

With encrusted, aged eyes, The Hierophant gazed out towards the horizon. The sun's warmth did not often grace the Matrici Chancel. Now that every night was sharpened by an unpitied cold, one could only bask in its sweet relief.

The Hierophant could still remember the age of yore. When the days passed as occupation; when the body cooperated as one; when he could see the faces of all the young hopefuls who dreamed of love. Holiness once filled this house. Often it'd seem as if his mind broke it apart, so that he could keep it as wondrous as it had always been. After all, in his endless contemplation, he could never find an answer.

He could still feel how the chancel resounded with zeal. In this place, a multitude of pilgrims prayed for the fortitude to begin a journey of fulfillment. For each, he would bless with the collected water of the Sacred Drops. The other clergymen would host gamesome debates on this divine mystery – one of many. Her tears? Her sweat? Perhaps the water She used to bathe? It was never designed to be answered. What was concrete was the great faith it instilled in its recipients. That soothing coolness. That foreign-yet-familiar smell. That enigmatic, undefinable notion of closeness to Her. All of it gave them the courage to seek destiny.

And yet the flow of pilgrims trickled and sputtered out. At one time, his brothers rejoiced when they finally saw one climbing their way, and performed all the ceremony and ritual they had ever written for that lonesome, singular soul. It was only natural that his brothers would slowly steal away. It was always a different theory. With the enfeeblement of age and the perception of purposelessness, some took it upon themselves to begin a pilgrimage of their own. Sometimes it would be a heretical quest to seek Her out, ushered in by their unending confinement. Others simply grew tired, afraid of ending their days in a cycle that no longer turned. Only The Hierophant remained. As disdainful as he was of their treachery, he could not resolve to hate them. Even regret struck at his heart, for all he could pin to whatever remained was a title, a warped face, and a heap of scattered memories.

Breathing out, the man opened his eyes, content and filled with the warmth of the sun. As he raised his weary, fleshy vessel, his censer swayed. He looked out towards the prospect of impossibility once more, and turned towards the altar. With every stumbling, numb step, his bobbing head recalled the purposes of each memento that decorated that crumbling block. The Acheiropoietia, an unfolded mopping cloth stained with what could only be Her silhouette. The Stele of Serendipity, engraved with the names, histories, and hopes of every pilgrim who had come to be blessed. Maligna Pons, The Scribe's Quill, The Bone of Cherishing...

And the most important of all, The Unbreaking Seal of Inducement, the great relic discovered upon the rock of the Matrici, the very proof of Her existence.

With a sigh, The Hierophant collapsed at the foot of the altar. His withered hands caressed it desperately. He gathered himself once again. He curled his left hand into a fist, and gently drummed on the top of the altar, in line with the recitation of his wont sacraments.

“Oh Mother Above, Mercy of the Mountain, Unsealed Oracle; pay heed to these words of commitment.”

“Bring unto us your venerable eidolon, present within each and every kernel of perfection you provide us. Comfort us with them, so that we may be instilled afresh of our virtuous purpose. Let us not forget your grace through these long nights, oh Mother Above.”

“Anoint our gardens with your great love, so that they may reflect and uplift your essence. Caps of bellflower. Blooms of daffodil. Blossoms of lotus. The badges of carnations, striped and mauve. Render unto the flowers your grace, oh Mother Above. May their spirituous fragrance remark upon you, so that all may harken to your majesty.”

“Oh Mercy of the Mountain, help us to rescind the libertine among us. Act as intercessor on our behalf. Bring them to heel as one does a slaving hound, a hubristic bull, a rabid soricine. So shall it be, for the sake of this holy chancel.”

“And for the righteous, humbled pilgrims upon our doorstep, grant them peace regardless of destiny. Whether over ocean, tower, or firmament, may they find fulfillment within their procession. In this instance, I pray for Maximillian; Kurt of Kelp; Johannes, Esq.; and Sir Stanley. Their bodies, or their souls. May they be bestowed with security in their fate.”

“Oh Mother Above, may our voices be heard on high. May the prayers of the past echo within the heavens. And may the wills of our future come to fruition, so that we may shine as testament to your great love. Let it be so.”

“...Another familiar word from me, Oh Mother Above. I beseech thee once again: deliver unto me a reformation. The mountain we had called your own has unraveled. The holy house no longer radiates life. And through it all, only I remain. I ask not what I must give, but only state that I would give all that remains. Shall I sing once more of your glories? Shall I endeavor to interpret your being? Call for my mind, and it will be offered.

Please. I beseech you, Mercy of the Mountain. It must not end like this, flummoxed in an immanent gloom. It cannot. I beg you, let it not be so.”

The Hierophant no longer expected a miracle. His ears only harkened to the abyssal echoes of the ruined world behind him. His extremities but stung with the lifeless, abandoned stone. His mind merely hummed with desperation immune to immunity. He waited. Waited, as he meekly reached out for Her. He waited, as all of it swirled within his head, coalescing into that slurry of dejection. At last, he opened his eyes, lifted himself up, and limped away.

All that remained was blasphemous thoughts. The strength of youth once pulped such invasive notions, yet naught remained to repel them now. He questioned the purpose. Though it was written that their service was not servitude, he could only feel enslaved. He had shown faith where all others had scurried into faithlessness. Even when the world around him shattered, he remained steadfast and true. He was the lion of the Matrici, proud in the face of the insurmountable. Alas, even the noblest of lions, when brought to total ruin, cannot maintain their pride. Yes, by Her grace he yet lived, but to thrust forth a life of perpetual agony was the work of malevolence itself.

His dry lips parted, and he uttered, “Oh Mother Above, why have I been blinded so?”

Like a flowing tide, the memories of the calm shoals of the bright past washed over his mind. The warmth, the laughter, the peace. It lingered for a moment, as his insensate feet pushed forth towards the precipice. The merriment ebbed away.

He looked out once more towards the impossible prospect. He would have liked to think that he stayed because there was no escape, yet such would be ignorant of his devotion. The Hierophant had looked upon this very image for far too long. The stones, suspended perilously by nothingness, once seemed random. Yet as it lingered on, the branches of impossibility bloomed within his eye. A sort of cosmic tree, to be climbed like the pilgrims he once knew. By some will above, Hers or otherwise, it was imagined to be traversed.

And above the great branches lay a singular light, not of the sun or moon or stars. The Hierophant could not conjure an explanation for it. It could only be likened to that of a deep-sea lantern, the silent call of a sibylline siren.

To climb the mountain, though it no longer remained, was formerly deigned the highest order of sacrilege. The Unsealed Oracle sought not the rigor of a pilgrim, nor the vigor of a profligate. Not anymore. Though they never wanted to comment upon it, they

were the angels of Her will. And Her will was to maintain the designed order. An order, admittedly, of their design; a will, consequently, not truly belonging to Her.

No other answer called to The Hierophant. The bitter winds of this wasteland prodded at his feet. Feet that had long since grown numb. Feet that wobbled and swayed involuntarily, helplessly. Feet that only advanced to ordain the constancy of The Hierophant.

He closed his eyes. Exhaled. He cared not if She was watching him from above. All that mattered is that there would never be no greater act of repentance. No greater proof of conviction. The rite of pilgrimage would, at long last, continue on. He would be granted peace, regardless of destiny. Body or soul, he would meet the consequence of his virtue.

With faith, he leapt.