

The Window – Gabriel, Year 9, SA

Anna woke up two minutes late.

A cool zephyr flowed into the room, a breath of frosty, pungent air winnowing through the crenulated fissures in the thick concrete walls. The bed was cold, despite her having slept on it all night—she was an ascian, like the others walking the empty halls, ghosts dreaming of vestiges of their long-forgotten pasts, desideriums haunting them perpetually. However, Anna did not have another life outside of the mountains. This was all she had, a monotonous existence fulfilled with routine and unanswered questions.

Those two minutes were certainly more important than Anna had thought.

By the time she had completed her chores, Mass had begun. The dulcet chimes, slightly more distracting than soothing, signalled the Pastor's presence in the Grand Church, the vibrations of his powerful footsteps having been felt from across the mountain. He had an aura of dominance that exuded throughout the halls, reminding the people of their safety. Why they would need to feel safe, Anna did not know. She had been told by the adults of the beauty below, landscapes exploding with colour and joy—but they could never go there. Then she told the younger children of the fable—they would ask for it almost every day, as if they had never heard it before.

It made them hopeful.

She told them of carnivals and festive dreams one could never imagine—the sounds of celebratory bells and laughing children, all contributing to the cacophony of euphoria. Parades march down the glitter-littered streets, a festoon of colours emanating from the vibrant heart of the city. The scent of deserts and chocolate and sweets lingers in the air, patiently waiting for an unknowing person to experience a burst of its ambrosial piquancies. Wind rustles through the sinuous wheat fields dancing on lush, rolling hills, a bucolic farmland with plethoras of food and joy, a place where gluttony was encouraged. A place where everybody flourishes, thriving, teeming with alacrity and the anticipation of another perfect day. Everything you could ever want is here, just out of reach, so close but so far.

Nobody ever questioned it.

Anna assumed the role of a surrogate mother to the younger children, tending to their needs when the adults seemed too preoccupied with their own tasks. She would put them to bed, tenderly kissing their foreheads, and whispering wishes for sweet dreams. It was a duty she took on as an obligation, for it was the only way she could infuse their lives with a touch of warmth and affection.

Anna began to run, fearful her tardiness might have consequences. The tortuous corridors seemed to meander through the crater, penetrating into the nearby mountains. Although like a

maze, she had walked these halls for her entire life, so finding her way was easy. Others were still adjusting though.

Again, today was different. A palpable sense of foreboding lingered in the air, following Anna as she rushed to the church, late. Mass had already started, Anna's absence there unnoticed. Soon enough, she found herself at the two large, grandiose doors—remained closed, of course, though Anna could hear the Pastor speaking inside, a deep, powerful, inspiring voice. Anna rested her hand on the handle of the door, reluctant, but laboriously pulled it open as quietly as she could.

It took no time for the heads to swerve towards the door as she opened it, the splintering wood screaming against the worn tiles, making an unexpected vociferous noise. Fortunately they had not yet begun their hymns, so she quietly took a seat in one of the back pews.

“Thank you for joining us,” the pastor spoke, “as I was saying, our faith lies in the belief that our Saviour may save us all. Nevertheless, if we had proof, or were aware of God's existence, what is the point in all this? Faith is the answer, faith is what gives us hope.”

A woman in front of Anna began sobbing, tears running down violently in rivulets, glistening in the kaleidoscope of light from the Window. Before long, the crowd had genuflected and left the hall in silence, shuffling their way past each other in acrimony—a sense of wistful longing, needing something they could never have. Their hiraeth became stronger every day that passed, the sun and moon's entwined movements just another meaningless cycle in their senseless lives.

Anna was only two steps away from the doors when she was interrupted. She swiftly turned, attempting to find the voice. It was the Pastor, gesturing toward the altar.

“I think it is time,” the Pastor smiled, half-heartedly. She was expecting this.

Trepidation washed over her face of what was about to come. A thrumming in her body began, fast heavy beats of her fearful heart shaking her limbs.

“Do not be fearful,” the Pastor said, “God is with us.”

The Pastor led her up the short staircase, usually barricaded off from the public. Finally, Anna had approached the Window.

A brumous fog enveloped the land in an undulant blanket, the lambent glow from the moon providing sufficient light to see the terror below.

War.

A violent rampage, the cause of destruction. Tulgey forests upturned quietly spread throughout the city, vines and branches consuming the embellishments of a once-perfect life.

A dark, Cimmerian haze held the city in a state of tohubohu, utter chaos, the result of truculent leaders mocking each other. The homes of lovers died alone; once warm, bijou rooms now cast in shadow, family pictures burnt at the stake. Once vivid buildings rotted brown, hues of red and orange and yellow now peeling away from the walls, windows growing with mould, a musty, piercing miasma of death surrounding land. Stifling scents seemed to enter the mouth, filling the body with repugnance. In short, the city was dead.

What Anna felt was strange—the sense of formication along her bones, a shower of disillusionment washing over her desolate mind. Yet, she did not feel sadness, or anger, or hate. She was... empty, hollow; drained of all emotion, though still verklempt somehow. A feeling telling her that it was almost as if she expected what she just saw.

“I hope you understand,” the Pastor spoke solemnly.

The Pastor stepped down the staircase, looking back once more. “Coming?”

“Yes,” Anna responded. She took one last look through the Window, and turned away. Back in the church, the children had waited for her, feverishly teetering with excitement, eagerly prompting Anna for an answer.

“It’s beautiful,” she said, and the day ended.