

THE
SOURCE

A SHORT STORY
BY COLBY DUNN

THE SOURCE

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You go to sleep like every other day and when you wake up, it's happened. Nobis

awoke to find it was all true.

As the sunrise crested the high trees of the forest at the edge of the village, a beam of light lanced through his circular window and onto his face as though it were excitedly jerking him awake. He stirred and sat up to the sound of birds outside, rubbing the sleep from his eyes as he looked around his small room in a stupor. When he reached to pull the sheets away from him, his heart froze.

His right hand was bright red.

Had he somehow cut himself in the night? No- that wasn't it. His curved troll-hunting knife lay safely on his night stand in its sheath. He had fantasized of this day many times, but he had not been foolish enough to hope it would ever really happen. But it had...this was it. This was real. The Source had chosen him and he was favored. Rare as it was...he was favored!

He held his hand in front of his face and carefully twisted it from palm to back, inspecting it up and down with wide eyes of awe and a broad smile. He moved his fingers and could feel something different. His palm tingled but was not uncomfortable, coursing faintly. He touched it with his left and rubbed it slowly. He knew the bright coloring would not smear or come off, but he had to check just to be sure this was really happening. It was.

He leaped from his bed and looked around the room, pointing his hand around at the walls and trinkets on his dresser, imitating the magics he had seen others do. His mind raced. Could he summon fire? Could he levitate objects? He wasn't sure how to do any of these things, but he knew one thing for certain: the favored called upon the Source.

He steadied himself and closed his eyes, imagining the dark mass of nothingness sleeping peacefully on the horizon of the islands. He pictured himself walking through the foliage of the woods to the coast and gazing out over the sea at that mysterious, inaccessible void. He tried to imagine the power flowing from it through the waters and seeping into his feet on the sand. He had heard his father and uncle speaking of it this way. He had heard them speak of practicing focus and calm until it became second nature.

Despite his twelve-year old mind feeding him images of fighting trolls with magic-imbued swords or flying over the island in a string of lightning, he tried to quell his excitement and concentrate. He felt a flicker - something that burst from his core and flew up to his fingertips. Hastily, he threw his hand up toward his mirror which knocked and gently swayed on the wall as if something had tapped it. His heart jumped.

Wow! How about that? It worked! I did it!

Unable to contain his excitement any longer, he threw open his bedroom door and raced down the hall toward the entry room, hardly noticing the smells of breakfast meat over the hearth. He leaped down all six stairs at the end of the hall and landed with a hard thud that shook the dishes on the table where his mother, father, uncle and aunt sat eating and talking quietly. They stopped with food halfway to their mouths and turned, looking at Nobis in surprise. The young boy stayed

crouched in his landing position with his right hand hidden behind his back and a broad, mischievous smile on his freckled face.

“What in the heavens are-” his mother started but stopped short as she began to understand. His father stood from the table smiling while his aunt and uncle exchanged grins of expectation.

Nobis let them muse for a moment then stood tall and swung his newly-crimson hand out in front of him in a triumphant fist.

“Oh, my dear boy!” Mother cried as she stood and clapped excitedly. Her words were washed out by Father’s cheerful bellow.

“Oi! Would you look at that! Come on over here and let me see it!”

Nobis raced to the table, and his family gathered around.

“Just look at that hue!” his mother admired. “Such a deep red, isn’t it?”

“Yes it is, my dear! Yes, it is!” Father roared excitedly as he took Nobis’s hand and placed it against his own, comparing the two. “Almost as red as mine, and still just a lad! Would you look at that?” he repeated to his brother. Nobis’s uncle moved in and joined his red hand with theirs, ruffling the young man’s hair with the other.

“Oh, how simply wonderful!” his aunt was saying as she took his proud mother’s hands. “What splendid timing to happen while we’re visiting this side of the island!”

“I moved my mirror!” Nobis yelled. “Just now! I felt for the Source just like you always say and I did it!”

Father laughed but was clearly impressed.

“Of course you did! It may be rare for others, but our family has a long history of being favored by the Source. We are strong!”

Father threw his thick arm out toward the hearth with red palm open. The fire inside danced and then shot across the room, ending in a ball in his grip as though it were an apple.

“Why, in my day, I killed hundreds of trolls to keep this island safe! Hundreds! We were famed across the isles, weren’t we?” he said to his brother. Nobis’s uncle nodded.

“We certainly were!”

In reply, his uncle’s red hand emerged and coaxed a stream of liquid to rise from his mug until it pooled into a thick chunk of ice that his fingers could grip. He jumped back and launched the ice at his brother playfully. Father threw his fire at the projectile, and when the two forces of manipulated nature met in the air, they burst and showered into a blast of embers and water, winning aggravated moans from the women. Mother had to bring them back from their glory days.

“Now, now,” she said shaking her head, “you two are acting like children. This is about Nobis! Come and finish breakfast.”

After the fantastic display, Nobis was ready to burst with excitement. They threw power around so easily! They accessed the Source seemingly without any thought or effort. He wanted that. He had to have that!

“Yes, you’re right, my dear,” father said. “But son, you know what this means for you. You will not be working with me today. You must go to the elder immediately to receive your charge.”

The women and his uncle had taken their seats again, and his father finally calmed. He bent to one knee so he could look his son in the eye and speak to him in a somber whisper.

“The Source gives us all we need to protect our islands and live in prosperity. It is a great blessing that you can now be proud to wield. It is a great responsibility yes, but it is also a joy that many never experience! Learn of it and use it to your heart’s content! Call upon the Source anytime you wish - all the time, and let it fill your life with happiness! Its powers are limitless and never-ending and will never fail you!”

Nobis smiled and nodded emphatically.

“Now,” father continued, “hurry to dress and eat so you can be off without delay.”

Nobis needed no further encouragement, darting back toward his room as fast as he had come. The next few minutes were a blur of excitement. As he pulled on his trousers and fastened his troll-hunting knife to his belt, he tried again to bump his mirror from across the room, but this time his over-eagerness caused him to fail. He shrugged with optimism. He would soon see the elder and receive his charge, and then the Source would flow freely. Oh, the wonderful things he could do with it! As he rushed back down the hall toward the front of the house, he thought on the words his father had spoken. He had never heard the Source spoken of quite like that: a responsibility, but also a luxury he could freely enjoy. What sort of games could he come up with using it? What tricks could he perform for his mates?

When he emerged and approached the table again, the sun was shining fully through the windows, and his mother turned from where she had been readying his breakfast.

“Oh my, how old you look!” she said proudly, taking in the moment. Nobis hardly noticed and grabbed the meat off the plate to eat as he went, dancing the hot food in his fingers.

“I’m off then!” he announced.

Nobis emerged from his home into the streets of the village and viewed the world in a whole new light. The paint on the fences seemed more vibrant, the sun’s gleaming reflections off the fishing hooks lining his neighbors’ homes more enthusiastic. Even the distant sound of the sea seemed to carry on the wind more playfully than before. The world was his for the taking! The trees surrounding them obscured any sight he would have from his home of the Source, but he knew which direction the dark shape slept and looked its way, smiling and nodding to it in his mind as a new acquaintance.

Hurriedly he trotted down the lane toward the shore and the elder’s hut, but he didn’t get far before the tinker, who lived three cottages down, shouted out to him. He had been out working his tools and did a double-take at the lad’s red hand which proudly swung at his side as he walked.

“Well, I’ll be!” he shouted from behind his log fence, “Young Nobis, you haven’t gone and painted yer hand again, have ya?”

“No, sir!” Nobis replied, puffing up his chest. “I’m off to see the elder now!”

“Well, praise the Source!” the tinker laughed, echoing the announcement to his wife who was still inside. “Oi, my love! Little Nobis is favored!”

Her reply was inaudible, but the tinker’s attention was turned back to him anyway.

“You can come work for me now,” he said winking and waving a mallet in his hand. “Don’t go rushin’ into any trades or nothin’ till you talked with me, ya hear?” Nobis had no idea what he was to do as far as future training went, but he nodded congenially all the same.

“There’s a lad,” the stringy old man said. He lifted from the ground, rising steadily up until he was double his standing height. He held his red hand above his head and tapped his foot to a silent tune and his tools joined him in the air, spinning around him as though dancing. Nobis stopped only briefly to laugh and clap.

“You’ll be joinin’ me up here in no time!” the eccentric man said. His wife emerged and waved. “You’d best be off then to get your charge! Go on then!”

Nobis continued on at double the pace, following the winding cobblestone path through his quiet corner of the village and on through the center where the market bustled with the morning traders. Huddles of men and women jammed the walkways as they exchanged baked goods, fruits, and supplies for a full day of work at sea. He ducked through the crowd so as not to be noticed. As much as he wanted to display his good fortune, he did not want to be delayed any further. Despite this, he couldn’t help stopping to watch and admire the troll-hunting parties, sharpening weapons and making ready to leave. One thing was for sure, he would definitely be using the Source to slay trolls before melding any metal with the tinker!

Finally, he finished his trek to the other side of the village where the forest awaited him. He delved in, following the same familiar trail he knew so well. The shade of the trees above blanketed him, and with a little focus, he was able to close his eyes and feel the tingling - ever so slightly - of the power that was now his as it ricocheted through the branches. He could almost hear it echoing in his mind and soul like a wisp.

He emerged from the serenity of the trees on the other side of the forest and stepped onto the soft, white sand of the beach that lined their island. There it was, in all its glory. Far across the sea, just at the edge of the horizon hovered the Source. The quiet mass of nothingness looked like a black setting sun frozen in its decent, and it pulsed ever so gently with similar rays of warmth, emanating peace and fortune. Nobis pondered over its mystery. No sailing of the sea, no flight through the skies by a favored could ever bring anyone closer to it, but it was always there. Unmoving, unchanging. Relentlessly loyal. He thought for a moment about what could possibly lie within that strange void, but as he pondered, the overwhelming grandness of the unknown crept upon him. He shook the feeling aside and pressed on.

With an eye on his new resource for knowledge and opportunity, he walked the coastline to the elder’s hut which sat tucked sleepily in a patch of green foliage. A few of his mates were playing ahead on the beach, likely snooping around the elder in hopes they could ask him questions.

“Oi, it’s Nobbs!” One of them said as they approached. “You wanna play a game of sticks?”

“Not today,” Nobis replied, thrilled at the chance to show off his new hand to his peers. He forced himself to act collected and cool. “I’m here to see the elder. Coming through.”

“The elder? No you’re not.”

“Yep.”

He let their confused silence last a minute before he slowly, dramatically revealed his bright red hand from his pocket.

The boys moved in to feel and poke at his outstretched hand and each gasped in turn, realizing it wasn’t a trick.

“No!” the first said. “You’re favored? Nobbs is favored!”

“Can you breathe fire?” a smaller boy asked.

“Yeah! Or better yet, try and read my mind!” said another, squeezing his eyes shut and putting his fingers to his temples.

“I can’t do any of that stuff yet, guys!” Nobis said. “But let’s see what I can do!”

He moved his hand to hover over the hilt of his troll-hunting knife and closed his eyes. He got the mirror to bump earlier, and he could do it again! If he was going to impress his mates, he would need to focus. He reached for the Source. Called out to it. Tried to feel the tingling and the coursing he had in his room an hour before. He waited and called. It almost seemed hesitant at first to answer him- probably from a lack of training on his part - but then, all at once, it rushed through him! He felt a jolt move through his hand, and the knife rose out of the sheath an inch, hovered a moment, then fell back. All of his mates cheered and clapped at the display.

“Wow, wow!”

“No fair!” the first said. “My pops’ pops was favored but not my pops and not me, I think. I’m already past the age!”

An old man’s voice came from the darkness of the door of the hut.

“What is all this ruckus? You kids run along now, I’ve got work to do.”

He stepped out into the light, leaning on his cane with a wrinkled hand of deep red, dark and rooted to the skin like a layer of dried blood. He wore the long robes of the elder, and his white hair was pulled up and tied atop his head in a decorative fashion. The withering sandals on his feet clicked as he walked down the wooden stairs from his door to the sandy floor.

“But elder! Nobbs is favored now! Look! See?”

“Young Nobis?” the elder asked in surprise, looking down at them with beady eyes.

Nobis stepped forward, away from his peers and stood tall, a large grin on his face.

“Greetings elder,” he said, reciting the line he had rehearsed so many times in his head. “I am favored and have come to receive my charge.” The old man smiled and nodded, pleased at the formality.

“Very well, then. I shall give you what you ask and begin your journey. You others run along now. Go on.”

Nobis’ mates obeyed and ran off to play sticks, all the while talking of magic and the Source. The elder watched them go and nodded once they were beyond earshot. He placed a wrinkled hand on Nobis’ shoulder.

“Come,” he said, “walk with me now.”

Nobis followed the old man across the beach to the shore in silence until he stopped where the tide could crawl up the sand just far enough to tickle the fronts of his toes. Before them across the sea the darkness of the Source radiated, pulsing knowingly.

“So you are now favored,” the elder said. “Do you know what that means?” Nobis turned his head in thought.

“It means the Source has chosen me. Prefers me above others.”

“That’s mostly right,” the elder answered. “You have been chosen, but you must not ever assume you are higher than others. The Source is here so that the favored can bring joy and prosperity to others as well as themselves.”

Nobis nodded thoughtfully, considering a question that had always nagged at him.

“What *is* the Source, elder? How does it give us our power?”

“The Source is energy. Pure life,” the old man replied. “It is loving and endless, and it joys to send us the power to do what we ask whenever we wish. It is not alive like us; it does not breathe or think, but it churns and lives as a pot of boiling stew, flowing with motion to supply us with warmth and power.”

“I see,” Nobis said, still feeling fuzzy on the details, but the odd explanation was good enough for now.

“It exists for us to use and consume, for it can never be extinguished,” the elder went on. “It is a never-ending well of power that never refuses our summons. You should use it each and every day! Each and every minute to bring entertainment, joy, and usefulness to all around you!”

“That’s what my father said,” Nobis noted. “It’s a responsibility, but a luxury too to use freely.”

“That’s right, my lad. That’s right. Now, let us proceed. You have many years of training ahead of you, but the Source will always be there. I shall now give you your charge.”

Nobis did not need to have the process explained. He already knew. He had daydreamed about it a hundred times. He knelt in the sand and bowed his head. The old man placed his red hand upon it, and pointed the other toward the Source glimmering in darkness on the horizon.

“I call upon you, the Source; the power that was and is and will be. Heed the beckon and call of the hand newly red. Come to the favored, that he may be favored indeed and live a long and prosperous life of joy and freedom in service to himself and others. Favor him until the end of his life. Go forth with the power and prosperity of the Source. Nobis, I charge you thus. Be it so!”

When the elder spoke the last, Nobis felt the tingling return in a coursing gust rather than a whisper. He could feel the power of the Source answering the elder’s wish and immediately knew he was a new man.

When the elder lifted his hand from his head, Nobis leapt to his feet laughing and beaming. The old man smiled at his excitement and stepped back. Nobis couldn’t help it. He immediately hovered his hand over his knife again. Focusing as he had before and feeling the newly livened stream of connection from the Source, he lifted his hand to the sky and as though his fingers were attached to the knife with an invisible string, it followed and shot out from the sheath, spinning into the air. He focused harder, and stopped the weapon before it could descend, spinning it as it hovered above him. Nobis laughed at the satisfaction.

“Now, now,” the old man chuckled. “That’s quite impressive for a first attempt! But your true training must begin tomorrow. Until then, please exercise caution and be wise today. Do not use the Source with weaponry, but start experimenting right away with other things. Understand?”

Nobis let the knife drift down to the sand where he retrieved it, struggling to pay attention already.

“I understand!” he said.

“That’s a good lad. Now, run home to your parents and be ready in the morning. I have some things to prepare before then.” He smiled mischievously. “But before you return, perhaps join

your mates for that game of sticks, eh? I reckon you may make the game a little more interesting now.”

He winked. Nobis beamed and scurried excitedly away down the shore.

You go about your duties like any other day and suddenly, it’s happened. Agnus found it was all true. Her large, keen eyes had grown as adept to seeing through the eternal darkness as any twelve-year old girl’s had, yet she still did not notice her hand right away; not until she reached Garrin, her father at the wall of the settlement to deliver his meal-basket.

She listened tentatively as she approached the tall barrier of thick stone, the silence of her world pierced only by the rustle of foliage beneath her feet, and the faint and haunting echo of the dark ones moaning somewhere deep in the woods on the other side. She could see her father atop the wall clad in his wooden armor. He leaned forward with his back to her as he peered off into the distance, his head turned to the side. He cocked his head at an angle, listening intently with his large, pointed ears.

Carefully, Agnus climbed the ladder with the basket handles hanging from her wrist and Garrin turned when her ascent had completed, though his attention was still half on the trees below.

“I was beginning to think you had forgotten me,” he said smiling, but truthfully. “It’s been a long night on watch. The dark ones lurk closer each day it seems. *Luminarus* protect us.”

Agnus subconsciously turned to look at their deity at the mention of its name. From the top of the wall she could see over the trees and down the hillside to where the cliff broke and gave way to the sea. Far across the water, impossibly out of reach of their settlements, glowed *Luminarus*. It was their only source of faint light and the only thing holding the dark ones at bay. That is, as long as they continued to pay the price. The quiet, white mass of nothingness pulsed ever so gently, drawing away the warmth of their land like a chill wind. It was always there. Unmoving, unchanging. Relentlessly demanding. Agnus turned back to her father who had come away from the wall’s edge for a moment.

“Mother packed you an extra snapfruit today,” Agnus said cheerily. Garrin was visibly excited, but quickly checked himself and shifted to disagreement.

“That’s no good,” he protested. “It would be irresponsible of me to eat more than my allotment after the rough harvest we’ve had.” He looked over the bridges floating over the settlement which connected this part of the wall to others and his eyes followed the gatherers pacing with their baskets while they search the tree boughs above. “The fruit hasn’t grown well this season. We must preserve them, or we will be forced to search the ground outside the wall.” The thought made Agnus shudder.

“Mother said you would refuse,” she answered. “She told me to tell you that she saved hers from the other night to give to you today. It’s a surprise.” Garrin gave a hesitant sigh but smiled again.

“*Luminarus* bless that woman.”

Agnus finally took the basket from her wrist and held it up to her father but froze as it passed her eye level. Her breath was stolen away and her body stiffened. It took only half a breath for Garrin to notice also and exhibit the same shock. Her hand had darkened to a green, sickly color.

At first, Agnus rejected the possibility. She dropped the basket, spilling the precious products of their last harvest onto the stone at their feet. She frantically rubbed at her palm and fingers, praying that the change was merely a shadow or a trick of the light. It couldn't be. It just couldn't be. As the color persisted, she realized without a doubt that the dreaded nightmare of all the young ones in the settlements was now her reality. This was it. This was real. *Luminarus* had chosen her and she was afflicted. Against all odds... she was afflicted!

“No!” Father choked, breaking their doomed silence as he reached out to grasp her wrist. Agnus suddenly felt faint.

“It can't be me...” she mumbled involuntarily. “It's always someone else. Not me. Father...?”

She felt something odd - a tingling in her body and then a flicker somewhere deep within her gut as some nameless sensation rose up and fled from her mouth. She breathed out a faint wisp of white, and she suddenly felt dizzy. She swayed back and forth, and she lost her balance.

Father caught her before she could tip dangerously close to the wall's edge. He began to breathe heavily and immediately envisioned his wife and son hearing the news. Envisioned all the new pains and trials that would now alter the lives of his family forever. The gatherers had taken notice of the disturbance and watched from various points on the wall, pointing and whispering. With all his effort, Father forced himself to remain calm, and took Agnus up in his arms and walked carefully to the ladder.

“I'm feeling alright now,” Agnus said after they had descended the wall, though her voice was hazy and distant. Father put her down and knelt to look into her large, bright eyes, the dim glow from *Luminarus* over the wall reflecting back at him. She wanted to reassure her father somehow - his pained expression nearly broke her heart - but she had not the words to soothe him. She didn't want him or anyone to be sad. She didn't want to go through this. She felt scared. She wanted to cry but held back with everything she had. As if to mock her fears, the echoing howls of the dark ones outside the wall reached her sensitive ears.

“Come,” Garrin said in a carefully crafted voice. He took her hand. “We must hurry home.”

He led her through the darkness, hurrying her more quickly as they passed each plot of their neighbors crops until the domed roof of their home came into sight.

Agnus' older brother James was out with a few of his young companions who had just returned from a round of patrols through the settlement. When he saw father and Agnus approaching, he immediately sensed something was wrong and his heart sank. He was already past the age himself, but despite his efforts, he was not amply prepared for the possibility that his sister could be afflicted. His patrol-mates noticed the situation for what it was and turned to flee and spread the news without a thought. Garrin hardly noticed them as James approached.

“Agnus! No! Is she?”

“Don’t worry for me, brother,” Agnus said with a voice that broke with confused emotion. Unlike Garrin’s anguish, James’ was unrestrained, and it pained her deeply, tears welling in her eyes. He was speechless. Her mother, Kora peeked outside the door at the sound of the commotion. When the horrible truth struck her also, it was too much for Agnus. Garrin released her hand, and she raced to her mother and fell into her arms, sobbing.

“I don’t want to go, mother! I don’t want to be afflicted! I was supposed to help you today with gathering. I was going to learn how to help with patrols,” she cried, looking to James. Kora held Agnus’ sickly hand to her heart and rocked her daughter back and forth as tears ran down her cheeks.

“Go,” Garrin whispered to James once he managed to pull his gaze away from that terrible image. “Go and inform the steward that Agnus is...afflicted.”

James had to force the word out and it pierced them all to hear it aloud again, deepening Agnus’ sobs as she buried her head into her mother’s chest.

It took a moment for her brother to break from the heavy trance that had befallen his family and move his legs, but he was off a moment later, tripping over the roots on the ground as he flew.

“Oh *Luminarus*,” Kora wept, “Why? Why must it be her?”

Strangely, these despairing words calmed Agnus a little. She felt the tingling again, but this time, no sensations accompanied it save for a strange sense of duty stirring inside her, seemingly born out of her grief. She tried her best to stop her tears as Garrin helped the women to their feet.

“I know it is hard, but we must go,” he commanded gently, having regained some measure of composure. “We must make haste before the words are spoken!”

Gently, he took Agnus from his wife’s care.

“I can walk,” Agnus attempted to say but her words descended into a fit of coughs. Even she knew she was declining quickly. They had to get to the chambers. He allowed her to walk but took her hand all the same, squeezing it tightly in an anxious and loving grip. Kora took the other hand, the sickly one, and they hurried along together. Few in their family had ever been afflicted, but Garrin knew when *Luminarus* chose someone, many odd and unpredictable effects could take hold without delay. He had seen some of these ailments in previous newly-afflicted young ones and heard of many more still which he shuddered to recall. As they made their way toward the northern edge of the settlement wall, he pleaded with *Luminarus* to postpone the horror until they reached their destination. His heart would not be able to take it.

They glided through the settlement as the news quickly spread. Those working the gardens ran to the edges of their plots. The transactions taking place at the trade posts stopped as all turned to watch. Many cried out as they learned the identity of the next afflicted, and others shouted calls of support and encouragement as they passed. Some simply fell to their knees shedding tears of anguish and gratitude. Agnus allowed their words and gestures to deepen her resolve. Yes, her life as she knew it had come to an abrupt end. Yet the crushing blow of that knowledge passed more quickly than she anticipated as her sense of duty grew within her. Perhaps it was the tingling, like the sting of a nettle bite, she felt intensifying in her stomach and at her finger tips. It hurt, but she suddenly wanted to be brave for her family and for all those in the settlement. *Luminarus* chose her

after all. The pain was for those she loved. Her contribution would keep the light of their deity aglow and in turn, hold back the dark ones.

“I feel it,” she muttered as her father and mother hurried her along by the hands. “I can feel *Luminarus* calling out to me...it wants me. It is time to join...”

She coughed deeply again. The words gave her courage but did not seem to help her parents. Garrin and Kora simply exchanged pained glances and did not reply.

When at last they reached the wall, Agnus saw James standing as bravely as he could though his eyes looked red at the edges. Beside him hunched the Chief Steward standing a bit bent with a soft expression of empathy and compassion. His skin was paler than most, and his eyes and ears larger too. Everyone said the stewards were like that because they mostly lived underground in the chambers in true darkness - out of even the faint light granted by *Luminarus*. Agnus wondered if she too would one day look as they did, once they had kept her here long enough. Behind them was the entrance to the chamber, its doors opened wide to each side, exposing the deep darkness within.

“I brought the Chief Steward!” James said as they approached. “Agnus...are you alright?”

“My hand hurts,” she sucked in a sharp breath through her teeth and clenched her wrist. The sickly green had deepened, and suddenly the biting sensation escalated, as if sewing needles were jabbing at her fingers and side. In her mind, she felt lighter and saw a broken image of a knife being gently lifted from its sheath. Her feet and toes lifted from the grass beneath her and her family gasped, but she soon floated back down to the ground and wobbled where she stood, muttering incoherently.

“Help us...” Father pleaded to the Chief Steward. “What do we do?”

Kora hid her face and courageously, her son came to her side and held her close. The steward approached reverently and laid a hand on Father’s shoulder, still clad in the wooden armor of the watchers.

“I know this is hard,” he said, “but it will be alright. You did well to bring her so quickly, but we must hurry. Come! Before the words are spoken! Follow me!”

Garrin turned to retrieve his daughter who had moved to share the embrace with her mother and brother. They held her close as another coughing fit assailed her, though this time it left flecks of blood in her palm.

“You needn’t enter,” the Chief Steward said, addressing Kora.

She attempted a protest. How could she abandon her child in her utmost hour of need? She fought to be brave enough to stay, but the pain was overwhelming. She could only choke on a new fit of sobs.

“I’ll take her,” Garrin agreed heavily. “I can bear this portion for us. We will still be able to see her later. We can visit. She will be alright, you’ll see.” He did not believe his own words. Would Agnus be alright in the chambers? He knew the stewards would take care of her, but he had been into the chamber tunnels before. It was nothing short of haunting. His precious daughter...

“Son, take your mother home and be with her. I’ll be along after Agnus is settled. Go on now.”

James obeyed after hugging his sister tightly and pulled Kora away as she gave her daughter one last kiss on the forehead. Agnus nearly collapsed as they left, but Garrin was there to snatch her

again. The steward had been patient but urged them on now as Garrin descended into the chamber entrance. The thick doors shut behind them with a gravelly rumble.

Even Agnus' sharp eyes had to adjust to this new level of supreme darkness below the earth. Though the stewards had never shown anything but kindness, fear would have overtaken her in this new environment had she not been clinging to her father. The main shaft was hollowed out neatly and it ran on so long Agnus thought it must reach the cliffs that dropped to the sea. To the sides were rooms with barred doors. The sounds of pain, anguish, and torture rang in her large ears and mingled with the rumbles of the dark ones roaming the grounds above their heads. Passing several doors, they winced painfully as a burst of hot flame seemingly erupted in one of the rooms. To the left, a crackle like ice breaking assaulted their ears, accompanied by pained screams. Agnus felt true terror. What did it all mean? What must she pass through? The din of wails and screams was nearly overpowering.

"I know it can be overwhelming," the Chief Steward said, reading her thoughts. She and her father stood frozen in shock. "But I assure you, they are all well cared for. They must be kept in such restraining quarters for their own safety. Their actions can sometimes be...erratic. You will be happy here. As happy as possible."

Agnus would be happy. As the faces of James and her mother clung to her mind, she determined then and there that she would wholly accept the calling of *Luminarus*. Her people depended on her to fulfil this noble calling. Why the light needed her strength, mind, and body she did not know; but she knew it was important. She knew whatever force was growing in her mind - calling out to her and desiring her strength, was important; noble and grand. She wanted to give it everything she had when it asked. Her tears had stopped now, her emotions numbed for the time being, and although the pain in her hand was intensifying, she was ready to accept it. She was not alone in these depths. They were united in purpose. An army of chosen contributors to *Luminarus* and its will. She thought she could hear the sounds of the sea beating upon the shore inexplicably intensify. It was as though she could feel sand under her toes. She began to tremble and her knees buckled.

Two lesser stewards were there to catch her as they appeared from behind, nodding to the Chief Steward. He nodded in return.

"The words will be spoken soon. Hurry!"

In an adjoining room stood an altar adorned in soft furs and pillows. There Agnus was laid and surrounded by lesser stewards who knelt reverently and protectively by her side. Garrin joined them, following their actions. Carefully, they tied her wrists and ankles with soft ropes which were fastened to the sides of the altar at a comfortable length.

"Not to worry," the Chief Steward said as Garrin began to shake his head. "It's for her safety. The ropes will not harm her. When the words are spoken, there can be...complications. Sometimes odd things happen, but I assure you, she will be safe."

Agnus hardly noticed the new restraints and the whispers around her for her head was filled with voices. She could hear what sounded like a young and old voice conversing with one another though she could not discern their words. She did, however, feel a connection to them. Perhaps it

was *Luminarus* itself. Her body shivered in the darkness, and the pain in her hand grew still, causing a whimper to escape her throat but she remained steadfast. She would not back down.

It happened suddenly.

Agnus jolted upon the soft blankets and her large eyes grew bright. Garrin fell backward and covered his mouth, but the stewards remained calm and watchful. Her lips parted and words flowed from her in a tumult of voices, each sentence broken apart by a brief silence as if repeating a dictated speech one sentence at a time.

“I hearken to you and give you the power that was and is and will be. I heed the beckon and call of the hand newly red. I come to the favored that they may be favored indeed and live a long and prosperous life of joy and freedom. I favor them to the end with power and prosperity. Be it so!”

A silence hung in the air and Agnus’ body visibly relaxed, her breathing slowed, faint white tendrils flowing off her body.

“Favored? Hand newly-red? What...does it mean?” Garrin asked, having recovered a little. The Chief Steward responded somberly from across the alter.

“We do not know the meaning of all these things, but *Luminarus* speaks through Agnus. Our scholars have interpreted the meaning thus: She is bound to *Luminarus*, ensuring us that through its power we will one day live long and prosperous lives of freedom from the dark ones. Her life belongs to the light on the horizon now and each and every pain and torment she endures, lends to the collective sacrifice. One day, the sacrifice will be enough and we will become favored as the prophecy foretells.”

Garrin sat entranced, staring at his daughter’s face with a new profound respect and sadness.

“We can manage something like this at home, my wife and I. Can we not keep her there?” he muttered.

“I’m afraid not, my friend,” the Chief Steward said somberly, shaking his head. “I have no doubts that your efforts would be worthy but the afflictions and effects grow stronger over time and more intense. More difficult to manage, you see. We take them deeper beneath as this happens to keep them safe.”

Agnus was in another place. As the words of many voices finished of their own will, her body coursed with a burning power. She felt the force excitedly calling her from somewhere within *Luminarus*’ light. Her dark green hand burned, and she clenched her jaw as the sewing needles became daggers as though its strength was now tenfold. She felt light-headed and light as a knife again. Her back lifted from the bedding and she drifted up into the air though the ropes caught her before she could float too high. The world began to spin and lurch around her as though she was tumbling in circles, and she felt as though she would be sick. She felt the new energy pooling within her escape her body with a scream. It exited up and out through the earth above toward the sea as a swirling tendril of white. Toward *Luminarus*.

She groaned as she hung in the air with the world spinning around her, but soon the new sensation subsided as though her weight was slowly returning to normal. Her body gently landed back on the soft alter and she lay still, completely exhausted.

She thought she could hear her father's voice nearby, but her vision was dark, consumed for the time being with attempts to reach out and understand the new connection that spoke to her from the light beyond the sea. It was an honor, they said, to be one of the afflicted. A privilege reserved for only the most worthy. She would do it for her family. For all her people. And one day *Luminarus* would banish the dark ones from their settlements forever. That hopeful thought gave her enough strength to fight through the searing pain and carry on for now.

She opened her eyes to find herself being carried down a long hallway, moving ever deeper into the eternal night.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Colby Dunn was born in La Mirada, California in 1985 and was soon thereafter moved to Utah. Growing up with four siblings meant there was plenty of imagination in the house and fantasy lured him in at a young age. After serving a proselyting mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in Japan and becoming proficient in multiple forms of martial arts, he began writing his first novel, *Crimson Sun*, in 2010. He still resides in Salt Lake City, Utah with his wife and three children.