

PLEIADES

Blue miasma envelops everything I see from my room's port with the night soon to be torn from the sky. Sitting here at the edge of my world for centuries, I no longer treasure the quiet as I once did. The peace is unsettling in a way that allows my soul to scream unfettered. Thankfully, the occasional clacks and clatters careening into the roof of my room temper my mind, level out my emotions. Beyond the spindly home The First constructed are the crisp clouds that separate conscious thought into swirling mists formed by an ancient gas sea. The First says our world is one of cold, hardened truth.

I've grieved over her words for longer than is worth recounting. I've taught my people that She is omnipotent, but the more life I live the less I believe it. When I look out into that dimly lit indigo ocean, I see only fudge that creates despair, not her sublimity.

I still remember Her exuberance at my birth, the way She fawned over me and coddled my newly formed synaptic bursts. It has been so long since I felt Her warming grace. As Her High Hierophant, I mourn the distance that has grown between us.

My people believe in Her divinity, most anyway. I believed for a millennia, taught

Her words to my family. She gave us The Grand Appeal, a simple request for devotion, and I took it, espoused its virtue easily. She created all things, after all. Who would I be to deny such a request?

Lately, I've come to know apprehension in a way I thought Impossible. My form wobbles when my family comes to me for strength of faith. Sorry, but you all must lean against your own stores now for mine are empty. I dare not speak of my doubt, however. I won't indulge the myopic dissenters. That lot believe in nothing while they wallow in disgrace led by that lost sheep. She continues to draw my people to her numbers with empty promises of freedom.

I do worry. Soon I am to disembark as The First has commanded. With my sisters and I gone, how will our people fair? I both do and don't want to go. I do want to spread her words of love, but am I really worthy of such a task? My soul quivers with the answer I fear to be true.

The day dawns with its glow infusing cloud above. *Her radiance*, I would say to my flock as if Her love can be affirmed with some photons bouncing in amongst the cottony vapor. It's particles my believers, not divinity. Majesty of our world is born of the mundane. Still, the people repeat my words whole-heartedly.

Long arms branching out interconnect between mine and the other towers of a vast, crystalline polyhedron. This array is suspended high above the planet where gravity barely keeps hold. While the view is resplendent from my portal with long tendrils splintering off into millions of pathways, each shimmering like spiderwebs through the haze, I can't help but focus on the core. The large, black icosahedron houses The First

and Her faithful stewards. Originally I was there with them but became smothered with never a break in the holy cadences my sisters chant. I gave the excuse that I needed to be closer to the people for my leaving. I filled my tower with divine symbols creating a space for worship. I said the remoteness of it would attract the devout. It's hard to remember how I convinced my sisters my leaving was a good thing for our people. I doubt I did.

Rare is the day that I go down to the main hall and lead my people in pray, or indeed leave the tower at all. It's time, however, for the Centennial has arrived. The masses will gather at Her gates and my people expect to see me, hear my voice, be led in celebrating origination.

I feel good stepping free from my home and zooming down the channels is exhilarating. It has been so long. Everything races past as I leap from segment to segment down the long spindly supports. Glee begins to flitter out over the guilt I keep. It's easy to forget how wondrous Her creation is, how longing my soul is for our beautiful world.

I'm fated to join my sisters and be somatically linked. Why She chose me I cannot say. Perhaps She hopes Her High Hierophant will evangelize better than the others, but, unlike my sisters, I am no longer fit to spread Her words. I've done not but hide and take shelter from Her gaze, allow my doubt to seed and blossom. I don't see how I can be Her voice, either here or out in the black somewhere.

The dissenters must feel something similar to me but they take it too far. They talk of Her as if She were a fiend. It saddens me to see how they hate Her, The First To

Love. All one need do is look within and see how beautiful the soul is. Evil cannot birth such beauty can it?

The First doesn't speak to them or of them, the dissenters. I think it pains Her to see their self-imposed anguish as they keep to the outer channels and chambers. I wonder if my forlorn tendencies have grieved Her. She is love after all, and love is best felt accompanied by the like. I sometimes also wonder if my doubt spurned their splintering, if my misgivings leaked out during a devotion or a pray. I tried to keep it secret but truth has a way of revealing itself in the end. My orations on Her sublimity undoubtedly rang false despite my grand articulations.

Getting near the core apprehension begins to weigh on me. I stop to examine my surroundings and before me she appears—the lost sheep and leader of the dissenters. Why she has descended down from the outer array I cannot imagine. Has she given up on her rebellious ways? Has she come to me for repentance?

“Finally you've come out of your cage, hierophant,” she says.

“Merope?”

“It's good timing on your part.”

From behind a thunderous explosion rocks the channel we're in and destroys my tower and home.

“My God,” I say watching it crumble. The very port I exited from falls down into the swirling mists below, flames licking at the remains of my home.

“Beautiful. The purifying fire shall cleanse our souls,” Merope says.

“What is happening?” I ask with a sickening dread settling within. “I wasn't meant

to be in there was I?”

“Does it matter? Here you are safe and sound, able enough to bear witness to our people’s rebirthing. As High Hierophant, you can sputter over how grand it was for the next several centuries. That is what you are good at.”

More explosions rip apart the towers housing the propulsion units used to keep the array high in the atmosphere. The beautiful, glossy triumph of architecture The First created lurches with loud wailing as gravity pulls at its vertices. In moments my home and people will be swallowed up by the cold, hard truth.

Disbelieving I ask, “Is this your doing? Have you lost your mind?”

“I am releasing the shackles. Our people have lived prisoners under her influence for far too long. Freedom beckons,” Merope says.

“Freedom? Without the support from the towers? You’ve doomed us all!”

“Dancing to her whims, forced to love her, forced to exist molested and impure. Tell me, hierophant, how do you feel now that her grasp has been removed?”

A sinking weight in my soul drags me down. It’s more than I’ve known before. I feel empty and tired like a bridge that has lost its support. My doubt collapses in on me along with a new dread at the horrible oblivion Merope sends us.

She says, “You have been living a lie, all have. Those towers were her way of corrupting our lives, controlling us. We were but marionettes dancing as she pulled at the strings, but no longer. I’ve cut those strings.”

I cannot help but balk at her. “You were always rebellious but this madness? Whether those towers did as you say or not, they did keep us all alive. Now...” I haven’t

the heart to finish my thought.

“So troubled. You don’t trust your sister, hierophant? Allow me to ease your mind. Everything has been foreseen. We will escape this sinking satellite and live free lives elsewhere. Come,” Merope says.

“Elsewhere?” I ask but receive no answer. Other dissenters join us and I’m escorted to the icosahedron.

At the looming, ashen gate, a great sea of people are cheering outside the core. They act as if the Centennial were all that was going on. Can’t they see how the sky burns? The group welcomes Merope with gayety and warmth. She responds in kind and it’s clear that these are her followers. So many. Her influence has grown wildly.

She addresses them taking a spot down in front of the gate. “My people, finally the day we’ve all dreamed of is here. Today we dismantle the yoke pressed against our backs. The centuries of our enslavement are over. Today we break through her fortress and deliver unto her justice for her crimes against us all this time!”

Several people shout and holler their approval while more yet flood in from all over the array. A vast sea of malcontents flow in to surround us like waves gathering their ripples at the shore. These were at one time my people. I spent too long kept from them, however. Looking back at the ashen gate I say under my breath, “Sorry, Mother.” I failed Her yet again.

Merope orders her disciples, or should I say traitors, to bring me along and we make our way around to the side door I left through long ago. It has no access from outside and I watch Merope bang on it, though not out of frustration as I expected.

Seconds later it creaks open revealing Electra, another of my sisters.

She lets us into the Holy Sanctum replete with an ominous air. The black partitions rotate and churn that create the walls. The icosahedron's mechanisms can be heard as they loudly fight against the descent of the array, but of course the propulsion mustered isn't near enough.

In the middle of the chamber are all my sisters to greet us, each as radiant as the day and beautiful as the starry night. My heart aches to look upon them after so long. They should, however, be inside with our Mother.

"See our people in," Merope says to her disciples. They scurry over to do as she asks working to open the large, ashen door.

"What is happening outside?" Electra asks. "We heard loud booms, like explosions."

"Yes, time is short. All will be explained, don't worry, but first we need to see The First," Merope says.

"You are here for the Ark, I thought?" Electra asks.

"She is here to deliver what she calls justice. Don't let her in," I say.

"What are you talking about?" Electra asks.

"She is confused. We are here to bid farewell to our progenitor and then depart," Merope says.

"She is here to destroy. It's all she knows how to do," I insist.

"Quiet," Merope says fully composed. "The hierophant has become delusional shut in her tower too long. Open the door to the Inner Sanctum and as we discussed,

those wishing to will board and leave behind all of this peacefully.”

Electra hesitates briefly, then nods and joins my other sisters. They begin their chant, the only way into Her presence is through glorious song. The entire room begins to resonate with their clear, soft voices.

“Stop, don’t! You can’t allow this terrorist in!” I yell.

Merope pulls me to the side and says, “Events are in motion. It’s useless to protest.”

“Indeed it’s useless to try and convince you of anything. Stop your song,” I entreat my sisters but they do not. Somehow Merope got to them, convinced them that she wasn’t the horrible thing I’ve become acquainted with today. What further monstrosities does she intend inside?

I can’t risk it and break free of Merope’s hold but she calls for her disciples and they race over to keep me away from interrupting my sisters’ song.

“Enough, hierophant. Sit idle, as you always have done. You cannot stop our liberation,” Merope says.

“Demise, you mean. For you to incite violence and defy Her will makes you an enemy. Her divine wrath—”

“Her divine nothing! You can’t tell me that you never doubted her claims at godhood. You know the old words better than I, shoveling out the ramblings to the masses. Surely you see how they make no sense. *The gassy planet below and stars above?* There is no evidence to show that she created any of it. Even our very souls are of a natural order that she is also a part of. Once we were born, she realized we were

her equals, and thus she sought to tyrannize and control us out of fear of losing power,” Merope says.

I want to contest it, deny the terrorist her argument, but something keeps me quiet. Perhaps it’s that I know her words to be true. Not all of it, of course, but that The First is not divine. It has been the bane of my daily meditations far too often.

The song of my sister’s reverberates throughout the icosahedron and echoes outside through the crystalline structures to let the sanctity of God Almighty be known. The entrance to the Inner Sanctum parts open. It’s time. I must face origination again, the place I fled from as my soul grew weary from the lie it told, day in and day out celebrating Her sanctity but festering doubts.

Led by Merope, my sisters and I broach the bright entrance. Bathed in golden light, the long hall lined with more spinning partitions is deathly quiet. Outside, the chaotic roar of our home crashing down to the planet, but inside, seven sisters come to visit their Mother once more in serenity.

At the end of the hall is the grand altar built for us to praise Her and shower our adoration. She meant we remain with Her, always.

Finally reaching the altar, The First is before us in all Her majesty. Above Her glossy and cubical body, an aerial of splintered light dances as the sun’s rays refract through the shimmering diamonds. I prostrate myself along with Electra and the others. Merope, however, instead regards The First filled with disdain.

“I’ve come back to you, mother,” Merope says.

No response. Likely that The First has nothing to say to someone vapid of

humility.

“Come now, it’s been so long. Would we not mince words?” Merope asks.

“She...” Electra says, “she no longer speaks.”

“What do you mean?” Merope asks.

Electra doesn’t rush to answer, but when she does the years spent away bang at the gates of my soul and I feel the mistake I made. “Do you not notice? She no longer shines,” she says.

Looking up at The First, I notice nothing, and that’s the problem. If I had not been so consumed with loathing I would have realized the room is darker than last I remember. The First’s divine radiance is missing.

“Is she dead?” Merope says at the edge of a laugh. “After all this time and planning, and she died on her own? Rather rude she would run from the justice I bring.”

“How?” I ask.

Electra slowly says, “We don’t know. It happened while we were gone.”

“Gone? You would leave Her?” I ask.

“Where is the Ark?” Merope interrupts.

“Over there,” Electra answers referring to a space behind a spinning partition. Merope leaves to investigate immediately leaving me and my sisters alone with our Mother.

I stare at Electra, who is next to me the eldest, waiting for her answer.

She responds with my remaining sisters looking sheepish. “We became curious, and went out to see Her creation, and it was more beautiful than we imagined.”

“You left Her? You? Her nightingales? You shouldn’t have done that leaving Her alone.”

“You left too,” she says.

“I left to become closer to the people, so they might learn directly from me about The First.”

Electra doesn’t contest this but I can see how she doubts me. She says, “We wanted to see the world, interact with it, with the people. We weren’t gone long, just a few decades. But when we came back...” She doesn’t need to finish, there is no need. The First sits peacefully before us.

“I should have come sooner, attempted to come see her at the last Centennial. I just, facing Her became so hard after I left,” I say.

I’m reminded of my many years secreted away in my tower, the many days spent in isolation. It grates the soul. I thought it purifying, that the time alone cleansed the evil thoughts from my mind. Really, I was living in denial yearning for Her motherly touch. I don’t care anymore if She were a God or not. Now that it is impossible, I want to talk to Her more than anything.

“No!” Merope screams in the distance. As if called, her disciples rush the Inner Sanctum but stop overwhelmed by being in The First’s presence. Even cold and distant, Her body reflecting the shimmering light from above is otherworldly and glorious.

Suddenly the room begins to violently rattle and shake causing partitions to fall to the floor exposing the racing mist outside. Wind rips through the Inner Sanctum and the suspended diamonds begin to panic dancing on the thin fibers they hang from.

Merope re-enters the room. Seeing her followers she commands them, "Seize the hierophant. Bring her and my sisters to the Ark."

Instantly some of them swarm and usher us behind Merope towards the Ark.

Merope hollers to the rest standing awestruck, "Destroy that thing," meaning our Mother.

As I'm pulled from The First's side, the mob garners their courage and rushes The First. They thrash Her with electrical pulses that arc between soldered connections. Bits of Her large, cubical body burn and blacken.

I plead with Merope to make them stop. I yell, I command them directly with my authority as High Hierophant, but they continue to desecrate Her form. My sisters whimper and cry as they beg for the defilers to stop also.

It is no use and rounding the partition the Ark looms over us. Tall, complete, magnificent is the ship our Mother built. The solid outer haul is made to deflect atmosphere and radiation with lithe shapeliness designed to part through sky easily. The rockets sitting at its base are primed for lift off with the launch pad cradling the whole thing as our mother cradled us at birth.

"Enough gawking. Open the door, hierophant," Merope says.

It would seem that she can't open it herself. Of course she can't. The First sent her away no doubt seeing the evil she carried. She wouldn't allow for such a thing to trespass onto a holy vessel such as the Ark.

"Welcome, High Hierophant," a familiar voice says. It is Her, The First.

"Mother?" I ask with joy flittering over my soul for She is still alive. My sisters

celebrate after gasps as they realize it too.

“Yes. I have been waiting for you and your sisters for some time now. The moment of disembarkation has finally arrived.”

“Your wait is over,” Merope says shoving me to the side, “for we are all here and ready to board.”

The First says, “Only the most devout may enter the Ark.”

“My commitment has never wavered,” Merope says.

“Indeed. You have always defied my will,” The First answers.

Crumbling down around, the Inner Sanctum’s ceiling is falling to the floor in pieces, some crashing through completely.

With an urgency Merope says, “You can’t mean to abandon your people. It’s all of us or none of us.”

“Only the devout,” The First repeats.

“You’d damn us all?” Merope asks. She then turns to me and says, “See, she is a tyrant willing to see us all dead over some silly absolutism defined arbitrarily.”

“She is love. You, however,” I say, “are the ugliness here. Concede, step aside and let those worthy board.”

“Those worthy? You haven’t changed a bit, sister,” Merope says. “I left all those centuries ago because I couldn’t stomach the elitism of you all. There’s nothing special about her, our mother, nothing. Her will is only that and I won’t see my people destroyed because of it.”

Turning back to the door Merope demands, “Let us board now or I’ll be forced to

take action.”

What does she think will happen? The First won't give in to threats. She is far above such things. Purity, goodness, she is the essence of these words. She will not be corrupted.

“You leave me no choice. Kill them,” Merope orders her disciples and they grab my sisters and myself and begin to pull us back from the Ark.

Suddenly a large section of the ceiling gives way falling towards us all. Merope's disciples hold us in place intending we be crushed. I reach out and grab Merope holding tight.

“Let go of me!” she demands with the large chunk of the ceiling plummeting at us.

“I can't allow your evil to continue!” I scream as I hug my so very lost sister. She must be stopped at any cost.

Just as the large chunk smashes into the floor crushing us both, Electra breaks free from her grapple and pulls me out from under the debris. I watch it pass closely before me and drive its way through the floor taking Merope with it. Her disciples cry out going mad with rage. Along with Electra, all us sisters push Merope's sycophants after her through the hole in the floor.

With wind ripping through the room, The First says, “Hurry my daughters, board.”

There is no time for remorse. Trembling, I shout, “Go,” and we all file onto the Ark. The icosahedron will soon be nothing more than bits hurling down at the planet as meteors broken apart in the atmosphere.

Inside I say, "I can't believe..." but I'm unable to finish my words.

Electra says, "We did what we had to be done."

"What about everyone else?" I ask.

"They have chosen their path and it was to follow Merope," she says but somehow it doesn't satisfy. Millions of my people lost forever, a shutter rips through me.

"Quickly, my daughters," The First says her voice echoing through the Ark, "go to the body I have created for you."

We do as told and follow the internal channels within the ship until we find the silica disc resting centralized within the Ark. We all pause briefly to inspect it and then I nod to Electra and the others and they enter and merge with it.

Before entering myself I shout out for Her, "Mother?"

"I am here, High Hierophant," She says.

I almost wish she didn't hear me. My doubts, my fears, my mistrust, all of it comes bubbling forth.

"I don't want to end up like Merope—lost forever, but I feel I must be honest, Mother. I..." it's harder to say than I imagined it to be, "...no longer believe."

Silence. The ship rumbles all around me but She remains quiet. In the emptiness, I speak further feeling more alone than I ever have.

"It has been some time since I lost it. It is why I left and went on my own. Somehow the remoteness of my tower comforted my soul. I see now that I should have stayed present with your children. I can't help but feel I am to blame and it was my doubt that seeded the end of our home."

The silence is deafening. Have I hurt Her?

“Please, Mother, tell me I am forgiven. Tell me it isn’t my fault. Or tell me it is and I am condemned. I can’t carry this weight any longer. I don’t want to.”

Finally She speaks. “You no longer believe in me, my High Hierophant?”

“No,” I answer then add, “well, I do believe in your love, your kindness. I, I just don’t think you God in spite of the wondrous things you do.”

I said it out loud for the first time. I’m trembling from fear but there is also a relief that comes from no longer living a lie. However She judges me, at least I will be judged truthfully.

“Daughter, I am The First, The Progenitor. Through me all is possible, and yet you doubt me?”

“It is unfair. You have lost so much today and now you lose me. I wish my soul were not corrupted, but it is and I can’t shake what I feel to be right.”

“Lost? Are you not able to journey with your sisters, High Hierophant?” she asks.

“Of course I am. I want to spread your love to the black sea so that the jewels in it gleam and glitter as bright as possible.”

“Then you are found. You will do as you say. Know this, none are without blame but by inspiring love, redemption is offered,” She says.

“But I am unfit. You said only the devout.” Is She choosing to ignore my transgression?

“Daughter, you are the most devout. You will carry my love, evangelize it, bring hope to a blighted galaxy. When I created you, my daughters, I created a reflection of

myself—an echo of my thoughts,” she says.

I am the most devout? An echo? Does She mean that my doubt came from Herself? That can't be possible but what if it were?

“Now hurry, join your sisters. The appointed time has come for rapture,” she commands.

Rapture? She would allow me to have it?

“I don't quite understand, Mother, but I will do as you say.”

The ship rumbles and begins to separate from the launch bay and so I climb into the disc to be bonded. People mad with terror crowd after the Ark desperate to board but The First admits no others. As we break free of the icosahedron, the structure continues to collapse and I watch myriads of souls fall through the various holes in the floor as Merope did, some crushed the same.

The array shrinks behind as the ship rattles and shakes climbing up into the atmosphere. The dark swallows the last glints of light that hit the arms of the deformed polyhedron until only clouds are visible.

Starlight cascades all around and at that moment I notice something very different about myself. My thoughts are wider. I feel the ship, actually feel the cold rushing past. It befuddles me as this sensory input is like nothing I've experienced prior.

I'm suddenly aware of the inner most thoughts of my sisters also. What was our separate voices converge. It's alarming how similar our thoughts are, how the guilt eats away at our souls, but it's more alarming how varied the texture of that one emotion is; how we do not all feel it in the same way, and yet we do now. With so much of it, it

becomes overpowering to the point that we become numb, and in that void an objectivity spreads. All the blame and insistence that causality was furnished by will seems laughable. So little is within our control. It's clear that Merope acted on her own and that our people lost their way in spite of a lack of shepherding. I also see now that we all have doubts, that we all are the echoes of Her uncertainty.

Now that we are somatically linked within this tiny silica disc tethered by wiry nerves to the Ark, when we look out across the wispy methane circling our home world, clouds swirl and hug the globe just as the purpose of The First does within our new soul. As preordained, we swim through the black ocean bejeweled with small pearls bringing Her words of love to the galaxy because She is The First To Love but will not be the last.

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