

A Place of Death

By Connor McCloskey

Darkness unending, voids swallowed by voids, whispers echoing from every oily corner of this world. These are the first thoughts that rush into your head as you regain your footing. An infinite plain of half-dead grass stretches before you, punctuated by a sole, gargantuan city. Overhead, the sky appears to be nothing more than a gray void, casting this realm into a perpetual overcast. Its gates have long since been torn down, but you can't help but feel as if it has been this way for eternity.

No, you think. It can't be. I will remain faithful. Let us see what lies within.

You begin the long walk to the city, trying to push the incessant whispers from your mind. "This is a place of silence," they seem to say. "Your presence disturbs the very air. This is a place of death. You don't belong here."

"But you will."

It is the Spring of 7:03, Heraldic Age. Months of anticipation have led to this moment. The caravan comes to a halt just outside the small wooden gate guarding the entrance to your family's meager farm. You love this place with all your heart, you love the land, the sights and sounds of the valley, and you love your family, but the time has come. Your devotion to the Venderic Litany has earned you a place within the Church, in the distant Temple of First Blessings. Your mother and father grieve to see you go, but they know this is for the best.

"You can live a comfortable life as a Priest, and you always did prefer reading the Text to sowing seed," your bearded father huffs as he hands you your pack. A gruff figure, with his balding head and rough farmer's physique, but you can see the tear in his eye.

"Write to us as soon as you have paper in hand!" your mother exclaims, falling upon you in one final hug. She's a homely being, a sweet soul who can hardly believe that sixteen cycles have passed since your birth. You say your final goodbyes before racing out the door, eyes bright above your smile as Brother Thom waves a greeting from beneath his simple brown robe. Thus begins your life of devout service, the answer to the call you've always felt, to rise and serve something greater than yourself.

You push against the heavy door. The whispers are growing louder with every passing second. You can't make out what they say, you have but an ominous inkling of the dark secrets they're attempting to pass on.

The door before you seems to both open and remain closed, but you pass through it nonetheless. This place acts as if a dream: changing, yet constant, filling you with thoughts that come unbidden, a string of paradoxes that are somehow both coherent and a work of utter chaos. The door opens to nowhere, and you find yourself wandering the streets of this gray, corrupted, rotting city. Looking back, you see no door, and now that you think about it, how did the door get there? Was there ever a door? What door?

“The light...the beauty! They said there would be a light!”

8:04, Heraldic Age. A year has passed, and Spring has given way to a vibrant Summer, filling the land and the Temple with life. Your tutelage in the ways of the Litany are well underway. It's the best time of your life. You love it so much that you still take to reading the Litany's Text in your free time, particularly the passages on the world after this one, the Realm of the Transcended. You pester your teachers with questions about the Realm and the fabled City at its center. Brother Thom, your mentor, frequently discusses the topic with you. Once, while reading the Text one lazy afternoon, he approaches you, head bowed in thought.

“Tell me, young one, what does the Text say of death?”

You bend your head to look at him. “To die a good death is to unlock one's full potential, the gift of the Ascended One. To die is to undergo Apotheosis. To die is to enter the Realm of the Transcended, to enter the Alabaster City.”

“Very good, young one. And there in the City find a beauty unlike any in this realm, bathed in a light unlike any ever witnessed by mortal man. But, I wonder, what is this beauty?” Brother Thom sits beside you, eyes narrowing as he concentrates.

“What do you mean?” you tentatively ask. Is this part of the teachings? A test of your knowledge of the Litany?

“Many things are beautiful, and not all light is bright and righteous. Tell me, young one, what do you believe is in the City?”

You hesitate, considering your answer. You think back to the Text. “Our Litany says that our Forebears who lived lives of service reside in the city, that the Ascended One oversees our realm and His from a throne in a mighty white keep. Such is told to us by the Prophets who have seen the City in their dreams. The only others who would know would be the nine Servants True, who tried to enter the City and find the beauty inside. They, however, have either never returned, failed, or have long since hidden the knowledge they gained in their quest.” What is Brother Thom doing?

“An answer indicative of your youth, and considering that we have yet to decide if the Servants True were heretics or saints, this remains a topic of debate. It is something to think about. The Text, remember, was not written by the Ascended One, but the hands of man. Much of it could be inaccurate, or left for us, His progeny, to decipher. All of it could be true, or perhaps this life is all there is for us, or maybe there is something else we could never imagine. I merely wanted to strike conversation, I worry that I never see you do anything outside of reading the Text, but let this be a lesson for you today. Be wary of taking the Litany for what it is. Our task here is not to merely teach the Text to others or to perform our daily rituals; it’s to decipher the true word of the Ascended One.”

He smiles at you and rises slowly, complaining that his age makes sitting far too difficult, and that cook Meridethe’s food doesn’t help in the matter. He gives a mighty laugh as he walks away, the clack of his worn shoes and laugh echoing down the hallways of the Temple. Your heart sinks like the stones you enjoy tossing into the Temple’s courtyard pond. Have I mistaken the words of the Litany for all these years? What truly awaits us in the City, the Realm of the Transcended? Surely, these passages are more than mere symbolism.

The keep sits at the center of the silent city. You can hardly tell that it is white, but wiping away the grime and decay that oozes from it, you can see an almost ethereal pearly marble beneath. You push at the gate blocking your entrance, but this one does not give so easily. Though the wood seems rotten, it appears to be impossibly strong.

“Please, allow me entrance! This must yet be another test! I must know, I must serve!” you yell, smashing your hand against the gate. You hear no thump against the door, but the force of your pounding still echoes down through the city.

The gates swing open, and you set foot within the keep.

“In their last moments, they were wholly luminescent with beauty,” the whispers call. They seem stronger in this place. “You too shall be beautiful. This is a bastion for beauty.”

Fall, 9:07 Heraldic Age. Another cycle, gone. You’ve shown yourself to be quite the prodigy, someone who was truly born for the clergy. You are to be instated as a Priest far ahead of your peers - yet, Brother Thom’s words still hang heavy on your shoulders. You’ve begun to pore over the Litany once again, reevaluating the Text with new eyes. You search now for the truth of the City, a truth you thought you’d grasped so tightly before but now seems to slip between your fingers. If the nature of the City as described in the Text is untrue, then what truly awaits us in the next world?

Does the Realm even exist? You begin to question your place in the Temple, your faith shaken. You eventually seek Brother Thom's advice.

"How does one faithfully decipher the truth from the Text?" you plead. He seems more amused than anything.

"Well, if I knew that, then there would be little for Priests to debate. The biggest question among the clergy would be what vintage of wine to have that night," he chuckles.

"What of the words of our Prophets? Are they not to be trusted?!" you exclaim.

"Calm yourself young one, I did not mean to cause offense! But I must say, yes, they are not to be trusted; you know that as well as I. Prophet Mayher always stated that the dreams granted the Prophets by the Ascended One were odd, complex undergoings, built upon paradoxes and chaos. Such is any communication with the Ascended One according to the Text. We have trouble communicating with a being so vastly above us all; thus, we have to spend our days divining His message to us. Some of the Prophets said that communication with Him was so alien that they felt that He was a whole world unto Himself, so vast is His mind."

"Then the only ones who know, who know the truth, the actual truth, would be the Servants True? Those who entered the City?" you ask. Desperation escapes from your voice like the wails of a trapped animal.

Brother Thom eyes you nervously. "Yes, I suppose so. I believe you're taking my words to a dangerous extreme. The Servants walked a line between devout faith and zealous sin. It is best you look no further into this matter, at least for a while. The truth, whatever it may be, will not appear to you for a while yet, that I know."

But his words never reach you. You nod and leave, deep in thought. If you are to make the world a better place, you must know the truth. Your call to a higher purpose demands it. It is the only way to carry out the Ascended One's will!

And if it is possible, you would know the truth from its ultimate source, from Himself.

Corruption incarnate. The walls are cracked, tiles broken, banners torn, candles long since spilled. The keep is in disarray, if it ever was put together in the first place. You can't hear your own footsteps as you run through these dreary halls, lit only by the pale, unearthly light that seems to emanate from everywhere.

Dread fills every part of your being. You look into each room you pass, searching for any sign of life. Each is empty, as if it was an unoccupied jail cell.

"Where are my ancestors? They should be here, in these halls! Why are they not here?!"

You continue to run through the empty palace, silent as the grave.

Winter, 10:11 Heraldic Age. Another cycle, another year of rigorous restudying of the Text. Your mind has been made up for a while now, and you've begun researching outside of the Text. Old books from the Temple's library, written in tongues long since unused. You have to teach yourself the languages, but the effort is worth it. You've received tremendous respect amongst the clergy for your dedication to the Venderic Litany, and the knowledge is leading you ever closer. Thom still seems worried for you, but that hardly seems to matter. Your research is going splendidly.

Until, that is, you hit a wall. The books in the Temple are not enough. There are volumes upon volumes on the history of the Servants, yes, but not their methods, not *their own writings*. You begin casting a larger net, looking for books from faraway lands. The search takes ages since you cannot leave the Temple grounds. Another cycle passes, and finally, a collection of never-before-seen books arrives. Traders from lands with names unpronounceable have brought them to you, and you can't thank them enough. The works are incomplete, and some have obviously seen damage. But it is a boon nonetheless.

You spend hours upon hours, days upon days poring over them. The lines that stick out to you are the ones from the Servant known as Brother Vance: *"...it is a realm of the metaphysical, unbound by the laws of this world. The Realm of the Transcended seems to have a mind of its own, and I wonder, is this the Ascended One? The Litany says that the Realm is a mere extension of Himself, as is this world, so it is possible. I find myself drawn to know anything I can of it, but the truth of it all cannot be gleaned from here. I must go to the City, and learn from the Ascended One Himself. The Litany gives us all the directions you need to get to Him once there: He sits upon a mighty throne, at the top of a glimmering white keep reaching high into the sky, at the center of the Alabaster City. What the Litany does not tell us is how to enter the Realm before death. I find such beauty in truth, how am I not supposed to find a way in?"*

"But how? What did you do?" you whisper.

The study takes another cycle of rigorous study of Vance's notes. But you finally find it, encoded in the books. The way, no, *The Way*. The Way into the City.

Your preparation takes time, but at last you gather the materials, and you begin the ritual. You shall become one of the Servants True. You shall step from one world into another, body and mind. You know thanks to Vance that this will be a one-way trip, but if all goes as planned, that will hardly matter. Besides, if the Ascended One does not wish to have another servant, another disciple, at His side, then you would gladly leave the Realm at His behest and await your time. The final

moment comes, and in the next step you take, you feel yourself yanked from this world, and into the next.

You eventually find yourself in a great hall, an antechamber, much like the one in the Temple you must enter before being granted audience with the High Priest. Panic has set in. The whispering is no clearer, but it is all the more present, all the more terrifying. The Realm is trying to tell you something, but what?

You burst into the next room, doors swinging wildly. The room is almost bare, despite its immense size. In the center of the back wall sits a plain dais, with something else upon it.

“No, no, no no no no...” you mutter as you run to see what it is. You collapse before the dais, tears streaming down your face. Before you is the throne of the Ascended One, but it is empty. It is simple, chiseled from ordinary stone, and covered in thorns and dead vines. Before the throne lies bones and simple brown robes, much like the ones used by the Priests of the Temple. With horror, you count nine of them, nine sets of bones, nine brown robes.

“Truth is beautiful,” the whispers call forth. “Now you know, and now you are beautiful, burning oh so bright with truth. Now, you belong here. This is, after all, a place of death.”