

— THE SEEKERS | BOOK ONE —

**THE
CHILDREN
OF DARKNESS**

DAVID LITWACK

SPECIAL PREVIEW - FIRST 5 CHAPTERS

Copyright



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**The Children of Darkness  
(The Seekers - Book 1)**

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ISBN (EPUB Version): 1622534336
ISBN-13 (EPUB Version): 978-1-62253-433-3

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*Editor: John Anthony Allen*  
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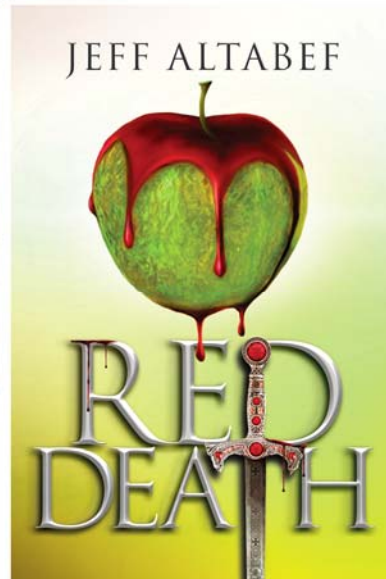
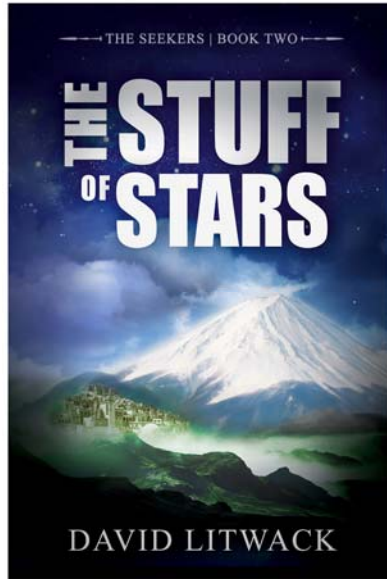
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## Books by David Litwack

### THE SEEKERS

Book 1: *The Children of Darkness*

Book 2: *The Stuff of Stars*

Book 3: *The Light of Reason*



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The Daughter of the Sea and the Sky



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### *Along the Watchtower*

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## WHAT OTHERS ARE SAYING ABOUT DAVID LITWACK'S BOOKS

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The Children of Darkness:

"The plot unfolds easily, swiftly, and never lets the readers' attention wane... After reading this one, it will be a real hardship to have to wait to see what happens next." ~ *Feathered Quill Book Awards & Reviews*

"A tightly executed first fantasy installment that champions the exploratory spirit." ~ *Kirkus Reviews*

"The quality of its intelligence, imagination, and prose raises *The Children of Darkness* to the level of literature." ~ *Awesome Indies*

"...a fantastic tale of a world that seeks a utopian existence, well ordered, safe and fair for everyone... also an adventure, a coming-of-age story of three young people as they become the seekers, travelers in search of a hidden treasure - in this case, a treasure of knowledge and answers... a tale of futuristic probabilities... on a par with Huxley's *Brave New World*." ~ *Emily-Jane Hills Orford for Readers' Favorite*

"As a high school teacher and avid reader, I am constantly in search of books for my students as well as myself. David Litwack's *The Children of Darkness* is a perfect story for young

adult readers, but its underlying theme and character development will keep any adult engaged. Nathaniel, Orah, and Thomas go on a journey to discover the keep, a rumored hidden treasure that many believe never existed or has been destroyed over time. Through their quest, the three main characters work to solve a riddle while meeting many strangers that provide them with more questions than answers. These questions, however, are the heart and soul of this book: How can just a few young people change the world? If all progress were stopped, would we look back to the knowledge and wisdom of our ancestors? David Litwack writes the message I hope all of my students hear: 'Ideas combined with courage can change the world.'"
~ Kathleen A. Sullivan

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***The Daughter of the Sea and the Sky:***

"...a fully imagined, gripping read..." ~ *Kirkus Reviews*

"...an enthralling look at an alternative world... thought-provoking, beautifully written and highly entertaining." ~ *Readers' Favorite Book Reviews, Jack Magnus*

"Author David Litwack gracefully weaves together his message with alternating threads of the fantastic and the realistic.... The reader will find wisdom and grace in this beautifully written story." ~ *San Francisco Book Review*

"...keeps you on the edge from one page to the next as you wait to discover the reason behind [Kailani's] sudden appearance in the land of the soulless... in the end, the truth is very awe-inspiring and most deserving." ~ *Readers' Favorite Book Reviews, Faridah Nassozi*

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Dedication:

For Mary Anne, who always knew I would write again.

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[BONUS CONTENT](#)

[Books by David Litwack](#)

[Dedication](#)

[PART ONE - LITTLE POND](#)

[Chapter 1 - A Dreamer of Dreams](#)

[Chapter 2 - A Teaching](#)

[Chapter 3 - The Darkness](#)

[Chapter 4 - Emptiness](#)

[Chapter 5 - Festival](#)

[Chapter 6 - Winter](#)

[Chapter 7 - Orah's Log](#)

[Chapter 8 - Confession](#)

[Chapter 9 - First Test](#)

[Chapter 10 - Temple City](#)

[Chapter 11 - The Keeper](#)

[Chapter 12 - Nightmares](#)

[Chapter 13 - The Scroll](#)

[Chapter 14 - Pact of the Ponds](#)

[PART TWO - THE SEEKERS](#)

[Chapter 15 - Flight](#)

[Chapter 16 - The Spinner](#)

[Chapter 17 - Bradford](#)

[Chapter 18 - The Holy Man](#)

[Chapter 19 - The End of the Chain](#)

[Chapter 20 - The Rhyme That Was Not](#)

[Chapter 21 - The Rock Face](#)

[Chapter 22 - Water and Dark Walls](#)

[Chapter 23 - The Falls](#)

[Chapter 24 - The Iron Snake](#)

[Chapter 25 - The Golden Doors](#)

[PART THREE - THE KEEP](#)

[Chapter 26 - The Magic Window](#)

[Chapter 27 - A Question for Heroes](#)

[Chapter 28 - Exploration](#)

[Chapter 29 - Discovery](#)

[Chapter 30 - Enlightenment](#)

[Chapter 31 - A Plan for Revolution](#)

[Chapter 32 - The Potential for Greatness](#)

[PART FOUR - HEROES](#)

[Chapter 33 - Fearsome Odds](#)

[Chapter 34 - Eyes of Fire](#)

[Chapter 35 - The Trial](#)

[Chapter 36 - Temptation](#)

[Chapter 37 - Great Pond](#)

[Chapter 38 - A Sliver of Moonlight](#)

[Chapter 39 - Choices](#)

[Chapter 40 - The Edge of the Storm](#)

[Chapter 41 - The Beginning](#)

[**EPILOGUE**](#)

[**SPECIAL SNEAK PREVIEW: *The Stuff of Stars* \(The Seekers - Book 2\)**](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[About the Author](#)

[More from David Litwack](#)

[**SPECIAL SNEAK PREVIEW: *Red Death* \(Red Death - Book 1\)**](#)

PART ONE - LITTLE POND

“Whoever undertakes to set himself up as a judge of Truth and Knowledge is shipwrecked by the laughter of the gods.” ~ *Albert Einstein*

Chapter 1 - A Dreamer of Dreams

As a seven-year-old, she'd watched her father die. She could still see his sunken eyes, so filled with hope as he whispered his final words.

Now, little Orah, don't cry. You have a wonderful life ahead of you. Study hard in school and don't let the vicars set your mind. Think your own thoughts, big thoughts based on grand ideas, and find someone to love.

But now, with Nathaniel's coming of age, the vicars weighed heavily on Orah Weber's mind.

This night marked the start of the celebration leading to the winter festival, a joyous event that preceded tomorrow's more somber blessing of the light. Her neighbors from Little Pond clustered around a modest bonfire, warming themselves and sharing the season's cheer. Each evening for the three weeks leading to festival, the mound of logs would grow until the finish of the games. Then the grand fire would be lit and the feast served. Although this night was only the first, the fire blazed brightly enough to light up the square, yet no bonfire could drive away her gloom.

She glanced away and focused instead on the twilight-shaded woods, hoping for Nathaniel to appear despite her misgivings. She checked the bell tower looming over the commons. Perhaps Nathaniel had been right, and on this night, he was in no danger. The bell had not yet tolled; the vicar had not yet arrived. Spicy-sweet wassail still bubbled in its cauldron, and the music played on.

A trio struck up a lively reel, and she turned to listen, tapping a toe and patting her thigh to the rhythm.

At the fire's edge, a girl bobbed up and down to the beat in a purple hat with three snowflakes embroidered on the brim. Nearby, young couples looked on while elders sat on the porch of the commons with firelight flickering across their faces.

She'd spent that afternoon with Nathaniel, sitting on a log by the pond. The leaves in the surrounding forest had completed their autumn change, and stunning hues of red, yellow, and orange reflected off the still water. She'd stared at the colors, struggling to find a way to convince him. After her fifth try, she stood and planted her hands on her hips.

"I forbid you to come," she said.

"Since when are we in the habit of forbidding each other."

"Since you've come of age and grown too bull-headed to take care of yourself."

She'd been close with Nathaniel for as long as she could remember. Even as a small boy, he'd wondered what the world must be like beyond their tiny village, but now he was an adult and she on the threshold. She'd always been the mature one, bothered by his childish notions. Time to forego his fantasies and become more responsible.

Yet he resisted, stubborn as always. "What would you have me do, Orah? Cower in my father's cottage."

"Not cower, but be less conspicuous when the vicar arrives."

"Only one in three are taken."

She bent low and pressed her palm to his cheek to force him to face her. "Have you forgotten the look of those who've been taught, the far-off gaze, the dreams seemingly ripped away?"

He grasped her wrist and eased her hand aside. "What good are dreams if they stay unfulfilled?"

They'd had this conversation many times before, every day for the past month since he'd come of age. He'd brood on this one thought – life was passing him by.

"But we're so young," she'd say, "our future so filled with possibilities."

He'd scoff at her, never satisfied with the way things were. "What possibilities are there in Little Pond?"

Little Pond was the smallest village along the edge of the mountains, much smaller than Great Pond, which had two shops and an inn. The pond that gave her home its name was a lovely spot, filled with lake trout and frogs with huge eyes, but Great Pond was triple its size with an island in its middle. It bettered Little Pond in every way.

Nothing much ever happened in Little Pond, and so nothing much happened in their lives. Yes, they were both good at many things. Like her, he possessed a fine mind, the two of them the top students in school. At seventeen years, he was already one of the strongest in the village, though he'd never been tested in a fight. He could run fast, among the fastest in footraces at festival, though he'd never finished first.

And so... despite her encouragement, he always wanted more. Was he destined to be good at everything but fall short of greatness? What if the opportunity for greatness came only once in a lifetime, a single perilous choice to change the world? Would he charge forward, believing in his own courage and strength, or run away? That, he claimed, was the test of greatness. Yet he feared their preset life in Little Pond offered no chance to find out.

She was different. Her family had been weavers in Little Pond for as long as anyone remembered. Unlike the surrounding farmers, her days followed a predictable pattern. Five days a week, she worked the loom. Two days, she traveled to Great Pond to trade for yarn. The flax never failed, and her neighbors always needed cloth.

Still, she wondered. Should she be more like Nathaniel? Should she long for something beyond the village of her birth?

She yearned to think big thoughts as her father had urged, to do important things with her life, but not so much that she'd take risks like Nathaniel.

Now, as she stared at the bonfire on this night before the winter blessing, a new worry consumed her. Though one in three were taken, none ever recounted what happened during the coming-of-age ritual. Every child in the village grew up fearing the teaching, all except Nathaniel. She suspected a part of him hoped for it.

"At least I'd get to see Temple City," he'd say, "the light's eternal fortress against the darkness. At least something different would happen."

Orah startled from her reverie, as Thomas separated from the crowd, pointed to the tree line and cried out. "Well look who's come to do us honor in the village square."

She spun around and caught Nathaniel emerging from the woods. Despite her protestations, she was pleased he'd come. Her face grew warm from something more than the heat cast from the fire, but she held back, letting Thomas make first contact.

He tugged at Nathaniel. "Come on. I've been waiting for you to get our first wassail."

"I thought I'd find you with the players."

Thomas's face sagged. It'd been all he'd talked about the past few weeks – the chance to play his flute at festival now that he was of age. Apparently, the players didn't dare let him take part. Music was frowned on by the Temple of Light. By rule, a group was restricted to no more than a drum and two winds. Other instruments, such as strings, were banned as remnants of the darkness.

"I tried," Thomas said. "They told me to wait my turn, so I'll have to settle for wassail."

He gestured to the cauldron bubbling in front of the commons. The familiar smell filled the

air – fermented apples with cinnamon and honey. Everyone claimed wassail was the best use of the harvest, but only those of age were allowed to indulge.

Nathaniel shook free. "I haven't said hello to Orah yet."

"She can have some too.... Oh, I forgot. She's not of age."

Orah forced a scowl. "Two more months and I won't have to take that from you anymore, thank the light."

She smoothed her gray skirt so it flowed to her ankles, and tugged her gray vest until it properly displayed her slender form. All would change to black when she came of age. Once satisfied with her appearance, she stepped halfway to Nathaniel and let him fill the space between them, only then allowing her fingertips to brush his arm.

"I was hoping you'd stay away," she said, before letting her lips curl into a smile. "But I'm glad you came."

"I've always come for the celebration," Nathaniel said. "I didn't want to miss it now... just because I've come of age."

"You both worry too much," Thomas said loud enough to attract the attention of Elder Robert and Elder John, who were playing checkers at the far end of the porch. Thomas clasped his hands to his chest and pleaded. "Come on, Nathaniel. I missed the music. Don't make me miss the wassail."

Orah's back stiffened and she blocked his way. Though only two fingers taller than Thomas, she could loom over him when she wanted. "Perhaps you should reconsider before starting on wassail. It's frowned on by the vicars."

"So?" Thomas said. "They don't like music either, but we still play."

"The vicars teach us to avoid frivolous foods like honey. They're trying to help us lead a better life. They don't like the name either."

"Oh, I'd forgotten. The name comes from one of the –" His eyes bulged and his voice rose. "– old, forbidden languages."

The two elders glanced toward them with that look of scorn the old reserve for the young.

Orah waved to quiet him, but he sailed on. "Next they'll ban friends meeting in threes. Come on, Nathaniel, or are you afraid of the vicar?"

Orah grabbed both by the elbow and dragged them to the edge of the shadows cast by the fire. There, she placed a hand on each of their shoulders, drew them into a circle and lowered her voice. "It's unwise to mock the vicars, especially on this night."

Nathaniel raised his chin and glared at her. "I'm not afraid."

"Me neither," Thomas said. "I'd welcome the chance to go with the vicar to Temple City, to see the tall spires and the officials standing in line to greet me. I'll bet they've never met my like before."

"Well I'm quite sure of that," Orah said, "but not for the reasons going around in your big head."

"Why so glum? Wouldn't you like to visit Temple City? I'm sure Nathaniel would."

Her response sliced through the night air. "Nathaniel is not going to Temple City."

Nathaniel brushed the sleeve of her tunic in that way he had when she became agitated. The firelight reflected off his features, highlighting the stubborn eyes that refused to accept the world as it was.

"Tomorrow's the blessing," he said, "nothing more. We'll watch our words while the vicar's here. After he's gone we can gather at the NOT tree and celebrate our own festival."

The "NOT tree" was their name for a shelter deep in the woods, built by Nathaniel's father as a place to play their games when they were little. They'd named it the NOT tree, using their

initials—Nathaniel, Orah and Thomas. With so many years gone by, she doubted his father remembered it, but the NOT tree remained their special place.

She flicked a strand of hair from her cheek and brushed it back. “A fine idea. We’ll meet there tomorrow after dusk.”

Thomas reached into his tunic and pulled out the wooden flute he’d carved years before, and which he always carried with him. “And with the vicar gone, I’ll be able to serenade my friends.”

When all three nodded, Orah lifted her face to the sky with arms extended, palms outward as she’d been taught.

“Praise the light, giver of life. Let us end tomorrow safely, together at the NOT tree.”

Just as she finished praying, the bell atop the commons began to toll, ringing sixteen times, each clang echoing in the night air. All music stopped, and parents took children by the hand. Cups of wassail were set down, and faces turned toward the entrance of the square.

Thomas slipped the flute back into his pocket.

The vicar strode through the east gate of the village with all the pomp of temple clergy, bearing a pack on his back and the weight of divine authority on his shoulders. He stopped near the fire and confronted the villagers.

“Greetings,” he intoned, enunciating every letter. “Don’t let me interrupt your festivities. The blessing is for tomorrow, not tonight. Please, dear friends, continue your celebration.”

No one stirred.

The vicar approached a table, lifted one of the abandoned cups to his nose, and closed his eyes. As he inhaled, he shook his head.

“Honey in your drink. We’ll speak more of this tomorrow, but for now, my friends, enjoy your evening. Blessed be the light.”

The surrounding crowd muttered, “Blessed be the light.”

Orah touched hands with Nathaniel and backed away.

Though no one appeared to move, within seconds the villagers had faded from the square.

Orah lingered behind the trunk of an oak tree, invisible in its shadow. She needed to learn more, to understand the threat to her friends.

Nathaniel had always been a dreamer.

When they were children, she’d organize games in the woods, elaborate adventures pitting the light against the darkness.

Nathaniel would try to add to the game, conjuring up stories based on bedtime tales told by his father, beyond what temple rules allowed. He’d pretend the darkness had been lifted by a knight, slashing about with a sword and riding an armored horse, though weapons and the riding of animals had long ago been banned. He’d insist the knight had built Temple City, then scaled the mountains outside Little Pond and discovered a great ocean on the other side.

As he grew older, she’d warned him to keep such notions to himself. Nathaniel and his notions. She prayed he wouldn’t pay the price tomorrow.

She sniffed the air, trying to read the breeze, before glancing back to the clearing where the unattended fire had begun to die.

The vicar stood alone in the middle of the square. With a sigh, he set down his pack, carried all the way from Temple City. Inside would be two of the Temple’s most essential mysteries: the season’s medicine and the sun icon, greatest miracle of the light.

After stretching his shoulders, the vicar squared them to the bonfire, picked up an abandoned cup of wassail, and poured its contents onto the embers, which hissed and spit out a

sweet-smelling steam. His lips curled upward into his hollow cheeks, until his teeth showed and his face displayed a rarely-used, but perfectly genuine smile.

Chapter 2 - A Teaching

Following his meeting with the elders, the vicar had two hours to roam the village prior to the noontime blessing. He assumed the posture he'd been taught – back arched, head up, eyes focused on the path ahead. His beard was freshly groomed, a pencil-thin mark that traced the contour of his jaw. His hair had been razor cut to an exact line that intersected the middle of each ear. On his head was the not-quite-square hat of a junior vicar, narrower in front than in back, all black, with no red stripes as yet. Even so, the villagers would treat him as a proper envoy of the Temple. He'd followed the rules and so would they. Little Pond would yield one of its young for a teaching.

He measured his stride – three foot lengths per step. As each heel struck, it made a mark that mimicked the hat, forming a sequence of almost-squares in the dirt road. The squares detoured only to avoid the occasional puddle left from an early morning drizzle.

Whenever he came upon villagers, he tried to engage in conversation.

"The autumn's been warm, thank the light. Did that make for a productive harvest?"

This brought the trite responses he'd come to expect and was able to ignore.

Next, he would ease into more personal topics. "Is everyone in good health? Was the medicine sufficient for your needs?"

Then, intermingled, the contentious questions: "How goes the struggle against the darkness? Have you noticed a change in behavior, anyone showing signs of being tainted, someone who might need my attention?"

Most of the villagers, like villagers everywhere, chose their words with care, answering at length but saying little.

"Oh yes, Anne bore Matthew a son. Elder Robert's daughter married a young man from Great Pond. The light's strong in the people of the Ponds. We're true to the faith."

They'd been conditioned all their lives to parrot back the litanies of the Temple, and viewed this conversation as another ritual. By midmorning, he was growing impatient and began pressing harder.

"Do the young congregate in unruly ways? Have some become rebellious?" Then more bluntly, "Do any speak ill of the Temple? We must be vigilant, my friends, or the darkness will return."

Back in Temple City, a red stripe awaited his hat. Others had achieved monsignor by his age, but he sought more than status. A promotion would allow him to pass off the Ponds to a younger vicar.

How he loathed this village, a nasty little outpost at the edge of the world, bounded to the west by a barrier of white granite mountains ending high up in a sawtooth. Locals claimed ancients had scaled these peaks and found beyond them a sea so great its far side could not be seen. But no one in the age of light would have dared such a quest. Since it was forbidden to speak of the time before the light, at least in civilized places, the rumored trek had never happened. Yet here at the edge of the world, they still told tales.

Not much changed in Little Pond, and he was bound to keep it so. There were no big problems, only minor distractions. If someone strayed, he exercised his duty as visiting vicar to correct the transgression before it grew. Even a small change might undermine the light. The line must be drawn, he'd been taught, before the darkness had a chance to return. Be vigilant always.

It was usually the young who deviated. The young, so adventuresome and curious, had not yet learned the full horror of the darkness. Schooling was less strict here, teachings less common than in larger towns, so once each season he traveled to Little Pond and listened in the prescribed way, searching for a candidate for a teaching. For the past three seasons, however, they'd resisted the will of the Temple, tarnishing his record.

Ahead, the steeple of the commons loomed, the completion of the loop near. Small villages often lacked enough young ones to teach, but if he failed this time, a full year would have passed. Less than an hour remained until the blessing – barely time to communicate to his superiors.

As he paused to consider his options, a white-throated sparrow landed in a puddle to begin its morning bath. With a blur of wings, it splashed about, lifting its neck and singing with a whistle too passionate for its size. Its song was five notes, two long and three short, with the last ending in a trill. The bird seemed unaware of his approach.

He knelt down, picked up a stone the shape of an acorn, and straightened, never taking his eye off the bird. Then he took aim and threw, just a flick of the wrist so as not to startle it.

The rock missed by a feather and the bird flew off.

He'd redouble his efforts. This time, he'd find one for a teaching, an example so the light would shine forever.

On the porch of the commons, he found the two elders, John and Robert, who had resumed their game from the night before.

He strode toward them. "Greetings, my friends."

The two barely looked up, but stopped their play.

"Elder Robert and Elder John, I believe?"

They nodded.

The vicar reached into the pocket of his robe and pulled out a waterproof pouch. He removed a piece of paper from inside, making no effort to hide the printing that the superstitious villagers took to be nothing less than temple magic.

"Little Pond has had no teaching in almost a year," he said. "As elders, you know the importance of discipline. I need your help in finding a candidate."

The elders looked past him as if wishing he would disappear.

The vicar stayed quiet, letting the silence grow into a physical presence.

The two men fidgeted in their chairs. Finally, Elder Robert spoke. "We're a small village. Enough have been taught that we can keep the faith."

"Children come of age all the time. Surely some need... correction."

Robert's voice grew resolute. "We take care of our own and are loyal to the Temple. We give no reason to believe otherwise."

The vicar noted the white mourning sash draped across Elder John's chest. Perhaps he'd be more pliable.

"I note you've had a passing to the light, Elder John."

John looked away, as if the ache inside was none of the vicar's concern. "I lost my wife of forty-four years."

"I'm sorry. May she dwell in the light everlasting."

John nodded in gratitude, but the vicar gave no reprieve.

He pulled the paper closer and read deliberately. "Temple records show two comings of age within the past half year and, as you know, the records are never wrong."

John's voice cracked. "I don't recall."

"Why surely you attended the ceremonies."

"I'm getting old. I can't remember."

"Perhaps, if you saw the names...." He turned the paper toward them so they could read the bold writing done by no man's hand. "The records tell of Thomas Bradford and Nathaniel Rush."

"Two fine young men," John said after a moment. "From strong families faithful to the light. The Bradfords work hard on a farm at the south of town. They're good folks and kind to their neighbors. Nathaniel's mother died in bearing him. He was raised by his father, William, one of the elders. You met him this morning. You have no cause to bother either."

The vicar rocked on his toes. "It's not for you to say... what's a bother to the Temple of Light."

John slid toward the edge of his seat and matched the vicar's stare. "William was sent for a teaching when he was young, a week after coming of age. It was the longest this village has ever known. Is that not enough for the Temple?"

The vicar pressed his face closer to John's. "I will get my teaching today, if not one of these young men, then another." He glanced at the paper. "The records show you have grandchildren. A little old, perhaps, but maybe I should choose one of them."

John's fingers tightened on the arms of his chair and he began to rise.

Before he could get to his feet, Elder Robert intervened. "I've heard one making light of the Temple. A teaching might help him lead a more responsible life."

John turned to him and licked his dry lips, but said nothing.

The vicar narrowed his eyes into slits. His mouth twitched at the corners. "Elder Robert and Elder John, you are true children of light. Once you give me a name, I'll need speak of your families no more."

The elders' every muscle sagged as they avoided each other's gaze.

The somber villagers assembled in the square, old and young, men, women and children. Orah settled on a bench at the rear between Nathaniel and Thomas, while the elders moved to the front.

As she waited for the ceremony to start, she took stock of her friends.

Nathaniel sat straight-backed, eyes unflinching, focused on the altar like a good child of the light. Thomas only grinned. Both bore the obligations of all males who'd come of age: the temple-prescribed black tunic beneath the ceremonial robe, the hair trimmed to the temple-ordained length, and the thin beard marking their jaw line. But that's where the similarities ended.

Though Thomas was a few months older, he looked younger. Where Nathaniel's whiskers could use filler, only charcoal could make Thomas's sand-colored fuzz look like a beard. He had boyish features that seemed like they might linger well into middle age, and he acted younger too. When they'd been in school, Thomas loved to chide her for studying too much, but she spent much of her time keeping him out of trouble and covering up for him when he misbehaved.

The vicar stepped to the front, and a hush settled over the villagers. Everyone turned to face the stone altar. Little Pond was too small to have a building dedicated to the blessing, so its inhabitants had built the altar at the request of the Temple generations before. With no resident vicar, they often used it for other purposes, such as holding festival pies. Such use would have enraged the vicar had he known, but the people of Little Pond took advantage of what they had.

Now the altar gleamed, covered by a satin cloth, pure white but for the emblem of the

Temple, a yellow orb whose rays beamed down on an adoring family: father, mother, and child. A gold icon three hands high stood at its center – an image of the sun.

While her neighbors wasted little time dwelling on the light or worrying about the darkness – they had enough to do to get by in their daily lives – all were respectful of the ceremony. They reserved their true awe, however, for the sun icon. Through it, they heard the grand vicar speaking to them four times a year from far-off Temple City. Each time, he'd astound them with his knowledge – babies who were born, couples wed, young people who'd come of age. It was a true miracle.

The vicar approached the altar to the right of the sun icon, and faced the congregation with arms raised and bony fingers pointing toward the heavens.

"Dear friends," he intoned. "The Temple brings you greetings. Another season is upon us. Blessed be the light."

The congregation responded in a monotone. "Blessed be the light."

"The grand vicar is the human embodiment of the light in this world. He sees into your hearts and knows if darkness dwells therein." The vicar pivoted toward the icon and stared at its center. "Holiness, is this village worthy of receiving the blessing?"

Like the others, Orah held her breath – not because the answer was in doubt, but because the voice emanating from the sun icon always inspired her. A crackling rose from its metallic center, and children would later claim it glowed.

"People of Little Pond." The voice resounded through the square. "This past season, we have felt your love as you walked in the light, and so, you have been blessed with a fruitful autumn. We welcome three new children."

The disembodied voice went on, listing the names of newborns along with their parents. As each was mentioned, eyes turned. Heads nodded approval as if the births were not complete until acknowledged by the Temple. Afterwards, the chief clergyman recognized one marriage, a cousin of Orah's to Elder Robert's daughter, and the death of Elder John's wife. The people took it positively – their communal father dispensing approval and sympathy.

The grand vicar finished with the usual blessing. "May those newly arrived be welcomed, those departed be remembered, and all be embraced by the light."

With this cue, the vicar asked with a tremor in his voice, "Holiness, are they deserving of the gift of life?"

"The people of Little Pond are deserving."

The vicar turned to the audience. "Let the elders approach."

The five elders, including Nathaniel's father, stepped forward, with the two oldest, John and Robert, bearing a sack that contained donations collected in the past week.

"What is it you bring?" the vicar said.

"We give what we can to support the Temple," Robert responded.

The vicar took the sack of medicine from his pack and handed it to the elders in a simultaneous exchange. The medicine was a gift from the Temple, enough to last until the next blessing. Like every child in Little Pond, Orah remembered the magic in that sack, white tablets for headaches, pink powder for stomach ailments, and miraculous blue capsules that healed infections during cold winter nights. Its contents would be stored in the village pharmacy and dispensed freely according to need.

"Bless you, people of Little Pond. Through your generosity, the light shall thrive." The vicar stuffed the tithe in his pack and turned toward the icon. "Holiness, will you lead us in the precepts of faith?"

The crowd rose to their feet. When the grand vicar began the precepts, everyone recited

with him.

“Blessed be the light. Blessed be the sun, the source of all light. Blessed be the moon, the stars, and our own world which revolve around its light. The light is the giver of life, the darkness of chaos and death. Those who seek the darkness shall be doomed to darkness never-ending, but those who embrace the light shall dwell in the light everlasting. While we believe and are true to the light, the darkness shall never return.”

Once the voice from the sun icon had quieted, a sense of satisfaction settled over the villagers. Orah waited for the vicar to dismiss them with the usual intonation: “Go with the light.”

When he hesitated, she grew restless. Her heart pulsed louder with each beat.

After too long a delay, the voice from the sun icon spoke again. “The light is stronger than the darkness, but we must be vigilant. For hundreds of years, the Temple has armed a few to be soldiers of faith. Little Pond is honored this season to have one of its own chosen for a teaching. Come forward, Thomas Bradford of Little Pond.”

The crowd went silent.

Orah turned to her friends. Nathaniel bore a look she’d seen before, whenever he spoke about the death of his mother. Thomas’s face had gone ashen.

“Come forward, Thomas of Little Pond, and be taught the horror of the darkness, so you may keep the light shining in Little Pond.”

Thomas stood and drifted forward on wobbly knees. Orah lunged to touch him, but he’d moved beyond her reach.

The vicar spread his arms. “Welcome, Thomas. You shall accompany me to Temple City and return to your people wiser. Now, my friends, go with the light.”

A subdued village repeated the benediction.

Orah squeezed Nathaniel’s arm. “What will happen to him? Will he be all right? When will he be back?”

The vein in Nathaniel’s forehead throbbed. “Who knows? No one ever talks about teachings, but it’s a three-day trek to Temple City and three days back, so he’ll be gone at least a week.” When she remained disconsolate, he added, “He should be home for festival.”

As the villagers dispersed, Orah rose on tiptoes to peer over their heads. She caught sight of Thomas, hands held high in triumph, the mask of his face painted with a grin as if he’d just won a race, but she knew him better. Even at that distance, she could see the glow in his eyes had gone dim.

Chapter 3 – The Darkness

Thomas squinted, trying to see the opposite wall. It had to be near, because his boots pressed against it, but try as he would, he couldn't penetrate the darkness. Not a flicker of light to help, only the darkest dark he'd ever known. No moon, no stars, no hint of dawn – a dark to haunt one's dreams.

He could guess the size of the teaching cell by touch. The floor covered at most one pace square, enough to sit up straight with legs bent. The wooden hatch that formed the ceiling hung well short of his height, so he had to hunch over when he stood. He could sustain the position for only a few minutes before dropping back down.

He'd given up trying to find a comfortable position. The Temple hadn't designed the cell for comfort. They intended the teaching to be harsh. No way around it, so now he stared into the darkness with his knees drawn up to his chin.

The voices of the vicars echoed in his mind. "Let us record the first teaching of Thomas Bradford of Little Pond, blessed be the light. Do you understand why you are here, Thomas?"

"Yes sir." Temple City still dazzled him then, with its lofty towers and arched halls that boasted row upon row of larger-than-life statues. He'd felt privileged to be there.

"Why is that?"

"To learn to defend the light against the darkness." He'd been a fool.

The senior vicar had leaned forward and glared. "Do you know what the darkness is?"

"Yes sir. The darkness is the time before the light, a time of chaos and death." The standard answer learned in school.

The vicar's response struck like a slap in the face. "You know nothing of the darkness, because you've never been taught. The darkness would terrify a child, but you're of age now, Thomas, a full child of light. We chose you for this teaching, so you'll guide your life hereafter to ensure the darkness never returns."

They asked him to say the precepts, an easy test, and with a grin he recited what he'd memorized as a child. "Blessed be the light. Blessed be the sun, the source of all light. Blessed be the moon, the stars, and our own world, which revolve around its light. The light is the giver of life...."

When he finished, they said he'd recited the words with "insufficient sincerity," and sent him to ponder the meaning of the darkness.

He'd crouched in this cramped cell ever since. Time passed, but he had no sense of it.

At first, he felt no fear. The Temple preached no harm to others. Weapons, war and violence were of the darkness and forbidden. Gradually he realized that the teaching caused him no harm, that the pain came from within. The constant dark gave no measure of space and masked the passage of time, leaving him awash in a sea of nothingness so large he couldn't see the shore. He longed for the light of a firefly, for news of the day. These thoughts gnawed at him like a physical pain.

Deacons brought food and water at intervals, but never enough. His stomach growled, and his throat stayed raw and dry.

His legs began to throb. To escape the cramping, he imagined himself separated from his body, floating in the air overhead, but he kept glancing down at the wretch below. He could envision himself clearly, all except the eyes.

Exhaustion reigned above all. At first, he hurt too much to sleep. After a while, he'd drift in

and out, his head nodding until his chin dropped to his chest and woke him.

Sometimes, he'd startle as the ceiling cover grated open. Light would pour into the cell, flooding him with exhilaration. Such moments meant more than food or water. He'd stand, stretch his limbs and look into the plump faces of the vicars surrounding him, seniors all with their decorated hats. They, in turn, would look down on him with sympathy before reciting a litany of the horrors of the darkness.

In the darkness, they claimed, people spoke different languages and worshipped different gods. Their leaders used these differences to separate the people – each from the other – and then rail against their enemies to turn focus away from their own shortcomings.

At first, they fought with simple weapons, similar to the pocketknife the vicars had taken from him. Then their wise men studied in schools and toiled for years to create bigger weapons to destroy their enemies in greater numbers. *A tale to scare children*, Thomas would think, *and I am not a child*.

Then they would close the cover, and the darkness would return.

He'd awaken after a time, his mind confounded by sleep, and watch the air above him shimmer. Visions appeared, showing ranks of people rushing toward each other with strange weapons. They chanted the name of their god as they attacked, each side in a different language.

It had to be a dream.

The vicars returned and asked why he carried the flute. They warned that music, taken to excess, might facilitate the return of the darkness. For in the darkness, the young gathered at night to dance to forbidden music, a way of worshipping death.

Later, his cell lit up with visions once more. Boys and girls, tenfold all those of the Ponds, crowded in the dark with strange lights flashing above them. Their shirts bore images of skulls, and some had etched symbols of death into their skin. A piercing sound pained his ears, a kind of music played not with the sweet flute and drum of festival but with impossibly loud instruments. The people swayed to the beat, oblivious to each other's presence.

Another dream? He began to wonder.

The vicars told how scholars had created a liquid that melted flesh off bone, and the leaders of the darkness allowed them to drop it from the sky so they'd be deaf to the cries of their enemies. In their arrogance, they even created a false sun. They dropped this too, so its heat scorched those on the ground, leaving nothing but the outline of their bodies in ash.

This time, when the vision startled Thomas awake, he pressed his eyes shut to block out the light, but the flash of the false sun glowed through his eyelids.

Perhaps the horror had been real.

Again and again, the vicars told of the darkness. Again and again, what they'd described showed in the dreams.

The vicars came so many times he lost count. Each interview started with the same question: "Do you know the darkness?"

"Yes sir," he always replied.

They'd ask him to recite the precepts. With each response, he spoke with more sincerity, until one day he sobbed and struggled to get out the words.

Then suddenly, the interviews stopped. No more questions, no more visions. He waited in silence.

His cracked lips measured the passage of time. With no taste, no smell, no sight, no sound, he exercised the last of his senses by groping at the walls. They had the feel of stone, rough-hewn by unskilled workers, but worn smooth by thousands of desperate fingertips. Like so

many before him, he'd been abandoned. If light was the giver of life, his would soon end.

Then, as the wings of death fluttered in the darkness overhead, a new vision appeared, no longer a nightmare from the past. He saw Little Pond in the spring, its sparkling waters, its hills strewn with apple trees newly bloomed, its granite mountains looming in the distance – and the utter loneliness of his circumstance struck him. He imagined Orah and Nathaniel strolling along the path to the NOT tree together, hand in hand, without him. No longer their burden, he'd drifted from their memories. He reached out, trying to touch his old life once more.

The vision vanished and the ceiling board creaked open. He looked up at the panel of vicars and staggered to his feet.

This time, they asked a different question: "Thomas, are you happy with your life in Little Pond?"

"Yes sir."

"Do you care for your family and friends?"

"Oh, yes sir."

"And would you like to go home?"

His throat seized up. He nodded.

The clerics leaned in and consulted with each other, and then the senior vicar turned to him. "So you still may, Thomas. You've learned of the darkness. We believe you may become a faithful child of light."

Thomas waited.

"The Temple offers three teachings. The first demands understanding, allegiance and proof. You must convince us you understand the darkness. Once you've done so, you'll prove your loyalty by swearing allegiance to the Temple. But know this, if you go back on your oath, you shall endure the second teaching, a hundred times worse than the first, and you'll dwell in the darkness to the depths of your being. If you stray after that, the Temple of Light will deem you an apostate, and the people of your village will do as is written in the book of light:

If there comes among you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams, and gives you a sign or a wonder, saying, 'Let us return to the darkness,' you shall not hearken to the words. If your brother, or your son or daughter, or your wife, or your friend, who may be as your own soul, entice you saying, 'Let us abandon the light and serve the darkness,' you shall not consent to him, but you shall surely kill him. Your hand shall be first upon him, and afterwards the hand of all the people. And you shall stone him with stones, that he die, because he has sought to thrust you away from the light.

"That is the third and final teaching, Thomas. Think before you answer. The Temple loves its children but will do what it must to prevent a return to the darkness. Do you understand?"

Thomas tried to concentrate. *A prophet? A dreamer of dreams?* He was no dreamer. He just wanted to go home.

He nodded.

"Thomas of Little Pond," the speaker's voice resounded through the circular room. "Do you know the darkness?"

"Yes sir."

"Can you recite the precepts of faith?"

He did, his voice growing stronger with every word.

"One final test and you'll be free to go. Enlighten us as to where the seeds of darkness have started to grow in Little Pond. Tell us the names of those who have questioned the light."

Thomas's mind again switched out of his body. He regarded his face, dust-covered with streaks of tears.

“But why, holiness?”

One vicar said, “It’s not for you to question—”

The senior vicar cut short his colleague’s words with a wave. “You’ve endured much, Thomas, but what you’ve learned is merely a symbol, far less horrible than the real darkness. That’s why the Temple exists—to prevent a return. You say you’re happy with your life, but this happiness does not come cheaply. Prove your faith by giving the names of others who need our help. Show your loyalty, and we’ll allow you to go home.”

What were they asking? *For me to betray my friends.*

“I cannot,” he said.

“Then, Thomas, you do not yet know the darkness.”

He sat down without being asked.

They slammed the ceiling cover shut, and the darkness returned.

Chapter 4 - Emptiness

Orah worked the loom, trying to focus on the task at hand: shift and weave, shift and weave. She marveled how her fingers passed the shuttle back and forth while her feet rocked the treadle, weaving the weft through the warp without engaging her mind.

Though most of her neighbors were farmers, her family had been weavers for generations. Like everyone else, they kept a vegetable garden, cultivated flowers to adorn their cottage, and raised a few animals for milk and eggs, but they spent the bulk of their time at the loom.

Local farmers delivered wool or flax to Great Pond, where a community of spinners turned the fibers into spools of yarn. They sent these to families like Orah's, masters of the weaving craft. The weavers kept some of the resulting cloth for their own needs and distributed the rest to the farmers and spinners, receiving food and yarn in return. Everyone had enough to eat and wear, a balance so sensible Orah could imagine no other way.

Her mother had taught her the craft at eight years old, and Orah had been taking her turn at the loom ever since. Weaving had become as natural to her as walking.

Yet now she wished it took more concentration, that it didn't leave her free to think of other things.

She needed no calendar to tell that festival was near. She tracked the date by the shadow on the sundial in her family's garden, a beautiful piece with a face of white granite, inlaid black numbers and a bronze shadow maker. Her grandfather had carved the dial as a present for her tenth birthday, after her grandmother died that spring. He'd used the sundial to take his mind off his sorrow and force himself to look forward to the granddaughter he doted on.

It had taken half a year to finish. First, he trekked two hours to the base of the mountains, then climbed to where the vegetation thinned and the granite began. He needed several trips to locate rock pure enough for the face, weeks to carve out the piece, and nearly as long to drag it back. He went whenever he found the time. Overall, he took the entire summer to gather the materials and bring them home.

Every night that fall, he worked on the sundial by candlelight. Orah would stay awake as her grandfather chipped and rubbed at the hard rock until her mother insisted he go to sleep. Finally, in November, he went to Great Pond and had the blacksmith craft a bronze shadow maker. When all was ready, he brought Orah to a flat spot in the garden and sited the shadow maker to point true north.

In the weeks leading up to festival, and for a number of days thereafter until her birthday, Orah watched as sunset grew earlier and later, and the shadow longer and shorter. Her grandfather supervised while she recorded her findings in a log. For the past six autumns, she'd continued the tradition, writing down the date and position of the shadow, learning to forecast the seasons.

This year, she struggled to keep the log. Her grandfather had died in late winter, shortly after her sixteenth birthday, unable to hold on for her coming of age. As she penned each entry, she thought of him and continued for his sake.

Then the vicar took Thomas. Despite her best efforts, she could find out little about his plight, and no one dared predict the date of his return. The day Thomas left, she had drawn a double line in the log, contemplating a different kind of entry – not the trivial movement of the shadow on the sundial, but the progress of her life. Yet each day, she wrote nothing more than a brief note to Thomas: *Be brave* or *Stay safe*. Now the number of entries emphasized how long

he'd been gone.

The three friends had never been separated this long. When she and Nathaniel came together, they felt Thomas's absence, but staying apart was worse. So each evening after dark, despite the encroaching cold, they met at the NOT tree.

On this morning, she could hardly wait. She worked faster, but the thoughts kept coming. Thomas seemed to cry out to her from a cramped and lonely place, but she had no way to help. She concentrated on the loom until her hands flew – shift and weave, shift and weave – but her mind gave no rest.

Time passed no more easily for Nathaniel. He pressed his father for information about teachings, and with each day Thomas was gone, he found himself slipping closer to impertinence.

That morning, his father had asked him to help stack firewood. Nathaniel waited on the porch, surveying the mounds of wood the two of them had split through long hours at the chopping block. They looked like mountains.

His father stepped outside, rubbed his hands together and blew into them. "Are you ready, Nathaniel?"

He stood tall for a man of the Ponds, but shorter than his son by a hand. Hard work on the farm had thickened his muscles in a way that would not come to Nathaniel for years. His hair had grayed only at the edges, and his chin remained prominent. Deep-set eyes showed both the pain and joy of life. Nathaniel knew the pain came from the loss of his mother, and he himself was the joy – the son she'd left behind.

Nathaniel nodded, then held out his arms while his father piled three logs onto them. "I can take more, at least four or five."

"We don't need to carry all at once." His father grabbed a couple of the larger logs and led him to the lean-to.

They laid down an evenly spaced row on parallel beams and placed the next row crosswise to allow the wood to dry. After several trips, sweat began to bead on Nathaniel's forehead.

When they'd completed the third cord and a fourth had grown to Nathaniel's waist, his father held up a hand. "Let's stop for a drink." He set a water bucket onto a bench – nothing more than a plank nailed across two tree stumps in front of their cottage – filled a ladle and offered it to his son.

Nathaniel refused the offer and glared at his father instead. "Why won't you tell me what they're doing to Thomas?"

His father withdrew the ladle and took a swallow before returning it to its hook. "We've discussed this, Nathaniel."

"When will he come home? It's already ten days."

"They'll teach him until he's taught, another week or more."

"That's almost festival."

"It's not for us to rush the Temple of Light."

He turned away, attempting to resume their chore, but Nathaniel blocked his way. "Will he be all right?"

"Yes. The Temple does not harm its children. You know that."

"You said it might change me if I were taken."

"Change is different than harm. Yes, he'll probably be changed."

"In what way?"

His father's shoulders slumped, and he let out a long stream of air. "After teachings, people

become more serious and sadder too. Thomas will learn the stark reality of our past. He may go through a... period of mourning. He'll need time to recover and might be distant with you and Orah. But as far as permanent change, I can't say."

Nathaniel studied the toe of his boot, which did its best to dig a hole in the ground. He'd come of age, no longer a child, and deserved the truth. "Why are teachings so mysterious? They're not described in any of the books, and every time I ask, you avoid answering."

His father rested a hand on Nathaniel's shoulder. "I've explained all I can."

Nathaniel felt an unfamiliar tremor. Fear. He'd never seen his father afraid before. He tried to lock eyes with him, but his father released his grip and went back to the woodpile.

"Now hold out your arms."

Nathaniel opened his mouth to argue, but before he spoke, his father loaded him up with logs until he grunted under the weight.

"Take these to the shed. One more effort like the last and we'll be done by sunset."

Nathaniel dumped his load on the ground with a thud. "You're hiding something from me. Why?"

His father flushed and grabbed the logs himself. At the entrance to the woodshed, he spun around. "You forget yourself, Nathaniel. I'm your father and you'll show me respect."

In his young life, the two had never exchanged such words. Nathaniel knew he'd overstepped but couldn't bring himself to admit it. Without answering, he whirled about and ran off.

Susannah Weber glanced up from the kindling to find Nathaniel approaching on the path to her cottage. Usually, he bounded along, all arms and legs with only a hint of how to make them work together, but now his limbs hung limp, making his whole body sag. *The vicars and their teachings, honestly*. The boy looked awful, and her daughter seemed no better. The girl worked the loom as if her father had passed to the light that morning. Still, poor Thomas would be worse off.

She did her best to soften her expression and be welcoming. "Why, Nathaniel, what are you doing here so early? The farmer's life must be easier than I presume."

Weaving demanded less physical effort than farming but took more time, especially in the winter. She and her daughter spent long hours producing cloth to trade for their needs.

"Good morning, ma'am. Is Orah here?"

"Of course, but she's taking her turn at the loom. I'd prefer you don't disturb her until she's done."

"I'd really like to see her."

She resumed her work, half-heartedly tossing kindling into a basket on the porch. "We all want things. We don't get them the instant they pop into our heads."

"Yes, ma'am, but it's been so hard since Thomas was taken."

She thought of herself as kindly. When someone asked for help, she never paused to consider her own inconvenience. Once she understood the young man's mood, she set down her load and gave him her full attention. "Yes, I've seen it in Orah as well. Her turn will be done in an hour. Can I give her a message?"

"If you please. Tell her to meet me as soon as possible. She'll know where."

Susannah laughed. *The three friends and their secrets*. She knew vaguely of some meeting place in the woods behind the Rush cottage. "Would you mean the NOT tree?"

Nathaniel nodded shyly.

She imagined how his deceased mother would have responded, and cut short her laughter,

pursing her lips as if to say “poor boy.” Like everyone else in Little Pond, she liked Nathaniel and hated seeing him unhappy.

“I’ll tell her, I promise, as soon as I’ve finished with this firewood. I’m sure she’ll want to meet you when her work is done.”

Nathaniel thanked her politely.

As he walked away, she shook her head and – after glancing around to check that no one could hear – mumbled to herself. “Why in the name of the light don’t the vicars leave these young people alone? Honestly.”

Nathaniel wandered about the village, reluctant to go home, but after a while, he worried he’d draw attention and retreated to the seclusion of the NOT tree. He checked his tracks before entering the hidden path. No trace of his passing showed on the hard ground and, unusual for so late in the season, no snow had fallen.

When he arrived at the clearing, his heart sank. His mind held an image of a magical place, but now, with no greenery to brighten the view or night to cloak the scene in mystery, it seemed bleak and cheerless. As a child, he’d played their summer games here – make-believe adventures with his friends--but for him, they were much more. He’d go home and reflect on them as he lay awake at night. In the dimness of his bedchamber, the darkness they’d fought would transform into grotesque creatures, winged and scaled and breathing fire, or fanged serpents with slit tongues. Yet always, the hero of his imagination remained the same: tall, a plumed helmet upon his head, a gleaming sword with a bejeweled hilt grasped in his right hand. And on his chest, an obsidian medallion, all blackness, the oval talisman he’d used to capture and imprison the darkness. For nothing could destroy the darkness that dwelled in each person’s heart. Only great courage could constrain it.

A deep sigh. The scene before him triggered none of those fantasies. Beneath the noonday sun, the hut seemed small and bare, a skeleton of his childhood.

Usually by this time of the year, they’d have performed their winter ritual, cutting down boughs of balsam fir and covering the frame. Usually snow would have covered the land and... usually the three friends would be together. Nathaniel’s throat started to close, and the world weighed on him as if the adulthood that had hovered over him since his coming-of-age had come crashing down.

He heard a crackle of dry leaves and turned to catch Orah jogging along the path. Her breath burst out in gasps, and the color had risen in her cheeks.

“I came as quickly as possible,” she said. “I didn’t finish my turn, but I’ll make up for it tonight.” She grimaced at the bare shelter and stepped forward to touch the wood. The circle of slats held fast in the frozen ground, and their tops remained tightly bound. Nathaniel’s father had done well by them.

When she looked back, her face was drawn. “Do you remember how the three of us would play our games?”

Nathaniel forced a smile. “You’d always set the rules.”

“I did not.”

“You most certainly did.” He mimicked her voice. ““Thomas, go off to the right, and Nathaniel to the left. I’ll stay here and count to ten, saying one Little Pond, two Little Pond, which should give you plenty of time.””

“Well maybe, but you and Thomas would argue with me.”

“That’s why we came up with the Pact of the Ponds.” He placed his right hand over his heart and thrust his left in front, then gestured for her to do the same.

Her hand ventured into the space between them, but pulled back. "It won't work. We need three to form a circle."

"Then let's pretend Thomas is here."

She glared at him but finally gave in, covering her heart and grasping his wrist.

"Pact of the Ponds," he said weakly. "No more arguments and the game will begin."

"This is no game." She yanked her hand away and stared beyond the tree line, as if searching for Thomas in far-off Temple City. "Something terrible is happening to Thomas. I can sense his loneliness and fear, even at a distance. Do you believe that?"

Nathaniel nodded. More than once in their years together she'd seemed able to read his thoughts. "It's possible... for friends since birth."

"Can't we find a way to help? Your father's an elder. What does he say?"

Nathaniel gritted his teeth as the shame from that morning rushed back. He told her what had happened, and she had the same questions.

"How will he change?" she said.

"He might be sadder."

"A sadder Thomas? What a horrible thought. Why didn't you press for more?"

"I tried. I don't know why he wouldn't tell, but I said things I never should have said. Since Thomas was taken, we're all in a foul mood." He glanced at the hut skeleton. "Why don't we cover the shelter now, you and I? It'll cheer us up and give Thomas a pleasant surprise when he comes home."

A crease formed between Orah's brows and her eyes narrowed. "Our special ceremony without Thomas? How can you think such a thing? He's gone less than two weeks and you'd forget him?"

First he'd snapped at his father, and now Orah had snapped at him. The world had gone awry. This morning, he'd been angry with his father for one of the few times in his life. He'd *never* been angry with Orah before. "This is the Temple's fault, with all their rules and ceremonies."

"You mustn't say such things."

"Why not? No one's listening."

"Because the Temple protects us from the darkness." She recited from the book of light, a verse the elders used to admonish children. "*Beware the stray thought. Like water dripping on rock, it can erode the strongest mind and open a path for the darkness.*"

"We don't even know what the darkness is."

"The darkness is the time before the light, a time of chaos and death."

He stepped toward her. "That's what we learned to recite in school, but what is it really? You're the smartest person I know. Can you tell me what the darkness is?"

He studied her as she pondered his question. Her looks came from the Weber side of the family, with olive skin and delicate but unremarkable features, more than offset by flaring dark eyes. The sole gift from her mother was a striking red tint to her hair. Together, they combined into a fierce beauty, especially when outraged like now.

At last, her outrage vanished and she came closer, enough so he felt her breath. "Yes, Nathaniel, I can tell you. The darkness is when a son hurts the father he loves, when friends are separated, and when those who care the most about each other raise their voices in anger." Her expression hardened, and her delicate features disappeared. "By that meaning, I swear the darkness will never return."

The strong words narrowed his vision, so he saw her now as through a tunnel. When the moment passed, he noticed something cold on his cheeks.

A light snow had begun to fall.

Chapter 5 – Festival

As festival approached, Orah came to agree with Nathaniel. Covering the NOT tree would affirm their friendship with Thomas rather than deny it. Despite her distress at his absence, she had no way to help. So the day before festival, she and Nathaniel gathered to wrap the structure in green to welcome Thomas home.

Before they entered the forest, Nathaniel fetched an axe from the woodshed while she rummaged about for twine. They met as dark settled upon the clearing outside the village.

Stars winked into being and a moon rose, less than half-full but bright enough to light their task. She picked a branch lush with needles and prodded Nathaniel to chop it free. As it fell, she grabbed the end, and together they dragged it to the shelter. After she located the perfect spot, they bound the branch to the slats with twine before returning to the woods. In less than an hour, they had remade the bare structure into an enclosed dwelling that seemed, under the stars, to have stood there forever.

Orah ducked inside and waited amused as Nathaniel crawled in on all fours. Beneath the cover of branches, her breathing quieted as if she'd entered a holy place. The smell of freshly-cut balsam filled the air like incense, a comforting memory of childhood.

Custom prescribed a blessing when they'd finished their work. This year was Orah's turn. "May the light bless our shelter." She stopped at the tired old phrase, uttered without thought. This year's blessing had to be real. "Not the light the Temple claims to own, but the true light that burns in our hearts." She grasped Nathaniel's hands and spoke for the both of them. "Dear friend Thomas, we're sorry to have covered this shelter without you, but know we have not forgotten you. We're here in the darkness with you. Not the darkness of the Temple, but a warm and loving darkness that will soon embrace the three of us again."

Nathaniel gasped at her statement – too close to heresy.

She squeezed his hands to regain focus. "Thomas, we are with you. Say it with me Nathaniel, so it will be stronger."

Both inhaled deeply and spoke. "Thomas, we are with you." Then she added, "Return to us safely and soon."

In what moonlight filtered through the branches, the puffs from Nathaniel's breath filled the space between them.

For as long as Orah could remember, she'd looked forward to festival, but Nathaniel's coming of age and Thomas's absence made this year feel different. She'd tossed in bed last night, a cloud of uncertainty hanging over her, but when she awoke this morning, the usual excitement filled the air.

The celebration began at noon with footraces. The youngest competed first, followed by the older children, and finally those of age, from seventeen to twenty-five. Boys and girls raced separately, so she and Nathaniel could cheer each other on.

She'd always been fast, but now, as the oldest in her group, she managed to win all three of her races – the sprint around the commons, the longer run through the village, and a scramble between obstacles. The scramble required more agility than speed, and favored the younger girls, but this year she competed with a special intensity.

Age worked against Nathaniel. As a new adult, he competed with men whose muscles had thickened and minds had grown accustomed to the length of their limbs. Deriving no

inspiration from her victories, he ran poorly in the first two events. Then, in the scramble, he fell at the finish, lunging in an attempt to make the final three and skinning his knee.

When all the races had finished, the elders awarded prizes to the winners – by tradition an elaborate wreath made from the flax that grew around Little Pond.

Flax filled a vital need for the people of the Ponds, harvested for both its fiber and seeds, but in the spring when its blossoms bloomed, families would go out among the stalks and search for the most beautiful flowers – the whites and lavenders, and the blues valued most of all. Orah recalled long June evenings with her father before he died, sitting and weaving stalks into rings. Then the flowers would be hung on the walls to dry, looking like the wings of a butterfly. A simple prize, but even the oldest decorated their cottages with festival wreaths won long ago.

The elders often delegated the awarding of prizes to someone close to the winner – a parent or, for the older ones, a betrothed. When the time came for Orah to receive her due, Elder William Rush called on his son. Nathaniel gaped at him, but his father smiled, offered the victor wreaths and gestured toward Orah.

Everyone knew Thomas had been away a long time – longer than the usual teaching – and most had watched the three friends grow up together. The crowd murmured its approval as Nathaniel placed the wreaths on Orah's head so gently he disturbed not a hair.

But both Orah and Nathaniel had forgotten the last part of the tradition: male presenters were expected to kiss a female winner, once on each cheek. Their neighbors, however, had a better memory and urged them on. Nathaniel took on a look that said he preferred to be elsewhere, but in response to the crowd, he rested a hand on Orah's arm and leaned in to brush each of her cheeks with his lips.

She laughed and rolled her eyes, but a sudden glow warmed her skin, and a flush of crimson added to the color of the flowers.

By the time twilight came, Orah waited eagerly for the feast. All the races had been run. Happy winners pranced about, sporting wreaths on their heads. Food and drink covered every surface, from the railings of the commons to the Temple altar. All that remained was the lighting of the bonfire and the festival tree.

A spruce stood in the village square with candles attached to every branch. *Would the vicar disapprove of this tradition as well?* He never joined them for festival and no villager ever discussed the celebration with him, so the unseen and unspoken was allowed.

The lighting of the tree started at the top. This year, the elders chose Nathaniel to help. He planted himself at the base while strong arms hoisted a nimble ten-year-old onto his shoulders – a role once filled by Thomas at a similar age. The boy paused to balance and then straightened. Nathaniel's father passed a pole up to him with a flame attached to its tip. He kindled the topmost candle and worked his way down. Once the top third of the tree blazed with light, the boy vaulted to the ground and many hands lit the rest.

Orah watched open-mouthed as one by one, the burning candles chased away twilight. Then Elder Robert grabbed the burning pole and, amidst an air of expectation, tossed it into the bonfire stack. Within seconds the dry wood crackled, and the flames shot higher than the festival tree.

A cheer went up. While a few of the revelers stayed to watch the fire spread, most headed for the food, but as they turned, they froze in place. A hush rolled across the crowd, and Orah stretched for a better view.

There stood Thomas at the edge of the firelight, lingering like a part of the shadows.

What did they do to him? His pale skin stretched over cheeks so hollow that his face showed no sentiment save exhaustion.

The adults hesitated to approach, and their children caught their fear. Even Nathaniel wavered, too stunned to move.

But Orah rushed forward. "Thomas, you've returned to brighten our festival. What a gift." She reached out to touch him, but he recoiled.

"A drink." His voice rasped as if he hadn't used it in days. "May I have a drink?"

Someone offered a cup. His hands shook so much that the liquid spilled on his soiled tunic. After two gulps, he glanced at the festival tree and began to well up.

Nathaniel finally pushed through the crowd to join Orah. "Have you been to Temple City? Did you see it?"

Thomas growled like an offended stranger. "I saw nothing but darkness."

Two elders placed restraining hands on Orah and Nathaniel.

"He'll need time," Elder Robert said. "Give him a few days."

Orah pulled away and pressed closer. "What is it, Thomas? Did they hurt you?"

Thomas's head snapped around. He lifted his chin and straightened as if about to deliver a sermon. "The Temple of Light does not harm its children. Only in the darkness was violence done. The vicars have shown me the truth. Horrible things happened in the darkness. I'll dedicate my life to ensure it never returns."

The elders muttered how the teaching had made him wise beyond his years, but now he needed to rest. Gentle, older hands led him away.

"He's home at last," Nathaniel said as their neighbors strove to regain their festive mood, "but he's no longer our Thomas. Only time will tell whether what's been taken from him returns or is forever gone."

Forever gone. Orah shivered. *Nathaniel's wish has come to pass.*

Something had finally happened in Little Pond.

---END OF SNEAK PREVIEW---

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THANK YOU!

