

## Religion - Mabel Haller

For a Star, life in The Migron was decidedly boring. That was until the day when it wasn't. One minute she was dancing with four of her six sisters in the temperate grotto they called home, the next she was falling, tripping, spilling through open air, diving through sludge and then smashing into freezing water.

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"Pull the line, D." His voice was rougher than he intended. She didn't deserve his frustration, but they needed to bring in the sails before they shattered in the wind, and the more he tried to keep his composure, the worse he felt. He might as well have been the rigging, pulled taught and ready to snap. The seer had offered notions of a fair-weather trip to Norboros to deliver the stones. The storm brewing in the west was not fair weather.

*"Always trust a seer's word but never trust how they are said." His mother's words haunted him, her gray braid loose near the end. It was rare these days that she had the energy to redo it after his initial attempt each morning. He saw her there. Laying in that damned bed—her prison and nearly came undone. "Sometimes it takes time for their words to become clear," She croaked, unrattled by her impending death.*

But the seer's final words the day his mother died haunted him more than anything. The ones he'd never forget and the way they were said—with an unignorable truth. Truth he'd waited for.

Streaks of white veined across the sky.

"I'm pulling with my bloody calluses, Neo," Dione shouted over the grumble of the sky. And she claimed truth; the gray rope was marred with crimson streaks. His shipmate was trying her best, but the tempest threatened to pull them under.

Lightning struck the sky, the ship rolled and a blinding pinprick in the sky exploded like the star that formed the cosmos. The cacophony that followed shook him to the core as the radiant light peeled across the sky.

Was it a shooting star? A sign of the seven?

This was to be the voyage that ended his life, then. At least he'd been faithful, worshipping the seven from infancy. He'd have a place in The Migron. That's all he could ask for. All his mother had prayed for.

*His mother's silken gray hair thinned where her head rested against the pillow of the four-poster bed. The seer kneeled before her and two sets of frail hands locked together in communion. Though she no longer made it to the church, his mother's faith was devout. The power of the pantheon of The Migron never wavered in her eyes. She believed the seer's had visions of the pantheon and their desires.*

*"Alatha is The Migron star that will fall for you," The seer finally offered.*

But the star continued its advance rounding down toward the ocean and then rocketing toward the water with speed he'd never seen.

"Dione!" he shouted. His shipmate's soaked black hair slapped against her cheek as she whipped to watch the light descend toward the water in the distance.

Did stars fall?

The Star splashed into the inky black water. The boat only barely managed to stay afloat as the ensuing spray and wave reached them minutes after impact.

"The fucking Gods have it out for us today!" Dione shouted and with words like that, they certainly did now if they hadn't before. He scanned the horizon expecting the heaving waves capped with snowy white, but there in the middle was a figure reaching out from the

ocean. A woman fought against the current as it hooked her in and expelled her out. How was she out here? There were no other ships on the horizon. Neo didn't hesitate, jumping from the bow with precision—ignoring Dione's shouts.

The briny water sunk into his bones and threatened to do the same with his lungs as he propelled himself toward the shouting woman. Moments before he reached her, she sunk beneath the crests and didn't return. So, he dove. Fighting against the darkness and waves, he swam under. She was radiant, despite the flopping of the waves. A white gown tangled around her. Her blonde hair, some strands wrapped in braids and others floating, crowned her. Despite the darkness, she was all he could see. As if she glowed from the inside.

Before he could register the sensation pulling him towards her, he was already moving, wrapping his thick arms around her and ripping her from a watery grave. The seer's crusted eyes flashed before him in his memory, and he knew.

This was the Star.

She was Alatha.

The swim back to the boat was difficult as he fought to keep them both afloat against the deadly waves, but he knew they would make it and when his hand wrapped around the wooden hull, he felt the electricity pulsing his heart to life. With great effort he lifted her into the boat and then pulled himself in as well. Dione had secured the rigging line, and the storm was lessening.

"Who are you and where are you from?" Neo inquired as he wrapped the woman in a soaked blanket.

"The Migron. I live there with my sisters." Her lilting voice barely carried over the

dissipating waves. The thumping of his heart halted. She couldn't be from The Migron. Only the Gods and their few chosen lived there—could even get there. And yet he knew. Knew who she was. And that she was his intended.

She was as likely to be concussed as she was to be speaking truth. But the magnetic pull of her towards him wouldn't let him do anything but trust her.

Dione's shouts pulled his focus towards the snapped rig line. "We'll need to return to Loie to fix the boat," Dione cursed. "Blast the Goddesses! I wanted some pearl paste from Norboros."

"Pearl paste?" both he and the star said in union, sharing a glance of alliance. Dione exasperatedly explained that Pearl Paste was a new Loie invention for coloring one's cheeks to shimmer like the Migronmoons. The diversion wasn't in his plans, but neither was the Star. A voice deep in his mind called that it had been in his mother's plan. She had known because the seer had said. That thought should unnerve him, but instead it was settling. If his mother couldn't be with him any longer, at least this Star was. He knelt beside the shivering woman. The tanned skin of her bowed head was a perfect contrast to her light blonde tresses.

"Alatha?" he whispered and her head flew up. Wide lavender eyes conveyed that she hadn't expected him to know her name. But he had known it the moment she had fallen. Over the next few hours, he solidified his desire to protect and return this Star to its rightful place in the sky. Though he did not know how that would occur.

Alatha didn't seem to know how to return either. When they made it to land, he would find a seer. None of them spoke as the morning sun crested over the dying waves. Dione slept, Alatha and Neo shared glances as they swayed closer to land minute by minute, hour by hour.

When they reached the port of Loie, Alatha's sun tinted skin stood out against the pasty pale of the dock workers. Loie was not known for seeing the sun, but it now saw a Star, even if it didn't realize it.

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"They toil with alacrity." Alatha admitted her wonder of the oddity she witnessed. The chaos here in the port of Loie was something Alatha was all too unused to. In The Migron everything was always perfect—not too loud, not too quiet, not too warm, not too cold. As the dock workers began repairing the ship, Alatha stood on the terrace watching those at work. The warm sun heated her too thoroughly before it slid behind a cloud and allowed a breeze to chill her skin. Her savior—Neo—slid up beside her resting his hand softly—reassuringly—on her shoulder. The warmth of his hand caused her skin to burn with something and the hair on her arm to stand up.

"It is their life—their job. I will locate a seer. They will know how to return you to The Migron," Neo said bluntly. And for a brief moment she allowed herself to be curious. Curious about what other things she might feel should she stay. Because days in The Migron were always the same.

Alatha leaned in closer to Neo, misjudging the distance until her back was flush with his chest. It was like a ripple passed through her back where their skin touched. And she suddenly felt so unsettled, unbroken and rebroken. She was so undone by the contact that she barely heard him whisper against her ear, "How does it feel to be a God?"

"Monotonous until this day," She whispered truthfully. And she didn't regret her desire for it to stay varied. He jerked away from her, as if she was a coal iron pressed to him.

“While they repair the ship, I’m going to Madame Muse. Alatha do you want any makeup? I don’t know your shade,” Dione said quickly.

Alatha had deduced that Dione had an obsession with makeup, which was ironic because she’d explained that they spent most of their time sailing between the two ports with loads of stones or other goods, which meant Dione spent most of her time wet. They had no need for makeup in The Migron.

So, with the spirit of curiosity in mind, Alatha accompanied Dione to look for makeup while Neo searched for a seer. As evening rushed across the sky, one of them came back empty-handed while the other two had bags full of blushes, powders, and glosses. The trio headed to an inn for the night and Neo swore his search would continue in the morning. Alatha couldn’t move more than a few inches from his side, because there she was his own personal Star. And that felt invigorating.

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Neo saw his mother’s wrinkled face. It appeared anytime he shut his eyes. Her silver eyes fading softly as her breath slowed. The fingers that once soothed him with warmth were now devoid of it as he held them in his hand.

*“Watch for the Star,” she whispered as she exhaled her last and speared a hole the size of a cavern through what was left of his chest.*

A terrible wail surrounded him—no was coming from him. Alatha’s hands were silk as they bracketed his face, gently turning his head up to look at her. She sat atop him in the bed at the inn.

Piercing lavender eyes met his and though her palms held him steady he swirled into their depths. He sat up to meet her and she shifted but didn't retreat from him. She had fallen for him—in that, the seer had been correct.

There was something akin to worry veining through her eyes.

"I'm fine. I'm not hurt," he graveled.

"No, your wound is a schism of the psyche," she whispered.

He shook his head, but didn't protest further. And she caressed his cheek, tracing the line of his jaw down over his lips. Nothing mattered anymore aside from the way she sat in his lap, where she decidedly belonged. Her eyes glinted mischievously as she rocked forward and melted every piece of solid ice in his soul. Gods, if he was to be her experimental dalliance into life on earth, he would ensure she never wanted to return to The Migron.

How many nights had he spent on his knees praying to her and the seven for his salvation? But he'd bow to her in every way, if she'd let him, "How does it feel to be my religion?" he crooned.