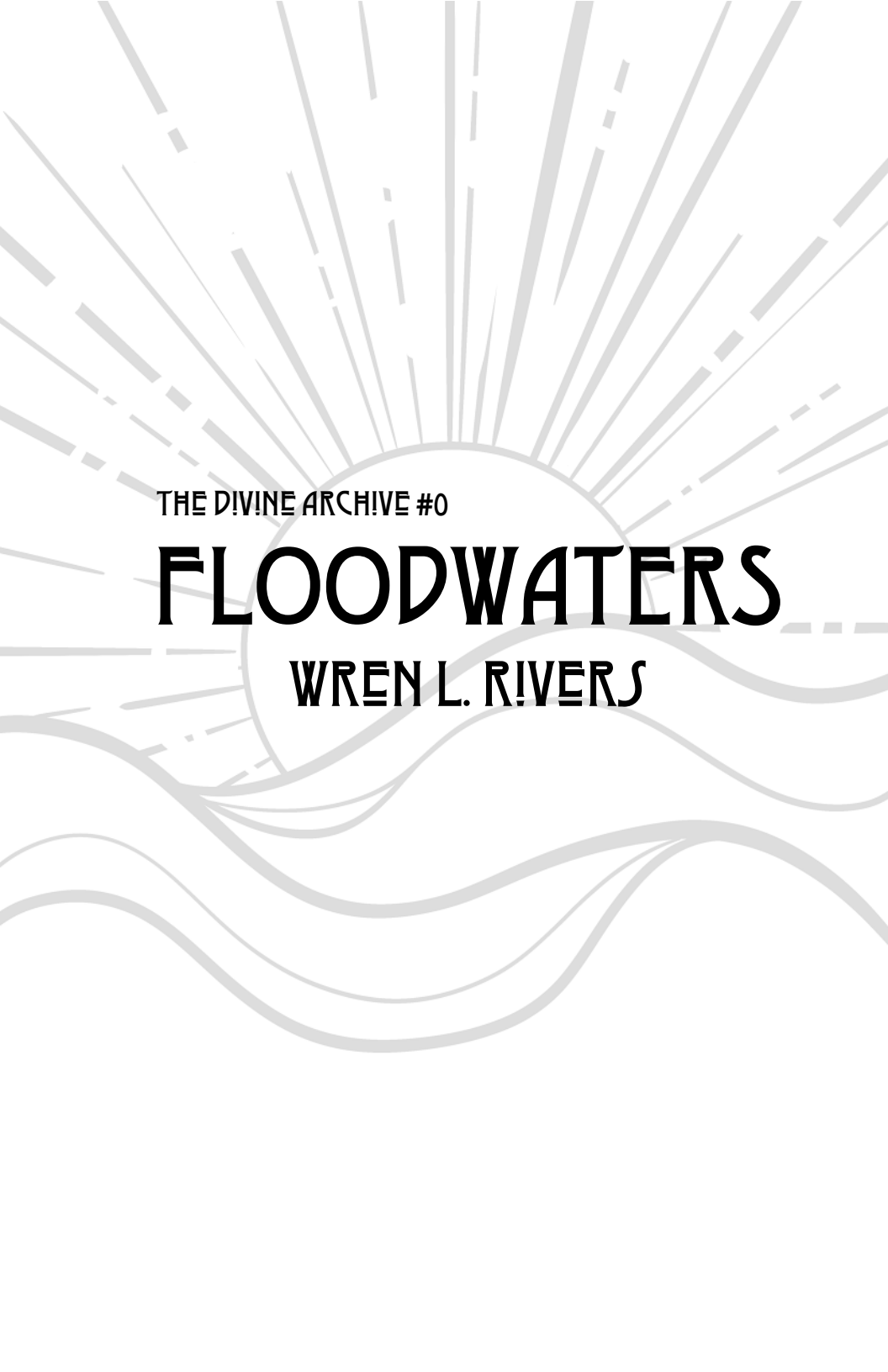


The background features a stylized sun with numerous rays of varying lengths and thicknesses, some solid and some dashed, radiating from a central semi-circle. Below the sun are several wavy, horizontal lines of varying thickness, creating a sense of movement and depth.

THE DIVINE ARCHIVE #0

FLOODWATERS

WREN L. RIVERS

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CONTENT WARNING

This story contains content that may be unsettling to some readers, including graphic violence, major character death, suicide, murder, child death, drowning, gun violence, and religious themes.

43rd Dew, Prosperity 2192

Later designated as the year Great Flood 01

One thousand years before *Blood of the Gods*

Some people died loudly. Others, with nothing more than a whisper.

A soldier under heavy gunfire, screaming in agony as blood gushed from her wounds. An elderly man, asleep on his deathbed, slipping into oblivion the moment his visitors stepped out for coffee. Either way, the human body shut down one organ at a time, until it realized there was nothing left to keep alive.

But was there any death more torturous than that of a group science project? Eris didn't think so.

He sat draped over the old living room couch, its upholstery worn and matted from far too many years of use, and twirled a blue ballpoint pen between his fingers. He had long since looked away from the notebook balanced on his lap, his gaze trailing lazily around the room. Was there *anything* more interesting than his homework? It seemed not. His gaze met nothing but woven prayer mats and bland,

undecorated walls. He threw his head back over the arm of the couch, catching a glimpse of his companion.

Miri Chase was a quiet girl with a bob of brown hair, which curled toward her face like a round, decorative frame. She was a sophomore, though by some manner of happenstance, she'd wound up in junior-level classes. Eris never once considered her, and he would have preferred to continue that streak, if not for Mr. Darren, who had paired them for the final research project of the year.

On the first day they worked together, she had looked him up and down, eyeing his mussed blond hair and grass-stained tee shirt, then said, *"I can do the whole thing, if you want."*

"What?"

"I know your type," she elaborated. "Jocks. You usually make me do all the work."

"Oh. No, I'm not like that."

Now, Miri met his gaze and adjusted her round glasses, her earnest face upside-down from his perspective. She sat cross-legged on the beige loveseat perpendicular to Eris's couch, holding a library book in her hands. Its pages were stained and creased. "What's wrong?"

"Sue me, but *Tree Biodiversity's Impact on Local Squirrel Populations* isn't the most exhilarating paper we could be writing."

"That's what we proposed, though. We can't change it now. Mr. Darren said if the subject isn't what we proposed, he'll dock us a letter grade. Remember?"

"I know," Eris groaned, drawing out the *o*. "Want to take a break, at least? My mom n' dad will be home soon. They're picking Aria up from soccer practice. Ugh, she's so annoying. We'll want to be out of the house."

"Where would we go? Do you have your license?"

"Not yet. We can walk somewhere, though. I'm antsy to move my legs."

"Sure."

Eris led Miri to the foyer and toed his sneakers on. As he waited for Miri to zip on her ankle-high boots, he nabbed his inhaler off the console table and tucked it into his pocket. He opened the front door, and as soon as Miri was ready, he ushered her out into the temperate dew season air.

A yellow car pulled into the tiny urban driveway. Its grumbling engine cut short, and out climbed Mom and Dad, a screaming Aria in tow. Eris marched past them, Miri following in his wake. If he was fast enough, he could escape before his parents forced him into daycare duty. He called over his shoulder, "We're going for a walk!"

Mom and Dad did not stop him. They were too preoccupied with Aria, who stomped her foot on the asphalt and wailed.

"Poor girl," Miri cooed. "Not easy being six, huh?"

"I wish she would shut up." Eris kicked a rock down the sidewalk. "She hates sports. But she doesn't realize how easy she's got it. Mom 'n Dad switch it up yearly. They're trying to find something

she'll like. They forced *me* to play basketball 'till I was thirteen. It took a huge argument to convince them to let me play lacrosse."

"I can't do sports. I'm not built for it. Fine by me, though. I think they're boring." Miri paused. "Dad makes me take piano lessons, though, so I get it. He insists it's a good skill to have, but I don't really like the instrument."

Eris couldn't fathom the concept of a sport being boring, but he said nothing. He kicked the rock again, and it clattered a few paces ahead. They settled into an uneasy silence. Should he try to keep the conversation going? What were they supposed to talk about, aside from their project?

Miri must have been thinking the same thing.

"Swathi says there's a god visiting Midir," she said. "Swathi's a friend of mine. We sit next to each other in Advanced Literature."

"A god?" Eris repeated, casting Miri a sideways glance. "Which one?"

"I don't know. She told me she saw him, though. Dressed in flowy robes. Too pristine and ethereal to be human. I mean, I guess it's always possible she'd just seen some random guy, but she seemed rather set on it."

"May he grace us with kindness," Eris muttered. A half-prayer. There was no way to pray in earnest without knowing which god one prayed to. Prayers to nobody went nowhere. But, as Mom and Dad always insisted, the act of faith was most important.

“I wonder if I’ll ever get to see him. Wouldn’t that be cool? To meet a god?”

“Anesh is a huge city. He could be anywhere. Heck, he could be anywhere in *Midir*.”

Miri took Eris by the wrist and hurried down the sidewalk. Eris had half a heart to wrench his hand away, for fear of someone seeing, but he didn’t. They weaved through alleyways, past Wayfarer High School, and through the business district. When they skidded to a halt in the town square, both teenagers were panting for breath. Sweat dampened Eris’s hair, slicking choppy blond tufts to his forehead.

He took a puff from his inhaler, held his breath for a few seconds, then exhaled.

“Swathi said she saw him down that street,” Miri said. “He might still be in the area. He could be staying in a hotel nearby.”

“A hotel? I doubt a god would be staying in a *hotel*.”

“Well, do you have any better ideas?”

“Do you think...” Eris spoke slowly, with trepidation, as he and Miri approached the grand fountain in the center of the square. He sat on the fountain’s lip, eager to rest his legs. Water misted the back of his neck.

Miri scanned the ledge, then sat a shoulder’s distance away, far enough to avoid the brown-white splotch of bird poop next to Eris’s thigh. “Do I think what?”

“Do you think, if we met the god, we could change our thesis?”

“Isn’t a scientific paper about the divine a bit contradictory?”

“Well, sure. But we don’t have to write about theology. Hear me out: *The Effect of Divine Presence on Human Behavior*. It’s not about the god, per se. It’s more about the response.”

Miri grinned. “Better than squirrel populations, hm?”

“Much better.”

“Let’s do it.” She held out her hand as though a high school paper was a business deal. “I’ll take the lowered grade, but we *have* to blow Mr. Darren out of the water.”

Eris shook on it. Miri’s grip was firmer than he had anticipated.

“Our control group?” Miri asked.

“Churchgoers?”

“Hm. I think we should have three levels. Control group could be atheists. *Then* we have churchgoers—the first stage of divine presence. Spiritual presence. Right? And then, above that, we study folks who have interacted with the god.”

“Good thinking.”

“And if we fail, well...” Miri snickered. “We always have the squirrels.”

Eris stood. “Let’s get searching.”

They combed the streets until the sun was low. At twilight, after a whole lot of nothing, Miri called for Eris to stop. She stood on the sidewalk,

hands on her knees. “My legs hurt,” she complained. “And I’m hungry. Let’s call it a night.”

Streetlights flicked on. Eris propped his foot against the curb and stretched his calves. “Do you think your parents could come pick us up?”

“I’ll call them. Hang on.”

Miri stepped a few paces away and held her phone to her ear. Eris allowed her some privacy. He wandered down the sidewalk, kicking his feet out in front of him with each languid step. *At the corner*, he thought, *I’ll turn around and come back*.

But when he reached the corner, he paused.

On Compton Street, there stood a derelict warehouse. He knew it well. When he was fourteen, he and his teammates would sneak in after practice to explore. Its vast, empty room was the perfect space for them to get the remainder of their energy out.

He’d scrawled a rather crude, inappropriate picture along the walls in chalk, once. Another time, Marco Peterson dared him to climb all the way to the little circular window at the top. He did, of course, because he wasn’t a wuss, but he got stuck up there. The fire department had to help him down.

He hadn’t been in the building since. Mom and Dad forbade it. For good reason, he supposed, with the unidentifiable plants that crawled their way up crumbling walls. Grimy signs warned passersby

that the warehouse was condemned, their lettering faded, scratched, graffitied.

A little girl, Aria's age, played with a red ball half her size. Her father lingered nearby, phone in his hand, his forehead wrinkled from the strain of his furrowed brow. Down the block, a passerby walked, making his way somewhere important, if his brisk pace was any indicator. A quiet evening, tonight. Rare in a city like Anesh.

The girl tossed the ball into the air. She fumbled her catch, and the ball rolled across the road, bumping the curb in front of the warehouse. The girl looked left, right, then left again—diligent, well-taught—and hurried across to fetch her toy.

"...come pick us up?" Miri's voice floated into his ears. *"Oh, right, I forgot you said you were working late tonight... We were doing some research for our paper... Me 'n Eris. My classmate. No, you haven't met him. Yeah, he's nice."*

A creak. A groan. The wood was too termite-eaten to hold out any longer, and once-shiny steel was browned with rust and decay. Supports gave way. Something along the far side of the warehouse toppled with a cacophonous crash. The girl's father looked up from his phone in alarm.

"Hey!" Eris yelled to the girl, waving, beckoning her. "Get out of there!"

The girl's feet remained rooted to the pavement beneath her. She stared up at the warehouse, trembling. Her father stepped off the curb with little regard for his own safety, intent on rushing to grab her.

He did not make it far. Something deep within the warehouse snapped, and the building collapsed.

A thick wave of dust and debris flooded the street. Eris covered his mouth with his sleeve to filter out the sour air, though the gesture did him little good. His lungs ached. His eyes watered. Still, he squinted through the thick dust cloud—somewhere beneath it all, was that girl a bloodied, crushed corpse?

Miri rushed to his side, phone still pressed to her ear. She surveyed the wreckage, her green eyes wet thanks to the dirt lingering in the air. “Oh, *Heavens*. Dad, I-I gotta go. We’ll walk home. See you later.”

Eris caught Miri's dad's frantic ‘*are you okay?*’ over the phone's tinny speaker moments before she cut the call.

The dust settled, and hunched in the street stood the girl, cuts littering her skin. A man stood over her, his long black hair descending upon her like a veil. He'd blocked her from the brunt of the collapse, and somehow, he too was alive. How?

Blood dripped from a wound at the man's temple, trailing its way down his cheekbones. The blood wasn't crimson, but rather a shimmering gold, which caught the yellow light of the streetlamps above.

“Miri,” Eris gasped, taking in the man’s draped robes, marred with dust. “Look.”

As if she wasn’t already looking.

“What happened? I heard the crash, but I was down the street, I didn’t see—”

“His blood,” was all Eris could get out. “Look, his blood. It’s not red.”

This was divine blood. There was no other explanation.

Miri coughed into the crook of her arm. She said nothing, but Eris could see the wonder on her face. Her jaw was slack, lips parted enough to show a hint of teeth. She couldn’t quite tear her gaze away.

The girl’s father rushed to her and scooped her into his arms. Gripping his daughter tight to his chest, he gasped out a long string of what Eris could only presume were reverent thank-yous. He spoke too softly for Eris to hear across the wide street. Eris did, however, catch the daughter’s high, elated voice.

“He healed me!” she exclaimed. She held up her arm, caked in crimson and gold, but with no wound in sight. “Look, daddy! He healed me!”

The man rose. He was tall, with broad shoulders and a tan, chiseled face, as though he were carved out of marble. Eris had seen this face before, painted in murals and sculpted on statues; a face borne of seafoam and brine.

He was the God King, Einari.

2

49th Dew, Prosperity 2192

Eris shared science class with his teammate Adrien. Today, Adrien sat in the back corner, leaning his chair back on its hind legs, chewing gum he wasn't allowed to have. Eris usually sat next to him. Not this time.

Mr. Darren had allowed his students a free period, with the expectation that the class spent the hour working on their group projects. The classroom was alight with chatter, the occasional comment about the pH of soap or the frequency of radio waves breaking over the monotonous hum of voices.

Adrien's project partner was Lucas, who did marching band in the autumn and rowing in the spring. Rowing saved him from loser status. He bridged *band nerd* and *jock* just enough to slide through high school undetected by the social elite. Eris couldn't remember what instrument Lucas played. Maybe the tuba.

"The fact that it's Einari complicates things," Miri was saying. Tired of pushing her hair out of her face, she rifled through her backpack until she found a yellow barrette, which she clipped into place above her temple. "I mean, I might be overthinking it. But people are

going to react differently to the God King's presence than they would to any lesser god."

"Well, we can't exactly ask another god to come visit."

Miri laughed. "Yeah."

A ball of wadded-up paper hit the back of Eris's head and tumbled to the floor.

"*Miri and Eris, sitting in a tree,*" Adrien jeered from across the room. Lucas snickered. "*K-I-S-S-I-N-G.*"

Eris knew a reaction, positive or negative, would only further fuel the fire. He ignored Adrien. Mr. Darren held a different opinion, however. From his desk at the front of the classroom, he snapped, "Adrien, get to work. And spit that gum out."

His attempt was valiant but unsuccessful. Adrien ripped another blank sheet from his notebook, crumpled it, and lobbed it across the room.

Miri was a good sport. If Adrien and Lucas bothered her, she didn't show it. Instead, she passed Eris her phone, a bold, declarative headline on its screen. "I found an article that was published a few days ago. Give this a read."

God King Saves Child's Life

On 43rd Dew, the condemned Gilmore Warehouse collapsed. Ilse Petromi, age five, was playing near the site.

The building, slated for destruction on 13th Sun, was once home to Gilmore Industries, the leading innovators in automotive technology, bankrupt in Prosperity 2103. The warehouse was never purchased by a successor.

"His Grace saved her life. I am his faithful servant. I owe him everything," said Tomás Petromi, Ilse's father.

Ilse Petromi is currently staying at Charity General Hospital. Though uninjured, her clothing was bloodied, leaving doctors vexed. Her diagnosis: shock.

"He healed her wounds," said Tomás. "A few drops of his blood. That's all it took."

Though no scientific conclusion has come of this yet, the question stands: can the substance researchers are now referring to as God's Blood cure wounds?

“Okay,” Eris said, sliding Miri’s phone back across the lab table. The charms clipped to it jingled. A little acrylic bee and a ladybug. “This is great. I mean, I don’t think Mr. D would’ve accepted our eyewitness account, for fear we’d made it up. But this is reputable.”

“Are you free tonight?” Miri asked. “I want to talk to Mr. Petromi.”

“I’ve got lacrosse after school, but I could meet after. We’re just doing drills today. I’ll be done by five.”

“I’ll see if I can find his contact info. Meet me at the Sage & Tallow on fifth street at... six-thirty? Is that doable?”

“I’ll be there.”

Miri tucked her binder, one of the fancy ones with rubber reinforcement along the edges, into her backpack. The bell rang, and she was the first out the door.

Sage & Tallow was a coffee shop, not a butcher like the name seemed to suggest. The name sounded dignified to those who did not know what tallow was, and disgusting to those who did. Must have been intentional. To steer away snooty folk and vegans. The place was locally owned, as opposed to the cheapo chain shop across the street, Golden Hour Coffeehouse, which gained twice as much foot traffic and served half as good drinks.

Eris arrived ten minutes early, ordered himself a caramel latte using money he'd stolen from Mom's wallet, then settled upon a small couch nestled in the back corner and texted Miri. *I'm here.*

While he waited, his eyes wandered. The walls were covered in as many picture frames as could fit, leaving not much more than a thin maze of dark green paint between them. Each frame looked different. Thrifted, most likely. Eclectic.

The same went for the furniture. The couch Eris sat on was light brown, its upholstery stained by spilt coffee. There was not a single other couch like it in the entire shop. The table in front of him was square, but a few paces to his left was a tall, round table surrounded by velvet-padded barstools.

The bell hanging from the door chimed, and in walked Miri. Eris sat up straight and waved. She glanced his way, offered a small smile, then made for the front. She didn't linger there long. She grabbed a mobile order off the counter without exchanging a single word with the barista.

"I found Mr. Petromi's email address during lunch," Miri said as she sank onto the couch beside Eris. "He replied by mid-afternoon. Said he'll meet up with us at seven."

Eris nodded. They had thirty minutes to kill. Not long enough to go out and do anything, too long to sit in awkward silence. Eris sipped on his latte and eyed Miri's. The side of the cup had a printed label on it, which read: *Green Tea—Robert Chase.*

“You could have gotten anything,” Eris opted to say. “But you got green tea?”

“Sure,” Miri said with a shrug. “Well, Papa was happy to buy me whatever I wanted, but Dad insisted that it couldn’t have a ton of caffeine this late. Didn’t want me up all night.”

“You have two dads?” Eris blurted.

“Yeah? What of it?”

“Nothing, I just... I’ve never met anyone like that. Do you ever wish you had a mom? Someone you can relate to, or whatever?”

“Not really. Dad and Papa love doing *girl things* with me. Their words, not mine. Papa lets me do makeup on him. He’s an engineer for his day job, but he performs drag on the weekends. And Dad takes me to these STEM For Girls conferences twice a year. They’re pretty fun.”

“You do both?” Eris asked. “Makeup and math?”

“...Yes? They’re not mutually exclusive.”

“Oh. Cool.”

Eris tapped his fingers against his knee. His eyes darted around the room. He stared at a rather ugly painting of a sunset, taking in its blotchy, uneven brushstrokes and its gaudy colors. Not that Eris could do any better, but would it hurt the coffee shop owners to have something a bit nicer to look at?

Right next to it was an illustration of a clown, housed in a round gold frame. Not much better. Still, he supposed, it was better than

looking at Miri. Staring at a grinning clown portrait was much less awkward, even if it was a bit unnerving.

“So, we’ll interview Mr. Petromi,” Miri said, after a while. Eris glanced over at her. She had a notebook out. On it, a checklist. Miri’s handwriting was neat. Far neater than Eris’s. “He’ll be our first source, aside from the article. From there, we could go to a temple and interview a few folks. The only issue, though, is that anyone at a major temple is bound to worship Einari. And now that the news has confirmed his presence, people are going to, by nature, act differently. Our results are going to be skewed by circumstance. I guess we should just lean into it.”

“My parents force me to attend a niche temple every week. Nobody there *dislikes* Einari, but it’s one of those god-specific ones, for those who are primarily devout to one,” Eris said.

“Which god?” Miri asked, tilting her head, interested.

“Ugh. The Fool.”

“Oh! I suppose I should have guessed. Your name—”

Eris didn’t let her finish her sentence. “I hate my name. Someday, I’m going to be punished for my parents’ decision. Once I’m old enough, I’m changing it. Something simple, like John.”

“John? You don’t strike me as a John.”

“Peter?”

“No. Too stuffy.”

“Lawrence?”

“Ew!” Miri laughed. She typed something on her phone. “I like Eris. Not that my opinion means much. You gotta do what’s most comfortable for you. But I think it’s the kind of name that can mean whatever you want it to. Look, see here: *Eris. Origin: Køveni. Derived from Aeris, the god of the sky. People with this name prioritize freedom, vitality, and ambition.* It’s not really about *Aeris*, Eris. It’s about you.”

“I guess.”

“Anyway, if you want me to call you John or Peter or Lawrence, I will.”

“Maybe someday. Not yet.”

The door chimed. A familiar man stood in the entryway, with warm brown skin and graying hair. His eyes skimmed the room. Miri waved, and he approached, his arms folded, nervous.

“Hello, Mr. Petromi!” Miri greeted with a welcoming smile. She gestured toward the empty seat across the table. “Sit down. We won’t take too much of your time. Just had a few questions for you, is all. How’s your daughter?”

“She’s well,” he said. He was a softspoken man, though Eris had trouble gauging whether that was the norm, or if he was still shaken by the ordeal. “The hospital discharged her last night, and she was smiling as bright as ever. I feel so horrible. Work has been hectic. Too many business deals to close—if I hadn’t been wrapped up in answering messages, I would’ve stopped her...”

"Glad she's well," Eris said. His paper cup was long since empty, but he feigned taking a sip. He wasn't sure what to do with his hands.

Miri placed her phone in the center of the table, screen up, a recorder app open. "Do you mind if I record our conversation? It'll help us when we write our report."

"That's fine."

Miri tapped the red icon at the bottom of her screen, then sat back. "Can you summarize your experience with Einari and your daughter?"

"Well, like I said, I'd been dealing with some work matters. Ilse is a good kid, most of the time, so I trusted that I could look away from her for a moment. A contractor had been sending angry messages. When the building came down on her, I was terrified. I can't put into words how relieved I was to see her alive. I hadn't seen His Grace coming."

"Can you tell us what your relationship with faith is?" Miri asked.

"I'd always considered myself agnostic. Until—until the collapse, I guess. I swore to him I'd devote everything I had. You're too young to know it, but someday, when you're older, you'll understand. You'll do anything for your children. You'd give your own life for them. I quit my job yesterday. Spent the entire day at the Temple of the God King. The big one by the harbor. Have you ever been? Beautiful cathedral."

Eris shook his head. Mom and Dad only cared about attending one little, near-forgotten temple. He wished he could attend sermons at the Temple of the God King, but the best he could do was bike past it on occasion.

Would he be allowed in if people knew he was named after the Fool? Would the Book of the Tide he stowed under his bed be enough to prove his devotion? Would he have to repent double-time, for the sake of his family?

“Can you describe how it felt?” Eris asked. “To have such a close encounter with a god?”

“Breathtaking,” Mr. Petromi said. “And crushing, all at once. I felt so small, so humble. A speck of dust, compared to him. His blood—it glittered under the streetlights. I’ve never seen blood that color, and I never will again.”

“Well, we don’t want to keep you,” Miri said. “I’m sure you’re still a bit rattled. We appreciate you taking your time to help us with our project.”

A few pleasantries and goodbyes, then he was gone. A random face in Anesh’s crowd of residents. Eris couldn’t help but feel bad for thinking of him as a data point.

“I have a program that can turn audio files to text,” Miri said. “I’ll get you a transcript by tonight. Could you start a rough draft of our introduction?”

“Sure.”

“Do you want a ride home? Plenty of room in Papa’s car.”

“No, thanks.” Eris replied. “I’ve got my bike.”

Miri chuckled. “Best get going, then. Before it gets too dark out.”

The Temple of the God King was on the opposite side of the district, but Eris took the detour anyhow. He skidded to a halt outside its ornate bronze doors and hitched his bike to the rusted iron rack along the sidewalk. Then, he tugged at his bike lock once, twice. Just to double-check.

Eris approached the temple’s doors. He placed his palms against the cool metal surface, its intricate bas relief details—swirling lines and expressive human figures—pressing into the pads of his fingers. He pushed the doors open. They were heavy, but nothing he hadn’t expected. The hinges groaned. Thousands of years old, this cathedral must be, kept standing by those who devoted their livelihoods to Einari.

Eris wasn’t sure what he felt more awestruck by. The prospect of seeing a god in the flesh? Or this? A cathedral several stories tall, with domed ceilings decorated with vibrant murals? This building was designed to evoke a sense of the divine. *This* was what a proper temple should look like. Aeris’s puny temple, which stood sandwiched between industrial buildings, was nothing in comparison. A speck of dust.

Eris sat in the backmost pew, even though the off-hours emptiness meant he could have sat anywhere. His fear of intruding kept him close to the doors, where he could make an easy escape, should he need. His phone buzzed in his pocket. A brief glance revealed a text message from Mom. *Will you be home soon? Dinner's almost ready.*

I'm on my way, Eris texted back. *Got caught up with school project stuff after practice.*

He tucked his phone away and folded his hands together.

"Dearest king," he muttered under his breath. "Please, forgive me for how I am named. Forgive me for my family's faith. Those are outside of my control. I can't stay in your temple long, but let it be known. I believe Aeris takes up precious space among the Big Four and offers little for it."

A moment passed. Even a breath felt loud enough to echo through the cathedral.

"I hold tight to my faith," Eris recited. A prayer from the Book of the Tide he'd memorized. *"As the tides ebb and flow, His Grace remains constant, and so too shall I."*

He sat for a few minutes longer, then rode home.

The Effect of Divine Presence on Human Behavior

By Eris Vandermere and Miri Chase

*It's no secret that the gods have an impact on mortal behavior. From the beginning of time, the ~~citizens~~ denizens(?) of Midir worshipped a pantheon of gods, starting from the Big Four and eventually growing to include a lot of smaller gods, too. There's a lot of arguments about whether the gods existed before humans or if human belief is what created the gods. The Theological Journal states in its Prosperity 2060 essay, *The Beginning of Humankind*: "The gods created us. There is no reason to believe that we created gods. We simply discovered them." (Norris, 5).*

On an otherwise pretty normal day this year, a god showed up. This was witnessed by ~~us~~—Eris Vandermere and Miri Chase. The Anesh Gazette reported on a collapsed warehouse that nearly killed a five-year-old girl, Ilse Petromi. But the God King Einari saved her and cured her wounds. Vandermere and Chase witnessed a shift of faith that day. Tomás Petromi, Ilse's dad, was once agnostic, but upon meeting His Grace, he knelt before Einari and swore a renewed faith.

The presence of a god changes people in a fundamental way. In this essay, we will track Einari's travels through Anesh and study how he affects the behavior of people he meets.

Eris sat back and stretched his arms above his head, turning his gaze away from his computer. Sunlight peeked through his blinds and landed in long stripes across the floor. He'd been up since before sunrise, eager to have *something* to show Miri today. He would need to get ready for school soon. He had an hour until the bus was scheduled to come, though, so he went for a jog.

His favorite aspect of city jogging was the freedom to go as far as he wanted. He was not constrained to the length of any one trail, like in the suburbs where he was born. Anesh's infrastructure consisted of a neat, straight grid, and most street crossings boasted those flashy yellow lights that warned drivers of pedestrians. He could run to the city limits, or he could turn around anywhere in the interim. He could turn any corner and run any block, and every road could lead him back home.

While the possibilities were endless, he did have a preferred jogging route, which took him across the bridge to Southside. He didn't visit Southside in any other instance than to run, as its bright murals and weird-looking architecture kept him stimulated.

He paused to catch his breath on a street corner whose lights were yet to turn off, despite the morning sun casting long stripes of light across the streets. His chest ached and his breaths came in wheezes. He took a puff from his inhaler.

This unremarkable street corner seemed as good a place as any to turn around. He cast a glance at his watch. The timer on its tiny screen read fifteen minutes. Perfect. Plenty of time to get home, shower, and catch the bus. He turned and started his jog back home. Through Southside, across the bridge...

At the end of the bridge, crossing back from Southside to the Central Quarter, Eris heard a ragged, desperate voice. Gritting his teeth, he kept his attention pinned ahead of him. *Don't come begging to me*, he thought. *I don't have any money*. He jogged at a quicker pace and wished he'd brought his headphones.

"Please, sir," the voice floated up from somewhere below the bridge. "A drop of blood, Your Grace, that's all I need, just a drop... My father is dying. You could help him. Please. I'll do anything."

Eris dug his heels into the pavement and ground to a halt. He dared to peer over the bridge's rim. On the narrow strip of shore before the river, a beggar knelt. The God King stood over them. Einari had his hair pulled into a bun today, kept away from his face. Most artists depicted his hair as a waterfall, spraying mist and foam at his shoulders. Now, bound to the constraints of a mortal body, it took on a shiny black hue, with strands so thin that a few chunks refused to stay confined by

his hair tie. Some had slipped from the thick blue band and fell in front of his ear, ghosting against his sharp, sun-kissed cheekbone.

Einari produced a razor from the pocket of his suit jacket. No robes today. The warehouse's rubble must have ruined his traditional attire. What he wore now was far more modern. His suit was crisp and pristine, dyed a rich ocean blue. He pricked his thumb, and gold beaded to the surface of his skin. The beggar held up a small glass jar, and Einari brushed his thumb against the lip. His blood dripped down the jar's glass slope, pooling in a thin layer at the bottom.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you," gasped the beggar, clutching the jar close to their chest. They bowed as low as they could, their nose kissing the damp dirt below them. *"Kind Einari, merciful Einari..."*

Einari stood tall, reveling in the beggar's praise. A smile graced his lips as he soaked up every drop of the beggar's devotion. If this were a mortal man, Eris would have scoffed, but he did not once think Einari haughty—he *was* a god, after all.

When the beggar sat up, Einari made to leave. He shifted his weight, and his gaze turned upward. As Eris peeled himself from the bridge's ledge, Einari's piercing seafoam green eyes found him. Unsure of what else to do, Eris ran.

3

51st Dew, Prosperity 2192

Eris and Miri were drowning.

Miri had created a spreadsheet, within which hundreds of rows boasted links to blog posts, articles, and newspaper publications, all published within the past two days.

Eris had stumbled upon a few more posts while scrolling through his social media feeds instead of paying attention in class. Sniped photos of Einari. People fawning, people fighting. Devotion and apathy. He scrolled through the document, all the way down to row 486, and pasted them in. *486. 487. 488. 489.*

He sat beside Miri in Wayfarer High School's dilapidated library, shifting his weight upon the creaky wooden chair. Its ugly, faded brown padding was lumpy and uncomfortable. With a fed-up groan, he stood and swapped out his chair with one from an adjacent table. Miri watched him with an amused smile.

These days, Eris spent most lunch periods in the library. His lunch didn't line up with Miri's. He had lunch A, and Miri had lunch

C. But this was Miri's free period, which she spent amid Wayfarer High's vast expanse of bookshelves and mandated silence.

His teammates, no doubt, were gabbing about him behind his back. *Eris is turning into a nerd*, they might have said. Or, worse, *I think Eris has a crush on Miri*.

Yuck.

"I think we have enough data," Eris said. "There's no way we can keep up with all this. And look at our graph—it's getting crowded."

"I think we need a thousand data points," argued Miri. At this, Eris choked on his chocolate milk, which he wasn't allowed to have in the library. The librarian was rather strict about enforcing the *no-food-or-drinks* rule. But he and Miri had tucked themselves away in the back corner, which the librarian couldn't see from her desk. "Think about it. Midir's population is *billions*. And even if we only survey Anesh, that's still, what, a couple million? Four hundred is a puny slice of that. One thousand isn't much bigger in comparison, but we'll have a wider breadth of data."

"That's so much," Eris groaned.

"We have time. This is our final project. We need to make sure it's good."

"I guess."

"It'll fill up pretty quick. We're already almost halfway."

Miri was right. Halfway wasn't a bad place to be.

When Eris returned home from school, Mom and Dad loaded him and Aria into their car and drove them across town.

Temples of the Sky traditionally were tall structures, reaching high enough to pierce the clouds. Not this one. This temple was puny, blending in with the grayscale corporate buildings it was smushed between. The smallness was one of the few pleasures Eris took in attending. The Big Four's jester did not deserve a temple any grander than this.

Eris sat slumped in the pews toward the front of the temple, his dad's shoulder brushing his. He couldn't stop his eyes from wandering. What else was there to do, after all, when phones were strictly prohibited during service? How was he supposed to keep himself entertained while the priest tried to slop drivel into his ears?

The temple consisted of one single room. Splotches of midtone beige sat atop otherwise pale walls, the mismatched paint thanks to the renovations from a few years back. They'd knocked out as many interior walls as they could, destroying private prayer rooms to make the nave as large as possible. Nobody could match the original paint color, and it seemed nobody wanted to repaint the whole temple, either. Or, more likely, the temple couldn't afford a new paint job after the construction bills came through.

As far as Eris was aware, the government offered little funding for Temples of the Sky, and priests were not allowed to take money from members, either. Mandated limits on Aeris's worship.

As it should be.

At the front of the temple stood a dais. The lectern was empty, so far as Eris could tell. Most temples kept their god's Book upon the lectern at all hours. Aeris did not have a Book.

A priest, dressed in sky blue vestments, climbed upon the dais. He cradled the Book of the Tide with great care, and when he deposited it onto the lectern, he took a moment to flip through its pages in search of whatever passages he planned to preach about.

There was a particular creativity necessary to be a priest of the sky. The Book of the Tide preached to Aeris's uselessness, and somehow, these priests found positivity to glean from it.

"Good evening," the priest greeted. The quiet murmurs of small talk went quiet. He turned his gaze up, toward the skylight windows above. "What a pleasant day to be worshipping the sky! Not a cloud in sight, allowing us to look upon the stars—and what a blessing it is that they may grace our eyes."

"A blessing, indeed," the temple's patrons echoed. Eris remained quiet, despite his dad nudging him with his elbow. There were few enough people present that Eris could make out individual voices, if he so chose. Another perk to worshipping the sky, Eris supposed. A worship space guaranteed to be quiet and empty.

“Let us begin with a prayer,” the priest directed. Eris’s family ducked their heads and clasped their hands. “Aeris, we thank you for the air we breathe, the rain that nourishes our crops, the sun that warms our skin, for we could not survive in your absence...”

Usually, Eris would abstain from following along with prayer, hoping his intent would be enough to make it clear to the gods he was not participating. Today, though, he ducked his head and clasped his hands, mirroring everyone else. As the priest led a prayer to the god of the sky, Eris prayed to Einari.

“My king,” Eris muttered under his breath. “You grace Midir with your presence, and yet these idiots still worship your jester. Pardon my tongue, but I think you know it’s true. These people know your power and reject it. But I know your power and embrace it. I’ve seen you heal people. I’ve seen you change lives. Has Aeris changed lives? No.”

Eris paused. He tapped his foot. He needed to get the timing of his prayer right. Finish too soon, and he’d have to listen to the rest of the priest’s prayer. Finish too late, and his delay would not go unnoticed.

“Aeris breathes precious air and offers nothing in return. Like—oh, what was it? Book of the Tide, page thirty-seven, line... thirteen, I think. Uh, shoot. I don’t have the quote memorized. But, the basic gist of it went something like this. Aeris requested a drop of silver to build a small reflecting pool, from which to watch the mortals below. You

held out a hand and expected something in return. But Aeris had nothing to provide, and you laughed, and laughed, and laughed.

“Is it a sin to pray to one god while in the home of another? If it is, I hope you’ll sympathize when I say I do not care. Someday, I will have the freedom to pray to you from your own temple.”

Eris’s voice joined dozens of others as he said, “May it be so.”

He observed the folks around him. Most sat at the edge of their seats, their eyes alight with devotion, inspiration. Eris did not pay attention to the priest’s sermon, but occasionally a few words slipped into his awareness. “The sky is our freedom,” the priest proclaimed, gesticulating with the wild fervor of a man who devoted his entire life to the gods. “You must ask yourself in your day-to-day, ‘am I allowing myself to be free?’ If not, what must you change?”

A lot, Eris thought.

Section 1: Spiritual Presence

Divine presence comes in a lot of different forms. The first form we’re going to discuss is spiritual presence. We will define spiritual presence as a metaphysical presence, where the god is not actually there, but people believe in them enough that they are actually kinda there. [User Miri Chase commented: awkward phrasing]

Places where spiritual presence is strongest are in temples. Temples are constructed specifically to evoke spiritual presence. In the Temple of the God King, the high ceilings and murals and stained glass are all meant to bring out a feeling that you're in, or near, the Heavens themselves. Meanwhile, the Temple of the Sky on West Ivory Street is small, but its glass ceiling is designed to bring patrons to a closer relationship with the sky. These aspects are what create a sense of wonder and holiness in people. Architecture, along with strong faith, are the reasons why temples have such a strong spiritual presence.

So, how does spiritual presence affect human behavior?

Eris wanted to smack his head against his blue-gray bedroom wall. How *did* spiritual presence affect human behavior? He stared at his screen, his eyes unfocused. All he'd observed in the Temple of the Sky was people doing their usual prayer. Nothing any less ordinary than walking down the street or doing their taxes. Prayer was as much a routine as it was genuine faith. That was why Mom and Dad always took him to the midweek evening sermons. Routine.

In spiritual spaces, people are a little bit gentler. Like they're walking in the rain, careful not to fall into a puddle, or something. Faith is slippery like that. People are calm when they step into a temple. Maybe they just want to impress the gods, who might be watching them from the Heavens.

He left it at that. Miri could swing by later and add in a few facts and sources. She was phenomenal at digging precise data out of their ever-growing spreadsheet. They were close to one thousand sources, now, and their graph was a crowded disaster.

There were two variables on the graph. The *Y* axis measured faith. The *X* axis measured excitement. The lower the level of faith, the less excited people were about Einari's presence. The higher the faith, the higher the excitement. There were a few outliers, of course—a couple of religious folk who dreaded the coming of Einari, believing it an omen, and a few atheists who were rather intrigued by the concept of a real-life god.

Eris did not log his own belief, unsure if he would unintentionally skew the data, but he knew where he'd land on the graph. Average level of faith, high excitement.

He closed the draft and the spreadsheet, then texted Miri to give it a look whenever she got the chance.

Miri replied an hour later. *Will do. Check out this video.*

The footage was shaky and in poor resolution, shot on somebody's phone camera. A massive crowd had gathered by the town square fountain. The cameraperson stood toward the back, camera raised aloft to film over the heads of the folks in front of them.

Einari stood atop the fountain's ledge, its ornate marble carvings and bubbling water made him look bigger, stronger, grander.

"As a reward for your devotion, I have graced Midir with my presence," Einari announced. The audio quality wasn't fantastic. What was it like, Eris wondered, to have been there? Did his voice fill every atom of stagnant air? Was it rich? Grand? It must have been. "I have heard your pleas. I have healed your sick, your injured. Continue devoting yourself to me, and you shall be rewarded! Bountiful clean water to drink! Calm oceans! Give yourselves to me, and I will give myself to you."

Someone in the front row grabbed Einari's leg, snaking her hands around his shin, his calf. Instead of shooing her away, Einari turned his gaze to her, smiled, then offered a hand. She took it without any hesitation, and he helped her up to the ledge.

"What is your name?" Einari asked.

"Aliz," she replied.

"What is your faith?"

"I pray at your temple twice a week."

"And what do you desire?"

“I cannot afford an education. I want to be a historian, but school costs too much.”

Einari nodded. He reached into the inner pocket of his coat and produced a tiny jar, so small he could hold it between his thumb and forefinger. He pricked his finger, and golden blood dripped inside.

“Keep this close,” he instructed as he pressed it into her palm. “You may find someone willing enough to finance your schooling in exchange.”

“Thank you,” she said. She offered Einari a bow, then hopped off the fountain’s ledge, fingers clasped tight around the little jar, which she held close to her chest. A few people grasped at her, wanting to lay hands upon the divine blood she now possessed. The woman turned away, clutching her prize ever tighter, and scurried away from the crowd.

“Who is next?” Einari called.

“I have endometriosis,” said one voice among the crowd. “Doctors won’t listen to me, and I’m in a lot of pain.”

“Chronic conditions are tricky,” Einari mused. “Curing you would take a lot. More than I can offer. But I can lessen your pain.”

More people. *I have a headache*, and *My sister can’t make rent*, and *Next year, I’m traveling across Midir. I need to save enough money*.

The whole crowd clamored for a share of Einari’s blood, but Einari only had so much he could give. People pushed and shoved with unquenchable *need*, desperate to lay their hands upon divine flesh. Even from a distance, Einari’s darting eyes were unmistakable. The God

King took a shuffle-step backwards, leaving him teetering on the fountain's ledge. The prospect of getting his feet wet did not deter him. When the crowd surged forward, he stepped into the shallow pool to escape the wall of grabbing hands. Water drenched the hem of his pants.

Someone threw a rock, which whizzed past Einari's head. A near-miss. Einari flinched. A few in the crowd gasped. Others yelled, and whether the yells were of outrage or excitement, Eris could not tell. People pushed and fought one another. One man punched another, and when the victim clutched his face in agony, the aggressor shoved his way forward.

Amid the chaos, Einari slipped away. Moments later, someone bumped into the cameraperson, and they dropped their phone. The video went black.

Eris sat back in his seat. *Wow, he texted Miri. This is horrible.*

Have you read the article?

Not yet.

Three people were hospitalized. For a few minutes, Eris watched the little dots that indicated she was typing. She would type, then stop, then type again. *Trampled by the crowd. Einari offered no blood to help them.* Another pause. Another too-long stretch of typing. *At what point does faith override logic? At what point does desire turn into desperation?*

Eris did not reply. He wasn't sure what to say. Maybe if he waited long enough, Miri would say something else. Or they'd both go their separate ways.

His phone buzzed again.

At what point does devotion turn into devastation?

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About the Author

Wren L. Rivers (they/them) is a transmasculine and neurodivergent author born and raised in Virginia. They are a jack-of-all-trades type creative. Alongside writing, Wren illustrates their own covers and character art. Everything Wren creates is 100% human-made and untouched by generative AI.

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