

## *Enlightenment For All!*

By Paul Victor Tims

### 20,000 Years Ago

Below Venon's feet, there was only black stone, mottled with reddish swirls. Here it was flat, but in the distance, that same stone formed sweeping mountains of eerie smoothness, as though they were not mountains at all, but impaling spikes made by some gigantic torturer from a bygone age. High above his head was a seemingly endless procession of fat, continent-sized discs, connected one to another by ancient stone stairwells. There was almost no light down here, at the bottom of the Stack; on the lowest and lowliest of discs. The only food and water here tumbled and fell down from the levels above. And somewhere, at the top of it all, was enlightenment - the meaning of life itself, just waiting for someone to climb to the top of the Stack and learn its secret.

Sometimes, Venon imagined the fabled enlightenment as a scroll, on which the purpose of all existence was written in a fine, looping hand. Other times, he imagined it as a fountain - if he drank its waters he would simply *know*.

He had a lot of time to imagine, as he waited for food and water to come dripping and bouncing down from the upper levels. When it did, he'd dismiss his imaginings long enough to participate in the scramble with the rest of the Lower Dwellers, desperate to get something to feed himself. He was luckier than most - he didn't have a family to support. Despite this, he was still a skeletal figure; still dressed in a patchwork of faded rags - scraps of cloth that had drifted down from above. His skin was the grey of age-old ash and his eyes were a faintly bioluminescent amber, allowing him to see in the dim lighting conditions of the lowest disc. To anyone other than another Lower Dweller, he would look like a horror from sentient-kind's oldest nightmares.

Yet he had his imaginings.

As he stood on the flat expanse of the Inner Desert, waiting for food or water to fall from above, he thought about enlightenment. He was always hungry; always thirsty... but what he craved more than food or water was knowledge. He wanted to bathe in it; to be filled with it; to find peace in it.

His waiting eked on for ows (the standard unit of temporal measurement across a million universes, though Venon didn't know it). It went on far longer than usual. In fact, it went on for long enough for Venon's starved and ever-tired mind to reach a decision.

He would seek enlightenment.

Somewhere above, the daily waste-dump happened and scraps of leftover food and clothing came tumbling through holes in the disc immediately overhead. Venon hardly noticed. In that moment, he had become a Stack Walker.

It took Venon only a few hours to reach the stairs that led up to the next disc. A small settlement had grown up around them, made from sheets of corrugated metal and rotten wood. He had seen its lights at night many times and knew its location by heart.

As he passed through the shanty town and approached the stairs some of the locals clustered together, blocking his path.

“No one goes up to the next level,” said an old man, gruffly. His voice was not unkind - just firm. Venon heard deep regret in it. He *wanted* to let Venon ascend, but there was some vast and important reason preventing him.

“Why?” Venon asked - just one word. He rarely had enough water and his throat was always dry. The settlements got the best crop of water from above, but Venon had always been reluctant to live around other people.

The old man looked at him wearily and told him.

It made perfect sense, too. The discs immediately above were barely better off than the lowest disc. They didn't have any water sources or much natural light either, so they couldn't grow crops of their own. They each depended on the leftovers of the mid-Stack discs - or so the old man's forebears had told him. They then threw *their* leftovers down to the lowest disc. If Venon went up *even just one level* and happened to reproduce or start a family, suddenly there would be more mouths above the lowest level, and their already-pitiful share would be reduced even further. Of course, just one man going up a level wouldn't make much difference - Venon alone wouldn't make a dent in the daily waste-drops (not unless he proved to be the most prolific breeder in history). But if one was allowed to ascend, others would soon follow. Soon, those who stayed would have nothing.

Venon nodded and said he understood and the old man led him to his shanty-hut and shared a loaf of mouldering bread and a cup of water with him by way of apology. That night, he even let Venon sleep on his floor.

Venon's Stack Walk might have ended there and then, except that he happened to rise early the next morning, disturbed by his bladder. He left the hut in search of an outhouse and saw that he was the only person in the street. The stone spiral of steps that connected the lowest level to the one above it was completely unguarded; unobserved.

The newly-minted Stack Walker knew why he shouldn't be *allowed* up, but he also felt that he had a right to *try*. If someone stopped him, so be it. Otherwise, he would climb.

He was too furtive and worried about being caught to feel any great sense of moment when he put his foot on the lowest step. A question did, however, occur to him when he was halfway up the stairwell: why didn't *everyone* just climb? A mass evacuation of the unliveable lowest disc would solve the problem of those left behind having less. In fact, why shouldn't everyone leave the lowest

reaches of the Stack altogether? If the mid-Stack was where crops were farmed and water ran freely, why shouldn't everyone simply live there?

Venon never received a satisfactory answer to his questions. Over the course of twenty years, he managed to climb over a hundred levels - most of that time was spent finding the next staircase and the next and the next, and waiting for each to be unguarded. Each level had the same concerns as the one below it - the ever-present fear of not having enough.

Perhaps, he once reflected, *that* was why there was no mass evacuation: it would take too long. But even an intergenerational effort would be better than nothing, wouldn't it? No, time couldn't be the answer to his questions.

He hoped he would find the real answers when he found enlightenment - and he went on hoping that for twenty years, until, one day, he could no longer raise his foot high enough to get onto the next staircase. He was old now, and he had crippled himself.

There were, however, worse days to finally fail on, he reflected philosophically, when he realised that he'd never ascend any higher. Though he had not reached the fertile ground of the mid-Stack, he had climbed high enough that almost a river's worth of water was dumped from above every day. This deluge, combined with thin slivers of light at dawn and dusk allowed a few anaemic crops to be grown, and there were straggly farms with *actual soil* amid the expanses of grey and black rock. An old man could live and die here with a full belly, provided he had something to offer the farmers. Venon liked to think that he could offer tales of his travels.

It transpired that the old Stack Walker didn't have to offer anything - at least, nothing that cost him effort. As he stood and stared at the stairway upwards, a woman a little younger than himself approached.

"If you start climbing, someone will pull you back down," she said, sounding amused.

"I know. My window to start climbing ended twenty mynats ago," he replied wistfully. "I'll never go another level higher."

The woman smiled and invited him to dine with her at her farm. Her father had not long died and having a man stay near would deter bandits and thieves.

Venon followed her back to her abode and, as luck would have it, never left.

### **17,000 Years Ago**

Vymok, whose ancient ancestor had been Venon, put down his satchel and sighed with relief as its weight left his shoulder.

He was one level below the official start of the mid-Stack, and he had every intention of resting well before he crossed that all-important threshold.

For nearly three thousand years, his family had lived and died on one disc. Then, Vymok's father - an eccentric by anyone's standards - had unearthed an old family legend about how his ancestor had ascended from the lowest disc on a quest to find enlightenment. He'd been so inspired that he'd took off there and then. When he'd gotten too old to continue, he'd done what his ancestor had done - settled down and raised a family. He'd only made it up fifty levels - half the number of his ancient forebear, on account of starting older. The difference was that he never let Vymok forget he was from Stack Walker stock. Thus, when Vymok came of age, he'd continued the legacy. And now, just eight years and twenty levels later, he was about to enter the mid-Stack and make family history.

He took a moment to look around and savour the sights and sounds of the disc on which he stood. It was unusual, bordering on surreal, with endless fields of indigo grass and natural springs whose spigots had been carved into twisting, abstract shapes by the timeless forces of geology. Rivers wended their way through the landscape, sparkling with luminous brilliance.

The whole level was uninhabited, however. The land was only good for growing the strange grass, which Vymok had been told was poisonous just one level below. The water of the rivers was saline and near-toxic. In short, the disc on which Vymok stood was a beautiful deathtrap.

It still amazed him that nobody came up this far. The last few staircases he walked hadn't been guarded. Certainly, the level couldn't be settled, but there was nothing stopping people from coming to admire its beauty.

He wondered if perhaps it was the same reason that so few tried to reach the top of the Stack.

Then he put his foot on the first step of the last staircase of the lower Stack and began to climb.

It took many hours, but Vymok finally reached the top of the climb. He emerged through the hole cut in the first disc of the mid-Stack and took a deep breath of pure, fresh air, faintly scented with some kind of natural syrup. Trees with golden-brown bark that bore beautiful blue fruits stretched away in all directions, interrupted only by homes of quaint red brick and burnished wood.

There had been areas of beauty in the lower Stack, of course, but they had always concealed some hostile sting or an underlying bleakness. For the first time in his life, Vymok saw a landscape that was *purely* kind; a disc that seemed to welcome the habitation of mortal men.

He was so drunk on the sight of it that he didn't see the mid-Stacksmen approaching until one of them snapped at him "Get back down!"

"What?" Vymok asked, blinking at the man. He'd encountered staircases guarded at the bottom before, but never ones guarded at the top. It took him a moment to realise what he was being told.

“You’re trespassing! Get back down!” the mid-Stacksman repeated. He was a tall fellow whose skin was silvery instead of grey. His eyes didn’t glow, as Vymok’s did - part of his ancestral legacy. Instead, they were a cold and piercing blue and his hair was swept back neatly. He and his fellow both wore robes of deep azure, a little like togas, and they carried spears.

“You misunderstand,” Vymok assured them. “I’m not here to trespass. I merely wish safe passage. I’m on my way to the top of the Stack.”

The two mid-Stacksmen looked at one another and then began to laugh.

“Hark at him!” one of them said- the one who had not yet spoken. “He thinks he’s going to the top!”

“You’re not going anywhere, my son,” the first mid-Stacksman said. “Now get back down. We don’t want any vagrants on this disc.”

Vymok summoned up all his dignity and said, sternly “I’m not a vagrant. I’m a Stack Walker.”

“Same difference,” said the more antagonist of the two mid-Stacksmen and struck him on the head with the flat of his spear.

Vymok staggered back, lost his footing and began to tumble down the immense flight of steps he had so recently ascended.

He managed to arrest his progress a quarter-way down by digging his fingers into the pitted rock.

Nothing was broken, but he had run across a new situation.

The stairs between the levels of the lower Stack had often been guarded, but only in a lackadaisical sort of way and on a voluntary basis. Vymok had always gotten the sense that the guards were just trying to maintain a balance between the ecosystems of the different levels. Their reasoning might have been erroneous - he doubted people moving up and down the Stack would cause any real problems - but they had at least been devoid of real malice and easy to dodge. The two toga-wearing men had been professionals, however, which meant there would be no easily exploited gaps in their guard duties. What’s more, they had clearly been chosen for their meanness and willingness to inflict harm.

Vymok knew that, if he was going to get by them, he would have to start thinking differently.

At first, the Stack Walker tried the obvious tack of waiting for nightfall and sneaking past, just as his father and his ancestor had sometimes done. However, the night-guards on duty were positioned right next to the hole through which the staircase emerged.

They were less violent than their daytime counterparts, but just as firm in pushing him back down.

After that, he tried emerging at different times of day - and *on* different days - so that he’d catch different sets of guards each time.

He quickly noticed that, every time he told the truth about his intentions, the spears would be pointed (and sometimes even used). Thus, he started lying.

To elicit the most sympathy, he found it was wisest to claim that he was looking to become a mid-Stacksman himself by working the land for an established holder. In the lower Stack, such a claim would have been seen as risible or – worse - an attempt to upset the delicate balance of the discs. The people of the mid-Stack seemed to find it admirable, however, and several guards said they would pass on his message to the local holders to see if any of them wanted a hard worker.

For a while, Vymok held out hope that this tactic would work. After all, if someone needed a reliable labourer, he could do the work for a while until attention, inevitably, slipped off of him. Then he could bolt for the next staircase and the next level.

However, this too was unsuccessful. He was offered only the *prospect* of work, never the real thing, which meant he had to stay where he was. No local landholder needed his services at present.

One of the friendlier guards advised him to return during harvest season and Vymok said he'd think about it.

Of course, he couldn't live on the poisoned disc until harvest time rolled around, and he couldn't backtrack either. He had put too much effort into avoiding the security measures of the lower levels. If he slid back down the great ladder of the Stack now, he'd be watched more closely. He wouldn't get the chance to rise again. The quest for the top and for enlightenment would be delayed a generation or perhaps even longer.

Vymok despaired and, in his despair, grew angry.

Rage is a powerful fuel. Part of the Stack, which predated mortals and cared not for their affairs, had been claimed as property by people who saw it as something to control and exploit. Vymok had never seen himself as a philosopher or as someone with political awareness. After all, he never stayed anywhere long enough to become involved in its politics. However, it seemed obscene to him that parts of the eternal Stack should only be accessible to those born there and those who were willing to work for them. The Stack was geology and geography and history - to treat it as a currency of reward and punishment was, it seemed to Vymok, an insult - not just to travellers like him, but to the land itself.

Thus, with his supplies running low, he marched up to the top of the staircase one last time and found himself face to face with the same guards who had cast him back the first time.

“You're going to let me through,” he said, simply.

“And why would we do that?” one of them asked. He was the less overtly violent one, but Vymok wasn't stupid. He'd encountered dozens of different guards since he started trying to enter the mid-Stack and he knew false friendliness and sly contempt when he saw and heard it.

“Because it’s my right,” he replied. “As it is the right of all men.”

“You have no rights here,” said the one who usually let his spear do the talking.

He raised it again now and went to strike Vymok on the head.

This time, however, Vymok was expecting the blow.

He shot his hand up and caught the spear by the shaft. He wrenched backward and the guardsman was so surprised that he actually let go of it.

“I don’t want to hurt you, but you *are* going to let me pass,” Vymok reiterated, brandishing his prize.

The other guard aimed his spear, however, and lunged at Vymok.

There was a confusing moment in which the Stack Walker acted purely on instinct, ducking, recoiling then lunging reflexively. Then the guard was skewered through.

His companion, from whom Vymok had taken the spear, began to flee yelling “Murder! Murder!”

An icy calm gripped the Stack Walker. The houses were far apart and the leaves of the trees would absorb sound quite efficiently. It would be mynats before the man was heard or noticed.

Vymok withdrew the spear from its first victim, aimed, and loosed it.

He’d had to hunt his food several times as he climbed the lower Stack and his aim was good. The spear went through the fleeing guard’s neck and pinned him to the ground.

Vymok’s sense of emotionless tranquillity didn’t depart until after he’d dumped the bodies of the two guards down the stairs to the level below.

At first, he didn’t even realise he’d stolen one of the togas and put it on, disguising himself as a native of his current disc - and a native with authority no less. It only dawned on him that he was wearing the garb of a dead man when, an ovr of walking later, he happened to look down at himself, puzzled by how strange his clothes felt.

He had an idea that, if he walked with authority and snapped instructions in a brusque enough manner, he’d go unchallenged for at least a few levels, despite his grey skin and glowing eyes. In this costume, people would let him pass.

He learned two lessons that day.

He learned that not everyone could be reasoned with because not everyone had a rationale for wanting to stop him... and he learned the value of violence.

## **12,000 Years Ago**

Mikona was aware of the horrors her forebears had perpetrated as they climbed their way through the mid-Stack, but such things seemed distant- part of a past that had nothing to do with her.

She knew that one of her ancestors had been named Vymok; that he had been the first Walker to kill to make his way up the Stack. She knew that he had been restrained, only striking when necessary, until he had grown too old to continue, settled down and took a wife. She knew, also, that each subsequent generation of his descendants had been less and less controlled. She knew that her position as a well-off woman in the upper Mid-Stack had been bought with a mountain of bodies. But there had been no violence for fifty generations now. She couldn't imagine slaughtering someone and taking their possessions simply to rise to the next level, and the idea of reaching the top and finding enlightenment didn't appeal to her in the slightest.

She lived a comfortable life in a city of ruby towers. When she looked out her window, she saw a glittering skyline, dyed rose by the jewelled city, whose lowliest coffee shop was still carved from precious stone. She didn't need to work- there was an inheritance. She was on good terms with all her neighbours. She was a soft, relaxed pacifist, brimming over with kindly intentions and vague good will.

If she looked a little different from her fellow mid-Stackswomen - if her eyes glowed faintly and her silver skin had a faint persimmon colouration from her ancient, scalded heritage- it only made her a little exotic and appealing to the menfolk who lived in the same complex as her.

If anything, her life was a little too comfortable - her mere day to day existence left her drowsy and apathetic.

At least, it did until someone she'd never met tried to kill her.

It happened as she returned home from a day out in the city, meandering around the little boutiques, meeting friends and taking drinks in the more civilised caffeine outlets.

She entered her home, with its plush velvet sofas and thick red carpeting and sighed with relief as she took her shoes off.

She didn't notice the shape just behind her paisley-patterned curtains as she lit the fireplace, poured herself a glass of wine and sat down to sip it, looking pensively into the comforting undulation of the flames.

She had no warning - no inkling that anything was amiss - until the blade of a knife was at her throat and a man's husky voice was whispering in her ear "I know what you did to get here."

Someone was in her house! That was her first thought. The fact that this someone had come up behind her chair and pressed a knife to her throat barely registered. The real shock was that her little chunk of peace and privacy had been invaded.

"I... I don't know what you mean!" she protested.

"All the blood spilled; all the death and pain and suffering," the voice hissed. "Somebody has to pay."

“I haven’t done anything!” Mikona yelled as the knife pressed a little harder into the soft skin of her vulnerable neck.

“Of course you have, Stack Walker,” the voice of the man growled.

And just like that, her terrible situation made some sort of sense. She’d heard of the vigilante groups who hunted Stack Walkers, of course. They were the subject of some public debate. Stack Walkers weren’t above using violence - Mikona’s family hadn’t been at any rate - and the various groups who hunted them sought to repay that violence in kind.

“Look...” Mikona said carefully. “I’m *not* a Stack Walker. My family were, but that was a long time ago. I’m just a normal person- I just want to live out my life on *this* disc.”

“You have no right to be here!” the man snapped. “You blood-soaked little whore, get on your knees!”

He withdrew the knife from her neck and shoved her so she landed on her knees in front of the fire place.

For a moment, she wondered why he hadn’t simply slit her throat. Then he grabbed her hair and she understood with horrid and perfect clarity what he planned. He was forcing her forward and she knew that he meant to push her face into the scalding flames.

“Please!” she cried out, barely articulate now.

“Shut up!” her would-be murderer replied. “I’m going to cauterise your filthy line before you can breed any more Walkers.”

The fire was less than a finger’s length from Mikona’s face now.

It was funny, she reflected, how one never really thought of a fire as a collection of individually burning logs. It was a morass, devoid of individuation.

She wondered if this fatuous and utterly irrelevant thought was her brain’s way of distracting itself from her impending death - a psychological reflex against hopeless peril.

The analytical nature of her own thinking struck her, too.

She realised, with distant surprise, that she was calm. Her face was being forced into a crackling mass of agonising incandescence and yet she was calm.

Logs.

The thought presented itself to her again- just one word this time.

She had been using her hands to push back against the floor; to resist her attacker’s attempt to burn her alive.

Now, she reached out with one instead, barely realising what she was doing.

She reached into the flames, ignoring the smoky smell of her own sizzling skin, and wrapped her hand around one of the scalding logs.

A single, individual log, which blazed like a torch in her blackening hand.

“What do you think you’re doing?” snarled her attacker.

By way of an answer, Mikona flung herself downward, not caring that this brought her hair into contact with the fire; that the ends caught alight.

Her assailant hadn’t expected that move - it had the desired effect of releasing her from his grip. His hand still clutched a chunk of her hair, but now it was no longer connected to her scalp. She’d severed the connection.

She rolled onto her back and swung upwards with the log she still clutched.

It caught her attacker only a glancing blow, but the shock of it was enough to make him stagger and fall to the floor, crying out in pain.

He was a stockily built man in a plain suit. Mikona had never seen him before and had no idea how he’d found out about her family origins.

Not that it mattered. The calm she’d experienced before was still there, but now it was accompanied by a cool, diamond-hard desire to kill.

The man had invaded her home.

Before he could get up, she straddled him and raised the burning log high above her head.

“Please!” he said, echoing her own sentiment from mere moments before.

Mikona didn’t listen, she brought the log down on his face, over and over again until she felt his skull crack, then again for good measure, driving the fragments into his brain.

Finally, she cast aside the log and staggered to her feet. The fire in her hair was starting to kindle, so she staggered through to her bathroom and soaked herself in cold water. She retrieved bandages and ointment from her medicine cabinet and did what she could for her burned hand, then went back through to the living room.

Her cold pragmatism had departed, but it hadn’t been replaced by panic. Only numbness.

When she saw that her living room was ablaze - set alight by the log she had cast aside- she just stared dumbly for a moment, unable to muster the will to act.

Eventually, she stumbled to the door and let herself out of the apartment.

Many of her neighbours were gathered in the connecting hall.

“Mikona?” someone asked. “What’s going on?”

“Fire,” Mikona said simply, and found herself leading a confused escape party to the nearest exit.

By the time they reached the ground floor, the fire had spread and the whole building was starting to burn. Firefighters had arrived.

Mikona felt alone in the staring crowd.

Alone, but not unnoticed. There were men in plain suits watching her.

Vigilantes were rarely solitary.

For three days, Mikona moved from hotel to hotel, but every morning, the suited men were hanging around the lobbies, looking quizzically at her. It was only a matter of time before the next strike.

Fear came to rule Mikona's world. She took to sleeping in halfway houses and hostels far below her station or spending entire nights in dive bars. Anything to stay in view of other people; anything to prevent the men in the plain, identical suits from getting her alone.

She cut ties with her friends, fearing she would put them in danger.

In truth, she couldn't have said how long she spent in this state, roaming the ruby city, eternally hunted and perpetually fearful.

Then, one day, she found herself on the outskirts of the metropolis, between the true city and the concentric band of agricultural land that surrounded it.

In the distance, she saw something she'd never seen clearly before, because her view had always been blocked by skyscrapers and the clutter of the urban environment.

She saw the staircase that connected her disc to the one above.

For twelve days, she travelled, stopping in small towns and villages, her eyes forever darting around for pursuers.

At first, she saw many, but the route she took wasn't direct. It was zigzagging and gave no real indication that she was heading for the staircase. To any external observer, her movements must have seemed random and, eventually, she stopped seeing the plain suits of the enemy altogether.

When she was sure her pursuers had lost her, she headed directly for the staircase.

She expected it to be guarded by more vigilantes, but its base stood in the middle of a field that looked like it had been abandoned for longer than she'd been alive and there was no one nearby- not for as far as the eye could see.

Someone had erected a gate in front of it, with a sign that firmly stated 'NO TRESPASSERS'.

The lock, however, was rusted to the point of uselessness.

No wonder the vigilantes didn't bother to guard it, she thought. The stairs clearly hadn't seen a Stack Walker in hundreds of years. Perhaps more came up from below - which would explain her hunters - but none ever made it this far.

She broke off the lock with ease - the metal was practically dust before she ever laid a finger on it - and stepped through the gate.

Her breath caught in her throat as she choked back a sob, and she put her foot on the first step.

She had no idea how she'd protect herself if the people of the next disc up hated Stack Walkers as much as those on her current level. She had no idea how she'd sneak past any guards who might be stationed at the top of the stairs. All she knew was that she had put as much distance between herself and her pursuers as possible, and that meant doing what her ancestors had done.

She began to climb.

## 8,000 Years Ago

The last disc of the upper mid-Stack was a strange and beautiful one. Here, endless sands of sapphire blue stretched away in all directions and trees with multicoloured feathers in place of leaves sprang from the ground at irregular intervals. Great shards of mirror-glass jutted from the sands, towering many times higher than a man and making a fun-house maze of the pseudo-desert.

Upon seeing it for the first time, Konvar fell in love with it.

It was a place unlike any he had seen in his long travels. The rich colours and wild geometry of the landscape and its features appealed to his sense of the decadent and the surreal.

He was different from his ancestors. He didn't hope to reach the top of the Stack in his own lifetime. Enough Stack Walkers had gone before him for him to fully appreciate the sheer, mind-crushing scale of the world whose layers he moved through. Perhaps the settled generations that had ended with Mikona had also introduced a patience and relaxation that had been absent before. In any case, Konvar's mode of travel was less objective-oriented. He savoured every new disc he reached and spent time there. He knew, as soon as he laid eyes on the azure pseudo-desert that he'd be spending a great deal of time there before moving on.

It wasn't just his attitude that differed from that of his ancestors. His appearance was decidedly *other* too. His earliest antecedents had had the grey skin and glowing eyes of the Lower Dwellers. His more recent forebears had, through interbreeding, acquired a silvery skin that allowed them to pass as native mid-Stacksmen, albeit with lines of bioluminescent amber showing just below the surface of that skin. By some genetic fluke, Konvar's bioluminescence had spread from localised lines and suffused his entire skin, so that instead of silver it seemed to glow gold. His eyes had the same golden tint.

He was the first in the long line of Stack Walkers to pass unchallenged between discs, for the simple reason that nobody knew what he was and didn't feel comfortable making claims about where he belonged. He was something new; something *other*. Perhaps this, too, influenced his character. He was easy-going; charming in his fashion. This, of course, would play a role in the trajectory of his life, as it already had.

Konvar meandered through the deep blue pseudo-desert for days, plucking fruits from the feathered trees for food and trusting to the innate kindness of the land for his survival. He sheltered beneath the mirror-shards at night - he carried blankets in his backpack and the cold of the nights never touched him provided he put himself somewhere away from the wind.

He assumed that he was alone. Something about the disc bespoke emptiness; loneliness. It was a land where a man could wander undisturbed.

It therefore surprised him when, after fourteen days of aimless plodding, he came upon a camp comprising many colourful tents. Pennants hung between them, linking each to each. Men and women wandered between them or lay on rugs on the desert ground, sunning themselves.

What amazed Konvar was the mixture of levels they represented. Some were grey-skinned; others were silver; some were silver with the same lines of the glowing amber his forebears had possessed. They wore an array of costumes from a hundred discs, too. Some were in deeply coloured togas while others wore plain white robes. Some wore clothes made from the feathers of the trees while others were clad in hard-wearing tanned leather.

Konvar had always lacked reticence, leaning far more towards curiosity than wariness. He obeyed his first instinct without question and approached the camp.

It was here that his journey up the Stack ended.

“Greetings, stranger,” quoth a slender man, reclining lackadaisically on a rug outside the front of a tent. “I don’t recall seeing your face before?”

“I’m new to this level of the Stack,” replied, Konvar with a smile. “Try not to hold it against me.”

“Of course not,” returned the fellow. “But if you plan to stop awhile, you should do the polite thing and introduce yourself to the camp-khan.” He gestured towards the most grandiose of the tents, which was dyed deep, emerald green and decorated with gold filigree.

Konvar sauntered inside and knew, at once, that he would never leave the azure desert.

The woman in front of him, reclining on a plush throne, was the most beautiful he had ever seen.

Her eyes were the same brilliant emerald as the tent that served as her court and the face that framed them was one of soft, symmetrical poise. Her figure - held in check by flowing, multicoloured silks - was as lavish as her surroundings, plump and billowing. Her skin was neither grey nor silver, but had the colour of fine marble and the texture of fresh blossoms.

Konvar had no thought of romancing her. He was a wayward traveller and she a de-facto queen. Besides which, he knew nothing of her personality. It was simply that he couldn’t imagine leaving any place capable of producing such exquisite beauty.

“Hello, Stack Walker,” she said.

“Hello, stunning queen. How did you know what I am?” Konvar asked without embarrassment.

“We know our own,” replied the camp-khan.

“Everyone here is a Stack Walker?” Konvar asked, slightly amazed. He’d never encountered others like himself.

“Everyone here *was*,” the camp-khan said, amused. “But this level has become our home. Those above and those below see only a desert. Nobody wants it and nobody tries to stop us making a home here. Only exploration reveals the bounty of this place and only Stack Walkers explore. Thus, it belongs to us.”

“Can I stay?” Konvar asked.

“I was hoping you would,” the camp-khan replied. “I’ve never seen a man with golden skin before. You interest me.”

“I’ve never seen a woman with marble skin before,” he returned.

“My ancestors were going *down*, not up. What they were seeking I don’t know, but I have the skin of the people of the upper Stack. You, however... you don’t seem to belong to any level.”

Konvar shrugged eloquently: “I’m a genetic anomaly.”

“You’re a handsome genetic anomaly,” the camp-khan flirted.

What could have ended as flirtation, or ended a little later as a short-lived romance, persisted. The camp-khan - who went by the name of Shantivi - proved to be a match for Konvar’s easy-going frankness and relaxed character and their spark, once kindled, burned steadily.

Sometimes - perhaps once or twice a year - Konvar’s eyes would alight on a spiral of stone stairs in the distance: the passage to the next disc up, which was also the first disc of the upper Stack. For a moment, he would think about climbing it... but only for a moment. At first, it was simple love for Shantivi that stopped him. In later years, it was the need to stay and be a good father for his children. Eventually, one of them or one of their descendants would continue up the Stack. He wouldn’t live to see the next level, but someone of his line would. Strangely, this thought appealed to him more than seeing the upper Stack himself.

### **5,000 Years Ago**

Varnatine breathed raggedly and with great difficulty as she mounted the steps that led to the first level of the upper Stack. She was an old woman.

For three thousand years, her family had lived in the azure desert as rulers and figureheads. They had watched the tent encampments grow into towns of wood and then cities of stone. They had overseen the development of new technologies and new philosophies. The responsibilities of rulership had kept them tied to one piece of land. They were khans first, and the Stack Walker side of their heritage had been put on indefinite hold.

Then, last week, Varnatine had signed away the last of her power to the newly-elected parliament. Democracy had come to the desert and now, once again, the line that had started with Venon could continue its climb. They were nobodies once more, and as such were truly free.

Varnatine knew she wasn't going to climb far. She was almost certain, in fact, that she would end her days just one disc higher than where she started. But she was getting the ball rolling again, and that was what mattered.

She was eighty-nine years old and she leaned on the arm of her grandson, Tyno, as they worked their way up the stairs. This was as much his journey as hers and, one day, he would continue on in her stead.

"Do you need to stop, gran?" Tyno asked.

Varnatine shook her head. Her hair was the same marble-colour as her skin, from which all bioluminescence had long ago faded. Her eyes were milky and her skin hung loose on her. But she wasn't as weak as she looked.

"Don't insult me, boy," she chuckled. "When mid-Stacksmen from the level below us invaded and tried to claim our lands, these legs of mine kicked an insurgent to death, right in the throne-room. Believe me, they can manage one dusty old staircase."

"That was a long time ago, gran," Tyno pointed out.

"And yet, I remember it like it was yesterday," Varnatine grinned. "Did I ever tell you *why* those men invaded us?"

"Many times," Tyno sighed.

"Because we let anyone in!" Varnatine stopped to laugh, coughing as she did so. "They hated that we were as advanced as they were but we still gave safe harbour to Stack Walkers. Hated that we provided a waystation for those seeking enlightenment. Now ain't that something?"

"It certainly is," Tyno sighed. "I don't think I'll ever understand why so many people think climbing the Stack is wrong."

"They don't," Varnatine replied promptly. "If you're going up-Stack by a level or two to work, nobody gives a hoot. If you want to carve out a new life for yourself and spend money doing it, they're fine with that, too. What people hate is that Stack Walkers don't want anything from 'em. Walkers don't want to be tied to one place; don't want to settle into one society like regular folk. *That's* what people don't like."

"But why?" Tyno asked.

Varnatine stopped talking a moment to get her breath back rather than to think. She'd had years to think about it and she'd settled on a theory.

“People think jobs and houses and money and a good reputation all matter, but deep down, they know those things only matter if everyone *agrees* that they do. Stack Walkers don’t want any of it, and that scares people; it makes their lives seem less solid, I think. Or at least less meaningful.”

“You talk as though you’ve been a Stack Walker your whole life. Until last week, you lived in a palace,” Tyno laughed.

“Our family were never meant to be rulers,” Varnatine replied. “We were only ever keeping the throne warm until someone found a better way to run things.”

Tyno didn’t reply. The two of them were passing through the hole at the top of the staircase and about to enter the next level of the Stack.

There was a moment of tense silence. Neither of them knew what to expect.

When they emerged from the hole and stepped off the staircase, Varnatine could only let out a sigh of contentment.

The whole level onto which they had walked had been remade. Here, nature had been abolished and replaced by the will of sentient-kind. The floor was endless tiles of white and gold stone. Vast Corinthian-style pillars connected the disc to the one above it, though they couldn’t have been necessary for support. A row of small, deco tables stretched away for miles, connecting the top of the staircase to *somewhere*. Each table sported a small lamp that would keep the route lit, even at night.

To Varnatine, the whole thing looked like a hotel lobby, albeit one the size of a continent. The people who inhabited the upper Stack seemed to be opening their arms in welcome.

The old woman and her grandson followed the lamp-line for hours before reaching a huge desk of dark, reddish wood, inlaid with gold.

Behind it stood a smiling woman in a red uniform.

“Good afternoon,” she said pleasantly as they approached.

“Good afternoon,” Varnatine said. “What is this place?” The way she saw it, she was too old to waste time on pointless preamble.

“You’re at the entrance to the upper Stack, of course,” said the woman in the red uniform. “Is it just the two of you, or are we waiting on company?”

“It’s just us,” Varnatine said. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were here to check us in.”

“Not exactly.” The uniformed woman’s smile widened and Varnatine fancied there was something a little *off* about it. “I’m here to give you the warning. You should know that it’s the only warning you’ll be given, so you should pay attention.”

She seemed to be waiting for something, so Varnatine said “Go ahead, girly.”

“Of course, ma’am. It is not the official policy of any civilisation in the upper Stack to hunt or harm Stack Walkers. However, you should be aware that nobody will save you either. From this point on, it isn’t hostility you must fear, but indifference and environments that you are not equipped to

survive.” The woman’s smile was now *unnaturally* wide. Though her marble skin was the same as Varnatine’s, Varnatine was suddenly aware of some unspeakable difference between herself and the uniformed figure. “Have a nice day!”

“If nobody here cares whether we live or die, why have a formal warning?” Tyno asked, sounding baffled.

“If you turn back, it saves us paying someone to recover and dispose of your bodies,” the woman in uniform replied.

“Shall we go back down?” Tyno asked doubtfully.

“No,” replied Varnatine flatly. She’d made up her mind that she was going to die in the upper Stack. She’d initially assumed that it was going to be on the first level, but now she was too determined to stop after one short climb. “Madame, where’s the next staircase up?”

### **3,000 Years Ago**

Nyrin had spent his life learning that the inhabitants of the upper Stack were cruel. Not wilfully, deliberately cruel, but cruel on autopilot. He wasn’t the only Stack Walker to have made it to this height. Whenever he entered a city, he saw others of his kind - grey-skinned and silver-skinned - lying in the gutters, starving. There was no work for Stack Walkers here and no social provision for them either. Nobody stopped their advances, but sooner or later, they all succumbed to age and weakness.

The line of Stack Walkers that had led to Nyrin was unbroken all the way back to the recalcitrant khan, Varnatine, and they had survived, generation after generation, by providing the one service that the inhabitants of the upper Stack *did* want. It was also the only reason that there *were* successive generations. It was a compromise, but it had allowed them to make progress- slow, arduous progress-up the Stack.

Nyrin hadn’t believed his father’s warnings about the casual indifference of the upper Stacksmen; had always assumed that if he got into trouble, some kind and reasonable soul would take pity on him.

Two years previously, he’d nearly starved to death believing that.

The violent tendency that had started with Vymok was what saw him through. He turned to criminality to survive. Robbing on one level of the Stack and spending his money a few levels up.

Nobody questioned where he got his money. He had the marble skin of the upper Stack and he dressed the part- all sharp black suits and deep, crimson shirts. So long as he wasn’t caught in the act, he wasn’t stopped.

Now, he was in Last City, having just arrived via an unguarded stone staircase.

It was beautiful - soaring, baroque buildings carved of pale stone towered about him and every window was stained glass. Yet it did not impress him. He’d seen a hundred others just like it and

knew that, for all its externalised glory, there would still be men breathing their last in its gutters while the elegant and pampered walked past, oblivious.

The only aspect of the city that interested him was its name: Last City. His family had long ago climbed through the first third of the upper Stack. He must be nearing the end of the second third. Above and beyond this city, the landscape would be too wild for major settlements.

Things had already gotten strange. In his own lifetime, Nyrin had seen discs with seas of liquid gold that felt cool to the touch and discs where the trees grew upside down, reaching their roots in the air to form twisting, abstract horror-shapes. He'd seen discs where time seemed frozen and if he dropped something, it wouldn't fall but hang in the air.

The closer one got to the top of the Stack, the more the laws of physics broke down.

Last City was the last stable disc before the top; his last chance to encounter civilised life- or what passed for it in this zone of wealthy barbarism.

Nyrin went forth in search of a bar.

At night, the difference between Nyrin and a true upper Stacksman became apparent. His family line had never lost its bioluminescence and, in the darkness of the night or a poorly lit room, one could see countless colours playing just below his skin like a personal aurora. His father had told him that it was a genetic mutation, brought on by the family interbreeding with the inhabitants of so many different levels. What had once been a golden light had first grown to white and then broken down into a full spectrum of different hues.

Luckily, it rarely aroused suspicion. Actually, it served Nyrin well.

As he sat in an upmarket cocktail bar, sipping something sweet and blue beneath a complicated chandelier of nouveau inspiration, a dark-haired woman in a salacious black dress walked up to him with slinky poise.

"That's a beautiful implant," she said, referring to the colours that played beneath his skin. Like most people, she assumed he'd paid a plastic surgeon to install subdermal lights. Upper Stack society had reached such a point of decadence that a man undertaking such a procedure seemed entirely plausible.

"Thanks," Nyrin murmured, sweeping her with his gaze. "Nice dress."

"Thanks," she replied, mimicking his reply and the look he'd given her.

Nyrin signalled the barman, who placed a second cocktail in front of him. He slid it over one space, so that it sat in front of the empty seat next to him.

"On me," he told his new admirer.

She sat and swigged it back in one gulp before looking him right in the eye, saying "I didn't want to waste any time."

Later, Nyrin slid back into his suit in an anonymous hotel room. He'd done this before and knew the drill. He was expected to leave as soon as the act of intimacy was over. Upper Stacksfolk didn't like to allow time for physical intimacy to develop into any *other* kind. The possibility of connection terrified them.

The woman on the crisp, white double-bed behind him surprised him however.

"That was incredible," she said.

Once their needs were sated, most upper Stacksfolk just lit a cigarette and said nothing, waiting to see if their partner would leave or if they'd have to. It was the first time Nyrin had received feedback.

"So were you," he said experimentally.

He expected that to be the end of the anomalous, post-coital interaction, but the woman from the bar replied "Well, I try my best. What's your name?"

First a compliment and now a question- it was a night for firsts, Nyrin reflected.

"Nyrin," he replied. "You?"

"I'm Solathique," she replied. "Have you done this before? You seem like you've done this before."

"Hooking up? Yes. Talking about it afterwards? No. People usually expect me to clear out."

"Sorry."

"Don't be. It's nice to make an actual connection with someone for a change, no matter how brief."

Solathique giggled: "That's good. I thought I was showing my roots a little *too* much then."

Nyrin turned, puzzled, and for the first time recognised one of his own.

Solathique was from Stack Walker stock- the product of some other family line stretching back to the mid-Stack or even the nightmare world of the lowest levels. She didn't glow like he did, or exhibit any other signs of genetic aberration, but there was a cast to her face and a curiosity in her eyes that he never saw in the born-and-bred upper Stacksmen.

"You're..." he started, then simply said "Me too."

"Up or down?" she asked

"Up. You?"

"My family were going up, but when they realised they could pass, they stopped. We've been here for four generations."

"Do you *want* to be here?" Nyrin asked.

"No, but I'm afraid to continue into the wilderness alone." Solathique hung her head in shame.

"Together?" suggested Nyrin.

Solathique nodded.

The two Stack Walkers supplied themselves for a long trek and found their way to the stone staircase that led upwards the very next day. It took a long time to climb it. The space between the disc of Last City and the disc above was greater than previous gaps but, eventually, they reached the top and found themselves in a land of mountains.

It was cold here and there were clear signs that the laws of physics were in a state of breakdown. The snow that crunched beneath Nyrin and Solathique's feet sometimes rose as powder into the air and didn't come back down.

Birds flew across the sky but, every so often, one of them would hit a distorted patch of air and fly backwards, as though reversing through time. It would go backwards and forwards several times before the bubble of anti-time popped and it was able to continue.

It was a realm that resisted habitation with geography, climate and the perversion of natural law. But Nyrin saw at once that two determined Stack Walkers could survive here and find the next staircase. There were straggly trees that bore the bare minimum of fruit and plants that looked like the overground protrusions of edible tubers, sticking out of the thinner patches of snow.

"If we climb a mountain, we should be able to see the next staircase," Nyrin said.

Solathique nodded and slipped her hand into his.

Neither of them knew it, but it was the first time since the time of Venon that two Stack Walkers had travelled together.

### **1,000 Years Ago**

Somyn stood in the endless field of cubes. Each one was a mirror-silver box that hung in the air at a seemingly random height. They ranged in size. The smallest were no larger than a man's head. The largest were the size of mountains. There were millions of them and circumstances obliged Somyn to use them to cross the disc. The ground wasn't an option. It looked solid, but it wasn't. When he'd first reached this level, he'd put his foot on what looked like rock and met almost no resistance. It had parted and rippled like water and he'd nearly fallen through, all the way back to the disc below. He'd recovered his balance just in time, made a note of the aberration to natural law, and instead proceeded by climbing across the floating cubes.

The bizarreness of this level didn't overly perturb him. The level below was made of flowing, dancing fire with only a thin path of scalding hot stone to connect the top of one staircase to the bottom of the next. The level below that had been a utopia, abundant in edible crops and fresh water... however, it had also been filled with rends in the air itself, through which countless worlds could be seen. Somyn had considered stepping through and exploring, but something stopped him. The worlds

clearly weren't part of the Stack- weren't part of his universe at all- and there was no guarantee that the matter from which he was made could even exist in them.

No, strangeness wasn't new to Somyn. It didn't perturb him even slightly.

Yet he stood stock still, listening, perturbed by *something*. He had the notion that he was being *hunted*. Though he couldn't put his finger on what gave him the sensation, he was certain he was right.

Then, as if to confirm his suspicions, one of the cubes behind him exploded and *something* burst forth. It was no part of the natural world- of that, Somyn was certain. It resembled a triangular hole in the fabric of reality, but the interior of that triangle was full of sharp teeth - a spiral of them that formed a tunnel leading down to infinity.

The thing howled as it swept through the air towards him.

Somyn was fast, however. He leaped from cube to cube with the grace of experience, dancing across the floating forest of silver planes. The thing - the monstrosity that had no place in any physical universe- sped along behind him, its countless teeth glowing unnaturally and spinning like the tips of drills.

No matter how fast and dextrous Somyn was, he knew he couldn't outpace the creature indefinitely. His path was dictated by the geometry of his environment, whereas the triangular abomination could simply hurtle towards him along a straight line course, swallowing or shattering every cube it touched.

It was getting closer.

It didn't have *breath*, but Somyn could feel a sucking of vacuum at his back: the sensation of a pulling emptiness slowing him down and drawing him in.

Then, suddenly, he leaped up to a higher cube and there was the staircase upwards, right ahead of him.

He put on a fresh burst of speed, skidded across the final intervening cubes and hurled himself onto it. He began to sprint up the stairs as fast as he could with the creature hot on his heels.

The top came into view with merciful rapidity. Soon he would be on the next level - it was a matter of moments.

Then there was a searing pain in his ankle and when he tried to take the final step up to the next disc, he found there nothing on which to take that step.

Unable to engulf all of him before he reached safety, the geometric terror had bitten off his foot.

With a last burst of determination he *hopped* the final step and collapsed. He just had to hope the entity couldn't move between levels.

He looked about and experienced a wash of relief. The level was surreal, but less harsh and menacing than the ones immediately below. He was lying on an island, half-submerged in a beautiful turquoise sea- the staircase must have burrowed straight through the island bedrock without opening

a passage for the water. There were other islands around him- many of them - but they floated in the air rather than on the water. Some had trees; others had abstract stone structures.

On one of them was an encampment of tents. The Last City had been passed generations ago, but sentient life always found a way to create outposts.

Somyn passed out, hoping that someone would find him before he died of blood loss.

When he opened his eyes, he was staring up at the canvas of a plain, cheap tent. Someone had cauterised and bandaged his wound. In fact, Somyn could see the man responsible for this act of kindness.

He was no upper Stacksmen, that was for certain. The men and women who thought of themselves as upper Stackfolk weren't kind. He belonged to some other, unknown category of life. His eyes were orbs of white, devoid of iris and pupil, yet clearly somehow still capable of sight. His skin wasn't grey, silver or marble white: it was the colour of the night sky and seemed speckled with glittering impurities that imitated stars. He wore a white lab coat and a strange little bowtie that looked silly on him.

"So, young man," he said. "It seems your Stack Walking days are at an end. If you plan on continuing upwards, we'll have to call you a Stack Hobbler." He chuckled.

Somyn hadn't spent a lot of time around people, and humour was often lost on him. He stared blankly at the medic.

"You're wondering how I know you're a Walker, of course," the man said, mistaking the look of mystification on Somyn's face. "Nobody else sports such unusual genetic anomalies. Skin as white as snow that glows with subdermal effulgence? Only on a Stack Walker, my friend."

"Where am I?" Somyn asked.

"An outpost, established by we few who reside at the top of the Stack," the medic said. "We find it wise to make sure the breakdown in the laws of physics is stable. So far it hasn't crept any further down the Stack, but there's a first time for everything."

"What caused it?" Somyn asked, sitting up.

"The footsteps of Metaphysicals- beings that were never meant to walk the corporeal plane," the medic replied. "Hold still- I need to administer a morphine injection."

Somyn permitted the man to apply a needle filled with colourless liquid to his neck, then asked "Metaphysicals?"

"What? Did you think corporeal reality is all there is?" the medical man chuckled. "You're looking for enlightenment, aren't you? The pure knowledge that resides at the top of the Stack? Well, where did you think it came from? It's not like mortals have a clue what's going on. Of course, you probably

don't realise what a foolish errand you're on. Before you ask for perfect enlightenment, you'd be well-served to ask a more pragmatic, mundane question."

"What question?" Somyn asked. The morphine was taking effect. His head was starting to swim.

"What is the Stack?" replied the doctor.

Somyn tried to say something in reply, but the drug was doing its work and he fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Later, when Somyn awoke again, he learned that the medic's name was Fullerac and that he was part of a team of some seventy individuals who had taken a one-way trip to reach their current level. Going *down* from the top was easy, he said, but if his people ever wanted to go back *up*, they'd have to starting hiking like Stack Walkers themselves.

Somyn asked Fullerac what he'd meant by the question 'What is the Stack?' and Fullerac smiled at him.

"Just that," he said. "You don't even know what kind of universe you inhabit, yet you're looking for knowledge that goes far beyond one universe. How do you really know if you want it when you have so little to base the decision on."

"You could tell me," Somyn pointed out. "You could tell me what the Stack is."

"I couldn't!" Fullerac laughed.

"Why not?"

"Because I don't know either - and I'm happy not knowing. Some knowledge can only bring pain."

Following this conversation, Somyn made the decision to stop his climb. Some future generation might continue upwards - in fact, it was almost certain - but he'd lost his appetite for enlightenment.

### **500 Years Ago**

What was the Stack? That question had haunted Mynal's family for five long centuries and now she had to confront the fact that she would *not* be the one to find the answer. The climb up the Stack had resumed with Somyn's son, Sobrys, but it had been difficult and arduous and many generations had come and gone. Now Mynal, too, was going to die without getting an answer and without receiving enlightenment.

At least, she reflected, the line was secure. Her children- ten or so levels back- would continue the climb when they came of age. Now, all that was left for her to do was let go. She was lying in a pool of her own blood and she wouldn't last much longer.

How had she gotten to this point?

It had been the hermit, of course. She'd found him in the cave where she was now spending her last breaths, the dance of lights of her bioluminescence going dark beneath her night-hued skin.

She'd heard rumours at one of the outpost camps that a man resided on this level who had been told what the Stack really was.

How he'd come by this information was anyone's guess, given that he was too far from the top of the Stack and enlightenment to have gotten it first-hand. What was known was that it had caused him to go into seclusion in a cave whose walls pulsed with strange blue light.

The level itself was a harsh one, all brittle desert and endless rocks, punctuated only by cool caves for relief. Sometimes, the sands formed towering shapes of horrible aspect before collapsing back into the desert as though nothing had happened - another sign of the breakdown of physical laws. Despite this, Mynal had diverted from her straight-line course to the next staircase to seek out the hermit.

She'd asked him what he knew and explained that she was on a quest to receive enlightenment.

The hermit had become increasingly agitated and she knew, now, that she should have fled. Instead, she'd pushed her luck, begging for answers... and gotten a broken-off stalagmite through her guts for her trouble.

The hermit had whispered as she died "If you knew what I knew, you'd thank me."

Even as she died, Mynal found the energy to reflect on what a stupid thing this was to say to a murder victim.

### **100 Years Ago**

Melrob knew he was close to the top of the Stack in large part because the discs were getting smaller. Viewed from a sufficient distance in space, he imagined that the top layers of the Stack would form a cone. No longer did he have to cross continent-sized expanses to find the next staircase and the next - the distance was down to half what it had once been, even in his own lifetime.

The other thing that tipped him off was how extreme the break-down was. More and more often, he had to circumnavigate beams of light where the ground itself sublimated directly into photons. More and more often, the rain fell in the wrong direction. More and more often, he was chased by monsters that were little more than two-dimensional shapes filled with teeth: they appeared out of thin air and gave him trouble on the loneliest levels of the Stack.

But Melrob wasn't disturbed by any of these issues. The men he met at outposts assured him that the break-down wasn't getting any worse: things had always been thus at this height in the Stack. It was to be expected. After all, he walked in the footsteps of Metaphysicals.

After years of travelling, however, he did eventually come upon something that managed to surprise him- something he'd never expected to see.

He stepped off the top of a staircase one day and found himself in a city.

It was a strange type of city, the one in which he stood. The buildings floated freely above a shimmering ocean of quicksilver and were vertically symmetrical, so that they had spires and crenellations depending from their undersides as well as adorning their tops. Men with night-black, starry skin moved between them on floating platforms of gold, wearing robes of many dark and lustrous hues that billowed about them.

He looked down at himself.

His skin was like theirs, except that a riot of colour blazed just beneath it. His family's bioluminescence, which had only grown stronger with each generation.

He didn't dress like the people of this city, however. Where they wore graceful robes, he wore only a light shirt and trousers, with a backpack slung over one shoulder.

He was on the only solid landmass in the entire quicksilver ocean, which was just a pillar of gold through which the staircase was drilled. It occurred to him that he had no idea how to proceed. Thus, he stood where he was for a long time before deciding on a course of action.

"Excuse me!" he called to one of the men on the floating discs. "Can I trouble you for a lift?"

"You're a Stack walker?" the fellow asked, floating down next to him.

"Yes," replied Melrob. "What is this place?"

"Just a place for people to live," replied the robed man airily. "Though for you, of course, it has a more special significance."

"How so?" Melrob asked, perplexed.

"We've long had a tradition of showing hospitality to Stack Walkers - the few who make it this far that is. In fact, you have the right to ask a question in the Hall of Answers. Just one, mind, so make sure you ask something you really need to know."

"Why only one?" Melrob inquired, hoping that this didn't count as his question. Presumably not - he wasn't in the Hall of Answers.

"It focuses the mind. Being told to ask just one thing forces you to dispense with the trivial and the fatuous. Consider it part of your training for enlightenment, if you're still set on that fool's errand."

"I am. And do you mean to tell me that *I'll* be the one to finally reach it?"

The robed man shook his head: "No. A couple more generations yet, I think. We couldn't build the city any closer- the landscape is too barren from here on up, just as it is between here and Last City. Though, if Last City knew about us, one has to assume they wouldn't call themselves that." He laughed out loud at his own joke.

“But we’re close?” asked Melrob.

“Very close... cosmically speaking,” replied the robed man. “Shall I take you to the Hall of Answers now?”

Melrob swallowed awkwardly and nodded.

On the flight to the Hall, it dawned on him that he was in the midst of a civilisation of almost infinite advancement and refinement; a culture that had learned to use the breakdown of physical laws to its advantage and which had created technology and a bustling, beautiful urban wonderland that those lower down could barely imagine. Yet these people didn’t bring their marvellous machinery any lower. They knew about Last City, which meant they must know about the cruelty of the upper Stacksmen. Presumably, then, they also knew how mid Stackfolk sometimes hunted or abused Stack Walkers and worked to keep the Lower Dwellers down. They must, therefore, know about the suffering of the Lower Dwellers, who capitulated in their own plight out of desperation, trying to stop others from rising above them.

Yet these elegant, robed men did nothing.

Melrob was too many generations distant from the lower Stack to feel the betrayal personally. It was all ancient history to him - something partly preserved in the oral tradition of his line and partly absorbed through tomes that others had written, and which sometimes turned up at the outposts. Thus, he wasn’t enraged, but he did resolve, in his slow, patient way, not to entirely trust the city or its people.

The Hall of Answers turned out to be a golden palace of elegant, not-quite rococo design. Though palatial in decoration and shape, it was still smaller than Melrob had expected. Then again, it really only needed a single room.

Inside that echoing room, there was only a simple wooden desk with an elderly man sat behind it.

He had some sort of device in front of him, which Melrob could only assume fed him information in response to questions.

“A Stack Walker?” he croaked as Melrob approached. “Haven’t seen one of you in a few years. Or is it decades?” He paused, then asked “You know the rule, yes? One question and one question only?”

“Yes,” Melrob said.

“Then ask it,” the old man replied.

“What is the Stack?” Melrob asked.

The old man took a deep breath, and provided him with a *comprehensive* answer.

The Stack, the old man said, comprised an estimated one million discs, narrowing to a point towards the top. Of course, since no one person could walk *all* of them and the gaps between discs varied, this estimate *could* be wildly inaccurate, but it was the closest anyone could get. It orbited a spherical star elliptically, so that most of the levels got *some* daylight, but those at the top got the most. Below its lowermost level was a gravity well that kept everything pulling downward and ensured that nobody went flying off into space. It was part of a wider universe that appeared to be abundant in stars but devoid of other planetary matter. That is to say, it was the only solid, habitable place in its universe.

This, of course, described the Stack physically, but not other important details. Those, the old man also shared. The Stack, he said, seemed to have been created by Metaphysicals. That is to say, it didn't come about naturally, as the result of ordinary cosmic processes. Rather it was summoned into being by the powerful wills of non-corporeal entities acting directly to create something.

They had done all this seemingly just to place something at the top of the finished structure-something that mortals came to think of as enlightenment.

This naturally raised the issue of why the Metaphysicals who created the Stack hadn't simply created one level and set enlightenment in it like a jewel in a ring. The countless other levels had to be *for* something.

Having realised this, the academic community had come up with two competing theories about the Stack's true purpose. First, that the top levels were meant to be almost inaccessible while the lower levels were easier to reach. Ergo, enlightenment would be protected from all but the most determined explorers, whether they evolved in-universe or elsewhere. The whole of the rest of the Stack would serve as distraction and a deterrent from anyone actually *looking for* enlightenment. This theory implied that enlightenment, whatever it was, was dangerous and that it wasn't *meant* be looked at or received; that the Metaphysicals themselves had deemed its knowledge so hazardous that they hadn't wanted to keep it in their incorporeal domains. The second theory simply stated that the Stack was a test to make people worthy of enlightenment, and it was widely ridiculed as dewy-eyed nonsense. No, the first option was far more likely - that enlightenment was not a desirable state of being and that it had been put on the high shelf of the Infinite by beings who knew better than to leave it within easy reach of impressionable mortals.

"Knowing all that, may I ask a question?" the old man requested.

"Sure," Melrob agreed, a little hesitantly.

"Do you still mean to continue the journey towards enlightenment? There's a high probability that it will simply obliterate your mind- or the mind of your child's child - and leave them a helpless vegetable... but you are one driven by curiosity. What wins? Curiosity or self-preservation?"

Looking at the sparkle in the old man's eyes, Melrob got the queasy feeling that he was being viewed as some obscene species of science experiment.

There was, however, one trait that had persisted along his family line ever since Venon took his first steps towards the top of the tower: brute stubbornness.

"I'll continue," he said.

## **Now**

After twenty thousand years, the end was finally within reach. The disc on which Emblem stood was the size of a small field and it was filled with strange metal flowers, their leaves so sharp that, if he fell into a patch of them, he'd be ripped to ribbons. But he wasn't going to fall into them. He'd already picked his way through them to the first step of the final staircase. Above him there was only one more disc, on which enlightenment itself could be found. From his present vantage, it looked barely bigger than a large garden, yet it contained the most precious treasure in all existence. Or, at least, he believed it did. Some said the state of enlightenment might be a terrible thing. His own grandfather, Melrob, had warned of the possibility. But Emblem believed what his ancient ancestor had believed: that enlightenment meant the meaning of life; that he was about to learn the final truth of all existence.

He cut a strange figure - half barbarian and half poet. That final generations had been difficult ones, but also romantic, hopeful ones as the millennia-long quest neared its conclusion.

His skin glowed continually with so many different colours and so brightly that it was impossible to determine his actual skin tone. His eyes were orbs of brilliant gold and his lightning-white hair was long and flowing. Yet, for all the romance of his base appearance, he wore only ragged trousers and carried a blood-stained axe on his back. He'd encountered hermits like the one who killed his forebear, Mynal. They had all been as mad as that one had been, too.

Now, however, he unslung the axe and let it fall the ground. Every fibre of his being told him it would not be needed. He began to climb to the final flight of stairs.

The landscape of the final disc was, paradoxically, beautiful and full of death. Everywhere there were skeletons, yet flowers and blossoming vines grew around them like trellises. The grass, nourished by the corpses, was sweet-smelling and turquoise in hue. There was a golden tint to the sky, too, now that there were no additional discs between the point of observation and the sun.

At the centre of all this death and sublime natural elegance was a tree of more branches than Emblem could count. It bore no fruit, but pink and white blossoms fell from it in a continual rainfall of soft colour.

To Emblem's surprise, he was not alone on the final disc.

A decrepit-looking man, dressed in the rags of the lower Stack, was watering the tree with a beaten-up watering can. He whistled quietly to himself as he worked.

Emblem approached him in silence and then stood close enough to catch his attention but far enough away to appear respectful.

After a time, the man stopped work and swept his grey hair out of his face.

Emblem looked at that face but couldn't seem to fix on a single detail of it. It *had* eyes, a nose and a mouth, but he couldn't have told you what colour or shape any of them were. There was something about the man that seemed to defy physical observation.

He didn't ask if Emblem was a Stack Walker. He didn't ask what he wanted. He took all that as read and simply asked "Are you sure you want to go through with this, lad? These bodies aren't here coincidentally."

"What happened to them?" Emblem asked, quietly.

"Enlightenment happened to them. They got what they were looking for - the meaning of life - and then they sat or laid down and just never got up again. Knowing the answer to the final question seems to have that effect on people - they just give up."

"Are you a Metaphysical?" Emblem asked. It seemed like an obvious question.

"I was. Somebody had to fall in order to stay on the corporeal plane and keep an eye on the meaning of life. Now I'm neither one thing nor the other - neither of the High Realms nor of the physical world. But that's by the by - you never answered my question."

Emblem looked around at the bodies and, for the first time in his life, felt doubt. Enlightenment was exactly what he'd always thought it was - the meaning of life. The Metaphysical had told him as much. But, despite being exactly what he'd hoped for, it had still killed many.

He looked back over his shoulder towards the stairs that led downwards and imagined himself quietly retreating.

The idea was repellent; almost unthinkable. Twenty thousand years and generations beyond counting had brought him to the top of the Stack. A yearning for knowledge that had transcended a single life and become the purpose of an entire bloodline had driven his family since time immemorial. To turn back now would be a betrayal, even if accepting his prize was sure to kill him.

"How do I receive enlightenment?" he asked.

"Look at the base of the tree," said the Metaphysical.

Emblem did and saw, nestling at the very bottom of its trunk a small stone bowl. The tree had grown over the years and its wood had pushed *over* the bowl, but half of it still protruded.

It was filled with liquid light - a glowing white water that danced and shone with an energy all its own.

“Do I drink it?” asked Emblem, feeling a little foolish.

“Just touch it,” replied the Metaphysical. “It’s knowledge, distilled to a corporeal state. Pure information. Just dip your finger in - a little goes a long way.”

Emblem took a deep breath, stepped up to the bowl and, with his hand shaking, touched the surface of the water with the very tip of his finger.

The effect was instantaneous and overwhelming.

It was as though a door opened in Emblem’s memory and *everything* came pouring out. First, he remembered every single detail of his own life with perfect clarity - every disc he had ever seen and every conversation he had ever had were suddenly accessible to him with the ease of turning to a folded page in a book. But then the memories kept coming, going beyond the mere photographic. He remembered *being* his father, whose genetic material had gone to make him, and likewise his mother. Likewise their mothers and fathers, and theirs, and theirs, and so on back through the generations: the lives of countless men and women were suddenly *his* lives. And why not? They were part of him. From their existence, his existence had been distilled.

Among this endlessly expanding kaleidoscope of lives, one particular sequence stood out- a direct line of descent dating back to a man named Venon, who lived in a nightmare but dared to look upwards and seek meaning. The Stack Walker part of his heritage stood out louder and clearer than all the other lives, telling the most compelling story.

He remembered living in squalor but accepting it because he knew nothing else. He remembered the hard labour of the generations of farmers and land-workers that had followed until one of his ancestors shirked their supposed duty and took up the quest once more. He remembered being comfortably well-off as Mikona and ruling as Varnatine. He remembered the cool ease with which Nyrin had accepted the misfortune of those in the gutters he walked past and Melrob’s compassion to all who suffered. He remembered mistrusting the city of the robed men and he remembered having lived his own life, in which he’d never seen a city of any kind.

He saw it all - the whole trajectory from the lowest disc of the Stack to the highest. He lived again Venon’s first glimpse of hospitable farmland after a life lived on bare, unforgiving rock. He savoured the sight of the azure desert as Konvar. He thrilled at the chase Somyn had experienced through a forest of floating cubes and felt the fear of it once again. Discs surreal and gorgeous flashed through his mind, along with every choice that had been made on them and every thought that had been had on them.

And they had all brought him here.

But, he realised with dismay, the trajectory was neither noble nor heroic. The history of his Stack Walker heritage was filled with blood and violence and living through harsh situations by dumb luck rather than skill or goodness.

He had arrived at the top of the Stack not because he belonged to a line that deserved, uniquely, to be there, but because he belonged to a line that had gotten lucky over and over and over again.

It struck him like a hammer blow.

He had sought the meaning of life and now it was obvious: there wasn't one. The people in the city of robed men had been right. The secret of the meaning of life had been tucked away because to know it was only to know it did not exist. Such knowledge was not survivable. Nothing *meant* anything. The universe - the Infinite itself - was cruel, random and arbitrary and only measured success by who lived longest and reproduced most prolifically.

With this crushing epiphany, he was released from the constricting embrace of memory and understanding and was once more back at the tree, with his finger just touching a bowl of liquid light.

"If you're going to sit down and die now, would you mind doing it over there? Your remains will rot down to *wonderful* soil for my roses," said the Metaphysical, pottering about somewhere behind him. "I did try and warn you that you might not like what you found in there."

Emblem's hand dropped to his side and he stared vacantly into space.

It was over. The quest was over and it had ended in the most abysmal disappointment possible.

"No." Emblem hadn't been aware he was going to speak until he did.

"No what?" asked the Metaphysical, absent-mindedly.

"No!" Emblem said again, louder this time.

He tilted his head back to the sky and screamed it: "NO!"

It wasn't a cry of despair. It was a repudiation. He refused to accept what he had been told; refused to lie down and die because there was nothing left to do and because others before him had done that.

If the Stack Walker line to which he belonged had one defining trait, it was stubbornness.

He'd come for the meaning of life, and he wasn't going to take 'there isn't one' for an answer.

There had to be more. He'd barely touched the distilled knowledge of enlightenment. Surely, such a small touch couldn't reveal the whole truth.

He took a deep breath and plunged his face into the liquid light.

And this time, he got a *good* answer.

Once more, Emblem remembered everything. Once more, he saw every life his genetic line had ever lived. Once more, he saw how arbitrary and chaotic it all was. But this time, there was a sense of something else; something deeper.

When he re-experienced Venon's first sight of liveable farmland, the joy he felt wasn't *just* joy- it was a bestowing of that joy onto the land. When he once more felt Vymok kill the first man to bar his way, it wasn't just a senseless act of murder. Instead, he experienced it as a struggle for an inalienable right; a battle for the justice that had long been denied the Lower Dwellers. When Konvar came together with the khan of the azure desert, it wasn't just an act of physical intimacy, it was love-making in the most literal sense: the creation of love. When Varnatine chose to abandon her rule, it wasn't just the last act of an old woman wanting to move on, it was the birth of a new system of government that would, she had hoped, be better. When he himself chose to partake of enlightenment, it wasn't just from lack of options - it was the closing of a story his family had been telling with their actions since Venon took his first step upwards.

And Emblem understood. A sunset wasn't beautiful until somebody watched it. Love only mattered because people made it matter. Sacrifice wasn't noble until someone enacted the belief that it was. Violence was just violence until it was motivated by a concept of justice. A life was just a series of events until someone saw the story in it.

Life didn't *have* meaning, because life *created* meaning. The farm on which Venon had lived out his life would only be land if it wasn't for Venon. The meaning 'home' had been ascribed to it. Konvar and the khan could have ignored their attraction to each other and continued as Stack Walker and ruler respectively, but they had applied the meaning 'love' to each other and that had made them more. All the strange things Somyn had seen would have been lost, meaningless fragments of a broken universe if Somyn hadn't born witness to them. *Because* he had seen them, they represented beauty or fear or exhilaration.

With every emotion a sentient being felt; with every step they walked; with every breath they breathed, they gave life to a universe that would be inert and purposeless without them. Life was the engine of meaning; the thing that created it and inscribed it and kept it vibrant.

The first time he had received enlightenment, Emblem had been too tentative, too scared. Thus, he'd only seen the events, not the story they told. The second time, motivated by desperation, he'd taken the plunge and seen the truth beyond the facts. He was, he realised, free. He had the same freedom as everyone else, only he was now consciously aware of it. He was free to create his own meaning.

He brought his head up from the bowl of liquid light, laughing with sheer, uncontrollable delight.

After it was all over, and he'd manage to get his sudden surge of ecstasy under control, Emblem spoke with the Metaphysical who tended to the meaning of life.

"There are still a few things I'm curious about," he said.

“You just received perfect and pure enlightenment straight from a fragment of pure knowledge placed in the Corporeal realm by beings as old as time. What could you *possibly* still be curious about?” the Metaphysical asked, though he sounded amused rather than irritable. In truth, his indeterminate face was cracked by a broad grin. It was clearly a long time since he’d seen anyone take the plunge into full enlightenment - most people gave up and died after dipping a finger in.

“Why *did* your people create the Stack?” Emblem asked. “Was it meant to keep people away from enlightenment or prepare them for it.”

“Neither. We didn’t create the Stack,” the Metaphysical replied. “The odds of the Stack coming into being randomly are infinitesimal, but in an infinite multiplicity of cosmoses, such as the one we live in, even the least likely phenomena exist somewhere. Despite what the academics of this universe think, we didn’t build the Stack, we just found it.”

“So why did you put enlightenment here?” asked Emblem.

“As I recall, the thinking back in the High Realms was that this universe needed a kick up the arse,” replied the Metaphysical, rather more prosaically than Emblem had expected. “Have you *seen* your species’ social structures? If anyone needs a dose of enlightenment, it’s probably you lot. But most of you aren’t ready for it. Hence the skeletons.”

Emblem laughed. The dead around him no longer seemed melancholy or brooding - just silly.

“You don’t help by telling people to only dip a finger in, you know,” he pointed out.

“Well, taking the plunge has to be the individual’s choice, otherwise it doesn’t mean much, does it?” replied the Metaphysical with a shrug. “What will you do now.”

Emblem thought about it then asked “How powerful are you? I mean, your footsteps permanently bent the laws of physics, but how much of that energy do you retain?”

“Enough to put you wherever you feel you need to be,” the Metaphysical replied.

“Then I want to go back to the bottom of the Stack. The very bottom. The people down there are *my* people- I still remember being Venon, and now I feel bad for leaving them. Besides if life creates meaning, then those people down there, who create it under the worst conditions, are more valuable than a million upper Stacksmen. I think it’s about time somebody told them that.”

“Sounds like revolutionary talk to me,” the Metaphysical said.

“Perhaps it is,” Emblem replied and his new friend snapped his fingers.

### **Now: The Lowest Disc**

A young boy sat in the centre of a crowded shanty town, looking up at the disc above and wondering what it might be like up there. He’d heard that, if someone could climb high enough and reach the top of the Stack, they could be rewarded with the meaning of life.

Suddenly, his thoughts were interrupted by a crashing roar of thunder.

The people all around him dropped what they were doing and all stared in one direction - some crying out and some whispering.

The boy couldn't see what was going on, so he tugged at an adult's sleeve and said "Lift me up!"

The man was so engrossed by whatever was happening, however, that he didn't even notice the young lad trying to get his attention.

The boy began to push his way through the staring crowd, which was growing more and more hushed by the moment; every conversation and shout of joy or terror drying up.

At last, the young boy came to the front of the crowd and saw what all the fuss was about.

There was a man standing at the edge of the shanty town. He glowed every imaginable colour and his eyes were brilliant gold.

"20,000 Years Ago, I left this place as a man named Venon, seeking the meaning of life," the many-hued man said. "I found it, and now I'm ashamed. The first time I left, I rose above you. Now, I realise that I have to rise *with* you."

The boy didn't understand the strange man's words, but for reasons he couldn't express, they filled him with hope.

*The End*