

## *The Gray Tower*

Across the endless sea of grass, the exile fled from the world he knew. He never turned back, because behind him, there was nothing left for him. He kept moving forward, his eyes fixed on the sky ahead. That was the only place he could go. He had no plans or goals. All he could do was follow the horizon until he found where he needed to be. So he walked on. Grasslands spread out around him as far as the eye could see. For miles, there was nothing but plains, dotted with a few small trees. Something stood out though. Out of the corner of his eye, the exile saw a flash of red to his left. He turned his gaze, and saw a rose, pushing up out of the ground. For the first time since he began his exodus, the exile turned and walked to his left. He kneeled down and examined the rose. It was delicate and soft, red petals flush with color and cool to the touch. The petals flowed in and out of each other, creating a whirlpool of intricacy and beauty.

It was the first flower the exile had seen in his journey across the grasslands. He stood up and looked into the distance. As his gaze met the horizon he was stunned. Where before the wastes had stretched on forever, now in the distance there was a plateau, pushing its way up from the grass below. And on top of the plateau was a monstrous tower. It spiraled up into the sky, a steel gray needle, piercing the heavens. The exile had never seen anything like it before. It was as incredible as it was terrifying. He could hear it in the distance. It was calling him to it. The man saw nowhere else to go, so he followed the tower's call.

As he got closer the tower seemed to grow higher and higher. The exile climbed the small plateau and reached the tower's base. A high wall grew out of the tower's trunk and created a courtyard in front of it. The exile walked around the base looking for an entrance. He walked around the courtyard wall and found a door leading inside the walls. He walked inside and waded into a sea of roses. The roses covered the courtyard in a sheet of red and flowed across the ground. Across the courtyard the exile saw a door leading into the tower itself. He heard the tower calling to him again, and he walked through the roses and opened the door.

Inside was a large circular room, the gray walls flowing up towards the pinnacle of the tower. In front of the exile was a small hill of grass, with more roses scattered around it. At the top of the hill was a deep blue pond. The exile walked up to the pond and looked into it. The edges of the pond were shallow, but towards the center the bottom grew deeper, and murkier. At the very center of the pond was a dark spot, the deepest section of the pond. The exile looked up and saw the tower spiraling inwards above him. The spiral walls sloped and curved in towards the center as they slowly ascended to the top. The gray walls were occasionally disrupted by small bricks of gold that glowed and illuminated the area around them. Blue pieces of sky poked through the gray walls, and light shone down onto the pond below. Behind the pond the man saw a small gray staircase. It clung to the sides of the tower and followed the spinning walls in their ascent.

The exile walked around the pond and climbed the stairs. Up and around he climbed, higher and higher. The exile looked down and saw the pond and roses far below. The center of the pond looked even deeper from his vantage. He wanted to give it another look, but the tower's call was pulling him up, and

so he continued his ascent. The gray walls began to mesh together and the spiral of the staircase began to shrink in its width. Finally, the staircase flowed up and outside onto a small platform near the center of the tower. Around him the walls continued to spiral up to the pinnacle, but the stairs stopped, and he could see more of the sky above him. The sun was in its descent towards the horizon, and the sky was beginning to darken with the coming of night. The exile looked around for more stairs, but couldn't find any. The tower still called for him from above. The call slowly grew stronger and the exile became frantic. He had to hurry or else he would miss it. He didn't know what it was, but he knew he had to be there. The exile steeled himself, and began to climb the walls around him.

The exile clung to the inner wall and slowly, carefully moved up to the top of the tower. He eventually reached a top to the wall he had climbed, a small ledge spiraling along the outer walls to even greater heights. It continued to slope up and around the center of the tower. The exile clung to the gray surface and continued his ascent. The slope became steeper and steeper, and the exile was forced to move slower and slower. He looked out from the tower and saw the grasslands stretching endlessly to the horizon. He couldn't go back to that now, not when he was so close. He looked down and saw the courtyard below, a small patch of red flowing out of the gray monolith he was climbing. Then he looked up and saw his goal above him. The peak of the tower. A shining point piercing the slowly darkening sky. The exile knew if he could reach that point, if he could finish his ascent, then he could know peace. He could know wisdom. He could return home and bring with him the light of God. He climbed the spiral with renewed fervor. The sun set but the stars and moon shined down to light his way.

The exile reached the end of the spiral ledge. It curved in towards the center. He looked down and saw the inside of the tower, and the pond, a deep blue dot at the center of a gray swirling eye of stone and steel. Across from him another spiral continued upwards and ended at the gold pinnacle of the tower. The only way to reach the other spiral ledge was to jump to it, to leap across the pit below, the hollowed empty air of the inner tower, leading down all the way to the pinprick blue of the pond... and a certain death. But the call of the tower was greater than the risk of death.

The exile braced himself and leaped. He felt time slow as he flew forward, his mind racing with a thousand panics and thoughts, and no time to analyze any of them. His hand caught the ledge on the opposite wall, and he hung there in shock and growing despair, on the literal precipice of death below and life above. He tried to pull himself up, to make the final climb up the spiral, but his arms were tired from climbing and he didn't have the strength. His hand began to slide, slowly down the curve of the spiral, friction betraying him as he fought for purchase. His fingers were clenched and white as he desperately tried to hold on to the wall with everything he had.. He was so close to the pinnacle. So close to heaven itself. He pooled together all the power he could muster and he tried once more to pull himself up.

And his hand slipped. The exile fell down, through the ancient air that filled the center of the tower. The gray walls flew past him faster and faster, and he saw the ground below, rushing upwards to embrace him in its deadly grasp. The blue pond grew wider and wider, as the gray of the walls began to back away from him. The exile screamed soundlessly as he plunged headfirst into the pond, falling directly down through the very center of it. The crunch of impact never came, instead he kept falling. Downwards he fell, through the murky water, deeper and deeper into darkness. The light from above

dimmed and slowly faded away. Darkness was all around him. He gasped for air and his mind began to slip away.

The exile woke up to the feeling of grass on his face. He had rested long enough and had to continue his exodus. He stood up and began to walk. Across the endless sea of grass, the exile fled from the world he knew.