

# **Editorial Companion Guide**

**For  
R.G. Triplett's**

**The Great Darkening**  
**Epic of Haven: Book One**

by Melody Farrell

## *Introduction: Editing Haven*

If I had known the enormity of time that editing this book was going to cost me, I would never, ever, in a million years, have agreed to do it. If I had realized the frustration and emotion and plain old hard *work* that would be involved, I probably would have gone running in the opposite direction. When I told Bobby that I would edit his novel, I thought I was just agreeing to help a friend get a little project off the ground. I don't think I completely believed he would actually ever finish the thing. And I certainly didn't realize I was committing to anything more than correcting some spelling and grammar and maybe a bit of continuity.

May it hereby be officially known that although the esteemed R.G. Triplett is a masterful storyteller with a visionary imagination and a way with words that is stunningly beautiful and insightful ... he is not exactly the king of spelling and grammar. Truly, when I first received the beginning chapters of this book, the only word that could accurately describe the grammatical state of things is probably *gruesome*. Or perhaps *atrocious*. Maybe even *obscene*.

I must admit that he has learned a thing or two along the way ... and perhaps even affected my own writing style in ways I should not very much like to admit. For example, these ridiculous ellipses ... if I had a dollar for every set of ellipses I removed from this book, I would be a rich lady indeed. But the thing of it is ... now I can't write without throwing them in every once in a while! Drat!

But I digress. The point of it all is to note, simply, that nothing could have possibly prepared me for the journey that was to come when I agreed to edit this book.

And so I must say, with every fiber of my being, with every ounce of passion and honesty and clarity that I possess: I am so very grateful that I didn't know. I'm so thankful that I didn't realize the time it would take, or the emotional toll that would have to be paid, or the sheer scope of work that would be involved. I would have

said no. And *if* I had said no to this book, I would have missed out on the most impacting, liberating, inspiring experience of my life.

This book has changed me forever, and changed me in all the best ways possible.

When the idea was brought up to write a “study guide” for the book, both Bobby and I were rather unsure of the merit of such an endeavor. First of all, it seemed a little bit like it was only pandering to the “Christian” market out there, finding a hook to get churches to buy into the book and hopefully create some sales. The problem is that this story wasn’t necessarily intended for a “Christian” audience. The hope is that the story will transcend the confines of religion and speak of greater truths that resonate with all human hearts, regardless of any specific belief structure.

The intention of this book was never to spell out the allegory in such a fashion where it becomes preachy or heavy handed. In fact, there were many times where I would want a concept or idea defined more clearly in the story, and Bobby would refuse to do it. He purposefully left it vague, feeling that there was more value in allowing the reader to process and struggle with the concepts and questions than there was in laying out what his take on the truth of it was.

This story doesn’t attempt to define truth, or condemn beliefs, or create theology.

The intention is that the reader will find his thoughts engaged as he journeys through the pages of the story, engaged with something deeper and more meaningful than mere narrative. That each heart that interacts with the characters and wrestles through the confusing tensions of the allegory will come out on the other side with a unique story of change and impact.

And yet, how could I not comment on the layers of truth nestled in the dialogue of the characters in this story? How could I stay silent about the wisdom of these Poets and Arborists and Sprites—these *friends* that I have journeyed with over the last

few months? How could I refuse to write of the hope that has taken hold of me because of this story and this process?

I couldn't. I can't. I won't. I must share my story with you.

So this companion guide, then, is not meant to break down truth in any final or focused way. It is merely a reflection of my own, personal take on some of the themes in this book. Let me be the first to say that I do not consider myself to be an authority on any spiritual matters. I'm not a Bible scholar, not a pastor, not even a writer in any official sense of the term. I am simply a person who has been impacted by this story.

I certainly would never pose as someone who has any of this truly figured out. There is plenty in my life and my heart that is still deep in the process of being redeemed, being healed from the broken and dark places that I have journeyed through. I do not claim even for a moment to have *answers* ... the best I can hope to do is to help define the *questions*. Together, then, we can take those questions to the One who does indeed have the answers.

Perhaps my observations and pontifications will resonate with you, and perhaps some of your doubts and struggles will find some clarity in the wake of my engagement with the same doubts and struggles.

Or maybe you will draw out your own themes and questions and conclusions. Maybe you will find your own story, your own change, your own hope. In my humble opinion, that would be an even greater result, a result that we prayed for each day that we worked on the Epic of Haven.

In any case, this companion guide will take us on a journey together through some of the major themes of the story. I'll tell you what they meant to me, and then leave

you with some questions that can help you process what God might be saying to your heart in response to each particular topic.

And I'll fill you in on some "behind the scenes" stuff too. No editorial companion guide would be complete without the revelation of some of the secret sources of inspiration or hidden easter eggs that are written into the story. For example, you know the dedication scene at the beginning of the book, where Cal sneaks away from his parents to play with the sacred fire? That isn't just a made-up scene. It is actually the story of our dear R.G. Triplett's own baby dedication! Yep, really ... when he was dedicated as a baby, he escaped from his mother and went up onto the stage. They found him sitting right in the pastor's chair. Talk about foreshadowing! (He's a pastor now, in case you didn't know.) Anyway, it's a cool story in its own right, but I think it's pretty awesome that the protagonist of the Epic of Haven shares the same baby dedication story as its author.

And that's not all they share, by the way, the author and his characters ... but we'll save the rest for later.

## *Section One: Hope*

If you have spent any time at all engaged with *The Great Darkening*, it will come as no surprise to you that hope is the major theme of this story. Woven throughout each chapter, in the dialogue, in the narrative, in the heart of the characters and the story, the topic of hope is constant.

I found this extremely annoying.

The first time I read through the book, I just read it to get the overall story. The second time, however, I began to engage deeply with the characters and their motivations. As an editor, it was my job to make sure these motivations made logical sense as the story progressed.

Boy, did I struggle with this Calarmindon fellow. About a third of the way through the story, when Cal finally makes it to the Poets, I had just about *had* it. I demanded a skype conference with Bobby so that he could explain to me just exactly why these Poets were so committed to hope. Why was Cal so committed to it? Where did it come from, and what were they hoping for? What brought the hope to begin with? What evidence did they have that it was worth holding to? I barraged the poor author with more questions than he could have possibly had the patience or wisdom to answer, and although he did do his best, I was left highly unsatisfied with the answers I received.

And yet I continued on, determined to discover where the disconnect was. I was sure that if I could find the missing link, the forgotten truth that had not been revealed in the narrative, I could make more sense of the reason for the inexplicable hope of the Poets and of Calarmindon himself.

Somehow, as I spent more time in the story, and as I pondered the wisdom of the Sprites and the Poets and my dear mentor Engelmann (yes, he has indeed mentored

me even though he is only a fictional character) ... I discovered the most breathtaking phenomenon.

The hope was contagious.

I might not have understood where the hope came from, or what precisely it was for, but somehow I felt it taking root in *me*.

Now I can look back and see the path that I have traveled. I can see that the reason I was so annoyed by the idea of hope was because I was afraid to hope in my own life. It didn't seem fair that these Poets had figured out the key to holding onto hope and yet they hadn't shared it with their world. It didn't seem fair that not only did they know how to hope, but they also knew what to hope *for*. In fact, the unfairness of it all made me quite angry.

Yes, I was afraid to hope. Not afraid to hope for the more vague generalities of God's promises. Of course I hoped for God's goodness, and mercy, and blessings, and grace. But at some point in my life, I had let *true* hope die. It wasn't that I didn't know how to hope. And when I truly searched my heart, it wasn't even that I didn't know what to hope for. I knew exactly what I *wanted* to hope for. Deep, deep down, underneath the noise of a discouraging society and loudly screaming enemy and my deafening self-criticism, I knew all along what I was called and created to hope for.

I think my fear came from a false assumption that by daring to hope for something, I *also had to strive to make it happen*. I believed that along with my "hope" came my responsibility to will and work that hope into being. What a godless perspective *that* was.

I still wrestle with this. I still fight against an immense pressure that I put upon myself to bring my own hopes to fruition. But Paul tells us that there is a better way to look at it:

It's important that you not misinterpret yourselves as people who are bringing this goodness to God. No, God brings it all to you. The only accurate way to understand ourselves is by what God is and by what he does for us, not by what we are and what we do for him.

*Romans 12:3*

In the story, Armas asks Engelmann why he clings to the hope of finding a new light, when it seems that it would be more practical and less difficult to simply hope for the plan to harvest timber from the wreath to pan out. Engelmann says,

“But my boy, that is precisely why the hoping is both so costly and so painfully beautiful. For hope requires a surrender of your dependence on lesser things, and a trust in the *greatest*.”

I had killed the deep hope, the real hope, because it was way too scary to hold onto it. And what was it, exactly, that I was too afraid to hope for and to trust God for? It was the hope that *God would use me for the true purpose He designed me for*.

We will talk more about passion and calling in a later discussion, so I won't go too deeply into it here. Let it suffice to say that somewhere among these pages, this hope has been awakened in my heart again. And I truly cannot think of anything more beautiful, more powerful, more divinely appointed than that.

We who have run for our very lives to God have every reason to grab the promised hope with both hands and never let go. It's an unbreakable spiritual lifeline, reaching past all appearances right to the very presence of God where Jesus, running on ahead of us, has taken up his permanent post as high priest for us.

*Hebrews 6:18-20*



There is not space to quote every single line about hope that has impacted me from this book. But I must bring up another one that was most striking to my heart. (It's from Engelmann, of course. Sometimes I hear that Arborist's voice in my head when I get too discouraged. He is a cool dude.)

“But do not be fooled into thinking all is well. For relief often masquerades itself as hope, but the two of them are not nearly as similar as they appear. You see, relief's only promise is in survival, whereas hope, well ... hope dreams of a new way of living altogether.”

I cannot pretend that this story of *The Great Darkening* was the only influence in my life to awaken this hope in me again. I must give credit to another author who has profoundly affected me on this subject and who has greatly influenced both the author and the story of the Epic of Haven. John Eldredge deserves a massive note of thanks for his contribution to my understanding of hope. If any of this discussion resonates with you at all, I cannot recommend John Eldredge highly enough. Start with his book, *Waking the Dead*. It will rock your world.

R.G. himself has already given credit to Eldredge's influence in his own way. You may or may not have noticed that many of the characters, especially the Poets, are named after authors who have made a significant impact on Bobby's life and his work. Yes, you figured it out, didn't you? Elder John is indeed a nod to John Eldridge. But did you catch his mule's name? Ransom? It took me a couple times to figure out what that alluded to.

And there are plenty of other meaningful names scattered throughout the book. If you know Bobby, it probably won't take you too long to figure out who Tolk and Clivesis and the Miller are. Did you catch Bell at the beginning of the book? That one is a little better hidden. If Bobby would have had his way, it would have been a bit more striking, I'm sure. Bell's original name was Velvis. Yep. *Velvis*.

I put my foot down on that one.

I could quite literally write this entire study guide about the theme of hope. And in fact, I probably will, for this theme will permeate all the other themes we have yet to discuss. It simply IS the point and the purpose of *The Great Darkening*, and cannot really be separated into a concise examination.

But we must move on.

My guess is that you may still be frustrated by my less-than-satisfactory explanation of this elusive topic. I get that, believe me, I do. There are many days where I feel like I have manufactured this whole hope thing in my head and that really I'm just editing a silly book for a silly pastor who has an overly-optimistic view of the world.

But somewhere deeper, I know it's real. This hope is more real than anything else I've ever experienced. So my prayer for you is that you will feel that deep knowing in a part of your heart that has been buried for far too long. My prayer is that you, too, will dream of a new way of living altogether.

Here are some questions to help you engage with it on your own terms:

**Questions about the story:**

1. Do you think the reaction of Haven's citizens is a "normal reaction" to their darkening world? Did you feel empathy or annoyance towards their focus on survival rather than hope?
2. How did you feel about Calarmindon and his inexplicable hope? Do you know anyone who has an internal hope like that? How does their hopefulness affect you generally? Why do you think that is?

**Questions about you:**

3. Do you think hope is contagious? Have you seen evidence of this in your own life and heart?

4. Is there an area of your life where you have settled for relief in the place of hope?
5. Have you ever thought about "hoping for hope" as Michael does towards the end of this first book?

**Questions for God:**

6. God, what do you want me to hope for? Will you place that hope in my heart?
7. God, how can I share your hope with others? What people can I impact with my example of hope?

## *Section Two: Reminders*

This topic is truly an extension of the previous one, but to me it has been so pivotal that I felt it deserved its own section of discussion. When I uncovered the fact that “reminders” were a theme in this book, it kind of blew me away. It was like God was telling me precisely what I needed to do to hold onto my own hope by revealing this little nuance in a novel.

Let me tell you the story.

I don't like the beginning of this book. Sorry, R.G. ... but then again, it's not news to him! The poor fellow had to bear through the agony of three or four massive rewrites and rearrangements of the first few chapters of this tale. I wanted a flashy opening, something to grab the attention of the reader and compel them to keep reading until the intrigue of the beginning tension was resolved. I wanted a mysterious attack on a young child by a velociraptor, or a naked, dead dude in the middle of the Louvre, or an improbable reaping of someone like Primrose Everdeen.

The author, on the other hand, wanted the slow introduction of world-building through poetic narrative and long exposition. If he told me once, he told me at least 20 times that it took Tolkien 80 pages just to get out of the Shire. I tried to tell him that he wasn't Tolkien yet, but you have to understand that R.G.'s hope and confidence about this story and this process are eerily similar to a certain protagonist you may be familiar with. It was kind of like arguing with Cal that an Owele isn't real. He just wasn't hearing me.

And he was right, I *suppose*. He didn't need a velociraptor after all.

But he did need just a little intrigue. (I'm getting to my story, just bear with me.) I remember praying one night, asking God what we could do to the first few chapters to add a little more fascination for the reader. And He gave me an idea.

I added just a couple paragraphs about Tolk sneaking back into the church after Cal's baby dedication. I didn't even know why the idea came to me, it wasn't particularly interesting or engaging, but then again it kind of made sense. It kind of seemed like something Tolk would do. I had him take the torch of illumination with him, although I had no idea what we would do with it later on in the story.

Well, the great R.G. got ahold of it, and it ended up that when we finally meet Tolk again, the torch becomes something that the old Poet had kept all this time to remind himself of what he had witnessed. To remind himself to keep hoping. That was cool, I dug it, and it was a nice addition to the story. I didn't really think much of it other than that.

"You see, *this* ... this was meant to be but a reminder. A token of remembrance, so that I would not forget to hold onto hope."

Cal stared at the old man, not fully comprehending his meaning. Finally he said, "Remember to hope? How could you, a Poet, forget that?"

"Oh Cal, even the most tenacious hope can be buffeted with overwhelming doubt, or at the very least dulled by the relentless passing of days. But it is in those times that we must hold fast to things which remind us why we hope in the first place." He gripped the torch tighter and shook his head with a bit of disappointment. "I should never have put this away."

Later on in the editing process, I came across another instance where a character had kept an item as a reminder to hope. Deryn speaks to Eógan of the ancient blade Gwarwyn, and it turns out that Eógan had kept a little memento of his own.

“Tell me Eógan ... do you still have its scabbard?”

“Indeed I do,” Eógan smiled. “When I could not heal the broken spirit of Caedmon, I kept this as a reminder of my crumbled pride and as a token of hope that maybe one day I could amend for my past failures.”

I found this extremely similar to what Tolk had done, and I almost thought we should go back and change the Tolk thing ... but I kind of liked the repeated theme, so I decided to leave it.

Then, I came across a third time where a character has a tangible reminder. The Poets give Cal the gift of his armor for this very same purpose.

“My Poet friends wished me to stay with them, but deep down they knew that I must continue on my own. After we had broken our fast together on my last morning, Elder John, the one who fished Moa and I out of the river, came to me with this very gift.” Cal looked down at the resplendent bronze armor that he wore. “He told me to take it as a reminder of my time under the mountain, and of the great battle I would fight, and of the true prize that I seek.” Cal’s eyes had grown damp with the remembering.

When I came upon this *fourth* instance of the exact same thing, I literally got goose bumps.

Armas thought on what Engelmann was saying for a moment before he spoke. “So ... if the gilded branches are not talismans for the favor of the THREE who is SEVEN, as you suggest, then why does your brotherhood hold them in such high regard?”

“Not high regard, son. They are but a reminder—or at least, that is how I see them,” Engelmann told him. “Each day that I pass through the doors of the mother willow, I am again reminded of the apparent failure of my life’s work and calling,” he told him, fully aware of what his words implied. “But let me tell you, son, those golden sticks there ... they are also a reminder for me to hope.”

“Hope?” Armas asked.

“Yes, Captain, hope,” the Arborist answered him. “For the enlightened power of the THREE who is SEVEN to show itself again, and that those who remember to seek it will not be disappointed in the end.”

I remember writing a note to Bobby in my “red parentheses of doom” about this striking trend. Okay, *he* coined the term “red parentheses of doom”. I would have just called them parenthetical questions, but whatever. It was how we communicated regarding the countless inquiries I had about continuity and structure and timeline and motive and everything else.

But this time, it was not a question I inserted into my parentheses. It was a humble and inspired realization that this theme of tangible reminders permeated this story. I’m not sure the theme was at all intentional; at least not to the degree that it affected my heart.

But there it was, nonetheless. And God was using it to speak to me.

Much of my hope is wrapped up in this book. Not in the success of this *specific* book, but more in the promise of a future of writing and editing and affecting hearts through this medium. I do think that doing this is part of what I was made to do. And, as I have said before, that is a scary thing to hope for. When you find out what it

is that you were truly created for, it becomes really easy to see all the reasons why you might *fail to become that creation*.

And that is when you need the reminders. The tangible monuments to the moments with God that you have experienced, those moments of *clarity*, where all the fear and failure melt away and you are left with *hope*.

The best part of this whole thing is that my reminder, my monument to keep hoping, is this book itself! When I hold the final, published book in my hands, and remember the impact it had on my life and my heart ... I will be reminded why I will always keep fighting for this hope. The *story of hope* is indeed my *reminder to hope*.

Bam. Awesomeness. Let it marinate a minute.

In 2 Peter we are urged to realize the importance of reminders:

Because the stakes are so high, even though you're up-to-date on all this truth and practice it inside and out, I'm not going to let up for a minute in calling you to attention before it. This is the post to which I've been assigned—keeping you alert with frequent reminders—and I'm sticking to it as long as I live. I know that I'm to die soon; the Master has made that quite clear to me. And so I am especially eager that you have all this down in black and white so that after I die, you'll have it for ready reference.

*2 Peter 1:12-15*

Here are some questions that have helped me; maybe they can help you too:

**Questions about the story:**

1. Which reminder stood out most to you in the story? Why?



2. What do you think about Engelmann's reminder of the gilded branches? He says that they daily remind him of his failures, but that they also remind him to hope. Eógan also says that the scabbard reminds him of both failure and of hope. How is it possible for a reminder of a failure to also be a reminder of a hope?

**Questions about you:**

3. Have you ever created a reminder like this for something God wants you to remember? (Tattoos, piece of art, trophies, children, letters, songs?) Do you know anyone who keeps reminders like this? What ways does this affect both their life and the lives of those who know them?
4. Is there something you are learning in your life right now that you could create a reminder about? Perhaps some truth, some realization, some victory or hope worth deliberately holding onto?
5. Is there a place of failure in your life that could somehow be turned into a place of hope?

**Questions for God:**

6. God, what do You want to remind me of? What are You pointing my heart towards? What kind of story are You reminding me to participate in?
7. God, how can I share this idea of reminders with others? Is there a gift, or a story, or a song, or an experience that I could give to someone I love that will remind *them* of a promise You made?

### *Section Three: Seeking*

The theme of “seeking” is another matter that is clearly addressed in this story. Cal’s quest is, after all, to “seek the light”. I struggled for a while to understand what exactly this seeking of the light correlated with in the greater allegory. Was it seeking God? Seeking truth? Seeking destiny and purpose?

I’m not sure that the answer is any one of those things. In fact, it’s probably closer to being all of those things, and more. But the point, I think, isn’t so much *what* Cal is seeking as it is *how* he chooses to seek it, and *why*.

When the writing of *The Great Darkening* began, I was in a rather strange place with God. I’m not quite sure how it had happened, but I found myself questioning truths that I had always known to be certain. I literally, at one point, came to the place where I began to doubt the existence of God at all.

Along with all the doubt, I was living in an undiagnosed depression. I managed to force myself to carry out the duties and obligations that were mine to fulfill, but it was a strained and painful existence. Every single morning was an internal fight, a battle of my will against my lack of energy as I screamed silently at myself just to get out of the bed.

I had learned how to cope with this difficult state of being in every way that could be handled on my own. I knew that if I took the right vitamins, got the right exercise, ate the right foods, got enough rest, read enough books, and engaged continually with positive people ... I could make it through the day, make it through my life.

But it was a fight, every single day.

And yet, somehow, God didn’t give up on my heart. He continued to call me in His gentle, consistent way, being patient until I was ready to seek Him once again. In the

midst of the struggle, I distinctly remember hearing God’s voice. I didn’t often hear Him clearly in those days, but this time, it was unmistakable. His question was simple, but it floored me.

*What if it didn’t have to be so hard?*

I knew that God was inviting me to a new awakening of what it meant to have intimacy with Him. And I knew that if I decided to accept His offer, my life would quite possibly change forever. The purpose of this guide is not to go through the story of what turned me around from the devastating direction I was headed. Perhaps one day that will be a book of its own. But I must tell you that the engagement with this story has been a huge part of my healing.

As I began the process of seeking intimacy with God, much of my time was invested into the editing of this story. I remember vividly the day that I was sitting in a Panera Bread, stealing a few hours away from the kids and all my other obligations so that I could focus on the book. I was fully engrossed in my favorite part of the entire story—Cal’s discovery of the Sprites.

As I read, I came upon what is perhaps my favorite line in this entire book. Cal was being regaled by the Sprites as their liberator, for he had just set them free from their prison underneath the great Hilgari Mountains.

“But you must be mistaken,” Cal said quietly to Queen Iolanthe. “I am no savior ... I merely fell through a bookshelf, and nearly broke my arm for the second time stumbling down the dark stairs. If it were not for your voice I would still be lost somewhere in the labyrinths of the mountain.”

“And what makes those deeds any less heroic to we who were once imprisoned and who are now set free?” the Queen kindly replied.

“But you don’t understand, I was ... I was merely lost, it was you who found me!” Cal argued, blushing at her breathtaking gaze that had not broken with his. “I do not deserve all of this ... especially not from you, Your Majesty.”

“But it was you who struck brick with stone, it was you who did not choose to save himself by following other paths, and it was you who followed the light,” she said, recounting the facts. “Perhaps you misunderstand our joy? For we were not praying for a mighty warrior, nor for the strongest of men; and I have no concern for the context of circumstance. No, Calarmindon Bright Fame, we were praying for one who would seek the light, and seek it relentlessly.”

Iolanthe flew up to meet his eyes with her own as her bronzed hair gleamed and played in the wake of her beating wings. She took his face in her small hands to emphasize her next words.

“It is not of consequence to me how fierce or how feeble your resolve has been. For you sought, and you have found, and the result is freedom.”

I sat in the middle of Panera Bread with tears streaming down my face. I knew that perhaps this scene was not intended by the author to be such a pivotal, poignant, heartrending moment ... but I also knew that it most certainly was intended by God to be that for *me*.

*It is not of consequence to me how fierce or how feeble your resolve has been. For you sought, and you have found, and the result is freedom.*

In all of the ups and downs of my personal seeking, God was telling me that the effort was worth it. In all of the back and forth between struggling for clarity and settling for doubt, God was telling me that the effort was worth it. In the fierce moments of deep conviction and the feeble moments of giving into fear, God was telling me that the effort was worth it.

The effort was leading to freedom.

I think it is so easy to mistake a feeble resolve for a failed resolve. It is so tempting to presume that because our heart is exhausted in the seeking and our mind is assaulted in the fight, it would be best to give up altogether and admit defeat. I think the lesson that I learned here is that whether we feel fierce or we feel feeble, we must not give up. We must hold onto hope, we must seek after it, and when we do, we find freedom.

He promises ... we'll find Him.

When you come looking for me, you'll find me. Yes, when you get serious about finding me and want it more than anything else, I'll make sure you won't be disappointed.

*Jeremiah 29:13*

But even there, if you seek God, your God, you'll be able to find him if you're serious, looking for him with your whole heart and soul. When troubles come and all these awful things happen to you, in future days you will come back to God, your God, and listen obediently to what he says. God, your God, is above all a compassionate God. In the end he will not abandon you, he won't bring you to ruin, he won't forget the covenant with your ancestors which he swore to them.

*Deuteronomy 4:29-31*

Another key point in the story of Cal's seeking that greatly touched my heart is the failure that he feels after his escape from the Isle Dušana. Though he had presumed that his resolve was strong enough to avoid temptation from the evil that surrounded him, he would have fallen prey to Morana's seduction were it not for the intervention of Deryn.

Cal is nearly destroyed at that thought that he almost betrayed his calling and gave up on his seeking.

Cal's sadness broke a bit there in the presence of his brave and true Sprite friend. "I am sorry, Deryn, I am so sorry I didn't listen when you tried to warn me. I am ashamed for the cruel things I said to you." Tears began to fall from Cal's weary eyes.

Deryn wiped the blood from the tiny blade of his tiny sword before returning it back into its leaf-shaped scabbard. "It is not my role to hold failure and shame over you, Calarmindon Bright Fame; but it is my duty and my honor to remind you of your coming glory and your present calling." Deryn flew up to the face of his friend before he spoke his next words. "Neither myself, nor the holy messengers, nor our great Father is caught by surprise at the trappings of this darkening world, or those hearts of men who find themselves trapped. And yet ... He chooses to call to you anyway, Cal."

He chooses to call us anyway.

*He chooses to call us anyway.* He is not caught by surprise at our temptations or our trials or our doubts or our failures. He knows better than we do of all the potential roadblocks and struggles and fears and attacks that we might face as we seek Him. But yet He invites us to join him in the story of the seeking, invites us to participate

in the saga of hope and healing and restoration and redemption, because He will also not be surprised by the result of it all.

And what is that result?

Freedom.

By entering through faith into what God has always wanted to do for us—set us right with him, make us fit for him—we have it all together with God because of our Master Jesus. And that’s not all: We throw open our doors to God and discover at the same moment that he has already thrown open his door to us. We find ourselves standing where we always hoped we might stand—out in the wide open spaces of God’s grace and glory, standing tall and shouting our praise. There’s more to come: We continue to shout our praise even when we’re hemmed in with troubles, because we know how troubles can develop passionate patience in us, and how that patience in turn forges the tempered steel of virtue, keeping us alert for whatever God will do next. In alert expectancy such as this, we’re never left feeling shortchanged. Quite the contrary—we can’t round up enough containers to hold everything God generously pours into our lives through the Holy Spirit! Christ arrives right on time to make this happen. He didn’t, and doesn’t, wait for us to get ready.

*Romans 5:1-6*

**Questions about the story:**

1. What was the most impacting moment of Cal’s “seeking” for you? Why? How did it resonate with your own story?
2. Do you think Cal deserves the “credit” for his resolve to seek the light?

**Questions about you:**

3. What does “seeking the light” mean to you in the greater story of your own life?
4. Have you ever felt a failure so deeply that it seemed it was best to give up? Do you think God is disappointed in our failures? Or is he wholly unsurprised by them?
5. Do you find that seeking after the heart of God comes easy for you? Have you ever felt that it was unwelcomed or unsupported by those who introduced you to God?

**Questions for God:**

6. God, what do You want me to “seek”?
7. God, what failures or temptations or struggles are you not surprised about in my life? Why are you calling me anyway?



## *Section Four: Calling*

I must admit I am a little nervous about writing this section of the companion guide. I am nervous because it requires a transparency and vulnerability with which I am not completely comfortable. It requires a confidence in a story that has not yet been written. It requires a hope in a promise that has not yet been proven.

And yet I cannot possibly keep quiet about the truth of it all. Because if I am quiet about it, then the goodness that has been whispered to my heart will stay there, captured and hushed, until it is drowned out once again in the noise of the battle. I won't get to share it with you ... and I might even forget it myself.

And so, share I shall.

I was an awfully difficult editor to work with on this thing. I mean seriously, I picked at so many issues and details and themes and motivations and nuances that I am surprised Bobby didn't respectfully ask me to step away from the project. I went through three solid passes of the story giving multiple red parentheses of doom on nearly every page. (Of course, if he had listened to me the first time, I wouldn't have had to have nearly as many doomful comments on the later rounds.)

Now don't think for a second that I won every battle of these passes either. Oh no, the esteemed R.G. Triplett is quite the stubborn one when he gets his heart set on something. There were plenty of times where I would have no choice but to concede and move on. I suppose it *is* still his book, after all. Of course there were plenty of times that he *did* listen to me, and we will all be eternally thankful for that. But some of those times he was downright cheeky about it.

I'll tell this story so that I can state my outrage in a written form to be documented forevermore.

I had some trouble with the crew on the ships headed for the Wreath. I thought it was very confusing because he had written Captain Tahd, who was the captain of the guardsmen, but there was no ship's captain on either ship. I begged him several times to rethink this. To me it seemed quite logical that the ships would each need a commanding officer to captain them as they made their way over to the Wreath, and certainly as they made their intended ferry trips from the Wreath to Haven and back, carrying the coveted timber.

But the stinker wouldn't do it! He thought a lowly helmsman was good enough, so he refused to write a captain. Well ... I decided to make a stand. So—as I did frequently when he refused to write something I wanted—I wrote it myself. Just wrote that captain right into the story, hoping that the author would see the error of his ways. When I completed the rewrites I was excited and nervous to see what he would do with them. Sometimes he would keep what I wrote, sometimes he would change it beyond recognition, and sometimes he would discard it altogether.

*Usually* these decisions on his part were to the betterment of the story.

Until my sea captain.

I had given the captain a nice name, and a striking personality, and a great potential use for book two. When I got the changes back, however, such a travesty had been inflicted upon him. Gone were his quirks and lovely lines of dialogue. Gone was the intrigue I had hoped for book two. And ... gone was his name.

Instead, he had a new name. Captain Means.

Captain Means? I didn't understand the reference. Usually characters have some sort of meaning behind their names, and I didn't get this one at all. It sounded kinda dumb to me. So, I asked, politely of course, why the new name. The answer?

He is a means to an end.

Oh hahaha, very funny, R.G. A means to an end of my pesky editing. Blarg! Well, fine then. I got my sea captain, but the poor mariner had quite the price to pay for my insistence. Captain Means, indeed. I shall always be rather irritated at that.

And now I'm sure you are wondering what part of that tirade is supposed to make me nervous about sharing. I have greatly wandered. I apologize.

Back to the point—I was a very difficult editor. I am one of those people who tend to analyze things up and down, way beyond the point of any normal thinking, to a place where sometimes I hardly even know what I believe about a particular topic. I found myself doing this over-analyzing thing a LOT with Haven. It was making me a bit crazy and I'm sure it was driving the author quite mad.

I remember apologizing frequently over this, and actually thinking from time to time that I should just quit—that I wasn't good enough or skilled enough or experienced enough to do this. I'm actually in no way qualified to even BE an editor (but don't tell R.G.!).

Then God spoke a pretty striking truth to me, and I don't think I will ever be the same.

I was reading a book called *Victim of Grace* by Christian author Robin Jones Gunn. It's the story of her coming to be a writer and how God used her to affect a lot of hearts. In the book, she talks about her propensity for telling tales—lying even, or at least imagining a different version of the truth. It got her into trouble as she grew up, and it was always viewed as a weakness.

Until the day she learned how to put that part of her into writing. Until the day she learned that *everything is redeemable*. Until the day she learned that something that she thought was her greatest weakness was actually her greatest strength.

And do you know why it was her greatest strength? Because God put it there!

When I read this, I heard God speaking so very clearly to me. My analyzing nature was not my greatest weakness. Or at least it didn't have to be. God wanted to *redeem* it back to what it was always intended to be—a great strength. God was not surprised that this was a part of me. No, in fact ... *He made me this way*. And as I use this gift He gave me, I come every day closer to getting a clear picture of the true person that I was created to become.

This was a paradigm shift that has truly changed me forever.

Here is what Paul has to say about it:

I was given the gift of a handicap to keep me in constant touch with my limitations. Satan's angel did his best to get me down; what he in fact did was push me to my knees. No danger then of walking around high and mighty! At first I didn't think of it as a gift, and begged God to remove it. Three times I did that, and then he told me, My grace is enough; it's all you need. My strength comes into its own in your weakness.

Once I heard that, I was glad to let it happen. I quit focusing on the handicap and began appreciating the gift. It was a case of Christ's strength moving in on my weakness. Now I take limitations in stride, and with good cheer, these limitations that cut me down to size—abuse, accidents, opposition, bad breaks. I just let Christ take over! And so the weaker I get, the stronger I become.

*2 Corinthians 12:7-10*

We can take this a step further, look at the true battle that we are a part of, and see that it is not just ourselves that take what God meant to be a strength and turn it into a weakness. No—there is an enemy out there who seeks to do precisely that. One small twist of a truth, and sin takes over to destroy our strength.

I love how the story of Cal reflects some of these truths. It doesn't take long to see that Cal's foreign propensity for hope could easily be viewed as a great weakness. Most of his contemporaries viewed it as such. And in fact ... perhaps the evil darkness might yet seek to turn it into a weakness as his story continues to unfold. You'll have to finish the trilogy to see what happens there. But it's a slight tip of the scales, a tiny shift of the lens, between great weakness and great strength.

When we first meet Cal, we learn of his gift with horses. We discover that he is unusually, almost supernaturally talented with them. And what is Cal doing when he discovers the path that the THREE who is SEVEN has for him? He is using his gift! He is caring for the horses. He is calming Dreamer.

When we use our gifts, we are led to our purpose. Pretty cool.

Cal is also reminded, in the same way that I was, that the THREE who is SEVEN called him despite his apparent unreadiness for the task at hand.

“I am just a groomsman, a groomsman who hasn't even finished his restitution yet. I have no authority, no sword to protect myself with, and not even a platform to tell of all that I have learned.”

Iolanthe smiled warmly and looked him straight in his dark eyes, her captivating gaze grabbing him again and speaking to his soul. “Do not mistrust your abilities or your circumstances, for those are not of so great a significance to your purpose. Rather, trust in the One who has

seen fit to call you forth in the first place. For if He has asked you to seek the light, then you must seek the light ... and in this seeking, Calarmindon Bright Fame, you must place your hope in the One who had done the calling.”

Cal felt his mind giving way to the truth his heart had known all along, and his questions and excuses faded to the back of his consciousness.

So what is the scary part to share then? What am I so nervous to spell out for you? I think it is the belief that this editing journey has begun the process of molding me into something that I was created to be; something that I wasn't before, or maybe just something that I had lost. It is the hope that God is redeeming those things in me so that I can become precisely what He designed me to be.

It's scary, because it's not proven. And it won't be proven or disproven on the financial or critical success or failure of *The Great Darkening*. Perhaps the editing on this project could only be a tiny part of the journey God intends for me. Maybe I will end up doing something completely different than book editing and publishing. As I said—the story isn't finished. The ending hasn't yet been written.

But that's where I get to choose to hope in “the One who has done the calling”. HE knows the end of the story. And somewhere among the pages of *The Great Darkening*, that truth has become enough for me. Somehow, I can cling to the promise I have been given.

We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing him directly just as he knows us! But for right now, until that completeness, we have three things to do to lead us toward that

consummation: Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly. And the best of the three is love.

*1 Corinthians 13:12-13*

And so I give what little I have in a valiant effort to trust ... and to hope ... and to love. Why?

Because dawn is coming.

**Questions about the story:**

1. Do you view Cal's hoping as a weakness or as a strength? How could it be turned into a weakness?
2. Are there any other characters where you see an attribute that is fighting to be either a weakness or a strength?

**Questions about you:**

3. What is your greatest weakness?
4. Do you believe that everything is redeemable?
5. Can you see how a strength that you have plays into a calling you feel on your life?

**Questions for God:**

6. God, how can you redeem my weakness? Why did you put it into me? How can you use it as a strength?
7. God, what are you already doing right now, and where do I fit in? Today, in this moment, how can I walk the path toward the calling that you have on me?

## *Section Five: Passion*

I'm a bit of a perfectionist. I admit it. As if I hadn't spelled it out for you enough in this brief saga of my editing endeavors – I drove Bobby a bit crazy with my need for the details to make sense. (And before you go telling me about all the details that *don't* make sense, please remember that I already told you I couldn't win every battle. Okay? Don't even try convincing R.G. that rivers don't run upwards into the mountains. It's his world, and he can make magical rivers if he wants to.)

At any given point in time I would have several browser windows open on my computer at once, all hinting at the different topics I was researching.

How many bales of hay would 40 horses eat in a week?

How many miles can a horse travel in a day with a rider on his back?

What are the different parts of a carriage called?

How fast did a 15<sup>th</sup> century sailing vessel travel waters? What if a storm was involved?

How fast did woodcutters in the 15<sup>th</sup> century cut down trees? How many woodcutters would it take to clear a certain land area in a certain time? And what if they had to remove the stumps so that they could plant more trees? And how fast would the newly planted trees grow? And if it matters what type of tree it is, what type of tree typically grows in these types of climates? And speaking of climates, what even regulates climates in a world with no sun or moon? And speaking of tree growth, how do they actually grow without a sun? And back to the point, how many times can these woodcutters replant and harvest on the same land in 70 years? Wait is it 70 years or 73 years? Hold on ... 73 years ... how are these Poets still even



*alive?! They are super old! And why didn't they have children? Were they too old to have children when they left Haven? Well then ... now they are really super old!*

Ah, friends. These were the questions that kept me up at night.

I think the great R.G. Triplett probably slept just fine.

I did have one answer to my questions that managed to drastically change the entire world of Aiénor.

I was a bit concerned one day about the size of the Oweles. Bobby had portrayed them as these menacing birds of prey, and I had been picturing them to be pretty huge. But when I came across an Owele described as being only five hands tall, I got a bit confused. Five hands? That's not so big. A hand is only 4 inches... a 20-inch tall Owele doesn't strike fear in my bones quite the way I was envisioning.

So I asked Bobby. He didn't realize that the measurement "hand" is actually a real thing, based on the size of the palm if you hold your hand horizontally—about 4 inches. He was picturing a hand held vertically, which would be more like 7 inches. So in effect, I basically shrunk the whole world of Aiénor almost in half. Those tall watchtowers in the cutter camp were now just little platforms. The herald tower was certainly less impressive, and Seig was not nearly the giant of a man that the author had intended.

Ah well, we fixed it. Aiénor was eventually put back together in a realistically sized fashion.

We fixed a lot of things in the telling of this tale.

And here is the point of it all. (You knew it was coming eventually, didn't you?)

The perfectionism had its place. It had its use, but I learned that it also needed its limits. Distances and measurements and physical laws needed to make sense ... but the intangibles didn't have to be so cut and dried. It was acceptable to not completely understand the nuances of the allegory. I didn't need to know how every bit of magic worked in this world. I didn't even need to understand each character's every motivation.

Sometimes ... it's okay to just admire the beauty of the story God wants to tell without the need to understand all of it.

I remember trying to explain this shift in my thinking to a friend who has a similar personality to mine. She wasn't quite as convinced about certain things that I had decided to leave vague. And she knew that my personality is always striving. Striving for excellence, even perfection if it's possible. Peak performance. If I can't be at peak performance, then I usually don't bother attempting something at all.

And this is where the talk of passion comes in. I remember telling her that I was learning each day to invite God into my work. And I was discovering that as the passion for the project grew, and as God's heart became evident in the process ... my focus became less about peak performance and more about *joy*.

Joy.

I had found something I was passionate about, and that passion had brought joy. And so the sleepless nights weren't costly. And the doomful conversations amongst the parentheses weren't exhausting. And the long process of revisiting word upon word and letter upon letter and symbol upon symbol wasn't grueling. In fact, quite the opposite. I loved every moment of it. Because I was letting God redeem my faults into the strengths he intended them to be, I found not only a calling, but a passion and a joy.

David found this joy of the Lord, even in the constant battle he faced with his own weakness. When his feet are on the “life path”, he is filled with joy.

My choice is you, God, first and only. And now I find I’m *your* choice!  
You set me up with a house and yard. And then you made me your heir!  
The wise counsel God gives when I’m awake is confirmed by my sleeping heart.  
Day and night I’ll stick with God; I’ve got a good thing going and I’m not letting go.  
I’m happy from the inside out, and from the outside in, I’m firmly formed.  
You canceled my ticket to hell—that’s not my destination!  
Now you’ve got my feet on the life path, all radiant from the shining of your face.  
Ever since you took my hand, I’m on the right way.

*Psalm 16:5-11*

I think Armas might be the best example of this experience. When we first meet him, he has no clue of the danger that awaits Haven, or the hope that he is destined to find, or the calling that he has. He is just a regular guy with a good heart, doing his job the best that he can. Doing it with excellence, in fact. Maybe focused on peak performance? Until his peak performance demands that he direct Hollis to an audience with the Priest King—an audience that is sure to lead to imprisonment for his friend.

Suddenly, the world is not so black and white for Armas. Though he can’t see the full picture of what Hollis claims to see, he is moved by a passionate care for his friend to do a thing that goes against his nature and his duty—he sends Hollis back to the forests.

This costs Armas a lot. It costs him a trip to the Wreath, and it leads him into a calling that he had never intended to fulfill: commanding the armies of Haven. But it also leads him back to Engelmann, where he is taught of the hope that is the true key to fending off the darkness.

The teaching from Engelmann doesn't take root in him at first, not visibly anyway. Just as he has been dubious of Hollis' stories, he is dubious of Engelmann's ramblings. His heart is drawn to the hope that he sees in Cal and Engelmann and even in Michael ... but the truth of it all takes a while to set in.

And yet—when it does—a passion burns in Armas that is completely worth the wait.

Armas chewed on his lower lip as he stood there, his mind racing to come up with some comforting words to offer the scared people of Piney Creek. As he thought, without much effort and to his great surprise, the words of Engelmann were the first words that came to his mind.

“Do not give up hope, people of Haven. You must hold onto it with both hands; for it may be hope alone that proves to be the very weapon to defeat whatever evils await us.” As Armas heard the words come out of his mouth, a deep empathy overcame him for these complete strangers of the cold North. His empathy however, was quickly followed by the sudden realization that he was not just saying the words of Engelmann in order to pacify and create calm; it seemed that he indeed meant them. He meant them, perhaps more than he had meant any words he had ever spoken before.

That is how I feel when I talk about the hope of Haven. The hope of this story, the hope of this process. I mean the words that I say, perhaps more than any words I have ever spoken before.

The passion is powerful.

“People of Haven!” Armas said, trying to even his breathing. “I fear that your nightmares have indeed come to life this day, and I fear all the more that the only thing keeping them out in the darkness is the fading light of the dying tree.” Armas turned his gaze from the hypnotic stare of the large green eyes and focused his attention again on the line of men and women gathered atop the battlements of the wall. “It seems that the duty has fallen to us to be the first line of defense for our people. I do not know what green death waits out there in the dark wilderness. I do not know the source of its power, and I do not know what it plots in the shadows of its own greed.”

He looked back over his shoulder, his dark eyes illuminated by the torches of his fellow guardsmen. “But I do know *you*, people of Haven, and I believe that the THREE who is SEVEN will raise *hope* enough in our hearts that we might defend our people fiercely. So stand with me now, you men and women of the North. Muster your courage and your strength ... and hold tight your hope!”

And here is another point about passion ... it is what leads us to *action*. It brings us to do something more than just sitting around pondering hope, waiting for goodness to find us. It gives us the courage to act.

James certainly urges us to action.

Don't fool yourself into thinking that you are a listener when you are anything but, letting the Word go in one ear and out the other. *Act* on what you hear! Those who hear and don't act are like those who glance in the mirror, walk away, and two minutes later have no idea who they are, what they look like.

*James 1:22-24*

I told you at the beginning of this companion guide that I was very angry at the Poets for a long time. I was angry that they had this hope, this LIGHT even, and yet they kept it hidden. They experienced hope, but where was their passion to go out and put this hope into some kind of action?

I was so irritated at them that I actually wrote in a whole scene of Cal questioning Klieo about it. His anger in this scene was certainly my own.

“But you are the Poets!” Cal cried. “The keepers of the very ideals my parents *died* for! How can you hide here with your violet light, hidden from a world that so desperately needs the illumination you have? There is a whole dying city filled with people who need to know exactly what you all know!”

She grew quiet, solemn, taking in his words. “Perhaps you are right, young Cal. Perhaps we have hidden away for far too long, and kept His hope to ourselves.”

Cal pressed her further, barely bridling his indignation. “You should have left to seek the light! The time is gone now and you have nothing to show for your years of hope!” He spat the last word at her, panic rising inside of his heart at the thought that perhaps he had been wrong all along. Perhaps the way of the Poet was no better than the way of the flint after all.

I won't continue the dialogue here, since I presume you have read this part of the story. But you might want to go back and read it again, for there is plenty of wisdom to be found in this scene. (I must add here that the *author* added the wisdom, after he went through and read my angry ramblings. His additions to this scene made it into something pretty exceptional. Klieo has some rather profound responses to Cal's concerns.)

What I *will* note is that, whatever his flaws might be, Cal has passion. And this passion in his heart is what fuels his willingness to embrace his calling and set about the actions needed to pursue it. Many have hoped for a new light to come. Only one had the passion to actually go and find it.

And that passion—the true, deep, REAL passion—comes from the unmistakable pull of a Creator. The undeniable pleasure of the Author of our story as He sees us stepping into the role that He has written just for us.

**Questions about the story:**

1. What do you think of Armas' transformation from someone who strives for excellence to someone who embraces hope? Did you buy the progression of his heart?
2. What other characters exhibit passion for what they do? Does the passion always lead to action?

**Questions about you:**

3. Have you been a part of something where your passion for it brought you joy?
4. What would you be willing to sacrifice for your passion?
5. Who is someone in your life that displays a passion like the one we talk about here? Is it a part of their calling in life?

**Questions for God:**

6. God, where can I find and use my passion? How can I find and hold to Your joy? What action can I take today? What role have you written for me?
7. God, is there something in me that searches for peak performance or some other lesser victory instead of joy? Can you show me how to invite you into my purpose, my calling, so that I experience your joy and your pleasure while I'm pursuing it?

## *Section Six: Wisdom*

Fair warning before you attempt to read this section: there are far more questions here than there are answers. There is more confusion and contemplation than there is understanding or resolution. I am still very much in the middle of my ponderings on this topic, but I felt that this companion guide would not be complete without them. So ... I shall muddle through my thought process; after all, isn't that what seeking and asking for wisdom is all about? If you care to join me, perhaps we shall discover something rather powerful.

Then again, we may just discover that I am a confused mess.

But we'll give it a go!

I think it is probably rather clear to you at this point that I believe there is much wisdom written into the layers of this story. Not only in the direct dialogue of the characters (though there is plenty to be found there), but also in the themes and the nuances and the overall plot that is being played out in the midst of *The Great Darkening*.

It is my belief, of course, that the wisdom found in the story came from God. He gave it to Bobby, and some to me, as we worked through the writing process. And I am so very grateful, so very humbled and honored, that He chose me to be a part of it.

However ...

I remember working through some of the final edits on the Engelmann part of the story, when a very intriguing and compelling thought progression came upon me. The question at the heart of it was: *What does it take to become an Engelmann?*



How does one change from someone like Cal into someone like Engelmann? Cal is hopeful, sure, but he is also naïve, and rather needy in terms of support and reminding and encouragement. He is about to go through hell, and I'm not sure he will handle that hell with the hope and strength and clarity that he might think he has a handle on. (OOPS! Don't tell R.G. I'm giving away anything from book two!)

But Engelmann perceives challenges for what they are, chooses to hope unswervingly, and yet doesn't wrestle with the great emotional ups and downs of these challenges he is called to face. He doesn't require the constant reminders, the frequent encouragement, or the group of supporters in order to hold onto his hope. And in the midst of his perpetual hope, he manages to bring a level of wisdom that is unique, a level of mature understanding that alters the course of the story he is taking part in.

I began to be rather jealous of Engelmann. I want his strength. I want his ability to turn off his own needs and focus on his calling. I want his wisdom!

Is it only experience that creates a sage such as this? Does the wisdom come from years and years of taking the beatings and choosing to rise up again? Or is it a gift that some people get that helps them keep their emotions and fears from working against their hope?

It seems like with all the great sages in the stories—Engelmann, Gandalf, Galadriel, Dumbledore—their burdens are somehow heavier because they carry them for the *whole* of their people or the *whole* of their world. And yet ... somehow those burdens are also LIGHTER, because they don't hold the responsibility to *fix things* upon their own backs. They seem to trust—to hope—in some power or some story greater than themselves. They seem to have the wisdom to merely play their part in the story, and let the greater power worry about the rest of it. And because they shoulder the collective burden of their society, they somehow ignore their own personal burdens that might cripple most anyone else.

Then I thought ... maybe it's not only experience. Maybe it's not just a gift for a select few. Maybe it's just a shift in focus—a shift OFF of self.

I am reminded frequently of what an extraordinarily SELFISH world we live in. MOST people are consumed with themselves MOST of the time. Even when it is well intentioned, it is still self-centered. Like me. I try not to focus on myself. I try to care about others, see from their perspective, be concerned about their hurts above my own. But even in that, I still frequently make it about ME. *What can I do to help? What can I say that will make a difference? What example can I be that will inspire a change? How can God use ME? What does this person think of ME? How is this going to make ME feel?* The "I"s and "me"s are endless.

And even Cal is pretty self-centered, isn't he? It's all about HIS calling, about HIM finding the light.

Well, I began to really wrestle with God over this "sage" thing.

*Okay God... selfless. That's what I've got to be. Completely selfless, because that's the only way I'm going to be able to survive the heartache that this life will continue to throw at me. But ... what if only part of me really wants to be selfless? What if there is still a part of me that is quite content to have myself right smack-dab in the middle of my own little world?*

I asked God, pretty regularly for weeks, about my own heart, and how I could begin to change into an Engelmann. I wanted to be a sage, after all! To heck with this selfishness thing!

I felt rather lonely and desperate in this seeking until I came across this passage, written by a man who is arguably the best model that Christianity has ever had for a life that is completely sold-out and committed to God. If there was ever a sage in the New Testament, it was this guy. BUT ... read what he says:

Yes. I'm full of myself—after all, I've spent a long time in sin's prison. What I don't understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise. So if I can't be trusted to figure out what is best for myself and then do it, it becomes obvious that God's command is necessary.

But I need something *more*! For if I know the law but still can't keep it, and if the power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help! I realize that I don't have what it takes. I can will it, but I can't *do* it. I decide to do good, but I don't *really* do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don't result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time. It happens so regularly that it's predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God's commands, but it's pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge.

I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn't that the real question? The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does. He acted to set things right in this life of contradictions where I want to serve God with all my heart and mind, but am pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different.

*Romans 7:15-25*

Well! That's intriguing! Paul himself, the great leader of the early church, the man who wrote most of the New Testament ... his words echo my own? I mean this guy was so committed to serving and leading the church that he didn't even marry,

because he felt that it would be a distraction to his calling. And yet ... even *he* is sometimes incapacitated by his own selfishness?

It was at this point that something pretty shocking and powerful occurred to me.

I don't think *anyone* can actually become an Engelmann.

Because here's the thing about most of the sages in the stories—Engelmann, Gandalf, etc—*they aren't human*. They don't have selfish motivations like human characters do because they do not have the same souls that human characters have. They have not felt the same heartaches or the same joys. Not in the same way. And so they are able to trumpet the cause of the "greater good" because they do not have to battle the same selfish loves and motivations that we humans do.

All of the human "sages" that exist today—even the ones I look up to, like Eldredge, and Peterson, and Bell—they aren't wizened, selfless wizards. They are men, with selfish motivations, and ambitions, and secrets, and pain. They are capable of wisdom, but I bet they have all led people astray at times as well. They are USED by God to bring wisdom, but their wisdom comes from HIM.

All of the "sages" in the Bible—Solomon, Peter, David, even Paul—they battled the human element. The selfishness. David was in a constant state of emotional upheaval—one minute joyful, the next in the depths of despair. And he probably spent his whole life like that. Yet God used him, of course, and he was called a man after God's own heart. His beautiful songs and Psalms have resonated with the hearts of God-followers for hundreds of years. But most of his woes seem to stem from a selfish perspective—*God why aren't You showing up for ME, why are You doing this to ME?*

Here's just one example:

I cry out loudly to God, loudly I plead with God for mercy. I spill out all my complaints before him, and spell out my troubles in detail: “As I sink in despair, my spirit ebbing away, you know how I’m feeling. Know the danger I’m in, the traps hidden in my path. Look right, look left—there’s not a soul who cares what happens! I’m up against it, with no exit—bereft, left alone. I cry out, God, call out: ‘You’re my last chance, my only hope for life!’ Oh listen, please listen; I’ve never been this low. Rescue me from those who are hunting me down; I’m no match for them. Get me out of this dungeon so I can thank you in public. Your people will form a circle around me and you’ll bring me showers of blessing!”

*Psalm 142*

See what I mean? It’s beautiful ... and it resonates with all of us, because we’ve all been in the low places where we cry out to God ... but it’s also selfish. Right? The people will form a circle around him and God will bring showers of blessing? Well geez that’s kinda asking a lot, isn’t it, David?

And so I do not think we can expect for any human to truly be a sage. I do not think we can expect to find an Engelmann.

Except in *moments* ordained by God speaking through a person.

Or perhaps, even more likely for some of us, in the pages of a story.

I think that GOD brings the wisdom, brings the goodness, to those who are open to Him bringing it. And that could be *anyone*—any of us broken messes down here who are trying to figure Him out. And for some of us, He brings that wisdom and goodness to us in the form of a STORY. Because in the stories ... we can imagine away the selfishness. Sure, we relate to the characters who have the selfish motivations, who wrestle with the human element. But we accept the greatest truths

from the characters we can TRUST—the ones that don't have an ulterior motive of selfishness. Those ones that exist purely to bring truth.

Bobby told me once that he had been asking God his whole life for a mentor. A sage. Someone who could help guide him through the incredibly difficult life of a career in ministry. Bobby said that God had never given him a sage ... so he had to write his own.

But one day it hit me.

Engelmann IS who God gave to Bobby! That's how he chose to give the wisdom, both to Bobby and to the many others who will read this story. It's beautiful—it's SO God. He gave Bobby exactly what he was asking for, *in the way that he would best receive it.*

I think there is danger in trying to FIND a sage, OR in trying to be one. Because I have discovered in my relatively short time on this earth that all humans will fail. Over, and over, and over again. We come up short. We let people down. We let sin and selfishness win. And the humans that get put up on pedestals as sages sometimes end up failing and falling the hardest of all. Somehow, in our search for truth, we tend to elevate these “sages” higher than they ever deserve or know how to handle.

But the beautiful thing? God still uses us. HE is the source of wisdom. The ONLY source. And for those of us Poets with hearts that connect to the written word and to the magic of epic narratives ... God gives us a way to be channels for HIS wisdom and HIS goodness. Even in our brokenness, there is a way for us to point hearts towards Him. And that's why our hearts have always resonated with fantastic tales. Because whatever else does or does not happen in the confusing lives we lead—we hear His voice most clearly in the stories.

The STORIES are our sages. They always have been. They always will be.

And I don't suppose for a moment that stories are the only way to hear wisdom from God. On the contrary, it seems to me that God created a world with many different avenues for His truth to be manifested. Some of us may connect to story to find His truth ... while others connect better to music, or philosophy, or science, or serene moments in nature. That's just another captivating part of the love of our Creator, I think. Whatever a person's passions are ... He has created a way for His truth to be found there.

Before I move away from this segment, I must revisit the selfishness conversation for just a moment. For although perhaps we can never be completely wise or totally selfless, I think we are certainly instructed to invite God's spirit to make us more and more of those things. Here is what Paul says about it.

Focusing on the self is the opposite of focusing on God. Anyone completely absorbed in self ignores God, ends up thinking more about self than God. That person ignores who God is and what he is doing. And God isn't pleased at being ignored. But if God himself has taken up residence in your life, you can hardly be thinking more of yourself than of him. Anyone, of course, who has not welcomed this invisible but clearly present God, the Spirit of Christ, won't know what we're talking about. But for you who welcome him, in whom he dwells—even though you still experience all the limitations of sin—you yourself experience life on God's terms.

*Romans 8:7-10*

And what are these terms? What does it look like for the spirit of God to dwell in our hearts, to pull our minds away from selfish desires and settle it on Him?

This passage in Galatians outlines so clearly the difference between a life absorbed with self versus a life in the pursuit of focusing on God.

It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time: repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community. I could go on. This isn't the first time I have warned you, you know. If you use your freedom this way, you will not inherit God's kingdom.

But what happens when we live God's way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely.

*Galatians 5:19-23*

Well ... I know this is all rather heavy. Rather complicated. Rather overwhelming. I still haven't quite figured out where our own efforts should cease and where God's leading and spirit should take over. I haven't determined HOW exactly to fully receive this amazing gift from God where selfishness ceases and gifts abound.

But the beautiful thing is that He calls us to the process of discovering these truths—this wisdom—right alongside Him. That's part of the ancient story He is inviting us



to be a part of: the story of a loving creator who is redeeming a broken creation back to His heart.

**Questions about the story:**

1. Do you think Engelmann exhibits any selfishness?
2. Does Engelmann's hope and certainty seem out of place? How do you think he came by these virtues? ARE they virtues?

**Questions about you:**

3. Where do you find God's truth most easily? Stories? Music? Science? Nature?
4. Do you have a mentor in your life that you would consider a "sage"? How has their humanity affected their influence positively? How has it affected it negatively?
5. Do you see the fruits of selfishness in your own life? Do you also see the fruits of the spirit of God? Is it possible to manifest both simultaneously?

**Questions for God:**

6. God, where can I find Your truth and wisdom?
7. God, how can I invite Your spirit to cleanse me of the fruits of selfishness and enrich my life with the gifts that You long to bring into it?

## *Section Seven: Hoping Together*

Oh, yes, we are back to hope again. We never really left it, did we? I told you we wouldn't. But as we ponder this final point together, I think you will see how the theme of hoping together is perhaps the most beautiful and life-changing part of the whole story.

I'm sure you noticed the intriguing yet vaguely explained violet light of the Poets. Believe me, the ambiguity of it was quite intentional on the author's part, though I tried my best to clarify its purposes and properties and limitations. You will fortunately get to learn much more about this light in the subsequent stories. But for now, we must keep our discussion to this story ... in which Cal was quite delighted to discover it.

"I have never heard of the magic of the purple light," Cal replied. "Tell me, what kind of wisdom or sorcery has the THREE who is SEVEN let you and your friends in on?"

"But I've already told you, haven't I?" Elder John paused, giving Cal a moment to think.

The young man stared back at him, willing him to divulge his secret.

"Hope, my boy," he finally said with a fatherly smile. "For He has taught us how to hope, and it is hope that has placed His light in our hearts."

I did not really understand the great significance of the Poet's purple light when the idea was first presented to me. I just thought it sounded like a cool idea – when the Poets get together, they glow. Visually interesting, and just think of how we can play

up that advantage if the world ever goes completely dark! (Will it? I don't know ... you'll have to read *The Ravenous Siege*.)

It has been only recently that I have come to understand the true meaning behind this concept. It is not simply about the visual impact or the way we can use it in the story; it is the key to understanding hope!

It is scary to hope alone. *I'm* scared ... I'm scared every day to hope for success with this book, with my business, with my kids, with my health, with my relationships. If I'm left alone in my own head too long, Satan loves nothing better than to set me on a path of destroying every bit of hope I've managed to muster.

Which is why I am discovering that I don't have to hope alone.

I'm learning that *hoping together is the key to hoping at all*. I'm learning that God created us to live in a community that hopes with each other, that works together towards a shared vision and a common purpose. My fears and doubts can eat me alive unless I have someone to remind me just what it is that I am hoping for and why it is worth the fight.

Sure, I can build monuments to remind myself of hope. And I can choose it even when the choice costs more than I feel like I have. But nothing can replace the sincere and contagious hope of a fellow dreamer.

“Now then!” Elder John spoke up. “Who needs an old torch to remind you of such things when we are all here to remind each other? You may have lost your hope a day or two ... but there were many days when you gave mine back to me.” Elder John reached over and firmly clasped Tolk on the arm. “We hope together, my friend. Together.”

These Poets have that part of it figured out. And their shared belief, their community of hope, brings to them the precise thing that they are hoping for in the first place! The *light* of the THREE who is SEVEN comes to them *when they hope together*.

Bam. Awesomeness again. Seriously ... LIGHT comes only when they hope together.

Here's what Jesus says about it:

Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.

*Matthew 5:14-16*

I am only beginning to truly recognize the beauty of hearts coming together in hope. Though I am sure I have seen evidence of it in my life many times, I think this book has awakened my spirit to more fully perceive this gift that God has designed for his children. He created us to share strength, burdens, callings, and hope.

Paul certainly encouraged this in the early church:

Those of us who are strong and able in the faith need to step in and lend a hand to those who falter, and not just do what is most convenient for us. Strength is for service, not status. Each one of us needs to look after the good of the people around us, asking ourselves, "How can I help?"

That's exactly what Jesus did. He didn't make it easy for himself by avoiding people's troubles, but waded right in and helped out. "I took on the troubles of the troubled," is the way Scripture puts it. Even if it was written in Scripture long ago, you can be sure it's written for *us*. God wants the combination of his steady, constant calling and warm, personal counsel in Scripture to come to characterize *us*, keeping us alert for whatever he will do next. May our dependably steady and warmly personal God develop maturity in you so that you get along with each other as well as Jesus gets along with us all. Then we'll be a choir—not our voices only, but our very lives singing in harmony in a stunning anthem to the God and Father of our Master Jesus!

Oh! May the God of green hope fill you up with joy, fill you up with peace, so that your believing lives, filled with the life-giving energy of the Holy Spirit, will brim over with hope!

*Romans 15: 1-6, 13*

The light of hope in this book was rather dim when it was just Bobby, Brandon, Rob and me hoping for it. (Brandon was hugely instrumental in the greater story structure of the book, and Rob was our graphic designer and map-maker extraordinaire.) The four of us had our little hopes, our wishes and beliefs for the impact of this story. We learned that as we encouraged each other along the way, the hope of it all got brighter and brighter. The energy of the shared vision grew to a place where confidence in God's plans and purposes began to overshadow the doubts and discouragements that were being constantly hurled at us.

When the writing process finally came to a close, God led us to make perhaps the best decision in the whole behind-the-scenes story of *The Great Darkening*.

Lost Poet Press was born.

It occurred to us that our passion and belief and hope in this story could only burn so brightly before our reach was maximized. There was a finite amount of light that just the four of us could generate. We needed more dreamers and artists and lovers of hope and beauty to join us in blazing this trail.

We were so excited about this idea, not only because we needed people for *our* purposes, but because we wanted to invite them into the joy of finding their *own*. We wanted to invite them to use the gifts and strengths that God had given them. We wanted to invite them into an atmosphere of hope.

Contagious hope. Nothing burns more brightly than that.

After we had put together our team of “Lost Poets”, we decided to expand our reach even further by launching a kickstarter project. This gave us the opportunity to share the heart of Haven with our greater spheres of influence – to invite even more people to be a part of the violet light. We ended up with 125 backers! 125 people who saw enough beauty and light in what we were doing to choose to be a part of it with us. We raised over \$12,000 and we were able to fund all parts of the publishing and marketing of *The Great Darkening*.

This lesson was taught to us, or at least clarified to us, in the writing and re-writing of the story. And then we got to apply the lesson in the real world so that we could *tell* the story. So that we could *share* the story. So that we could *invite* others to be part of the story.

And so, we pull apart the darkness. One pinprick of light at a time.

**Questions about the story:**

1. What do you think of the light of the poets? Was it fair of them to hide their light instead of sharing in with the citizens of Haven?
2. Do you think that everyone can see the violet light?

3. How do you think the violet hope (light) will play a part in the next installment of the story?

**Questions about you:**

4. Where have you let hope die in your own life? Who can help you remember why it is worth rekindling?
5. Have you experienced the power of a shared hope? A community of hope? Would you be willing to?

**Questions for God:**

6. God, who can I partner with to share a hope?
7. God, how can you use me to be contagious in my hoping?

## *Conclusion*

I feel as though it cannot possibly be right to end this guide here. There are so many points I wish I could touch on: the journey of Michael ... the mythology of the Oweles ... the origin of the evil ... the disappointing lack of strong female characters in this story ... the list could go on.

But I am not writing another book here, and my time and space for commentary is nearly gone. I hope that you have enjoyed a bit of the backstory of this crazy journey, and I pray that maybe you found some truth and light along the way. That is all I have ever really hoped for in this Haven story. To be a part of a process that points hearts towards God.

I wish I could tell you that all of the truth and beauty and light I have written of in these few pages has turned my life around to the point where I am living in total joy, powerful and confident and brave and free. I wish I could tell you that the Great Darkening in my own life has been obliterated by a new light that will keep the darkness away forever. I wish I could tell you that my calling is clear and my path is certain and my hope is constant.

But, the truth is quite the contrary. Since the writing of *The Great Darkening*, I have been slammed with trials and pains and confusing tensions that I could never have seen coming. I have had to gather a hope that I never knew was in me. I have had to engage an enemy that is seeking to steal and kill and destroy with a fury that I never thought would come against me. The path has gotten harder, not easier, since this story was finished. To be completely honest, there are many days where I completely doubt the validity of all the truths that I have written of in this very companion guide.

But the good news? I'm willing to keep fighting the battle. I've learned enough, I've changed enough, I'm in the processing of becoming enough to not be afraid of the



current darkness. Because I know who wins. I *know* the dawn is coming. And I will hope in God's perfect story to be written.

Bobby has had his share of trials in the midst of this story too. He is still in the middle of them. He said to me not too long ago, "I just wish this didn't have to be so opposed."

And I said back to him, "Well R.G., then stop trying to change the world."

The enemy has tipped his hand in his assault on this story, to the point of ridiculous attacks. My car was even broken into and my laptop stolen, right during the final, crucial week before we went to the printer. So much confusion, and distraction, and discouragement, and green, hazy unlight has attempted to thwart the completion of this book ... but God continues to remind us that this is His story, and that He called us to tell it.

So we will tell of *The Great Darkening*. And we will live through *The Ravenous Siege*. And we will hope for *The Coming Dawn*.

Thank you for joining us on the journey.

I pray that as you seek your place in the story of your own life ... you will uncover the very role that God designed for you to play. I pray that as you try to find Him in the craziness of this life, you will discover that He has already found you.