

Agharta- Sample Chapters

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1

“Crosby! Stop!”

Crosby didn't stop. If anything, he ran faster.

Undeterred, Sarah chased after the yellow Labrador, her chest burning and her breath coming in short staccato bursts. She could feel the drag of fatigue on her muscles, but she did her best to fight through the pain. Every time Sarah felt herself flagging, she managed to regain her pace, bolstered by the fear of what lay ahead.

If Crosby didn't turn soon- he would reach The Bridge. After that, he would be out of Sarah's reach, lost, perhaps forever.

From the time she was a little girl, her Father told her, “no matter what happens Sarah, don't you ever, ever cross The Bridge, not even to help Jesus himself.”

A gust of cold wind whipped across Sarah's face, reinforcing the taboo nature of crossing The Bridge. There was little she wouldn't do for Crosby, but crossing The Bridge was one of the things.

Sarah weaved through the deep undergrowth and tried to figure out what made Crosby start acting like a total nutter. He was a good dog, not usually prone to running off. Yet, one minute they were playing fetch and then, without any warning at all, he turned and raced away, his doggie legs pumping as fast as they would go.

At first, Sarah assumed Crosby was only chasing a rabbit or a deer. He would reach the edge of the clearing and stop once he realized he could never catch whatever he thought he saw. But then Crosby hit the edge of the clearing and kept going. Sarah yelled at him to stop- but he disappeared back into the brush. Annoyed, but not yet afraid, Sarah jogged over to the tree line and yelled for Crosby to come back.

But he didn't return.

After five minutes, Sarah took a deep breath and plunged into the brush after her dog. It had rained hard the day before, so the ground was soft and muddy. Crosby's paw prints were clearly visible imprinted in the earth. Sarah was grateful for this smidge of good luck and redoubled her efforts to catch up.

Even though she never stopped yelling his name, Sarah only saw Crosby once. She was standing at the bottom of a steep, rocky incline. Her eyes followed the paw prints leading up a muddy slope. Sarah groaned. The thought of climbing up after Crosby was too much- she thought about quitting. He would come back.

Then Crosby suddenly appeared out of the foliage at the top of the hill and started barking at her. She called plaintively to him- trying to get him to come back down the slope to her.

For a minute, Sarah thought Crosby was going to come. But instead, he turned and disappeared again.

With a yell of frustration, Sarah barged up the hill after her dog like a soldier rushing a fortified position in a war movie. She thought un-girly-like thoughts about wringing Crosby's doggy neck when she got her hands on him. But the longer she ran, the less angry she was. Each step transformed some of her anger into fear and sadness.

Crosby was her best friend, and she was going to lose him. The only people she had at home were her older brothers and her Dad. Her brothers never wanted to sit still long enough to play anything- they always wanted to race off and be with their own friends. Dad was always working.

But not Crosby. Crosby would sit patiently with her no matter what she was doing- even if that meant putting up with having ribbons tied around his neck. The dog would even stay with her while she practiced singing.

With a final burst of effort, Sarah made it to the top of the hill and resumed her chase. Further and further from home she ran. At a certain point, she could no longer doubt it- Crosby was going to The Bridge.

Sarah had only visited it a single time- on a field trip with school. Their teacher, Mrs. Puddlepocket, took the entire class. While they were there, she pointed out the skeletons of the dead, littering the ground all around the great chasm. She took the kids right out to the edge of the deep scar in the earth and pointed out the remnants of the death machines still visible at the bottom of the crevice. Sarah came home from the trip traumatized and never wanting to go back.

This was, largely the point of taking the kids there.

At a full run, Sarah emerged into a narrow valley with very steep walls. She recognized where she was even before she saw the twin rows of skulls propped up on sticks leading up to the start of The Bridge.

The bridge spanned a deep fissure in the earth that extended as far as the eye could see in either direction. On the far side of the bridge, there was a clearing that ended in the beginning of a forest. There was a dimly visible path leading off into the trees.

The Folken's land consisted of an oddly shaped island in the Great Sea. All of the sides facing inland were high, sheer cliffs. The only exception was this one fissure leading to The Bridge. From the cliffs, the land flattened rapidly everywhere, except for a five mile stretch in the south that consisted of forest so dense it was essentially impassable.

The Folken never went inland.

Ever.

They didn't need to. Their numbers were small, the land was easy to farm, there was plenty of wildlife, and due to the careful cultivation efforts everyone lived comfortably in the knowledge there would be food for the next meal.

Plus, the weather was uniformly pleasant.

Crossing The Bridge meant the loss of all of that. If the wrong sort of person found The Bridge- it might even bring ruin down on the entire tribe of Folken. No matter how badly she wanted to- she wouldn't cross.

Crying at the loss of her best friend, Sarah didn't allow herself to look up until she got to the beginning of the thin, metal expanse. She kept hoping to see the top of Crosby's fuzzy yellow head. But it wasn't ever there. Instead, she saw the faded black metal plating of The Bridge. Sarah let out a defeated little sob and allowed her gaze to follow down the three-foot wide expanse of metal with steel cables on either side, acting as handrails.

She couldn't believe it. Crosby didn't stop.

Instead, he was sitting on the far side of The Bridge, wagging his tail like the happiest dog in the world.

Almost like he was mocking her.

Through eyes distorted by tears, Sarah looked at Crosby. He'd been her constant companion for the last four years. She asked herself if she was really going to walk away. Sarah heard a lifetime's worth of warnings echoing in her ears- "Don't cross The Bridge, don't cross The Bridge."

Sarah was afraid, struggling mightily between her fear and her love of her dog. She tentatively decided to cross The Bridge half-way, when a high-pitched whistle came from the direction of town. She stopped and listened, her heart sinking. The high-pitched whistle continued and then tapered off. There could be no doubt- it was the one telling her to come home.

The whistle was taken very seriously by her Dad. When it went off, she needed to be in the house ASAP or there would be no concert and a stack of chores waiting for her when she walked in.

Realizing how far from home she was- she decided that she didn't have time to go after Crosby. She allowed herself this line of argument in order to avoid the issue of her fear at crossing The Bridge.

"All right dog, that's it." Sarah yelled through her tears. "You can just stay on that side of The Bridge then. I'm gonna go home and eat. You're gonna have to fend for yourself I guess. I'd like to see you try to catch something- you big fat yellow beast!"

Crosby just sat and looked at her, his tail still wagging with gusto.

Realizing the dog was calling her bluff- Sarah turned on her heels and started walking back towards home. Every few seconds, she thought she heard Crosby on his way back to her, but every time she turned around, he wasn't there.

It was hard to see where she was going through her tears, but Sarah still hurried as best she could.

2

By the time Sarah's surroundings became familiar, she knew she was in trouble. Dusk had fallen firmly into darkness and despite her best efforts- she was still a good ten minutes from home. Not even adults ventured alone out into the wilderness after dark, for fear of a whole host of things- not the least of which involved disappearance and death. Staying out alone after dark was the second worst transgression of the rules- preceded only by the order not to cross The Bridge. Sarah didn't need to try too hard to imagine how pissed her Dad was going to be when she got home.

Thankfully, between her agonizing over her decision to leave Crosby at The Bridge and her fear of the chewing out she was guaranteed to get when she got home, Sarah didn't have room in her head to let her imagination invent things in the wilderness to be afraid of.

Her Dad was plenty real enough.

For 45 minutes, Sarah rushed through the underbrush, getting uncountable scratches on her legs and forearms. As she ran, she tried not to think about her Dad at home, staring at the horizon and worrying about why she wasn't home yet. At times, she felt like she was never going to get there. Eventually though, the front door of her large stone farmhouse came into view.

Sarah was hot, sweaty, and tired. To make matters worse, she got a rock in her shoe when she was halfway home. Every few steps Sarah would consider stopping to get the rock out, but she never actually took the time. As a result, there was a noticeable limp in Sarah's stride by the time she made her way up the stairs to the front porch. She loped straight up, only hesitating when her hand fell on the doorknob.

Instead of going straight in, Sarah decided to say a little prayer. She lowered her head and her left foot began tapping on the hardwood of the porch. What came out of her mouth weren't words or incantations to a deity.

Instead, she hummed a melody to a song.

The music coming from deep in the back of her throat was quite beautiful and very familiar. When she was finished, she looked up and took a long, deep breath. She held it in, until she saw white stars floating in front of her eyes. Then, she let the air out in a big chuff and turned the knob.

Every head in the room swung toward the door when it opened. Her brothers and her Dad looked terrified. Walking in, Sarah thought she was going to be able to be brave, but the moment she saw her Dad, all thoughts of being in trouble and getting home late flew out of her mind.

The only thing that mattered was Crosby and her Dad understanding that he'd run away, and that it wasn't her fault, that she loved her dog immensely and took care of him just the way she'd been told and she didn't know why he would just run off the way he did- but it seemed like he was going to The Bridge on purpose...

Sarah started sobbing again, tears once again covering her cheeks.

"Dad... Crosby... Gone..."

The interesting combination of anger and fear disappeared from her Dad's face. Concern took its place. His face had gone quite white all of a sudden- everything his mind was worried about, disappeared. In a flash, her Dad replaced his old worries with a new level of anxiety.

"Wait, slow down honey. Tell me what happened." He said, hoping he'd misunderstood.

In fits and starts, Sarah told Kyle (her Dad) and her three brothers Eddie, Aaron, and Tim, what happened with Crosby. She told them about the chase and about the way Crosby ran across the bridge even though she was yelling at him to stop. The further into her tale she got, the more ashen-faced Kyle became.

When she finished, Kyle just looked at her for a long time. He seemed to be searching Sarah's face for signs of a lie. When he didn't see any, he asked, "So Crosby just ran off and went straight to The Bridge- and stopped?"

“Yeah, it was almost like he was daring me to follow him across. But I didn’t go. Dad, I know you’ve told me a thousand times not to cross The Bridge so I didn’t go, even though it killed me to leave him behind.”

“I believe you honey.” Kyle said, but still, there were tears in his eyes.

“What’s wrong?” Sarah asked.

She hadn’t seen her Dad cry since the day her Mom died. Seeing him crying, actually scared her a little. Maybe more than a little.

“There’s nothing wrong, sweetheart.” Kyle said. He reached over and tussled Sarah’s hair, an act that confirmed for her that something was wrong. Her Dad only tussled her hair when he was upset about something.

Changing the subject, Kyle said, “Now I want you to hurry up and get something to eat. The procession is going to be here before you know it.”

Sarah totally forgot there was going to be a concert. She’d been looking forward to it for two weeks and until Crosby ran, it was the only thing she’d really thought about. Remembering the concert helped Sarah put Crosby out of her mind. She realized she wasn’t going to be in trouble for being late, which was certainly something to be relieved about. Things were looking up- a little bit. Her Dad would know what to do about Crosby, he was the smartest man she’d ever met- he knew about all kinds of stuff, from music to farming to history to the best way to pull a fish out of the ocean.

The work of getting Sarah her food gave Kyle a moment to collect himself. He never would have expected his daughter’s tardiness was a result of her being in the opening stages of fulfilling the prophecy.

Kyle wasn’t even sure he believed the damn thing. Yet, the similarities were impossible to ignore. And even insofar as he believed the prophecy, there was no way in a million years he thought Sarah would be the one called.

Yet all the signs, as he knew them, were there.

He had no choice. Sarah needed to see Clarissa during the Concert.

Trying very hard to keep his voice even, Kyle said to Sarah, “I’m very proud of you for not going over The Bridge, even to chase after Crosby. Maybe he’ll get tired of his little game and come back by the time we get back from the Concert.”

Kyle felt sure this wouldn’t happen, but he was trying to be optimistic. Sarah could tell her Dad didn’t mean what he was saying, but she appreciated the thought. Sarah’s brothers were ten minutes late coming home too, and all of the drama caused Kyle to forget about their transgression completely.

“I thought Dad was going to blow a gasket.” Aaron told her under his breath when Sarah took her place at the dinner table and began scooping food into her mouth at a furious pace.

“Aaron.” Sarah said in a low, extremely menacing tone, “I’m going to rip you to pieces if you don’t screw off.”

All three siblings face’s registered the same shock- at the same time.

“Did you just say screw off?” Eddie asked incredulously.

“I think she did!” Tim affirmed.

“Well good for you Sarah. We often think that Aaron should screw off. It’s nice to know that we have your concurring opinion on the matter.” Eddie, who was the oldest and Sarah’s favorite, congratulated her sincerely.

Sarah laughed.

Hearing the laughter, but not what caused it, Kyle said, “I don’t know what you’re doing to cheer Sarah up- but keep doing it.”

“You hear that Aaron? Even Dad thinks you should screw off. And not just for a second either- he thinks you should keep doing it.” Eddie chided.

Everyone at the table was nearly in hysterics with laughter, including Aaron. It was more a release of tension than because Eddie was a great comic.

Kyle, who didn’t know what was so funny, merely looked bemused- which caused everyone to laugh even harder.

When a thin stream of half-drunk milk came out of Eddie’s nose, any remaining composure flew out the window. A wise man, Kyle took a long look at his children sitting at the table and laughing together and took a mental photograph.

It would be his last opportunity to take a mental snapshot of the entire family.

The loud knocking at the front door startled everyone, choking off the laughter. Everyone turned to the door.

“It’s the procession.” Aaron said- verbalizing the explanation everyone already knew. “It’s time for the Concert.”

3

Kyle went to the door and opened it with a creak. Standing in front of them on the front porch was a tall man wearing a wide floppy rimmed hat and big grin.

Bowing deeply, the man said, “Comes there one who seeks the true sound of God?”

Instead of responding Kyle began tapping his foot on the kitchen floor, and using his hands as drumsticks began to beat his thighs in a complicated rhythm. Sarah’s father was a percussionist as were all three of her brothers.

Sarah was a singer.

It was part of the prophecy that the girl would be the only singer in her family. Still, Kyle never thought she could be the one- she wasn’t very good. Parents can ignore the obvious when they don’t want the obvious to be true.

“And how are you David?” Kyle asked his visitor once he was finished with his mini-drum solo.

“I can hear the rhythm in my soul.” David replied.

The interaction was part of a ritual. The greeting was the same before every Concert, only the person, the names, and the means of expression changed. Throughout the Folken’s land, this same ritual played out at house after house, as nearly the entire population wound its way to the large amphitheater in the center of town.

Once David completed the formal greeting, he turned to Sarah and asked, “What’s wrong? Did your Dad try to sing a duet with you that was so off-key on his part, that he brought you to tears?”

“No, Crosby just ran away.” Sarah replied.

“He’ll come back.” David assured her.

“I don’t know- he crossed over the bridge.” Sarah said, trying to think about the Concert and not what she was saying. Because of this, she didn’t notice the peculiar look that came across David’s face as he realized the implications of what Sarah just said. Unlike Kyle, David had *always* thought Sarah was the most likely of any girl in the village to be the one to fulfill the prophecy. He never said as much to Kyle- why would anyone want to say such an unkind thing?

David looked at Kyle who gave him a clear look to keep his mouth shut. He understood and merely reiterated his wishes that Sarah find her dog.

“Well, let’s get going then.” Kyle prompted.

The five members of the Throckmartin family followed David out to a group of about fifty people gathered in the yard and on the road. Kyle took his place at the front of the procession and began to lead the large group of people to his nearest neighbor to the east, about 250 yards away.

This was The Procession.

No one really knew how the ritual of The Procession started, but it always carried out in the same way. There was a hat filled with pieces of paper. On the paper was the name of every family in the Folken territory. During every Concert, the ‘winners’ of the previous week’s drawing, drew four names from the hat.

No one wanted to ‘win’ because it meant walking to the neighbor’s house, in the dark, with only the safety of one’s own family. By the second or third house there were enough people, the darkness lost its teeth and the procession became an opportunity to meet with neighbors and friends.

In the beginning, it was always scary.

The fact nothing bad had ever happened, to any family, in the known history of The Procession, didn’t alleviate the fear family’s felt toward being the first to travel alone in the dark.

The Folken believed darkness was like the world without music- empty, terrible, and without meaning. Music came from the sun- lack of music, like lack of sun- caused the world to be plunged into darkness. This was why they

always held the Concerts at night. The day held its own melodies, but it was up to the Folken to create the music that filled the night and drove away the darkness.

Besides, you could see the light-show much better in the dark.

They collected their last family and the whole procession turned to the center of town. About a half-mile away, Sarah's group met up with the southwest portion of the procession at the bottom of a hill, doubling their number to a bit over 100.

In center of town was a large circle of ground. The grass was clipped short by grazing sheep during the day. A loose perimeter of enormous trees of the type that looked like they could tell you amazing stories if you were wise enough to hear what they were saying, ringed the circle.

A round stage stood in the center, big enough for up to twenty people to stand comfortably. The stage wasn't a bland utilitarian platform- it was a work of art in its own right. Marvelously intricate designs reminiscent of a Tibetan mandala decorated every inch of its wooden sides. The flat surface of the stage had a huge spiral carved into it. During performances, a thick hand-woven carpet covered the spiral.

Between the trees, around the perimeter, were a series of tents trading any number of non-crucial goods. It was the informal rule of the Concert (not enforced but closely followed) that except for food and water, the items traded at concerts should have no practical purpose. Concerts were where the Folken traded every kind of art medium from sculpture to jewelry to glass. There were tapestries, clever devices for carrying your drink around in, all kinds of weird doodads, but no seed. No tools or farm equipment. No fish and no boat accessories. There was certainly a place for business in the light of day- but never in the emptiness of night.

For the Folken, concerts weren't just about going and listening to music- the Concerts were religious ceremonies. The focus was to tap into the vibrations holding the universe together. To connect to the power that makes the planets revolve and the body heal. The Folken call this force the Groove. It manifests when a group of musicians lock into one another so completely they are, in a sense, each playing every instrument. In these moments, the world fell away and all there was- was SOUND.

The Folken called this specific vibration God.

Kyle was fond of saying "there is no God in commerce."

Then he would pause, and he'd admit, "Well, I suppose there is some kind of God in it, but certainly not one I would want to worship or even have over for supper." Then he would laugh and scratch his stomach.

This never failed to make all his children laugh. It wasn't funny in itself anymore- they'd heard the joke far too many times for that. It was funny, because they knew Kyle still thought it was the funniest thing in the world, even after telling the same joke three million times.

Eddie was the same way about the word "cheese." That word just killed him no matter how many times he heard it.

When they arrived at the concert, most of the rest of the town had already filed into the ring. Normally, Sarah would be bouncing around like a pinball with excitement. Concerts were her favorite things in the world. With Crosby gone, it wasn't quite the same.

Every concert featured more than one band. Usually five or six different groups took turns playing. Some bands were families, some were just friends, but they were all good.

Very, very, good.

If you weren't, you didn't get up on the central stage. In contrast to the variety of bands- there was no variety of music.

Every single band, played Bluegrass.

That's what we call it anyway. They called it the voice of God.

To the Folken, Bluegrass was the only true way to hear God's voice.

If there were preachers at Concerts (there weren't), they would explain the Folken found Bluegrass music to be the purest reflection of God. His very voice channeled through the instruments of the performers. For the Folken, listening to bluegrass music was like reading the Bible, listening to a hymn, and hearing a sermon given by a Saint, all at the same time.

The Folken didn't believe, per se. They experienced. They were mystics. They really didn't try to talk very often about the abstract nature of their God. There was no need for the normal trappings of religion. The Folken just gathered together and played, no one felt the need to talk about it too formally.

There was only one true formal aspect to the Concerts: the Council of Musicians- made up of all of the elite musicians. The Council made decisions about new music and what songs bands had permission to play.

Although no one in the world knew it except for her, Sarah was a heretic. She loved bluegrass, but she couldn't help thinking that there must be ways of playing music that were totally different than Bluegrass. Music played in different time signatures, or music that focused on different instruments- or music played in different keys, using different scales.

Sometimes, walking by herself, Sarah unconsciously hummed music that didn't sound anything like the familiar runs of melody in the music the Folken played. Sarah never talked about this music to anyone- not even her father or her brothers.

However, on this night, her favorite group was playing, the Yonder Mountain String Band. Yonder was made up of four guys who played the fastest, most intense God in the entire town. When Yonder Mountain played, Sarah could feel the vibration of the air and the trees and God and everything, channeled through the liquid fast picking of mandolin, bass, banjo, and guitar.

"Come on, we gotta get close." Sarah urged, pulling Kyle by the hand towards the rapidly filling circle.

"Sweetheart, there is someone we have to see before we can sit down and listen to the music."

"Because I came home late?" Sarah asked, suddenly frightened. "I said I was sorry Dad, I told you what happened to Crosby..."

"I know baby, you're not in trouble for being late. But the story you just told me might be very important. That's why we're going to see Clarissa."

Sarah didn't think she'd ever heard the name before. "Who?" She asked.

"You know, the Spook." Aaron told her, earning himself a very nasty look from his Father.

People talked about Clarissa, aka, The Spook, in the kind of hushed tone reserved for only the most sinister of boogie men. Clarissa's was the house kids dared each other to run up to and touch- the dare no kid ever took for fear of what she might do.

"I have to go see the Spook? Why Daddy?" Her fear skyrocketed at this distressing news.

Kyle flashed Aaron another angry look. "I know Clarissa is a little weird. But in a way, it's her job to be weird. She is the Keeper of the Prophecies."

Although Sarah was a smart girl, this was the first time she'd heard the word 'prophecy.' This was not by accident. The Folken didn't tell children about the prophecies until they turned 16.

She asked, "What does 'prophecy' mean?"

Kyle thought for a minute before answering, "A long time ago there was a different kind of civilization on this land. They had all kinds of technological machines we don't have anymore. They say, that in my great grandfather's day, some of the machines still worked, but that might be a lie. If you were to swim down to the bottom of the ravine that separates us from the rest of the land, you would find the remains of all kinds of these old machines."

The band started playing and Sarah didn't even glance in the direction of the stage. This was very much out of character for her and marked how seriously she was taking the conversation.

Kyle continued, "The people who made the broken machines also left writings. Most of it was burned- all except the books about bluegrass music."

"What's that?"

"That's what they're playing right now. At least, that's what the old people called it."

Sarah nodded her head. Her Dad never failed to amaze her with the scope of his knowledge.

"We don't know what a lot of it means, but there is one particular story that we take very seriously."

"The prophecy?" Sarah asked.

"Exactly."

"What does it say?"

"Well I think we'll leave it to Clarissa to tell you what it says; after all, she's the expert."

"She's a loon is what she is." said Aaron.

"Aaron Michael!" Kyle scolded. "Don't you talk about Clarissa like that. In many ways, she's as important as the music."

Clearly, there were things Aaron wanted to say in response, but he didn't say them. Kyle nodded at this. He was proud his boy was wise enough to know the right time to have something out. For the moment, Sarah was what was important.

"Sorry Dad." Aaron said, nodding his head ever so slightly.

"You're a good boy." Kyle told him before turning back to Sarah.

"I don't want to go see Clarissa. I want you to tell me the story." Sarah whined.

"I'm sorry honey, but she's the one to weave that yarn. Just as it is the musician's job to play the Concert, it is Clarissa's to tell the Prophecy. Now let's hurry up and go see her so that you don't miss all of Yonder Mountain, I know they're your favorite."

"Dad, do you think it would be okay if we talked to Clarissa after Yonder?"

Kyle hesitated for a moment and then agreed. He took his daughter's hand and together they walked up close to the band. The same people tended to clump up toward the front when their favorite band was playing and so everyone knew Sarah and Kyle and made room for them.

Sarah took a long look at the band, concentrating mostly on their fingers as they skittered across the strings. The stage was lit by a series of torches that fitted into holes notched into the stage itself. Then she closed her eyes and watched the music in her mind, the intricate interplay between the musicians appeared to her eyes like colors engaged in a frantic, beautiful dance.

The ego known as Sarah disappeared- there was just music and her floating in a void of beautiful sounds.

4

Eventually, Yonder Mountain played their last note and the performance ended. The ecstatic experience of the music ebbed away. As Yonder left the stage for the encore break, Kyle took Sarah's hand again and led her behind the stage to the farthest point in the circle. Because the musicians faced the opposite direction, the sound was muffled.

Clarissa DuChamp sat in her usual place, cross legged on a thick mat woven out of some kind of hair that didn't grow on any animal Sarah had ever seen. Older than dirt, Clarissa's hair was a wild mat of dreadlocks, beads, and multi-colored thread. The most disturbing thing about the old woman was her eyes. Think whatever you wanted about her, but there was one thing no one could deny. The woman was seeing a different world than anyone else. That world might have been a symptom of insanity or it might have been God. Whatever the cause, there was no denying she lived on a different plane of reality.

"Hello Kyle." Clarissa said when Kyle walked up. "I haven't seen you in quite a while. Maybe not since Bonnie died."

Kyle flinched at this.

Bonnie was Kyle's wife and Sarah's Mom. She caught a bad case of pneumonia and died eight years earlier, when Sarah was just four.

Bonnie was Clarissa's student.

It would be fair to say Bonnie and Kyle had about as good a relationship as two people reasonably could. They fought, sometimes bitterly, but mostly they didn't. They respected and loved one another. The only place where the couple disagreed completely was on Clarissa.

Kyle thought Clarissa was a lunatic and he hated the fact that Bonnie went to her to have her head filled with all kinds of crazy stories about the past and the future and the grand meaning of the universe.

Truth be told- Kyle was afraid of Clarissa. Kyle knew Bonnie had a little of the old woman in her- and he was afraid of that part of his wife too. For him, it was hard enough to live in the present. Their society was paranoid- but relatively safe and stable. They had enough of everything *really* necessary, but it took hard work to maintain- and nothing came free.

Because Kyle disagreed so strongly about studying the prophecies, Clarissa was often the subject of their infrequent squabbles. Standing in front of her, Kyle remembered one particular occasion when their neighbor from three houses down died in his sleep and Bonnie tried to relate it to some phrase she remembered from Clarissa's reading of what she called, "The Books of the Past and Future."

The Books of the Past and the Future were the only things still remaining of the old world- and Clarissa was the only one who could read them.

At least that's what she claimed.

Clarissa had one of these books lying on her blanket when Kyle and Sarah walked up to her. Kyle didn't notice it right away- he only saw it after the old crone made her remark about Bonnie. There was a picture on the cover of the book.

It was a dog.

In the background was a bridge.

Kyle flinched again.

Sure, the dog was black and Crosby was yellow and the bridge was enormous and red while the bridge over the chasm was thin and black, but still...

"You have come to hear the prophecy? You have finally realized the truth of my words?"

"Why don't you tell Clarissa what happened today." Kyle told Sarah. He wasn't sure he could be civil with the old hag.

Sarah recounted her story again to the old woman sitting on her mat, her eyes fixed on the ground, She didn't so much as glance at the woman. Clarissa didn't express any emotion as the little girl told her story. She just sat and listened, her face as blank as an empty sky. When Sarah finished, there was a long uncomfortable silence.

"Sit down here in front of me child." Clarissa said finally. "You've told me a story and now I am going to tell you one."

Reluctantly, Sarah sat down. Even more reluctantly, Kyle joined her. He knew he'd initiated this meeting, but it didn't mean he was happy about it.

After a few more seconds of silence, Clarissa opened her book and showed the first picture to Sarah. It showed a little girl and a dog playing in a field. The caption underneath the picture said, "Jane loves her dog."

Clarissa pointed to the letters and said, "You see these symbols down here at the bottom of the page? They may just look like weirdly written numbers to you, but in truth this is writing. Writing is the use of symbols that combine to create a visual representation of the words we say. The old ones used writing to reveal the hidden meaning in pictures. You see these words here? They say this book is a book of future prophecy. Then this other word here says there is going to be a girl born who owns a dog."

Clarissa paused to take a long look at Sarah in the dim light that carried over from the concert. After a moment, she continued, "It says the girl will have yellow hair and bright eyes and she will be around twelve years old when she is called. Of course, you are a bright girl and you probably already realized the book says this little girl will have a pet. You can tell as much from the accompanying picture. But you probably don't know, it also says she only has one parent, the other having died in an unspecified tragedy- just like your mother."

Sarah could hardly believe what she was hearing. She stared down at the squiggles written under the picture, trying to glean this information from the page herself. She couldn't. Sarah had never seen writing before in her life. They wrote down math, but writing and reading disappeared generations earlier.

The only exception was for the shaman. The shaman was allowed to learn to read and write, but there could only be one shaman and one apprentice at any given time.

Clarissa had always wanted Bonnie to be her apprentice, but Bonnie always refused to make her training formal, because she knew how much Kyle disliked her studies. She wasn't going to quit entirely, but she was willing to hold back from the commitment that would put her next in line to take Clarissa's spot on the mat.

Clarissa turned the book's page. The next picture was just of the black dog running across a field with the little girl in the far background. Again Clarissa pointed to the writing under the picture. It said, 'Jane's dog loves to run. He runs and runs.'

"It says that this little girl will have a pet. It isn't specified what kind in the writing, but the picture clearly shows a dog. Still it wasn't certain until now the pet would be a dog, it is just a testament to the accuracy of the prophecies that the correct animal is pictured."

“Then why is it the wrong color?”

“Please girl, be reasonable, this book was written a hundred years ago, maybe longer, even I am uncertain. Recognize the vibration of the music when it meets your eyes. You don’t complain when a musician misses a single note in a marvelously fast breakdown do you? Even Jesus missed a note every once in a while.”

To avoid confusion- Clarissa isn’t talking about *that* Jesus. She’s talking about Jesus Martinez, the Folken’s most legendary picker. He could play twice as fast as his nearest rival- faster than anyone before or since. He could sing too, a voice to call down the angels.

“I’m sorry, what else do the symbols say?” Sarah said, terrified the woman would stop telling her story.

“It says that this pet is going to run away. The girl will chase it but she will be unable to recover it. The prophecy says this girl is very special. She is chosen.”

“Chosen to do what?”

“To travel the world.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know there is a world beyond this place. It is no secret. The entire earth isn’t this small parcel of land we Folken live in. We are forgotten here, but that doesn’t mean the world beyond doesn’t exist. It only means the world beyond pays no attention to us. This is fine with the Folken and we hope it will remain this way forever. For now at least, the world seems to have troubles of its own and cannot be bothered with us. In order to maintain this balance, since birth, you’ve been chosen to leave Folken lands.”

“You mean cross The Bridge?” Sarah asked, her throat dry.

“Yes. And you must go tomorrow. If you don’t, the world will indeed remember us here. Then the strangers will come and we will all be dead, roasted and burning for not listening to the signs when they came.”

“What?” Sarah asked, shocked. She turned around to look at her Dad. He was looking straight at her with tears in his eyes.

Right away she could see it written all over his face- he knew!

Her Dad knew what Clarissa was going to say. He knew and it broke his heart. This terrible old woman was serious- she could tell by the mixed look of sadness and regret on Kyle’s face.

“Why Daddy?” She asked- her voice breaking.

“Because sweetheart. As much as I hate this old woman, I have to admit now, that I was wrong about her prophecies. Everything she said has come true.”

Clarissa ignored the insult and only nodded at his acceptance.

Kyle continued, “She has been talking about this particular prophecy for years. I’ve heard it recounted from nearly every one of our neighbors and I myself have heard it more than once.” He sobbed. “I’m a fool for not seeing this coming; I should’ve realized how close the prophecy came to describing you. It’s just... I didn’t believe.” He shook his head, scolding himself. “I shouldn’t have let you get a pet until you were thirteen. This is my fault.”

Clarissa leaned forward and patted Kyle with her wrinkled, corpse-like hand. She said, “Now Kyle, I know we’ve had our differences, but this is the hands behind the world playing the strings of fate. There is nothing you could’ve done to prevent Sarah fulfilling the prophecy. She is the chosen one. Even if you would’ve forbidden the girl any pets, she would’ve found herself one against your will and kept it hidden out in the barn or something. No, I am sorry Kyle, but this was written long before our lives began, it is part of the beat of the earth.”

Kyle just looked at Clarissa for a long minute. He could feel the wave of momentum coming from the world around him. He shook his head. “Baby, you’re going to have to go. I know it’s scary, but you’ll be safe. There’s no reason to be afraid. Destiny wouldn’t send you out in the world just to get eaten by a wolf on the first night, would it?”

Sarah was in a mild state of shock. She honestly didn’t know what to say or do. In this trance like state, she turned back to Clarissa, waiting to see what else she had to say.

“There is one more part of the prophecy I have never read until now. I kept it a secret.” Clarissa said.

“Why?” Sarah demanded, becoming exasperated in her fear.

“Why else, you silly girl? Because the text tells me to keep it a secret.” Clarissa retorted.

She turned back to the cover of the dog, the girl, and the bridge. Written across the top was the title of the book. It said, ‘Jane and Her Dog.’

Tapping her fingers on the letters, Clarissa said, "It says the girl's dog will run across the bridge and the girl wouldn't follow. It says there is a good chance, though not a certainty, that the girl will be reunited with her dog- that they will be companions on their journey. This will be a good omen."

Sarah's heart leapt at this tiny glimmer of hope. It was a small consolation, but a reunion with Crosby would be some minor comfort.

Kyle couldn't be sure, but he thought there might've been a smile on the old crone's face when she added, "If however, the little girl cannot find her dog again- this will be a bad omen and the girl, I must lament, is probably doomed."

"If I don't find Crosby, then I won't go." Sarah said. She didn't think she could bear to make the trip totally alone anyway.

"Failing to follow the rules of the prophecy will bring certain doom to us all. If you stay, everyone you love- indeed, our entire town will suffer unfathomable loss. If you don't leave, you will be cursing us all to certain destruction."

Sarah started to cry.

"Is there anything else?" Kyle asked.

He wanted to get away and be with his daughter, to try to explain. He knew he couldn't make it alright- but he could try to soften the blow as much as he could. The hardest part was- he didn't think it felt right. Something gnawed at him from deep inside. But there was something else, some weird intangible feeling. It prevented him from rebelling against Clarissa's words.

"We must announce this to all the Folken." Seeing the family's obvious unhappiness Clarissa added, "You all need to relax. This isn't a bad thing. Don't you see? One of the great prophecies has been born out today. This is a day people will talk about for generations. By going out into the world, your daughter will guarantee the Folken another fifty years of safety from the world beyond."

Clarissa smiled through her blackened and missing teeth.

"Come, we must take the stage and announce what has happened." She reached out to take Sarah's hand, but the girl instinctively pulled away.

Shrugging off the girl's rudeness, Clarissa helped herself to her feet and shuffled off in the direction of the stage. As if in a dream, father and daughter followed the woman to the beautiful stage and mounted the steps carved in a spiral around its outer rim.

To Sarah's perception, the preceding ten minutes felt like a lifetime. It had to be a lifetime. It wasn't possible to lose everything in the space of ten minutes. Was it? For the first time, Sarah regretted her decision not to cross The Bridge and get Crosby. If she would've just went across, she could've brought him back and instead of being exiled, she would be grounded and crying at home, wishing she was at the concert. Judging by the alternative- missing a concert was getting off light.

Sarah scolded herself for wasting her time thinking about what she could've done differently. She didn't know. She couldn't have. She was a little girl being forced out on her own. On top of that- if she didn't find Crosby again- that old bitch said she was going to die. How dare she say it was a glorious day?

Sarah wanted to punch her.

The reality of what was happening really hit Sarah when Clarissa waved Yonder Mountain to a stop in the middle of their third encore. The sudden end of the music made Sarah aware of how a part of her had been listening to the music the entire time, using it to maintain calm. When it stopped, she felt a profound sense of fear and loss in her heart.

She would never hear Yonder's music again.

Hearing the music cut off in the middle of a song felt like a metaphor for everything she was experiencing. The loss of harmony, of the familiar, of her childhood...

Trying to focus on the bright side, Sarah told herself she could always listen to Yonder in her head. She'd heard every song they played a hundred times. But this wasn't the same and Sarah knew it. She wanted to cry, but held back. She wanted her Dad to see her be brave. She'd already broken down in front of him once today.

Meanwhile, Clarissa was waving her arms around and doing all she could to draw attention to herself. When she felt there were enough eyes focused in her direction, she recounted to the crowd the events of Sarah's day in her loud, croaking voice.

At the end of her address she said, "And now, this little girl will go out into the broad outside and she will learn secrets none of us can even imagine. Not even I can claim to know what is out there, but Sarah will know. This little girl will have to show a kind of courage none of us will ever know. You should admire her. She should be your hero. She leaves because she has to, because if she doesn't we will all be killed- wiped out by the great ocean of the outside world. So Sarah must go- and answering the call to duty is what makes us people. It is what makes us great."

The crowd erupted from silence into great applause. The sudden wall of noise surprised Sarah and brought an involuntary smile to her face. For a brief second, the despair of her situation was attended by a small bit of pride. After all, if all of the Folken agreed that she was doing a brave and noble thing- who was Sarah to argue?

Clarissa continued, "In honor of this girl's sacrifice, I am going to call for something that has never happened before in our generation. The concert is now over. Cut short, like our time with Sarah. I want you all to go home and dance with your families for Sarah's safe travels out into the world. She will need all of our luck."

"I want them to play one more song." Sarah said.

"What?" Clarissa asked.

"I would appreciate it, if Yonder would play one more song. You know, like, for the road." She smiled nervously at Clarissa, who felt just the slightest pang of guilt over what she was doing.

The aptly titled "Rambler Anthem" was Sarah's favorite song and so she turned around to the band and asked them to play it.

"Of course we'll play it for you." said Jeff, the mandolin player.

And play it they did.

From her place on the stage, Sarah closed her eyes and listened. For a long time there were no people and no problems. Music carried her through time and everything else was gone.

But eventually the song ended, as all songs eventually must. Sarah opened her eyes again to see her Dad and the many familiar faces of her fellow Folken.

The concert was over. There was nothing to do but go home.

For the last time.