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Amayra Short; Touch of Shadow (Creative Writing, Fictional Short Story)

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It is obvious to me when a child begins to display the signs of those born of shadow, and even in my fear, my heart weeps for their eternal souls.”

~From the private diary of Father David, Fall 567th year of Rayden

Touch of Shadow

Children dreamed long and hard on the planet Amayra, seeking to manifest their dreams into reality, yet in Teagan’s case, it was the rule rather than the usual fantastical whisperings of childhood and hope. She lived among the abandoned children at Del Marah Orphanage on a hill overlooking the quaint town below. The town had ceased to move forward in time, instead Del Marah was trapped in an age before the wars. A time where neighbors were trusted and children allowed to play far from the protective eyes of parents. The orphanage was a place where favored pastimes included the hopes of adoption and a family the children could bring pride to. Amayra was a place where one’s familial association granted prestige, self-identity, and social standing. She knew no one would ever be claiming her, yet it had never stopped her from dreaming what a mother and father would be like.

Teagan learned the power of her dreams at a young age and now, though only in her eleventh year, she knew in her heart her abilities weren't normal. In a world where people’s birthright was inheriting the power of the gods, she had no real place. Being born to a specific god held such control over the populace that many children were given to the orphanage if the child was born to god undesired by the family—such was Teagan's case, while few children came into the world godless, they generally becoming the lower than those without familial ties. Upon birth, the god whose celestial body was most prominent in the sky claimed the child, offering a blessing of power. Regrettably, there were a few days out of each year when no

prominent force commanded the heavens, leaving the child giftless which was a fate thought worse than death for some. Most of the time, when Teagan's thoughts were in alignment, the world manifested her ideas; her dreams and wishes often became reality.

For example, one day she had thought of splashing through puddles in the cobblestone street with the other children in the orphanage during supper; abruptly a torrent of rain stormed above the bare wooden trusses spanning the dining hall, drenching everything inside. Outside the great arched windows, the sun shining brilliantly in a cloudless sky. The children abandoned their food, feet splashing as they quickly retreated. On another occasion Teagan had been separating laundry, and a small tornado erupted into existence sending boys and girls screeching out of the room as twisters of sheets threatened to strangle them. The worst incident so far was the night of the fire in the girls' sleeping quarters.

It had been the last night Teagan, sometime before her fifth birthday, was permitted to sleep with the rest of the children. The girls were nestled in their sheets, the older eleven sleeping in beds tucked against one side of the room, while the younger children slept in bunks across the way. The younger girls, about twice as many in number as the older girls, slept soundly except for Teagan, burrowed in damp sheets in her corner bed furthest from the door. In her dreams she danced in a ring of fire the heat from the flames all around her, her skin flushed from exertion. Reaching outward Teagan gently caressed the fumes as one would a pet dog, and when she woke, flames were spreading from her linens to the bed frame, lapping with greedy tongues. The increasing blaze shifted, seeking to devour her bed and spread to the walls and floor. Smoke saturated the room, obscuring Teagan's vision and causing the sleeping girls to cough, choking awake with aching lungs. Teagan leapt from her bed, her nightdress smoldering, and rolled across the thick woolen rug blanketing the oak floor beneath her bunk to extinguish the embers.

Teagan screamed the image of dancing in flame faded from her thoughts to be replaced by reality, fear of herself slowed her motions. Chaos erupted as girls ran screeching in terror, prompted into motion by the sight of the singed threads of Teagan's nightgown and her blackened soot-stained flesh added to her resemblance of a charred corpse. She fumbled after them while she struggled to see past the burnt ends of her hair. The rest of the night was difficult to recall, thankfully no one was seriously injured, and a tiny storage space was converted to Teagan's own sleeping quarters, added far from the other children.

It had taken her weeks of scouring to remove the overpowering stench of burnt things from the girls' quarters alone as punishment afterward, and nothing could be done about the scorch marks, burnt shadowy scars etched into the floor reaching upward to the ceiling converging from where Teagan's old bunk was. Even now, when she went to sleep at night, memories of the fire haunted her. She would often wake feeling flame against her accompanied by the heartfelt shrieks of frightened girls echoing accusingly in her mind. Because of that night and her fear of its recurrence, her life's goal had become not to think too long or too hard about anything. Instead she spent her days at the orphanage avoiding conversation and quickly skimming over anything she considered thought provoking or too mentally involved. Her greatest fear was to wake surrounded by the burnt corpses of her fellow orphans.

Living her life without dwelling on anything was tiresome and difficult to manage, especially when it came to earning passing marks in her studies. Her failures academically just added to the difficulty. Being unfocused was a simple goal, proving harder day by day as her gift intensified in strength and broke from its bonds more frequently. To keep her gifts controlled, her thoughts raced from one idea to the next without much pause. It was one of the most important skills she'd gained over the years, though it constantly exhausted her. If she didn't let

her mind focus for more than a moment, the chances of anything unusual resulting diminished greatly. Other people had to focus their gift to use them while Teagan simply had to set her's free.

Long white scars, covered in dense fresh welts, formed a collage of fibrous tissue on her thin back and legs serving as reminders of her blunders. Difficult lessons were paid in blood as she learned to control her gift, both from punishments and the manifestations themselves. When she came to the orphanage her back was already a disfigured canvas, with no memories attached to why. It was good to know she had never been wanted, it was hard to miss something she had never had. At least at the orphanage punishment was quickly administered for each of her misdeeds, lashes struck across already gnarled flesh and adding to her own humiliation. Each mark was a tally of her failures.

Her motions were stiff that morning as she shuffled down the stone corridor, her dragging footsteps echoed, announcing her progress toward the woman waiting near the distant open doorway. She looked down as she stepped, carefully placing her dirty bare feet. Her long dark hair slipped in front of her violet eyes, the black thin strands knotting together as she swept them back behind her shoulders.

The corridor was bathed in light admitted through rectangular windows spanning the length of the outer wall. The hall sprawled the length of the building to five separate classrooms and moved in the direction of the foyer, containing the stairs to the girls sleeping quarters. In the winter, it was the coldest section of the building where frost would seep in through the leaded glass panes and creep across the stone. On the wall opposite the windows hung the stern, timeless faces of the past curators of the Del Marah Orphanage. Their severe faces loomed from above with judgmental stares watching everything, unsettling even the bravest of children. The

curators' collective eyes followed Teagan, raising the fine hairs at the nape of her neck as she shuffled past. Teagan paused in her advance to look at the faces, trying to catch their wandering eyes in her own gaze, but she was never quite fast enough to catch them in the act. Her steps resumed, a feeling of unease settling over her as thoughts of the dead administrators, using portraits as a looking-glass, observed her.

The last portrait nearest the main classroom was the worst; the image was already solid in shape through the distance as Teagan shuffled on, her mind already adding the detail obscured by distance. She was the current Reverend Mother, varied from the other portraits in the hall by being the only one still alive. Reverend Mother Zin was a name whispered in reverence in the daylight and never spoken in darkness. She acted as judge and jury for Amayra's shadow hunting movement, a group of highly trained individuals dedicated to the suppression of the Forbidden God's forces and the prevention of his return to power. Speaking her name called her attention as well as the eyes of the Goddess Jayden. The Patron Mother of Light and Destroyer of Shadow used the Reverend Mother as one of her main tools in the protection of her children. Teagan was terrified of her.

As orphans, the children knew falling under the gaze of Reverend Mother Zin was often a sentence worse than death and brought tragedy to those her attention was drawn to. Whenever the Reverend Mother visited an orphanage, there was always a few children who left with her never to return. The belief of the remaining children was the Reverend Mother took those in possession of shadow to become her slaves, or she simply murdered them by removing the taint in a ceremonial bleeding by slashing the throat and hanging them upside down until all the blood pumped out. Acting as high priestess for the Mother of Light, the unwavering woman spent her days investigating claims of children displaying signs of manifesting powers of the Forbidden

God throughout the entirety of Amayra. Teagan didn't know which theory to believe, but the three children who were taken during her years at the orphanage were never seen again.

Teagan's attention shifted from the image of the Reverend Mother to the soft sound of childish conversation drifting out of the main classroom. Freshly scrubbed orphan's faces attached to thin bodies draped in neat threadbare clothes peered from behind the Lady, watching Teagan with weary eyes. The Lady served as the enforcer for the will of the Reverend Mother at the orphanage, overseeing the children's daily functions and education while observing them for the taint of shadow. As far as the children knew, she had no other name, instilling fear in even the youngest of the orphans.

A small blonde head poked out further into the hall past the woman and belonged to a stupidly brave girl named Saraph. Her eyes closed in concentration as her lips moved, calling on her abilities. Saraph was born under the god Hayden, controller of earth, when His sacred planet was dominate in the sky upon the day of her birth. The normally smooth slates of the floor became uneven, causing Teagan to stumble as her bare toes met with unforgiving stone. A gasp slipped from her dry lips as she fell, crumpling to the floor amidst peals of muted laughter emanating from behind the Lady. Her hands and knees burned with pain on impact, marking the ground with droplets of blood. Tears escaped from the corners of pained eyes, landing on the stone to mingle with her blood. Saraph's smug face had already disappeared from view when Teagan looked up as the stone responsible receded slowly back into its setting without making a sound.

"Tardiness is unacceptable, Teagan," the Lady scorned, striding the last few steps of distance between them, her coiled brown hair remained motionless. She pulled Teagan up from

the ground with a manicured hand, her expressive green eyes revealing her anger in an otherwise placid face.

Teagan placed her palms on the wall to steady herself and closed her eyes for a moment, letting her head drop forward to separate her attention from the Lady's demanding gaze as her cold fingers released Teagan's wrist. The girl could feel a tendril of blood seeping from a deep scratch on her knee and dripped down her calf as she forced her mind to leap from one thought to the next as the Lady released her.

“Child, do you enjoy this? Go clean up, I expected you in class five minutes ago like everyone else.” The Lady's blue dress whirled as she turned abruptly, heading back into the classroom, her shrill voice still lingering in the air amidst the reverberating soft click of her receding steps.

Teagan quickly gathered herself and lifted her head, staring at the wall before her in the now silent corridor. Outlines of her palms remained in the stone, etched into the surface with the Reverend Mother's eyes bearing witness. Teagan reached out and traced the marks with her fingertips gliding smoothly over the still warm rippled edges with disappointment. The rough stone was smooth to the touch within the outline of her palms, a stark contrast to the irregularity of the rest of the surface. She would be punished for this transgression just like she had been for the others.

Reminders of Teagan's loss of control were carved into every surface of the orphanage; the handprints before her weren't nearly as deep as others which reached more than half the depth of the dense stone blocks. All children born of the gods had a difficult time controlling their gifts until they were older, though, of all the other seventy children in the orphanage, none of them melted walls with an ill thought and a touch like Teagan. If it was fear which pushed

children like Saraph to single her out, then she understood it— she scared herself most of the time.

“Five more minutes Teagan, and not one second past,” the Lady swung the door almost completely shut, giving Teagan the illusion of actively participating in the lesson.

“Today is the Day of Remembrance,” the Lady’s muffled voice began, “and as we have for the past four decades, since the conclusion of the Dark Wars, all students across the land will spend the day in reflection. The Wars resulted from the Forbidden God of Shadow and Darkness reaching for more power than allowed by the other gods. The people of our world became divided and fearful, calling upon the Light to vanquish the Darkness. Our Blessed Jayden answered our prayers and upon the conclusion of the Wars, peace was restored,” the Lady’s heels tapped against the stone as she paced, punctuating each word with a resounding clack.

“The Forbidden One’s greed was immense, demanding more for His followers including the blood of those faithful to our Blessed Jayden. The Umbra, named by the forces of Light for his absolute corruption, was the Forbidden God's physical presence here on Amayra, acting as a dark beacon to others, and was almost equivalent to our Reverend Mother in strength.” A hoarse cough interrupted the words of the Lady who looked on with contempt while a few children shifted uncomfortably in their seats until the Lady resumed her lecture.

“Our Lady of Light and Goddess of all that is pure, entrusted to her followers the task of battling the darkness. She was joined in her campaign by the other gods and their worshipers, the four gods of the elements; Pinel as the Ruler of Water, Rayden as the Commander of Fire, Wudan as the Voice of the Wind, and Hayden as the Manipulator of Earth. Armies formed under each god, combining their strength under a common cause to become the greatest force in our history, and thus, the Dark Wars began...”

Teagan, feeling the penetrating gaze of Reverend Mother Zin's portrait on her back, took several deep breaths, letting her hands fall from the marks. She pushed thoughts of the Reverend Mother aside as manifesting in front of her painting wasn't something Teagan could explain away. Closing her eyes, Teagan followed the pull of her power and allowed her mind to align into a single thought.

Her power was a prismatic polychrome of hues in her mind with hundreds of layers of thin silver chain enveloping the light, preventing it from bursting out of her unbidden. She pulled slowly at the chains with metaphysical hands, trying to free a miniscule glint of color. The restraints shifted fitfully to permit a small ray of light to travel between the links. Her blood pulsed powerfully in her vessels, wrapping her freshly skinned knees with splashes of light radiating from beneath her flesh. Gently she coaxed the skin to knit together by imagining it whole, and allowed her gift to work just long enough to stop the flow of blood— anymore, and the Lady would be sure to notice. Satisfied Teagan resecured her power back up in its bonds and thanked the Goddess of Light and Health for gracing her with the gift of healing, grateful most of all for her gift's uncommon obedience.

Teagan's mind returned to nothing in particular as she once more glanced down. Several paving stones were tinged pink, and the Lady's command to clean rang in her mind. Her steps were carefully silent as she turned to the cleaning closet behind her, wary of the unsteady floor. The Lady would expect the corridor to display no signs of what transpired, and Teagan did not want to witness the Lady's wrath if the mess remained for her to cast haughty eyes on a second time. Besides, leaving it would just make it harder to clean later. Teagan removed soap, a wooden bucket, and an old horse-hair bristle brush from the stained wooden shelves to begin cleaning. She knelt forcefully scrubbing in rhythmic circles as quickly as she could.

“Our civilization was almost destroyed before a way was found to combat the Umbra and his followers,” continued the Lady. “Beloved Father Iren Wayfield, developer of the Rehnem Stones used to find those of darkness, was one of the most tragic casualties amidst thousands in the final battle of the Dark Wars. Without the Rehnem Stones, the dark followers were indistinguishable from those of the light. Winning without them would have been difficult.” Teagan listened over the sound her breath coming in gasps. Her arms burned with effort, as sweat fell from her forehead, leaving circular dots of moisture on the uncleaned stones before her.

“The Reverend Mother holds one of the five stones created by Iren. The stones, as most already know, change color in the presence of those who are blessed by the Forbidden God. The Reverend Mother's stone is unique in its ability to also indicate the general direction of the corrupted individual though how the stone accomplishes this only the Reverend Mother knows. Another stone is with the head of council at all times, one is posted at the main entry of the Denah Tower, the High Council's enclave, and of the last two: one is missing, though both are believed to be destroyed...”

The section of wet stonework glistened as she rose from the floor, her joints protesting the change of momentum. She put back the supplies and headed to class. The heavy timbered door creaked, banging into the frame as it closed behind her. Teagan winced as the sound reverberated. The Lady stood, condescension radiating from her features as Teagan crept into the classroom. The heads of the other orphans quietly turned, a few dozen younger children total, to watch Teagan slip into the middle front seat. The Lady maintained a strict seating arrangement, keeping the more troublesome orphans near her podium, and typically Teagan was the most problematic. It seemed no matter what she did to please the Lady, it wasn't good enough.

Memories of her first few years at the orphanage flitted through her mind. There were many times she had helped only to be chastened for the assistance like the time Teagan saved Saraph's mouse from a slow and painful death in the bowels of Peter's snake. Saraph told the Lady of the animal's existence while it was still in Teagan's hands, in order to remain blameless. The most infuriating part of the entire situation were the punitive measures, Teagan not only missed dinner for three days but was in charge of cleaning up the dining area afterwards, while Peter's penance only involved a grumbling stomach.

The Lady stood near the blackboard waiting for Teagan's interruption to conclude. The Lady's eyes tightened with anger as Teagan's chair scraped against the floor, disrupting the room yet again. Teagan sat quickly, anxiety making her limbs heavy. She worried about having to make up class time during dinner for her tardiness, a typical choice of the Lady's, regardless of how well she knew the subject. The reteaching of the Dark Wars on the Day of Remembrance was a mandate set forth by the Reverend Mother herself and would not be broken no matter the circumstance. The information was reiterated every year near the anniversary of the Forbidden God's defeat, making this Teagan's seventh year hearing it.

Teagan's thoughts drifted to the magpie singing outside the window, pushing her worries aside as the lesson continued. The clomping of small feet startled her back to the present seemingly only a few minutes after she sat down. Teagan remained at her station as the other children filed out for supper.

"Given your inability to attend the lesson, you will read the section in your book this evening, and tomorrow I will test you on the material before the day's lessons begins. Failure will result in scrubbing the entire hall tomorrow after class by yourself. I also want you to contemplate your decided lack of devotion to your education during dinner. Orphans should be

diligent in their studies; how else are you to make something of yourself without a family name?" The Lady's disgust was palatable.

Teagan strained to hear the sound of the others moving to the dining area as her feet followed the familiar green paisley runners through the corridor several paces behind the Lady's rapidly moving form. Between missing dinner for remedial lessons and occasional punishments, it had been a few weeks since Teagan had been allowed to eat with the other orphans. She couldn't suppress the shiver of excitement at the thought of a real meal instead of musty cheese and tough day-old bread. The Lady disappeared into her private study just before the entry to the dining area. The aged oak door shuddered heavily into place as Teagan moved past. The sound of the Lady's voice filtered through the warped edges of the door frame, enticing Teagan to approach and listen.

"Reverend Mother," the Lady's voice subdued through the aged wood, "there is a child here in Del Marah whose affinity for the Forbidden God is great. The child bows to His will and her disfavorable actions were witnessed again today. Please come to pass judgment on her soul."

A domineering voice rose, biting out a response and sending chills down Teagan's spine. Her footsteps faltered as she looked around to ensure no one was near. She maneuvered closer to the door, thoughts of her death shifted through her mind accompanied the quickening thump of her heart. Leaning toward the large door Teagan's ear strained to separate the tones of the Lady's conversation from the rising tide of the dinning noise. The Reverend Mother was coming for her. The laughter of children overcame what little else Teagan could hear. The bleakness of her future settled into her gut, turning her stomach in fear. Her throat constricted against impending tears of bitterness. She didn't want to disappear like the children before her. More than anything, she

knew she wanted to live. Leaning against the wall in a daze, Teagan's mind scattered in numerous directions searching for a way to bypass her fate.

With wooden motions Teagan pushed herself from the wall and walked into the dining area. The scent of melted butter and fresh baked rolls an enticing welcome from the bitter stone hall. Saraph's knife scrapped across her plate, drawing Teagan's attention and grating on her tattered nerves. Her mind traveled over her options ignoring the rumble of her empty stomach, maybe she could change the Lady's mind, or perhaps she would pass the test without lighting the stone. Darkening thoughts took precedence slowing her meditations— maybe she truly was of shadow, she might touch the stone and fail like those before her. The introspection was fleeting as she absentmindedly gathered her plate of meat, tubers, and radishes from the children working kitchen duty. She plopped her book on the table next to the tarnished metal dish. Leafing through the pages, the words obscured in her divided mind. Questions of her own self-worth and the validity of the Reverend Mother's judgement kept her fork from lifting. She knew didn't want to disappear, and she also had never been more frightened or more trapped in her life.

The situation reminded her of the day when she had an image of a pixie stuck in her mind. The sprite first manifested inside a milk bottle during breakfast and then the soap bottle near the bath the following day. Teagan's smile was fleeting as she thought of the week spent with children stubbing toes on chairs as they flew out in front of them in passing and slipping on disappearing puddles, all amidst peals of tinkling laughter. The healers at the orphanage had worked beyond the point of exhaustion, attending to more medical needs in one week than all the combined medicinal aid administered the year previous. However, this time, she was the pixie.

She glanced up from her unread text book to watch the world beyond the windows the sparsely leafed tree branches, beckoned in the fall breeze. Patches of sunlight breached thick

gray clouds casting dark patterns on the surface of the long white table as Teagan's attention shifted to watch the first condensed grouping of children leave the dining area. The Reverend Mother's words still echoed in her head, tainting each normal moment with longing. Soon even the patchwork family she had might be taken away.

There was no other reason for the Reverend Mother to make the journey, unless the Lady was confident Teagan would fail the testing. They must have made some kind of mistake; she was a nobody, just another abandoned child born under the wrong sign. Her mind slowed, the wrong sign. That's why she was left there, not because she was unpredictable or unable to wield a gift, but because she was dangerous, dangerous and filled with Darkness. Was this how it felt to be filled with the gift of shadow? Were they so terrified? Could she truly be born to the Forbidden God? Teagan's unseeing eyes gazed beyond the remainder of the children as they finished clearing and washing their plates, leaving them in the racks overnight to dry.

Unable to enjoy her meal, Teagan abandoned her plate on the copper surface of the sink after to hasten down the corridor— fear adding strength to her limbs. Her book lay forgotten on the ancient dining table, opened to a dog-eared page. Trying to sooth the rapid beat of her heart, Teagan blended into the steady stream of children to the main entrance of the orphanage. The last thing she wanted was to stumble into the Lady while her mind was too divided to conjure up a defense, to this end being in a crowd supplied her with the best chance of passing by unnoticed. The clamor of children's voices rose up to the peak of the grand ceiling in the entrance hall, intensifying in volume before resounding downward and drifting into the other hallways. All the corridors converged into this one nexus point, which was often used by the children as a meeting place. The murmur of voices ceased as Teagan walked under the open bowed doorway acting as a partition between the halls leading to the classrooms and the entryway. With the Lady's

appearance, the sound of shuffling feet descended as all the children filed past the hand-hewn door carved with the image of Light, a reminder of a past generation, to walk the footpath leading to the church nextdoor. Teagan took up a place at the end of the line as the children passed by her to go into the fading dark.

It had become customary for an orphanage to neighbor a church after the Dark Wars. This allowed the priests, who were trained in the detection of darkness, to be closest to those deemed at the highest risk of manifesting the powers the Forbidden God. The Church agreed to relocate the children of the Del Marah orphanage into the empty building next door to the chapel to reduce the Forbidden God's access to willing followers. Before becoming an orphanage, the building functioned as a school teaching dedicating to the Church the path of servitude. The church and school became separated after the teaching institution relocated to a larger and more remote area in the foothills of the Kilimoro mountain range, several days' travel south of Del Marah. The children walked across the outdoor landscape.

Teagan moved in a uniform line with the others along the familiar path worn to dirt by decades of children's feet making the daily trek between the orphanage and the church, while humming a vaguely remembered tune from her early childhood. She didn't remember much else from her years before the orphanage besides the wordless melody, though occasionally she would dream of a woman, with the impression left in her mind that it was her mother. The woman's features were no longer solid in memory, hazy around the edge of the image and bleeding into the rest of the atmosphere of Teagan's dreams.

Father David, the head priest and main caretaker of the church, had lit a row of candles between the buildings in the belief of the light being a necessity. The Father couldn't bear the thought of the children getting lost or threatened by Shadow along their way to worship. Teagan

walked past the row of trees marking the property line between the church and the orphanage, their leaves varying in color from deep red to vibrant yellow with trunks fading into black and blending into the evening landscape. The old stone structure of the church loomed before her. Its imposing figure stretching into twilight, lights pouring from every stained glass window, and luminous in the fading sun. The dirt was cool between her toes, having worn her shoes out the year before. Surviving only on donation the orphanage lacked the money to replace children's footwear and supply food simultaneously. The shoes were always the first to go. The smell of winter drifted in with the breeze, warning of the coming snow and sending chills through Teagan's threadbare dress. Soon the children would be forced to pray at the feet of their beds, being unable to walk barefoot through the deep snow.

In a few days the land would be swaddled in a blanket of pure white, sleeping until spring roused it again. Regret gnawed at her, calling attention to the swirl of emotions within. Teagan watched as the sun sunk beyond the horizon, thinking of the night and how it would quickly be longer than the day; how this may be one of the last nights she saw it. The longest night of the year was soon to come bringing with it a day of lurking shadows and the darkness of the Forbidden God. The children would remain inside the orphanage until spring returned and the light chased away the night in order to keep them safe. Teagan treaded the path silently taking in the abundance of life outside the oppressive walls, committing to memory the sound of chirping crickets and the taste of crisp fresh air. The moment offered a distraction from the seemingly never ending winter to come. A winter she might not see. Too soon, the group reached the church, six stone steeples crowning the only location where the gods were worshiped in tandem.

Each steeple stretched into the sky housing a statue representing one of the gods, and reaching a point where their respective sacred planet was visible through the plate glass ceiling

above. That night Rayden would burn in the sky in alignment with Amayra. Its red glow would filter through clear leaded panes in the steeple, bathing his sculpture in light. The children would be in bed long before Rayden's alignment, left to imagine the crowd of people who would stand in the atrium of the church waiting for their turn to pray at his feet. Teagan tried to imagine the event, the people who would later tread the same path and breath the same air as she had, just hours before. They would be traveling up from the main section of the village located to the north of the church in the valley below, following in the footsteps of the generations before. Worshipers marking the path for those to come, as it had been for hundreds of years since the church's construction in the 359th year of the Forbidden God. She imagined them walking with fingers outstretched, brushing the surface of the archways marking the steps to the atrium and the beginnings of holy ground.

The children continued in silence as they crossed the aged threshold on the west side of the church, passing the Lady as she held the heavily scarred blue doors open allowing a ray of light to penetrate the darkness. As Teagan passed by, the Lady released her grip on the bronze handle and allowed the weight of the door to close it behind them.

Teagan had been left on the steps of the atrium as a child and lived in awe of the Church. Her won birth celebration had been transformed from an unknown date to a celebration of the day Father David had found her. Without knowing her own month of birth, Teagan's gift from the gods was merely conjecture. Father David cared for her despite the uncertainty surrounding Teagan's birth and the suspicions of her abilities. Thoughts of the Father brought a faint amount of hope to her bleak situation. Despite the Lady's belief that Teagan was of shadow, the Father would be far less quick to judge her life as evil. If she could talk to Father David tonight after her prayers, maybe he would offer his guidance.

A squeak permeated the air, pulling Teagan's attention to the small figure of Mouse bouncing back from the side of a thick marble pillar. Mouse's momentum ended with her leaning into a bracket holding one of the torches of the pillar. Strangled cries fell from the girl's lips as she pulled frantically at her long hair trying to liberate it from the steel bracket. Teagan looked over her shoulder, gauging the reaction of the Lady, who took a series of hard steps on the marble floor to hurry past the rest of the children. The Lady clasped her hands tightly around Mouse's snarled mane while taking an irritated breath. The stench of burning hair coiled around her trembling figure, calling tears to the girl's green eyes. The Lady's hands pulled away revealing the now jagged and singed brown locks covering most of Mouse's head. Mouse ran from the Lady, tears racing down her cheeks and took a place near Teagan at the end of the line. Mouse's stifled sobs permeated the silence surrounding Teagan as she reached out a hand to the girl. Teagan cringed at the slick dampness on the Mouse's palms cinched around her fingers, cutting off the blood flow.

The orphans followed the Lady through another set of six archways constructed of pearly marble to match the floor and pillars of the entryway just behind them. It was the largest room of the church and housed the alcoves below the stone steeples seen from outside. Each alcove contained a large statue carved out of a single piece of colored marble. Six gods, each with their own depiction of power and each likeness so tall that their facial features were indiscernible in the distance with the falling of night. Five of the alcoves faintly glowed, lit by wood and pitch torches mounted to the walls by worn steel brackets. Each god's name was etched into the base of their statue and plated in metal.

The alcove containing the sixth statue remained shrouded in darkness. The name on the base had been scratched out and the metal plating removed, leaving the sixth god nameless.

During the time of the Dark Wars, the temples dedicated to the god of shadow had been torn down, and the statues left behind to fade over time. The church of Father David was different from the others as it served as a place of worship for all gods. The shrine dedicated to the Forbidden God remained in the church. Removing the statues dedicated to the God of Darkness would not only deface the oldest church in Amayra, but call the wrath of the Forbidden God in retaliation for the desecration. It was for the fear of his revenge that all other likenesses of the god remained scattered across the nation and left to their natural decay. To face the wrath of the God of Shadow, would lead the nation into another Dark War. The God of Shadow was a god to be feared, which granted a wary respect. The children spread through the chapel, giving the dark god's depiction a wide berth as they approached the statues of their own gods.

Teagan looked around the chapel, her eyes drawn to the stained glass windows covering the south wall of the building. She stared admiringly at the kaleidoscope of their history in resounding technicolor. Each of the six panes displayed the rise of one of the six gods, six more were dedicated to the gods' roles, and six more to the great battles. Teagan's eyes followed the depictions down the wall to the final pane. It was larger than the rest and took up the majority of the immense wall it's graphic image a backdrop for the worn podium. The difference in design an indication image had been constructed after the others to show the defeat of the Forbidden God. Teagan could make out the shape of the Umbra easily within the illustration. His depiction the focal point of the image, complete with blood flowing from his flesh in a river to drown those portrayed in close proximity. Jayden's likeness took up the upper corner exemplifying her image with a hand reaching out toward the Umbra in banishment. Teagan knew the last fight had to have taken place differently from its depiction. The impression of the final battle and the

Umbra's face trapped in torment lingered, reminiscent of the discomfort Teagan always felt when viewing the portrait of the Reverend Mother Zin.

Teagan could feel Father David's eyes upon her, like the portraits in the hallway. The Father's eyes lit with joy as he smiled from his position in front of the dais as their eyes sought each other from across the expanse. His robes shimmered in the dim light, a multitude of color against the starkness of the marble. His hair had grayed since Teagan's arrival and was now brushed against his shoulders.

Teagan recalled the day they first met. Rain poured from a cloudless sky, soaking the ground and the inhabitants of Del Marah. The figure in Teagan's mind was a woman, if she remembered correctly; she turned and walked away leaving Teagan's younger self crying on the steps outside of the church. Father David had heard her cries of anguish and walked through the torrent of rain to the church's front steps. A frail and dirty child looked up at him through hair so dark it absorbed the touch of light. From that moment onward they were connected. He had saved her that day by pulling her into his open arms.

Father David had moved to Del Marah, the seat of power for the Church of Amayra and chose to live near the outskirts of town. The father represented a small sect of individuals born to follow the path of godlessness. He dedicated his life to the support and teaching of religious freedom. In order to prevent his family from falling into disgrace by raising a godless child, he joined the church as soon as he was able. First he attended the school in Kilimoro, and later took his vows into the organization of the Church while maintaining his desire to help others like himself. Now, he brought pride to his family through his works.

Teagan was the last child to reach him and grabbed his offered hands, after slipping from Mouse's grasp. The Father held Teagan tightly as he embraced her in his arms as he did each

night with all his children. The father's gentle hands cradled Teagan close to his chest. Her heart warmed in welcome, the strength in his arms a balm soothing the lingering panic.

“May the gods shine their light on your path and keep you forever from Darkness,” the Father recited.

His uncalloused hand brushed the hair back from her eyes. The radiated with joy as he stooped downward to kiss her forehead. The sound of roaming feet echoed in the large cavernous room pulling Teagan from her moment of peace as the children scattered and moved to the statues of their prospective gods. Teagan broke the embrace while looking longingly at the Father, and imagining the moment when they were afforded the privacy to share her looming altercation with the Reverend Mother. Teagan peered around the room trying to imagine a future past the orphanage, without the kindness of Father David. Statues of the gods were assembled in a line beginning with Jayden, followed by the elemental gods, and ending with the Forbidden One shrouded in darkness at the end of the continuous room.

Saraph knelt alongside Mouse and several others before the likeness of Jayden just to the right of the dais. Jayden's statue was more crowded than most because of Her connection to healing and light, as well as the children's desire to be found unworthy of judgement in the eyes of the Lady. It was a common belief among those in the orphanage; praying to the Goddess denied a place for the darkness to manifest. Unfortunately for Teagan, her prayers to Jayden for freedom and a family had so far gone unanswered. Teagan fervently hoped she was included in the prayers of the other orphans, just in case the Goddess changed Her mind. The Reverend Mother was the embodiment of Jayden's will, if Teagan could get the Goddess to favor her, surely the Reverend Mother Zin would permit her to live despite the calling for her judgement. Jayden's worshipers this evening were rivaled in number only by the mass at Rayden's statue.

The Lady walked across the room and knelt to join those before Rayden. The scent of sage filled the air as the Lady lit a smudge, weaving it before her and placing it onto the brass offering plate at the feet of her god. Teagan had been drawn to kneel at the feet of many of the gods during her time at the orphanage. It was common practice for those who had yet to manifest their gifts to pray on a rotation, moving from god to god, until their gift was established. It was in the fervent hope that one of the gods would respond and answer the question of their birthright. Then there were others, such as Saraph, who had known their calling from the beginning.

The Lady had also been such a child and had been raised in a family where all of their children were born over a brief span of time in order to ensure they all were gifted with the powers of Rayden. This was a common practice among families of great power in order maintain the secrecy of familial knowledge passed on through the generations. Teagan prayed to Rayden in public as her reputation for melting hand prints into walls and setting fire to the girls sleeping quarters created the expectancy. In private Teagan knelt in prayer before the rest of the gods, after the orphans were sleeping soundly. She would slip out of the orphanage and into the chapel, aided by Father David. With the celebration of Rayden taking place tonight, she felt a physical strain from the knowledge of ignoring the other gods.

Teagan walked slowly to the statue of Rayden with thoughts of the Lady's actions clouding her mind and tainting her tranquility. The Lady's close proximity fogged her ability to seamlessly function in the expected manner. Teagan paused to pull her attentions together from their numerous directions and tried to tuck the anxiety of her own death away in her mind for later evaluation. She moved through the room, pausing to look at each statue before continuing on her path to Rayden's feet. Teagan closed her eyes as her steps faltered. An image of the Lady

laughing as the Rehnem stone's color shifted to a brilliant red sent a wave of distress crashing through her causing her limbs tremble.

She could feel her power slipping free from its chains, reaching out to another god in her onsetting panic. Teagan's breathing became labored as she fought against the desire to answer His call. The prayers of the other children were a backdrop to her mounting panic. She was a marionette to her gift as it pulled her further from Rayden, forcing her to her knees to kneel before another likeness. Cold marble pressed against her skin, the chill reaching through the fabric of her woolen dress. Her fingers moved of their own accord across the gouge marks in the base of the God's likeness. The silence descended, a tangible visceral thing smothering the chapel in alarmed serenity.

Foreign words tumbled from her lips to offer ancient prayers to a dead god in accordance to His will. Though Teagan knew that to call Him 'dead' was to call all gods dead. The power radiating from him was too strong to ignore as thoughts filled with tragic pain and unwavering devotion emanating from the image before her. Teagan knew He would never leave His children out on the steps of a church to be raised by strangers, as her own family had. He was a true god and remained despite His banishment from Amayrian life. Teagan's name joining her brothers and sisters in the contract of His blessing a pact signed in suffering and ending only by their deaths.

As Teagan prayed she was shown the truth. He had worked tirelessly to fight for the lived of his children and defend the gift He bestowed upon them. They refused to turn from Him even as they were murdered in retaliation for supporting his name, and so He choose an Umbra. The Umbra was a direct conduit of His will and was also a great warrior who fighting in defense of His name. The rise of the Umbra acted as the catalyst for the creation of the Rehnem Stones, and

eventually brought about a mass cleansing of Shadow from all of Amayra. Trying to save His remaining children, He turned from them by denouncing their devotion and refusing to heed their prayers, He severed all ties so that the Stones might pass them by. He allowed his gift to dwindle in the world, willing it to fade into nothingness.

His forsaken children were not spared from death. The strength of the Stones and the fury of the Reverend Mother were relentless in their pursuit, tearing babes from their mother's wombs. The blood of His children soaked into the earth, and tainted the soil with Shadow. The Reverend Mother still sought His children in an effort to continue the cleanse of Amayra. After a generation of silence and mayhem, He could no longer ignore their fervent prayers, calling to Teagan as he had not done since his call to the Umbra. The backdrop of the chapel fell from Teagan's mind as she placed her forehead on the ground at His feet.

Night moved past them; the children left in ones and twos to follow the path back to the orphanage. Teagan remained praying as His pain combined with her own. In her mind she showed Him the memory of the Lady talking with the voice in the darkness. She prayed for her life, and freedom her fear finding an outlet in worship. Dread weighed her down, pressing her forehead into the cold stone floor. Tears flowed freely from her eyes, dampening the ground before her God. Fear bubbled up settling in her chest and pressing firmly on her lungs. The power of her God called to her, giving her support through His strength. Her fear dissipated overshadowed by His power, love, and understanding as it filled her mind removing her worries.

As the connection deepened Teagan's body started to shake; her mind moving between reality and the expanding force traveling uninterrupted between herself and the Forbidden God. Sweat gathered at the seams of her dress, damp against her skin as she fought to separate her consciousness from the domineering presence combining with her own. Her thoughts

disintegrated, warped by the will of the Forbidden One. The need for the liberation of His children twisted to become Teagan's governing ambition as an apparition of the Umbra formed within her mind called into existence by the will of her God. The scene of the final battle was shown to her in spectral imagery as the actions of the Umbra became her own. She watched with His awareness, her body rising from the floor and mirroring the Umbra's motions as the Forbidden God enlightened her to the path that would guarantee her survival. Her eyes opened, sightless to her surroundings as the outline of the Reverend Mother from His memory blurred with the figure of the Lady kneeling before Rayden.

Her fists moving from her sides lighting with an internal glow mirroring the movements of the Umbra in vivid spectral imagery. The Umbra's actions flowed through her. Striking forward she released the condensed orbs of Darkness that had built in her palms at the Lady's figure, mimicking the Umbra. The Lady rolled to the side away from the statue of Raydan without breaking eye contact with the stone form. The Darkness dispersed against an unseen barrier before hitting Raydan. The Lady gracefully rose, breaking eye contact with the statue to glare at Teagan.

Beams of power escaped through the orifices of Teagan's flesh, radiating outward, reaching the stone walls and making them glow red from the burst of energy. A multi-colored aura encasing her in luminescence and swallowed the surrounding darkness. Teagan called the strength of His gift, using it as her own. The Umbra's movements showing her how to dodge and attack in short bursts of concentrated darkness. Teagan's second attack was immediate as her blood pulsed with borrowed energy.

Fire spread out from the hands of the Lady; a snake attacking from the ground, slithering across the stone to leap up and strike at Teagan's moving figure. The remaining children

scattered, running to the imposing figures of the gods for shelter. Chunks of mortar fell from the spires above, shaken free by Teagan's fist, covered in shifting shadow, as it struck out at the serpent's abdomen connecting and sending explosions of flame riding on a concussive wave of energy outward. The air around her crackled. The glass panes groaned, fracturing across their surface. Mouse and Saraph huddled together at the feet of the Forbidden God avoiding a large section of broken glass that had detached from its frame and tumbled to the ground. Mouse screamed.

Following the Umbra's direction Teagan's hand shot out from her side traveling in an arch and leaving a trail of Shadow glimmering in its wake. Words of power fell from her lips, calling to the Shadow to answer the Umbra's will and mingling with her own. The flow of darkness coated the air around Mouse and Saraph, solidifying into a physical barrier. A ripple traveled across the glass ceiling above them splintering another section apart from the rest. The section above Mouse and Saraph crashed against the dense Shadow encasing their trembling forms.

Teagan's power poured past its chains in emanating waves, pushing her mind to edge of sanity as it fought to control the abundance of energy coursing through her. A sphere of Shadow pooled from her hand and connected with a globe of blue fire streaking across the chapel. The two forces clashed in the air, pushing the air from Teagan's lungs with the concussive wave. Bits of darkness and flame rained down as the energies fought until both powers dissipated leaving behind dense murkiness. With each movement her power exploded in her mind, a versicolor bursting forth shattering the silver chains restraining her gift. A force so brilliant her skin glowed with a polychromatic complexion, erupting from her being in a wave of spectral-luminosity, shattering the stained glass depictions above. Teagan's ears rang with the silence as she stood

watching the kaleidoscope of glass fall in a deadly wave and explode against the stone floor. The air cleared with painful slowness to show the Lady no longer standing.

Saraph and Mouse remained encased in the thin shell of stone where Teagan had left them. In her mind Teagan watched the Umbra approach, and place his hand upon the spherical barrier, causing it to scatter and shower down on the frightened children in a coruscation of shimmering dust. Saraph and Mouse fell back from her, terror twisting their faces into masks of revulsion as they observed the corpse of the chapel and choked on the stench of its destruction. Mouse's rejection pulled at Teagan's heart and pushed the image of the Umbra from Teagan's mind.

The presence of the Forbidden One shifted in Teagan's awareness, fading into a contented ubiquitous form. Silence descended, broken only by the intrusion of Saraph's coughing. The haze in the chapel cleared, the toxic air pulled from the room through the gaping holes in the ceiling. Teagan returned to her kneeling position before the altar of her God, thankful for His intervention. Without His guidance her life would have joined the numerous others during the war taken by the Reverend Mother. Her life had been forfeit before his intervention, because of His intervention her life was His for as long as He wished it. Teagan called to the power in her blood, willing it to flow from a cut on her fingertip. With careful strokes she wrote the Forbidden God's name on His plaque; her blood greedily absorbed. The defaced lettering shifted under her touch to reform His name.

"Galmeth," she whispered, a smile upon her lips as His power unfurled from her chest, returning to Him. "Thank you."

Metallic-tasting bile spewed from Teagan's mouth and landed between her knees, splattering them with flecks of gall. Knowing the night would play forever in her dreams,

Teagan rose. Scorch marks covering the ground in a ring originating from His statue. Coldness crawled from her stomach and up her spine. Her mind fought to decipher the implications. Many of the orphans were missing. She watched the battle play out again in her mind paying closer attention at the darting figures of children leaving the chapel. Teagan sent a prayer to her God for them, and continued walking through the destruction.

Bits of mortar and glass shook free of her sullied dress cascading down her legs to the rhythm of her footsteps. A trail of bloody prints marked her path from the chapel to the outer door of the church as glass crunched beneath her bare feet. Blue doors slammed behind her entombing the remnants of the battle until Raydan's worshipers arrived for the alignment ceremony. The voice of Galmeth whispered in her mind urging her to travel quickly out of the city as Teagan watched the moon, bright against the night sky penetrate the darkness surrounding the church. The crickets continued to chirp, in her mind warning her of the coming of the Reverend Mother. Destiny uncertain, she walked onward surrounded in Darkness.