

VIHARA

#1 ASCENSION

MICHAEL
STRAND

[In this brand-new Cosmic Fantasy series, we meet an unlikely hero, Robin Sagara, and travel with her to a fantastical school filled with intrigue and mystery. Inspired by Buddhism and Shamanism, this new series will explore the depths of the human mind and reveal the infinitude of the cosmos.]

This is what I heard.

Robin's muscles screamed and protested. Sweat ran from her face and dripped onto the straps of the ParaPack weighing heavily on her shoulders. The afternoon sun hung low over her, still powerful and hot. Soon, it would be too dark to safely climb.

Good thing she was going fast.

For a moment she paused to check her watch: going on eighteen minutes. Above her, a hundred feet of dizzying rock separated her from her goal.

"Don't be afraid," she mumbled to herself.

Robin had been climbing the cliffs around her home village for five years, but it scared her every time, with or without a rope.

She adjusted her headphones, wirelessly pumping into her ears a steady stream of brain-rattling bass and heavy electronic kicks. Then she reached into the pouch at her waist and dried her brown hands in a cascade of chalk dust. With a deep breath, she started to push herself upward again.

Robin bypassed easy holds for hard ones, reaching big and pulling herself up over wide areas without the help of her legs. Sometimes she'd make a risky jump rather than waste time cajoling herself up a wide overhang.

Red dust and hand chalk smeared her clothes and face. Her breath came deep and even, the technique of a trained

athlete.

Anyone on her school team could've handled the cliff face she climbed today, but none could match her fearless athleticism (or wild abandon for personal safety). She always took risks in her climbing for the sake of speed. Not small ones, either.

Today was no different.

Hand over hand, she searched and willed her way to the top, pushing herself upward with every fiber of her being. By intuition she ascended, thinking of nothing but the clock as her powerful fingers sought every hidden hold and crevice.

Up and up she went, reaching ever higher toward her goal. After what felt like just a few breathless moments, Robin approached a wide cliff-top plateau. The sight of her goal-filled her with a pang of manic hunger. Her hazel eyes grew wide.

With a final heave and leap, she placed one hand on the lip of the windswept clifftop, and then the other. The veins on her forearms bulged and twisted beneath her dark skin as she pulled herself up and rolled flat onto her back. With a heavy sigh of exertion, she slammed her hand against her wristwatch, stopping it, but not yet looking at the time.

She breathed hard, unfastening the straps and clips of her ParaPack and setting it heavily next to her. The warm breeze felt cool against her sweat-drenched tank top. She pulled from her belt a canteen of water and greedily drank it

down, a cool cascade spilling from the sides of her mouth, wetting her neck and throat.

For a moment she lay back exhausted and breathing hard, her sweat drenching the dusty red stone beneath her. Through her closed eyelids the brightness of the setting sun filtered into a dull, red glow. She removed her goggles and headphones, momentarily disoriented by the sudden vacuum of sound.

Slowly, tentatively, she raised her wrist to her face and checked the time. She'd done it. Almost 300 meters in just under 22 minutes. Her smirk broadened into a smile, and then a laugh. No personal best meant as much as this one, for tonight was her last opportunity to climb to "her spot" before the Ascension Ceremony.

The breeze carried the scent of jasmine and sage. Before her stretched her favorite vista of her home, Chikara.

As far as her eyes could see, a vast canyon city spread out before her. Hewn out of ruddy red stone, more than a hundred million living souls occupied the vast city-state of Chikara.

Along the bottom of the canyon complex shimmered a snaking river of sapphire waters, shining and dancing in the dying sunlight. Just over the western rim, the crimson sun splayed-out large against the desert horizon.

Below her, lay the clustered dwellings of her home borough, Ohta. Much of her hometown had been carved deep into the rock face, hidden away. On the surface,

though, a series of geodesic structures cascaded down the face of the nearby canyon walls, each connected by a crisscrossed network of paths, verandas, bridges, and stairways.

Robin always thought the cluster of polyhedral buildings looked as though a treasure box had been spilled from a high place, its precious contents covering every canyon crease, crevice, and plateau.

Though the sun had not fully set, already her home had begun to glow with an ethereal blue light. The long shadows of evening triggered bioluminescent plants and trees to illuminate the labyrinth of glass, red-stone passages, dwellings, businesses, and hanging gardens.

Robin breathed deep and savored the view. Soon, she'd be far from her home borough on a fresh adventure. Her compulsory education had ended a week earlier, and today she'd learn if she had been accepted to the premier institution of learning in all of Chikara—Vihara University.

The thought of the Ascension Ceremony in a few short hours sent a thrill through Robin's stomach, making her feel a bit lightheaded.

“ROOOOOOOBINNNNNN!”

The voice of Robin's father, Ryu Sagara, drifted up from far below her, echoing off of the faceted stone faces of the buildings around him. She rolled to her knees and popped her head over the side of the cliff, her wild cloud of dark, brownish-red hair on fire with the last rays of daylight.

“COME ON DOWN SOON! IT’S GETTING DARK!”

Robin’s father beamed and waved up at her, tiny from her cliff-top plateau. Robin waved back and bellowed that she’d be down in two minutes.

She stowed her water canteen at her belt, reached down for the ParaPack at her feet, and slung it onto her back. She pulled tight the fastenings and checked the release mechanism before replacing her headphones and goggles.

Immediately, the invisible landscape of heavy electronic beats and melodies rattled her head once again and provided a whirling texture to the hallucinatory vantage she occupied.

With one last loving look, Robin turned from the view of her canyon home and sprinted into a wild dive from the dusty plateau.

For a moment, Robin enjoyed the heady thrill that accompanied the initial moment of a base jump. Her stomach tightened as the feeling of weightlessness gave way to the intense rush of free-fall.

As soon as she’d determined she’d reached a safe speed, Robin slammed her fist into the button on her chest. Immediately, the mechanism at her back unleashed a spiderweb of feather-light parasail, which spread above her like a candle’s halo, catching the last golden rays of sunset.

Robin’s father always hated watching his daughter climb cliffs and then jump from them. Being terrified of heights himself, he could never understand his daughter’s bird-like ability to climb, reel, and fly.

Like a winged ghost, Robin circled down toward the wide, carved-stone veranda where her father stood. She pulled hard on her hand controls, slowing her descent until her feet touched the warm, red-flagstone floor.

Robin touched a second button and the whirring mechanism in her ParaPack came to life, reeling in the fine cords and folding tight the gossamer sails. Like an origami flower, the billowing structure reversed into Robin's pack, giving her the illusion of a great bird folding her wings.

She skipped forward and hugged her dad hard, his black beard scratchy against her cheek.

"Yeagh! Gross! You are absolutely dripping with sweat!" her father exclaimed, attempting to extract himself from her grasp. "And you smell terrible!"

Robin laughed mock-maniacally and shook her sweaty mane of dark, curly-red hair like a wet animal, spraying salty drops everywhere.

"Robin Sagara! Nineteen years old and still joking like a child," said her father in a mock-reprimanding tone, removing his black, horn-rimmed spectacles and wiping them on his light, linen shirt.

"Of course!" she replied. "I will never be too old for immature jokes."

He laughed. "How about climbing cliffs?"

She smiled.

"Not yet."



Robin's father placed his hand on her damp shoulder and guided her toward the archway behind them. They walked together for several minutes, climbing steep little stairways festooned with sweet-smelling evening flowers and down side corridors lined with carved stone arches and columns.

In time, the ancient network of passages gave-way to a long, wide thoroughfare of worn, polished stone mosaic floors. An endless series of colorful doorways brocaded the promenade, each revealing a brief peek into sun-soaked gardens and noisy arcades as they passed.

All around them, crowds of Chikaran citizens bustled here and there on their evening errands. The wide, vaulted corridors echoed with shouts of greeting, the laughter of children at play, and the bubbling chatter of friends exchanging the day's news.

Insistent street vendors hawked their wares to gaggles of men and women, many already burdened by baskets and packages. The heady smells of herb smoke and street food drifted from raucous market corners, mixing with the sound of street musicians playing flutes, beating drums, and plucking intricately-carved soapstone guitars.

"Are you nervous?" Ryu finally asked as they emerged from the busy market. "It's not like you to be so quiet."

She smiled and shrugged. "Maybe a little."

"Don't be! You are an excellent student, and I've taught

you almost everything I know. You shouldn't worry about not being accepted."

"I'm not so much *worried*. I mean, at this point, there's nothing I can do. It's not my decision. Either I get in, or I don't. It's just..." She trailed off.

"What?"

"I'll *miss* you if I get into Vihara and have to leave home. When I think about it, my stomach churns itself into knots." She looked at her feet, frowning.

Ryu tossed aside his mane of dreadlocks and pulled her into a side-hug as they sauntered home together. "You've grown into a brilliant young woman. Your mom would be *so* proud of you. And so am I. That'll never change. No matter the physical distance separating us."

Robin smiled wide, looking up at him.

After Robin's mother died, when she was eight, her dad became the center of her world. In a way, she couldn't imagine life without him. He'd been there for her every day — her protector and teacher.

"Going to Vihara is a great privilege, Robin. Embrace it, if the opportunity is given to you. Be appreciative and strong, alright?"

She nodded and tightened her grip on her beloved father.

After a few more minutes, they reached the doorway to their little dwelling. By then, the sun had fully set, and only the dusky, luminescent sky high above them betrayed any hint of daylight. All around them, twinkling bio-lights set

into stone alcoves gave off a friendly, ethereal glow.

Like all dwellings in Chikara, Robin's home consisted of a series of polyhedral spaces connected by tunnels and spiral stairways. The main room protruded a bit from the cliff face like a multi-faceted soap bubble, while the rest had been hollowed deep into the stone cliff body behind it.

Robin's father opened the triangular door and they stepped inside.

Soft music and the sweet smell of simmering meat and spices greeted Robin as she entered the cool interior of her home. Suddenly, she felt ravenously hungry.

"Bathe quickly and come eat, Robin," her stepmother, Padma, said, stepping out from the adjacent kitchen. "I've laid out a fresh dress for you to wear to the ceremony tonight."

"Thanks!" Robin barked, attempting to catch her stepmother in a sweaty embrace, as well. With a practiced pirouette, though, Robin's stepmother deftly avoided her daughter's affections and gently pushed her toward her room.

"One hour, Robin. You promised not to be late."

Robin's royal blue Ascension dress flowed behind her in the cool night air as she hurried toward the Athenaeum, where her peers had already gathered for the ceremony.

Her footsteps quickened from a fast walk to a steady run. “Arg, I said I wouldn’t be late,” Robin mumbled to herself as she doubled her pace.

Robin ran up a passage that opened into a long, curving corridor lined with a series of wide, well-lit doorways encircling the top of the Athenaeum. She scuttled through a doorway and looked around wildly for her friends.

The Athenaeum consisted of a large chamber made up of a series of huge, concentric half-circle stone benches constructed radiating out from a central dais. Every inch seemed to be packed with young men and women all excitedly waiting for the program to begin.

“Hey Robin!” she heard a familiar voice call her name. A few rows away, Chuda stood on his section of the stone bench and beckoned her with a big wave.

Robin met his call with a broad smile as she set about clumsily climbing over her peers, excusing herself repeatedly as she stepped on people’s toes and bumped them aside. Robin squeezed into place next to Chuda and a few other friends from school.

“Boy there is a ton of people here,” Chuda mumbled to her. “There must be kids from across at least three boroughs.”

Robin nodded, scanning the mass of unfamiliar faces. Many schoolmates from Ohta sat clustered nearby, while she recognized a few of the other students from climb meets she’d participated in.

Far below them on the central dais, their teachers and administrators took their seats. Then, the house lights dipped to half-illumination. An instant hush befell the crowded room as a venerable figure with a huge, fancy grey beard stood to speak at the lectern.

Robin recognized the man to be the headmaster of a neighboring school. He wore royal purple robes and a velvet, tri-cornered scholar's cap.

"Let's have quiet now, students, it's time to begin." The man's voice boomed out over the room without any obvious amplification, its intensity propelled by the acoustic facets in the high ceiling above. "I know you are all excited for tonight's festivities, so I will be as efficient as possible. I will call a discipline and name those students who've successfully passed the exams for that field. When your name is called, stand and acknowledge yourself; but, please, hold all applause until all the names have been read, all right? Ready?"

The crowd cheered loudly in reply.

"Good!" he exclaimed, shuffling his papers and clearing his throat. "First off, Healing Arts..."

As the administrator read off each name, a student somewhere in the crowd jumped to his or her feet and barked a loud, crisp reply. When all the student's names were read, the whole crowd burst into applause and cheers. Then the administrator moved on to the next discipline.

Robin had no idea that there were so many things to

study following primary education. Students proudly stood to accept apprenticeships to great artists and craftspeople, or to become part of the fire brigade. There would be students going off to learn how to design clothes and make artisan foods, while others had been chosen to become midwives or primary-school teachers.

Truth be told, Robin found the whole affair quite boring. She had counted all the people in the room three times over by the time the magistrate got around to announcing the inductees to Vihara.

“Now, everyone, let’s give a big hand to all those students placed so far!” The room erupted in more cheers. “The final category is, of course, those students chosen to study Amritic Engineering at Vihara University.”

The room quieted to a still hush, pregnant with expectation. No position in Chikaran society was so mysterious and powerful as that of Engineer.

In Chikara, the prime mover of all technology is a substance known as amrita. From the lights above their heads to the water filtration systems hundreds of meters below their feet, amritic power kept the millions of desert-dwelling Chikaran’s alive. For a hundred generations, the graduates of Vihara University had been tasked with creating the amritic technology upon which they all so desperately relied.

Each borough had a team of resident Engineers, who worked to keep the local population’s amritic technology

working properly. They built for the community key technological components, which assured the essentials for commerce, education, food production, and energy distribution. On top of being proficient artisans in their own right, many Engineers were revered by their local communities as men and women of wisdom and insight.

Many students applied to Vihara every year —enduring an arduous and sometimes unintelligible testing regimen — but only a few were accepted. Robin’s father was an Engineer, as had been her mother. She, too, had her heart set on learning the mysteries of amrita.

The administrator read out the first name. A boy Robin didn’t know stood up across the room, his hands in the air. Around him, a gaggle of friends and classmates roared with loud applause and lifted him off his feet. The administrator scowled until everyone quieted again. With each name he read, the cheers grew louder, and each time the administrator’s scowl deepened.

When Robin’s name was called, she hardly heard it. Only the feeling of being pounded on the back by Chuda alerted her to the fact that her wildest dreams were suddenly coming true.

Robin leaped to her feet and thrust her hand in the air to acknowledge her place among the esteemed ranks of Amritic Engineers. The cheers of her classmates hit her with a deafening wall of sound. Someone nearby struck-up the Ohta school song, which was quickly joined by Robin’s

peers.

“Now, really, please contain yourselves!” the administrator roared again, using his shoe as a gavel on the lectern before him. “There is one more student to announce.”

The room quieted.

“This student deserves special notice because this is his third Ascension Ceremony without placement, which is unusual.”

Chuda sank into the seat next to Robin, attempting to make himself as small as possible. Each year Chuda applied to Vihara and took the exams, and each year he was rejected.

Robin and Chuda grew up together because his mother and her stepmother were sisters, but they didn't become close friends until after his first failed attempt at the exams. For two years, she had tutored him and helped him with his remedial classes. The experience had bonded them for life, but it'd also made Chuda a bit of an outcast among their peers.

Chuda buried his face in his hands and mumbled “please” to himself over and over in the maddeningly-long moment it took for the administrator to speak again.

“I am very pleased to announce that Chuda Panthaka, of Ohta, has also passed the Vihara entrance examinations.”

No amount of cheering so far could have matched the tremendous roar that issued from Chuda's friends and

classmates. The dumbfounded look on his face belayed a sense of utter shock. This had been his last chance, and he'd actually done it.

Robin beckoned him to rise. The pudgy young man adjusted his glasses, smoothed his dark hair, got to his feet, and weakly raised his hand. Everyone cheered.

"Looks like we're classmates," he said, smiling wide to Robin.

"Looks like it," she replied.

"I couldn't have done it without you, Robin," Chuda said, tears in his eyes. "Thank you."

Robin cried too.

"I'm just glad to have someone I know coming with me," she said, wiping her eyes and hugging her cousin.

"It's scary," said Chuda.

"Don't be afraid," Robin whispered in his ear.

Dancing and celebration filled the air following the Ascension announcements. Fireworks lit up the sky outside the Athenaeum as the newly-graduated students issued into the night air. Music and refreshments greeted the crowd of young graduates. Robin and Chuda partied until the early dawn hours, celebrating their hard-won victory.

Robin arrived at her front door just as the world had begun to glow with the golden luminosity of early-dawn

light. She tiptoed inside quietly, careful not to wake her sleeping parents. She silently shut the heavy stone door behind her and turned to make her way through her dark home.

“Robin,” said her father’s quiet voice from the shadows.

The sound startled her half to death, and Robin whipped her head around to see her father sitting in a shadowed corner of the kitchen sipping tea from a steaming, hand-thrown mug.

“Don’t worry, it’s just me,” he whispered with a smile. “I couldn’t wait to hear the results of placement tonight. So... did you make it?” Her dad’s voice was even, but hopeful.

Robin smiled hugely and nodded. She’d got in.

“Good girl. I knew you would be chosen.” He got up from where he was sitting and strode across the room to embrace her. “Well done.”

Robin savored the familiar scent of her father, squeezing him tight, feeling simultaneously proud and sad that she’d soon have to part from him.

“Come with me, I have a gift for you. Something special I’ve been engineering just for you.” He took her hand and led her through the silent house toward his personal workshop.

Robin’s earliest memories were of her father tinkering in his workshop, making and repairing amritic objects, or pouring over intricate, hand-drawn plans covered in mysterious mechanical schema. A few years earlier, he had

finally allowed her a corner workbench for her own projects (of which her ParaPack had been one).

He opened a hatchway in the floor of the library—a round stone door inlaid with interlocking rings of gold and brass.

Ryu Sagara descended the spiral staircase into a womb-like, twenty-sided room. Robin followed.

She never tired of the feeling of descending into her father's workroom. It was like entering an alien world of untold mysteries and wonders.

Myriad shelves and alcoves covered the faceted walls, each overflowing with intricate silver tools and brass instruments. Precise scales sat next to piles of bottled chemicals, each dimly glowing with a rainbow of technicolor light.

Loadstones ready to be imbued with amrita lay stacked in polyhedral soapstone chests beside piles of thick hemp books. Tiny fragments of colored glass and gold dust occupied delicate vials set into wire racks. Clay paint pots stained with cobalt and ochre were stacked next to bolts of fine, colored silk. Blue-glowing feeds of amritic power snaked like veins along the faceted walls, casting soft shadows in the dim space.

Robin's father stepped carefully across the crowded room to a desk where he flipped-on a leaded-glass lamp, revealing a clay bust, which sat like a quiet guardian.

He reached around the neck of the bust to remove a

white-gold necklace.

“Here, this is for you. Something special to celebrate your entry into Vihara,” he said, handing her the piece of jewelry.

Robin gasped at the beauty of the object in her hands. Attached to the white-gold chain dangled a tiny glass sphere. At the center of the babul shimmered a tiny loadstone no larger than a grain of sand. Despite its tiny size, the loadstone glowed with intense blue light. Surrounding the blue speck spun eight concentric metal rings, each slowly inter-orbiting within the tiny glass sphere.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” she whispered, her face shining blue in the dim light from the orb. “It must have been difficult to make.”

“I’ve never made anything so fine,” her father said proudly. “This, Robin, signifies the power of amritic engineering and the deep responsibility you now carry.” Her father’s usually jovial voice turned uncharacteristically grave. “This tiny loadstone carries the same amritic power that drives all of Chikara. Once charged, it will glow for a thousand years and allow these eight rings to spin in perfect suspension. Each ring signifies a planet in our star system and the oneness of humankind working in concert with the hidden mechanisms of Universe. When in balance, these forces nourish life and provide for all we can see around us. When out of balance, suffering and illness follow.”

Robin could feel her heart beating. She raised the tiny object to her eye. Every few moments the rotating rings

reached a point of perigee, creating a silver sphere inside the glass ball. Though a seemingly simple little thing, Robin knew it required a profound knowledge of Universal force to create such an object.

“The glass will never break,” he said, taking the necklace from her hands and stepping behind her. “It will be an heirloom of our family for tens of generations.”

He placed the white-gold chain around her neck and clipped the fastening. The small glass orb felt slightly warm against her chest. She placed her hand on the tiny thing, enjoying a soft rhythmic sensation, like the beating of a tiny heart.

“Thank you, father,” Robin whispered, feeling the sharp sting of fresh tears. “I wish mom were here to see this...” her voice trailed off.

Robin’s father reached out to embrace her.

“Wherever her spirit now dwells, I’m certain that she is proud to have another Engineer in the family.”

He beamed at her in the low light, wiping tears from his eyes. She smiled back and clutched her babul necklace close.

Later, as she lay in her bed about to fall asleep in the weak dawn light, Robin gazed at her necklace, entranced by the eight tiny rotating rings. She felt a heavy sense of relief.

Finally, after years of work and months of exams, she'd made her goal.

"Vihara," she whispered quietly to herself, as though the word itself were a precious jewel.

"Vihara."

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