

Ritual

Awaiting the visit from Custodian 8, I prepare myself for the Trial, by practising Harĩ Nature Meditation. The air of my quarters seems thin; it draws no breath. Yet outside, in the Sacred Forest, there is a motionless physicality of the dense roots of the trees, the breath of the wind hastily creeping all the way up to a solitary leaf at the very top of its branches. The leaf looms, strangely isolated from the lower branches, shining brightly despite the immersively contaminating darkness that stifles all life around it. The Law of Harĩ means that of course this leaf is destined to descend, but before it reaches the ground, encompassed in the caliginous abyss, it is gone, obscured from my heightened vision in the uninhabited night.

The time has come, Guardian of the Times.

I am interrupted by the graciously given cognomen to label my 'sacred' role as a watcher, by the monotonous voice of Custodian 8. Broken from my meditation, I feel an assertive hand on my arm and hear the prayer words of our sacred text, uttered by my chaperone.

Through your prolonged existence you shall emerge, but for now, you will abide.

The 1st Word of Harĩ expresses the value of achieving acceptance of the highly protracted voyage to gain erudition, and the untold value of starting your journey to enlightenment through the teachings of Aira. The 1st Word contains the most picturesque and enticing calligraphy to complement its teachings. I often find myself foolishly entranced in the formation of the words, the shaping of what feels like a beautifully sculpted tête-à-tête between my soul and my scripture. The time is twenty hundred hours. I light the ceremonial candles, gazing at their exhalation as they circulate the atmosphere, shifting and convulsing, moving in a wraith-like formation.

The vapour casts a rich, oaky aroma and all at once, every fibril is suffused, every sense and intuition guiding me towards the Ritual.

Whenever it is Ritual time, the Pathfinders will tell you enlightenment isn't meant to be easy, that there are 'reluctances' within the container of our souls. Pathfinder 2 is sure the physical discomfort one feels during Ritual is a symbolic preparation for the Breakthrough. Though my faith lies within Harĭ, after the Ritual, I often wonder whether this endurance of physical pain can lead me onto this higher level. They say the torment on this journey is known to scar people, initially through the severity of physical affliction, and eventually, through the unendurable process, infiltrating the cerebral matter. During the Ritual, the tears within the mind, known as 'breakthroughs' surface as tears on your body; their location depending on what mental blockage you overcome, each segment of your body corresponding to a segment in your mind. The scars are seen as 'your guidance, your own personal illustrations helping you, to heal yourself.'

I am on my last chapter of Hira; in order to progress I must undergo the 'Change of State'. To the community, it is known as something of a test, to challenge but certify how far we have progressed. To those with less knowledge, those from the outside world, it is seen differently. Countless ex members of the community have turned their back on us, releasing erroneous information that the act of the 'Change of State' is a hallucinogenic conclave or seance. There are stories that some become paralysed within the mind. To us, this must be seen as a punishment for not fulfilling the teachings of Hira. Today is my judgement day, the day of confirmation.

As Custodian 8's lilting chant tails off into the distance, the new silence interrupts me from my thoughts. A reminder that the hour approaches. As I extinguish my candles, my chest begins to throb rhythmically as I look around my orderly lodgings one last time, for fear I may not ever see it again.

Guardian 7.

Yes?

Follow me.

I rise. With every breath I draw I attempt to diminish the intensity of the smoky textures belonging to the ceremonial candles, whose fragrant fog have been dominating my senses. Descending from my quarters towards the Ritual Chamber, each step lessens in resonance. Apprehension has eroded the calm I had achieved from the Harī meditation, as I grow closer to the fate that stood before me. Custodian 8 gestures his hand towards the door I am to enter.

I stop. Paralysed by the most obscure mumbling that initially seemed to reverberate within my consciousness.

We must not toy with the containers of the spirit that cannot withstand the Ritual. We are bordering on murder.

However, as I approach the Ritual Chamber, the sound becomes louder and clear enough that I detect it is coming from the concealed side door. Prohibited for Guardians, it was strictly for those with Omair clearance level.

Guardian 7 is a strong candidate. We must proceed with force, in our given direction.

I have calculated the outcomes, the reluctance levels this Guardian will encounter vastly overreaches the scale, he...

I bow my head as I entered the Chamber. The time that is left has met its departure, along with Custodian 8 and now, I too am to depart from the shell I have grown so accustomed to.

I sink into the Ring Chair, its glacial crimson leather penetrates the filaments of my fingertips, draining all warmth and life. Pathfinder 2 towers over me, injecting the

mucilaginous cobalt serum into the vein. Almost instantly, I am mentally realigned, overcome by a state of delirium.

As I surpass the Chamber and enter the Akin Land, I encounter him. The marred figure, concealed under the deception of the Seraphim, clad in a trailing, ivory robe. With its fixed, strenuous gaze, the conflagrant corneal rings within the eyes command control of my own.

As the intensity deepens, the tip of my kneecap is met with a pulverising sensation, I flee from the rapturous gaze, focusing my attention towards my fragmented lower half. Each decomposed limb drifting into the piercing chill of the atmosphere, the chill which showed an uncanny resemblance to the red leather of the Ring Chair.

As my mind recalls the resolute subjugation imposed by the chair, the rapturous figure quickly disintegrates, as if just a figment of my imagination. And as this notion was repeated in my mind, the words exchanged between Pathfinder 2 and the Sachmis enable me to partially reclaim my consciousness. Failure to come out of the hallucinatory state, would result in my entrapment, restrained as the cells of my body try to escape the torment inflicted by the robed figure. This is my test, though not as I expected, my test of competence. My duty to retrieve my sanity, to abscond the binding stannic confinements of my existence.

My religion.