

# The Sun Children by Robert Peate

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## Chapter I: Offering

Walking in the forest near my home, I do not see or hear another human being. I see only the snow, the bare trees, and myself. I remember the empty space is one of the good things about our world now. It was overfull before. When I feel sad for our reduced numbers, I curse my own disobedience to Havo and command myself to rejoice in His will. He sometimes works in mysterious ways and tests us. He has a plan and never asks us to bear more than we can bear. Even so, a test is a test, and sometimes tests are hard.

I hear the snow under my booted feet, the slight breeze swaying the trees, even the gurgle of the creek on the edge of our property through the trees. I do not enjoy the cold, but my robes, coat, and hat suffice as long as I keep moving. I like the winter weather much more than the others in town do. I do not enjoy the cold, but I do enjoy the beauty—the snow covering everything, making the World look like a fantastic vision. Even though I might not like the cold, I do not complain about it. Those who complain far more than they should are alive to complain, after all. They are here on this planet, unlike the dead.

There I go being ungrateful again—I should be more compassionate. They too cannot have children. I know this. But we are all the Children of the Sun—Havo—whose presence I feel everywhere. Even in the cold I feel His warmth around and inside me, keeping me well and bringing me joy. His light, His love for us creates everything good in the Universe. How can anyone complain of anything? How can anyone feel anything but joy and certainty in His love for us all? Yes, it is true we have been suffering without children, but we must have done something morally wrong, and our scientists will find what is scientifically wrong. We must have faith and purify ourselves in all ways to be worthy of the gift of life. My cheeks are numb, yet they sting. I see my own breath and smell the crisp air. I sigh in contentment and keep moving, grateful for my life and even my suffering, as it shows I am alive.

It will be spring soon. I can feel it in the air.

I find my way to the creek and crouch down by its edge. The water, though frozen over in some places, still runs in others. Mother liked to bathe in a deep spot in spring and summer. I come here sometimes that I may feel closer to her. I touch the icy water. I

often wonder how a woman who came to this spot almost every day for many years could have drowned. I remember Father saying we must always beware the Evil One, Havo's son Nox Aeterna, the Eternal Night—excepting that our Sun returns to save us each day.

“If we stay true to Havo,” he said, “Nox cannot reach us easily. To the extent bad things happen to good persons who stray from Havo, this is what they deserve. To the extent bad things happen to good persons who do not stray, this is Havo using Nox to test us. Nox is a servant of Havo, which sometimes we forget. Either way, when bad things happen, we must not question our lot. We deserve whatever Havo brings to us—pain or pleasure, sorrow or joy.”

Did Mother deserve to die? She was always true to Havo. Is Havo testing Father and me? Was this how she served Havo, by sacrificing herself? No—it is too terrible to contemplate. Our Sun would never do that to us.

*Havo, I long for her.*

Havo chooses not to answer my pain directly.

Until the Day, there were disbelief and rebellion. How could anyone suffer such an error in judgement, I have long wondered? Only pain could cause that to happen—pain causing confusion. Despite my pain, I see the truth and the light of Havo's love. I look at the spot where my mother died. If I had lived then, and I had met someone doubting Havo, I would have responded with compassion and love. Only these can conquer pain and grief, and Havo would expect no less of me. *No amount of pain will ever distract me from the truth of your love*, I promise Havo. I cannot help smiling.

Everyone knows Havo now.

The Father and Mother of Us All, Havo and His Consort, Havia, take care of all human beings, their Rays, as my father takes care of me and I take care of him. Since the day of Mother's drowning, my father hates my leaving him alone for long periods, especially when I go walking by myself in the woods. I do not wish to cause him worry, so I never tarry long.

I tear myself away from Nature more easily in winter, when Havo chooses to pull away from us, to remind us of His importance, to make us appreciate Him all the more. I remind myself that Havo's perfect creation is everywhere, even in the mundane home we have made as instruments of His will. I must not begrudge the mundane. Despite my mother's loss, I return home feeling strengthened and blessed, to find my father weeping.

“What is wrong, Father?” I ask, but he cannot answer me. He makes a feeble gesture, but his arms drop, and he bursts into a fresh round of tears. I feel both alarmed and confounded. He sobs and gestures toward the floor.

I look down to see a wrinkled piece of fine vellum, an official church correspondence, and a part of me feels shock and outrage that my father could desecrate a holy document. With the love I feel my father should have shown to those who serve Havo by caring for us all most selflessly, I gently pick up the correspondence. I see the seal reading, "SACRED CONGREGATION FOR THE WORLD INSTITUTION." This is the letterhead of the entire Church, but I see this correspondence has come from our Provincia office. I continue reading words I will never forget:

*Tullius Clovius Tertius, filius Decentii Clovii Metelli et Furiae Lupariae:*

*Praise Havo. As you know, in this time of trial known as the Inopia, we are all called upon to make sacrifices for the good of the World in perpetuity. Our lives and concerns are as nothing compared to those of the good for which we must all suffer at times, as Havo wills. Now is one of those times.*

*Each year, each of the ten Provinces chooses one person to send as Offerings to Our Sun Havo. To decide who the fortunate Offering will be, we pray and beseech Havo for wisdom.*

*As you know, we send only Offerings between the ages of three and twenty-five. We try to choose older children to lessen the pain and sorrow of losing younger ones. In light of the untimely loss of your wife, Davena Nervina filia Auli Nervini et Aquilae Sabinae, eight years ago, it pains me more deeply than you will ever know to have to write this, but as your daughter is not yet twenty-four . . .*

I stop reading and drop the paper. I am the daughter. I am to be sent to the Sun. A fire burns in my soul. I look up toward the Havens. I will meet Havo soon. A part of me feels overjoyed, exhilarated beyond words, though I am sad to part from my father. I look over at my father, who continues crying in his chair, and feel confused.

"No," he says through tears. "No more."

"The Church is wise," I say. I hold him. I understand his sadness. I feel the simultaneous loss and gain of my future, uncertain yet excited. I think of Octavius de Haricuria, a year younger than I am, chosen three years ago. He would be twenty-two now. His family bore it bravely.

My father does not answer. He turns toward me with an expression I cannot understand. He masters his pain and grief, wipes his tears away, and pulls himself up to face me.

“Clovia, my darling,” he says, holding my face in his hands. “My beautiful daughter.” He gives me the strongest embrace I can remember from him. “I do not want to lose you.”

“You will not lose me,” I say. “I will be here.” I touch his chest, to indicate his heart. He nods absently.

“No,” he protests. I am surprised, having never seen him like this before. I have also never heard him disagree with the will of Havo or His Church. I take this as a sign of his grief and forgive him. Everyone knows Havo, Our Sun and Source, is loving and fair, the provider of all good things.

“Father, you do not know what you are saying,” I assure him. “You think you will lose me, but you will not. I will always be with you, and we will be reunited in Haven. Think of what this means. Think of how wrong it would be to go against Havo’s will.”

My father does not seem to feel much better. I try again. “Father, I love you,” I say, caressing his arm. “I thank you for all you have done and endured. Your strength has always made me feel secure, as it does now. I cannot feel fear, thanks to you. You bore Mother’s loss. You will bear this too. I have faith in you. We will be separated, but only for a time, after which you will join us forever.”

“I am sorry, Clovia . . .” he says, looking directly at me for the first time. “I would take you away from here if I thought you would go. But I know you will not.” He says this last sentence as if to himself.

“Do you mean to hide from Our Sun Havo?” I ask in shock more than outrage. “To evade my holy duty?” I do not mean to admonish him, but I can hardly believe he has spoken blasphemy, something I have never heard him do before. I see him shrivel before my eyes.

“I am . . . sorry, Clovia Cara,” he says.

“Father, Our Sun and His Church in their wisdom have chosen me to save our world,” I say. “How could anyone wish to thwart this divine mission? I wish to save our world. I am but an instrument of Havo’s will, and I serve him with the greatest of joys in my heart. To refuse would earn me eternal damnation, but, worse than that, it would be evil. Nox is acting against our world, and I will not aid him.” I hope that my reminding him of these truths will help him to see reason.

“Yes. Yes, of course, Clovia.” He composes himself, and we speak of other matters: of my walk, of his work in town, of Mother, and of dinner.

The launch will occur on March (Mensis Martii) the thirteenth, which means I have a little more than a month to bid farewell to everyone in Soul River. I must also prepare myself and our home for my father, who will learn to live without me. I make more trips to town than ever before in one month, to repair small damage to our home and fill our larder with enough stores to last him the better part of a year. Not the most appealing food, but it will save him having to make trips for a while. He begs me not to do it. He says he will go to town. I do not believe him. I know how he neglects himself, and I expect him to do so even more in my absence. He can do many things, but in some respects, he is helpless without someone to care for him.

Soul River has about a thousand residents. The evening after the letter arrives, I visit the market, the post office, and the hardware store. I had hoped to attend the races in the nearest large city, Seginum, on the fourteenth honoring Havo's lieutenant Mars, the Fourth of Eight, but now I will not. I will honor him in a much more important way.

I am walking down Vita Way, the spectrum-trimmed silver banners hanging from the lamp-posts, when I see our Prism, Arcturus Victor, leaving the town church for the day. The church itself, of course, has its silver and spectrum cloth banners hanging down at either side of its main triangle-shaped, prism-colored window. Beneath the window, above the main doors, a video screen shows comforting verses from the *Book of Havo* accompanied by pastoral scenes.

Havians wear silver in public, with spectrum-trimmed cuffs, collars, and triangular caps with fabric flowing down at either side (from the flat front to the pointed rear), almost reaching the ground. At home we may dress as we choose. My father wears fewer colors at home, but I always wear the silver and spectrum. I do not always wear the cap, as I know he likes to see my hair. I greet Prism Arcturus Victor.

"Love and Light," I say.

"Love and Light," he says, then turns to see it is me. He becomes silent.

"Good even, Father," I say hopefully.

"Good even, Clovia Nervina," he says uncomfortably. I am surprised.

"Father, you have known me my entire life. You led my Harmony ceremony, bringing me into full communion with Havo and Havia. We have known each other since I was a child, and you call me by both names?"

"I am sorry, Clovia," he says.

I stare into his eyes, but I do not know the expression I see in them. He seems pained.

"What troubles you, Father?"

I try to discern the matter, but he looks off over my head.

"I am to meet Havo," I say, and this brings his eyes back to me.

"Yes, you are," he says.

"Are not you proud? Are not you pleased? For me?"

He regards me penetratingly, then says, "Yes. Yes, I am."

"Then why do not you show it, Father?" I demand, my boldness surprising even me.

"I am . . . pleased for you, Clovia . . .," he says. "And yet I am also saddened that we will lose you."

"Do not feel sad! My father and you are the same. Is not it a treason against Havo to feel sorrow at His pleasure? Who are we to miss those we love, placing our loss over Haven's gain and even that of those we profess to love and miss? My mother is dead, yet I do not grieve! I rejoice that she is with Our Sun, Our Father!" I wish I could see on his face the joy I feel in my heart, but still he does not wish to look at me.

"I . . . will not rejoice," he says. "I will pray for your soul."

"Do not pray for my soul," I say, making the most forward statement I have ever made to a Prism. "My soul is at peace, for I go to a better place to make this world a better place. I do so for you and everyone else here. Rejoice with me, Father. That is all I ask." I reach out my hands for his, and he places them in mine without a word. I squeeze his hands and recite Havo's Prayer:

*Our sun, which art in the Sky,  
Havo be thy name.  
Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done,  
on Terra as it is in Haven.  
Give us this day our daily warmth,  
which giveth us all things,  
and forgive us all things,  
as we forgive others all things.  
Lead us not astray,  
and deliver us from evil.  
Thine is the heat, the light, and the life,  
forever and ever, amen.*

I finish reciting the prayer the whole World knows and loves, then we release each other's hands.

"I know the prayer, Clovia," the Prism says.

I study his face but learn nothing. "Father, I do not understand your reactions. You have spoken of our love and joy in Havo every Sunday."

"Clovia, to me you have always embodied all that is good and pure on this world. I wish you nothing but joy and peace. I love you as I would have loved a daughter of my own. That is why I mourn the loss."

"Father, you must not forget your faith and love in Havo's will."

"I do not, which is why . . ."

I wait for him to finish, but he does not.

"Why what, Father?"

"Clovia, you must forgive me. There were others they could have selected, but . . . I put your name forward to the committee."

"Then I have you to thank most!"

"No," Father says, apparently trying hard not to raise his voice. "You have me to curse." I am at a loss.

"To curse? Clearly it was Havo's will! You are an agent of Havo, and I bless you, Father!"

"I know that no one could represent this world, this church, or our need better than you," Prism Arcturus says, placing his hand on my shoulder. "I regretted the recommendation, but I knew it was the obvious one. You are our most precious jewel, Clovia, the only Offering in this provincia *worthy* of Havo and Havia." He pauses, then takes his hand off my shoulder.

"Please do not regret your choice, Father. I do not."

"You are a credit to your family," he says. Then, in a more resigned tone: "Comfort your father."

Soul River's Prism walks away, leaving me feeling secure in the ultimate knowledge that I am going to meet my maker, and that I was chosen for this honor by the most admired man in the provincia.

I am filled with joy . . . but baffled by his sadness, and my father's.

Why did Prism Arcturus seem so distressed by my having been chosen, when he said he himself played the most important role in the choosing? How could anyone be distressed or dismayed by the choice? I am overjoyed by the honor of being chosen, of being worthy. I decide Prism Arcturus must feel sorry for my father and me, which is of course kind but misplaced in this case. Prism Arcturus temporarily forgot the greater benefit and glory of Havo, but he will remember them. I decide he was simply surprised by

seeing me, and of course there is sometimes difficulty when things change, but change is a part of Life.

The day of my departure is less than one month away, and the prospect of meeting Havo thrills me beyond expression. I can never thank the Church enough for this greatest of blessings.

I do not share my news with anyone else at first. I go through my next day at work normally. I confess a part of me will miss every moment, even the moments of displeasure that make up a typical day. When the school day ends and the children run home, barely saying goodbye as they are wont to do, I feel a stab of longing. I had hoped to have children someday. Now I never will.

I finish my work, pack up, and bid the co-workers I see a good evening. Everyone takes everything for granted, every day. I did until yesterday. Now everything is different. Better, I know, but change means change.

I go home to hear female voices inside. I open the door to find a group of women I do not know sitting around our main entertaining room. "Your father excused himself, dear," one of the ladies says. "He said you would be along soon, and here you are."

"Thank you and welcome, Sisters," I say. "Might I offer you some food or drink? We are about to sup, and you are all most welcome to join us."

"No, thank you, Sister Clovia," the woman who is clearly the leader says. "We are from the provincia center, so you do not know us, but we know you have been chosen for the upcoming Offering."

I listen.

"We are all over twenty-five, but the Lead Prism of the Provincia suggested that, as women under thirty, we visit to offer our support at this time of trial. Some of us have made such visits in years past, to other Offerings."

"I am sorry," I say. "I do not understand."

"You are naturally confused, even dismayed, by this turn of events," the woman explains calmly.

"Sisters," I say, "I cannot thank you enough for the beauty of your care for me at this most significant of times. It is true that my father and even the Prism of Soul River are saddened, so perhaps you should tend to them. But I have been blessed by Havo, and nothing could please me more." I see surprise and doubt in their faces, which cause me more puzzlement. "I go to meet my maker with an open face, an open heart, and joy in my soul. I do this out of love for my world. If you are sad not to be among this year's Offerings, this is understandable. It is true you are too old for this honor. But you too will

meet Havo in due course, when Havo decides. Havo has chosen different paths, different fates, for you.”

The leader’s face changes to one of soothing pleasance.

“I can see this one does not need support,” she says. “She is truly blessed by Our Sun.” She stands. “Let us go, Sisters. We can only hope someday to achieve this level of faith and devotion.”

“Pray, stay,” I urge them all.

“No, many thanks, Sister Clovia Nervina,” the leader says. “We do not wish to intrude upon your joy.”

“Light be unto you all,” I say, bowing to their will.

“And also with you,” they say in unison. They rise and depart.

At the door, the leader remembers something, turns, and says to me, “Oh, yes. Provincia Media would like to interview you before your meeting with Havo, and I was asked to arrange this.”

“You do me too great an honor, Sister,” I say.

“I will have the station contact you.” She smiles, then purses her lips and turns to go.

“Thank you.”

I seek my father and find him whittling in the back yard. I know that he often does this to work out frustration or stress, but this time, he seems surprisingly content.

“I am sorry for that,” he says without looking up.

“For what?” I ask.

“For that visit by those women.”

“I am sorry their faith is not as strong as my own,” I say.

Father says nothing for a time, then, “My daughter, you will find that not everyone’s professed faith is sincere.”

I say nothing. I had of course thought this for years. I had seen small hints of lack of complete faith in many of the townspeople. But I told myself I was mistaken. I had not wanted to believe it of them. Now, thinking of these women, I tell myself their faith is sincere; they just do not understand the full blessing I am about to receive. They love their life here too much. They will see the joy of Havo when they die. Of course, if my assessment is true, that does mean their faith is incomplete. These women from the Provincia believe in a Havo who is far, not Havo who is near and everywhere at once, including inside us. That is the answer: they do not believe in themselves.

I believe in Havo and myself.

This is why we have teachers, not only to help Havians learn reading, writing, mathematics, science, and history, but to help perfect their understanding of Havo's love.

"I understand, Father," I say. "But yours is, yes? Earlier, you were distressed. I cannot bear the thought of leaving you if your trust in Havo is not absolute."

"It is," he says gravely, filling me with relief and gratitude.

"Thank you, Father. I do this for our world, for Mother, and for you." I embrace him.

"I know," he says, touching my arm.

At that moment, I know I am ready.

The next morning I wake and give morning praise as always:

*O Havo, through the Immaculate Ray of Your Beloved Consort Havia, I offer you my prayers, works, joys, and sufferings of this day in union with the Holy Abundance of the Rays throughout the World. I offer them for all the intentions of your Sacred Suns: the salvation of souls, the reparation for our former sin, and the reunion of all Havians at the end of the World. I offer them for the intentions of our Prisms, and in particular for those recommended by our Lead Prisms this month.*

Without my telling anyone, the whole village knows my secret. The students pepper me with questions:

"Clovia Nervina, is it true?"

"Are you going to meet Havo?"

"Are you scared?"

"Are you excited?"

"Will you come back?"

"Who's going to be our teacher for the rest of the year?"

"What about next year?"

After saying, "One question at a time!" and laughing, I calmly answer each question. In the days that follow, my life returns to normal, to the point that the students and I do not talk about it. It is possible that some of them forget. My father and I do not.

I do not notice the rest of the month. I begin to feel only a calm eagerness to join the nine other Offerings. I trust they feel the same, wherever they are.

I always feel Havo surrounding and inside me, so I almost never pray, but the night before our departure, I do.

*My sun and moon, I thank you for the Universe, this galaxy, and this world. I thank you for all the blessings you have bestowed on Humanity, on my family, and on me. I am eager to meet you. Please look after my father in my absence, as it will be hard for him.*

*I say "absence", but I know I will never come back. I am coming to meet you, Havenly Father and Mother. I am coming home.*

I should say a few words to explain my references to Havia. Havia, as the consort of Havo, has great power, though She came second and did not create the Universe. It is to Havia that Havians pray to intercede with Havo on their behalf. They do not know if She will intercede or if He will act on her intercession. But Havo rules the Universe and has bequeathed this duty, among others, to Havia. She is extremely important in this way, also in that She provides the softening of all Nature. It is her spirit that tempers anger, fosters mercy and compassion, even, some say, inspires all artistic creation.

Havia is represented by the Moon.