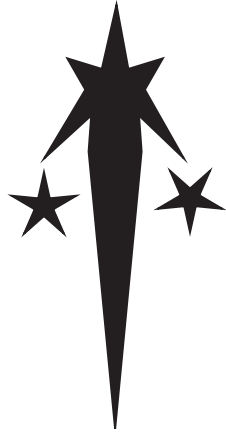

THE RECORD
- OF THE -
SAINTS CALIBER

BOOK 1: STOKING FIRES





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THE RECORD OF THE SAINTS CALIBER
BOOK 1: STOKING FIRES

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*To my family, who have helped shape and grow me.
And to those who aren't afraid to look into
darkness with their eyes wide open.*

Stellaglyphs

 <p>Adonael of the Rivers Edge</p>	 <p>Aeoria, the Sleeping Goddess</p>	 <p>Arric</p>
 <p>Celacia</p>	 <p>Erygion the Standard Bearer</p>	 <p>Eulalee</p>
 <p>Gamalael</p>	 <p>Hadrael</p>	 <p>Holy Father Admael</p>
 <p>Isley the Wolf</p>	 <p>Jeduthon of the Holy Gates</p>	 <p>Karinael</p>
 <p>The Knights of the Dark Stars</p>	 <p>Nuriel</p>	 <p>Ophelia of the Many Tears</p>
 <p>Ovid of the Nine Days</p>	 <p>Ramiel of the Hammer</p>	 <p>Rathaniel of the Grieving Hand</p>
 <p>Seraphiel of the Holy Gates</p>	 <p>Tia</p>	 <p>Umbrial</p>

— 1 —
ROOK



The first light of dawn had begun to creep through the foggy streets of the city, not yet strong enough to dispel the shadows from the longer alleys or the streets running north and south. It had been a cold spring so far and frost clung to the bricks of the buildings and formed crystalline webs upon the murky puddles of the dirt roads. Rook's baby sister, Ursula, cried out from mother's arms, her infant mewlings coming in short, constant blasts that seemed eerily muted in the morning fog.

Rook pulled his cloak tightly around his shoulders. It was far too long for his frail little body and he tried to make sure the frayed ends didn't drag on the street. It had been his father's before he died last month. An unbidden memory of his father's sunken eyes and those skin-and-bone arms and legs came into Rook's mind and he had to shake it from his head. His father had died of starvation, and the last memories Rook would ever have of him were of a gruesome, pale, skeleton of a man. Rook's mother had told him that during the winter famine when the church cut rations down by half, his father had been giving his own share to Rook and his mother. Rook wasn't quite sure if he felt guilt or hatred for his father's death. His father was gone now, away from the pain and suffering. His responsibility to protect and provide now fell solely on Rook's mother. Rook couldn't help but feel they had been left to languish. He bit his bottom lip and tried to shake the thoughts of hunger from his 10-year old mind.

Rook coughed and drew the old cloak closer to his body. He had never known his father to wear anything other than this same cloak. It was an old thing. Rook thought that it might have once been black but had over the years faded to the dingy blue-gray it was now. Still, it was less threadbare than the rest of his patchwork outfit and was his only recourse against the frigid, morning air. It had drizzled last night, and the icy water had already soaked through his flimsy shoes and he could feel the ends of his toes going numb again. He might have cared more if his stomach wasn't stinging with hunger.

From somewhere beyond the gray fog and the looming buildings tolled the church bells. They were deep and throaty and sang a somber song. Rook's mother quickened her pace and now he was forced to scamper behind her. All around them leaned ramshackle old buildings of wood and cracked plaster whose roofs had likely afforded their occupant's a little shelter from last night's drizzle as his own home's had. His baby sister cried out again, this time more of a scream, and his mother tried her best to wrap the tiny child up in her own cloak, but had to double up the fabric just to cover the holes.

Rook took a few hurried steps and tugged on his mother's damp cloak. "Momma," he said softly. "Are they gonna have food today?"

"I don't know, hun," rasped his mother. Her eyes, eerily dark and sunken upon her pale face, looked ahead but didn't seem to see anything. She had been doing that a lot lately, the looking without seeing. She sniffled. Rook had also noticed her hair and nails had become brittle as of late. A finger, more bone than flesh, gently stroked the tears from Ursula's face. Momma was beginning to look a lot like father had before he died. "We'll see, sweetie." she said softly. "We'll see."

Ursula was still screaming and doing a good job of drowning out the tolling bells. Rook sidled up next to his mother. "Momma," he said. "You can use my cloak."

She turned to him and looked down at him, her thin, blue lips pursed into a tender smile. She seemed to see him now, to really see him with those sunken, brown eyes of her's. Her face was

quite white and her thin hair was pulled back in an old, red bonnet. “It’s ok sweetie, she’s just a little hungry, that’s all.” Rook’s mom had told him that her breasts were no longer producing milk. They had been relying on their paltry milk rations to feed Ursula, but even those had been cut. Ursula had been living on little more than barley water for two days, made from the last bits of their moldy grain.

They hurried through the streets and as they came upon the town square Rook noticed more and more families flooding out of the foggy alleys and side streets. Few were better dressed than Rook and his mother, but were perhaps made better off by the fact that their families were whole. A little girl walked hand-in-hand across the way with her own mother and father, gazing with sunken eyes at Rook’s mom, perhaps trying to see who was making such a fuss.

Past the fog a dark shadow now came into view that stretched up into the misty, gray heavens. It was tall, looming and dark and from it emanated the haunting bells that echoed in the streets; streets that seemed lifeless despite the people upon them. The church stood at the outskirts of a small political district neither Rook nor any of his family or friends had ever been privy to. Beyond the church no citizen was allowed to go, and there was something about this area of the city Rook had always resented. Here, the roads were paved with brick, not dirt. The buildings beyond the church all had chimneys alive with smoke and their windows shown like eerie will-o-wisps thru the fog, aglow with gaslight. The haunting church bells tolled again and from its highest tower, barely visible through the fog, Rook could make out the giant face of the clock. The black hands stood in contrast against the white face, the hour of 7:00 a.m. just minutes away.

They hurried past the fountain of the town square, which had not flowed with water since Rook could remember, and the church emerged from the fog. Its sharp spires clawed at the gray skies and Rook had always thought the entire complex looked like a gaudy crown placed on the land. Beyond it, like stark sentinels of some ancient emperor, loomed the rigid brick buildings of the church officials and the lords and nobles who ran the city.

They were the only buildings in town that were not in some state of gross disrepair. From somewhere beyond the high, stone walls Rook could hear the bawling of a cow and thought how pleasant it must be to be one of the nobles and have access to milk each day. Through the stained glass windows that depicted the loving goddess, Aeoria, Rook could see the gaslights burning brightly and thought about how warm it would be inside.

As they made their way toward the stone steps that ascended to the church's heavy double-doors Rook became aware of the black shadows strolling the roads. Immediately he averted his gaze from them. He clenched his eyes closed and tried to mentally block his previous thoughts of contempt for the clergy and chided himself for coveting the church. If he had ruined their chance of getting some food and warmth this morning he would never forgive himself. He opened his eyes and kept them plastered on the church as he walked, holding his mother's hand.

Through the corner of his eye he could see one of the Sin Eaters on patrol as it strolled about the churchyard in its black robes. Sin Eaters always unnerved Rook, even more than the Oracles. They looked like ravens—maybe vultures would be more accurate—with their hunched forms, black robes, and beaked leather masks. It held its gloved hands together at its chest, the long sleeves of its robes draping nearly to the street. Despite the fog, the emerald lenses of its goggles gleamed as it stared at him. Rook wondered if it had heard his sinful thoughts.

As they approached the stone steps of the church Rook felt that he could relax. The Sin Eaters would have pulled them aside earlier if they were going to. At the top of the stairs was a set of large, wooden doors where a kindly old man of the clergy was standing and greeting people as they came. He wore bright crimson robes, trimmed in gold. Around his neck hung the golden star of Aeoria, and he held a golden scepter as he stood smiling and greeting. "Welcome, my child, welcome," he was saying.

Rook and his mother came up the steps and baby Ursula ceased her crying, as if she could sense the impending warmth that escaped the open doors. The old man greeted them, and

Rook's mother softly thanked him as he bid them enter.

Inside, the pews were already filling up. The cavernous cathedral was well lit by lamps flickering with gaslight on every stone pillar. Marvelous stained glass windows lined the walls and were even cast in a delicate glow through the murky fog outside. Rook could not immediately smell any food, but the thick aroma of incense was pleasing and he breathed in deeply. At the front of the cathedral was a massive mural made of glass tiles depicting the goddess Aeoria in her grand heaven, surrounded by the black and white coils of two titanic dragons. The mural was framed by the towering brass pipes of the organ and they seemed to sparkle with the gaslight. An altar in the form of a glass coffin filled with roses took center stage, a symbol of their goddess's eternal slumber. At either side of the podium stood an Oracle; a figure dressed in flowing black robes who looked straight out upon the crowds through a polished, silver mask. The pair stood straight and rigid, the full pews and burning flames of the lamps reflecting in their mirror masks. Like the Sin Eaters, Rook often wondered who—or maybe what—looked at him from beyond the faceless masks. Part of him felt he would be better off not knowing, part of him wondering why a person so close to Aeoria's eternal love would hide their face.

Rook's mom slid into a pew toward the center of the immense chamber and Rook slid in next to her. Beside them sat Mister Brumal and his wife Camellia and their two sons. They lived just a few houses down from them. Last summer Rook had seen their boys working with their father in the fields and hoped that this year he could get a spot in the fields too. The farmlands were mostly all dedicated to the kingdom of Jerusa and the crops grown were to feed the King and his nobility, the army, and the clergy. However, working the fields allowed you to have a larger share of the community fields allotted for the citizens. This extra allotment of space might allow for another row or two of corn or potatoes, hardly worth the time and labor tending the fields of the kingdom. But Brumal's family was lucky, for not only did they have the extra share from both their boys working the fields, but Mister Brumal had a bow and often poached wild

turkeys, squirrels and rabbits from the nearby woods.

This, of course, was secret knowledge. Rook wasn't supposed to know they had this bow, but he had found out after seeing Mister Brumal give his mother an extra rabbit they had shot. Nobody was supposed to have any weapons or hunting equipment anymore. It was last year, at the onset of winter, when the soldiers came through and said that due to a shortage of game throughout the kingdom, all bows were to be forfeited and hunting was forbidden until the summer. The church did a good job of helping to round up the bows and arrows but many, like Mister Brumal, hid theirs. And it was a good thing too. Summer never saw the return of any bows or any rights to hunting, and this was now the second year without being able to hunt. The rations given by the church were hardly enough.

Brumal and Camellia would often share the meat they acquired, partly out of kindness and partly to keep those who knew about it quiet. Having the bow alone would get Mister Brumal hung. Poaching would surely see his whole family hung. When King Gatima decreed there was a shortage of something, it was a decree not to be ignored. There seemed to be a shortage of lots of things these days. A month ago soldiers had come through and said that King Gatima was requisitioning all weapons and one tool per family due to a steel shortage.

Rook and his mother exchanged friendly good mornings with Brumal's family and Camellia remarked how well their mother, Rook and Ursula looked this morning. Rook's mom replied in kind. If starvation and poverty were the in-fashion, everybody in the church looked stunning this morning. Rook sat up on his knees and rubbed a finger on Ursula's rosy little cheeks. Her eyes were squinched shut, her dark eyebrows furled, her tiny little lips puffed out. She looked content and cozy, wrapped in momma's tattered scarf. Rook smiled down at her.

"She looks like you, you know," said his mother, smiling down at her too. "Already her hair is as black as yours and your father's. She has your eyes too. Those black-blue eyes you and your father have."

Just then the organ music began to play and the mumblings

amongst the pews settled. Rook and his mother straightened in their seat as the priest walked forth and took his place at the podium. Father Tarask was an older man with salt and pepper hair and soft features. He was plump and his red robes hung loosely upon his bulbous body, his jowls wiggling as he addressed the audience. He spoke in a loud and commanding voice that reverberated through the stone chamber, and instructed all to rise as he said the morning prayer. Rook couldn't understand the ancient language recited during the prayer—none in the church, save the clergy, really could—but he and his mother voiced the prayer along with him. It was the typical prayer, supposedly asking Aeoria to forgive them of their sins and to bless them with her love and grace this day.

After the prayer the congregation all took their seats and Rook sat next to his mother as she cradled and rocked little Ursula in her arms. Normally Rook didn't much care for the boring services. Usually he spent the hour daydreaming and hoping that food would be handed out after mass. He would gaze upon the stained glass windows, especially the ones that depicted the heroes of the Saints Caliber. His favorite was Saint Bryant of the Horn. Saint Bryant was boldly depicted in his black armor of star-metal, his arms spread wide as children gathered around him, bread and fruit in abundance for all. Rook's favorite tales of him involved how he single-handedly slew the Cerberus, and how he would bring candies and gifts to the people of the towns he visited. The most famous tale was of how he bravely held the lines of Sanctuary against the hordes of Apollyon. Saint Bryant had died a hero that day, but was better known for spreading bounty and abundance to the towns and villages he visited during his life. Rook often wondered what it must have been like back then, before the Great Falling, when there was food enough for all and Aeoria still favored all of mankind with her love.

Today, however, Rook would not be daydreaming. The topic that Father Tarask was speaking on was persevering in the face of turmoil, and he was illustrating the point by speaking about the Saints Caliber. Rook leaned forward in his seat, lost in the stories being told. Father Tarask spoke about how times were

indeed tough right now, tougher now than they had been in the last six-hundred years since the Great Falling. But even now, promised Father Tarask, the Saints Caliber were fighting the hordes of Apollyon to win back the love of the goddess. “And all of you,” declared Father Tarask becoming quite animated at the podium. “By coming to worship our loving Aeoria in the face of all this strife, are telling her that you believe! That you believe in her love! That you believe she will again bless us with abundance and prosperity! For it is you—all of you!—who continue to show your love to Aeoria, in the face of strife, that will see the sun rise upon a new dawn! And for us here today, I can assure you that Holy Father Admael will send the Saints Caliber forth and they will smite the evil of Apollyon and bring abundance, love and wealth back to the lands of Jerusa!”

Father Tarask brought the mass to an end with a final prayer to Aeoria and the music of the great brass pipe-organ began to reverberate. A man called out asking if there would be food today and a wave of murmurings spread across the congregation.

Father Tarask held up his hands and said, “I know it has been a trying winter for all of us. We had to give up more of the community fields last summer than any of us had hoped. But spring is now upon us! Soon we shall plant crops again! Soon fields shall bloom and life and prosperity shall return to us! Certainly King Gatima will call an end to the shortages this summer and allow us to reclaim more of the fields for our own families.”

“That’s what you said last year and the year before!” cried the man. “My wife and daughter are at home too weak to move! I lost a son this winter to starvation! Everybody here today has lost somebody to hunger!” Here the man tore off his dirty shirt which was little more than patchwork cloth. His stomach was sunken and filthy, his ribs clearly visible beneath the skin. “We go hungry while you stand up there fat as the hogs you keep hidden from us!”

Father Tarask held up his hands and began addressing the audience, urging them to remain seated and calm, but his words were being drowned out by the mumblings of the audience. Rook could feel something happening; a palpable tension build-

ing amongst the people.

The man who had ripped off his shirt turned to address the congregation. “We starve while they get fat!” he screamed at the men and women in the pews. “They receive shipments of grain and bread! Their homes all have pigs and cows and we have to come here every day and beg for the scraps from their tables!”

Immediately the man was beset upon by a group of Sin Eaters. They descended upon him like a flock of crows and he seemed to disappear beneath their billowy cloaks as they took him away, screaming and struggling. Meanwhile, Father Tarask began reciting a prayer, asking Aeoria to forgive the man and his sins and to bless his family with food and health, but it was too late. Others began standing up, talking loudly and angrily amongst themselves. And then Mister Brumal stood up and shouted that his own sons were starving. Rook looked up at Mister Brumal, whose face had turned red with anger as he screamed at Father Tarask. And then he pointed a finger down at Rook and screamed, “For the love of Aeoria, they lost their father to hunger! How much longer must we suffer?!”

At this Rook’s mother quickly grabbed him by the hand and they slid out of the pew quickly. “Come, Rook. We have to go.”

“But—” began Rook, thinking desperately that this little uprising would certainly provoke some sort of giving of food, but his mother cut him off, saying that the Clerical Guard would be coming and they had to leave.

Rook followed his mother, but couldn’t resist looking back as the people stood and yelled at Father Tarask. A few more families got up to leave as well. He turned back around just as his mother was opening the door and a group of Clerical Guards came bursting in, nearly throwing Rook, his mother and Ursula to the floor. They wore their red armor, lacquered and shining above their black bodysuits. Upon their heads were helmets that covered all but their eyes, their mouths covered by a grilled visor that Rook thought made them look like some otherworldly insect. Upon their rounded pauldrons was the holy star of Aeoria worn as a badge. In their hands were the heavy iron guns—bolt-throwers they were called—that made them so

fearsome. Rook had only seen the guns used once before, on a man who had tried stealing a goat from the nobles. He was ordered to stop but starting running. That's when the soldier raised the heavy gun in both hands. It roared to life with three quick blasts that sounded like a steel sledgehammer upon a metal anvil. The running man fell to the ground, his body torn open into mangled meat by the steel spikes—"bolts" his father had called them—fired by the gun.

The guards shoved them aside but paid them no further attention as they charged into the church. Rook's mother did not wait to find out what would happen, and grabbed Rook solidly by the wrist and exited the church, along with some other people.

The fog had cleared by now, but the walk back home was as silent and somber as the gray skies. Ursula had begun crying again and Rook's mother tried to comfort her as best she could until they got home. Like the others in the town, they lived in a modest sized house of brick, timber and plaster. Rook's father had always told him that before the Great Falling these houses were for the wealthy and great feasts would have been had within them. The fireplace would have been alive and the walls decorated with art. Today most of the walls had cracks that had undergone makeshift repairs and been stuffed with mud and straw. Some of the interior walls had even been stripped bare for firewood. The roof had too many holes to be properly fixed, and the gray light of day shown through in numerous spots. There was no art on any of the walls, and the bedrooms had nothing more than straw piles for beds. There was wood for the fireplace and stove, but certainly nothing to cook.

Rook's mother sat down on the floor in the corner by the fireplace. They had long ago sold all their furniture for food. She tried to ease the crying baby. She looked exhausted and had that blank stare again. Rook placed some logs into the fireplace and soon had a nice, warm fire crackling. They sat there silent, staring into the fire for many long moments before Ursula began screaming again.

"Shh, shh," said Rook's mother, rocking the child. "There, there, now."

“Momma,” said Rook, looking at his screaming little sister. “Can I make her some barley water?”

“There’s no more barley,” said his mother softly, not looking away from Ursula as she rocked her in her lap.

“Momma,” said Rook. “Do you think they’ll have any food tomorrow?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know.” rasped his mother, and then suddenly she too began bawling.

Rook wrapped his arms around his mother and patted her on her back. “It’ll be ok. Maybe one of the Saints Caliber will come soon,” said Rook. “Maybe like in the legends of Saint Bryant he’ll come and bring us food and save us from all this.”

Rook’s mom looked up at him, tears streaming down her sunken eyes and cheeks. She touched his face and said through her tears, “There’s nobody coming, honey. It’s all lies. Everything they tell us are lies.”

“No,” said Rook, pulling away and shaking his head frantically. “No! No, they’re not! They can’t be!”

“I’m sorry, Rook.” said his mother, wiping tears from her eyes. She rocked Ursula in her arms, but the baby was inconsolable. “I’m so sorry I brought you and your sister into this world.”

“No,” said Rook, unable to hold back his own tears. “No! Don’t say that! The Saints Caliber will come one day! They will! They’ll destroy all of the Unbound and restore prosperity to the lands! They will, momma! They will! They say the wars are almost over, and then they’ll come! They will!”

Rook’s mother hugged him but he could feel she had too little strength to do it with any firmness. Ursula screamed out. Rook’s mother looked down at her with a tender smile. “Rook, honey. The knife in the kitchen. Bring it to me.”

Rook stared wide-eyed at his mother.

“Please honey,” she said. “I don’t think I have much time.”

Rook could feel his heart racing. Something wasn’t right. Something about the way his mother was acting. She was breathing heavier too. Ursula screamed out again, and again his mother urged him to get the knife, saying she didn’t have the

strength to get it herself. Hesitantly, Rook ran to the kitchen. Upon their table, barren of all but dust, sat a lone knife that hadn't seen bread in a month. It was a rusty old thing. A steak knife his father used to call it, not that it had ever cut meat let alone a steak. He ran it back to his mother.

Gently she took it from his hand and pricked her bony index finger. A blot of blood formed at the tip and she placed the finger delicately in Ursula's mouth. She began to suckle ravenously. Rook could do nothing but stare in dread. He had heard whispers once. About people eating people. His mother and father had told him that stuff only happened in the cities far away from here, further west where there was even less food. Was it coming to that now?

"It's time I show you something, Rook. Your father made me promise that I show you one day." rasped his mother. Her breaths were very ragged now. She seemed to struggle as she raised her free hand and pointed to the far wall.

Rook looked at her, confused. He slowly walked to the wall she was pointing at. It was a barren, white wall. Dirty and stained with water that had dripped down from the ceiling. Something that used to be called wallpaper still clung to certain areas, but was faded beyond recognition.

"The baseboard there," said his mother.

Rook knelt down and pulled at the loose board on the wall. It came off easily and he set it aside.

"The floorboards too," said his mother.

Rook lifted one of the boards and it peeled up. He lifted another and another. Beneath the floor was stuffed rotten rags and hay, and beneath that Rook discovered a small pit dug into the very earth. Within it was a rusty old anvil and a hammer, as well as some other rusty tools. There were some things wrapped in rags as well, and when Rook unwrapped them he saw that there were two small ingots of copper and another larger ingot of some type of steel. It all had a strange but pleasant odor, like oil and coal smoke and burnt metal. "Wh...what is this stuff?" asked Rook.

"In his youth your father was a blacksmith. So was your

grandfather and great-grandfather, and theirs before them.” said his mother. She paused and her breath was wet and heavy as she sucked it in. “That was before the King forbid people to make their own tools and weapons.”

Rook reached in and picked up the hammer. It was an ancient looking thing, full of rust, and it weighed more than he could properly lift. His wrist gave out and it clanked hard upon the anvil. He got another whiff of that wonderful coal smoke and metal.

“Your father wanted you to have all that one day.” said his mother, adjusting Ursula in her arms as the baby still suckled at her finger. “He wanted you to know what was in your blood, and hoped that one day you could use all that to make something of yourself. He always dreamed of a better day for you. He always dreamed of being able to teach you the family trade.”

Rook tried lifting the hammer again. Despite its age and condition there was something about it that was not lost on him. It had once been a very fine hammer. All of these tools had once been very fine, very expensive. Perhaps the top of their line. They had been well used and in his mind Rook could almost hear the hammer upon the anvil; could almost smell the oil and coal from the smithy; could feel the heat from the forge. Upon that rusty anvil Rook was certain that weapons of the finest steel had been crafted by innumerable blows from the very hammer he now held. Again Rook’s wrist gave out and the heavy hammer clanked upon the anvil.

“Keep that safe,” whispered his mother. Her chest heaved as she sucked in a wheezing breath. “I...I want you to sell it. Trade it for food and things you and your sister will need.”

Rook looked down at the rusty stash of items. “Sell them?” He picked up another tool, some sort of clamp.

He heard his mother swallow hard and inhale some ragged breaths. “Me and your father...we held on to them, hoping for something better. It was foolish of us.” She paused again for another deep, ragged breath. “But you’ll need them now. You’ll need to trade them for you and Ursula.”

Rook shook his head. “No,” he said, almost frantically as he

dropped the heavy clamp to the floor. “No. No, we’re going to keep it all and one day I’ll learn how to use them. No. No. The Saints Caliber will come. They’re the ones that can save us.”

Rook’s mother looked at him, her sunken eyes dim, fading. “The Saints Caliber are evil, Rook.” she said, almost a whisper. “They all are. They don’t care about us. We’re nothing but slaves to them, Rook. Rook...I’m so sorry I brought you and your sister into this world.”

“That’s not true!” screamed Rook. He glared at his mother through red, tearful eyes.

“Son,” she rasped. She heaved in a large breath. “The stories are all lies.” She huffed and wheezed again.

“No! No!” Rook screamed, shaking his head violently.

“It’s true,” wheezed his mother. “They are the servants of Apollyon, son.” She paused for a moment, her chest heaving. She was breathing hard now. Her head lowered and she seemed to look down at Ursula. She was mumbling, uttering softly to the little baby.

Rook stood there, huffing with eyes red with tears as he looked down at the rusty tools beneath the floor. He looked at his mother, and suddenly something went off in his mind. She wasn’t showing him the tools just so he could sell them, she was *passing them on to him*. “No!” he cried, shaking his head. “No! You’re going to live and the Saints Caliber will come and they’ll bring food and we’ll all be fine! You’ll see!”

Rook ran to his mother and grabbed her and hugged her. He realized how light her body felt in his little arms as she flopped over. “No mamma! No!”

Ursula was crying now. Blood no longer flowed from her mother’s fingertip.