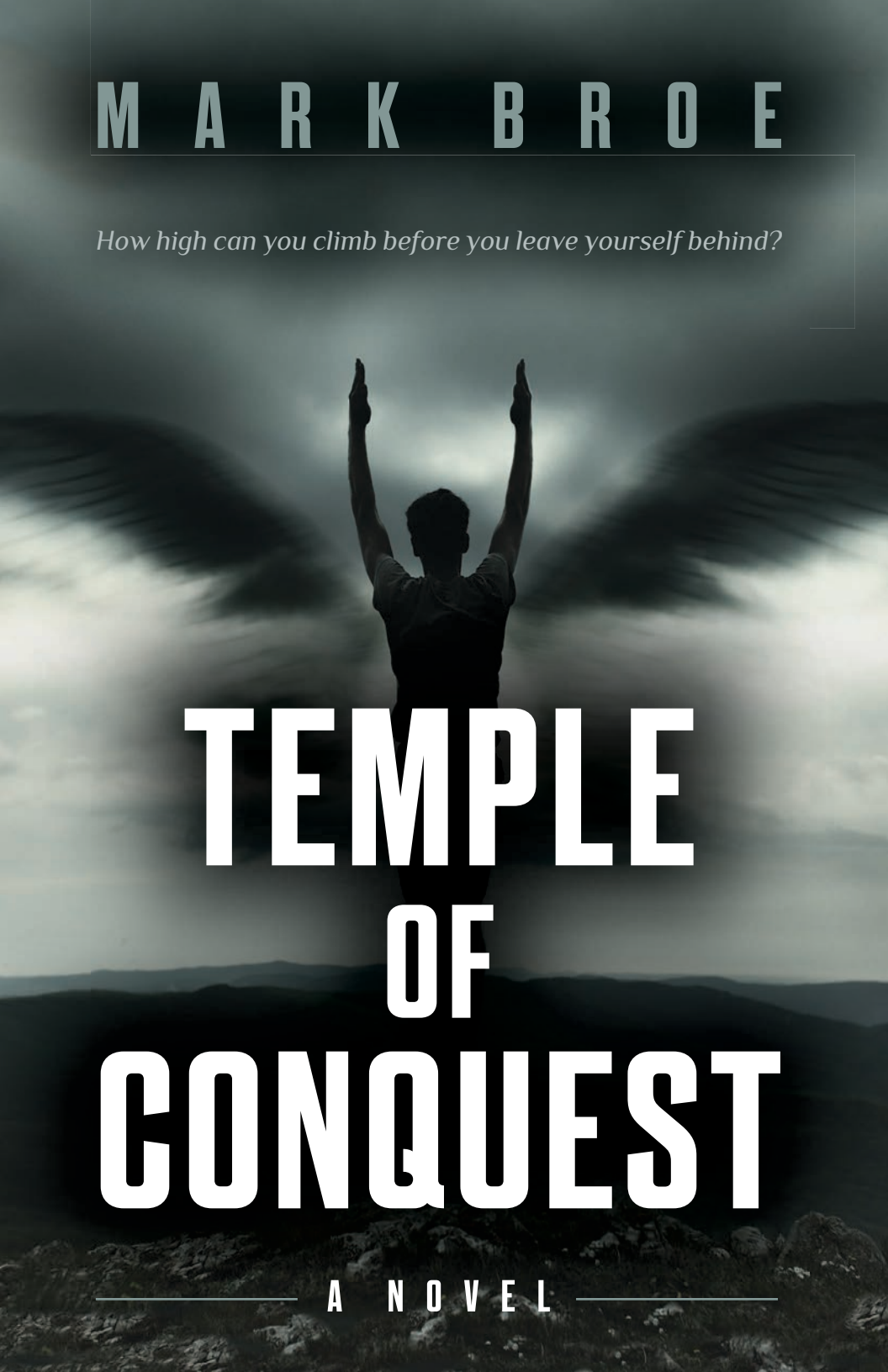


M A R K B R O E

How high can you climb before you leave yourself behind?



TEMPLE
OF
CONQUEST

— A N O V E L —

**TEMPLE
OF
CONQUEST**

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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Chapter 1

Telep had two hands. One gripped the jagged stone and pulled him higher on the rock face while the other held a wooden cup filled with tea. He held it steady near his chest as he climbed, the steam licking the side of his face. A brown leather satchel hung from his shoulder and swung back and forth as he ascended. It was not a difficult or long climb, though doing it with one arm did increase the challenge. He had climbed it many times, always trying to find a new path to the top. This time he chose the easiest steps and holds, as balancing the beverage surpassed any natural desire to test himself. Even holding the tea, he moved up the rock face with a swift grace that he had been honing for as long as he could remember.

The brightness of the full moon cast hard shadows across the rock face, though he did not rely on the light. He could find the holds in pitch dark, so on this climb his focus stayed on the brim of the wooden cup and not letting any more tea spill over.

He had spent his childhood practicing on this rock face. It was one of the only ascents in the mountain hills of Eveloce that had large bushes at its base, which proved very valuable on more than one occasion. The tall greenery's long supple branches,

sticky with sap, hid small brown thorns, which contributed to the array of light scars on Telep's back.

Telep almost never climbed a face the same way twice. He often sought out new paths and new techniques and new maneuvers. By the time he was thirteen solars in age, Telep could ascend the wall faster than anyone in Eveloce. Even the most accomplished climbers marveled at his skill, and he began to draw the attention of the elders.

When Telep reached the top of the face, he rested the tea on the ledge and pulled himself up. He looked far and away—to the edge of land where white water shone amid the jagged rocks littering the surrounding sea, all the way to the horizon. People referred to the rocky formations surrounding the island of the Mainland as “jagged rocks,” though they more closely resembled clustered mountaintops poking through the sea—large immovable barriers making outward seafaring impossible. The tide was high, so only the tops of them were visible, but when the tide was low, Telep would gaze far out at the rocky maelstrom and imagine himself climbing from one to the next, all the way to the horizon.

He sat with his back to a rock, out of sight of anyone coming down the trail, and covered the cup with his hand. He waited. His chest rose and fell. The faint sound of trickling water created a sense of serenity. Keeping one eye closed, he looked to the moon and relished in its immense brightness. The full moon was nearly as large as a fist held at arm's length. He gazed at it—its pure white surface, the slight red luminescence around it, its dark gray pools that moved across it during the night.

Familiar footsteps pattered from up the trail—bouncy yet soft, more a skip than a walk. He stayed behind the rock until the footsteps passed by. He then saw her from behind. Her tattered woolens cut off above the ankle, her short but sleek legs hurrying to keep up, the wet handprints on the ass of her pants that waved to him as she bounced along, the way she held a book to her chest with both arms—it all gave Telep an auspicious excite-

ment as he crept to his feet. He slunk up behind her until she was close enough to touch.

“Excuse m—” he began.

She spun around in such terror that he stopped mid-sentence.

“Hey, hey, it’s me,” he said holding up a calming hand.

She put a hand to her chest. “Telep!”

He laughed and tried not to spill the tea when she slugged him in the shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Root. I didn’t mean to make you scream.”

She looked to the sky, still breathing heavily.

“This is for you, for your voice.” He held out the cup of simmering tea. “I’m sorry, Ell.” She looked at him with playful grumpiness, followed by a smile.

“Aw, how did you get this up here? It’s still hot,” she said, tucking her book under her arm and taking the cup.

“I have my ways.” He put his hand on her shoulder and thumbed the side of her neck.

She glanced down at the creamy liquid and brought it up to her face. The fresh, soothing aroma overwhelmed her senses.

“You came to meet me?” she murmured, nudging him with her shoulder.

“Of course. I gotta take care of you.” He pulled her close, and they continued down the path.

She smiled with pinched lips in a way he found endearing.

Gripping her hand, he pulled her up the grassy slope until they stood on top of the ridge overlooking the Temple of the Moon, an enormous land basin of light soil carved out of the ground. It stretched at least four stone throws across. Telep pulled a dark wool blanket out of his satchel and spread it out for he and Ell. They sat with their legs hanging over the edge of the basin while gazing into the distance. The bright soil glowing in the moon’s

light made all else seem darker, like the edges of a dream. Cool, soft light reflected on Ell's face giving her an angelic glow.

Telep undid the clasp on his sandals and set them aside. Putting his hand on Ell's thigh and sliding it down past her knee, he grabbed her woolens and raised her foot to remove her sandals as well. Then he lay back, gazing at the points of light in the sky.

His eyes drifted to Ell's long dark hair nearly touching the ground as she sat upright. He reached out and touched her, gently sliding his fingers over her back.

"Ell."

"Um-hum?" She set the cup down, making sure the steaming liquid wouldn't spill.

"What's on your mind?"

She paused before answering.

"Do you think we're going to make top tier?"

"What?" He pinched her shirt and pulled her back on the blanket. Rolling onto his side and pressing his body into hers, he looked at her. "Of course we are."

"Okay." A wind whisking through the grass calmed, and their ears rang with silence. "Sometimes I worry. The elders let so few people up there. Sometimes I just can't see it happening for us." Ell's gaze remained fixed in the sky.

"Come on, Root. Your father and I are a great team. Since the collapse of the North Rim, he and I have delivered twice the supplies as the next most efficient team." He nuzzled his face into the side of her neck.

"I know. Sometimes the elders just seem . . ." She was lost for a moment, unable to finish her thought, or perhaps unwilling. The thoughts weighing on her mind dispelled with the tickle of Telep's tongue on her neck. She took a breath, seized his shirt, and rolled on top of him.

In so doing, her foot knocked over the cup. Tea spilled over the edge and ran down the light sand of the basin.

Chapter 2

Hot, white slits of sunlight drifted up Telep's cheek as he lay in bed. The blinding light squeezed through the gaps in the wooden shutters covering his bedroom window. When the light finally reached his fluttering eyelids, he stirred and recoiled. Purpose and routine dragged his feet to the floor where he pulled on his climbing attire: thin woolens to increase maneuverability, a knit shirt that hugged his body tighter than the shapeless tunics that could snag a rock, and a pair of firm sandals that were closed at the toes and had extra straps extending up his calf. He'd had the same climbing garments for several solars now, and they had become worn and tight on his growing frame. His wool trousers barely extended past the calf. His toes had blisters from being forced into outgrown sandals, though he always seemed to stretch the leather a little bit more every time. His knit wool shirt had started off white, but solars of grazing rock faces had stained it a reddish brown. Every time he put it on, he pulled the fabric away from his chest to stretch it out a bit.

Out of the saltbox, he pulled two chops of lamb and put them on a thick slice of hard bread. Grabbing his large lumber satchel, he was almost out the door when he heard his parents

descending the stairs. Both stood a head shorter than Telep, though his father sounded much larger the way he stomped down the steps. Both of them wore robes, his mother cinching hers, and his father making no such effort.

“What’s the cargo this sun?” his father asked.

“More dark wood,” Telep said.

“Alright. So, when will it be done?”

“The Temple of the Sky?” Telep asked the question even though he knew what his father meant.

“Yeah. You’ve taken so much lumber up there, can’t it reach the sky yet?” His father crossed the kitchen and leaned on the saltbox to stretch his back. His mother followed behind impatiently.

“Did you get enough breakfast?” she asked, trying to lift the wooden hatch of the saltbox, which her husband’s lean made impossible.

“Yes, Ma. I’m fine.”

“When are you back?” his father groaned amid a deep stretch.

“Should be back tonight.”

“Neil, would you move?” his mother pressed.

“No classes this sun?” his father asked, and then turned to his wife. “He said he ate, hun.”

“Can you just stretch on the floor?” she shot, still pulling on the saltbox lid.

After a moment of silence, Neil laughed and grabbed his wife around the waist.

“You want to put me on the floor?”

She giggled.

“Yeah, I’ll be back tonight,” said Telep, turning out the door. The laughing got louder as he closed the door behind him.

Blue skies radiated overhead as he walked the main path to the wood stockade, which had been moved after the collapse of the North Rim. The collapse had slowed the transportation of raw materials on Eveoce, and Telep found himself busier than

ever. He and Ell's father, Caleb, were among the select few who were able to scale the South Rim with a decent payload of cargo.

Construction of the Temple of the Sky had slowed considerably with the supply of materials dropping off after the North Rim's collapse. Though most of EVELOCE's habitants were skilled climbers, only the best were able to traverse the jagged vertical faces leading to the top tier crescent. This was where the highest elders and mountain elite resided. It was also where many of the most sacred temples were built.

Telep looked up to the top tier with admiration. To him it was something to strive for, something to idolize, a place embodying the pinnacle of human endeavor.

Even in his earliest memories, height had enthralled him. His mother liked to speak of his infancy when he would sit at the bottom of the stairs as if in a trance, his eyes fixed on the top step.

Telep couldn't deny that he found much of his identity in climbing. It made him valuable in EVELOCE. It gave him a chance to advance his societal rank to top tier. And it was through climbing that he had met Ell, his love, the girl he wanted to hold until his last breath. Climbing put it all within his reach.

Looking up the path to the wood stockade, Telep saw the brawny silhouette of Caleb. This surprised him as he almost always reached the stockade first; something he did to show Caleb how responsible he was. He felt a kinship with Caleb because he was the only climber in EVELOCE whose ability and zeal matched his own. They had been climbing partners for three solars and had grown very close. Looking at the sun's position over the mountain, he took a breath, confirming he was not late.

When he reached the stockade, he saw an inordinate amount of lumber behind Caleb, who waved him over with a smile. Usually there was just enough lumber for three or four stacks, an amount that he and Caleb could move in two sun's time, but he

counted twenty-four stacks. Only two were dark wood, he observed, one already loaded into Caleb's lumber satchel.

"Morning," Telep said.

"Hey." Caleb slapped him hard on the shoulder, and they walked over to the other stack of dark wood. "I learned something about you, Telep."

"Yeah?"

Caleb knelt next to his fully bundled satchel and started examining the straps. "Do you need silver? Does your family need silver?"

All flippancy faded from Telep's face. He always tried to present himself to Caleb as well-off and capable. After all, he was Ell's father.

"No, we are fine. Well, I mean we need it; we all work, but—"

"I mean are you struggling? Does your family have debts?" Caleb looked at him with concern.

Telep bit the inside of his lip hard. "No, we are fine. We're more than fine."

Caleb jiggled one of the straps on his satchel and started tightening it.

"Why do you ask?"

"I spoke with Elder Anaea," Caleb said, standing up. Though he was a hand shorter than Telep, the power he asserted could intimidate a bear. "He tells me you have been bartering the price of the wood."

Telep looked down at the pile of dark wood, slung the leather satchel off his shoulder and knelt to start loading it. "We are fine."

"Okay." Taking a breath, Caleb knelt down to help load the satchel. "Listen, I know you can take care of yourself. I know you contribute to your family. And I don't doubt you could take care of Ell."

Telep stopped, a log mid-air in his hand, and looked up at Caleb as he continued.

“You know this landslide has been hard on everyone, the elders too. They are cut off. They used to get their supplies very cheap from the North Rim—”

“Anybody with a wheelbarrow could deliver on the North Rim.”

Caleb grinned. He secured the last strap of his satchel, and they departed.

The South Rim had several sections of vertical rock face, and each one needed precise planning and execution. If a climber didn't know where the next hold was, there would not be much time to find it considering the weight of the load was enough to peel even the strongest climbers off the wall. Relative to his weight, Telep had the strongest hands in Eveloce but with a full load, there were times when they burned with exhaustion.

Caleb and Telep climbed slowly and steadily, resting after each section of vertical rock.

The sky darkened. Black clouds enveloped the horizon. The dark wood grew heavier as they made their way up the South Rim. Calling it the “South Rim” made Caleb and Telep laugh because prior to the landslide, it was known as the “Southern Cliffs.” It was scarcely travelled because of its extreme climbing difficulty.

Halfway up the third vertical face, they looked to the next landing. They named it “The Precipice of Perdition” because it came before the largest and most strenuous section of the climb.

Telep looked up at Caleb, about ten holds ahead of him. He stopped and took a deep breath. The strong aromatic scent of wood from his satchel permeated the air. He felt honored to be carrying dark wood to the top tier. It was a very rare wood used in the most sacred temples. While the other supplies could be lifted up the cliffs using hoists, the elders required dark wood to be carried by climbers so it remained connected to the people

harnessing its power. It had a smooth texture but was dense and heavy. The bark was black; the wood, dark gray. It proved very difficult to burn, but when dark wood did ignite, it released an intoxicating fragrance so palpable that people spoke of tasting it rather than smelling it. A dark wood fire sent thick dark smoke high into the sky. It was said that, if set on the top tier's burning pyre, the smoke could be seen anywhere, from the seawall of the south to the lakes of the West Isles. Everyone in the world would be seeing the same thing.

Telep noticed the humidity rising. The rock face felt moist to his touch.

POP! The sound pierced the air.

“TELEP!”

His eyes shot up. Logs of dark wood plunged toward him. He leapt from the wall and grabbed for the safety line, kicking sideways at the rock, trying to evade the falling logs. He gripped it. A barrage of dark wood whipped past him. A strong *WHACK* from the descending lumber rang in his ears. His left hand jolted off the hemp rope which began burning through his right hand, unable to support the weight. He forced his hand back on the rope, trying to stop himself from sliding, but the weight of the cargo dragged him down. Tiny pieces of calloused skin clung to the rope as it passed through his hands. With a pained yell, he cocked his hands in different directions and ground to a halt.

Again, his gaze shot up. Caleb was falling, his outstretched hands searching for the safety line just out of reach. Telep froze in terror. He stuck out his left foot, hoping it could help in some way, but all he felt was a whoosh of air as Caleb flew past him. His eyes shivered in horror as they followed his mentor, his friend, Ell's father plunging toward the rocky ledge below. An image of Ell shot in his mind—she was smiling so big as she always did upon their return from a climb.

Caleb kicked at a rock jutting out from the face. It pushed him forward just enough to wrap his extended fingers around the safety line. He gripped hard. The rope shuddered with

tension. His feet swung under him violently. One leg wedged itself between two rocks, jolting him to a stop an arm's length above the jagged ledge. Caleb's bloodcurdling scream seemed to silence all else. He hung upside down from his jammed leg, bucking like a snared animal, desperately grabbing for anything to ease the strain. Between screams, each breath surged from his throat as a tortured wheeze.

Telep was still, just for a moment before panic seized his body like a muscle in spasm. The dark wood on his back became a suffocating weight; the purpose of the climb, instantly worthless. He wanted to tear the strap off his shoulder, but Caleb had swung directly underneath Telep's safety line. Jettisoning it could crush him. Stings of acid prodded Telep's chest. Something needed to happen *now*, but he couldn't do anything *now*, nothing that would quell the screams from below that were churning the blood in his veins.

"I'm coming!"

Needles spread through his hands as he released the rope and grabbed a hold barely large enough to support two fingers. He jammed his fingers into the rock and began to move across the rock face, away from the safety line.

"Oh God, oh God, oh God," he whispered. "Just hang on!"

His heart throbbed. His lungs churned to the beat. He continuously looked down to see his progress. Caleb finally found the safety line and pulled the weight off his trapped leg in spurts, his screams turning into low roars of agony.

When Telep was a couple body lengths to the side, he slid the satchel off his shoulder, and the bundle shrank peacefully along the cliff before erupting on the rocky ledge. The worn leather popped, spewing dark wood in all directions. One log bounced much farther than the rest, striking Caleb in the chest. A pained cry shot up the cliff, consuming Telep's ears.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" gritted Telep, grinding his forehead into the rock. For an instant, thoughts of disbelief invaded his mind—This was a dream. This wasn't the sun he climbed second; he

was first as usual. His parents playfully arguing in the kitchen. He was just at home. How did he get here? Ell's smitten smile. *Fuck. Everything was perfect!*

He shook his head, then struck it against the rock.

"I'm coming!" his voice cracked. Looking down, he saw Caleb's safety line wedged between the two rocks along with his leg, and he wouldn't dare climb down his own safety line that Caleb was using for each excruciating breath. He found a lower hold, grabbed it, and began his descent. He moved fast. His speed, usually accompanied by a sleek elegance, was replaced with fear and panic. He jammed his fingers into holds and kicked his feet into steps almost with malice.

Once low enough, he dropped to the ledge and leapt from rock to rock until he reached Caleb.

"I'm here, I'm here."

Caleb's face was blood red.

"Telep, you gotta unwedge it!" Caleb sputtered between breaths. Telep put both arms under Caleb's back, trying to ease the strain, but Caleb pushed him away.

"No. The leg. Get it out!"

Telep gaped at the leg. A yellowish bone stuck out just above the snared knee. Large lacerations tore through the discolored calf, dark purple and red. Telep reached for the ankle but then pulled away.

"Do it!"

Telep squirmed his hand behind the trapped foot, gripping the heel. Caleb made a pained cry through his clenched jaw that made Telep take a single breath before ripping the leg free from the rocks. A pop, a tear, a scream, and Caleb passed out. Telep held his weight by his limp and mangled extremity and lowered him to the rock below. He could not reach far enough to lay his whole body down. When he let go, the body fell like a sack of damp wool. Telep looked at the converging rocks dripping red, then down at Caleb whose blood was amassing under the shredded limb.

Chapter 3

The medical tent had a tangy odor, like a barrel of lime peels had been left there. Telep sat hunched at Caleb's bedside. A low fire crackled in the corner as a small piece of fuzz floating over the sedated body kept him mesmerized.

The medic burst through the leather flaps and Telep jerked to attention.

Ell followed on the medic's heels, her face frozen in distress.

"Any change?" asked the medic as he slapped his fingers on Caleb's jugular.

"No," Telep said, receiving Ell, who gripped his shirt in her fists, never taking her eyes off her father.

"Papa, can you hear me?"

"He's had five drops of hondrekk milk; he won't be hearing anything for a while," said the medic as he threw the blanket off Caleb's leg.

Telep's shirt stretched in Ell's hands. She let out a pained gasp at the sight of what was underneath the blanket. The leg was black and swollen to nearly twice the size of its counterpart. A rope tied tightly just above the knee contained the discoloration. The tips of his toes were black as soot. Dark purple

streaks surrounded every gash in his calf, the biggest one spewing a dark yellow puss. Telep clenched his jaw and swallowed the lump in his throat. Never had he seen such a thing. It sickened him.

The disgusting and grotesque limb was useless. The weight of it sank in like death, staining the symbol Caleb embodied, robbing its purity. The man he had known was different and he would always be different. Looking at him now, his body seemed smaller, weaker, dependent—the antithesis of what he'd been.

The sight of it brought tears to Telep's eyes. Instinctively, he looked to the ceiling and tightened his arms around Ell, pressing her head to his chest.

“The leg has to go.” The medic's stoic gaze didn't flinch.

Ell shuddered. “No! You can't. He will heal. I know he will, even if it takes four seasons. He will heal!”

“The bone in your father's leg is shattered.. This isn't a choice.” His voice was cold.

Ell released Telep's shirt and faced the medic. “There is *always* a choice!” she screamed.

The silence that followed her outburst was palpable.

The medic let out a breath, his mouth in rigid restraint, just waiting.

Streams ran down Ell's cheeks. She softened, both in body and voice.

“But he's a climber,” she pleaded with an expression that made Telep want to hold her tighter.

The medic walked past and began stoking the fire. “All I can do for him is take the limb.”

Ell's body shuddered. Telep struggled to keep his arms around her.

“All you can *do* for him?!” she shrieked, lunging toward the medic who stepped back, surprisingly composed. Telep held Ell back, and soon her body softened again. She buried her face in his chest. He felt the fury heating her breath as she sobbed. Telep rested his cheek on top of her head and turned to the

medic, who stared at a host of tools hanging on the wall. Among them was a hacksaw as long as his arm and a large file meant for smoothing bone.

The medic exchanged a glance with him and leaned in close, whispering, “She can’t be here for this. I may need another pair of hands. Stay close so I can call you, but make sure she stays outside.”

Telep’s heart pounded. The medic pulled back, catching his eye to make sure he understood.

“What would you need me for?”

The medic took a breath and leaned back in. “Hondrekk milk is a strong sedative. It can keep a patient under through a lot, but if he does wake, I will need you to restrain him.” The medic checked for a pulse behind the knee of the wounded limb.

“I don’t know what else I could have done. I washed—”

“Listen, son. You did what you could. It wasn’t enough. The damage was already done. His knee was crushed. In two suns’ time his urine will turn dark brown, and he will die. The limb has to go.”

Telep looked away.

“You’re the climber, right?”

Telep’s eyes narrowed, unsure how to respond. He opened his mouth, but no words came to his defense.

“So maybe you can appreciate this . . . *I’m* the best at what *I* do.” The medic held his gaze for a moment before nodding toward the exit and turning to his patient.

As Telep ushered Ell out, he glanced back to the medic reaching for his saw.



Ell rested her head on Telep’s shoulder while they sat with their backs against the stone wall outside the medical tent. The sun had fallen out of view making the light tepid and uniform. On the horizon, the sky glowed red, fading into orange, the farthest

clouds lined with gold. They watched the luminous aura of color slowly dissipate into a shadowed scale of gray.

Telep replayed the incident over and over in his mind.

Climbing for Eveloce was Caleb's whole life, aside from Ell. It was his lifelong pursuit to elevate them in the social hierarchy. He worked to be the best, worked toward the highest ideal, transformed himself into a symbol of that ideal.

Telep imagined what the high elders would think—that being a symbol required the presentation of an image, and Caleb's image was now reduced to nothing more than a cautionary tale of possibility lost . . . that he was disfigured, his image destroyed. The loss of a limb, the loss of a dream.

Rising to tier five was Caleb's dream, and the plane of the dream had been pushed so close to the plane of reality that it felt tangible, physical, like it was meant to be. Now there it would stay, one hold away, filling the view of those who believed in it and worked for it, taunting them, living in their minds so they would always know what was never to be.

Shame needed no sound, but the sliding of metal across metal from inside the tent gave it one. Shame needed no touch, but the warm tears falling from Ell's cheeks provided one. Things would never be the same.

Telep pulled Ell closer.

"Everything's going to be all right." The warm tears falling to his chest cooled his skin in the twilight air. "Do you believe me?"

Silence.

"No."

Silence.

"Why?"

Silence.

"I don't know how to believe you."

A rhythmic gnawing sound emanated from inside, their dream of reaching top tier slipping farther away with every slice of bone. They held each other and wept, pretending not to hear.

Hosts of thoughts bludgeoned Telep like battle-axes landing blows, each delivering a demoralizing realization, each harboring a stinging, undeniable truth: He would never climb with Caleb again—Ell would never be the same—the elders would advance neither Caleb nor Ell to the fifth tier.

The more he thought about it, the more he tried to cultivate hope for Caleb and Ell's future on Eveलोce. *Caleb is not a broken symbol. Losing his leg does not change what he has done. How could such a man be denied after a life of devotion?* Though when he thought of Caleb's unsightly body, he couldn't help but feel detached from him.

Distant. Separate. The thoughts circled in his mind like hungry scavenger birds.

Telep looked to the darkening horizon. The clouds were no longer lined with gold. The red and orange had become a soft yellow and pale gray.

Every tear that Ell shed on his chest made his own eyes well up. He smeared them across his face. When the tears continued, he leaned his head back and let them roll to his ears. A lump formed in the back of his throat, and he knew he would not be able to speak without his voice cracking. Pursing his lips, he swallowed it back; letting out each breath slowly, careful not to make a sound.

He thought back to the last time he allowed himself to sob openly. It was when he was nine solars aged and his older brother Areto died. When the finality of death struck him, Telep lay in his bed and sobbed for the loss of his father's son, his mother's firstborn, his friend, his teacher, his tormenter, his rival, his blood, his brother. He sobbed loudly, screaming into his cotton-wool pillow until it was lumpy with tears. He sobbed his throat raw. And when he was done, a stillness settled in the air, and he made a conscious decision to never cry like that again.

Tears will fill my eyes, but they will drip silently from my face. Never again will I sob like a child.

Every time tears filled his eyes, he pressed his chin into his

throat, and let no sound through. His brother had gotten his last sob, and it would remain that way.

Placing his finger on Ell's forehead, he swept the hair from her eyes. She stirred, sliding her hand over his stomach and holding his side. Silence came from the tent behind them.

He looked back to the horizon. The yellow sky was gone.



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PROGRESS COMES WITH A PRICE.

Caleb had said it was soft, unpredictable rock, but Telep had never experienced anything like this.

Suddenly he felt in a foreign place, something he had never felt while climbing. This wasn't a rock. Rocks were hard and sturdy. Trustworthy edifices. They wanted to be climbed. Telep had always felt a kinship with mountains, but no such connection existed here.

***"This is a rock like a corpse is a man."
The realization sank into him like betrayal.***

"Not content to create just one world, first-time novelist, Mark Broe, unfolds one after another as his protagonist, Telep, fights, climbs and crawls his way through increasingly hostile geographical and social strata."

**—Andrew Steiner, Pushcart-nominated author of
"La Mesa de Jesús" and other short stories**



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