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## They Call Him Nightfish By Raymond Towers

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This story was written in May/June of 2021 as part of Raymond Towers' Write This! Cyberpunk Challenge. It has a MEDIUM level of controversial content.

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## **Introduction**

About this story: At present, I am creating writing projects for the Cyberpunk Challenge, and happily, energetically, enthusiastically, I might add. Nightfish came about when I browsed through the low cost / no cost offerings on Drive Thru RPG for cyberpunk-related material. It was there that I came upon Paul 'Geist' Gallagher's scenario builder *Augmented Reality*. This is a nifty guide, I thought, and it will fit in very well with the *Write This!* material I put together previously. I contacted Geist, asking if he wouldn't mind if I used some of his excellent ideas in a new story arc, and he agreed, and that is the start of it. *Augmented Reality* is available through Drive Thru RPG as a Pay What You Want title.

You might notice that there is no character called Nightfish... yet. Also, I haven't used all that many ideas from the scenario builder. This story arc doesn't even begin in a cyberpunk city. I have done this deliberately to break away from the mold, to establish the character before he is forced into a home not of his choosing, where he must adapt from what he was before into what he will become next. Also, I hardly ever write Young Adult novels and I wanted to delve into that as well. There are only the first few pages, split up into short sections to allow for posting into manageable chunks on my blog, or on Geist's blog if he should be inclined to do so. Think of this as an introduction to bigger and better things.

## Part 1

His name was Sohl, and he raced like the wind to stop death. Standing at five-nine, he had the lean, athletic legs of a sprinter, and the rare ability to spring forward or leap sideways, to shift speeds in a split second. These gifts Sohl used now as the stupid sheep bleated in panic and by instinct crowded together, nearly guaranteeing that one of them would succumb. They became a fluid obstacle course for the dark-haired, dark eyed sixteen year-old, a moving maze full of half steps and quick spurts of motion as he dodged their incoming rush. One of the sheep would fall, would surely die, if he didn't act quickly.

The wolf had come in from the edge of the trees, where the grass was still yellow but grew higher than where Sohl kept the flock. The animal was all teeth and snarls, seeing his approach. It had knocked down a lamb with a swipe of its furry paws, sending the creature tumbling just out of reach. The wolf was ready to pounce, to bite and drag the lamb into the forest. It would have done this already, had Sohl not come bounding out after it, over the frightened backs of the still retreating flock.

He held a weapon in his hands, but not his trusty plastic bow. This time he carried what his rival Rory called a bug zapper, but Sohl liked the name electric lance better. A traditional shepherd wielded a staff, but this staff measured five feet long and had an outer shell of strong, dark gray PVC pipe. The inside of the pipe held wiring and a power converter capable of sending out 400,000 volts of bowel-loosening electricity. The end of the pipe, the lance, showed a PVC cap with two long screws drilled through backwards, sharp ends sticking out. Those were the contact points. The fingers of Sohl's right hand tensed around the trigger, cut into the lance, with ridges his hand could settle into. The handle once belonged to some kind of power sprayer, a device long since broken and recycled.

Sohl built the lance himself, fashioned after an old cattle prod. The end of the weapon stretched out towards the wolf, that now adding sharp barks to its arsenal of noise.

"You think I'm scared of you?" He called out. "I'm not!"

The lamb hobbled into the flock, obviously hurt. That was okay, Sohl understood. Small injuries, scrapes; they could be fixed. He saw no blood trail, nothing broken.

A tense moment passed between man and beast. Sohl's clothes were colored in olive green. They were made of micro-fibers that did their best to keep him cool on warm days: a shirt with removable sleeves and trousers with removable legs, turning them into shorts. A sunny day such as this one meant Sohl could tan his arms and legs. Good sandals with heel straps fitted his feet, gladiator sandals. The woven, wide-brimmed hat he wore, it had distracted him for a good fifteen minutes. His negligence in trying to tighten it allowed the wolf to stalk closer than if he'd paid attention. His sister Septima could have fixed it, except he'd forgotten to ask her the night before.

Sohl took a big risk by holding the lance too far out. If the wolf lunged at it, it could very well knock the thing apart and the shock mechanism wouldn't work. At the same time, Sohl wanted to test the weapon, and he couldn't test it unless he set both contact points right on the wolf's hairy hide. Preferably a meaty spot.

"Turn to the side." He said. "You'll get a nice surprise if you do."

Behind him, the sheep sounded like a really bad, and really terrified, chorus.

Sohl relented. He squeezed the grip on the lance. It emitted a high-pitched hum, a design feature built into it from its former life as an old cattle prod. The wolf stopped complaining at

him. It still bared teeth, and it snarled in a low rumble, but it feared the noise and the end of the staff so close to its snout.

If Sohl shoved the lance at its face, and it opened its mouth and clamped onto the two contact screws... Yeah, the wolf wouldn't be too happy about it. Sohl carried a knife. Its blade a good six inches long, it was sheathed to his side. If the lance didn't do the job, the knife would come out, but it would put that fearsome beast a lot closer than Sohl cared to have it.

Unconsciously, he glanced down at his hands. His tanned, peach skin had several stripes on it, from a time when a bobcat jumped on a little girl. The kids played out on the edge of the village sometimes, where it was usually safe until something bad happened and then it wasn't. The hungry bobcat jumped on her and scratched her up. The first person on the scene who could do something about it was Sohl, and what he did was grab the bobcat with his bare hands as it shredded away at her hair. For his trouble, he'd gotten lacerations on the backs of both hands. To repair them, his mother used collagen strips and a protein mix, but they didn't have the right pigmentation and so his hands ended up with pale streaks on them. He could live with that. The little girl's injuries were a lot worse than his.

"Come on!" He challenged. "You want to fight? Let's fight! I'll make myself... I'll make a jacket out of you! See if I don't!"

A movie would show the hero taking on the wolf. In real life, the wolf calculated its chances. It eyed the humming lance one last time, before backing up and loping back into the trees.

"We need to get moving!" Sohl called out to the sheep. "I can scare off one wolf, but I'm not going to fight away an entire pack!"

He ended up having to carry the hurt lamb; its injuries were worse than he thought.

## Part 2

Sohl stopped the flock on a small hill overlooking the archology. He knew he shouldn't allow the sheep to graze there; the sloped pasture needed time to regain its composure after nearly reaching a barren state, but thanks to the wolf sighting he didn't have much choice. He still had a couple of hours to go before the sheep were scheduled to come back in. Sohl didn't mind the wait. He asked for the duty because he felt he needed time alone, time to think.

Officially, people called it Steward Archology, named after the founders. It had the shape of a large, sliced pentagon with an empty center. Each of its five sections could house up to fifty people, but at present occupancy was down around thirty percent. Each section had its own color designation, with short avenues between the sections fenced off on both ends, creating play spaces for the little ones, except for two avenues where Gardener Stream ran through the entire complex. Because he lived in Brown Building now, Sohl belonged to the Brownie club. The accent color of the building designated who lived in it.

Blue Building housed married couples and families with small children. Sohl lived there with his parents until recently. Married couples and the older crowd referred to the married as the Blues.

Brown Building housed the village's young or single men. Some of the older boys left their families as young as thirteen, including Sohl's biggest nemesis, Rory Magdan. The residents of Brown Building were called Brownies.

Green Building housed the young or single women. Unlike with the young men, nobody batted an eye if a girl didn't leave her parents until she turned sixteen. Occasionally, girls as young as thirteen or fourteen were ready to become Greenies. More than a few of those early starters came in ready to get married right away.

Silver Building housed anyone over the age of sixty, whether they were single or married. Every other section had a mandate to keep their building clean except for Silver. Each evening, people volunteered to go into Silver Building to help the older people, the Grayhairs, do anything they needed help with. Just the day before, Sohl swept and mopped there, and carried out used bedpans for washing. Some people, like Rory Magdan, assumed Sohl did the extra work because he gained merit points, or because he flirted with the Greenie girls who also enjoyed taking care of the Grayhairs. The assumptions were false. Sohl did not flirt, not with any girl or woman, and he didn't care for any merit points. He simply enjoyed the smiles and conversations the older people gave him whenever he did something nice for them.

The last section carried the name of Yellow Building. People who wanted to join the archology stayed there, sometimes for months before they made a final decision over whether or not they would become permanent residents. Visitors from Triumph used the building as well, including social workers and health care personnel, or the occasional tourist wanting to take a quiet vacation outside of the city. The archology rules did not permit dating or intermarrying with Yellows. Even after officially joining, Yellows were assigned to Yellow Building for one full year before they could move into any of the other sections. They were expected to work as hard as anyone else.

Buddy Mayson strode up the hill to where Sohl tended the sheep. His race was Negro, the man in his thirties and looking fitter than most. Buddy had watchman duty that day, as attested to by the shock rifle he had slung across his chest, military style.

“Hey, Sohl.” Buddy greeted.

“Hey, Buddy.” Sohl said. “I had to bring the sheep in closer because a wolf tried snatching up one of the lambs.”

Buddy’s eyes instantly scanned past the flock. “How far back?”

“I don’t know. A third of a kilometer maybe? It happened right where the woods start up. Can you do me a favor? Can you carry the lamb in for me? I don’t think its leg is broken, but the wolf took one good swipe at it before I could chase it off. It’s hobbled along ever since.”

“Yeah, I’ll take it in.” Buddy said. He carried a rechargeable radio clipped to his vest, used it to inform the watch commander of what he was doing. “I’m going to hand this lamb off about halfway home. You stay right here, kid. When I come back I’ll go out to make sure the wolf didn’t follow you.”

“Sure.” Sohl nodded.

He watched the man walk off with the lamb, talking to it as if he held a cute puppy. Some people didn’t like Buddy because he could seem rude sometimes. A better word for him would be moody. Personally, Sohl got along with the man fine, but he had seen his father arguing with Buddy on occasion.

With the potential crisis averted, Sohl took a few minutes to toss around the thoughts that plagued him right before he started messing with his hat. Part of it had to do with the Spring Festival coming up. A lot of people, including his mother, expected Sohl to choose a wife, even if he was celebrating only his first festival as a Brownie. The idea scared him, of choosing a wife and later she turns out an ogre, like what had happened to two other young men he’d known. The rules of the archology were that married couples stayed married for five years before they could go their separate ways. In his opinion, as a sixteen year-old, five years could be compared to forever. Besides, of the four girls he could choose from: one at seventeen years old, two at fifteen and one at fourteen, he did not really like any of them.

Steward Archology was a horny place, Sohl grinned to himself. Well, not horny as in sexually horny, but horny as in everything the residents did had to be dictated by horns, in this case expertly placed air horns that could be heard throughout the complex and beyond its walls. The wake up horn, the breakfast horn, the go to work horn, the lunch horn... Those blasted out in the morning. Sohl waited for the come home horn, herding the sheep together when he heard it, because his hunger that evening could be compared to a hunger of two days. Every so often, people would say they were hungry enough to eat a horse. Sohl had an idea of what a horse looked like, and how big it was, and definitely he felt he could scarf one down, mane and hooves and tail and everything else.

He counted his sheep for the hundredth time that day, and prodded them along past the groves of fruits trees: apples, avocados, oranges, lemons and others, that lined the outer walls of the entire archology. Through one of the avenues, he pushed the sheep. The hardest part would soon come up, where he couldn’t let the sheep stray into the gardening area where all the veggies and herbs grew. Several of the sheep tried to veer off that way, smelling something tasty when Sohl could only smell garlic and onions. He managed to get them all into their pen, even the last two stubborn ones that stood their ground until he went hands on and wrestled them in.

That done, he figured he smelled so much like a sheep he could be mistaken for one of their relatives. That prompted the young man to head out of the complex again, this time south where the stream flowed out. The bathing area came first, and after that the bowel movement area.

The elderly, couples and small children bathed together, while single men and women had their own areas further along. Sohl understood some teasing would come his way, and it did because Rory always teased him nowadays.

“Hey, Mama’s Boy.” Rory called out to him. He stood at a few inches taller than Sohl, with a similar athletic build, but a lot more boldness. “I heard you got a little too excited with the sheep earlier. Is it true you almost broke one of them? The poor thing can barely walk now!”

The Magdan’s first arrived at the archology seven years before, when Rory had just reached double digits in age, and Sohl one full year younger. For years, the two boys played with each other, and with the other boys, showing their competitive spirit and always trying to outdo each other. At thirteen, Rory had joined the Brownies, but a year later Sohl could not follow his lead. Sohl felt he should stay with his parents at least one more year, but that one more year turned into three more. He still didn’t like the idea of being without his mother and father.

Maybe he did deserve to have Rory call him a Mama’s Boy, but that did not mean that Sohl would be seen as a chump, either. Fights and rough wrestling matches always broke out between the two, regularly, because Sohl did not fear Rory like some of the other young men did. Every so often, Sohl even won a fight against his rival, but most times Rory handed him his ass. For some reason, and Sohl hated this, Rory could anticipate his moves and counter them ahead of time. Sohl felt that maybe Rory had the ability to read his mind; he was so good at it.

Sohl stripped down to his micro-fiber briefs and grabbed a bar of soap before walking into the stream. The current cooled from his knees on down the moment he stepped into it. There weren’t enough buckets to go around, so he waited for one of the other young men to pass one over. The wait gave Rory and a couple of other young men time to wade over to him.

“So, how’d it go with the sheep?” Rory kidded. “Are you two engaged now?”

“Keep talking, Rory.” Sohl said.

Dirk Diluh’s family joined the archology two years before. Dirk entered Brown Building the first chance he got, clicking with Rory because they were both assholes. “Why don’t you ask him if he still breastfeeds, Rory. I bet you he does.”

Not again, thought Sohl. More and more frequently, Rory or one of the others brought that up. Sohl’s mother was attractive, and... and curvy up front.

“He never gives us a straight answer.” Rory said. “He always dances around the question.”

“Just ask him.” Dirk persisted.

“Okay. Sohl, is it true that you didn’t join the Brownies until you were sixteen, because you were having too much fun breastfeeding from your mother?”

“I’m going to take his clothes.” Dirk grinned. “I’m going to put them on and maybe his mother will think I’m him and I’ll motorboat on her for a while.”

The other men around them laughed, even the ones that didn’t get along with Rory.

Dirk took a step closer to the bank, where Sohl’s clothes were lying. Sohl took a step toward Dirk, but Rory got in the way.

### Part 3

That's all it took to get the fight started. Sohl went after Rory, and Rory went after him. Sohl threw his punches and he got some in return, with the single men cheering, some for him, most for Rory. Sohl nailed Rory's jaw hard enough to send him reeling back, but Rory came back strong and rained down fists on his head and arms. The last time they fought, Rory's longer arms lifted Sohl and slammed him on his side. Unwilling to have that happen again, Sohl went into a crouch and kept his weight low.

Somehow, Rory thought of a way to counter the crouch. He pretended to grab at Sohl's shoulder, and then, oomf! Rory's knee came crashing into Sohl's side and toppled him into the drink, where of course he swallowed half a gallon because he had his mouth wide open. Not only did he fall, but he had the wind knocked out of him, and Rory toppled over him like a tree falling on a watermelon.

Rory seemed to grown ten arms a second later, until Sohl realized the others were pulling them apart. Breathing hard, trying to catch his breath and spit water out at the same time, Sohl let himself get dragged away.

"I'm not done yet!" Rory shouted. "Let me go!"

Sohl tried pulling away from the many-armed octopus that held him. "Let him go! We're going to settle this right now! Dirk, you're next, faggot!"

"Sohl!" His bare-chested father splashed into the water, standing in front of Sohl and showing that face of disappointment the son hated so much. "Watch your language!"

"Dad, this has nothing to do with you. This is between me and Rory."

"Enough!" His father shouted. "I said enough!"

Sohl's anger provoked him into kicking water at his father. After that, he relented and stepped back. The others let him go. So much for his bath, he thought, seeing the soap floating nearby but not caring enough to pick it up. At least he got his entire body wet. Sohl stalked his way over to his clothes, snatching them up as the adults turned their scrutiny on Rory, because everyone knew who started the fight.

Sohl did not sit at his usual place for dinner, next to his parents. Instead, he took his supper bowl into an avenue and sat down next to the wall. Sohl ate in relative peace, almost, because a couple of flies kept buzzing around trying to get at his rice and veggies.

Septima came and found him. "I brought your dessert."

"What is it?"

His sister had dark hair and eyes, like he did. She looked a lot like their mother, and even at fourteen she showed signs that she'd be just as pretty, just as busty.

Septima took a seat next to him. "Yogurt-covered pretzels from the city."

"I didn't know we had those." Sohl commented, taking a new bowl from her hands. He counted five savory pretzels, all for him.

"They were just brought in today." She replied. "You'd better eat them before I do! So, brother, why didn't you sit with us at supper?"

"You know why. Dad already had that look on his face. I know exactly what he would have said. The bigger man walks away from a fight. Violence doesn't solve everything. You handle disputes with your words, not your fists. I'm sick and tired of hearing that!"

“Is it true that you called Dirk a faggot?”

“Yeah.”

For some reason, the admission made Septima giggle. “Nobody uses that word anymore! Why would you call him that?”

“Because he said something I didn’t like.”

“What did he say?”

“You don’t want to know.”

She snatched his bowl of pretzels away. “Tell me or you’re not getting these back!”

“Septima, yogurt pretzels are my favorite. Give them back to me!”

“Not until you tell me what Dirk said.”

“Fine. He said he was going to motorboat Mom.”

“What does that mean?”

“It’s a porn term.” Sohl said, wincing because there was no easy way around it. “A guy shoves his face into a woman’s boobs, and he shakes his head like this.”

Septima laughed. “Why is that called a motorboat? I don’t get it!”

“I have no idea. Can I have my pretzels please?”

She returned the bowl to him. “I figured Rory started the fight. I don’t understand how the two of you used to get along, and now you hate each other’s guts.”

“Rory can be as stupid as a log.” Sohl huffed. “It’s no secret that he’s after Brittney Valeta for this year’s Spring Festival. I told him a dozen times that I’m not interested in her, but he can’t get that through his thick head.”

“Brittney is the prettiest girl in all of Steward. You’d be crazy not to want to marry her.”

“I swear, I’m not interested! I’m not ready to get married yet! I still haven’t given up on the idea of becoming a priest.”

“Priests are allowed to have wives.”

“I know that. I don’t know what I want to do with my life. I could be a farmer, or a hunter, or a fixer, or I could be a priest. I want to choose a career before I choose a wife.”

“Brittney wants to get married. She’s not going to be single for next year’s festival.”

“So?”

“So?” Septima made a face at him. “Maybe there is a reason why Rory picks on you so much. Maybe the reason is because he’s jealous. Give me your rice bowl. I’ll take it back for you.”

Sohl watched his sister walk away. Did she just hint that maybe Brittney liked him? That was not what he wanted to hear! It only added more stress to the mountain he already felt pressing down on his head. He could only take so much!

“Think good thoughts,” Sohl said to himself, as he walked to the garden center of the archology. “Say good words. Make good actions. Good thoughts, good words, good actions.”

The open area in the middle of the pentagon had a jogging path all the way around, two small bridges of redwood on opposite ends to cross the stream, several poly-plastic tables and benches for eating or group meetings, and separate garden spots with retractable roofing for use as small greenhouses. One of the garden spots measured four yards by eight, with rotating plant tubs and automatic nutrient feeding through timed drips. That would be the hydroponics section where Sohl’s father worked to grow carrots, lettuce and potatoes. His father wouldn’t be there this late, but Sohl avoided that section anyway.

People living in the archology didn't have any requirements or prohibitions when it came to religion, but they did have to respect the beliefs of the original founders. The Stewards believed in a god named Ahura Mazda, a god of light and purity, of honesty and altruism towards all. The religion didn't have temples like other religions, but it did have holy writings from thousands of years ago written by the prophet Zoroaster. A shrine stood in the exact center of the archology, two yards around and three yards high, with four ruddy columns leading to a cone-shaped roof, a large urn of oil at its base, and wind baffles that prevented the Holy Flame from going out.

Ever since childhood, Sohl had witnessed at least one priest keeping watch over the flame, or several of them at a time meditating together around the shrine. The priests could be men or women, but the men presently outnumbered the women by two to one. They had three ranks: votary, the lowest rank, priest, the middle rank, and at the top, elder. The votary did the menial work like passing out food and sweeping, the priests organized functions and gave orders to the votaries, and the elders counseled and spoke wisdom learned throughout the ages. In the past, the followers of Ahura Mazda kept long beards and robes, but practicality had won over tradition. Nowadays the men kept short beards, the women short hair, and both sexes used tunics and trousers in light colors rather than long, flowing robes.

"Hello, Sohl." The priest Regine Wyke greeted him. She kept busy dusting the poly baffles and readjusting them against whichever way the wind was blowing. "I was just about to take the flame indoors. Would you like to help me?"

"Yes."

Sohl knew what to do. Regine used the flame burning in the urn to light a candle, and would carry the candle into a sealed room in Blue Building, where she would transfer the flame into a new urn. Once lit, the urn at the shrine and the candle could be extinguished.

Sohl followed Regine into the building, where two other priests, votaries, waited to watch the flame transferred over. They both greeted Sohl. When the indoor urn lit up, a votary was assigned to turn the candle off, and the second would walk back to the shrine. In this case, the votary accompanied Sohl, and it was Sohl who covered the outdoor urn to stop the flame, and who removed the baffles so they wouldn't rattle if the night became windy.

## Part 4

Everything went smoothly, with Sohl ready to return to Blue Building to meditate with the priests for a time, when Katt Steward, the fifty-year old daughter of the original founders, stepped up to him.

“Can I have a word with you?” Katt asked.

“Sure.” Sohl said, as the votary went ahead without him.

“Your father told me that you used inappropriate language today. He recommends that I fine you ten merit points because this isn’t your first violation.”

Sohl tried hard not to let his irritation show. Merit points were not that easy to come by! Two months of hard work were about to be flushed down the stream!

“Do you think the punishment is warranted in this case?” Katt wondered.

“I called Dirk Diluh a faggot,” Sohl admitted. “Because he said he was going to motorboat my Mom.”

“What does that mean?”

“It is a porn term...” Sohl explained the concept, with a little more discretion than when he’d told his sister. “I don’t think it’s fair that I get merit points taken away, only because my Dad ratted on me and Rory and Dirk are not getting any punishment at all.”

“Your father came to me. Rory or Dirk’s parents did not.”

“Go ahead.” Sohl gave up. “Take ten merit points away, because my dad just had to be an asshole and ratted me out, while Rory and Dirk can get away with whatever they want!”

“You shouldn’t use that language against your father.” Katt commented.

“Take the ten points and leave me alone.” Sohl growled. “I need to go meditate!”

Normally, he didn’t turn his back on the woman who ran the entire complex, but on this occasion, with the way he felt, that’s exactly what he did.

Meditating with the priests could be compared to receiving a reward. Sohl walked into Blue Building feeling confused and tense, not to mention bruised up. The simple act of sitting down and mimicking the relaxed postures of the others changed his state of being. When Sohl sat with the priests, he entered another world, a world where nothing existed past tranquility.

They sang sometimes, or hummed, or chanted. Energy blossomed in the small chamber when they did that, with them seated around the Holy Flame and watching it flicker. The energy took Sohl away from the place of calm, a peaceful, blue state, and into a new place filled with joy. The new place was yellow, bright as the sun. The energy flowed from the mouths of the priests, and also from Sohl’s mouth. It flowed past him at first, circling the worshipers, but in time, it flowed *through* him. He tried to explain it to his mother, more than once, but she would really have to come in there and experience it for herself to really grasp what he tried to say. Words could not do justice to what Sohl felt, what he imagined, what he invoked by being there.

*Oh, God, for whom did you create me? Feuds and violence have oppressed me. I have no one to protect me save for you, oh God. Give me the blessings of a peaceful life.*

Sohl recognized the words from the Gathas, or the Divine Songs. He wondered if the priests had chosen those specific verses because of his fight with Rory. Then again, maybe they chose

the verses because he didn't know too many of their songs yet, and they were right there at the beginning of the song book. Whatever the reason, Sohl didn't mind hearing them. He chanted right along with the others, and on a rare occasion in his life he felt happy and clear-headed.

Sohl stayed with the priests until past nine. The last time he'd gotten into a fight with Rory, he'd stayed out late that time, too. The next day, Rory and his bunch teased him because they assumed Sohl was too scared to return to Brown Building at the usual hour. Not this time; this time Sohl walked into his building and went straight to Rory's room.

All five buildings had the same set-up. They could hold fifty occupants, with two people per bedroom. A wide hallway went through the center of the building, twelve rooms on either side. The next to last room could be reserved for a captain, but not every building had one. The last room space measured a little bigger than the others. The toilets and urinals were found there, but since the archology didn't have running water the large, filtered tank on the roof had to be filled up a couple of times a week.

Brown Building had its little factions: to one side, the single adult men of varying ages, in the middle, a small clique of young men that didn't like Rory and his bunch, with Sohl's room just past theirs, and on the far end from the captain's room, Rory and five of his lackeys. A few doors were closed, meaning the residents were already asleep. Sohl walked past the middle section on his way to the end of the building. He walked steadily and quietly, but regardless, someone saw him and stuck his head out, seeing where he was headed. Word would get around fast and Sohl's walk would be seen as confrontational, and everybody wanted to watch the show.

Sohl stopped before Rory's open door. Rory sat on his bed with three others, including Dirk. They chatted and listened to music, turning when they noticed him standing there.

"Hey, look who's here?" Rory grinned. "You've got to tell us where you've been for the last couple of hours. Half of us think you were hiding out with the Grayhairs. The other half, and that includes me, think you were hiding out with your mother."

"Yeah, settle our bet." Dirk joked.

"I just want to say one thing." Sohl spoke up. "I don't know if Brittney likes me or not, but I have no intention of asking her to marry me at the Spring Festival. Rory, if you want her, you can have her."

"Bullshit." Rory replied. "I know for a fact that you and her already talked about it."

"When? Is that what Brittney said? Who told you that?"

"He did." Rory pointed at Dirk.

It wasn't often that Sohl had epiphanies, but he had one now. "Dirk lied. I wonder why he lied, Rory. Maybe Dirk wants to keep us fighting with each other so we can get kicked out of the festival. I wonder who Dirk is going to try to marry. Why don't you ask him, Rory? Why don't you ask him in front of me?"

Rory looked at his buddy.

"He's full of shit, Rory." Dirk said. "I stand by what I said. I heard them talking about getting married behind Green Building about a week ago. They've got it all planned out."

"I want to say something else." Sohl spoke up. "Dirk, you crossed the line when you talked shit about my mother. Tomorrow, I'm going to catch you by yourself, and I'm going to hand you your ass. You done fucked up, buddy."

Rory and the others started laughing. Dirk's face went ashen.

"Why don't you fight him, Dirk?" Rory urged. "You gonna let him talk to you like that?"

“I’ll get him tomorrow.” Dirk said.

“Why tomorrow? Get him right now, Dirk.”

“Yeah, get me right now.” Sohl challenged. “Faggot.”

Dirk rushed at the door, ready to plow into Sohl and shove him through the wall. The best part about it, from Sohl’s point of view, was that Sohl had a clear, mellow head and witnessed the charge coming. The door to the bedroom was only so big, and he wasn’t dumb enough to stand there and get bulldozed flat. Sohl waited until the last moment, before he used his lateral quickness to hop out of the way. Dirk’s momentum took him out of the room, where Sohl grabbed onto an arm and shirt, and veered Dirk into the wall across the hallway. The crash was loud enough to wake most everyone who wasn’t already watching the fight. Dirk groaned and slipped to the floor, trying to hold his head and shoulder at the same time.

“What the hell is going on over there?” One of the adult men shouted from way over on the other side of the building.

Sohl figured he was in big trouble if dumb ass Dirk was really hurt.

Rory came to the door, laughing when he saw Dirk on the floor groaning. “Did you just run into the wall?” He too heard the adults coming. “Sohl, prove to me that you’re not going to marry Brittney.”

“How?”

“Who are you going to marry?”

“Nobody. I don’t want to get married yet, period.”

“What if we walk up to Brittney together? Can you tell her to her face?”

“Yes.”

Rory quieted down when the adults moved past Sohl and helped Dirk to his feet. Dirk grimaced as he held his arm.

“What happened here?” One of the adults demanded.

The older men were all staring at Sohl and Rory.

“Dirk had to go to the toilet in a hurry.” Rory said. “And then he ran into the wall. Isn’t that right, Dirk?”

Dirk looked at Rory, and then at Sohl. He nodded at the adults. “I wasn’t paying attention. I think I need to see the nurse.”

The men made way as Dirk started the walk across the building. Some of them followed the youth, while others stayed behind, wondering if something was going to happen between Sohl and Rory.

“Everything is fine.” Rory said. “It was an accident, like Dirk said.”

“Yeah, everything is fine.” Sohl seconded.

“You should both be turning in soon.” One of the adults said. “No more banging on walls tonight, you hear me?”

Finally, the men started filtering away. The younger men from the middle of the hallway, however, were still paying attention.

Rory waited until the adults were gone. “Promise me you’re not after Brittney.”

“I promise I’m not.” Sohl said.

“What about Tamsin? Do you want to marry her?”

Tamsin was the seventeen year old.

“No.”

“You’re not thinking about marrying me, are you?” Rory kidded.

His friends laughed. The young men in the hall laughed.

Sohl had to give credit where credit was due. Rory had charisma that he did not. Rory was a natural leader. “Look, maybe I’m a late bloomer or something. I don’t think I want to get married this year. I might become a priest. I haven’t decided what I want to do with my life yet.” He realized he was saying too much. “Just don’t talk shit about my mother, okay?”

He turned and walked to his room, knowing everybody was going to be talking about him the next day.

## Part 5

Sohl knew how he could get out of everyone's crosshairs. He got up the next morning and went into the hills with the priests. The priests would choose one of the higher peaks, but not always the same one, and have conversations focusing on what was and wasn't allowed in the religion. A lot of things had to be reconsidered or revisited because things had changed so much in the last three and a half thousand years since the religion was first created.

Sohl paid attention. The two elders spoke of how the spirit left the body at death, and the body was then considered pollution. The body of a dead person or dog polluted everything that it touched, including a living space, the ground, air, water and other people who handled the body out of necessity to move it. Ritual washing took care of some of that, but the living space of a dead person or dog should not be inhabited for a time. The same went for a dead person's clothes and personal belongings. In the old days, the elders said, the dead were not buried or burned, but carried off into the wild and left out in the open. Steward Archology was under governmental mandate to maintain a small cemetery, or remains were transported to their next of kin in the city of Triumph, with the result that no bodies were taken out and left anywhere.

When the topic of conversation shifted into how a woman's menstrual cycle was also considered pollution, Sohl excused himself and went for a walk. He brought a weapon along, but it wasn't his electric lance this time. Sohl carried a bow that, like the lance, he'd made himself out of PVC pipe. His bow was bad ass. One of the fixers had showed him how to soften PVC plastic with a heat blower, and how to cut out a wooden mold that enabled him to bend the bow while it was flexible. The bowstring was made of Dacron II poly-fiber, and the arrows were state of the art carbon straight from a 3D printer, with feather shafts he'd attached himself. While the PVC was free, and the quiver he'd sewn together from old denim pants, the other pieces were expensive. That's why he hated losing merit points. They were the currency he needed to get the best gear.

By noon, when the priests were ready to walk back, Sohl had hunted two small quail and one unlucky squirrel. He would have to wash thoroughly after he dressed the animals, but the priests understood the necessity of hunting, and of the god Mazda providing sustenance for his flock of faithful. Sohl was proud of himself. Rory might beat him at fighting and wrestling, but Sohl was one of the top four hunters in the village.

They arrived at the archology just as the rest of the villagers were finishing up their lunch. Usually, people ate light meals: only an apple or orange, and a bag of chips or crackers washed down with vitamin water.

A lot of young people watched Sohl coming in with the priests, and sitting down at their table after he'd passed off his catch. His father wasn't around, thankfully, but Brittney Valeta looked angry, and Dirk Diluh walked around with his arm in a sling. His sister wanted to say something to him, but she did not want to approach the priests, so she went elsewhere. Only Sohl's mother had the courage to walk over, but all she did was compliment him on his hunting. She might have wanted to say something past that, but not in front of the priests.

"Next time, you bring me some quail eggs and I'll make you a nice omelet out of them." She said, just before she left.

"Can I still be a hunter if I'm accepted as a priest?" He asked the elders.

“You can still be a hunter, if you are hunting for sustenance and not glory.” One answered.

“I can’t make up my mind on what career I want.” He said. That was something he’d wanted to bring up all morning, but had been too timid to speak about until now. “I think I’ll like being a priest, but I also like hunting, and I also like fixing things.” He could have added that he liked farming as well, but at the moment he was upset at his farmer father for telling on him. “I can’t figure out what will bring out the best of me.”

“If you put your best effort into your tasks, you will bring the best out of yourself.” The elder told him. “Regardless of what career you choose.”

“But I can’t decide what to do!”

The second elder replied this time. “Meditate your concerns to Ahura Mazda. Ask for god to bring guidance into your life.”

“I’m going to do that.” Sohl decided. “Tonight when I go in the meditation room, I’m going to do that.”

While mornings were reserved for cleaning one’s residential building, afternoons were pretty much open. Sohl had choices. He could play sports, learn arts and crafts, work on his potential career choice, or simply hang out with people he was cool with and do nothing. All of those choices would leave him accessible to nosy rumor-starters. To avoid any questions about Dirk or Brittney, he went into Silver Building and made himself useful there. There wasn’t much to do, since only eight older people lived in the archology and they’d taken care of the most crucial things themselves, like emptying out bedpans for those who were too frail to walk to the toilets at night.

Sohl went to the roof to check on the tank’s water level; it was more than half full. He looked into the toilet and shower area; it was clean. His next idea was to knock on every elder’s door, and ask the elders personally if they needed anything.

One of the elder priests lived in Silver Building. He walked into the hallway and motioned for Sohl to step closer. “What is this I hear about you losing merit points?”

“Do you really want to know?” Sohl asked. “You might get offended.”

The priest smiled. “I think I’m too old to get offended.”

Sohl took a deep breath and let it all out. He told the priest about Rory’s harassment, Dirk’s motorboat comment about his mother, and his father’s betrayal of him to Katt Steward. Since he was revealing so much already, he added last night’s confrontation with Rory and Dirk too.

The priest listened quietly, nodding a few times. When Sohl finished, the older man placed his hand on the young man’s shoulder. “This conflict took place because of three men and one woman. That should be a lesson in and of itself, yes, of how men can get overwhelmed in their jealousies of one another. Dirk was a manipulator, and perhaps Brittney as well.”

“Brittney? Why her?”

“Your sister hinted that Brittney might like you. Is your Brittney one of your sister’s close friends?”

“No. They barely even talk.”

“Why would Brittney give your sister the impression that she might like you?”

“Because she likes me?” Sohl shrugged.

“Perhaps, but wouldn’t it be easier if Brittney told you herself, or told one of her friends to mention it to you? How many days are left until Spring Festival?”

“Less than a week.”

“We are talking about marriage for the next five years at least, Sohl. If Brittney really liked you, I think you would know about it by now. One way or another, she would have reached out and gotten your attention a long time ago.”

“Wait... So Dirk wants me and Rory to fight so he can marry Brittney, and Brittney lied to my sister so I’ll think Brittney likes me? I don’t get it. Why would she do that?”

“A boastful spirit, perhaps?” The elder guessed. “To say she had three suitors after her for Spring Festival would surely disappoint the other girls who had none. Brittney would be seen as the biggest catch of them all.”

“Oh.” Sohl said. “I didn’t think about that.”

“But that isn’t what bothered you, is it? No, what bothers you the most is that your father meddled into your affairs and made them his affair. Your father stepped into your world, and now it is going to cost you merit points.”

“Don’t mention any of this to my father.” Sohl said. “It will just make things worse.”

“If I did that, I would be stirring the pot, wouldn’t I? It is up to you to find your legs and make amends with your father and Katt, if you believe in your heart that you offended them. Do you believe you were at fault?”

“No. I’ve been fighting with Rory for years now. Most of the time he wins, but I’ve beaten him a couple of times and he knows it. I believe I have to stand up for myself because that is how I will find my legs to stand on my own.”

“Would you say that your actions against Dirk were done out of purity?”

Sohl had to think the question over for a few moments. “Yes, because I was defending my mother. If I let Rory and Dirk get away with it, they’ll be taunting me forever. Am I right?”

“If you were defending against lies and manipulation, you are fighting the good against the evil. That is the lesson you are learning well. The loss of merit points is regrettable, but our god Mazda sees injustices. You will have your reward, possibly in some way you don’t expect.”

“Evil must be cast off one’s back for there to be purity.”

“You have done that. If someone does you wrong, you can forgive, but you can also move away from that person so you will not be wronged a second time. You feel that your father has wronged you, but was your father acting out of malice, or out of concern?”

“My father wants me to be his duplicate. He wants me to be him, but I’m not like that. If my father was my age, Rory would run over him every day of the week.”

“If your father was your age, and he tattled on you to Katt, how would you react to that? I want you to answer that question tonight during our meditation. You said you needed a task. Why don’t you take Dessa out for a walk? I’m sure she would be grateful.”

## Part 6

Dessa was the oldest person at the archology, so old she could not remember her exact age anymore. The closest she could come was eighty-something. The woman was light-skinned with gray-white hair, and had a unique head and face that set her apart from everyone else in the village. Dessa's forehead was wide, her eyes set close on either side of a long, thin nose, her head the shape of an upright rectangle. It was possible, according to the rumors, that Dessa had been an artificial baby, designed and grown, but not born from a human mother. Maybe that helped to explain her deteriorated mental and physical state, as if her genetic material simply gave up working earlier than it did on natural people. Another rumor hinted that she was very beautiful when she was young, and had been a gifted dancer, with enough wealth to help the Stewards buy the supplies used to build the archology.

Regardless, Dessa could barely walk, even after several surgeries in Triumph City to strengthen her body. Her ligaments had worn out, resulting in her leg bones grinding against each other, causing her pain if she even stood up for too long. Dessa moved around on a tread-chair. Mostly, she stayed in the flatter pentagonal open area in the center of the buildings. If she went out to where the groves were, her tread-chair's equilibrium sensors would sometimes have trouble tracking uneven ground. The tread-chair was not stuck, but it worried it might tip forward or sideways, and it would start beeping until someone pushed it to a flatter patch of land. The chair was designed for sidewalks and floors, not the great outdoors.

Dessa maneuvered the chair as far as she could outside the archology, before setting it on manual to avoid any beeping. After that, Sohl pushed it under the shade of an apple tree.

"I haven't been out here in over a week." She smiled at her young escort. "Will you fetch me an apple? They look so sweet."

"They're not sweet, they're tart." Sohl replied, but he went ahead and stretched his arm up into the branches and pulled a couple of them down.

One thing that had not failed on Odessa was her teeth. They were complete, crispy white and sharp. She could still chew her way through a stubborn apple. It took her twice as long as most people to swallow, however. She said she had to make apple sauce first, she said, because even small bits tended to give her throat trouble if they had edges on them.

"I'm in the mood for an orange." Sohl said. The orange trees were a short distance away. He jogged over and picked two fat ones, because he always picked two of everything. He'd gotten the idea from the priests: pick one for yourself, and one to give the next person who you come across, and then two people will be happy instead of only one.

Sohl had accompanied Dessa out before, but her memory was faulty and she sometimes forgot. On some days, she would repeat stories because she didn't recall that she'd already told them to Sohl. Today, the young man soon discovered, she was unusually lucid.

"Tell me about Triumph City." He said. "I was three years old when my parents came out to the archology. I don't remember anything about it."

Dessa smiled and started talking, saying things he'd never heard before and could not verify to see if they were true or not.

"I was a dancing prodigy at three years old." She said. "People would pay money to see me perform onstage. It was almost as if I could float on air when I leaped. My bones were designed to be light, you see. They weight a third less than the bones of other women, always have. That is

why I have so much trouble with my legs nowadays. I would twirl and pirouette and splay my legs, while dressed like a little princess with a sparkling tiara. That was when I was only three. When I was ten, oh, I remember one time I danced in the Cantrum amphitheater! The other girls couldn't believe what I was doing and how I could stay airborne for so long. The critics thought I used grav-wires, but I never did. My costume, it twinkled and dazzled. I had a set of wings pinned to my back, and my hair... I looked like a fairy that night, not a princess. A fairy right out of a storybook!"

"You were that young and you knew you wanted to become a dancer?"

"Of course! I had to be a dancer! When I was a baby, my mother would stretch my arms and legs to give me extra flexibility. She knew she had to be careful, you see, because my bones are so light. All I ever knew was dancing, and all I ever wanted to be was a dancer!"

"Did you want to be the best dancer in the whole city?"

"Oh, that came later." Dessa reflected. "During my teenage years. Before that, I danced simply for the pleasure of dancing. When I grew into a teenager, that's when things became more complicated. I had rivals, you see, who couldn't stand that I could do things they could not. For a time, I was banned from entering competitions, for about six months when the critics found out about my genetic alterations. The critics were all hypocrites. Every girl I competed against had some kind of enhancement. Most had facial surgeries or breast and hip sculpturing. A few had flexi-joints, and let me tell you, they were a marvel to watch! Not a one of those girls had lighter bones, mind you, but only because their mothers didn't think of it like mine did."

"Did you ever want to do anything else, other than dancing?"

Dessa laughed. "Are you crazy? Dancing was my life! My entire life!"

"Where have you been?" Sohl's sister asked.

He'd stayed with Dessa until just past dark. Septima had run up to him right after he'd come out of Silver Building, where he'd taken the old woman to her sleeping quarters. They stood near a low glare, solar-powered light mounted over the door.

"Is something wrong?" He asked.

"Did you really break Dirk's arm?"

"Is that what people are saying? More like he broke his own arm. I was standing in front of the wall, he ran at me, and I moved out of the way. Anybody that says different is a liar."

"Are you telling people that you don't like Brittney? She's mad at you right now."

"What's going on, Sep? Are you gossiping about me like everybody else?"

"Come on, Sohl!" His sister whined. "The Spring Festival is one of the biggest party days we have all year! I just want to find out who you might end up with!"

"Dirk is starting rumors about me, Brittney is starting rumors about me, and now you? If Brittney really liked me, why didn't she tell me herself?"

"Sohl, please. A girl is not going to walk up to you and tell you she likes you. Think about it! If you liked a girl, and you walked up to her and said you liked her, what if she laughs in your face? That would make you feel really bad, wouldn't it?"

Sohl suspired. "Yeah, I guess it would. I still don't think she likes me. If she did, she wouldn't wait until a few days before the festival to send you to tell me. I think she's doing it for the attention, so she can say she had Rory, Dirk and me chasing after her."

"Tell me who you do like."

"I don't like anyone!"

Septima made a puppy dog face at him. “You have to like somebody. Pweese, pweese tell me who it is?”

“All right, let me think.” He relented. “I am not going to marry anyone at this year’s festival. First, I’m going to figure out what career I want. Once I know what my job is going to be, I can run a compatibility search on our library computer. If I am going to be a hunter, I need to make sure my wife is into hunting. If I’m going to be a fixer, same thing.”

“My friends and I have been running that program for weeks now.” Septima admitted. “We have been creating profiles from all the info we have available. You know, all those vocational tests, aptitude tests, and personality questionnaires we take. I know who would make a plus-seventy percent match with you.”

“Don’t tell me that! Now I want to know who the computer matched me up with!”

“Tamsin.”

“Really?”

Septima nodded. “That’s from her point of view, as if she input all her information. We couldn’t do it for you because you’re so fickle!”

“Fickle? What does that mean exactly?”

“It means you can’t make up your mind because you do so many things so well. If we enter your info with you as a hunter, we get one set of matches. If we enter it as a farmer, we get other matches. Tamsin comes out at plus-sixty percent for you, most of the time.”

“I really don’t want to get married, Sep, not even to Tamsin.”

“She’s shy. That’s why she hasn’t told you. But she told somebody, and that somebody told me, and now I’m telling you.”

“Less than a week before Spring Festival? That’s cutting it pretty close, if you ask me. I’m sorry, but Tamsin is just going to have to marry someone else.”

“She said no last year. Do you remember? She could say no this year too, until you think you’re ready. She might wait.”

“Sep, cut it out!” Sohl nearly burst apart. “Why are you so interested in who I’m going to marry, anyway? You know, I bet you’ve done like a hundred match searches on yourself. Who did the computer say you were compatible with?”

“You’ll get mad if I tell you.” She answered.

The first name that popped into Sohl’s mind was Rory.

“If I had more accurate information, maybe I can get a better result for you.” Septima said. “Why don’t you tell me who your ideal woman is? Tell me what she looks like. Tell me what she likes. I’ll enter that into the computer tomorrow.”

“You know, I was supposed to go into Blue Building to meditate with the priests.”

“I’m not leaving until you tell me!”

“You serious?”

“You’re not going anywhere until you tell me!”

“All right! This is pointless, but all right. My ideal woman... Let me think... Okay. My ideal woman is a lot like Mom. Same face, same hair, same everything. If I could do it, I would take DNA samples of Mom and have her cloned until she was my age.”

“You would marry Mom?”

“No, that’s not what I said.” Sohl corrected her. “I said a clone of Mom around my age. That’s a whole different person. All I’d have to do is widen out the dynamic range for the clone and she would be mostly like Mom, but maybe twenty or twenty-five percent different. That

would give us a high match percentage, wouldn't it? Wait, would that be seventy-five percent compatible with me?"

"No, dummy!" Septima laughed. "Mom would have seventy-five percent match with a clone of herself. You know what? I'm going to run an analysis on you and Mom. I'm curious to see what your compatibility with her really is."

"Just don't tell her I said that, okay?"

"Oh, my god!" Septima laughed again. "You want to motorboat Mom!"

"I didn't say that!"

Sohl chased his sister as far as the small, wooden bridge over Gardener Stream. The reason he stopped was because she laughed her way into Green Building, and he didn't want to run into Brittney or Tamsin, or anybody else for that matter. Instead, he turned back and made his way to Blue Building.

## Part 7

Sohl had never witnessed a livelier debate between the priests than he did that night.

“It is not evil for a father to hope his son turns out a good person.” A priest said.

“No, but it is evil for a father to hinder his son’s natural spirit.” One of the three votaries present countered. “Sohl is making the transition from rambunctious boyhood into disciplined young man. We were all young once. We have all said inappropriate things or felt contempt toward others whom we believe have wronged us. Most of us, if not all, have raised our closed fists in anger against another.”

“What Sohl’s father is doing is putting Sohl into a place of specific expectations.” Another priest reasoned. “This is tantamount to a father who excelled in sports, wanting and perhaps forcing his son to follow in his footsteps, to become a greater athlete than he ever was. Sohl may never meet his father’s high expectations.”

“But a shepherd must return a wandering sheep to the flock.” The first priest argued.

“If a sheep strays too far, it may never find its way back.” Another priest added.

The entire group looked to the two elders.

“Sohl’s father is right to mention to Sohl that he has made a mistake.” One elder said. “This matter should be discussed privately between father and son. What I don’t agree with is that Sohl’s father went to a higher authority to punish Sohl.”

“Perhaps his father felt he could not approach Sohl directly?”

“Then counseling is appropriate, but not the punishment.” The votary said. “Punishment happens when counseling has failed. What has happened in this case is that the transgressors have not been reprimanded, but the victim has.”

“Was Sohl’s fist pure and holy when it struck Rory Magdan?”

“Evil must be stamped out.” The elder spoke out. “Or would you say that Rory and Dirk Dilhus were pure and holy when they made disparaging remarks about Sohl’s mother?”

A votary addressed the young man. “Do you get along with your father?”

“No, not really.” Sohl answered. “I get along with my mother.”

The second elder entered the conversation. This was the man he’d spoken with earlier. “Let us hear from Sohl. You were angry with Rory and Dirk, and now you are angry with your father for butting in. Tell us your point of view.”

“I have more than one.” Sohl admitted.

“Then tell us more than one.”

“Okay. I was not showing off when I got into a fight with Rory. I did that because Rory keeps picking on me. We must have fought twenty times by now. Sometimes it is a long fight, and sometimes a short fight. My Dad knows this, but he doesn’t like it. He’s told me that a couple of times.”

“It bothers you that you cannot satisfy your father’s hopes?” The elder questioned.

“Yes, it bothers me. I’m not deliberately trying to disappoint my Dad. It happens that way because Rory likes starting shi--- starting strife with me. I walk away sometimes. I take shepherd duty by myself, if I think Rory might come around trying to start something. If Rory goes out hunting, I’ll go farming. If he stays in the archology, I’ll go outside. This is pressure on me that I don’t want. Rory is hindering me from being happy a lot of the time.”

“This could be over once we move past Spring Festival?” The first elder asked.

“It could be. I hope so. Then again, what if Rory decides to start up over something else? Am I supposed to let him push me around? We’ve been fighting for like two years now, and I don’t see anybody putting a stop to it from Rory’s side. If I stand up to Rory, I disappoint my Dad. If I don’t stand up to Rory, I disappoint myself. I’ve been thinking; what if my Dad was my age and he ratted me out to Katt Steward? I think... I really think I would fight my Dad and tell him to get out of my business. I understand that I’m giving in to anger, to evil, but if I don’t get past the problem, the problem is going to follow me around until I do something about it.”

“To speak of striking one’s father, that is good reason to punish Sohl by taking away his merit points.” The first priest said.

“Are all fathers perfect and do no wrong?” The votary rebutted. “I know mine was not.”

“The eternal flame of Ahura Mazda is pure and holy.” The second elder said. “Can we agree on that?”

Everyone in the room said yes.

The elder continued. “If you reach out to that flame to strike it with your fist, what will happen to your fist?”

“The flame will burn the fist.” The priest said.

“And by burning the fist, does the flame become impure or unholy?”

“The flame remains holy.” The first elder said.

“I believe Sohl’s father has undermined his son by overreaching in his punishment.” The votary decided.

“And I believe his father was right to discipline his son as he thinks fit.” The priest replied. “But I also believe Rory and Dirk have earned a greater punishment than Sohl.”

“And I think Rory and Dirk were selfish and arrogant to insult Sohl’s mother.” The second elder said. “They provoked a violent reaction from Sohl. This was their intention all along, and that sort of manipulation is evil.”

“Don’t fight your father, Sohl.” The single priestess present said, bring about grins and chuckles from the others, lightening the mood.

When things settled down, the entire group went into meditation.

Sohl thought of many things. When he farmed, he enjoyed the hard work, even if he wouldn’t see the results of his labor for months. When he hunted or when he fixed something, the recognition and approval came much faster. At that moment, however, sitting with the priests and talking things out, even personal things, more than ever before he felt that he belonged with this group of people more than he did with any other group.

Rory’s end of the hall was unusually quiet when Sohl finally made his way into Brown Building. It was nearly ten at night. He made a pit stop at the toilet, deliberating over whether or not he should take a quick shower. Apparently it was government mandate that showers had to be built. The original founders of the archology were perfectly happy to bathe in the stream, but certain living standards had to be met to ensure the public health.

Sohl was glad he didn’t live in Triumph, where people were always looking over each other’s shoulders, and the government was always taxing people and telling them what to do. He finished relieving himself and strode down the hall to his room. The solar-powered lighting was on sensor mode, brightening an area of five feet across all around him, and turning on light after light in the direction he headed.

Before he entered his room, he looked toward the dark end of the corridor. Part of him felt bad, felt guilty if it was true that Dirk had broken his arm. He would have avoided any violence if he could have, he knew, but Rory loved riling him up and that's why things had gone bad. A moment later, he stood before his door and let the scanner identify him. The door lock clicked and a hydraulic piston slid it open. The lights turned on inside.

Sohl was glad he didn't have a roommate. He could come and go as he pleased, and he wouldn't bother anyone or wake them up or interrupt whatever they were doing. At the same time, Sohl was conscious of his surroundings. Most people who didn't have roommates would fill up the entire room with their things. Sohl used only as much space as he would if he did have another person living with him.

He took off his day clothes, catching a hint of stink from his armpits and wishing he had taken a shower after all. He put on his micro-fiber sleeping shirt and shorts, and coupled with his duvet of the same material would be kept comfortably warm all night. A couple of minutes later he was in his bed and telling the room to go into sleep mode.

In the dark, he spoke to god. "If I had to choose a career tonight, I would choose to become a priest. I know I go back and forth about this a lot, but that's because I want to be the best I can at whatever career I do end up choosing. Ahura Mazda, you know what kind of person I am, and what kind of temperament I have. I am positive that I don't want to get married at sixteen, even if certain people are trying to pressure me that way. As far as a career, if you don't want me to be a priest, I would be grateful if you sent me a sign pointing me in a better direction."

Sohl continued his prayer, giving thanks for all the good things he had experienced that day, including his time with Dessa and the priests. He asked for increased patient in dealing with the likes of Rory and Dirk, and also with his father and Katt Steward.

"May tomorrow be brighter than today." He concluded, and shortly after he settled down and went to sleep.

## Part 8

Sohl's dreams haunted him that night. He envisioned taking a bath in the stream. Everyone in the village was there, chatting in their assigned areas. Sohl stood in the water with the other young men from Blue Building. He observed Brittney Valeta watching him from a short distance away. She laughed at him for no reason at all.

Rory appeared out of nowhere, trying to pick a fight with him, but Rory's body was disfigured. Sohl's rival had two heads, his own, and another head Sohl couldn't see because it was behind the first, hiding in its shadow. He figured it was Dirk's head back there. Rory challenged him in front of everyone, and Sohl did not back down. They started fighting in the stream, just as they had in real life.

As they fought and wrestled in the water, Rory's second head started shouting at Sohl. The voice was his father's. The second head was his father's. It admonished Sohl for fighting, even menaced that it would take away all of Sohl's merit points so he would never again afford to buy anything he wanted.

Sohl began to fear the two-headed creature he tangled with. When he realized his fear, he fought back against it. His fear became rage and he threw his heavy fist at Rory's face over and over, but really he was trying to strike the second head that kept hounding him, barking at him.

The second head would not shut up.

Explosions went off on both sides of the stream, huge explosions that blasted the bank and uprooted trees and grass and tossed them into the air. The air was filled with dirt and gray-white smoke. Pebbles rained down on Sohl, and dirt, and also splashed into the stream.

Sohl's bed shuddered. He sat up on his bed, the lower of two bunks, grasping that the explosions had not come from his dream, but from outside his room. He jumped out of bed, nearly falling over because his legs were tangled up in his duvet.

"Lights on!" He called out to the room's vocal command sensors. "Open the curtain!"

Neither command worked. Sohl went to the curtain. It was secure from the top and bottom sills, but it did have a manual turning rod. In the dark, Sohl found the rod and twisted it to cause the curtains to slide over a little at a time. He almost couldn't believe it when he looked outside. Yellow Building was on fire from two places: one end and the middle. People were running back and forth outside. People were screaming.

Sohl made his way to the door. "Door unlock!"

The door refused to open. He realized the electricity was out, or had been deliberately shut off. Another explosion went off outside. Sohl ran to the window, quickly making his way across the room because of the light flashing outside. This time, part of Silver Building was damaged and burning. Someone was trying to blow it up! Someone was attacking the complex!

He heard the pop, pop, pop of fireworks. It took him a few seconds to understand those sounds came from gunpowder weapons. He was used to handling electric shock weapons, not used to hearing real gunfire. Grab your bow, he thought, grab your lance!

As fast as he could, he retrieved his weapons. He was so filled with adrenaline by then he'd forgotten about changing out of his sleeping clothes, but he had no time to spare. Sohl went into the room's single desk. There was a key inside, a key that would unlock the door. He fumbled, nearly panicked when he didn't find it right away, because that side of the room was still dark, until his fingers gripped the small box that held the seldom-used key. He went to the door; the

key was coded magnetically. Sohl set it against the door lock and heard it click. Flinging the door open, he leaped out and tried to run while guiding himself by putting his hand on the wall.

Once he was outside, Sohl witnessed a bright flash in the sky. An ultra-bright glare appeared and hovered in place, leaving a long trail of smoke behind it. That was a flare, he knew what a flare looked like. A lot of things wrestled for his attention: he heard screams, he heard a man shouting, a man who sounded like Buddy, he heard more pops from real guns, and the loud whir of flying drones. He saw Dirk Diluh sitting on the grass, his back against the wall, open-mouthed and looking terrified.

“Dirk, what’s happening?” Sohl asked.

When Dirk didn’t answer, didn’t even acknowledge him, Sohl ran into the open middle of the archology. The light from the overhead flare enabled him to get around, but the shadows of small trees and from the various bushes created moving figures, as if other lights were active and competing with the flare for brilliance. He heard screams from Blue Building, and also the quick *shoosh, shoosh* of shock rifles in another direction. For a moment, he was undecided over which direction to go on in. Since he had weapons, he ran towards where the fighting was.

Another explosion rocked Silver Building, incredibly loud, shattering an entire corner of the structure and sending debris flying into the air. That was the end where the meditation room was. Sohl veered directions, heading that way, cutting across freshly plowed gardens with seedlings just put in. From the rubble, he saw the priests bringing out the Holy Flame. The flame flickered wildly from the sudden movement, near to dying out on the candle it clung to.

Sohl heard the sharp reports from weapons firing bullets, watched the forms of the priests holding the flame flung back, onto the rubble they were trying to clamber away from. So many rounds were fired that Sohl didn’t think they would ever stop.

Someone big and heavy pummeled into Sohl’s side, nearly knocking him over. Strong hands grabbed his arm and kept him upright.

“Have you seen Dirk?” Rory shouted into his face.

“He’s at Blue, sitting on the ground.” Sohl answered.

“Shit! We’re getting hit from the east! That’s why Yellow and Silver were hit first! We don’t have enough guns, Sohl! Dirk was supposed to go to Blue and get the women and children to safety. You have to do it, Sohl! Take as many people as you can up the stream! Hide them in the hills, in the forest!”

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know! All I have is my knife!”

“Take my bow!”

“I’m not good with a bow!”

“Take my lance! All you have to do is press the trigger and touch somebody with the end!”

“Thanks! Go north, Sohl! They’re trying to swarm around us by going south to west!”

“They shot some of the priests!”

The glow from the flare died out, dousing most of the light.

Only one side of Rory’s face was seen, from the heat of the burning fires. “Don’t try to help the priests or else you’ll get shot too! Go help the people in Blue while you still can!”

Rory pushed him, hard enough that Sohl fell on his ass. He scrambled to his feet, wishing he had cloned himself so one of him could see if any of the priests were still alive. And the Holy Flame, he had to get that lighted up again as soon as possible! As long as the flame lived, the god Mazda would watch over them.

Halfway to Blue Building, a light shone in his face.

“Sohl!” His father called out, standing next to another man. “What are you doing?”

“Rory said to take the kids up the stream!”

“We thought he was already doing that!”

“No, I just passed him like half a minute ago! Dad, they just killed the priests!”

His father came up to him, on a rare moment setting his hand on his son’s shoulder. “I’m sorry to hear that. We have called Triumph City to tell them we’re under attack, but we’re not out of danger yet. Take the kids, and your mother and sister! We’ll hold them off as best we can here. We’ll come and get you when help arrives!”

“Go! Go now!” The other man urged.

## Part 9

Sohl started moving, as fast as he dared to with the low light confusing him, making him see giant plants in front of him, when they were really smaller and strides away. Just as he reached Blue, his mind caught up with him. His father and the other man both carried shock rifles. Sohl had never seen his father holding any weapon before, didn't think his father even knew how to use one.

By the door, he found four children: three boys, all under twelve, and one girl who was only six. All four were in their sleeping clothes, scared to death. One of the boys was fidgety, only a few seconds away from a panic attack.

"Have you seen my mother?" Sohl asked. He figured they might know her better by her first name. "Have you seen Lentia, or my sister Septima?"

None of the children spoke, but two of the boys glanced toward the door.

"Stay here!" Sohl ordered, as he rushed inside. He hated the complete darkness that greeted him. "Mom! Septima! Can you hear me?"

"Sohl!" His sister's voice returned to him, along with a baby's loud cry. "Do you have a flashlight?"

He did, back in his room. "No, just reach out and guide yourself with the wall."

"I can't! I have the baby and its things!"

Sohl started across the corridor. "I'm coming to you! Walk toward my voice! Where's Mom?"

"Can't you hear her? She's banging on the doors on the far end, but the people inside aren't answering! How can anyone sleep at a time like this?"

The first thing Sohl thought of was the solar cells on the roof. If whoever attacked them had used EMP grenades, the sudden electromagnetic disruption might have reached down to affect the people living on that side of the building. The people might be dazed, unconscious or worse.

He reached his sister. "Sep, take the baby outside. The children out there, start leading them up the stream. I'll go find Mom and catch up to you!"

"What about my friends in Green?"

"I'll try to get to them too, but first Mom!"

Septima brushed past him, the frightened baby still wailing its lungs out.

Sohl kept his hand against the wall, starting a near run toward the far end of the building because he knew time was short.

A flash of light caused him to wince. Half a second later, he heard the boom of an explosion and felt the shockwave throw him onto his back and tumble him for yards. Fragments of hard and sharp poly-crete, the material used to 3D-print the building, battered, scraped and became embedded in Sohl's thighs and legs. There was no pain, not yet, but there was darkness as the blast faded away, and darkness also in his head as his consciousness faltered.

"Move!"

Sohl had gone blind. He couldn't hear anything but a loud buzzing that sounded as if bees had invaded his ears.

"Move!"

His legs were moving, but he didn't think he was controlling them. Stagger... crash into brush... fall over... face in dirt.

"This way! Come on!"

The voice, distorted, like trying to shout through an ocean. Talons ripped into his arm, pulling at him, a giant eagle taking him into the sky.

"Move!"

One step, two steps. Legs burning, leaking... Why were his legs wet? Stepped in something even wetter... bad step... tipping over... splashing... gasping for breath.

"Sohl, get up! Get up!"

The eagle shrieked... came in for another pass, to carry him into the hills... No, it wasn't an eagle. It was the baby crying, still crying.

"Move!"

His mother's voice. She wrenched at the front of his shirt, dragging him with her. He took steps, had to be careful because of the rocks and pebbles in the stream. Another splash, not him this time, but close.

His mother let go, running through the stream with the screaming baby, yanking a small form up. "Get up, keep moving! Keep moving!"

Sohl didn't like the feeling in his left leg. It burned, but burned cold. He was scared of that feeling, as if his leg was dying and would fall away from his body.

"Fuck, Sohl! I'm going to kick your ass if you don't start moving right now!"

That wasn't his mother, he realized. It was Septima, herding him and the children through the stream. He mumbled words, tried again. "Where's Mom?"

Splashing, all he heard was splashing. The small form was crying. It was the little girl. Sohl sloshed through water, rocks and mud to reach her. He tried to pick her up, but that dead, sinking feeling came back. It felt like his leg was trying to detach itself from the rest of him, wanted to stay behind forever.

He clenched the little girl's arm, hearing her scream because he'd gripped her too hard. His grip loosened. He moved toward the sound of the wailing baby, dragging the girl along because her tiny legs couldn't keep up, dragging her like a weightless doll.

"Sep, where's Mom?" He tried again, but he had no voice, had no coherence because his dead leg was draining everything out of him.

*Shoosh!*

The sound of a shock rifle, but that couldn't be because they were in the stream now, away from all the big buildings where the fighting was taking place. The fighting... Everything came back into focus. The priests had lost the Holy Flame because they'd been shot down. His father had a shock rifle in his hands. Rory had his electric lance.

"My bow!" Sohl gasped. It wasn't over his shoulder anymore. He'd lost it in the explosion at Blue Building. "Sep, where's Mom?"

The shock rifle; somebody was shooting at them. They wouldn't get very far with the baby screaming its lungs out.

Sohl crouched, feeling a jolt of pain in his thigh, his left thigh. He tried to remember the little girl's name but his mind was still out of the game. "Listen, listen, you have to catch up to them, okay? You go on, okay?"

He pushed her. He had to because otherwise she wouldn't have moved; would have only stood there crying at him. The girl fell into the water. She got back up and splashed her little legs

away, while Sohl dug his hands into the streams until he found two rocks almost as large as his fists. He moved out of the stream, brushing against leaves and branches, hoping his sister didn't come back right away.

Splashes were coming, big, heavy splashes that meant at least one man was running. He had to be an enemy, otherwise he wouldn't be shooting a shock weapon at children. The man had a light. It had a strong beam, for a second pointing ahead toward where the others had run, but not at Sohl who was hiding in the plants. More splashes followed.

It was just like hunting, Sohl compared, a waiting game, and he was gifted with explosive lateral movement. The man kicked water, closer, closer, passing Sohl's spot without looking to the side. Sohl used his good leg to propel him out, a desperate lunge with his arm stretched out. He wanted to smack this man on the head, as hard as he could, and he was close, but the rock struck high on the shoulder, close to the neck. The man grunted and fell, with Sohl falling on top of him, with one rock left, but in the wrong hand.

The man was strong, severely strong, enough that he pushed at Sohl and sent the young man flying away from the stream and onto the bank. Sohl crashed on his elbow, adding a new hurt to his already aching legs.

The man stood, pointing his bright light at Sohl's face. "Fucking kid!"

"Don't touch him." Another man said, splashing water until he stood by the first one.

"He just tried to kill me with a rock!" The first man rumbled. "I'm going to break his fucking hand!"

"You touch him and you don't get paid!"

"His legs are shredded! Who's going to buy him like that?"

"That's not your problem. He's a kid and we're here to get kids. Don't matter what shape they're in when we find them, as long as we don't add any damage ourselves. Stun him and let's go catch the rest of them!"

The second man splashed away.

"Fucking Blitz." The one who stayed mumbled. He shined the light in Sohl's face again. "It's your lucky day, kid. Any other day and I'd take your fucking head off. I hate to break this to you, but your legs are gone."

Sohl tried to remember details of the man's face, of what he wore, what kind of gun he carried, anything he could. He noticed a small camera on the man's broad chest, next to where the flashlight's loop was. He'd called the other man Blitz.

"I'll give you a good stun, kid." The man menaced. "A real good stun!"

He made an adjustment to his rifle, before he pointed it at Sohl's leg. With the gun's barrel, he pushed hard at an open wound, making Sohl scream, but that was nothing compared to the pain Sohl felt when the man squeezed the trigger.

*To be continued.*

Project started on May 28, 2021.

The following are my personal notes, because I always need notes! Some of these will set up what Triumph City looks like on a map.

Triumph is modeled after the country of Spain, with statistics reduced to 1/10th. Population is 4.7 million. Area is 50,000 km / 19,500 miles. Spain's states / departments are Triumph City's neighborhoods. Below are the neighborhoods with their state equivalents, arranged clockwise from 12 o'clock. Neighborhood names are simply the state names rearranged or reinvented.

Northeast - Nogara Heights (Aragon)  
Extreme Northeast - Anula Beach (Cataluna)  
East - Cianelle or CNL Shores (Valencia)  
Southeast - Old Cantrum (Murcia)  
South - Landsea Port (Andalusia)  
West - Aramex Port (Extremadura)  
Northwest - Neo Celiset (Castilla Leon)  
Extreme Northwest - Gaitel Hills (Galicia)  
Center - Neo Cantrum (Madrid)

Minor territories to the north, lesser populated and mountainous, past Neo Celiset and Nogara, from left to right:

Celiset (Asturias)  
Arbana Mountains (Cantabria)  
Ajora-Osca (Pais Vasco / La Rioja combined, like Buda-Pest)  
Arrava Mountains (Navarra)

#### Archology Info

Katherine (Katt) Steward is the daughter of the founders of Steward Archology. The archology is pentagon-shaped with five separate living sections. Each section can house 40 people and is marked by one of the following colors: blue, brown, green, silver and yellow.

Buddy Mayson is a Negro in his mid-thirties. He and his small family of wife and two young daughters have lived in the archology for three years.

Rory Magdan (17) is Sohl's rival. Dirk Diluh (16) is one of his buddies.

Brittney Valeta (15) is the girl Rory is after.

Regine Wyke is a female priest.

Blue - married couples

Brown - single men

Green - single women

Silver - older people, married or single

Yellow - new members, guests

Master Blitz is the name of one of the raiders.

**About the author:** Raymond Towers is an author of fantasy, horror and science fiction that strays away from the mainstream, plus a little in the way of true paranormal and other genres. He has written and independently published a good number of titles, most of them full-length novels and collections, with several more on the way. The author has been a lifelong resident of warm and sunny southern California, a location that pops up frequently in his writing. At the moment, the author is looking for ways to reach new readers all over the world, in addition to pursuing his great love of writing and taking it to the next level.

Keep up with the latest on the Cyberpunk Challenge on Raymond Towers' writer's blog:

<https://raymondmtowers.wordpress.com/>

Also, be sure to stop by the author's website:

Raymond Towers Dot Com

And here is where you can purchase the author's e-books:

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