

The Ten Challenges of Vas Taria

A novella in
The Dream of Blood and Innocence

Aphrah Ashe

© 2023

Prologue

Reawakening

The cost of entering the vault was all his memories of the world. Friends, family, name. They were all gone. But he knew why he was there. At the end of the vault was a treasure that would give him every bit of power he sought. He couldn't remember why he wanted that power, only that it was very important for him to attain it.

He stood in a white room, the walls and floor and ceiling were pristine stone that gave off a faint glow, allowing him to see. There was no smell in the place, not even stale air. The situation was unnerving, but he stepped closer to the centre anyway. Just moments ago the door behind him had vanished so he had no choice but to go on now.

The room stopped glowing and he was plunged into total darkness. He held himself firm, knowing that if he let himself be afraid he'd never make it through the challenges that lay ahead. He needed to be strong.

Then a thought crept into his head and he knew it wasn't his own. It addressed him by name but he couldn't make it out and it sounded like the grumblings of an annoyed dog.

'Adf lYtuy why do you come here?' it asked.

"I need the prize at the end of these challenges," he said aloud. He wasn't sure if he needed to or not, if the voice could read his thoughts as well as hear him, but he spoke as steadily as he could.

He tried to project confidence.

‘No, you do not. You want the prize. There is a difference.’

“How do you know what I want and what I need?”

‘I see it all. It feel it all.’

At that an image was pushed into his head. It was familiar and yet distant. A memory that had been taken from him. It hurt to see it, yet he wanted to fall into it and live it again. Just one more time.

He stood in the back garden of an urban house, high wood fences painted deep red, the house made of smooth grey blocks with a balcony above. The garden had a path leading up its centre and on either side there was some grass. To his right was a table with some chairs, and to his left was a statue of a woman holding her hands up forming the shape of a diamond. Around the edges of the garden were black rose bushes.

At the table sat three people. The first was an older man, who he knew was now dead, but he couldn't remember how. He was completely bald with a scar running around the side of his head from his left eye, which was missing and covered by a patch. He wanted to call him father, but he knew there was no blood ties between them. He wore a red tabard over a white shirt, with tough trousers and boots that made him look military.

The second person was a beautiful woman dressed in a fine silk dress that clung to her form. He'd once thought he loved her until he realised what she was doing to his mind. In that moment he'd broken free and she'd started to respect him as a person and not a toy. Her voice was lyrical and she sat reading poetry from a book while everyone listened.

The third person at the table was a girl he'd grown up with. An albino who he'd walked the streets with, taking as and when they needed. She was tiny and obviously uncomfortable in the dress she'd been made to wear, even though it was much more modest than the other woman's dress. She had a look in her eyes that

spoke trouble, but she was kind to him, at least.

The image vanished and he lost the memory again. He knew he'd been shown something, but it was gone once more. He was on his knees, crying, but he couldn't recall falling.

"Why do this to me?" he asked, but there was no response. The room glowed again, this time a little brighter than before. "At least tell me who you are. At least tell me my name."

'Your name is to be earned once more. You have forsaken your past in order to grasp at the future.'

"And you?"

'I was once Vas Taria, first of the people of blood. Now I am the spirit of this place. A dream within a dream. The rooms ahead of you are my own dreams, brought to reality to fend off those who are not worthy and to reforge in blood those who are. Tell me, do you wish to proceed?'

He stood up and wiped his eyes on his sleeve, noting for the first time that he didn't recognise what he was wearing. A white long-sleeved tunic, fine black trousers with dress shoes, and a wool cape that had been dyed red. He didn't know if these clothes were his own or not, but they surprised him. Especially the cape. He hated capes.

"Vas Taria... I intend to beat your challenges. I'm ready to start, so let me in."

There was a silence before an almost silent 'as you wish' passed through his mind. The room rumbled and broke apart and he fell into darkness. Or, he thought, everything rushed up past him and he was swallowed by the darkness beneath him.

Then there was a blinding red light that threatened to overwhelm him, to take him in and destroy him, to ruin his mind and body so thoroughly that he'd never be human again. He fought the thoughts and tried not to be afraid, but his mind shook, his head hurt, he could feel himself separate from his body and be pushed back together.

He stood in the white room again and blinked. Had that happened? Had any of it actually happened? He was wearing those clothes still, so it must have. He tried to take a step but his legs were weak and he fell to one knee, both hands flat on the floor. His chest hurt and he struggled to breathe.

‘We begin your trial,’ said the voice in his head. Vas Taria held him in her clutches now and he wondered if this was the right thing to do. But it had to be, or he wouldn’t have come.

A red diamond appeared around him on the floor for a brief moment and then again on the wall in front of him, this time staying there, calling to him. He found the strength to stand and walked to the wall, touching the red diamond. It collapsed into a vertical line and then expanded to the floor and just above his head. The line then pushed out to the sides, opening the wall as a doorway.

‘There is no going back. You either continue to the end or you die in here.’

“How many people have died trying this?” He wasn’t sure he actually wanted the answer, but he asked it anyway.

‘One thousand, seven hundred and nine.’ It wasn’t any kind of comfort.

“What happens to the bodies?” Another question he didn’t think he should ask and he really didn’t know why it came out of his mouth unprompted. It was rhetorical, really.

‘You’ll see.’ He ignored that. He didn’t think about it. He *refused* to think about it.

He stepped out of the room into the hallway beyond. It looked endless. The same flat white stone stretching on and one into eternity. He started walking.

Challenge 1

Cards of Fate

He wasn't tired when he reached the dead end with the red diamond on the wall in front of him, but he thought it had been hours of silent trudging to get there. He did, however, feel the need to sit down for a few minutes before touching the red glow on the wall to open the door to the first challenge.

Vas Taria hadn't spoken to him again in all that time, but he hadn't tried to talk to it either. He flipped back and forth between it and her as he thought about the voice, and when he tried to fix one or the other in his head it didn't stick. Maybe who he was before coming here knew something that he'd now lost. Something that would explain his indecision on the matter.

He took a deep breath and pushed himself up. His legs still hurt and breathing was hard, but he decided it was time to go. He touched the red diamond and entered the next room.

The room was larger than the first and lined with fluted columns that didn't touch the ceiling, but were easily twice as tall as he was. They were an off-white that made them look dull compared to the glowing walls. The floor was tiled instead of flat, and at the centre of the room was an altar of sorts, with a small brown box sitting on top of it.

He picked up the box and opened it, finding a deck of cards inside. He put the box down and flipped through the deck. As he did he had a feeling it was a standard set of nataro cards, a game

he was familiar with, but those memories were gone too. But these cards were old. They were yellowed and frayed at the edges.

“Are we playing a game?” he asked. The box vanished as he blinked, and on the altar were nine squares, arranged in a three by three grid. “So we are.”

He went to place the deck to the right of the grid, but then thought about it for a moment. On his right would mean he would play first, and he didn't doubt he'd be playing against the magic of that place. Depending on the draw, going first could either be good or bad. He took a deep breath and put it on his left. Perhaps hoping for a weak defence and the chance for aggression would serve him better than being passive.

One card floated up to the other side of the board, back of it facing him. He drew a card and another floated up. He kept doing this until both he and his invisible opponent had five cards. It was a little unnerving, but he was ready.

His cards were bad in general, but would serve as good fodder for later cards. He just had to hope that his opponent didn't draw those cards he was hoping for. He had all three pages, which had no special rules and were entirely useless. He also had the maid, so if he drew an heir he could get an extra draw by playing them together. And lastly he had a squire, which was used for enhancing the rank of a knight. Each card had a number and highest won, but all his cards were ones.

“I'm ready to play, Vas Taria,” he said. He felt a pulse in the back of his mind, like a nod from the voice.

His opponent drew a card and then placed a soldier on the top-right square. A two. He couldn't beat it unless he drew higher. He took a new card to see a soldier of his own. He placed it in the bottom-left square, mirroring his opponent. It was a passive move, which he thought was bad, but he had little choice.

His opponent took the next turn, drawing a card and then played a maid of his own in the top-middle square. A one, and lost

potential. He could be sure his opponent didn't have one of the heirs. There were three of each card in the deck and that meant only two heirs could be paired with maids now for the extra draw. It also meant that whoever drew the last soldier would be able to increase the rank of their first soldier.

He drew a new card and found a warden. The name made it sound like a jailer but the image was of a man in white standing over an open grave raising a skeleton into undeath. It was a three and with this he could pick up a discarded card later. He chose to save it and played one of the pages in the central square. The picture was of a serving boy and seemed to scream up him in fear. He shook the thought from his mind and tried to focus.

His opponent took a card and played a witch in the central left square. The card was a three and his opponent shifted the card forward on the board, indicating an attack. His soldier was moved off the grid to his left, and then the witch moved into the bottom-left slot. It was now three cards to one, which was an ill omen this early in the game. When all nine squares were filled the game was over.

He drew his next card and got the last soldier. A plan was forming in his head. He played the warden in the bottom-right corner then took the soldier from the discard area and put it in the bottom-middle square. He then placed the soldier from his hand on top of it, allowing it to become a three, protecting it from the witch in the bottom-left.

The opponent drew a card and then played a priest. It's a two that can't attack, and was placed in the top-right square.

His next card was a surprise. He hadn't seen it when going through the deck. It was a red card inside a silver border. There were no people depicted and the deck looked older than the newer designs that had the name of card written along the bottom, so it lacked a name. He didn't want to speak out and ask Vas Taria about it just in case his opponent would get the knowledge, but he

then started to wonder if the invisible thing he was playing against could see his cards anyway.

As if reading his mind—very likely reading his mind—Vas Taria spoke within him. ‘This set includes the Grand Hand. Three cards of great power. If put in your hand, you may reveal them to win the game. Later sets added a fourth card in the Hand, and then even later sets removed the Hand. It cannot be placed on the grid.’

He could see why they were removed. It’s not so fun to lose a game without ever playing if the opponent draws the whole set in one go. He played another of his pages in the free spot on the right, knowing he was going to lose in the next turn.

The opponent drew and placed an assassin in the only free square. His jaw dropped. What kind of hand did this thing have that *this* was its only reasonable move? The assassin was forced to attack and moved into the middle square, replacing the first page he’d played. That left the left-middle spot open again, so he’d get another turn.

He drew a card. A witch. He smiled as he placed it down and turned the opponent’s witch to face him. The witch made an adjacent witch switch sides. That could turn your own against you if you weren’t careful, but in this case it worked for him well. He then made an attack on the priest in the top-left, letting him move into the square.

The opponent drew and immediately played a traveller. This card was a one and had to move to another open space or it was discarded, so it went to the discard area. It was better to get them early in the game.

He was smiling as he drew his next card. It was a knight and he could play it with the squire to make a four instead of a three, meaning it could kill the assassin in the centre square, but instead he placed the final page. He’d never heard of someone playing all three pages in a single match and winning before, but he’d

somehow managed it.

The opponent's cards lay flat on the table for him to see now that the game was over, with him winning six to three. The cards showed were incredibly bad. The other two assassins, the other two of the Grand Hand he thought since they were plain cards in white and green, each with those silver borders instead of the normal black, and finally another traveller. He couldn't have played three of them and the two assassins still would have ended the game five to four.

"Lucky I got that witch," he said. "That's just the way the game goes sometimes."

He set his cards down to show his opponent. It was only a courtesy to the thing if it was even still there. He thought maybe he'd been playing against Vas Taria herself and she was looking at his hand, so it didn't matter, but it was polite. Then, to his surprise the red, white, and green cards rose and settled themselves back into his hand. Then another card from the middle of the remaining deck did the same and he saw it was black with a silver border.

"So this deck is old, but not as old as it could have been, if it has four?"

'Correct,' said Vas Taria in his skull. 'This place does get maintained by those outside. The cards are coated in magic to keep them from degrading for a long time, but they do need to be replaced from time to time. Now, go, onward, and bring the cards. There is no turning back.'

A door opened in the wall opposite him and he continued.

Challenge 2

Broken World

He walked another long hallway and he was hungry now. Hunger seemed to be his constant companion, so he thought, but once more those memories were gone. He wondered if he'd ever get them back or if the cost was permanent.

After fifteen or so minutes he found the next door. When he touched the red diamond on the wall he was expecting another blank room, or maybe something of a physical test he'd need to pass, but what he saw shook him to his core.

He stepped out onto a platform floating in an empty black space. The door closed behind him and when he turned to look at it he saw it was gone completely. He stood on a grey stone disc in the midst of a void, with nothing to see at all.

Then another stone disc appeared. The gap between them was only about a foot but he didn't fancy the idea of falling into that nothing. He wasn't even sure it was real, but that didn't make it any less intimidating.

"Onward, huh?" he asked and Vas Taria didn't respond. He didn't think he'd fallen from any great height before, there weren't any feelings like he'd gotten with the cards.

He made the short hop to the disc and immediately another appeared. Slightly farther away than the previous gap and a little bit higher. The disc he'd just come from vanished, because of course it would. He made the next jump and then the next three

without any real issue. He thought that maybe he was athletic before coming here. Maybe he was a climber. Or maybe a runner. A rooftop courier of sorts.

The next disc appeared touching his current disc, but it was entirely vertical. It was taller than he was and made for quite the wall, but he had no idea how to continue. Was he meant to climb it somehow?

‘Continue,’ prompted Vas Taria.

“How?”

No answer.

He touched the wall disc and his hand became heavy. The hem of his tunic’s arm looked like it was floating, trying to touch the disc.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” he said with a sigh.

He stepped back from the vertical disc and gave it a stern look. This wasn’t right. Even less right than the void that surrounded him. He was thoroughly displeased. He put his foot on it and felt the change immediately. He then lifted the other foot and gravity shifted entirely, slamming his face into the previously vertical disc that was now the floor.

When he pulled himself up he couldn’t see the next disc until he looked straight up. He’d have to jump to touch it and when the gravity switched he’d probably end up on his face again. How did they go from a luck based card game to his mind being melted?

“Vas Taria, did you make these challenges?” he asked. He stared at the platform above him as if it had offended him on a personal level.

‘I did not. I am simply in charge of their running.’

“Can you leave this place?”

‘No. I am bound to it until my mind slips from reality. It is here I lie in wait for the end.’

He wanted to probe further, but felt that would be rude. Instead, he jumped and touched the disc above him, then crashed

into the new floor. The floor stretched out into a path that turned in a wide spiral, so he began to walk. He hated the motion of his vision as everything turned and he wanted to close his eyes but he knew he couldn't. One trip could be the end of his journey.

The open space all around the spiral seemed to be growing as he walked. He couldn't say why he felt that way, it was just what he thought when he peered out the gaps in the road. It was oppressive in its darkness. It wanted to swallow him whole and that expanding depth was like a mouth opening just for him.

He snapped back to control and caught himself from taking a step over the edge at the end of the path. The spiral was behind him and he shook, a violent shiver running up his spine as he finally realised what he had been about to do.

"What was that?" he asked. No response. "Where do I go now?" No response. He narrowed his eyes at the darkness, his frustration getting the better of him. He had always tried to keep himself under perfect control as passion led to mistakes. Mistakes in what? He couldn't say; that was gone. He hoped he'd remember it all one day, but there was a doubt in the back on his mind that said he never would. He'd paid the price for the chance at the treasure beyond these trials and there was no taking it back. His memories belonged to Vas Taria.

He looked around and saw the platform in the distance forward and above. It was tiny and the fall up to it would hurt. He'd need to take a running jump, a leap into the mouth rather than an unconscious step. It was an unnerving thought.

He took a few steps back, but not far enough that the spiral turned his field of view. His chest hurt at the thought of what he was about to do and he took a few deep breaths to calm himself. He took one more step back then lunged forward, running as fast as he could and then pushed off hard.

He was in the Peak District, leaping between roofs as the Red Guard chased him. He rolled as he landed, his scarf caught in the

flows of wind, his prize clutched to his chest with one hand. He saw her on an adjacent roof and threw her the sack, the albino girl catching it and sprinting off. Two guards landed next to him and he pushed one off the roof before barging past the other, hoping they'd chase him instead.

Gravity twisted and he landed hard on his back, unable to roll and recover to his feet. The wind was knocked out of him and he chose to lay there for a while, letting his body catch up to his racing mind. That must have been another memory. He could still feel the light of the sky warming his skin and the wind in his hair. Then it faded. He felt so cold and empty.

Everything ached as he pushed himself up, a sudden and empty hole in the pit of his soul making him want to just lie down and die. It seemed like every time he was ready to accept his loss this place found a new way to make him feel bad about it again.

“Is this just a form of torture? Were the trials not enough?”

Again, no response. She only spoke what it suited her.

He turned around and saw the path ahead. It was mostly straight, but there were a few more jumps, mostly ones that would pull him to the side, and nothing close to the one he'd just done. With a sigh he steeled himself and started walking. And jumping. And gaining a few more bruises.

After what felt like days but was probably only another hour, he found a door. It looked like it was in the middle of the darkness, attached to no wall and with nothing behind it. But he knew that when he opened it he'd find another one of those long hallways with the smooth white walls.

He looked back at the darkness before speaking. “What was the point of this challenge, Vas Taria? Are these tests of the mind, or luck, or skill? Are they meant to break me and then rebuild me?”

‘Yes. To all of it.’

“Great.”

He shook his head, opened the door, saw he was right, and left

the unsettling room into the hall beyond. The door closed behind him automatically and he ignored it as he headed to the next challenge. A card game and a gravity gauntlet. What would be next? Juggling fire? He was expecting the worst, or at least the ridiculous.

Challenge 3

River of the Soul

Just when it couldn't get worse the hallway turned into stairs going up. They couldn't have gone down and been easy, could they? He calmed himself. He was tired and hungry, but he pressed on regardless.

As he climbed the stairs he started to hear flowing water. He knew it had been a long time since he'd been near a river, but he couldn't name the river nor knew why he'd avoided it. The water was slow, but there was no doubt in his mind that there was some sort of river ahead.

Thankfully the stairs weren't long and at the top was a small room with the red diamond door. He opened the door without a thought and stepped through, into a large cavern with a river flowing through it. At the other side was the door out, this time with a white diamond instead of red, and to his left and right the cavern narrowed into gaps where the river flowed in and out.

Stepping up to the river he saw that it was only about waist deep, but it was too wide to jump across. It would take a couple minutes of wading to cross, but there had to be a trick to it. There must have been a monster, or the water would mess with his head if he drank it. Or maybe he was supposed to drink it? Was he supposed to bathe in it? It could be anything at this point. His expectations were shattered and the rules of reality as he thought it must be were no longer true. He had to start thinking like an

immortal soul who dreamt up puzzles.

“What manner of trial is this?” he asked. It was a coin flip whether or not it answered him. He got lucky, this time.

‘It is time to wash away the sins of your past, like the Father of Rage passing the torch of Empire to his son. Before you touch the water you must present the key. You must give up the anger of God that flows through us all.’

“What key? What anger?” he asked, but she replied with silence. He had to figure it out himself, it seemed, so he sat at the edge of the water and looked into the river, thinking.

He refused, throwing the knife to the floor. The man he wanted to call father stared down at him, stern and hateful. But then he smiled and it was warm. The man knelt down and put a hand on his head.

“Welcome to the family,” he said, still looking in the river. He’d thrown away any rage in him a long time ago. He’d never been angry. He didn’t want to hurt people, he just wanted the thrill. He couldn’t remember what the thrill was, but it wasn’t in hurting others. How was he supposed to throw away what wasn’t there in the first place?

He turned the key in the lock and could smell the bread baking in the oven. The woman was cooking something that smelled wonderful, and the albino girl tugged at her dress as she helped. The girl looked at him and gave a wicked grin.

“Took you long enough to get back,” he muttered. He didn’t think it was that kind of key. That would be too obvious and he didn’t have anything like that. He searched his pockets and found the cards from the first challenge. He didn’t think they’d be useful, and he just stared at them for a while.

It had been over a hundred years since the last king had come to the city and there was talk amongst the people that the next was delaying for some reason. Talk of a rebellion that needed dealt with. He didn’t care, he was in his late teens and politics of

the high weren't and interest to him when he needed to find coin for food. But he needed to be careful as he walked the streets, prowling for his next adventure. The Black Wardens were on edge.

"By the Diamond," he remembered someone exclaiming. It was such an odd phrase and held something deep he couldn't recall. Something profound and cultural.

He looked at the Grand Hand and something clicked. He looked up at the door on the other side of the river to see the white diamond, then back at the door he'd entered through with its red diamond. He stood and tried to remember what Vas Taria had said. Present the key?

"This is it, right? This is why you wanted me to bring the cards with me?" He held up the Red Ruby card and to his shock it burst into flame. His hand shot back down but the flame stayed in the air.

'The first key has been accepted, not cross and let your soul be cleansed.'

He looked back at the river and saw it had turned red and thick and there was a smell of iron in the air. His tunic wasn't going to be white after this. He made sure to hold the other cards above his head while he stepped into what he tried to tell himself wasn't blood, and made his way slowly across.

Flashes of memory appeared in his mind and were instantly ripped away. He had to focus on each step, the stones beneath his feet were slippery and threatened to drag him off into the murk and horror of the cavern's hole.

He ran down an alley, the albino girl tailing him closely. He avoided the stairs to the upper city and quickly reached a door that was hidden in a nook. They went in then quietly closed the door behind them. Listening, they heard the Red Guard rush by and then compared their prizes. She held up a silver feather and he had to admit it beat his golden orbiter.

“Why are you showing me this!?” he shouted at Vas Taria. He was about halfway across the river and he was sure the current was getting faster, pushing on him heavier and daring him to make one wrong move.

‘Cleanse yourself of the past. You cling to it despite giving it up. You must become a new you. First, you must forego your bonds. They must be severed.’

He sat on the sofa pretending to read while he watched the woman and the albino girl. Originally what drew his eye was the woman wiggling her hips rather sensually as she cooked, humming a tune that was far more elegant than her rolling rear. But what really caught his attention was how awkward the girl was as she tried to copy the woman’s movements without being seen. She was malnourished, underdeveloped, and trying to prove she was an adult now that she was almost twenty years old. He kept his smile subtly and tried not to laugh. He couldn’t discourage her if that was what she wanted.

Bonds? What bonds? These people whose names he’d lost but kept creeping back into his mind?

The man staggered back into the base, clutching his side and looking pale. He collapsed to his knees and started giving instructions to him and the girl about what to do with his body. All he said to the woman was to read a letter hidden in his study, and that she’d know what to do from there.

He was about three quarters of the way across the river when Vas Taria spoke again. ‘If you do not reject your past, you will not have paid the price. You hold too tight and so it is coming back to you. Let go or the River of Souls will take you.’

“I reject who I was!” he shouted. “I always have! I seek the new me! That is why I am here! I’ve always wanted to leave it all behind!”

He was seven and covered in filth, hiding behind some garbage that the Custodians would soon collect. He heard a snuffle and

looked to his left. Small and bruised and trying not to cry, the albino girl stared at him with large red eyes. He held out his hand and she looked at it. With a weary smile she took it.

“I reject it! I will become a new me! I have to!”

The river subsided, draining away more and more with each word. He leaned on the low ledge that used to be the bank of the river and cried. His chest hurt and his legs ached, and he never thought he'd give up her friendship. She was important, but this was more so. It had to be.

‘Broken bonds can be reforged,’ said Vas Taria softly into his head. ‘But for now you must accept that they were never as important as what lies ahead.’

“I don't even remember what treasure I'd been told was here,” he said. “I can't remember what drove me here.”

‘None of that matters if you wish to succeed.’

He nodded, climbed the ledge, and opened the door. The hall beyond was different. Red banners hung on the walls, fringed in tiny white tassels that blended into the stone. The passion of the past left him, the memories becoming more and more vague with each step, and within minutes he couldn't remember anything he'd been shown. No faces, no places, no moments. He paid the price, and now it was time to be rebuilt.

Challenge 4

Coping with Loss

He started awake, his body still sore. He hadn't dreamt, but still felt like something had been inside his skull trying to dig its way out. He didn't remember what he'd gotten himself into the night before, but he sat up in his bed already dressed. At least he'd taken his shoes off, which he quickly put on and stood up, ignoring the pounding in his head.

His room was cluttered with books and items he'd found over the years. Neatly folded on his writing desk was his long two-toned red scarf, the one he'd gotten from his mother and used to wrap him tightly like a shawl. She had been a believer, and even if he hadn't, he wanted to remember her.

He opened the thick curtains and saw that the violet sky was bright, and by the clock tower he knew it to be an hour past dawn. Though his window looked over the roof of another building, if he looked to the right he could see down an alley that led to Parade Way, a main street. Strangely, the street was empty when it was normally bustling.

Then he listened carefully because he knew something was wrong. There was a buzzing in his ears and he couldn't find the source. No flies in the room. No one in the house. Then he stopped looking around for what was making the noise and thought for a moment. No one was in the house? There was normally the sounds and smells of cooking, her determined but

futile attempts to learn the violin, his hammer or saw in the workshop.

He stepped into the hall outside his room. Across from his room was hers, and peeking inside she wasn't there. She'd been making herself a new dress, it seemed, in purple silks and lace. He didn't want to think of her as being different than before, but maybe she was simply able to finally embrace what was always there.

He headed downstairs and found breakfast waiting for him. Buttered bread and sausages and hot tea. He felt like he hadn't eaten in so long, but he didn't know why. She always took good care of the cell, as was her job, and he trusted her. But the food rang wrong in his mind.

He stepped outside and saw the chain and lock on the shed that held the workshop. It was where their tools were made and stored by the leader. The fact that it was locked told him everything he needed to know. There really wasn't anyone in the house. Where had they gone? He wanted to go into the workshop, but knew he shouldn't. There could be unfinished work in there and he didn't want to damage anything. He already got enough grief when he broke them on the job, he didn't need more than that.

He went out the property through the back door, exiting into the alley beneath his window, then went to Parade Way. It was entirely empty. Not a single person was around, and it worried him. There were usually plenty of people around, on their way to market or temple. He felt exposed and thought there were eyes on him, peeking out from the darkness in the cracks of the paving stones, from behind curtains and from behind crates down alleys.

As he walked towards the fountain in Dremel's Square he kept his eyes open and his ears sharp. There was something very wrong. The fountain was their emergency spot. If the others were around, they'd be meeting there. He clenched his fists to stop

them shaking and tried to ignore that his footsteps were echoing in the empty streets of the largest city in the world.

At the fountain stood a woman, facing away from him and watching the water pour and spray. She had long black hair that almost touched the floor, and she was tall for a woman. She wore the red robes that he remembered his mother wearing when he was very young. When she turned to look at him she had soft features, with big eyes the colour of amber.

“This is what you’ve chosen to give up,” she said. Her voice was firm and surprisingly deep for such a cute face. “The last trial put you through the rage of the father, and now you see the melancholy of the son. You see what you’ve lost, so tell me, do you mourn?”

“I look at all this and it feels like I remember, but I don’t,” he said. “Everything I’ve thought since getting here has been instinct. It’s an echo of the memories, which is why it’s hollow, right? No one is here because you’ve taken them from me.”

“I didn’t take them,” she said. There was no smile on her face, just a sort of sorrow he thought he understood. “You gave them up.”

“That I did.” He nodded in agreement. “What did you give up, Vas Taria? How did you come to inhabit the vault and run the challenges?”

“I gave up everything,” she said. “My freedom, my future. I would do it again, however. Every single time.”

“Why?”

“Because he asked me to. He didn’t tell me, he didn’t make demands. He asked me to guard his treasure. It was so out of character that it made me appreciate what he really wanted.”

“What is it he wanted? Why does the vault exist? The challenges?”

“If you make it to the end you’ll find out.” She gave a cruel kind of smile. “Tell me, do you choose to move on? There’s no turning

back from here. You might still make it out if you go backwards through the rooms, but from here it will become impossible. You've made a decision under duress, and now you must choose when calm. Do your thoughts align with your heart?"

He looked at the city once more, feeling how eerie it is with no one around. Even at night it shouldn't be this empty. These thoughts came from a place of familiarity. As he had said, it was instinct. They were knowledge, not memories. There was a nostalgia gently bubbling in his gut and a softness to the way he viewed the buildings and the fountain and the grey and red stones that made up the walkways.

"I'm ready to give it up." He looked at Vas Taria. Her face was stone again. "I don't know why I'm here, but I know I have to go all the way. There's a reason I have to do this, even if that reason has vanished from my mind. Take me to the next challenge."

"As you wish," said Vas Taria with a gentle smile. She closed her eyes and bowed her head. Not a single hair fell out of place, hanging down her back perfectly straight.

He opened his eyes and looked at the white room he was in, the red banners hanging on the walls and the mumbles and moans of the others. He blinked and started, pushing himself to his feet and looking at the people around him.

"They never gave up their past," he said. Most were far too thin and sickly looking. They were dying in the delusions that this place had created for them. He thought he should feel a little remorse for them, but he didn't. He was just glad he'd had enough willpower to not become one of them.

As he headed to the door he noticed he was wearing new clothes. He had on a short-sleeved tunic with thick red wraps on his wrists. His trousers and boots were unchanged, and so was the damned cape. He wondered if Vas Taria would care if he took it off and dropped it right there, but for all he knew he'd need it for a challenge. He checked his pocket and the three remaining cards

were still there.

He touched the glowing white diamond in the wall and a section slid into the floor, revealing a new hallway. He stepped out and had to force himself to not look back. They were dead already, even if they clung to life. He didn't mourn them. He couldn't afford to. He knew he'd seen worse on the streets and was just glad he'd never remember those days.

He stepped away from the door and it closed behind him with a definitive thud. He walked on and tried to think of something to say to Vas Taria, wanting to make conversation, but it all failed him. There was just nothing to say after seeing what was left of those people.

It was a while before he realised he was no longer tired and hungry. He asked aloud "Did you feed me or is it magic?" but got no answer. Maybe it was better he didn't know.

Challenge 5

The Mirror

As he stepped into the next room he was met with a looking glass that stood ten steps tall and eight steps wide. It was at the end of an oval room, and quickly peeking around the mirror didn't show the door to the next challenge.

He stood in front of the mirror and looked himself up and down. He had to admit that he liked the clothes. Not the cape, though. The wraps around his hands going up to his elbows were odd but rather stylish. Despite his time in the vault he was still clean-shaven and his hair was still pretty short. Thinking about it, he checked his finger nails and they were short and clean too.

As he was contemplating what all that meant he noticed movement in the corner of his eye. He looked at the mirror and nothing seemed wrong, but he eyed it warily. Then he saw that the room had turned red in the reflection. He looked around and the room was still white, and when he looked back to the mirror his reflection had vanished.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

The mirror cracked and then shattered. Glass shards shot all around him, but strangely they never hit him. They floated in the air to his left and right, as well as behind. He could still see the reflection of the room beyond the frame, but now there wasn't glass between them. The floor had a harsh line between white and red stone.

Then a strange mist grew in the air, crawling up from the minute cracks between the floor tiles. It formed into the shape of a person, then solidified, then stepped forward. It was his reflection and its face was cold, harsh.

“You’re a monster,” said the reflection. It stepped across the boundary, into the real world, and tried to grab his collar. He stepped back and knocked away the thing’s hand. “You’ve killed before.”

“The past no longer matters,” he said. “Only the future.”

“You’ve always tried to run away,” it said with a smirk. Its eyes were filled with malice. This wasn’t him. It couldn’t be.

He stepped back again and bumped a shard of the mirror, glad it had been a flat side and he hadn’t just stabbed himself. The reflection laughed at him. Its tone was cruel.

“The power will be mine!” shouted the reflection through its horrible laugh. “With it I can go where I want! Do what I want! Nothing will stop me!”

Now it was just getting ridiculous. There was no way this was a true reflection of his inner-self. It must have been some sort of exaggeration of his worst qualities. He couldn’t take its words seriously.

The dark version of himself lunged and tried to punch him, but he side-stepped and pushed it away. The reflection tumbled through the floating glass and was caught in various places, but there was no blood. It oozed black from its cuts. It smiled at him, but there was only malice in its eyes.

“Why did you kill him?” it said.

“I have no idea who you’re talking about,” he said. “Even if I did, he probably deserved it.”

“You are a villain,” said the reflection. “You always have been. You’ve killed. You’ve stolen. And you have no regret.”

“How can I have regrets when I can’t remember who I ended or why? Maybe I was defending myself? Maybe I was fighting to

survive? Maybe I was a soldier? There are plenty of valid reasons to kill, even if I know I'd rather not do it at all."

"You can justify it all you want, but in the end you're just like me inside. You're a monster."

It rushed him again, throwing punches wildly as if it were a drunken madman. It hit him twice, once in the face and once in the stomach, and he fell to the floor. He wanted to retch and his right cheek burned, but he managed to roll himself away from a kick aimed at his head.

He scrambled up and fell into a low stance, able to bounce away in whatever direction he chose. This felt familiar. It felt *right*. He knew this and it was ingrained in his bones. He raised his fists to guard his face and steeled his soul.

The reflection punched again and he stepped inside the arc of its arm, then with a swift uppercut he knocked the thing to the floor. He stepped up quickly and brought his boot down on its head. Then again. And once more for good measure.

He stepped back. His breath was heavy and his leg trembled from the strain. The reflection's head was a bloody mess and he was ready to leave it behind, but then it moved. The reflection twitched and violently shuddered as it stood up, its face a flattened mess.

"You become me," it spluttered out, spitting blood all over the floor in front of it. "Violent and ill tempered."

He thought about what this challenge was supposed to be. Facing the worst version of himself. It was pretty simple, if a bit grotesque in its execution. So how did he overcome it? There wasn't a white diamond anywhere on the walls that he could see, so maybe it was somewhere he hadn't been yet?

Then it clicked and he dashed straight through the broken mirror, finding himself in the red room. He could smell fire and iron, and turning around he managed to see the incoming kick at gut height and dodge it. He ran around the edge of the mirror

within this version of the world and saw the diamond on the wall, but it wasn't glowing. The back of the mirror was solid wood rather than an empty frame, which surprised him for a moment.

He leapt out of the way of a punch and then countered with one of his own, striking the broken face of the reflection. He fell into his stance again, ready for more, and he needed time to think.

He needed to overcome his worst aspects, that much was obvious, but how could he do it when what he was meant to overcome was no long in his head? Wasn't he already a better person by not being weighed down by all his past issues? Or was he unable to move on simply because he no longer felt the impact of his past? Was he now stuck?

He grabbed a punch and forced the reflection to the ground and then skirted around the broken mirror again. He was running out of breath and needed to rest, so keeping distance to the thing was for the best.

When his mirror-self ran around at him and lunged he had a thought. A *daring* thought. He caught the reflection and instead of being tackled he pulled it up into a hug. He held it tight and poured his heart into his words.

"I will never be you. I may have made mistakes and I likely will again, but I won't fall to darkness. My soul is light, and even if my circumstances grow dark, I can be better. I accept my darkness as a part of myself, but that doesn't mean I have to be you."

He thought the thin in his arms was going to laugh at him, but it was something he needed to say. When it turned into mist and disappeared into the air, he knew he'd succeeded. It was a terrible challenge, just stating the obvious. Everyone tries to live a better life. Everyone tries to not wallow in their failings.

'Very endearing,' said Vas Taria in his head.

"Is that sarcasm from a phantom?" he asked. "I'll have you know that I am entirely wholesome." He thought he heard her

laugh, but he couldn't be sure.

'I've seen your memories,' said Vas Taria. 'I've seen through your eyes the way you've looked at the woman you raised you.'

"Alright, that's enough," he said. There was more laughing as he went behind the mirror. The diamond was glowing white, and touching it let him leave the room.

He did wonder where the line "my soul is light" came from, though. It felt natural on his tongue, but it wasn't something that he felt should have come to mind. It was embedded in him deeply, and he knew it, but the why was lost on him. He'd given up that memory but he was alright with it. He would cope with that hole in his mind.

Challenge 6

Dice of the Heart

The next room had a table at its centre and two chairs, reminding him of the first challenge. As he approached he noticed a set of three dice and he groaned. He'd come all this way and was relying on luck rather than physical or mental ability? Whoever made this challenge was cruel.

'I can see you are enthused about this next challenge,' said Vas Taria.

"Are you not supposed to be more neutral? It feels like you only want to mock me now." He sat down and looked at the dice. Three of them, two six-sided and one four-sided. Two cubes and a little pyramid. "This is going to be bad, isn't it?"

'Only if you roll poorly,' said Vas Taria. He could imagine her face now and he could hear the smile in her voice.

"So what are the rules?"

'The game is played in three rounds. You must roll the dice and then I will roll the dice. Whoever gets the higher number wins. You may reroll a single die once.'

"So it's pure chance, love it." He rolled his eyes. The card game at least had strategy. "What happens if I lose?"

'You cannot progress,' said Vas Taria.

"But I can't go back either, can I? The door after the fourth challenge shut, so I get to choose my spot to sit down and die."

'That is the essence of it.'

“Do I have to win all three rounds?” he asked.

‘No, only two.’

“Alright, let’s get started.”

He picked up the dice and turned them in his hand. They were a nice set, which was to be expected. Anyone with enough wealth and power to build this place should at least have some fancy trinkets. They were heavy metal with rounded edges and corners, with the numbers etched into the sides. The four-sided die had the numbers along the edges at the bottom of how it would stand.

He cupped them in his hands and gave them a shake, rolling them on the table. He assumed they’d need to stay on the table to count so he made sure not to throw them too far. His result was a four and a five on the cubes, and a three on the pyramid. Twelve in total out of a possible sixteen, which he didn’t think was too bad.

He leaned back in his chair as the dice rose into the air, spun so quickly they became blurs, and then dropped to the table. Two, four, two. Only an eight.

‘You win the first round,’ said Vas Taria.

“There’s a problem with this challenge,” he said. “If you can use magic to roll the dice, how can I trust you’re not going to cheat me and win these next two rounds with ease?”

‘Do you really trust me so little?’

“Not really,” he said with a smile, “but I do think it’s an inherent issue with the challenge. If I fail here today, maybe pass that along to your boss and get it fixed.”

‘Today? How long do you think you’ve been here?’

“What? A day, maybe two at most?”

‘You’ve been here for nineteen days,’ said Vas Taria.

“How?” he asked, standing and shaking the table. “How could I have been here that long?”

‘It took one day to remove your memories. You spent three days in the second challenge, crossing the gravity rift. You spent

two days in the third challenge, crossing the river. You spent seven days in the fourth challenge, exploring the city, waking up again and again as you tried to leave the areas you were familiar with. The rest of the time has been spent in the halls or asleep.’

“How can that be? How could I have lost so much time?”

‘The Dream is an unusual place,’ said Vas Taria. ‘Now if you could roll the dice. Please.’

He sat down and looked at the dice. He didn’t understand. He picked up the dice and rolled. Three ones. It didn’t matter, not really. How could he have lost so much time? Vas Taria rolled and he didn’t look. He knew he’d lost. He just picked up the dice again.

“Please help me understand,” he said. “Why did I lose so much time to these challenges? Why didn’t I notice?”

‘The vaults are infused with power that distort reality. Much of what you’ve experienced is a part of the magic of this place. The building is solid, as is the chair you sit in, but the river and the mirror and the challenges to come are made of condensed soulstuff. You will face more, so long as you believe in your ability to succeed.’

“And if I don’t believe?” he asked.

‘Then your dice will show as they did last time,’ she said. ‘Those ones are the dice resonating with your thoughts and your feelings. You cause your own downfall by not believing. Most who get this far are over-confident you refuse to even consider that they might lose, and so yes, I fix their dice to test them. Sometimes it’s enough to get them on the right track, but other times this is where they meet their end.’

“You tell me more than you probably should.” He rubbed his eyes with one hand and felt the dice with the other. “Have I been sat at this table for days too?”

‘Of course not,’ said Vas Taria. ‘If it makes you feel better, I can do this.’

A thick brown vine broke through the wall and crawled along the floor, then up the chair opposite him. From the vine grew a massive pile of red, white, and pink flowers, then they fell away to reveal a woman.

“I will roll the dice myself. No magic.” She smiled at him and tucked her long black hair behind her ears. Her amber eyes shone.

“Could you have been keeping me company this whole time?” he asked. “Instead of being a ghost?”

“I could have, but this is actually against the rules. I’m not supposed to have a body outside the final room of the vault. I am just supposed to be a voice whispering in your ear.”

He looked at her for a while, making sure not to get lost to the strange flows of time again, then rolled the dice. Three, three, four. A ten in total. Could be better.

“My turn,” she said, scooping up the dice. Her hands were small and delicate, yet he had the impression she could crush his skull if she wanted. He didn’t know why he got that feeling but it was firm in his head. More knowledge without memory.

She rolled the dice and got a one on the pyramid, then a six and a four on the cubes. An eleven. She won. He let out a solemn breath he hadn’t noticed he was holding, and just as he was about to give up she reached out. She picked up the die that had landed on six and rerolled it, revealing a four. Nine in total. He’d totally forgotten about the reroll rule because of everything else she’d said.

“Why?” he asked.

“Because I find you amusing,” she said. “Perhaps you’ll be the one to finally make it past the tenth challenge and we’ll see each other again.”

Those same flowers sprouted all over her, and when they fell away again she was gone. He picked up one of the red ones that had fallen by his foot and looked at it, then smelled it. He put it in

his left pocket, not wanting to crush it with the cards in his right.

‘You have completed the trials of the Son,’ he heard in his head. ‘Present the next key to enter the trials of the Heir.’

He held up the White Opal card it vanished in a burst of light. The door behind the chair opposite him light up, the diamond on the wall changing from white to green. The door opened and he stood up to go. He was tempted to swipe the dice, but chose not to, though he could hear Vas Taria tut in his head.

Challenge 7

Sliding Stones

The room for the seventh room was large, with pillars lining the edges, each with a statue on top. Every single statue was of a naked woman in a different compromising pose.

“So this Heir you mentioned,” he said. “He’s some sort of pervert, right?”

‘It’s not my place to comment,’ Vas Taria said in a dry tone, but he got the impression she agreed. ‘The vault originally only had six challenges, but the Heir decided to add three more when he took over.’

He nodded as she talked and then looked down at himself. He was no longer wearing a tunic and cape, but instead a silk shortcoat that didn’t close at the front. He hated it more than the cape. It was green and only just covered his shoulder blades, and it had long sleeves that hid his hands.

“Are my clothes getting changed to the fashion of the time the person took over?” he asked.

‘Correct. Most people don’t get that.’

“And there’s at least one more change coming, right? There were four cards and I guess I’m into the green diamond era. So shouldn’t there be twelve challenges instead of ten?”

‘The Monarch suggested only a single challenge,’ she said. There was a hesitance to her voice in his head. ‘His is the tenth, and it is the one that has never been passed. Most fail at the river

or the delusion, never making it to the dice, but those few that have were very recent, and none of them made it past the tenth challenge.'

"Well, we'll see if we can change that," he said.

He stepped up to the stone tiles that were inset in the floor. He instantly knew what it was, though the solution eluded him because the tiles were sparsely decorated. Each stone tile was edged in metal that allowed it to slide. The tiles were in a five-by-five grid with one slot missing. The goal was to move the tiles so they made a picture, which was an odd inclusion this late into the vault. It didn't seem very deadly.

"What's the trick here?" he asked. "This seems like it will take a while, but it doesn't seem like it will trap and kill me or anything."

'The Heir believes in intellect as being important. Those unable to solve this deserve to get stuck, according to him. You would be surprised by how many people get stuck here for so long that by the time they move on to the next challenge they don't have the energy to complete it.'

"Is there a reference for the picture so I at least know what I'm doing? It's just swirls and lines. No, wait. That's part of the challenge isn't it. You've got to be smart enough to see how it all lines up."

'Correct.'

"Great."

He started making a mental map of each tile and all the possible connections. While he couldn't quite make out what the picture in his head, he thought he knew at least where most of the tiles should be. This felt natural to him too, just like the fighting stance. Something he'd trained for over and over again. Not the puzzle, specifically, but finding patterns and making connections.

'You've been stood there for two hours,' said Vas Taria and he broke out of his flow with rapid blinks.

"What?"

‘Just kidding. It’s been ten minutes and I was wondering if you were going mad.’

“I was thinking.” He looked at the stones and his mental web still intact. He had a suspicion that he’d been interrupted like that before in a tense situation. “When did you get a sense of humour?”

‘I’ve always had it. You just never noticed.’

“Sure...”

Was she becoming different over time? She’d certainly lost that malevolence he’d felt when he’d first entered the vault, in what were now his earliest memories. Maybe even ancient spirits got bored when they’ve been working for a God King for millennia. God King? That was more knowledge slipping through, though he was sure that wasn’t quite right. Certainly a king with powers beyond compare, but not quite a God. He was the first of the diamonds, owner of the Red Ruby. The Father, Vas Taria had mentioned.

He concentrated again and started to move the stones. They were heavy and he had to put his whole body into moving them, even though they were on rails and locked to each other. He worried about accidentally knocking them out of alignment and jamming them, so he had to be careful.

When the first stone was in place the pillars around the edge of the room sank into the floor. He watched them with curiosity but then he heard a thud and the side walls moved a tiny bit closer. No more than a finger width, but he couldn’t waste time or moves, it seemed.

Each individual move took about twenty seconds and after ten moves he took a quick breather. Then he noticed the walls move without him touching the stone. He took a deep breath and plunged back into the puzzle, a mild panic setting into his mind.

When one edge was finished the walls had covered the holes where the pillars went. His arms and legs and back were aching,

but each line would take less effort than the last, so he got to it.

‘This challenge has killed five hundred and twelve people,’ said Vas Taria in his mind. Was she smiling? Why did she sound happy about that?

“You’re not helping!” he said through a grunt as a stone found its place.

‘I wasn’t trying to,’ she said. He thought he heard a giggle.

Second line finished. He thought he could see the picture forming. Some sort of tree? That made it easier to see where the rest went and he could form the mental image in his mind.

His chest hurt as he kept moving. He was running and skidding around to get into place now, worried about the walls getting ever closer. If they got to the stones he’d have no way to complete the puzzle and he’d be crushed, becoming number five hundred and thirteen.

When he got the third line done Vas Taria started to hum. It was a happy song, upbeat, yet somehow ominous. Like it would all be alright and yet this was highly important. But he had to concentrate so he tried to ignore her and kept going.

The last two lines had to be done at the same time, the stones weaving around each other in circles to get into the correct order. He was sweating so much his hands slipped on the stones several times and he wasn’t sure he was going to make it.

The walls reached the edges of the puzzle and his heart pounded harder in his chest. It hurt so much but he kept at it as hard as he could muster. He needed to pull some of the stones now, gripping onto the rails or the patterns on the surface which were just deep enough to feel but didn’t really give enough grip.

He only needed a few more moves when the walls started to really get in the way. The stones on the edges were half-covered and he made sure to finalise those first. Then the walls were suddenly up to the middle three rows. His fingers were raw when he finally pulled the last stone into place with only a hand-span of

distance on it to work with.

He stood on the middle row, walls either side of him, and he heard the machine wind down and stop. He'd done it. He lay on top of the puzzle and just let himself relax. Everything hurt. His body burned. His heart and lungs and stomach were threatening to jump out his throat.

“At least I know I’m not claustrophobic, right?” he asked with ragged breath.

He heard Vas Taria laugh and it settled his nerves.

Challenge 8

Sacrifice of Blood

It took him a while to get up and go to the next challenge. He hadn't even noticed the walls had moved back and the pillars had returned until he got up and went to the green diamond on the wall. The hallway beyond was a thankfully short walk, but he stopped outside the next challenge before going in.

"Is the next one physical too?" he asked. "I'm not built for this. Thinking and running away, I'm better at that than manual labour."

There was no reply, but if a smirk could be pushed into his mind then Vas Taria was doing it now. He checked the flower in his pocket and it was flattened, but still mostly intact. He put it back carefully, treating it as a good luck charm.

He opened the door and found a small room with a large bowl at its centre. It was made of pure gold and made him feel a little greedy. He wouldn't mind taking that with him, but just like the dice he thought better of it for moral reasons, and not because it was too big to lift.

'Step into the Crucible of Azrum and your blood will be tested. Your lineage to the Balanced Judge will be made clear and your worthiness known. The Heir demands someone of the proper blood to inherit the treasures of the vault.'

This was going to go very well or very poorly and felt like another game of chance. He didn't think he had a lineage, and

even if he did it likely wouldn't make him related to Balanced Azrum. He knew the name and title from somewhere inside him. This was the God King he'd thought about before.

He stepped into the bowl rather awkwardly as it was over knee-high. While the outside was perfectly smooth, the inside was heavily decorated. It looked like writing, but he couldn't read it. There were other symbols within large circles that looked like they should be important.

'You must submit a drop of blood to begin the Crucible's ritual.'

A knife appeared in front of him and he plucked it out the air. It was a small knife, very light, and it too was decorated in that writing he couldn't understand. The writing was tiny and covered the entire blade of the knife, both sides, and he saw another one of those circled symbols on the flat pommel.

He rolled up his sleeve and cut the back of his arm, dripping the blood into the bowl. The cut healed absurdly quick right before his eyes and the knife disappeared. And then the bowl began to heat up and he was covered in a warm fire that was more uncomfortable than painful. His skin tingled all over and his eyes watered.

'Your blood is... different,' said Vas Taria.

The heat didn't change but the intensity of the tingling did. It threatened to overwhelm him. His hands clenched and his arms pulled in on his chest, completely out of his control. His knees threatened to buckle.

'All peoples have some of Azrum's blood, as is right. He is the conqueror of this continent and all peoples descend from him through his children. But you do not. Your blood is somehow older.'

His knees gave way and hurt as they slammed into the bowl. He curled into a ball, the pain causing his muscles to act on their own and he wanted to cry.

Then the flames disappeared and he released a breath he hadn't realised he was holding and his chest ached as it heaved in and out with each new breath. He fell to his side, resting in the bowl.

He didn't know how long he waited, but he did feel Vas Taria leave his mind for a considerable amount of time. It was enough for him to recover and climb out of the bowl. He called to her many times but she never replied. It was an odd feeling, as if he were alone for the first time since arriving at the vault.

He fell asleep and awoke multiple times. He started to think it must have been multiple days and could only wonder as to how long he actually waited. He didn't dream and there were no flashes of memories. There was just emptiness. A hollowness.

But then she returned and his mind felt like it was whole again. He felt her connect into him and her voice filled his skull once more.

'I have spoken with Balanced Azrum,' she said. 'He has approved your progress.'

"What? I thought for sure I was abandoned here. I thought you'd say I was to die here for being so different." His voice felt strange. How long had it been since he'd eaten anything? Since he'd had water. Was this really a dream as she'd said before or was it just magic?

'He didn't want to know who you are, but was intrigued by your differences. He told me to let you pass despite having none of his blood in your veins. You are the complete opposite of what the Heir believes should inherit the prize, but if you are allowed by Balanced Azrum then I cannot argue.'

"This doesn't make sense to me."

'It doesn't to me either, but you must continue on.'

The green diamond on the wall began to glow and he just looked at it incredulously. What even was this challenge? Why is he being allowed through when he apparently failed? Vas Taria

had said his blood was older than the ancestor of all people on the continent, but how did that make any sort of sense at all?

He stood, but he was still weary. His muscles still hurt and he had to push himself up against the wall, then almost fell back into the bowl. He sat himself on the rim and took a few deep breaths.

“What have I come this far to obtain? I obviously knew before I came in here, but I’m eight challenges down and it’s getting so hard to go on. You tell me I have weird blood and that I’ve spent days that I’m missing. What is going on?”

‘I cannot tell you,’ said Vas Taria. ‘You gave up that when you entered here.’

“Is it worth it?”

It was a long time before she answered, simply saying ‘You thought it was when you came here, knowing the cost and the contents of the first three challenges.’

“I knew that much? How?”

‘People who fled before being sealed in by the later tasks. Their stories spread and you gathered information.’

“Do you know why I wanted the treasure? Was there a real reason? Was I just being greedy?”

‘I cannot tell you that. Not yet.’

He stood on unsteady legs and went to the green diamond. He didn’t touch it, not yet.

“Will you tell me if I pass the next two challenges?”

‘Once the prize is yours you will be free from the contract that binds my tongue. Your memories won’t be returned to you, but I can tell you whatever you want to know.’

That had to be good enough. He touched the green glow and the wall slid into the ground, revealing a white passage beyond, lined in red banners and with a thick red strip of carpet leading off into the misty distance.

“Do you think it’s possible to beat challenges nine and ten?” he asked.

‘I have seen the next challenge beaten fourteen times.’

“Well, let’s go make that fifteen so I can see what the final challenge is then, shall we?”

As he walked, leaning on the wall when he needed it, he heard Vas Taria hum again. That same song. Hope and comfort and the darkest of intent. She sang a few words in a language he didn’t know, possibly the same one as the writing he thought. It was beautiful and uplifting, but gave him a foreboding feeling that he couldn’t explain. It was going to be alright, but it was going to get worse before it got better, the song seemed to say.

Challenge 9

A Strong Will

He opened the door to the next challenge and waited patiently while it slid into the floor. Not that he had much choice, as his legs ached so much he didn't dare step over it when it was low enough.

"Here we go again," he said as he looked at the statues in the room. All women, all in poses that would have made him blush if they were real. He was sure that no one could get their leg that high from a standing pose. The statues were scattered around the large room in a seemingly random arrangement.

In the centre of the room was a raised area with steps leading up to it. He ascended the stairs and it gave him a better view of the statues. It was a ridiculous display.

"What am I meant to do here?" he asked.

There was no response. He was starting to hate it when she did that, like he was already meant to know or she was waiting for him do something specific. Maybe there were rules about it, but she'd broken them before so why always stay quiet?

He stood up there for what felt like a long time. Were days passing again? Then, after an eternity, something moved in the corner of his eye. He jumped and turned, but didn't see anything. He could have sworn there was some sort of shadow behind one of the statues, but he must have imagined it.

"Vas Taria," he said. "Is there something in here with me?"

She didn't respond, which made him think there was. Was he going to get into another fight? Was it the statues or was it some kind of beast?

Another movement to his left, and spinning on the spot he caught a glimpse of a long shadow. Like a tail. But it vanished behind a statue in a way that suggested it was twisting space rather than actually existing.

He told himself that he shouldn't be afraid. His body hurt but he could still win. If others could pass this challenge, so could he.

"What's in here, Vas Taria?" he asked.

'Nel Taria,' she said at last. 'One of my many little sisters.'

The edge of the room suddenly burst into flames, covering the walls in flickering orange and red light. There was a deafening screech that echoed all around him, forcing him to cover his ears in pain.

'Good luck.'

He knew this was the last challenge made by the Heir, which meant he needed to use the Green Emerald card, but there was something else to this. The Red Ruby had to be used to start a trial and the White Opal to finish one. When did he need to use the Green Emerald and what did it have to do with this shadow? He took the card out his pocket to be ready.

Then a shadow leapt and crouched on top of a statue. It formed into the shape of a woman, entirely naked with long ebony hair that flowed around her as if alive, caught in a continuous unfelt wind. She had the same amber eyes as Vas Taria, but they were filled to the brim with fury and hatred. This wasn't human, despite its shape. This was a creature of darkness and flame.

It turned into shadow and disappeared amongst the statues and he lost sight of her. The flames changed the shadows all around him constantly, making it look as though the statues were dancing. It was starting to get warm and he was just glad that the fire was magical and gave off no smoke.

“Can we talk about this?” he shouted, not really expecting a response. “I feel like we could sort this out peacefully.”

In an instant Nel Taria was in his face with a grim smile. She jumped from the shadows, forcing him to step back, almost falling off the platform.

“Talk?” she asked. Her voice was similar to Vas Taria’s, just a little deeper than average for a woman. “I think you’re the first to try that.”

“Well, there’s always a first time for everything, right?”

She moved to the side and made him walk circles around the edge of the platform to keep out of her arm’s reach. She moved like a predator on the hunt.

“Do you think I’m going to give you the answer to leave this room alive? Is that it?” She had a cackle of a laugh.

“It would be nice,” he said. “I’d hate to have to fight my way out because honestly I’m just really tired and ready to collapse on the floor.”

“What makes you think you’re worthy of what lies at the end of this vault?” she asked. He couldn’t help but notice she never blinked. Her pupils were wide, taking in everything while remaining fixed on him.

“No idea,” he said. His foot almost slipped and he wobbled, but seeing Nel Taria lean forward made him steady himself quickly. Why wasn’t she attacking? Was she only allowed to kill him if he left the platform? He stopped and she almost walked into him, but she stepped back.

“Not afraid any more?” she asked, leaning up to his face. She licked her lips and he saw her tongue was sharp. She smelled of roses.

“I just figured out the rules,” he said. She narrowed her eyes at him and stepped away. She looked him up and down with a tilted head.

“So how do you plan to proceed?” She crossed her arms and

looked up at him, her hair around her like a cloak.

“No idea, but if you’re not going to kill me then I have time. You can turn off the fire now, it’s getting stuffy in here.”

She laughed again and the flames disappeared. As he stood at the centre of the platform she walked around him. It was almost a prance, with little hops and turns here and there. Was she insane? He couldn’t tell.

“So when do I use the card?”

“Whenever you want,” she said.

He held up the card and it bent the air around it, folding away and leaving his hand, teleporting itself away. As it did, a green diamond on the wall lit up and Nel Taria squatted down and smiled in a way that could only be described as hungrily.

“Oh, I see the problem now,” he said and she laughed. He had to reach the door, open it, and escape before she could kill him. How was he meant to do that when he was facing a Sorad. He caught his thoughts and knew what she was. He’d evaded her kind before, he knew, but he didn’t remember how. The price to enter this place was screwing him every chance it got.

The Soradi were witches, capable of using dark magic and able to summon flames and lightning from nothing. They drink blood and follow Balanced Azrum. They can be killed like any living creature, but they were far more resilient than they looked. He was only human and he had no weapons or magic of his own. He was a decent runner but she could dive into shadows to move faster than him.

“Could I give you a present to let me pass?” he asked.

“A present?” she asked. “What could you possibly have to give? The rules of this place state you can bring nothing in, even if you don’t remember agreeing to that.”

Agreeing to it? He must have had a conversation with Vas Taria or some other guard before entering. He’d need to ask her once he had the prize. He put his hand in his pocket and pulled

out the flower, holding it out to the witch.

“This is all I have,” he said. She took it and without looking back at her he jumped off the platform and opened the door. He stepped through and only then looked back to Nel Taria. She was standing on the platform still, looking at the flower. She looked up and met his eyes.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“I have no idea,” he said as the door closed.

Challenge 10

Spoken Truth

He stepped into the final challenge with his head held high, though everything still hurt. He was mentally exhausted and felt he had no hope. This was the one that killed the best of the best amongst the challengers, and he was going to face it as though he had a chance. He needed to. He'd come too far to truly give up.

He was wearing a black shirt that closed at the front with steel buttons. He had on a waistcoat that was red at the front and white at the back. His sturdy black trousers were comfortable and his shoes were soft. And, sadly, the cap was back. It was a deep green and had a hood.

“So, this is the trial of the Monarch, I think you said.”

He walked out along a narrow strip of white stone into an endless void. Floating in that void were hundreds if not thousands of dead bodies. Past challengers, he assumed.

‘Use the key right away,’ whispered Vas Taria. She was as nervous as he was by the sound of it. ‘Then brace yourself.’

He pulled out the Black Diamond card, the only one to be called a diamond despite them all being in that shape. He held it up and his heart stopped, his lungs seized up, and he dropped flat on his face.

It could have been a second or a year later but he woke with a start. He pushed himself up, his entire body shaking and his vision blurred. Reality was spinning and he forced himself to stay

on his feet. He took deep breaths and clenched and unclenched his fists to try and focus.

“Speak the truth and you shall pass,” said a voice from the void around him. He saw that he was on a white stone circle in the middle of nothing, the path and door gone. Even the bodies were gone. The voice was deep and masculine, and it made him feel like he was tiny.

“What is truth but what God dreams?” he asked. It was a quote from somewhere, he knew. He no longer dwelled on that sort of stuff being in his head. His vision was clear and his balance was getting better, but he felt battered. He was done, win or lose. He’d either die here or take a long rest in a soft bed.

“Answer these three questions and you shall be judged. Speak only the truth.” The voice was demanding and was deep and loud enough to shake his bones.

“Then let’s get started,” he said. He didn’t know if the voice could hear him, but he felt the need to respond in the long silences. Either it was waiting for him or it was trying to make him stew and was trying to intimidate him. He wouldn’t let it get the better of him. Not now.

“The first question: Why are you here?”

Why was he here? He actually didn’t know. How was he meant to have an answer to that when his memories were taken from him? This just seemed cruel and unfair, so he gave the first answer that came to mind that was still true.

“I’m here because I beat the first nine challenges.” He thought it was probably a mistake to sass what could be some sort of God. That didn’t matter much any more.

“The second question: Why did you make it this far?”

That was another odd question. Was it what motivates him? Was it meant to do with his reason for being here now? He was confused, but didn’t dare take time to think about it. He had to answer with the first thing that came to his mind.

“I made it this far because I am determined. I must have had a real reason for coming here, for paying the price, for taking the risk. I made it this far because I had to... But also because Vas Taria has been encouraging me and helping me along the way. I wouldn't have made it here without her.”

There was silence for a while and that worried him. Should he have not mentioned Vas Taria? Was that going to be an issue? Did he just fail and now he had to float in space for all eternity? Would he just dehydrate and starve here? Then the voice spoke again and all his worried vanished.

“The third question: What do you see in the void when you gaze beyond the darkness?”

The Monarch was messing with him now. This was the most absurd question yet. What was he meant to see when it was only black?

Instead of just complaining in his head he decided to try and see something. He looked out into the darkness, and at first he saw nothing. It was oppressive, in a way. There was just nothing. It was empty.

And then he heard the song. The same one Vas Taria was humming and singing, but this was so much more. It started quietly, so quietly he might have never noticed it, but now he could latch onto it and it became more and more obvious. It sounded like there were over a hundred people singing all at once, both in harmony and combatting each other. Beauty in conflict. Balance and a kind of divine wrath that threatened to crush him.

As he stood and listened it seemed like the black became white and he could see the flames and the filmy wings that could carve reality. The song got louder the longer he stared and he felt the universe vibrate around him. He wanted to become one with the song and his body threatened to destroy itself. He longed to join with it and sing.

And then he blinked and it was gone. He blinked again and

everything was black. He took a moment to steady his heart and hands before answering.

“I saw God,” he said. He wasn’t sure why he said that, but it felt right. That thing beyond the darkness, singing that song, it could be nothing else. He clutched at his neck and grabbed nothing. He was missing something from around his neck.

He lurched as the stone platform disappeared. This was it. He was dead. He flipped and turned in the emptiness and held his stomach firm as he dipped in and out of consciousness. Oddly, he felt like he was being pulled upward, not falling into the darkness. His arms and legs wanted to be left behind, his head rushed and threatened to explode.

Then he landed with a thud on the platform, the path back to the door intact, but a new path built itself before his eyes as he lay there. It stretched away from the door and stopped far away in the darkness. A light appeared as a new door opened, and in it stood Vas Taria.

“Your answers were accepted by the challenge. You told the truth. Everyone else tried to mislead the voice of the Monarch in one way or another. They couldn’t accept that simple truth was the answer, whether they were correct or not. ‘Why are you here?’ was always answered with something that was meant to be profound. ‘Why did you make it this far?’ was met with boasts of skill and intelligence. And they refused to acknowledge what they saw in the void. Whether you are right or not about what you saw doesn’t matter, only that you answered the way you did.”

She smiled, turned, and went into the light. He knew he had to follow, but wasn’t quite ready yet. The prize could wait a moment longer. He looked back out into the darkness, but he knew this was different from what he’d seen. There was a different feel to it, never mind all the bodies. God wasn’t there, it was somewhere else in a deeper darkness.

He didn't know what any of it meant, so he just sighed to himself and walked the path to the door. He felt strangely refreshed as he entered the light. His aches and pains were gone, he had a new energy, there wasn't a hint of hunger or thirst.

Epilogue

The Prize

He stepped into the long room and was wearing his own clothes again. Hard-wearing deep brown trousers and black boots scuffed from being used too long. White shirt with wood buttons and long sturdy gloves that reached his elbows, worn and torn in a few places. And his scarf, which he touched gently for comfort. He had a silver pendant tied to his wrist, which had a symbol of a sword on it.

The room was empty except for a large stone coffin that was little more than a grey box in the blindingly white room. There was no light source anywhere in sight, and he couldn't remember any from throughout the challenges, but it was odd. On top of the coffin was a small wooden box bound with a strange white metal, and standing next to it was Vas Taria, wearing those same red robes as always.

She smiled at him and tapped the box before taking a step back. He stood opposite her with the coffin between them, and then opened the box. Inside was a pure white pearl no bigger than a thumb nail.

“Is this really it? This is what I came here for?”

“It's more than you might think it is,” said Vas Taria. She stepped towards him and took his hand, then raised it to his forehead. Her skin was soft and warm. “Accept it into yourself and you'll have what you want.”

“And what is it that I wanted?” he asked.

“Freedom,” she said. “That’s what you sought. But I must be honest. You are running, rather than seeking. It’s what you do best, right?”

“Who am I running from?”

“Not who, but what.” Her smile for him was a sad one, her amber eyes giving him pity and empathy. “Your family broke with a death, then one was arrested, then the other became so filled with rage she lost herself to the flames. So you ran away. That’s what led you to seek out this Tether. With this, pushed into your mind, you can leave and explore all of reality at a whim. That is your prize. Most come seeking to sell it, but you wanted to use it. You sought adventure and release.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad.” But it was. Hearing that made him feel pathetic. He lowered his hands and looked Vas Taria in the eyes. “I don’t think I deserve this.”

“What?” Her eyes went wide.

“Shouldn’t this be used by someone who could do some good with it? Why would I deserve this?”

“You overcame the challenges. Why wouldn’t that be more than enough?” She tilted her head and her hair flowed behind her. She had an eyebrow raised and he wondered if she’d ever understand.

“You cheated the rules for me,” he said. “I can’t take this.” Running away wasn’t a real answer. He’d do something else. Maybe there was a way to get his memories back. He tried to put the pearl back in the box but Vas Taria grabbed his hand.

“You cannot mean that,” she said. “You would give up true freedom just like that?”

“I have to go face my issues,” he said. “I can’t run away.”

“Don’t be dumb,” said Vas Taria, her voice pitching up. She was actually shocked. “You can go anywhere you want with this. You’re not tied to your past. You’ve been given the gift of a fresh

start. Use it.”

He didn't know whether or not she was right but he held the pearl, not dropping back into the box. He should have known his past was not so clean. He had thought it was worth giving up, after all.

“I guess I'll go then,” he said.

“You need to use the Tether to leave.” She touched the hand that held the pearl. “Push it into your forehead and you can leave.”

“So the people who wanted to sell it never had a chance?” he asked. She smiled and shook her head.

He did as she instructed and touched the pearl to his forehead and pushed. It slid into his skull with a horrible warmth and his whole body burned for just a moment. When it passed he could sense strands of reality moving up and down and knew that if he reached out and grabbed them with his mind he could traverse the universe.

“It was good meeting you,” said Vas Taria. She took a step away from him again.

“I need a name,” he said. “I don't think I should have my old one back. I don't think that matters any more. You should give me one.”

“I like Izea,” she said, a coy smile crossing her face. “It is from an old language. It means future.”

“Then my name is Izea.”

He walked around the coffin and hugged Vas Taria. She grabbed his back in a way that suggested she'd never been touched before. When he stepped back she looked as if she wanted to say something.

“Goodbye,” was all she said, closing her eyes, bowing her head, and forming a diamond with her hands at her chest, fingers up and thumbs down. He looked at her and had a thought. It had been bubbling inside him for a while now and he decided it was

worth voicing.

“Why don’t you come with me?” he asked.

“Do you... Do you mean that?”

“You want freedom as much as I do, right? That’s why you wouldn’t let me refuse the prize.”

She crashed into his chest hard, almost knocking the wind out of him. The following hug could have broken his back. He held her shoulders, focused on the flows of reality, and pulled them up from the vault. Perhaps running away was a bad reason to be there in the first place, but a new future was a good reason to leave.