

Historian's Notes

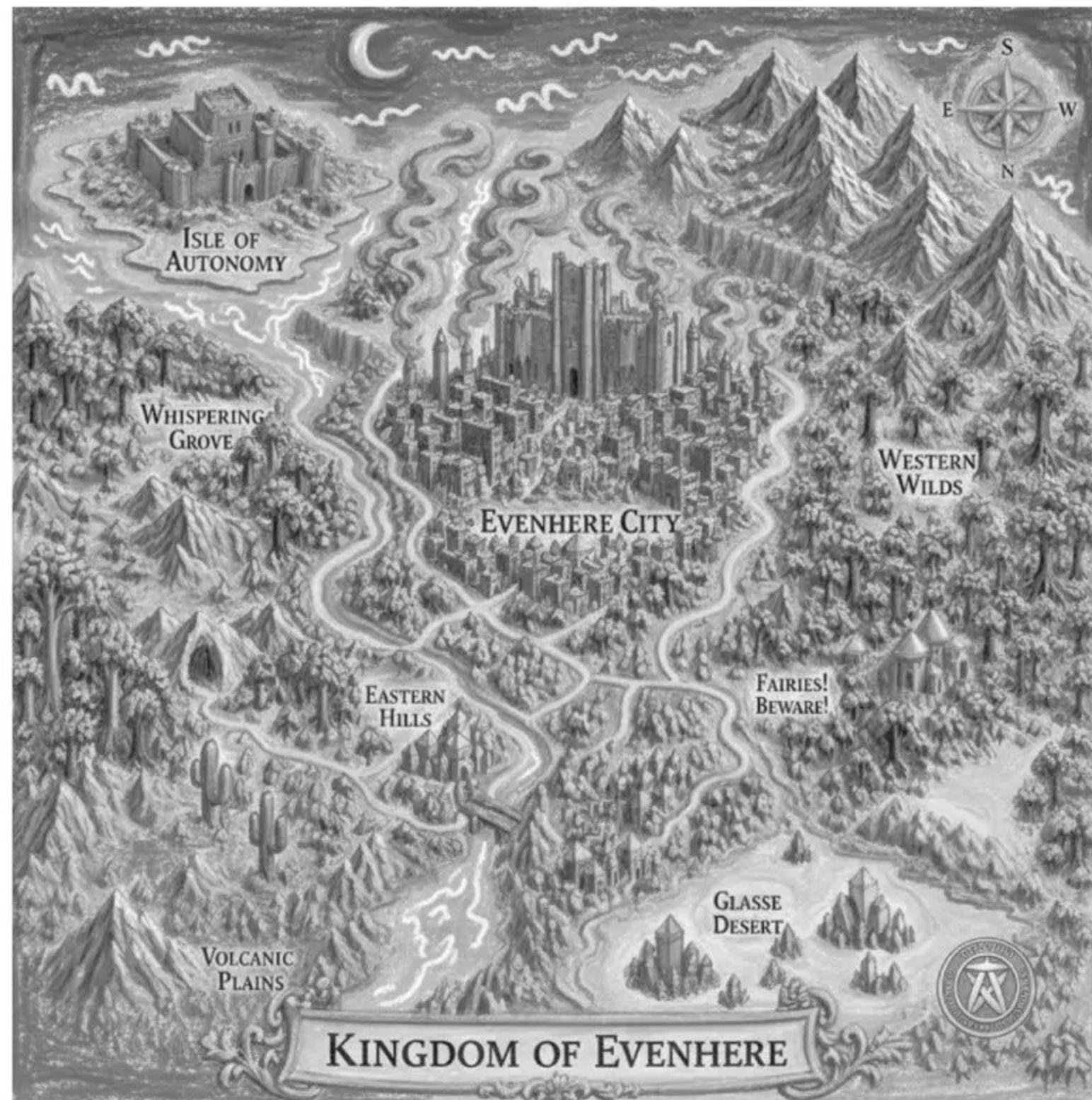
There exists a universal impulse, this desperate need to make sense of what came before, to find some kernel of truth in the legends we've been told. It is what sends heremen on expeditions into forgotten ruins. It drives young wem to dream of knights and princes. All hoping for truth in the myths that still call to us from the dawn of time. Myths of worlds without magic, forgotten gods, and herelings who overthrew kings.

The book that I am translating now is one of these ancient pieces. It was found buried beneath a circle of six stones within a grotto that time had long forgotten, a place sealed away in the depths of the Evenhere Forest. It is believed to be a rare, eyewitness account from the storied Age of Echoes. A time thousands of years ago, now spoken of in *Silvarii Stories* designed to put herelings to sleep with lessons on manners and forgiveness.

At first glance, it is a staggering find. However, a closer examination of the text reveals... *irregularities*. Contained within its fragile pages alongside other strange musings are whimsical images that point toward a nature that would be uncommon as a component of historical text. A complicating factor regarding its authenticity is the inscription on the cover itself. Translated from the ancient language, the title reads not as a chronicle or a history, but as *Silvarii Stories and Lullabies of Fable*.

Providing further evidence to the exact nature of this work, it begins with a phrase so often used for tales such as this:

Upon A Once Before...



Evenhere - Age of Echoes

Chapter 1

Flawed Color

The air in the hospital room tasted of nothing. It sat heavy in the lungs, like breathing powdered stone. The silence between the machines stretched thin, broken by pale blips as unwavering lines of light streaked across the black screens. The medics moved like unfeeling shadows in white, their faces hidden behind linen masks.

“Maybe it's a Colorista contagion,” one medic suggested.

On the cot, slick with sweat, sixteen-year-old Regale Frye cried out in agony. Her cinder-shaded skin was pale, her mouth cracked from panting. But her voice. It cut through everything.

“Let me see him,” she begged. “Why won't you let me see him?”

They ignored her as a new doctor entered the room. Collis, known to everyone as the Big Aught Medic, had come to examine the malformation. An unreadable glance passed between them.

“Could it be a Silvarii curse?” one of the medics questioned.

Regale strained to lift her head. She couldn't hear him. Couldn't smell him. No warmth. No cry. It was as if the world had swallowed him before she ever got to touch him.

“What's wrong?” She pleaded, “Please, let me see my baby.”

Then a whisper.

“Blushborn.”

The word hung there. Clinical. Damning. One medic flinched. Another turned away. But Regale stared forward, her eyes blazed through the fog of pain.

“Give him to me,” the young mother said, as she stood to her feet.

“The infant is a Flaw,” the Big Aught Medic hesitated. “It has an unprecedented Chromatic Disruption. It will be remanded to the incinerator.”

“Give him to me *now*.” Her voice had changed, no longer pleading. She was demanding.

With a surge of desperate strength fueled by a mother’s primal need, she pushed through the crowd, her eyes wild until they landed on the swaddled bundle on the warming table. She saw him, and the world fell away. The humming machines, the worried whispers, it all disappeared. There were no concerns on her face, no flicker of doubt, instead a profound sense of wonder. She reached out and scooped him into her arms.

He had the slightest pink cheeks, a soft mallow pink that seemed to radiate against the ash color of his face. It was unlike anything she’d ever seen. His silver irises were shot through with a spark of the same shade, and within the few tiny charcoal curls that crowned the top of his head, a defiant streak of vibrancy ran right through the middle.

She looked down at his clenched fists, as she unfurled his left hand with a gentle finger. Her breath stopped as she saw his palm was also marked with the same otherworldly hue. As she traced the impossible color with her fingertip, his little hand instinctively wrapped around her finger. He opened his mouth in a silent yawn, and she saw that his gums and tongue were the same fleshy cement color as everyone else’s. He was perfect.

“You don’t know you’re pink. Don’t you listen to any of them. It’s a blush,” she breathed, as she kissed his forehead. “You are not a flaw. You are just Jethran. You are beautiful, Jethran Frye.”

As she held him close, her world shrank to the warm weight in her arms. Regale Frye didn’t know how it had happened, but she was grateful for this beautiful gift.

The years that followed were a whispered study in cruelty. Their cramped apartment was a sanctuary in the heart of Evenhere City. A world Regale built from love and defiance. An orphan at sixteen years, she knew how to be alone, but this was a new isolation. It was a colder reality. It was a silence that had teeth.

Some nights, the oppressive silence felt too heavy. The drone of the public address speakers seemed to seep through the walls, so she would

wrap her son in a lustrous blanket the color of steel and she would hold Jethran close. Regale often hummed the forbidden lullabies. She always told him they were stories her mother had sung to her, tales from a time before the Gray, from the Age of Songs. Her favorite was The Divine Scar.

*Sung upon a once before,
In a time lost evermore.*

*A wound sat on a small hill,
Stretching out both near and far.
People feared the wound until,
A traveler saw the scar.
Seeing that it held no curse,
Pain without love being worse,
Kissed the scar to show it love.
Then with a vibrant new hue,
A light shined out and above.
From it a soft flower grew.*

*Beautiful is life that grows,
From deepest wounds for it knows,
To love what's beneath the scar.
Love will put the pain to sleep,
Showing truly who you are,
Finding truths that you hold deep.*

*The traveler smiled inside.
He now carried renewed pride;
Loved his beautiful story.*

Regale would lean down and kiss him on his cheeks and his hands. He would look up smiling at her and close his eyes. She would kiss both of his eyelids.

"I love your beautiful story," she said.

She taught him games of survival that no hereling should ever have to learn. The Jewel Game, played in the press of the slate-hued market. She told him the Silvarii would leave jewels between the cobblestones. If he found one while they were out, they would be rich enough to move out of Evenhere City. He would keep his face tilted to the cobblestones, searching for treasures.

One market day, when he was four years old, he looked up to see the majestic sight of the Seven High Reach. He was mesmerized every time he saw that mountain. On this particular day, during a moment of innocent wonder, his collar slipped. He exposed his face and a nearby wem's sharp gasp sent a palpable chill through the air. She yanked her hereling away in a pantomime of theatrical horror. A hereman pointed, his face stained with righteous disgust.

"Flaw," the word slithered through the air.

Jethran flinched. The blush on his cheeks pulsed unforgivably. He looked up at his mother, his eyes swimming with a question she could never answer: *Why?*

Regale's heart blazed. They wanted a spectacle, so she gave them one. With a sudden, jarring lurch, she feigned a stumble. Her ration bag swung from her arm, and a large sack of ash-hued flour tumbled from the top. It hit the ground with a soft, pregnant thump and exploded, erupting in a massive cloud of dust. The spectacle of the Flawed boy was instantly forgotten, replaced by the more immediate drama of soiled tunics and wasted food.

In the chaos she had created, Regale knelt. Hidden from view, she brushed the pale dust from his dark hair.

"Whoops," she whispered in his ear. "Mommy made a mess."

Jethran looked at the swirling dust and the frantic people. A giggle escaped him and bubbled into a full laugh before ending in a light snort.

"A big mess," he breathed back, his voice full of awe.

"The biggest," she confirmed, her eyes crinkling in a smile. "Our new secret. The Messy Game."

That same evening, he sat on the cot in his room, his face buried in his hands. Regale came and sat beside him.

"Jethran?" she asked softly. "What is it, my love?"

He looked up, his silver and pink eyes swimming with tears. "I don't want it," he mumbled, his voice thick with a sorrow too large for his body. "I didn't ask for it. I don't want it. Make them take it away."

Regale's heart fractured. "Oh, Jethran," she breathed, pulling him into her arms. "It is a part of you. It is beautiful. One day, you will grow past the dirty looks and the messy gaze of the world and you will be seen by everyone for the beautiful person you are inside."

"No!" he cried, his fists beating against her back. "It's ugly! It's wrong! Everyone hates it. I hate it!" He pulled away from her, and wiped the tears from his eyes. His face became stoic with a heartbreaking resolve.

"Mother," he quietly begged, "can you... can you ask the Medics to remove it? Please?"

"My love, they can't," she said, her voice aching with the terrible finality of the truth.

"Then... if they can't remove the colors from me," he said, his voice dropping, barely audible, "can you ask them to remove me?"

The air left Regale's lungs. The sheer, unvarnished agony in his request was a wound from which she knew she would never recover. She pulled him to her, and rocked him. The only sound in the room was her heart breaking.

By the time Jethran was six years old, it had become increasingly difficult for her to find anyone who could watch him while she was at work. Everyone she asked would refuse out of the fear that his flaw would spread to their hereling. Regale had no alternative but to quit her job to care for him, which meant losing their income.

That hardship triggered the state's solution. A hereman arrived at her door, delivering to Regale a scroll.

It was a decree sent from the TriAught, the ones who make the laws. Specifically from the hereman responsible for creating the laws of wem's rights. He was an unmarried hereman who had been raised by four older brothers. His charge ensured that the wem of Evenhere received all of the rights and privileges to which they were entitled.



Regale lowered the scroll to see that the messenger was still standing there. At least, she had thought that he was the messenger. He was *the message*. The first day Martier Rowe walked into their apartment, he seemed to suck all the air from the room. He was a mountain of a hereman, his presence as heavy and unyielding as the concrete walls. He looked at Jethran's blushing cheeks, then at his mother's worried face.

"It's his fault you're in this mess," Martier had said, his voice a low rumble. "You should send him into the Western Wilds to live with the fairies where he belongs."

Regale flinched and recoiled, at his suggestion that she send her son away, but also at his choice to use the word *fairy*.

"He is my son. He belongs with me. He will stay with me as long as I can protect him," Regale said firmly, as she stepped towards Martier. "And, you may be overseeing my home," she clarified, meeting his eyes with a fierce glare. "But you will not use language like that in front of my son. I will not have you teaching him to speak like he was raised in a bog."

Martier looked at this wem who was bold enough to stand up to a hereman. It should have bothered him, yet he found it impressive. That didn't stop Martier from reminding the boy every day that their poverty, dependence, and fear all had a name. That name was Jethran.

One afternoon, when Jethran was ten years old, Regale was at the market. He watched from the window as a Big Aught Police officer slipped on a patch of wet cobblestone. The BAP's stiff uniform did little to cushion the fall. A moment of pure, lingish bliss bubbled inside him. A laugh escaped him, ending in a light snort. Martier was on him in an instant.

"Boy!" he hissed. "What did you do?"

"What? I... didn't..." Jethran stammered. "I didn't mean to, whatever it was. Honest."

"You're laughing!" Martier's voice was cold. "The Unruliness Order specifically forbids the laughter of herelings during the daylight. Are you trying to bring the TriAught's wrath upon your mother? That is the behavior of an animal."

He grabbed the boy by the arm and dragged him into the kitchen. He shoved Jethran toward the table where his bowl of mush sat, then slapped the bowl from the table sending it clattering to the floor.

"So you will eat like one." He forced Jethran to his knees, making him eat the chalky paste from the floor. That was the day Jethran's laughter died, and his lingo joy, already so fragile, was extinguished.

"What did I do to deserve this?" Jethran asked as he trembled on the floor.

"You exist," Martier barked.

Not long after, from the radio on the counter, a series of screeching chimes announced a new decree:

The time is 3:00 p.m. This is your hourly news update brought to you by U.G.R.A. Radio. The Yoke of Youth has enacted a new Ling Labor Law effective immediately. All herelings above the age of ten must find employment to offset the burden created by their cost of living.

Now a reminder on Civic Duty:

Compliance is free!

"Finally, we can have some peace around here," Martier grumbled.

Despite Jethran's shocking appearance, he started a job working at the River Stones Sorting Facility.

The years that followed bled into one another, a long, monotonous gray blur of dust and stones. The boy who had entered the facility at ten was now sixteen years old. The quiet hope of his youth worn down into a sharp resignation by the daily grind of survival.

He woke to the monotonous drone of the public address speakers outside, the Uncrowned King's voice a constant murmur in the background. To Jethran this was yet another day in the gray. After a quick, lukewarm shower, he dried himself, wrapping the threadbare towel around his waist. He brushed his teeth with a flavorless paste, spitting the foam into the sink. He looked at the cracked mirror, then licked his teeth with his dark gray tongue.

In his room, he got dressed for the day. He pulled on a hooded tunic the color of dried cement. He knew it was a flashy color, but he couldn't abandon the joys of fashion. He paired it with a dark obsidian belt and a

greige crossbody satchel. He completed the look with dark gunmetal boots. He stood before the mirror, looking at himself before heading out to begin his day.

"Who, me?" he murmured to his reflection, then laughed dryly. "No, but thank you. You're too kind."

"There's my well-dressed hereman," Regale's eyes crinkled with pride at the sight of her boy.

"Good morning, Mother." He met her eyes with a genuine smile before sitting down for a breakfast of chalky mush.

From the radio on the counter, a series of chimes announced the morning news:

The time is now 7:00 am. This is your hourly news update brought to you by U.G.R.A. Radio. The weather remains unchanged, with an overcast sky. Evenhere City's financial index is stable.

The Uncrowned King's approval rating holds at 100%.

Now, a reminder on Civic Duty: Gray is Great.

Jethran finished his breakfast quickly and filed down the stairs into the dull monotony of Evenhere City.

"Have a great day at work!" she called, as she watched him leave.

"It'll be a blast," he said over his shoulder. "I'll be the king of rock sorters!"

The city street was lined with perfectly shaped square buildings of slate and limestone. He darted underground to the public transit trains. The surrounding Here subtly shifted away on the crowded train, creating an empty pocket in the dense pack of bodies. As respectable Here, they wanted to keep him there. He instinctively played the Turtle Game, his collar pulled high and his face tilted to his feet. The pink of his Blush chilled with the quiet glow of shame.

At work, Jethran sat separating stones by size, shape, and dullness. The hours bled together in a monotony that Jethran had always believed felt like a crime itself. The only benefit Jethran found from his job was that the dust from the stones nearly filled the air at the facility, settling over his face. By the time he left work, he looked like everyone else. A dark slate-skinned boy who could finally hold his head up as he walked

through the City. No one avoided him while on the transit home. He was a Here, even if only for a few moments each day.

Upon arriving home, he found Regale humming softly, stirring a pot over the electric stove. The pattern of the room's wallpaper, smoke-hued vines and pale gray flowers on a dark charcoal field, seemed to press in on him from the moment he entered.

"How was your day?" she asked as he closed the door behind him.

He gave her a tired smile. "Oh, another great day being a model Here of Evenhere," he said, his voice layered with a sarcasm only she could hear.

He went to the washbasin, pumped water from the spigot and splashed it on his face. He watched in the cracked mirror as the water sluiced away the day's grime. The thick layer of dust washed away to reveal the lighter ash-shaded flesh beneath and the pink of his Blush. He dried his face and dropped the few tokens he'd earned into a clay jar on a shelf.

From the radio, another long series of chimes introduced the broadcast update:

The time is now 6:00 pm. This is your hourly news update brought to you by U.G.R.A. Radio. The Arbiter of Aging has proposed a new law that would impose a curfew on all elderhere. The Aesthetic Improvement Ordinance will require all Here above the age of 60 to remain indoors between the hours of 5:00 a.m. and 4:00 a.m.

This would be in effect all nine days of the week.

Now, a reminder of Civic Duty: The Uncrowned King kno—

With a muted sigh, Jethran reached over and turned the knob, silencing the voice mid-sentence. He had just sat down to his dinner of chalky mush when a sharp knock rattled the door. Jethran opened it to find Martier. The mandated hereman stepped inside, his bulk filling the doorway. He glanced from the silent radio to Jethran.

"Regale," Martier rumbled. "He shouldn't turn that off. You'll miss the broadcast."

"Oh?" Regale replied, "I hadn't realized." Regale had learned long ago that, as a wem, sometimes it was easier to just pretend to be dumb. It made them heremen feel more important, and then they would talk less.

From behind Martier stepped a hereman Jethran had never seen before. Regale gasped, as she recognized Collis, the Big Aught Medic. His gaze was cold as it fixed on Jethran. Regale instinctively stepped in front of her son.

"I remember this one's birth," he addressed Regale without looking at her. "A pronounced case of Chromatic Disruption. We were certain It would not have survived this malformation."

"Our records indicate that It has reached Its 16th birthday," he turned his full attention to Jethran, his lip curling slightly. "Clearly this condition has only accelerated as It's gotten older. The radiance is stronger due to Its refusal to choose Gray. It is no longer a simple Chromatic Disruption. We have reevaluated this case based on Its noncompliance with normalities."

"The Council has approved a new designation," the Medic continued. "Subject JF-3529, presents with a chronic case of Attention Necessity."

The room fell silent. Regale watched her son process this statement. She knew Jethran never wanted attention, let alone had a necessity for it.

"*Attention Necessity?*" Regale questioned. "But what does that even mean?"

"Precisely!" Collis replied. "Its phenotypical anomaly is an intentional coloration which causes others to direct attention toward It. This is a societal disruption. Despite receiving constant attention, It makes a spectacle of Itself. Radiates, forcing the world to look at Its Malicious Vibrancy."

Regale finally stepped forward, "His name is Jethran," she stated clearly.

Martier put his hand on Regale's shoulder to move her from Collis' path. She flinched at his touch and pulled away. The Medic circled Jethran as he conducted his examination. Jethran watched as he moved. He was treating the boy like a disease.

"They don't have to look!" Jethran shouted. "Everyone looks but they never see me."

"The Big Aught Council, on my recommendation, has approved a remedy." Collis removed a bottle of pills from his satchel. Jethran stepped back, looking toward Regale then back at the Medic.

"I won't... I won't take it," Jethran said, his voice shaking but firm.

"Mandate Rowe," the Medic sighed. "The subject is being noncompliant. Please assist."

Martier was swift. Before Regale could stop them, Martier was on him, pinning his arms to his sides with brutal efficiency. His grip was like iron on the boy's jaw, forcing it open. The Medic shoved the pill onto Jethran's tongue, then a flask of cold water pierced his lips and was poured down his throat. Martier held the boy's jaw shut. He released his grip as Jethran gagged and convulsed on the floor.

He lay there whimpering.

"One pill every day to dull Its shine," the Big Aught Medic announced. He placed the bottle filled with tiny pills upon the table. The Heremen left. Jethran looked up at his mother as she scurried to lock the door behind them.

Why didn't you stop them? he thought. He already knew the answer.

After his mother had fallen into a deep sleep brought from the exhaustion of the evening's events, Jethran sat alone on his cot. He pulled his mother's lustrous, steel-hued blanket around his shoulders, drawing the fabric tight against his throat.

The blanket was old with holes he'd traced with his fingers since he was a small ling. It always brought him comfort when the world was too cold and gray. He shivered, but the cold he felt was internal, a spiritual chill that no fabric could stop. The weight of the blanket brought him a small, tenuous comfort as the fear from the evening settled in his bones.

He thought of his mother's lullaby. The one she used to calm him. To protect him. He closed his eyes, focusing on the core of the story, building it like a fortress against the noise. He thought of the flower growing from the wound in the world. He remembered how the people in the lullaby said that the world was cursed from the wound that laid on it. He didn't see the pink in his hair begin to pulse, a thread of deep, shadowy new shade creeping down from the root. He didn't see the pink on his cheeks deepen as a new ring of fierce color bloomed from the center. He didn't see his palms begin to glow with a light they had never

held before. He remembered a traveler that came and knelt down kissing the wound.

Jethran remembered the flower that was grown from the wound on the world, lost in the lullaby, his spirit clung to the only truth that had ever mattered. As Jethran focused on the lullaby, a deep internal rhythm began to thrum beneath his ribs. He whispered the words his mother had given him.

“I love my beautiful story.”

With that, a concussive eruption of pure indigo energy shot from his body with the sound of a thousand screams. The force shook the foundations of the building. Jethran stood panting, as he looked in the mirror. His Blush was now blazing with this vibrant color. He noticed five silver lights and one of a glowing indigo as they swirled out the window.

Then he noticed his room. The floor, his cot, the door. It all had transformed. The dull gray grain had changed, it was now a soft lilac. The wallpaper had always been a charcoal background with smoke-hued vines and little gray flowers. But now the background was a deep aubergine.

He launched himself toward the cracked mirror and began scrubbing at his cheeks, his nails digging into his skin. He focused on the Blush, the traitorous sign of his difference, to scrape away the new violation, to rub the dirt from his spirit. He stopped only when his skin began to sting, leaving gray lines etched across the deep pink and the new purple ring.

His skin felt wrong, it was crawling. He believed that the Medic's touch had left a permanent stain that warped his Flaw. He felt damaged and wounded. The room, which used to feel small and safe, now felt suffocating, its lilac floors and aubergine stained walls were now a cage built for him.

He stared at his haunted reflection and remembered the Medic's words, cold and sharp as a scalpel.

“It radiates, forcing the world to look,” he rasped at the reflection in the mirror. “Who could possibly look away now?”