

2024-05-01

A Muzzle for the Lamb: A Novel

Scott Beggs
University of Texas at El Paso

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.utep.edu/open_etd



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Beggs, Scott, "A Muzzle for the Lamb: A Novel" (2024). *Open Access Theses & Dissertations*. 4069.
https://scholarworks.utep.edu/open_etd/4069

This is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UTEP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Open Access Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UTEP. For more information, please contact lweber@utep.edu.

A MUZZLE FOR THE LAMB: A NOVEL

SCOTT BEGGS

Master's Program in Creative Writing

APPROVED:

Jeffrey Sirkin, Ph.D., Chair

Daniel Chacon, M.F.A.

Beth Brunk, Ph.D.

Stephen Crites, Ph.D.

Dean of the Graduate School

A MUZZLE FOR THE LAMB: A NOVEL

BY

SCOTT BEGGS, B.A.

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Department of Creative Writing

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

May 2024

Building a Broken World After the Apocalypse

In February 1534, a group of apocalypse-hopeful Anabaptists took over the German city of Muenster. Aided by the Catholic church, the government successfully conducted a siege of the city, and when the dust settled the next summer, the three surviving Anabaptist leaders were tortured before a cheering audience for an hour. Afterward, they were executed (to even greater cheers), and their bodies were left to rot inside metal cages strung up on the steeple of St. Lambert's church. The cages were meant as a warning to anyone else who might test the church and the state's dominance, but they are still there for admiring tourists as a reminder of a tragic year with a gruesome ending. The silver lining, depending on your perspective, is that the world did not end.

It's the kind of story that might make a modern observer feel morally superior to their peers from the past. Otherwise, why would the wanton violence and its celebration shock us so deeply? Inspired by this gruesome event, *A Muzzle for the Lamb* seeks to bring an antique lust for unthinkable pain to a near-future United States rocked by economic and ecological catastrophes. Like the cages still hanging at St. Lambert's, the central hope of the novel is that it makes the reader question if we've truly left that bloodlust and joy for punishment in the past.

The genesis of the novel came from a coincidence. I first learned about the Muenster Rebellion in the summer of 2017, and a few months later I watched in real time as megachurch Pastor Joel Osteen refused to let stranded people into his church during Hurricane Harvey. In imagining the American version of Muenster, it seemed obvious to place Prosperity Gospel at the center of the action. It was easy for me to imagine a path forward wherein Prosperity Gospel took on dominating importance in American culture, becoming the near-future version of the

Catholic Church in 1534 Muenster, which enjoyed almost unrivaled strength until the creation of the printing press put the word of God literally into everyone's hands. From Osteens' act of neighborly neglect during a catastrophic storm, the world of *A Muzzle for the Lamb* took shape at the nexus of climate crises, economic woes, and the peddling of God's love for cash.

It's 2049, and society has restructured itself into an uncomfortable stasis. At the top of a massive wealth disparity, trillionaire Pastor Oscar Johns leads the Prosperian Church, compelling his followers to funnel their money into his pockets to earn God's favor. Those outside the church membership live largely outside the protection of the law. At the opposite end of the wealth gap, the anti-money apocalypse cult Eternal Triumph proclaims a small Colorado town called Braintree to be the site of the end of the world, taking it for themselves and establishing an anarchist commune awaiting the destruction of the non-believers.

Jammed into the middle of this polarized society, Enjoli Vargas is a beleaguered assistant in the Prosperian church, working herself to the bone to support her grandmother, cousin, and baby nephew. After a series of personal disasters that leave her destitute and betrayed by the faith she's served since childhood, she journeys to Colorado to join Eternal Triumph hoping for a fresh start even as the government sets up their siege camp. Is it possible to find happiness among those you once considered your enemy? Is it right to quietly endure a painful life in a broken system instead of dying while trying to tear it down? These are two major questions Enjoli must find the answer to through her choices.

Likewise, the major question for Eternal Triumph is whether they can build their ideal society while under extreme duress. At their core, the hope that the world will end is the literalization of a desire for a corrupted system to vanish so that they can build something better

from scratch. Led by the fanatical Child of Aaron (who possesses a rock star's preternatural magnetism and the absolute belief that God is speaking to him directly), the group experiences the external stress of a hostile government sabotaging their efforts and threatening to kill them either through slow starvation or direct assault.

When I first heard about the Muenster Rebellion, it seemed like a grotesque soap opera with each plot point more unbelievable than the last. A small band of largely disorganized fanatics swept a town right out from under its Lorde Mayor's control. The government's military response was cartoonishly bungled. The fanatics created a society of neighbors turning on neighbors as their leader grew murderously paranoid.

What would cause a man enjoying the fruits of leading a radically devoted cult to attack an entire army by himself (with predictable results)? We can never know what Anabaptist leader Jan Matthys was thinking or feeling when he went on his quixotic mission, but that lack of knowledge offers a free poetic license to invent a course for Child, the character inspired by Jan, to travel. In converting these wild events into the skeleton of the novel, these unthinkable choices felt like a fascinating challenge to bring to life without destroying a reader's suspension of disbelief or having the story slide into parody. My guide for doing so was the advice from E.M. Forster paraphrased by Alice LaPlante to write in a way that's "surprising yet convincing" (LaPlante, 4). The historical evidence provides the surprising, but it was up to me to provide the convincing by crafting the characters well enough that their most outlandish behavior was always within the scope of possibility.

While *A Muzzle for the Lamb* sits comfortably in the post-apocalyptic genre, I thought of it throughout the writing process as "historical fiction set in the future" with some sci-fi set

dressing. Just as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* evades simple genre categorization, everything that happens in *A Muzzle for the Lamb* has happened before in world history – from postcards of smiling lynch mobs in the Southern United States to the public cannibalism of Dutch politician Johan de Witt to the siege of the Branch Davidians at Waco. That rule also applies to science fiction elements that are all rooted in accessible technology of our day. It is speculative only inasmuch as these specific events have not happened in these specific places; their corollaries are littered throughout United States and world history. Despite being set in the future, I never wanted it to feel like a distant time, too separated from our own lives or fears for how our own future may unravel.

Post-Apocalyptic fiction has a rich history of drawing our gaze to the present by allowing us to judge a fictional, broken future. In *American War*, Omar El Akkad takes polarization to the extreme by imagining a new United States Civil War predicated this time around on the division between those who want to outlaw fossil fuels and those that cling to them in spite of ecological decline. Over the course of decades, the protagonist Sarat Chestnut is transformed from a young innocent to a hardcore ideologue by growing up in turmoil where tribal loyalty trumps all other values. It's a strong example of a high concept novel that focuses on character development alongside major historical milestones. While Akkad's book spans a much longer time than mine, and therefore imagines more thoroughly the evolution of society (micro and macro), there are lessons throughout in how to use sensory details, minor plot elements, and important character notes to place the reader into the imagined world – the landscape has been ravaged by climate change; children are trained for war at a young age; and people overvalue physical items from the pre-war era. *A Muzzle for the Lamb* also extrapolates polarization, but instead of division

over green energy, it's a widening gulf between the wealthy and destitute aggravated by the conditions of post-economic collapse.

In other words: what if the world didn't end for everyone?

This question isn't new for post-apocalyptic fiction. In many post-apocalyptic stories, there is a group that has risen to power (or maintained it), typically through iron-grip military might and the threat of violence combined with a willingness to shed their morals to dominate.

Beneath them is a group without traditional organizational power just trying to stay alive. In *Station Eleven*, the main antagonist is the son of a wealthy actress who has grown up after a catastrophic pandemic and has seized control over his followers through charisma and sadistic violence, allowing him to take over towns (and their resources) who are just trying to scrape out an existence. In *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy, the antagonists are almost entirely seen from afar: raiders who have chosen to abandon their humanity altogether to survive by murder, theft, cannibalism, and slavery. These story elements raise the tacit question of whether necessary adaptation is worth it merely to survive. Can we really say they've survived if there's nothing human of them left?

In my novel, Oscar Johns was already wealthy before the "end of the world," and has used that wealth and access to power to increase his stature and bank account by an obscene amount. He's a man who saw the destruction of hundreds of millions of lives, the sinking of Florida into the Atlantic, and the prolonged suffering of survivors as an investment opportunity. His status also helps *A Muzzle for the Lamb* stand out in the genre by creating a group of survivors who live as though it is still pre-apocalypse. Unlike the most powerful raider warlord

scoring the choicest canned goods in *The Road*, Johns does not have to endure the post-apocalyptic landscape or redefine what comfort and success mean. His wealth and savvy have successfully placed him and a small number of others completely outside the range where the new, destroyed world can affect them. For him, the world hasn't ended at all.

This aspect of the wealth gap is most visibly explored through technology, delivering a future familiar to most sci-fi novels but only enjoyed by the wealthiest members of society. For Oscar Johns and other rich folk, the march of technology has continued unabated after a brief recess. Mass death was merely an inconvenience. The rich are assisted by life-extending drugs, exoskeletons that keep them mobile, service robots, and a wide range of AI-powered machines. The only thing advanced technology has delivered for the poor is cheap food like mass-produced algae paste, so when the impoverished members of Eternal Triumph get access to advanced technology in Braintree, it's an explicit revelation of what emergent tech can do when it's spread among an entire community instead of hoarded by the few.

Many post-apocalyptic novels explore the new jobs and responsibilities that people may have after the "end." This is a trope I wanted to subvert, finding that many people in 2049 are still doing essentially the same jobs that they might have been doing in 2024. Enjoli is the assistant to a megachurch pastor, Karen Fielder is an organic farmer, Berenice is a social media influencer, and characters like Cooper McGovern and Mayor Rashoderick Kemp are retired benefactors of inherited wealth and investments. Even The Triumphant operate a farming co-op at the beginning of the story, making money selling their food to others. This was a purposefully ironic foundation both to alter the usual expectations of a post-apocalyptic novel and to offer a stark difference between how the mainstream world operates in 2049 and how Eternal Triumph

chooses to run Braintree after they've taken it over. To survive without any resources from outside the city, they have to resume living closer to nature, relying on what they can grow and keep alive to feed themselves. In doing so, it offers a rebuke to the half-empty urban centers where most people continue to eke out an existence despite mass poverty and the natural wasteland of concrete. The cities in *A Muzzle for the Lamb* are offered as sprawling ghost towns with a sizeable population that is incapable of escaping. For the wealthy, it's because they don't need to leave, opting for the comfortable modern life they were used to (or that they heard existed) before everything collapsed. For everyone else, they are victims of their lack of resources, ensuring they must stay close to the environment that keeps them only barely alive.

Enjoli transitions from working as an assistant to operating the logistics of feeding 1,000 people. The latter job currently exists in the real world, but food distribution undoubtedly takes on even more profound importance in a post-apocalyptic setting of scarce resources. For those living in Braintree, they've chosen this lifestyle, opting for a closer relationship to the environment and an attempt at harmonious living within a closed system. Fortunately, they also have the benefit of technology that does not exist quite yet.

Characters in post-apocalyptic novels also tend to change clothing as an external sign of shedding their old identities in favor of the new ones forged and necessary for the emerging society or environment. In *The Sparrow* by Maria Doria Russell, the unlikely astronauts start out with common clothes, shift to space-appropriate uniforms, and the survivors eventually wear the local clothes of the planet Rakhat. In *The Planet of the Apes*, the crew's spacesuits are stolen, and they end up in loincloths. In *Station Eleven*, the accountants and baristas of the old world don costumes as a traveling troupe of entertainers and, notably, Kirsten changes out of her post-apoc-

appropriate garb when she finds a blue silk dress. After years on the road and the detailed hardships of death and kidnapped friends, choosing such a soft, delicate outfit is a shocking act of defiance. She chooses comfort as a means of fighting back against her environment.

Enjoli's journey involves shedding the yellow Polo uniform of the Spire church assistant class. She wears them even after leaving her job because it's all she has. Upon moving to Braintree, her clothing is so ragged that it's burned, and she picks through the closet of a wealthy retiree who has been booted from the town. The sweaters and high-tech athleisure wear are too big for her, and she doesn't understand how to use the tech woven into them, but she chooses to inhabit them just as she chooses to inhabit the evicted person's home. She's constructing a new identity from hand-me-downs.

As post-apocalyptic fiction reflects our larger fears, it has broadened from direct representations or allegories of nuclear war to the specter of mass disease, tyranny, and climate change. The genre has remained flexible in how it displays or responds to these fears, showing stylistic resilience beyond placing interesting characters in seemingly hopeless circumstances. In *Station Eleven*, author Emily St. John Mandel offers a compelling look at a United States that has been returned to pre-Enlightenment technology levels, but instead of constantly feeling the pressure of the broken world, the characters are largely comfortable in a way that they aren't in other books like *The Road* or *Parable of the Sower*. It offers a keen hope that those who survived would find a way not only to scrounge out an existence in the wastes, but actively thrive under new conditions. It also sets a blueprint for focusing on a cadre of characters beyond their struggles to survive.

The world of *A Muzzle for the Lamb* is a bit bleaker than *Station Eleven*, but its scope and depth is presented similarly through an ensemble that passes the POV baton from chapter to chapter. Using 3rd person limited was a clear choice from the outset of constructing the novel because it allows for a full view of the details of a complicated environment with a diverse group of people acting on different pressures and incentives. Beyond a clinical recitation of the events, 3rd person offers a view into the thoughts and feelings of characters as they engage in actions that might shock current sensibilities.

The value of limiting the 3rd person perspective comes in focusing attention on a singular character. That benefit is two-fold. First, it allows us to read deeply into one character's thoughts and feelings. Second, it allows for that character's perspective to dominate an event, in turn allowing for the baton to be passed around so that there is never a single dominant viewpoint. (This also echoes the structure of Eternal Triumph, a collectivist anarchist group who make decisions as a unit and, while under the control of a single figure, believe that no one person should be in charge permanently.) One secondary intended effect of passing that perspective baton is that the reader should become so accustomed to switching perspectives that it repeatedly raises the question of how other characters in the scene would respond to a situation, allowing the reader to fill in those voices on their own. Likewise, it naturally asks the reader what they would do in increasingly intense and shocking scenarios.

It was vital not to make the novel a pedantic, unrealistic celebration of one ideology over another. Extreme greed is displayed as clearly poisonous, but the oppressed Eternal Triumph members are no saints, succumbing to cruelty and violence despite their professed desire to escape the cycle of death that has kept them trapped under the boot of Prosperianism. Here,

again, is where multiple perspectives created a powerful storytelling foundation. After *Eternal Triumph* takes over Braintree, instead of celebrating their victory and the positive changes they've brought to bear, we see their revenge through the eyes of a young girl from Braintree now living under their occupation.

"Child made his way toward the watching crowd which parted for him. He waved his hands, urging people to keep the lane open as Janthy led the procession alongside a small contingent of armed guards. Fewer than Sophie might have guessed. It didn't take many people with large guns to take control of a lot of people. Claire's grandmother took some prodding to get going, and something in the way her face slackened as she stepped forward told Sophie that she'd never see her or Claire again. She held up her small middle finger behind her mothers' backs, and Claire's eyes narrowed when she saw it" (Beggs, TBD).

Sophie makes a far more interesting POV character here. Shifting focus to her offered me the chance to complicate and deepen the ethics of other characters' actions, but it's still easy to imagine what any other character would have made of the scene. From Child's perspective, he would have relished in the righteous act of cleansing the town of the worst apostates. Wesley Shirkus, who has a long, combative history with Claire's grandmother, would have had more complex feelings: simultaneous remorse and celebration of seeing her laid low.

The final way that 3rd person limited played a large role in crafting the novel is in presenting a sprawling, unfamiliar world. In *Wanderers*, author Chuck Wendig uses this perspective to explore an incipient apocalypse that involves a super plague, an omniscient AI, and nanobots protecting a comatose ambulant group. With so much to juggle, the multiple

perspectives cleanly make sense of a mind-boggling premise. They also allow the reader to travel to dozens of different locations, making the novel feel as large as its subtext and themes demand. In the same vein, I envisioned the multiple perspectives of *A Muzzle for the Lamb* as individual flashlights illuminating different parts of the whole. Like *Wanderers*, my book gets to hop around the country, creating the mental image of being drawn more and more toward Braintree just as Child's followers are. In the back half of the novel, the bulk of the action takes place inside the city, drilling down into how their society operates through the judgmental eyes of Sophie, the fanatical faith of Child, and the hopeful heart of Enjoli, whose arrival creates an opportunity to see the collective at its cooperative, full-bellied best.

My novel is a trek through one possible nightmare future, but it was important for it to focus on characters, their individual wants, needs, and quirks, instead of constant handwringing about the state of the world. With its roots in 16th century Germany, and its reach into a dystopian 2049, it's also a deeply personal project. Since graduating with a BA in philosophy and political science from Baylor in 2006, I've lived through two "once-in-a-generation" economic collapses; a global pandemic that killed millions and uprooted all of us (whether physically, psychologically, or both); and the upheaval of the political order that has seen a con man sent to the highest office in the land and the overturning of bodily autonomy at the Supreme Court. This, on top of arthritic disfunction in the legislative branch, a steep reduction in faith in our public trustees, and the very real feeling that you don't matter very much in United States democracy if you don't have a billion dollars. Things feel a little wobbly.

It is also in enduringly wobbly times that post-apocalyptic fiction shines.

Writing in 2015 about the dominance of post-apocalyptic books among a slew of new novels, cultural critic Jason Heller wrote:

"Post-apocalyptic books are thriving for a simple reason: The world feels more precariously perched on the lip of the abyss than ever, and facing those fears through fiction helps us deal with it. These stories are cathartic as well as cautionary. But they also reaffirm why we struggle to keep our world together in the first place. By imagining what it's like to lose everything, we can value what we have" (Heller).

It's in this spirit that I decided it wasn't enough to have one catastrophe as the cause of my apocalypse. "The end" is one of the primary concerns of post-apocalyptic fiction, and it's fun to play around with doomsday scenarios that would test us in different ways, but it's also clear from our experience with the pandemic that these catastrophes aren't necessarily solo acts, and they don't have to wait in line for their turn to put us in the vice. In *The Deluge*, one of the most heavily-researched post-apocalyptic novels focused on climate change, author Stephen Markley wrestles with the hefty challenge of an economic calamity preceding the ecological disaster of sea level rise. The government officials and experts saddled with the task of saving humanity following years of kicking the can down the road recognize that the people facing the destruction of their homes as the sea rises are justified in panicking. That makes the inevitable economic collapse a completely understandable result of people acting the way that they should. It's a depressingly realistic understanding of the multi-pronged attack that fate would have in store for us, so it seemed grounded to imagine an end of the world for *A Muzzle for the Lamb* which featured multiple systems failing within a short span of time. Instead of zombies or an AI-fueled pandemic wiping out almost everybody, the hinted-at "Plunge/Drowning," "Beggar's Uprising,"

“Champagne Riots,” and economic collapse of my novel offer an arguably more realistic vision where ecological collapse begets economic strife which begets more ecological, social, and health collapse.

This is also a reflection of my current fears. In his podcast "The End of the World with Josh Clark," Clark argues over the course of 10 episodes that we are more aware of and have a deeper understanding of all the ways that we as a species might go extinct. From rogue AI to the implosion of the universe, Clark explores so many ways that all of humanity could go that it seems quaint to consider only one of them as the basis for the novel. More than the sheer amount of ways we could go, Clark argues that modern humans have a uniquely profound perspective on what it means for every single one of us to perish: since we have not met any other intelligent life, it's highly possible that our extinction would also mean the extinction of all intelligent life in the universe. It doesn't get weightier than that.

However, the problem for the characters in my novel isn't that every single human is dead (of course). Their problem is that they are living. The world is unkind, but they still have to navigate it. This ties back into the status of the elements of the novel coming from the real world. I may have stretched income inequality with creative license, but not that far. I may have set wildfires and super storms loose, but they're only marginally stronger than what we're facing now.

Unlike *Station Eleven*, *Wanderers*, and others, I made the conscious choice not only to avoid depicting the end of the world but to also avoid describing beyond those vague nicknames. I had two reasons for not getting into the weeds of how my world goes down. First, post-apocalyptic fiction is such a recognized genre that mainstream and niche readers alike will be

more than capable of filling in the blanks of what they think may have happened. On that front, I also worried that focusing too much on the specifics of the disasters would lean too heavily into overly familiar tropes. Since I wasn't reinventing the world-ending wheel, keeping the details of the destruction vague also allowed me to focus completely on the present. Instead of worrying about how and why the world "ended," or even to watch a few plucky survivors pushed to their limits in the resulting danger, my novel focuses on the heartbreaking possibility that we will trudge through the wasteland of trauma and devastation only to settle into a banal new normal where mass death and suffering are shrugged off.

The character who first gets to voice this feeling is the only one happy about what the world has become. In the introduction to Oscar Johns, Enjoli asks him for a raise, and he refuses, taking the opportunity instead to get longwinded about a woman who died penniless but was guided by faith to make a model of Noah's Ark using a flimsy, ill-suited tool.

"Why is the picture of Jane Jue your favorite?" she asked, surprised at her own interest in what a crazy old lady had obsessed over until she died.

'Because that's what we did with the country after The Plunge, Enjoli. We built Noah's Ark with a tiny hacksaw so that those of us who remained could float "' (Beggs, TBD).

The chronotope of *A Muzzle for the Lamb* is firmly after the country has been cobbled back together. After reading a lot of post-apocalyptic fiction, including in a class on the end of the world for my MFA at UTEP, I was fascinated with the idea that the broken world would eventually settle into a new rhythm. When all the zombies have been cleared out, will we like

what we've built? Can it be a chance to reimagine how we structure ourselves? If we hate it, how difficult would it be to tear the world back apart after it's been put back together?

Finally, my novel also follows the genre tradition of examining faith through the lens of loss. In *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren keeps a new faith doctrine constantly in the back of her mind, building it and, later, sharing it with new followers as she transitions from the ebbing safety of her gated community out into the harshness of the road leading toward a rumored safe haven. Because of her faith, she is capable of creating her own safe haven alongside her new friends. While not strictly post-apocalyptic, Maria Doria Russell's *The Sparrow* focuses heavily on both faith and religious structures following the world-shattering revelation that aliens exist and are reachable. Like its protagonist Father Sandoz, Enjoli in *A Muzzle for the Lamb* is betrayed by the religious structure she's committed herself to since childhood, losing both her understanding of God and a portion of her own identity in the process. Following that betrayal, she is tested multiple times, proving her ability to survive. She eventually must create her own belief structure when neither Prosperianism nor Eternal Triumph match her individual needs. My book also draws inspiration from *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, which operates inside the religious structure itself, focusing on future monks who cling to tradition and faith as a life raft in desperate conditions. In my novel, organized religion and faith are placed front and center so that our humane value structures can be questioned for what they supply, what they fail to provide, and what they take away.

In imagining the world of the novel, this question of religion offered a springboard for wondering what we might do once our world changes. For Father Sandoz in *The Sparrow*, learning that aliens exist (that humans aren't God's unique creations) actually strengthens his

faith and gives him purpose. For Lauren in *Parable of the Sower*, the world has changed radically enough that she needs to reject the religion of her father in favor of something that suits her needs in this altered living condition. In my book, the implication is that the survivors needed both material aid and a moral foundation, allowing Oscar Johns to gain power and wealth in a perpetual cycle of his own success. Despite enduring the pain of the fallen world, millions still adhere to Prosperianism out of the hope that its metaphysical correctness is the key to their eventual security. Characters like Child and, later, Enjoli, aren't willing to wait for that salvation so seek to build it on their own.

"When do the promises of Prosperianism kick in?" added Cutwolf. "That's the fundamental thing you need to ask yourself. Coming to this meeting means you're probably already asking yourself that, and while it might seem like it's my motivation, my job is actually not to convince anyone here. My job is to organize those that want to go, just like other emissaries across the country are doing, so that we can bring as many of the faithful into what will be the last bastion before the final judgement.'

'The end of the world, you mean?' Dasha spoke up.

'From what Kaleel has said. From what Child has said, yes. But I recognize that for some people The Plunge was the end of the world. And for some it was the crash in 2026. And for others some horrible event that didn't get a clever nickname. And if you don't think more pain is set to come, you haven't been paying attention.' At this, Enjoli expected Cutwolf to become serious as his subject matter, the wounds of all these tragedies fresher for some in the room than others, but instead he smiled again and began detailing what people should gather to make the journey to Braintree" (Beggs, TBD).

Revision and Beyond

To reach this version of the project, the revision process included large-scale changes to plot and word-level editing in line with Edgar Allan Poe's advice in "The Philosophy of Composition." Poe's essay breaks down *The Raven* element by element to display a possible blueprint for poetic construction by considering how each individual element (down to the word) might bolster or hinder the other elements. This concept of using only elements that add to the impact of the overall intended effect of the piece was a revelation. It is a singular, powerful rubric to test individual elements of my novel. For this project, I can apply that principle to the novel as a whole and to individual chapters. How do I want the reader to feel? Is every element working toward that goal?

One small example was the change from the Spires' green Polo uniform shirts to yellow. The initial green was meant to represent wealth, but that symbolism didn't jibe with the overall ethos of the Prosperian church which would not have viewed the Spires as having achieved wealth or the worthiness of it yet. The change to pale yellow also clothed Enjoli in something weak instead of vibrant and offers another opportunity for worldbuilding in the church's doctrine that Spires must add faith (blue) in order to achieve wealth (green).

In line with Poe's principle, I'm approaching further revision using LaPlante's Exercise-Based Approach which allows me to step outside of the novel in order to find what's missing, what's not working, and how to discover solutions by using writing exercises. In other words, making it messier before tidying it all up.

The largest change so far was an aborted storyline which saw Enjoli take a reading of the Biblical story of Judith seducing and killing an enemy general as a sign that she should also seek out their enemy by herself to behead him. This storyline was modeled after what really happened at Muenster, where a young girl, inspired by Judith, left the safety of the walled city in full faith she could destroy their enemy. She was immediately captured and killed, but in my story, Enjoli would have succeeded and launched the beginning of the end for Prosperian domination. However, this was one of the historical elements that had to be excluded from the novel because it did not fit in with any of the main characters' motivations or personalities, and giving such a detailed task to a minor character would have drawn focus too far away from the main story. While Muenster provided the framework, the novel skewed further and further away from it as it came into greater focus.

While *A Muzzle for the Lamb* tells the story of one young woman's journey through two dangerous faiths into a sense of personal clarity, it will require more revision after its life as a thesis project in order to bloom into a genuine novel.

My goals for future revision include fleshing out the worldbuilding, connecting the dots between tentpole scenes to improve the flow of the story, and to do the small-scale work of following Poe's operational rule while utilizing semantic fields to test the poetic connectivity of the language. The second half is currently constructed with tentpole scenes, and I need to connect them both for the pacing of the project and to bring Enjoli back into the spotlight, using her as a backboard for a response to the incredible progress Braintree has made and the paranoid violence its leader is capable of enacting. Enjoli is a product of and response to the Prosperian-dominated world, and while she's prone to conversion when that faith fails her, especially since

the alternative offers the entire lower portion of Maslow's triangle, additional chapters in the novel will follow her growing understanding that she fears Child in a similar way to how she feared Oscar Johns. Eternal Triumph solved the material problem for her but left the spiritual one. Revision will involve drawing out those aspects of her learning how to build a personal ethos for herself.

The process of crafting this thesis has shown me that *A Muzzle for the Lamb* feels incomplete, but that offers opportunities for adding greater details into the broken world. It also means building out the plot in a way that will make Enjoli's ending satisfying whether that means finding the right puzzle pieces to insert earlier on in the story or rethinking the ending entirely.

In conclusion, the process of writing *A Muzzle for the Lamb* has been its own act of faith. Faith that I could persevere through challenges. Faith that I could build an entire world after fictionally destroying this one. Faith that the story and characters would reveal themselves if I was brave enough to look.

Works Cited

- Akkad, Omar El. *American War*. Vintage, 2017.
- Arthur, Anthony. *The Tailor-King: The Rise and Fall of the Anabaptist Kingdom of Muenster*. Macmillan, 2011.
- Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. McClelland and Stewart, 1985.
- Butler, Octavia. *Parable of the Sower*. Grand Central Publishing, 2019.
- Heller, Jason. "Does Post-Apocalyptic Literature Have a Non-Dystopian Future." NPR.org, 2 May 2015, <https://www.npr.org/2015/05/02/402852849/does-post-apocalyptic-literature-have-a-non-dystopian-future>.
- LaPlante, Alice. *Method and Madness: The Making of a Story*. W. W. Norton, 2009.
- Markley, Stephen. *The Deluge*. Simon & Schuster, 2022.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Philosophy of Composition." *Graham's American Monthly Magazine of Literature and Art*, Apr. 1846.
- "Planet of the Apes." Directed by Franklin J. Schaffner, performances by Charlton Heston, Roddy McDowall, Kim Hunter, Maurice Evans, and Linda Harrison, APJAC Productions, 20th Century Fox, 1968.
- Russell, Mary Doria. *The Sparrow*. Random House, 2010.
- St. John Mandel, Emily. *Station Eleven*. Pan Macmillan, 2014.

“The End of the World with Josh Clark.” Apple Podcasts,
<https://podcasts.apple.com/bg/podcast/the-end-of-the-world-with-josh-clark/id1437682381>.

Wendig, Chuck. Wanderers. Rebellion Publishing Ltd, 2019.

Table of Contents

	Page
Building a Broken World After the Apocalypse	iii
Works Cited	xxii
Table of Contents	xxiv
A Muzzle for the Lamb: A Novel	1
Prologue	1
Chapter One	8
Chapter Two	24
Chapter Three	44
Chapter Four	62
Chapter Five	79
Chapter Six	93
Chapter Seven	109
Chapter Eight	115
Chapter Nine	130
Chapter Ten	140
Chapter Eleven	154
Chapter Twelve	169

Chapter Thirteen	183
Chapter Fourteen	195
Chapter Fifteen.	202
Chapter Sixteen	206
Chapter Seventeen	222
Chapter Eighteen	243
Chapter Nineteen	246
Chapter Twenty	258
Chapter Twenty-One	273
Epilogue	287
Vita	291

A Muzzle for The Lamb

Prologue

Saturday, April 17, 2049

Envision Yourself Attaining Great Wealth Correctional Facility

Grant Parish, Louisiana

His prison cell was made of alternating concrete blocks, painted off-white the way a school cafeteria might be. The layers of paint were thick, as though someone had chosen to slather on more instead of cleaning each new stain from the wall, but there was a block of gray putty the size of a man's chest where a hole or large crack had been. Even hidden, it was tempting proof that the walls could be torn down. Kaleel thought of the gray patch as a painting, and he tried, without much difficulty, to find beauty in the odd ways the gray mass had clumped together or smoothed out, to question if there was any pattern in how some segments had dried much darker than others.

A stainless-steel sink jutted out from the wall opposite Kaleel's painting. Above it, a cubby for toiletries, which had all been removed, as had the small mirror that was usually screwed into a flimsy frame. They'd left him a hook for his towels but hadn't given him any to hang.

An angled metal support had been cold soldered into the wall to hold up the mattress, which was thin as a fist and covered by a sheet that slipped and bunched in the night as Kaleel tried to sleep. He called it his tango partner, and when the guards mocked him for it, he calmly told them in his hypnotic tenor that he wasn't talking to them. He was never talking to them.

They also taunted him when he held his arms out to touch his fingertips to the walls, short as his reach was, joking that he looked like a homeless angel, but, then again, they taunted him about everything, barking ridicule for the way he did lunges or sipped water or pulled the food tray from the floor slot as though every crumb and blot of mush the color and texture of the wall putty were sacred.

They all howled and hooted when he talked to God.

His conversations with God were simple enough. He would turn his head to the left, as though looking over his shoulder while changing lanes on a busy highway. Sometimes he would talk. Sometimes he would listen. And outside, the needling shrieks of laughter plinked against the door like flies against a tombstone.

There was only one guard who never laughed. Colt was an underfed pup whose guard uniform sagged off his frame and whose mustache refused to fully grow in. Kaleel had seen in Colt's eyes the first day an ally who understood the fear infecting the enemies of God which forced them to lock him away. The other guards reveled in bullying the young man shamelessly within Kaleel's earshot.

Kaleel had been in the Envision Yourself Attaining Great Wealth Correctional Facility long enough for the wound on his forehead to heal, although he'd suspected that the prison doctor had done more to maintain its seeping reds and purples than to help. On a stage built in the parking lot of a Wal-Mart in El Paso, Kaleel had stood a half a year before, preaching about the end of the world to hundreds of followers, exalting in his passion and certainty of eternity's swift

arrival to burn away all those who worshipped, groveling, in their bank vaults and supermarket aisles. He spoke until a Dr. Pepper can filled with cement flew from the crowd and dropped him.

The chaos gave the Peacekeepers along the perimeter the excuse they'd lusted for to rattle their battle batons against their riot shields and beat a path to the stage.

What was worse is that the world hadn't ended. He'd gotten it wrong. He'd founded his Eternal Triumph movement as an antidote to greed and the worship of money, yes. To claw back some sense of humanity from the overwhelming dominance he'd witnessed Prosperity Gospel gain during his lifetime. But he'd also gathered his flock on the bedrock understanding that God spoke to him to reveal the exact date and place of the world's destruction, and somehow, maybe in missing whispers, maybe in some translational error, he'd failed.

But the wound on his forehead had scarred over. And, he trusted, this was still very much part of the plan. What else could there be? It was his mistake alone.

The door grille slammed open, and a pair of amber eyes appeared. A muffled voice announced that he had a visitor. Kaleel smiled, looked over his shoulder, and said, "That's true."

He bowed to his tango partner and tilted his head at his painting before turning to his favorite part of the prison cell. If he'd believed in mistakes, he would have thought the window was a big one. It didn't look out on much. An obstructed view of a sun well where a patch of weeds grew flamboyantly against the blinding white light reflected off the dull building. Contorting his body unnaturally, he was only able to see a sliver of the weeds. The window was a parody of its kind, but it was still here in the cell, still offering a glimpse at something touched

by fresh air. Kaleel thought of it as bittersweet proof that the world was still spinning beyond his walls.

After shackling his hands and feet, they led Kaleel down the hall toward the visitor's center, passing by Colt, who grimaced and looked away, failing some silent test the other guards had set for him.

"Don't worry. You'll be with them in Braintree," Kaleel said, giving a wink before Colt scurried away.

The other guards emptied their lungs laughing. They carried a gleeful energy into the visitor's area, but there was an undercurrent of something else. A fierce immediacy. They tugged on Kaleel a little harder than normal. Tightened his shackles even tighter. Their impatient smiles stressing their faces, their joy existing only to mask the real emotion like a beeswax candle struggles against the stink of black mold. The falseness of it permeated the room until the first fist came down, and their malice was allowed to bloom.

The sun was shining when they killed Kaleel Fonseca. After dragging him out of the rattling prison gate and into the parking lot, a gang in crisp Polo shirts joined the prison guards and took turns kicking his ribs with steel-toed boots before stringing him up on a lamp post. It took him nearly half an hour to choke and slacken.

When they thought for sure he was dead, they pulled his body down and tore into it with their teeth, mashing the softer bits and chewing and cracking and swallowing. They each stomached a part of him to satisfy their superstitions about transferring power, feeling even hungrier than before, convinced they were personally growing in strength by destroying him.

Then Kaleel inhaled, fast and deep. His eyes popped open, and his mouth widened as if he were about to scream, but no sound came out. His lips stayed gnarled and frozen.

All of his killers scrambled backward. An older man fled, rocked by a wave of intense doubt.

Without thinking, they each held their own breaths waiting for him to exhale. His body and its constellations of bloody teeth marks and strained violet marks lay still. Then, the exhalation came thin and slow out of his broadened mouth, and when it was done, their bravest member checked his pulse and determined conclusively that they'd killed him. They'd been spooked by a death shudder.

So passed Kaleel Fonseca, the founder and leader of Eternal Triumph, the mad fool who believed that God had no use for a poor man's money.

They drained the blood as best they could. They pulled the flesh apart until tendons tightened like over-tuned guitar strings. They chopped parts clean off and clutched small mementos. His hands, his fat pink tongue. All of this they placed into Tupperware and thin plastic Ziploc bags, and when those ran out, they used black bandannas for the bones and a plastic grocery bag that had blown up against the chain link for his head.

It was not deliberate work. They killed him as a group and fell upon his body as individuals, scavenging his soulless form with dollar signs and full pantries and swimming pools floating in the foreground of their stunted sight. They sawed and tore through, grasping at a new comfort the sale of these blasphemous relics might bring.

Some would work to exhaustion, hacking through stubborn flesh, before letting others take over. A de facto camaraderie took hold, but, if each had had their druthers, he or she would have walked away as the sole owner of every pound and quart, inventing prices to list on eBay during the drive home.

They all licked their lips and nervously high-fived. Some wiped blood from their chins with their shirtsleeves and others kept it to dry in the warmth of the sun. They took photographs on their phones, posted grinning videos to their socials, and wished they'd been allowed to advertise the assassination. They could have sold tickets and advertising blocs. Could have labored under applause and cascading digital hearts.

The mob, spent but not sated, left the thin, unsellable greasy mass that remained on the asphalt to be stolen away in the night by animals or erased by time. Then, they scattered without bothering to pray.

Inside Kaleel's cell, Colt huddled in the corner, haunted by the old man's final, calming words and wondering where Braintree was. What it was. He pulled out his flip phone and sent a message. A call was too risky. Puffing himself up to hide how distraught he was, his eyes landed on the gray patch in the wall. In the bottom corner, he had no idea how or with what, Kaleel Fonseca had signed his name.

‡

Part One
Spring and Summer

Chapter One

Saturday, April 17, 2049

Houston, Texas

Enjoli regretted not sleeping in the church parking garage. The weeks leading into Easter Sunday were always a circus at Living Prosperity Church, and the rest of the Spires got antsy when she wasn't there to greet them. Sleeping in her truck guaranteed she'd be on time by being early. It also meant she'd actually sleep, drifting off in the solitary metal nest surrounded by the hum of the GuardiaNet mini-drones and staticky blur of road noise from the rattling highways boxing in downtown.

Instead, she'd gone back home for the night at Abuela Marta's behest, enduring complaints that they never saw her anymore in the daylight as the squat old woman tapped her grease-stained wooden spoon against the edge of an ancient comal. Enjoli had brought along a sack of buñuelos for her prima Cecilia, who had craved them desperately during her pregnancy and continued devouring them after pudgy little Filip was born. Enjoli had gotten them from one of the vendors she trusted not to put any sawdust in the dough. She considered the sweets her way of apologizing for never seeing them, but the greasy sack had only focused Abuela's irritation into bitterness, and the old woman complained that they didn't have the money for extravagancies.

"I don't know what you want from me," Enjoli had said while Abuela scooped algae paste inside the steaming tortillas.

“They are working you too hard, mi cielo. Y no pagarte nada,” Abuela had said, pressing her tongue firmly against the back of her teeth on the final word. “That devil man needs to give you a raise.”

“Pastor Johns is the only reason we have food on this table, or would you rather move into one of the goddamned shelters to have your shoes stolen?”

“We’re cursing at our elders now?”

Enjoli huffed and looked down.

“Sorry, Abuela,” Enjoli had said. “Spire pay is standardized. Everyone gets exactly the same across the board.”

“Are all the others coming home at midnight every night?” Cecilia had asked. She put Filip to her breast and looked at Enjoli pleadingly.

“Why don’t you get a job, cuz?” she had spat, hurt by the truth of what her prima had said. The fight had grounded her down, and Cecilia was a softer target than her grandmother.

“All day I’m searching for a good one.”

“Prove’s my point,” Enjoli had said, trying and failing to calm down. “I’ve got a job, and I’m going to do whatever it takes to keep it. Otherwise, we go hungry.”

“Explotación,” Abeula had said, waving her hand erratically in front of her wrinkled face. “When I was your age, we wouldn’t have dreamed of being a cog. Soon, they raise the rent, and Filip starts eating all our food, and then what? We go hungry anyway.”

“You don’t think I’m tired?” Enjoli had said. Abuela smoothed down her dress and looked as though she were about to speak but faltered. They had eaten mostly in silence for the rest of the meal.

Enjoli had slept in the bed next to abuela, drifting off that night under glowing plastic stars with her knees gathered to her chest. Exhaustion put her down immediately, but Filip woke up with a bad cough sometime after midnight, and Enjoli spent the pre-dawn hours rubbing agave syrup against his gums while Cecilia rocked him in her thin arms.

When he finally settled, Enjoli groggily slipped on a yellow church Polo – the unflattering uniform of the Aspirer caste – and slipped out in the darkness.

“Buenos dias, Marta,” the truck said before proceeding to its automated daily message from Pastor Oscar Johns. Hearing her boss’s sing-song voice so early was something she’d grown begrudgingly used to, but today the message was about making bold moves in the face of doubters, so she took it as a cosmic sign that asking him for a raise was the right course of action.

Their apartment was far enough south that she still needed to cross over a few miles of dried saltmarsh where the gulf had once threatened to drown the beltway. What trees were left were graying husks waiting to tip over, so poisoned that animals wouldn’t make their homes inside. They still called her enclave Pearland, but she couldn’t imagine what one tasted like.

She wove sleepily between self-driving semis which seemed to speed up and slow down based on how much they could scrape the exposed nerve of her patience. Her truck breezed through checkpoints after seamless license plate scans. She usually liked this time of day, barely distinguishable from night, but the threat of being late nagged at her, and the heavy trucks made

her feel small and unnecessary as they rumbled through the early gloom. She wished she were bigger.

Once inside the beltway, the emptiness truly took hold. Death had hollowed Houston out, leaving it a swollen body with very little blood pumping through it. Less than a million still clung to the safety of the inner city, miles inside the new sea wall and within striking distance of the no-kill shelters with whatever handouts they might scrape up.

Enjoli cursed as she navigated to the service road, spotting the Peacekeepers' cordon too late and slamming on her brakes. For a moment, she was stuck between the off-ramp and the blockade. The encampment behind a series of cattleguards to her right was alive with activity. Dozens of Peacekeepers were slashing tents and rousting young men who thrashed or wandered aimlessly along. The cattle guards were scuffed with rust, underlining the scene with decay. The only reason to clear the encampment was new, private development, and Enjoli wondered briefly if she might move her family to whatever apartments were going up in the space. She'd be closer to the church at least, and a living space built this century would be a pleasant change, but it was foolish to even consider.

As she puzzled out how to get unstuck, a group of men started running in her direction with the Peacekeepers at their backs. One tipped over a barrel, which spilled charcoal-black trash before rolling backward on the uneven caliche. They all swerved suddenly before reaching the cattleguards, except one in a dirt-crustied hoodie who ran straight on, coming close enough for Enjoli to see that he wasn't a man at all. Maybe not even a teenager. Small and wild, he took off down the sidewalk, cutting across a parking lot and disappearing from sight.

Enjoli rolled her eyes and backed her truck the wrong way up the exit ramp. She popped it into gear once she'd reached the highway and set the engine screaming toward the next available exit, passing by a tall tan-bricked building with a mural of Pastor Johns's smiling face taking up the entire side that faced the highway. Someone had scaled the billboard at the top to scrawl "H-Town til I Drown" in a defiant neon orange.

She reached the church parking garage far later than she felt comfortable with, taking her favorite spot on the rooftop near the elevator and rushing inside.

With her adrenaline spiking, she sped down the hulking concrete breezeways of the church and past the shuttered counters of the Salt Lick Barbecue and Gringo's Tex-Mex in Section 546, trying to get to Pastor Johns's office before he arrived. She checked her watch. It was going to be tight.

"Hey, Slugger! Slow up, will ya?" came a voice lagging behind her. It was Travis, one of the younger Spires who was just now pulling his yellow work Polo down over his skinny chest. He was a bright, gawky Black kid with a perfect set of shiny white teeth. Enjoli didn't break her stride as he caught up with her.

"I've got tech run notes to go to Monroe, a binder headed upstairs to Carla, and exactly one trillion balloons are hitting the loading dock before lunchtime, so keep up or forever hold your peace," she shouted back.

He stumbled before jogging alongside her.

"Pastor Johns should get you a fitness implant for Accrual Day," he said.

"I'd break it."

"Seriously. I just need a moment."

"Don't have one."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously."

Travis huffed, failing to catch his breath.

"Benji says the butterflies aren't working out."

"What does that mean?"

"That's all he said. They tried them, and they just sat in the box or something," he said, jumping ahead to pull the door to the Bud Light Longue open. The stale stink of it hit them, the carpet threatening to stick to their trainers.

"You're telling me this because you want me to tell Pastor Johns."

"We need someone—" Travis mumbled.

"Who he'll listen to."

"I was gonna say, who's not terrified of him."

"Same thing, really," she said, moving at a pace Travis felt was slightly faster than before. Enjoli checked the time on her phone.

"He's here in two minutes. Take the butterflies to the Baskin Robbins in Section 223, the one with the big freezer. Stick 'em in there."

"Won't that kill them?"

"They'll just go dormant again."

"What happens then?"

"They gain a hunger for human flesh, Travis. What do you think? Just get 'em frozen, and I'll break it to the boss."

"Oh, thank God."

"Sure. Him, too."

When she reached the heavy double doors to Oscar Johns's office, she took a beat to smooth her clothes and thump her chest before opening the door. A row of other Spires was already lined up against the wall, and Enjoli slid into place just as Johns and his massive retinue was stepping off his private elevator. First, the security detail with their too-tight shirts and earpieces, then the cadre of suits constantly buzzing around Johns and doing fuck all to earn their keep as far as Enjoli could tell.

"Good, glorious morning!" he shouted, rubbing his hands together as if to heat the entire room. Enjoli was relieved he'd shown up in person. Asking for a raise on the eve of Easter Sunday was stressful enough without having to speak to his hologram.

"Good morning, sir. Praise God!" all the Spires shouted.

“Praise God.”

The thousand eyes on the walls of Oscar Johns's office watched Enjoli as she conducted his morning briefing. Each of the eyes belonged to someone more valuable to the world than her. Politicians and policymakers of every flavor leading up to the highest office, visiting dignitaries, owners of industrial cartels. People who would be missed if they disappeared. All of their arms draped over Oscar Johns in hundreds of photographs that obscured the walls where the great pastor worked. Hundreds of important people. Hundreds of Oscars, all smiles, staring down in tandem with the real one.

They still made Enjoli feel uneasy.

There was no desk. Johns paced. He demanded to work on his feet and to take meetings in transit. The openness of the space made it feel unfinished and dangerous. The Brazilian Amazonite marble he'd chosen for the floor, with its spider webbing of cream and chocolate against ocean green made it feel like you were walking on a million-year-old map of an earlier draft of Earth.

"Why are we sending those butterflies I asked for back?" he asked with a pleasant tone Enjoli knew as caged fury.

"Turns out they don't majestically burst forth from the box as soon as you open the lid."

"Yeah?" The fury dissipated. It was in these moments that Enjoli found her boss particularly childlike, giggling at tiny pinpricks of comedy in the world that only he could see.

"They just sit there. Apparently, they're not aching to escape as soon as they see sunlight. They're pretty comfortable in the dark."

"I know the feeling," Johns said. "You're telling me because all the other Spires are terrified of me, huh?"

"No comment," she answered, working hard not to look back at the others pressed to the wall.

"Let's get doves instead. Can we have them here in the next hour? I want Benji to have plenty of time to practice with them so it's flawless."

After months of careful planning and a precision roll out of messaging to support the biggest lift in attendance, membership, and donations the church had ever attempted, the "Biggest Sunday Ever," he'd moved the timeline up by half a year with his announcement, and Enjoli had barely blinked. He watched her stand on the sea of his office floor without drowning. He watched her peers and underlings orbit her.

He pulled a box of matches from his pocket, slid it open, and pulled one out. He ran his thumb up the thin, rough stick. His eyes on her, fully aware of the blurring voices and stampede of heels on marble, he pressed his thumb against the chemical tip. It strained. He smiled, pressed just a little harder, and the matchhead popped off.

He plucked it off the floor where it fell, examining it between his thumb and forefinger, lost in its uselessness. This object meant to spark fire, now without power.

"Remind me to ask you why you do that one of these days, boss," Enjoli's voice came through, breaking his meditation.

"The matches? It's something my father taught me. What's next?"

"Can I have one more minute? I need to discuss something."

Johns cocked his head and would have matched his image in the photographs on his wall if he were smiling.

"I recognize that my announcement has shortened the timeline a bit..."

"That's not it, Pastor Johns. When you said you wanted to pull the trigger for the event in September, I assumed you'd want to do it in May."

"Ha! Incredible. So, what is it then, Ms. Vargas?"

"Considering my value to the church, I'd like to request that you give me a raise," she said, holding her chin out.

"Interesting. Won't the other Spires be jealous?" he said, watching their faces.

"They all know I'm the lead."

"I suppose it makes sense. When I look at you, I still see the little girl who won the Tithing Lottery all those years ago. You do good work. Hard work, of course, but more importantly it's smart work. You're dedicated. I see your worth. It would be reasonable to give you more than what you're getting now."

“Thank you, sir.”

“But I’m not going to,” he said, pulling absent-mindedly at the knot in his tie.

“Uh,” she faltered. “With all due respect, sir, without me you’d be dumping a box of sleepy butterflies on the crowd during your grand finale. The other spires, they...I’m just worth more.”

He scrunched his mouth up, appearing to mull it over in his mind before striding over to one of the framed pictures on the other side of the room.

"There are a lot of photographs on my wall, so you may have missed this one," he said, sitting down crossed legged on the floor in front of a black and white still of him with a dark-skinned woman wearing what looked like floral pajamas. Enjoli didn't know whether to keep standing or join him. She crouched down, half-committing.

"You're right, sir. I don't know who that is."

"No reason you should. But it's absolutely my favorite picture in the bunch. It's Jane Jue. You would have been a baby when this was taken. Her faith called her to build a replica of Noah's Ark using a 12-inch hacksaw. With those flexible little blades? The damned things bend if you breathe on them wrong. But she did it. Took her eleven years."

"This was right after the Beggar's Uprising."

"Yes. That's when she started. You would have been a baby. She called me. So many times. Said she needed me to bless her and anoint the project."

"I'm guessing by the picture that you did."

Johns shook his head.

"I told her only God could do that. But I also told the press that God was doing something enormous through her. This was in the days before Prosperianism was clarified and required. People were afraid, going off in all sorts of directions. Grasping for understanding where there was none to be had. They hadn't realized the church's truth yet. She died penniless, so there's God's judgement for you. But she left me something in her will."

"What?"

"The hacksaw."

Johns stood up, brushed the front of his pants, and walked back toward the other end of the room. Enjoli stood, too, and turned, waiting for him to complete the parable. To give her the lesson he was trying to teach.

She'd prepared for this, but hearing the words still burned her. She faltered, picturing the same half-empty dinner table they'd endured for years.

"You have to understand that I am the economy in this country," he continued. "All of the money out there moving around is mine. I could stop it moving. I could keep it flowing. I could shut down the buses tomorrow or add a thousand. I could stop Penatex from making insulin. I could stop them from making it free. Because the buses and the pharmaceutical companies and banks all run on my money. The cash in your pocket right now is mine. And the cash in your

family's bank account, if there is any, belongs to me. It should and will flow back to God, and God is this church, and this church is me."

"I know that sir," she said. She took a moment to think, then said, "You said you still see me as the little girl who won the church's Lottery."

"Yes, Enjoli."

"Do you know why?" she said, moving close enough to him to brush against his arm as she passed. "It's because she never left."

She pointed at a photograph of Johns smiling his broad copycat smile, arms around Enjoli as a young girl holding her winning Lottery ticket.

He peered at it, then looked back to the woman she'd become.

"I always knew this day would come. When you try to take my job, I'm not gonna be able to stop you, am I?" he said, chuckling and inviting her to laugh with him. "I'm still not going to give you the raise, but I admire your spirit. It's the reason why I keep you around, and when you're working here you get something far greater than wealth. You get my wisdom. You get the security of God's favor which, for so many others, has been a fragile and fleeting thing."

He stuck out his hand, and she shook it, fighting hard to hide her disappointment.

"Why is the picture of Jane Jue your favorite?" she asked, surprised at her own interest in what a crazy old lady had obsessed over until she died.

"Because that's what we did with the country after The Plunge, Enjoli. We built Noah's Ark with a tiny hacksaw so that those of us who remained could float."

Travis burst through the door. He almost went sprawling to the ground but righted himself awkwardly in the last moment and shouted "Sir!"

"What? What is it, son?" Everyone's eyes turned.

"Something's happened. The news is saying Kaleel Fonseca is dead."

||

The rest of Enjoli's day was a tailspin of abandoning projects and beginning new ones only to abandon them as soon as Pastor Johns changed his mind again. Missives emerged from his office like fireworks only to be pulled back down from the sky. The Eternal Triumph founder's death galvanized her boss, and he buzzed with an energy she'd never seen before. A leap from giddy opportunism to what she thought she must have misread as deep sorrow. When Travis first broke the news to the office, Johns ordered everyone out so that he could pray, bursting out of his heavy double doors nearly an hour later with a head-spinning list of tasks which sent Enjoli and her fellow Spires all over the church complex and twisting down every street of the city.

It was almost midnight when she'd finally been dismissed to take Johns's personal effects to his home in Kingwood. She bore the additional hours with a smile, hoping he'd recognize her efforts and change his mind about her raise, but also with the thrill of being a cog in an overwhelming machine with an exciting new mission. The Easter service would be grander now,

and the show largely fell on Enjoli and the rest of the team's shoulders. They needed to pull a Super Bowl from their back pockets in just a few hours. Enjoli took her own pleasure in tackling the impossible.

The stars were all out by the time she pulled into Kingwood. The lawns were purple under the moonlight, and sprinklers hissed, their long arcs soaring. Trees budded in bold reds and golds in front of successively larger houses. The lights were still on in some of them, and a cheer popped from a group of people on a patio dancing to music that was too quiet for Enjoli to hear.

She was almost too exhausted to appreciate the evening's peace as she climbed the steps to Johns's mansion. It was a sprawling thing of Plantation-era excess, although she knew it was nearly brand new. He'd aped the style hoping to create a sense of former glory bursting from fresh soil. His story was the story of the country. Still there, fate and disaster be damned.

The household staff was in bed, so Enjoli let herself in with the embedded employee pass in her wrist, laying a banded bulk of folders on the foyer table and trudging up the impeccable marble staircase to Johns's bedroom suite to hang his dry cleaning. The monitors turned lights on and off as she entered and exited the rooms, trying not to make too much noise. She waved at the security staff through cameras, tucked away in whatever shacks they spent their working hours. Johns had boarded his jet for the Winter Haven property in Arizona, claiming he needed solitude to think and prepare for the morning service. Enjoli wondered what it might feel like to be able to escape so easily as she stood at the entrance to a closet that was nearly the size of the apartment that she shared with Abuela Marta, Cecilia, and Filip. All of Johns's clothing was meticulously ordered, and she quickly found the space for his dry cleaning.

Burned out yet still thrumming from the day's work, she stood a moment, running her hands along the fabric of his clothing. She suddenly remembered that she'd failed at the only objective that really mattered that day. Without a raise, they'd be drawn closer to the cliff's edge and maybe get pushed over. More than anything, she feared the poverty that snapped at her heels.

On instinct, she walked to the back of the closet, reaching her hand deep into a compartment that housed Johns's neckties, pulling down a few from the back. She hung them around her neck and tucked them all under the collar of her shirt, an imperfect job, but not so bad that she felt nervous leaving through the front door or waving goodbye to the security cameras on her way out.

‡

Chapter Two

Easter Sunday, April 18, 2049

Figure Nine Farms, Outside Menan, Idaho

Child of Aaron knelt down and dug his massive hand into the dirt underneath the damp wooden marker. He piled small mounds of earth next to it, pulling more and more out until he grazed the ragged blue bandana buried below. He lifted it out, nodding his head at its woeful lack of holes. He squeezed his companion's shoulder and handed the bandana to her.

"The soil's dead," Child said flatly. He'd been hoping for a hundred tiny tears in the fabric where worms ate through, signaling fertile soil and offering everyone at Figure Nine Farms a chance at surviving another season. Maybe it didn't matter anymore. With Kaleel dead, Child was no longer sure that survival was what he wanted.

"Maybe just dormant?" Chelsea offered.

It was an ugly day, already well past noon without any sun. Fat, ashen clouds hung limp in the sky without offering the promise of rain.

They both stood and wiped the dark dirt from their hands. Chelsea stretched out her lower back and pulled a rebellious black curl behind her ear.

"No. The earth here is useless," Child corrected. "But God's plan is still well in hand." He brought Chelsea in for a firm embrace and left her with wet, pleasant eyes, spending the rest of his morning walking through the fields that he and Kaleel had planted together. The straight rows

of vegetation spread out from the abandoned middle school like sun rays off a dead star. Kaleel had squatted at the school and preached there for a decade, slowly gathering acolytes from across the country and building a community of hundreds of eager believers. Child had been one of the earliest. Even so, he was still younger than most Eternal Triumph members, exuding an authority that came from his great size and beatific demeanor more than from the false promise of wizened age. As soon as he could, Child had started growing his beard out like Kaleel's, and soon appeared like a younger version of the prophet, naturally adopting the mantle of successor. As he grew taller, the roles often seemed reversed, with Kaleel appearing as an elder sidekick to the towering youth.

Throughout those years, the movement's collective faith never considered the possibility that Kaleel might die. He was the voice of God on earth. His word was sacrosanct knowledge. Surely, he would be there in the new Eden after leading them all through pain and tribulation. There was no poetry for Child in those hardships. Only people who didn't have to face them would have held them on a pedestal, but Child recognized them for the banal miseries they were and entombed them in his mind accordingly.

He left Chelsea and the fallow field, moving south to drift among the potato flowers, admiring their delicate, indigo petals before turning east toward the peas and broad beans they'd planted after rescuing soil trapped under the school's parking lot. Reclaiming paradise had been one of Kaleel's happiest triumphs.

There was no sign for Figure Nine Farms. It sat at the end of a short dusty road that the group had formed off the backend of the abandoned property. With the front parking lot dug up, they'd stretched an old chain across the turn off from the paved Farm-to-Market and adorned

with a sign warning of hazardous material beyond. It offered a fragile sense of safe seclusion. There were other farms around them before, but blight and wildfires had driven their owners off the land. Sometimes all it took was one dry season.

As he often did, Child headed home after his meditative walk, spying the group preparing for Kaleel's funeral on the edge of the meeting house. He wondered what he could possibly say to them. If he was meant to lead them, why did he feel so lost?

The bungalow that Child of Aaron and his wife Sorola shared was an airstream trailer that they'd built up with wooden slats and rigid metal siding. It wasn't any better or any worse than the others who lived in the commune. There was a bed big enough for the both of them, the quilt an old relic with stars and stripes they'd found on the side of the road back in Nashville. Next to the bed, a flimsy side table stood, its single drawer filled with letters from Kaleel, a handgun that felt like a toy in Child's hands, and a tin of candy Sorola always pretended not to see him eating. There was a rusty metal table in the corner, covered in cracking, black plastic lining where Child would sit to read his Bible or Sorola would relax drinking their sweetroot tea. Moving around the small space required each of them to warn the other by touch, to place a hand on a lower back, to squeeze a hip. This brought them great joy.

This afternoon, he sat alone. Sorola was with Janthy and the others preparing for the ceremony where they would have no body to put into the ground. They had gotten used to that.

When news of Kaleel's death reached Figure Nine, Child cried harder than when his father had died and feared that the entire movement would collapse. He lamented the failure of something that absolutely had to succeed because God had ordained it so. And what had Kaleel

asked of him? Only loyalty. In return he was gifted the certainty that, after the slow-moving poison of this life passed through, he'd be shrouded in joy until the last star burned out. He thought about that, thought about Kaleel gone from this world, and eventually stopped crying.

Child grabbed his Bible and walked toward the funeral. It was time to take his rightful place.

The school was the largest structure on the commune. Built in the elbow of a highway where the Snake River decided to turn North again, the school had served a handful of rural communities until its abandonment. The Eternal Triumph members who squatted on the land used its hallways for storage, its classrooms for housing, its kitchen for sustenance, and the cafeteria for their meeting house.

A silhouette of a red bucking bronco dominated the wall of the linoleum sanctuary. They'd thought about painting over it, but it made Kaleel laugh to see it, to think about the absurdity of the space, and to recognize the gift they'd been given was not meant for them. At least not by the people who built it. So, the horse stayed.

Around back, they'd set up fire pits and low benches for clear nights. Janthy and some of the families had moved the benches into rows nearby, and a few Triumphant carried their own folding chairs to the spot. They all faced a group of young quaking aspens, planted a few paces away from each other. The tallest rose over Child's head, but most of the rest didn't even come up to his knees, and today they would plant a seed for Kaleel that would hopefully one day grow taller than all of them.

With Kaleel dead, Child wondered if he would hear the voice of God. If it passed on or if it was something unique to his master. If he didn't hear the voice, how could he lead? How would he know what to do if God didn't command him directly? He understood as he walked through the growing crowd that the heaviness he felt was not just mourning. It was the responsibility of eternity that fell upon him, a flawed boy rising to take the prophet's place. Until now, he'd been a placeholder, a bookmark until Kaleel got free and returned to them to share the future. Child had felt a confidence that rotted now into temerity faced with having the responsibility on his shoulders.

His head ached. A grasping, sneering pain that uncoiled down the back of his neck into the meat of his shoulders. His chest tightened as he looked out over the hundreds gathering to say goodbye to their shepherd.

Sorola was compact, their shoulders the only thing wide about them. They were mesmerizingly beautiful, with glowing umber skin and dark brown eyes that emanated warmth even in their grief. Their mix of gray and purple twists cascaded down their face with a mind of their own.

They caught Child's eye as he made his way closer to the front, where he was expected to be. They moved toward him, floating through the swirling crowd, placing a hand on his chest as a wordless welcome.

He kissed them.

Janthy appeared beside them both. Child drew her into the embrace, her cheek pressing against Sorola's.

"It's time," she said.

Anyone who wanted to speak could say their piece. Children bounced on minders' knees and played in the grass at the back of the crowd. The Triumphant shared their memories of Kaleel as tears and sweet laughter flowed like waves lapping against the shore. Hayat and Jan played a song they'd written to celebrate Kaleel's life, and stories came through tearful halts and stuttering sobs about his faith, his connection to the eternal, his goodness. Child had expected an emptiness to the ceremony, but he was surprised by the shape it took. Everyone there felt as if a limb had been ripped from their body, maybe even their own hearts, but the unspoken fear permeating the gathered was a question of how this could have happened if Kaleel had not ordained it so. Had he known about his own impending death, but refused to tell his followers?

Janthy walked to the front with her cane, and Child watched her with keen attention. She had known Kaleel the longest, ranging back to days she didn't readily speak about.

"I met Kaleel at a protest at Freedom Plaza," she began. "This was before the Champagne Riots. Before the Drowning. Hell, it was before the economy collapsed for the third time in my life. This was back when we didn't know how awful everything could really get. So, there were tons of people at the protest, all the cops pushing us where they wanted us to go, and the same thing that always happens happened. It wasn't my first time, but it got scarier than previous scuffles. A tear gas canister fell near my feet, and all I remember was that I was alone in this large, frantic crowd for one second, and in the next, this scuzzy, salt-and-pepper hippy was next to me. He was so casual about the way he picked up the canister and threw it back across the police line. Then he helped me down the block and away from the worst of it. And because my own father was a piece of shit, and Kaleel wasn't, Kaleel became my father. Just as he became

whatever any of you needed him to be. That was his superpower. Even before God spoke to him and commanded that he should build all that we've built, he was whatever we needed him to be.

"He was not perfect. He could be forgetful. He absolutely could not be counted on to wash the dishes properly. He stubbornly refused to learn the right lyrics to 'Sweet Caroline.' He could be cruel under the right circumstances, and there were times when his temper took over. He let hate into his heart, and he was ashamed of it. But I take comfort in his flaws, because if God could choose a man like that to be his messenger, then it means there's hope for all of us."

It seemed for a moment that she would say more, but she stayed silent, not meeting anyone's eyes, then started walking back to her seat. As Child stood up to take his place at the front, Sorola slid over to where Janthy was sitting down and whispered in her ear, "They're all burying a prophet, and you're burying your friend." They kissed Janthy's lips, cradled her jaw in their hand, and for one of the rare times in his life that Child could remember, no one was paying any attention to him.

He waited, giving them the space to grieve together, for it to radiate out into the entire group, whose cheeks were slick and red as though they might never smile again. When Sorola took their seat again, everyone turned back to Child.

"Right now, it feels like we've lost everything," he said. "But nothing has changed about our destination except the way getting harder, and just because things are hard doesn't mean we're on the wrong path."

Child moved through the crowd, continuing to try to find the words he desperately hoped would come to him as he needed them.

"Cling tighter to one another. Take heart in knowing that Kaleel is resting in eternal peace while our souls are still shackled. He's already free, but we still have to fight for our freedom."

Child stopped in the center of the group, placing his hand on Sorola's shoulder.

"Now," he exhaled. "Breathe in."

The command came as an unexpected delight. A final tribute to Kaleel that caused heads to nod and lips to curl upward before obeying the command of the man who ascended to lead them. An ounce of tension was released. Since before anyone at Figure Nine could remember, Kaleel's sermons had begun with a breathing ceremony wherein they pushed their bodies so that they could free their minds. Burying him now, they let go of whatever anchors of the world had captured their hearts to ready themselves to receive the word.

"Out!"

Lips pressed together. Lungs craved. The Triumphant crowded closer, pressing each other against Child.

"Breathe in!"

The crowd complied. Pliable and willing. Ready to be filled and deprived. To move beyond, as they did, of the steady failure of the graying sky. They sought and received, dismissing what little property they owned, dismissing what right they claimed to their neighbors, dismissing what interest infected them to snap at the poisonous bait which prosperity promised.

Bidden by hidden, angry energy, the crowd convulsed along to Child's breathing rhythm.

Upon his focused instruction, the assembled took in breath after stinging breath, trying to stretch their cells wide enough for their bodies to hold all the faith they required.

They held. Child opened his eyes, watching each of them strain to keep the air in. To shake their heads, struggle to remain calm, to grimace against the body's inconvenient reflex to save itself.

One by one, they erupted in exhalation, some heaving in and others more seasoned at taking the next, regulated breath. Then, they watched him with palpable need.

"Not what I want. Not what you want. But what God commands," Child said. The earthquake gripping him seemed to pass, and he bent his head to look into everyone's eyes, tears rolling down his cheeks, but otherwise deathly calm amid the heavy-breathing mob. In the sad ease of the day, the Triumphant said a quiet prayer of thanks for their leader as Chelsea placed a tiny Aspen seed into the ground and smoothed dirt over it.

||

When they'd all shifted into the meeting hall, Child carried out jugs of water for everyone. There was food and drinks, and joy slowly overtook pain as the primary energy. He found Sorola and kissed them deeply as though he were a corpse coming back to life. To everyone else in the room, this was a lover's kiss. A few worshippers ignored it, sitting or stretching or dosing themselves with drugs of choice in preparation for the daily rites. Even in their grief, those closest to the couple watched with guarded, hopeful anticipation that the kiss

would evolve. They wished that Child and Sorola would start peeling off their clothes and pull them into a smothering huddle, as they'd sometimes done on ugly-sky days when God had commanded it.

Instead, Child and Sorola found a quiet corner where Janthy and Chelsea were locked in conversation with severe faces. One of the children burst into their huddle to hand Chelsea a paper flower before running off just as quick as he'd come.

"How can we ever explain it to them?" she said, motioning at the boy who had come and gone.

"When we get to Braintree, we may never have to explain death ever again," Child said.

"So, we're committed to the same path," Janthy added.

Child nodded his head.

"God commanded Kaleel to bring us to Braintree, so we will heed that command. This world is headed for even greater disaster."

"We'll do what's required," Sorola said.

"Why not just stay here? There's some strategic sense in staying put," Janthy added.

Child shook his head, unbothered.

"Figure Nine Farms will be ash by this time next year."

The others absorbed the news, looking around to inventory all the things added to their list to say goodbye to. Chelsea thought of the dead soil and held her tongue.

“We trust in God, we make ready the new Eden that’s been vouchsafed for us,” Child added.

A scraping thud sounded from the other side of the room. One of the folding tables had collapsed, and a few women were checking to see if they could prop it back up.

"It's not nearly ready," answered Janthy. "Kaleel was working with an Influential in Braintree called Berenice Barnhart. She's an Ecotrender using her platform to draw believers to the city."

“They haven’t killed her yet?” Sorola asked.

“Braintree is split almost evenly between Prosperians and Garcians, so she can hide in plain sight a bit more easily. Our goal is to increase our numbers there to take over the council this summer. The mayor is a callous opportunist, but he's not an idiot, and it's difficult to hide the kind of numbers we'd need to flood the city. So, we need to be patient and then be quick."

"We will be whatever God requires us to be," Child offered. "Brighton and Roberto are bringing more from Portland. Cutwolf is gathering believers all along the east coast. Tarran is in California. We won't need to fear being lonely in our new home."

"Before he was arrested in El Paso, Kaleel told me that violence was coming," Janthy continued. "At the time I thought he was lamenting those of us who have been brutalized for sport, but now I think he was prophesying."

"Predicting what exactly?" Chelsea asked.

"That we would have to inflict far more violence on them in order to secure our future."

"Then we should prepare accordingly. Everyone who wants to train should be able to," Child said.

"Luckily, Braintree is a fortress with a golf course," Janthy laughed. "The walls are high, it's in the middle of nowhere, and has a natural spring that could serve the entire community for years."

"A wondrous new Eden, then," Sorola said, grinning.

"A beautiful place to enjoy the end of the fallen world," Child added. He squeezed Sorola's hand.

A security door crashed open.

"Men! Coming here!"

The voice was wild with fear, and the assembled Triumphant turned to find a harried young scout called David limp-running toward Child. Blood coated the leg of his jeans like syrup.

Janthy walked quickly to him.

"Where?"

"Up the road in a truck. Guys in the back, I don't know, maybe a few, all with guns. Heading our way."

"What happened to you? Did they shoot at you?"

"I tripped on a grate running here," he said, wincing and sliding down on the floor.

Janthy looked back to Child, who nodded with deep unease.

"Right," Janthy said, her voice firm and steady. "Sorola, tend to David. Hark and Singh, with me. The rest of you stay away from the windows, get low and spread out. Hide. Get the children somewhere secure. And if anyone else comes through those doors, beat them to death."

With that, she bolted from the room, forgoing her cane in favor of a fast hobble, with an older man and younger woman fast at her heels.

The remaining did as they were told, finding the floor, and following it to the wall furthest from the windows. A small group broke away, ducking fully into the adjoining kitchen to check the loading dock door.

Sorola pulled a pocketknife from the pocket on their dress. They dug them into the denim of David's pants and cut up the leg, revealing a series of small, blackening puncture wounds.

"We need alcohol, love," they said with an irenic smile. "Stay here while I fetch it."

Keeping low, they disappeared behind the kitchen doors.

Child of Aaron remained standing in the middle of the room and waited for the sounds outside to signal the promised danger. It was quiet, except for the rumbling of an engine and dust being kicked up far away. It grew louder. He turned his face away from his followers, bit the inside of his mouth until it tore skin, and said a tiny prayer he hoped would be large enough for all of them.

Sorola emerged from the kitchen doors, carrying a large, glass bottle with a swing stopper, filled with clear liquid and a roll of paper towels under their arm. They crawled to David and beckoned for him to part his lips. When he did, she poured a healthy swig of the liquid into his mouth, and he swallowed with a sputter. She poured twice as much again on his wound, and he cried out before cutting off his own voice and grinding his teeth against the pain.

"Maybe I should have waited until you got drunk," Sorola said, daubing at the injury with the paper towels.

"It's fine," David said, regaining a bit of his calm.

Tires ground the dirt outside, kicking up a gray cloud as they stopped. The men in the busted solar-power pick-up were loaded down with purpose. Two swung their legs over the sides of the bed and plopped to the ground, eyes up, weapons stalking.

Doors slammed.

"Put on your Nikes, assholes!" a rail skinny one in camouflage pants shouted. "Time for your souls to burn, you hippy fucks!"

"Animals!" cried an older, bearded man who struggled to keep his gun parallel to the ground.

Beard sprayed bullets, and his gun bucked uncontrollably, peppering the dirt and the concrete wall on the opposite end of the school. A few members inside the cafeteria screamed in panic. Child had feared that Kaleel's followers would never become his own, but he'd never wanted more viciously to hear the voice of God than in those seconds after the first snare drum rattle of bullets.

The driver stepped around into view, a gawkish and cruel face hugged by scummy, blonde hair and jutting ears. He smiled with giant, pearl white teeth at Camo, who lifted the scope of his rifle to his eye and scanned back and forth at all the windows until coming to rest on Child of Aaron.

Big Teeth pulled a pistol from the back of his jeans and motioned to his blood-hungry men, who began creeping toward the meeting hall, guns drawn with inexperience and romanticism.

"We can come in if you want, but it'll be a lot easier for everyone if you all just line up out here and take your medicine."

They shouted curses and spit at the ground, and Child decided to take them up on their offer. An overwhelming sense of righteousness, like dominoes falling at all the right angles, surged through him. After holding up a hand to keep the rest of the Triumphant in place, he opened the security door, and stepped outside to face the mob.

He didn't understand why, and he didn't question it, but Child felt certain that nothing could harm him as he walked wordlessly toward Big Teeth and his pistol.

He cocked it.

"Stop right there. Tell your people to come out."

Child felt a breeze against his cheek. He could hear his followers muffled shouting through the brick walls of the meeting hall. He knew they were begging for him to come inside to safety, and he lamented how poorly they were failing this test of faith.

Inside, David fell against Sorola's shoulder.

"Are you scared?" David asked Sorola, his voice trembling. They looked down to find that he had wet himself.

They shook their head.

"How could I, when God is with me?" they said, drawing a hairpin from another pocket in their dress and pinning up an unruly twist that kept falling on their face.

A shot rang out.

Big Teeth fired into the air.

"I'm not fucking around!" he shouted as Child walked slowly forward, a cat's leap away from the barrel.

With one more step, Big Teeth pulled the trigger, and the pistol jammed. A second later, half of Camo's face splattered against his comrades' dungarees. Big Teeth slapped the side of his pistol in raging disbelief, then frantically pulled the trigger, a helpless morse code of clicks, as Child reached him.

"You've mistaken us for pacifists, but we are followers of Christ," Child said, towering over the man and blocking out the sun.

Scrambling in shock, two of the remaining gunmen dropped to the ground, and Beard fell on his ass without ceremony before tumbling over forward to get his bearings. His face was ripped off next. From the ground, the two gunmen sprayed the fellowship hall with bullets, shattering the windows and allowing the screams inside to pierce the air. Bullets clawed into the painted brick, marring the giant painted Bronco, and sending the Eternal Triumph members huddled on the far wall crouch-running into the kitchen.

Sorola kept David on the floor. It was too dangerous to cross the room for cover. They both stayed low, but Sorola risked looking up in time to see Big Teeth's head explode from his body. David pulled them down to the floor.

Outside, Child dropped to his knees, hands covering his ears in such excruciating pain that he thought he was the one who had been shot. His ears rang with black hole intensity, and Child punched the dirt and clenched his jaw.

Both gunmen on the ground finally looked to the roof.

"Aw, hell. Fuck this," one said. He abandoned his mate and fell over himself trying to get back to the truck.

Janthy watched him through the scope of her rifle as he scrambled inside the cab.

Hark and Singh sighted him, too.

"You got him?" Hark asked.

"Hold on," Janthy answered, watching him from her perch on the gymnasium roof as he flailed against the driver's seat after realizing that the keys weren't in the ignition. He threw open the door and sprinted back toward the road, awkwardly zigzagging until Janthy's shot took him down.

Child writhed in the dirt. The wave of pain intensified, and he thrashed against it. His senses failed him as pain was the only thing he knew, and then, like a dove emerging from a blizzard, the voice came low and sweet. It assured him that he'd been chosen by God to lead his people to safety at the end of everything, and the pain subsided enough for him to open his eyes and catch his breath.

The final gunman lay on his belly unable to move. The shooting had long since ceased, and Janthy's snipers had already made it most of the way to where Child was drawing himself up off the ground. Feeling safe enough, Sorola came out of the security doors and kept a wary eye on the prone gunman while reaching out to their husband.

They knew immediately.

"You heard it," they said, smiling.

"Heard what?" Janthy said, approaching alongside Hark and Singh with her rifle shouldered. She bent down to pick up Big Teeth's pistol and began stripping it with a curious look on her face. Child beamed with clarity.

"The voice of God," he said, looking to Janthy. "God needs you to go to Braintree to help prepare the way, and this vehicle is a gift to get you there."

Janthy eyed the pick-up, blissfully bullet-free, then looked back down at the guts of the pistol.

"That's odd. The firing pin's bent."

Child smiled.

"Not odd," he said. "Ordained."

Janthy motioned at the cowering gunman.

"What about him? What does God say about him?"

Child stood and loomed over the man.

"You may choose to repent and join us."

The man began to weep, his breath shuddering and face spasming.

"Go to hell," he spat.

Child thought for a moment. He stepped to where Big Teeth's body had blown back, reaching into the man's pockets to find the truck keys. He tossed them at Janthy before turning back to the final gunman.

"So be it," he said. "We'll bury their bodies by the aspens so they might be of some use."

†

Chapter Three

Easter Sunday, April 18, 2049

Houston, Texas

The streetlamps flickered off as Enjoli pulled into the Edloe Street Tiger Mart. It was still cold, and overnight rain left a sheen of slickness to the parking lot, drawing the poison scent of diesel into the air. She slid her hand between the thin bars outside the security window and tapped on the glass with a razor-sharp knuckle. The boy on the other side – hidden like treasure under his frayed sweaters and musty coat – looked up from the empty boxes of his crossword puzzle and gave her a smile, but his eyes popped when she held what she was carrying in front of the window. Wallace hopped down from his chair and struggled with excited fingers against the deadbolts.

"Is that for real it?" he said, locking up after she entered. He was a short white guy whose acne had clung on into his mid-twenties. He was tough enough for a gas station night shift, but, whether young or old, this is probably where he'd die.

"It is, for real, it."

"No way. No way! You're a legend."

The plastic grocery bag was clear enough to make out the tangle of color inside.

"Can I see it?"

"You can even hold it in your hands if you want. Make it into a noose," she said, tossing the bag at him.

Enjoli watched his little eruptions of glee and pressed the button for a macchiato on the machine, knowing it would spit out the same acrid black stuff no matter what she ordered. It launched into a hungry whirl.

The necktie in the bag was bice blue, almost shimmering, with curled turquoise figures that swam against the background. As Wallace tried to focus on one, his eyes were pulled to another, and he gawked at the alchemy of the effect.

He rubbed it to his cheek and let out a sigh that slackened his whole body. Then he dropped to his knees.

"Happy?" Enjoli asked, stirring her coffee, and letting the steam warm her face.

Wallace, eyes shut, knees on the scratched linoleum of the convenience store, didn't answer her. His lips moved slightly, belying the nature and enthusiasm of his prayer.

Enjoli rolled her eyes and shoved him off balance without spilling a drop.

"Kinda jumping the gun, yeah?" she said.

"Sorry. Yeah, whoa, sorry. Just carried away I guess because, well just look at this thing! The power here," he said, scrambling to his feet. "It's unreal."

"Yes, yes. Very powerful stuff."

"I can't believe you kept it in an H-E-B bag."

"I'm all out of diamond-studded gift totes, Wallace."

"I just mean it's a little like carrying a nuclear bomb in a bowling bag."

"He's got, like, 500 of these things."

"And Pastor Johns just let you have it?"

Enjoli took a sip that burned her tongue.

"You could say he's not actively asking for it back..."

"This is so wild. Thank you, thank you!"

"I keep noticing that you haven't paid me yet."

"Right. Oh shit."

Wallace ducked back behind the counter, clutching the necktie close, and reappeared with a stack of bills.

"Five thousand."

"Lovely," Enjoli said, and as the bills passed to her hands, the heft of them grounded her in a way she hated to admit. The money, such a pleasant amount, had come to her freely, of her own actions and pursuit, and that it belonged to her now was as sure a sign as there could be of God's providence.

What she had done was sanctioned by the Almighty.

"It's probably bad business to ask, but how much do you think you can get for it?"

Enjoli set her coffee on the counter and walked her new money to the Lottery machine.

"I ain't selling this one. No way. This is a sacred relic."

"The Holy Cravat of Houston," Enjoli said, feeding a fraction of the cash bill by bill into the Tithing Lottery machine.

"Laugh all you want, but this is my ticket. Prayers can't help but be heard amplified by something touched by Johns. Worn by him! He wore this, right?"

"At least once."

"Then I'm on my way, Enjoli," he said with a voice already drifting into the future.

"Big car, big house..."

"Forever and ever amen."

"I've got two more if you want them," she crooned.

"Fuck! I'm tapped, Vargas. Otherwise, I'd be all over them."

Enjoli continued feeding bill after bill into the Lottery machine, methodically and patiently watching the total tick up on the screen. Wallace smirked.

"I'm surprised at you," said Wallace, laying the tie over his shoulders and obsessively pulling back and forth at the ends. "I judged you all wrong. I admit it."

"What are you talking about?"

"This right here. You feeding the machine," he said. "I'm impressed, and even a little relieved to see you take such a big pay day and feed it right back into the church's coffers where it can do some good work. When you called to tell me that you had one of his ties to sell, I thought you'd finally turned to the dark side."

"Ah," Enjoli said, slipping the last bill into the slot, which sucked it in with mechanical hunger.

"But you're stealing from your boss and giving him the profits."

"Where do I request my halo?"

She scanned her wrist when she finished feeding the machine, and it spat out a dozen Lottery tickets with randomized numbers. She tucked the bulk of the bills into her purse.

"They pay attention to how much we tithe, genius. If I don't give back at least 10% to the church, I'm in deep shit."

"And you're a little light this month?"

"Why else would I be doing this?"

Back in her truck, she drove toward Living Prosperity, hoping to beat the sunrise.

Hers was the first vehicle in the parking garage, and she gave a sigh of relief as she strolled through the abandoned breezeways, skipping down the carpeted concrete steps with Johns's pulpit in view.

Every other month, or if she was simply feeling low, she liked to have the church to herself to indulge in the enormous quiet at the center of it all.

She stood on the stage barefoot. It floated like a carpeted island amid the two hundred thousand seats which would be filled within a few hours but remained blissfully empty as she gazed in meditative awe at the cavernous solitude. Like having the Grand Canyon all to herself.

Living Prosperity had been a church since she was a child, but before the soft pews and prayer purchasing stations had been installed, it had been the football stadium where the Houston Texans played. It was NRG back then, a symbolic name which Oscar Johns's father Bill had been ecstatic about. Pastor Bill filled it and continued to fill it even when virtual services first became necessary. When little Oscar took over after his daddy died, he did the unthinkable by drawing an even bigger crowd. As crowd control became deliciously unbearable, he nearly split his lips smiling for cameras when his crew blasted out the eastern wall and connected NRG to the decrepit Astrodome next door. Oscar Johns resurrected the crumbling baseball stadium, connecting the two and drawing hundreds of thousands to their seats. Enjoli had grown up with the construction and marveled at how something gargantuan and unmoving could still be fundamentally, unrecognizably altered. With the sea swallowing entire cities on the east coast, after years of cowering and running inland to die, it also felt like an act of defiance, whether that was Johns's intention or not. It was an act of hubris to build something permanent in a hurricane's path.

Standing alone on the riser at center stage made Enjoli feel like the last woman on Earth. She closed her eyes for a moment and could feel the building hum not just beneath her, but from a hidden place within her, as though she were an ant inside a rocket rumbling off its launch pad.

Then, she got to work.

People trickled into the building. First, employees. The sound engineers, operations team, facilities staff, and security crew. With her wireless headset on, Enjoli could listen for all the small fires that needed to be put out and whether they needed a helping hand. Seeking to make herself invaluable, she fluttered from station to station, carrying an errant speaker or dumping gray mop water which had been absentmindedly left out all night near the Krispy Kreme. Each time a new voice came over the radio, she hoped it would be Oscar Johns asking for her by name. She spent the preparatory hours before greeters unlocked the doors without a word from him, so she was surprised to find him standing behind her as she surveyed the brood of doves marked for post-service release alongside Benji, the technical director, and a few other Spires.

"I could see you up on the stage when I came in this morning," he said, face blessed since birth with a red-carpet smile. Since he'd taken over the church, Oscar Johns had smiled for an hour straight each Sunday before taking the stage to preach. It showed his audience the physical manifestation of his joy, displayed the great toll it took on his face, and possessed the knock-on benefit of warding away negative thoughts. They were the momentum killer, and what he needed every single service was the energy to move mountains. Once he'd begun the hour, nothing could stop him from smiling.

"I'm so sorry. Am I not supposed to be there?" Enjoli managed, flushed from hearing his voice and the sudden awareness he had infiltrated her private indulgence. The other Spires quietly genuflected to note his presence without injecting themselves.

"It's okay, it's okay," he said, holding up his hands. He placed one on Enjoli's shoulder. "I do it too, sometimes. Makes everything feel bigger, doesn't it?"

"It's incredible."

"But I also meant I could *see* you up there. As in, could picture it. With an audience next time, maybe. Morning, Benji. What have we got here?"

"Two hundred doves to be released when you say the magic words, Pastor Johns."

The conversation moved on so quickly that Enjoli found that she didn't know what to do with her body. She'd leaned into Johns's hand on her shoulder but felt exposed as Benji went on about how and when the skylight would open and where the birds would be staged. She felt a pleasant eruption of joy inside when Pastor Johns suggested she should preach. The compliment slid into ears like melted gold, leaving her greedy for more.

"Anything special about the number 200, Benji?" Oscar Johns asked.

"It kept the cost below \$10,000."

"Hrm. Let's see. David killed 200 Philistines," Johns offered. His eyes drifted upward as if to a teleprompter in the ceiling. "Ziba gave David's army 200 loaves of bread. Two-hundred exiled singers who returned to Jerusalem from Babylon. And King Solomon made 200 shields of

gold. None of those really fit my theme though, so let's not worry about it. Enjoli, I've got a special task I need to talk to you about after the sermon today. Good?" Johns asked.

"Absolutely. Yes, Pastor Johns." There it was again. Her name in his mouth.

"For now, I wanna show all y'all something. A little bite of wisdom I'm not sharing with the crowd out there." They all leaned toward him.

Johns reached into the box Benji was holding and pulled out a dove, which looked dumbly around, largely uninterested in the circumstances of its capture or maybe drugged with something that would wear off just before release. There was a hushed buzz throughout the assembled Spires, who suddenly realized they were getting a rare front row seat into the mind of the wealthiest man in the country. "People are always mistaking power for freedom. They say they want power, but uh-uh. They don't. They want full control over their own lives, and power doesn't get you all the way there."

Johns closed his fist around the bird's head. The dove jerked briefly but quickly settled.

He squeezed his hand. His eyes stayed with Enjoli's, and she wasn't sure at all whether she was expected to hold his gaze or to look down at the bird.

She heard a crack. It took a moment's effort and a strain severe enough to turn Johns's cheeks red. A crunch. Enjoli's body jolted sharply against her wishes, and after another soft pop, Johns's fist closed completely, almost effortlessly, and the dove's body went slack. He dumped it back into the box with a thud.

"That's power," he said, still smiling. A baby-faced Spire with baggy jeans dropped to his knees.

"Lots of people can do that," Johns continued. "Cheap strength is all. But...you think I'm worried about what I just did, Enjoli? It wasn't very nice to the bird."

She shook her head cautiously, digging her nails into her palm to keep from hyperventilating.

"What about you Benji?"

"No sir, Pastor Johns."

"But why wouldn't I be worried about the repercussions of my actions?" he said, turning his attention to the Spires, who all shook their head as Enjoli had. He turned his eyes back to her, calm as a sleeping lion.

"We'd never tell anyone," a middle-aged Spire in large glasses dared to offer.

Johns shrugged.

"Eh. What do you think might happen if you did? What if everyone knew?" he asked.

"A fine?" "Nothing." A few scrambled voices emerged, valuing the opportunity to stand out more than the fear of it now.

"You're in the right ballpark, but—" Oscar Johns began.

"People would start killing doves," Enjoli interrupted.

A campfire glow popped into Oscar Johns's eye, and Enjoli felt for sure that she'd passed a test she didn't know she was taking. The rush of his approval was intoxicating.

"Bingo. Now that's freedom," he said. He paused, maybe to let the lesson sink in fully, his smile somehow even larger. "Alright! It's gonna be a fantastic service today."

||

The crowd swarmed the church in the coming hour. Those who could afford to bought popcorn and roasted chickens and all the sticky, sweet, tangy things they liked to lick off their fingers before Johns compelled everyone to raise their arms into the sky like antennae for Jesus. Enjoli busied herself with helping Ram move some cables and tidying the crafts services table. When showtime came, she took her place at stage left, ready for the usual litany of problems that cropped up during the service. Through her headset, she could hear all the team leads as well as Johns's microphone feed. A voice from the control room started the countdown.

The announcer's warm tenor filled the former stadium from a hundred speakers and somehow stayed above the rapturous cheering, clapping, and stomping from the ad hoc city ready to feel the flame of God within them. They were a mass unified only by their thirst for God's favor, returning to the fountain for the chance to drink.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Pastor of Living Prosperity Church, Oscar Johns!"

"Good afternoon and welcome, welcome, welcome." He was already talking into his headset mic before emerging from a tunnel onto the church floor, a parade of one floating down a wide central aisle toward the stage.

For the first time in years of watching him, Enjoli decided to study him. Not just his philosophy, not just the silly aphorisms in his self-help books, but the man himself. His springy posture and easy way of speaking flavored like home brewed sweet tea sipped next to a backyard swimming pool. She'd known he hadn't been born into wealth; everyone knew Johns's life story. But he'd somehow managed to carry the burden of money without losing the essence of his previous poverty. Maybe this had all been done on his father's back. After all, it was the elder Johns who had risen from dust-covered revival tent hopper to stadium crowd performer. But Enjoli knew the impossibility of ever reconciling yourself after your bank account got even a little larger – not to your old friends on the block, who constantly teased and hinted and outright demanded to be given some of what you'd made, not to your family who folded you careful as an heirloom quilt into an underaged matriarch, and not to yourself who had spent years believing you were meant to be a certain way only to discover you'd been wrong. And, even more importantly, not to those who had always had money, who would always see you as an interloper branded by crass caveat. As the most powerful man in America flew onto the stage, Enjoli found herself trying to find something in common with him. She wanted to crack the code of his motions and speech to gain the same alchemical control over the crowds. If he could see her up on the stage in front of them, she wanted that to happen.

"A man died and went to heaven," Johns chuckled as the audience calmed itself to listen. "He was met at the Pearly Gates by St. Peter who led him down the golden streets. They passed stately homes and beautiful mansions until they came to the end of the street where they stopped in front of a rundown cabin. The man asked St. Peter why he got a hut when there were so many mansions he could live in, and St. Peter replied, 'I did the best with the money you sent us.'

Alright, everyone. Welcome, welcome! Show me my Easter Pilgrims! Who came the farthest to be with us today?"

Hands shot up all over the church, whooping noises bounced off bodies, but all Enjoli could see was an amorphous mass with half a million limbs swaying and lurching in gleeful anticipation of his message. A spasming leviathan. How did he tame it?

"I sincerely hope all of you feel welcome. I hope the journey we're about to take together is fulfilling. I hope you feel uplifted. I hope you feel grounded. Let's get started, shall we?"

He took the stairs two at a time, landing on a carpeted platform that used to be directly over the 50-yard-line.

"What do y'all know about how nerve endings work?"

The crowd, that slithering immense beast, laughed with innocence and shook its head at the question. Oscar Johns was never what you expected. *Surprise and convince*, Enjoli made a mental note.

"I know, I know. You didn't come here for a freshman biology lesson. And we don't have enough of those flimsy goggles to give to all y'all, but nerves are fascinating little things," he paused, knowing the assembled thousands wouldn't dare interrupt him. He stared into its gaze. "They're the messengers of the body. When we get hurt, when we feel good, when we get cold. Those nerve endings rush with lightning speed to tell our brains what's going on. What we experience in the world is largely a matter of how those nerve endings are doing their job. Sometimes we hate them. You ever think when you're in pain that you wish your nerve endings

weren't so good at giving us the message? That's what Codeine's for right? But I'm here to tell you that we should appreciate them especially when we're in pain, because without that pain we could be doing something even worse to ourselves. That pain is a backstop."

As he spoke, he crossed from one side of the stage to the other like an excited gazelle.

"My nephew Tyler, he's five, and he came up to me last week, just five years old, and he tells me, Uncle Oscar, God is angry with me. Five years old! God's angry with him. And I asked him, now Tyler, why on Earth would God be angry at you, and he told me that another kid at school didn't have the right kind of markers at school, and Tyler knew he should help him out, but he didn't. You know why not? Because Tyler didn't have the markers either! Ha! The kid's heart is so sweet. His heart beats for God.

"This is what I asked Tyler: Does God expect you to save someone whose drowning while you're drowning? You know what he said? He said if he could save himself, he'd save the next person too, and I tell you now, with God as my witness that this child of five shows more wisdom than I could ever hope to. If he could save himself, he'd save the next person. God does not want you to drown. God wants you to float. God does not expect you to save the world with lungs filled with water. Save yourself first.

"I know a lot of you probably feel like you're drowning. You've got aches and pains, lost your job, medical debt, family troubles, depression, all those demons you're battling. Hear me now. Are you still here? Because if you are, then you're not done fighting yet and God has a plan for your life. Hear me now. Listen even closer. If you feel like you're drowning it's because there

are dark forces who do not want you to reach the shore, do not want you to reach your full potential, do not want to repel them back into the shadows in the name of Almighty God.

"And maybe you're in pain and you blame God for that pain, but I'm here to tell you that God is your nervous system telling you something. God is your backstop, and if He weren't there to allow a little pain into your life, you'd be doing something way worse to yourself. The good news is that God is your Codeine, too. You ask, and God will listen. Take this pain, take this debt, take this uncertainty from me, God. He will listen. If your heart is righteous, he will reward you a hundred-fold."

Johns went silent. Enjoli counted in her head how long he could hold their attention without saying a word. As long as he wanted. *Freedom*, she thought, searching his eyes for a hint of secret pleasure.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, adopting the appropriate solemnity to christen the moment. "It's been a week since the Eternal Triumph guru Kaleel Fonseca died."

At this, the Leviathan coalesced. The monster constructed itself out of all its component parts. Each set of grinding teeth. Each huffing nostril. Half a million blinking eyes. Whetstone-ready voices. All cheering and jeering and snarling.

"Now, now, I know why you're clapping," he said, quelling them only with his tone. "I know why you're celebrating. An ungodly man with a dangerous message is gone, and that makes you feel a little safer, but let me tell you that I am heartbroken, because God is heartbroken, because another soul was lost. And I just want to send a prayer up for Kaleel Fonseca. I don't know what happened in the last moments. Maybe he repented and saw the light.

Maybe he didn't, but Lord Almighty God please hear our plea for his soul and the souls of his followers. May they come to turn away from their evil path and know you with open hearts ready to receive your grace. Amen. Amen.

"It may seem like the world has lost a terrible man, but I'd remind you that our enemy is not flesh. Our enemy is not blood. Every soul lost is a failure. It's going to get harder. When the forces of darkness take a hit, they come back even stronger. You don't need me telling you that. Those of you who've caught cancers and pink lung and addictions and paychecks that don't cover rent. Just when you think you're getting a handle on things, what happens? That's right. That's right.

"Earlier today as we were preparing for the service, I instructed a whole slew of my Spires to walk through every inch of the church. Probably a strange thing to see. They did it because I told them to, and I told them to because God told me to. So, check under your seats, all y'all, and you'll each find a thousand dollars in an envelope."

The leviathan erupted. Enjoli beamed. He took the animal on a glorious ride, and they finally reached the pinnacle together.

"Folks in overflow, there are Spires circulating right now with envelopes for y'all, too. This is God's grace in action."

Bodies shifted wildly in seats, hands grasping below and scrabbling against the hard plastic, the stuffed cushions, and emerging with their prizes held high. Enjoli's hands were empty. She prayed that Cecilia and Abuela were sitting in the audience. She thought about how easily Johns had wiped his hands clean. She wondered how many of those bills got stuffed into

Spires' pockets as they grumbled down the aisles. How many of them resisted out of fear or out of the purity of their obedience?

"God is good. God is good!" he shouted from the stage. "I hope I didn't just blow out the mic. I forget sometimes. I'm alright, Sharon? Great. I can't have the tech team scolding me again after the service. Now. You've got a little slice of God's love in your hands right now. Maybe enough to change your life, but I'm wondering if this is what you're gonna settle for. Because we've got ushers coming around with offering baskets right now. Sharon's gonna pop the donation AR code up on the screen, and we're gonna listen to our award-winning choir led by Ms. Taylor, and we're gonna have a little contest to see which of you has the faith, the spiritual fortitude, and the out-of-control love for God to give the most back to Him. Who here will give the most? Who here will place that thousand dollars right back in the basket to secure God's love and stand blessed knowing that they will bask a hundred-fold in his riches?"

The choir sang, flooding the church with melismatic intensity, drawing each word of the hymn into a sonic lava lamp as the individual parts of the Leviathan considered how much of their flesh would be required to prove themselves to God. Enjoli didn't have to wonder how much she'd give. Instead, she watched as Johns took a seat and wiped his brow with a silk handkerchief with pops of gold and burgundy.

When the song was over, he leapt to his feet again, and a very large number appeared on the Jumbotron behind him. He pumped his fist and extended his arms toward the audience as if to wrap them all in his embrace.

"This is the way we pour out our love for the Lord!" he shouted, and almost 200 doves flew from the top of the Jumbotron into the sky.

‡

Chapter Four

Monday, April 19, 2049

Braintree, Colorado

Mayor Rashoderick Kemp called it greasing. His father had called it goosing. He walked from his mansion on the west end of town, through the market streets, all the way to town square doffing his cap with genial bonhomie meant to illustrate his status as a man of the people. A magic trick. Those who it worked on never questioned why a man would need to perform his status, so there he was, at least once a week, strutting with his gut out to make the wheels of Braintree spin smoothly.

That was his birthright, wasn't it? God had gifted his family a striking amount of wealth, previously buried deep in the Colorado mantel, brought up on aching backs so that he could sleep on silk cushions. "Fill the earth and subdue it," should have been on the family crest.

Yet lately this ritual had been clouded by the uncertainty of strangers' faces. Never near his house, thank the greedy Lord, but certainly on the corners marking the starting line of the sales district. More and more, they were there. The first had been a ruddy-faced woman with lanky curls in jeans. It had been like discovering a smudge on his favorite oil painting. It was a curiosity. Was she a tourist? Yes, of course. She'd been lured by the promise of clean air and mutton that wasn't 3D-printed.

But she'd been too thin. Not that Kemp bothered too much with bigotry, but the woman had not had the look of someone day-tripping there to spend money or endure one of those

heinous spa treatments Cooper McGovern was always trying to convince him would rejuvenate his skin. The stranger had looked distant and skeletal, as though she wasn't there for any particular purpose at all. A lost lamb uninterested in searching for her shepherd.

Today, he could swear there were even more.

People moved, yes. Not often in a town as small as Braintree. But sometimes. He'd heard about a new Zoox truck factory opening up south of Denver, and it didn't seem outside the realm of possibility that some of the workers would find a home this far south. Should he introduce himself? Were they worth greasing?

"Fine weather this morning, eh?" he said to a young Black man wearing a tie-dyed hoodie and bobbing his head. Mayor Kemp offered his hand, and the young man popped an ear bud out, staring right through him.

"Huh?"

"The weather. It's lovely."

"Sure," the young man mumbled, replacing his ear bud, and shifting away.

"I'm the mayor. If you're new in town. If you need anything," Kemp half-shouted at the young man's feet.

He'd been ostentatious and social-ready since birth. A natural, according to his father. Ready to slip into the shoes of his old man and take over the dusty leather chair in the mayor's office whenever he'd needed it. Maybe he wanted to travel first. To sample whatever his heart

gravitated toward. Greasing was a game for him. Not the survival tool it had been for his father. Kemp looked at each person in his path as a potential rung on a ladder most didn't even know was there. That's not how he'd gotten his power, but it's how he'd kept it. Other members high up in the Prosperian Order found him an equal, but they'd never understand his struggle. Not really. To hold a town together that was so firmly divided between the righteous principles and the mushy, loose philosophies of the Garcian church. The half-measures and compromise that marked their faith. He considered them all self-hating in their comfort with so little.

That was never his father's burden. David Kemp was a Black man of means in the 1980s who had dared to run for HOA president of newly-built Brain Tree Luxury Housing Development, a keen rip-off of what the Morse family was doing with The Villages in Florida. Aimed at an older generation, but happy to absorb fresh-faced families to bring their kinetic energy to the crisscrossing streets. Rashoderick clocked early on how few Black families lived within the gated community, so his father's victory to lead the homeowner's association puzzled him until it became a fact of his life, like garish wallpaper he'd looked at long enough to ignore. His father was the obvious choice for Mayor when the town incorporated as Braintree, but then Long Covid had claimed him, and Rashoderick ascended to a tumultuous throne.

His reign had been marred almost singularly by the growing number of Garcians infiltrating the mature Prosperian stronghold. A city of princes and princesses needed someone to clean the toilets. There were enough Garcians to build a church just after the Beggars' Uprising broke out, and there had been some laughable confusion as to which contractors had come to lay its foundations and which had come to build out the boondoggle protective wall Kemp had felt bullied into approving by the more paranoid members of the Braintree elite. Those who

screamed loudest had been convinced that the violence rocking major cities would find them in their sleepy hamlet. Thankfully, the masses in Portland and New York and the like were quelled quickly enough that it didn't have to come to that, but Kemp still remembered the panicked complaints and the looming air of inconvenient uncertainty that rattled a constituency who had paid through the nose to know what every tomorrow would bring.

Although he'd long felt the rise of Prosperianism as the kind of righteous re-correction that often comes after tragedy, he'd never been threatened by the Garcians. Who ever was? They were placid and too malleable to speak as one voice; professing to believe in God while reading Dr. Seuss from the pulpit. At a Christmas party a few years before, he'd been drunk enough on cinnamon eggnog to proclaim to his husband Oliver that he knew full well the truth about everyone proclaiming to follow Juan Garcia's teachings: atheists who didn't want to meet the fate of atheists. Oliver had only sighed and said, "Yes, dear. And as long as they're all pretending, we should, too." Kemp wondered if there was a way in every generation to hide from the mob in plain sight.

He also considered Aisling Anderson, the pastor of the Garcian church in Braintree, to be a friend. That's where other leaders got tripped up. It was one thing to reach out to the well-liked opposition to appease them with hot air, but Kemp knew to earn someone's trust took at least a teaspoon of honest, pure vulnerability. He wasn't willing to have his mind changed, but he was willing to listen when she spoke. He also knew, as his dad had instructed, that if he'd only pretended to be her friend, the necessary alliance would one day collapse, and he'd find his fat ass out in the cold. They'd brunched, they'd played tennis, they'd even gone snowmobiling together, and he relished the look of joy on her face as she experienced the trappings of wealth.

That lust was still somewhere inside her, and he didn't care to extract it, but appreciated the opportunity to massage it in his favor when tempers flared.

Strolling into the market square, he found himself goggling at the unfamiliar faces clogging the streets, trying to test his eyes, and wondering how this could possibly be the town he'd grown up in.

His mother, sharp-eyed and strict, far less trusting of their clean-cut neighbors, had told him an old widow's tale when he was a boy that had become a favorite. It was about a young girl who wakes up early on a Sunday eager for church. She ignores the dim light of the new morning, strange to her eyes, and ignores the lack of church bells that usually marked her travels. She even ignored all the strangers' faces as she entered the church hall and found her seat on a pew next to two ashy-skinned figures. The little girl didn't listen to the siren in her gut warning that she was not in the right place, and it wasn't until she recognized the face of her Meemaw who'd passed that last spring, that she understood she'd accidentally woken up long before dawn and joined a church service for the dead. She hightailed it home, shaken, her faith poisoned by fear.

Kemp's town was being haunted, and he didn't plan to ignore it.

He took his seat at Honeysett's Cafe pressing his belly against the edge of the table. It dug into unbothered flesh, signaling to everyone around them the bounty and splendor that God's love bestowed upon him. He was as fat and beautiful as the noonday, Colorado sun.

A waiter came around to pour more sparkling water from a pitcher, and Mayor Kemp didn't bother to look up until he spotted Pastor Wesley Shirkus, elder Prosperian of the Great

Fountain of Wealth Church in Braintree, shuffling toward him. He greeted his old friend heartily, finally allowing for a genuine smile to cross his face.

“Tony, some coffee, black, with a shot of Balcones Reserve for the good reverend here,” he ordered, and Pastor Shirkus nodded at the splendid choice.

Pastor Shirkus settled himself and banished a crumb from the tablecloth. He was a Black man with smooth golden skin and graying temples, and the rings on each of his fingers spoke of the danger of fighting him either in the courtroom or on the street.

"I'd like to show you this, Wesley," Kemp said, his voice diplomatic and steady as he continued searching. "Set to receive on a private channel. I think you'll find it illuminating and infuriating. Further proof that we need to move more quickly."

Shirkus set his AR implant to the correct frequency and reached for his inhaler to take two quick puffs. The pollen was getting out of control. The data populated between the men, floating above the table. Shirkus pinched the air and made the small chart legible, squinting at the long list of names and registration numbers. The new citizens of Braintree.

"How many months' worth is this?" he asked.

Mayor Kemp touched his index finger to his wide nose.

"This is just last week."

Kemp relished the look of shock on Pastor Shirkus's face. All these names. Unrecognizable. Presumably connected to bodies that were walking around town, buying things,

maybe stealing them, taking up space and air. Registering as citizens. Registering to vote. Changing the essence of his town.

Braintree was swelling.

To call it a city was too generous. Calling it a town would earn a squint and a head nod. Tucked into the leas of crawling vegetation and a thin stream aspiring to riverhood, Braintree abutted an abandoned air force base with its dangerous spiked walls and hollow concrete dormitories. It was walled, naturally, with a guard taking names at the entrances and operating whirring mechanical gates on bike chains that required a maddening amount of upkeep during Kemp's father's day. The manicured houses spiraled in creatively angled streets, leading to the center inspired by the European market towns of old. The cobblestones had been replaced when they'd gone out of fashion, and an earlier population boom added a middle class and replaced the bedeviled gate with n AI-powered one, but the town square still boasted the same striking fountain where four horses ride out of a raging white water upwards and upwards and out, splashing the unexpected in lavish Prosperian symbolism.

Closest to the fountain sat the city hall, and next to that, the miniscule Peacekeeper headquarters, trafficked by neighbors complaining about the height of someone else's lawn. All around the square there were shops and condominiums above them, each more splendid than the last.

To live in the heart of the town was to be deliciously rich. Four tiny alleyways crept into the town square, spilling out the foot traffic and keeping cars away. Pastor Shirkus's church dominated the space with its stately spire and lovely tolling bell tower. It had been Catholic

before the conversion. Next to it, Honeysett's Cafe, where Kemp's ire was rising. His head turned, and his eyes rose to the apartment above the flower shop.

"A month ago, I came to you to raise the dangers of allowing Berenice Barnhardt to continue operating inside the city. When she called for municipal funds to pay for a food pantry, you scoffed at me. Likewise, when she questioned the value of having, and I quote, 'more than one lifetime's money.' And when she called for the poor to move to Braintree on her socials, I came to you, Pastor Shirkus, yes, I came to you and what did you say?"

"I said she wouldn't succeed."

"You said she'd have better luck catching trout in the town fountain, but the sentiment is correct. So, tell me. Has she succeeded?"

The evidence in front of them was undeniable. The poor were coming to Braintree. A hundred in one week could mean a thousand the next month. The outsiders would overrun the good people of Braintree.

"The registration numbers here make plain what we need to do, Mayor Kemp," Pastor Shirkus said, pushing a plate covered in a thin skeleton of Hollandaise sauce away from him.

"We'll just have to kill her."

Mayor Kemp slapped both hands against his cheeks and thrust them out toward his friend as though trying to embrace him despite the cafe table.

"Oh, Lord. Thank you, dear lovely Lord, for allowing my friend to finally see the light."

"Only we can't just yet," said Pastor Shirkus.

"Christ, Wesley. Why the fuck not?"

"For one, she's a registered Garcian, and she—"

"You and I both know that she's Eternal Triumph masquerading..."

"—and she hasn't done anything blasphemous enough to warrant death. You need her to slip up. Or you need to wait. Kaleel Fonseca's death has left a vacuum. The movement will collapse any day now."

Mayor Kemp tapped his foot on the ground with raging compulsion. He wondered if his friend was right.

"That's changed the calculus, a bit, I'll admit."

"Plus, his death will have even the Garcians on edge. Especially those who remember the early days. Give it a week. A month, tops. There will be a correct moment to exact the same fate on Berenice Barnhart."

Kemp looked again to the window above the flower shop, lined with false shutters and scummy from the spring humidity.

"She's up there right now. Living in a room she doesn't deserve. Do you remember Blake Hornsby?"

Hearing the sounds of the name conjured the past vividly and immediately for Pastor Shirkus. He saw nails hammered into baseball bats. He had seen the boy's ripped, bloody clothing. It had been his first winter preaching in Braintree.

"That's how we stamped out Eternal Triumph from this town in the good old days, and now we're coddling it. It's disgraceful."

"It's tact, Rashoderick."

"Caution doesn't suit me."

"But it suits the situation."

"If we can't kill Berenice now," Mayor Kemp continued, "I still need something from you."

"I am ever your servant."

"I need you to figure out who her benefactor is. I need to know who's paying the rent on that egregious apartment, who's ensuring she can work around the clock on undermining my authority. I need to know who is helping her wreck my town."

"If you believe she's secretly Eternal Triumph, then it's likely she's getting funds from them."

"They don't have any. Selling beeswax and strawberry jam to rednecks in Idaho doesn't get you that apartment. Or her computer. Or her recording equipment. It doesn't get her the tools to broadcast her hate from the heart of Braintree."

"Perhaps you're right."

"So, you'll do it."

"Of course. Your word is my command. I'll find out who's keeping her flush before you dump her body in a shallow grave."

"Don't be bleak, Pastor," Kemp said. "I'll hang it in the courtyard and throw a parade."

||

Berenice's ballet flats made a pleasant scraping sound as she meandered the farmer's market, making curlicues with each turn back to re-examine or swing back toward a booth to reconsider. Her dance was as much about judging her immediate desires as it was about becoming one for those around her. Sometimes she held her phone out, provocatively live-streaming so that people were forced to choose to stay in the frame or duck to get away. She liked seeing who did what.

Today she wore clean-lined denim shorts that ringed the fattest part of her thighs and a black concert tee her mother gave her with a sailing ship smashing against a wave and rising into the air above it. She'd memorized the cities and dates on the back. As with any time she left her apartment, she was calculatedly thrown together.

The pallets on the outer ring of the makeshift pavilion tents were brimming with beef heart tomatoes, dewy butter lettuces, and asparagus spears standing tall as soldiers bound together with cheap rubber bands. Each step brought a new scent, sweet, earthy, floral. A makeshift booth at the end of the farmer's row was brewing fresh coffee for the weary.

Berenice brushed past the flower stalls, admiring, but never buying. Maybe once in a while. Double knock out roses and blue columbines and blanketflower. It was a luxury that brought personal gratification but little return on investment. It was easier to pluck something beautiful off the side of the trails beyond the wall. It would be a smart idea to pick some for when her special guest arrived.

It was also easy to spot which of the sellers was in it for the prestige and who really needed the cash. The healthy glow and bright eyes of the man hocking pressed juices suggested a hired rep paid decently enough to buy himself lunch and pinch a juice every so often to wash it down. The sunken, wanting gaze topping the proud grandpa smile of the man selling homemade pasta revealed a man counting every tablespoon of flour left on the counter.

She bought a package of spinach raviolis.

"These are an absolute fave," she said, pressing "Live" and pretending she'd forgotten to care about her make-up. "Gianni here is a godsend. Everyone always asks where I get this stuff. Secret's out! And he's just the sweetest man. When y'all come through Braintree, don't leave without seeing him."

She winked at him and didn't wait for her change.

She bought a small container of fresh kimchi with a mind to feature it in a video and flitted toward her favorite produce vendor to pick the brightest citrus specimens.

"Can you hold them out as far from your body as possible?" Berenice asked, cocking her head at the vendor as if calculating the sunlight to capture its angle.

The vendor – really the vendor's oldest son – held the lemons in his hand out as she asked and grinned coyly.

"Perfection," she said, bringing her fingertips to her mouth and kissing them with a sharp, theatrical smack. She touched the face of her phone. She took the picture. The lemons popped onto the screen so close that the roughness of their skin featured prominently even as their deep yellow beamed and the young man remained a blur in the background.

Pleased, she sent it out into the world, and heard a familiar bonfire of a voice. She looked over her shoulder, turned back to squirrel her face up at the vendor's son, and spun around to face the source.

"You know, Oscar Johns is the only reason you can buy those."

"Oh? Does he work with Cody at Lupine Farms?"

She gestured toward the lanky young man behind the lemons. Cody. With his rough hands, broken nose, and the story that went with it. She'd never been able to drag it out of him, even after a bottle of wine. Her attempts were short-lived, and talking wasn't her main goal anyway.

Cody backed up now, grinning, but smart enough not to eavesdrop.

"Merely pointing out that Pastor Johns funds the entire agricultural industry. And electric. And water."

"And we all fund him."

"Bite your tongue, Ms. Barnhart," Pastor Shirkus's voice was insistent. A principal scolding a rebellious student. He took the lemon from her hand, rubbing his thumb against the bumps of its peel.

"Lemon yellow is a great color for your skin tone. Mind if I snap a pic?" she lifted her phone. Wesley's thick hand brought it back down, shocking her with how quickly he could summon his power.

"Don't play games." She felt his other hand wrap around her wrist. "Understand the fragility of the position you're in."

She laughed.

"Wesley..."

"Pastor Shirkus."

"...is the purpose of this conversation to get me to leave town?"

"It would make Mayor Kemp's life much better, but the cost of rope isn't that high these days at any rate. Your little project in population growth hasn't gone unnoticed," his breath was coffee and bourbon. Or whiskey. She always confused the two.

"Understood. Thank you for your concern, Pastor Shirkus."

He sighed, letting go of her wrist.

"Can I at least have my lemon back?" she asked.

"Cody. My order, please."

Cody came as called, excusing himself from another potential patron at the kale end of the stall. He picked up a fat plastic bag of lemons, its handles strained into a small knot at the top and handed it across the yellow stack to Pastor Shirkus.

"If only your sense was as good as your taste," he told Berenice, tossing her lemon back to her and retreating back into the crowd.

She dropped it among the others nesting on a fat pile of baby spinach, and Cody handed her bag over. She sighed out in relief, nerves jangled.

"Pleasure doing business with you," she said, bounding off.

In her apartment above the flower shop, she unloaded her shopping, leaving the pasta and vegetables on the counter next to the refrigerator.

Too tight to untie, she cut the knot off the top of the lemon bag with a paring knife. She picked out one of the plump lemons, carefully cutting the knobby pedicel and peeling it back to reveal the tightly wound cylinder of bills stuffed into the fruit. Satisfied, she took the bag and the knife to her bathroom, unrolling the bills and pinning each to a clothesline to dry. Soon, the whole room smelled of citrus. The scent she would forever associate with money. The wealth hung like pennants.

At the bottom of the bag, she found a small tin airplane and smiled. It was forest green. She spun the wheels along her palm and added it to the other tin toys on the shelf by her bed. A memento from her secret benefactor.

Berenice Barnhart lived above a flower shop near the city center, but she'd grown up on a dairy farm an hour out of town. The work of the farm, with its bursts of intensity and languid periods of rest excited her. The satisfaction of the farm's nurturing and providing for others astounded her, and the girl-shaped part of her still bristled at what she'd allowed herself to become by moving into town, but there was work to be done here, too. Thrilling and transformational work that would nurture in a different way.

The studio apartment was a cozy nest. If she stood at her kitchen table she could fall backward onto her bed, and she frequently pinballed from each space, tablet in hand, attempting to push the world off its axis solely with words. She logged almost all of her thoughts online, gathering a significant following, and she pretended that sponsorship advertising was enough to cover her rent. Obviously, her cover story was crumbling. Pastor Shirkus's threat was all too clear. She was no mystic, but the timing of it felt pure and imbued with meaning. Janthy would be there any day, Child would follow soon after, and so what if some old patricians grumbled? No victory without effort. She understood her own limitations, and she felt her honest beliefs bubbling inside of her, ready to emerge with the full force of her personality. The day was dawning soon that she could remove all artifice, and that possibility sent a tingle up her body like a single finger tracing from wrist to neck.

She wasn't going anywhere.

She opened a window. As the money dried in the mid-morning breeze, she loaded the feed for her podcast, Beyond Prosperous, and pressed record, feeling the need to convert her nervous energy into action.

"Just enjoyed a fascinating tete-a-tete with our local Prosperian parson about the value of knowing your place. We are at a crossroads of understanding here in Braintree. It's a powder keg doused with gasoline," she adopting a silky radio timbre, ladling out each syllable for the microphone. "Anybody got a light?"

†

Chapter Five

Thursday, April 29, 2049

Houston, Texas

The table Enjoli had to set up for the recruitment station outside the Department of Human Services wobbled at both ends. A Spire named Janelle, beaming with the confident joy of a Labrador, had flipped it up by herself while trying to explain what she called "the ropes," but Enjoli only half-listened. The woman's attitude was grating, and Enjoli couldn't fully immerse herself in the first day of her training.

"Oscar Johns sent me here himself," she said, trying to make it seem as though she were excited about it.

"Well, that's just lovely!" Janelle crowed.

This had been the special project he'd assigned Enjoli after the Easter sermon, and she still felt crestfallen about it. He had pitched it as getting to know the totality of the operation, but it felt like nothing short of banishment. She scraped brown crust off the bottom of her shoe and half-watched Janelle line up clipboards.

Enjoli was pissed. First at Oscar Johns for sending her away, then at herself for spoiling her relationship with him by asking for that stupid raise, and then at her family for griping. They should see the people here. The fleshy atmosphere of despondent people with no particular place to go and no particular hurry to get there. She and Janelle were twins in yellow Polos amid a sea of ragged grays and browns, hand-me-downs restitched and recobbled together into something

barely wearable. An older man walked by without a shirt on, his concave chest bruised beneath a thorny beard. A few kids played a game with dice along the sidewalk, squatting down so they could sit on their heels for hours without getting tired. They looked as if they would remain there in the gutter like little discarded statues that occasionally risked tipping over to roll the dice.

The thin crowd seemed in constant motion, some shuffling slowly in line for the DHS where they would cough against the glass as their digital money token was processed. Enjoli wanted to throw up. The people disgusted her, and she worried that they all might lunge at her at any moment, clawing desperately at her and not knowing how little she also had. More than they did, but she worked for it, and that left her vulnerable.

A large portrait of Oscar Johns hung inside the lobby of DHS next to a quotation in big block letters. "IF YOUR DREAMS SEEM OUT OF REACH, YOUR BOOTSTRAPS NEED A GOOD TUG." Enjoli saluted it from the other side of the window.

Janelle beamed at her, and Enjoli returned a closed-mouth smile.

"Isn't the energy out here infectious?" Janelle said. "The line really builds out in about half an hour, which gives us time to scope them out, decide on the most likely prospects." Janelle smoothed an absurd plastic covering over the foldout table. Their job was to find people willing to take vows as Aspirers, pledging their lives to service of the church.

"We don't approach just anyone," Janelle explained. "Everyone here would jump at the chance for a paycheck."

"Even ours."

"Even ours." Janelle raised her eyebrows in a way that made Enjoli think she wasn't as square as she assumed. She was older than Enjoli, close to forty. This also depressed Enjoli.

"What are we looking for?"

"Someone who isn't too far gone. They don't have to be young, but it's a bonus. I can usually tell by the way someone carries themselves whether they're confident or just full of it."

"It's hard to hide insecurity," Enjoli said, taking a seat next to Janelle.

"Sometimes you see someone dressed a certain way and you can tell they're clever. They can turn a little into a lot. Otherwise, just trust your gut and the testing process will weed out the rest."

"You really take this seriously, huh?"

Janelle sighed, finally showing a gap in her armored smile. "If I didn't, I would be bored to tears. Plus, I like people watching, and I bring this." Enjoli looked under the table where Janelle wagged a small silver flask.

By lunch, Enjoli had spoken with dozens of people. Almost all had signed up to be tested to see if they would make good Spires. If they passed, they'd train, buy their uniforms, and be assigned to a home church somewhere in the United States.

It was a process Enjoli had skipped entirely because she'd won the tithing lottery and landed on Johns's radar. While her training class was shipped to coastal Tennessee or rusty Ohio, she stayed put.

Throughout the morning, she saw hints of ingenuity. She saw charisma. She saw grit. But the only thing all of the applicants shared was a desperation, deeply familiar to Enjoli, that trickled out of them as they leaned forward, ready to sign anything they were asked.

Deciding to take Johns at his word, Enjoli took the morning as a class in how the church operated at the most foundational level. She immediately questioned their approach. It didn't seem ideal to build an army of assistants using despair as the main motivation, yet the operation had worked successfully like this for years. Johns had created something better than loyalty. He'd shown starving people what it meant to have a half-full belly, and the question silently voiced with each new working day was whether they wanted it empty again.

When they were about to shut down their efforts and load up the van Janelle had driven from the church, a young man with a shaved head and an ear littered with rings slammed his hand on the table and swept the remaining pamphlets to the ground. He stared with crazed eyes, but Janelle didn't react. After a moment, the man spat at the table and ran off down the cracked sidewalk. Enjoli's phone rang, but she ignored it, turning her head to Janelle.

"Friend of yours?" she asked.

"So many new friends each week," Janelle said, rising to pick up everything scattered on the ground. The line for the DHS shuffled slowly behind them.

Enjoli's phone rang again, and when she answered, Abuela's voice exploded in her ear.

"Whoa! Vaya! Más despacio, abuela," she pleaded. "¿Lo que está mal?"

She listened, then covered the phone's mic with her palm.

"It's an emergency," she told Janelle. "Do you mind?"

"No problem. You did good for your first time."

Enjoli raced back to her car and tossed her phone into the passenger seat. She turned the key in the ignition, but it only grinded a cruel whine at her.

"Shit. You've gotta be kidding me."

She tried it again. Slammed her hands against the wheel. Then, grabbing her phone and keys, she raced back to Janelle who was still folding up the table.

||

She couldn't believe that Janelle agreed to drive her all the way to her apartment, but there was no time for gratitude when they pulled into the parking lot. Enjoli was out of the car before Janelle could put it in park, speed-walking to where a dumpy, middle-aged man who looked like her Tio Matt was standing his ground. Abuela shoved a finger into his chest next to the acorn logo embroidered onto a pocket bursting with touchpad styluses. He was not the only one in the apartment complex, and they weren't the only family pleading a case. Shouts rang throughout the courtyard. Curses in Spanish and Vietnamese and languages Enjoli didn't speak.

"What's going on?" Enjoli said, aiming her question at the man and catching her breath.

"This man dice que está robando nuestra casa!" Abeula answered instead.

"You speak English?" the man asked Enjoli.

"Yeah. Who are you? What's she mean you're stealing our home?"

"In accordance with imminent domain laws, the Colley-Laburu Development Corporation is reclaiming this property for new projects. Please remove yourselves and whatever property necessary from the premises by 4am tomorrow morning, or you may face such penalties as fines, imprisonment, and deportation. Do you understand?"

"There's been a huge mistake," was all Enjoli could think of saying.

"We pay our rent always!" Abuela screamed. Cecilia watched from their living room window, and Enjoli thought she heard Filip crying through the thin walls.

"In accordance with imminent domain laws, the Colley-Laburu Development Corporation is reclaiming—" the man started again.

"Deja de decir eso! Stop it!" Abuela yelled, but the man continued droning on.

"Sir," Enjoli began. "Sincerely, there's been a mistake. I work with Oscar Johns. Let me call him and sort this out." She hoped that invoking her boss's name would stir something in the man, that he would panic and realize the power he was messing with, but he didn't even seem to notice. He started his repeated spiel anew while Enjoli scrambled to call into the office.

Janelle approached the squabble. Enjoli wasn't sure she wanted a relative stranger there, but now it felt like strength in numbers was better than nothing.

Enjoli got Johns's scheduler Amber on the phone just as the man pulled out a stylus and made a mark on his tablet.

"As I have communicated the situation to the occupant multiple times with no affirmative response, consider yourself duly and legally informed. Goodbye."

He walked off before Enjoli could explain anything, but when she finally did, Amber got serious and said she would tell Johns immediately.

"He'll get this fixed," she said, trying to be reassuring before disconnecting.

"Can they do this?" Janelle asked, but Enjoli didn't know, so she shook her head and ushered her abuela inside.

||

Abuela's bed was covered by a floral quilt rubbed soft by decades of use. Its mauves and teals had long ago ascended into distinctive colors, giving the interlocked triangles of the flowers a deliquescent quality as though they could produce any image they pleased if handed down through enough generations. The old woman smoothed it out every morning after making the bed, which Enjoli gave thanks for because it made it much faster to lay out their passports, state IDs, social security cards, insurance documents and tax records, Abuela's naturalization certificate, Papa Vargas's death certificate and military records, and several bound photo albums with pictures dated back to Enjoli's great-great-grandparents' wedding in Bustamante.

She'd been in perpetual motion since the terrible man had left, making mental lists and giving orders so Cecilia would know the triaged order of all the things they needed to take with them. Abuela had been frustratingly unhelpful, succumbing to a state of violent disbelief of what

was happening to them – what was being done to them – and acting like Enjoli was crazy for tearing up the apartment.

"Worst case is we unpack all of this tomorrow," she'd said, telling herself as much as Abuela. It was the first time she'd appreciated living in a small home.

Janelle had left to return the church's van and equipment, but had returned a few hours later with dinner, flat-pack boxes, and her sleeves already rolled up, reacting with the kind of selflessness that confused Enjoli to the point of irritation. She didn't enjoy feeling like a charity case, but she didn't have any time to get angry and so set Janelle to work packing non-perishables while Cecilia was left to all things Filip. Enjoli finished the last load of laundry around midnight, folding a mound of jeans with her cell phone pressed to her ear making yet another call to Amber. Between each task she called and texted anyone within the church hierarchy she thought might be able to help her get information. Stow a shoe box of heirlooms. Call Amber. Pack toiletries. Text Travis. List their medications while boxing them. Amber again. All anyone had was platitudes. Johns had been notified, and something was in the works.

The Colley-Laburu Development Corporation hadn't told them where they were meant to go after the deadline, so Enjoli assumed they were on their own to figure it out. Thank God she had the truck. They could pack out and drive to the Piney Point Shelter and work their way as far east as they dared if they didn't have any beds. Enjoli's stomach turned at the idea, but it was only for the day while she hunted down a new apartment. As long as they didn't have to go all the way to the tenements along the coastline by the old airport or in the southern saltmarsh near Sunset Terrace. They'd find a place to rest long before then even if Enjoli needed to bribe an administrator. She thought suddenly of their security deposit and burst out laughing.

Maybe Abuela was right that she'd lost it.

Janelle stepped into the bedroom, drying her hand on a damp kitchen towel.

"The dishes..." Enjoli muttered. "I didn't even think about them."

"Well, they're washed at least. Whether you leave them or not."

"Maybe no room in the truck."

Janelle nodded. "I'm starting to pace around here, so I thought I might pop out and check to see if the neighbors need anything."

"Why?" Enjoli said, not meaning to sound so acidic.

"Is there something else you need me to do?"

"God wants us to save ourselves first," Enjoli almost cackled.

Now it was Janelle's turn to laugh.

"You really believe that?"

Just hearing the question for the first time made Enjoli wonder, but she quickly snapped back.

"Me? You're the one who was a model Prosperian all morning. Except the flask."

"Because they monitor us, newbie. You seriously think they send us out there without supervision?"

Enjoli felt like an idiot. Of course they were watching. Inside Living Prosperity there were GuardiaNet nanodrones tallying every step and vape break. She hadn't thought of monitors existing outside the castle walls, hadn't considered that someone would be even more keen to keep the missionaries in check so far away from home base.

"Who are you?" Enjoli asked.

"Same as you," Janelle answered. "A lapdog depressingly content with table scraps."

"That's not me."

"Sure. Okay."

"It's not."

"I didn't mean it as an insult," Janelle said, tossing the dishrag on the nightstand. "I just thought I saw...something there. Look. It's not my place, but he's done this before."

"Who?"

"Pastor Johns. Let me guess. You thought you were close, maybe worthy of some special place in his cadre, and then you did something to piss him off, and now you're stuck with corralling the outcasts with me."

"That's not what happened," Enjoli said, suddenly terrified that he knew she'd stolen from him.

“Something similar happened to me,” Janelle said. “A while ago. I’ve seen a few others like you over the years.”

Enjoli's phone buzzed, and she leapt on it. She punched the bed after reading the text, then shoved it in Janelle's face. Oscar Johns would be calling in five minutes.

“You’re wrong,” Enjoli said, showing her the screen.

"I hope I am. Sincerely. I like you, and I hope this all works out," Janelle said.

"Yeah, thanks, I guess. For being here," Enjoli said, feeling the tension of the panicked hours slip away. She needed to hear Pastor Johns’s voice telling her everything would be okay.

"There's *mate* if you need a pick-me-up. And here," Janelle said, tapping her phone against Enjoli's, which responded with a keen vibration. "Now you have my digits. In case you need anything."

"Why are you helping us?" Enjoli asked. The other Spire’s charity made her suspicious, but what drove Enjoli even crazier was not being able to figure out the angle Janelle was playing. She couldn’t see the endgame, how it would put Janelle on top, and Enjoli’s ignorance tore at her.

Janelle smiled. "Because you needed it."

After Janelle left the apartment, Enjoli downed a sludgy cup of *mate*. Abuela had fallen asleep on the sofa in the living room with the lights on. Cecilia and Filip were in their room, and

all was quiet. Enjoli retreated back to her and Abuela's bedroom, so the phone call didn't wake anyone up.

"Enjoli, I've only just heard," Oscar Johns's face filled her screen. He was wearing a white, plush jumper and appeared out of breath. "It's an awful spot."

"Thank you, sir. It's an incredible relief hearing from you."

"I wish I called with better news, then."

Janelle's accusation niggled at the forefront of her mind. Enjoli slumped against the bed, knocking over a small tower of Passports.

"Is there nothing at all you can do to stop them?" she asked, worrying suddenly that her assumption at his omnipotence was misplaced, surprising herself with how forthrightly she offered her hopelessness.

"I can't stop what's already in motion, but I secured your family a spot at a no-kill shelter. Golden Boughs. It's particularly clean, I hear. And close to the church. You'll come stay at one of the Aspirer dormitories," he said, offering her the closed-mouth version of his smile. A soft pillow she'd seen him use both to comfort and to smother.

"Sir, I'm not sure I can leave my family alone in one of those places."

"I thought you'd be grateful not to have to stay there yourself."

She wasn't sure what to say. She suddenly felt as though she were tapdancing on the head of a pin, trying not to slip off. The idea that she would worry about losing what he'd already offered her sickened her. Let it just be for one night. She could survive the one night.

"Of course, Pastor Johns. I'm incredibly thankful that you've stepped in and pulled strings. If it's possible to stay with my family, I'd like to do so."

"Have it your way, Enjoli. Spots in the shelters are a precious thing."

"I know. Thank you, sir." She ran the back of her wrist against the sweat on her forehead, too tired and amped to consider what he'd think of her in this state. A disheveled, puny thing with her hands outstretched and eyes pleading.

"One more thing before I let you go. What might you have done to incur God's judgement in this way?"

Enjoli struggled to hide her confusion, and Johns continued just as the first words were forming on the tip of her tongue.

"When we love God, we're rewarded with comfort and security. When we displease God, he removes those things so that we may learn to love him better. You have lost your home on short notice and are going to live, who knows for how long, in a place of wretchedness and disease. It's safe to say you're getting knocked on your ass. So, it's obvious that you've fallen out of God's favor. You've done *something*, I don't know what, to anger God and set loose this abominable consequence. So, can you think of anything you might have done?"

All her sins jumped to mind.

"I can't think of anything, Pastor Johns, so I will pray on it once we're in the shelter."

He stayed silent, and she felt an undeniable urge to fill the void. She wanted to confess. To beg for his mercy.

"Well, good luck," he finally said, and his face dissolved into the gunmetal gray of her screen. The tears started to come. Enjoli threw her phone at the ground and collapsed against the bed, sending their passports and birth certificates to the floor. She moaned, her throat tightening and face reddening. She tried to prop herself up, but she couldn't breathe, so she returned to the carpet gasping against air that felt like cement. In a moment, the heaviest wave passed, and she brought herself to her knees, unable to unclench her facial muscles but finally, graciously, able to breathe.

Abuela appeared, sleepy-eyed in the doorway, padding over to Enjoli and placing her delicate hands on her shoulders.

"Mi cielo," she said, kissing the crown of Enjoli's head. "Mi cielo, mi cielo, mi cielo... everything will turn out okay."

‡

Chapter Six

Monday, May 3, 2049

Braintree, Colorado

Janthy let the radio in the pick-up struggle to find a station, searching for peace in the static as the dark miles flew by. For years she'd hung a cross on the dash, but she refused to let anything hang there now. Throughout the mountain passes she felt an overwhelming sense of loneliness even as the occasional car or horse trailer flashed by, headlights growing from firefly interrogation lamp to blinding lighthouse bulb before whipping past. She didn't wonder where they were going. They were all headed the wrong way.

She ran her hands through her short hair, mussed it, and smoothed it out again. The excitement she felt jettisoned from her fingertips, and she wanted in that moment to give herself over completely to a deep breath meditation or to cry as hard as she could or to scream at the top of her lungs, so she did the only one she felt safe enough to do while driving. The radio picked up Braintree's country station mid-scream, a jangly-voiced ingenue breaking into her meditation with a staticky line about loving Coors Prime and Saturday nights. Janthy laughed with a mournful glee, wishing desperately that Kaleel were sitting in the passenger seat explaining the universal truths of why God chose that song to burst through at that exact moment. Instead, Janthy tried to puzzle out the deeper meaning herself until she felt silly, missed Kaleel even more, and gave up.

The signs proclaiming the miles to Braintree first felt like enemy flags, but the closer she got, the more she understood that she'd have to become the town's ally. A guide out of the wilderness from blankness and greed, even though she felt guilty for not feeling any sense of excitement at arriving there.

She turned off the radio and pulled over when she got to the town arches. Such a strange desire. To want to announce your town to the world. She imagined the silver reflecting the sunshine in a dazzling display during the day, but at night they reminded her of dirty mirrors with nothing to reflect. When she placed her palm flat against them, their magic gave way further. As the silver paint flaked off against her skin, she felt the wood underneath.

There in the dark, with the wind whispering angrily, she tried once again to hear the voice of God. She had tried it almost every day since meeting Kaleel because he had asked her to. "Can you hear it," she'd asked him, and when he nodded so casually, as though she were asking if he'd ever had Thai food or liked rainy days, she'd found suddenly that it was something she needed desperately. A connection she hadn't been offered before. Kaleel asked everyone who joined Eternal Triumph to try to hear God's voice. That didn't bother her. It didn't make Janthy feel less special. He relied on her so thoroughly that there was no question of the strength of their bond. It was something far beyond physical love, a stirring that made her even more confident that she would one day be able to hear the voice over her shoulder as Kaleel had. Now that Child heard it, she didn't feel jealousy so much as a flattening of her heart because she assumed that there must be something wrong with her love to not hear it. Since she wanted it more than anything else in the world, there was no use blaming it for not arriving, so the fault must be with

her ears, her heart, her faith. Standing at the threshold of what Kaleel and Child professed to be the new Eden seemed as good a place as any to try to listen again.

"Please. I am here. Tell me what to do."

There was only wind.

Janthy pulled her pen knife and a Sharpie from her pocket, scraped off a square of silver, and left her own welcome message on the town's arches.

Now that she was here, the moment felt small. Ideally there would have been some kind of external sign marking the occasion, a floating lightning in her chest telling her that she was doing the right thing, but no such image or feeling came, and she looked toward the city with a looming doubt.

Kaleel had told them to come to Braintree, so what did it mean to follow Child there? She loved Child, and she trusted him, but she still had not made him a home for her faith since losing Kaleel. There was no way that this place, with its abundance waiting to be claimed, would feel even half a paradise without him.

Scrawling out the final letters on the arch, she underlined the words "YOU'RE SO CLOSE" three times before getting back in her car.

The first few days of the journey had been hell. She had left Figure Nine Farms not knowing if another attack was imminent, not knowing whether her family was going to be safe. Even worse, the doubt had pulled at her guilt, confirming that it was the engine that drove her, and she felt that it had carved out of her faith something essential. She sweated with worry across

the border into Wyoming, waiting for a message from Child letting her know they'd all made it safely out of town. There were a million reasons why he couldn't send word. No service. Too busy making preparations and seeing them through. But Janthy could too easily imagine that she would be on the road as an unknowing sole survivor, navigating the cracked highways of limbo and not knowing anywhere she could lay her head or her soul. Then, like all of her fears, she tucked it into a small box deep inside her mind and burned it until all that was left was the mission.

She had felt a lot better by the time she pulled into Lime Kiln.

It was the only Eternal Triumph encampment between Figure Nine and Braintree. Janthy had planned to spend some time there training its members in combat and preparing for the trip down south. There was no town nearby, and only those who knew the way could reach it. She had followed 660 south alongside and across the North Platte River, lacing the flattened golden shrub land in scummy blues, but when the highway twisted back north, she kept straight onto an unmarked dirt road that led, a little over a mile later, to the Lime Kiln Free Encampment – so called by its founder because the move to Wyoming had been caustic. She also called it that because she was a chemist with a sense of humor.

Ruby Shawl, her face like a beacon and arms like a pro wrestler, had hugged Janthy before she could even get the car door closed.

"Perfect timing, my darling. I need someone to stir while I dice," Ruby said with a voice of burnt honey.

It had been years since they'd seen each other, but they fell into the old rhythms immediately and effortlessly, amusing the others at the encampment. There were three families, the numbers even thinner than the last time Janthy had been able to pass through. *The only direction the numbers goes is down*, she thought, but her spirits were buoyed by dinner and a clove cigarette that Ruby insisted had been hand-rolled to ward off "road-weariness and dumb bullshit."

"Be even better if there was any tobacco around," she'd joked. "Sage just don't do it for me."

Ruby had a way of making Janthy laugh until her chest felt lighter. Not limbo, she thought. Homes abounding.

"If the world wasn't ending, I'd just stay here," she said.

"Honey, the world ending is the best possible reason to. And you haven't even seen my boon."

"Boon?"

Ruby took Janthy back into the kitchen, which brimmed with steam and 1980s R&B. A young pregnant white woman named Christina was still cutting lemons, but Janthy saw immediately what she was making.

"Lemon stick!" she cried, picking up a fat peppermint stick. "But how?"

Christina handed her a lemon. Janthy dug the peppermint stick into the middle, drew it out, and closed her eyes in pleasure as the sour-sweet taste hit her tongue.

"You can take the girl out of Baltimore..." Ruby began.

"And you can't grow fucking lemons in Wyoming," Janthy finished.

Ruby lifted her finger and her eyebrows.

"Ah, but you can. They're just a real bitch to keep alive.

"Don't tell me you're hiding Old Bay under the sundress of yours."

"You're joking, but we came close. Just couldn't get the cinnamon, celery salt, and smoked paprika."

"And we don't have any crabs anyway," Christina said.

"This is incredible. I'm ten years old, again."

Ruby led Janthy to a greenhouse out back. They stepped from the dry chill into the tropics, and Ruby flipped on a light, bathing a dozen squat plants which still held onto their ripening fruit. A burgeoning yellow against the green.

"Dwarf Meyers," Ruby explained. "We planned to bring them in here for the colder months, but then most months were cold, and it seemed silly to lug them back and forth. You know how much I hate excess work."

"Child has me going to Braintree because it's supposed to be the new Eden. I can't help but feeling I'm overshooting paradise by a few hundred miles."

"You're sweet, but this is a miniscule luxury in the wilderness. What we'll build in Braintree is the real deal."

"But not nearly as miraculous as lemon trees in the tundra," Janthy marveled.

"Just imagine what we could do with all the gizmos the big girls play with, my darling."

Janthy had slept well that night and the night after it, muscles sore from running drills with Ruby and the others, getting them to use their weapons smartly, getting them to understand when to run and when to fight, teaching them how to win when cramped by a lack of resources. Before he'd been arrested in El Paso, Kaleel – the man most dedicated to peace in her life – had told her that violence was coming, and history had taught her that they would be on the receiving end. Her last day at Figure Nine replayed in her mind, but she felt good doing something active. She was preparing those for whom violence was inevitable. They were clumsy, and there were only a few days she could spare, but they would get better.

She offered to stay until they were ready to travel to Braintree, but Ruby waved her off. They were still fixing up a second vehicle, Christina's baby was due any day now, and it was better if Janthy paved their way.

"It'll be your turn to greet us with something sweet after a weary journey," she'd laughed.
"And it won't be too long."

Her visit to Lime Kiln had only made the following days on the highway heading to Braintree even lonelier.

After she carved her name in the Braintree town arches, Janthy reached the southern gate a little after midnight. Her ankle ached, and her calf tensed up, so close to her destination. Her whole body ready to be done. She punched in the security code Berenice gave her into the metal box. The buttons felt thin against her fingertips, and the box gave slightly against her pressure. Then, the city of Braintree opened to her. The walls were a fine height, but there were already spots she knew would need fortifying, and her mind automatically set itself to the task, envisioning guard rotations and heavy buttressing.

She found the apartment above the flower shop in market square easily. Berenice almost fully crushed the bag of peppermint sticks in Janthy's hand between them when she wrapped her arms around the old soldier at the door.

"Oh my god, I haven't had these since I was kid," she exclaimed, beckoning Janthy into her apartment and plucking a stick out of the bag for herself. "Chamomile, Jamaica, or bourbon? It's real bourbon, so don't worry. Or whiskey. I can't remember. I know sometimes people make their own and don't warn you about it. Not sure if you had that at Figure Nine or what. Whoa. It is so, so great to meet you. So weird that you're physically here."

Road-weary and scuffed by so many miles on her own, Janthy took an instant liking to the girl.

Karen Fielder rose when Janthy entered, smiling broadly and opening her arms wide in embrace. She was older than Janthy, her white skin tanned from hours crouched in fields, wrinkles on her face like ripples on a lake emanating from her broad smile.

"Youthful energy," she whispered in Janthy's ear, and Janthy smiled. "I've missed having you around, lady."

The apartment was a tidy space, every part of it visible from the doorway. The galley kitchen a few paces from a student bed nestled between shelving that doubled as desk space. Berenice's tablet sat among several houseplants that would have toppled over if the curtains were ever closed. Down below in the square, a couple kissed at the fountain, their hands on the verge of discovering more skin under the silent cover of night. The sound of the fountain tinkled like windchimes hung near a waterfall. Berenice popped a peppermint stick into her mouth and handed Janthy a mug of hot tea.

Janthy plopped down on the bed, head framed by pictures of long-dead movie stars smiling in black and white. The familiar faces of hers and, she assumed, Berenice's mother's youth. A huddle of tin toys sitting on a small shelf caught the moonlight. It was all so cozy that Janthy felt like Berenice's hug hadn't ended, and there was a lilt of citrus lingering in the air.

"It's so strange that you're here," Berenice repeated. "So strange."

She took a post in the kitchen, busying her hands and reaching into the refrigerator to set up midnight snacks. So many things on the tray Janthy hadn't seen in years. Olives and feta. Crushed eggplants and artichoke hearts. They'd pickled onions at Figure Nine, but they certainly didn't have hummus. Berenice gave them so freely that it was shocking.

"What's our status here?" Janthy asked.

"You don't wanna eat first?" Berenice responded, chopping into a thick carrot.

"Janthy has planned several wars on an empty stomach," Karen said.

"I'm sorry," Janthy offered. "Just a little anxious from the road."

"Don't apologize," Berenice said. "I've never wanted to give bad news without something to wash it down with."

"How bad?"

Berenice put down the knife.

"A large initial wave showed up. A few hundred. It was large enough that Mayor Kemp and the council took notice, but the numbers dwindled and never picked up again. The election is in a month, and it's on a knife's edge."

"And they're gonna ratfuck us by kicking all the newcomers off the voter rolls anyhow," Karen added. "Probably me too just for spite."

"Karen has been playing hostess to those who heeded Child of Aaron's call."

Those words. This young woman, born while Janthy was getting teargassed in the streets, so easily and unknowingly erased Kaleel from the narrative. Somehow, he was already gone, and the movement moved on. Janthy grimaced.

"Has Child checked in with you?" Janthy asked.

"Child?" Berenice coughed incredulously, as though Janthy had just referred to Jesus by his first name. "*Child* has never been in contact with me. Holy hell. To even think it. I mean, I would lose my shit, but--"

"Kaleel thought it smarter to keep everyone separate from Berenice and Braintree," Karen interjected. "He told us to ready the way, we asked how, and he shrugged like plotting a minor coup couldn't be simpler."

"Sounds like Kaleel," Janthy acceded. His vagueness should have bothered her, especially now that time wasn't on their side, but the familiarity of his trust in God was comforting instead. Janthy had made the mistake of asking "how?" many times during her time with Kaleel – when they'd first marched together in DC, when they'd grown Eternal Triumph's numbers, when they'd sought a refuge to operate from – and he'd never known. How could he? Knowing would make him God. For Kaleel Fonseca, life itself was one big trust fall. Now that he was dead, Janthy was trapped believing that was just one more part of the larger, unknown plan.

"The good news is that we only have to unseat two members to gain a majority," Berenice said, laying out the feast before them. "Ella Shotto and Nelso Mower are both Prosperian royalty who have been on the council since back when it was still an HOA. The safe seats are either ours or Garcians who are sympathetic to our views."

"But who can't be trusted to go the distance, I imagine. How crucial is it that we take over the city council?" Janthy asked.

"It's the difference between a peaceful transition and a street brawl that ends up like El Paso," Karen answered. "How many guns did you bring?"

"And even that leads us back to the problem of numbers," Berenice said, grimacing.

"Then this may be providence. Child and Sorola are bringing Figure Nine to Braintree, and other encampments will follow suit. You'll have your numbers."

"They're coming now?"

"Yes."

Berenice hung her head and huffed.

"Problem?" Janthy said.

"Their arrival will upend everything. Up to this point we've operated under the radar, as much as possible at least, although if my run in with Pastor Shirkus this afternoon is any indication, the prosperity fascists are catching wise that we're doing *something*. They just don't understand it yet beyond all the new neighbors."

"But they have puzzle pieces and aren't stupid," Karen added.

"Mayor Kemp is windbag enough to miss what's in front of his eyes, but not forever, and not when an election might be at stake. We've let the gasoline simmer so far, but Child coming is a rain of napalm. They could suspend elections entirely. Arrest him for anything they like. Shoot him on sight. "

"And they will. And they will love doing it," Karen said.

"We cannot stop them from coming at this point," Janthy said. "We were attacked. It's too dangerous to stay at Figure Nine, so they've all but certainly left already. They could be here tomorrow or next month."

"Hopefully it isn't too dangerous on the road. We've heard rumors," Karen offered. "Rumblings really. Mobs of Peacekeepers. Traffic stops. Whole caravans turned around. Or worse."

"Noted," Janthy said. "Then the pathway is clear. We have to increase our numbers with persuasion and hope for new arrivals."

"What do you propose?" Karen asked.

"A miracle would be nice."

"I think I have two," Berenice said, biting into a carrot with a sharp crunch. Her eyes went wide, and she scrambled for her phone, swiping up and checking herself in the camera as she chewed, swallowed, and ran her tongue back and forth over her teeth. Janthy couldn't remember being that energetic even when she was young. Without a bit of fanfare, Berenice began speaking to the unseen audience on her phone.

"God just granted me a powerful vision, everyone. I saw storm clouds. And rolling thunder shook the ground. And I saw The Great Fountain of Wealth Church here in Braintree collapse."

Janthy got to her feet.

"The stones of the church crushed everyone inside, and a great rain washed the rubble into the gutter," Berenice continued, internalizing a terror and awe that made the performance unnervingly real, even for Janthy. "It will happen the Sunday before the election. July fourth. Everyone inside will die, and the course of history will be altered by the hand of almighty God."

Berenice pressed a button and dropped her phone onto the sofa. It happened so quickly that Janthy hadn't spotted when the girl had turned back into her sweet, smiling self.

"What have you just done?" Janthy seethed.

Berenice's face fell, looking like a puppy confused as to why its snout was being rubbed against a pissy carpet.

"Just a moment ago, you were worried about escalation, and now you've pretended at prophesying the future, risking arrest for making threats, and ensuring we look like idiots when nothing happens to the church," Janthy said. "What's the next step of your plan? No, you haven't thought that far."

"I was trusting my gut," Berenice said sheepishly. The look on her face softened Janthy's anger. The girl was capable of getting away with murder.

"You are," Janthy began, counting in her head to relax further and see the solution more clearly. "You are used to acting on your own here in Braintree, and you've done well. But you and Karen aren't going to be alone anymore, which means I have your back, and the entire movement will need you to have its best interests in mind. We need concrete ideas. Not whims."

Karen looked on severely. Berenice nodded. Janthy imagined that Berenice's chaotic fancies had caused scuffles before.

"Maybe my second miracle will make up for it," the girl said.

"Should I take your phone away before you present it?" Janthy said, mostly joking behind her tired eyes and flat voice.

"I propose that you meet our silent partner tonight. He's the man whose money has made all this possible so far."

"That's risky," Karen said, but it came more as a warning than an earnest attempt to stop the wheels in motion.

"Who is it?" Janthy asked.

"It's Pastor Shirkus, the head of the church I just doomed to destruction."

Janthy stood stone-lipped, caught between surprise and admiration.

"You weren't kidding when you said you were operating in the shadows," was all she said.

"He's a good man."

"There was a boy," Karen said. "Blake Hornsby."

"I knew Blake," Janthy said quickly. She folded her arms. "That was here?"

Karen nodded, anger creasing her face.

“Blake worked on the farm with me, and I warned him to keep his ideas quiet, but he never backed down. He was in love with Kaleel, read everything he wrote, watched every stream.”

Berenice placed her hand on Karen’s knee, squeezing it and drawing closer.

“So,” Karen sniffed. “Pastor Shirkus had just been assigned here to live the cush life. It was his flock murdering that poor boy in the street, cheering. Some of them are on the council now. They popped champagne when it happened, and Wesley came to me to ask if there was anything he could do. He was disgusted, seeing it up close like that.”

“Some people don’t understand the true cost of something until they have to pay it themselves,” Janthy offered.

“Pastor Shirkus has been funding our operation. He recognizes that Child is the messenger of God on earth even as he preaches Prosperity every Sunday,” Berenice said. She beamed with the pleasure of the successful missionary.

“If he’s willing to do what’s necessary, I know exactly what we need him to do,” Janthy said.

‡

Chapter Seven

Thursday, June 29, 2049

Braintree, Colorado

They came, fearful for their property values, snapping at the assembled city council. Each of them shared the same complaints, and all of them needed to say their piece, working themselves up into a lather and blowing past the allotted five minutes at the microphone.

Pastor Shirkus sat in the center of the crescent, flanked by the other members, enduring the cockeyed ballads from each concerned citizen. Panhandlers were infecting the market square. Property values were at risk. Eternal Triumph scum was preying on their children at local playgrounds. The spirit of the town, that ephemeral essence only detectible to those who could afford pearls to clutch, was being diluted, polluted, and erased entirely. The complaints swirled together. He'd slammed the gavel several times already.

Councilwoman Ella Shotto, impeccable makeup on papery pale skin, nodded thoughtfully along with each diatribe, using her question time to whip the frenzy like a jockey injecting a grand champion with cocaine. She said what a shame and echoed the complaints, only taken aback when her promises of installing anti-homeless spikes and rousting street sleepers from their nests and hauling them out of town were met with brief cheers and even more complaining. The poison flowed too deeply in their veins.

Pastor Shirkus stared down at the list of names yet to speak and sighed. He'd long ago inured himself to the hot wind of inanity in these meetings. Whether property lines or overgrown

lawns, the insistence was always that *something* needed to be done *now*. Each inconvenience was an emergency. Now, they were all facing the prospect of something worse than golf balls smashing windows. Fear was alive in the room.

Reverend Aisling Andersen also failed to stem the tide from her position behind the council desk, reminding the sporty complainers to consider compassion for the newcomers. Jeers convulsed from the crowd at the suggestion and simmered long enough that an elderly white man used his time to harangue her with suggestions that she was in cahoots with Satan and needed to step down in shame that very evening. She looked to Pastor Shirkus, who promptly gaveled for silence and, when the old man kept squawking, turned off the audience mic, sticking to his guns even as cries of fascism and First Amendment rights bloomed from the scrambling red faces. Each gavel strike popped into the space as the AI took minutes, unfeelingly ready to read back anything needed for context.

Mayor Kemp watched it all, cringing, until Sheriff Tarrant tapped his shoulder with a fat finger.

They slipped out the double doors and walked into a wood-paneled meeting room, where Price Tulley and Cooper McGovern waited, sipping from something bubbly. They stood when he entered, but it was offered as the last courtesy of the evening, and Kemp knew it. He would have rather stayed in the council room among the shouting.

"What is he doing here?" Price asked, motioning to Sheriff Tarrant. "He's unnecessary."

Kemp gave a slight nod toward the sheriff, who quietly ducked out.

Price pressed a knuckle to his forehead, massaging a headache. A white man who made a fortune short selling the stock of failing companies, he'd used that same foresight to move to Braintree before everyone else in Florida got trapped with sinking investments. Cooper was a woman with sharp features and bulimic elbows who came from oil money and managed the tricky act of not losing it. She was older than Kemp but wore a flexatanium exosuit that kept her movements as lithe as a teenager's.

Their sustained silence was fiercer than the barking in the council chambers.

"We can skip formalities, yes?" Price said. It wasn't a question.

"The picture here is clear, as is our course of action," added Cooper, pink lipstick coming off against her glass like crime scene evidence.

"I'm happy to entertain your suggestions on how best to deal with Berenice and the flies she's drawn," said Kemp.

"These are more than suggestions, Rashoderick," Cooper said. "We all know that adding barbed wire to the fountain won't fix the problem of Braintree swelling with unwanted visitors. They need to be removed from the city limits, and Berenice Barnhart along with them."

"I'll go dig out my catapult, Cooper."

"This is serious, and if you don't take it seriously, then we will find someone who does," Price said with a flinch of haughty irritation. "Your father. What would he do?"

Mayor Kemp refused to lower his head as they expected him to.

"He was a dentist. And the head of this town when it was just an escape for aging trust fund kids. And a founding Prosperian, by the way."

"Hmm."

"The council is removing newcomers from the voter rolls," Mayor Kemp added.

"So, *your job* is safe..." Cooper hummed.

"And Oscar Johns has instructed—"

"Ha! Don't speak as if you've talked with Oscar, Rashoderick." Price blasted.

"The national flame needs to die down. It's not just Eternal Triumph developing a fever. It's Virtuous Gaze, Final Phoenix, the Celestial Loom ecotheists, all the legacy faiths holed up in their caves, and the list continues. Anyone who feels slighted and owns a call roster."

"There is no reason to be worried about so few, especially with how far any of them are away from Braintree," Cooper added. "Our threat is here and must be dealt with."

"Even Garcians are all on edge thinking that there will be another clampdown. There's your canary," Kemp said.

"Garcians are on edge when a cat goes missing," Price shrugged, shaking his head.

"Should they not expect another clampdown? Should Prosperians not exert the power they have and that is their due?" Cooper asked, her eyes gleaming brightly enough for Kemp to picture himself being tossed onto the flames inside them. "When Maria Hornsby's boy started his

perversions and shouting in the market square about eating the rich, we didn't hesitate to make an example of him, and we shouldn't be afraid to tie that same noose around Berenice's neck now.

What exactly is your hesitation?"

"Believe me," Kemp began. "I've sincerely considered it. Even Wesley is against it."

"Can't stomach it, you mean," Price chided.

"Against it," Kemp emphasized. "And as much as I hate it, he's right. We shoot someone holding a torch, it may fall on gasoline."

"Your cowardice is especially galling in the face of her threats to blow up the church," Cooper said.

"Oh, please, Mrs. McGovern. You can't seriously be worried that she—"

"That bubbleheaded brat threatened the people you have sworn to protect, and she's not even in handcuffs! Why, Rashoderick? You could end this tonight."

"Or knock down the first domino toward losing control over what I can assure you is a shatterable balance. The two things we need least are to give insane proclamations the weight of honest response and to make her a sympathetic figure with a deluge of digital support. Now, I appreciate your concerns and I share them, but we cannot use brute force this time. So, we will change the laws to keep them from voting, and alter housing ordinances, and we will diminish this small insurgent wave. Once the buffet closes, they'll move along," Kemp's voice now settled with resignation. "That's how this always works, and apparently it was Braintree's turn in the barrel. Either they'll drift up to the slums of Denver or out into the woods to starve."

"That was a pretty speech," said Cooper, cool and even. "Now run along and do your duty, son."

Kemp gritted his teeth. A crash came from the council room.

"More of your democracy in action?" Price smirked, but Kemp had already run out of the room, moving quick as he could toward the sound, which landed even louder the second time. Wood splintering against something intractable.

Bursting through the council room doors, he found the assembled members backing away from the dais, recoiling from the incoming violence before ducking into the back offices. A handful of the more agile citizens chased them, banging on the doors with red fists and slathering mouths. The woman who had spoken out first about panhandlers bothering her in the square picked up another bench seat and threw it against the wall, letting it thud down to the carpet, taking out her anger on the furniture.

Sherriff Tarrant looked at sea, flummoxed and shuffling his feet like a linebacker facing a tsunami. Kemp did not hesitate. He backed away, closing the double doors behind him and shuffle-stepping quickly as he could away.

††

Chapter Eight

Saturday, July 3, 2049

Golden Boughs Unhoused Shelter, Houston, Texas

Hurricane Vesta was all anyone at the shelter could talk about. Forecasts gave them the rest of the day and evening to prepare for landfall, but everyone voiced their own opinions and creaky-knee superstitions about when it would come for them. These opinions were huffed in spittle-flecked rants, spat out, categorically dismissed as worry over nothing, heeded with deliberate speed, and growled through hollow voices. Those who chose to remain silent emitted a casual sense of resign to whatever nature was going to deal out as they sat on mesh Copyfiber bunks and gnawed on stale biscuits. People who could afford to leave, and a few who couldn't, had already gone. Others were packing their few belongings with hopes of going north, whether something there waited for them or not. Beyond the city limits, shelters were almost non-existent, and the terrain was harsh, often deadly for those who'd only ever had concrete and asphalt under their feet. There was almost nothing between Houston and Dallas, and everything beyond had been a desert since Enjoli was old enough to drive.

Enjoli didn't care where any of them went. She fed Filip algae paste and prayed for everyone else in the shelter to disappear. The pale-lipped addicts hunched over in the aisles between the cots, the large Bolivian family with their constant fighting, and the greasy man who always kept his hand down his pants. These were their closest neighbors in the shelter, and she could feel the weight of them copied and pasted a hundred more times along the rows and columns where they slept and ate and worried below smiling portraits of Oscar Johns high on the

walls. Some had hung up tarps for privacy, and a plastic shanty town had formed, stretching the length of an airplane hangar. Enjoli couldn't guess what the building used to be, but there were fans with giant blades hanging still high above them and hundreds of rust-red fire sprinklers that had undoubtedly run dry years ago. On the streets someone might stab you in your sleep if you had an apple, and it was only marginally better inside Golden Boughs.

Abuela had her own thoughts about the hurricane, but she kept them to herself. Enjoli would have given anything to hear the old woman speak again. The past few months following their eviction had all but destroyed their relationship. Abuela now treated her grandchild much like all the other strangers inside the shelter, issuing a prickly coldness that shocked and worried Enjoli.

“You see what happens,” Abuela had said as they loaded the truck. “You do everything they ask, and they throw you out like garbage.”

Run down as they were, even the shelters came with a price tag, and Abuela's attitude chafed Enjoli. Would her grandmother rather sleep on the street than thank Pastor Johns for what he'd done for them? For all he could do?

Enjoli didn't want to risk all their stuff getting stolen by parking the truck near Golden Boughs, so she stowed it in the church's parking garage, chipped chair legs poking at a swollen blue tarp, and resigned herself to risking the walk to work.

“Looks like you got what you wanted,” Pastor Johns had said the following morning when she appeared for the team meeting. “You'll save money without paying such high rent.

You can spend that extra cash however you want, so getting kicked out of your apartment is a little bit like getting a raise when you think about it.”

She had smiled then, showing teeth, and dying inside.

Enjoli’s recruitment duty had been short-lived, and she was thankful to be back at Living Prosperity, at home base, but her nerves jangled every time Pastor Johns wanted to speak with her, fearing that he’d send her away again, out into the wilderness. She wanted to show her gratitude. Pleasing Pastor Johns was the only way back into God’s good graces, whether that meant he found them a new apartment out of the kindness of his heart, or if something fell into their laps because of the intensity of her devotion.

Amid the clanging and crowd noise of the shelter, Cecilia roused from her sleep on the cot just as Enjoli finished feeding Filip and yawned before uncurling herself.

"My back's all twisted up. Did they call for lunch yet?"

The lights above them flickered, buzzing with the force of their effort.

"They called lunch time for little Filip," Enjoli said sweetly, kissing the boy's fat cheeks and nestling him in with his mama. They kept a plastic sack of his dirty diapers at the edge of their row. The only trash cans were a hundred yards away, and Enjoli loathed making the trip because it meant leaving Cecilia and Abuela on their own. That fear made it even more difficult to leave them to go to work. It would have been impossible if not for its necessity.

She'd stuck strictly to the church without detours even though she wanted to hunt down a new apartment for them. She had tried after seeing the state of Golden Boughs, but every

apartment manager wanted a bribe that Enjoli wasn't willing to pay, especially when she knew they'd tell her they were full up while pocketing her cash. By the time she had made it back to Golden Boughs that day, she had strangled an Autoride's seatbelt and devoured an entire bag of Hongyuan guava candies that cost twice what they should have.

"There have been hurricanes as long as I've been here, and we always survive. Ike. Harvey. Sonia. Camile. We never run," Abuela said, speaking to herself and making the sign of the cross. She did this when she wanted to tell Enjoli something without talking to her. "God will watch over some of us."

"We're far enough from the coast not to worry," Enjoli said, her eyes still on Filip, knowing Abuela was listening. When Enjoli looked up, she was surprised to see Janelle coming up the aisle.

She had stopped by a few times, bringing extra food and tampons, tiny energy bars with illegal ingredients, and little boxes of single-use wash clothes that leave your skin tingling. There were no showers in the shelter, and even if there had been, navigating the crowd to use them was unthinkable. They might have been trashed within a few hours, or rendered unusable when groups of crotch-grabbing men took to loitering inside the women's area. It would have been like trying to shower at an outdoor concert, trying not to cut your bare feet on the jagged edge of crushed beer cans. Enjoli had held onto the lower-class cliff with every fingertip, but here is where entropy sped up, the downward spiral of life making her head spin. While Oscar Johns's treasures could last beyond his lifetime, everything at Enjoli's new level was rotten and spoiled within a matter of minutes. Food and shoes stolen and re-stolen. Everyone using the same logic of survival that barely kept them alive. Many of them still held onto some sentiment of

Prosperianism, assured that safeguarding themselves was the only goal even if it meant slaughtering their neighbor, although Enjoli's yellow Spire polo afforded her some reverent apathy. Enjoli was crushed to realize that she was no different from them, but if she were going to steal, it wouldn't be from the next cot over.

"What are you doing here? Are you crazy?" she asked, popping up and taking Janelle's arrival before the storm as an excuse to stretch her legs away from her family, forgetting to worry for their safety for a few minutes. Janelle gave her a hug, and they walked together through the bunk rows toward the clattering front doors. Cooking smells of chili oil and rice in banana leaves hung in the air, and they had to step wide around a large woman with purple mascara who had fallen asleep on the ground between cots.

With each of Janelle's subsequent visits, Enjoli shed some of her annoyance at her friend's insistence at helping. She began looking forward to seeing her. Still, even if she could accept that Janelle was willing to bring them extras from her pantry, it was astonishing to see her show up with toilet paper rolls and hand sanitizers for the rest of the shelter to use. Janelle fascinated Enjoli because she wore the yellow Polo but seemed to adhere to none of the teachings. Enjoli had diverted from the path herself, but at least stealing from the church still put money in her pocket. The first few times Janelle showed up, her generosity frightened Enjoli. There was a blasphemous weight to it, and the way some of the people in the shelter fell upon her donations proved that they were barely more than animals who would lap spilled milk off the grungy linoleum. Abuela was overjoyed at Janelle's visits, dipping her hand into bags of chicharrons and the little faux-pate' chaud that came in grease-stained paper they didn't have to pay for.

"It took me a while to figure it out," Enjoli told Janelle while sipping Jarritos the color of traffic cones from stolen coffee cups as they leaned against the brick facade of the shelter.

"Giving people free stuff is how you cope."

"Don't blow my cover."

"I'm still waiting for the bill to come due."

"Alright," Janelle said. "If you absolutely must consider me opportunistic, you can pay me back by going somewhere with me."

"During a hurricane?"

"In a couple of weeks. A meeting."

"What kind of meeting?"

"A group of people who see a different way forward," Janelle said, putting her cup down on the concrete.

"You can't be serious."

"Eternal Triumph is –" she started. Enjoli clamped a hand against Janelle's mouth, her eyes popping instinctively to the portrait of Oscar Johns smiling above the main doors to the shelter.

"Why would you say that name here?"

Janelle pulled Enjoli's hand away.

"Eternal Triumph is building something special in Colorado, Enjoli. Something where everyone can have a real slice of prosperity."

"A magical paradise far away from all this? Heard that before. Those people are lunatics convinced that if they all orgasm at the same time, they can ride out the literal end of the world."

"Enjoli. Do you remember your first impression of me? And what you think of me now? Come to the meeting. It's outside of the city and away from prying eyes. I'll drive."

"Hell. No. Even talking about this could get me fired. Get us both fired."

"It's your call., but this may be one of the last times I get to see you. If the meeting goes well, I'm heading to Colorado."

"Seriously? There are easier ways to get boyfriends and girlfriends, Janelle."

Janelle laughed and straightened her back off the wall. "I want to be a part of something different than this. I'm tired of punching the fucking sea. It would be nice to escape with a friend."

Enjoli sighed as Janelle waved wanly and walked away. She was tired of thinking and talking and worrying about her soul.

Her phone buzzed. Travis was calling from the church.

"Stop punching the sea, Enjoli!" Janelle shouted from halfway down the block, her back still turned, face turned toward the storm waiting to crawl across the land.

Enjoli let the phone buzz in her hand, watching Janelle go before answering.

||

Vesta made landfill earlier than anyone predicted. Janelle left about an hour before the skies over Golden Bough darkened. The clouds were lined by a strange shade of green as though ready to rain down emeralds. The pressure dropped, sinking Enjoli's heart even further down, and she milled around her bunk, more bored than anything, wondering what it meant that a person she liked, a person she'd grown to become friends with, was abandoning her life for Braintree.

The meal call was late, so Enjoli went to the front office to see what was going on. She found it abandoned, a half-eaten apple, flesh already browning, resting on the desk next to a frayed friendship bracelet. She jogged back toward the kitchen. The staff had set them adrift. Others were already stirring, heading for the office to find what she'd found and to understand what she understood. After sliding into kitchen, she bolted to an embankment of shelves holding dry goods, searching briefly for a sack, a basket, anything she could carry something in. At first, she only meant to secure enough for dinner, but fear and the incoming wave of other hungry people made her greedy. She found a large mixing bowl and filled it with spirulina bars, a fistful of seaweed jerky, and packets of soup mix. She heard the doors open when she reached the refrigerator. A couple crept in, and they attacked the same set of shelves that Enjoli had looted, scrambling to put whatever they could into their pockets and turning their shirts into kangaroo pouches with chlorella cakes spilling over the side.

The refrigerator was almost empty, giving off a stale warm stink, but Enjoli found some lemons and oranges to toss on top of the pile. More people were pushing through, and suddenly Enjoli worried she wouldn't be able to get out. She threw a towel on top of the bowl and hustled against the growing mob, the scratchy noise of sloshing plastic packages announcing her presence to a crowd distracted by the fear of starvation enough for her to shoulder through, back into the sprawling maw of the bunk rows.

"What's going on?" Cecilia asked when Enjoli made it back.

Enjoli put the bowl on the ground and slid it under one of the cots.

"Staff's gone. Kitchen's picked over by now."

"Oh, dear Lord," Abuela panted. "We should be in our home, eating our food, sleeping in our beds, but we are here in this terrible, horrible place. Mi cielo." She slapped her knee with every other word, and her face tightened nearly to tears.

Enjoli rubbed Abuela's arm to comfort her, but Abuela slapped it away. Then, just as quickly, she pulled Enjoli tight against her breast, squeezing her and pressing her head down onto Enjoli's. The old woman said nothing, loosening her grip enough for Enjoli to breathe again and stand up straight.

"I love you, too, but—" Enjoli began to say before the lights shut off. The cranky hum of the HVAC was replaced by rolling thunder from outside. Enjoli reached out and caught Abuela and Cecilia's arms. Her hands were slick, and Filip grumbled in his sleep.

The lights came back on, but the power quickly failed again.

"Stay calm," Enjoli commanded. They sat in darkness for a few minutes. The recycled air wasn't flowing, and the sharp smell of salt and melted plastic trickled in. Enjoli recognized it from hurricanes spent closer to the coast, but maybe it was normal here, too.

Someone screamed, a man's voice pitching high and quickly stifled, whether by a friend's clamped hand or something else Enjoli didn't need to think about. Cecilia pulled Filip to her, and he writhed against her breast before settling back down. A thunderous clatter came from across the room, the sound of a cot scraping across the floor, and a shanty wall collapsing.

"We can't stay here," Cecilia whispered, rocking Filip against her skin. A figure bolted past them in the dark.

"I know. I just need a minute to think." Enjoli felt Abuela's hand find hers. The old woman squeezed it like paper covering rock, and Enjoli focused on Abuela's heavy breathing in the darkness. There was a familiar rhythm to it, and Enjoli realized that Abuela was praying. Windows shattered somewhere deep into the building, and a few flashlight beams jumped and danced like blue lances piercing the darkness. Enjoli's belly felt warm, and her chest tightened. She heard the squeaking of her shoe against the cement before the thread of freezing cold water slid against her feet. Filip started crying. Cecilia rocked him even harder, and Enjoli grabbed the bowl of food. She felt around for her purse and dumped the food into it but kept hold of the bowl. Filip let out a sharp cry, and the water rose a little higher.

"We need to get to the front office," she said, pulling them all up and guiding them, whispering prayers, bawling with need, sloshing against the water, down the darkened aisles.

They found dozens of people crawling over each other in the office. Someone had busted the glass door to unlock it, and it was already overrun by people who'd all grown up knowing what to do during a hurricane. A thin young man groped inside Enjoli's purse, and she swung on him with the bowl, spooking him into stumbling backward. The building buffeted from the force of the storm. Enjoli led her family further down a hall, far enough away from the threat of being trampled and drowning in inch-deep water. The sound of screams echoed down the hallway, and a few moments later, a mob of people came running past them. Undaunted, Enjoli pressed forward, Abuela and Cecilia following close behind until they reached the backend of the shelter where even more people were pressing through the double doors. A fire spread quickly among the cots, climbing up the walls and devouring the makeshift structures. Black smoke crept through the doors into the hallway, and Cecilia covered Filip's face.

Without a word, they all joined the others heading in the other direction, back down the hallway from where they'd come.

By the time they'd reached the office again, people were stumbling over each other to get out, the massive flames close enough inside the shelter to cast everything in an orange glow.

A stream of people shuffled through the slowly rising water out of the front doors, and Enjoli moved to follow them, but Abuela hung back, shaking her head furiously. Smoke poured from the doors leading to the main hall, burning Enjoli's nose. She pulled hard at Abuela's arms, but she wouldn't budge. The water was ankle deep then, and the sound of people screaming, and the fire roaring was unbearable.

"Come on! What are you doing?" Enjoli shouted, inches away from Abuela's face.

A man running for the door clipped Abuela's shoulder, sending her twisting to the ground, Enjoli's hand still clutching at her blouse. The fire climbed out the doors, filling the hallway with brilliant red daylight, keeping to the walls, and refusing to swoop down into the water.

"Please!" Enjoli screamed. "Get up!"

Abuela's eyes met Enjoli's, and then all at once a sharp pain surged through their bodies, sending them both face down into the water. Enjoli stiffened, and an ache spiked through her and, just as quickly, dissipated. She felt like her bone marrow had rotted. An exposed power line had tapped the water.

She rose sluggishly and grabbed Abuela, pulling her out of the muck and thanking God when she saw the old woman's eyes again. Cecilia screamed for them at the front doors, and they hobbled together with the rest of the luckiest people of the shelter, escaping into the storm. The wind whipped at them, and the rain danced between sharp spikes and fat slaps hitting them from every direction. Cecilia let it hit her face, hunching over Filip to keep him close.

Debris floated against their shins as they waded through the floodwater. Behind them, the rain doused the fire, but the structure of Golden Boughs verged on collapse. Enjoli and her family trudged forward, keeping the church on the horizon. Enjoli searched for another building nearby to take shelter in, but doors were few and far between. She tried one heavy metal door to a brick warehouse, but it was locked or stuck tight by the water, and there was no use trying to force it. She shouldered Abuela. A sharp pain wrenched down into her sides. She dragged numb

feet through the murky water, leading them toward Living Prosperity. They climbed uphill, the wind lashing them, until they found dry ground.

Abuela Marta perked up a little when they fell in at the back of a crowd at the main entrance to the church. Two men at the front slammed a crumpled metal garbage bin against the doors, and more stragglers boxed in Enjoli and her family from behind. Enjoli shouldered Abuela to a grassy patch against the outer wall of the stadium, setting her down away from the growing crowd.

"Wait here for me!" she shouted at Cecilia, who stood only a few inches away, clutching Filip tightly.

"Where are you going?" Cecilia shouted back, but Enjoli didn't hear. She ran jerkily, half-limping, around the side toward the employee parking garage. A few others stood in front of the gated entrance to the parking garage, screaming and rattling the roll-up security grille with no more force than the wind would have mustered. Enjoli pushed them aside and shoved her wrist at the sensor, but the security gate didn't rise. She tried again, cursing at a blinking red light as the others resumed shaking the thick metal of the gate.

Enjoli dropped back, dialing Travis. When it went to his voicemail, she dialed again. She stabbed at her phone, struggling to keep the screen dry, texting him when he didn't answer. She called whoever she thought might pick up, but no one did. A small cadre of GuardiaNet drones floated down from one of the upper levels, struggling against the wind, orange hub lights flaring in solid sheets of rain.

"Enjoli!" Cecilia grabbed her cousin by the arm. Enjoli's phone started buzzing.

"You left Abuela?"

"What are you doing?" Cecilia shouted.

Enjoli answered her phone, heard Travis's voice in crackles, and the line went dead. She cursed at it, rubbing the face of it futilely against the front of her soaking wet Polo shirt.

"Trying to get us inside!" she screamed back.

"Come on!" Cecilia shouted, dragging Enjoli by the arm back toward where they had left Abuela propped up against the church's outer wall. The phone buzzed again, and Enjoli heard Travis clearly. Filip shrieked, and the force of the wind nearly made Cecilia drop him.

"Thank God, I'm outside! Open up the church!" she yelled into the phone.

"Holy shit, Enjoli. We just spent the morning locking it down," Travis said. His voice sounded miles away. "We all left."

"My employee badge won't open the garage!"

"Yeah, we disabled it. Johns's orders. There—"

"Travis?"

The line hissed back, then popped back to life.

"—it overrun with—"

The line went dead again. The GuardiaNet drones opened fire on the crowd, sending everyone scrambling. A woman near Cecilia fell, and Enjoli lifted Abuela Marta back up with a groan from both of them, stuffing her phone back into her pocket. She hustled them along the wall until they reached the covered walkway leading to the sprawling south parking lots. The water had reached their ankles, even at the church's elevation, and the crack of gunfire rattled through the air in angry spurts behind them. Enjoli didn't look back. They were too exposed in the parking lot, trudging ahead through the freezing salt water and the constant spray of rain.

Then she saw it. The highway underpass. It wasn't ideal. It probably wasn't even safe. But it was the best they could do, so Enjoli hoisted Abuela higher on her shoulder and led Cecilia on the steep climb up the concrete to its highest point. They huddled together, stooping into the crevice to keep warm. The storm felt further away, the rain falling in curtains on either side of the underpass to feed the makeshift river that flowed out to the service roads. Cecilia gave Filip her breast to try to calm him, and Enjoli ran her hand along Abuela's cheek, but the old woman's eyes looked distant. Her body began to slack, and Enjoli found herself struggling to support Abuela's full weight.

Abuela stopped breathing. Enjoli breathed for Abuela until she got lightheaded, and then cradled her until the rain stopped, endless hours later, just a few minutes shy of sunrise.

‡

Chapter Nine

Sunday, July 4, 2049

Braintree, Colorado

It was colder inside the church than usual on the day it was supposed to collapse. Mara went row by row, turning on all the electric candles in the foyer to give those participants willing to brave the service something pleasant to greet them. She brewed coffee. She laid out pastries and didn't take one for herself but licked a bit of raspberry filling off her finger when she'd done. The floor still looked gummy after mopping, so she decided to sweep, hoping it would be enough in the time before worshippers arrived, clomping up the marble stairs and filling the hall with their scuffling feet and booming voices.

Pastor Shirkus came up behind the girl, holding a pastry on a small plate for her.

“You can't be skipping breakfast, Mara.”

She nodded.

“And you don't have to be here if you don't want to be.”

“Mother said it was important,” she said, her voice quiet but clear as a struck bell.

“Oh? Where is your mother this morning?”

Mara looked at her feet. She took a small bite of her pastry, chewing and swallowing mechanically.

“Why did you open the church today, Pastor Shirkus?” she managed.

“To fulfill my duty.”

He placed a hand on her shoulder, smiled, and retreated down the aisles toward the stage. He'd already loaded his sermon into the Intelliprompter but found himself unable to take his usual seat. Instead, he trod the worn carpet on the stage in a pantomime of his normal delivery, stopping briefly to run an anxious hand along the ride cymbal of the drum kit. It sang with a brassy note, and Pastor Shirkus turned to find a thin group nervously trickling down the aisle. Far fewer than the common turnout. Less than half. He smiled, welcoming them as they shuffled in, some brooding and questioning if they were willing to take the chance of being there, some piercing the space with their bravado, some pulled along by held hands and scoffing blusterers. They all seemed allergic to the front rows.

“Welcome,” he said, hearing that it hadn't been picked up by the speakers. The sound engineer hadn't shown up, so Pastor Shirkus mic'ed himself. He fussed with the lapel mic for a moment, testing it briefly before abandoning it to the dais like a dead slug. He repeated his welcome, launching it into the room this time with a sultry, booming voice. “It seems we'll have an intimate service today.”

He scanned the crowd, noting who was missing. Shelby Tidsworth sat meekly in the back corner, but Ella Shotto, and the other Prosperians on the town council hadn't shown. He tucked the observation into his back pocket and checked his watch. A few minutes late to start and a few minutes more until promised destruction.

“Who here is scared to be here today?”

The shuffling against the pews and a stray cough gave the answer. Pastor Shirkus nodded and raised his own hand, giving the nervous assembled permission to do so in turn. Then he raised his other hand with a chuckle.

“Yeah, my whole band called in sick this morning. Must be a serious bug going around.”

He stepped around the dais and took a place sitting on the edge of the stage.

“I don’t really want to make light of it. This may be the first Sunday in my years of preaching here where none of us is sure what’s gonna happen. But that’s not really true, is it? People who believe that we are a threat proclaimed that something terrible would happen during the service, but we are always at the whims of something terrible happening just by walking out the front door. Or by staying inside. I’ll confess that I am often fearful of things I do not know. I am fearful of the mysteriousness of the universe and what might come tomorrow.”

He checked the time again, sending the worshippers into a shiver of checking their own. Not long now. A few people in the very back hustled quickly to the back door, their courage failing. A collective sweat broke out among the seated worshippers in spite of the chill.

“Death is the cost of living. Today, fear is the cost for us being here, but I’m encouraged by those of you who have decided that the price of good standing in the church and the Lord’s eyes is worth it to be here. Then again, what do I know? If God has given you fear, perhaps you should heed it. I’m sure you came here today to be reassured and uplifted, but a hollow threat from non-believers is not something I believe deems a mantra or message or any larger response than this. The women who made the pronouncement do not have the ability to pull this church down on our heads.”

“Amen!” came the shout from an older man. More heads were nodding.

“Instead of concerning yourself today with the ramblings of someone who does not view the world the way you do, consider the word according to the God that you praise. Instead of focusing on your own fear, focus instead on all the treasures that God has bestowed upon you. Think of all the things you’ve wanted in life, and how far you’ve come when so many others were unable.”

Pastor Shirkus jumped back onto the stage, but he’d no sooner reached the dais than a loud cheer erupted from outside. Everyone turned, and Mara shouted, “Oh my God!” from the foyer, clamping her hand to her mouth. Most everyone left their pews to go see, and Pastor Shirkus waded through the bodies to reach Mara at the bay windows looking out over the square.

“Sorry, Pastor Shirkus,” Mara said.

“I think God will give you pass on that one, darling,” Pastor Shirkus said just before Berenice Barnhart mounted the stairs to the church completely bare, banged her fists on the door, and pressed her ass against the window.

||

Janthy had started the day by brewing coffee. She couldn't get over it. There was no use counting the years she'd gone without it, and even though everything from the loamy aroma to the crisp, bitter taste thrilled her, it left her feeling jittery in a way it hadn't when she'd drunk it every day as a matter of ungrateful due course. She worried that she maybe shouldn't get used to it again. Shouldn't risk becoming addicted. She drank anyway.

It was dark out, but it would be light soon enough.

Staying with Berenice had been jarring in other ways. Her apartment was cramped, but it was comfortable and serene. Janthy hadn't been used to that – not at Figure Nine, not growing up, and certainly not after everything had gone to shit. They'd contemplated having Janthy stay at Karen Fielder's, but decided it was better to have her in the center of town. It positioned her better to see, to speak, and to act, and today was a day when she'd need to do all three.

Berenice padded around the apartment, picking at her nails while classic aggro-pop thumped loudly.

"You're making my head spin," Janthy castigated. "And I'll need another cup of coffee to deal with this music."

"Well, it's calming me down."

"This is calm?" She put her cup down. "Come here. We should start a day like this with the breathing anyway."

"I've never done it before."

"Never done it?" Janthy looked shocked. She turned on the music.

"I've never been part of an ET community before."

"Well, you're in one now. Come. Sit."

They sat on the fake hardwood, cross-legged facing each other. Janthy held out her hands, and Berenice took them.

"Mirror me," she said, then took a deep breath and held it until she could not hold it anymore. Berenice obeyed, and they stared into each other's eyes, counting in their heads, and breathing purposefully until Berenice relaxed.

"Whoa," the younger woman said. "Where did you learn to do that?"

"From Kaleel. He showed me before our first protest together. There's a reason we take a deep breath before a plunge. He said we couldn't deliver peace into the world unless we could hold it for ourselves."

"And did it work?"

"A rubber bullet shattered my ankle." She watched Berenice's face change wondering if she'd said the wrong thing, to bring up violence and ruin the focus the breathing could bring.

"I'm so sorry."

Janthy had started following Kaleel a year before the Champagne Riots. The Beggar's Uprising. Whatever they wanted to call it on whichever side they wanted to call it from. The world had gone to shit, at least on her end of the stick, and she'd done her best to stay floating alongside a lake of a million dead fish. Kaleel had said what needed to be said. Too many were in pain, and too few were spared. Too many were crawling through the gutters, and too few were sleeping on soft beds. Those few too easily sacrificed the nameless destitute. It was all true, and so she'd heeded the call, taking her place first on one side of the bread line and then on the other,

serving those who might ultimately make their way to Kaleel's side. Janthy had felt safe in those early days.

"We should get down there. It's almost time."

"Hold on," Berenice said, rising and looking out the window. "A little while longer. We should let the crowd gather without us. Show that the movement is bigger than a couple of weird ladies."

||

Karen Fielder's crew came, but Cooper McGovern, Mayor Kemp, and some of the other Prosperian heavyweights assembled in front of the church as well. Janthy smiled, seeing them from afar and relishing whatever emotion had kept them from being inside when the walls might come down. A few hundred turned out, huddled around the edge of the fountain, mostly drawn, Janthy believed, from curiosity rather than personal investment. Those were the prime targets for conversion. A vein of yellow Polos ran through the crowd, and Janthy hoped more would join them with only a few moments left until the appointed hour.

Berenice had put on a shift dress and kept her hair down, letting her corkscrew curls bounce as they walked from the flower shop toward the church. They held hands, and the large crowd was quiet enough for Janthy to hear her cane on the cobblestones. Her knee ached, but she ignored it, wishing bodily complaints wouldn't intrude on the moment. More than anything, she wished that Kaleel were here with her to see.

They pushed gracefully through the crowd, taking a prominent position well away from the steps of the church. The tensions of the crowd – whether fearful of destruction or gleefully anticipating it – were inseparable from one another. Each flavored with the same coiled bodies, clenched fists, and sweat stink. It was a moment on the precipice, and no one dared to cut through its possibilities with conversation because any words might have spoiled the sensation like drops of fish oil into fine ale. Berenice had warned Janthy about speaking beforehand, instructing her that the clock tower would do all the talking for them. Still, she began livestreaming, pursing her lips into a tight, worried smile for the camera before showing the assembled crowd and locking her screen on the front doors of the church.

The clock tower sounded the hour, and the silence of the crowd held a few heartbeats longer before all eyes turned to Janthy and Berenice, eager to see how they'd respond in their defeat. Their pronouncement had failed. The church still stood.

Seizing on the attention, Janthy turned to face the crowd, and Berenice kept her framed nicely.

"Our prayers have been answered!" Janthy shouted to the gathered faithful and disbelieving. "We have prayed non-stop and brought enough people into the light that God has spared the church!"

A cheer rose from half the crowd.

“What the fuck?” whispered Cooper. Mayor Kemp remained stoney.

"Rejoice!" Berenice yelled from the top of the stairs. Karen Fielder whooped loudly into the air, and the other assembled believers made such a commotion that some of the skeptical began to wonder at how much power they truly possessed.

Berenice pulled off her shift dress and began dancing wildly, her livestream audience one partner among many. She ran up the church stairs, banging her fists against the front door, and pressing her bare ass to the window. Howls went up from the crowd.

Janthy, too, howled and stripped in the square, tossing her clothing into the fountain as others followed suit and found willing hands to clasp. They spun in wild circles and leapt into the air as if trying to take flight. Mayor Kemp and Cooper stood gape-mouthed as the celebration erupted around them.

"This doesn't change a thing," Mayor Kemp told Cooper. "No one here can vote."

"Make sure it doesn't."

The noise drew others to the square, where they saw the unbroken church and the revelers bidding others to dance alongside them. The happy attendees seemed to multiply at an alarming rate, and the fervor grew even stronger when the front door of the church swung open, and Pastor Shirkus stepped out onto the marble landing.

"Repent!" Berenice shouted. "Repent and rejoice that this building has been saved despite the faith rotting inside it!"

To the shock of everyone inside the church and spinning in the square, Pastor Shirkus, head of the Prosperian church of Braintree, closed his eyes and repented, just as Janthy had

instructed him to do. He dropped to his knees, a great wailing emerging from deep within him, shouting out that the old way was blasphemous, that the new path was righteous, that the church could only survive if his followers turned their hearts away from their love of money.

Mayor Kemp's eyes went wide.

"I may have underestimated—"

"Repent!" Karen shouted, raising a sledgehammer to the bottom of the fountain statue. Dust popped off, and with another swing, a sizable chunk. Sheriff Tarrant stood frozen, unsure of who to arrest or how to do it.

"You had a chance to stop all this, Rashoderick," Cooper said with fear barely concealed in her voice. Someone started in on a fiddle, and the collective whoops and cheers became something organized and harmonious. Janthy pulled Pastor Shirkus to his feet and wrapped her arms around him. He wept, and she recognized his tears, the release of a man shedding the false skin and feeling, for the first time, the sun shining on his true form.

‡

Chapter Ten

Tuesday, August 3, 2049

Southern Gate, Braintree, Colorado

Child and Sorola approached Braintree from the west, so they could see the top of the mayor's mansion nestled well inside the outer wall. It was an insult that they could see their destination as they trudged on another few miles or so to the closest entrance gate. The trip had been disastrous. Sorola had gotten sick before they'd even reached the Wyoming border, and there was no way to slow the caravan without risking everyone else's lives. They were exposed on the road, and Child had been pulled over relentlessly even when he'd paid the tolls, cops adjusting heavy belts over big bellies and leering inside the car. None had dared to rise beyond bluster, and Child wondered if it was by his sheer size alone that they'd been spared bloody lips or worse. Yet he felt a powerful sense of joy at the threats because there was something about them unmistakably outside the mainstream. He would have hated to blend in, for the cops to think of him as just another Prosperian cruising toward the golf course or on their way to trade a family member's kidney for a few more tithing lottery tickets. Or maybe those men hadn't guessed at their religion. Maybe this was how they treated everyone who seemed poor. Child felt a pang of embarrassment that he'd been, as he felt now, walled off inside of Figure Nine Farms away from the aches of living, but still appreciated that some essence inside him was so loudly not of the real world.

Sorola's fever broke just before they reached Lime Kiln, which was providence considering what they found there instead of a warm welcome and a soothing bed.

Child had prayed on the hour for Sorola's recovery and allowed himself the blasphemy of believing that their return to health had been solely the result of their strength instead of an intervention by God spurred by his pleading. Of course it was. There was so much more work to be done.

On Janthy's orders, they'd abandoned the vehicles outside Cripple Creek. They'd split up the caravan and walked for three days on foot, hoping to reunite in the new Jerusalem.

"No need for a parade when the wrong people are watching," she'd said, and Child had trusted her implicitly. Why did he feel so scared? The truth remained the truth even when shouting it at someone who wants you dead.

After so long in Idaho, it was strange to be here. At their home, Child had decided that the earth had chosen how it wanted to rest, and here, it undulated in odd hills until climbing craggy ranges that to his eyes seemed unsettled. The land was wild. It was still cool enough mid-morning for magpies to throw their voice – sounding like chopsticks against a broken snare drum – into the air. Pine siskins added their tiny engine-revving trill to the mix, invisible among the trees plotting for the upcoming migration, following the irruptive path of seeds dropped and blown by the wind. Child saw a Red-tailed hawk circling. He asked God if it were a sign, but the voice that lived behind his ears stayed silent. As they crested the slope where the road split off south toward the lakeside and onward east to the southern gate of Braintree, Child and Sorola saw that they were the first to make it.

"Listen," Sorola said. They placed their hand on Child's chest, and he stopped walking.

Janthy had made it sound as though they only had a few hundred firm followers inside the city, but the noise and grateful clangoring they created made it seem like a million. The walls of Braintree vibrated with their music. There were drums and discordant trumpet blasts followed by shouts and singing of all the standard hymns. Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty. Open the eyes of my heart, Lord. I want to see you. The words of praise and worship were so loud that Child could swear they were coming from his side of the wall. He was overcome with the desire to scale the stones and leap from the top into the open arms of the army that would build paradise.

Sorola smiled, lighting up Child's soul. His heart quickened against their hand, and when he thought he could not be any happier, he saw the first of the caravan from Figure Nine emerge from the tree line, walking their way.

Over the next hour, they reassembled. Sorola flitted through the crowd as it grew, kissing and greeting everyone as they appeared. Child's eyes held the horizon.

"Everyone is ready," Sorola said, sliding her arms around Child's stomach from behind.

"Not everyone," he said. As if summoned by thought, a rust yellow hatchback appeared on the horizon heading their way along the road.

Since hearing the voice of God outside the meeting hall, Child's faith had been renewed in small ways every day, allowing him to hear the voice more clearly. He already trusted it, yes, but he found himself craving it so aggressively that not getting a response was maddening with an increasingly heavier weight of rejection. He tried to understand that he could not summon God at the snap of his fingers, but it was cold comfort when each bout of silence felt like a

burned love letter. Child felt for the second time in his life like a neglected son. It was small moments like these, little bits of magic, of conjuring that proved his new ability to reshape the world using his connection to the Almighty that reminded him to be still and to trust. He believed, and the world provided. There'd be no room for doubt.

After pulling up onto the grass where they were waiting, Colt, the young guard from Kaleel's prison, stepped out of the hatchback and immediately fell to his knees, lowering his forehead to the ground and making a strained mewling noise of excitement.

Child lifted him up and brushed him off.

"It's me who should be kneeling before you," he said, and he wondered how much he believed it. Had this been what Kaleel felt like all the time? The pressure of expectation to be whatever it was people needed him to be?

Surely that was the devil speaking. To cement his fervor, Child got on the ground himself, placing his head against Colt's shoes and whispering a small prayer of thanks. Out of the corner of his eye, he glimpsed the collective appreciating his act of selflessness with the appropriate awe, and he was pleased.

"You were there with the prophet when he died," Child said to Colt, who went rigid from the welcomed invasion of Child's personal touch. "You are our messenger."

Child rose and moved toward the southern gate. As a sleeping limb awakening, Sorola met his pace, and the rest of his followers chased happily behind as the sound of revelry inside the walls grew even louder.

They were stopped at the gate by a confused guard, a dumpy white man with red blooms on his nose and cheeks and a handgun on his belt.

"I'm here to enter Zion," Child said with a calming smile painting his face like an early sunrise.

"Oh, fuck right off," the guard said.

Child towered over the man. He placed a hand on his shoulder and shook his head slowly before leaning fully into the guard shack and pressing the button clearly meant to swing wide the flimsy metal gates. If the guard thought at all about stopping him, his face revealed nothing except a deep terror of being made to feel physically as insignificant as he'd felt in his heart. God placed the picture of the man's greatest fear made manifest into Child's mind, and he luxuriated in the knowledge that nothing in the world was out of his grasp anymore. He thought how Kaleel's jail cell must have not felt like a jail cell at all. How his death must have been as easy as turning a page in an old, familiar book.

"Come follow us, and be saved," Sorola cheerfully told the guard as the gates swung open.

||

Berenice snaked through the crowd, snapping selfies and oblique images of the happy chaos. She giggled and dosed with a drop of acid offered to her by an older woman in a flannel button-up and camo pants whom she didn't know. She chased it with one of her pink pills and was flying.

Throughout the morning, waves of spinning fits would crash through the assembled there. One person would start, and the entirety of the crowd would be spinning and crying out with glee within a few moments, grinding through the frazzled nerves of their anticipation.

A few citizens stood on the perimeter, shaking their heads and scowling. They spoke solely to each other, but one sunbaked older white man with a game show host's haircut, razzed the believers from the steps of city hall, baring his ass at one point to excited cheers and a small eruption of disrobing among the Triumphant. The old and young peeled of clothing in the waning summer sun and beckoned the jeering man to join them, to be free, to dance. Berenice peeled off her tank top, slung it over her shoulder, and joined them in their call. She wrapped her arms around the shoulders of the two nearest revelers and looked like an unbottled genie who'd pretended for too long that she wasn't trapped.

"Bring that down here!" she shouted sugar-sweet to the man.

Cowed by their unexpected acceptance, he fled awkwardly down the steps and into an alleyway, shuffling quickly back toward his home in one of the wealthier neighborhoods in town. Berenice caught most of it on stream.

No one knew what to expect of Child's arrival, and rumors began to circulate, growing more and more absurd with each retelling. He had walked all the way from Idaho. He would appear among them, somehow invisible until he needed to be seen. He would drop from the sky on six-winged angels to the sound of a thousand horns blasting every name of God. He would be announced by his wife and walk humbly onto the steps of the Braintree Prosperity Church to explain their future to them.

The morning was warm and bright, and the smell of humans mixed with onion grass and grilled meat.

Janthy checked her watch as Berenice approached.

"Where's the funeral?" she asked.

"Everywhere, every day," Janthy replied, her lip turning up just enough.

Berenice plucked Janthy's collar.

"Ditch this and come celebrate. Run your hands on a stranger. Or me. Touch and be touched. There's plenty of joyful men out there."

Janthy stared through her.

"Women?" Berenice said with a grin.

Janthy checked her watch again.

"Something in between, maybe."

"My faith is not only uplifted by joyful abandon," Janthy said.

"Let them praise His name by standing stock still and scowling."

"Not familiar with that verse."

"That's because God would never say something so terrible," Berenice chided, jostling Janthy shoulders quickly before flitting back into the crowd. Janthy straightened her clothes,

watched the young woman bound away, and smiled when she knew she was out of sight. Then, she saw the commotion at the far end of the street leading up to the town square.

Those who spotted them first couldn't know for sure what they were seeing, as they'd never seen Child or Sorola before in their lives, but his size and their beauty spelled it plainly. Awareness spread through the incipient crowd spilling into the street. Disbelief became belief. The story made flesh. Some prostrated themselves before the pair. Others shouted. Others shook with ecclesiastical seizures like clockwork toys wound too tightly.

Janthy moved easily through the parting crowd to greet Child and Sorola, and they all walked together to the fountain that was marred by Karen's hammer. To Child, it looked like an ice sculpture left out in the sun, properly perverse and monstrous enough for a symbol of soulful corruption.

Child lifted his hand, two fingers out and two fingers folded down, and the shouting crowd was silenced, and he spoke:

"Welcome, my friends, to the last city on Earth."

A cheer from a sizable fraction of the crowd, frothing with the promise of destruction raining down everywhere but their own heads. Others remained silent or huffed at the man stealing the center stage of their afternoon.

Then Child removed a hundred-dollar bill from a pocket in his robe, holding it up for the crowd to see, snapping it comically between eager fingertips.

“You are all worthy, and you will remain in a world transformed into the owed paradise. We will light a fire, sprinkle it with incense, and purify this city until the final night comes, and then we will celebrate together for eternity in the loving embrace of the Lord.”

Sorola stood next to him, garnering as much attention through their silence as Child did with his words. Together, they appeared as two beautiful angels come to earth, and thoughts flowed freely throughout every present mind of what they might look like without their robes, what their hips my feel like against their fingertips, what the soft parts of them might taste like. And what they might cry out. The outline of their nipple against the fabric. The bulging shape of his cock framed by his robe. Their silence. His words. The audience was frenzied, silenced only by their master's voice as their own screamed inside their heads. They wanted to devour and be devoured.

Sorola's lips parted only just, their eyes remained steady, looking out beyond the crowd, as if the massing people didn't concern them as much as did the clouds crawling across the clear blue sky.

"The great Satan came to earth disguised as a savior. He misleads you, lying about God's grace, because he wants to take the place of God. He promises you milk and honey but delivers only hardship that curdles in your mouth and leaves your stomach thundering. His chosen have built themselves thrones they did not deserve. They have built temples that Christ would not recognize. They have sold the world a lie that has been gulped down like fistfuls of sugar until each body broken on the street rots into maggot-beloved decadence. We all know this antichrist. It is Oscar Johns, the man selling you a broken world.”

Janthy found Wesley Shirkus standing next to her. She was surprised by how silent and nimble a man of his size could be. Or how enraptured she could also become by Child of Aaron's words. She'd forgotten how well he could keep a crowd.

"This is going too far," he whispered, his lips almost grazing her ear.

She switched positions with him.

"Maybe if you tackle him, he'll stop speaking."

"This is too much, too fast. The Prosperians' power may be waning, but they will still have him strung up before nightfall."

On the stage, Child pulled a gas station lighter from his pocket and sparked a flame. He held the flame to the bill, and the crowd became volcanic. They shook in fits and fevers. Colt cheered and began jumping up and down wildly.

"Light your censers, my family, and we will see the face of God!"

Child reached out and took Sorola's hand, holding it low against his body as they both sipped on the audience. Their exultations. Their obsessive gaze. Their hope in an immortality close enough to cradle.

Child let the money singe his fingertips. The flame rioted quickly in his hand, and he reveled in the pain, praying silently for it to last a little longer.

He quieted the crowd down again before their enthusiasm boiled over into a fervor he couldn't control. When their dying shouts left space in the air, a woman just on the edge of the group, shouted "You're not welcome here!"

She was tall and dressed finely. Her pale skin was dotted by freckles, and her sundress hung limp against her body. "Get out of our city!"

She bared sharp teeth as she yelled, lips stretched wide, ensuring she'd be heard.

The people closest to her grumbled and spat out insults under their breath, but they were all Eternal Triumph and remembered El Paso. The trauma held their tongues.

Child of Aaron stood impassively, as if waiting for a teacher to finish a lesson. This gave the crowd an action to mirror, although anxiety and anger climbed into their hearts. They kept him in their gaze but allowed their eyes to hunt on their periphery for threats.

"We don't want your lies here!" she cried, her voice was a spinning nail gun, but it lost an edge of confidence the longer Child stood quietly staring into her eyes from across the lake of bodies.

This was a test. Not of her, but of him and his disciples.

She stepped forward, more out of misplaced energy than malice, and a young, pockmarked man wearing glasses shoved her hard, his hands firm against her shoulders. She fell back on her back heel, shocked that her shouted threats could put herself in physical danger.

Child hid his pleasure.

The boy shoved her again, and Child's arms shot skyward. "Please, no! Brother! Were it not that I feared the provocation of the enemy! Lest their adversaries should judge amiss, Lest they should say, Our hand is exalted, And Jehovah hath not done all this!"

The woman tugged at her clothes, making a show of it, and searching, desperately scanning under the muffled, frightened breathing, for a friendly face in the crowd that would back up what she most wanted to do next with her fists. Seeing no one, she shouted obscene accusations again before shrinking into a side street near the flower shop.

As she faded, Child lifted his voice into something resembling pomegranate syrup.

"To our neighbors who may doubt, and to those who wish us harm, know that we are not your enemy. Your false prophets have dangled comfort and grace in front of your noses, swearing that if you obey and supplicate and tithe that you may – may! – earn God's compassion. But you already have it! That is our message! You've always had God's greatest concern and care. It is this human plague of greed that has hidden it from you, kept it locked away in bank accounts, and ensured that you spent all your nights wanting! As they take, we will give, and all are welcome!"

He licked his fingertips, marred by ash and burnt ink, and commanded the assembled crowd to dance.

||

In the evening, Sorola sat down with Janthy in the apartment above the flower shop to tell her about the massacre they'd found in Lime Kiln. No one had been left alive. Whoever had

killed them had burned down buildings and smashed in all the glass of the greenhouses. They had knocked over the trees and squashed lemons littered the floor. Child insisted that they bury all of them, saying twice the prayers over Christina and leaving a bouquet of burnt thistle in Ruby's weathered hands. Janthy wept, and Sorola held her in their arms while Child got her a glass of water.

After she'd settled into a manageable numbness, Janthy vocalized the fear that everyone else felt in the room, the passion of the celebrated afternoon wearing off like tears evaporating off a man's cheek.

"We were counting on Ruby and her people," she said. "Without them, even if we can take this city for ourselves, it will be a struggle to keep it."

"Brighton and Roberto haven't checked in. Cutwolf is still out there. There are others who are going to fill the rooms in the mansions of this town," Sorola said.

"Wait, what struggle are you talking about?" Berenice jumped in.

"Do you think the mayor, the governor, Oscar Johns, are just gonna roll over and allow a place of decadence like this to be taken over?"

"Janthy is worried that we need numbers to repel the threat of attack," Child said.

"Yes, Child," she said. "That's typically what's needed to stay alive in those situations."

"But we have God on our side," Child remarked plainly.

"Amen," Sorola added.

"In this case I'm reminded of God saying he would help those who help themselves. We can praise God *and* pass the ammunition," Janthy said, although she felt the balance of the room tilting away from her.

"Have faith, Janthy," Sorola smiled.

"What if that's not enough?" Janthy asked. Berenice cocked her head at the woman who had bulldozed the town with her in readiness for this day. Janthy was immediately ashamed of what she said, not just that she'd uttered the words, potentially poisoning the others, but that she'd lacked the strength of her faith to falter in the first place. Kaleel would have shaken his head sweetly and reminded her that she came by her hard-won skepticism honestly. It was healthy to question, and he'd loved her for her it.

"I doubted at one time too," Child said. "But the time has come to wash all doubts away. A sacrifice will be required by the time all of this is done, but we will all fail if even one of us distrusts our savior to guide."

Janthy nodded, uneasily. The past few months, doubt had been her constant companion, and it held tight to her heart in Braintree, even as she saw the wheels turn in their favor. She couldn't hear the voice of God no matter how desperate she was for it, but her doubt whispered constantly that jumping off a cliff would not allow her to fly.

Child drew her close, and the others followed suit, pressing in against each other.

"I don't want to lose anyone else," Child said. "We have found each other forever."

Chapter Eleven

Thursday, August 12, 2049

West Houston Clearage Zone

Enjoli had never gone further west than the church bus depot in Katy, and she'd certainly never been to the reclamation zone, so she watched the rusted mile markers with a nervous eye as Janelle sped through the busted lamplight darkness of the highway. They were miles outside the city. Cecilia sat in the backseat cradling Filip. She didn't want to be away from Enjoli, and she hadn't cared one way or another about where they were going. Filip's eyes were shut, threatening to crust over with an amber goo that Cecilia had taken to wiping away before it could get gummy. Enjoli had watched the change in her after Abuela's death, maybe because of Abuela's death, finding a renewed joy in nurturing the child. Whatever the reason, Enjoli was glad to see her cousin emerge from the dark place she had been even as they both mourned their grandmother.

There had been no time for a proper burial. They'd sat there, twisting themselves into strained shapes under the overpass to get rest as the water threatened to rise even higher. There was no way it could reach them, but the strength of impossibility had melted away already, leaving behind it bare flesh ready for whatever each stranger had in store for it. A kiss, a slap, a gutting. So, they sat there with Abuela long after the rain stopped, impatiently waiting for the water to recede and to take her somewhere she might find some peace. Before they could move, the Peacekeepers were already patrolling the area, so Enjoli signaled them assuming they would help. They ignored her, and Janelle later told her she had been lucky for it.

When the water went down low enough that they felt safe enough to move, Enjoli and Cecilia simply did not know what to do with Abuela's body. They knew they couldn't leave here there, but had no means of carrying her anywhere else, so they laid her in the median and half-covered her with construction-grade rocks.

As they drove west, Janelle swerved to avoid the potholes. The highway had been ripped to shreds without repair, and the steppe land off the shoulder looked untamed. They passed a mile marker sign too rusted to read, and a few minutes later passed a set of off ramps into a ghost town of burnt gas stations and collapsing hotels.

"You ever been out this far?" Janelle asked.

"No way. Too dangerous," Enjoli answered.

The stories she'd heard growing up made her happy to stay within the city limits. Even with Abuela's flair for exaggeration, nothing she said about the reclamation zones sounded too dire to be untrue. They were the initial answer to The Plunge, when millions fled the sinking suburbs along the coast, clogging the highways into Houston and scattering like wishless dandelion spores into the exurban sprawl of mattress stores and kitchen supply warehouses. The thousand strip malls with their chain taquerias and dentist offices were never built to handle that kind of influx, and even as the water receded, few in their right minds would return to homes that had their stilt legs swept out from under them. Some had already rebuilt their homes too many times. Some were terrified by the ferocity of the lingering storm, the ugly uppishness it showed in hovering over their land and threatening to push all they'd worked for into the same ocean the hurricane drew its strength from.

So, those that survived moved to the suburbs on the other side of Houston, which had already exploded into mini-villages separated only by a few hundred yards between this one's last used Hyundai lot and that one's first. In this way, Houston stretched almost all the way to Austin. It was fine until it wasn't, and Abuela's stories were filled with angry savages who stuck to the zone, attacking those who tried to cross the highways, taking what they needed with the justification of survival.

"Those campfire tales are a little outdated," Janelle said, turning up the AC. It stank out here. The smell rising terribly for miles, darkly sulfuric like a fertilizer plant explosion. "Anyone who stayed out here after all the businesses shut down didn't last long enough to go full Mad Max."

Filip wailed as they pulled into the circular driveway of the factory, and Cecilia made a silly face at him that seemed to delight the discomfort out of him right away. He cooed against her cheek and stuck a finger in his mouth to suck on.

"Your crew picked the creepiest place possible to hold this meeting," Enjoli said, slamming the door to Janelle's car and staring at the statue at the center of the roundabout. It was of a young girl in a straw summer hat carrying a wooden pail in one hand and leading a dairy cow by a thin rope in the other. They were both expressionless, the details blunted by time, drawing the girl's cheeks back and flattening out her eyes into inhuman watchfulness. Her blue-stained bronze dress flowed with the illusion of her movement. A rancid green crust had formed along the cow's broad flanks making her look sickly, and someone had removed most of the left side of her face. The sulfur smell lingered even here, and the night was silent and dark beyond the parking lot.

"I never get to talk in normal places," came a crystalline voice from the sidewalk leading to the entrance. He was petite with smooth skin the color of driftwood, and he walked with the confidence of a ballet dancer. Even in the darkness, his smile popped, and it's what Enjoli continued to stare at as he came closer. "I'm Cutwolf. Thanks for coming."

"Where's the guy with the fake chainsaw gonna jump out from?" Enjoli said.

"He only comes out after the haunted hayride," Cutwolf winked.

Inside they found a table stacked with copies of Oscar Johns's *Secure Your Tomorrow*. It was an older book, and the spines were all warped, the pages frayed from being thumbed through. Enjoli gave a curious look.

"It's a cover story," Cutwolf said. "In case we get raided."

"What are the odds of that happening?"

"Highly unlikely."

"It's brilliant," Janelle beamed, taking one for herself and nabbing a small flashlight from next to the pile. The lights were out in the building, giving the truth to their trespassing and sending a slight thrill of fear through Enjoli as she cradled the book under her armpit. She didn't want to see Johns's face. Cecilia clicked her flashlight and clicked it again.

"I think mine's not working," she said.

"Here. Swap me," Cutwolf offered. "I think I have more batteries." He reached into his pockets, searching for them with slight clumsiness and came up empty. He shrugged and smiled,

leading them through the lobby into a candlelit office space where a dozen other people had gathered for the meeting.

Janelle ran to hug a young man that Enjoli recognized by his shaved head and riot of jangling earrings.

“Enjoli, this is my boyfriend Budge.”

“Didn’t you spit on us outside DHS?”

“Prosperian cameras beg for a little realness,” he said, kissing Janelle on the top of her head.

“Budge passes me notes in plain sight. It’s how I learned about the meeting tonight.”

“You fucked up all our pamphlets,” Enjoli said, realizing. “And you’re—”

“The Co-President of the Houston Area Chapter of Eternal Triumph, a position about as prestigious as the loogie I launched at you. Sorry about that by the way.”

They found their seats. A few younger women wore yellow Polos and nervous looks. Some of the older men and women in the cheap plastic chairs stared at the ground after looking up briefly when Cutwolf led Enjoli and the others in. No one was talking, and the room gave the air of a will reading among enemies.

Cutwolf found his place in front of everyone, making eye contact with one of the Spires nervously picking at her fingernails in what became the front row.

"What's your name?" he asked her.

She gave a look as though contemplating whether it was safe to say.

"Dasha."

"Nice to meet you Dasha," Cutwolf said, smiling with his eyes. "You're in charge of getting people who come in late up to speed. If anyone else shows, that is. His eyes scanned the thin group, but Enjoli couldn't tell if he was disappointed at the numbers.

"Some of you are here to radically change your lives, and some of you are here to decide whether radical change is what you really want," Cutwolf said. Enjoli placed herself in the second camp, but even that didn't feel right. A few months ago, she couldn't have imagined coming to a meeting like this.

"Kaleel Fonseca started Eternal Triumph with a promise that we should experience heaven on earth. Strip away the religion and the mysticism, and what you're left with is the question of giving and accepting help from others."

"Can you strip away the religion?"

Enjoli was surprised to hear her own voice. Cutwolf didn't look in the least bothered to be interrupted.

"You can do whatever you want. Each of us navigates this life choosing which God we serve and accepting the consequences. What we're building in Braintree is a place of real freedom, not just because there's food and shelter for all, but because none of you will have to

feel the pressure to perform your faith ever again. Yes, we follow the vision of a leader, but the Triumphant can speak up and demand change, complain, criticize, and protest. The word 'anarchy' terrifies people, but what it means for us is that no one is in charge permanently. The group chooses what's best for themselves."

As he spoke, a few heads nodded, including Janelle and a few of the Spires.

"When do the promises of Prosperianism kick in?" added Cutwolf. "That's the fundamental thing you need to ask yourself. Coming to this meeting means you're probably already asking yourself that, and while it might seem like it's my motivation, my job is actually not to convince anyone here. My job is to organize those that want to go, just like other emissaries across the country are doing, so that we can bring as many of the faithful into what will be the last bastion before the final judgement."

"The end of the world, you mean?" Dasha spoke up.

"From what Kaleel has said. From what Child has said, yes. But I recognize that for some people The Plunge was the end of the world. And for some it was the crash in 2026. And for others some horrible event that didn't get a clever nickname. And if you don't think more pain is set to come, you haven't been paying attention." At this, Enjoli expected Cutwolf to become serious as his subject matter, the wounds of all these tragedies fresher for some in the room than others, but instead he smiled again and began detailing what people should gather to make the journey to Braintree. Before he could say when he planned to start the journey, the front doors of the factory rattled, and he shifted to the door, preparing to greet the latecomers. After looking

out, he turned and said, "Everyone. Please turn in your books to page 113 and think about your favorite ice cream flavor."

Enjoli had forgotten about the book in her lap. There was momentary confusion among the group before they rifled through the pages of the Oscar Johns book on their laps or leaned down to retrieve it from underneath their seats. The candles wavered with Cutwolf at the door, and he waved to an unseen group. Enjoli heard boots on the linoleum. Four sets. Maybe more. Fear caught in Enjoli's throat.

"Highly unlikely," she said to herself.

Janelle elbowed her playfully, pointing down at her book when she'd gotten Enjoli's attention to where "Silence Is Literally Golden" was printed in Johns's book on the page above a rambling paragraph about keeping your intentions hidden so that you can accumulate wealth freely.

"There are still some books on the table if you haven't brought yours," Cutwolf called out into the hallway before turning back inside the office space. The boots stopped, a pair of rough voices emerged from the hallway, and a moment later six Peacekeepers came through the door, hefty like cattle in their street armor. It was crowded now, and Enjoli squirmed in her seat in spite of Cutwolf's easy confidence. Six flashlight beams exploded, and Enjoli winced against the slap of brightness.

"Sorry we don't have enough chairs for everyone. Did you grab books?" he asked the officers. The lead Peacekeeper – a tall, amber-skinned bruiser with high cheek bones and a slight paunch – clomped into the middle of everyone.

"Drop a squirrel," he said, eyes scanning the corners of the room. One of the other officers popped out a thin flexi-metal tool from her armband. She swiped its surface with a bony finger, but it stayed dead. She tried again, and it lay there uselessly.

"Worthless, hand-me-down bullshit," she muttered. She slapped it again, it buzzed to life, and floated into the air just a second before crashing down to the carpet.

"You can bet they don't have to deal with this crap in the city," the lead Peacekeeper grumbled. "Skip it."

"But it's protocol to scan, sir," the other officer said, bright-eyed and keen.

"If they care so much about protocol, they can send us squirrels that work."

"How can we help you tonight, officers?" Cutwolf asked shrewdly.

"Get on your knees, and this will go smoothly," the lead Peacekeeper barked.

Almost everybody complied. Some quickly, some crumpling to the ground like a Coke can under a boot.

Enjoli rose instinctively.

"I think there's been—" she said before a bulky Peacekeeper with a jutting chin pulled his gun on her. Enjoli stepped back and lifted her bare hands.

"Oh, holy fuck. Okay," she said as some of those on the floor scrambled in place. She caught Cutwolf's eyes, and he seemed to signal that she should do what the officers said. Filip

screached louder, and Cecilia pressed him tightly against herself as if she were trying to absorb him under her skin where it was safe.

"On your knees, ma'am," the lead Peacekeeper commanded again.

"I work for Oscar Johns," she said, still standing.

The lead eyed the others in the room.

"Sure. So does everyone."

"I'm his personal assistant."

The gun was only a few feet from her chest.

The lead Peacekeeper sighed, pulling out a scanning pod from a pouch on his belt. The plastic was marred and slightly warped. "We do it old school, then," he said, pressing it to her wrist until her info populated in his display, floating like poetry over her face from his point of view.

"It just says you work at Living Prosperity," he muttered.

"No, wait. Here," she said, taking a deep breath. "I used to be in a ton of commercials with him."

The bulky Peacekeeper lowered his gun and looked to his lead.

"A couple decades ago. I was a little kid. He would hoist me on his shoulders and then I would say, 'The time—'"

"Is now!" the lead Peacekeeper chirped. He looked at her face, eventually finding the little girl somewhere still in there. "Oh, man! I remember you. My daughter loved that commercial. That and a handful of M&Ms are the only reasons we got her to go to church with us. This is wild. You won the lottery, didn't you?"

"I did! And I started working for Pastor Johns right after. We are trying to learn from Pastor Johns's word. Here, look. Can I pick up my book? Great. See?" she said, picking it up and flipping through some pages to show off the writing in the margins. Satisfied by the set dressing, the lead Peacekeeper relaxed and shook his head.

"Can't believe this. Can I get a selfie?"

"Uh, sure," Enjoli said. He leaned in close enough for his stubble to scratch her ear.

"Let me see your phone, ma'am," the bulky Peacekeeper said after they'd taken the picture.

"No need for all that Randy," the lead said.

"I just wanna double check. If she really works for Pastor Johns then she should have some emails from him. Texts. Something to prove it besides a book anyone can buy."

"It's really no problem. Here," Enjoli said, scrolling to the text messages and sliding her phone to him. As he scrolled through skeptically, Enjoli became acutely aware of being the only standing who didn't have a gun. Everyone else was on their knees, eyes averted. Their heavy breaths slowed, but they still looked up to her with cow eyes. Cutwolf remained calm and implacable, and Enjoli was stunned to see him sneak a wink at her. She couldn't help herself, so

she looked around at the officers to see if anyone clocked it, but they were all staring at the officer squinting at her phone, whether waiting for him to stop wasting their time or to find the jackpot that could justify their violence.

"Tons of texts here," he said finally. Enjoli felt the air in the room grow lighter, and the people on their knees stopped clenching. "Last one is from over a week ago."

He said it, expecting her to answer an unspoken question. To invent what she thought he was getting at in her mind. She'd done this a million times with vendors. Led them to the point she wanted to make and then left them to fill in the blanks in case they offered a price even lower than the one she wanted to suggest. It was a no-risk freebie, and if the person didn't take the bait, Enjoli was never worse for wear. She wasn't going to expose herself now.

"I went on vacation to Majorca. Right before that hurricane came through. I'm not back on the clock until Saturday," she said flatly. She wanted the lie unadorned.

"You can manage that kind of thing?" one of the other Peackeepers asked. He'd looked nervous at the back of the pack when they'd come in, but he only looked jealous now. Imagining a world that was closed off to him.

"Working that close to Pastor Johns has its perks," Enjoli said. Then, because she was still buzzing from trying to sell the lie, she pushed even deeper. "If you worked harder to gain the Lord's favor, you could do it, too."

She felt the shift in the room. The six officers becoming a singular entity. An audience. Miles from the center stage surrounded by thousands of seats, stuffed into a dimly lit, crumbling back office, she preached for the very first time, something she no longer believed in.

The Peacekeepers let them all stand. They gave Enjoli her phone back, and everyone else ran their hands nervously along their skirt hems or braced themselves against the unreliable edge of an office chair. It seemed like Enjoli had spoken the very bullets out of the man's gun. The air returned to the room. Cutwolf approached the lead Peacekeeper with his hand outstretched, saying something about them just doing their job. All smiles. Hands steady. One of the Spires, a girl Enjoli couldn't have imagined being anything over seventeen laughed in search of a release. A few of the others stood up, blank-faced, so clearly acclimated to repeated stops and the promise of handcuffs.

"We should stay," the bulky Peacekeeper said. "I want her to teach me how to get to where she's at." He pulled up a chair and sat down, his heft crushing into the seat. The man's energy sublimated from a wallflower's hesitation to a wolf's hunger.

The lead Peacekeeper rolled his eyes.

"Come on, Michaels. We're still on the clock."

"How often are we gonna meet someone who could put in a good word with the big man himself, Sergeant?"

But his lead was already pushing through the door, his command the final word on the subject.

After they'd left, Cutwolf asked everyone to pick their books back up and turn back to page 113.

"So, what are some examples we can offer that would fall into Johns's rule about keeping your intentions hidden so you can excel within your private endeavors?" he asked, scanning the room with a serious face, tapping his ear and pointing to the door.

No one answered at first, but then Janelle piped in with a story about how she got a coveted Spire work placement by telling her peers the wrong day for the interview. The conversation simmered that way until Cutwolf felt confident that the Peacekeepers were well and truly gone. The entire ordeal left Enjoli with philosophical whiplash, first considering the end of the world, then the end of her life with a brief detour into the worldview that abandoned her when she'd needed it most.

"You saved our bacon," Cutwolf said after he'd relayed the full plan on travelling together to Braintree, and the group started to dissipate. "Seems like you've made up your mind."

"I just didn't want to see anyone hurt," Enjoli responded.

"Yup. Like I said. You've made up your mind."

‡

Part Two

Fall and Winter

Chapter Twelve

Tuesday, August 17, 2049

Braintree, Colorado

The morning arrived cold and wet. A heavy wind battered Sophie's house loud enough to wake her up early. She bounded down the stairs two at a time. Mama Aisling hated when she did, but Mama Kendra got a kick out of it so it felt like a wash depending on which greeted her at the bottom.

"You're going to break an arm, Soph," Mama Aisling tsked when the young girl, pajama-clad and beaming, slid into the kitchen across the tile. "I thought the house was collapsing."

Sophie kissed her on the cheek. Mama Aisling stirred burbling oatmeal on the stovetop. She sprinkled cinnamon on top, filling the room with a sweet spiciness as she blended the red swirl into the pot. They had gone to the commons exactly once for breakfast since Eternal Triumph had taken over management of Braintree, more so Mama Aisling could show her face and they could see the set up. Long folding tables lined the square where people ate and drank after pulling whatever they wanted from an outdoor cooking space that stood, wobbling with commotion, covered with tarps and old jackets they'd stitched together. The busted statue had been cleared away, and a wooden platform set over the fountain so that one of the tables sat on what looked like a stage, but it didn't seem to Sophie that anyone in particular was assigned to sit there. In fact, it didn't seem like anything was assigned. People seemed to move with a hidden logic, like bees wholly focused on their task but erratic to anyone watching. The food tasted good, and Sophie didn't understand why they hadn't gone back, especially since the square was

taken over completely by a round-the-clock operation of grilling and smoking and steaming and serving.

"Looks like we're in the belly of the beast," Mama Kendra had said as they sat down with plates of bacon and rolls. Mama Aisling had rolled her eyes, but it was clear how impressed she was by what they'd created even if she had no intention of utilizing it. It reminded Sophie of the soup lines she'd been parentally encouraged to volunteer at in Denver before Mama Kendra suggested the city had become a little too dangerous for an 11-year-old girl. It never felt that way to her, but she was happy to get out of it. The appreciative faces Mama Aisling had promised her had never materialized, so Sophie spent her volunteer time staring back at flat expressions who didn't seem to care whether they ate or starved. Not a single smile for her efforts.

The Braintree commons was filled with happy faces.

Mama Kendra went straight for the coffee as the others ate. Every meal now felt like a family meeting, with something severe to discuss, several items that Mama Aisling considered vital to be cautious of, but that Sophie hadn't seen happen. So far, all she'd seen was everyone being fed. They also told her she wasn't going back to school after the start of classes Wednesday where she'd been happy to meet her new teacher and despondent to see familiar classmates. Mama Aisling and Mama Kendra had gone back and forth on whether it was better to get her out of the house or to keep her close, and after winding up on the protective side of the argument, Sophie had celebrated by staying up late with a flashlight and colored pencils under her blanket after lights out. She'd drawn a stallion standing in a field under a blossoming tree which was good enough for Mama Aisling to say she was a genius and for Mama Kendra to tell her the line work needed improvement.

"You'll stay with us today, no matter what," Mama Aisling said. She still wore her vestments, but instead of making her seem authoritative, they now made her diminished, and Sophie worried that, if all her concerns were real, she would stand out in a dangerous way.

They were half-heartedly playing a board game when a scream sounded from down the block. Mama Aisling signaled for Sophie to stay put, but the girl rose anyway, swinging a leg out from the bench at their dining room table to listen. Mama Kendra peered out the window first, then opened the door and craned her neck. She stepped out, and Sophie rushed to follow her, hearing Mama Aisling's frustrated exhalation before another screaming voice joined the first.

It wasn't obvious what was happening. At the big house near the end of the block, a group of Triumphant guards with guns held a family of five on the ground beside a bed of begonias. Sophie ducked back inside.

"What is it, Kendra?" Aisling asked, but Kendra just shook her head and slammed the door behind her after she was safely back inside.

"The Petersons."

The bell from town square rang out, and the drop of defiance Mama Kendra mustered quickly drained from her face.

||

Sophie stood shivering next to her mothers in the middle of the crowd that gathered when the church bell tolled. Child and Janthy stood at the top steps of the church, overseeing a separate group of hundreds lined up stretching back toward the pickleball courts, hemmed in by guards.

Sophie stood on her tiptoes in the light rain and craned her neck to see who all was there. Cooper McGovern stood at the front of the line looking bold, with her granddaughter Claire just behind her. A red-faced man behind them attempted to shove his way out of the line, and Sophie realized that the Triumphant guards were holding massive guns which cowed the man back into place. He spun and shook, shouting obscenities, but neither of her moms attempted to cover her ears.

"We've gathered here this morning to rejoice in the first act of cleansing needed to prepare the way for the end of the world," Child's booming voice rose over the assembled. He frightened Sophie, especially when he smiled, and he was now grinning intensely as the soft rain clung to his long red hair and darkened his cloak. She looked to Claire McGovern, who looked so small, and Sophie found herself shocked that she'd ever feared her. That she'd hidden behind lockers to avoid her in the hallway just as she'd hidden bruises from her mothers.

Child made his way toward the watching crowd which parted for him. He waved his hands, urging people to keep the lane open as Janthy led the procession alongside a small contingent of armed guards. Fewer than Sophie might have guessed. It didn't take many people with large guns to take control of a lot of people. Claire's grandmother took some prodding to get going, and something in the way her face slackened as she stepped forward told Sophie that she'd never see her or Claire again. She held up her small middle finger behind her mothers' backs, and Claire's eyes narrowed when she saw it.

Child halted them again at the edge of the commons, looked over his shoulder down the avenue leading to the south gate, and then brought his attention back to Cooper.

"You can't take anything with you," he said.

"You've taken my city, my house, and everything in it," she said, looking away and finding Claire.

"Your suit," he answered, pointing to her exosuit. "It can help someone who needs it."

"But it's mine," was all she could manage.

Child sighed.

"I was like you when I was younger. My life was easy, and the most difficult thing was admitting how soft and weak I was because of it. My father owned a bunch of car dealerships, and when I turned sixteen, he gave me this mint-condition Audi TT. He had it freshly washed and waxed, and it looked like a cresting red wave. I couldn't have been happier. It still took gas, so after a week of cruising around in it, I went to go fill it up, and there was this man crouched behind the dumpster at the gas station peeing against the wall. Do you know what I thought?"

Cooper shook her head slowly.

"I was mad that he'd ruined my day. At first, I thought it was because he was so disgusting, and I shouldn't have to see something so ugly in my beautiful life. But it nagged at me until I realized that I was mad because he reminded me of how pointless I was. This feeling sunk deep into me. I hated admitting that I was soft or weak, but I needed to for my own sanity. Then I asked myself why I would be so ashamed to be weak when my life was so rich and full and blessed, and it dawned on me that I didn't feel awful because I had money. It was because others didn't. Do you understand what I mean?"

"I will not feel bad for enjoying what I've earned," she said.

"Well, you've enjoyed it long enough. It's time for someone else to have a turn."

The old woman's body tensed, and the guard nearest to her moved in closer, his gun brushing against the red-faced man's arm.

"Don't listen grandma," Claire spoke up.

"You're a monster," Cooper said, but she was already tearing up. She looked like an embarrassed child sent to her room without supper. She dry-swallowed and said softly, "I can't take it off by myself."

Child nodded. A guard undid the clips in the back of the exosuit, and Cooper fell into Child's arms as the limp fleximetal slid off. Then Child dropped her into the mud. He looked again down the long avenue leading to the south gate and out of town as Janthy reached the head of the line.

"Parade's waiting on you, ma'am," she said.

"I built this city! I built it!" she screamed from the mud. "You can't do this!"

"You've been in the mud for less than a minute," Janthy said with a chilling calm. "You'll get used to it."

"You can't seriously expect me to crawl," Cooper spat.

"Not sure you'll enjoy the other option," Janthy answered, tapping her finger against the stock of her gun.

Cooper raised herself to her elbows and spun her head around.

"Claire! Claire dear, come help me."

The girl stepped back, bumping into the red-faced man before freezing there.

"Someone, please!"

No one moved, so concerned they were with their own safety, their empathy having atrophied so long ago.

"You, sir," Janthy said to the red-faced man. "Would you carry her?"

He shoved Claire away from him and shook his head.

"What about you all?" she asked the group crowded behind him, but no one dared to step out of line.

"It's okay. I promise. You can help her if you want to," she said.

When no one came forward, Janthy knelt down in front of Cooper and shrugged. Looking on from the crowd, Sophie couldn't understand why all the people who had lived next door to the McGoverns for years, for decades, didn't step up.

"Wait, Janthy," Child instructed before turning his attention back to Cooper. "If you repent and commit to living our way, you can stay."

The offer withered in the frigid air. Cooper thrust her elbow forward and started crawling in the mud, inch by slow inch, toward the gate.

Sophie looked up to find that her mother wasn't there.

Aisling emerged from the crowd and wordlessly lifted Cooper up. The old woman's thin arms wrapped around Aisling's neck, muddying her cassock, and the pair of them led the desperate procession of the wealthy out of town.

||

Sophie and Mama Kendra spent the rest of the morning clearing out the houses of those who'd been kicked out of Braintree with only the clothes on their backs. Child commanded that anything of value be brought to the town square, including whatever scraps of physical cash they might find. By their third house, they hadn't found any. There were piles of jewelry and gadgets. Mrs. Stuyvesant's house even had a stack of gold bars that had been like something out of the tattered AtoZ Mystery books Mama Aisling handed down to Sophie.

"What are they going to do with all of this?" she asked Mama Kendra.

"Lord knows. They can eat it for all I care."

"What they're doing. It isn't right is it?"

"What do you think?" she asked. This was Mama Kendra's usual response to anything Sophie wondered about.

"What they did to Mrs. McGovern was mean," she said, but the words came without conviction, painted by a twisting feeling of confusion in her head.

"But?" Mama Kendra said.

"But you and Mama Aisling always say that it isn't right for some people to have so much while everyone else has so little. That we have to help each other to survive. So, you agree with them."

"Life's pretty messy, huh? You think it's okay to help others survive if it means hurting someone?"

Sophie wished her mother would just tell her what was right. There were always so many questions.

"I don't think Mrs. McGovern would have helped anyone if no one had made her. And you always said she's an entitled twat."

"Language."

"It's your language!"

"It's grown-up talk, and just because someone happens to be an entitled you-know-what doesn't mean they deserve what happened to her today. Or that any of those people deserved to lose their homes and have us walking around like we own the place."

"But we do. Child and his followers share everything, and we're still here, which means we're part of that now, too."

"They aren't sharing the guns, love."

They left the enclave north of the golf course when they got hungry. Devout Eternal Triumph believers guided machines along the greens and the fairways, digging up the manicured grass into erupting ribbons of soil. Sophie wondered what they were going to plant there and found herself hoping it would be strawberries. Who knew when they were meant to grow, but she wanted something sweet. Her neighbors and the new strangers moved in and out of houses, rolling wheelbarrows along the sidewalks heading toward the commons. Some clearly had the same idea as Sophie and Kendra, wiping their hands on their jeans and joining the procession toward the commons.

They'd already sat down with plates of lunch when Mama Aisling caught up with them.

"You get something?" Kendra asked.

"I'm not hungry."

"What happened out there?"

"Sophie, darling. Did you see those kids? Why don't you take your lunch over there and see if you can learn all their names and favorite comic book characters."

"Aisling, she's already seen a lot today," Kendra said, using that faux-sweet voice Sophie knew to be her attempt at diplomacy.

"That's exactly why I'm suggesting she go play with friends, Kendra."

She didn't want to, but Sophie got up and took her plate with her, heading instead to an empty table near the end of where a smiling couple were serving the food. She looked back to see if her mothers noticed her protest, but they were already serious-faced and distant.

"Hey," a bright voice came from behind her. "Can I sit here?"

He was younger than her, but he was more brash. His shaggy hair popped off his head like a black sunburst, and his teeth were gray inside his broad smile. Despite the cold he was wearing a tee grown soft from wear, a cartoon tiger jump kicking into the air on his chest. He was holding a burger in one hand and an apple so small that he could curve his fingers completely around it in the other. He took a bite of the burger before Sophie could answer.

"Sure."

"I'm Max," he said, his mouth stuffed with food.

"Sophie."

"My dad and I got here a couple days ago. Isn't it incredible?"

"What is?" she asked, taking a bite of her own food.

"This," he said, pointing a finger toward the serving line. A woman at the end knocked over a stack of plastic cups, and they clattered on the cobblestones.

"Yeah, I guess it is," Sophie decided. "Where do you and your dad live?"

"Up at the farm. But I came down here because they said there was burgers and I love burgers and it's too loud up there. You play Gaga-ball?"

"What's Gaga-ball?"

Somehow, he'd finished his burger while they were talking, but Sophie barely ate at all.

"I'll show you. Come on."

He hopped up from the table and took off up the road to the east, past the flower shop. Sophie looked down at her food, then looked up to see if she could find her moms, but they weren't where she'd left them, and there were too many faces gathering for lunch. She took another big bite, placed the rest gingerly on her plate and raced to catch up with Max.

"The ball's in my room," he said, grinning.

They ran all the way up to Karen Fielder's farm, where a dozen big trucks were parked. One roared to life and drove itself toward the access road leading to the eastern gate while another took its place. A line of them was waiting their turn. Bots unloaded crates and boxes from each, disappearing into barns and storehouses while people hustled around them to direct traffic and pick up dropped cargo. Sophie knew Karen from the church, but never really talked to her, even when her moms brought her up here on one of their homebrew field trips.

"Hey now! Be careful with that!" Karen shouted from across the yard. A bot with crates of heavy bottles struggled against the terrain, and the top crate teetered. Karen jogged toward it, but didn't get there in time, and the crate toppled over with a splashing noise of broken glass and something fizzy. Karen shook her head and bent down to clean up as another truck pulled out

and another claimed its place. After it came to a stop, it didn't stop rocking. It was alive with the shouting flutter of chickens clawing and squawking against thin wire mesh and each other.

"Oh my gosh!" Max cried, changing course, and heading straight for them. Sophie held back, watching as Karen met Max as the truck, pulling her wide hat back up on her head from where it had fallen back on its drawstring after the bottles fell.

Sophie dared to get closer, walking cautiously, her heart beating quicker as the chickens threw themselves against the walls of their cages. Karen pulled out a long wooden tray from near the back of the truck, and Max's eyes popped when she lifted the lid just enough for a peek. Karen gave a sweet nod, and Max reached his hands in, pulling out a golden-brown chick.

"Look, Sophie!"

He held it out to her with happy insistence, stretching his arms out with the fluffy offering when she didn't immediately jump to his side to take it. When she scooped up the chick, Max took another for himself, and the three of them stood running their fingers gently over the chicks' heads. The sprinkle of rain grew to a steady shower. Sophie curved her body over the chick, tucking it away as Max giggled and Karen looked on smiling.

"What are they for?"

"Everyone's getting them," Karen said, gesturing to the rest of the fully grown chickens in the truck. "I hope you like eggs."

"What do they taste like?" Max said, transfixed by the creature in his hand.

"They're good," Sophie assured him. "They look like fluffy yellow clouds."

"Let's get you kids inside to dry off and wait this out. Your dad is in the way back, packing up your stuff, Max." Karen said. She checked her watch screen. A set of drones flew single-file from the fields back to their docking stations inside the barn. "Rain shouldn't last too much longer."

||

Sophie's moms weren't happy that she'd run off without telling them, but they were more relieved than angry when she came back to the commons in Karen's golf cart. They hugged tight enough for the air to pop out of her. The rain stopped, just as Karen said, but the sun still refused to show, and the dreary gray of the late afternoon gave the town square a mystical air. People milled anxiously, and the bell at the top of the Prosperian church continued ringing. They couldn't call it that anymore, though. It was something new, but still searching for a name.

Child appeared at the steps, and Sophie worried she was getting used to seeing him there, expecting that he would be perched there permanently. He was covered in dirt, his jeans streaked in black, and his shirt smeared where he'd wiped his muddy hands against it. He didn't look like any other pastor she'd ever seen, including her mother, whose soft kindness and caution Sophie had loved. While Mama Aisling had given up long ago on whether her daughter would come home with ruined clothes and caked boots, she herself still tried to step lightly even during hikes. Sophie couldn't imagine her mother kneeling down in the dirt to plant anything.

‡

Chapter Thirteen

Tuesday, August 31, 2049

Braintree, Colorado

Everything north of San Antonio was a wasteland, and Cutwolf had already taken enough risks traveling the country to call members new and old to Braintree, so they had decided to use the long, slow road west from Junction. They rested during the day and drove at night on the Zoox's solar cell. It had taken them almost a week to reach New Mexico, cautious of letting the battery dip below half-charge in case they needed it in a hurry. Their food had run out a day's drive out of El Paso, so even though Cutwolf had deemed it too dangerous to stop there, he acceded to scavenging what he could, disappearing for a few hours and returning with dented cans and a large plastic jug of water with a dusting of sediment floating near the bottom. Filip was the only one that didn't complain, but two of his teeth had come in, and Cecilia yelped in pain from the backseat whenever he bit down while nursing.

"He's adorable," Cutwolf had said.

"He's about to get yeeted out of this car window, chavo bronca," Cecilia had spat back. Everyone in the car laughed.

"No hay estrés, sis. I'll go grab some ice for you," Enjoli had cooed sweetly. Cecilia swung her arm in the air, motioning to the vast, dry nothingness outside their window with her lip curled up. Enjoli loved getting Cecilia to make that face and seeing it for the first time in months made her cackle with delight.

They'd cut into Navajo territory to restock supplies. It had taken Cutwolf a few hours to remember the right backroads to get onto the land, and the first person they'd seen had shot at them, but Cutwolf had shouted some secret code word, and the whole exchange had ended with a hug that lasted a little too long from where Enjoli was sitting. She'd grown jealous of Cutwolf's easy flirtation with anyone he came into contact with, wanting for some reason to be the sole recipient of his sarcastic attention. Enjoli was as surprised as anyone to realize it.

After the reservation, it had been smooth sailing until they reached the military blockade a mile to the east of Braintree. Cutwolf had spotted it a mile off and pulled over. He'd left them in the dark for half an hour, returned with blood on his shirt, and they drove through the quiet checkpoint with an understanding not to ask him what had happened.

Enjoli woke up in a bed underneath an unnervingly soft comforter. It was early afternoon, but it felt as if she'd slept for days. She pulled the blackout curtains, and the bustling life of Karen Fielder's farm sprang into view. Everywhere she looked, people were working, drones were flying through the air, and the open country lay just beyond with its bevy of pines rustling in the breeze. She smelled awful. She forgot for a while where she was and how she'd got there. Through the fuzziness of her disorientation, she remembered waking up outside the barn, having slept through their journey into Braintree through the northern gate. Cutwolf shook her by the shoulder, waking her up just long enough that she could stumble into the bedroom and fall asleep. There was a pair of pajamas folded neatly, and untouched, on the nightstand.

She didn't know what to do with her solitude. It was the first time in years that she had slept in a bed by herself, not with Abuela snoring raucously next to her, not in the backseat of a car, or a hard cot in a noisy shelter. Now she only had the luxurious anxiety of being alone. It set

her on edge. She was starving, too, so she opened the door and crept down the hallway in search of the kitchen. When she rounded the corner, she found Cecilia sitting next to Karen Fielder. The old woman was holding Filip and doting on him, making silly noises, and bobbing him gently up and down.

"I'm glad you're awake. I've just put out a late lunch and was coming to get you. I know y'all are exhausted," Karen said. "Have whatever you want. Much as you want. I'm kinda the welcome wagon around here. Was it okay in the room? Too cold? August comes around and hits hard."

"It was fine," Enjoli found herself saying, feeling immediately stupid for how petty it had sounded. "Amazing really. I haven't slept in a bed for a while."

"Phew. That one's seen better days, so I'm happy to hear it wasn't too bad. Come have some food. There's a tomato and cucumber salad, beans and corn, and I guess I just combined two different veggies for just about every dish huh? Can't really go wrong. We fried some chicken too, but I gotta see if your sister here left you any. And we gotta get you some new clothes, love. Hopefully you aren't too attached to those. Hey, Emmy!"

Hearing her name, a robot paused midstride across the room, stalled, then turned to face Karen. It was a little taller than Enjoli, with tall legs, a petite torso, and a face that looked like a spacesuit helmet. Enjoli recognized it immediately.

"Yes, Karen?" Emmy said.

"This girl is going to change her clothes, and I need you to take the old ones and dump 'em in the earth maker."

Emmy stood silent for a moment.

"Um, okay. You got it," it said, then went back to its initial task.

"Everything goes in the earth maker," Karen said as Enjoli took a seat next to her at the table. "Bell pepper stems, chicken guts, pencil shavings, whatever. Mix 'em up with mesophilic and thermophilic microorganisms that chow down and convert it all into soil that grows plants like crazy. It's super old tech, but very handy."

"That's a Figure 03, right? An earlier model?" Enjoli said, motioning toward where the robot had been.

"Good eye. She's a Figure 01. First gen, which is why she's not as quick as some would wish her to be but let me tell you she still works hard as any of 'em. Especially here. And smart as they come. I've had a ball chatting with Cecilia here, and of course playing with this little cutie pie," Karen said, cooing at Filip.

"Karen's been doing most of the chatting," Cecilia said.

"Oh, hush."

"What...is this place?" Enjoli asked, spooning some tomatoes cucumbers onto her plate.

"It's Braintree, love," Karen answered.

After lunch, they changed into fresh clothes and walked down to the commons together. Cecilia left Filip with a group of people watching over the littles at a playground near the flower shop. Enjoli and Cecilia marveled at the business of it all, the people moving here and there to build or bake or banter, the mid-afternoon drinking, the deep-breathing group stretch Berenice was leading, the happy noise of community.

"There's a lot to do. Eventually you'll need to decide what jobs you want. It's totally up to you, but there's a little wiggling between what you're good at and what the community really needs. And it's not like you can't paint and frame out a new house, you know? But first, Child wants to see you," Karen said.

"Where's Cutwolf?" Enjoli asked.

"That's why Child wants to see you."

They pushed through the heavy front doors of city hall, strolling past some security guards with heavy weapons that set Enjoli's teeth on edge. If Cecilia cared, she didn't show it. They arrived at an office at the end of the hallway, just beyond the council room, finding that Child, Janthy, and Cutwolf were waiting for them. They all stopped talking when Karen led Enjoli and Cecilia in, and the air took on a heaviness of serious business. Cutwolf gave a quick, excited little wave from his hip.

"Enjoli, Cecilia, welcome," Child said. Even hearing the stories about him, he was so much larger than Enjoli could have imagined. There was an impossibility to his structure, and he

looked absurd sitting there behind the desk, but it was as if the architects had ruined the measurements of the building, and not that he was the wrong size. He was a perfect being slotted into an imperfect room. She'd heard all her life that symmetrically played a massive role in our attractiveness, but his features were far from even, and their alignment created something fascinating to look at. Something she couldn't look away from. Even feeling the schoolgirl anxiety of being called into the principal's office, Enjoli's instinct was to goggle at the look on his face, which angled harshly as though he were concentrating very hard on not plummeting right through the earth.

"Thank you," Cecilia said.

"Thanks," Enjoli echoed. "For the food, the clothes. Everything." She was bothered by her own incipient obsequiousness. She reminded herself to breathe. He was just a man, after all.

But what if he was more? Enjoli couldn't dismiss it completely. Not after seeing even a fraction of what they'd built. Not after enjoying even the small charity they'd already given her.

"You can relax. This isn't an inquisition," Child continued. "I just want to ask you some questions. Cutwolf told me about your special relationship to Oscar Johns."

She and Cecilia both sat. Janthy leaned back against the wall.

"Fire away," Enjoli said.

Cutwolf gave a discrete thumbs up.

"How did you get such a coveted position? Someone from your background," Child said.

“You know about the tithing lottery?” Enjoli asked, sliding the palms of her hands along the brass studs on the sides of her chair.

“Naturally.”

“I won it. When I was twelve. Not the big prize, but big enough. I remember I'd spilled orange soda on my shirt before church that week, and dad had to scramble to find me something from the lost and found that fit. The closest he got was a frilly fake-silk blouse, blazing hot purple, which sagged everywhere but somehow made me feel like a grown up. When they called my name, I got to go on stage with Oscar Johns. I won't lie. His hug felt like salvation. I can't remember feeling that happy again. It was more than the money. I had won, which meant that God loved me.”

“You still sound enamored.”

“My family ate for a month.”

"And not seaweed paste," Cecilia added.

Child nodded his massive head and closed his eyes. Enjoli looked to Janthy.

“Not everyone who wins the lottery ends up a confidante of Johns,” she said. “Please, continue.”

“Living Prosperity called me right after to fulfill my obligations as a winner. One photo shoot, one commercial recording. They wanted a testimonial that they could quote and air. You've got to make people believe they have a shot, too, yeah? My mom went with me and held

my hand so I wouldn't be nervous. Johns was there for the photo shoot, and I told the crew that I wanted to do my commercial with him. It amused him, and he agreed. That series of commercials became kind of famous, and they told me I was a natural. Precocious and slightly formal. A tiny adult with an attitude that would be caustic if I were on the other side of puberty. Obviously, that had a short shelf life."

"What made you ask him?" Child said, lifting his eyes again.

"To do the commercial with me? That's easy. The morning after our celebratory dinner, I looked around the house at all the food, the money we still had left over, and it hit me that I'd never seen anyone win the lottery twice. We'd burned half the winnings on food. What came next? How soon until we were back to where we were, with the lottery night a distant memory that we talked about for years with our plates half-empty? The way I saw it, we would gnaw on the bone of that memory until it snapped in our throats. The happiness I saw at the table with my family eating chicken fried steak and queso made me want desperately to sustain it. Making the connection with Johns was a first step."

"And when you got older..."

"He said I was already like family."

"Do you still have it?" Child asked.

"Have what?"

"The winning ticket."

“Ha!” Janthy laughed. “Of course, she doesn’t. It’s been, what, twenty years?”

Enjoli looked sheepish and wondered for the first time whether telling the truth would get her killed.

“I keep it in my wallet, behind my credit cards.”

She pulled it out. The paper had been rubbed almost back to pulp, the ink fuzzy and unknowable to anyone but the owner.

“I need you to burn it,” said Child.

“And that will prove my loyalty?”

Child turned his head and whispered into the air over his shoulder before turning his gaze back to her.

"We have several tenets of our community that you and Cecilia will need to abide by. We share ownership of everything, we speak with one voice, we value self-sufficiency and simplicity, we reject traditional hierarchies and pointless employment in favor of community service and education based on non-material values. Last, but not least, we promote emotional and spiritual wealth. You won't see a scrap of money here. Can you abide by these rules?"

"What about, hell, you know," Cecilia started. It was the first she'd spoken up to question anything, and it took Enjoli by surprise. She hadn't balked at going with Janelle to the meeting in Brenham or at piling into a car heading halfway across the country, but now that they were here,

she was on the verge of coming right out and saying it. "What about you being Jesus and all that?"

Child laughed.

"The city of Braintree is going to be the site of an amazing transformation just a few months from now, and it will demand a spiritual purity, but it's on me to prove to you that I am what I claim to be. Not the other way around. Now, can you abide by our way of life?"

"Happily," Cecilia said.

"Yes," Enjoli echoed.

Child stood, rounding the desk to stand in front of Enjoli.

"I'm going to touch your face now," he said, placing one massive hand at the base of her skull and the thumb of the other against her forehead. She was startled and instinctively shut her eyes.

"Burn your lottery ticket. It's shackling you to a long era of pain. Release it."

Enjoli saw a bright flash of light and was overwhelmed with a confusion that pressed against the walls of her mind until melting into a pleasant sensation of warmth that spread throughout her body. She couldn't explain what was happening to her, but it felt so good that she let it take over.

"Release that pain," he repeated.

She opened her eyes and looked up at him, so high above her.

"I don't really care who you used to work for, Enjoli. Everyone is welcome here."

Child tilted his ear to his shoulder and started chuckling sweetly.

"God commanded me to give you a new job."

Enjoli didn't know what to say.

"You're to be in charge of our food distribution."

"I've never done anything like that before," she said.

"It seems like a serious responsibility that may need a more trusted hand," Janthy interjected, but Child shrugged.

"I suppose God knows that she will have a tougher time betraying us while trying to keep us fed."

Enjoli left the room shaking, already feeling hungry again and relieved to be accepted into a place where it seemed she could pluck anything she wanted off the nearest tree. And there were trees! Not the poisoned corpses sticking up out of the saltmarsh or the endless concrete guiding her toward brief midnight glimpses into Oscar Johns's front yard. The technicolor of it all made her heartsick to think of how long she lived without something she didn't know could make her feel such ease.

“I know you’re tired, but there’s one last thing,” Cutwolf said, leading them beyond the center of town where a drum circle pounded out a happy rhythm. They walked into the eastern neighborhood, what had once been called The Lush, where they stopped in front of a house that was bigger than Enjoli and Cecilia’s apartment building.

“It’s yours if you want it, but there are a few more unclaimed—” Cutwolf said.

“We’ll take it,” Cecilia said, already heading toward the front door.

“Well, okay then,” he said with a grin, turning to Enjoli. “If you need anything, I’m right next door.”

Suddenly, all she wanted was to get inside, to see her new bedroom, to stretch out on the bed and try not to wake up from the dream.

‡

Chapter Fourteen

Wednesday, September 1, 2049

Government Siege Camp, Outside Braintree, Colorado

The metal scraps and hardened plastic shrapnel clattered together in the bin as an unshaven lieutenant wheeled it behind the control tent. Mayor Kemp listened to it as the dirt was displaced by the squeaking wheels. Some genius had placed the all-purpose directly behind the control tent, which meant he heard every rattling tub of broken drones dumped into the heavy dumpster. Every stray Coke can, too. Every little sip and busted piece of tech rolled back his net worth. He could feel it in his gut. Even if Governor Bui had promised state funds to set up the siege, Kemp knew a bill always came due, and he was still furious with how long Bui had dragged his feet to get the operation underway.

"Is it possible to get the dumpster moved?" he intoned as Colonel Greenwood poured jalapeños into the oil vessel in the top of their popcorn machine.

"If the noise is gonna bother you, consider it motivation to end this thing quick-like," she said, adding an extra slice for good measure. She was shorter than Kemp with hair long enough that it must have unraveled down to her ankles. Kemp doubted he'd ever see it down, although Greenwood had a joyful way about it, a buddy-buddy lilt to her voice that made him nervous to see behind a uniform. Kemp had seen every combination since arriving at the siege encampment. Men with olive t-shirts and baggy camo pants, women with black boots or busted trainers

beneath uncuffed pant legs, soldiers sporting bandanas and unwashed tank tops already marked in place by sunburn. One guy wore his high school letter jacket, and Kemp would have been shocked if the kid had been able to spell his own name to sign on the enlistment form. This is what the harried midnight calls and haggling had brought him. A skimpy Army battalion augmented by a sad Colorado Guard unit and two Security and National Resilience Agency goons creeping around pretending to be useful. Kemp didn't have to be thankful. What worried him was the group he hadn't called.

Leaning back in a chair against the back flap of the tent, Leon Nash waved off Colonel Greenwood's offer of popcorn and returned to tapping his phone screen in a way that made Kemp sure he was playing an arcade game.

"For you, Mayor? The trick is getting the jalapeño into the oil, so the flavor spreads evenly throughout the whole batch," Colonel Greenwood said. He took some to be chummy.

"This is what they teach you in the army?"

"First day of boot camp," she smiled. "Not sure we could fight a war without old Bess here." She patted the popcorn machine and looked sweetly at it, sending a new round of anxious jitters through Kemp's body, which chafed every minute he was out of his office, out of his city, and out of his element.

"Well, this isn't war, luckily."

"Not yet," Nash grumbled with unearned bravado. The man's teeth were too big for his face, his nose red from drink. Kemp eyed the metal tumbler at Nash's feet warily. He knew the fool's breath would either smell like paint thinner or peppermint. Kemp cleared his throat.

"I can't tell you how much I appreciate you being here, Leon, but regardless of what you've been told, I sincerely doubt we'll require the services of your mercenaries."

"Militia," was all he said, returning his gaze to his phone and sending Kemp's blood pressure into the attic.

"He's right, Leon," Colonel Greenwood said. "President Garrick doesn't want a whole city blowing up on his watch. Bad optics."

"So, keep sending drones to the city wall to be shot down or bashed by baseball bats. Suits me," Leon said.

"That's why we buy 'em in bulk." Colonel Greenwood plopped down at a folding table littered with tablets and map printouts weighed down by rocks and dirt clods.

A woman in a charcoal suit darkened the opening at the front of the tent, followed closely by a man in her shadow.

"Is the Governor on yet?" she asked, hovering.

"Any minute now. We're discussing how long until Leon nukes Braintree," Colonel Greenwood said.

"Boy, if I had just one. A small one even."

"Charming," the woman in the suit said. "I'm Agent Rozman, and this behind me deciding whether to step inside is Agent Pragganandhaa. We're with SNRA."

"Lovely," Mayor Kemp scoffed. "The devil, and the devil's mother."

"It's procedure for Security and National Resilience to oversee these kinds of events."

"Your predecessors always did a bang-up fucking job of it, eh?" Colonel Greenwood winked, popping some popcorn into her mouth.

"As spotless as the Army, ma'am."

Colonel Greenwood smiled and looked to have another one-liner up her sleeve, but before she could speak, Governor Bui's likeness emerged in holo at the head of the table.

"Can you hear me alright?" he asked, his voice a lovely low growl that commanded every room he'd ever been in, or appeared in digitally, since he was in high school. He was plump and handsome, almost disgustingly ready to run for office once President Garrick was booted by term limits. Kemp could see the hunger in the man's eyes, even as he projected himself from his office in Denver.

When Kemp had called from the backseat of his Mercedes as it rolled depressingly away from his city, Governor Bui had taken far too much convincing for Kemp's taste. He'd practically had to beg, and now Bui appeared smarmy and self-congratulatory for having lifted an entire finger. Even worse, Kemp couldn't complain out loud because Bui had let him stay in his vacation home outside Colorado Springs and provided a security detail and full office for Kemp

to conduct business in absentia. Naturally, he didn't dare step foot inside the city walls for fear of being beaten to death, but he wasn't going to stop being its mayor.

"Great, good," Bui said after the collected heads nodded and Colonel Greenwood provided an enthusiastic thumbs up. "After discussing the situation with Mayor Kemp, Colonel Greenwood, and people above my own prestigious pay grade, oh hold on. One second." Bui leaned over such that his digital head was severed from his body, which bobbed in his chair and the faint muttered sounds of a lunch order flitted into the crackling speaker.

"I remember when everyone's holo used to be shades of blue," Colonel Greenwood whispered, leaning over to Kemp.

"Okay, fine," Governor Bui began again. "Ground rules. For the time being, y'all are sitting on your well-fed asses waiting for these psychos to make a mistake, which they will, because that's what these kinda people always do. The national mood is not to rattle the cages any harder, and I vibe hard with that, so it's best if the city implodes while we keep the women and children safe. If and when that changes, though, and I want all you kiddies to write this shit down, por favor, any attack on the city shall be tightly coordinated by Colonel Greenwood and will absolutely seek to limit damages to the fancy wall sconces and pickleball courts so Rashoderick doesn't go bankrupt restringing the nets. Presumably the cleaning bill will already be outrageous. No telling what they're getting up to in the mayor's bedroom right now. Furthermore, any offensive action on our part should seek to capture the leaders of the rebellion instead of killing them so they can face the full public ridicule of a trial, but we all know that oopsies sometimes happens when the guns come out. Just try your best. Any questions?"

"Governor Bui, is that all the contingencies? I'd rather not trade one group of squatters for another." Mayor Kemp asked, flustered.

"Duly noted," said Bui. "Soldiers are prohibited from looting houses and city buildings they liberate, and I can only speak for the Colorado Guard, but we will be out of the city within a week of securing it and won't get their bonus pay until they're out."

"Same with us," Colonel Greenwood added. The group turned slowly to Leon, who was slow to understand why they were looking his way.

"I can't be blamed if my men grab an extra candlestick or two," he said, finally.

"Governor Bui..." Kemp said exasperated.

"Keep the war crimes to a low hum, Leon," Bui said. "Rashoderick. You'll get your town back. Promise. Colonel Greenwood, where are we on making life painful?"

"Thrilled you asked, Governor. We've started dropping pamphlets inside to let everyone know that they're committing a crime by remaining inside. Sure, we'll get a few stragglers out here. Maybe enough for full collapse."

"Makes sense," said Agent Rozman. "If they're under duress, why not just leave?"

"Exactly," said Colonel Greenwood. "We're working on cutting internet, power, and water, but they have a decentralized web, a ton of solar panels, and enough water to last at least through the winter. Plus, they brought in loads of trucks in the weeks leading up to the takeover, and there's just no telling what all kind of supplies and weapons they secured before locking

things down and booting the squishes out. We're stamping out any other shipments into the city with sentry posts on the major farm-to-markets leading into Braintree, and the thirty-thousand-foot view is that Peacekeepers have, what's the phrase, cancelled a few dozen pilgrimages from all over the country, meaning that whatever strength in numbers they were hoping to have is gonna look pretty limp."

"Do we know how many are inside?" Agent Pragganandhaa asked.

"Hard to say. Anywhere from a few hundred to a couple thousand," Kemp said.

"Super helpful," Agent Pragganandhaa said.

"Either way, we wait. We'll be in touch," Governor Bui said, his image disappearing before the final word landed. Almost as quickly, Kemp was up and out of the tent, fuming.

"Hold on, there," came Colonel Greenwood's voice. "Just a second. So, we're on the same page. She caught up with him, and they walked together through the rest of the camp.

"I know you're pissed that Leon and his Nash Gag-Me Irregulars are here, but they are here on Governor Bui's invitation for a very special reason involving their unique skillsets and knowledge of combat."

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"Cannon fodder," Greenwood said with a grin. "We sure as shit ain't givin' 'em any whiskey rations, and their bodies will be easy to climb over when the fighting starts."

Chapter Fifteen

Friday, September 3, 2049

Braintree, Colorado

Brighton's body was tangled underneath the brush lining the western wall that lay behind the mayor's mansion. Her hair – a bright cotton candy pink – was what Wesley saw first, and when he'd gone to investigate, he'd been shocked to find her there as though spooning the thorny trunks, barely breathing. She was cold to the touch, even in the midday heat, and he carried her back through the hidden gate yelling for help.

She was frail, dehydrated, and almost fatally malnourished, which accounted for the chill according to Karen Fielder as she tended to her. Brighton's lips were cracked. Her chest, neck, and arms – littered with tattoos as if to prove her porcelain white skin wasn't as delicate as a stranger might think – were scratched and smudged with ash. A monarch butterfly spread its inked wings against her throat, bordered by golden lines running abstractly down her collarbone until they met with a pair of double knockout roses that disappeared beneath the yoke of her blouse, which was ripped in places and crusted with blood. She had nothing covering her legs, and Karen exhausted a meager supply of mullein oil combatting the prickling sun exposure. Luckily, she had plenty of gauze. She worked on Brighton, listening regularly for her continued breathing and praying for her to open her eyes.

As she steeped a mug of mint tea, Child and Sorola arrived, desperate for more information than either Wesley or Karen could provide.

"Was Roberto with her?" Child asked.

A small search party was formed to check the perimeter, starting with the western wall, but they didn't find Roberto among the thorns or otherwise. Of the dozen they'd sent into the country to shepherd new faithful to Braintree, only Cutwolf had come, and the low numbers chilled Child. Without more people, they had no hope if the military decided that any given day was a beautiful day to invade. With Roberto and the others lost in the wilderness and Brighton unconscious on Karen's pull-out sofa, Child feared for the worst and resented that the good work they'd done to purify the city would be lost by a violent adversary he felt powerless to address.

When Brighton woke up in the afternoon, she began shouting for Child with a single-minded terror gripping her. Karen wondered if her body could take it, eyeing sunburns that had begun to bubble up into small pockets of pus-filled skin, and she did her best to soothe Brighton with soft words and deep breathing.

Child came quickly, and Brighton told him her story.

Portland had been a trap. The police had tracked them as soon as they arrived, waiting for them to meet with local Eternal Triumph members, and slaughtering everyone in a coordinated raid. The story rhymed with so many others that trickled in as rumor.

Brighton had barely made it out of the city, spending months on the road trying to reach the safe house in Salt Lake City, the shell of an arts and crafts store once famous for a full wall display of every color yarn you could still get. The store had fallen into disrepair, with dirt and graffiti covering a mural at the back wall that read "The purpose is the process" in sunny rainbow lettering.

“The police raided there, too. I led them right to it. They arrested some of us. Hit my face until it swelled and then hit me some more. I knew I was going to die in that cell, but then something miraculous happened. I saw a pink light, no bigger than a pinhead, coming through the cracks of the cell, and the voice of an angel boomed in my ears telling me to dig.”

“Incredible,” Child said, nodding for her to go on.

“But it made no sense. There was nowhere to dig. I lost faith. I was pretty damned sure I was losing my mind. When the guard came in to give me water, I jumped at him. I shoved his head against the bars until he slumped, and I was able to run barefoot through the Peacekeeper station and out into the city.

Brighton delivered the details with the flat affectation of someone who has hypnotized themselves, the vacant long-stare in her eyes as though she were trying to envision herself from outside her body destroying one life to save her own.

"Then, again, the voice told me to dig. It was so loud I had to clamp my hands over my ears as I ran, and I got to this city park, and the pink light returned, blinding like lightning flashes into my eyes. I couldn't see or hear, and I knew for sure that they would be on me again. I knew then that the angel must be real. So, I ran blindly until the light crystalized into a thin thread, pulling me toward the largest tree in the park, pulling me until I was flat on my belly at the base of it. I heard the voice one more time, and it hadn't softened, so I scrambled against the dirt with my fingers. The soil came out so easily. When the hole was barely large enough for me to fit, I tucked myself in, cramped and aching and hidden well enough although I heard sirens and shouting. The angel protected me. I think it was Roberto."

"God rest him," Child said, taking her hand. "But how did you get here?"

"I stole a car and got out of the city. I drove all night until it was out of gas, and then I walked, but I didn't have any water, and the angel's voice had left me. The next thing I remember is waking up here."

"And now Brighton needs to rest so she can heal," Karen said. "Or else she'll have bloodied my sheets for nothing."

"But, no," Brighton said. "You have to listen to what I'm saying. No one else is coming. We're all alone."

Child felt a cold surge of fear and cursed himself for it, blaming his body for not being as hearty as his soul. He stood, trying to understand the full extent of the situation he had led them all into, and finding that it felt like drowning until he remembered to breathe. He prayed silently in his own head for God to guide him, and for the first time since he'd heard it, he felt fine when the voice did not answer. There was an aching freedom in feeling so lost, but Brighton had just taught him that it was possible to survive. Maybe it came from God, or maybe it came from within, he didn't know, but Child felt a relaxing certainty that the persecution of Braintree's small numbers was further proof of his righteousness, and that Brighton's experience was a sign of Holy protection.

"It's a test," he said, laughing. "The die is cast. Violence is coming."

†

Chapter Sixteen

Sunday, September 11, 2049

Operation Hemmed Garment Camp, Outside Braintree, Colorado

Rashoderick Kemp's headache got stronger the more he listened to Leon Nash. The militia leader loved to hear himself speak, and Kemp was too tired to hide his disgust for the man, particularly after a month of hearing him make the same arguments at length. His men could take back Braintree, easy. Wouldn't even lose a man. This is what they've been training for, and the government could disavow him if they wanted to. Let him slit throats and blow shit up, and then claim he was a rogue actor defying direct orders. At first, he made his case after complaining that it had already been a week. Then after complaining that it had been ten whole days, two weeks, and now that they were verging on a month of wasted time if they didn't get a move on.

Kemp couldn't fault him there, but Nash's half-stewed idea wasn't helping them progress. It seemed to him that the siege would give them time to wear down the Triumphant while conceiving of a plan that met very plain directives: to regain control of the city while doing as little damage as possible. He wasn't a lunatic. Kemp understood that they'd have to break down a gate in order to pass through it, but the other courses prescribed by the brain trust continued to miss the point entirely that he wished to live in the city after conquering it.

"These meetings are pointless," Kemp said, stepping out of the HQ tent into the clear afternoon air. "Nash wants to rape and pillage, and the SNRA can't come up with a plan to do really anything at all. Meanwhile, President Garrick and Oscar Johns, speaking solely through

the grapevine, demand that we stop wasting money and hold off on doing anything. We've had the same exact conversation umpteen times."

"So why do you keep coming in person?" Colonel Greenwood said. Kemp gestured to the tent city erected with military efficiency a mile south of Braintree's southern gate.

"All this fresh air."

"Remind me again. Is umpteen before or after a shitload?"

"Why won't President Garrick listen to you and the other military advisors? If you could get him to see reason, we could thread the needle."

"Above my pay grade. All we can do is give him some COAs and let him choose."

"Please stop using acronyms, Colonel Greenwood."

She placed her hand on his shoulder and looked intently into his eyes.

"But they're all I've ever known, Kemp."

He scoffed, but his headache was starting to subside.

"All business," she continued, "this is the sausage getting made. The government proudly solving yesterday's problems tomorrow. And to offer just a little charity to those you're otherwise rightfully castigating, you haven't given us the easiest task here. Taking a city by force usually means big damage, usually means big casualties. For some reason they've been able to best the

most expensive drones we've got with baseball bats and rubber nets, so we're back to the human component."

"Agent Pragganandhaa and Agent Rozman want to dump concrete into the natural spring wells that feed the city," Kemp said, rolling his eyes.

"At least we talked them down from toxic waste."

"I'm all for subterfuge, but it's got to be the right kind. The water's untouchable, internet is decentralized, although I assume I'll have to explain to Nash again tomorrow why there literally is no cable to cut, and they seem to have stockpiled all the food they could need."

"Not to mention about three guns for every man, woman, and child," Greenwood said.

Kemp wanted the late afternoon sun to dance, but it fell flat on its face. The encampment seemed to sink little by little into the ground, with heavy boots stripping away the grasses and churning up the viscid muck anchoring the tents. All the equipment was ragged and fraying with age, but no one else seemed to notice. The soldiers ducked under rotting canvass flaps going in and coming out, bunking down for the night in creaking cots and eating their meals in the makeshift chow hall on dented tin platters. Maybe they weren't used to anything better.

Agent Rozman and Agent Pragganandhaa tromped from the HQ tent to meet Kemp and Nash. The puffy vested SNRA agents had taken to wearing wellies that made both of them look like they were newborn dinosaurs lurching clumsily forward. It struck Kemp that their only objective was to ensure their outfits stayed clean.

"Mayor Kemp, Colonel Greenwood," Agent Rozman began. "There's something we want to brief you on, but we can't have Nash involved. And not Governor Bui, with all due respect, yet."

"This has my enthusiastic endorsement," Kemp responded.

"We have a trick up our sleeve we haven't put on stage yet. An insider," Agent Pragganandhaa said.

"A spy," Colonel Greenwood said flatly.

"Sure," said Agent Pragganandhaa. "Someone who knows the operation and can feed us information."

"Which means it's someone who can also help us destroy things from the inside," Greenwood added.

"That's the trouble," said Agent Rozman. "Our leadership disagrees on whether we should risk burning the operative through direct action or let them remain purely hidden for the potential future gains."

"What future?" Kemp asked. "Let them salt the fucking fields they ripped up my golf course to plant, and if they get caught, the maniacs will have something to eat."

"The mayor's right," said Colonel Greenwood. "We need to get this person in the game. Destroy those crops, sow discord and distrust among the leadership, taint food stockpiles. Create the conditions for our waiting game to succeed."

"That's exactly why we're coming to you. We want to do another pamphlet drop into the city, but we want to include several suggestive phrases as calls to action. We'll inform the operative, they'll act, and we can report to our wishy-washy bosses that it was a communication muddle. Meanwhile, all the carrots are dead, and we can check out of the roach motel our per diem is barely covering."

"Done," said Kemp. "Finally, some momentum. And this needs to be a two-front assault. We need Oscar Johns, but Governor Bui is playing gatekeeper. Greenwood and I will fix that tonight."

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"A kid's birthday party."

||

The Willows was a massive home just west of Mineral Hill where the Rocky Mountains started their climb toward Utah. The sprawling estate, with its endless balconies and salt-and-pepper stonework, was nestled against a backdrop of ancient pine trees. Governor Bui had bought it primarily because it had a working ski lift that dropped you off right at the front door, but he only ever stayed there during the summer. His son's 16th birthday was an exception he was thrilled to make, decking out the mansion and inviting as many people as he could, promising the A-list crowd bracing nighttime rides up the mountain and view of the stars that remained crisp even with beer goggles.

When their plane landed itself at the home's runway, a small purple light lit up underneath Kemp's skin near his wrist.

"Perfect timing. Blood sugar's low."

It was a luxurious hassle to get into the party. Robotic and human security guards were on high alert, and the general crush of partygoers created a glitzy stampede heading to the bar, the buffet, and the bedrooms. Spotlights swung lazily back and forth in the night sky. The flood of people deposited Kemp and Greenwood into the ballroom, welcomed by a rainbow banner boasting Governor Bui's son's sweet 16. Waiters cruised the room with trays of quickly-disappearing food. Mini lobster quiches, mushroom terrine dusted with cricket flour, Aerofoamed caviar on lab-grown seaweed crisps. Greenwood plucked a small golden orb from a passing platter, placing it in her mouth with a keen look of anticipation on her face which dissolved into unbridled joy when the nano-encapsulated pearl burst in her mouth and coated her tongue with an heirloom olive oil.

Kemp pulled a small pile of hors d'oeuvres into a napkin and ate them while scanning the crowd for familiar faces. Despite the initial wave, the group had thinned out as it crept into the crevices of the ballroom.

"The seaweed crisps are 3D-printed," came a husky voice from behind Kemp's ear. "You can't buy them on the market because they aren't shelf-stable, so you must have a special machine, although the ingredients are not so expensive anymore."

The man introduced himself, and Kemp immediately forgot the name, continuing his search. Dozens of holos moved among the group, digital ghosts passing through the living and

pausing for polite conversation. The night was early. One holo playfully pretended to grab a quiche off the platter and winked at the waiter. Greenwood took up the mantle of mmhmmming the man talking about 3D-printed shrimp paste made in part from recycled plastic until he gracefully moved on.

"I've done my share of cosplaying as a wealthy person on the diplomatic track, but this is on another level," she said, leaning toward Kemp's ear.

"Embassy grunt work? Did you ever do any real soldiering?"

"I commissioned just after the economy got wobbly and put on captain during the first years of The Plunge working search and rescue. I put in a few hours."

"Was there much to rescue?" Kemp said. She gave him a cold look.

"My apologies," he added, feeling sheepish. For whatever other faults he could name, Kemp had always prided himself on owning up to his mistakes and misconceptions, a trait that almost always endeared him to others and put him on a glide path socially despite his status as the mayor of a little hamlet.

"No harm done. Are these parties always like this?" Greenwood asked, eager to move on.

"Usually," he said. "I imagine they're even more pious in New York and Houston."

"So how are we gonna find Bui?"

"We're not looking for Governor Bui. We're looking for his scheduler. The keys to the kingdom."

Greenwood and Kemp swan upstream, spilling first into a conversation about a sitcom show Kemp had been obsessed with that had recently been re-released as a VR experience. Then, a slinky older woman captured both of them in a conversation that, to all Kemp could tell, was entirely about how she'd paid her dues doing emergency direct carbon capture on the government's dime and was happy to transition into something called Bold Comfort which was either a company or a lifestyle. Kemp dismissed himself in search of another drink.

They bumped into Governor Bui's scheduler just as the Governor was taking the stage to present his gift to his son. The Bui kid was a chubby munchkin of overstimulation. He was holding an empty flute of champagne, the last bubbles gripping onto the curved walls of the glass. He didn't seem to know what to do with it, and it stuck out as a prop instead of something he knew his way around. A troupe of acrobats in vivid costumes swung and jumped behind them on the stage, maintaining the chaos of their movement. From his vantage point on the side of the stage, Kemp could see the sweat pouring from them, slinging in all directions and soaking their Lycra until the pinks turned magenta. As Bui spoke about the boy's achievements, his son looked anxious for his father to shut up and commence with the gift. There was to be no great surprise what it was. A boy's 16th birthday almost always came with the same thing. The question was how many he'd get. And what age.

Bui gabbled on as his son shifted his weight foot to foot, meandering into territory nakedly campaigning for his re-election and asking for high dollar donations from those present. Again, why else were they there? With elections only in the rearview by a month, it was time to start the cycle all over again.

Finally, Governor Bui faced his son and pronounced how proud he was of him, wrapping him in a massive hug that felt reliable and unmanufactured. An act of familial love that would have happened with or without the crowd and cameras. Then Governor Bui invited four young women on stage to join them. They were each pale white girls with dark brown hair and light blue eyes. The assembled partygoers cooed with admiration. One was expected, two was the standard, and three would have been impressive, but four was staking a claim. Bui's son goggled at the girls, who all wore spangly formal wear with their hair up in tight ponytails.

"My son takes after me, a man of particular taste and an insistence on utmost quality," Governor Bui continued. The girls each began to undress, letting their gowns slip down to the floor in rippling piles like four deflated rainbows. An assistant standing near the scheduler gave an assertive nod at them, and the girls continued removing their garments until they stood naked on the stage in front of the crowd. Some of his friends gave a rude whoop from the back of the room, and Governor Bui's son gave a stern look which made him look like a tiny businessman. Kemp wondered if it were out of genuine reverence for the presentation or out of embarrassment. He guessed the latter, mostly because everything any teenage boy does is borne from embarrassment or the fear of experiencing it.

"This was certainly not the way things worked when I was a young man, but if our emergence from the catastrophes and crises of the past has taught us anything, it's that we must adapt and progress," Governor Bui intoned. "We have carved out a new way to live and, against every odd, have discovered the rarest of treasures: stability."

This last line earned a steadfast round of clapping and glass tinkling, and the girls, done with their clothing, turned slowly in a circle as Bui's son leapt from one to the next. His eyes

snapped pictures of them for later, then he switched to video. It would be easy enough to screenshot the best angles later on.

"Andy, my son, I'm proud to be able to gift you these four beloveds so that they may serve you in whatever needs you have and that they may teach you what you want most in a wife. Happy birthday, big guy."

Greenwood leaned into Kemp's ear.

"All I got was a used Toyota Camry for my 16th," she said, trying to be heard over the applause. On the stage, Governor Bui hugged his son again as the young women stood there in a row, waiting for the young man to speak.

Kemp busied himself with the scheduler.

"We need five after he gets off stage."

"Impossible. He's going straight into a meeting," the scheduler said.

"Push it by five."

The scheduler rolled his eyes.

"Pastor Johns doesn't love waiting."

"Hold on," Greenwood butted in. "Oscar Johns is here?"

Governor Bui stepped off the stage, his son taking over the microphone and the spotlight to thank everyone for coming to the party. Kemp caught Bui's attention with a slight lift of his finger.

"Rashoderick, so nice of you to come," Governor Bui said, a low severity taking the place where his public-facing joy had been a moment ago. "And such a lovely plus-one."

"Can we have a few minutes?" Kemp asked. Governor Bui gave a thoughtful look to the question, looked to his scheduler who discretely shook his head, and then slapped Kemp on the shoulder.

"I'll do you one better. Join me for my next meeting."

It was more than he could have hoped for. Kemp maintained his cool and nodded solemnly as if he were the one subjugating himself to the whims of his master. It was easy to keep his composure because Colonel Greenwood very much did not. Her eyes went wide, and she swallowed hard before a look of confused panic set in.

"You know who's in the private lounge?" Governor Bui said, staring daggers at his scheduler. "No matter. You've never met Pastor Johns? All fine. He loves new friends."

They all walked through a velvet drape behind the stage hiding a set of double doors that led to a well-appointed hallway.

"That was quite a birthday gift you gave Andy," Kemp said.

"I'm wealthy and powerful, and I still cannot fight against what's de rigueur," Bui responded. "I am doomed to fail my son a thousand ways every day."

"You're also blessed to give him an uncommon life most would dream about and the tools by which he can know what he truly wants. Some would call that priceless," Kemp said.

"Then I can show them the receipts."

They pushed through another set of doors at the end of the hallway past a set of push-button style elevators adorned with the same ruby carpet that covered the floors. The lounge was more intimate than Kemp had imagined it might be, considering the history of the complex, and it gave off a smoky vibe that made the space feel long-abandoned. In the center of the room, swirling a glass of buttermilk with a thick foamy head, Oscar Johns looked like the lone survivor of a terrible tragedy. In a way, he was. The man standing atop the rubble after hundreds of millions had been wiped away and an old value system was made violently obsolete. Leaning against a polished pine table, his brow was furrowed as if contemplating something deeply sad, so Kemp was startled when Johns's face stretched into a lovely smile as he caught sight of them heading his way. At first, he thought it a performance, but Johns seemed wholeheartedly happy to see Governor Bui, and the two embraced like estranged college buddies back in the old dorm for homecoming.

"Oscar! Where's the entourage? You're usually travelling deep."

"Gave them the night off," Johns said placidly. "They're currently raiding your buffet."

"Excellent," Bui said. "Oscar, this is Rashoderick Kemp and Colonel Greenwood."

"I know those names," Johns said, shaking each's hand enthusiastically. Kemp felt unsteady, a giddy sensation hollowing out his gut and sending raw tingles down his legs. He felt the magnetic pull of the room shift.

"We've met once before. It's a massive honor, Pastor Johns," he said.

"Lovely sermon this morning," Greenwood added.

"Now that introductions are out of the way, Rashoderick, will you please tell Oscar why you're so royally fucking up the retaking of your insignificant little town?"

Bui had baited and sprung the trap so cleanly. Kemp stammered and was caught off guard again when Greenwood chose to speak up.

"It's, um, my fault, sir" she said, looking Johns straight in the eye. "The, um..."

"Just talk to me like a normal ol' human being, please, sweetie," Johns said. He emanated an impossible warmth. To say he was handsome wasn't correct, although he certainly wasn't hideous. There was an alien angle to his face, something beyond the evolved perfection of humankind like he was the first version of a new advanced species. Kemp still could not look away, and clearly neither could Greenwood.

"Yes, sir," she continued. "President Garrick has rejected every plan we've given him, and while I'm attempting to create courses of action that maintain Mayor Kemp's vision of leaving at least a few of the buildings standing, we haven't cracked the code on making every stake holder happy."

"Ah," Johns said before circling back to his table without sitting. He picked up his glass and gave it a sip, then turned back to the trio waiting on whatever assessment he deigned to offer.

"You got a first name, Colonel Greenwood?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Laverne."

"It's a gorgeous name. Where you from, Laverne?"

"I grew up in Jupiter, Florida, sir."

Johns tilted his head down ever so slightly.

"I'm guessing you're up at the joint staff or somewhere now, right?"

Kemp appreciated the deftness of the soft landing. Certainly, she was somewhere else. No one was in Jupiter anymore.

"Yes, sir. The Pentagon."

"How's the new building?"

"I miss the old one," she said without skipping a beat.

"Ha, me too. Me too," Johns said. He appeared lost in thought for another moment, and Kemp was surprised that his unease at meeting such an idol and his anger at being thrown right under the bus by Bui had turned into fear. He'd never seen Oscar Johns look so vulnerably pensive before. He'd almost never seen him without a smile.

"You ever see my face on buildings and billboards around the capitol, Isabella?"

She nodded.

"Naturally, sir. They're excellent reminders."

"Aha!" he said, his finger leaping up almost on its own to punctuate his excitement at the observation. "A reminder, that's exactly right. I know what people think when they see those murals of my big mug. Reverence, maybe, sure. A renewed sense of their goals and purpose, certainly. Maybe some even think I'm Big Brother, threatening them in two dimensions from twenty feet up, I don't know. But you wanna know the truth of it? Those murals aren't aimed at any of you. They're aimed at God. He's the only audience I have. Do you understand my meaning?"

"I'm sorry I don't quite, sir," Greenwood said, furrowing her brow.

"I'm the only stakeholder you got," Johns said. "Mayor Kemp, your town is a national disgrace. You've allowed the barbarians into the citadel, and those animals have shat all over your reputation and the very principle of rightful Prosperian power."

"Agreed, sir," Kemp managed.

"Here's what I want, straight from the horse's mouth. I want you to do nothing. Sit on your hands. Governor Bui may be pissing himself over the cost, but he'll survive. Won't you, Governor? Because I want those animals to fail all on their own. What better way to show the world that there is only one correct path to salvation? They must fail. Give them all the nudges you want in that direction, but a direct confrontation risks blowing the winds of sympathy in

their direction. In fact, I'm pretty sure that's what those maniacs want. To be victims. Well, I won't gift them that. They can dance naked around the campfires until the food runs out or the world really ends."

He shrugged.

"If they're right, sounds like we won't be around to worry about it anyway," he said, finally smiling, but Kemp had no idea if it was meant as a joke or not. He was shaken, and they were promptly ushered out of the room, leaving Governor Bui and Johns to private matters. Through the ornate hallways and the raucous chatter enveloping the ballroom, Kemp seethed. His anger and shame made the bottom of his throat burn and his left arm go numb. He breathed as slowly and steadily as he could, first driving out ragged puffs and eventually reaching a tense stasis. Greenwood kept lockstep with him the entire time, frustrated and cowed. They were so caught up in their own fury and bewilderment that it wasn't until the plane ride back to the encampment they realized that Johns had told them nothing new, had given them no firm directives, and had stalled them out in exactly the same spot they'd been before meeting him.

‡

Chapter Seventeen

Thursday, September 16, 2049

Braintree, Colorado

Every morning, Child left whichever home he and Sorola had slept in while it was still dark. He drank a glass of water as quickly as possible, trying each time to create a cold tightness behind his sternum which shot him into a state of alertness. They had slept with Berenice several nights and bunked with a dozen other families and worshippers, landing wherever the whim took them after the night took them as it pleased. During the day, there was a never-ending list of things to do. There were petty disputes over shared houses and problems with how Chelsea was running childcare and leaking faucets that needed attention. But the evening was the commune's, the night was Sorola's, and this small slice of twilight he reserved for himself. Child of Aaron would find a random place in Braintree, usually wherever the crickets were loudest, and sit in Pleasant Pose to speak with God.

Lately, they had been at odds.

God had filled his mind with disturbing images of his friends and family covered in blood, lifeless as rubber dolls, stacked unevenly in a pit that threatened to burble over with human bodies. Their limbs flopped unnaturally, curving with angry geometry. Their ruined faces intimately recognizable beneath the caked dirt, scorch marks, and crusted gore. Their eyes all begging him for something he couldn't translate. Not just Sorola and Janthy, but Kaleel, his friends at Lime Kiln, and all the other people he'd failed to save. A killing field of everyone he'd ever cared for.

God's messages had been worse. The voice spoke the loudest just after Child had woken up, as if castigating him for sleeping at all when there was so much work to do. Blaming Child for being unable to keep the end of the world on schedule.

So, the meditation became necessary to rebalance himself and ward away the violence stamped across his mind. It also compelled his followers to search for him every morning. A good leader's followers will come when they call, but Child didn't even need to call.

On the morning Child discovered the traitor, his followers found the giant prophet with his eyes closed in a hemlock grove a few hundred yards of what used to be the mayor's mansion. After the first few arrived, he spoke his breathing pattern aloud so they could follow along, and within the hour hundreds of Triumphant were breathing in unison, stretching to reach the enlightenment they chased each day. Some stood and shook vigorously to slough off the demons. Child's eyes found Sorola in the crowd and smiled at his wife's ability to connect with anyone they came into contact with. He would always find them, no matter how deep into the crowd they sat. Janthy sat up front, looking exhausted from nighttime drills and what she deemed the abject failure of their defensive forces charged with watching the wall walk while others slept. There was a need in her, he knew, beneath the caution of the government's siege, which made her sit as close to him as possible. He wished he could ease that burden for her, but he still hadn't learned how to perform that miracle. She had been the same with Kaleel, following him as a daughter, eager to show him her worth and always coming away with exactly what and with as much as she needed from him. In that way, maybe Sorola was more like Kaleel than either he or Janthy could ever hope to be. Then he saw their faces in the ditch again, ripped apart, heavy tires rolling over them with a squelching ease. He winced but steadied his breathing quickly.

His mind wandered until it settled on the fear that all of this had been too easy. The takeover of the city, the removal of the Prosperians. Even the general flow of life in Braintree had only been disrupted by the same low frequency human friction he'd dealt with so often at Figure Nine Farms. It had been a bloodless coup so far, and God was flooding his mind with blood. A portent of what's to come? He prayed it wouldn't be, especially because he could never find his own face among the rubble in these visions. God never spoke of his own demise but promised the gruesome end of his family in the same calming voice that had guaranteed victory. Braintree was now their domain, and his overwhelming sense was that he was cut off from the rest of the world, sincerely, to such a startling degree that the borders could sink into the ocean again, and he wouldn't even know of it to care. Surely that was enough.

His father always told him to block out the negative voices. That they made him a loser. To surrender to them would make him irretrievably lost. The sound of his metronomic breathing was replaced by his father's, a voice he hadn't been plagued by in a long time, and a reminder of how happy he'd been, how right he'd been, to run away. He'd emptied his bank account for Kaleel and the cause. So many zeroes. Now the thought creeped in that he had divested himself of more money than most people would ever make in a lifetime, and here he sat, pockets empty, closer to peace than he'd ever been.

If only for the voice of God.

He wrenched his locket up from the chain and pulled a small pink tab from it, popping it into his mouth and smiling when dozens of Triumphant followed his lead. He wanted the voice to leave him, and he felt a great shame for it, as though he had defiled the temple and didn't have the tools to clean it.

His mind cleared, and the answer came to him. It was simplicity, as most puzzles are, after receiving the solution. If God was giving visions of violent death to him, then they were a gift he was meant to have, and if his father had scolded him for paying attention to the everyday negative voices in his head, then he resolved to heed the divine ones. The weaker parts of his humanity had recoiled from the spark that ignited the reservoir of mourning that lived between his ribs, but the part of him that required transcendence would sift through the ashes to uncover what lesson he was meant to learn.

They all travelled to the commons for breakfast together in a haze. Berenice and Sorola danced around an invisible, moving Maypole at the head of the pack, while Janthy marched with her cane alongside Child as he enjoyed blissing out. He occasionally shouted words of wisdom which his followers devoured. Child had taken to wearing a plain shift instead of the jeans and rough shirts needed for field work. It had been Sorola's idea, and he'd enthusiastically taken to it, shedding his skin for a fresh beginning. Colt, ever present at his heels since his arrival, slinked behind Child as though trying to carry an invisible train flowing behind the savior. At the ready to pick up whatever Child may drop or fetch whatever might be needed. The young man had even started dressing like Child, and the fashion had spread without Child's encouragement or discouragement, but with his hidden delight that came with routine adoration.

Brighton and Wesley found them at breakfast, their faces severe.

"Something's happened at Fielder's farm that you need to see," Wesley said gravely.

After a vigorous walk, Child stood with them at the edge of a newly planted plot of spinach, the young shoots stretching out of the black-brown soil. Emmy and Karen Fielder were there at a heads-up-display, and the drones were flitting through the air.

"This field's been sabotaged," Brighton said.

"We don't know that for sure," Wesley rebutted.

"This morning's soil readings showed, um, an alarmingly elevated level of salt," Emmy said. It pressed the screen on the display and ignored the others to read it.

"Is there any chance one of the drones malfunctioned?" Child asked.

Karen shook her head slowly.

"I don't see how. This took an enormous amount of salt, and all the drones were accounted for in their docking stations."

"We don't have cameras on the fields?"

"Never had a reason to," Karen said.

"Maybe we should," Wesley said.

"I'm sorry I'm not a farmer, but what's gonna happen?" Brighton asked.

"The salt makes the soil infertile," Karen said.

"It throws the chemistry off balance," Child added. "Kills the microbes doing all the hard work down there. The seeds we planted will wither, and the soil may never be usable again."

"We might be, um, able to save the field by flooding it with water to dissolve the salt more quickly," Emmy offered.

"It would take an astronomical amount of water. Better to use that to keep all the other crops alive and declare this plot down for the count," Karen explained.

"Where would someone even get that much salt?" Child asked.

"A lot of the houses have pools," Wesley answered. "There's a storage shed at the artificial lake near the clubhouse that might have had some. Not sure where else."

"You de-ice the roads here?"

"Course," Karen said. "Couldn't have all the golf carts slipping and sliding, could we?"

"Can we get back to the fact that someone did this to us?" Brighton said. Her face was puffy, the bags under her eyes heavy and purple. She looked as though she could barely contain either fear or rage. Child wasn't sure which.

"It's almost certain," Emmy said.

"The government?" Wesley said incredulously.

"If they could get in, they'd have slit my throat in my sleep," Child said. "It's someone here. Someone we love. A traitor."

"Maybe traitors," Brighton added.

"Um, she is most likely correct," Emmy said after a slight processing pause. "It would have taken several tons of salt to destroy this field."

Child rubbed his fist into the palm of his hand as if breaking in a stiff baseball glove. He looked backward over his left shoulder and listened to God.

"Right."

He turned and walked back down toward the commons alone.

||

The sky was grey blue with brushstrokes of cloud swiped through.

Child spent the rest of the morning in seclusion. Janthy tended to the wall walk, anticipating a resurgence of grousing over the hours they had to work. It had been long enough for the romanticism of holding a weapon had worn off, and the long days and nights of the enemy not attacking had lulled some of the guards into hope of changing professions. The only offense they'd seen from the tents standing a mile away was a soldier who regularly dropped his pants and slapped his ass in their direction, causing a debate amongst the guards as to whether having such strong binoculars was a good thing or not. Berenice and Sorola busied themselves by live-streaming to show the outside world how happy they all were living inside the wall. Convinced that enough people could be swayed to travel to Braintree en masse to overwhelm the military blockades, Berenice had made displaying the riches of banding together to build a paradise.

Enjoli had tagged along with Karen and Cutwolf, and she watched as they tended to the bees in the apiary. Chelsea sprayed smoke into the air, and Cutwolf lifted the small slats to check on the bees.

"How's your sister settling in?" Karen asked Enjoli.

"Ceclia? She's my cousin, and she's always just gone with the flow. I feel like you could dump her on Mars, and she'd adapt. Seems she's enjoyed looking after the other kids with Chelsea and Hark."

"Hark's watching children?" Cutwolf scoffed.

"He put down the gun as soon as he had the chance. Janthy was desperate to keep him in the guard, but he says we're in peace time," Karen answered.

"Sure, with the government launching drones at us constantly," Cutwolf said.

"He's really good with the kids," Enjoli said. "Filip loves him."

"And how are you adjusting to your job?" Karen asked.

Enjoli weighed how she should respond. Everyone in Braintree took pride in what they did, whether they chose the job or were convinced to do it out of necessity. After years of working for Pastor Johns and feeling wrongly that his universe was on her shoulders, Child had given Enjoli her first real job of consequence, and the health and life of her neighbors required her skill and concern. She could also do it in her sleep.

"To be blunt, it's really easy," she said, deciding that the truth was easier to deliver than platitudes. "I used to juggle a dozen spinning plates for Living Prosperity, so working logistics to feed a thousand people isn't much of a challenge. But it's really rewarding."

"And you don't have to wear those hideous yellow shirts," Cutwolf added. "Oh, hell. This one's a graveyard of hive beetles."

Cutwolf opened the panel further so Karen could look in and sweep out the fat, little brown bodies. Enjoli tugged at her oversized purple knit sweater.

"You know those yellow Polos were all I owned," she said. Cutwolf turned in shock, then caught himself and fixed his face.

"Yeah, yeah. It's embarrassing," Enjoli said, rolling her eyes. The previous owner of her redbrick McMansion was a little larger than Enjoli and far more obsessed with enhanced movement wear. The smartLycra leggings sagged a little, but Enjoli was happy to have something comfortable and found other clothes she liked in weekly swaps with her neighbors.

"No way. Yellow's a great color for you."

"Cutwolf, can you do a quick scan?" Karen said, pulling his attention back to the hive.

"They're all dead," he pointed out.

"Rookie mistake, hot shot. Robots don't always get all of 'em. So, scan, please," Karen said warmly.

"I'm very happy to be in something less oppressive," Enjoli said. "Although there's a part of these leggings I can't figure out."

"What is it?" Cutwolf said, pressing a button that launched a scan of the infested hive. Enjoli pointed to her hip at a slick octagonal panel that shimmered oddly in the daylight.

"Oh, yeah. It's biorhythmic. You never got an implant, yeah?" Cutwolf said.

"I had better things to spend my money on."

"No doubt. Here. There's a hack around it."

Cutwolf placed his fingers on her hip, dragging them along the inside edges of the panel and pressing lightly in the center. It beeped into working mode, flashing a smiling face in blunt pixels before dissolving into a flipping hourglass.

"It'll pick up everything directly from your skin. Old modes are good to keep operational in case the new stuff breaks down or goes offline. It can't tell you when to drink a glass of orange juice or anything, but it can do just about everything else. Might come in handy."

"A giant slice of the world went to shit, but pants that tell me my heartrate survived," Enjoli said.

The monitor beeped, done with its scan.

"Looks like we're in the clear," Karen said, closing up the panel on the hive. "Although the food's a little low going into the winter."

"You wanna send out pollination drones?"

"Nah, we have nutrient supplements. Maybe check to see they're not expired first, though. Honey doesn't taste the same."

"They won't go to sleep for the winter?" Enjoli asked.

"Nah. Those bees never sleep," Karen answered. "Now I think some warm damiana tea's in order."

Together, they hiked back toward Karen's house.

"You know, I just had the strangest feeling," Enjoli said.

"What's that dear?" Karen asked.

"I don't really want to call it happiness, but it's close. Maybe I just don't feel like shit anymore."

||

Sorola climbed into bed with Child, wrapping their arms around his body and pulling his back into their chest. They ran a finger through his hair, tracing a nail against his skull, curving over his ear and back down to the base of his neck.

"What wrong, button?" they asked.

"God has asked me to do something I do not want to do."

They rubbed his temple. He was pulled low like this sometimes, and Sorola didn't always know the right thing to say to bring him back from the abyss, but they saw it as their solemn responsibility to protect him. That wasn't easy in El Paso, or at Figure Nine, and it still wasn't easy here behind the walls of Braintree. It seemed like everything should have been simpler after taking the city for themselves, but Sorola had never been foolish enough to believe that the march toward the end of this rotten world would be anything but grueling.

"Have you wanted do all the things God's asked of you so far?" Child nodded softly. They kissed his neck.

"Did God only ask easy things of his followers in the book?"

Child turned to face Sorola, shifting his weight such that the bed strained and resettled. They'd moved back into a house they'd slept in the first week they arrived in Braintree, deciding it was their favorite and the place they both felt most at home.

"Sorola, it's horrific."

"Worse than telling Abraham to kill his son?" they asked, kissing away one of his tears.

"I've seen visions of all of you ripped apart, and I've prayed all day to refuse God's command, but I know in my soul that if I don't do this, everyone I love will be lost to violence."

"The righteous choice is the heaviest to lift, and its shadow shelters many," they said.

"It's horrific, Sorola."

"And you've got a servant's heart, Child."

The Garcian church lacked any kind of decoration that would have impressed the Prosperian God. The pews were hard, and the lectern serviceable, and while they sometimes sung hymns, Reverend Aisling enjoyed Depeche Mode and Aretha Franklin more than the stuffy choral entreaties that sounded half-hearted no matter how skilled the singer. The building also didn't look like their might be worship inside, simple in its boxy artifice and uncolored windows. It was surrounded by a lush lawn, except on the northside where Kendra and other parishioners had planted a vegetable garden bordered by an overflowing compost heap. Aisling had never been good at keeping things alive, but she had a way with words and drew pride from building up her congregation's spirits on a weekly basis. It was a soulful necessity living in Braintree as it once was, crawling with unfeeling inequities and the desires of some whose only goal was gaining more of everything for themselves. They took heart in seeking the Lord as children might, looking for wisdom in uncommon places and striving to be peacemakers above all else.

Aisling had gathered them all reluctantly inside the church at Child's behest. She'd known a confrontation like this was inevitable. She'd weathered dozens of them since moving here and corralling her small resilient faithful. Her position on the city council had always been set dressing for equity. Good fences, and all that. Yet she'd been able to leverage the speck of power they'd given her to ward off the worst of it, at least. She thought of Prosperianism as poison, but never begrudged them of their earned wealth, which made her an ideal partner in fixing the potholes and cutting ribbons. Mayor Kemp had wooed her so often that she began thinking that he wanted something more than a professional relationship, but he disgusted her with his high gloss of industrial-strength smugness. It was important that he always reminded her that she was

a tool. A button he could press whenever heat came down from the Garcians in Braintree. See? There she is. One more vote on the council than he has.

Child hadn't proven to be any different. Maybe he would thrash like a toddler at that assessment, but Aisling hadn't been impressed by him. Not by his stature or magnetism, not by his petty display of cruelty toward Cooper McGovern, not by the attempted show of strength by kicking the Prosperians out of town. It was all thin as graphene. So, she gathered all her followers as ordered after dinner and convened them inside the church. She stood in front of them, facing the main doors, steeling herself for whatever crude lecture was coming their way. No matter what, she was prepared to defend her people and their faith.

Aisling had studied with Jacob Garcia himself. He was a breezy man with a huge heart and enough sense to see the irreconcilable schism between ideologies come to pass. As Prosperianism rose from the pain and suffering of so many hundreds of million dead, so many millions displaced, Jacob knew there would be a violent whiplash for those who refused to accept it. He'd carved out the middle way, ingratiating himself to Johns and other Prosperian leaders so deeply that they could never rid themselves of his movement. There were too many who did not want to give everything they had to a fair-weather faith.

Child was sure to have an ultimatum. He was that kind. Someone who needed his demands met. Well, she'd have to hear him out first.

It was so dark when he arrived that they could hardly see out the windows. A group of guards flanked him, and a handful spread out to the back of the church as soon as they were

through the door. The sight of them unnerved Aisling, and her eyes immediately went to Sophie, who was standing on Kendra's feet in the middle of the congregation.

"Someone destroyed one of our fields last night," Child said without greeting them. The tacit accusation confused her. Is this what all the fuss was about?

"I couldn't have been one of us," she responded. "We all like to eat, too."

"Let me finish, please. I can't be sure of who's responsible, and I don't really care. The poisoning of the field is a sign from God that this city is still impure. We have worked so hard, all of you included, to build a community that will sustain and enliven and grow as the outside slips away. But good intentions are not enough. Not here on the precipice."

Two large clanks echoed from the back of the church, and the guards returned, passing Aisling and filing out past Child through the front entrance.

"Reverend Aisling, you're a woman of faith," Child said, remaining long enough afterward for her to think he meant it as a question.

"Yes," she said.

"Then you understand. You understand."

His voice was shaky, his eyes cast down. Child seemed to be giving himself encouragement, and Aisling felt a powerful need to give him a hug. It was the same compulsion that drove her to carry Cooper McGovern out of town after years of the old woman's vitriolic narcissism. When she'd picked her up, she'd felt hollow as glass pipettes, promising to hold

unstable chemicals but cracking, splintering, turning to dust if dropped from even the shortest height. Her silken muscles melted into Aisling's arms, and she couldn't remember ever carrying something so easily.

"God has commanded that we destroy this church," he said, the words falling out of his mouth like meat from the grinder. Instead of a great weight removed from his shoulders, he looked ashen and unsteady.

Aisling couldn't believe what she was hearing. The others railed in protest, and she heard Sophie's small voice drift upward from the crowd.

"I don't believe you'd do that, Child," Aisling said.

"He can't do it!" Wylie Holland shouted. He was a stout man who had been in the church since before Aisling and her family had come. A few others shouted their support, but the bulk of the group remained quiet, a huddle of barely a hundred too used to being in the minority.

"I truly wish I didn't have to," Child said, and before Aisling could respond, he turned away and walked out the front door, which clanged shut and rattled as its lock clicked into place. A sick metallic scrape followed.

Aisling caught Kendra's eyes. Unbelieving, she walked quickly toward the door and tried her key, which slid easily into the lock and turned it, but the door remained shut. She shoved it hard, but it jolted against something stuck fast into its outer handle. An animal terror spread throughout the others, and she slammed her hand flat against the door. The sound felt so small

and thin. She rattled the handle and shoved her shoulder into it. Kendra and a few others joined her, but the door held fast.

Aisling scrambled to the side window. A dozen guards outside carrying torches flanked Child, who looked on, his features twisted with tetanic agony. The sight of the flames shut down her heart for a few beats, but she saw her chance in Child's fear. She slammed her hand against the window again as the others grouped behind her. The torches forced an icy realization down their throats that shot straight down to their kidneys. Aisling slammed her hands hard enough against the pane for it to crack. A thin sliver of glass stuck in her palm, and she kept hitting it as the blood smeared on the casing.

Wylie scrambled to the back of the church, wildly testing the other doors and finding them just as stuck. He ran back toward the group at the front, shouting "Stand back!"

Grabbing a chair, he slammed it into the window, and glass rained down against their chests and legs and feet with a bright tinkling. With the glass shattered, Aisling could hear the sound of the flames even as everyone screamed around her.

"It's okay, baby. It's okay," Kendra said too quickly to be calming as she smoothed Sophie's hair over and over, a caramel sheen covering the girl's neck. Aisling turned back to both of them and swallowed hard.

"Child!" she screamed out the window. "I know you don't want to do this!"

He didn't seem to notice her. Light from the flames tripped over his face, then disappeared into the darkness over his left shoulder.

"Please!" she called again. "Remember Jonah! Remember Peter!"

She hoped desperately that he was the man of faith he said he was. She prayed as she screamed.

Resilience returned to Child's face as he locked eyes with Aisling. He walked slowly to the window, as though completely exhausted, and placed a hand up to silence all of them. Wylie continued hurling curses, and Child spoke over him.

"I will beg God on your behalf," he said, turned away and motioning for the torchbearers to follow him. The other guards were visible at the front of the church.

"We need to get the fuck out of here," Wylie shouted, and all eyes turned to Aisling.

"Wylie's right," Kendra said.

"And go where?" she said. The children were still crying. The question silenced everyone else.

"We can't just sit here and wait for that maniac to decide to kill us," Wylie said.

"Then tell us your plan."

Wylie shrank back. His bluster hadn't produced a viable escape. They were trapped, and none of them wanted to admit it.

"Right. Let's take a minute. Take a deep breath. Try to come up with something," Aisling felt herself shifting back into pastor mode. "Sophie, take the other children where y'all can play sharks and minnows while the adults talk, okay sweetie?"

Aisling hugged her tighter than she ever had, and the girl led the other children away.

||

The hour passed achingly slowly. What was meant to be a break to reset before planning turned into an extended silence as no one could think of anything to say. Wylie proposed an impossible feat that involved tackling the guards after breaking down the door, but he eventually wore himself out when no one got on board with his desperation. They were all too tired, and most everyone in the group had resigned themselves to using the time to eke out what might be there last few moments. Shrieking against the defeat, Wylie seemed like an idiot screaming at the passengers of a crashing plane that they'd be fine if they could only invent the parachute.

When it became obvious that no plan was coming, some of the parents retrieved their kids. Others watched them play. Sophie led them in a game of Tattletale, and the distraction was enough to force a laugh from a goofy boy who accidentally tagged himself out.

Aisling couldn't have been prouder of her girl. She leaned against Kendra and wondered if this was what starving was like.

"Why were you shouting about Peter back there?" Kendra asked.

"Peter and Jonah were given second chances."

"Didn't Jonah end up covered in whale vomit?"

"Absolutely slathered in it, but he lived." Aisling closed her eyes. Would it really be so hard? To take the next step together?"

"I always hated that paint color," Kendra said, motioning at the back wall.

"Probably too late now to change it," Aisling said.

"Don't joke."

"Yeah, I know."

The front doors rattled and swung open. Aisling and Kendra leapt to their feet. Others backed away. Parents shielded their children, arms over chests, backs pressed into knees as if they could reabsorb them completely to keep them away from the danger.

Child stepped in, his hands raised, a massive smile stretched across his face.

"Rejoice!" he called, the word thudding into the space, echoless and without response to his happiness. "Rejoice! The Lord God has saved you through faith. Stepping outside this doorway will be an act of repentance and a Baptism into the true faith that will purify and safeguard our community. We're united in our purpose, Amen."

His face was so red, Aisling thought he must have broken blood vessels. His eyes were still an irritated pink and tear tracks shone clearly against his cheeks. Her heart rattled in her chest, trying to escape the prison of her rib cage, her body lagging behind her mind in the understanding that, for whatever else may come, they were safe for the night. Just the night.

Child left the room, and a wave of relief crashed over the Garcians, who hugged one another in shock and lingering fear.

"This was all pretend," Kendra told Sophie. "Just a silly game. You tell the littles that. Just a silly, silly game."

Wylie shook Aisling's shoulders from behind, spinning her around crudely enough for her to nearly twist her ankle.

"This isn't over," he said sternly. "This was him sending a message."

"Message received," she said. Then, because her nerves were split open at the ends, "Wylie, did you destroy the field?"

He snorted, shaking his hand and storming off. She watched him go, then turned and crouched down to Sophie's level.

"You'll sleep in our bed tonight. All together."

‡

Chapter Eighteen

Saturday, September 18, 2049

Operation Hemmed Garment Encampment, Colorado

"So, he asks you to pick a number and think of a card, and whatever number you thought of, that's the position in the deck your card is," Agent Pragganandhaa said, clumsily pantomiming the motions for the table. Governor Bui's holo hadn't loaded yet.

"And he doesn't have an implant?" Greenwood said plainly, scrolling her tablet screen and making corrections to a wall of text filling it.

"He does, but I don't see how that would help the trick."

Greenwood shrugged.

"Maybe he's just really good with his hands. You said he's at the Thai place in Hillsboro?" Agent Rozman said.

"Every Monday night. I'm going back there if you wanna come," Agent Pragganandhaa said, swallowing a bite of his tea cookie.

The HQ tent had taken on a slight veneer of college dorm room, with personal effects weaseling their way onto desks and tables.

"What are you doing, Colonel?" Kemp asked. She looked up from her screen with an exasperated sigh.

"Trying to pull some strings to get my daughter into Virginia Country Day School."

Agent Pragganandhaa whistled.

"For real?"

"I can't afford it by a long shot, so I'm scrounging in search of a Medici who's also got sway there. I have a few connects."

"I didn't know you had a kid," Kemp said.

"I've got four."

The main flap opened, and a harried captain hustled in, instantly relieved to see that the briefing hadn't even started yet. He handed Greenwood a handwritten scrap of paper covered in dirt. She read it and handed it to Kemp.

"Hot damn. He did it." Greenwood smiled at Kemp.

"What's the scoop?" Agent Pragganandhaa asked, reaching for another cookie.

"We undertook an operation to destroy their crops, and it was successful," Greenwood answered. "And it's paid dividends, causing some dissent. Apparently, Child threatened to burn down the church with all the Garcians inside."

"Holy shit," Agent Rozman grinned.

"I wish I could be there when they tear him apart. Damned animals," Kemp seethed.

"I'm surprised you'd have the stomach for it, Mayor," Greenwood said.

"I need justice."

"Do you know what the maximum punishment is for treason against the church, Mayor Kemp?"

"Death, I'd assume. I'd hope," he answered.

"At the end, yes. But the highest punishment is an hour of torture before execution. If the prisoner passes out, they wait until he recovers consciousness to start the clock up again."

"Then I hope they give me a turn with the thumbscrews."

"Ha. Sure, you do. While you do that, I'll be organizing a bake sale for the booster club," Greenwood said, turning back to her screen.

Governor Bui's face popped into place, and Agent Pragganandhaa almost choked trying to get his cookie down.

"Enough hold up," Governor Bui said. "Tell me some good news."

†

Chapter Nineteen

Sunday, October 3, 2049

Braintree, Colorado

Flecks of snow fluttered down, trying their best to survive before melting when they reached the ground. The ground was turning hard, and the artificial pond looked outlandish against the graying air. A manufactured happy blue that had no place in the coming winter. Even with the chill, there was still no building in Braintree that could house every one of the residents, so they all bundled up as best as they could to gather in the field with that alien blue rippling behind Child as he preached.

Filip toddled clumsily next to Cecilia. He'd take a few steps, tumble, and push himself back up again while his mother hungrily received the word. Life in Braintree had pulled her close to its bosom, and Enjoli had watched with concern as her prima became increasingly vocal about her passion for Eternal Triumph and its goals. Everyone's response to what Child had done to the Garcians had surprised Enjoli, but it was her prima's response that truly confused her.

"Child convinced God to save them," she had said as they swung on the playground swings.

"You think he's actually, literally talking to God?" Enjoli asked, meaning it as a challenge.

"Enjoli, you spent your whole life thinking God only liked people who had money."
Cecilia raised an eyebrow, and Enjoli wanted to keep arguing, but Filip had started shoving mulch into his mouth.

Instead, she argued with herself. She moved through the community that had given her the first taste of contentment and watched as everyone else beamed at the wonders that God was working through Child, and the progress he was working through them. Hadn't she always fought to take care of her family too?

Filip landed in her lap just as the breathing ritual was beginning. Cutwolf leaned over and handed Enjoli a pink tab, as he had every Sunday since they'd arrived, completely unfazed when she refused. Cecilia snagged one and popped it in her mouth.

Fuck it, Enjoli thought. She took it from his palm and tucked it beneath her tongue. She needed to escape her mind, to cut through the doubt.

She found herself irritated, cold even with a heavy coat, and anxious for whatever the tab was going to do to her body to happen.

Cutwolf squeezed her hand, and she opened her eyes. He pressed his cheek to hers and whispered in her ear.

"It's not going to be a fun trip unless you think happy thoughts."

So, she tried. She tried to match the breathing. She hadn't been very good at it and had felt like there was something broken in her that made her incapable of enjoying the ecstasy everyone else seemed to relish. A pit stop in transcendence.

Enjoli fell into the rhythm but didn't feel what she was supposed to feel. Not like when Child had made the light flash in her mind during the first meeting. She sank a little deeper into herself, and the chill went away, but she still wondered why she felt only comfortable enough to dip her toe into happiness.

At the head of the crowd, Child stood up following the ritual, stripping his clothes off. His skin was tight with goose pimples, and his penis retreated against the cold. He stood, his arms open wide, ready to speak about living authentically. Enjoli hardly noticed. She had the opportunity every Sunday to sit near the front because of her job, but she felt too exposed there. She had been in Braintree only a month, but the persistence of the place was astonishing, a second-by-second encouragement to see the truth as they all saw it, to shed all her old pain, and emerge on the other side psyched to see the destruction of the world. It's not like she didn't want to feel it. For the first time in her life, she wasn't hungry. She had a big house, a kind community, and a knot of worry that there was something wrong with her keeping her from fully believing as everyone around her did.

Child's willingness toward violence didn't help.

Enjoli did as Cutwolf had suggested, thinking only happy thoughts. The sense of purpose in feeding her neighbors. Cracking jokes with Cecilia while she burped babies. Long conversations with Cutwolf that kept her awake longer than she'd planned. There were memories of playing video games on Saturday mornings with Abuela Marta, but as her spine tingled, the back of her skull wrapped in a fuzzy blanket of delicious haze, she recognized that all her happy thoughts were from a single month in Braintree. Every drop of joy since her childhood had been poisoned by Oscar Johns's betrayal, and she had to pick through the dumpster in order to save the

gems among the rubbish. Things had been so easy in Braintree, the people so open, that she had felt safe enough to accept genuine happiness instead of fleeting joy tinted with the danger of going without dinner, of not catering to Oscar's every whim, of working until her joints ached, of her only hobby being sleep.

Attempting to lean over, Enjoli discovered that her muscles didn't want to do exactly what her brain instructed them to do, but she managed after a giggle, placing her head on Cutwolf's shoulder.

"I love this," she said, and he let her lean on him while they listened.

||

Enjoli was still flighty after walking down with everyone else to the commons to eat. The Triumphant took the day of rest seriously, and Enjoli found herself hoping that real snow would fall so that she could see it for the first time. Even the impermanent flakes struggling in the air fascinated her. Cecilia gave her shit for it, but Enjoli knew that her prima was only pretending to play it cool.

"I miss Abuela," she said once they were seated, trays of buttered bread and scrambled eggs in front of them.

"Me too," Cecilia said.

"I'm sorry you lost someone," Cutwolf offered.

"We never even got to bury her."

"It's awful. Back at Figure Nine, we started planting trees whenever we heard someone had been killed."

"We should do that, too," Cecilia said, shifting Filip over in her lap as he gummed some eggs.

Enjoli nodded, so they hiked after breakfast to a quiet spot near the northern wall to finally say goodbye.

Cutwolf struggled with the spade against the cold dirt.

"This is stupid," Enjoli said. "Planting a seed at the start of winter."

"Yes, it is," Cutwolf said. "Which is why we're doing it."

They told stories and prayed. Cutwolf offered to give them privacy, but both of them told him to stay, so he sat and listened until Cecilia and Enjoli were ready to draw the earth back over the hole to cover the seed.

||

Berenice held court in her apartment above the flower shop. It was cramped with a dozen people, stepping over one another when they needed to go to the bathroom or get another sip or nibble. These were the lucky ones who got in to see her, reveling in her insights and her connection with Child and Sorola. Jealousy was thick in the room, and she encouraged their slight bouts of worship at her trundle bed. The conversation wove back in on itself, at first a

fierce debate about vaginal imagery in Luce Cannon lyrics until someone brought up Taylor Swift, and the discussion hinged on what her most prescient song might have been.

"It's funny. I used to be obsessed with politics, but since being here I haven't thought of it at all," a sallow-skinned girl with a buzzcut said. "What do you think they're even doing out there?"

"Same as ever," said a scuzzy young man in cutoff jeans and a top hat. "Pawning the world."

"It's so incredible you just said that," Berenice said as the heads nodded. "I've been obsessed with these historic reality TV shows that document how people used to live at the turn of the century, and one of them is this series where a family runs a pawn shop and gets to talk about how much an old baseball bat or piece of parchment from World War II is worth, and the numbers are always shocking."

"Stuff," the girl with the buzzcut said, shaking her head.

"The oldest one I have on stream is called *The Real World*, and it's this social experiment where they put all these people together from different backgrounds and pay for all their meals and rent and everything, and the fights they have are so deeply stupid."

"Probably because there were cameras," popped a voice from the middle of the crowd.

"Just goes to further prove how righteous Child is, how much would fall apart without a spiritual task in front of us. How amazing everything is going to be everywhere once out there comes crashing down," Berenice said.

"Here we go again," the scuzzy man said. "The only topic you ever really want to talk about."

Watching Braintree transform from country club to collective had deepened Berenice's faith to a fanatical degree, and she couldn't help fantasizing about the end of the world as it was promised. There was no doubt of the town's purity now. She didn't care what they were doing outside the gates. They should all get busy burning.

"I bet I can get her mind on something else," the girl with the buzzcut said, pressing herself up against Berenice, and running her teeth along her neck. Berenice's eyes closed, and she let out a little moan. The girl continued to kiss down her chest, and Berenice reached for the button of her jeans.

It was afternoon by the time she woke up. Most had left, but a few had stayed behind, passing a joint around and noodling carelessly on a mandolin. Berenice untangled herself from the sheets and limbs. She took a deeply satisfying piss and got dressed before braving the chill of the commons.

She found Janthy and Wesley there, drinking something close to coffee that made her gag.

"Afternoon, brother Wesley, sister Janthy," she said.

"Join us," Janthy said, patting the seat next to her.

"Why, thank you. Where is our esteemed leader on this fine day?"

"He should be here soon," Wesley said. "He told me he wanted to help cook dinner tonight. I'm hoping it's meatloaf."

"We don't have any cows here," Berenice said, puzzled.

"That's why it's only a hope."

Dozens of people came down the hill with Child, and Berenice marveled at his ability to maintain his composure with so much attention on him at all times. She'd grown up displaying her entire life online, but there had always been the separation of the screen as a safety net. People could get their claws through the cracks, but she wasn't exposed like Child was now. From what she knew it had never been like this at Figure Nine either, yet he didn't seem to be put out by or enjoy the attention. The buzzing flock of the neediest believers was a small atmosphere surrounding him that he'd acclimatized to.

Berenice didn't see what happened next because Wiley Holland knocked her down trying to run past. She hit the cobblestones and saw stars. Wesley's hands were on her arms lifting her up, and she heard the screams. A large grunt of effort. A sound like meat hitting the cutting board. She turned to find Wylie pinned against the side of the old bank building, Child's forearm trapping him there. The knife was still inside Child's gut.

Janthy stripped the scarf from her neck and tied Wiley's hands together, frog marching him toward Braintree's puny one-cell jail.

||

Karen patched up Child, and the division lines were drawn. Sorola and Karen urged forgiveness. Wesley and Janthy wanted punishment by the book. Only Berenice wanted blood.

"You'll look weak if you do anything else," she argued.

"He'll look unhinged if we do not follow the law. They exist for a reason," Wesley said. Berenice scoffed.

"I can't imagine how you hold onto those arcane ideas, Wesley."

"Because they are the only thing really holding us together."

"This is going to happen again," Berenice continued. "We cannot lose you."

The debate boiled over, but Child seemed not to hear any of them. After it devolved into a shouting match, he cleared the room and emerged a few minutes later telling Janthy to bring him three guards and a gun.

"You don't really want that," Janthy said, but he repeated himself as Berenice smiled wickedly.

They dragged Wylie up the hill to Karen's farm, his feet kicking against clods of dirt until they tossed him down to the ground where the first line of potatoes butted up against the front yard. Berenice ran to catch up, and her heart tripped with every new excited shout. Wylie scrambled to get to his feet, but they kicked him back down.

"Dissent is destructive," Child of Aaron bellowed, the red drying against the front of his shirt. "We've opened our community so that you can fill it with filth, and we will not let that filth

fester and rot here waiting to be burned by God's good grace along with each pore of your flesh. We have instead joined together in this field to end you."

Wesley stepped forward urgently.

"Child," he pleaded. "You can't do this. This man must see real justice."

"He tried to kill me, Wesley. He tried to kill our movement."

Child stood apart, hovering above everyone's head and commanding from as if on high. The guards held Wylie down as he cursed and spat, but he was a treed cat, whipped by his own frantic humors, taunting the dogs below because it was the only thing left to do before dying. His pupils bloomed in panic. When Child pulled out a gun, Wylie wailed.

"Oh, God! Please, please!"

His voice sounded small, absorbed by an earth not willing to reflect it back.

When Child cocked the gun, Wylie soiled himself and toppled over, scrambling with such ferocity that one of the men holding him almost fell backward trying to restrain him.

Child stood over him, and Berenice couldn't imagine what he was waiting for. She saw in him an unwillingness to complete the task, just as he'd spared the Garcians before, letting them remain in the new Eden despite the obviousness of the violence they would seek. It wasn't a given, though. They had always been like little lambs, hoping if they accumulated enough tote bags that peace would break out across the word. It had never made sense how they could have

lived through so much destruction and pain and come out the other side still believing that everything would change if they didn't get involved.

Berenice found herself momentarily disgusted with Child. How could he save them if he wasn't willing to fight back?

Child looked into Wylie's eyes and wavered, letting the gun drift downward before flicking it back. He steadied his resolve but was so uncommitted to pulling the trigger that the gun bucked wildly, and the point blank shot only grazed Wylie's skull. He jerked and shuddered, flopping like a downed electrical line, but he did not die, and his survival swayed Child of Aaron further, who turned over his shoulder to consult the voice of God. The way his neck snapped back, like he'd torn his own spinal cord, Berenice could swear she could see between his own shoulder blades as he whispered and nodded and exhaled in ragged bursts.

"Is this a stay of execution?" he prayed as Wylie's body convulsed, his mouth erupting with pink-gray spittle. Berenice resigned herself to God's grace setting a killer free, just as he'd failed to bring about the burning of the Garcian church. Here was his reward, an assassination attempt by a coward.

After a heartbeat of silence, Child nodded sagely, turned his head back, and fired on Wylie again.

The bullet hit Wylie's clavicle with an unsatisfying thud following the deafening gun blast. He stopped flopping. Someone started singing, and soon a dozen or so of the gathered joined in, proclaiming with joyous voices, "Open the eyes of my heart, Lord! Open the eyes of

my heart!" as blood geysered from Wylie's second wound. Karen knelt down, mouthing the lyrics of the song, and gasped when she checked his pulse.

"He's still alive!" she yelled, and the singing grew louder.

"Shining in the light of your glory!"

Child looked stricken, frozen in place by what he'd just done. Crushed by the idea that he might have to do it again. Berenice saw it all on his face and understood what would happen if everyone saw him the way she had seen him. Weak. Cowardly. With the entire government outside the gate waiting to shred them with gunfire, Berenice couldn't have Child's followers think of their leader that way. She pulled a knife from a belt loop sheath and stabbed it into the middle of Wylie's chest. His body jumped. Blood cascaded over her face, dripping down her lips and neck. She stabbed again.

"Pour out Your power and love!"

And again.

"As we sing Holy Holy Holy!"

And again. Until he lay completely still, blood seeping into the soil.

††

Chapter Twenty

Thursday, October 21, 2049

Braintree, Colorado

Enjoli had never been to a wedding, let alone presided over one, so she only had *The Little Mermaid* to fall back on, trying to remember how the priest marrying Ariel and Eric handled it without the sea witch rising up to capsize the ship. She was jittery with nerves, but it was pleasing to worry about something as trivial as how she would do on the happiest day of someone's life. Even the wind didn't get to her as it spread a chill crispness that made everyone wrap their jackets a little tighter around themselves. Fall threatened Winter's arrival. The leaves were a riot of oranges and reds and browns, all beauty in change with the threat of dropping to the ground at any second. Enjoli savored them. She tugged at her dress, still happy not to be wearing yellow.

She tucked her cross into her collar, as the band struck up a soaring melody that quieted the crowd. Almost everyone in town had shown up, and the lakeside swelled with joyful conversations, smiling faces relishing the miraculous merging of lives, something more granular than the pledge they'd all taken to build a community together.

Budge walked down the aisle first, looking beautiful in a floral suit of burnt pink and swirling soft greens that clashed and challenged the autumn palette. A shimmering satin pocket square splashed against the fabric, and he carried a bouquet of dried, pressed flowers from his and Janelle's first date. Enjoli found Cutwolf's eyes. He playfully shifted his shoulders up and down, and Enjoli realized with embarrassment that she'd been nervously rocking on her heels.

She stilled herself, then rolled her eyes, knowing that no one else was looking at her. When she looked up again, Cutwolf still hadn't turned his head to watch Budge, and Enjoli felt a swift assurance that the smile on his face was something she wanted for herself.

Janelle practically ran down the aisle to whoops and cheers, cartwheeling at the end so that her dress arced up and over a flash of her skin, a pod of linen waves cresting and falling together before she planted a swooning kiss on Budge's blushing face.

"I think that part comes at the end," Enjoli said, relieved when everyone laughed.

Child sat in the front row, looking bored, smiling occasionally. Nursing a headache maybe. Abuela had told and retold her story about seeing Nirvana in concert, the sway and magnetism, impossible to resist, of Kurt Cobain. The guiding pressure of his magnetism. She said she lost all control.

That's as it was with Child, who commanded attention and turned any stray patch of dirt he happened to stand on into a spotlight stage. Even now, sitting there slightly bemused to Enjoli's eyes, even with two friends about to be wed, he was still the center of the universe. Maybe that's how it always is. Power focused into one man. Oscar Johns. Child of Aaron. With the rest of us lucky to have them in our world at all. Child's erratic moods frightened Enjoli. She couldn't forgive what he'd done in the church, and it had clarified her refusal to believe that he was anything but a man. Johns believed he could melt the world down to stuff in his back pocket. Child acted like the world would crack if he held it too tightly. Neither made for sturdy ground.

The world Child created was better than Johns's. Enjoli had to admit it, especially here in the cool sunlight of the Colorado foothills, gathered to celebrate bonding love miles away from

the gnawing dangers of real life. As ever, even with the army encamped a few miles away and the jangly-eyed prophet sitting in the front row, Enjoli felt complete and total contentment. Back in Houston, shadows lurked everywhere. An invisible ceiling to knock her head against. The fear of ends not meeting even with the consistency of her paycheck, which was whittled away each week by her own measured devotion. Devotion she, now, was seeing only as a trained act of self-harm. The unspoken bond between the wealthy patron and the bug-riddled peasant pledging to cut off their own hand for even the chance at a fuller belly. Medicine for their pains. A proper burial ground for their lost loved ones, turned to dust by the constant, slow grinding of a life which dripped on command away from them. She had been a human pinata built with holes in her so that the candy spilled upward.

She worried about Child, but she valued what he'd built. Someone had tried to kill him because of it. Wasn't that worth an ounce of her sympathy?

For the first time in her life, she felt unshackled. Even as she mourned for everyone she lost, she no longer had to mourn for herself.

Sorola leaned their head on Child's shoulder, and it seemed to calm him, and Enjoli wondered what it must be like to sleep next to him. Whether he laid down his burdens to Sorola, seeking their comfort and wisdom as profound as their beauty – a rock star in their own regard. Desired and needed. Or if she only imagined Child's capacity for burdens, like a broken genius screaming at the air because he didn't neatly fit into the real world.

"Dearly beloved..." she began, smiling warmly at Janelle and Budge, who welled up and stuck out a tongue respectively.

The ceremony was brief and sweet. They'd written their own vows, and everyone cheered when they kissed for the first time as wife and husband. Enjoli remained at the makeshift altar, watching the heads turn like dominoes as they shuffled back down the aisle where Karen released a single dove into the air. It flew away without poetry, soaring immediately upward rightfully unconcerned with the people down below who had briefly held it captive.

||

The party raged in the evening. In the fifth hour of the reception, a second round of food was brought out, with everyone gorging on honeyed chicken and roasted root vegetables, washed down by a rapidly depleting stockpile of beer and wine and spiced mead. Some had stayed the whole time. Others had gone home, napped, and either remained to rest or returned with renewed appetites. Enjoli had never made mead before, never thought about it, but that afternoon amid the rabble and noise she wondered briefly if she could do it. Then, she thought, for sure that she could and wondered why she'd never thought herself that capable of doing anything that creative for her own sake. It had all been for Johns. Using up every inch of her talent and skill, wasting it on the success, overwhelming as it was, of one man. Somehow, if they ran out of mead, she was sure she could help her friends make more.

Child hadn't stopped dancing since he'd arrived at the market square. He commanded that the tables be pushed even further back to allow for more people on the dance floor, and a heady group thought they'd match him in energy but fell off one by one, rejoining as the mood struck and swaying manically to a steady flow of hymns, worship songs, and raucous folk tunes. Child had lost his shirt at some point in the revelry, and his long red hair whipped sweat around as he spun. Child was so young, yet he looked like an ancient thing out there lost in the music. As his

followers traced their fingers against his skin or dared to dance alongside him or tittered too loudly on the edge of the dance floor with their eyes locked on him, he was in a different universe altogether, in tune with steric perfection. He moved his body to music that matched up perfectly with the band but came from a source no one but he could hear.

Janelle and Budge bumped into Enjoli, spilling some champagne, and raising their sloshing glasses up past her face. She beamed, and they drew her into a hug that was sticky with the movement of the afternoon. They dragged one another to the dance floor, and Enjoli thought it was a perfect time to get another glass of something.

Cutwolf was posted up at the bar, sipping at a glass of white wine, tucked into a scrum of people.

"We're gonna run out of this stuff before Easter," he shouted above the fray as Enjoli slid up beside him. "What's your poison?"

"Same as you."

"Ah."

"I mean, I'll have what you're having."

Cutwolf grinned and pulled another glass from the table, performing a curious bit of alcoholic chemistry and handing it over.

"Mom called these Filipino Grigos."

"Cheers."

They plinked glasses, and Enjoli took a sip, spilling a little down her chin and catching it with her finger.

"Mmm. It's good. What's in it?"

"Whatever's on hand," Cutwolf said. "It's the perfect drink for when the party's winding down."

"It's funny. I was just thinking about that," Enjoli said. "What we'll lose and when. What we can replace. I thought I'd be scared about it, but—"

"But you're excited by it?" Cutwolf offered.

"Not excited, but not scared. Working on being excited. Didn't miss catfish nuggets as much as I thought, anyway. Definitely don't miss algae paste. Cecilia is dying for more sweets."

"Wait until we run out of coffee."

"Isn't the world supposed to end before that?"

"God, I hope so."

Cutwolf took a large sip and offered a flat, thoughtful smile.

"Are we drunk enough to be honest?" Cutwolf asked.

"Mhmm," Enjoli purred.

"I believe that this is the city I want standing whether the world ends or not. I spent a long time out there struggling to fix the system from the inside, from the outside, you name it. And then I saw what Eternal Triumph was doing to separate themselves from a fundamentally broken world, and it made sense. It's the most human possible response. So, if you ask me if I think the outside world is going to be set ablaze by a vengeful deity, it pretty much seems like it already has been. Just not everyone acts like they're on fire."

"In this metaphor, I think I was one of the ones helping to spread the fire before I came here."

"Like a really incompetent firefighter."

"Right down to the uncomfortable uniforms."

"But now you're here."

"I am. I am here. Drinking after presiding over a wedding in an immaculate autumn surrounded by people who are perpetually happy. It doesn't feel real."

"Because the army is waiting outside the gate to kill all of us?"

"Sure. Or because six months ago I was helping Oscar Johns prepare to publicly celebrate the murder of the man who started this movement."

"I'm proud of you."

"For being open to change? For seeing things your way?"

"For saying Oscar Johns's name without throwing up."

Enjoli linked her arm with Cutwolf's and looked into his eyes.

"If we're celebrating, I'll take another one of these, please," she said, lifting her glass without looking away. "Whatever's in it."

On the dance floor, Sorola and Child's bodies molded together into one four-armed angel not just moving in time to the rhythm of the music but guided by it completely. There was no space between them. The music intensified, the renewed percussive assault flaring up alongside the bonfires. Berenice danced up behind Sorola, sliding her arms around their waist until her hands rested on the inside of their hips. Sorola placed their hand behind Berenice's neck to cradle it and draw her even closer. They pulled out hot pink tabs from their dress pocket, placing one on Child's tongue, and feeding another to Berenice before taking one for themselves.

Janthy and Wesley watched the ballet from their table. She downed her drink.

"I might try one of those," Wesley said.

Janthy raised her eyebrow.

"Let me get my camera first," she said. He kept his eyes on Child.

"I'm worried about him," Wesley said.

"Because he killed that man?" Janthy asked. "I've killed several." Her admission seemed to chasten Wesley.

“It wasn’t right. Not like that.”

“You’ve lived inside bubble wrap too long, Wesley.”

"I noticed that you don't partake in what Child and Sorola are having," he said, shifting the subject.

"Yes, well. My dad did enough for both of us."

"Ah. I'm guessing that you and your dad—"

"I'm not drunk enough to have this conversation."

"Even still, it seems to me that your faith in Child is a pretty large contradiction then."

"If I had a dollar for every one of life's contradictions, huh?" Janthly smirked.

"Child would burn them all and dance naked around the ashes."

"He's a good man with a strong vision, and one of these days the army is going to get bored of not using their guns, so I'm happy to have a leader who fights back when attacked. I can't explain why he's the one, but that's where the faith part comes into play. Kaleel trusted Child to succeed him, and I trust Kaleel."

"Huh," Wesley said. "I had a different role to play here, which is why my eye is always on the logistics of building this community instead of the ecstasy. We worked for a long time to lay the groundwork for all of this, and we did it with a knife pressed to our throats. Maybe for some that feels too cold and sterile."

"Not at all," Janthy said quickly, shaking her head. She took his hands in hers. "Not at all. It's proof of a towering faith. Risking your life to plan for something without knowing if it will ever come to pass. What other elements of faith are there than that? Although maybe you should be the one on the dance floor loosening up."

"I'm not drunk enough for *that*."

"Then let's get another."

On the dance floor, Child had spun away from Sorola and Berenice, who continued running their hands along each other's curves as the music slowed to a creeping swoon. Child swayed on his own, enveloped eventually by the faithful excited to put themselves in his path. They appeared as bodies in suspension, hanging by loose wires, some folded at the waist, some stretched upward to a breaking point, some shuddering against the cold kissing their sweat-stained skin. The evening folded in on itself, and the wind through the tall trees made their pines shudder in chaotic opposition to the music. When full darkness came, they lit torches on the parameter where the bonfire couldn't quite touch, inviting everyone to stay a little longer and deny the night.

Beyond the dancing, and beyond the sticky slick bar, Enjoli and Cutwolf sneaked off to the dock. Enjoli thought about snaking another bottle as though the muscle memory of her youth and what tended to impress the older boys and girls had twitched on their own, but then she thought better of it, deciding that the buzz she was already riding was more than enough. What she needed was a blanket.

Now that she was this far away from the party, she also wished one of them had a flashlight. The moon wasn't quite a sliver, but it would be one in just a few days, completing its cycle of futilely trying to disappear completely from the world. They both sat down on the dock, a stack of turtles piled up against the pylon closest to them. Enjoli leaned down to trace her finger in the water but couldn't quite reach.

"So, what's your favorite food?" Cutwolf larked.

Enjoli kissed him without warning, and he pulled her closer, the scent of strawberry champagne evaporating between them. As she pulled away, Enjoli traced her finger along Cutwolf's jaw.

"What are you thinking?" he said after she'd smiled like a fool.

"That I can't remember the last time I did something like this."

"Kissed a boy?"

"All of it. Partied. Not worried about work or surviving or anything."

"You're still relishing in the surreal."

She nodded, her glassy eyes searching the sky.

"It's okay to be astonished by existing," he continued.

"I just never would have expected any of this. I spent so many years of my life building something that I thought was sustainable. And not just that. More than that. Something that I

thought was specially marked by God as permanent and unwavering. I spent so many nights slipping into bed next to my Abuela after she'd gone to sleep and waking up before her. A ghost in my own house. Now, I can't be sure that I'm in my own body. Here with you. I feel something that I haven't felt maybe ever."

"Here's where I hit you with a suave statement and kiss you again."

"Alright. Shoot your shot, mister."

"That feeling you feel," he said, cradling her face. "Is love."

They burst out laughing. Enjoli rolled onto her side against the rough wood of the dock. Cutwolf nearly fell backward into the water, and Enjoli scrambled to pull him back, which made them break into a new eruption of laughs.

"Whoa. That's twice you've saved me," Cutwolf said. "I can't imagine what all I owe you at this point."

"I'm absolutely going to lord it over you."

By the time they made their way back to the party, the crowd had thinned considerably, but those that remained were being served a third meal of charred tofu and smoked greens. A handful remained on the dance floor, surrounding Child, who continued spinning with his eyes closed as the musicians threatened to burst their callouses.

"Has he been like this the whole time?" Cutwolf asked, plopping down into one of the stray chairs next to Janthy and the others. Berenice handed him an ear of corn slathered with butter, and Cutwolf bit into it with suddenly realized gusto.

"The band wanted to take a break, and he screamed at them," Janthy said.

"But then he let them rest while he danced like that without music," Wesley added, sleepy-eyed and looking all of his age.

"Where were you two?" Berenice asked Cutwolf and Enjoli.

"We saw a rabbit at the edge of the field," Cutwolf answered quickly.

"Yeah, and we wanted to make sure it got home okay," Enjoli added.

"Lucky bunny," Berenice said. Sorola sat silently, an easy smile on her face.

The music stopped abruptly, and the twang of a guitar hitting the ground made Enjoli jump. Child had collapsed on the dance floor, his body making small shudders against the dirt. They all scrambled to him. Berenice shrieked, but Sorola grabbed her by the shoulders, saying "He's fine. He's fine. He's fine," like you would to a kindergartener who's just watched their favorite stuffy fall from the dining room table.

"He doesn't look fine," Enjoli said with rising concern.

"This happens sometimes. It passes," Sorola said, and they all watched and waited as Enjoli's fear grew. She chewed on the inside of her mouth and looked first to Cutwolf for a sign that she wasn't crazy, and then to Wesley, who had always seemed the most sensible to her.

Neither one of them moved, trusting completely that Child was safeguarded from harm. It was absurd. They'd all seen the knife sticking from his belly. They were fools to trust his divine spark so completely to think that he couldn't be killed. He was down on the ground in front of her, all but surely dying in front of a crowd that adored him.

His eyes opened, and he took a deep ragged breath, popping up to his feet with a speed that turned Enjoli's stomach. The small crowd that had grouped around him lurched back. Child reached to the sky and screamed, "I hear and obey! Not what I want, but what you demand!"

He then searched the circle for Sorola, pulling them close when he found them, kissing them hard on the mouth. He did the same to Janthy and two others standing next to her.

"It's wonderful. I see it now. There's always a test, and this is mine. There is always a sacrifice," he said, fizzing with manic delight. He continued grabbing people and kissing them, reaching for Berenice, then Wesley, whose eyes went wide. He moved to Enjoli, kissing her fully as she squirmed, and just as soon as he'd pressed his lips to hers, it was over, and he was already kissing the man next to her.

"What's happened?" Wesley demanded.

"I've been given the ordeal of my faith. As God tested Jesus with the desert and Isaac with his son, my test is before me. I must be silent for three days, and on the morning of the third, I must ride out to meet our enemy on the field of battle."

"But that's—" Wesley began, but Sorola cut him off, shouting that their salvation was at hand.

"Yes, my love," Child responded. "This is the final act of faith before everything else burns away and we are left to peace."

Janthy looked like a boulder attempting to take flight.

"I can't have everyone ready to fight by then," she said without triumph.

"No, no," Child said. "You don't understand. I don't need an army. I am the army! God commanded me to go alone."

†

Chapter Twenty-One

Sunday, October 24, 2049

Braintree, Colorado

Janthy couldn't sleep, so she spent the dark hours cleaning her guns before cleaning herself and then cleaning the church.

She waxed the great front doors, inside and out, polishing their handles until they shined even in the moonlight. The joyful sounds from the southern gate carried in the cool night air, and she left the doors open so she could listen to the muted music and happy chants. She wished she might absorb their joy. She dusted the pews, the altar, and the lectern in the sanctuary. She swept the floor in the lobby, wiped down the blackboards in the Sunday school rooms, and made a fresh bucket of soapy mop water. As she ran the corner of her rag into the spaces between the offering candles, Mara appeared, her skinny legs goosepimpled and bare.

"What are you doing here little love?" Janthy asked.

"I always clean the church and light the candles before Sunday service."

"There'll be no service today, little one."

"She's right, Mara," Wesley's voice came from behind the child. His footsteps soft against the marble. "We will be praising in a very different way after this morning. Now run along."

Mara did as she was told, and Wesley turned his attention to Janthy.

"It takes a true saint to tidy up before the world ends."

"Couldn't sleep."

"Me neither," he said, checking his phone for the time.

Janthy handed him her rag. A new song, too soft to be identified, bloomed from south of town.

"Is it wrong to be afraid to let myself believe, Wesley?"

The pastor heaved a sigh, shifting his weight down on the closest pew, his hand heavy against the carved armrest.

"We've both been fighting a little while, huh?"

Janthy held onto her hip as she moved to join him.

"I used to be a cheerleader. Did you know that?"

He shook his head, smiling in disbelief.

"In this crummy town outside Baltimore. Coach was a skeeve, but I liked the other girls. I did debate team, too. Won some state trophies, but there was never going to be any money for college, so none of that ever mattered. We struggled even before the bubble popped. Dad had a few shifts at a gas station, then he was a tech salvager for AeroSynth-Navigator, and then I don't know what he ended up doing. We lost the house really quick, and I ended up shacking up with some guy my dad knew from his Air Force days just because the guy had some land. The house was filthy. I used to have to wrap rubber bands around my pant legs and sleeves to make sure

roaches didn't crawl into my clothing at night. Some nights, he let me sleep in the bed. Even the nights I didn't want to. Then I found Kaleel, and he saved me."

"He got you out of that house."

"He gave me a sense of purpose. Before him, all my anger was wasted."

There had been so many times Janthy had funneled that anger into action under Kaleel's direction. They'd folded pamphlets and stuffed gasoline-soaked rags into empty Vodka bottles together. All it had ever done was drive them further away from the everyone.

"But you're afraid to get your hopes up this time."

"Kaleel was wrong about El Paso."

"Can you imagine how proud Kaleel is looking down on us right now, building a real community? We're living his wildest dream. So maybe save your fear for something that deserves it."

"My fear is that I'm going to lose another friend, and my second fear is that my lack of faith is the thing that's going to get him killed."

Wesley waited.

"Last night I told him he shouldn't do it," she said, filling the silence. "That he was going to get himself killed."

"What did he say?"

Janthy laughed, a sharp barking, single laugh.

“He’s still struck dumb. He just smiled at me. He wrote a verse on my palm with black marker.” She turned her hand to Wesley where the thick black lines had smudged into a single gray rain cloud.

“Which one?”

“Hell if I know. Matthew something. I’m sure it was about trusting God or sparrows in the field. Something meant to pacify me that would only send me into a grief rage.”

“Or something about eating lobster on a Tuesday maybe,” Wesley said. Janthy glared back, not wanting to smile because it would puncture her worry.

“You know where I think we really fucked up?” Pastor Shirkus went on. “After everything fell apart, we should have had a period of national mourning. The world fell out from under us, and we can barely talk about it. All the names we gave it, all shorthand so that can avoid being specific about what happened to our communities and to us directly. We did what we had to survive, which meant outrunning any sense of recognition that something so overwhelmingly horrific had happened to us at all. I guess that's what we've always done, and it always bubbles to the top. Flying flags at half-staff is such a pitifully small gesture.”

"We had to adapt to survive. I don't regret that."

"Neither do I, but we folded in ourselves, lost our patience, lost our ability to see beyond our own needs. Why else could something like Prosperianism get its hooks so deep? We lost people, we lost homes and communities and land, but we also lost time, and I don't think we ever

reckoned with how deeply that broke us. You and I are both skeptics in our own way, and I don't know what's going to happen this morning, but I'll tell you that my faith is renewed by your desire to fix things. I know there's a reason that you came in to clean on the eve of our triumph. You mind if I ask you something?"

"Of course not."

"What would Kaleel be doing this morning?"

He rose, and Janthy followed his lead.

"He would be sitting near a fire watching everyone dance. He would be thinking about ways to serve them," Janthy answered, a tear forming in her eye. "And he would face any army God commanded him to."

||

Janthy held Wesley's hand as they walked toward the southern gate. The morning was still dark, crafting odd silhouettes that made it feel to her as though they were walking through a fairy story without leaving breadcrumbs. Up ahead, the door to a house opened and closed as a man ushered his family onto the street to make their way down to the festivities.

Janthy could hardly see the gate through all the bodies. It was clear that many had been there all night. People nested around campfires, leaning against one another under blankets or sitting cross-legged and closed-eyed. As they wove through, it became clear to Janthy that the music she had heard was not a single song, but many, all blooming from a dozen different instruments guiding a hundred different voices that all merged into one beautiful,

incomprehensible melody. People danced, cloth falling away from their bodies which sweated and prickled against the cool Autumn air.

Brighton Candlemass strummed one of the patchwork tunes around a campfire with Enjoli and Cutwolf, and Janthy briefly took Brighton's face in her hands and kissed her cheeks, but moved on before she could ruin the song. Her arrival signaled a shift in the mood and attention of the revelers, and she enjoyed the eyes that followed her, conferring a silent message that something was about to begin now that she was there, like the pastor who appears in her place before a wedding. If the energy had died down during the night, her appearance brought it back to life, and she let the joy diffuse throughout her. Maybe Wesley was right. Maybe it was safe to believe in the happy ending.

The smell of cooked meat made her realize how bone tired and hungry she was, her body crashing back down into its mortality after spending the night nervously awake. She wandered to a campfire where an older Black woman was pouring out coffee and took a cup for herself, thanking the woman and thinking how odd it was to be doing something so plain on a morning this momentous. Was Child drinking coffee? Maybe stealing a few more minutes in bed with Sorola. Would he piss and shit and yawn before proving his faithful worth as their savior?

Her nerves jangled. She longed for the culmination of their project. She wondered at what form the miracle would take place. She hoped the soldiers would be burned away by a brilliant flash of light as Child rode out to meet them. More likely they would run, driven into the wilderness by the face of God propelled by Child's sacrificial leap. Yet even imagining the victory, questions still nagged at her about what came next. The army outside was a fraction of

the real forces. The Triumphant guards on the wall walk still looked outward, vigilant even as the celebration raged.

After Child returned victorious, she wanted the celebration to continue forever. She wanted this, what was right in front of her, to remain throughout the coming days as she imagined Heaven might be like, surrounded by her loved ones enjoying each other and standing, arms outstretched in the presence of God like children reaching for something off a high shelf. That feeling of finding and continuing to seek, to know that God was with her and that there was still more of God to discover.

She missed Kaleel. At the risk of blaming God and missing out on paradise, she failed to understand the fairness of why her mentor had been left out of the new Jerusalem. Why he had to die by filthy hands, alone in a parking lot in a strange city after suffering the humiliation of imprisonment. Why the tip of the spear had been broken off before her family could land the final blow.

Maybe she should be thankful that she was here to bear witness. Yes. Kaleel had known that violence was coming. He had seemed content to follow the plan as he understood it, so why shouldn't she? She had found continued purpose in serving God and serving Child. If she wasn't meant to hear the voice for herself, maybe it was enough to bring about the next world by pulling it over the face of the old one to smother it until all the ugliness and pain had suffocated.

As if summoned by her thoughts, Child appeared with Sorola at the edge of the crowd. The assembled gave a deafening cheer, and he nodded beatifically, head and shoulders lifted above everyone else. As the crowd enveloped them, Janthy moved in the opposite direction,

climbing the steps to the top of the stone wall where she could look out on the morning. The sunrise still hadn't pierced the horizon, but she knew that out there in the darkness, the enemy was sleeping the sleep of the unknowing damned. Soon, they'd be obliterated. Or maybe shamed into mass conversion, seeing the light and bringing new mouths to feed inside the walls. Janthy knew which she hoped for.

Berenice climbed the steps to join Janthy, her body bare and shivering.

"Aren't you cold?" Janthy said.

"I think it's from excitement. I've been dancing all night," Berenice beamed.

Janthy removed her weapon and propped it against the railing. She took off her coat and gave it to Berenice, who wrapped it around her before hugging Janthy tight as a blood pressure cuff.

Wesley took his place beside them both, recognizing that the central committee had found an ad hoc place of honor.

"Where did you find coffee?" he asked.

"Isn't every little thing momentous?" Berenice said, her voice warbling as she teared up.

The crowd slithered into place beneath them, completely obscuring the road. Hundreds had arrived after Janthy and Wesley, filling the road and propelling Child and Sorola forward toward the gate. A few of them climbed up the wall to straddle it. Some continued to play music, leaving their fires behind and shout-singing.

Children ran about, playing a chasing game as the parents set their gazes on Child's every movement. Colt trailed behind Child and Sorola through the reluctantly parting crowd, lugging a duffel bag, long gun slung on his shoulder. As the two of them ascended atop the guard shack roof, Child took the gun from Colt, who climbed the stone steps, out of breath, to stand by Berenice.

When Child and Sorola stood on the guard shack roof, the crowd silenced itself, ready to receive. Child took an enormous breath in, and the crowd did the same. Janthy pictured the exhalation becoming a hurricane that blew their enemies away.

"My blood!" Child began. "I have not spoken for three days, so that God could prepare me for the mighty task I undertake today. And now that I have finally found my voice, I recognize that there is no need to speak, for there is no need to waste another second with the world unclean. He hoisted the gun above his head, and Janthy pictured Moses with his staff on the hill ensuring victory against the Amalekites. The collected citizens of the new Jerusalem erupted in happy, bloodthirsty cheers.

How much they'd sacrificed to be here.

"When Joshua led battled the Amorite kings, God sent giant hailstones to kill his enemies. Let's see if God does that again this morning or chooses to get creative," he said, the crowd cheering in happy response.

Child turned to Sorola, embraced them, and whispered something in their ear. They smiled broadly and held their hand against his cheek. Child climbed up onto the parapet, crossing over toward Wesley, whose hand he clasped enthusiastically.

"Calm the storms that drench my eyes, and dry the streams still flowing," he said, and Wesley nearly gasped at the reception of this wisdom.

"You must blaze a trail," Child told Berenice, tucked away inside Janthy's coat. "Though the wild blue yonder of God's amazing grace." The young woman who had first called for the destruction of the Prosperian church openly wept.

To Colt, he said, "To live your life, you've got to lose it. And each loser get a crown." Colt bowed his head with awkward formality before Child pulled him into an embrace.

When he got to Janthy, he held her close before kissing her. She allowed herself in that moment to relinquish all fear and doubt, to love the man in front of her who promised to deliver them all. To trust that his task was righteous and that he would return home to them against all earthly logic. There was not a sorrowful face below her.

"Consume the idols in your way, Janthy."

She feared spoiling some theatrical rhythm to his departure, but she still leaned into him and asked against his cheek what the voice of God sounded like. She needed to know.

"You will hear it soon enough," he said, before climbing down the steps and calling for the gate to be opened.

"This is just how Kaleel was when they took him," Colt said.

They brought Child his golf cart, and he settled into it. Janthy watched him for any sense of fear or doubt, mystified by how calm he seemed, how much work he must have done to train

his body to reject the heart-racing impulse, the shallow heaves of breath that doomed any small animal in panic. Child looked as though his name had just been called for a prize. People swarmed the cart until Child pleasantly shooed them away, complaining that he couldn't get out the gate with all of them crowding him.

They opened the gate.

Cheers drowned the noise of the gears reluctantly turning. As Child drove forward, Janthy was joined on the wall walk by more believers, all clamoring to get a view. Others stayed near the opened gate. The sight of it, after long months of remaining closed, was strange and hopeful. It was in witnessing it coming free from its sleeve that Janthy decided that her doubt was born only from being disconnected from the rest of the world. She mourned for Kaleel, and for Ruby Shawl, and for all of her friends, even those she'd never met, who had been killed in apathetic daylight well within the letter of the law. She decided that surely that must be enough. God wouldn't dare take one more from her.

Across the field, a small squadron had assembled, visible from the wall walk in their bulky camo and wobbly helmets.

"They knew," Janthy said, mostly to herself, but Sorola heard her.

"He's going to save us all," they said in response, squeezing Janthy's shoulders and kissing her on the cheek.

Child was already deeper into the southern killing field than any of them had dared to go since the siege had begun. He drove steadily and straight, a consistent speed toward his destiny.

"The soldiers are at the ready. They knew he was riding out this morning before we opened the gate."

"What does that mean?" Wesley asked. The crowd had gone largely silent, everyone holding their breath in anticipation of the miracle.

"That they will be the first to go," Sorola said.

The squadron began marching forward behind two Hummers that look like children's toys from the city. Child continued toward them.

"Sorola's right," Berenice said. "They either die in their tents or on that field."

Child was almost to them now. The Hummers still driving slowly to stick with the men and women on foot.

"And it is a beautiful morning," Berenice continued.

Child was so close that the miracle could happen at any moment.

In El Paso, when Kaleel's prophecy had not come to pass, he'd said it was his great sorrow to wake up and see the world still there.

Kaleel was an unlikely prophet, which is the only kind. He was short, and everything about him seemed to be rounded off as if he'd been sanded down to ensure there were zero rough edges. He had docile eyes and his smile erupted out of joyous instinct whenever he saw anyone, friend or stranger. There was nothing of that man that Janthy could see in Child except for the

maddening simplicity of their faith. Where she had a jumble of wires crossed in her soul, Kaleel and Child both carved a direct path from God's word to action. God wants something, so be it.

That morning, standing in front of a bewildered crowd on a makeshift stage in a Wal-Mart parking lot, Kaleel had said, "I cannot tell you why what we believed would happen didn't happen. I can only tell you that God doesn't lie. God speaks in the rarity of existence and delivers us its treasures."

It was then that a man in a red ballcap threw a Dr. Pepper can filled with cement that dropped Kaleel to the ground. It was Janthy who cradled him in her arms and used her own shirt as a bloodsop.

But it was Child who caught the man in the ballcap by the wrist, wrenching it back until the bone threatened to break. The man cried out in hollow agony but was drowned out by a bombardment of smoke cannisters launched into the center of the crowd drawing a horrific scramble of screaming bodies. Where they were sparse before, lining the periphery, the Peacekeepers had become a blockade at the back of the crowd, hitting everyone who tried to cross their line with fat black clubs and shouting with orgasmic zeal. Their riot gear made them look like duplicates, the faceless sameness adding its own layer of terror to the Eternal Triumph faithful trying to run from the chemical smoke seeping through the sea of loved ones.

Like farmers sowing wheat in the heat of spring, the Peacekeepers had continued to swing their clubs against the oncoming sea of Triumphant. One of them had hit Child of Aaron squarely in the arm, and the man in the ballcap had broken free, ducking underneath the onslaught, and scrambling away. Child had shoved the Peacekeeper, sending him soaring into

two others before crumpling to the ground in a heap. Another Peacekeeper on the other side of Child had raised his club to strike, but Sorola had punched him in the armpit, shouting "Amen! Amen! Amen!" with such animal intensity that when the Peacekeeper's weapon clattered to the asphalt, several others backed away enough to let them escape.

On the wall walk of Braintree, overlooking a field beset by the moody autumn chill, Sorola shouted "Amen! Amen! Amen!" once again. It startled Janthy, and the rest of the crowd cheered it back. The distinct feeling of peaceful triumph washed over her, and an unnaturally large ray of sunshine stole free from the clouds. Someone shouted. The break in the clouds grew with Child only moments away from the guns of the enemy. It spread out over the entire field, painting Child in pale relief, his colors a blinding reflection of the light.

"Amen! Amen! Amen!" they all shouted, and Janthy released all fear, all doubt, all despair. She embraced the hope of the promised future.

The Hummers turned outward and stopped, allowing the soldiers on foot to pass, their guns raised and Child driving straight for them.

They gunned him down, some diving for cover when the golf cart wrenched violently to the right as Child body slumped against the steering wheel with his foot still lodged against the gas pedal. It swerved in a broad circle until his body fell out, and the soldiers descended on it with their weapons, wasting round after round into his body, making a grand game out of killing him.

‡

Epilogue

"Elusive Utopia: The Breaking of Braintree and Enjoli Vargas's Perfect World"

By Ryan Walters, Vanity Fair

[Note: You're enjoying a free excerpt of a feature article in a future edition of Vanity Fair.]

ASPEN GROVE, NORTHERN RANGE—2050 The tortuous road that leads to Aspen Grove cuts through overgrown steppe land, surprisingly exposed for what lies at the end of it. The air is thick with mockingbird calls and the buzzing thrums of dragonflies, green and shimmering in the sunshine. It's not fair to say that nature has returned here because it's been decades since flora and fauna found their way back into all the spaces we left behind. It's more accurate to say that people have come back. This place, with its abundance, was always there waiting for us, and I'm told these little pockets exist all over the country.

Aspen Grove isn't on any maps, which is why Enjoli Vargas agreed to speak with me. She's smaller in person than I imagined, her happy eyes tired and smile placid. She greets me as soon as I turn into her driveway, dressed in a handsome gray tunic and complaining that she didn't get a chance to do her hair or makeup. She needn't worry. She radiates with health and beauty. Her home is a modest, purpose-built split-level that seems lonely in its way, as though it got lost from the suburban herd and gave up trying to find them again. Despite its isolation, the

house is alive with people doing yoga, endlessly cooking, crocheting blankets, and sharpening knives.

Vargas serves me mint tea with honey and begs me twice to take the comfiest chair in the house. It's in this living room, and their kitchen, and their garden, that they're creating the blueprint for revolution.

A year ago, a group of Prosperian thugs murdered Eternal Triumph founder Kaleel Fonseca outside the Envision Yourself Attaining Great Wealth Correctional Facility. Since then, Vargas lost her grandmother, her faith, and gained a front row seat to the inner workings of the Eternal Triumph apocalypse sex cult as they violently overtook the Colorado town of Braintree. Enjoli was the last person that Child of Aaron hugged before riding his golf cart to his death at the hands of government-sanctioned militias.

"He had gravity," Vargas tells me. "When he looked at you, you felt God's eyes on you."

After Child's death, and the military's subsequent embarrassment known as Nash's Blind Charge the following morning, Eternal Triumph held the town until the day after Christmas, following a successful sabotage campaign and a frontal assault led by Colonel Laverne Greenwood. When the smoke cleared, hundreds were dead, and the three leaders of Eternal Triumph were in custody. No one will ever forget ringing in the new year with streamed footage of Wesley Shirkus, Janthy Mitra, and David "Colt" Falcon's hours-long execution in Braintree's market square, but Enjoli struggles to say they're "martyrs."

"I guess I don't know what else to call them," she admits, adopting a long-off look as though calculating infinity. "There are some people who think that seeing what was done to them

was the thing that flipped the switch for a majority to rise up, and in that way, they claim that their torture was somehow necessary, but that's bullshit. I hate that they're gone because out of anyone else, they would have gotten what we're doing here."

Vargas's husband Cutwolf De Las Casas agrees. He's a reformed cultist who joined Eternal Triumph in its earliest years. De Las Casas, a handsome half-Vietnamese, half-German trans man, tackles everything in life like a matador eager for the gate to open. He and Vargas make a striking pair of foils. The debonair pirate and the rose that could bloom in a cave. They spend their days listening to vintage MP3s of a Japanese pop jazz guitarist Masayoshi Takanaka and debating the best way to bring their vision to the world, or whether it's right to bring it at all.

"Kaleel used to say, 'Why water the stones when the plants are so thirsty?' and that always resonated," De Las Casas explains, but when I ask if that means it's pointless to spread their gospel because the country's mostly stones, De Las Casas demurs, explaining with his rugged vibrato that "roots are growing in all sorts of weird soil these days."

Vargas and De Las Casas hold hands like high school sweethearts as they stroll with me around their garden, big enough to feed the dozen who call Aspen Grove home. "These are my babies," Vargas coos at me as we check on a gorgeous little apiary that's clearly her pride and joy. For what it's worth, the bees seem happy. Goats roam behind the house, a brown-eyed convert strums a haggard guitar, and the call goes out for lunchtime. When I'm able to ask all the converts over a homegrown beet salad with honey-glazed chicken (thanks again, bees) what their revolution is, all of them offer some version of "This is it." What they tell me doesn't sound crazy, not seated in the warm sun eating good food and listening to De Las Casas tell the story of

how he and Vargas met. The group has a familiar rhythm with the tale, and I find myself laughing at all the right places.

"So, there we were, right?" De Las Casas winds up. "Peacekeeper boots on our necks, and Enoli suaves this thick-necked bumpkin with how she used to be in commercials with Oscar Johns, and she did, she did. That's the crazy thing. Yes. But we're having our little socialist fan club meeting, and this one over her is telling *the Peacekeeper* that if he just worked harder, he could gain God's love."

The laughter sounds good. I assume it's also a part of their revolution.

Despite the violence and terror Vargas experienced over the past year, she says the only thing she regrets is not being able to get her cousin Cecilia and her baby nephew Filip out, a dark frustration crowning her brow as she describes how Cecilia assaulted her when she tried to get them to leave the city, tragically locked in the throes of the death cult.

"The future will probably slander us," Vargas jokes, enjoying the cool of the living room again after showing me the grounds. They've adorned the mantel with tin toys, hand-dipped candles, and a small hacksaw in a shadow box. She draws my attention to it, explaining that it's her proudest possession. It doesn't look like any other I've seen before. Its handle is pockmarked with divots, its metal blade bumpy and inexpertly hammered at the anvil. It can't be from a store. When I ask Vargas who gave it to her, she says, "I made it myself."

[You have reached the limit on this free excerpt. Please log in to continue.]



Vita

Scott Michael Beggs is a writer, editor, and film critic. After earning his B.A. in political science and philosophy from Baylor University in 2006, he worked in television and film production for Marvel Studios, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, and MTV Networks. He spent ten years as the managing editor for *Film School Rejects*, helping to grow and professionalize the movie blog into one of the top online film magazines. Since stepping down in 2015, his freelance work is featured in *Vanity Fair*, *Mental Floss*, *Nerdist*, *IndieWire*, */film*, and other major publications. His pop culture writing is also included in the anthologies, *The Curious Movie Buff*, *The Curious Viewer*, and *The Curious Reader*.

His scholarly work includes the essay "Could Possibility Exist for the Naturalist?" published in the Notre Dame Undergraduate Humanities Journal, and he acted as a researcher for the textbook *Middle East Patterns: Places, People, and Politics* by Colbert C. Held. An accomplished short story writer, Scott's speculative fiction has been published (and narrated as audio) by *PseudoPod*, *MetaStellar*, *All Worlds Wayfarer*, *MYTHIC Magazine*, *Dark Moon Digest*, and more. Scott serves as a judge for NYC Midnight short story and screenplay competitions and is a two-time Hugo Award nominee as a first reader for the speculative fiction magazine *Strange Horizons*.

Contact: scottmbeggs@gmail.com