her lap, then raised the napkin to wipe her mouth as she pretended to chew.

“Alex, how was school?” Cheryl asked. Alex held up her finger and pretended to swallow.

“It was good. My group gave our presentation in English today.”

“Is that what you wore?” Cheryl asked, eyeing Alex’s plain-Jane t-shirt. Alex nodded, and looked down at her plate as her mother informed her that she might have caught the boys’ attention if she had worn a dress. A lot had changed since her mom was in high school. Alex didn’t think she really knew how it worked anymore. Or maybe nothing had changed, but since Alex wasn’t the petite pom squad captain that her mother had been in her younger years, she just didn’t understand that it was different for Alex. Cheryl began asking Jackson something about Homecoming, which wouldn’t be voted on for another month, but it was a given that Jackson

would win. How could he not? Alex took the opportunity to shove the rest of her bread into her napkin.

“Alex honey, do you have a date to the dance yet?” Cheryl asked, eyebrows raised in concern that was masked as excitement.

“No. I probably won’t go,” Alex said, cutting into the lasagna on her plate.

“What about that boy you helped in math class last year, Thomas. He was nice.”

“Tommy Fink? Mom, he’s a total weirdo. He got caught messing around with the frogs and cow eyes they keep in the biology lab last week. Plus, he’s got a girlfriend.”

“Yeah, her name’s Palmela Handerson,” Jackson piped up, snickering at the look his mom shot him.

“He has a girlfriend?” Cheryl asked, looking back at Alex. “Who?”

“Some girl that just moved here from like, I don’t know Kentucky or something. She doesn’t shave her legs above the knee. The other day she wore running shorts in gym class and it looked like she escaped from the petting zoo. Can I be excused?” Alex had pushed her dinner around her plate enough to make it look thoroughly picked over.

“Alright, I guess. Put your plate in the dishwasher, please.”

Alex carried her plate to the sink and rinsed her uneaten food down the garbage disposal. She tossed her bread-filled napkin into the trash, and was glad her mom and brother hadn’t noticed the too-heavy thud it had made when it hit the bottom of the trash can.

Cheryl spooned a helping of lasagna onto a plate with some garlic bread, covered it in cling wrap, and set it in the fridge for her husband. She listened as her son’s footsteps disappeared up the stairs, then poured herself a glass of wine. She took the bottle of pills from where she had stashed them in the cabinet earlier and looked at the label.

VICODIN, 5 MG/500 MG. 1 REFILL(S) LEFT BEFORE 10/01/15

She swirled the wine in her glass, then took a long drink as she remembered the puzzled look on her son’s face earlier that night. She hoped he wouldn’t ask her about it again, but chances were he would eventually.

Cheryl leaned against the counter and tried to remember why she had even been in Jackson’s room that day. She had started off the afternoon with a trip to the library, where she picked up the novel that her book club would be starting next week. After this she headed to the grocery store, where she ran into Karen Newman, who lived down the street from her. Karen’s son was second-string quarterback under Jackson, and Cheryl always felt a sense of accomplishment for giving birth to an athletically talented son and bringing Karen just a little bit of disappointment into her life. It’s not like the stuck-up bitch had anything else she could complain about. Her husband was the head of a law firm in the city, and she came from money anyway. Never wanted a thing in her life that she couldn’t have, except for her son to be star of the football team. *Ha.*

When she got back from the grocery store she had been irritated and in need of a pick-me-up. She had picked up a stack of clothes from the laundry room on her way upstairs. First she had gone into her bedroom at the top of the stairs, reached into the back of her nightstand, and pulled out the small, orange bottle she kept hidden there. Then she walked across the hall to Jackson’s room and set the stack of clothes down on the end of his bed.

Obviously the pills hadn’t made it back out of Jackson’s room with her, but she couldn’t remember why. They had been sitting on top of his laundry, why didn’t she take them with her?

Then she remembered. The phone had been ringing, and she had hurried downstairs to catch it before the answering machine picked it up.

Her husband's mother called at least once a week, and today she had talked to her mother-in-law for over an hour before hanging up and rushing out the door to pick her daughter up from school on time. When they got home, she had immediately started dinner. Homemade lasagna was so much more work, but it was what her son liked, so she made it that way. She hadn't thought about the pills again until Jackson had showed up with them in his hand. She wished she had.

John shut off the car and exhaled slowly, trying to release the pressure that had built inside of him throughout the day. He looked out the window at his yard. The grass needed to be mowed one last time before it started turning brown. The flowers still looked good, though. Cheryl had been keeping them watered and their bed weeded. If he took care of the grass before the weekend, they might even make yard of the month for September. He unhooked his seatbelt and walked inside.

The house was dark, and smelled like garlic. He dropped his briefcase on the table, walked to the fridge, and pulled out the plate his wife had wrapped up for him. He nuked it in the microwave for a minute, then cursed when the steaming sauce burned his tongue. When his food had cooled, he ate quickly and washed it down with a beer. John left his briefcase on the table and made his way up the stairs to his wife.

Cheryl was propped up against the headboard with pillows stacked up behind her, with her black framed reading glasses on and a book resting in her lap. She didn't look up when John entered the room.

"Hey," John said, walking into the closet and kicking off his shoes. "How was your day?"

"Fine," Cheryl said, still looking at her book. John waited for her to say something else.

"Mine was too," he said when she didn't continue. "Ted stopped by my office. He and Karen are having a barbecue on Saturday, they want us to come."

"Of course," Cheryl said. "I'll make a potato salad."

"They said we didn't need to bring anything," John said. His wife finally looked up and took off her reading glasses.

"Well, of course they wouldn't ask us to," Cheryl said, "but you and I both know Karen's potato salad is God awful."

"It's not that bad," John said, pulling back the covers and climbing into bed in his boxers. He looked at his wife. She wore a t-shirt of his that he had given her back in college with no bra underneath. He leaned in and pressed his lips to her neck, running his hand up her thigh.

"You smell like beer," Cheryl said. She reached over to her nightstand, setting her book down and switching off her lamp. She rolled over onto her side, facing away from her husband. "Goodnight."

John flopped back down onto his back. He hadn't had a good night in a very long time.

No Epiphany
Bethany Blue

Chapter 1

Belle stared into the bright chunks of color and let her eyes follow the white streaks, meant to be reflections of the lampposts on the wet sidewalks. The strokes created mere suggestions of form, something the eye could recognize but remained undefined. The colors were brilliant and chaotic but smeared into one another, making no sense other than forcing her eyes to zero in on the calm figures in the center. A man and a woman embracing face to face, foreheads touching under the safety of an umbrella. The couple was clear, with the hectic energy of color dancing around them. She studied the black line of the man's arm as it wrapped around the woman, holding her to him with certainty, on the canvas, unable to change. And the woman was still. Resting.

Finally Belle exhaled, breaking her focus from one of her favorite paintings. She only came in the mornings, right at 10:00 AM, when the Met was always quiet and vacant for a few moments, just enough time for her to linger or wander alone. Today she turned toward the gallery room. The works of Gustav Klimt were visiting New York and Belle had come to see "The Kiss." She hurried by the rooms of hard sculptures and sharp modernist shapes until the quick clicks of her footsteps slowed and melted away into the thick quiet of the Klimt gallery. She stopped right inside the doorway of the warm glowing room and was completely alone. Sparkling gold leaf shimmered on the walls. The familiar image hung straight across from her, the place of honor. Belle sat on the couch in front of the painted lovers, leaning forward and studious. She concentrated on the face of the woman. She tilted her own head to fit into the painted red hair and marveled at the woman's closed eyes and smooth, placid face. She was surrounded by gold and limp in the arms of her lover as he kissed her cheek. Belle looked harder and thought and tried to pick the secrets out in the paint, the secrets of this peace. She always tried to pick them out.

The squeaking of shoes began to echo through the polished halls along with the rumble of people. A museum docent came into the gallery and handed Belle a pamphlet about the artist and his most famous works. A bookmark adorned with a purple tassel slid out of the fold, "The Kiss". Along the bottom were stamped the words, "common art." It was common, she thought. Everyone recognized this painting, knew what it meant, understood it. Yet she felt that uneasy tug in her stomach as she held the trinket. Everyone had it figured out but her. A young couple entered the Klimt exhibit signaling that Belle's moment alone this morning at the Met had passed. Their hands were locked and Belle could see the man rolling his fingers over the humble ring on the young woman's hand. Their steps were in sync as they crossed the room toward the famous "Kiss." They stood beside her making an odd crowd. Belle numbly smiled and just handed the woman the bookmark as she left. At the doorway, she turned back toward the lovers looking at the lovers and then leaving them to their peace, she left alone.

The museum had filled with tours quickly that morning. Belle hurried for the cold, busy, city outside to escape the intimate crowd. Stepping onto the wet sidewalk, she buried her face down into the soft fur of her jacket. Her long dark hair lapped at her elbows and blew behind her as the New York November wind nudged her toward her Manhattan apartment just a few blocks away. The early morning storm was lifting and hints of blue were framing the clouds. She hoped for a clear day. But the air was still damp and she shivered as she navigated through the rushing

morning crowds. They all seemed to be moving against her. She was pushing upstream through the mass of professionals, all with eyes like laser beams fixed on some destination. She could see the focus and the intent on their faces. They were driven to something, some grand order of how to function in the world maybe. She could not help but feel left out of that plan. So she pulled her arms tighter around herself as she bounced off of the business suits like a rubber ball. Her whirling mind tried to focus on just getting home, home to her own small world. As she reached her building, suddenly fresh, yellow daisies were thrust in front of her. Gary, her doorman, stood firmly in the passing crowds presenting Belle with the bouquet and smiling broadly as he extended his other arm toward the street ushering her eyes to the familiar black limousine parked in front of her building.

“Ms. Adams.” Gary grinned, almost child-like, as he handed her the flowers.

“Thank you, Gary,” Belle said as she accepted the bouquet.

She paused and whispered, “It’s Friday and it’s November.”

The words sounded more like a question or at least a search for confirmation. Gary nodded his head.

Belle stood in the chilly wind with her nose buried in the daisies. She tried to replay the last week in her mind. Nothing really stood out, no reason, nothing unexpected. What the hell had she been doing? How had she forgotten again? For five years now this had been the routine. Once a month, around the first, Robert would come into town. Belle would tidy up the apartment. Her piles of books and papers that would collect all month atop every table, spill into every room and cover most of her bed, would be neatly shelved. She would fill the kitchen with her favorite foods, which she no longer cared much to eat, and push the cheap coffee containers into the shadows of the backs of the cabinets. She would throw out all of the bottles. Once a month, she would have him there. Once a month, she could pretend that she knew how to be happy.

But for the past few visits now, Belle had forgotten to expect him. She didn’t notice the changing of the month or the passing of a week. Robert would show up without warning, it seemed, yet right on schedule. Belle would often be out and although it was his apartment by all sensible terms, he would patiently wait in the car for her to come. He was always waiting on her and always patient.

Robert took Belle’s thin hand as she slid in beside him. He watched her move. She must have been stiff from the cold. She sat just inside the door though and Robert pulled her slight body toward his. Her long dark hair was dotted with mist and she seemed to sparkle. She brought the daisies up to her nose again and smiled. Her heaving chest fell in one loud sigh and she softened into the leather seat. She let her head fall back and closed her eyes. He could see that she was thinner. But her young, pale face was flushed pink by the wind and she was as lovely as ever. She was so young and beautiful at 28. These were the times when Robert felt every one of the 30 years between them. He traced the hair tucked behind Belle’s ear with his aged finger and wondered where she had come from this time. He knew that she had forgotten again.

Robert had spent every night that week pacing the hotel suite cursing that he could not be in New York sooner. This time he had made up his mind. At almost 60, Robert was ready to just stay home. His business was solid, and the time was right. She felt right. He already stretched out every visit to Belle as long as he could and had begun to panic every time he left her. The ache for her had rooted deeply. He knew that he loved Belle almost too much when

every time he left, he was afraid that she would disappear. He hated the panic. This time he had not been able to reach her for days. But Gary reported as he watched her come and go. She was safe at home.

“My love, you are a sight for my old eyes. You look like a flower, just beautiful, Belle. This has been the longest month without you.” Robert said, grinning at her.

Belle took his hand into her lap and opened her grey eyes. She knew Robert had to know that she had forgotten him again.

“It’s so long between visits. You surprised me. I was at the museum. But I’m so glad you’re here, Robert. You must have wonderful stories of Dubai,” Belle said, working every word like trying to soften butter, knowing that things weren’t ready and knowing that he would want to come upstairs. Belle sucked in the flowery air as Robert beamed, “Oh, I do and I have so many gifts for you. Let’s go upstairs, love.”

The bags were full as Gary brought them from the trunk. Mostly of her gifts. Robert carried little and Robert owned little. Belle admired this. He was so simple, such a wealthy man who needed so little. From the time they had first met, Belle knew this. His focus was on her. All men seemed to be that simple really. They seemed to get less tangled up and less bound by the world. And it always surprised her how willing they were to support her, to let her flutter about, just for her companionship, or as they called it, love.

Belle had never had a real job, aside from babysitting when she was eleven. From the time she was thirteen, there had always been a man to take care of her, her dad and then on to a string of men. She had never sought one out but they seemed to be right there when she would need someone else take care of things. Robert had been there for her for five years now, taking care of the mundane goings-on of life for her. He did provide a grand apartment, paid all and any of her expenses and loved to pamper her. She allowed this and this allowed her time. She studied, even got her PhD while with Robert. Belle could never understand how people found the time to create a stable bill paying, grocery shopping, dentist appointment keeping, nine-to-five life when there was so much else to figure out. She knew that there must be something that she didn’t quite get, some reason that everyone else could get through the day and not be left with just confusion. This ached inside her and grabbed her focus, and most of her days were spent trying to figure out how to be as simple as everyone else.

Robert pushed aside the stack of journals and sat comfortably on the ruby couch that he had brought back from Bali last year. It was firm and felt unused. Belle had followed him in and set to tidying but the apartment was still beautiful, just covered in her papers and books. Along the walls were all of his gifts to Belle: tapestries, masks, anything exotic and exquisite that made him think of her. Actually everything in there he had given her and never seemed to be moved or used in the slightest. He often wondered how much living Belle even did in this apartment. The kitchen always looked untouched. He imagined Belle out in the city every day.

“Please come sit, Belle. I have just missed you,” Robert said as he reached for her.

The couch was low and deep with beaded turquoise fringe that draped over the arms and weaved into Belle’s hair as he laid on top of her. He had missed her. She was the sweetest lover that he had ever had, almost timid. She was his to take care of and love.

Her head was cradled in his arm and he loomed over her like an umbrella. His face was kind and his body was gentle. Belle knew that he loved her, really loved her. But this didn’t

matter, it was actually painfully unfortunate. She knew this. Belle had hoped that she had found a place with Robert to stop and be at peace. She always hoped this with every man. But the same chaotic and confusing feelings had been resurfacing. What was out there that she couldn't find? She ached again for something and she had no idea what.

The blue afternoon clouded over to an evening of shadows and rain. Robert had showered and dressed in one of his finest suits. Sprays of clove oil lightly dotted his collar, the only scent that Belle loved on a man. As the steam of the shower rose again in the bathroom, Robert wandered into the living room. He flipped through the top journal that lay beside the couch. The pages were filled with poems and pencil sketches. People, yes couples intertwined. The journal underneath seemed to be filled with old bible school songs. These notebooks were tattered and all over the apartment. He wondered how many there were and pictured his beautiful Belle filling the pages while thinking of and missing him. But he really knew better. And as he glanced at the bed covered in more books, he doubted that he was even ever on her mind.

Robert brought the ring box out of his pocket and rubbed the soft velvet. Belle needed him whether she loved him or not. Robert loved her whether he needed to or not. The faint whiff of some flower flowed into the room as Belle came over to him wrapped in a downy towel. She was exquisite and the time was now. Robert handed her the box in humble silence.

A cold stone fell into the pit of Belle's stomach and now she knew that she had to break his heart. She opened the small box and there before her was an answer, the most common answer to so many questions. She could do this and maybe everything would make sense. It could be easy. Robert was easy. Robert was sure. The ring was so perfect but in all of her trying, Belle had never understood perfect. There so many things that she just didn't understand. The jets of light from the ring stung her, pierced her mind and sharpened her memories, the memories that she carried deep in her every day. Belle knew that her mother must not have understood perfect either.

Keeper of the Flame
Jacob Pollard

Chapter 4

Shepard raised his staff higher, extending the distance the light reached from the flame that burned on the tip of it. He was careful where he stepped, making sure to not step on any icy patches, but there was still a slight bounce in his step. After all this was his first time to leave Cindre by himself as a fully-fledged Keeper. He wondered what it would be like to speak to people who weren't Keepers, what they wore, what they liked. He wanted to know more about them. For so long they had been spoken of and sometimes seen from a distance, but this would be his first opportunity to truly get to know them.

He quickened his pace and he checked the crude map he had been supplied for his journey. The first city he was to stop at was Gan. Shepard had already been traveling for nearly three days and Gan was just a day's journey from where he was now. However, Shepard could tell by the stars above and by the grumbling of his stomach that this day was nearly over, and that he would soon have to find a place to set up camp to get some rest.

He continued on for about another 15 minutes before coming across a clearing within the large forest. This would be as good a spot as any to set up his camp. He first took his staff and planted it in the ground, using the sharpened bottom to push it through the icy outer layer. With his makeshift torch now firmly placed, he laid out his bedroll next to it. Finally he took a small pouch from the knapsack he carried and began to pour out its contents in a circle about his camp. Shepard looked at the small ring of ashes he had laid out, remembering how Gareth had taught him that ashes of wood burned by a Keeper's fire still held its warmth and that with a spark could be rekindled into a dull flame that could last for hours. The flame didn't provide much light or warmth, but was effective at keeping the beasts away while one rested. Shepard snapped his fingers and the ashes seemed to breathe with new life. Embers began to form. Soon small fires burned around him.

Satisfied that the makeshift camp was complete, Shepard sat down on his bedroll and reached for the food supplies kept within. He pulled out a small loaf of bread and a ceramic bowl. He placed the bowl on the ground and filled it with snow. Shepard then took the bowl in his hands and engulfed them in flames. Slowly the ice began to melt into clear water. When only water remained in the bowl he placed it in a small drift of snow to chill it again. He then tore into the bread, completing his meal.

When he finished he lay down on his bedroll and looked up at the stars. The stars had always been of special interest to Shepard. Not only was every Keeper taught to navigate and tell the time by them but they also reminded him of the Great Flame. Gareth had taught Shepard many things about the Great Flame, that it had provided life to the people and that it had rested in the sky giving light to the world. All this was before the shadows had forced the Flame out somehow. This was all common knowledge, but Shepard didn't think that the Flame was completely gone. The stars were the last vestiges of the Great Flame, embers left to watch over the world and give it some light, even if it wasn't as before. Shepard smiled and fell asleep, gazing at the stars.

Shepard awoke with a start at the sound of low growling. He swept his eyes back and forth over the area, noting the scattered ashes seemed to have been blown into disarray by a stray

wind. Shepard snatched up his staff and took a defensive position. He ignited the tip with a quick wave of his hand. In the new light he spotted a large beast on the edge of the clearing, glaring at him. The beast looked like a dog, but was nearly three times the size of one, with paws that rivaled the size of a human head. It was covered in a mottled grey fur that was thick and shaggy, hanging down across its body in uneven clumps. Its muzzle was long, with dangerous fangs underneath the curled snarling lips.

“Yah! Go! Get out of here!” Shepard shouted. He swung his staff in front of him, brandishing the fire towards the beast. The creature’s eyes followed the fire but it didn’t move from its spot.

Shepard wondered why the fire wasn’t seeming to frighten the beast. Despite the ashes being blown around they still should’ve deterred the creature, and now the fire wasn’t working. Normally, the forest animals kept their distance from fire, however this one didn’t seem to be phased by its presence at all. Shepard brought his hand up and pointed it at the creature. A small stream of flame shot from his hand and landed next to the beast. It jumped back as a small flame sprung up next to it. Shepard smiled. His plan seemed to have work, but his grin quickly faded as a dark grey form streaked toward him.

Shepard tried to bring his staff down on it but was bowled over as it hit him with one of its paws. He gasped for breath, nearly letting go of his staff from the pain. Still recovering, he rolled away. He saw the beast land where he had been seconds before. The creature went in for another attack and Shepard brought his staff up, catching the beast’s jaws with it. The creature thrashed and gnawed at the piece of wood stuck in its mouth. Shepard ignited the staff in his hands, causing the canine to yelp in pain and release him, stepping back when it felt its tongue burn.

Shepard stood to his feet and quickly assessed his wounds. His side was bleeding from claw marks, but they were shallow and not overly worrisome. He was more concerned with what damage the force of the blow had caused. One of his ribs felt broken. He glanced back at the big wolf-like creature. It was crouched low and circling him slowly. It seemed more cautious than before but just as determined. The pair stood watching one another waiting for an opportunity.

Shepard tensed as he saw the beast move quickly, leaping to his left, when a short zinging sound came from his right followed by a loud yelp of pain. An arrow was now lodged in the beast’s eye. Before he could contemplate what was happening another two arrows flew, hitting the large beast in the head with solid thuds. The creature slumped forward and with a heavy sigh stopped moving.

Shepard turned and looked in the direction the arrows had come from but saw nothing but trees and snow in the dark. After a few seconds a figure stepped out into the light, almost materializing from nothing like it was a ghost. The figure was wearing a thick cloak, a light white color that blended in with the snow. It was short, no more than a couple of inches above five feet tall, and was thin, nearly fragile looking. Long tresses of nearly white blonde hair spilled out from under the hood of the cloak, framing the face of a young girl, nearly entering adulthood. Her eyes were a sharp icy blue, and were just as cold looking. In her hands she held a bow, nearly half her height, with curved ends. A quiver full of arrows hung at her side. Shepard stared at her as though her image merely confirmed her ghostly heritage, ethereal and foreign, as she stepped past him and began to retrieve her arrows from the corpse of the large animal.

“Uh... Thank you,” Shepard stammered when he finally regained his composure.

“Are you an idiot?” the girl asked, her voice as cold as her eyes. Shepard blinked. This was not the response he had been expecting.

“What?” he said, revealing his confusion.

“I said, are you an idiot?” she turned to look at him. “Why did you antagonize it?” she said motioning to the wolf.

“I.. I didn’t. I was trying to scare it off,” he explained.

“Not that. You slept out in the open next to its den. It’s like you were asking it to come and eat you,” she said, a condescending tone in her voice.

“Den?” Shepard asked. The girl stared at him as though he was the dumbest person she had met. She pointed to a bush on the outer edge of the clearing. Shepard looked at it but saw nothing important about it and was going to say so when he saw that the bush was covering a hole.

“Oh... that den... I didn’t see it,” Shepard admitted.

“So, you are an idiot then,” the girl replied, placing her retrieved arrows back in her quiver and turning to walk away. Shepard blanched. This was not how he had imagined his first meeting with someone besides a keeper would go. Who was this girl anyways? Where had she come from?

“Wait! Who are you?” Shepard shouted after her. She turned back to him.

“Bryn. I’m from Gan,” She said. “I’m assuming you’re the Keeper who’s been sent out to kindle our fire. Keep up if you’re coming, I’m not into coddling idiots.” Shepard couldn’t believe this girl was so rude, but he wasn’t going to pass up the chance for some company. He quickly gathered his things from the camp and caught up to her, the light of his flame in the dark like a star against the night sky.

Chapter Five

Shepard hurried to catch up with Bryn, wincing from the pain in his side which reminded him all too clearly of the wounds he had sustained in the fight. He lifted his shirt to get a closer look at the injuries. There was a large bruise on his lower left side. He touched it and a shock of pain went screaming up his spine, causing him to release a grunt. Bryn turned at the sound and looked at him. Her eyes widened at the bruise.

“You broke your rib?!” she half-asked half-yelled. “Are you trying to die out here or something?”

“Well it wasn’t exactly my first choice either,” Shepard responded, grinning a bit before wincing once more.

Bryn began digging in a small bag that was concealed within her cloak.

“I don’t have enough medicine for that, you’ll have to wait till we get to Gan,” she said.

“Don’t worry,” Shepard replied, holding up a hand, “I can take care of it,” His hand lit in a small golden flame, which flickered slowly, almost calm. It looked nothing like normal flame and seemed to only give off a bare minimum of light. Shepard then placed his hand on his rib as the flame slowly enveloped the wound. The bruise began to gradually fade away and soon the skin looked new with no signs of damage.

“There, all done.” Shepard said as he shot a smile at his companion. Bryn’s eyes were locked on his repaired rib with a look of cold calculation.

“What did you just do?” she said with a hint of wonder. Shepard raised his eyebrow at her.

“What do you mean? I healed it,”

“You healed it? That’s all? That’s what you’re going with? No explanation? Just wave your hand and you’re fine,” Bryn shot him a glare.

“Sorry, I assumed you’ve seen this before. The flames have a restorative property to them. I thought everyone knew that,” Shepard explained.

“What’s with the golden color? I’ve never seen flame like that before.” Bryn said as she began to walk once more. Shepard moved to catch up with her.

“Well, Keepers can do few different things with fire. After all we were blessed with the Great Flame’s spirit.”

“Such as?” Bryn said. Though her voice was brusque, Shepard thought he detected a bit of actual interest in the subject. He began to explain many different things about the Keepers. How they trained with wooden staves so that they could be used as both a weapon and a torch. How to create flames that could be used to fight with.

“It can also be used as a repellent for the creatures of the forest if you place embers around the area.” Shepard continued.

“What if it’s next to a territorial wolves’ den?” Bryn said as she smirked. Shepard chuckled.

“Well I wish I could say I didn’t have any experience with that but…” Shepard trailed off. A comfortable silence then descended on the two as they walked. Shepard smiled at the thought that he may have made his first friend outside of the Keeper’s hall. Granted she was a sarcastic one, but he was still happy to have met her.

“How far to Gan?” he asked.

“Around an hour.”

The walls of the city of Gan rose before the two shortly thereafter, just as Bryn had said. The city of Gan was one of the richer cities and thus had large walls surrounding it. The walls stood nearly 30 feet in height and were several layers thick, being nearly 10 feet deep.

As Shepard followed Bryn into the city, there were even more signs of wealth. It seemed that every house Shepard saw had at least two large furs covering it, keeping in the warmth, and there were torches at every door. Up and down were people peddling wares and bargaining. Most were trading various arrowheads, wood used in bow making, or other archery equipment. However, there was also a good amount of fur clothes and blankets being sold as well.

“There are a lot of bows being sold here. Why is that?” Shepard asked.

“Warmth is what keeps us alive. We get that from the fire and from furs. You need to hunt to get furs so there are a lot of hunters like me here. Bows are the best tool for a hunter. Hence, we deal in bows and other equipment in its use,” Bryn explained. “We also use the meat from the animals as our main source of food here. That’s why hunters are so important.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Shepard agreed.

“Right up this way is town center. The main censer is there, so you can do your thing.”

“Oh. Right. Thanks,” Shepard said. He had nearly forgotten the reason he was here due to the excitement of finally getting to see what a town looked like. It really was quite thrilling, all these people leading a life so different from his own. Gareth had told Shepard that Keepers weren’t well liked in the outside world, but Shepard had never really understood that or believed him. After all, Bryn could be rude but she seemed to be nice enough. And no one seemed to look at him with any animosity. Surely Gareth was just mistaken. After all Gareth wasn’t the easiest man to get along with either.

“Bryn!” came a voice as a man walked towards the two of them. “Glad to see my favorite hunter in all Gan got back safe,” he said. Shepard watched as the large man approached. He seemed to be in his mid-thirties, with a bald head and large beard covering the large grin on his face. His arms were thick almost like tree stumps and he was wrapped in a large fur cloak. Bryn sighed.

“What do you want, Tal?” Bryn replied to the man, harsher than Shepard was expecting. Weren’t these two friends? Tal’s grin grew wider.

“I was hoping to see what you brought me,” Tal said, holding his hand out to Bryn.

“Nothing. I didn’t find anything but this lost traveler,” Bryn explained.

“Nothing? Now Bryn, you and I both know that that isn’t going to pass. You know the standard tax,” Tal said with a threatening smile.

“Yeah I know, and I also know you wouldn’t want the guardsmen to hear about your ‘tax’ either,” Bryn replied, crossing her arms. Tal glowered at her.

“You wouldn’t speak a word. You wouldn’t want your father hearing what you’re always up to.”

“Good, then we have an agreement, we both keep our mouths shut and you’ll get your tax next time,” Bryn said as she gave him a sarcastic smile. Tal grunted once more. He then looked over at Shepard and began sizing him up.

“And who exactly are you? Not much travelers about these days,” he said, narrowing his eyes.

“I’m a -” Shepard began to explain before Bryn cut him off.

“He’s a merchant here to buy some furs and such. You know how it is,” The man named Tal thought for a moment before grunting his acceptance of the lie.

“Yeah, well make sure he stays out of my way. Don’t want anyone cutting into my profits,” Tal growled before stomping away and disappearing once more into the dark and the crowd.

“Why didn’t you tell him I was a Keeper?” Shepard asked, puzzled. Bryn looked at him with her cool blue eyes. Shepard could almost feel them driving a hole in his head as they gazed at him, but they seemed more inquisitive than angry, as if they were searching for some answer to an unsolvable riddle. Finally Bryn broke off her gaze and sighed. Bryn then turned and began walking towards the way she had indicated earlier, towards the center of town, and mumbled something under her breath. Shepard tried to hear what she said but could only make out the words “actually is” and “idiot”.

Shepard fell in behind her as they made their way to the censer where the City Flame burned. The City Flame was what fed all the fires within the entire city, and was of course the largest flame to be found within. Shepard recalled what Gareth had taught him about them and their maintenance as this was the primary job of Keepers. A City Flame had to be fed and kept healthy by Keepers, but it wasn’t as simple as just pouring one’s strength into the flame. If fed too much the flame could become unruly and begin to writhe out of the censer it was kept in, but if it wasn’t fed enough then the Flame wouldn’t last until the next Keeper could come. Also the City Flame was what repelled the beasts. It had to be big enough to make the beasts leave the city alone.

As the two neared the center Shepard was able to get a better look at the Flame. It was low, and it flickered slowly, as though it were tired and weary, trying to conserve its energy. Shepard smiled as he stepped to the censer, imagining the life he was about to give to the fire. Bryn stayed where she was and watched him as he made his way closer.

He soon stood at the lip of the censer. Without a moment's hesitation he thrust his hand into the fire, eager to make it come alive. He could feel the heart of the fire, he could feel its quiet timid nature. The flame moved slowly, curling around the hand of this welcome visitor in a slow dance. Shepard felt the flame inside of him react as contact was made. He pushed strength into himself, feeling his flame surge with power as he did. He then pressed it down through his arm into his awaiting palm. The flame within the censer leaped and danced as new life poured into it.

The people standing nearby gasped and stepped back as the fire burst high into the dark sky before settling down again into a roaring inferno. Shepard took his hand out of the fire and gazed at the now lively flame. It was bigger than he had intended. He had gotten lost in the excitement and put too much strength into it. The censer seemed to contain it well, however, so Shepard didn't worry about it. He smiled as he realized he had succeeded in completing his first journey as a Keeper, watching the flame that burned bright because of him. It was a beautiful sight to Shepard, the lively dance of the flame full of hope against the darkness that surrounded it so completely. He turned to the crowds, excited to see their faces as they marveled at the flame he had brought.

However, he found they weren't looking at the flame but at him. Instead of the awed faces of people grateful for the life he had brought into their midst he instead found faces of fear and contempt. He blinked in confusion. People stepped back away from him as if he were going to burn them. What was this? Shepard didn't understand. Did they not see the beauty of the flame? The life it brought them? That it stood against the darkness that they all feared? Then it hit him. Gareth had been right. The Keepers weren't loved. The Keepers weren't considered the heroes he thought them to be. They were feared. Shepard felt his body felt his shoulders sag as the realization hit him. He stood before these people an outcast. Alone. The darkness seemed to close in around him.

Then he felt himself being pulled away from the censer and through the crowd. He looked down to see Bryn holding his wrist. Her white hair was bright against the dark around them.

"You really don't know much do you?" she said, her voice barely above a whisper as they fled the town center.

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Tania Runyan is the author of the poetry collections Second Sky, A Thousand Vessels, Simple Weight, and Delicious Air, which was awarded Book of the Year by the Conference on Christianity and Literature in 2007. Her guides How to Read a Poem and How to Write a Poem are used in classrooms across the country. Her poems have appeared in many publications, including Poetry, Image, Harvard Divinity Bulletin, The Christian Century, Saint Katherine Review, Atlanta Review, Indiana Review, and the Paraclete book Light upon Light: A Literary Guide to Prayer for Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. Tania was awarded an NEA Literature Fellowship in 2011.

Fiction—Anna Myers

Anna Myers is the author of 19 novels for young people, all published by Walker Books of New York. Her awards include four Oklahoma Book Awards, New York Public Library's Best Books for the Teenaged, New York Public Library's Best 100 Books to Read and Share, Bank Street College's Best Children's Books, Parent Choice Awards, Crown Award by Christian Schools, ALA Quick Pick List, Independent Book Sellers Pick of the List, three Gamma State Author Awards, and inclusion more than twenty times on children's choice lists for various states. She has received the Arrell Gibson Lifetime Achievement Award from the Oklahoma Center for the Book and is a member of the Oklahoma Writers Hall of Fame.