

Pazuzu - Manifestation

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Preface

Outrage as the victim of extortion or the lack of amphetamine caused the priest's fat hands to quiver. The UnChosen caste called the drug "Ape," the street name for the stuff that typically turned users into anxious, howling gorillas. But that would never happen to a priest, the upper echelon of the Chosen caste. All the pomp and dignity granted to Kanen's position guarded against that base lunacy. The unquiet phases of the chemically grown monkey would not drive Josiah Kanen into madness. The Church promoted the middle-aged priest to the rank of captain because of his genetically endowed discipline. Captain Josiah Kanen was born a Chosen and granted authority over the Mortal God

The responsibility of the rank crushed him under the stones of responsibility. The pressure the Church applied to Captain Kanen drove him to use the damned drug in the first place. The problem with Ape was not the use of the drug, but the lack of using any once addicted. Sobriety-sharpened nails pressed into his chest and head. Being clean took away the magic of knowing exactly what to do in any situation. Sobriety compromised Kanen's ability to control his god and the forsaken UnChosen living his squalid quarter by the Wall.

Reverend Arnett, who Kanen assigned as custodian of the St. Erasmus parish and reported directly to the captain, had just been murdered in its church, an unheard-of crime unheard within the walled city-state of Capital, the Promised Land. The Wall protected the city-state from the ravages of heathen terrorists. No one passed through the Wall without approval of the Church or its military. The Chosen exercised exclusive entrance to Capital

The UnChosen permitted to stay behind the Wall lived in parishes like St. Erasmus, a suitable place for spineless degenerates. Still, the status of the murdered victim raised the severity of the crime to an act of terrorism. The Church and the military's censors debated if news of the crime should be made public, but could not come to a decision.

The presence of pagan tablets on the altar at St. Erasmus will never be reported to the public. The Church immediately confiscated and destroyed the sacrilegious objects. Whatever the dead Reverend Arnett planned to do with them better left unknown. The blasphemous controversy went to death with him. Reverend Arnett brought the awful fate upon himself.

In the midst of Kanen's dealing with the lack of Ape, and the murder of a priest too curious with an archaic and forbidden religion, the phone rang. Reverend Benedict Ishkott called, a non-commissioned asshole from the city-state of Gomorrah.

"Captain, Kanen," addressed Reverend Ishkott with the aggravated squall of an addict. "I know you don't know me from Adam, but you have something I want."

"A demotion?" threatened Captain Kanen. "Why, in the name of the Mortal God, do you dare talk to me with lack of respect?"

The two priests shared their addiction to Ape, with a difference. Ape caused Reverend Ishkott to lose respect for superior officers, sending him out-of-the-away to Gomorrah.

"Listen, I know you're related to Judah Bathierre, the crime-lord in this city-state," Ishkott said, uncovering his hand.

Hopefully, Ishkott didn't know how complicated the relationship between Captain Kanen and Judah Bathierre became. The crime-lord used the captain as his connection to the Church, although Judah's patience had increasingly grown thin with Josiah, resulting in Ape becoming difficult to find and impossible to obtain.

"That is a sad coincidence," Kanen claimed.

"I know you keep the military away from Gomorrah," Ishkott stated. "And I know Bathierre is your Ape connection."

"I know you are a dead man, Ishkott!" Kanen shouted over the phone. "How dare you call me with your crazy accusations!"

"Listen!" Ishkott shouted back. "Military patrols will be coming to the city-state whether you like it or not! Ilu Drystani is in these parts of the Shur. Colonel Taclale himself is coming here!"

Colonel Taclale's trip to Gomorrah presented a bigger problem. Captain Kanen reported to the colonel, as would Ishkott when the bishop arrived at Gomorrah. Ishkott, the tattling Ape, may tell their superior officer anything.

“What do want?” Kanen capitulated.

“An assignment away from Gomorrah, and heathens,” Ishkott bartered. “This city-state will be the next to fall to the terrorists. Drystani is here!”

“Let me think,” Kanen replied.

The situation seemed to work itself out. A custodian position suddenly opened at St. Erasmus and a priest materialized who would shut his mouth if invited into Capital. Josiah didn’t think ahead when he offered the position to Ishkott, as the wretched blackmailer might one day try to twist Josiah’s arm again. Yet the possibility failed to stop Josiah from asking if Reverend Ishkott would bring Ape into Capital.

“No, of course not,” declined Ishkott. Whether he brought drugs to his promotion sounded like a way for his supervisor to trap him. Captain Kanen could not be trusted with the truth.

“That’s unfortunate,” answered Kanen before hanging up. He meant what he said. Josiah looked forward to securing another batch of Ape for himself.

1 The Wilderness

His own shoulders bore down on him with a foreign weight he wanted to throw off. The extra fleshy padding around his waist only added to the burden. The gain had crept upon the man stealthy over many years, while age brought denial and moments of complacent acceptance. Growing fatter seemed to be a natural process of age, as weight introduced itself like a hobo trespassing the rails, a sneaky hanger-on who wouldn't be shaken off easily. His tired posture and swollen, blistered gut made him a forlorn caricature. His arms swung like pendulums knocked from their paths. The broiled devil lumbered across a desolate, alien world - the only living thing exiled to hell. Without warning, he grew desperately thirsty.

“You’ve certainly wandered enough.”

The voice spoke clearly into his left ear. It sounded like his own, but of better clarity, absent of the muffled hesitation he vainly struggled to overcome in ordinary conversation. This voice sounded rehearsed and confident, far from his own verbal fumbling. His voice, like a rapidly recorded, nasal monologue on an answering machine, was an amputation hopelessly separated from his self-conception, whatever that could be now. The better voice resonated as if echoing in an empty room. Just as abruptly, the voice vanished and a second of stillness filled the void. Leaded footfalls on packed dirt and a muffled ringing in his head dispelled the silence, much like listening to a radio station when the announcer misses his timing until a burst of sound suddenly jolts the dead air. Yet the voice did not have the static of a radio. The voice, and his plodding across the dry waste, were exclusive and opposite each other.

He did not bother to look around, because the sporadic company of the voice remained his only companion. It had joined him earlier that day, or it may have been the day before. Time passed as fleeting as the voice. The sun traveled only a quarter of its path through the sky, yet the day already became unbearably hot and bright, and the previous night had been sweltering. He stumbled through the darkness, unsure of when one day ended and the next began, as the endless expanse of dirt and suspended days were disorienting. He needed to continue walking, to find his way, or die. The desert never looked this large from the roads. He would have easily spotted the scant landmarks if driving, but he was on foot; “leather locomotion” he heard it called some time long ago. Regardless,

he thought he could recover his bearings, as his sense of direction had always been amazing, or so he believed.

Although he could not recall why he was in the middle of nowhere, he suspected a he decided upon a destination when he began the dangerous trek. The “when” was now long ago, hidden beneath multiple hours and unending sand dunes. If he initially had any water, it was now gone. He did not know what supplies he brought on the journey, as he didn’t even have a pack or a shirt. All he apparently owned were the clothes he wore: a pair of scuffed laced boots and crusted khaki pants with empty pockets.

“Hey, wouldn’t a tall glass of cool water be great?”

The voice, barely noticeable among the hot winds, teased like some subtle siren. Whirlpools transformed into sandstorms. The pleasant thought of a gulp of water lit in his mind, but he deliberately quashed it. There was none to be found here, and he would not torture himself. Entertaining pleasant fantasies remained more conducive to his survival.

He dreamed of finding that siren and lying down with her. She would take this poor, baked fiend to her dune, her bare skin as cool as the ocean where she was birthed. Eyes green as kelp competed flirtatiously for admiration, against lips glistening with the sheen of pearls. Rescued and transformed, they would soon tire of the colorless desert and travel back to her sea. He would never be thirsty again, never care to recall how or why he had discovered himself alone in the desert. Finding the bliss of love and the sea would be the answer, and she would be the reason for his journey.

Stumbling on his feet was just a pretense. He was already lost and dead, since dehydration had set in a long time ago. Heat exhaustion was near, and the voice called insistently.

“Benedict,” it called him. This time the voice shut out every thought. “Ben.”

Ben jerked leftward so violently, he twisted completely around, like a marionette positioned into a clumsy pirouette by an amateur puppeteer. The momentum pulled Ben off his feet. He fell forward as if his strings were cut. His shoulders remained hunched as he lay face down. With a huff and small cloud of dust, Ben flipped himself over. He saw the orange cauldron of the sun over his toes. He stopped sweating, which wasn’t a good sign, but he didn’t have the will to worry.

The dirt caking his arms, chest, and back, dried and flaked off with each heavy step. His torso and arms looked like an old table dusted by careless brush strokes. Overall, Ben was red with angry pustules. He could feel his insides baking. His already bulging belly would continue to bloat until the skin burst and juices bubbled out. The very last of his fluids would evaporate before dripping to the ground.

That was not the image of death he desired. He would not die, sizzling in his own fluids. Instead, he'd dry up and blow away, and become part of the dust, red dust. His name would be forgotten, if ever known. He recalled it now, because the voice had reminded him. His name was Ben. He closed his eyes and pictured rippling waves drifting upward from his body. He was stuck to the ground, as if a part of it. This land may also be called Ben; he was merely a piece of desert, like the dust stirred by his steps. The particles would eventually settle back down to rejoin the suffering man, misplaced specks relocated from one piece of the desert to another, but still part of the whole.

His breath was the hot breeze. He exhaled a gust, singeing the inside of his gaped mouth. Ben opened his eyes. The sun now hung directly overhead, like a white whirlpool in a smooth blue ocean. A mighty hand polished away the waves and ripples; not God's hand, though. The Mortal God was gone. The voice told him, although the man suspected.

"Ben, you're wasting the day with daydreaming."

Ben realized he was disoriented and hallucinating. The voice was clearly not his own, but disguised itself to imitate an internal conversation, to creep up on him unawares. Still, Ben responded to the voice's reproach and rolled to his right. He grunted with the exertion, and then felt as if he choked.

Ben laid still and listened to the ringing in the back of his head. The sound was high pitched and constant, but did not demand attention. He heard his own thoughts and shallow breaths. The ringing reminded him that he was awake and painfully alive. With his ear pressed against the ground, Ben also thought he heard far off rumbling, not unlike an ocean wave slowly rolling over the shore, then retreating. The rumble seemed to come from a road. Ben continued listening, but the familiar sound of civilization again evaded him. After a few minutes, the ringing in his head receded. Ben avoided focusing on it entirely, unlike the voice when it decided to speak, demanding to be heard.

Ben spent an hour feebly pulling his knees to his chest. He lay in a fetal position for a few more minutes, as flashes of the sea above taunted him. Fear of the voice scolding him for such fanciful ideas brought him back to the reality that he lay in the desert, beneath an afternoon sun. He should put a little more effort into his survival. Ben started panting slowly, with hard breaths crescendoing and climaxing as he pushed himself to his knees. He hoped the difficult part passed, but he was disappointed. All the exertion became harder, rather than easier. Standing nearly took the last of his strength.

Ben dropped back to his hands and knees. He needed leverage to lift his leg from the ground. Ben planted a palm flatly in the dirt as he went into a runner's three-point stance, as if waiting for the starting gun to fire. After a few minutes of posing motionless, Ben considered standing. Apparently the starter and the other runners had gone home, the race called due to the extreme weather. The temperature was much too hot to compete; Ben agreed there would be no running today.

He raised his other leg shakily and pushed himself backwards. Ben dug shallow furrows with the toes of his boots as he attempted to stand. He grunted and stood up, with his feet spread wide. His head swam and he felt nauseous; if he had any gorge, it would have bubbled into his throat. He wobbled uncontrollably, but at least he stood on his feet. Where this reserve of energy came from, seemed unfathomable. A fluke of gravity held him upright, much like setting an egg on its end during the vernal equinox. The fossil of this creature wouldn't be found here in the Shur desert, unless he fell back to the ground or dried up alone. Ben determined he would be the last thing to cross this particular piece of desolation, until the end of time. He decided he'd rather have his bones found in a cool lake or in an air-conditioned car. He leaned forward and let momentum carry him, as each step caught him from falling on his face again.

Now where was that road? Behind him lay the temporary path carved by his shuffling, although the wind began sandblasting it away. A compass point was impossible to find, with the sun directly overhead. Chances were he had confused his direction a long time ago, even after noting the sun always rose in the east. He did not recall where or even when he became lost. The belief that he possessed an acute internal sense of direction could have been merely delusional thinking. His misconception was a perfectly rational diagnosis, given he now heard voices, saw seas in the sky, and held generally grandiose ideas about himself.

“Rationalization and losing one’s mind probably shouldn’t be exercised simultaneously,” Ben thought, and then laughed aloud. The chuckle started as coughing, and then cracked his harsh voice with a noise he had not made since the age of thirteen. Ben now became delirious, as the sound made him laugh harder. He stumbled and nearly fell, but his feet continued to swing forward and faster now. Wherever he was going, he planned to get there quickly.

He veered to his left, as that leg became heavier than the right. It dropped and dragged. His right foot crossed his left, as if stepping over the carcass of an animal that stewed in the sun beyond recognition. The sidestepping dance continued another twenty or thirty meters, until Ben grew dimly aware that a black line stretched in front of him. The line reached from horizon to horizon, and an invisible glass wall rose from it. No matter how Ben tried to step unto the line, he leaned to the left. He walked parallel to a road. A road! That’s when the voice became more than a hallucination, hailing him from the direction he forced himself to follow.

“You have certainly wandered around long enough.”

Ben did not raise his face from his discovery. The thin black line magically stretched into a thick ribbon of cracked asphalt, and sand drifted over it in sheets. As he realized that the road lay flat instead of vertical, Ben steered himself onto it. He continued walking to his left, deliberately.

“Now, here we are, and all the worse for wear.” Ben swore the quip was a thought hidden in his head, but the voice said it. Ben snorted, then choked in amusement.

“Who are you?” demanded a nervous new voice. Ben stopped walking. This voice couldn’t be any more real than the first.

The sound of the wind had not deadened when Ben heard the voice ask his identity. There were other noises, too. Labored yells barked from a hoarse throat, and yet another voice sounded from the direction of the distressed shouting.

“Oh man, he’s gonna die too?” This voice sounded shrill and scared.

The only reply came from the hoarse throat. “Help me! No, stay way from me! All of you! Away, heathens! Do you know who I am? Stay away, damn you!”

Ben raised his eyes. Crust nearly glued the lids shut, and now tore away painfully. Only the right eye opened enough to see more than white light and blocked, shadowy shapes. Two men shuffled toward him cautiously, with their hands raised before them. One came from the rear of an old truck, really only a moving assemblage of scrapped parts, haphazardly painted yellow. Scratches scarred the crude brushwork, already by pitted by sand. The mirrors and back window were missing, and the bed of the truck crumpled in toward the cab. The yellow coat of paint looked like it had been added after the apparent accident, because the folds in the metal retained the color thickest and brightest, as if freshly coated. The truck stood parked in the middle of the road, its bald tires molded to the pavement. The engine ticked as it cooled, if that were possible in the daytime heat.

Another man sat in a white Bourdon sedan, a popular car for Church fleets. A couple years passed since that particular model had appeared on the market. It looked dirty, but in good condition. The car sat behind the truck on the shoulder of the road, and the hoarse voice came from inside. The approach of the two men obscured whoever actually issued the warning.

The men looked alike, thin, but not wiry, maybe brothers. They wore coarse denim work shirts and pants. The mismatched boots and cuffed pant legs on one of the men dispelled the impression that they were wearing military uniforms. The one with cuffed pant legs displayed a small bump in the middle of his forehead. Their faces were deeply tanned and unshaven, revealing that work and life outside carved undeserved age into them. The men were accustomed to the heat and glare, as they took no precaution, such as hats, and bared their necks with open collars. The smell of their musky sweat reached Ben before the two unrecognized men.

The shrill voice sounded again. The man from the sedan, the one with the bump on his head, spoke, as his lips curled back over short white nubs of teeth. Wrinkles curved over his nose and below his eyes as he took a closer look at Ben. "There can't even be any blood left in him. You're not doing all right."

"Get him to the car," the other man ordered. Up close, Ben saw that the other man had narrower eyes. His mouth was larger than that of the man with the bump, but his lips were thinner.

Ben staggered toward them as they came closer and he ventured to say

something. Three words crackled like smoldering leaves, “Tall...glass...water.”

“Sure, man” the thin-lipped man replied. “Sure. Yeah.”

Ben fell forward into the pair. Their hands wrapped around his arms. His skin felt scalded where the men touched him. Ben hissed in pain, as he was badly burned. He felt lighter, though, born by these strangers. Ben’s head became a weight he could no longer bear. It lolled, as if tethered by a heavy invisible chain, jerked from side to side by the sadistic puppeteer.

“He’s heavy for being all dried up, huh, Dil?” The shrill sound disappeared from the voice of the man with the bump; he was a better man for its absence.

The man he addressed, the one called Dil, did not reply. The trip to the sedan was short. As they neared the driver’s side, Ben peered through the partially open door, seeing a lap clad in black slacks upon the reclined seat. A pink elbow resting on a rotund gut made Ben feel a little less conscientious of his own, but only a degree. Panting came from within. The hoarse yelling started again as the three men approached.

“Get away, heathens! I’ll command the Mortal God down upon you all!”

A pale man, not much older than Ben, sat sprawled in the sedan. Ben didn’t notice this man’s herald of gray hair. The man’s right hand buried into his left armpit. His other hand gripped the stunted collar of his shirt, pulling it from his neck. The outburst caused him to gasp and wince in pain.

The man with the bump squeezed Ben’s arm emphatically.

“He’s having a heart attack. He won’t let us help him - won’t even let us touch him.”

“I’d rather die out here by myself, than let you spiteful heathens cut my throat,” the man spat. The meager spittle fell across his chin in long clear threads, as more pain gripped him.

“Take him around to the other side,” Dil directed, speaking about Ben.

Dil and the one with the bump carried Ben around the front of the car to the passenger side. The windshield was covered in dust, except where wiper fluid

turned it to bluish mud, which the rubber blades pushed aside and left to cake. Through the glass and semi-circles of grime, Ben watched the panting man grow calm. He closed his eyes and rested his head against the window at his side. The immediate threat had dissipated, temporarily.

The sick man was a priest and one of the Chosen; he must have been born of the elite caste, the Mortal God's Chosen. That accounted for his threats and recalcitrance. Only heathens would be out in the wastes of this desert. That is what they believed in Capital and other city-states where the Chosen lived. The priest obviously didn't have a rank, because there wasn't an insignia pinned to the short upright collar of his white shirt. At his age, people expected he would have had some achievement in the Church. The lack of rank, and his presence in the desert, were connected.

"You're him, huh?" the man with the rolled pant cuffs asked Ben, as they walked around to the passenger side. His voice stayed low and conspiratorial.

"Shut up, Hen," Dil warned sharply.

Both the question and command floated past Ben like a conversation drifting on the wind from far away. He didn't respond to either as Dil reached for the door handle. At the sound of the latch, the priest stirred crazily from his brief respite. He made a desperate lunge for the lock, but could not lift himself from his seat. It was too late, anyway, as Dil already swung the door wide open.

The priest scowled. "Damn each of you! I mean it!" He had fallen against the driver's side door and now hung from the open vehicle. Only the seat belt saved him from spilling out entirely.

"Give me back my keys," the priest demanded feebly, as he pawed at his neck. He sucked in short, shallow draws of air through his mouth. An unseen weight immediately pressed each breath back out. The priest's hands returned to his chest.

"Hey, we found him like this. We were going to help, you know," Hen's voice quivered.

The two men eased Ben into the passenger seat, within the blessed shade of the sedan. Night seemed to fall mercifully early. The brown leather upholstery burned like a griddle on Ben's bare injured back, but Ben endured it since being

out of the direct glare of the sun was worth the pain. Dil let Hen lift Ben's feet into the car. The thin-lipped man passed in front of the car, back the way they came.

"You were going to peel the skin from my living skull. Terrorist!" The priest emphasized the last point with another dry spat.

Hen reached over Ben to the dashboard's middle console. Hen's shirt felt like sandpaper where it dragged over Ben's torso. The air conditioning burst forth with a roar. "You know," Hen said, "we're UnChosen. We believe in the Mortal God."

"Liar," the priest abruptly denied. "Don't touch me when I'm dead."

Hen stepped out of the car and straightened up. He grimaced and looked over at the truck. As Hen placed idle hands on his hips, the glare made him squint. Dil rummaged through the crooks of the folded bed. Instead of calling out to Dil, Hen shut his mouth with a clack of his teeth. Dil soon returned and handed Hen a clear plastic bottle of warm water.

"Give it to him," Dil said, before disappearing around the back of the sedan. Hen held the bottle around its bottom and carelessly dumped the contents into Ben's open mouth. The water streamed down his dirt-caked chin and bare chest.

The air from the vents instantly cooled the interior of the car, as well as the space just outside the open doors. The stream reached for Ben like a caress. The siren had finally arrived and her golden hair floated about her face as if underwater. Her smile, gleaming as white as the sun above, was the only thing he saw clearly beneath her hovering yellow tresses. The siren's hands raised goose flesh as she stroked his face and shoulders; her touch was the only sensation that did not burn. She straddled Ben's lap and pressed her cool, bare breasts against him. The feel of her skin made him forget his pain. He slowly surrendered to his exhaustion and would soon follow her into secret fathoms. Her hair drifted into his face as she leaned forward, smiling through slightly parted, shining lips. When she kissed his open mouth, cold air flowed into him, and the cool caress filled his lungs with frost, which was unbearable.

Ben choked and the water Hen gave him sprayed against the dash. It ran down in little rivulets from the interior of the slanted windshield and evaporated before any of it pooled. Hen fumbled.

“Just a little. You can have more, just not so fast.”

The coughing and sputtering continued a few seconds more, but Ben didn't move. Exhaustion planted Ben in his seat, as firmly as the priest had sunken into his. Ben drank in his siren a little at a time, lest she drowned him. Hen gave him a sip of the water, carefully this time. When the scorched stranger looked like he could tolerate the life-saving liquid, Hen gave him several more gulps.

The priest looked away, as he softly spoke. “I condemn you ...” He grew rigid and his mouth fell open. The sound of the air conditioner covered whatever the priest said next, if any intelligible comment had followed. The priest added a long and low “...oooooooo...” trailed by a longer, rattling exhalation.

“I think he's dead,” Hen guessed. His voice quivered again. “We didn't kill him. Right?”

Ben did not hear him. The siren drifted away. The thirst, only slightly quenched, became worse. Hen's rationing of the water taunted Ben, but he didn't have the strength or presence to do more than suck the tiny portions as they were offered. Ben remained unaware of the dead man next to him.

Suddenly, as the voice returned, all other sounds vanished. “You're filling up again,” it said. “You were empty, just the right place to store something for later use.”

Ben disregarded the cryptic statements. The water was gone, the only important news he cared about.

“You learned some truth today. You're going to remember that later. We need to keep your revelation in mind.” The sound of the air conditioner wavered and then quit abruptly, before roaring back solidly. Within that pause, the voice added another word.

“Transformed.”

“What happened to your clothes?” Hen wondered out loud. He saw Ben would not answer.

“Hey!” Hen exclaimed. “You look about the same size as the priest. He has a suitcase back here.” Hen stretched his neck as he peered into the back seat. Just

as the priest passed on, so did Hen's fear. He sounded eager to scavenge the vehicle.

Ben remained conscious long enough to see Dil return. In his right hand, he carried a small gas canister. The red plastic had faded to pink, especially at the seams. Light passed through the canister, making it appear to glow from within. The black spout looked gnawed. Dil passed something to Hen. The object appeared a small key ring adorned with a charm shaped like an elongated "X." It was actually a cross, a shared emblem of the Chosen and UnChosen faiths. One silver key clearly belonged to the sedan. Ben closed his eyes. A dreamless sleep claimed him completely.

2 Samaritans

“Come on, Hen,” Dil shouted. Peeved impatience was his first display of real emotion since the brothers had spotted the Bourdon at the road’s shoulder. He hoped the car was abandoned. Even more so, he hoped to find something to scavenge, especially fuel. Then he saw the priest slumped in the driver’s seat.

“Get it off the road,” Dil ordered, “and don’t get it stuck or you’ll be digging it outta the sand yourself!”

Dil was the older of the two Cortras brothers, by three years. His younger brother, Hen, endlessly tried to impress Dil. Hen often overstepped his bounds, trying to protect Dil, and the effort was always half-cocked. Hen’s assumption of both older and younger siblings’ roles grew frustrating, as neither were accomplished very well. Hen was too excitable, so Dil remained burdened to stay level headed and stoic. There were moments when he could relax, but strangely enough, only with his little brother. Relaxation consisted of bossing Hen around and generally giving him a hard time. They both loved it, since they were as close as any family either had ever known. They only had each other, since being thrown out of their home as teenage delinquents. That was many years ago, and was truthfully no great loss. Their mother and her rotation of substitute stepfathers didn’t provide a childhood worth mentioning.

The Cortras brothers were taking their chances when they decided to cross the Shur desert into Capital, known as the Cap, by outsiders. They didn’t have enough gas or money to make the trip, but they had to try. The lack of cash didn’t matter, as there wasn’t any place to fill the tank along the way through the empty, colorless waste of the Shur. Dil expected to drive until the fuel was spent, or the old truck overheated and the engine permanently seized.

Hen was more hopeful. He recited the dogma that claimed Capital was where the Mortal God lived with the Chosen: The Promised Land. A quest to the city where the Mortal God made his dwelling had to be a lucky decision. Dil liked it when Hen talked like that, although he’d never let his little brother know it. Religion was a little too emotional for Dil’s taste.

The sad reality was that patrols would probably find them broken down far from their destination, or they would be stopped and harassed. Then they would be

sent back to Gomorrah or be escorted to the encampment outside the Cap and its Wall. Getting past the Wall was an entirely different problem; if the brothers got to the Cap, they had no means or purpose to get inside the city-state. The encampment was probably going to be their final destination.

The trip would take a day. If they started early and drove westward through the night, they'd reach the encampment by sundown. Summer was the wrong season to cross the Shur, since the days stretched too long, and the landscape and everything in it baked slowly. The sands oozed hoarded heat through its pores throughout the night, so there was never a cool respite. As far as Dil was concerned, there wasn't a choice - they needed to leave. Driving as fast as they could with the windows down was the only way they were going to stay in some moderation of comfort. The back window of their truck was missing, anyway. They lost the glass on a rare occasion when Dil had allowed Hen to drive. The broken window occurred during the accident, which was ultimately what drove the the brothers into the desert.

Dil and Hen had just arrived in the city-state of Gomorrah. The Church of the Chosen did not have an interest in the area, as no real skill or resources were present for exploitation, just citizens eking out an existence. The UnChosen were alone to administer to their spiritual needs and police themselves. In the absence of the Church or its appointees, local crime lords assumed the governing, unbidden. The Batheirre family won that mantle in Gomorrah and ran the drug trade. The city-state disintegrated into a haven for amphetamine production and served as a heathen induction outpost. With the frequent exploding labs, which were hidden in garages and crawlspace basements, it was a wonder that the place hadn't burned to the ground. Dil wished it had been consumed by fire long before the brothers had found their way there. In the beginning, a big city-state seemed to be the best place to earn some money, and maybe even save a little. There was still honest work, if only day labor. If a man or boy didn't attract

attention, and remained secreted away from the streets at night, he avoided being shanghaied into the heathen's holy war.

The head of the Batheirre family reveled in delusional righteousness of himself and the countless members of his family. So when his nephew rear-ended the two brothers, and was carried home unconscious and bleeding, Dil and Hen fled. Plenty of witnesses had seen the young man barrel his uncle's convertible into the stalled truck. The young Batheirre was plainly at fault, yet that didn't make

any difference. The witnesses would have run, too, if they had been involved and not just convenient bystanders. But true to their nature, no one in Gomorrah would hesitate to tell a story other than the truth they had witnessed. Dil wouldn't have thought twice about lying, either. The game was self-preservation.

The victim's uncle placed a notice on the Cortras brothers. They had to flee Gomorrah before the word spread. Dil collected debts from strangers and made a few of his own, none of which he had intentions of ever repaying. The lenders knew it, because people had already heard the news. When this desperate man came banging on doors after dark, most people tried to chase him away, which was also self-preservation. So Dil gathered all he could by yelling threats in alleys and smashing back windows. In the end, chasing the man away was easier and safer than just giving him anything that could be spared. In either case, whether he was caught or got away, he'd never be seen again. The faster this marked man vanished, the better.

Meanwhile, Hen drew a curious audience. Stealthy gawkers peeked through slightly parted drapes and cracked doors. Dil had instructed Hen to go over the truck and fix anything that needed repairing, if he could. The brothers would leave before dawn and the vehicle had to be ready. Hen reasoned the truck was fine, because they were able to drive away from the accident. In fact, the accident got the engine started again when Hen had popped the clutch as the truck rolled.

Before his head had jerked forward in the collision and snapped off the rear view mirror, Hen had seen the convertible racing up behind them, too fast and unaware. Hen had recognized the driver and was very much aware of the vehicle's owner. All Hen had time to do at that moment was brace for the impact. The crash was followed by an aftermath filled with threat to life and limb. Hen had decided, by himself, to escape and take Dil with him. Instinct was Hen's counsel.

Hen drove the truck to an empty lot, parting dead bushes and short trees along the way. Despite the sparse cover of skeletal branches and chaparral, every window and doorway facing the lot had an open view. Hen balanced on the crumpled folds of the truck bed. His attempts to stomp the buckles into their old shape were futile. He swept out the cubes of glass with a ragged, short-handled broom he had brought with him. In the setting sun, the glass chunks sparkled like thick drops of water as they clinked to the ground.

Hen had also brought along a couple liters of yellow house paint that he had found discarded on a corner along the way to the lot. An idea struck him when he spotted the paint. Once most of the glass was gone, Hen opened the paint using the long stem of a broken screwdriver with a missing handle. Hen dipped the broom into the paint and brushed it across the molded metal of the truck. The paint went on quickly with thick, broad and textured strokes. The truck was soon covered and enough remaining light allowed Hen to assess his work. Hen sighed in exasperation at his crude camouflage. This was just the kind of thing that made Dil angry. Hen laughed aloud anyways, as he couldn't wait to see his brother's face. Hen added the empty paint cans and broom to the clutter of junk hidden in the dry grass. He backed the truck out of the lot in the same direction it had come from, scratching the wet paint and leaving a trail of pastel twigs and branches.

The brothers met again after midnight, rendezvousing at a train yard where they had once made a temporary home. They had slept in their truck until they found work and money. Compared to the strung-out homeless, camping beneath sheet metal overhangs, the brothers had lived in luxury. Their new plan entailed getting some sleep before starting the trip, but they were restless. They left before dawn with the clothes on their backs and whatever had been left in the truck. Once the city was out of sight and the sun rose behind them, Dil turned the driving over to Hen. Now that they were safe, it was time to trade places. Hen got out and ran around the back of the truck as Dil slid over. Dil was vaguely aware that something was different with the color of the vehicle, but he was too fatigued to figure out even the obvious. He was so tired that he had no choice but to let Hen drive. They weren't going to stop if it could be helped. Dil dozed off after sufficiently scolding his younger brother for grinding gears.

Dil woke suddenly, soaked with sweat. His back felt prickly and his shirt stuck to the vinyl seat. The day was going to be terribly hot. Hen listened to the radio as it softly played, although the rush of the wind through the cab and the thrum of the engine made the broadcast impossible to hear. Dil reached across and turned up the volume. His brother smiled.

"I'm fine. You can sleep some more. Go ahead."

"No," Dil replied.

The desert made radio reception excellent. It was a shame only a couple of

stations were broadcasting. But then, those two stations were the only choices available: one was the Church and the other was military news and propaganda. They were the same entity, the head and the arm. Both would broadcast twenty-four hours a day, usually recordings. The only music that ever played was carefully crafted non-rhythmic chants. Hen listened to the news, because the other station would make his older brother mad. Dil never tolerated anyone preaching to him. A woman's voice announced events from the other night. Her voice sounded artificial, like every other female announcer. All of them could have easily been replaced with a machine that rearranged audio clips. News was just as generic; feed in the copy and get a mechanical voice to match the message.

"... Military patrols from four desert sectors joined to conduct the operation. The missing scout was located. He had been tortured and murdered. Fourteen heathen fighters were killed. Military forces did not suffer casualties. It is suspected that a high-ranking leader in the heathen terrorist network was present, but could not be accounted for. The leader has been tentatively identified as Ilu Drystani. It is assumed he escaped into the desert outside Gomorrah. Patrols have been alerted and a search operation has been ordered. If Drystani was at the raid, it would be the third sighting in the area this month. He is wanted for heresy, murder, and crimes against the Chosen people. There is a substantial, but undisclosed reward for information leading to his arrest or proof of death."

"We could really use that money, huh?" Hen said wistfully. He half-expected the reward would actually be handed to him, if he had anything useful to offer. Dil didn't answer. That was blood money and only a loan. It would be paid back in the flesh of anyone stupid enough to succumb to the temptation. Before Dil had crafted an appropriate put-down, there was a flash far up the road. He instantly fixed his eyes on the spot where he had seen it.

"Slow down," Dil ordered. Hen creased his brow as he took a quick glance at his brother.

"You see something?"

"Yeah, maybe a car. Let's check it out."

Dil turned down the radio as he squinted into the distance. It was definitely a car, and it was off the road. The truck slowed, as did the wind whipping through the

cab.

“There goes our air conditioning,” Hen sighed.

“It wasn’t working anyway,” Dil quipped.

The brothers coasted past a white Bourdon sedan. It looked abandoned, from their vantage point. Hen stopped the truck in the middle of the road. The engine clanked and quit a few seconds after he pulled the keys from the ignition. Hen handed them to Dil out of habit.

“Let’s take a look.” Dil stepped out onto the road.

Hen followed his brother, skipping around the side of the truck as if he were barefoot on the hot pavement. If he stood in one place long enough, the heat would eventually work its way through the soles of his boots. Dil did a double take and his face wrenched with disbelief. “What in the name of the Mortal God have you done to the truck?”

Hen had waited all morning in anticipation of this moment. His brother’s jaw finally dropped. Dil had four fillings and a missing back tooth; Hen was familiar with the landscape. He hooted the laugh he had saved for the occasion. “They haven’t found us, have they?”

“Not yet.”

As the brothers neared the sedan, they spotted a body slumped deeply into the seat on the driver’s side. The door was ajar, so they drew closer cautiously.

“What is it, Dil?” Hen whispered to no one but himself. “You think he’s dead? I think he’s a priest.”

Dil opened the door further to discover it was just as hot inside the car, as outside under the sun. Hen was right. Judging by his clothes, the man was a priest. Dil stooped forward, hovering over the priest’s mouth. A chemical smell wafted from the skin of the unconscious man. Evidence suggested that speed of the narcotic kind had killed him and the drug probably came straight from Gomorrah. Still listening, Dil deftly snatched the keys from the man’s lap. At that moment, the priest resurrected. He screamed and kicked himself upright, tangling himself in the seat belt. Dil yanked his head out of the car. He thought

he heard himself yell in surprise, but that was Hen. Loud humming filled Dil's ear.

"Who?" cried the priest. "Heathens! Get away from me!"

The brothers were paralyzed. The door fell against the girth of the priest, preventing the door from latching shut. The priest continued to scream with his arms around his chest. His heart was succumbing to the drugs.

"What?" Hen finally asked.

Dil looked into the distance, from side to side. His brother repeated the motion. The horizon was far away and empty, confirming that the three men were completely alone.

"You stay with him," Dil pointed at the groaning priest. He had seen this before from previous experience with drug addicts and the clergy. Dil headed back to the truck. "I'm still gonna take the gas."

"What am I going to do?" Hen pleaded.

"Nothing," Dil replied. "He won't let you, even if there was anything you could do."

Hen timidly shuffled toward the dying priest. He felt he should extend some kind of help. They couldn't let the poor man suffer.

"Hey, who are you?"

The priest cursed Hen and howled. Hen raised his arms in surrender and dropped them to his sides with a thump. Friendly introductions were obviously out, but at least he had made the attempt.

Dil was suddenly startled by the red apparition on the opposite side of the road, as he had been careful to guarantee their privacy. The figure looked like a scarecrow sewn together from the skin of some gruesome ripe fruit. Both Dil and this new figure remained staked to their posts. The apparition tottered to its left as the priest began to yell at Hen again. The sound and motion brought Dil back to his senses. As he called out to the stranger, Hen whipped around. He had been trying to calm the priest, but that task was quickly forgotten. Hen may have said

something out loud, but lost that, too. He rushed over to Dil, while the priest continued his tirade.

“I think that’s him,” Hen confided to Dil. “I think that’s Drystani.”

Dil thought about the suspicion for a moment. “How did he get up here?” He considered the thought further. “I don’t think so.”

Dil was still uncertain. The brothers stalked the still figure. Hen continued to talk, but Dil was deep in concentration. He did the majority of his thinking while Hen yammered. He talked mostly to himself, anyway. The constant noise was probably how his little brother vented stress. After awhile, tuning Hen’s gibberish out became as natural as farting. Dil instructed Hen to put the man in the car with the priest.

“Tall...glass...water...” The broken words crackled in the dry throat of the stranger. Dil agreed that the request was reasonable. If this was Drystani, there may be some change of luck to be seized. The man collapsed into the arms of the brothers and they carried him to the sedan. Cooling him down became their top priority. Hen began asking the stranger what both brothers suspected, but Dil put an end to Hen’s questions before they could continue. The whole scenario would have to be carefully thought out. Tipping your hand was unwise, even to a dying priest and living mummy.

Regardless, Dil left Hen to watch over the two as Dil attended to his original plan. He returned briefly to hand Hen a bottle of water from the truck and then purposefully approached the trunk of the sedan. Dil used the priest’s keys to open it and looked inside. There was little to claim, as the emergency road kit was missing most of its essentials. The flare and an empty aerosol can of flat tire repair remained. A beaten plastic gas canister had rolled to its side against the back seat. Dil had to lean all the way into the trunk to retrieve it. He lay nearly flat before he managed to right the can with his fingertips and grasp its handle. It was empty, which is what Dil had expected. He slammed the trunk shut.

A hose or tube wasn’t available to siphon the tank. Dil discovered the long stem of a screwdriver covered in yellow paint, the same new color as the truck. He shook his head and reconsidered the situation. The sedan had to be removed from sight before taking the gas, an impossible scenario in a flat, featureless desert. Dil calculated that if the car was far enough off the road, it might escape

bleary eyes, dulled by hours of traveling. If the car hadn't appeared directly in their path, Dil wouldn't have necessarily noticed it. He went back to the passenger side, toting the gas canister. The priest was dead, for good or ill. Dil couldn't figure out what to do with him, anyway. Having a corpse to work with, instead of a drug-addled priest, was a morbid relief. The situation was less complicated when there were fewer opinions, so the priest would have to stay with the car.

"Hen. Shut that door and give me a hand."

Hen capped the empty plastic bottle from which he had been rationing water to the stranger. Dil held the keys out to him. The cross on the key chain flashed in the light, but there was no need for Dil to worry. It wasn't their car and it wasn't going to be.

"Take it into the desert. Straight out, until you see me waving," Dil instructed.

"We're not taking it? Come on, Dil!" Hen protested and slammed the door. Now that the coolness from the air conditioner was shut inside, Hen realized how much he was enjoying it. His fingers were pleasantly numb. The luxury of cold air wasn't one he had counted on, but now he added it to his list. The muscles in Dil's neck contracted.

"Think about it, Hen! Us, in a dead man's car. He's probably got orders - some place he's gotta be. Patrols will look for him, and this car, if and when he doesn't show."

What Dil said sounded logical. A priest alone out here in the middle of summer didn't make sense, not just to get aped on speed, unless he had an assignment he was reporting to.

Hen nodded. As a concession, he was able to enjoy the air conditioning for a little longer. He pretended to sulk on his walk back to the driver's side. Hen was going to have to touch the priest now, but there would be no protest from either of them. Hen pulled the driver's door open and hunched over the dead man. The smell of aped people was bearable, but the priest had also soiled himself when he died. Hen held his breath while drawing closer to unbuckle the seat belt. The dead man was snared in it as the strap crawled across his body. He looked like an oversized rag doll, draped over a clothesline by its neck to dry. The sight made Hen shiver and the stench replaced the chilled air inside the sedan.

Hen backed out and exhaled. He took another breath and stretched forward, holding his face back. His small chin disappeared into the wrinkles at his neck. He untangled the priest's head from the belt. As the strap snapped back, it snagged Hen's arm and trapped his hand against the priest's forehead. It was slimy and Hen's fingers slipped into the moist tangle of hair. Hen frowned and squinted at the fishy texture, this feel of dead flesh. The interior of the sedan became considerably less appealing by the moment. Less ginger action was required. Hen shoved the priest's head into the car, followed by his upper body. Hen freed his arm at the same time and the buckle whipped back to its bracket with a clank. Hen felt better until he realized that only the first step was complete. He repeated his deep breath, his chest swelling and remaining inflated while he dove into the priest's body.

The front seat was a bench, and inclined downward, due to the car's position on the shoulder of the road. The body of the priest crushed the stranger who was planted on the passenger's side, against the opposite door. The priest slid easily across the seat while the stranger remained unconscious and oblivious to the dead man's weight. When Hen exhaled this time, he did so with a contented exclamation. Hen fished the keys from his pocket but he paused before taking the priest's place behind the wheel. Hen fretted over sitting in something embarrassing and unpleasant. The seat and its back were streaked with a film of oily sweat, unpleasant, but a fact of life in this climate. Hen still paused, watching the splotches shrink now that the air and light touched them.

Dil yelled at his brother to get moving. Dil became impatient, as Hen's delay drove Dil mad. The frustration was evident in his voice, but Hen still took a moment to roll down the door's window before getting in. Once he sat down, he adjusted the vents to point toward his face. This was the sensation he looked forward to, as every muscle slackened and he moaned with a pitch not dissimilar to his earlier shrill. He relished being at the wheel of the chilled Bourdon with leather seats. Getting out of the sun allowed escape from the desert for a few seconds, and he didn't even smell the priest. Hen turned the ignition.

The instrument panel lit up, but he couldn't hear the engine over the fast howl of the air conditioning. Hen did hear the screech of the starter and whipped his hand off the key, then he shifted into drive and stepped heavily on the accelerator. The car lurched forward and rocked over the uneven dirt. Hen took his foot off the gas pedal entirely and let the vehicle roll, but it didn't go far. Hen had to get accustomed to the way the sedan drove. He pulled the steering wheel

hard to the left and tried the accelerator again. A great wall of dust rose as the car left the shoulder and headed into the emptiness. Despite the rough ride, entirely due to where Hen was taking the sedan, he wished they didn't have to abandon it. The Bourdon was the best thing he had ever had, even for a few brief minutes.

Dil performed a crazy dance in the rear-view mirror, waving his arms wildly over his head. Hen slowed as his brother skipped off the road, following Hen before he stopped the car. The walk was longer than what Dil wanted, but it wouldn't be long before he reached the sedan. They left the air running after shutting off the engine. Hen kicked the door open and assessed his passengers. Neither had moved much with the jostling, and neither was in any condition to be disturbed. The backside of the priest was turned toward Hen. Hen made an effort not to look, but he couldn't resist the wallet that had spilled out. The billfold disappeared without inspection into the same pocket from which Hen had pulled the keys. He then reached over the seat and retrieved the suitcase lying in the back. The luggage was heavier than it looked. Hen hauled it to the front of the car and slapped the suitcase on the hood. For a second, he felt a pang of fear for having dented the metal, then remembered it wasn't going to make a differ

ence. The twin latches popped open as Dil reached the back of the sedan.

"What are you doing?" Dil asked, perturbed by the walk. That wasn't really a problem, although further from the road would have been better.

"I'm looking for some paper," Hen answered, as he rummaged, but the case contained only clothing.

"Why?" Dil had to ask.

"I'm gonna write a suicide note. You know, for the priest."

Dil was dumbfounded. Twenty-four hours hadn't passed since his brother had started them on this exodus, painted the truck without talent, and then come up in an idea of a suicide note for a dead priest. The idea couldn't possibly be mistaken for a good one. To make matters worse, Hen started to whistle tunelessly. Dil must stop his little brother before he went any further.

"Damn your brain, Hen! And you're illiterate," Dil glared at him. "Forget that and come over here."

There wasn't any paper, pens, or pencils, anyway, and no drugs either. They'd be on the priest or hidden in the car, if he had not smoked the drugs already. That's not what Hen wanted, since the Cortras brothers had enough everyday anxiety to keep them tossing at night. Hen did find a folded manila envelope and crammed that into his pocket as quickly as the wallet. There would be time later to sort through what he'd poached.

"What goes on in your head? Can you even tell me?" Dil continued with the chiding. He wasn't looking for an answer. "It's best no one ever finds out about this. Let's not make any more problems than we have to."

Dil went down on his knees at the back bumper. He clawed at the dirt with his hands and didn't stop until he had dug a hole beneath the tank large enough for the bottom of the gas canister. It fit perfectly, with the opening of the can just below the bottom of the tank. Dil pulled out the painted screwdriver shank again.

"At least we'll make it to the Cap."

Dil drove the screwdriver into the tank with a blind and awkward thrust. The result was precise enough, as it wasn't the first time he'd done this. He withdrew the shank slowly, with a long groan of metal, and Hen winced at the noise. The complaint was like the pain of a living robot, stabbed in its belly. Gas flowed into the can with a thin, constant stream, until the can filled and fuel spilled over the sides.

"Stop it up, while I put this in the truck." Dil yanked the can out of its ditch and replaced the nozzle. "We need as much as we can get."

"With what?"

"Well, uh..." Dil was lost. "Put your finger in it."

Hen wasn't sure if his brother was joking. Meanwhile, the small hole filled with fuel.

"Go on! You're wasting it!"

Dil walked back to the road and Hen did what he was told. The ground sucked up the spilled gas, now that the source was plugged. The process took several trips before all possible fuel was transferred to the truck, although about a third

as much had been squandered in the dirt. Hen watched on his knees, bent over, with his finger in his version of a dike as Dil walked back and forth between the vehicles. The blast of the air conditioning grew weaker. All the life in Hen's grandest, luxurious moment would soon be gone.

The last time Dil returned, he was empty handed. He placed the can into the truck's rumpled bed and watched the last of the fuel drain into the ground. Both men were soaked in sweat and it was time to move on. In the back of Dil's mind, he hoped to deal with the stranger as he had with the priest. Let the stranger pass away so they could leave him behind, forgotten. However, there were larger matters to think about, and the stranger was still alive. The brothers would take him with them after all, as that would be a big debt to repay. If this was Drystani, the brothers might gain dissuasion to be used against Batheirre. If a patrol stopped them before they reached the Cap, the truth would naturally come out. This was a stranger in the desert who needed help, and they were simply doing the right thing when they picked him up. They weren't heathens, after all.

The brothers pulled the stranger out of the car. He was harder to carry this time, since all his strength had left him and he required the brothers' energy. Just as they started back to the truck, Hen stopped and flung the stranger's arm from his shoulders. Dil was nearly pulled to the ground by the unexpected weight.

"Wait a second." Hen ran back to the driver's side. He reached into the sedan and grabbed the body of the priest with both hands. Propping himself with one foot against the seat, he yanked the priest over to the driver's side and dropped him over the steering wheel. Dil watched in discouraged resignation before turning away. If he could have done so on his own, he would have dragged the stranger much closer to the truck by now. Hen had grabbed the suitcase from the hood when his brother wasn't paying attention. Hen assumed his position again at the right side of the stranger and they got him back to the truck more quickly than they thought possible. Grisly fate had worked out in their favor so far.

They placed the stranger on the passenger side. The brothers went opposite directions around the truck, and Hen entered the driver's side before Dil. Hen straddled the stick shift on the floor and sat far back into the seat. Dil was visibly irritated that he needed to reach between his brother's knees to change gears. The suitcase on Hen's lap didn't miss Dil's notice, but he started the truck and sped down the road before he asked what was going through Hen's head now. Obviously Hen had experienced too much time with nothing to do, other than

corking a gas tank and huffing the fumes.

“You need to get rid of that suitcase, Hen. What are you doing with it, anyway?” Dil’s attention was divided between the suitcase and his driving, but the straight, empty road didn’t demand much. Curiosity compelled him to wish he had special vision to see through the leather lid.

“What’s in it?” Dil asked, immediately after directing Hen to lose the case.

“Nothing, just clothes.”

“Then throw it out the window.”

Hen smiled and nodded toward the stranger. “He’s going to need clothes. That’s why I brought it along.”

“Priest clothes? You’ve lost it,” Dil diagnosed. “How do you think this guy will pull off being a priest?”

“Listen, Dil.” Hen had spent some time thinking out an idea and he insisted on being heard. “He needs clothes, right? And we’re not going to hand him over...”

“Unless we’re stopped,” Dil interjected. “We’re not putting our necks out for him, even if we have a choice.”

“But if we’re not stopped, he’s going to need clothes. Right? Cover,” Hen continued, believing he had just made an indisputable point. “And a priest can get into the Cap.”

Dil was intrigued by Hen’s last statement, as Dil was sure his little brother hadn’t thought about their obstacle with getting past the Wall. The plan may have been ill conceived, but it was amusing. Dil scanned ahead and glanced over his shoulder twice as he watched for patrols and more apparitions. He prompted Hen to continue.

“This guy can wear the clothes we got. They’ll fit him, you’ll see. He can go right up to the Wall and order the guards to let us pass.” Hen raised his brow and spoke more quickly as he finished his thought. “It’s that easy.”

But it wasn’t going to be easy. Priests didn’t just order soldiers around, despite

being like officers in the chain of command. The status was more honorary, and carried little power, especially with priests that didn't have rank.

"It doesn't work that way. Those guys at the Wall aren't local militia. The Cap is the most secure city-state of them all. It's the command center of the Church and military headquarters." Dil felt compelled to paint the complete picture for his brother.

"And look at him." Dil gestured at the sleeping stranger, with a hooked thumb. "He's burned to a crisp. How do you explain that?" Dejection filled Hen as his older brother continued. "Everyone needs a pass or a good reason to get into the Cap. Priests need orders."

Suddenly Hen stabbed his leg straight out to retrieve the wallet and manila envelope he had taken from the dead priest. Hen shuffled the two items as he decided which to thumb through first. Dil went pale.

"That better not be what I think it is. How can you be so stupid?" The last part was more of a statement than a question. "How much money is in that?"

Any hurt Hen felt at Dil's judgment was quickly forgotten when Hen opened the wallet and discovered identification cards without photos, and more importantly, money.

"About two hundred."

"Split it and give me half. Put yours in your pocket."

Hen divvied the cash and let the wallet drop into his lap. The manila envelope remained unfolded, with its top seam split and frayed. It had already been opened properly with something like a letter opener. Hen drew out creased papers and found photocopied orders in triplicate. Dil leaned over to read them with Hen.

"It says he's going to the Cap," Hen relayed. "There's a parish he's supposed to take over, St. Erasmus."

"St. who? How can you rub out a name like that?"

"Dil, don't even kid about things like that. Cuz, you know..."

The conversation ended, as both brothers thought about the challenges Dil had listed. An uncomfortable silence formed like skin on milk until Hen poked a hole in it.

“He could have the orders. We could give him the IDs.”

Dil almost gasped and he felt sick to his stomach. Apparently they could implement Hen’s plan.

“He could get us into the Cap,” Hen added. He had to say it aloud to convince himself of the possibility, although his own guts fluttered with butterflies. The lack of verbal dissent from Dil implied affirmation. There weren’t any other clues in his body language, as he was usually just stiff. The plan might not work. That would mean arrest and permanent detainment, which also indicated something bad could happen in the detention camp. Then there was the stranger to consider, as he may not go along with their idea. There was no reason he should, and trying to talk him into the suicidal scheme may be a waste of time. This man could also be Drystani, although that hadn’t been established yet. But the situation could change again, back to Dil’s hope for cashing in on a favor owed to them.

“Okay,” Dil finally said. “What’s the name on the ID?”

Hen plucked the wallet from his crotch. He verified that the name on the orders matched the IDs and he grinned triumphantly.

“Benedict Ishkott,” Hen stated. He looked at the stranger. “Hello, Ben. I’m Hen and this is my brother Dil. We’re Dil and Hen Cortras.

3 The Assailed Rock

Margot Sebash needed to meet her deadline. Otherwise, she would be forever relegated to the status of an irresponsible hack. None of the dozens of stories she had written made it to military news radio without being heavily edited, and consequently, became tragically delayed by the process. In fact, few of her stories were selected at all. She was lucky she could get by, doing transcription work. But there wasn't a real future in that part-time job, and it certainly wasn't why she had spent so much time and money in school. Every Sunday afternoon, she'd gather her friends, alumni from the university, and they would empty their rations of liquor. During the gatherings, she and her friends always rehashed complaints and whined about the lack of work for reporters, and the lowly commissions for those stories that were approved for broadcast.

Still, their focus remained solely on the climate and nature of reporting, and avoided criticism of the Church itself. That could put an end to a fledgling career. Margot and her friends consoled themselves with the fact that they were still young, only a couple years out of school, and were all having a hard time earning a living in their chosen field. "Misery loves company" was the expression, and they were certainly a miserable bunch.

Capital was different, two or three generations ago. Margot's grandmother had told Margot stories from the past. The Wall was under construction when Margot's grandmother was still a little girl. That period was called the "Great Social Renovation" when families of the Chosen and UnChosen alike were clothed and fed by Church-financed construction projects. The projects were mainly defensive measures, such as the Wall. Heathen terrorists had escalated to conducting suicide bombings and kidnapping highly ranked priests, straight out of the city-state. The terrorist attacks were impossible to stop because of their desperation and daring, so a barrier between them and the uncivilized world was the only solution.

Once the Wall was completed, the Chosen lived within the barricaded city, while most of the UnChosen found their families rooted in the despicable slum outside, which was called the encampment. It was originally a temporary home for migrant construction workers during the "Renovation." The encampment was a flat piece of ground covered with tents, but it grew as more people came to find work. People still arrived, despite the end of construction and reins on Church

money. The encampment became a way point for the destitute and UnChosen pilgrims seeking entrance to Capital. Few were admitted in those past times and none were admitted today, so the camp spread like a weed sending out runners, outside the gates of Capital.

Poverty and squalor cried in stark contrast to the wealth of the city-state. As the encampment expanded, it pushed back from the Wall. The military expressed concern about securing the perimeter, but in reality there were aesthetics to consider. The approach to Capital and its great white wall should convey reverence and awe. Corrugated steel buildings and hastily erected networks of phone and power lines couldn't be allowed to creep up the Wall's pristine face. So the northern section of the encampment came down, while workers bulldozed shacks and installed barbed wire fences.

The space between Capital and the encampment was a restricted zone. Only travelers with reasonable business during daylight were allowed to approach the gates, and even then, they had better keep moving. The Wall had, to date, fulfilled the promise to keep the heathens out. It had become the pride of the military.

The existence of free print was what had particularly interested Margot about her grandmother's stories. Magazines, newspapers, and books could be found in people's homes and for sale in legitimate shops. Writing wasn't constrained by the scrutiny of the military, the functional arm of the Church. Libraries held more than technical manuals, carefully worded textbooks, and archived recordings of sermons and military news. That freedom was gone by the time Margot had learned to read. Printed material that hadn't been scrutinized was deemed potentially subversive and systematically collected through books-for-cash programs, and later, by outright confiscation.

Even bibles and hymnals printed before an exaggerated prehistoric date, had not survived. The clergy became the only authority on the Mortal God. Still, the fact that independent publications ever existed, inspired Margot to write, as the freedom sounded ideal. When the practical side of life conflicted with the naivety of youth, she was already in debt for her higher education and there was no turning back, at least not yet.

Margot dreamed of the possibilities opened by the re-introduction of the written word. For her, they were primarily additional opportunities to sell stories. A

newspaper meant that a level of restriction on information dissemination was lifted; that meant opinion and commentary may even be possible. No more walking a tightrope for the grace of the Church. The trick to writing today required an intuitive understanding of the balance between public perception and Church propaganda.

However, propaganda wasn't the term the Church or military used; everyone else did, but covertly. Her journalism classes defined juggling between fact and Church agenda, as a hard line of discretion. The practice was necessary to avoid unrest and uprising among fringe elements influenced by heathens and other malcontents. Information control was paramount for public safety. The undeniable truth was that the Chosen lived within a wall because of terrible hatred. Free speech wasn't entirely revoked, and people could still express themselves and voice their dissatisfaction. There was an age-old forum for that. The Church called the practice, the Sacrament of Penance. Confession vaccinated against civil disturbance.

The problem with Margot's stories was her exposition beyond unimaginative bullet points. She was too creative, and she used quotes. She never solicited permission, because she wrote for the news, after all. People shouldn't be afraid to have their names read over the air if they told the truth. They should be grateful for the recognition; but the practice often backfired, when it came to the fact-checkers.

Censors lacked tact and were intimidating, even in mundane matters. If the military news called to verify a source, the typical reaction was to deny anything had ever been said. No one wanted his or her name finding its way onto a list. Anonymity reigned as a valued trait among Capital residents.

If UnChosen were quoted, the censors automatically struck those quotes from stories. Their comments were considered uninformed and unreliable. The truth was that the censors were prejudiced, just like everyone else, although Margot never accepted that. Chosen and UnChosen shared the same beliefs. The only things separating the two castes were a matter of birth and a parable about God playing favorites. She, of course, was a Chosen, and her presence in Capital, along with her degree, were testaments to the fact. There were UnChosen living here with college educations, but they were few. Exceptions always existed among millions of people crammed together in any one place.

Story investigation required clearance from military news. Sensitive and high profile stories were assigned to experienced reporters directly from the Church or military. Meeting the deadline for those stories guaranteed a steady stream of work. Ordinary current events were left to the rookies and hacks, who fought over them like scraps thrown to scrawny dogs. Margot hoped to find an angle with recurrent activists petitioning to open the Wall for transit. The story resurfaced every few months, with new proposals by aspiring community leaders.

The Wall was more than a barrier against heathen terrorists. A four-lane road system rested on top and gated ramps rose up to the Wall from myriad points within Capital. Public use of the roads would alleviate traffic congestion dramatically, and the relief was sorely needed. Expediency excused the lack of foresight when the Wall was built, as the planners didn't anticipate that growing families would swell the population.

The Church supported the military's desire to maintain possession. On a few occasions, the Church used the issue to weed out potential threats to their complete sovereignty. When a particularly vocal leader gathered inordinate support, the Church would reveal an embroiling scandal. The issue always convoluted things, as the leader became mired in controversy, and then languished in everlasting obscurity. Truth had never been the goal, because sensational stories paid a lot of bills. Innocence and truth were subjective, depending on how the facts were presented, and the public got their blood.

There was another story Margot was currently covering. She was repulsed, but it was quick work. A priest had been murdered in his parish, but the crime was probably a botched robbery. The military wanted a very specific story for their broadcast, or nothing about the incident would be reported at all. So an outline was prepared for Margot, and all she had to do was flesh out the details.

The parish was within the ghetto of Capital, where most of the UnChosen lived. A fellow reporter, an old friend from school, had tipped her off with a phone call. He claimed he had grown sick of tales of murder and suicide, and didn't want the story. They had been his revenue for the past year and he would likely return to them, but for now he had taken a sabbatical. He needed to clear his head and Margot was grateful, at first.

Margot followed her friend's steps to navigate through the typical bureaucratic

experience. She went to military headquarters, stood in lines, presented credentials, and provided a request form to retrieve the crime summary and photos. After the normal delay, the clerk provided an additional cover sheet, flagging the case for censorship, which was also typical. Instructions were included, stating that the murder was to be linked to heathen sympathizers as an opportunistic attack on an isolated member of the Church. The public's morbid curiosity would be satisfied and patriotism would be infused. Only the preliminary writing remained.

The story was a day old, as the priest had been killed the night before. The summary remained brief, which again was expected from the military. Details were the realm of reporters and censors, and solving the crime was secondary to the military's intentions. If the real perpetrator were caught, he or she would be pinned as a sympathizer in the story. A death sentence would ensue and "justice" served, no matter what the circumstances.

The summary stated that the victim was Reverend Jude Arnett, age forty-two. The priest didn't have a rank, and given the location of the St. Erasmus parish, that wasn't surprising. The summary went on to describe the death as a result of fatal lacerations. The incident had occurred in the church sometime after sunset. The name and address of the person who reported the crime to the military had also been included, which was rare. Calls were usually made anonymously from pay phones, another common tactic used to avoid being added to a list.

Apart from the bullet points on the summary and the additional instructions, the story was skeletal. Margot supposed she could sew it together with embellished and transparent stitches, but habit took hold of her. She'd pay a visit to the caller, Mrs. Tamara Stoughton, and gather a few quotes. St. Erasmus was on the other side of Capital, which meant traffic would be gridlocked in the usual places and thick everywhere else. She would waste the remainder of the morning getting there.

How Margot wished the roads on the Wall were open. It was painful gazing up at them while stuck in a car and going nowhere. Daydreams played through her head, likely the same dreams as other drivers in wedged cars, compacted like bricks. People could speed away on those empty roads above the smog, and trips would take minutes, instead of hours. Rather than looking and dreaming today, she should make use of the time. She could write the draft and even peek at the crime photos, but Margot preferred to delay reviewing the images.

Margot wasn't disappointed in her expectation, as the freeway was jammed. She completed her draft, leaving a few blank lines to insert quotes. Mrs. Stoughton's comments were already scripted, but formality insisted that the woman actually say them. That wouldn't be a problem, because Margot was a crafty reporter. Traffic came to a complete stop near the address of the parish because a delivery truck had overheated and died in the center lane.

The summer had been unusually warm. Strained engines often quit after idling in traffic and running air conditioners. Long, frustrating minutes would pass before drivers managed to establish a flow to either side of the stricken vehicle. If a large stone was dropped into the middle of a stream, the water would part and merge again behind the sudden obstacle. Unfortunately, human behavior was less fluid, and drivers sparred to inch in front of each other. Great metal jabs and feints only produced scratched and dented fenders. Now horns blared as if to wake the truck from death's slumber. In the meantime, the folder with the crime scene photos waited, but Margot hoped to escape looking at them. The story was essentially complete, and she didn't need to review them. That had been the plan from the beginning. Currently, however, she had nothing else to do, and a modicum of integrity had crept in with the boredom.

The photos were in a pale green folder stamped with the heavy red words "Evidence," "Authorized" and "Authorization granted." Margot's name had been handwritten on the line following "Authorized" and the name stamped in smeared black ink on the line below was presumably the clerk's superior. Margot opened the folder with one eye squeezed shut. The photos were black and white photocopies. She knew they would be, but knowing didn't desensitize her enough. Even before looking, Margot knew solicitation for other violent stories would be few and far between. She would reserve them for tough times, for her and the victims.

Oddly enough, she was disappointed, because few photos were included; even then, they were dark and unfocused. A body at the base of a nondescript sanctuary could be surmised, and appeared slashed numerous times. The quality of the copies made it impossible to judge the severity of the attack, but there were too many cuts to make this just a typical third degree murder. This looked like a hate crime. There may be truth to the angle that the military hoped to portray, or this was some crazed or aped intruder, or both. The lacerations likely resulted when the priest fought and he had no defense. His face, arms, and clothing were ribboned with a knife as the unarmed priest was attacked. The

crime summary didn't indicate that a weapon had been found, but there was a lot of blood. In the photo, it flowed together with shadows, and defining where one ended and the other began was difficult. Margot was glad the photos were blurry in that regard.

Something else in the photos puzzled her, as the scene was littered with oblong black shapes spilled out in a rough circle around the body. The scattered shapes could have been a tasteless inlaid design for the floor, but that wasn't quite right. Suddenly traffic started to move again, as the stone had been removed. Margot replaced the photos, stacked the folder, summary, and draft, and secreted the bundle beneath the passenger's seat. She'd ask Mrs. Stoughton about the shapes. She could also look for herself, if she worked up the fortitude. The woman lived across the street from the church.

Margot knocked on Tamara Stoughton's door well past noon. The woman lived in a tenement house. Her door faced the street, and a hallway and stairwell connected the building to the other apartments next to her barred entrance. The asymmetric construction looked like units were added as the old ones readied to burst. The conjoined dwellings were covered in stuccoes, in a misguided attempt at unity, but the appearance was that of a tumorous mass, covered with face powder.

An excited yelp sounded from inside the woman's apartment. A small dog had probably been startled, yet the thundering toward the door wasn't from an animal that belonged in an apartment. The door swung open inward, as the bars before the opening stood in place. A short, thin teenage boy bounced inside, wearing a rumpled yellow t-shirt and blue shorts. The shirt bore a decal of a fuzzy pink cartoon pig, which resembled the boy. He had a flat nose and tiny ears, and his squinting eyes were set a little too far apart. A minute passed as the boy and Margot stared at each other. Margot offered a tentative smile, and the boy's mouth dropped open.

"Mama!" he cried. "Mama, a pretty lady's here! It's a pretty lady!" The boy disappeared into the impenetrable shade of the apartment. He repeated himself, turning it into a song. Margot heard hushing from within and the singing stopped. An old woman appeared and greeted her.

"You're right. It is a pretty woman. She looks just like a mermaid."

Behind the old woman rose hawing laughter. Margot started to blush, but she held the smile that had started with the boy. The old woman stood at Margot's height, just a little shorter than average. Her hair was gray, but once had been the same hue of blond as Margot's, only the old woman's hair color had been natural. When the woman stepped into daylight, Margot was stunned to see her face and hands covered in nasty wheals. Her skin glistened with an oily salve, but the old woman didn't seem to mind her appearance.

"Hello, can I help you?" the woman asked. She sounded like she had worked her whole life behind a counter and had taken the polite servitude to heart and practice.

"Hello," Margot answered. "I'm Margot Sebash ..."

"I'm Tamara Stought," the old woman cheerfully volunteered. "And the little boy who ran away is my son Davey."

Laughter rose again, and Mrs. Stought turned around and sent a warm "shh" to her child. Margot thought the boy was a grandson or even a foster child; the latter were taken in for extra money, or "Church charity." Mrs. Stought looked too old to have a teenage son. The disbelief must have shown on Margot's face, or the woman had grown accustomed to providing an explanation.

"I know, I'm an old woman. He was an accident. But I love him with all my heart."

Margot nodded and began again. "I'm Margot Sebash. I'm a reporter ..."

"And you heard about Reverend Arnett," the old woman interrupted again. Tamara Stought was going to try her patience, so Margot got to the point.

"Yes. I wanted some details. You found the body, isn't that right?"

The old woman nodded and waved for Margot to step back. "Baby, stay inside and don't lock your mother out. I'm going to talk to our friend."

The bars swung out with a slow creak. Margot sighed. The hottest part of the afternoon crept upon them, so if the old woman wanted privacy, she would get it. On wilting days like these, people stayed shut in their dark hovels. The street was empty except for an occasional car coasting by with the windows up and air

conditioner blowing. Afternoon commuters wandered lost, looking for shortcuts around busy main routes. Margot asked if the old woman would like to sit in Margot's car which, also had air conditioning. Margot's little red compact, nicknamed 'Mariposa' after the Mariposa Lily, was parked up the block. The old woman graciously declined.

"I can't go far without someone looking after my baby. He can get into trouble if he's not watched."

Mrs. Stought brought a scarf to drape over her head. The floral patterned cloth partially covered her eyes, although she still had to use her hand to shield them against the light. The afternoon was too bright, even though Margot still wore her sunglasses. The pair took a short walk to the curb.

"Do you mind if I ask you what happened?" Margot asked, unable to restrain herself any longer. "It looks like you were bitten - a lot."

The old woman "tsk'd" her hands as she held them out before her and rotated her wrists. "I'll tell you. It happened when I found Reverend Arnett."

A second minor mystery pended; the objects or marks on the floor, and now the bites. None of these miscellaneous facts would find their way into Margot's story. These were superfluous details, outside the bounds of the censors, therefore struck from any submission. The story was already written anyway, but Margot had grown curious. Before she could prompt the old woman to continue, the story went on.

"I was coming back from work down the street. I dust a few of the shops for cash. I can't work at the factory because I have to be home most of the time with Davey. The owners at the strip mall are nice. They don't really need me, but the shelves do get dusty."

"Mrs. Stought," Margot intervened. "It's warm out here."

The old woman took the interruption in stride. She may not have even heard it. Tamara used Margot's prodding as a convenient spot to pause and take a breath. "Well, it was after curfew and I had to sneak back home. The church is on my way to our place. I thought I'd stop there to catch my breath and wait for the patrol to pass before I got home to Davey. Sometimes they can be so mean to an old woman. My neighbors will watch Davey sometimes if I fix us all dinner."

A smile spread across the old woman's face. She enjoyed living in this neighborhood, even though Margot wanted to get back to Mariposa, for fear of it being stolen, as much as for the cool air. Questions had to be asked, though. This time she did rudely interrupt the old woman with a question, interjected in the middle of the blathering about kind neighbors.

"Where is the church? I thought you lived close by."

"Oh, it's right there," the old woman pointed across the street. A tent, or more so a tented building, sat between two large, low warehouses. The building was about two stories tall, although the distorting thick, vertical blue and white stripes on the canvas made accuracy difficult to judge. St. Erasmus was a flat rectangle. There weren't any steeples or buttresses as Margot was accustomed to seeing on the mediocre churches where she had lived and gone to school.

"They covered it when the fumigators started working. They had to kill the flies."

Margot's curiosity twisted to confusion. She opened her mouth and got her answer before asking.

"They came out of nowhere, after Father Arnett was killed. They were nasty and biting, and they were big. I've never seen flies like them. They must live in the desert, eating carrion."

"Please, start at the beginning," Margot insisted. She had a feeling that a timeline needed to be established or the story would become convoluted quickly.

"I was coming home from my work when I stopped at the church. The doors were always open late into the night after curfew. Reverend Arnett was a night owl. Bless him, although he never welcomed company for long. Before I reached the stoop, I heard him screaming. I thought he was being tortured. It was the way he screamed."

The old woman's face went pale, making the angry blemishes stand out like neon in the shadow of her scarf. "It was horrible! When I opened the door, there was blood everywhere. Reverend Arnett was stripped to the bone!"

Margot knew the last part wasn't true, as she had seen the photos. The incident was embellished on its way to becoming a ghost story for scaring children back

into their homes at sunset. Still, Margot would not contradict the old woman. She wanted to avoid bickering over details, for the sake of expedience.

“And there were feathers, like a whirlwind.”

“Feathers?” These were the shapes in the photos. Margot almost asked Mrs. Stought if she knew what they meant.

“I think it was the devil,” the old woman gushed.

“Please, go on.” Mrs. Stought’s comment dissuaded her from asking about the feathers, and it appeared she couldn’t get into the building to look. A tour of the crime scene wasn’t necessary. Besides, Margot realized the blood would still be there with feathers. That stomach-turning vision and resulting sleepless nights, could be happily avoided.

“I wanted to run home, but I used the church’s phone and then I went outside and called for help. The patrol was right there. A little while after that, an ambulance came. Then the flies.” The old woman took a breath and moved her hand to cross herself shoulder to hip. She was very orthodox. “They were big, and black and white like bees, but their stripes went the wrong way.”

Mrs. Stought motioned up and down with the hand she used to cross herself. “They went for the blood. I swear, I could hear them lap it up.”

The description made Margot feel ill. She battled against conjuring up the sound. Her imagination could disquiet her at times. The hot weather proved to be an adequate distraction. She dabbed at perspiration on her face with a tissue from her purse.

“They started to bite me and the photographer. It was as if the blood on the floor wasn’t fresh enough for them. They wanted living blood, right from the vein!”

“Mrs. Stought, please.”

“I’m sorry, honey. But that’s what happened. Well, the men from the ambulance put on their coats and wrapped up their faces. They pulled what was left of Reverend Arnett out and stuck him into a bag right outside. Then they left. I told the patrol what I saw and they let me go home. I told them I was coming home from work. I wasn’t as quick as I was when I was your age. That’s why I was out

after dark.”

Margot had enough. She would omit the quotes and submit the story as it was written in the summary. The report would be accepted, since it was already exactly what the military wanted.

“Thank you, Mrs. Stoughnt. I’ll need to get back to headquarters.”

“You do believe me,” the old woman stated. “About the devil. I won’t set foot into that church until the new priest arrives. Reverend Arnett was a good man. He prayed to the Mortal God. He commanded miracles to make Davey normal. That’s why the devil killed him. Out of jealousy.”

Margot nodded. She was religious, but at the same time, educated and rational. The beliefs that miracles were produced upon command, and the existence of a malevolent force envious of man’s authority over God, were pedestrian Church fables for children and the despondent. The second case probably applied to Tamara Stoughnt. Margot wanted to withhold judgment. Although she noted, not so deep inside, this was an example of what separated the castes. She was Chosen and this woman was UnChosen. Margot told herself the difference was a matter of privilege and education. She was glad to have both.

“Thank you,” she repeated. “I have to go. Goodbye.”

“Yes, take care. Goodbye.”

Margot returned to her car, started the engine, and cranked the air. The instant coolness felt wonderful. She sat back, relished the air, and flapped her blouse’s collar. As she turned away from the curb, she looked back to see Mrs. Stoughnt trying the handle and rapping on her apartment door. She had been locked out, despite the instructions to Davey. Margot was certain the retarded boy thought the trick was the funniest thing since the last time he had locked his mother out.

Enough time in the day remained to type the story and return to military headquarters for submission. Reporting was much like transcription work. Reporters translated the handwritten scribbles on summaries into typed pages, which were later read on the radio. The summary and photos required being returned as they were presented, or the story would be rejected. Margot would be subjected to a prying investigation into her personal affairs, followed by an extensive audit of previously submitted work. The process was crippling, and

that couldn't happen to her again.

Putting aside the old woman's assumption that the devil murdered the priest, the culprit was still unknown. The summary reported nothing had been taken, or at least, the meager donations and ornamentation were untouched. No proclamation or threat associated with heathen sympathizers had been left at the scene; yet there were the feathers.

This may be some crazy killer with an unconventional calling card. Margot flirted with the idea to follow up similar incidents. If this was a serial killer, someone who hated priests, and not an opportunist stealing in through open doors looking for a few valuables, it could be a real story. The censors would not twist facts into sugary nonsense if a manhunt ensued. That would be counterproductive to finding the perpetrator. Margot now became the ideal candidate for the assignment. She had staked her claim for being there first. All she had to do was identify a trend and play by the rules. She grew so excited, she planned on skipping the pile of transcription work. The forms were due tomorrow morning. Missing their deadline would cause trouble. Some serious thought would need to go into her hopeful plan.

4 Trespass

Night had arrived by the time the Cortras brothers crawled in from the low desert. Time stretched long and thin in the emptiness. It snapped back at the first signs of civilization, with the sudden setting of the sun. Now that the wilderness was behind them, under the cover of darkness, the trip became substantially cooler. Hen fell asleep a few hours after the stranger's rescue from certain death. The Cortras brothers called him Ben. They tried the name on him for size and it fit; the stranger looked like a Ben. The suitcase full of clothes lay on the floor, underneath Ben's knees. The army boots Ben wore were working against his upcoming assumed identity. That is, if he accepted their hastily planned scheme to get into the Cap. Hen had neglected to take the priest's shoes; Hen rebuked himself for overlooking the detail. Nothing could be done about it now, so he didn't concern his brother with the oversight. He mentally kicked himself enough for the both of them. The brothers were exhausted, so they didn't need to fight over the stranger's boots until later. They could win their escape from worry and the heat through sleep.

The trio reached the encampment past midnight. The drive was uneventful, as if they were the only souls stranded on a blasted world. Dil got what he had hoped for, which was no confrontation with suspicious patrols or more desert wanderers. As luck would have it, they appropriated enough fuel to cover the stretch, and then some. The only task now was to stay under the radar, as the Cap couldn't be entered before dawn. The Wall was secured at its gates from sunset to sunrise, completely locked down. Besides, their new friend Ben needed briefing. Dil found a liquor store at the outskirts of the encampment. The place looked like it never closed. The owner didn't have a choice, as three battered tin walls and a canvas flap were all that stood between the merchandise and a world of thieves. The twenty-four hour service ran for security, rather than convenience. A young man in a loose t-shirt and cut-off jeans sold Dil three tall bottles of water. The travelers needed it, especially Ben.

Hen had passed part of the drive dripping the last of their water into Ben's open mouth. Ben swallowed and spit reflexively. The stranger appeared semi-conscious at the time, but Hen couldn't tell. Ben needed a constant supply of water to bring him back to the world of the living, and he'd get it, awake or not. Hen told his brother he had heard from migrants about nursing badly dehydrated

people who had crossed the desert on foot in the winter.

The Shur remained dry and inhospitable, no matter the season. The brothers had plenty of opportunity to talk to migrants during day jobs. The only taboo subject was the heathen, although the brothers must have rubbed shoulders with more heathens and their sympathizers than they cared to know.

Dil returned to the truck with the water. With his free hand, Dil pulled his dozing brother off Ben. Despite the heat still radiating from the stranger, Hen had rolled on top of him in his sleep. Hen woke after being righted, but stayed drowsy.

“Where are we?” Hen slurred.

“The encampment.”

Hen slid over to dangle his legs out the open door on the driver’s side. Dil handed him a bottle of water. The brothers opened their bottles and drank, and quietly observed their surroundings. Hen shook off the haze of slumber. Coyotes yipped their questions in the near distance. The yelps of the wild canines and hum of an electrical generator from the liquor shack were the only sounds. The relative peace was a welcome change from the whistling wind that the trio experienced as they sped through the desert.

“I’m hungry, Dil.” The statement sounded empty.

“Yeah. They got nothing at the store. We can wait until the sun comes up.”

Ben groaned, and the complaint made the brothers jump. Hen twisted in his seat, while Dil strolled slowly around the truck to the passenger side window. A suspicious gaze locked him and the young store clerk together. They watched each other out of familiarity with the kind of folks meeting at the edge of towns in the middle of the night. There wasn’t malice, only caution. Dil broke the stare and turned to the waking stranger.

“Hey,” Dil said. “Are you waking up?”

Ben’s head hurt and his face was swollen. His nose was filled and pinched shut. He snorted, but the blockage didn’t clear. “Who?” he asked. His voice didn’t crackle this time, but his throat was still dry.

Dil held out the last bottle to the stranger. He tried his best to sound friendly and tough simultaneously. "I asked you first."

Ben took the bottle. The container was heavy in his parched and weakened state, but he needed the water. Ben strained to break the seal of the plastic cap. The snap eventually echoed through the stillness. Because of the demanding thirst, he remembered where he'd been. He forced himself to sip the water carefully and then he finally spoke.

"Ben."

"Yeah!" Hen exclaimed. The shout reverberated into the distance, bouncing off unseen walls. Hen smiled through his brother's disapproving gaze.

"Okay. We need to talk about that," Dil said, placing his hands against the door and leaning forward. Now that the moment had arrived, he wasn't sure how to proceed. He hoped the stranger would take the initiative. "Hen, go ahead and give him the wallet."

The younger brother wrangled the wallet from his pocket, along with the envelope. He handed the items to Ben. A purple lump on Hen's forehead momentarily distracted Ben.

"I'm Hen. My brother's name is Dil."

Ben accepted the wallet and the envelope, but neither looked familiar. The empty wallet only contained ID cards. Ben pulled them out and tilted the cards into the dim light from the liquor shack. "A priest?" Benedict Ishkott was his name. Here it was, printed on foreign IDs. The identical names were maybe an odd coincidence, but Ben, in person, wasn't a priest. He was...he couldn't remember.

Scattered memories of the desert and a priest in a white car floated in a sparse sea. Before the desert, he remembered mundane events, such as shaving, shitting, and an occasional shower. He recalled a childhood memory from when he was five years old. He had caught pneumonia that went untreated, because his parents lacked money for a doctor. Ben wound up in intensive care after he stopped breathing and spent two weeks in a hospital on Church charity. But Ben couldn't remember the years that led him to whatever role he played now. The lack of memories was like walking through the home in which he grew up and looking through the rooms, but a room was missing. A wall existed where there

was once a door, with no evidence that an entrance ever existed.

Ben opened the folded envelope; more mystery was stuffed inside. This Benedict Ishkott had been ordered to a parish in Capital. Ben looked at the brothers, Dil and Hen. They had saved his life, although he still felt he was about to fall back into the dirt. Yet he could still afford to trust them. How did that belief go? Cultures had mangled the saying but it went something like the brothers were now responsible for him, or he owed them some equal service. Either way, an implication of being bound together existed. The idea sat with bony knees and elbows in his throat. Ben remembered always being alone, and purposely so. Self-reliance may have led him into the desert in the first place, before events turned for the worse. Yet, he may have wanted that, too. At the last moment, delirium could have driven him to the road - or the voice pushed him.

The voice was gone now, as was the ringing. Only the thirst remained, but the bottle was empty. The brother named Dil didn't offer more.

"Where are we?" Ben repeated Hen's question.

"The encampment," Hen answered, feeling privileged for being the very latest informed. "So what do you think?"

"Think about what?"

"We were thinking you'd take us into the Cap. More like, we'd take you and you'd get us in." Dil wanted to tell it straight, before Hen could twist the idea with his lack of forethought.

"These will get me in." Ben made the observation. He couldn't think of a reason he'd want to get into Capital, but he had no other place to go and he felt a strange compulsion to try. Still, he needed more information before he could agree with the pending decision.

"What would we do if we get in? Why do we want to?" These were genuine questions.

Dil crossed his arms as Hen shrugged his shoulders. Dil caught the obtuse gesture and shot his brother a smoldering glance. Hen shrugged his shoulders again, this time raising his open palms starward. Ben turned to see that Dil disapproved. Ben moved slowly, as every muscle was rigid and achy. Hen

assumed a neutral posture, hands on hips, and head turned downward. He had played the same game with his brother since they were kids.

“We thought you might have a reason,” Dil said.

Ben might, but that was still unknown. Getting through the Wall would be taking a big risk. The IDs didn’t bear a picture or rank. This was as anonymous and hassle-free as someone could get with a false identity, as a priest of no importance. Ben strung events together to deduce the IDs belonged to the priest in the white car. Now that Ben had them, things must not have turned out well for the man. Ben recalled something about a heart attack; he was curiously concerned by his disregard. Pilfering IDs and sneaking past checkpoints seemed ordinary, even comfortable.

“We can go to the parish,” Hen piped up. It was merely a matter of time before he finally chimed in.

“Hen,” Dil attempted to quiet him.

“Why not? That’s where he’s supposed to be, ain’t it? It’s not like the other guy is going to come knocking on the door, wanting his stuff back.”

“But his superiors might,” Dil countered.

“Well, where else are we going to go? We never went to the Cap before.” Hen made the obvious and valid point. Curfew also needed to be considered. The plan grew less viable with each step. That’s the way the younger Cortras brother’s schemes usually went. They were bound to fall apart, due to myopic vision.

“Okay,” Dil said, including Ben in the plan. “Here’s what we’ll do. We go in and check it out. If it looks bad and we can’t find a place to stay, we’ll leave before sunset. We’ll stay in the encampment.”

Ben looked down at his bare and raw chest. “My clothes.”

“At your feet. Check it out.” Hen hadn’t stopped smiling since giving Ben his name. The smile grew wider each time he had something to say. Ben leaned forward to see a suitcase that he also didn’t recognize. His body screamed and pushed him back. All his muscles were still too tired and sore, so reaching for

the case was out of the question. He would wait for morning to open the case, after some of the stiffness receded. The Cortras brothers had put a lot of thought into the construction of their plan. Many of the pieces went into the right places, but Ben wouldn't make up his mind yet. He was still exhausted and had a lot of missing pieces of his own to find.

"Let me think about it." Ben closed his eyes.

The brothers finished their water. Hen exclaimed, "Oh!" and pointed as if noticing the liquor shack for the first time. Dil recognized the thin disguise of spontaneity. Hen used the tactic when he wanted to make a proposal, but couldn't find the appropriate time or words.

"How about we get something, to celebrate."

Dil couldn't argue with the desire. "All right, but we gotta make our money last. Give me some of yours."

"Aw, Dil," Hen said grudgingly, and handed over a few bills.

"Ben," Dil called. "You want something? More water?"

"Yes," Ben answered, never opening his eyes.

Dil returned with a cheap bottle of wine, bearing the label "Yowling Cat." The wine tasted like grape-flavored cat piss, straight from a feline with a yeast infection. The proof made up for the taste, as the Cortras brothers said. The inexpensive wine was their preferred juice, totally lacking any essential vitamins. Dil screwed off the metal cap. He offered the first swig to Ben, but he refused, shaking his head. Dil gave Ben another bottle of water, instead. Dil then took a long drink in one swallow, as his face twisted into a pucker. He passed the bottle to Hen.

Ben gulped half his bottle of water immediately and then capped it. Swallowing felt like drinking marbles. He wanted more, but he had to save it until he felt like relieving himself. He needed his organs to soak up the moisture like a sponge in a bucket, only from the inside out. Fluids needed to start flowing again.

The wine was gone within the hour. The brothers slowed when their stomachs began burning and the grape acid crept up their throats again. The alcohol did its

work; it had strange affects on the two. Hen grew quiet, and Dil, more adventurous. He attempted to start a conversation with the young man in the t-shirt, but the clerk silently brushed aside Dil's animated monologue about shoplifting.

Interaction entailed only making sales, not friends. He'd seen enough of their likes when working late. Trouble chased strangers to drink on the fringes of the shack's pathetic fluorescent glow. Trouble must have caught up to most, since they were never seen again. Dil was accustomed to the lack of banter. People never felt like talking when he did, or at least when Dil drank. He went back to Ben.

"You know, there was a heathen camp outside Gomorrah that got hit." Dil retained enough discretion to avoid asking what he really wanted to know. "It wasn't long after that, we found you out there."

Dil made a wide gesture with his arm. He wasn't pointing out a specific location and the arc of his limb seemed to indicate a path to nowhere. Hen sat on the running board at the driver's side, holding the empty wine bottle. When Dil drank, he had a tendency to go too far with teasing. Usually, he just turned mean. Hen learned to sit quietly when the drinking started and avoid Dil after a certain point of intoxication. Dil liked it that way. No talking back, just listening, which was fine with Ben.

"What were you doing out there without a pack?" Dil asked, knowing he may be reaching for too much. Ben shook his head.

"You know, when a man is generous, like saving somebody, favors are usually expected." Dil realized this was too excessive. He had pushed his luck. If this man were Drystani, Dil better stop while his comments were still broad and optionally unanswered. But Ben nodded; Dil thought he understood the motion. They were going into Capital. The decision resulted from a nagging in the back of Ben's mind. There wasn't a hope or expectation, only a compulsion.

The remainder of the night was short. None of them had slept for more than a few hours, including the young storekeeper. The liquor shack stood closer to the encampment's jumble of ramshackle huts and adobe walls than expected. A pink light bathed the slum, making the adobe look furry. Much of the place still slept, while scattered waking sounds punctured the quiet. Car engines idled or

sputtered to death. Loose and wild dogs barked at random distractions. Ben felt better when he woke soon after the brothers. They jostled him while rummaging through the cab of the truck and Hen apologized.

“We’re taking a look at what we brought with us,” Hen explained.

“And for contraband,” Dil clarified. “We’ll probably be searched at the Wall. You don’t have anything, do you?”

Ben patted his pockets, knowing there wasn’t anything in them. He assumed Dil meant weapons, drugs, or both.

“I already looked through the suitcase, Dil,” Hen reported. “Nothing except clothes, like I said.”

“Speaking of which, maybe you ought to put ‘em on,” Dil suggested.

Ben looked at the suitcase, which lay unlatched on the seat beside him. He was sore, but could move. The clothing didn’t offer any variety, just black slacks and white collarless shirts. These were a priest’s everyday attire, but he still sorted through the case. Ben anticipated the younger Cortras brother had already confiscated any valuables, but whether he shared them with his brother or not was something Ben didn’t know. He suspected Hen was the sort of fellow who wouldn’t, at first, but eventually he would show the prize to Dil. The two acted like brothers, as a complement of motion and thinking played between them.

Ben made his selection, which was simple, considering the lack of choice. Uniformity had that going for it. He debated with pulling the clothes on while he sat in the truck, but then he spied a spigot set in a flat pile of stones. Mud surrounded the mound like a newly drained moat. Ben could stand there to wash the dirt off. He liked the idea of lying on the stones and letting the water shower over him. He would have to make due with what was available, and do it quickly. A sense of urgency radiated from the brothers. Stepping out of the truck, Ben felt as if the joints in his legs would snap. He bent them and his knees popped loudly. He dropped awkwardly to the ground and stretched, with the shirt and pants tucked under his arm.

Ben drained the remainder of the water from last night and still craved more. He began to think that the thirst would never be satisfied. He carried the plastic bottle to the pump with him. The only waking souls still around were just the

brothers, and presumably the storekeeper. The shack was dark, now that the sun had risen, and the fluorescent light was off. The young man could be just inside the shadows, lurking or snoozing. Ben caught himself scrutinizing shadows, like those in the shack. Ben didn't know what he watched for, but was compelled to check anyway.

At the pump, he relieved himself absentmindedly. He pulled off his boots and banged them together to knock off the dirt. He placed them on the ground with the loosely folded clothes on top. The stones around the spigot were hazardous. Ben balanced on them with bare feet as he jerked the pump's handle. The movement rocked him back and forth on his perch. The water soon flowed and Ben drank until the stream slowed to a trickle and stopped. The taste was coppery, so he had to prime the pump again to get more.

Ben primed the pump half a dozen times before he was done. He splashed handful after handful of water over himself. Bathing never felt as good as it did then, even though he shivered a little from the cold water. The chill was glorious. When Ben finished, he shook the droplets from his feet before hopping over the mud moat. Still wet, but drying fast due to the stark lack of humidity, he pulled on the shirt. It felt like pushing through a patch of nettles. The polyester blend stung his damaged skin and made him suck in his breath through clenched teeth. At least the long sleeves would protect his arms from further burning, and the shirt hung loosely, away from his body. He stretched out his hands; the redness and swelling made them look like thick, bright gloves. He could only imagine the impression his face would make. If there had been pictures on the IDs, his cooked mug would have disguised him well.

Ben peeled off his soaked pants. For a moment, only the tail of his shirt left him unexposed. It didn't matter, as he could have bathed naked, with no one around to object. However, modesty demanded that he pull on the black slacks quickly. Even with the shirt tucked in, the waist was still too wide, but at least the inseam length fit. The new Benedict Ishkott had lost a little weight and had gotten a tan; but he wouldn't recommend his spa.

A belt with strained notches had been packed in the suitcase. Ben put on his boots and laced them up. The pant legs weren't cut for the boots, so he had to roll the legs over the tops. Ben had filled the plastic bottle, drunk its contents, and filled it again before going back to the truck. Ben gathered the excess waist in a bunch, and left the old pants where he dropped them. Ben decided to locate

the belt.

A piece of graffiti on a tin wall of the liquor shack caught his eye. A cross had been spray painted on the building, a red lopsided "X." Two long additional lines ran through the vertex, one vertical and the other, horizontal. The Chosen called it the Star of Lucifer. They claimed the hieroglyphic was a heathen symbol, but Ben knew the actual meaning. The mark was defilement and rejection of Church icons. Pubescent vandals were more apt to scrawl the corrupted cross than heathens. Ben didn't understand why the cross caught his eye, as he'd seen them hundreds of times in places just like these. He remembered frequenting many slums, although the extent of his travels was still unclear. The graffiti wasn't important, but the fact that the Star of Lucifer was so close to Capital struck him as ironic. But then again, looking around, it was perfectly natural to expect to see it here. What better place?

The Cortras brothers waited in the truck. Dil thrummed his fingers against the dash. Ben fastened his new belt and climbed inside. Dil tried turning the engine. At first nothing happened, but with a few more attempts accentuated by curses, the truck came alive. The three entered the encampment proper. There were no roads, just worn paths weaving around makeshift dwellings and temporary walls. The city survived in this respect. Where a building had been leveled, a road instantly continued, and when a denizen decided to erect a shanty in the middle of the street, a new twist was added or the path simply came to a dead end. Visitors and natives alike were forced to slowly peck their way through to wherever they were going. There was no guarantee the route taken the day before, would exist tomorrow.

Exploration included a lot of back tracking. There were few vehicles so early in the morning, but that would soon change. The lack of traffic signs created havoc. Two-way streets suddenly became one way. The flow of traffic became crippled when someone decided the best place to park was just where he or she happened to be at that moment. Passive-aggressive dueling was another experience that life offered in the encampment. The three men were spared the battle over right of way. The smell of cooking meat and beans greeted them after a few turns into the city. A mobile open grill stood in the middle of road. The cart rested on hard, cracked rubber wheels, as a mobile business. An older couple worked together preparing meat and eggs; she did the cutting and breaking eggs, while he cooked.

“There, Dil,” Hen pointed, even though it sat obtrusively ahead.

“I know. That’s where we’re going.”

“You’re hungry, right?” Hen asked Ben.

Ben nodded. He wasn’t, but knew some food would be good for him. Dil let the truck run while they all got out.

“Hen, get me something. I’ll stay with the truck.” Dil could have shouted his order to the couple, but didn’t like the idea of turning his back with the engine running and the streets beginning to fill. He was afraid to turn it off. The brothers couldn’t risk being stranded, if the truck didn’t want to start again.

“Yeah.” Hen was agreeable.

Ben and Hen approached the couple. They stopped cooking and stared at Ben. Hen forced a quizzical frown. He stared back at the couple, at Ben, and at the couple again. Hunger fed his annoyance. “What’s the matter?”

“Oh, sorry,” the woman instantly replied.

“Sorry,” the man reiterated.

“It’s just that we’ve never seen a priest in the encampment,” she explained.

“What?” Hen stated in disbelief. He didn’t accept the excuse for the lack of prompt and friendly service.

“Plenty of patrols, just not priests,” the man said.

“Never mind that. What have you got here?” Hen had already peeled off some money.

“What you see and tortillas. No salsa, but we have spices.” The man pointed at a metal rack hanging over the grill. The assortment included ground peppers, salt, and other shakers with colored dust. Hen couldn’t tell what they were.

“Alright,” Hen commented, preparing to order. Then he called over to Dil, “How about breakfast burritos?”

Dil curled his thumb and forefinger into an “OK” sign.

“Just put some beans and eggs into tortillas, five of ‘em,” Hen instructed. “Wait, how many do you want?” he asked Ben.

“One.”

“Five,” Hen said, holding up splayed fingers, his thumb tucked into his palm.

The man poured broken eggs into a skillet and scrambled them. The woman spoke to Ben as the man tended the frying.

“Are you alright?” the woman asked, noting Ben’s face and hands.

“We found him broke down in the Shur. He’d be dead if we didn’t save him,” Hen practiced their story. “We’re taking him to the Cap.”

“All right, Hen,” Dil interrupted.

The old man handed the burritos to Hen in nothing but their tortillas.

“They’re free. It’s for the priest,” the woman said. The man had reached for the money Hen offered, but let his hand drop, smiling close-lipped, yet agreeably.

“Thanks!” Hen smiled back, bouncing as he turned to his brother.

“Reverend, will you command the Mortal God for us?” the woman asked Ben. He waited silently.

“Have him send us money and health. Oh, and a car.”

Ben felt loathing stir in his heart. These were common prayers of the UnChosen, and such requests were even encouraged by the Church. Something was fundamentally wrong, as Ben couldn’t justify his feelings. The idea of a wish-fulfilling god in the flesh, killed by people in a show of preeminence, was warped. Ben remembered that his disguise promoted this horrid theology, so he nodded.

“Are we ready to go?” Dil asked assertively.

Hen had already finished his first burrito and started his second. The others

formed a stack in his free hand. Ben stepped into the truck and took his breakfast. Both he and Dil nibbled as the group hunted for the other side of the encampment and the Wall.

“We’re all doing this, right?” Dil garnered agreement.

“Yeah,” Hen answered, then turned to Ben. The question was actually directed to the stranger. “Right?”

“Yeah.”

“You’ll vouch for us, if it comes to that. We get into the Cap and you can even go your own way.”

Ben’s way was their way until more of the recent past returned to him. Part of his brain must have fried in the desert during his transitory bout of insanity.

This was it. Past the northern edge of the encampment, behind the curled rolls of razor wire fences, stood a sign.

“You are now approaching Capital,” the notice read. “Admittance through verification only. Identification must be presented at gate.”

The travelers were subject to the posting with its smaller print the second they passed the wire fence. Turning back would attract attention and a patrol would be dispatched. All roads to Capital were clearly visible from the Wall. The empty plain sloped gently downward and away for three hundred meters. The Wall literally looked down upon the encampment.

The Wall itself was more like a dam in appearance and function. The base was much thicker than the top. The barrier incorporated the hills that had originally wrapped the city-state, though less completely. The hillsides facing away from Capital had been sheered away. The construction used the mined rock. The Wall was circular. No matter which gate was approached, that section of the barrier bowed out. An ocean interrupted the Wall from completely encircling Capital.

Ben had never seen a body of water larger than a pond in an oasis. He had never been out of the desert. The ocean was said to be as large as the desert and deep as the sky. A strange agoraphobia frightened Ben from being curious. The fear seemed recently formed, and the desert still felt safe. That’s where he’d been all

his life. The desert presented ground to stand on.

A quarter way up the Wall, at about three or four stories, the infrastructure could be spotted. Observation windows and machine gun nests cut evenly spaced holes in the smooth surface. A pair of binoculars was undoubtedly trained on the lone, shoddy truck at the fence. The direction of its movement was the only thing that distinguished it from the motley composition of the encampment. Dil tossed his second burrito out the window. He didn't feel like eating any more.

"No turning back now," Dil proclaimed.

They moved into the perimeter. The dirt road rolled up to pavement. The truck bumped over the transition. Shocks creaked as the truck rocked. Waist-high signs stood like sentinels just off the road. "Danger. Mines." Hen gazed across the plain. Only leveled dirt was visible, but Hen still looked. The straight road in the featureless terrain echoed the trip through the desert, except in one respect. An uneasy feeling that their identities were being scrutinized replaced the comfortable sense of anonymity. The drive was going to be shorter than Dil would have liked. Arrival at the gate couldn't be postponed. As much as Dil wanted otherwise, he wasn't going to slow down and attract undue attention.

"Hey," Hen said halfway to the gate. "What if they know what the priest or Drystani look like?"

Dil suppressed his nervousness reasonably well. Leave it to his little brother to find a way to rattle him.

"Hen, we can't go back. Stick to the plan and shut your mouth."

Ben recognized the name Drystani. He tilted unconsciously toward Hen when he heard it spoken. Did these two think he was a heathen terrorist? He knew he was Ben Ishkott, just not the one ordered to St. Erasmus in Capital. The brothers were in a desperate spot if they were playing games with someone they believed was Ilu Drystani. Ben hoped there were no hidden agendas. It would be a horrible turn of luck if he were passed off as a terrorist in exchange for a reward. He would have fared just as well stranded in the desert. Wearing a priest's clothes certainly wouldn't help. The brothers would have to be held at their word. The time to turn back had passed.

They couldn't possibly think that taking someone they thought was Drystani

straight to the gates of Capital could work, even in hope of collecting a handsome reward. They had to know that was suicide. If the military didn't shoot them all outright, the heathens would mark the brothers in vengeance for their martyr. Dil was correct on the one account; the near future was set. Waiting for it was like a falling man holding out hope against death, the moment before meeting the ground.

A solitary stop sign loomed a few steps from a lowered gate, which was a large metal arm locked between two concrete columns. Dil stopped the truck before the double yellow lines on the road. A single armed soldier came out of the Wall to meet them. He wasn't alone with his folding stock H830 automatic rifle. Within the tunnel where he sprang from, a number of similarly equipped shadows shifted. There were gun nests carved into the Wall. The nests at either side pointed barrels of monstrous machines in their direction. The design of the guns made it impossible to see if they were manned until the target was in a gun's sight. Still, the truck would be cut to shrapnel at any sign of trouble.

"Stop the vehicle and get out," the soldier instructed. He trained his rifle on Dil.

Dil took the keys from the ignition and swung open his door. "We were taking ..."

"Shut up. Get out. Put your hands on your heads."

All three slid out of the truck and followed the soldier's instructions. The soldier scanned the inside of the cab. He looked at Ben. "Is that yours?" he pointed at the suitcase with his rifle. "What's in it?"

"Clothes."

"Do you have anything else?"

"We weren't planning on staying," Dil answered the soldier. The rifle went to Dil's face. Obviously the soldier was not asking Dil.

The soldier twirled his hand in the air. Three more soldiers marched forward. They wore brown field uniforms with the requisite black and white name and rank patches. Their boots were polished and in much better condition than Ben's. When the soldiers moved, telling them apart was difficult. Duty at the Wall must call for a strict physique, and specific hair and eye color.

Ben never tried to assign soldiers personal identities anyway. He didn't want to disappoint the military when it tried so gallantly to create an impression of uniformity. Two soldiers stepped forward and patted down the travelers, one by one. Ben brought the envelope with him, holding it in his hand. When the soldiers got to him, one asked if the papers were orders, and Ben confirmed that they were. The coffin's lid was nearly nailed shut. The soldier who asked, waved off the others.

"May I see them and some ID?"

Ben handed over the envelope, then carefully reached for the wallet in his back pocket and produced the IDs.

"Reverend Benedict Ishkott?"

"Yes."

"Please wait here, sir." The soldier's demeanor immediately changed. The other soldiers lowered their rifles. The soldier who had been asking Ben questions, disappeared back into the tunnel with the orders and IDs, and another soldier followed him. The brothers continued holding their hands to their heads as Ben stood with his arms dropped. Hen chewed his bottom lip. Ben could see bits of black beans stuck between his small teeth.

The soldier who had been asking the questions returned, led by a sergeant. His large chevrons on his uniform's sleeves and a small gray mustache distinguished him from the others. He carried Ben's ill-gotten orders and IDs.

The sergeant saluted Ben. He didn't wait for Ben to return it, before dropping his hand. "Reverend Benedict Ishkott, I'm Sergeant Meshonne." He handed the documents back to Ben. "We are a little surprised to see you. We found your automobile."

Hen visibly paled. Ben suspected the blood rushed from his face, too, but the burns wouldn't betray him. If they found the sedan, they would have found the priest. Ben and the Cortras brothers should have been face down and dead in the dirt by now, executed on the spot. Whatever was happening, Ben played along.

"If you would pardon me, sir, by the looks of you, our suspicions were not far off."

“We found him!” Hen exclaimed. The soldiers snapped their rifles up again at the sudden excitement. The eyes of both Cortras brother opened so wide that they formed perfect white orbs dotted with black circles. A look of disdain for the brothers hovered on the sergeant’s face.

“Where are you coming from?” the sergeant asked.

“The encampment,” Dil answered, trying to assume control.

“I didn’t ask you.” The sergeant went to Hen. The soldier was shorter, but tougher, many times over. “Where are you taking the Reverend?”

Dil held his breath. He prayed Hen would stick to the story and be as brief as possible.

“To his parish. We found him in the desert when we were coming from Gomorrah.”

The sergeant considered this and spit. “Why did you leave Gomorrah?”

Hen was alone with the question. Thinking up a back-story had been an oversight. They couldn’t say they were running away, because running people were troublemakers. They certainly wouldn’t be allowed to hide in the Cap. Patrols would flush them out of the encampment if Hen made that their destination. Newcomers were tolerated if the military was reasonably convinced they’d actually lived there since the day they were born. This was despite the unchecked growth of the encampment that flew in the face of such claims. Dil redoubled his prayers.

“We were looking for Drystani. We were going to collect the reward. We figured he’d be in bad shape after that raid we heard about on the radio.”

Now Dil went pale. He didn’t expect Hen to concoct such a far-fetched cover. Dil mentally prepared for detainment. Eventually the truth would come out and they may even be sent back to Gomorrah, unless there was more to the story about the military finding the priest’s car. Dil made the same nervous connection as Ben.

The sergeant howled in laughter. The baying spooked the two soldiers, who held their rifles steady. “You are either stupid or crazy.”

He turned to Ben. “We thought the heathens kidnapped you. What happened, car trouble?”

“Ran out of gas,” Ben answered truthfully, after a fact.

“And these two rescued you?” The sergeant tossed his thumb at the brothers.

“Yes.”

“Well, the car is back on the road outside Gomorrah. Looks like someone stripped it. I hope the Church insured it for you.”

Whoever took the car parts also took the priest. There were tales of cannibalism and obscene rituals among heathens and migrants, but that was so much propaganda and urban legend. Still, it appeared the body was missing. Maybe the priest wasn’t dead and was left stranded, or perhaps he wandered off and met the fate Ben had escaped. They had literally traded places.

“I’ll tell you what.” The sergeant paced between the Cortras brothers. “Take the Reverend to his parish. I’m sure they’ll be happy to see him. But be out of Capital before sundown. My men will take your names from your IDs and put them in the logs. We’ll know when you go. And we’ll be looking for this vehicle if you’re not gone. This piece of crap is too easy to miss. You crazy bastards belong on the outside, no matter how harmless you are.”

The brothers were relieved, and Ben even smiled. “Crazy” and “bastard” were terms of endearment to him. The soldiers copied the names from the IDs before returning them. The arm of the gate tilted up from its left.

“You have a good day, sir.” The sergeant saluted Ben again and signaled the three travelers through. Dil felt even better when the truck started right up. He wanted to get away as fast as possible.

The trio drove down a passage through the Wall that was shaped like a tilted “Z”. The narrow tunnel and sharp corners made it impossible to navigate quickly. Shards from an exploding bomb smuggled inside would have negligible impact with the twists. The design was simple yet effective. Suddenly they were out of the Wall and inside Capital. The buildings were nothing like the brothers had ever seen before. There were skyscrapers in the distance, closer to where the city-state met the sea. The streets were wide and paved, and packed with

vehicles. The brothers were excited that they had made it. Gaining entrance was perhaps the grandest scheme of their lives. Ben still waited for what would come next.

5 Promised Land

The world changed upon leaving the tunnel through the Wall. Gomorrah was the largest city-state the Cortras brothers had ever seen. The single-storied, factory-fabricated dwellings were only a grade above the assemblages in the encampment. Gomorrah consisted of nothing more than a collection of kit shacks with enforced building codes. The Cap was a real city. Gutters spilled through grates into functioning sewers. Freeways provided alternatives to surface streets, although traffic moved slowly, if at all, on both. The promise of opportunity beamed like the sun. There was no mystery why the UnChosen huddled outside; they sensed possibilities hidden behind the Wall.

The Cortras brothers were lucky. Ben was a like a lottery ticket that they had just cashed. They were safe from Batheirre. His family may be the top of the food chain in Gomorrah, but he had no entrance to the Cap. Law governed this place. Bathierre would never suspect that the two brothers could have stolen inside. The encampment was the only possible retreat for the likes of them. Batheirre was welcome to look all he might, but never behind the Wall. The Cortras brothers now hid in the province of the Chosen. Dil laughed out loud. Hen joined him with a whoop.

“I guess we have to find the parish,” Dil said. “What do the orders say?”

Hen wiggled his fingers at Ben. Hen wanted to be a part of the action. Ben hadn’t returned the orders to the envelope. He held the paper and IDs absently in his lap. As he passed the orders to Hen, the younger brother plucked them from Ben’s moving hand.

“L99 and F66,” Hen conveyed.

The Cap, like most other city-states, had been plotted on a grid. Addresses were actually coordinates. The military oversaw planning and development at the deference of the Church. They assumed the role before the Renovation. Dil scanned numbers on buildings. He had to turn east or west to get a bearing on where they were and where they needed to be going. Numbering must have started at the sea, because they passed double digit letters like “UU.” The trio drove in a circle for almost a half hour by the time Dil figured out the way. He insisted on taking surface streets. The freeways intimidated him, but he’d never

admit it. He had never driven on one before.

Along the drive, the brothers noted the absence of bars on doors and windows. Even the windows on parked cars were down. The only military presence they had seen was at the Wall. The general feeling of security was completely foreign to them. Soldiers always patrolled the city-states to both prevent and cause trouble. The military apparently didn't see a need for their presence past the Wall.

Capital was paved with sidewalks and decorated with colorful storefront awnings. After a dozen or so blocks, the buildings started to look the same. The men could have sworn they were going in another circle, if not for the diminishing numbers. Tracking the addresses as they went past was like counting down. Few people were out walking. Most were waiting in their cars on busy streets. Today was going to be another warm day, but nothing like the heat of the recent week in the desert.

A couple hours wasted away as they crept closer to their destination. The distant skyscrapers never got closer. The towers appeared to move with the trio, like the moon on a long evening drive. They drove beneath an overpass that resembled a parking lot. Hen was glad Dil didn't want to practice his driving on the freeway today; at least they maintained some momentum. On the other side, the buildings became residential, indistinguishable from the shops except for additional stories and the lack of placards. Many had underground parking. Ramps descended into dark caves where an occasional large metal groundhog poked its nose out and moved on to the day's toil. It wasn't long before the brothers saw that some of the doors and garages bore gates. As they continued, they noticed more, until metal bars were featured on all openings. Fewer vehicles crowded the road in these neighborhoods. The trip started to accelerate.

"I think we're in the bad part of town," Hen observed.

"If this is the bad part, we got nothing to worry about," Dil said. "These folks don't know what bad is."

They were traveling northward on L99 and getting very close to the parish. Dil slowed down. "I think this it."

A crew of men pulled a striped canvas off a two-story red brick building. The logo on the back of the crew's white overalls and on the doors of their long, flat

bed truck indicated that they were exterminators. The words “Gas-M” floated over a silhouette of an overturned spider. The letters and arachnid were colored blue. It appeared the Cap also had its share of vermin.

“You think we can get in on those jobs?” Anticipation filled Hen.

“That’s a real job with a regular paycheck,” Dil answered. “We’ll have to see how it goes.”

The presumed church sported ornate ironwork over the windows. The brick and lattice set the place apart from other buildings on the street. Enough of the canvas had been removed to spot the address. This was it. They had arrived at the church which the priest, now Ben, had been appointed to. Dil parked behind the exterminator’s truck. He gave them plenty of room to roll and fold the canvas before packing it on the bed. Ben and the brothers got out and loitered as the workers finished.

“You guys hiring?” Hen asked a pair of workers who were flattening the canvas.

“Do you have your apprenticeship?”

“What?”

“Real jobs,” Dil explained.

Hen started protesting that someone didn’t need to go to school to learn to kill bugs. The complaint went unheeded. One of the workers walked over to Ben.

“Reverend. Is this your church?”

“Yes...” Ben answered with hesitation.

“It’s safe to go in, but you’ll want to open all the windows. Keep them open until you can’t smell the gas anymore.”

Ben opened and closed his mouth in an assumed gesture of acknowledgment. The man climbed into the truck with a couple other workers. Others filled a nearby van which bore the same markings. Both vehicles soon vanished down the street. Ben and the brothers were left staring at each other. If they had arrived a few minutes later, there would have been no trace that Gas-M had been there at

all, other than the smell.

“Let’s check it out,” Hen rallied the group.

They approached the big wooden double doors at the top of a short flight of stairs and tried the looped brass handles. The doors were locked. Hen shook the doors, hoping they were merely stuck, but they held fast. He attempted to peer through the doors’ small, diamond-shaped windows. They were set so high that Hen needed to stand on his toes. The windows were red opaque glass, and only the glow of light behind them could be distinguished.

“There’s gotta be a back door,” Dil speculated.

Hen led the way around a side of the building. A canyon between the church and a solid wall of a neighboring warehouse presented an avenue. Only the church had windows. The thin breezeway was a long stretch of dirt, the first patch of ground not covered with concrete or asphalt that they had seen since entering the Cap. Tall weeds had filled that patch, died, and dried up. The brown leaves had curled into spiny stems, which crunched and turned to dust when the men trampled on them. The back of the church hosted a meager yard of stones. A brick wall joined the two buildings at either side of the church. The courtyard offered an abundance of unused privacy. Dil was right; there was a back door. A small rise of concrete stairs led up to a flaking white door. Hen took the steps in one leap. This door was also locked.

“Wait here,” Dil said. He disappeared back the way they had come. Hen passed the time kicking up small clouds in the breezeway. Ben found an angle of shade to lean into. His shirt had become damp with sweat. At least he was sweating again, so that was a good sign. He had enough of the sun. No more sunbathing for him.

Dil returned with the shank of screwdriver that he had previously pitched into the truck’s bed. He had scraped off the yellow paint the last time he used the tool, when he punched a hole in the gas tank. He found a suitable chunk of concrete and went to the door. In three strokes, he hammered the shank into the jamb near the lock. The screwdriver jutted out at a sharp angle. Dil stepped back, threw all his weight behind him, and delivered a flat kick to the shank. At first he looked as if he was going to run up the wall like some mean cartoon dog chasing a cartoon squirrel. Hen laughed, remembering he had seen cartoons printed on a

newspaper when he was a kid. Newspapers weren't printed anymore. In fact, the one he had found was in a garbage dump just outside of the town where he and Dil grew up.

The overwhelming damage to the door wasn't very funny, though. Dil released a great deal of anger to deliver such violence. The door flew open, taking the jamb with it. The force of the kick sent him stumbling partway into the entrance. It seemed that Dil was practiced in the indelicate art of breaking and entering. He retrieved the screwdriver that had skittered into the church. Hen followed his older brother inside. Once the brothers vanished through the doorway, Ben followed.

They entered the kitchen, where the only appliances were a stove and refrigerator. The latter clattered like the sound of gravel rolling down a metal chute. The room looked like it was used mainly for special functions, as nothing was stocked in the kitchen to indicate it had been used daily. No utensils lay in the empty sink, and common dishcloths, typically seen hanging on racks, were absent.

A pungent, almond-like smell nearly overwhelmed the three men. The odor must be the gas which the exterminator had warned Ben about. He opened the only window in the room. The view revealed a sliver of the breezeway that they had come down. Hen pulled the collar of his shirt over his nose and held it there as he explored the drawers and cupboards. They were bare. Dil surveyed the damage to the door and its jamb. The whole works needed replacing. Hen opened the refrigerator. The electric bulb refused to glow, but he could make out some plastic containers. Hen let go of his shirt to peel the cover off one container which was filled with black, fuzzy mold.

"Ugh!" Hen exclaimed. He tossed the container into the lidless trashcan next to it. "Looks like we need to get some food."

"You're not supposed to eat the stuff you leave in the house when you fumigate, anyway," Dil informed him.

As the brothers explored, Ben ran the water in the sink. The pipe spit out rusty brown water, then cleared. His damnable thirst demanded attention like a child throwing a tantrum. Ben leaned into the sink and gulped directly from the faucet. No matter how much he drank, he couldn't satisfy the brat. He lingered long

enough to draw the brothers' attention. They stopped exploring to watch. When Ben eventually felt like his gut would burst, he shut the water off and turned around. He wiped water from his chin with the sleeve of his shirt.

They moved as a group through the hallway that ran along the rear of the church. The tour led past a closed office, closet, and stairwell before the hall turned right into the nave. Dil tried the door to the office. It was open, so no lock picking was required. The smell wasn't so bad in the office, probably because the door had stayed closed. Ben still wanted to open the window. This one overlooked the small, barren yard. Ben had to reach over a small metal desk to get to the sill. As he did, Hen tried the drawers. With the window open, Ben pushed away from the desk. Hen rattled a locked drawer.

"You still got that screwdriver, Dil?" Hen asked.

"We don't have to rush it. After all, the priest is right here," Dil smirked.
"There's gotta be a key. Slow down. The back door is bad enough."

Dil was right. Hen pulled open the next drawer; within it was a key chain holding keys of various sizes. Hen tried the keys that looked like good matches for the lock, and got it right on the first try.

"Give those here," Dil said. Hen tossed the key chain to him. Dil turned the keys over, sucking in his cheeks. "I suppose these belong to you." He handed the chain to Ben. Ben held them in his open palm a long time before placing them in his pocket.

Dil kept an eye on his little brother. Dil was going to be certain to take his share of any found wealth. Hen pulled out a sealed envelope. "It looks like a check's inside."

"Let me see it." Dil took the envelope. "This looks like the fund from the Church to this parish. They get these every month, you know." He tore the envelope open from one side and pulled out a check. "It's almost a thousand dollars! We'll split it three ways."

"What do the parishes get checks for?" Hen asked.

"Food, I suppose, and other stuff that comes up. Things not on the Church tab."

“In that case, let’s say this one got lost and get another one,” Hen suggested, eagerly.

“Maybe, let’s not push it. Anything else in there?”

Hen dug deeper into the drawer and found another envelope. He opened this one himself and discovered tickets or coupons inside. “What are these?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Lottery tickets, maybe, or for the merry-go-round.”

Hen put them in his pocket. The fact that they had been saved made them important enough to keep on his person. The three left the room and followed the small hall into the church proper. Light spilled into the breezeways outside and through the long windows flanking a large room. They hadn’t noticed when they were outside, but the top thirds of the rectangular windows were composed of stained glass. Red had been overly used, and the ornamentation threw broad swatches of color to the floor, which welled up like spilled wine.

The glass depicted battles that the Chosen allegedly had waged in their claim for the Promised Land. Only the tops of the images were preserved. The bottom two-thirds of each scene had been replaced with clear glass, with straight iron bars outside. Bits and pieces of the remaining scenes were enough to suggest the art’s subject. Everyone knew the mythology, and priests sometimes felt compulsion to cite the story in sermons. The lessons were intended to convey what the Chosen were capable, and willing, of doing. The affect was still unbalanced, more so with missing details. The mind struggled to paint the absent parts. Spear tips, helmets of marching soldiers, and the feet of a sacrificed god were the only clear images. A crucifixion culminated a parade of victories against pagans, the devil, and the Mortal God. The lack of icons beside the windows was puzzling.

The usual pollution of paintings and statues was missing. The church looked austere. Above the altar and against a solid white wall, hung the expected wooden cross. It appeared sturdy enough to bear the weight of a man and then some. The wood surface was a greenish brown patina, making it look moldy instead of intentionally aged.

Black feathers were everywhere. They had swirled and stuck to the floor of the sanctuary in the muddy, crimson glue. Numerous little corpses about the size of a thumb were also trapped in the mixture. They looked like large flies, with wiry

legs curled above and below them. They were almost as plentiful as the feathers. The exterminators had done their job.

“What the ...?” Hen asked, tiptoeing over the feathers and dead flies. “What are these bugs? I ain’t seen them before. They look burned.”

“Dead,” Dil answered.

“Uh-huh,” Hen agreed. “Is that what I think it is?” He pointed at the congealed liquid.

“Blood,” Ben stated flatly.

“We can’t stay here,” Hen decided immediately, his earlier enthusiasm rapidly departed. “This has gotta be a bad sign.”

“I bet that’s why they needed a new priest.” Dil had taken over the task of opening the windows. They had become habituated to the smell, but Dil thought they all could use a little fresher air. He turned around and spit into a pile of feathers.

“Dil!” Hen exclaimed.

His older brother waved him off. “Well, the good news is this place will be closed for awhile until this gets cleaned up. We got a place to stay.”

“Dil, we can’t stay here!” Hen objected.

“How about you go find a place for the truck.” Dil tossed the keys to Hen. They fell to the floor next to him. “Go get a tarp or something.”

Hen stood motionless. The stillness attracted Ben’s attention, and he stopped pacing between the plain wooden pews.

“Ahh, shit!” Hen had given in to the queasy paralysis easily, and had to force himself to move. Reaching down, he picked up the keys with his thumb and forefinger. He handled them as if they had fallen into a cesspit. Hen even tried jiggling off unseen germs. Dil followed him to the front door. Ben tagged behind like a stray dog finding a new pack. Hen turned the dead bolt and yanked both doors open. Immediately, all three were struck cold with shock.

A priest stood on the steps outside, as the doors slammed against the inner walls. He twitched his hands up in front of him.

“What in the name of the Mortal God?” he cried.

Hen immediately crossed shoulders and hips. This priest was a captain. A pin advertised the rank with golden bars on the lapel of his black jacket. The day was too hot for a coat, but it fit him well. He probably wore it for the impression that the presentation created. He was a plump, older man. Years had shrunk his spine and swelled his waist. He looked wan and agitated, but the sudden fright might have caused the edginess.

“Who are you?” he demanded of the younger Cortras.

Dil slipped into the conversation before his brother attempted to answer, Hen’s jaw hung open uselessly. “We’re, uh, cleaning that up.” He swept his arm toward the mass of stuck feathers and flies. Hen raised his eyebrows, shocked at the prospect.

“Oh, good.” The priest was satisfied and promptly dismissed the brothers. He had no further interest in them. “Reverend Ishkott, I presume. I’m happy to see you’re showing some initiative. It’s good to start off an assignment giving more than what is expected of you.”

Ben wasn’t sure what to make of the comment. The welcome lacked sincerity and the clenched teeth delivery conveyed a degree of hostility. The priest obviously had confused this Benedict Ishkott for the clergyman he replaced. That was good, as the test couldn’t have been better than if the dead priest’s own mother mistook him for her son. The priest stood glaring at Ben, waiting for something.

“Bow and thank the ancient aperi,” instructed the companion voice behind his left ear. Ben didn’t turn, because he knew nobody stood there. The knowledge made his heart jump, yet he studied the priest for any reaction. Only Ben had heard the comment; then the voice said more. “Don’t be shy. After all, you have a friend in common.”

Ben lowered his head. “Thank you.”

The priest rocked back on his heels dangerously close to the edge of the steps.

Ben felt the urge to nudge him, as one jabbing finger would send him toppling backwards.

“Sir,” Ben added.

The priest nodded.

“Hmf.” The priest stood rigid, staring at the brothers. “You two have work to do. If you’re lucky, you’ll be finished before curfew.”

“Yes, sir,” Dil said. He turned and skulked back to the hallway at the rear of the sanctuary. “Come on,” he called to his brother. Hen followed without a word.

“Let’s get out of this stink.” The priest pulled Ben into the sunlight by his sleeve. “You look like you crawled out of hell on your hands and knees.”

“Behave yourself, Ben. You’ll never see this addict ever again,” the voice advised. Animosity did bubble up inside Ben. The feeling must have seeded in his forgotten years. What was the voice from the desert telling him? The voice sounded like it wanted to lead Ben through the encounter with the priest.

Ben recalled the story the brothers had practiced. “The car broke down.”

“I know. I was notified when you reached the Wall. The Church had given you up for dead, not that it would’ve been such a tragedy.” The voice offered no clue as to what the priest meant.

The priest scanned from side to side. The street was empty. He stood on his toes to peek over Ben’s shoulder. No one was inside the church either. “Listen. You’ve got your second chance. So forget what you think you know about me. Forget what you think you know about Gomorrah. You are a real cock to call me for favors, anyway.”

Some arrangement had been made. It looked like the other Benedict had finally taken his first step up the clergy’s ladder. It was a shame he wasn’t there to reap the reward.

“As good as it will do you here, anyway.” The priest wiped his receding forehead with the sleeve of his jacket. He suddenly lost his composure, as if he’d been holding his breath as long as he could and now needed to take a deep

swallow of air.

“I don’t know what went on in there.” The priest pointed inside the church. “And I don’t care. The guy was going crazy and he probably sliced himself to pieces. Committed suicide. I don’t care.”

The priest began shifting his weight from one foot to the other. He swayed as he talked. “What you have to do is not cause trouble for me or yourself. Don’t attract attention. You only have one thing to do here. Placate the dregs. Let them know the Church is here, too, keeping an eye on them. As far as I’m concerned, they should have built the Wall around this slum.”

Ben looked around the neighborhood. He had been in much worse places, and just recently. The encampment outside the Wall was one instance. Even the best parts of Gomorrah weren’t as clean and in as good condition as this street. Ben remembered he’d been in Gomorrah not long ago. So the psychic voice seemed part of a package deal, including bits of recollection.

“If I never have to come down here or see you again, everything will be fine. So you’ll get your check every month in the mail. You don’t need to file reports, but you don’t get special requests, either. No trouble. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” Ben didn’t feel obligated to call him “sir” again.

The priest drilled into him with narrowed eyes. Standing in the light was hot, but the priest was sweating just too much. Rivulets formed on his round cheeks, and stinking chemicals leaked from his skin.

“Fine. That’s fine enough for me. I wanted to make sure I saw you first and I was the only one you’d see. It’ll be like you never left that shit hole mission. The Church never cared to hear from you then and certainly not now. You understand that?”

Ben nodded. He felt less hostile. His alias appeared to have cornered this rat and poked the jittery thing with a stick. Ben enjoyed a degree of pleasure, taking vicarious responsibility.

“Then we’re done. That’s all.”

The priest didn’t wait for a reply. He trotted to a white limousine parked behind

the Cortras' truck. No lowly fleet car for him. He looked over both shoulders at Ben as he went. The car's alarm chirped when the priest tried the handle. He rustled through his jacket pocket for the key chain. Upon finding it, he shut off the alarm and unlocked the doors with a single button. He dropped behind the wheel, started the car, and slammed the door.

He turned the front wheels from the curb slowly. Ben felt he was still being watched, even though he could only make out a rotund shape behind the car's tinted glass. But there were more spectators than just the priest. The audience included the Cortras brothers at the back of the church and the voice over his left shoulder. The car accelerated with a screech, slowed, accelerated again, and then sped away.

"Everyone gets what they came for. You are a generous man, Benedict," the voice said as the car disappeared around the corner of the block and through the stop sign, slowing only to make the turn.

"Who was that?" Hen asked. The brothers had come out of hiding.

Ben listened for the voice before answering, but it didn't offer any answers. "I don't know."

"I think he's your boss," Dil observed.

"That didn't sound good," Hen scratched his head. "Maybe we should go."

"Don't be stupid. We just got a free ride. You heard what the priest told Ben. This place doesn't even sound like a real church. It's a stop in."

"I don't like it, Dil."

"You're always coming up with the crazy ideas, but when the chance comes, you either blow it or chicken out. We're staying."

Hen wasn't appeased by his brother's perspective and stubborn stand.

"Tell you what. Go get the tarp, like I told you. Pick up some Yowling Cat while you're out. We'll cash that check when you come back. I'll start on that." Dil pointed to the mess in the sanctuary. Hen agreed reluctantly. An errand away from the church and a few hundred dollars in his pocket were incentive enough

for him, so he went to the truck without protest.

Ben stood in the doorway with his hands on his hips. By now the smell of the gas should have diminished considerably, but he liked the building being wide open. He listened for the voice. Nothing. As Ben thought about it, he started to convince himself that the voice was his own process of thought. The experience in the desert must have disconnected a bit of himself to observe from outside and lend rational advice.

The calm within the church spread to the street. Ben hadn't noticed Dil leaving and returning until a snarling scraping noise and Dil's voice broke the peace. Dil dragged the uncovered trashcan from the kitchen. Inside the can were a broom, mop, and dust pan. If these were the only tools supplied, there would still be plenty of work for Hen when he returned.

"I don't know about you, Ben, but this place is growing on me," Dil said, as he scooped up a pile of feathers, insects, and goop with the dustpan. It slid off into the trashcan like molasses, leaving brown smears.

Ben turned around and watched Dil set to work. The older Cortras never seemed more inspired. Ben wouldn't be surprised to hear him start to whistle.

"It feels like we're supposed to be here." Another pan full of gore plopped into the can. "You know, the place talks to me."

6 Uncovered Nakedness

Immediately after Margot's story aired, her phone rang. The caller was the friend who had tipped her. A couple uneventful days had passed since she had visited the parish where the priest was killed. Margot needed to redouble her efforts to meet the transcription work quota, to make the rent. Checks for stories acquired by military news were notoriously slow and issued only on a biweekly basis. The money couldn't be counted on arriving before the first of next month.

Still, Margot became excited to have a check coming. She was very appreciative of her friend, Mark. He didn't hang out on Sundays with her other friends. He had married soon after graduation and had "grown-up" responsibilities. That made Margot a little sad. At times it seemed like she and Mark had been friends since grade school, despite meeting at a college party when, at the time, the only thing they had in common were their majors. One circumstance or another prevented them from getting closer than infrequent phone calls.

Today Mark called to congratulate her and proposed something more. He asked if he could take her to dinner. Margot jumped at the chance. She grew elated after listening to her story on the radio, even in the monotone of the woman announcer, and felt celebratory. That, and the transcription had her working hermit-like around the clock. Margot needed a break. She accepted without thinking anything more of it. A tenacious craving for pasta salad with feta had come upon her.

They met in late afternoon at a modest trattoria close to Mark's residence. Neither had ever been to each other's homes, and in fact, they hadn't seen each other in the flesh for years. Despite the passed time, they recognized each other instantly. Now that Margot saw Mark again, she remembered why she was so fond of him. He was tall and naturally blond, a rare sight in any city-state. Margot soaked her hair in peroxide, like many of the women in Capital. He looked taller, as if he'd been working out. Most reporters Margot knew sported thin arms and were beginning to permanently slouch, which included Margot and her other friends. She pushed the self-conscious thought away. This conversation wasn't going to start with complaints about being out of shape, and losing will and interest to do something about it. She had enough of that whining on Sundays. Mark smiled widely when he saw her sitting at a table outside the restaurant. She caught whatever afflicted him and returned an exaggerated grin.

“Margot?” he asked, in feigned surprise. “You haven’t changed a bit!”

Margot blushed. “And you get more handsome every time I see you,” she replied sheepishly. She knew for a fact that her butt had grown a little bigger, but she still liked to be reminded of the time when she was trim and full of energy. Life wasn’t wasting time breaking her down.

“Maybe you just keep forgetting how good I looked to begin with.” Humility wasn’t a weakness Mark suffered. Most of the time, trying to figure out if he was truly arrogant or just enjoyed playing with the trait, was difficult. Margot was sensible enough to realize his looks and flattery helped to overcome just how annoying it could be when someone enjoyed flaunting their own laurels.

“I can see you’ve been working those pecs. I notice these things. I’m a journalist, you know.”

“And a fine one. Congratulations again. I liked what you wrote. They didn’t censor you, did they?” Mark queried.

“No, they read the story verbatim. The story was flagged for censorship, so I just followed the outline. There wasn’t much to it, really.”

Mark pulled a chair from Margot’s table and sat down. “Still, it put you on the air. More exposure means more writing.”

“I know.” Margot handed a menu to Mark. She had asked for two when she had arrived. Despite having read every word as she waited for her friend, she perused the menu again. She cleared her throat. “I should be buying you dinner. But the check hasn’t even been cut yet and I’m short of cash.”

“I wouldn’t let you. I’ve been in your shoes. It’s just a pleasure to see you. Time has really flown by.”

“It has,” Margot sighed. “Well, thank you, and thank you again.”

Mark waved her off. He glanced at the menu and set it down again. The waitress came to the table. She was young and resembled the thin man who periodically peeked from the doorway to the kitchen. She was probably his daughter; then her etiquette cinched the suspicion.

“What d’ya want?”

Mark looked amused and pointed to Margot. She blinked and drew a tolerant breath. Civil outrage would only come off as envy for the girl’s youth.

“Do you have pasta salad? I see only green salad here.”

“Nah,” the teenage waitress shook her head. Her partially braided hair dragged over either shoulder as her head turned. “We just have pasta.”

“Then I’ll have the fettuccine and the green salad.”

The waitress bounced as she wrote out the whole order. She hadn’t bothered learning item numbers or short hand, and she was oblivious to the awkward wait her lack of skills caused as she scrawled. Judging by the way the face of the waitress twisted, she looked like she had trouble spelling; most likely the word “fettuccine,” Margot guessed. The waitress checked the menu, which confirmed it. She turned to Mark and he winked. The acknowledgment popped the girl’s tongue between her teeth and she bit lightly. Margot noted Mark had a talent for inspiring immediate giddiness in women. Since she was older now, and able to reign herself in with some efficiency, she could see Mark’s charm didn’t affect just her.

“Just an ice tea, please, honey.”

The waitress trotted back to the kitchen.

“Aren’t you having dinner?”

“To tell you the truth, I have to watch my weight.”

“Nonsense. It’s expected for a man to have a little paunch. It’s how a woman knows he’s taking care of his loved ones and not thinking about himself,” Margot lied. She found him much more attractive with the muscles and straight frame. She had always found him attractive. She thought it better to change the subject before losing herself in a familiar daydream she had held captive since school. “How is your wife?”

“Oh, let’s not talk about her.” Mark became suddenly flustered.

“We never do.”

“And that’s why I like talking to you.” His smile returned. He laid his hands on Margot’s. She was surprised, but didn’t want to pull away - so she didn’t. A little untoward flirting was coming to her.

“All right. Then it’s really good to see you, too.”

“Thank you.”

The young girl brought the ice tea. Margot asked her to also bring some water. The waitress turned with a frown and went back the way she had come.

“I was curious,” Mark said. “What do you think happened in the church? Was there any truth to the story that heathen sympathizers were involved?”

“To tell you the truth, I don’t really know. It was a murder, maybe by a maniac.”

“What do you mean? Maniac?”

“There were feathers all around the body.” Margot sat back and folded her hands in her lap. “Are we going to talk about the details of a murder? I am about to have dinner.”

“Margot, no.” Mark consoled her. “I’m just wondering if there was any real connection between the murder and the heathens. Was there anything at the scene like a star, a big asterisk? You said feathers.”

She sighed again, this time exaggerated and frustrated. “I didn’t actually go inside. I saw the feathers in the crime photos. The military didn’t take very many because of the flies.”

“You didn’t go in the church?” Mark was incredulous. “Flies?”

Margot relived the conversation with the old woman from the day she went to investigate the priest’s death. Having been there before, she knew how to stop the tumbling spiral.

“After the priest was killed, the blood must have attracted flies, biting flies. When the ambulance arrived and the patrol started to take photos, the flies

attacked everybody. It was so bad that they carted the priest away and fumigated. That's why I didn't go in the church. I don't think I would have, either. It sounded too gruesome."

Mark drained half his ice tea as Margot spoke. The girl brought a couple glasses of water. The conversation lulled for the time she lingered, waiting for Mark to notice her again. A phone rang inside and her father called her to the kitchen. Her name was Sadie, or Sally. Her father had the twang of a northern accent, like a foreigner. He must have married a Chosen with family in Capital. Such unions were rare, but it happened in other countries. The marriage elevated him above the caste of UnChosen, but forever outside the bloodline. His daughter would be viewed more kindly, but remain tainted.

"What about the feathers?" Mark resumed.

"I don't know. I have no clue where they came from or what they mean. That's why I thought it was some crazy killer." Margot sipped her water. "Do they mean something to the heathens?"

"No. Nothing that I've ever heard."

Margot became suspicious. "Mark, you've covered enough murders that have been pinned on sympathizers, whether real or not. Why are you so interested in this one?"

Mark shifted in his chair and thrummed his glass with his fingers. "Time for confession. It doesn't sound like the tactics of heathens, even though I'm sure they wouldn't be upset over the death of a priest. But I have to connect all the dots."

"What are you talking about?"

"There was a raid outside Gomorrah three or four days ago. It was prompted by a missing scout and reports of Ilu Drystani being in the area."

"I heard about that."

"Yeah. Missing scouts and Drystani resurfacing go hand in hand. He's a sadist, you know. He probably became a heathen just so he can hide his crimes under a cause."

“So what makes you think Drystani is connected to the priest’s murder?” Margot jumped to a grandiose conclusion.

“I don’t. But there have been rumors that he is in Capital.”

Margot shivered. Tales before the Wall were among the stories her grandmother repeated. One day, her grandmother had shopped across the street from a café no bigger than the restaurant Margot sat outside now. As Margot recalled, a driver had raced down the street. That was possible decades ago, before the constant tangle of automobiles. There were far fewer people and automobiles. The driver veered into the café, smashing through the front window, and disappearing inside. Her grandmother said she had seen people thrown into the air by the impact. There must have been a bomb in the car. Before the falling people hit the ground, the cave-like opening filled with flame. The crash and the whoosh of fire were instantaneous, but her grandmother recalled it clearly as if it played out on film in slow motion before her. Margot looked around. No reckless drivers, and the restaurant had so few patrons, so it couldn’t possibly be a feasible target. She felt sudden ire, not toward the heathens, but at Mark. She pulled her clenched fists to her sides.

“If there is a connection, this is my story. This is big. You can’t just take it over after I’ve done the legwork.”

Mark shuffled his feet, and Margot spotted the uncomfortable squirming through the glass tabletop. “I’m not doing that at all,” he said. “The whole Drystani thing is just a rumor. Babble on the airways. You know heathens say those sorts of things just to rattle the military. There’s probably no relation.”

“Why did you really ask me to dinner?”

Mark shuffled again. His hands remained on the table where Margot left them, but now he interlocked his fingers. “I wanted to see you. That’s all. I wanted to see if you still looked sexy when you were angry.”

Margot’s anger dissipated like the failing resonance of a bell. Her flushed face now refueled with hot blood. Mark was being especially bold this afternoon.

“Shut up,” was the only reply she managed.

Mark relaxed and leaned back. He gazed contentedly at Margot’s face a little too

long. The stare sustained her blush. The salad arrived, as did a refill for Mark's ice tea. After Margot's first nibble, she felt compelled to start another conversation.

"So why do the heathens want to hurt people?"

Mark sighed. He wondered if his charms were lost on older women. The waitress was easy enough to melt, but Margot resisted. The trouble could be that the two had known each other for years, or she knew he was married, but he could see Margot wanted to succumb. He'd known that since school, but she had always been with someone else. Mark had been, too, but that didn't stop him from having fun. He was in school, after all. Commitment came later in life.

For him, the shackles came immediately after graduation with the only woman who had ever stirred guilt in his heart, and an unplanned pregnancy; but the child died at birth. Of course, Mark was sad, but also relieved. Still, his wife wouldn't let him go free, despite his resisting her pleas for another child. The resumption of his flagrant philandering had no impact on their marriage, either. Mark couldn't get Sarah to leave him. He would have walked out a long time ago, but he didn't want to look like the bad guy. Mark's family warned him against his callous behavior toward his wife. This time, an old friend from school had turned up, accompanied by the realization of an unfulfilled love affair. She was the love of his life, for that matter. Who could scoff at such a romantic destiny, where the alternative was a hopeless marriage? There was some truth to the story, despite it growing from the seed of a missed conquest. Margot would require some work, but maybe it was about time Mark was challenged. He could

always use new tools, as he suspected age only enhanced his appearance. For now, he would set aside his game of peek-a-boo with Margot and rethink his strategy.

"We're iconoclasts," Mark answered. "One day, a messiah will come and wipe the Church and all its graven images from the face of the earth."

"But we don't worship the cross."

"They know that. Still, heathens hold to strictly literal interpretations of the scriptures. They don't accept that a human being can overcome a god, or god serves man. They think it's the other way around."

“Honestly, I’ve never been very religious.” Margot had enough of her salad and pushed it aside unfinished.

“Maybe that’s what they don’t like about us,” Mark ventured. “I think it’s politics. They want a theocracy of their own.”

“And Drystani would be a dictator?”

“He’s only a captain in their organization. I don’t think he has ambitions other than murder and mayhem. But he is their lion. In fact, heathens talk a lot about lions and tigers. If you didn’t know better, you’d think their god was a god of cats.”

“Well, there is the story about the prophet in the den,” Margot shared.

“That pit is now Capital, if you believe they have infiltrated it.”

“And if they have, you want to discover it and land the assignment from military news.”

“Well, sure I do.” Mark leaned forward again. He was about to share an idea.

“And so would you. But neither of us have a lead, do we?”

“Besides feathers in a church that have nothing to do with Drystani and the heathens.”

“Let’s be realistic, Margot. I’ve made a career of crime scene reporting. I know the difference between crimes of passion, lunatics, and terrorism. You need to work part-time copying illegible handwriting to stacks of mundane forms. But you’re still a reporter and I know you prefer investigation over writing sensational propaganda.”

Mark had a valid point. Even if she did find a lead, or break a story, chances were it would be passed to a trusted, more experienced reporter. That wouldn’t be Mark, either. They were in the same race, although he had a couple laps on her. There would have to be some angle to make either of them indispensable; a unique way of thinking or an invisible source. Making themselves essential reporters required far-fetched thinking and luck.

“And?” Margot asked, trying her best to sound unconvinced.

“Let’s work together,” Mark proposed. “I always thought we’d make a great team. And we look good together.”

Mark had returned to flirting. She liked it, and this time she put her hands over his. “That sounds a lot fairer than letting you steal my story.” Margot emphasized the possessive aspect of the comment.

“Great. Then we have a partnership.”

“So tell me, what will Sarah think about you working what could be long days with an old school flame?” Margot read Mark’s mind, or had some thoughts of her own.

“She doesn’t need to know,” he replied without embellishment. “Seriously, she would get in the way. She has always been jealous, even when there wasn’t anything to be mad about.”

Margot doubted there was ever a time his wife didn’t have a reason to be upset.

“The last thing we need is her getting the wrong idea,” Mark continued. “So I should always call you. And if you need to call me, hang up if she answers.”

Margot was tempted with the idea of a clandestine adventure, absorbed by the secrecy. The fettuccine dropped to the table with a clank that nearly cracked the glass surface. It appeared Mark could also inspire jealousy in women he had just met.

“Thank you.” Margot gloated over the attention she received in preference over the young waitress. The teenager snubbed her with a sour wince and abrupt twirl.

“Well, we wouldn’t want to give your wife any ideas,” Margot said. Now she held the long gaze and Mark’s eyes grew wild.

Margot tasted the fettuccine, but the pasta had already grown cold. No doubt the lukewarm dish was the deliberate fault of the waitress. Margot offered Mark a sample.

“Oh, this isn’t very good. I still owe you a dinner,” he critiqued. Despite the taste, they finished the creamy noodles together and talked a little more about

where they should start looking for clues.

“Give me the address of the church,” Mark instructed. “I’ll take a look if I get a chance.”

“Why? Everything is probably cleaned up by now.”

“Maybe it isn’t. The place is in the ghetto, right? That would be tough to order a new assignment on so short a notice. I don’t think anyone would volunteer for that kind of work, especially if what happened already made the circuit. No priest meant an absent caretaker for the facility.”

“I can go,” Margot said.

“There will be that mess you didn’t want to look at,” Mark warned. “Besides, you don’t know what I’m looking for. We can go together. Just give me the address today.”

Margot acquiesced. Chances of either of them getting down there in the coming days were slim, especially for her. She retrieved a pen from her purse and wrote the address of St. Erasmus on the paper napkin that came with the ice tea. Come to think of it, the waitress had only provided one napkin.

After finishing their dinner, Mark left an overly generous tip on the table. The old friends, and new partners, hugged. Mark leaned down, stroking downward until his hand rested in the small of Margot’s back. He pressed her into him in a grip that lifted her to her toes. She swooned at the strength of his arms and the solid feel of his abdomen. This man was bold and smooth. She had always known it.

7 Leviathan

The older Cortras brother had worked up a sweat, as well as an appetite, as the partially eaten burrito had turned to vapor and steam. Ben joined Dil in the grisly task of cleaning the sanctuary. They had found a rake in the opposite breezeway that they had followed upon their arrival at St. Erasmus. Dil raked feathers up like leaves at the end of a warm autumn afternoon. With the sun so low, only the top portions of the stained glass let light splay into the nave. Shades of fall dabbled room. Ben crouched as he pushed the dustpan through the red jelly, rolling dead insects into a mound like fruit suspended in an opaque desert. The scraping of the pan and rake against the wooden floor bit painfully, as if an angry spider skittered through Dil's ear. As the work progressed, scratches and stains damaged the floor. The scars were already obvious between the smears.

Hen was late. The sun threatened to set by the time he finally returned. He managed to find pizza and more 'Yowling Cat,' the alcoholic cough syrup that the Cortras brothers called wine.

"Those weren't lottery tickets. They're rations," Hen reported, showing a string of paper tickets. He had somehow stolen them from his older brother's pocket. "You can only buy as much liquor as you have tickets."

"I suppose it's better than nothing at all," Dil said, unsurprised at Hen. "There was some talk about prohibition in the Cap before our time. I guess they came to a compromise."

"Uh, yeah." Hen noticed something different. He expected his brother to be mad about being gone so long, leaving Dil to the unpleasant work. Instead, he was oddly cheerful. Hen would have preferred him angry. An animated Dil was unsettling. Perhaps Dil had found and drained a bottle while Hen was absent. Hen entertained using the altar as a dinner table, but decided that would be some sort of sacrilege. He scouted the pews before the image of the blood and feathers began to turn his stomach. "Hey, ah, can we eat this in the kitchen?"

Dil and Ben put aside their work agreeably. A change of scenery was plainly required if they were going to enjoy a meal.

"There's plenty left for you," Dil said to Hen. "I made a point of saving some."

That sounded a little better to Hen, but he could see that Ben and Dil had made admirable progress. Tackling the remaining work wouldn't fill a morning, even if Hen worked alone, although he had secretly hoped the work would be finished by the time he returned. Dil led the group to the kitchen.

"What are you doing with the feathers?" Hen asked. His voice echoed in the hall. The smell of fumigation gas had faded, but a rotten scent lingered. The smell was like a ripe, dead rat recently removed from a trap. Hen leaned over the pizza boxes and breathed in deep. The cheese and tomato sauce so close to his nose sufficed to mask the other offending odor.

"The yard," Dil answered. "It needed a little something to spruce it up anyway."

Hen's skin crawled. He had never heard his brother talk this way. Ben didn't say anything. Come to think of it, the stranger never really did speak. Hen hoped Ben was responsible for Dil's transformation. The change would be okay, but only if it lasted temporarily. Hen wondered what his brother and Ben had talked about, if anything at all.

"Did you get a tarp?" Dil asked, sliding a couple chairs from the table, one in each hand.

Hen opened the pizza boxes. Both pies were topped with sausage and mushrooms, heavy on the sauce and stingy with the cheese. Ben washed his hands in the sink. He lathered with a crusted bottle of dish soap that he had found in the cupboard below. Ben left the water running so he could take another long drink without the copper flavor. He then shook his hands partially dry. Dil didn't bother washing. He wiped his hands on his clothes. The sweat from his arms liquefied the blood again. Long red pin stripes were drawn down the front of his shirt. Hen didn't notice as he busily made his selection among the irregular pizza slices.

"Yeah, and I even parked the truck down the street with a couple other wrecks."

Dil shoved half a slice into his mouth. His eyes rolled back. The Cortras brothers had gone without pizza for a long time, but Hen couldn't imagine it being that good. His older brother was never much of a connoisseur of anything. The smell of pizza drove home Hen's hunger more than the promise of a fine culinary experience. Ben also ate greedily, so creating some dinner conversation fell to Hen. The burden couldn't be lighter, as Hen always felt compelled to talk.

“I know where those bugs came from. I heard it on the radio.” Hen’s audience continued eating, but did not protest the attempt at discourse. “There were some prehistoric squids that washed up on the beach. But they weren’t really squids; they had the arms, but their bodies were like snakes.”

“I thought you said you knew where the bugs came from,” Dil said. A huge, mushy wad of pizza muffled his speech.

“I was getting to that. They were huge. The biggest squids ever found.”

“So the military news is talking about events other than heathens and body counts. This must be their golden age of radio,” Dil observed.

“Dil? Are you on something?” Hen asked. “Cuz’ I wouldn’t mind...”

Dil laughed with his mouth wide open. Chewed crust spilled out and bounced off the edge of the table on its trajectory to the floor.

“Ben, have I told you that my brother is a crack-up?” Dil spat crumbs as he talked. He reached for a bottle of wine. “Where did the flies come from, Hen? My money is on the ass of Beelzebub. Any wager, Ben?”

Hen didn’t know what his brother was talking about and Ben didn’t seem to care. He was preoccupied with eating and had no interest in rhetorical gambling.

“They were on the dead squids, swarms of them. They started to bite people on the beach. The military brought in flame throwers to fry them out of the sky.”

Dil took a huge gulp of wine straight from the bottle. The next moment, he bowed over the table with his tongue jutting out. His arms spread wide as one fist gripped the bottle. The other hand wielded a folded slice of pizza. Dil was going to retch. Hen rescued the uneaten portions of pizza, but that were never in real danger as Dil recovered.

“Damn!” Dil exclaimed.

“Plague,” Ben said backing away from the table.

“Damn, right!” Dil added. “And fire in the sky!”

Hen sat cemented to his seat. His goose flesh had gone cold. Something was different about his brother, as if somebody else had slipped into his Dil's skin. This other Dil took a couple more big swigs of wine. This time Dil swallowed hard and clenched his teeth.

"Well," Dil said. "Did it work?"

"What?" Hen forgot what they were talking about.

"The flame throwers? Did they kill all the bugs?"

"I suppose so."

Dil turned around to recover the chair that had skidded back when he had stood up abruptly. Hen leaned toward Ben.

"Hey, Ben," Hen said in a low voice, impossible to hide from anyone at the table. "What did you guys do when I was gone?"

"By the wiggling toes of the Mortal God!" Dil exclaimed the interruption. "Let's talk about something else. I've been shoveling dead bugs all day."

Silence swelled within the kitchen, except for the prattle of the refrigerator. Neither Dil nor Ben seemed to notice. Ben continued eating and Dil drank. One of the bottles of wine was now his alone. Dil quickly drained half its contents.

"Where did you get this?" Dil asked. "Can you get some more?"

"It's the same stuff we always get," Hen answered. "There's a store on the corner. We still got tickets."

"We'll need some more, then."

"There's a curfew, Dil. The shop will be closed, too."

"Not tonight, my good friend. Tomorrow."

Hen thought twice about telling Dil to take it easy with the wine. Even though Dil would suffer for it in the morning, Hen knew better than to try to curb his brother's drinking. A younger sibling had no place telling an elder what to do.

The lesson was once reinforced in a drunken brawl. Hen could never get the better of his brother in any condition. Pent-up viciousness clawed Dil's inside. Hen avoided being the one to tap into it. Exposing that anger was easy to do when Dil was drunk, especially if obviously rude attempts were made to ignore him. Even though Hen also enjoyed tipping the bottle, it was best to encourage his brother to stay sober. Hen could have lied about the tickets, but the chance was spoiled. That's usually how his ideas came, just in time, or a little too late. Hopefully the impending hangover would dissuade Dil from drinking again for a while.

"Ben." Dil put down his squashed pizza and favored the wine. "I think we're going to be great friends. You, me, and him." Dil thrust the neck of the bottle toward Hen. Ben couldn't help noticing that Dil acted as if his younger brother was a recent acquaintance. Still, he didn't know much about either of them to say that the behavior was out of the ordinary. Last night, Ben had noticed drinking transformed Dil. The change was obvious, even in Ben's debilitated state. More alcohol must let more of that alternate personality loose.

Ben appreciated that he wasn't being asked more questions about his identity or where he came from. He already personally focused on those mysteries with as much diligence as he could summon. The effort to recall made his head throb. His memories were almost within sight. Seeing the images was like staring at a blank piece of paper with words printed on the other side. The backward ghosts of letters were perceived, but still illegible. Eventually, focus would drift through the white portions of the paper, but focusing only on the blankness promoted meditation. To avoid the pangs of thought, Ben droned away at his immediate task. A few hours that passed during the afternoon involved mindlessly scraping congealed blood from a floor.

During the work, Ben partially listened to Dil's light-hearted comments and morbid quips. They reminded him somewhat of the voice that had come to haunt him. He couldn't conclude Dil and the voice were the same. Ben realized he was trying to find an external source for the voice, but the uninvited guest had arrived before the Cortras brothers. Ben had mapped out that order of events on his recent timeline. The encounter with the dead priest, whose identity he had assumed, or shared, was also pinned in his history.

Now the three of them were in Capital. They had appropriated a parish church that didn't receive much oversight, as a base of operations. Everything had

happened thus far according to the plan. But whose plan? The brothers thought things out only as far as getting past the Wall and finding a place to stay. They were hiding. Ben picked that up instinctively. He didn't care what they were hiding from, and he didn't believe he had his own plan quietly unfolding in his subconscious. A large gap in his memory needed to be filled, but he felt it was bigger than his amnesia.

There was a reason Ben had come to St. Erasmus, more solid than any metaphysical purpose. A large chunk of pizza had grown soggy and tasteless in his mouth. A good chunk of time had passed between taking the bite and starting to chew. Ben eventually became aware of the unsavory fact. Thinking had spoiled his dinner.

"Here we are in a church," Dil said, spinning his free hand in a grand circle. "What better place to get started at making a difference. Do some great things." Dil laughed loudly and hard. He was the only one, and the lack of participation didn't escape his notice. "Oh, come now. Here we are together. Let's make a pact. We have plenty of blood to sign our names in."

"What are you talking about?" Ben asked.

Hen was glad Ben asked. His petrified state returned as he prayed Dil had merely become drunk too fast. He was grateful Ben picked this moment to shake off his daze.

"This world is coming to an end, Ben." Dil grew suddenly solemn. "Soon the only thing to walk the face of the earth will be zombies, vampires, and Cain."

Darkness filled the room. No one noticed the light growing orange and dim as they ate, but now that the sun dipped behind the low mountains beyond the Wall, all illumination retreated. Hen stood, stiff with momentary paralysis. He found a switch near the refrigerator and flipped it up. A bare bulb over the sink cast soft light and fuzzy shadows into the room. Dil's seat faced away from the light. His face was in complete shadow except for the beads of sweat clinging to his cheeks. They glistened like diamonds embedded in his skin.

"Do you think the Mortal God wants any part of this place? To be constantly nagged and bullied?"

"You're talking like a heathen, Dil," Hen cautioned his older brother.

“That has nothing to do with it!” Dil shouted. He rose from his seat, then sat back down with a thud, causing the chair’s legs to creak. “There’s not going to be a messiah, either. God is gone, my friend. Took a vacation and decided he liked the other side of the galaxy, or wherever he built his summer place. A little birdie told me.”

“You know we’re not heathens, right, Ben?” Hen asked. His voice trembled. Ben remembered that the younger brother had mentioned that fact to the dying priest. The clarification was important.

“It wouldn’t make any difference,” Ben replied. He didn’t care either way. He decided he was unconvinced, if not completely unconcerned, about the existence of a god.

“But we can,” Dil pronounced happily. He smiled again and stood up wavering. “That’s what I’m saying. How about we start a new religion? How about a cult? Virgins and drugs and not-so-virgins.” Dil’s chuckle echoed hollowly in the bottle as he raised it to his lips. One more mouthful would finish the nearly empty bottle. Dil took the gulp after an exhalation in which he pretended to breathe fire.

“Let’s not talk about this anymore. We’re in a church, Dil. We believe in the Mortal God.” Hen begged to change the subject.

“What better place to bid him bon voyage? Just don’t expect any miracles. He’s not even writing postcards.”

“What do you say, Ben?” Dil staggered. He still held the empty bottle in his fist. “We need to make our own miracle. Get ourselves a flock.”

Dil’s audience wholly dismissed his drunken rambling. Ben avoided being struck by the bottle as Dil swayed. Ben stood up and established a safe distance between Dil and himself.

“I think I need to get some sleep,” Ben said.

“Yeah,” Hen eagerly agreed. Any suggestion leading away from the current topic was welcome. He darted behind Ben. “Let’s go to sleep.”

“I was just playing around. Don’t get upset,” Dil said. “We can talk about

something else. Sit down. We need more wine... but I'm not feeling so good."

Dil pitched forward into the open boxes of pizza crust and partially eaten slices. Hen didn't have a chance to save them this time. The table slid forward with the momentum of Dil's fall. Its tubular metal legs creaked and screeched as they strained against the weight and motion. Dil had passed out. His body draped over the table, with his knees bent, and his arms dangled over the sides. The bottle slipped from his grasp and landed with a cavernous thud, and leisurely rolled toward the splintered doorway. Hen watched as it bumped and rested against the wooden door that could never be fully closed.

"That hit him pretty fast," Ben observed.

"I haven't seen him like this before," Hen said. "Are you sure he didn't take anything?"

Ben shook his head, but Hen didn't see.

"Those things he said," Hen started. "You know he didn't mean it. He never talks like that."

"Are you going to leave him there?" Ben asked, disregarding the disclaimer. He still had a sliver of crust that he now chewed casually.

"I suppose there's a bed upstairs. Can you help me?"

Ben nodded again, but Hen still wasn't watching. He busily explored ways to handle Dil. Apparently Hen was unaccustomed to touching his older brother. After swallowing the dry bread, Ben hoisted the unconscious Dil up with a hand under the man's armpit, and the other pulling his wrist. Hen followed the example. They strung Dil's arms around their necks. Ben couldn't help thinking he had come around full circle. One good deed had now been repaid with the same.

Dil was dead weight. He slept and snorted as he snored, and his breath smelled like rotting oranges and rubbing alcohol. Hen lifted Dil's head, worried that his brother would suddenly stop breathing. Moving into the hall was easy enough, but they stumbled on the steep, narrow stairs. They had to navigate the steps at an angle, with Ben going first. The stairwell itself was without light except for a dusty glow at the top. The light floated through windows just barely topping the

walls at either side of the church. Hen tripped and fell on Dil's limp form, which nearly dragged Ben backwards. The older brother would surely wake to mysterious bruises in the morning or early afternoon. Feeling the uncontrolled tug, Ben let go entirely. He wasn't going to allow himself to tumble backwards into a monkey pile of grown men. Once Hen pushed upright, they dragged the unwieldy Dil the remainder of the way by his arms.

Big rooms and a large bathroom partitioned the second floor. There was even a kitchenette with a hotplate, but no other appliance or sink. The layout looked more like a hostel than a church. Then again, the place was designated for other purposes than a house of worship. It wasn't such a stretch of the imagination to think this building was a way station for patrols in times of unrest. Ben wondered if a stash of riot gear or other provisions had been hidden somewhere. The breeze blew gently through open doors. Ben and Hen strung Dil's arms over their shoulders again. Ben steered for the nearest bedroom. His selection contained a half dozen bare cots set up in a row. More cots were folded and stood against the far wall. Hen wanted something cozier. He headed for the second room. Dil was tugged between the two, but Ben yielded. A game of tug-of-war was out of the question.

The room Hen chose contained two naked twin beds and closets, which carved the room into an irregular shape, casting thick angular shadows. The arrangement formed a nook filled with a table and chairs and provided a simple outdoor view of rooftops.

When they reached the nearest bed, Ben dumped Dil gracelessly. Hen didn't let go and almost fell again. He caught himself on the bed. The mattress was hard and bounced once before settling. Hen lifted Dil's feet to the bed. He didn't bother taking off his brother's shoes. Ben pushed Dil's shoulder beneath him so he lay on his side.

"I guess this will be our room," Hen said. "Are you going to stay?"

"In here with you?" Ben asked.

"No, I mean stay at the church. I still want to leave in the morning. I don't like what maybe happened here. It might be haunted or cursed. I don't know. This isn't what Dil is like."

"Where are you going to go?"

“I don’t know. But we got lots of money now. More than I’ve ever seen all at once. If we get jobs, we can stay in the Cap. If we can’t get jobs, we’ll have enough to live in the encampment for awhile.”

Ben couldn’t shake the feeling that he was meant to be here. Dil made it obvious that he, too, felt welcomed. Only Hen voiced aversion, and his reaction was perfectly natural. The eyes of the Church may be turned away, but the trio’s stay was on borrowed time. Then there were the blood and feathers, indicating that something terrible had happened to the previous priest. Signs did not bode well. There was no guarantee that Ben wasn’t the next target, even if he was an impostor. Yet, he gained entrance to the Cap and specifically came to St. Erasmus for something, great things, not merely for celebration or honor. There was a job to do. The big, blank spot in his memory may not have anything to do with the feeling. However, he had to assume it did. A human, inspired directive was more comfortable to believe than everything being the result of ghoulish coincidences.

“Let’s see what happens tomorrow,” Ben said. He knew he’d stay. The Cortras brothers would, too. Hen wouldn’t leave Dil. Poor Hen was like a man who wouldn’t unlace a comfortable boot caught in the tracks of a train barreling down on him. In a strange way, Ben felt better to know that. He knew what to expect of Hen, but Dil was a different matter. The older brother gave the impression of being stoic and contemplative, if shortsighted, but that personality started to change even before he started to drink. Hen saw it, and there wasn’t a better judge than a brother.

Ben left Hen and walked to the farthest room. A window overlooked the street. This must have been the priest’s room. A large bed, armoire, armchair, and table lent the space a lived-in appearance. Their shapes and colors were not exact in the low light. Ben realized he really was tired. He pulled off his boots and lay down otherwise fully clothed. The soft ringing in the back of his head returned and the steady whistle lulled him to sleep and into dreams. He couldn’t describe any of the frozen, intangible images, but he noted the absence of sound. His dreams were still and deaf.

8 Pride

Jimmy Batheirre had lived a very short life. At seventeen, he had everything he wanted when he wanted it. Most of the desires were driven by youthful whim, only to be forgotten once appeased. The red, newly antique convertible “Arroyo” wasn’t one of those passing impulsive urges. He had dreamed of it since the age of thirteen. The automobile belonged to his uncle Judah. The interior was glossy white leather. A liberal amount of chrome was applied inside and out. The family consensus was that the car was tacky, but to Jimmy and his uncle, it was a fine example of mechanical sculpture. The Arroyo was a real work of art. Jimmy believed it was a shame that the car sat beneath its cloth cover in his mother’s garage.

This jewel was meant to parade around town. It wasn’t just a symbol of wealth, but of class. Standards were dismally low in Gomorrah, and the car surpassed any little token the peasants presented. Shiny leather shoes, gold watches, and even a swimming pool in the back yard were trinkets compared to this marvelous machine. The car maintained its pristine condition by staying covered. Everything was original. There wasn’t so much as a scratch in the paint, except for the few tiny blemishes Jimmy had caused and hoped no one would notice.

Sometimes, when Jimmy was home alone, he would sneak into the garage and remove the thick cotton cover. He would spend a good part of an hour gazing at the beauty. Part of the ritual included slipping off his sneakers and stuffing his rings into his pocket. The jewelry had made those first, barely perceptible scratches. Jimmy would sit behind the steering wheel. He bet his uncle had felt the same thrill the first time he sat in the driver’s seat.

In Jimmy’s imagination, the wooden garage doors melted away and he was instantly transported to an empty road in the desert. The white vinyl top was folded down and the car cruised as fast as it could go, with Jimmy’s foot planted heavily on the accelerator. Not so much as a shudder, as he rocketed through the sunlight and solitude. Jimmy never dared to lower the top as the Arroyo sat in the garage. He never touched the dials and buttons on the console, either. The scratches were the only evidence he dared to leave, and if there was something he could do about them, he would.

There had been a time, at fifteen, when he found the keys. His uncle wanted to see the car one afternoon, as he occasionally would. Jimmy's mother left the keys on the kitchen table, instead of immediately secreting them back into her purse for safekeeping. She and Uncle Judah went to lunch. Jimmy couldn't resist starting up the convertible. He nearly panicked when exhaust started filling the small space, so he restored the cover and keys in a panic. He threw open the garage door and waved an old blanket through the air for a good twenty minutes to dissipate the fumes. Luckily, the little adventure went undiscovered.

The car would eventually be a gift to the boy, if Jimmy finished school and actually attended the university to which his large family bought admission. Going to the university was still a year away. Jimmy would major in business and then graduate. That was never a question. In fact, he didn't need his family to pave his entrance to school or to land a job. He was an intelligent and ambitious kid, smart enough to know life had handed him a free ride. He wouldn't turn his back on that.

The vices of common people made his family rich. The concept of morality was sketchy to the buyers and sellers in his family's business. Even though the production, distribution, and selling of methamphetamine, and a few other choice drugs for which the family was less known, were illegal, a popular demand persisted. Who were they to tell people what to do with their lives? They certainly weren't responsible if customers got hooked.

If people wanted to spend less fortunate existences while aped, the Batheirre family would happily provide the goods. Why not? Jimmy saw what Gomorrah had to offer for the less privileged. If he were not a Batheirre, he'd probably be an addict, too. Jimmy had his merits, but the temptation to escape the drudgery would have been nearly insurmountable, especially as relief was so readily available. If his family didn't provide what the populace wanted, somebody else would. That someone could be less interested in the longevity of customers and the safety of the city. The Batheirre family provided a service and held civic responsibility in high esteem. It was good business.

The Batheirres were not bad people. Jimmy had always believed that. He hadn't heard otherwise, until talking to his cousin one summer day. Jimmy and Nate were related, but many times removed, and rarely saw each other. Still, they were family. The solidarity of family was a core Batheirre value. It kept the operation of their business tight. Nate was older and wiser by a few years,

although his wisdom needed more time to cure. Nate outlined the history of the family.

As Jimmy had always believed, Uncle Judah and Jimmy's father were brothers, who learned the ropes from his grandfather. Jimmy knew that. That was how the business ran, passed down from generation to generation. Jimmy also knew he'd been conceived before his parents were married. That supposedly caused a problem between his father and grandfather. The unexpected death of his grandfather soon solved the problem. Cancer took the patriarch before Jimmy was old enough to remember. A young Judah took over the business and Jimmy's father never allowed another ill word about his wife and new son. Jimmy's father was killed in a car accident soon after. Some aped loser failed to yield at an intersection. Jimmy's father and the other driver were killed instantly.

Nate told a new variation of the story. Apparently Jimmy was closer to the brutal center of power than he realized. Nate said Jimmy's grandfather was thrilled to have a grandchild. The couple was indeed young and unmarried, but that wasn't a problem. The Batheirres were a close family and had plenty of money. No time at all would be wasted ushering the girl into the tree. Another leaf, or two in this case, were lovingly welcomed. So Jimmy's father and mother were married. Then, of course, his grandfather passed away. Jimmy's father was the older brother, so by tradition, he was heir to the empire. As Nate told it, tradition was firmly in place, as Jimmy's father assumed control. Nate revealed that this development didn't sit well with Judah, who was envious.

Competition between Judah and Jimmy's uncle had been overfed throughout their youth. Their father preached the importance in guarding against apathy. The business was to be passed to hungry sons. Judah landing in second place, solely due to the happenstance order of birth, wasn't fair. That's why Judah engineered his older brother's death.

The idea was difficult to comprehend. Uncle Judah had always been kind and generous to Jimmy. He spoke well of Jimmy's father. Most of what Jimmy knew about his father and his grandfather had come from Uncle Judah. Yet a subtle tension existed between his mother and uncle. She never spoke of it, but Jimmy had the impression that she wanted to put distance between her son and the Batheirres. They visited relatives only when Uncle Judah showed up at their door, and dragged them to holiday affairs or other special events. Uncle Judah had been the only one who had ever come to visit, and typically arrived

unannounced. He never said or did anything to coerce his mother, but she looked reluctant and pressured.

Maybe she sought to avoid the memory of her dead husband, but life would have been much different without the support of Uncle Judah and the rest of the family. The tailor shop of Jimmy's mother would have failed a long time ago. Jimmy wouldn't have the money to go to the university after passing the entrance exams, and there wouldn't have been the plentiful gifts and cash throughout his childhood.

In addition to the plan for Jimmy to attend school and earn a degree, he was also the only true heir to the family business. Jimmy's uncle had said as much. Uncle Judah never married and didn't have children of his own. When Jimmy graduated a good five or six years from now, he'd come back to Gomorrah. Uncle Judah would teach him how business worked in the real world. With that knowledge, and whatever Jimmy picked up in school, the boy was expected to do wonderful things for the family name, and maybe even bring it some legitimacy outside the ragged borders of Gomorrah. His mother never disagreed, but she did insist Jimmy express what he wanted with the future that was his alone. Jimmy did.

However, there was that bellyache of truth. Nate didn't have a reason to spin lies. Judah fostered an uncomfortable relationship with heathens around the time of his brother's death. The family disapproved of the interaction and had harassed Judah ever since. The relationship between Judah and his brother, the head of the family, was complicated, but it wouldn't matter if Judah were in charge.

The dealings with the heathens started with establishing lines of demarcation. Both sides benefited as long as their activities remained separated. Trouble in one camp never touched the other. The arrangement grew into tit for tat, not like a genuine partnership, but favors were exchanged. That kind of activity couldn't be hidden from a family the size of the Batheirre's. Nate said Jimmy's father demanded it end. An ultimatum paramount to excommunication was delivered, but Judah was committed to the path he had taken. He may have gone too far and owed too much to back out, or his dark desire was firmly coupled with heathen strategy. In either case, Jimmy's father was an obstacle to be removed. The body of the fledgling Batheirre heir had been so horribly mangled in a fatal accident, that the family insisted on an immediate cremation.

Jimmy didn't want to hear anymore. He ran straight home. Nate called after him to solicit silence. Jimmy didn't know what to do. He thought about having been mercilessly stripped of a father. The loss was the only thing going through his head all the way home. A whole other life had been denied him. Jimmy didn't know how to deal with that, either. He'd grown up without a real father, although Uncle Judah attempted to play the role every once in a while. His uncle insisted upon it to the point of imposing on Jimmy's mother. Uncle Judah even said he had chosen Jimmy's given name. Whether that was true or not, the revelation resulted in a terrible argument between Jimmy's mother and Uncle Judah. The fight left his mother crying and bruised. Jimmy pushed the recollection of that day beneath more pleasant memories. When the bad memories bubbled up to his consciousness, he tried to distract himself.

His mother's beating had been a long time ago, but Nate's story dusted and polished it. The small trauma glared in a new light that was impossible to ignore. Jimmy grasped at a desperate idea to make himself feel better, to restore his oblivious happiness from a few hours before. He would take the Arroyo for a drive.

The timing couldn't have been more convenient. His mother had stepped out, probably not far. Her purse sat in its usual place on the vanity in her bedroom. She must be making a rare call on a neighbor, but that was far enough. Jimmy snatched the key to the convertible. After slipping the key off the keyring, he backed out of the room, subconsciously retracing his steps. Once in the garage, he deftly removed the convertibles cover. He tossed it into the broad back seat. Jimmy unfastened the latches of the top and started the car. This was the first time he had lowered the top. A wonderful exhilaration made his heart beat faster.

The transformation was like watching a flower bloom or a bride lifting her veil. Jimmy sat amazed as the metal struts folded the top back. The convertible awakened as the Arroyo stretched its mechanical arms after a long hibernation. The car evolved into what it was meant to be, open to the sky-but not quite yet. In his haste, Jimmy had forgotten to open the garage door. He hopped out of the car and dashed to the door, coughing out the fumes as he went.

The garage door raised with loud twangs of un-worked springs and fear gripped Jimmy. He almost expected to see his mother and Uncle Judah standing there or on the corner at the end of the block. Jimmy scouted the area in three long-legged paces. The street looked empty, but it was the middle of a hot day. People

would either be at work or finding shade. He listened to the growling engine. The car was determined to go. Jimmy could feel the craving from the machine. That was all the convincing he needed. Jimmy went back to the car and roded it from its cramped cell.

The sun glistened like a bead of molten glass in the red paint. The reflection flowed across the hood as the car crept forward tentatively. Jimmy wanted nothing more than to drive away, fast and far, but he restrained himself long enough to lower the garage door again. When that was done, he returned to the idling car, shifted the car to “Drive” again, and placed his foot on the accelerator. The tires screeched with the slightest touch of the gas pedal. He raced the car down the street a second later. Everything Nate had said was now the furthest thing from Jimmy’s mind.

The feel for the car came naturally to the boy. Jimmy believed he was a good driver, despite the lack of experience. People got out of his path, anyway, because everyone knew who Jimmy was. Being the only nephew of the most powerful man in Gomorrah automatically granted the boy an amount of fame and status. No doubt, word of Jimmy’s adventure would soon reach his mother and uncle. That was the drawback of being famous, but Jimmy didn’t care. On long empty streets, he was able to build up enough speed to make the wind whistle past his ears. Between the wind and the thundering engine, he couldn’t hear himself laugh and yell. His shaggy black hair danced the whirl of a dervish as it whipped across his vision. The twirling locks brushed away tears that the wind blew from his eyes.

The speed, sun, and feel of the wheel in his hands stoked Jimmy’s daring. He turned the knob on the radio. There wasn’t anything to listen to. Sermons from the Church and military news didn’t cater to teenage boys. Both channels were droning bores. Playing with the radio was really a matter of exploration. Jimmy wanted to hear sound from the dashboard speaker. He wanted to blast it over the sounds of the wind and the car. Taking the convertible in the first place was the biggest risk. What more did little things like twisting knobs matter compared to that? The day had arrived when Jimmy did what he had wanted to do for years. Taking the Arroyo was the only thing he wasn’t allowed to do. It was the only thing that wasn’t given to him the moment he asked. Having this now, after wanting it for so long, was sweeter than any fulfilled desire he had ever had. The feeling made him bolder.

The radio wasn't cackling. The little orange bar behind the floating white numbers moved to the right as Jimmy continued to turn. The other knob did nothing at all. He caught himself minding the radio closer than the road. His foot pressed more heavily on the accelerator when he wasn't watching where he was going. He tugged the steering wheel to the left to avoid sideswiping a parked car. As he passed, he realized that he hadn't even come close to the other vehicle. The perspective and sudden upward glance had tricked him. He chortled at his momentary loss of confidence.

Jimmy returned to figuring out how to operate the radio. He grasped the first dial between his thumb and forefinger. It felt like there was a little give. He pulled a little harder, hoping the next sound would be a shower of voices or static, depending on if he had fallen on a station during his clueless knob twisting. Neither happened. Instead, the knob popped off its metal stem and slipped between his fingers. Jimmy watched as it flipped through the air in front of him. It bounced off the steering column, then rolled on the floor between the pedals.

Sudden fear gripped the boy. He could easily fit the knob back into place, yet all the anxiety over breaking something on the car rushed back with fury at the sight of the displaced chunk of cast metal. Jimmy's instinct was to immediately reach down and retrieve the knob. As he did, he sealed his destiny. No more thought or desire, only oblivion. The convertible folded like an empty soda can, as did the bed of the stalled pick-up truck that Jimmy rear-ended. The truck rolled forward, while the crumpled car skidded an impossibly short distance, given its momentum before it stopped. Then the truck pulled away as if nothing had happened. Jimmy's blood fell in thick drops over the white interior and shattered glass like big pearls of rain at the beginning of a summer storm.

The concussive collision drew witnesses after the fact. Everyone knew Jimmy Batheirre lay in the crushed convertible. A few people recognized the Cortras' truck, even though it was relatively new to Gomorrah. Before nightfall, a dozen people were looking for it as a reward was offered for finding the vehicle's owners. Jimmy was still alive, but only in a technical sense. Gurgling came from his throat, but the boy never recovered. Someone who worked for Judah, as half of Gomorrah did directly or indirectly whether they knew it or not, wrapped Jimmy's limp body in a blanket and rushed him to Judah Batheirre's home. Within fifteen minutes after being placed on a leather sofa in Judah's den, Jimmy drowned in a lungful of his own blood. Five minutes after that, the summoned doctor pronounced the boy dead.

Judah Batheirre was stunned into silence until the doctor offered his condolences - then Batheirre exploded. He beat the unsuspecting doctor until both men lay on the floor. Loud cracks accentuated Judah's flourish of curses. The doctor suffered a broken face during the knock-out blows, with his nose and jaw pressed unevenly to the right side of his face. Judah sobbed, with the fractured fingers of his right hand raised before him. He gave the order to find whoever had killed his son. He emphasized the word "son." The murderers would be brought there to see what they had done, before they had fled like cowards. They would make amends with their tears and their lives.

However, the guilty party was not found. The Cortras brothers had made their escape, but Judah now knew who was responsible. The following morning, Annette, Jimmy's mother, finally heard what had happened. She had spent the night worrying, since it was the first time Jimmy hadn't been home in the evening. She had not noticed the missing convertible, as she hadn't even bothered to look. Months went by without her going into the garage. As far as she was concerned, that part of her home didn't belong to her. It had been taken over by Judah for his brassy car. When she heard that it was the instrument of her son's death, the bitterness toward Judah that she had long harbored in her bosom, burst and inflamed her. She rushed to Judah's home to see her dead son, to take proper care of him, instead of allowing his body to be treated like muck to rub the offending dogs' noses in. It was an infrequent occasion when her will dominated over Judah's. She discovered that bending his bandaged fingers in the course of an en

suing argument helped make her point. She had not forgotten the lesson in how effective violence could be when it came to winning.

The visitation was held a couple days after Jimmy's death. Judah demanded it take place at his home. He argued a valid point about space, and Annette was too tired and shocked to dispute. The details were currently too much to wrangle over. Judah took care of everything, just as he always had before; likewise, Annette refused to be grateful. She did demand that Jimmy be taken back to her house to spend one more night at home before the funeral. As inconvenient and unorthodox as the request was, it was granted. The mother would be allowed her quirks in her grief.

Gathering the family together was a simple matter. Though there were many members to contact, all lived in the city, and word spread quickly. The ceremony

was quiet. Judah and Jimmy's mother sat furthest from each other on opposite sides of the burgundy casket. It was originally going to be red like the demolished convertible, but the pressure of time and poor taste were too great for Judah to overcome. The lid remained closed during visitation, since the boy's face had been turned to pulp. No amount of creativity on the part of the mortician had been able to restore Jimmy's cheeks to the same shape they had held in life. An open casket would have been cruel to the mother, even though Judah demanded everyone see what had been done to a member of his family. There would be witnesses to the work of cowards. Judah got his way. Whenever Annette stepped out of the room, Judah opened the coffin to show whoever was nearest. Jimmy was no longer a human being. He didn't even look like one anymore.

The immediate members of the family gathered at Annette's home that evening. The mood was reflected in the black dresses the woman wore. The ordinary suits of the men increased the somber tone. Judah invited himself. He felt justified, more than obligated. Despite his tenuous relationship with Jimmy's mother, he saw so much of the boy's features in her face, and he missed seeing that beauty now. The boy shared the same almond-shaped brown eyes and high cheeks as his mother. Both possessed sharp chins and noses, with clear, pink skin. Judah remembered that the beauty of Jimmy's mother, Annette, was what captivated him so many years ago, the day Judah had discovered his older brother had met this lovely girl.

She eventually found herself unable to decide between the loves of two brothers. Ultimately she chose the elder and rational brother, the one who didn't scare her. Judah felt that the passion he lost with Annette had been regained with Jimmy. Now he could only conjure up the mauled image of the boy in death. After such a tragedy, Judah was finally seeing Annette again. He recognized what he loved in Jimmy and realized it was Annette all along. The booze or the pain pills he'd been consuming all day played no part in the insight. He and Annette made Jimmy into the boy he was. Annette may see that in Judah now. He was the only one she had. Judah decided their game of avoiding each other for the past day and a half would come to an end tonight. The time for renewal had arrived, an affirmation of life, and a new beginning. Judah crossed the room and stood squarely before Annette. She was lingering near the coffin. The corner of the room cleared as the two met. The family was prepared for the confrontation.

"Annette," Judah said. His voice carried the inflection of reverence it hadn't

offered in years. He surprised himself. The sound of his voice took him back to his youth. It rekindled the excitement of the first time he had made love with his brother's girlfriend. He regressed to the weeks of tumbling romance when he had tried to win Annette's heart from another man. Tragically, it was in vain. "There is so much I want to go back and change."

Annette glared at Judah, with venom in her eyes. She could feel the muscles in her neck and shoulders tightening as if she was coiling, but Judah didn't heed the warning. He was swimming in his rediscovered memories of love and lust.

"This is not what I wanted for us. There has been so much time wasted."

"And that is why you tore it all away," Annette spat. "You lack imagination, Judah. Or was it some kind of sick joke, that you killed Paul and his son in the same way?"

Judah reeled. He didn't expect to hear these accusations tonight. He thought Annette's suspicion about Judah's responsibility for his brother's death, was buried ages ago. The subject hadn't come up since the argument over Jimmy's real father, the day Judah had staked his claim. This was unfair and flatly inappropriate, given the circumstances. Judah was still speechless, but a matchstick had been struck inside. He tasted the sulfurous smoke curling from his mouth.

"What was it, Judah? Was Jimmy reminding you a little too much of Paul? Did you think he was back for revenge?"

That was enough. Annette was growing louder, even as her voice quivered. The topic was off limits. Now this woman was dragging it out in front of the family at the very worst time.

"Jimmy is my boy!" Judah yelled. The family still in the room tried to inconspicuously retreat. Judah caught the motion in the corner of his eye. When the last back turned, he grabbed Annette's arm. A purple imprint of his fingers would swell up the following morning.

"Let go of me. You don't know what you're talking about," she screamed. "Jimmy is Paul's son. Sleeping with you was the stupidest thing I ever did."

"Marrying the wrong man was the stupidest thing you ever did. You thought you

were fucking money, but he's dead. He's been dead for a long time. I just don't understand why you're not fucking me now."

Annette slapped Judah. Judah raised his bandaged hand and thought better than to strike the woman in return. Injury taught restraint. Instead, he yanked her off balance and pulled her, stumbling, toward the coffin. The reminiscent affection for the woman was gone, like the past and Jimmy. Judah was going for the latch on the lid again.

"Like I said, Jimmy is my boy. Do I have to point out the resemblance?" Judah fired. "Let me show you why Jimmy is mine, not Paul's."

"Judah, please," Annette pleaded. She righted herself long enough to firmly plant her feet. Judah still pulled her along as she skidded on her heels. "Please, I don't want to see my baby. I don't want to see my baby like this."

"Bitch." Judah fumbled with the latch. His broken fingers made the task difficult. Annette tugged at her captured arm. Struggling made it worst, as each movement caused Judah's grip to constrict automatically. Her fingertips started to tingle and turn purple, while his knuckles turned white.

"No!" she sobbed in protest.

"What's going to happen to you now?" Judah asked, as he worked the latch. "You'd have nothing without me. You'll be nothing without me. I'll make sure of that! I'll take it all away!"

A dilemma arose; Judah couldn't possibly unlock the casket with his bandaged hand. If he let go of Annette, she would undoubtedly bolt. Judah wasn't a man who gave up easily. Even in his rage, he was timing his next motion. Once he let go, he'd have to lunge forward and deliver a backhand to Annette's face. An eye for an eye was his motto. He personalized the saying by making his retribution hurt much more. He was in the final seconds of his silent countdown when he was disturbed.

Neither Judah nor Annette had heard the man clear his throat, trying to gain their attention. It was Truman, Judah's uncle on his mother's side. He was no one of consequence, but closer to the center than Judah preferred. There were too many "hanger-ons" and charity cases on that branch of the family. Judah often felt lucky that there was enough fire in his father's blood to make up for the

meekness and beggary that cursed his mother's side. The woman was fortunate to preserve her natural beauty well into middle age. Her looks certainly had earned her a grand share of undeserved favors for her rodent-like siblings. She must have been a changeling, kidnapped at birth by a pack of half-rat creatures. What other than a mythical explanation would suffice?

"Judah?" Truman asked. He was a plump rat, just like his brothers and sisters, all thanks to Judah. Truman would be the only person so obtuse not to realize when privacy was desired, and he couldn't take a clue from everyone else present. Judah waited for Truman to leave. When it was obvious the man wasn't going, he let go of Annette. She ran past Truman, stunned and wobbling.

"Bitch," Judah muttered again. He called after the fleeing woman. "Think about what you're going to do next, Annette. Think about how good you've had it." As he watched her go, he couldn't believe that he had allowed it. She had managed to slip away. The escape made him angrier.

"What is it?" The flames still burned.

"It's Josiah," Truman answered. "He's on the phone." The ringing of the phone was something else Judah and Annette had missed.

"He wants to express his sympathies."

"To me?" Judah was incredulous. "What does your aped brother really want?" For a moment, Judah wasn't going to take the call, but then, his prey had eluded him. He was alone in the room with his unpalatable uncle. He needed something else to do and was at an immediate loss for anything. Judah stomped across the floor. He was grateful Truman stepped to one side to clear the doorway. Judah didn't like touching him. He mused over finding an island to create some kind of leper colony for his mother's side of the family; Truman and Josiah would be residents, and Annette would follow out of principle. It was a far-fetched solution, but seemed to be the only practical one. Killing family was much too complicated and perilous. Judah had learned that lesson when he was young and more rash.

Josiah Kanen had once shown potential. The Batheirres were introduced to him when Annette and Judah's brother, Paul, were married. Josiah was a priest and had performed the ceremony. Judah's father said it was fortunate to have a connection inside the Church. Not only was Josiah a priest, but also assigned to a

position inside Capital. It could prove useful. If Judah was more ingenious, he could have played both sides. The Church and heathens would have been unwitting tools. That was out of Judah's scope of abilities, as he didn't have the vision or the temperament. He was more of a rolled shirtsleeve overlord, always getting his hands dirty.

Despite the Batheirres' money paving Josiah's rise through the rank, the investment amounted to pearls given to swine. The priest decided to try the family's product and liked it. His addiction became a liability. Too many resources were wasted keeping secrets. Bribes and payoffs that once bought position and promises, turned to maintaining status quo. Losses had to be cut. There would be no more money or drugs.

Judah went to the kitchen where the phone hung on the wall. Most of the family had gone home, but the few who remained went back to the room with Jimmy's casket. Judah's continued insistence for privacy was evident. Annette was out of sight.

"Joe," Judah said into the phone. "What do you want?"

The caller replied with a pause then a keen inhale. "Hello, Judah." There was another pause. "I wanted to say I'm sorry about James."

"In the name of the Mortal God, you didn't even know he was dead until you called," Judah accused.

"No, Judah, I did."

"You know you've been cut off. Your fake sympathy isn't going to change that."

"Judah, please, that's not fair," Josiah pleaded. "That's not why I called. And I truly am sorry."

Judah made the concession. "All right, why did you call?"

"I need a favor"

"I knew it. What is the matter with you? You're a captain now, right? I'm supposed to be asking you for favors."

“It’s that priest. He’s here.”

Judah remembered. Another pay-off, but that time the request was refused. The day had come for Josiah to handle his own problems. That’s exactly what Judah thought Josiah did with this other priest without rank, another addict. The Church had so many drug users, it should be obvious that they had an epidemic of apers, but there was no such thing as a pink slip once an initiate was ordained. The addicts were just shuffled from one low profile assignment to another. This other priest got his stuff from the gutters of Gomorrah. He was a regular. He knew the players, producers, dealers, and other buyers.

That’s what he had on Josiah. Josiah had gotten stupid, and blindly wandered the streets of Gomorrah looking to get hooked up. It looked bad that a captain in the Church had sunk so low. As it was, with word on the street, everyone knew why he was there. Josiah had fallen out of favor with the Batheirres. This other priest took advantage of the knowledge. It wasn’t the first time Josiah was blackmailed. The fact that it would happen again was inevitable, even if Josiah managed to kick his habit. Without the resources of the Batheirres, Josiah pulled strings and got lucky. There was an opening at a parish in the Cap. Judah was genuinely impressed that Josiah was able to bring an outsider into Capital. The accomplishment made him wonder if his uncle held out on his obligations all these years.

“Yeah,” Judah said. “I thought that’s what you wanted. You handled it. It’s done, right?”

“He can’t stay here.”

Judah knew it. There was a catch. Josiah’s solution was a temporary one. Now he wanted his mess cleaned up for him all over again. Judah would not bail him out. “So what are you going to do about it?”

“I don’t know. He’s got to go.”

“You better not be asking me for anything. You know that.”

“But what am I supposed to do?” Josiah implored. The sound of desperation made Judah feel ill. At least his pitiful uncle distracted him from Jimmy and the dead boy’s mother.

“Handle it yourself. That’s what you do.”

“This isn’t just my problem,” Josiah said. “What if the Church finds out that the Batheirre family has their fingers in the affairs of the Church? This priest could tell them that.”

This was an old threat. Judah wasn’t going to fall for it again. Nothing would happen to the Batheirres. Gomorrah was of no consequence to the Church. What would happen is that particular finger, the gangrenous Josiah, would be sliced off. That would be the best for everybody. Judah was finished with this detour in his tumultuous evening. There were bigger concerns, and they would have to be put into perspective.

“Let me remind you, Joe, what has happened here. Jimmy is dead. His fucking brain was in his nose. I don’t have time for your shit. I’m looking for the cunts that killed him. You handle your problem yourself!”

Judah had called Josiah’s bluff. He was a terrible gambler. Nothing more could be said, but he still needed help. He wished Judah would just tell him what to do and he’d do it.

“You’re right Judah. I don’t know what to do. I wish this guy was dead.”

That was the simple solution. The hard part was figuring out how to do it and get away with it. There were professionals in this field. In the Batheirre’s business, Judah became familiar with a few. It was a necessity.

“So you want him dead?” Judah asked. Josiah grew hopeful. “You got money?”

“I can get it. Can I send it to you after you’re through?”

“I didn’t say I was going to do anything.” Judah provided an avenue and Josiah was already steering in the wrong direction. “There’s someone in the Cap you can talk to. You better have the money up front.”

“But...”

“Shut up,” Judah snubbed Josiah. “Or you might as well fuck it up yourself. All you’re going to get is a number. When you call, don’t ask him his name. He won’t tell you anyways. It just looks amateurish.”

“Thank you, Judah.”

The conversation ended with a phone number and more thanks from Josiah. Judah went home without talking to anyone else. He was satisfied that someone was going to die, but it was only an appetizer. He still wanted the Cortras brothers. He'd make a few calls the next morning and offer a bounty. No place was going to be safe, not even the Cap.

9 Wantonness

The sounds of scrubbing, and running water, woke Ben. The latter reignited his thirst, but he would ignore it for now. The drowsiness made it easier, so he decided to allow himself to drift back to sleep. The combination of scrubbing and water flowed together into a rhythm. The music of activity could have sung Ben back into slumber, except that the light had become a rude guest. At first it was soft and feathery, just a little brighter than the streetlight that glowed through the night. Within minutes, however, it started to pound through his closed eyelids, and Ben's face began to ache. Ben realized he was squeezed his eyes shut more tightly as the intensity of the morning light grew and that's what caused the pain. This was clearly a battle he wasn't going to win. It was time to wake up and plan for what should be the next step. The Cortras brothers may be leaving, if Hen had been able to talk Dil into the idea. Just as Ben made the decision to start the day, the running water stopped and transformed to a steady dripping.

The intruding light was bearable when Ben finally opened his eyes. The slow introduction and steady intensity adjusted his vision, even as he fought it. The ache at the front of his head was gone instantly. He was still lethargic, but now that he was not falling back asleep, the thirst was certain to take precedence and needed to be addressed soon. For now, he was going to explore his new room. The armoire and table he had spotted last night were constructed of pine and stained a dark chocolate. The table was bare. The chair next to it was upholstered in faux brown leather. The arms and back were worn down to the thick string mesh beneath. The strands were the only layer holding in the bulging stuffing.

The armoire was shut, but didn't have a lock. Ben pulled the doors open by their thin brass rings. The closet contained an identical wardrobe as discovered within the suitcase: more white collarless shirts and black slacks. Ben pulled out one of each. They were too big, even larger than the clothes he presently wore. There was also a pair of black polished shoes that looked like they'd fit if he wore a couple pairs of socks. He decided he would do that, eventually. He had dreaded the idea of putting on the beaten boots again. Once the boots were removed, Ben had enjoyed the air on his feet too much to stuff them into hot shoes again.

Ben looked down at his feet. They were stark white. All the color had been worn

off during his trek in the Shur. His toes were bony and shriveled. The difference between them and his still swollen red hands made him muse that he looked as if he had been stitched together from two different people. Ben assessed his wardrobe options again. He decided he would continue living out of the suitcase, because the fit of those clothes would be less conspicuous. He tried to remember where someone had placed the suitcase. He solved the quandary with a quick scan of the room, as he observed the suitcase just inside his bedroom door. Ben started to open it, then tossed it on the rumpled bed instead. He decided he would wear the same clothes he wore the day before. No reason to prepare for anything formal. He ignored the criss-crossed wrinkles in his clothes and walked into the hall, barefoot.

Ben's curiosity intrigued him enough to investigate the source of the scrubbing. Dil was in the room where Ben and Hen had left him. He held an oval-shaped toilet brush. The bristles had splayed from abuse. Dil was bent over the bare mattress, rubbing a large soapy circle.

"To hell with this," Dil evoked. He tossed the brush. As it sailed through the air and struck the floor, white suds splattered the wall. The plaster sucked up the moisture, leaving rings. Dil grabbed the mattress and flipped it up. He lost his grip and the mattress slipped to the floor on the other side of the bed. It leaned upright against the frame. Dil reached over and gripped it again. He jerked it back up and then over, wet side down. With the mattress turned over and back on the frame, Dil stood erect. Dry, yellow vomit coated the front of his blue shirt. Ben became aware of a rank smell, or perhaps the sight of puke triggered some hidden olfactory memory. In either case, Ben decided he'd move on. Neither man acknowledged each other and continued as if they had not seen one another.

Ben followed the dripping sound, which led him to the large bathroom. There were doubles of every fixture, including sinks, toilets, and showers. The drip came from the nearest shower stall where a soapy puddle obscured the tiles at the bottom. Ben heard Dil lumber down the stairs. Toward the bottom, just when Ben expected to hear nothing more than an echo, Dil cursed and hammered the floor once. He must have missed the last step just where it was darkest in the expiring morning. Ben listened longer for conversation. He knew Hen well enough to expect some greeting for his brother. Nothing. Hen must be gone. Ben hoped Hen was hunting down breakfast. Last night's dinner taunted his stomach to expect regular meals again, but first he'd get a drink.

He ran water in one of the sinks. Ben filled his cupped hand and brought it to his mouth. He captured a painfully small amount of water this way, and he realized that slurping repeatedly from his hands wasn't going to be enough. His head was too large to fit in the basin under the faucet. He still tried, because the need drove him. He turned to the second shower stall. The wide shower head offered a torrent of cool liquid. He felt gritty from his work yesterday afternoon and his skin still stung from his extensive burns. All his pressing problems could be solved with a shower.

Ben started the shower. He almost forgot to turn the water off in the sink and the basin had already started to fill. Some plunging may be required if he stayed at the church very long. Ben stripped off his clothes and piled them in the dry sink. Looking down, he saw where his two halves appeared to be sewn together. They were joined at his waist. The work was masterful, with not even a sign of a stitch. He was a living peppermint candy cane, eaten down to the last two colored bands. Ben stepped into the shower. It wasn't as cold as the water from the pump at the edge of the encampment, but it was cool enough. His skin felt soothed again. Ben had almost become accustomed to the pain. Most of the blisters had burst, leaving raw flesh beneath. They weren't any more painful than the rest of the top half of his body, though, as he hurt evenly.

Ben had barely stepped into the flow when he turned his mouth upward. He stood on his toes to catch as much of the water as he could and drank with restrained swallows. Ben imagined his insides like the bed of a stream. Every living thing within him depended on water and its motion. He needed to keep it running down his throat and throughout his body. The water had to fill the grotto of his belly and then overflow, to bring back the life, and banish the emptiness of memory and the past. When his legs grew tired, he took hold of the spigot and held himself up by locking his fingers together over the pipe.

He drank until his hands began to slip. Only then did he take a few minutes to bathe the rest of his body. Ben looked around for soap, but couldn't find any. The water alone would have to suffice. Ben stepped out of the stall and dressed. He didn't bother to dry off, since there wasn't a towel around. Shaking his limbs didn't help much but he didn't mind staying wet. Ben retrieved the shoes along with two pairs of socks before he went downstairs. He decided to stay barefoot just a little longer.

Dil was in the kitchen, wringing his shirt in the sink. His back was pale, but not

as white as Ben's lower half. The back of Dil's neck was red, but again, not like Ben's. Dil's red band was thick and permanent, like a leather collar that was never coming off. Dil held the shirt up. The light from the window streamed through the coarse fabric. The laundering was satisfactory. Dil put the shirt back on, sopping wet, but didn't button it up. It dripped from the shirttail and cuffs. The smell was finally gone from the shirt and Ben's nose. Dil turned around and acted like he was seeing Ben for the first time that morning.

"If the sun weren't shining, people would think the two of us got caught in a downpour," Dil smirked. There was something different about him, but only at times. Contrary to Hen's suspicion, Dil's change in behavior wasn't based on drugs. Dil was rarely alone. Besides, he didn't have that chemical smell. The personality change came and went like the voice from the desert. Ben waited for Dil to say more; Ben needed to know which personality was prevailing this morning. If this were the original Dil, he wouldn't say anything else; Ben would have to continue the conversation. Dil said nothing else. He walked past Ben and into the hall. Ben noticed the trash can was back in the kitchen. Stains and streaks covered the surface, in spite of it having been rinsed. Ben's and Dil's fingerprints were clearly visible. The pizza boxes had been tossed on top, since they wouldn't quite fit inside. They tilted up on their sides, forming shapes like diamonds. Ben followed Dil.

"So are you finished with the mess?" Ben asked.

Dil glanced over his shoulder. He didn't answer until he turned back around and watched his moving feet. "Yes, sir." The tone was far from subservient. The two were nearly to the knave before Dil said more. "Hen finished it up this morning. He was up early. He had nothing good to say about last night, his chores, and this place."

Dil looked at Ben again. It appeared that Dil was trying to read Ben; he was still the blank paper he had been since being rescued. Ben suspected he knew what Dil wanted; to hear that Ben was outraged at the thought of leaving. The older Cortras brother was looking for a majority vote, if the semblance of democracy was going to be used to convince Hen to the contrary. Dil didn't really need it for his little brother, but a consensus would serve to quiet Hen more quickly and gently than it would normally take. Ben didn't have an inclination to stay or go, so he abstained. The dispute would have to work itself out between the brothers.

This place was merely where he was meant to be at the moment. Ben didn't object to the company. If the brothers were to go, he would not leave with them. The feeling that he had a purpose to fulfill here still nagged him. It wasn't as strong as Dil's odd enlightenment with finding a place to call home, but it wasn't wise to dismiss it. All Ben currently had was his instinct. Dil turned away.

"Yeah," Dil punctuated. "I sent him to cash that check."

The two surveyed Hen's handiwork. There were no more bugs, clots, or feathers. The floor was damp. A great deal of water had been dumped over it. The trash can must have been filled and poured on the floor. The wood was dyed maroon, and only the deep scratches and gouges from yesterday's work hinted at the original color of the grain. Even then, the water had carried a diluted stain into most of them.

"You don't look too bad, considering last night," Ben observed.

"Now you're a doctor, priest?"

Ben had heard Dil talk to his little brother like this. Either he was getting comfortable or the hangover made him irritable. Ben would take it as it was meant and determined he would make no more comments about Dil's condition.

"I don't like the bars," Ben stated. He took a prolonged look at each window, one at a time. They were still open from yesterday. The bars were black and two-dimensional with the morning light behind them. The barrier made Ben restless.

"So cut 'em off," Dil offered.

After he dropped those words, Dil's mood lifted instantly. The hint at making improvements to the place seemed to cheer him. An investment of energy meant a longer stay. The plan was really hinged on Ben continuing his masquerade. Hen could be cowed and distracted, but Ben was the key. Without a priest, what business would a couple of UnChosen transients have in a church, even one in the ghetto of the Cap? But as long as they were here, the pretense existed of repairing the floor. There was certainly enough damage to require a long time to fix. It was an uneducated guess, but to any average eye, it looked like a lot of work. In the meantime, the brothers could even learn something about fixing floors. When that was done, there would be something else. Excuses could run on indefinitely if they were clever.

“I’ll even help you,” Dil volunteered.

Dil would take on the task all by himself, if it made a difference. The elder Cortras wanted to stay. There was another reason, other than the money and a safe place to hide from whoever was looking for the brothers. Ben and Dil seemed to be sharing it, and that feeling of belonging haunted them. It would probably be a good idea to talk about it. Dil had a more complete picture of the events that had led him to this point and place in time. For them to arrive at the same destiny, their pasts may not be so different.

“What did you mean last night?” Ben queried.

Dil blanched at the question. He scuffed the stained floor with the toe of his boot. It would take a little more than friction from the leather of a sole to restore the wood.

“I don’t remember what I said,” Dil replied. “Hen said I talked about some crazy stuff. Nonsense. It was the desert.”

“And the wine,” Ben handed the excuse to him. Dil scowled.

“I wasn’t drunk. I got a handle on it.”

Ben nodded. The subject was obviously a sore spot. He had no qualms about letting it go.

“You were out there,” Dil added. “No water. Sun and heat. Then this slaughter house.”

“I meant about the things you thought we could do. Why do you think we’re here?”

“I had a dream about that last night.” Dil looked astonished. “I didn’t think I told anybody. I didn’t even think I talked about it at all.”

“You didn’t tell me, exactly. The statement was vague. It was before you passed out.”

“You might think I’m crazy. I don’t believe much in dreams. I don’t talk about ‘em, if I remember. But this was different.” Dil took the time to button up his

shirt. He started at the bottom. The cloth was still very wet and stuck to his shoulders like a second skin.

Dil didn't speak again until he was finished with the third button from the collar. "I never had much expectation. You always get disappointed if you wish too much. But the dream I had last night, everything I told myself I could live without, was mine. I didn't even have to ask for it. And I mean everything. I even had the stuff I wanted when I was a kid."

"That was all it was about?" Ben was hoping for a revelation.

"Yeah. It was a promise. All I had to do was stay here at the church."

"What's going to happen if you stay?"

"I don't know, but I don't expect anything. It was just a dream. It just made me feel, uh, hopeful."

As Dil spoke, he drifted to the middle of the stain. He was almost at the altar. Ben had followed. Looking down, he realized he was standing barefoot in the discoloration. The wood felt soft and cool. Suddenly, noticing where he stood, he could feel the sensation turn clammy. He stepped into a clear patch. The nearest pew was pushed away, but Ben didn't bother correcting it before sitting down and putting on the socks and shoes he had brought with him. Dil looked disappointed, like a storyteller who had just lost his audience.

"You feel it too, don't cha?" Dil made the observation.

"Me?" Ben asked. He wasn't certain if being evasive was in order, but he didn't know how to say what he felt. He did feel hopeful, but he also felt like someone or something else was in control. That was what made him so uncomfortable. Maybe it was the voice, but that would sound crazy.

"C'mon, Ben. You have to be here for a reason." Dil was uncharacteristically curious again, this time without the alcohol. It was an indication of his eagerness to stay. "I know you're not Drystani."

"I never said I was." Ben pulled on the second pair of socks. As much as he enjoyed stretching out his toes, he saw a poisonous red field before him. The shoes were his only protection.

“I gotta be honest. It’s hard to believe there is a Mortal God. But something brought us here. Brought you out of the desert, even. You should’ve been dead.”

That was true. Madness and luck were his saviors. That was what Ben brought to the Cortras brothers; one went with the other. Together they were spreading like a virus. A soft rap broke their conversation. One of the front doors swung slowly open. The sound and motion caused Ben to jump up, leaving the shoes untied.

“Hen?” Dil called. Ben took a deep breath and exhaled his sudden rush of adrenaline.

It wasn’t Hen. An older woman and a teenage boy timidly stepped inside. Both wore t-shirts and cotton shorts. The woman blinked as she struggled to adjust to the shadow inside. The boy hopped from side to side as the woman cleared the passage. She was too slow for him. He pushed open the other door and danced in front of her. This must be a couple of the flock. Ben and Dil had foolishly expected that the lack of Church supervision also meant a lack of parishioners. Even outside the Wall, the plan hadn’t included prayers, sermons and confessions. Those tasks seemed too trivial to consider, based on the impracticality of ever arriving at the church, yet there would be some duties and expectations. Ben wasn’t comfortable with this idea. He’d wear the trappings, but refused to perpetuate the spurious religion of the Chosen. He knew it wasn’t his religion now, if it ever had been. They would have to chase the woman off.

“Don’t worry, Dil. I’ve got no other place to go,” Ben whispered. Dil nodded. This moment of expressing his contentment was spoiled by the presence of their guests.

“I’ll be in the back,” Dil announced quietly. “What are you going to tell her?”

“We’re closed.”

Dil disappeared into the hall at the back of the church, an escape route from unexpected visitors. Ben stood ready for his performance. The boy trotted up the center aisle. The old woman had to shuffle faster to catch him. The exertion made her breathe heavy.

“Davey, don’t go there,” the woman implored, as the boy approached the outer perimeter of the stained floor. “It’s dirty. Stay with your mother.”

The woman was short and grayed. Her face and hands bore temporary scars of healing bug bites. Ben concluded there was a connection between the flies and the woman.

“Hello,” the woman greeted. “Are you the new priest? You must be.”

“Hi, hello!” Davey laughed.

“I’m Tamara Stoughnt,” she introduced. “This is my son, Davey.” The boy repeated his manic salutation. Davey was retarded. His face was round and pig-like, which was an odd coupling with his thin body. Ben didn’t reply; he didn’t have a chance, as the woman hadn’t stop talking.

“I saw a workman going into the church last night, and I saw the lights. Thank the Mortal God you came so quickly. This needs to be a good place again.”

“You’re red!” Davey interjected. His finger shot within a hair of Ben’s nose. Ben felt a breeze chase the quick hand and he pulled his head back by reflex.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Tamara said. “Davey, put your hand down. Be a good boy. Sit down over there.” The woman pointed to the middle pews. Davey put his hand down, but didn’t go away. He stood at his mother’s side, twisting his fingers in his ears. Tamara returned to Ben. “You are badly sunburned. Does it hurt?”

“Yes, it does,” Ben replied. Obviously, was what he thought, but it should have been hurting more.

“Oh, and you cleaned everything up.” Her head rolled on her small wrinkled neck as the woman surveyed the floor.

“There is still a lot to do,” Ben chanced. “The church will be closed for awhile to come.”

“But you’re here. That’s the important thing.”

“Yes, but I have work to do.”

“Reverend, what is your name?”

“I’m Davey!” The boy raised his arms over his head. His mouth fell open and his tongue protruded. He stared at the stained floor. “Uhk!”

“Shh, Davey,” His mother said.

“Ben.”

Tamara smiled. “I like that you are not so formal. It means you’re friendly, just like Reverend Arnett.”

“Who?” Ben asked. Davey echoed him. Ben took a clue from Tamara and ignored the boy.

“They didn’t tell you? Reverend Arnett was the priest here before you. Did they tell you what happened to him?”

“No,” Ben replied. He already knew an explanation was coming. If her son didn’t constantly distract her, she may have answered her own questions.

Tamara leaned close. She gently nudged her son’s head away as he attempted to join the huddle. “He was murdered,” she whispered. The statement was nearly lost in the boy’s howl of protest. The old woman might have planned that. She acted practiced with her timing and volume. Davey was determined to push his way into the conversation. Missing secrets made him assertive. He threw his head against his mother’s head by accident. The boy didn’t have the wits to know better and there was a thud of skulls.

“Ow!” Tamara cried. She rubbed the bludgeoned side of her head and stomped her foot. “Oh, Davey. You’re being bad. I told you to sit down. Please, listen to your mother.”

Davey rubbed his head furiously. The motion was empathetic, as he wasn’t injured in the least. He stuck out his bottom lip. “Sorry,” he apologized sheepishly.

“I know, baby. Just sit down. Over there.”

Davey did as he was told. He weaved in and out of the pews, going from one end to the other through each row, until he reached the spot his mother had pointed out. Meanwhile, Tamara spoke to Ben, keeping her voice low.

“There were black feathers and big flies. I know you saw them.”

“Yes, and the blood. Why was the priest killed?”

“I don’t know.” Tamara crossed herself. “I think because of what he was doing for Davey.”

“What do you mean?”

“I asked Reverend Arnett to command a miracle. I want Davey to be a normal boy.”

Ben was disappointed, but realized he was being too hopeful to expect a substantial answer from this woman.

“So you didn’t see the murder?”

“No, but I heard him dying. It was so terrible. You can ask the reporter. I told her everything I heard and saw. It was even on the radio.”

“A reporter came here?” That worried Ben. He didn’t like the idea of more people showing up and asking questions. The Cortras brothers would agree. Dil wouldn’t want Hen to know, as he didn’t need any more reason to pick up stakes and move on.

“Yes. She was very pretty and young. Her name was Margot.”

“Is she coming back?”

“Oh, I don’t know. She might want to look at the church. It was being gassed when she came to visit. Because of the flies.” Tamara showed Ben her bitten hands. They were smooth and dry, mottled with fading purple circles. “But you were so quick to clean up, there’s really nothing to see.”

There was, truthfully, nothing more to see, except an impostor priest and a couple squatters on the lam. The sergeant at the Wall and an addict captain in the Church were enough of a trial for Ben. He didn’t want to tell lies to someone specialized in asking questions. That was still only a possibility. He would at least try to learn from the woman why there was such an interest in this parish.

“What was said about the church on the radio?”

“They said it was heathen sympathizers. The reverend was unlucky to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. I don’t know about that. I think the devil did it.”

Ben wasn’t going to argue the woman’s beliefs. He was satisfied that the reporter was dispensing the standard propaganda, nothing but a hacked story for a paycheck. He didn’t anticipate seeing any other reporters.

“All right, Mrs....?”

“Stoughton. You can call me Tamara, Ben.”

“Mrs....” Ben paused. “Tamara. You should go now. The church isn’t ready.” He opened his hand toward the doors. They were still partly open from Tamara’s and her son’s entrance.

“Ben.” She grasped Ben’s forearm. Her touch was light, but he still winced from the sudden pressure on his damaged skin. Tamara didn’t notice and even squeezed a little harder. “Since Reverend Arnett is gone, can you pray for Davey? Please make him normal.”

Here it was again, another demand on a crucified god. One who so loved his creation, he subjected himself to sacrifice and an everlasting life of servitude. This was the same god that was gone now. The deity was driven away by the selfish wants of an overgrown and merciless species of lemur. Ben would not abash himself and pray for worldly comforts. They had never been afforded him. Besides, the prayer would be for naught; no one was listening. This woman had been visited with hardship, just like most, and she would have to cope or perish. That was what Ben decided to believe.

The woman must have sensed Ben’s disapproval “Please, I know I’m an UnChosen. I know I was irresponsible and had a child when I was too old. But Davey is just a baby. He’s innocent. He shouldn’t have to pay for my indulgence.”

That sounded fair, but that kind of miracle didn’t exist. This was a godless world. Chance was a miracle and luck was divine intervention. Lack of either opened a person up to exploitation by the Church. Ben guessed by that criteria, he had been blessed the past couple of days. Tamara would have continued her plea for intervention in her fate, but she and Ben were interrupted.

“I couldn’t cash that check,” Hen informed them. He carried a couple full brown paper bags in his arms. A booted toe tapped the front doors the rest of the way open so he wouldn’t have to squeeze through. Light followed him in. Now Hen could plainly see the woman and the boy, and he was dumbstruck. “Sorry,” was the only thing he could manage to say. He glanced from side to side. His wandering steps mirrored his disarray.

“You can put those in the kitchen,” Ben said. It was the obvious rescue.

“Uh, yeah,” Hen agreed. He immediately followed Ben’s direction. Hen strode up the center aisle. He was fixated on the teenage boy and Davey returned the stare. They had the look of two young dogs eager to make friends, but still uncertain of each other. They were bursting with the restrained impulse to run over and sniff each other. Hen got closer and Davey lunged first.

“I’m Davey!” the boy shouted.

Hen grinned. Every one of his small teeth was visible and shining. “I’m Hen.”

The boy let loose a rollicking laugh. “You’re a chicken!”

The comment took Hen off-guard. Hen was his nickname; Dil had christened him when they were kids. He remembered being teased with it by his older brother. He liked the ribbing a lot, so the name stuck. The sight of Davey summoned back Hen’s too soon relinquished boyhood, but the comment recalled it. “Hey, you’re funny.”

The boy grew soundly sober. “No, I’m Davey.”

“And you’re funny.”

“No I’m not.”

“Yes you are.”

“No!”

Hen started to laugh. It was shrill, like his panicked voice in the desert, but it lacked the chafing helplessness. He looked at Ben.

“This kid is great.” Hen then turned back to Davey. “Brawk!”

Davey roared back in laughter. Hen joined him. Ben allowed Hen his joy. The old woman was engaged with the scene, and the subject of prayers and the need for an explanation for Hen’s presence was forgotten.

Hen used his knee to help him find a new grip on his groceries. “I love kids,” he declared. “Davey, it was fun to meet you. I gotta put this stuff down.”

Davey didn’t stop giggling, even after Hen vanished down the hall.

“I need to go with him,” Ben said.

Tamara nodded and smiled. “OK, Ben. I’ll come back. Please, think about what I said.”

Ben bit his bottom lip and looked to the bars on the windows. They were coming off.

“Let’s go, baby.” Tamara retrieved Davey. The boy led their way out of the church. Tamara’s hand rested on his shoulder.

“He’s my friend,” Davey sang, skipping out of his mother’s reach. She was speaking to her son, but was too far away for Ben to hear. The doors remained open after the pair’s exit. As much as Ben wanted to keep it that way, he closed and locked them. He went to the kitchen, expecting to find the brothers together, but he only saw Hen.

“Where’s Dil?” Hen asked. “Is he still sick in bed?”

“No. I thought he’d be here with you.”

Hen had bought an assortment of canned foods and a can opener, along with bread, jelly, peanut butter, and canned juice. He spread the items out over the table.

“Hey, if we’re going to cash that check, you’re going to have to do it. I’m not going back to the bank.”

“What happened?” Ben asked.

“I just got a bad feeling,” Hen confessed. “I mean, I thought about it. This is a check from the Church, right? Shouldn’t a priest have it?”

“You’re right.” Ben grew aware that a balance of caution and risk was how the Cortras brothers lived their lives. Gut reactions were their guides.

“Anyway, after that, we’re going to leave.”

“Is that what Dil said?” Ben was puzzled. Dil was determined to stay. Then again, he didn’t know what the brothers said to each other.

“Yeah.” Hen nodded. “He said we can go when the church is in shape and you’re set up. I don’t think coming to the Cap was so good.”

Ben didn’t tell Hen that his older brother had more in mind than mopping up a floor and doing some grocery shopping. Dil was stalling, and he probably wanted to get Hen out of his hair as he recovered from last night. If he were here now, Hen’s hopes would have already been crushed. Ben looked out the broken doorway, trying to locate Dil. The gruesome pile of feathers was strewn partly across the stone yard. The mound attracted flies of the normal variety. Dil wasn’t there. Indistinct knocking floated through the kitchen. At first, Ben mistook it for the cans being stacked on the table, but Hen was still.

“Who is it now?” Hen asked. “You see? That’s why we gotta go.”

Neither man moved. The knocking at the front of the church continued.

“How about I go look from the side of the church?” Hen asked, staring at the back door.

Ben expected escape was Hen’s real motive. If the younger Cortras brother didn’t like what he saw, he’d be outside the church already. Slipping into the street when backs were turned was a simple next step. If that was the case, Ben was fine with it. No real alternative existed except throwing the doors open wide and accepting whatever lay on the doorstep.

“All right.”

Hen skipped out the door without waiting another second. He checked his pockets as he went. The action reinforced Ben’s suspicions. He wondered if the

old woman had the same affect on Dil.

Hen stole up the breezeway, dragging his back against the church, with his head jutted out. He could only see a sliver of an empty street. The fact that there was nothing yet to see comforted him. When he reached the end, he held his breath. Stooping, he slipped one side of his face around the corner. It was the old woman and her son, Davey. Hen pulled back into hiding. He didn't think to go and tell Ben. Instead he casually strolled around the corner to the curb.

"Hey," he called.

Davey jumped around.

"Hen!"

The old woman turned. "Hello. Where is the Reverend Ben? He was just here. Why is the door locked?"

"Don't worry about that," Dil said. "He's around. We're just doing some work, you know, on the floor."

"Oh." The old woman looked anxious. "Can you find Ben for me? I need to ask him something."

"Um, I can ask him."

"I suppose that would be fine," the old woman said. "I really need to leave. I'm late. I can't find someone to look after Davey. I was wondering if I could leave him at the church."

Hen lit up. "You mean babysit?"

"Yes. Just for a few hours. I need to go dust the shops at the strip mall. I can't leave Davey alone. He gets into trouble."

Hen thought about spending an afternoon with the boy. Dil wasn't around, and there were errands to do in which Hen did not play a role. A few hours with Davey before leaving the church and the Cap may be something he needed to do. It had been a long time since he could relax. Playing with a kid would be a welcome change to all his stress and fright.

“Sure,” Hen said. “That would be fine.”

“Ben wouldn’t mind?”

“Not at all. I’ll look after Davey.”

“But don’t you have work to do?” The old woman was confused. Davey cheered for Hen and had to be hushed.

“I mean, I’ll take him to Ben.”

“Good!” The old woman was thrilled. “Thank you. You don’t know how much I appreciate this. You’re so nice, just like Ben.”

“No problem,” Hen said. “We’ll have fun, won’t we, Davey?”

Davey squealed his affirmation.

“I’ll be back soon. Thank you.” She hurried down the street.

Hen led Davey down the breezeway and into the kitchen. Ben was speechless when he saw the boy.

“I’m going to babysit Davey!” Hen said. He and the boy laughed. Caution and risk took a back seat to impulsiveness and luck.

10 Wild Beasts

Mark knocked insistently on Margot's door just after dawn. The hammering jarred her awake. Mark called for Margot to get dressed and hurry out. The sudden rousing from slumber was disorienting. She didn't recall him leaving. The last thing she remembered was falling asleep in her bed, wrapped in Mark's arms. That was at dusk, when the curfew took effect. The roads were choked with people hurrying to their destinations in the fading illumination. No one wanted to be stopped by a patrol only a block or two from home. It was inconvenient after a hard day at work and a longer day in traffic.

The last thing anyone needed after drawn out hours of inane busywork, was to be asked stupid questions with obvious answers. "Where are you going?" "Home." "Why are you out after dark?" "Traffic." That was the extent of the pleasant part of the interrogation. After that, soldiers became sadistic, knowing the frustration they could cause.

Margot had drifted off, feeling an iniquitous pleasure with the fact that Mark was trapped with her for the night. She hadn't expected he would stay after they had made love. Mark did have a wife waiting for him at home, but the lost sense of time and the setting sun made it impossible for him to leave. The uncomfortable moment where Margot would have to watch him draw up his pants and leave, wasn't going to arrive. She was happy for that.

Yet now he was outside and knocking. The door had locked automatically when he pulled it behind him. Margot wondered when Mark had made his escape. She hoped he left at sunrise, but didn't doubt that he had snuck out right after she fell asleep. Obviously he took his chances getting home to avoid a confrontation with Sarah.

It was ridiculous to become jealous. Mark was married and Margot knew it. She had accepted the consequences of her decisions with maturity. The fleeting moment hadn't caused her to be rash or desperate. Mark didn't seduce her with promises, although his flirting and advances were especially tempting. In the end, Margot wasn't certain who had kissed whom first. When they undressed, she would have liked to believe it was mutual, although it was probably she who had knowingly stepped over the hazy line. Margot had made the first move. She had guided his hand to her breast as the warmth from his lips spread through her.

She had unbuckled his belt and pushed his trousers off his waist.

Margot refused to feel guilty; she was well aware of Mark's infidelities. At one point, she stopped him from reciting a list of names of women he had known. A numerical trip down lover's lane sounded tawdry right from the start and the roll call would have squelched her libido. This encounter had waited a long time and she would not waste the opportune moment.

The damage was already done to Mark's relationship with Sarah. He had undertaken a guerrilla war to shatter the marriage, but his wife held on. Sarah entrenched upon a barren hill, resisting every humiliating siege. There could be no divorce in the eyes of the Church unless both partners wished it. Mark could leave, but he wouldn't be allowed to marry again until his marriage with Sarah was annulled. Sarah fought against that and it was unfair; Margot had known Mark first.

The old school friends shared a smoldering interest that had lasted for years. Desire for each other drifted and survived on a river of time. Margot didn't know what would happen after last night. She wasn't thinking of marriage or even a relationship beyond what they currently shared. The thing she didn't want, was for the affair to be complicated. It was only natural that Mark and Margot eventually expressed their desire for each other. Circumstances could not be allowed to sink this need that had finally surfaced. When the moment arrived, Margot seized it. A long time had passed since she had been with anyone. She was beginning to fret her youth would be irretrievably squandered before having sex again. Making love with Mark was a renewal. Youth returned like a flower after winter, as Mark brought her to life.

In the morning, she was just tired. The afterglow was gone. Being jolted awake and finding Mark missing brought back the weighted feeling of age to her. She wondered what it would feel like to be thirty. If it was worse than how she felt now, she couldn't bear to grow old. Something had to change in her life. Maybe she needed to have a child; an infusion of hormones could be the answer. The doldrums of adulthood may be the result of ignoring her biological clock. Once Margot was sitting upright, she dismissed the thought. She didn't even believe in cultural timetables and predestinations of nature. What she needed was another hour of sleep and a cup of coffee. This man she had brought to her bed last night wouldn't afford her those little luxuries.

Margot groaned and groped for her robe. She wasn't prepared to open her eyes. Although her small bedroom was dark, she didn't want to see the time. There was still a chance to send Mark on his way and catch up later with whatever he was excited about; she had a strong feeling it wasn't about her. The moment to wake peacefully to a gushing proclamation of unfurled love or romantic soliloquy had passed. If Mark left now, she might be able to sleep another hour, or maybe two, now that she had been disturbed.

The thin satin robe wasn't at the foot of the bed where Margot usually tossed it before sliding into the sheets. She wasn't proficient at being blind, so no choice remained except to open her eyes. The robe had fallen to the floor, along with most of the comforter. Its royal blue beamed against the ivory bedding. She slipped the robe on over her t-shirt and panties. The distance from her bedroom to the front door of her apartment wasn't more than a dozen steps. She doubled the walk by taking half steps. She needed the extra time to rake her fingers through her hair and tie it back. She knotted the robe shut standing behind the door. Mark had been rapping and shouting that entire time.

"C'mon, Margot. Open the door. Your neighbors are going to start complaining."

Margot hoped they would. She wanted a mob to confront Mark for his outrageous wake-up call. A soft kiss and strong embrace would be much more forgivable. In fact, that was her dream last night; but Mark had spoiled it and deserved any grief Margot could imagine. She peeked through the peephole in the door. She needed to stand on her toes and steady herself against the frame. Mark's change of clothes and freshly shaved face proved he hadn't simply returned from a forgotten, but urgent errand.

"I hope you brought me breakfast," Margot said, watching him. He shoved his hands into his brown leather jacket's pockets, striking an impatient pose.

"Flowers would be nice, too, but I would love a croissant and some cheese."

"This is important, Margot. I'll get you something on the way. I promise. Please, let's go."

Curiosity told Margot to disregard staying hurt over with the indignity of Mark's stealthy leave of absence. Whatever brought him back to her door this morning must be important. Mark must have left his house the instant the curfew was lifted, or a little before, to be back at her place so soon. What he had to share

was just as important as making it home to Sarah in the evening. Margot unlocked and opened the door with a twist of the knob.

“Should I get you a key?” Margot queried. The sarcasm was lost and the entire remark ignored.

“You’re not dressed,” Mark observed. “What took you so long?”

Margot wanted to punch him. She doubted that she had the reach to travel to his slightly dimpled chin and make it count. He probably wouldn’t notice that, either and would just brush off the blow. Margot let the impulse fade.

“Let’s go, Margot!” Mark guided Margot back into her apartment. He pressed his solid hands against her shoulder and the small of her back. She tried to brace against it, but Mark was already moving and too massive to resist.

“Wait,” she protested helplessly. She had to lift her feet if she didn’t want to be carried. Dead weight would be difficult to manage. “What is this about?”

“We’re going to get you dressed.”

“I’m a grown woman. I can dress myself, when I’m ready.”

Mark was clueless once they reached the bedroom door. He was married and had lived with a woman for years, but he didn’t know how one went about dressing. Mark jerked a half-smile when he realized he practiced just the opposite, getting women out of their clothes. In that respect, he’d been quite successful. He tore himself away from the thought. It was not an easy task. Mark had been trying to number his conquests since last night. Margot had stopped him before he got organized, but he didn’t stop thinking about it. She should be thankful, as it added gasoline to an already blazing fire.

After leaving last night, he didn’t worry in the least about patrols and checkpoints. He was too occupied with completing his mental list of women whom he had slept with. He didn’t mind having to start over numerous times when his concentration was broken or he put a wrong name to a face. In fact, he enjoyed it. It was like savoring a particularly luscious aftertaste. Margot was the most recent, but she went to the top of the list, at least in most cases, depending on how he shuffled the criteria. He had to put a little reflection and distance behind the coupling before he could be truly objective. The evening was too

emotional for him. He almost let himself get carried away in the current of deferred desire and fulfilled wishes. Expressing feelings of overpowering affection was foreign to him. Talking about them would be an insincere attempt to make sex more than the basic need it was. So he remembered to keep himself in check. He fended off falling asleep and left as soon as it was feasible.

“Mark, tell me what’s going on or I’m not moving.”

“We are losing time, Margot.” Mark glanced downward into Margot’s eyes, striking a pose reminiscent of a giraffe reaching down for a drink. “We need the assignment. It’s a first-in basis.”

Margot understood now that he was talking about a story. How Mark got his leads was a secret. She naively believed it was because of his experience. In reality, he probably had a source on the inside. He must know someone downtown at military headquarters, most likely a woman. Margot wondered if his source was allowed to call his home, but the scenario was most likely the same as Margot’s. Sarah must spend a great deal of time answering the phone to dead air and abrupt clicks as callers hung up from the other side. On that point alone, Margot would not call Mark unless it was imperative.

No development had been so important thus far. Mark and Margot had waited in lines for assignments and had wasted days unable to get across town to follow up with investigations. The parish where the priest had been murdered was no longer in their sights. Something more concrete had happened since. Rumors of heathen infiltration had more merit than anyone outside the military would give them. Fertilizers that could be used in explosives were found traveling from the encampment to the only local seaport outside the Wall. The suspicious thing about the fertilizer, was that it was heading in the wrong direction. That alone was enough. Little mistakes were often the cause of elaborate plans unraveling. Military news surmised it was going to be smuggled into Capital by way of its port.

The seaport was the least secure section of Capital. The harbor was policed night and day, but the volume of ships and cargoes, coming and going, made enforcement difficult. On the contrary, the gates through the Wall presented an impossible route for large trucks carrying goods. Essentially there was only one way to supply Capital; that was the design. It was only a matter of time before heathens successfully navigated the harbor. Decades of trial and error had been

used to probe for weakness. Margot believed the breach would involve complacency and arrogance, tried and true exploits. The only hardened soldiers were those patrolling the desert between the city-states. They had seen heathens, usually over the barrels of rifles pointed in either direction. Soldiers in Capital had uneventful nights and had grown comfortable in handling mundane domestic disputes, runaways, and curfew violations.

Real threats were growing, but most information provided to the public was concocted and driven by an agenda. Margot and Mark were the alchemists who mixed the ingredients. Mark was a good conjurer. He hooked Margot with the taste of the possibility of sympathizers and terrorists within the Wall. She was sucked in, despite being decent at the game. Seeing through spin and propaganda was part of her trade. Yet the priest's murder and Margot's last couple stories were unconnected and didn't amount to more than drunks and blasphemers. The latter often involved the former, who had much to say about the Church or the military - lots to say, actually, with few words of praise. There were, however, those stories to which Mark and Margot were not assigned that smacked of potential. Such was the story about the fertilizer.

No facts regarding a plot were provided. As soon as the driver had been pulled from the truck, he flashed a pistol and a firefist ensued. The battle was short, resulting in one casualty, when the driver was torn apart by an automatic wall of spinning metal. His identity remained unknown. The truck was registered to an owner from Gomorrah, deceased for many years. Authorities were tracking the place from which the fertilizer was purchased or stolen. That discovery would dead-end the preliminary part of the investigation. The real story would begin there. That much was predictable. What was required to go further, was a clue to the recipient, either at the port outside Capital, or the one within.

Someone would be waiting, a sympathizer, heathen terrorist, or even a sleeper cell. A sympathizer wasn't likely. The risk associated with transporting and storing incendiary material was too great. Inside the Wall, even the lackadaisical patrols would sniff it out. That kind of threat was the focus of their training. Bimonthly drills dealt solely with bomb threats. If the chemicals were available, though, they could be assembled quickly and put to use; a real terrorist could do that.

A terrorist spends a whole desperate, idealistic lifetime preparing for a holy moment of destruction. Losing his life for a chance to take others' lives was a

fair gamble. Terrorists were conditioned to trade one life for another, but their goal was the death of many Chosen in exchange for the terrorists' own.

Margot believed even if the military prevented an attack, lives were still wasted. There were too many people with a single-minded purpose to take or save life through violence. If all that were unnecessary, people would be free to better themselves. The world could not help but to be a better place.

"Does it have anything to do with the fertilizer and the man transporting it?" Margot inquired. If the reason Mark came back so rudely this morning wasn't connected to the most plausible terrorist incident, she would throw him out, in spite of his being quite good last night.

"Maybe," Mark answered.

Margot cleared her throat and crossed her arms. She faced him. "You could have gone without me."

"After last night, I'd never hear the end of it," Mark claimed. He recognized where Margot's attitude was coming from; it was because of last night. This wasn't the first time he'd seen this festering, but it was the only time when he was going to have to deal with it. He was glad she was mad and not crying. Margot seemed incapable of disappointing him. He even started to feel pangs for being so rude, but she needed to understand that it couldn't be helped. Mark was unhappily married and didn't want to make his life at his own home unbearable. Silently torturing his wife was his goal; there was no reason he had to suffer an outright confrontation.

"Are you going to tell me what happened?" Margot asked. She dropped her arms and walked into her bedroom. Mark followed.

"About the story? I'll tell you on the way."

"No." Margot frowned. "About you, last night." She cleared her throat again and grasped the door. "Excuse me. I have to dress."

Mark was vexed. "I've already seen you naked. You're making me leave? After last night?"

"Yes, especially after last night." Margot pushed him from the room. She

wouldn't have been able to, if Mark didn't accommodate. Margot shut the door. "Besides, I can always have my modesty. So tell me why you left."

"You know, Margot," Mark said. He walked into the kitchenette. The nook was appended to the only other room of the apartment, besides the bedroom. The compact oven and refrigerator looked like they had been custom built for the tiny spaces they occupied. Mark was fascinated that they were scaled half-size to the real things. He spotted the coffee maker and began a search of the cupboard.

"Sarah would have made my life hell. You, of all people, know that." Mark gave up trying to find the coffee. He doubted she had any. There wasn't any place Margot could keep it that he hadn't searched in the minute he spent looking. "Besides, it's a good thing I went home. I heard a story about missing soldiers down at the docks. They had permanent assignments. They had been there almost three years."

Margot's interest peaked. She hurried herself. If Mark was going where she thought he was, there wasn't any time to spare. The clothes she had worn yesterday were a good combination, a gray knee length skirt and peach long-sleeved blouse. As much as she knew about fashion, she expected to clash with Mark's tan slacks and brilliant blue short-sleeved shirt. There was no time to coordinate a new outfit. She did her best to shake out the wrinkles. Antiperspirant and a little perfume topped off the morning's preparation. She left her hair tied back in a single ponytail.

"And?" Margot prompted.

"So I called headquarters this morning, as soon as I knew someone would be there."

"And?" Margot opened the door. Mark gave her a sidelong look. She knew it was because she was recycling her clothes. "Listen, mister. I would have liked time to take a shower, too. Maybe if you had called ahead, I would be more to your taste. Just tell me what happened when you called headquarters."

Mark raised his hands in surrender. "Okay, I'm sorry."

"C'mon, Mark." Now Margot was the one rushing. She pulled the cushions from her love seat. Her purse typically slipped behind them.

“Well, I asked if there was any development on the missing soldiers. There was.”

Margot found her purse. Mark went to the front door and opened it.

“Let’s go,” Margot said. “Tell me more.”

The pair hustled out the front of Margot’s building to Mark’s silver coupe. Buying the Corbeta was the first thing he did after the birth of his stillborn child. The purchase was either in defiance of added responsibility or celebration of preservation of a degree of freedom. Mark caused a great deal of controversy between their families, especially when Mark was more emotional over a fitted car cover, than the approaching anniversary of his child’s death. He had completely ignored Sarah’s bout of crippling depression. She had stayed with her parents for a month; but then she came back.

Both sides of the street were like solid walls of parked cars. More sailed down the road and all moved in one direction toward the freeway. Mark had parked in front of a fire hydrant, a common practice. He was only taking advantage of the available opening and parking zones weren’t enforced this early in the morning. This time of the day, keeping freeway traffic moving was the chief concern of the military. Resources would be dedicated to that.

Traffic control was a politically motivated mandate from the Church. Concessions to the will of the populace, instead of dictates, were rare. Despite the predictable routine, it was amazing there wasn’t more crime. Mark ascribed the miracle to the hereditary decency of the Chosen people. He opened the passenger door for Margot. He had left the car unlocked and the windows rolled down.

Mark relayed the details to Margot during their stroll from her apartment to his car. The missing guards had been reprimanded on numerous occasions. The details were unavailable and probably not relevant. Typical causes included drunkenness, tardiness, insubordination, or a combination of any or all of the ills that plagued working career soldiers. Two extreme cases could be safely assumed where soldiers weren’t fitting the military’s acceptable mold. Frequent short-term assignments in diverse locations and guard duty drawn out over years were signs of a troubled soldier.

These two particular soldiers were assigned to guard cargo stacked on the docks, waiting to be packed into trucks. The pair worked the second shift during which

cargo was secured for the night and workers dismissed. The job entailed vacuous circling of fenced loading zones, and laden and locked trucks that could not leave the yard due to curfew. Shipments were searched before they came off the boat, and monitored as they were packed into waiting trucks. These two steps held the highest potential for finding contraband or evidence of sabotage. The missing soldiers weren't responsible for those critical areas. All they did was guarantee everything stayed where it was put. The task wasn't difficult, especially as the yard was emptied shortly after they began their guard. They were the only two souls besides the random patrols in the harbor and streets outside the yard's chain link fences.

The third shift had arrived to relieve the two soldiers. Alpha, military jargon for the station from which changing of the guard was staged, was abandoned. The replacements waited a half hour before they began their patrol. The original two guards didn't return during that time, and they weren't found during a subsequent search. The superior officer was notified. No one knew precisely when the two soldiers disappeared. The rounds' checklist was also missing. Mark interjected that the sheet wouldn't have been any help. Chances are the hours were ticked off at the beginning or the end of the shift. Paperwork was, in most cases, merely a formality. The only certain thing was that both soldiers were accounted for at the beginning of their shift. They had received the status report from the guards they relieved and waved goodbye to a few acquaintances. Gates remained locked and all areas were secured. Facts pointed to a couple of malcontents going absent without leave.

"How did you find out all of this?" Margot asked. She suspected Mark had charmed a clerk. That's how he got his early leads. However, this amount of detail suggested that he had made a connection higher up the rank and file. Mark didn't bother wading up to his waist in traffic. He stomped the accelerator and jumped ahead of an elderly man who was attempting to be cautious, but who was just slow. Mark waited for the bellow of honking to cease before he answered.

"Experience," he said. The answer was an unsatisfying morsel. "After awhile, you learn who to talk to and what to ask. You learn to write the story even before you start to investigate."

"Well, that's not hard to do, if it's flagged for censorship." Experience had taught Margot that much. "Anyway, about the missing soldiers, what's happened?"

“They found one.”

“What did he say?” Margot realized the question was presumptive as she asked it. She waved her hands as a gesture meant to erase the premature query.

“Nothing. He was dead. They found him floating in the middle of the harbor. The tide must have carried the body out, if he wasn’t dumped there intentionally.”

“That would have been foolish to take a boat out at night. Patrols would easily spot it.”

“Smart,” Mark said. The praise sounded condescending. Margot forgave the tone in light of her earlier question. Mark continued.

“How do they know one didn’t kill the other?” Margot asked.

Mark hesitated. “They were Chosen. Chosen don’t kill each other.” He wasn’t entirely convinced. Chosen lie to and cheat each other, but murder and theft were different sins all together. Acts such as those were degenerative. To think one Chosen would kill another was preposterous. Margot’s question reflected her novice outlook on the world. She’d soon learn for herself and accept the way things were.

“His throat was cut.” Mark stated flatly. “There was a Star of Lucifer carved on his face.”

“That sounds like heathens. They might be upset about not getting their manure.” Margot focused on other questions. She didn’t want to allow time for a mental image of grisly mutilation to form in her mind. “What do you think? Are heathens really in Capital? Do you think this might have anything to do with Drystani himself?”

“Thinking Drystani is involved might be going too far, but I do think heathens are here. That’s what we’re going to see for ourselves, once we get the assignment. I imagine they’ll dredge the harbor for the other soldier.”

“We got this story?” Margot asked. She found it hard to believe. A mangled and murdered soldier in a secured area was a high profile assignment, even higher than a priest’s murder in a ghetto. The story would surely be handed directly to a

trusted reporter.

“Yeah, we got it. Well, we’re going to claim it if the primary doesn’t get to headquarters in time. The story was assigned to Ralph Menton. Remember him?”

“Sure,” Margot said. “He handled the Drystani stories for months at a time.”

“Well, he can’t be contacted. So it’s fair game for anyone on the list behind him.”

“How do you know Ralph won’t turn up once we get to headquarters?” This was too good to believe. Margot hated to see the opportunity dangled in front of her nose, just to have it yanked away. If she was going to be disappointed, she wanted to know which way to look to see it coming.

“Ralph’s a drunk,” Mark sneered. “We got this one, Margot. I’m on the list and we know which story to ask for; we just have to pick it up before some rube gets lucky.”

The traffic slowed as drivers waited turns at a blinking red light on the freeway on-ramp. It was still early enough to get to headquarters with relative ease. During the conversation’s intermission, Margot realized the significance of her inclusion. Mark didn’t have to stop and pick her up. He didn’t even have to tell her of the development. She half-expected if something of this magnitude had come up, she’d never have heard about it. Mark would simply have gone incommunicado, despite their joint effort and what they had shared last night. That was the kind of world where reporters lived.

There was even a class at school called “Strategy and Tactics in Journalism.” Margot thought the subject was a little over the top. The idea was that once a doughboy like her graduated and started a career, she needed to think like a soldier dropped behind enemy lines. Everyone was hostile-fellow reporters, the military, the Church, everyone. Mark was breaking the rules for her.

“Mark,” Margot began sincerely. “I want to thank you for this. I know you could have kept the assignment to yourself. You had every right to it.”

“We had a deal, remember?” Mark had sustained his sneer since commenting about Ralph Menton. It changed to a genuine smile with an adorable smugness.

“Still, this is a big deal. I can almost forgive you for last night.”

“Margot, I told you I couldn’t stay, but thank you, just the same.”

“I did say almost.”

“Hey, before you get uptight again, and I have to say you are stunning when you’re angry, we are sharing a byline. I think that’s worth a full pardon.”

Mark rolled up his window and pointed for Margot to do the same. The fumes on the freeway would soon grow thick. Despite the roads being cleared nightly and a loose breeze from the sea, a permanent, invisible cloud of cancer-causing vapor formed. It clung to the cracks and crevices of overpasses; tentacles wrapped around signposts, leaving greasy black soot. It scratched as it crept through nasal passages and made throats raw. An open window was an invitation and the intangible monster wanted nothing more than to seed a living lung.

“All right. You get this one; but with the number of times you’ve pulled that stunt on other women, don’t think this means you have a clean slate.”

“Nobody does,” Mark mumbled. Margot didn’t hear the comment above the air conditioning. “That makes me just about even.”

11 Assassin

Robber was done with the part of the job for which he was best suited. More opportunities would abound as plans progressed, but for now, he had played his part. In the meantime, he'd wait for his money and sniff out the other offer. Robber was paid like a reporter - per assignment. Instead of writing stories, however, for the most part, he created the stories. He murdered. That was another exception; his stories were undeniable facts of death, with no room to spin propaganda or bury the fact. Death was a message and it was accomplished as a craft. Robber liked to think of himself as an artist, but he possessed just enough talent to realize there was always room for improvement. One day, his signature would be recognized.

Just like a reporter, Robber needed to supplement his income. As far as being on the payroll of the heathens was concerned, money came in with the same regular delay as it did for the military; so Robber freelanced. Crime lords in Church-forsaken city-states often had need for his specialized services. The Batheirres in Gomorrah were a reliable and secure source of work. The other offer was a referral by way of that family. The Batheirres' particularly strong ties to the heathens meant offers came to him and he didn't have to panhandle. The family also respected his need for continued anonymity. Remaining faceless and nameless was imperative. Robber's current engagement for the heathens brought him into Capital. A low profile was advisable, but he had to eat. Rent required payment, as did his 'secretary.'

This young man became at once Robber's unwitting accomplice and his alias. The role was an ingenious scheme, driven by paranoid dreams. Sleep is a rough sea and insomnia was a hazard in his business. Any improvised tool to smooth his nights wasn't beyond experimentation. His secretary had found a way into the Cap, but had no place to go. He was a young, atypically brown-haired man, probably a pilgrim, who didn't give any thought as to what to do or where to go once inside the Wall.

The faith placed by Capital's population on the military's ability to keep out immigrants and heathens was laughable. The Wall served as little more than a facade. Hidden breaches to crawl through, broke open constantly. The only items required for success were need and desperation. Unfortunately, Robber's secretary would have been found after curfew. That remained the bane of

interlopers. A stranger without a place to go was as good as caught, come nightfall. The military had a purpose when they planned the layout of Capital. Every obvious hiding place had been pinpointed.

As luck would have it, Robber found his secretary before the patrols did; but then, luck didn't have much of a say in the matter. He made his mark and followed the young man; Robber waited until the approaching night brought on panic. Darkness acted like a net in Capital. When it dropped, the trapped could do little else than wait for a patrol to show up. The threat made an already desperate person more compliant. His secretary would have quickly reached this poor state; Robber then offered the deal.

The terms were simple and included employment. In exchange for a room and a little cash, his secretary answered the phone, took messages, and swapped identities. The improbable arrangement was the best that could have occurred, under the circumstances. No time to think and nothing to lose, in the face of losing everything.

So Robber's secretary gave his name and ID cards away. He supposed they weren't of use anyway. No matter what name was used, cards or no cards, trespassers were still detained. His employer became Robert Veritos. The new Robert asked if his secretary had been called simply Rob or Bob in his former life; Robber was fine. That's what his friends teased him with, as he grew up. His secretary became Jack Ferdin. The new Robber didn't remember who that had been. The name might have belonged to a long ago victim or he conjured it up on the spot.

The inconsequential name would be forgotten a few minutes later. Robber only provided it to solicit a disarming degree of faith. There weren't any ID cards to go with it. The whole point was to weave a twisted tapestry of false identities and untraceable pasts. Robber laughed once they exchanged names. He was amazed he had gotten so far with the crazy plan. The scheme had to fall apart sooner or later. The new Jack nervously joined him. That's when Robber employed Jack under the official capacity of secretary. That was the Living God's truth, if anyone asked what the young man did to make money.

There was more, but nothing else could be revealed until the pair safely arrived at the new Robber's apartment, and night had solidly fallen. His secretary would never be able to leave the apartment without Robber knowing. Even then, his

excursions would be rare occasions. There'd be no sneaking out. Robber mentioned that he didn't plan on being home often, but he'd find out if his secretary betrayed Robber's trust. That was a warning. Robber would stay in contact to retrieve messages.

When his secretary answered calls, he needed to say Robber was busy, but could call back. Name and phone number would be made available to Robber at the next contact. Jack lived alone and didn't entertain guests. The cloistered lifestyle was a directive. If the military ever came knocking, he needed to get out and run as fast and as far in the other direction as humanly possible. Robber assured his secretary that secrecy was for the best. If either man was excised to a camp, it didn't serve anyone's interest but the military's. If his secretary wanted to quit, Robber would honor the wish and promptly pass the ID card to the military with a tip to look for a heathen sympathizer.

Robber was still amused every time he remembered the color running from his secretary's face as if his throat had been cut. The look was unmistakable. Robber professed to be an expert, after all. His secretary's lips even turned blue. Robber had no intention of reporting his secretary to the military. The threat had been merely funny and convenient. Still, his secretary got a good deal, the best someone in his predicament could find. Robber assured him that everything would work out for the best in the end. The comment carried no authority, and the lack of empathy was distressingly obvious.

His secretary escaped one net to be snared in another. The alternative was to be caught by the patrols. A long detention would be inevitable, if he wasn't made an example or pinned with a crime he didn't commit. There was that priest who was cut to pieces. An opening for a scapegoat in that piece of propaganda was still available.

Robber remained generally aware of heathen activity in the Cap. He was a part of it. Heathens weren't involved with the priest's murder, although Robber wished knocking off random priests had been on the agenda. He'd even think about throwing in a couple for free; but now there were the two recently murdered soldiers. At least, they would be considered "killed" as soon as the military figured out that they weren't coming back. Then again, the military wouldn't pin that incident on his secretary. The magnitude was too great to frame a transient. The military would be looking for someone like Robber.

The job had been botched and Robber had no one to blame but himself. That had set him apart from true artists. The harsh personal critique wasn't just a reflection of humility. At his age, he should have learned already. He had to remember to bide his time. The whole scene needed to be cased before making a move. Most men his age were married, maybe had kids and a little something to show for their careers. An equivalent achievement for Robber should be a reputation. He fell behind in that respect. If he didn't improve, he'd either be caught or killed. In either case, it would be his death. Then again, it wasn't practical or even possible to practice every day. Exercise was confined to lustful fantasies of infamous acts.

Robber had needed to devote painstaking attention to detail after that job. Being so careful taxed his manic personality. The challenge had begun upon leaving the shipyard. His black clothes were bloodied and dripping. Putting on a clean shirt and pair of pants required hurdling a fence and locating his locked car, blocks away from the scene. Darting into the shadows as patrols passed had been difficult enough; he couldn't risk leaving a trail of red splatters anywhere along his escape route. There were two guards; Robber had been contracted to kill both. The soldiers had no problem taking bribes to look the other way when cargo disappeared from parked and locked trucks. They weren't even concerned when cargo was switched between vehicles. Yet they got uptight when they learned heathens were part of the action; the two became downright sanctimonious. Robber's clients didn't appreciate the disdain and lack of cooperation.

Pressure had no affect on the two soldiers. They grew bold and stubborn, instead, and had even delivered a vague threat. A hint had been dropped about patrols stumbling across the nighttime activity. The reaction wasn't unexpected from Chosen. Arrogance flourished when lowly heathens were involved. Even money couldn't overcome the prejudice. It was a strange phenomenon that corruption was often impossible among the lower echelon, when intolerance persisted. The time had arrived when these two bigots would pay for their pretension. They believed birth handed them crowns. In death, they would be pawns.

Robber had entered the shipyard after waiting near his car and following a patrol. The second shift came to an end, but guard duty was the kind of job for which no one showed up early. The soldiers were alone for awhile longer. Robber had scaled the fence at a dark spot between vaporous circles cast by

streetlights and went straight to the docks.

The air was cooler, closer to the water. The summer had been a hot one. The blacktop of the yard hoarded the heat with miserly tightness. Before the smugglers had been evicted, they reported either soldier would be on the docks most of the time. That is where Robber had found them. One was already present when he reached the water. The guard appeared to be alone. Robber unwound his leather garrote.

He preferred bludgeoning, then strangling his victims. He'd knock them down and trap the air from their windpipes. The victims stayed dazed and helpless until it was too late to fight. By the time they realized what had happened, they were too weak and clumsy from lack of oxygen.

Robber had heard that people being strangled were graced with a lightheaded euphoria. Death arrived, ushered in with colorful hallucinations. He didn't mind allowing his victims that fleeting experience, if that's what really happened. From his perspective, however, the end came with the poor souls clawing at the strap embedding and constricting around their necks. Their arms twirled out from their sides like a kid imitating an airplane.

Robber watched the passing of life from behind, unseen most of the time. He felt like a voyeur to himself. The exertion and pain in his hands, arms, and shoulders would be forgotten as he floated above his own body. If a departing spirit truly went heavenward, Robber never saw it from his vantage point. The victim only fell limp and heavy. When Robber returned to his flesh, he still felt light. He had to catch his breath as if he had been holding his own in synchronization with the strangling. He never allowed himself to think much about it at the moment. Everything became rushed after that point. A racing mind needed to be calmed. The unpleasant task of cleaning up always needed to be performed as quickly as possible.

Before Robber had reached his target, the other soldier suddenly had come within view. Robber quickly drew and unfolded a lockback knife as he dropped the garrote. Robber muffled the locking snap of the long blade with the palm of his hand. It was too late to find a place to hide. Someone suddenly called the guard whom he had slipped behind. He turned around to meet Robber face to face.

When the soldier turned, Robber's blade flew across the man's throat. For a brief second, there was no blood or other indication that Robber had struck. The guard had started to draw his firearm from the holster under his arm, when he found he couldn't pull his next breath. A wide gash pulled his neck apart. The wound looked like it ripped its own corners. Blood sprayed in rapid jets and covered Robber. All he could think to do was kick the dying man away, so Robber threw his foot into the soldier's crotch. The pistol dangling from the soldier's thumb dropped into the water as the guard doubled over. Blood showered the oiled wooden planks beneath him.

There wasn't time for self-chastening. Robber darted for cover as the second soldier ran over. The second guard had witnessed two men scuffling and recognized the form of his partner. He pulled his firearm when he saw one figure drop and the other run. The guard paused for a second to verify that his partner was the one who fell. He uttered a sympathetic curse, but did nothing more for the dying man. The second soldier had rightly believed there was nothing he could do to help his fellow soldier. That, and the killer was within reach, so he gave chase. The pause and distracted curse provided Robber all the time he needed.

Robber whirled and doubled back as the second soldier bolted in his direction. The soldier had no chance to even raise his pistol. Robber jabbed at the man's face with the knife. The surprised soldier recoiled. Jerking his head away from the shining blade threw him off balance. His back arched and Robber drove a left hook into the soldier's solar plexus, which forced the air from him. Momentum carried the man backwards, despite the reflex to fold in upon himself.

Robber immediately squatted on the downed man. He would have used his garrote if he hadn't dropped it, and, more importantly, if he hadn't lost track of the second soldier's pistol. For his own safety, Robber slit this one's throat, too. Robber saw that the pistol was missing when the soldier's hands reached up to grasp his fiercely bleeding neck. The soldier tried in vain to stop his life from completely pulsing out. Robber had learned this trick well. Slashing just wasn't a clean way to get a job done. Nothing could have prevented this man from dying like the first, but there was no room for delay. Robber grabbed the soldier's wrists and pinned him to the ground. The soldier bucked and gurgled. The spasms and sounds soon grew weak. The man fell unconscious, never to wake again.

Sitting on the dying man had given Robber an idea. It occurred as more of a whim as he had waited for the ride of the man's death throes to finish. Robber used his knife to carve a deep "X" on the man's face. The cross went from the temples to the opposite jaw on each side. The cuts went all the way to the bone. Robber then cut down the middle of the man's face, from his scalp, down the bridge of his nose to his chin, with a perpendicular cut across his brow. The last line was too high to represent an accurate Star of Lucifer. The cut should have gone over the cheeks. Once Robber had finished, he regretted his idea. That sort of graffiti was for children. The carving made him look like an amateur. It wasn't the kind of work for which he wanted to be known by a fearful public. That's why he had to dump the bodies. Despite his instructions to leave them in the open to be discovered, he was embarrassed by his handiwork. These murders had made a chink in his pride.

As that part was also not planned, he had improvised. Robber dragged the bodies the short distance to the edge of the dock. He was familiar with hoisting dead weight. He propped one body and then the other upright, with their backs to the water and heads hung towards their laps. Blood still dripped from gaping wounds. Robber grabbed the ankles of the soldier he had killed first. It seemed only fair he wouldn't have to wait a turn going to his impromptu resting place. Robber tossed the dead man's feet over his drooping head. The legs dropped over the side of the dock, pulling the rest of the body with them. There was enough of a distance from dock to the water for the body to tumble almost all the way over. Robber dumped the second soldier into the water the same way. The splash echoed through the thick pylons below. Good riddance to the self-righteous grunts. They were but refuse now. Garbage had no claim to being better than anything else in this world.

Robber had never seen the ocean before. He'd never seen a real river or lake, for that matter. He had spent most of his life within the desert city-states. He didn't know what he was missing until he now stood at the edge of the sea. The expanse of water was beautiful, even in the darkness. The moon and city lights reflected in moving distortions on the surface of a deep world. Robber promised himself a trip to the beach within the next few days.

An urge to learn to swim had come over him. Robber was curious if anyone went into the water off the Cap. When he looked down, he had spotted the bodies floating just beneath the surface. He grew anxious and shuffled around for something to throw down at them, realizing that he should have tied

something heavy to the bodies. Robber gave up and hoped the tide would take the dead soldiers away. All his effort to hide the evidence had accomplished nothing. The killing ground was smeared and pooled with blood. This had been another situation in which he needed to assess the whole incident. He decided that one of his big areas of improvement was not to let one slip lead to another. Once something had been screwed up, there was a better chance more would go wrong, with little chance of a graceful recovery. This had been a lesson to him. Robber determined that it was time to leave.

Before Robber turned, he peered across the water again. He saw flashing lights crossing the harbor. They were the patrol boats. The way they zigzagged made it appear the soldiers were joyriding. It looked like fun. Once Robber learned to swim, he would venture out on a boat. The ocean had become a whole new world to explore. It was so very different from the gully of the tall buildings where he had grown up. As he watched the boats, something else caught his eye. A dark shape much closer to him had broken the surface and risen up.

A large snake-like shape rode the waves. As it rose, long curved spines fanned out and up. Moonlight shown through the veined membrane that stretched between bony spires. The spines limped to one side. They fell with a fluid grace like a string of dancers collapsing in a wave. More dark tubes rolled across the surface of the water; they were smaller and spineless. Robber thought the thing was some kind of huge fish with babies schooling around it. The water went still. He didn't really know what he had seen. The thing was a genuine sea monster to him. He had never seen the ocean until tonight and there were all sorts of mysteries to uncover. Robber looked toward the bobbing bodies. One had drifted further from the dock; the other was missing, possibly washed underneath. Robber couldn't say which dead man was which. The soldiers had gone into the water face down and wore the same uniform. Robber had determined not to be concerned. He needed to leave, with no more delays.

Robber rushed back the way he had come, stopping in the tall grasses leading up to the yard's fence. He knew a patrol would make a round soon; he had hoped that they would come and go before the graveyard shift had reported for work. Robber was certain he left thick red footprints across the planks and blacktop of the dock, as well as brushed blood from his clothes across the grass. A trail from the scene to the fence was apparent for anyone to see. It didn't matter. The point of entrance had been a random one. He could have come in anywhere. He had been more concerned with being tracked once on the other side.

When Robber had waited for the patrol, he had tried ringing the blood from his clothes. Twisting the front of his jacket and pant legs had little effect. The juice had squished in his fists and oozed between his fingers. Scraping off the slurry-like fluid had worked to remove the wrung-out excess, but the clothes had stayed wet. Robber had shaken off his hands. He had removed his shoes and hopped into a cleaner patch of grass. He had rolled his pant legs up to his knees and had taken his jacket off next. He had found a dry spot on its back and had wiped his face and hands before turning the jacket inside out; he wrapped his shoes inside. He had then knotted his jacket into a tight bundle. His skin had remained smudged and pants stained, but it was the best he had been able to do until he got to his car and the clean clothes.

The patrol had arrived. Robber had dropped to his belly and flattened in the grass. He had seen the beam of the jeep's mounted spotlight crawl over the yard, a long infinite triangle that had dimmed as it grew wider. The light had been powerful enough to catch anything that didn't belong between the fence and the sea. The patrol had lingered too long. Robber had wanted to stand up and see what had caught their attention. They hadn't looked in his direction or along the trail he had created. He had hoped the smugglers hadn't returned unannounced. They may have anticipated the sudden demise of the soldiers and seized the opportunity to attend to unfinished business. Robber had hoped the heathens had better control of their operatives than to allow for such an untimely snafu. If the military had been called in, Robber wasn't sure he could have gotten out of the yard. The smugglers would have been caught, too, but the most obvious and condemning trail would have led to where he had hidden.

The sound of his booming heart had become unbearable. Its beat had amplified as he held his breath. Neither the idling jeep nor slosh of ocean waves had been able to drown it. Robber had already cursed the suspected incompetence, when the spotlight finally switched off. For a moment, everything had gone black, as if the streetlights and the moon had been snuffed out. The patrol had moved on. Robber had risen to his knees to watch the shrinking tail lights disappear around the block. He had looked in the other direction. The area was finally deserted.

Robber had tossed the package of shoes over the fence in a high arch. He had hooked his fingers and toes into the chain link and cleared the fence easily. He retrieved the jacket and shoes, and scanned the ground for footprints or other marks. His jacket had created a smudge where it landed. The force of the fall had pressed blood through the fabric. Robber wasn't happy at the time, but as long as

the trail had ended there, he was heartened. He crept back to his car. Nobody had spied his movement. Daybreak had been many hours away and driving was not safe before then. Robber had known that he couldn't be caught waiting inside either, as a lone car always attracted attention. Patrols made a habit of peering through windows. Robber had known that hiding there was unwise, and he hadn't even been able to change his clothes.

The last thing Robber had wanted was to be caught unawares, hunkered down in his car, literally with his pants down. Robber carefully opened the car and gathered his belongings. He had made certain he had everything he needed and checked for marks. The car had stayed clean. He locked the doors and carried the clean and soiled clothes into the shadows. Robber knew that the vehicle would remain beyond suspicion until he was ready to return to it in the light. He depended on it being there, waiting for him.

Robber had spent the remainder of the night crouching and running. He had waited for a patrol to pass and had scampered into the nooks already checked. This game of hide and seek had been played since he was a kid. Moving became the key to his life. It was a good tactic even when he didn't have to hide. Robber needed to move to live, just like a shark. He'd chosen a shark as the creature he would become in another life, but the crazy idea of reincarnation belonged among cults far away from the city-states. Besides, he had to find out if he enjoyed swimming first. If he truly wished to be reborn, he'd quietly beseech the Living God, the omnipotent god of the heathens. He wouldn't make demands or even ask for a favor. That was a false belief of the Chosen, which led to wrath and oblivion. Robber could only wish, with all his heart, and hope he would earn some reward for all his good work below.

His skill at hiding was one of the reasons Robber believed he wouldn't be too shoddy at this sort of surreptitious work. His hatred of the Church and everything it stood for was another factor. He was better at concealment than killing, but there wasn't glory in hiding. Being recognized for the ability to hide was ironically incongruent, but Robber was masterful. The residential area needed to be avoided. Some night owls, who always sat at their windows, guaranteed to be too hasty with calling the military.

Robber had moved well away from the shipyard, but he had heard a number of vehicles at its gate. The ocean breeze had carried distorted voices, which made them sound like foreign tongues. Floodlights had filled the yard, so their glow

could have been spotted blocks away. The military had been occupied for the next few minutes. Despite the hours before sunrise, Robber had decided to change his clothes.

The dark ones were completely bloodied and had grown stiff as they dried. Robber had started to grow sick of the putrid smell. The clean clothes, on the other hand, were thin and light colored. They were the best camouflage in bright sunshine. The hue would have made it more difficult to hide at night, but he would take his chances. Robber moved away as the military widened their search beyond the yard. At one point, Robber had determined that their coverage would span too wide. He had planned to slip back to his car then. He placed all the dark clothes into the bundle of the jacket. He had decided he'd even go barefoot. The military had been given every small advantage to catch him. Robber hadn't thought they would. He had evaded these opening spiral search patterns for as long as he remembered. He had his pursuers beat before they started.

The trail to the fence had enlivened them. A rabid pursuit in the middle of the night was the best tonic for caged dogs, but once they were over the fence, clueless monotony had subdued them. When their circle had grown so wide that they met another patrol uninvolved in the hunt, a hole had opened. The growing area inside the perimeter had become just another nook that had been peeked into previously, the safest place for prey to hide.

At the very first ray of daylight, Robber reached his car. The vehicle would have already been scanned and forgotten. Nothing inside would have suggested anything other than an ordinary vehicle. The blocks around the docks were peppered with them. In most cases, their owners had grown sick of fighting traffic and trying to find a place to park in the crowded surrounding neighborhoods. They elected to walk home the extra hour. One could do worse than a stroll in a summer sunset, especially if the alternative was still being in their cars come curfew. Robber would be just another commuter making his way back to his car. The rush of traffic and scattered patrols would overwhelm any attempt to keep the area secure. Once morning came, the manhunt was unofficially over.

Robber would have to intrude on his secretary for a few hours. He sorely needed a nap and a shower. Then he'd go to the meeting for the other offer, which was another murder. Robber did not yet know the details, but he could guess what the

request entailed, just listening to the prospective employer. Depending on his or her stomach for such a despairing deed, his or her voice would tremble or become stoic, detached, or barely hanging together. A face-to-face meeting seemed to offer solace. Besides caution, that's why Robber never asked for information when he returned messages. If the job was acceptable, and the money real, he arranged a rendezvous. Everything he needed would be collected at the meeting, including half the cost.

This was a special job, almost a favor. A priest had asked for his help. Meeting a member of the Church, other than the final kind of meeting, was a mad idea. This priest, however, had no real part in the Church. He would still be just as bigoted and deluded as the rest of the clergy, but he was somehow related to Judah Batheirre, Robber's preferred benefactor. The name was waved like a flag of truce. There wasn't any way the priest would know who Robber was, but the priest came with his hands raised anyway. Despite the priest's kin, the man's attitude reminded Robber that the two of them stood opposed when the lines of faith and justice were drawn. As he thought before, Robber wouldn't mind knocking off a random priest for the heathens. Based on the rumors he had heard throughout his years working with the Batheirre family, the priest's untimely death would be the real favor to Judah.

12 Wastrel Son

“Spiders have eight legs and bugs have six legs,” Davey informed Hen. Hen didn’t disagree with the fact. The problem was that neither he nor Davey were degreed entomologists. There wasn’t much difference between either’s knowledge, compared to the great gulf that separated the two from an educated specialist. However, it didn’t require an expert to determine that what they were observing was something unnatural. Davey had found a strange fly, like those that had been swept up with the feathers, huge with black and white stripes running the length of its elongated abdomen. Little carcasses were located everywhere, in overlooked cracks and corners. Their eternal fate would remain hidden, and dry to dust, unless some adventurous or bored explorer discovered them. The boy had taken to crawling under the pews to entertain himself. That’s when he found the dead insect and showed it to Hen. Hen just couldn’t keep up with Davey any longer. He watched and rested. More so, Hen worried; the stress sapped his energy.

The teenager’s mother had left Davey with Hen all day yesterday. Tamara believed the boy was under Ben’s care at St. Erasmus; that was never the truth. Hen had usurped the role of sitter and monopolized the boy’s attention. They disappeared for hours into the warm afternoon and returned with ice cream and playing cards. Ben was happy for the arrangement; he hadn’t agreed to play guardian, but Hen had thankfully found something productive and enjoyable to pass his time. His single-minded focus to abandon the church was getting old and vain. Ben used the respite to meditate and think about what he should be doing. He knew he couldn’t continue drifting indefinitely. The Cortras brothers would move on or something would eventually happen, making it unsafe to stay at the church. Ben had to be prepared. He had to make a plan; he had to remember what he was doing as recently as a week ago.

Tamara didn’t return until close to curfew. The woman was gushing; her apologies and excuses sounded like they had been picked from a well-thumbed stack of note cards. There was more work for her to do than she expected. The dust piled like ash during hot days in the Cap. Specks floated in sun rays, angling through half-shaded windows. The dirt thickened to brown haze across the skyline. The cloud that clung to the surface of Capital wasn’t just dust, but full of plenty of other noxious particles, all manufactured by its masochistic

residents through the daily course of their lives. As Tamara wasn't able to leave home, due to her difficulty finding someone to watch her son, the dirt waited for her. She was happy to earn the money all at once. Even though it wasn't much, having a pocketbook of bills made her feel wealthy for a little while. Worrying day to day over money was wearing on her aging heart; even one day of respite was an answered prayer.

There was still much for her to do. Her advancing age slowed her down. A younger person could accomplish in an afternoon what took the old woman two full days. Tamara regretted being so slow, but she couldn't charge by the hour. She brought Davey back to the church the next morning. Ben suspected that she hadn't tried her neighbors, before coming straight to him. She had found a willing gull in Hen.

Her son and Hen had become steadfast buddies immediately. They played all the while Tamara was gone. Between the two of them, it didn't seem like they'd ever run out of ideas. They explored the church, repeating their games and gentle teasing in each room. Ben was willing to bet Davey had been talking and singing about Hen all night. The boy often lapsed into a singsong voice, which Ben and Hen discovered for themselves. Where it was not unpleasant, the lack of rhyme and mediocrity made it grating. To the boy's credit, he would whisper his song if he was asked to quiet down.

Hen may have been her only choice. If Davey were left with anyone else but his new friend, the boy's laughter would have probably turned to tears and an overgrown temper tantrum. The fit would have been turbulence that his mother could no longer weather. The boy was scrawny, but he was still a teenager. His slow mind and growing body could potentially be very damaging to an old woman. Her control waned over the years. Tamara could eventually do no more than give in to her son's perpetually childish demands. When the pair showed up again at the church doors calling for Hen, Ben was happy for that, too. He had spent the night coping with Hen's indecision about lapsing into a nervous breakdown. Davey was now available to keep him busy. Ben just hoped the church wasn't becoming a daycare.

Dil hadn't returned last night. Tamara came and took Davey home. Curfew began and the streets emptied. Hen risked the patrols and ran out into the twilight to check the covered truck. Despite having the keys, he made certain a dozen times that the vehicle was still parked a few blocks away. Wherever Dil

had gone, he was on foot. Hen immediately suspected that his older brother was plucked up on orders from the sergeant at the Wall. The soldier did say the brothers were under suspicion; the truck was still under surveillance. The military knew their names; they were on a list. Even crossing the street at the wrong spot could lead to detainment. Hen was so adamant in stressing the mounting danger, the only way to restore peace was to point out the flaws in his scrambled thinking.

Ben assured the younger Cortras that the military expending effort to find the brothers wasn't practical. Capital was a big city with a lot of its own problems. The sergeant was merely making the customary threat to strangers upon entrance. No one had come to the church looking for the two and that should be proof enough. Starting at the stated destination would be the first logical step in any search. The whole day had passed without Ben spotting a patrol; he told Hen as much. After curfew, a squad drove past the church as if rushing to something more urgent than usual rounds. The lone sighting amounted to the totality of military presence in the neighborhood. No word of the brothers' unaccounted presence was announced on the radio that Hen and Davey had found upstairs and switched on. There certainly weren't any wanted posters for the Cortras brothers; it appeared that they had been forgotten the moment they passed within the Wall.

Hen jumped to the next conclusion. His older brother must have done something stupid. Dil had a problem controlling his temper. Most of the time it simmered in slow rage, but bubbled up when it wasn't closely watched. It was worse if he drank. Ben rationalized, out loud for Hen's benefit, that if something like that had happened, the military would once again be at the church looking for the other brother. The hypothesis was a shaky one, but Hen appeared to accept it. Ben conjectured that Dil had lost track of the time; curfew had fallen and he was safely holed up for the night. The older brother would likely return in the morning.

Hen asked Ben to find an occupied station in the morning and make inquiries if Dil didn't return. Ben was a priest, after all, or at least passing as one. There wouldn't be anything unusual about him talking to the military. He could say he was looking for a stray workman, but Ben didn't like the idea. It didn't make a lot of sense and would attract attention. The request was driven by desperation, which was to be expected of Hen. He agreed to Hen's request only to calm him. Ben added that he really didn't think a visit to the military would be necessary and that everything would be fine in the morning. The tepid promise was enough

to send Hen to bed.

Without his older brother, Hen would be lost, nearly paralyzed. Getting out of Capital would be impossible after such a tragedy. He'd probably never leave the ominous St. Erasmus. Hen would sink into helpless despair; nothing would matter. If Hen were in peril from the military, he'd lose the will to escape out the back. The younger Cortras would surrender without flight or resistance. Catatonia wasn't conducive to the long-honored instinct to survive.

Ben wasn't able to look out for him. The only reason he was with the Cortras brothers was his own lack of direction. Losing that ride, Ben would fare better alone. He couldn't bear the dead weight while trying to gather pieces of his past. Becoming a surrogate brother was completely out of the picture. As far as Ben was concerned, the debt for his rescue had been repaid. Once the brothers had been brought into Capital, Ben and the Cortras brothers were square. The three now coincidentally shared paths and spoils that they had stumbled upon; their squatting was an arrangement of convenience.

The rising sun woke Hen. He behaved like it was Easter morning, a magical day when prayers were answered and gifts stripped of their patterned bandages. Hen wasted no time before waking Ben and imploring him to hurry downstairs. Ben didn't celebrate holidays; they were the province of the Chosen and the Church. He found Easter, the most prolific holiday of Chosen and heathens alike, pitiful. The celebration of the Resurrection was honored differently between the two faiths. The Chosen beliefs were especially debauched. Ransoming the living corpse of a mutilated deity for immortality was pathological. The theology of the Chosen was wrought with abominations such as these.

The thought that Ben had once subscribed to these beliefs, made his stomach churn. The heathen treated the day with more reverence. The rebirth was a testament to the immortality and omnipotence of the Living God. Everlasting life was not a birthright for the Chosen to take for granted. It was a grace to be earned. Ben knew the truth; both beliefs were obsolete. In the absence of god, there was only oblivion.

This day wasn't a holiday; Easter had passed two seasons ago. The summer was a long, dry stretch of uneventful days. The next holiday wasn't until its end; the date was the Chosen's parade of saints. The day was otherwise meaningless. Church and military bureaucracies shuttered offices for a long weekend. Graven

images were flaunted on the streets. Hen insisted that Ben wake anyway.

The pair went downstairs. Presents were waiting for them. A small hacksaw lay on the kitchen table. An unopened bottle of Yowling Cat to replace the wine consumed last night accompanied the tool. The presents were unmistakably from Dil. Ben guessed that searching for the saw was the reason for Dil's delay. They had talked about cutting the bars from the windows yesterday. It appeared Dil was willing to do anything Ben wanted to make the church a home. Dil must have gone off on his errand during Tamara's first visit. Ben had no clue where Dil was and what he was doing now. Dil had taken the unfinished bottle of wine with him. Hen was unburdened for a few short minutes. He rushed around the church and out to the truck looking for his brother. Dil was nowhere to be found. Hen's brooding panic drove him to question Ben again. Tamara delivered Davey just in time to stem the tirade.

The old woman offered apologies and thanks again. Before Ben could agree to watch Davey, the boy was in the church sniffing out Hen. Tamara was at her job by the time Ben, Hen, and Davey fixed breakfast together. The two men began gathering their own meals until the boy insisted on helping. Ben coordinated the effort to keep Davey out of the way. The boy became fixated on wanting to play with the stick matches that Hen discovered on a shelf above the stove. Davey was normal in respect to having the typical adolescent fascination with fire. Hen encouraged the bad habit by striking a match to life between his front teeth and spitting out the sulfurous bit. Davey was allowed to light the stove top burners and no more. Watching the orange flash and blue circle was enough to keep the boy content until the cooking was done.

The meal was a bland mix of rice, canned tomatoes, and refried beans, with the tomatoes stirred into the rice, and the beans heated separately. Hen commented happily that he felt like he had new brothers. He especially praised and played with Davey throughout the preparation. He would've liked Dil to be there, but what they were doing felt right, as in "normal." The older Cortras would hopefully be along at any time.

After dishing the rice and beans onto everyone's plates, they mixed everything together. Nobody grumbled. The only interaction throughout breakfast was Davey teasing Ben about returning to the sink again and again to refill his glass. Ben's thirst wasn't as intense as it had been, and he was grateful for that. He spent most of his waking day drinking and pissing. Ben ignored Davey and

drank until he was content. The boy refused to wash his dishes until Hen took responsibility. Davey then gladly helped with every chore Hen accepted or invented, which included the continued trips to check the truck. Eventually Hen and Davey rounded out the morning staked out on the corner, keeping an eye on the covered vehicle and watching for Dil.

Ben used the time alone to resume his thinking from yesterday. He had no luck uncovering any more pieces of his puzzle. The grandiosity of purpose and destiny encompassing St. Erasmus in Capital had diminished. The importance and imminence was gone; so was the voice. Ben may have been trying too hard to listen. The same probably applied to Ben trying to figure out the necessity of his presence there and then. Both the voice and sense of destiny were like his new notion of faith. Acceptance was blind and immediate. As soon as a hard look was warranted, it became insubstantial. There wasn't as much as a fleeting shadow from the corner of an eye. The only conclusion Ben arrived at yesterday was that his sanity was restored. That had been enough for one day, but today was a new one. Today he would need to establish a plan in case things went wrong.

Hen's doubt and general bad feeling were growing contagious, and Ben was getting a little spooked. The feeling that he was supposed to be in Capital still lingered. The fact just wasn't the shining revelation that it may have been intended to be. His entrance to the Cap was the condition of a mission. Ben convinced himself of that. The idea seemed to be in line with his feeling that he was a part of another's agenda. He must have been on his way when something happened in the desert.

He could have hit his head, although the fear of a concussion was groundless. He didn't suffer any symptoms, except the inner ringing he heard at the time and there was no lump on his scalp. So the next questions were what was his mission and how did he hit his head hard enough to knock out years of memory. If it wasn't for an insistent cautiousness, he may have been on legitimate business. No particular affiliation with the Church or the heathens was apparent. Ben may have been acting in the interest of a crime-lord of one of the poorer city-states like Gomorrah. If so, there may be consequences for his failure and he may miss an essential contact. That could apply to whomever he was working for, if what he was doing was work.

Time skipped an hour while Ben sat in the kitchen thinking and staring at the

blank wall outside the window. His right leg had gone to sleep. The numbness spread all the way up one side of his buttocks. When he stood, an electric jolt stabbed through the sole of his foot and up his calf. Ben froze, hoping the muscle wouldn't cramp. He turned the hacksaw over. The best thing he and Hen could do at the moment was keep busy, instead of share this state of limbo. Even if they checked into different rooms, it was the same motel. Hen had Davey to distract him. Ben decided he'd work on the bars in the nave. He'd open up a window or two and see if it made any difference to the odd claustrophobia that he experienced in the large room.

The window nearest the back hall was the ideal candidate, since it was the first in line. To comfortably reach the base of the bars, Ben had to kneel. The bars were so close to each other that the blade had to be removed from the bow. The miniature wing nuts were loose; it was simple to take out the serrated metal strip. The teeth were a straight line of vicious looking perpendicular triangles. They were small, but belonged in the jaws of a piranha. A single swipe could razor off a good bite of flesh. Ben held the blade carefully at one end between his thumb and forefinger. He propped his elbows on the windowsill and sawed at the bar in the center. Within a few minutes, Ben realized his approach was impossible. The iron would only scratch if he continued to cut the metal delicately like a jeweler. Frustration soon forced him to abandon the attempt. To get serious work accomplished, he needed to stop worrying about himself and attack the bar. Ben gripped the blade in his fist. The points were sharp, but didn't break the skin.

When he started again, the reward was immediate. A cut a few millimeters deep appeared in no time. Ben blew the scattered metal shavings out the window and ran his finger over the scar. The only problem with the undertaking existed in his head. The repetitive work had the same effect as a couple days past when he had helped Dil scrape the mess from the floor. Ben didn't believe he'd be able to generate ideas or recover memories if he continued to work. Yet the emptiness was addictive; it seemed safe and it was certainly serene.

Ben looked at the palm of his hand that held the blade. It was just as red as the burned topside. A black line pressed into the skin. The indentation was evenly dotted with small, but deep pits. The points matched the teeth of the blade perfectly. It was just an impression, but the marks broke every major crease in his palm. Ben mulled the significance. Any palm reader would probably say the slice was temporary and artificial. Then again, fortune telling was nothing more than a farce. What would they know of fate? They were all charlatans, offering

nothing more than entertainment. No one knew the future. Ben rubbed the slice with his thumb, but the indent remained, as did the discoloration from the blade.

The day of the week was also a mystery. Ben realized the fact when he returned to sawing at the bar. Any morning he could wake up to a slew of pious sheep looking for a sermon. In this neighborhood, the flock would consist of UnChosen making wishes and tossing whatever coins they pinched, into a collection plate, voluntary taxes to the Church. Dil may be right. The church could be just a way station for the military. The troubling part was that this also made him feel secure. In the past few days, there hadn't been many visitors. Guests included the priest who presumed to be his superior, and the old woman and her son. No soldiers or other neighbors even slowed down to look as they passed. There was enough conspicuous comings and goings to indicate the church was again occupied. Ben wondered what they were waiting for; there wasn't going to be a church newsletter. He wasn't about to go knocking door to door. Most of all, Ben couldn't allow himself to get too comfortable with his alias.

Protracted repairs would still keep the public out. Namely, the floor, but the back door also needed to be replaced. As much as Ben desired to take the bars from the windows, he wanted to be able to lock the entrances, front and back. The idle curious needed to be kept out. The pile of sticky feathers in the back could raise enough uncomfortable questions. Ben stopped sawing. He had cut through the base of two bars before knowing it. He could finish them if he went outside and cut the bars at their tops, or he could cut at the furthest point where he was able to reach up from inside.

The latter would be more difficult. The bars would wobble with the motion of the stroke. Ben decided he'd move his work outdoors. The side of the building with his window would remain shaded from the sun for awhile longer. He needed something to stand on; a pew turned on its end and leaned against the church would work. Ben turned around. Hen was sitting in the pews at the back. Ben hadn't heard him come in. The younger Cortras brother's face was long, and his gaze was fixed and beyond the cross over the altar. He had the look of a man who wanted to ask a favor, but knew he didn't have any coming. The pews in front of him bumped up and slid askew. Davey's shriek sounded from beneath them.

The boy jumped up, trotted around the pews, and then over to Hen. Davey

showed Hen something; Hen flickered back to the present. The pair started arguing playfully.

“Count them again, Davey,” Hen said. He was poking into Davey’s open palm. Ben needed a rest. His shirt was wet with sweat and he started to smell his own musk. He’d make a point to change his clothes today. He was thirsty again, but this time he had a reason. Before he went to the kitchen, he’d check on Hen. He didn’t look very well. Ben knew it was because of his absent brother, but he wanted to be certain Hen wasn’t scheming. Ben licked his dry lips, but it didn’t help. His tongue was sticky and lacked moisture. He sucked the inside of his cheeks to get saliva flowing and tried again. Water was absolutely necessary.

Davey held a dead fly in his hand. It lay on its back, with its numerous legs curled up. The bug was just one of the hundreds that had succumbed to the gas. It was huge. Being isolated from the dead swarm and clean of gelled blood didn’t do anything to shrink the insect. Sitting in the thin hand of the boy made the insect look sharp and dangerous, even in death. Ben felt a chill creep over his shoulders and the back of his neck. The shiver made the sweat there feel like melting ice.

“Eight legs,” Davey declared when he finished counting.

“You’re sure?” Hen asked, counting again. The bent legs made it difficult. Hen came up with the same number, but thought he might be mistaking a pair of antennae for legs, although the insect didn’t appear to have feelers. The head consisted of big, green, faceted eyes that glittered gold in the light. More distressing were the long mandibles that looked more like pincers belonging on a beetle. This thing was a bunch of different bugs bred together into a single blood-sucking monstrosity.

“I can count,” Davey said. He softly lay the insect down beside Hen, fearing he might shatter it. Hen slid away in a jerking motion. Davey raised his fists close to his tiny high-set ears, and blinked as he concentrated. The preparation was for the sake of performance. Both Ben and Hen had seen Davey count quietly before without the use of his fingers, but the boy didn’t have an audience then. As Davey counted, he raised a finger for each number. When he reached ten, both hands opened and fingers splayed. The boy paused and blinked again. His mouth froze in an open smile, ready to move on to the number eleven. Before continuing, he needed to remember which hand to use. Davey’s routine was

growing rusty. The hand that began the procession closed back into a fist. Davey reached fifteen and closed the other one.

“Hey Davey, how high can you count?” Hen asked. He saw the boy was determined to continue. If Hen could interrupt and explain that the boy didn’t need to prove anything to him, he was going to try. Besides, his patience for the show wasn’t as keen as he felt Davey deserved.

Davey ignored him and continued to count aloud. A very earnest look monopolized his face. One hand would snap shut, as the other shot up fingers one at a time. Davey looked like a mechanical traffic sign where the motion indicated flashing. He didn’t stop until he reached one hundred. The boy dropped his hands and waited.

Hen glanced up at Ben. Hen wasn’t paying close enough attention to know that the boy had finished; Hen tried to pick up clues from the second member of the audience. Ben was digging into the palm of his hand with his thumb, back to thinking about the windows. Hen turned again to Davey.

“Well that’s fine,” Hen said. Davey waited quietly for more. He looked disappointed. Hen was quick to correct his faux pas. “That’s real good!”

Davey laughed and snatched up his found bug. He cupped his fingers, forming a cage. The insect rolled around inside like the muffled clapper of a bell. Davey unfolded his hand in front of his grinning face. The dead fly was balanced on its curled legs. Its translucent wings pointed upward as if the thing was about to take flight. Hen almost tricked himself into seeing it revive before his eyes.

“I guess this spider has wings,” Hen said. Davey squinted one eye. His shoulders became stuck to his jaw in a jammed shrug. The boy was contemplating the idea. Davey wasn’t as sure of the possibility as he was with the number of legs that insects were supposed to have.

“How ‘bout you throw it out the window?” Hen implored. His squeamishness was building to a level that he could no longer handle. At the mention of a window, Ben turned back around.

“It bit my mama,” Davey said. His grin was gone and a white light flashed in his eye. “I’m going to eat it.”

Hen's lips curled back. "No, Davey, don't."

"Don't do that, kid," Ben commanded. The warning was the first thing he had said to Davey since saying goodbye last night. Ben wouldn't have even given that if the boy hadn't demanded a farewell from everyone. He made it a condition for going home.

"Why?" Davey asked defiantly.

"Because they're poisoned," Ben said, as a matter of fact.

"Oh, that's right." Hen jumped up. His hands jerked to his sides like a gunslinger. If Davey made a move toward his mouth, Hen was ready to slap it aside. "They killed 'em with gas. If you eat it, you'll get sick."

"I don't care. It bit mama."

"You could die," Hen upped the ante.

Davey paused and he grew serious. His revenge was stymied. He cupped his hand again, and his tendons tightened as if he was resisting the urge to clench his fist tightly. The carcass was about to pop and crunch inside.

"Go on and throw it out the window," Hen suggested again.

Davey raised his arm above his head and whipped his hand down. The insect bounced against the floor once and rolled over on its wings. It remained intact. Davey followed the fall and stomped hard on the fly. The church echoed with the flat boom. Ben and Hen jumped at the unexpected sound.

"Oh, Davey," Hen said. "We just cleaned the floor."

Davey ground his foot. The little pieces of chitin crunched like an eggshell. Hen was relieved that he didn't hear a squish. The boy laughed as if he was possessed. He dragged the bottom of his foot backwards across the floor. Thankfully there wasn't a smudge, only a trail of tiny carapace shards.

"Davey, that wasn't good," Hen said, solemnly. "We're in the house of the Mortal God. If it gets dirty, who's going to bless it?"

“Him!” Davey shot his finger at Ben.

“You’re out of luck, kid,” Ben answered.

Ben hoisted a pew up to his shoulder. It was heavier than he expected, and he stumbled backward and forward trying to find his balance. His skin had grown accustomed to the weight of his clothes. The burns, or rather the one comprehensive burn, felt like they were well on their way to healing. Yet as soon as the hard wood pressed on his shoulder, Ben was rudely reminded of his injury. It felt like he was being branded with the flat part of a hot skillet.

Ben threw the pew off his shoulder as if he was fighting off a mountain lion. It knocked into the other benches, raising a racket that dwarfed Davey’s stomping. Ben reached inside his shirt. When he shrugged off the pew, it felt as if a swath of skin ripped from his shoulder. As Ben patted his flesh, he realized he was still whole. There was only pain. He held the fabric of his shirt away from his shoulder. The area had grown incredibly intolerant again. Davey and Hen rushed over to Ben.

“Are you okay?” Hen asked. “What are you doing? We can help.”

“We’ll help,” Davey repeated.

“Just take it outside,” Ben directed, pointing at the thrown pew. “Put it outside the window.” He gestured to the window where he was sawing at the bars. He dared to rub his shoulders, but stopped when he discovered it wasn’t helping. “I’m going to get some water.”

“You cracked it,” Davey said.

The pew had a long split down the seat, running from one end to the other. As it was lifted, the wood twisted and slightly separated like parting lips. It was still solid enough to sit on, and Ben decided it was going to be strong enough to support his weight when he stood on it. Hen instructed the boy not to mind the damage and help him carry the pew outside. Ben went down the hall to the kitchen, while Hen carried the pew through the front doors.

13 Gnashing Teeth

Robber had put his shoes back on, because his feet had grown cold once the concrete lost all its absorbed heat from the previous day. In the spreading light of dawn, he had seen what needed cleaning and had found dry spots on the bloodied shirt to use for scrubbing. He had no problem getting back to his car in the morning. He even had a short conversation with one of the workers walking to his job at the dock. Robber let him in on the fact that the fellow would be starting late this morning because there had been an incident the night before. The military and a reporter or two may be in the way, scratching around the yard. When the dockhand asked Robber how he knew something was happening, Robber answered truthfully and nonchalantly. He had just come from the docks, and was now heading back to his car. The dockhand walked with Robber for a couple blocks and never asked questions about why this stranger had left the docks or about the bundle of clothes tucked under his arm.

The two men parted when Robber went south to his car and the worker went the opposite direction to the main gate of the dock. The dockhand expressed thanks for the advance notice. He was at once concerned with being late, wondered if there was going to be work that morning, and curious. Robber and the man bid friendly farewells with smiles and waves. A jeep with three soldiers slowly cruised past at that moment and Robber waved at the patrol, too. They continued down the street. The two men on the street appeared to be old acquaintances off to work, oblivious to the crime last night.

His secretary was in the apartment, as Robber expected him to be. The place was cramped. An off color wallpaper had started bubbling away from the drywall. The paper was new, but the summer had been hot. The heat inside the little oven of a pad had melted the glue. Robber's secretary was reading a book, which looked like it had once been a paperback. The cover was gone and the yellow pages had spoiled to a rusty orange at their edges. The black ink remained solid and clear, despite the wear and age of the pages. Robber was instantly wary.

"Where did you get that?" he asked. "Books are banned, especially in Capital."

"I brought it with me," his secretary answered. He didn't look at the man who took his name. He flipped a page and then another, skipping over a thick, continuous paragraph of text. "It's a good thing. I've been going crazy, stuck in

here.”

Robber grunted. He peeked through the window out of habit and drew the fading blue drapes. The room went dark, too dark for comfortable reading.

“Hey!” his secretary objected. “I can’t see the pages!”

The man got up. He wobbled on his long legs, as they had grown stiff sitting in one position for a long time. He stepped across the room to open the drapes.

“Hey,” Robber held him with a stern look. His secretary froze as if turned to stone by Robber’s face. “Only a crack.”

His secretary pulled the drapes open to allow a sliver of light to cast upon the spot where he had been sitting. He peeked out the window, but there wasn’t anything to see; just a barren courtyard surrounded by blind windows and locked doors. All the neighbors had gone to work. The new Robber always picked isolated times to visit.

“What’s it about?” Robber tossed the bundle of clothes into the chair where his secretary had been sitting. There were only a few places for it to go, other than the floor, and that was already scattered with clothes and strewn with trash. His secretary didn’t look eager to get back to reading anyway. A dark brown crust covered one of Robber’s hands. When he rubbed his fingers over the scab, it flaked off and sprinkled on a clear spot of the dusty gray carpeting, blending in with small chunks of dried mud and dropped crumbs.

The secretary stepped away from the window. He used a side of the beaten book to push empty bottles, boxes, and cans around a small table. He cleared enough space for the book to hang over the edge when he set it on the acrylic surface. The bottles and cans were perched close to toppling off the other side; all it would take was a gentle jolt.

“Nothing, really. Short stories. There’s a story about a cat out for vengeance. I almost know it by heart.”

“Yeah, I like cats.” Robber wasn’t listening to more than a few keywords. He heard “a book about cats” and assumed his secretary wanted to be a veterinarian. Good luck to him. Chances were pretty slim he’d find a school within Capital that would train a poor, illegal immigrant UnChosen.

“Why don’t you go out for a couple hours?” Robber proposed. “Go get breakfast or lunch, brunch. I don’t have liquor rations, so no luck there.”

“I don’t have any money. You haven’t paid me yet.”

Robber reached into his front pocket and pulled out a loose roll of bills. He handed a few to his secretary.

“It’s on me. I need the place for a while. I want to clean up. Take the keys. I won’t be here when you get back. Don’t take the book with you.”

“I’m getting sick of this arrangement,” his secretary said. “What if I don’t come back? How about I leave for the encampment? I was thinking, the military doesn’t bother people leaving.”

“You’ll be back.” Robber grinned sardonically. “The money is good. That’s what you came to the Cap for; you don’t need to test me. You don’t want to. Besides, I got your book.”

“You can keep it.”

“Go. Get out of here. I’ll see you later.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“We really ought to be friendly with each other. I like you, kid.” Robber was going to call his secretary by his alias, but forgot the name he had given him. Robber was going to continue being the only Robber in the room. “If you cleaned up around here, you’d have a nice little place to live. It’ll help you save money for school.”

“What?”

“I’ll see you later.”

The secretary scanned the floor. He found a pastel, button-up shirt and shook it out. Crumbs, among other motes, flew off. He turned his head to keep them out of his eyes. He pulled his undershirt off over his head. His torso was pale compared to the deep tan of his face and arms. He was as skinny as a fence post. So many ribs were visible, Robber lost count during the glance he took.

“I’m going to be soaking those,” Robber said, pointing at the bundle of clothes he had tossed in the chair. “I can throw in a couple of your shirts, if they need it.”

His secretary looked at him with outrage. “Darks don’t go with whites. There’s blood on your clothes, anyway.”

Robber nodded. Yes, there was. He wouldn’t need to clean them, otherwise. His secretary walked across the room and moved faster as he neared the door. He practically sprinted out of the empty courtyard. Robber hoped his secretary wouldn’t get himself run over in traffic, in his haste to get away. He wouldn’t have anyone to take care of him, if he lived through the accident. For better or worse, his secretary would be an anonymous corpse if he died. His medical report might just as well say he was an orphaned only child. His parents weren’t around long to give him a proper name. That last thought struck close to the facts of Robber’s own life; but Robber wasn’t thinking of himself. His secretary needed to blow off steam, as he’d been cooped up too long. Once his secretary was out of sight, Robber locked the door.

He went into the kitchen and cleared the sink of cans and plastic utensils. He and his secretary didn’t have proper plates or glasses. They ate directly from boxes, cans, or take-out containers. They didn’t even have a place to put their trash; that accounted for all the garbage piled on the counter and table. They rinsed what they had and found a second use for everything. Robber thought of it as bachelor living. The reality was this place wasn’t his home; he didn’t have one. The apartment was a makeshift safe house. Robber needed to keep moving. Once the sink was empty, he stopped the drain and ran cold water into the basin. As the sink filled, he collected the bundle of stained clothes from the chair.

The chair came with the apartment; the place was partially furnished, but furniture wasn’t a criterion when he selected the apartment. He grabbed the first available, anonymous, low rent dive he found; inheriting the table, chairs, and sofa was a pleasant surprise. Any place Robber didn’t have to sleep on the floor or sit in corners, was classy. Once he was finished cleaning up, he could afford to take a short nap. The sofa was already inviting him. He still had some time before his meeting with the priest.

Robber dropped the bundle of clothes on the black and white checkered linoleum of the kitchen floor. He reached for the bottle of bleach beneath the sink, the

only cleaner in the apartment. It was the general purpose cleaner; in the right amounts, it could be used for anything. A big bottle of bleach and a wardrobe of clean and properly colored clothes were indispensable in his business. If he could avoid the messy hits, the bleach would be less important. Using less noxious stuff in turn would mean he wouldn't have to continue ruining the clothes he owned. The cleaner did the job well, but also ate the fabric.

Robber measured four overflowing capsful into the sink. The quantity was arbitrary, but had become part of the ritual. The running water mixed with the chemical. The whole apartment soon filled with sharp, stinging perfume and made his eyes water. Robber liked the smell better than the unidentified, undertone odors in the apartment. It must have been the smell of his secretary, figuratively bricked into the small space during the warm days. The windows would still stay shut; having them open would make the place vulnerable. Robber turned off the faucet.

The clothes sank into the water, nearly overflowing the basin. Robber didn't bother to roll up his sleeves. He used his fingers to poke at the clothes until they were submerged. When he stirred, water splashed out and soaked the front of his shirt and flowed over the counter. A small, empty cardboard box skimmed the surface of the spilled water. Robber pulled out his hands. He mumbled a quiet curse for wetting his clean clothes. As he took off his shirt, he watched the water turn red.

The color began as tendrils reaching up to the surface and down to the bottom of the enameled white sink. The flimsy arms dissolved in the swirling water. The water turned pink, then darkened evenly. Before Robber left, he would need to drain the sink and soak the clothes again in cleaner water. This was a job he wished his secretary was willing to do. Robber was sure this kind of work was one of those shifting taboos of principle. Even if his secretary helped him, it probably wouldn't feel right. Robber needed to be responsible for his own messes. Ideally, he wouldn't create any. He would eventually be a maestro. For now, he'd have to focus on covering up the imperfections.

Robber stripped off his clothes and dropped them to the floor on top of the others belonging to him and his secretary. It was peculiar that two men sharing the same slovenly habits met by chance. Then again, coincidence may not have anything to do with it. All men may live as they did. Robber didn't have a lot of experience with roommates, so his observation was limited. He laid his knife on

his secretary's book, then picked it up again and opened it. The blade was clean, as were the pin, catch, and antler handle. His cuts last night had been fast and accurate, confirmed by the lack of blood. The blade itself was sharp enough to use for shaving, which Robber had done on a few occasions. This morning would be another one, so he took the knife with him into the shower.

Shaving was about all Robber accomplished in the shower, since the water wouldn't heat past lukewarm. Even though it was adequate, he preferred showering with scalding water. The room needed to be a sauna, because the sultry air relaxed him. Robber lay on the sofa naked after showering. He decided to nap while waiting to dry. His wet skin felt cool in the stagnant warmth of the apartment. He may have fallen asleep, or he may have only been sucked into an intense daydream. Whichever it was, dream or daydream, the vision was vivid and rooted in the present.

Someone was outside the door. Whoever it was, crept along trying to be silent. Robber hadn't really heard the intruder, but a prickly aura pressed into him. He rose, still nude. The locked door was off its hinges and lay on the wall to one side of the opening that no longer went to the courtyard. It was replaced with what looked like the inside of a covered garden where overgrown plants were wilted black. The area resembled a big birdcage like those at a zoo, an aviary, except there weren't any birds. No sounds at all, not even a peep. It was dark, even though the morning sun was climbing into a clear sky. The cage shed dense shadows, their solid shapes building a maze where every turn ended with an absence of light.

Robber didn't leave the apartment. He remained lucid enough to realize he wasn't wearing clothes. A figure appeared as Robber was about to turn and find his pants. It hadn't come forward from the shadows. Instead, the dark receded like a wave falling back to reveal beached jetsam. The figure was that of a short man, wearing matching blue pants and long sleeve shirt, a workman's outfit. His skin was leathery, as if his life had been spent in the desert sun. Someone like this didn't belong inside Capital, nor inside a creepy oversized birdcage, either.

It was curious why this ordinary man was in Robber's dream. He may have been a past victim, a ghost, seeking revenge or trying to reclaim a lost name. Robber didn't ask and didn't care, but the apparition outside still transfixed him. It mangled a smile that may have well been a grimace. The stranger raised a knife to his own outstretched neck. The knife belonged to Robber; the handle and

slightly curved blade were unmistakable. He remembered leaving it at the bathroom sink. Robber was promptly inflamed with the instinct to run out and recover his stolen property. The stranger twisted the knife back and forth, barely touching the side of his throat. Robber wished the stranger would drive it in and finish himself for his affront. If Robber could, he'd do it in an instant. However, as it was, he was naked and could only stare. His body refused to move, not even to recover his clothes.

A wet trickle rolled off Robber's shoulder and down his chest. The liquid was warmer than his shower and he mistook it for water dripping off his hair, but the flow was steady. Robber dabbed at his neck; it was hot and sticky. He looked at his fingers and they were covered in blood. Robber looked around to see where it had come from. The source was nowhere to be seen and the blood still streamed down his body. Panic began to take hold. He slapped his bloodied hand to his neck and it splattered. There was no way he could have been cut. He didn't feel a thing, and no one had even been close to him. The figure in the courtyard vanished during the building panic.

The blood oozed through Robber's fingers. It flowed with the constancy of water draining from a hole in the bottom of a bucket. Robber needed to stop it. He reached up with his other hand, but his knife was now in his open palm, with the blade folded back into its sheath. As Robber looked down, he saw his bright red blood trace like branching veins outside his skin. The lines traveled down his legs and between his toes, yet the floor was dry beneath. The inconsistency of events and physics was too absurd. The quick rage had snared him in a nightmare, but now he knew he was really asleep. He wasn't staring through an open doorway and he wasn't bleeding. To allow this to go on was stupidity. He knew he was dreaming and it was time to take control. With this realization, Robber woke.

The first thing he saw when he opened his eyes was his knife. It was sitting on his secretary's old book where Robber had left it. Robber wondered how much he had actually dreamed. He was still naked and damp, especially on his side facing the sofa. He felt his chin; he had shaved. Leaving the knife in the bathroom was probably a memory from the dream. That wasn't certain; his exact steps between leaving the shower and lying down were fuzzy. Remembering was unimportant, like the dream. The apartment was growing muggy, the low odor increasing with the humidity. He told himself to leave before it became a stench. Robber had an appointment, and he might as well be earlier than he usually was.

He always arrived early.

The clothes in the sink soaked, forgotten, as Robber rolled off the sofa and dressed. He threw on the same clothes he had just taken off. He had checked again and again for stains, and had determined that they passed inspection each time. The attire was suitable for a daytime meeting. Robber checked his wallet and knife before placing them into opposite back pockets, and his twisted garrote into the front. Before leaving, he scanned the apartment. Robber had a disquieted feeling that he was taking something with him. A brief scan of the room confirmed that everything remained in its cluttered place. He thought he knew the reason for the uneasy feeling. He didn't want the dream to follow; it was a bothersome feeling, but it was tenacious. Shaking it off wasn't as easy as simply waking up. Robber slipped outside with a quick sidestep and pulled the door shut. He hoped he locked the threat inside, so it wouldn't try to follow him. Let his secretary deal with it.

True to habit, Robber arrived across the street from the meeting place, well ahead of schedule. Robber attributed the practice to common sense in his business, although the motivation was actually paranoia. Sometimes he showed up hours before the meeting, depending on his impression of the client. A shaky voice over the phone meant Robber would be there sooner; someone who couldn't stay level-headed wandered off the course of caution. Robber considered looking out for himself as a service to his nervous client. Watching his own back meant he kept his client an arm's length from prying eyes and military stings. Robber didn't feel he needed to be as careful at this meeting. This was a referral from a regular employer; but the fact that the client was a priest raised alarm as well as hackles. For this meeting, Robber guaranteed he would be early. Thanks to the unsettling dream, he was even earlier.

Robber parked his car the standard couple blocks away. His work involved quite a bit of walking. Robber considered it a benefit; besides getting down to real business, long walks were the most exercise he got. The car always remained out of sight and pointed the opposite. That was one of those little details for which Robber was proud of himself. He considered it skill, not common sense, along with his timing. Being able to navigate Capital at those times when the roads were least dense involved proficiency. Most people with regular jobs didn't have the luxury of avoiding the rush; but one still needed to time when the hive would let out and swarm about during long lunches, and when the few who cut the day short became a wave of buzzing traffic hazards. Robber was successful avoiding

commuters, even after punching out from his shift as butcher at the docks, followed by a shower, shave, and a regrettable nap.

Something about last night should be on the radio soon. Robber had listened to military news on his way to the apartment, and now, coming to his rendezvous. So far there hadn't been a word or he had missed it. That was a disappointment, as Robber enjoyed hearing about himself, even if it was by way of his anonymous work. The shame of his sloppy evening had passed. Forensics would prove whomever wielded the blade was a master. The buckets of blood were merely a consequence of opened arteries. Now he was hoping the bodies would be found and the murders reported. The practice of knowing what the military thought heathens were up to, and even what the Church wanted people to think, was a sound one. If juggling a portable radio wasn't such a possible distraction or obstruction, Robber would still be listening.

Instead, he leaned quietly between storefronts watching for a priest to show up at the unpretentious bistro across the street. Most of the compact tables stood outside. It was a reasonable assumption that this was where a lone priest waiting for a guest would be seated. When the priest showed up, Robber would make him wait a little longer just to measure his movements. The priest may be inadvertently watching for someone other than whom he was meeting. Robber would leave if he didn't like the look of his prospect. The two men would never have met, and the advantage would be Robber's for making the call.

He wished there was a better place to scope the restaurant, other than squarely in the open. Loitering was too conspicuous in Capital. Robber paced a short part of the block to mask his lurking. He peeked inside stores under the pretense of window shopping, to catch anyone marking him. No one appeared to be paying any special attention to what happened outside. He appreciated that. The alternative was going across the street and taking a table at the very place he surveyed. Boredom did manage to creep in. He wished he had brought his secretary's book about cats. Then again, if he was trying to avoid scrutiny, he was in the last place for it. Leaning against a public building in broad daylight with his nose in contraband, was begging for trouble.

The thought entertained Robber. He thought a little longer about the stares and the ensuing trouble with the military, who would nab the smuggler in name only, thanks to Robber's confiscated cards. The distraction stopped being amusing with how the story would really end. Whoever took the fall, always disappeared

in a detention camp. Being a creature of the city-states, Robber imagined the camps were hells on earth, flat and smoldering patches in unmapped regions of the Shur desert. When he was a kid, he heard the sun never set in the wastes. That's why the camps were built there. Robber had never seen a camp, but he had crossed the desert at night a handful of times. There was an amazing sky of stars barely visible in city lights. Every time he saw them, it was like looking upon the sea for the first time. But even in his awe, he wanted nothing more than to be back within the throngs of civilization.

The priest pulled up in a white limousine. It was amazing coincidence that a space in front of the bistro, large enough for the vehicle, had opened up the second before he arrived. Robber kicked off the corner he was leaning against and took a short walk as he observed what happened next. The hostess escorted the clergyman to an anticipated outside table. The priest was average in most respects, wearing the standard uniform of black slacks and white collarless shirt. This priest also wore a suit coat, which wasn't so unusual, but it was summer and a hot spell was simmering. The priest didn't seem to suffer, other than being a touch flushed in his cheeks. The redness could have also been due to the extra weight he lugged around. The manner in which the priest dropped into his chair suggested the blush was because of his stuffed girth. Robber hoped the man wasn't going to have lunch. Not only would it be disrespectful, implying casualness grudgingly afforded to only well-paying clients, but Robber had a quirk with seeing fat old men eat. The image typified a lifetime of gluttony available to the least deserving. Robber watched to see if the priest requested a menu. If he did, Robber would leave.

When the waitress arrived, the priest ordered a drink and nothing more. Business would be conducted today. Robber strolled up the street again so that when he approached, it would be from behind. Only parked and passing cars screened him from the eyes of the priest. He could have easily spotted Robber if the priest bothered to look around, but he didn't. He was preoccupied with watching the women at the bistro and counting the cash meant for Robber.

They were related activities; while the priest had the big wad of bills, he might as well try to impress some working class girls. The priest's drink arrived in a tall glass with more ice than tea. The priest didn't produce a ticket, so it was obviously non-alcoholic. He flashed his money and made a coarse innuendo to the waitress. Robber didn't hear what the priest said, only that the woman recoiled, followed by the priest calling her back with a wave and curt apology.

Robber stepped in and told the waitress they didn't need anything else. She relaxed her small and sloping shoulders, and retreated inside. Robber sat down opposite the priest.

"You're Kanen, right?" Robber asked. He was already sure he had the right priest.

"Reverend," the man remarked, aghast. He put the money back into his jacket.

"You're not my daddy," Robber snapped.

Josiah realized that the person he spoke with didn't float in the sea of law-abiding society, but he expected the respect that his position and rank granted. It had been a long time since he had to put up with the lack of grace, other than from his nephew, Judah. Josiah retorted with what he knew was at the core of the meeting.

"I am the one paying you," he uttered with all the snobbishness he could muster.

"I haven't said I was doing anything for you yet." Robber's stomach began to burn. The inside of his mouth tasted bitter. He wanted to spit, but sucked it back. He wouldn't give this priest even that much of himself.

"Listen," Robber said. "You probably think you know who you're dealing with, but you better think again. I don't have a rank pinned to my shirt. I'm not like you in so many ways. I don't play by your rules."

"All right," Josiah stated. He wasn't agreeing, only forcing room for his reply. "All I meant was, that you're looking for a job, and I'm the one who's paying."

This meeting couldn't possibly go smoothly. Robber knew it as he arranged it. It may even end with a dead priest, which was the outcome he was looking forward to, and he'd do it in front of witnesses there at the bistro and expect an ovation. Strangely enough, Josiah Kanen was hoping for a dead priest, too. He just didn't know Robber was currently sitting across from his prospective target.

"Get this straight, priest." Robber leaned over the table so he could drop his voice. His close face and low tone was deliberately menacing. "I'm not a migrant. I don't have to beg for work. I like what I do. I'd do it for charity."

Robber sat back. The priest huffed and swallowed an ice cube with a nervous gulp of tea. He had to swallow again to encourage the frozen chunk to slide down. The cold hurt his throat and made his temples ache. He squinted to push back the pain. Robber was satisfied that the priest's level of comfort was shaken. His arrogance needed a few bites taken out of it.

"Let's try this again," Robber said. "Tell me what I need to know. If I have other questions, I'll ask you. If you open your mouth with anything other than an answer to my question, there's a good chance you'll say something I won't like. I won't stand for sermons or lectures on moral responsibilities. Where will that get us? Your religion won't get the job done."

"Do you think I'd try to tell you this is part of some kind of crusade? What are you talking about?" the priest spouted.

"Hey, I said I'd ask what I need to know. It wouldn't be the only crusade I was on. Anyway, the price has already been negotiated. I see you've got the down payment." Robber indicated the cash.

Josiah reached for the wad. He instantly forgot the affronts and everything else Robber had told him. The killer's thinking was distorted and he was probably insane. To do the things he did for money, he would have to be a regular psychopath. In any case, the end to Josiah's desperation was within reach in a few moments and the excitement made him giddy.

"Does that mean you're going to do it?"

The priest was grounded again when Robber waved him to put the money away. Josiah was hoping to ask for something else. If this piece of business were concluded, he'd talk some more. He had emergency money available. It wasn't in his possession, but Josiah had planned to funnel it from the petty expenses to conduct a certain funeral for which he'd soon be responsible. Josiah slouched.

"Who is this priest, Benedict Ishkott?" Robber asked. "The name sounds familiar."

"You want to know how I know him?"

"No. I want to know who he is. I recognize the name. If I didn't, I wouldn't care less."

“He’s from Gomorrah, but he was never at any parish for long. He’s just a leech, a real cock.”

“That’s quite an animal, when you put those two together. I bet he fits right in at that zoo of yours,” Robber quipped. “He’s alone?”

“Yes. At his parish in the slum.”

“Where? Be specific.”

“St. Erasmus. L99 and F66. It was an old barrack, made of red brick.”

Robber softly chanted the address aloud. He asked the priest to confirm it before committing it to memory. The address was all he needed.

“That’s not too far from here, right?” Robber queried.

“Regrettably so. Too close for comfort,” the priest commented.

“What about the neighborhood? Don’t they visit and tithe like good little lambs?”

A long silence swelled between the question and Josiah’s reply. The priest wasn’t quite sure how to respond. The lowbrow sarcasm was difficult to forgive. Josiah decided to ignore the part he didn’t like.

“No. The church needs to be refurbished. There was another priest murdered inside.”

“One would think the clergy were dropping like flies after this. You aren’t establishing a pattern, are you?” Robber hinted, sarcastically.

“I didn’t have anything to do with the first one. If we weren’t inside the Wall, I’d think it was heathens.”

“I bet you would. As if they didn’t have bigger plans.”

“What are you saying?” Josiah asked. He knew he wasn’t making friends. Neither man wanted that, but Josiah felt he was allowed to make some rules of his own for the sake of being polite. If he was going to have to tolerate

disparages about the Church, he'd like them to be clear.

"You think I know something?" Robber stared at the priest, looking for suspicion. Discerning the nature of the question was impossible over talk of murder. "Why don't you ask the military?"

Josiah wasn't going to bicker over something that was best assumed to be a misunderstanding. "I just want to solve my own problem."

"And that's the only reason we're here, two men with business. Not a priest. Not a, what you might call, independent contractor. Just a deal."

"If you say so. I think that's a good way to put it."

Robber's thinking was becoming slanted. The priest's garb perturbed him. If he pulled out one of those tacky key chains with a cross, Robber would jump on the table and finish the priest for the sake of the heathen cause and good taste. He reached at finding a mechanism for control and fell back on the concept of business.

"Give me the money," Robber said. "If you talk to Judah, tell him I was right by you. Downright civil."

Josiah pulled the wad out of his jacket pocket. The priest's red cheeks flared like beacons. He started to coo like an idiot. Robber reached over to take the money and slap the priest's wrinkled forehead, before catching a glimpse of a blue blur across the street. It flashed between the storefronts where he himself had been leaning a few minutes ago. The cash brushed against Robber's aimless palm and brought his attention back to the transaction. He took the money and quickly deposited it into his only empty pocket. To stash it, Robber had to rock back and stretch his leg out from beneath the table. As he did, he saw the blue again.

A workman had come out of one of the shops. His skin was as thick and dark as oiled leather. He was a small man, the same one from Robber's dream. For a second, Robber thought he was hallucinating, but the apparition was really there, and he was shopping. A paper bag knocked against the man's blue slacks as he strolled away. Robber didn't know how to react. The scene was surreal. Still, the gall of this stranger to threaten him in his dreams before tripping into the real world to buy a new suit was infuriating. Robber started to get up to follow. The priest snatched Robber's forearm, stopping him from leaving.

“Wait,” Josiah begged, rubbing his stung head. He was so stunned with expectation, he didn’t realize he’d been struck. “I was hoping there was something else you could do for me.”

Robber tore his arm from the priest’s feeble grasp. It felt like a rodent scrambling up his limb. The fierce reaction was reflex to shake it off. When Robber realized the priest had touched him, he ground his teeth and scowled. Robber stood and looked down on Josiah. The man from Robber’s dream was fading away.

“I don’t have anyone here and I can’t go back to Gomorrah,” the priest rushed. “I was wondering if you had any meth you could sell me.”

Robber fell stone silent. At first he was astonished the priest would ask him for drugs. The assumption was depraved. His hand drifted into the pocket with his garrote.

“Or if you know somebody.”

That somebody whom Robber knew was Judah Batheirre, but the priest knew him too, and better than most. Robber didn’t mingle with pushers or users, other than taking work from Judah. They weren’t his class of people. The scavenging and desperation disgusted him. Addicts were the worst; they were the real two-legged leeches. They latched onto the closest unsuspecting warm body and stole life. There was no art or skill in any of it. They were lazy thieves and opportunists. Family was the easiest mark. The reason behind the priest’s request was suddenly evident. His flushed cheeks and the jacket betrayed his habit, once one knew what to observe.

The Batheirre family lived in Gomorrah. They controlled it. If anyone decided who was allowed to come and go, it was them. What Robber had heard was true. The family wouldn’t tolerate a member of their clan using their own product. It wasn’t good for business. Even if supply was unlimited, the image was catastrophic to underground and legitimate dealings alike. The priest was lucky if he was not already disowned. His practical use in the Church was likely his salvation, but that wouldn’t help him today.

“Don’t touch me,” Robber growled. He brushed the sleeve of his shirt. He could still feel the priest’s hand clamped around his wrist. Robber imagined he contracted a fast rotting disease, gnawing at his skin.

“I don’t deal trash, and I don’t deal with it,” Robber proclaimed. Time was wasting and he needed his composure to successfully trail the workman. “That’s why you want the priest dead, isn’t it? Things aren’t going your way? Bad deal? Are all you priests aped every day, except the Sabbath?”

Josiah sat with his mouth quivering open. He had heard the same revolt from Judah and still had no reply. All he wanted was to get past this piece of dirty work and put off the agonizing days when he would need to quit the drug. Eventually the pain would come. The loss of chemical joy, ruin, or an exploded heart were the final ends. Josiah wanted security. If he couldn’t have it from Judah, he would be driven to deeper devotion in the Church. He just wanted to stave off that day until he was ready.

Robber was angered over being distracted from his chase. If this meeting weren’t wrapped up soon, he would lose the dream interloper. The man was no longer in sight, and there were no obvious shops of interest along the man’s path. It wasn’t likely he was inside any of them, yet he did pop into places where he didn’t fit. Robber was about to leave when another thought occurred to him.

“You better have the rest of my money.”

“Oh, I do.” Josiah unfolded the paper napkin that had arrived with the tea. He dragged it over his face. Josiah was relieved he could offer assurance instead of empty excuses and justification for his addiction. He may not be getting any drugs, but a problem they caused was going away. “Are we going to meet again? I’ll bring it then.”

“I’ll be in touch when I’m ready to collect. Don’t be so eager. You won’t see me until I’m done. Before then, you’ll have gotten the news. Listen to the radio.”

Robber glanced in the opposite direction where he had last spotted the workman. Robber ruled out the minute possibility that the man had escaped being tracked. The only place he could have gone was forward. Robber walked away without another word. Disbelief that the meeting had taken place drifted in, but the bulge of cash in his pocket was a solid anchor in reality. The best way to think of the deal was as a truce for the sake of business. To make a living in this world, allowances were required. Beliefs and principles still applied, they were only shifted. A priest was going to die.

The pace of Robber’s walk quickened once he cleared the bistro. He followed

the steps of the workman. Soon he reached the place where the man had been when Robber became distracted and lost him. He cupped his hands against the window of the shop before him and took a long look inside. The shop was a woman's clothing store and Robber felt a little ashamed with his overt ogling when the female clerks and customers stopped what they were doing and gazed back. This would be the last place his pursuit would reasonably lead him. So it was appropriate that the shop was the first place he checked. The workman wasn't inside. Robber raised his hand in apology to the ladies.

Robber moved from one shop, to the next. He jogged and sidestepped down the block, spending only enough time at each window to confirm he needed to move on. Once Robber reached the stranger, he didn't know what he would do. If the dream was a sign, he would find out then and there what it meant. He never liked puzzles, but he did not dismiss omens lightly. If the future offered a clue to what lay ahead, he would happily take it, especially if the message was as personal as his dream had been. The irony didn't escape him. When he left his apartment, he was too willing to forget all about the vision. Now he chased it down the block, peeking through windows as he went.

The streets began to fill. The lunch hour scramble came late, and rushed to make up for lost time. The bees were loose and buzzing. Robber didn't know if that would help or hinder him. He became convinced, without luck, he'd have to give up. Tracking across the concrete paths of a city was impossible. Being a scout had never been a part of Robber's forte to begin with; the only way to pursue someone in a city was to tail him or her. If the line of sight was broken, the target could easily disappear for good, and this was starting to look like the case. Robber stopped at the intersection at the end of the block, peering in all four directions. Tall trucks prevented him from seeing more than a few blocks. The workman was gone.

The man had become a phantom; he could have been no more solid than the apparition in Robber's dream the first instant he saw the man on the street. He could have materialized in Robber's waking life, because he had so easily disregarded it. The act of touting a bag when the phantom appeared, had been a little subconscious addition to help it stick to the physical world. As visions went, it was useless to go running after it. Like smoke, the more the air was stirred about, the more diffuse it became. Soon it would vanish entirely. So if there had been a message, what could it be? It could be a warning. Bleeding profusely from one's neck had some definite interpretations. As the act had been

something Robber had exercised on others, and very recently, the image had become a firm fixture in his visual library. No matter how deeply he studied it, it meant only death, an abrupt and messy end. The troubling part about that was the possible prediction of his undoing. It may have been a warning of retribution for so

omething he had done or something he was going to do. Messages arriving after the fact seemed unlikely and futile. Regardless, whatever would come, was in the future.

Robber needed to make a decision. The remainder of the day could be spent fruitlessly looking for a living, breathing stranger, or Robber could make his way through traffic back to his apartment. There he'd collect his thoughts and weigh the killing that he was undertaking for a priest. Granted, the man he saw bore a striking resemblance to the figure in his dream, right down to the common blue work clothes. The power of that happenstance was nearly impossible to ignore. There were plenty of open doors someone could duck into at the beginning of an afternoon. If Robber continued his hunt, he'd have to resume it as soon as possible. He picked the direction that seemed the most logical to easily slip away.

14 Sabbath Eve

The trip downtown to military headquarters wasn't as frustrating as it normally would have been on any other day. Mark and Margot were fortunate. A few early morning jams had converted the freeway's emergency lane into a condoned additional traffic route, at least until sharp debris caused the predictable flat tires and blocked the alternative route. Drivers took their chances circumventing the usual flow.

When accidents occurred, the shrapnel was usually brushed to the sides. An occasional sweeper and winter rain would eventually carry it to the gutter and down the ramps, where the piles were easier and safer to remove. In the meantime, it glittered and threatened passing motorists. Colorful, misshapen, and malicious ornaments were an established decoration on the freeway. The most hazardous were the small metal pieces that caught in tire treads and were carried back onto the road. They would twist and push through the rubber skin of tires. One screw could claim victim after victim. When the tire blew, the spinning rim shredded the flat and threw the screw back onto the road to reset its trap. The tire's strewn remains curled in on itself like the carcass of an animal racked with a pain, following the creature into death. Big chunks of flesh were torn from its body by claws disinterested in the meat. The lost fat and paws were a sacrifice to a sadistic freeway. There was so much man-made road kill.

Mark was wise. He'd rather tolerate the frequent starts and stops, than chance changing a flat tire during rush hour. The slow moving official lanes were safest. Once the two reporters reached military headquarters, Mark asked Margot to stay in the car. Margot didn't have to ask why. She had already convinced herself that Mark was going to see his contact and other lover. Walking in with another woman might complicate the situation, even if Margot was introduced as a colleague. No matter how brief or casual the introduction, intuition always exposed unspoken realities. Insinuating verbal slips and guarded posturing were dangerously unpredictable. In the end, a friendly exchange could damage trust and cooperation. At the moment, it was better to continue skirting awkward suspicions.

Mark did what was necessary to be successful. He had the assets for it, since his looks and personality disarmed every woman he assailed. What bothered Margot was the fact that he obviously enjoyed it. Privileges came so easily to him. It

hadn't mattered so much before she had slept with him. Prior to last night, her feeling was of general annoyance, a gender-shared distaste of chauvinism. Margot needed to get over her growing jealousy. She needed to constantly remind herself that Mark was married, yet a swinger at his core. He was not the kind of man with whom a relationship of trust was possible. The most he could offer was a fickle friendship and some risqué fun.

Now Margot wished she had gone inside; Mark was taking too long. She could have used the pretense of looking for another story. For appearances, she could have even waited a minute after the door closed behind Mark before going in. If he knew she was in the building, he may be inclined to rush. There were plenty of janitor closets inside for a speedy romp with his contact. Margot could have made that difficult if Mark knew she was watching. Anything would have been better than to be left alone with time to think over her expectations, misgivings, and envy. She needed to be more like him. Regrets and worries seemed to be pains Mark would never suffer. He lived life without fear of repercussion. Flaunting and risk-taking were paying off. The way he behaved made her wonder if he possessed any level judgment at all, good or poor. She wondered how much of herself she would have to lose to become that way.

After a few more endless minutes, Margot spotted Mark emerging from the reinforced glass doors of the cinder block building. He was just in time; Margot was about to go looking for him. Damn the sake of appearances. The momentum of her mind was making her anxious. Flirting with causing a scene would have released her pent-up energy. Thankfully Mark didn't look ruffled; she couldn't have handled that in the state she had worked herself into. He carried a pale green folder and a steaming floral patterned paper cup. They had gained the assignment and the summary was gathered inside. Margot's excitement drowned out all other thoughts and emotions, even the relief she felt when her sour rumination ended. She leaned over and opened the door for him.

"That's what I think it is, right?" Margot had to ask to believe. She wasn't going to settle for a lower profile substitute.

"You bet," Mark confirmed. He handed the cup to Margot. It was filled with black coffee, and an oily curl floated on the liquid's surface. He cautioned her that it was hot. "Our story. The big one."

Margot was impressed with Mark's thoughtfulness. The lack of caffeine hadn't

started driving the needle through her forehead. Margot was saved, so she thanked him.

“What are you waiting for? Let’s go.”

Mark smirked at Margot, with the keys already in the ignition.

“Not too long ago I couldn’t get you out of bed, now you’re pushing me around.”

“You took me to bed, remember?” Margot thought about her remark after it was loose. She either implied something or was just letting out a puff of steam. She was still boiling over with fabricated details of Mark meeting his still anonymous contact. Margot would stop there. They had a goal to reach. Mark took the comment in a context of his own.

“How could I forget? It was magical.”

“Shut up.” Margot punched Mark’s thick bicep. The blow bounced off harmlessly, and he only raised his brow. “Let me see the summary.”

Mark handed the folder to Margot. It was thick, stamped, and signed. Additional stamps with the words “Priority” and “Assigned” were present. Mark’s name was written twice, once after the standard “Authorized” and again next to the new “Assigned” stamp. Margot paused as she set the difference of the two signatures in her mind. She wondered if someone like a proxy could sign out stories for assignees. That would save quite a bit of running around. The list of perks of being an established reporter continued to grow. She would ask Mark later.

The summary had been appended with a second summary sheet recycled from last night’s story. The top sheet listed the names and ranks of the missing soldiers. It failed to provide the estimated time of their disappearance. The next shift had arrived, finding nobody to relieve. The premise was foul play, given the amount of blood found on the docks. Nothing Mark had told her about the soldiers had been reported. The information didn’t belong in the summary, but the frugal sentences amplified the depth of the unreported background. Mark’s contact at headquarters was someone privy to secrets and minutia. This contact probably had an office. She and Mark wouldn’t need a closet; a twist of blinds would provide instant privacy.

The second summary sheet was stapled beneath the first. One of the soldiers had been found in the water not far from the dock. The listed cause of death was due to his slit throat and ensuing blood loss. However, the report also included evisceration and facial mutilation. This was a bit more than what Mark had conveyed. Margot thought he was withholding details that she wouldn't want to hear first thing in the morning. She appreciated that to an extent, but as this was an important story, she needed all the facts.

"Mark, did you know that the soldier's organs were removed?"

"You mean his guts were cut out?"

"Grossly."

"No, I didn't."

"It doesn't sound like your connection at headquarters knows everything after all." Margot was hoping for a reaction. With luck, Mark would betray some details about his other lover.

"It's in the summary, isn't it?"

"Well, yes."

"Then we got what we need and a little more." Mark waited to get on the freeway ramp. They were going to the docks where they could view the crime scene and gather the minor details entailing good journalism. The docks weren't far from downtown, but as with traveling anywhere in Capital, the trip involved a great deal of patience.

"Tell me more," Mark said. "What else is there?"

It didn't sound like he was going to play along. Margot thumbed between the two sheets. She scanned them top to bottom, and back up again, looking for keywords. They were difficult to find. Margot believed the military provided a special course in summary writing: how to precisely execute spelling mistakes, sentence fragments, and generally bad grammar. Each skill was refined to create a confusing and cryptic propaganda template. The source was ripe with double meaning and missing details. The Church and reporters were left with plenty of gaps for their imagination to fill in.

“I’ve always hated these things,” Margot commented. She chewed her bottom lip and folded back the first summary sheet. The page contained nothing of use. She wished she had heard the embellished news story. Then at least she could have had some entertainment, since becoming acquainted with the case. “The only thing you probably didn’t know is the condition of the body, and I already told you what’s here.”

“Anything on the second soldier? If they found him, it should be noted there. That would be great. The rest of the story would be left to us.”

“No. There are the photos in the envelope.” Margot closed the folder. She had the whole trip from headquarters to prepare for the black and white photos of a scarred dead face, but she would need more time if there was gore.

“Give them to me,” Mark said. “I forgot you don’t like that kind of thing. I can screen them for you.”

“But you’re driving.” The protest was worthless, since they were crawling along. Margot had written whole stories driving in traffic like this, and she was able to eat lunch at the same time. The objection was an attempt to avoid an accidental glance at the photos. Mark rested his wrists on top of the steering wheel and pointed out the windshield with strained fingers. He displayed his best mockery of indignation.

“Oh, all right.” Margot opened the folder again and pulled out the envelope. She peeked inside just enough to see which side was up. She flipped the envelope and pulled the pictures out, face down. Mark waited with his hand held out. He took the photos once Margot had tapped them into a neat pile. They fanned out in his careless grip and Margot nearly gasped. She turned to watch the other motorists. The coffee Mark had given her had lost just enough heat to make it bearable. The taste was less so, but it was caffeine. She would take any source available at the moment.

Being a passenger allowed her to act like a tourist. Sightseeing was possible any time Margot was stuck in traffic, but she never looked. No other driver did, either. Everyone’s attention was focused on springing into the fastest moving lane or closing a sudden gap so they wouldn’t lose the car they were tailgating. A showroom of makes and models surrounded her. Margot swore she could count back all the years of her life just by finding a car built for each one. There were

handsome and beautiful cars.

She had never been very interested in vehicles, as her mindset had been geared toward what was functional and affordable. But seeing a good-looking car in the wild planted the seed for a change of heart. No single model had special appeal, and she didn't know the names of most cars, either. Both the molded curves and acute angles fascinated her. If she made it big, she'd have a beautiful car. The style didn't matter, but the color did. It would be red, just like her current economical Mariposa. The hot hue appealed to her. She liked how the sun reflected in the gloss. It was like divining with fire. Of course, there were also beaten boxes on wheels. Beautiful and ugly cars shared the common scratches and dents. Margot's enthusiasm for a new car sank when she realized that it would only be a matter of days, or even hours, before it would be marred. Everything nice was hard to come by, and more difficult to keep.

Margot turned to the people driving. Everyone stared, unmoving, dead ahead. She doubted that they could even repeat the license plate on the car in front of them. They probably didn't see further than the inside of their skulls. Oddly, every person behind a wheel seemed to have lost something. The look indicated someone who had searched for a long time and then given up. Maybe they didn't know that they had stopped looking. Each day blended into the next. Small tasks and diversions held dejection at bay. One day, they forgot to pursue the misplaced "something." The next day, they didn't bother to look at all, and soon unknowingly abandoned lifelong quests. For a chilling moment, Margot thought she knew what these people had lost, what everyone on the planet discovered was missing. They had lost their souls and now they sat upright in their coffins. Margot didn't want to think about it anymore. One moment, she was daydreaming of a new car, and the next, she was filled with depressing philosophy. She shivered, despite the hot coffee.

"The guy is an amateur. He's sloppy," Mark said.

"Who?" Margot turned. She made a concerted effort to look Mark directly in the eyes. His voice brought her back to the present, but she didn't want to freak herself out again. "Wait. Don't show me."

Mark deftly placed the pictures in his lap. He kept the image right side down. "The cut on the soldier's face. It's all wrong."

“It’s not a star?”

“Well, a bad one. It looks like something from a kindergarten class.”

“I really doubt that.” Margot was going to have to harden herself for the day. She was certain the rest of it was going to be filled with equally unpleasant conversations and images. Margot knew she wanted to be a reporter. The career was the one thing she had going for her and she had come further than most. This big break was more than an opportunity; it was a test. She would have to accept the gauntlet. Missing breakfast was a good turn of events this morning. “What does it matter? I expect the murderer was in a hurry and it was dark.”

“Yeah. Good points.”

Mark handed the pictures back to Margot. She quickly stacked and slipped them into their envelope. All the while, she stared straight ahead in case the photos curled over and the sight petrified her. She slid them back into the folder and under her seat. Margot stopped looking around once the photos were hidden. She would spend the rest of the ride looking forward.

“Hey, that’s a smart place for that.” Mark looked pleased for learning a new trick. “I should have thought of that a long time ago. It’s a pain taking it with you wherever you go.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Margot agreed. “It’s like a badge. When people see you coming with a folder like that, they suddenly don’t want to talk to you.”

Mark nodded as if he just learned another new thing. Margot was surprised he was so successful and hadn’t picked up these little habits of the trade. He was all good looks and personality, which appeared to be all that his success required.

“I don’t think it was heathens,” Mark declared. “I think it was personal.”

“Really? I don’t think that’s what military radio wants. You can tell that by looking at those lousy photos?”

“We’ll give them what they want. That’s not going to be a problem. I’m afraid we might be heading into just another dead end.”

“Mark, I wish you wouldn’t say that. I really need this.”

“I know you do. Believe me. I could use it, too.”

“What about the organs? That sounds like something a heathen would do, doesn’t it?”

“Or a crazy guy with a grudge,” Mark said casually. “The soldier might have been cut up really bad. They could have fallen out in the water. His intestines might be at the bottom of bay feeding the crabs.”

“I would appreciate less colorful conjecture, please.” Margot recalled the story she wrote on the priest’s murder. “Do you think it could be the same person from the parish killing? This is someone who is out with his knife, after curfew, looking for open doors and anyone who happens to be alone.”

“Could be.” Mark licked his lips. A small miracle blessed them when the road suddenly opened. An accident must have been cleared and they were among the first few out of the gate. “Except there were two soldiers, behind a fence, and both were armed. That’s really stupid.”

“So is killing a priest. Insane. Good sense and insanity are rarely roommates.”

“You could be right. So we’ll check it out. Spin it for the military and see if it matches your story.”

“Sounds like as good a plan as any.”

The two reached the docks within the hour. The gates had recently been opened and workers were beginning to file in. IDs were checked at the gate, even though most people waved and called the soldiers at the checkpoint by name. Mark drove by, scouting for a place to pull over. The streets outside the shipyard were restricted parking. The docks were a secured place and this was one street where violations were not tolerated. Tickets and fines were dismissed in lieu of immediate detainment. He and Margot were forced to walk from a residential area a few blocks away. Mark made idle conversation. He believed people living in the neighborhood all worked at the docks. They’d drive the short distance to fill every nearby parking spot just to punish the people who could afford to live further away in better parts of Capital. Margot agreed, even though if she weren’t peeved at her own inconvenience, she would have readily dismissed Mark’s flippant cynicism. She poured the remainder of her bitter brew on the ground and left the cup with it.

Upon reaching the gate, Mark attempted to speak with the two guards. Mark explained that he and Margot were reporters covering the dead soldiers' story. He asked if there was anyone he could talk to for details. Neither guard replied, other than to demand identification. Reporter credentials gained them admission into the shipyard. A swaying rifle barrel hastened them past the fence. The motion wasn't meant to threaten. It was habit.

"I guess we should go to the dock," Mark decided. "The summary said the murder was at the waterfront. There should be an officer around there. We can talk with him."

They began their trek toward the sea. A wide and straight stretch of blacktop pointed the way. The yard was bustling. Trucks were being unloaded, inspected and loaded again. The cargo was piled and scattered in every open space. If a system existed to separate loads from each other, Margot couldn't see it. It was chaos. An armed soldier was present for every truck, as they oversaw the operation. That made sense. Military personnel had experience with rushing nonsensical tasks.

"What's going on?" Margot asked Mark. "Those trucks looked like they were ready to go."

"There was a breach," Mark answered. "I imagine dead and missing soldiers are cause enough to think anything could have been smuggled in or out."

"Maybe we should cover the story from that angle," Margot said. She didn't want to go to the crime scene. Now that she was close, she decided she didn't need to see the evidence of carnage. The fumigation at St. Erasmus had saved her the first time when she had believed she was ready.

"That's not our story." Mark's tone became patronizing. "Margot, I have to tell you...breaking news isn't going to make you friends at military headquarters. Those folks like to call the shots."

Margot's mouth dropped open. She had heard the same from her friends and fellow reporters, but didn't give it credence. They were as inexperienced as she was. Yet now the same discouragement was coming from someone with reputation and some success. She was hoping her creativity would land her recognition, but that would be hamstrung if she couldn't bring an unassigned story to military radio. Mark might never have tried. He may have accepted the

rumors as fact and passed them along dutifully. Before she could refute the claim, they were interrupted.

“Mark Adut,” a gruff voice called, filled with excited surprise. “Mark. Over here.”

A short, older soldier behind a row of crates jumped up and down. The patch on his arm identified him as a sergeant. He was about to climb on top of boxes, when Margot pointed him out to Mark.

“Sergeant Meshonne!” Mark exclaimed.

“I thought you might know him,” Margot said.

“I know why you’re here,” the sergeant shouted. “Come over here. I’ll show you around.”

“We just got luckier,” Mark whispered to Margot. He took her by the elbow and hustled her across the blacktop and around the crates. The sound of the sea was now discernible over the ruckus of trucks and dockhands. Gulls chuckled and chastised each other, and soft, rolling crashes of waves hinted at the closeness of the water.

“Why? Who is that?”

“Sergeant Meshonne. He used to lead squads deployed to crime scenes. We go back to my starting days. I owe him a lot. I think he adopted me as a son and drinking buddy. Nothing like knowing a sergeant to help you skirt curfew and find free booze.”

The sergeant met the pair halfway. He grabbed Mark’s hand before Mark had even raised it. Sergeant Meshonne squeezed Mark’s arm as he shook his hand. Margot saw Mark wince. She was impressed. The sergeant was nearly a full head and shoulders shorter, but he must have been forged out of folded steel.

“It’s been a long time,” the sergeant said. “I was hoping you’d turn up sometime.”

“It’s good to see you, too, John.” Mark shook his fingers once the sergeant had released his grip. “After you went to the Wall, I didn’t think I’d see you again. I

thought you'd finally give it up and retire."

"Retire?" the sergeant looked outraged, but Margot couldn't tell if it was an act. "That's why I'm here. I had some overdue leave. The commander told me to take it or lose it. I said lose it. He said fifteen years without a vacation was too long. Thank the Mortal God that they needed a hand on the docks. I was going out of my mind."

"You didn't have that hairbrush under your nose the last time I saw you."

"What, the mustache? I'm not trying to look pretty for you, boy. What do you think ma'am? I'd appreciate the opinion of a woman, not a pantywaist punk like this one."

"He doesn't get any more charming with a couple beers in him," Mark interjected.

"Shut your mouth a minute, will you? I'm trying to make acquaintances." The sergeant turned back to Margot. "I'm John Meshonne."

"Hello, I'm Margot Sebash. The mustache is very distinctive."

"Damned to the Shur! Now I know I'm getting old." The sergeant brushed at his whiskers. "Well, so much for stealing your girlfriend."

"Margot and I are working together."

"Sure. You're here about those soldiers, right?"

"You've got us," Mark said. "Could you help us out?"

"I'd be heading in the other direction if it was anyone but you. Sure, but no quotes, you understand me?"

"Never, John. You ought to know me better than that."

"Nothing personal. But you can't trust a reporter as far as you can throw them, even though I could toss your scrawny butt halfway across this yard."

"I've put on a few pounds, John. I wouldn't want you to hurt your back."

“You know how it is. The censors can make life harder than it needs to be.”

Sergeant Meshonne ushered them on a short walk. The docks were very close, behind a second row of crates. The trio moved parallel along the water.

“I like being down by the sea,” the sergeant said. “Especially since it’s been so flaming hot. This job would have been a slice of heaven during the heat wave. I was at the beach when those giant squids washed up on shore. Did you hear about that? What a way to start a vacation. The stink was worse than any dead heathen I ever smelled. As far as I’m concerned, they should have burned them along with the flies.”

Mark and Margot recalled hearing tidbits about the events at the beach, with prehistoric squids and a swarm of biting flies. The insects were probably the same as those at St. Erasmus. The story was the biggest news of the week, chiefly because it was oddly different from the barrage of military or Church interests. Neither of them had paid much attention, since it wasn’t a part of their myopic picture of the current events.

“Those things were huge and strange looking,” the sergeant continued. “Tentacles ran up and down the body. I couldn’t count them in that tangled mess. I didn’t want to hang around long enough to sort it out. What got me were the teeth. They could have been spines, but they looked like shark teeth to me. At one side, I couldn’t tell top from bottom, there were row after row of them. Hey, if your story won’t have anything to do with heathens, you should squeeze those things in. That would be something worth listening to. You can say these guys were yanked off the dock by these things. Eaten alive. What do you think about that?”

“I think we better stick to the heathen angle,” Mark said. “I don’t think big fish bother carving stars on their dinner. That would be a tough sell.”

“Just leave that part out. Nobody cares anyway. This heathen crap in the Cap has run its course. I for one can tell you nothing is getting through the Wall.”

“I do what I’m told,” Mark replied. “I’m just working for the military.”

“Aren’t we all? And the Church.” Sergeant Meshonne stopped. He pressed his knuckles into his hips and hooked his thumbs into the black nylon belt. “Here we are. This is the spot.”

They stood in a large open area. The clearing was out of place, given the stacks of crates at either side. The perimeter was wet, as if it had recently been hosed down. The rank stench of bleach replaced the ubiquitous salt smell of the sea. Margot had to stop herself from laughing out loud. She was saved again, and the relief was difficult to hide. Her career may yet survive. She had to learn to let go and accept life as it was handed to her. A little faith was required; she wasted too much energy playing ping pong with investigating crime scenes, and now her more intimate relationship with Mark. There was so much being handed to her, she had to learn to avoid being overwhelmed.

“The place has already been washed down. I’m sure you saw the photos.” Sergeant Meshonne stepped into the middle of the soaked perimeter. He pointed toward the fence across the yard. “But there’s a straight trail through the grass. You can track it by the blood.”

“Sergeant,” Margot stated. “I heard the victims had some problems. Do you think they were involved with smuggling or bribes?”

“I don’t know what you think you’re going to do with that kind of information, but I’m not going to answer that.” The sergeant gave Margot a hardened look. She glanced up to see the same face drawn on Mark. The point was obvious, but she didn’t appreciate Mark’s disapproval as well.

“How about we stick to me showing you around?” the sergeant added.

“Thanks, John,” Mark said. “We’d appreciate that. Where was the body found?”

“Not far from the dock. Just out there.” The sergeant pointed opposite from the path to the fence. “As luck would have it, the body bobbed up like a cork just when there was somebody to see it. A private caught sight of it as he was overseeing the cargo being cleared from the area. I don’t know what he was thinking, looking out at the water instead of paying attention to his duty. Something stirred the corpse up from the bottom. We fished it out before it could sink again.”

“Any news on the second soldier?” Mark asked.

“Nope. We had a couple divers in this area. Now there’s a trawler in the harbor. You can see it out there with the patrol boats.”

“So that’s pretty much it, then. The soldiers had their throats cut. Let’s say they were outnumbered two to one. Then they were left for the next shift to find. They were carved and guts cut out.” Mark summarized how the story would go. He had been hoping the other body would have been found by the time they arrived, so the fabricated facts could be riveted together. Everyone’s job would be easier if the original story wasn’t continually appended with new discoveries, and contradictions didn’t have to be flattened out.

“A little dry, but it will work,” the sergeant said. “The sea monster story would be better radio.”

“So what happened last night after the second shift informed their superior?” Mark asked.

“Well, the search of the yard turned up the trail. We found the location where the killer came down on the other side of the fence. He must have been watching from somewhere close, to avoid the patrols. Once inside, he had free reign. I’m surprised those two soldiers even left the guardhouse. They might still be alive if they didn’t do their job at all, instead of half-ass. Those last few bits are off the record.”

Mark nodded, and the sergeant continued.

“A search pattern was initiated outside the yard. I suspect the killer got in and out a lot quicker than what was reported. There was no trace of him.”

“Or he slipped into the home of a sympathizer,” Margot said.

“Now that’s thinking,” the sergeant smiled. His lips stayed hidden beneath the graying mustache, but the whiskers went askew and soft lines folded into his cheeks. “Go with this lady’s ideas, Mark. It’ll liven things up.”

“Yeah, that’s good, Margot,” Mark said. “We should use that.”

Margot smiled; she was afraid her earlier question had banished her from the conversation. She ventured another.

“Are there any civilian witnesses? Someone who saw something out of place or smelled something fishy?”

“Nope. Nobody knew anything before patrols started knocking on doors and waking people up. Not a single civilian has come forward. That’s typical.”

“Any thought as to the direction of the escape?” Mark asked.

“The patrol circuit mainly runs northward, but they shake it up. The best guess would be the killer followed a patrol on foot to the north.”

“What’s to the north?” Margot inquired.

“Private warehouses and a handful of residences. They were secured with the first pass. A break and entry would have been a dead giveaway to the killer’s hiding place. He had enough sense to avoid trying that trick.”

“How’s the search in the harbor going? Do you think they’ll find the other soldier this morning?”

Sergeant Meshonne scratched through the bristles of his crew cut. The hair stayed up on end when he took his hand away. “Nope. If they haven’t found him by now, the body’s gone. I believe it’s out there, but we’re not going to find it.”

“Do you remember the priest’s murder not very long ago, at St. Erasmus?” Margot changed the line of questioning abruptly.

“I sure do,” Sergeant Meshonne answered. “It’s funny you should bring that up. I was on duty at the Wall when his replacement came in. He was in terrible shape. The Church had given him up for dead. They thought the heathens had kidnapped him as he came through the desert. It turned out he had car trouble. A couple of brothers found him and gave him a ride to the Cap. Probably expecting a reward. They were a goofy pair. Looking for Drystani. Can you believe that? They wanted to collect the bounty.”

“That is strange,” Mark agreed. He looked at Margot, waiting for her to continue.

“Do you think this could be the same killer?” Margot asked.

“I don’t know about that. Anything is possible. Is the Church trying to link the two incidents?”

“Not right now, but there could be a connection. If they were going to put the two together, we’d have the jump on the story,” Margot said. She stood at attention, looking proud.

“Well, aren’t you ambitious,” the sergeant stated. “Mark, you could learn something about hard work from this one. I can’t help you, Miss. I didn’t follow that one beyond that radio broadcast.”

“That’ll do, then. I think that is about as much as we’re going to need, Margot,” Mark said. “Let’s write the draft and get the story back to headquarters.”

“Sounds fine to me,” Margot replied.

“So after this, are you going back to the Wall?” Mark asked, trying to end the conversation on a less business-like note.

“Yes, sir.”

“Sergeant, when do you think they’ll open that road that runs along the top?” Margot asked. She was genuinely curious.

“That’s up to the Church, Miss. Personally I’d like to see it stay pristine. Once it’s open to the public, it’ll be just as overrun as the freeways. A lot of blood went into that Wall. The lives of Chosen and UnChosen alike were lost to accidents and terrorist heathens. Do you know how many workers died?”

“I’ve heard the stories,” Mark replied, but he hoped the conversation was not going to meander into gratuitous detail.

“Dozens,” the sergeant volunteered.

“Thirty-two,” Margot exacted.

“Close enough. One for every year of the Mortal God’s life on Earth. Heathens claim the deaths were a small measure of god’s vengeance. Can you believe that shit? Pardon me, ma’am.”

“They’re coming up short. He lived longer than that,” Margot added. She couldn’t help but smile at the sergeant’s profane slip and subsequent blush.

“I believe you’re right. But then, who’s to really say?”

The awkward time for a friendly goodbye had arrived. The idle silence was a signal.

“Hey Mark, it was good to see you again,” Sergeant Meshonne said warmly. The wrinkles in his curved cheeks came back. “If you got the time, you should come over to my place. You should come, too, Margot. We’ll show you what life is like after curfew. You’ll have a great time.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Margot replied.

She shook the sergeant’s hand. She clenched her teeth expecting every bone in her hand to snap in the sergeant’s grip, but he was very gentle. The thick calluses on his palm and the shanks of his fingers were the only hard part of the clasp. Margot decided she liked Sergeant Meshonne. Mark was fortunate in many ways to find this sort of friend. They said their farewells, and Mark and Margot returned the way they had come. Mark didn’t feel that exploring the bloody trail was necessary. Military investigators would have scoured any evidence. Margot agreed, for her own selfish reasons.

They discussed the details of the story during the walk to Mark’s car. He adhered to the outline that he had provided to Sergeant Meshonne. Mark was probably right. Give the military news only what they expected. It was a safe and sure road. Mark surprised Margot with what he said as they pulled away from the curb and cut a tight u-turn.

“You’re right about a connection. We should have gone back to the church when we had a chance. When we turn our story in, I’ll talk to some people at headquarters. I’ll tell them what you think and we’ll be at the front of the line, if they bite. I think it is a serial killer. The pieces fit.”

Margot blushed. The warmth started in her bosom and spread upward until it radiated from her cheeks.

“See what you get when you listen to your wiser friends?”

“I don’t think wise is a word I’d used to describe Sergeant John Meshonne. After all, he’s more interested in spreading stories about monsters.”

“Just the same, I liked him.” Margot couldn’t stop herself from smiling. Her warm feeling made her bold; there was something she wanted Mark to do. “Mark, stay with me tonight.”

Mark clicked his tongue and squinted. He knew it wasn’t the smart thing to do. His wife would be furious, but that was what he wanted. Margot would be in a voraciously amorous mood. That was obvious, just by looking at her. He wanted that, too. Tomorrow was the Sabbath, and no work was possible then, anyway. The chance meeting with John Meshonne could be a handy excuse, so spending the night with Margot sounded feasible.

“When are your friends coming over?” Mark remembered Margot’s weekly get-togethers. He didn’t want to be caught lying in her bed, when a bunch of old school buddies came to visit. He might even know a couple. Remaining coy was essential to his image.

“I can cancel. They can meet at someone else’s place. So is that a yes?”

Mark’s face relaxed. A devilish grin spread, revealing his perfect teeth. “That’s a yes.”

Margot squealed and tried to jump into Mark’s lap. The center console barred her way. The jolt bruised her hip, but didn’t damage her enthusiasm. She leaned over and kissed him hard on his lips. Mark swerved and recovered. They were going to have fun tonight.

15 Blind Wanderer

The afternoon had faded away, but Ben hadn't noticed. He was engrossed with sawing bars from windows. He had completely removed the bars from two adjacent windows, which lay in the breezeway where they fell. He had left the cracked pew outside. It proved solid enough. The wood split again as Ben shimmied up the leaning pew, but it held him. Ben would need it again as he made progress on a third window. He was pleased with his work. He spent a few minutes resting and admiring the unobstructed view of a plain block wall. The view wasn't the inspiring part; it was the unguarded opening. A man could climb out without having to contort sideways through an impossible angle. The lack of bars made Ben feel secure. He committed himself to finishing the monotonous task. All the windows would be open when he was done.

The sound of knocking on the front doors interrupted him. The outside soft rap rose to an echoing thunder inside the quiet nave. Ben reluctantly put down the hacksaw and unlatched the front doors. He had an idea who it was. Tamara had come to take Davey home. Ben had lost track of the whereabouts of Hen and Davey. He hoped they hadn't slipped out altogether, leaving Tamara here to wait for them. She was already listing all the mundane details of her day, from the discourteous drivers as she crossed the streets, to the one perpetually dusty shelf she would never reach. Ben called out for Hen with a low voice that reverberated through the church. This summons was like the crack of a whip. The call was answered by pounding on stairs, like a pair of bowling bowls rolling down steps. Despite the volume, it still sounded like a single person making the racket. Davey appeared alone, with long black feathers jutting back from behind each round, tiny ear. Tamara gasped.

"Oh, Davey! Not those feathers!" She yanked them out as soon as her son was close enough. They sank straight to the floor as if pulled by a magnet. She turned Davey's face left, then right, as she checked behind his ears. She then examined her own hands. They were clean. The old woman was looking for blood, but Ben imagined she was also distressed over vile invisible contamination. She feared her son was exposed to the same malevolent germs as those on that dusty top shelf. Davey whined the whole time, but submitted without a struggle.

"You can get into so much trouble," she scolded.

“Where’s Hen?” Ben asked the boy.

“In bed. He’s not sleeping. He’s just tired. Like you get mama.” Davey was still full of energy. He jogged in place as he talked to his mother. “I’m hungry. We ate beans.”

“Is that all?” Tamara asked. She looked disappointed.

Ben shrugged. He couldn’t recall what they had eaten that day. He wasn’t interested in remembering and he wasn’t hungry, so the detail was unimportant. What he ate later, if he felt like eating, wouldn’t matter either. Tamara commented on having a tuna sandwich and a green salad for lunch. According to her, that was a proper meal. Ben asked if Davey wanted whatever she had eaten, and the boy said he would. He jumped up and down in place to amplify his affirmation. Ben suggested that the woman take her son home and feed him. Davey’s head rocked back and forth as if he was being shaken. Even though the hint was obvious and plainly rude, Tamara missed it. She took Davey home only because it was the lone thing she came to do, the last errand of her tiring day. She rushed to get home before curfew. Ben would at least be spared her insipid parade of small talk.

As soon as Tamara and Davey were gone, Ben picked up the saw and found the unfinished bar. The rhythm of the saw created a numbing hum within the church but it wasn’t long before he was interrupted again. This time the interruption was a voice that had been missing for the past day and a half.

“If you’re staging an escape from jail, you should at least check the front door first. It’s wide open.”

Ben set the saw down on the windowsill again and turned around. Dil stood in the entranceway. One of the double doors was completely open; Tamara hadn’t closed it when she left. Ben could only blame himself for not returning to throw the latch shut. Dil was leaning unsteadily against the closed door. He wore new clothes, replacing the old work outfit. This new ensemble consisted of black slacks and a white long sleeve shirt, which bore a collar. The new shoes were leather, with factory black polish. Dil raised his arms outward. He looked like he could balance as long as he didn’t move.

“I liked your look. So I got new rags for myself.”

This was Dil's shape, but the voice was the one from the desert. Ben stood his ground. He was discouraged, hearing it again.

"Where have you been?" Ben asked.

Dil smiled and tapped his forehead with a stiff middle finger, causing himself to stumble backward. Ben could almost hear the thumping against Dil's skull; he began to stagger toward Ben. "Sightseeing," he said. "Visiting some people we really don't want to know. I'm busted. I need more money. Did you cash that check?"

Before Dil came close, Ben could smell the grape and alcohol signature from the cheap wine that the brothers liked. Dil's exhalation was potent, almost poisonous. He stopped and struck a lopsided pose. Before anything else was said, the sound of pounding on the stairs in the back reverberated again. Hen had caught the sound of his older brother's voice. Hen's weariness was miraculously shaken off and he appeared in the hallway at the back, breathing heavily. He lost some of his enthusiasm to see his brother upon realizing Dil was drunk. Seeing his brother at least relieved Hen of his worry. Except for the voice inside Dil's form, Ben felt some normalcy was restored. Whatever came next, at least the Cortras brothers had each other. Ben would be left to his own devices, and he wanted it that way.

"I'm happy to see ya', Dil," Hen said, shuffling nervously. "I like your clothes."

"Thank you. It was about time we became metropolitan. I think we should start looking the part," Dil said. "Why don't you go out and find yourself a new image?"

"Yeah, sure," Hen agreed. He didn't know what his brother meant. He liked the simple clothes he wore. The rolled cuffs of his pants created his personal style.

"You have any more money?"

"Ben didn't cash the check," Hen replied. "I guess we were waiting for you."

"No concern. We'll have something to do tomorrow, as a family." Dil pointed at Hen and winked. "I believe I need to sit down. I've been on my feet since yesterday."

The pew which Dil collapsed into rocked and almost toppled backwards. Dil didn't notice. He only cared about resting his exhausted and inebriated body.

"What have you been doing, Dil?" Hen asked cautiously. He sat down in the pew in front of his brother, just out of arm's reach. Ben joined them, but didn't sit down. He had been kneeling and squatting all day, and didn't feel comfortable sitting at the moment.

"I brought you the saw and refreshments. I see you've been busy with one. I'd be disappointed if you haven't used the other. That is some incredible wine."

"If you say so," Hen said.

"That's a trip of a few blocks," Ben challenged. "You said you were visiting people."

"But we don't know anyone in the Cap." Hen's comment was intended to defend his brother.

"That's right," Dil replied. "The exception being our neighbors. What have you been doing, Hen? What have you been up to with that boy?"

"Davey?" Hen asked, not expecting an answer. "That's his name. His mother didn't have anyone to watch him. So I did. While you were away."

"It looks like you've made a close friend. You think that's a good idea?"

"Davey's a good kid. I like him. And he likes me too. He's harmless. I tried to teach him how to play cards. He kept showing me his hand. He's not very good at the game."

Dil laughed. The sound came from deep inside his belly, not from the usual place in his throat. "Because he's retarded."

"No, he's not," Hen vehemently retorted. "He's just a kid. He's just a little slow. You know what he said today? He said rich people should marry poor people, tall people should marry short people, and fat people should marry skinny people. That shows he's thinking."

"That's just inane," Dil judged. "Keep him around if it makes you happy. It

makes no difference to me. Just keep an eye on him and his mother. Let's say we make a point to have no more unexpected visitors."

Ben had heard enough. There was something of Dil in his speech; the two personalities must have agreed to share the same head simultaneously. He wondered if the alcohol had anything to do with the phenomenon, but he didn't think so. Ben had witnessed Dil drinking when the voice was still over Ben's own left shoulder. He didn't care, as long as the voice wasn't following him around, disembodied, testing his sanity. Whatever the arrangement was, the voice had taken Dil somewhere. The new clothes and wine suggested that the trip entailed a little corporeal hedonism.

However, there was someone they had seen on business that did not relate to the Cortras brothers. Now the voice issued a warning for caution, but Ben didn't need to be told. The feeling was mutual. He hurried to lock the front doors. The streets outside were filling with long shadows as the orange orb of the sun dropped behind the western buildings. The skies were becoming overcast, but they glowed rich pink in the sunset. The streetlights hadn't flickered on yet, but night seemed to be coming early for a summer day. Ben had lost track of time as he worked, and consequently meditated. He felt strangely calm, compared to his earlier determination to make back-up plans today. The urgency and need had receded; the feeling that he belonged at the church grew intense once more.

Ben shut the door, locked it, and turned around. It was dark inside. Ben hadn't noticed before. His face had been turned toward an open window during the hours that the shadows crept in. He didn't see Dil. Hen was still sitting in the pew he'd selected and gazing down at the spot where his brother had been. A protracted snore vibrated the windows; it seemed too exaggerated to be genuine.

Dil had strewn himself across the pew. He had tipped over and slumbered where he fell. Hen suggested that they take his brother upstairs. Ben rejected the idea; he wasn't going to endure that ordeal again. The pew was going to be fine for tonight. Hen hooked his brother's pant legs with his finger and hoisted Dil's legs up so he could lay flat. Hen was glad his brother was back. Hen wasn't going to lose Dil again. Hen slept in the pew next to Dil to keep tabs on him. There wasn't going to be any more wandering off without him knowing about it.

16 Sorrowful Birth

The night was long and desperate. It arrived earlier than she wanted. Sarah knew. She had been watching the wall clock in the kitchen of the home she shared with her husband, although it was questionable whether she was sharing the home, or anything at all, with the man she married. Last night, Sarah re-enacted every minute of the night before last. She sat on the same hard metal chair as before. She kept her hands folded in her lap and her ankles crossed beneath her, exactly as her previous posture had been twenty-four hours ago. Anyone observing the pose before and visiting again would swear nothing had changed. Not a muscle moved and each hair was in place. Every wrinkle of her sheer pink robe and silken nightgown beneath it, was undisturbed. Sarah made herself into a bereft living statue.

Even the scene around her had frozen in time. The napkins on the table were folded and placed back into their machined wooden holders. The woven reed place mats were carefully arranged to lie parallel and close to the table's edge. This was an artifice. Sarah refined the arrangement on the table dozens of time to guarantee everything was perfectly in their customary places. When she was satisfied, she returned to her rigid state. Too soon, the churning of confused emotions inside her would well up. She would then rearrange and restore the tabletop yet again, back to the way things were two days ago.

Crying was impossible. As much as Sarah wanted to spill the torrent of shame and disgrace, she couldn't find her way to that relief. All the passages out had been sealed up a long time ago. Back then, the flow couldn't be stopped. She fought an endless battle to build a wall, defend it, and seal the ruptures. Now she needed to cry for the preservation of her sanity.

The late hour, long after curfew, when her husband had previously returned, had come and passed. She knew Mark wasn't going to be home. He wouldn't even phone. She wasn't worried for his safety; he was always fine. There was always only one reason why he wasn't home, and the same reason he didn't call. He no longer attempted to make excuses. The lies had become too frequent and ridiculous to be believed. Now there was only silence.

The most terrible days of her life had returned. Those unforgotten days embodied fear and lament. Sarah supposed they had never really gone. They

only waited for the moment when the devastation would be most severe. The timing could have been worse. Those lingering demons could have sprung on Sarah when she or someone in her family fell ill. A future misfortune when she needed the semblance of a man in her life would have been the expected hour; but these demons turned out to be impatient. They couldn't hold back from tormenting her again. When the torture arrived, that very hour became the worst time imaginable to be revisited.

The demons beset her with horrible possibilities. Her marriage could completely fall apart and she could lose her handsome husband. She could lose her wonderful home. Owning an actual house in Capital was usually possible only for the wealthy or highly privileged, such as members of the Church or officers in the military. Luck had provided her and her husband with a rare and modern two-story, two-bath home on a small lot. Sarah agonized most of all over the thought of never having had a child. It was the one thing she wanted most dearly in her life. She couldn't allow these anguishes to cripple her; her marriage and her house remained. The future could still bring a baby.

Just before dawn, Sarah went to the perpetual darkness of her bedroom to continue her sullen mood. She didn't expect to sleep. Much like a good cry, she also wanted that escape, but her restless mind would deny her. Sarah had suffered these nights before. At the same time, her thoughts robbed her of will and strength; if she didn't lie down, she would collapse. Her brooding would continue relentlessly on the floor where she fell. Having been there before, she knew she had to stay in the big, empty bed. This was not the future intended for her - it couldn't be. Everything had been in place. The life she wanted was to have started the day she graduated from school; that much was destined.

Sarah remained young. She still possessed all her gifted beauty which she had since she met Mark and fell in love. She was tall, almost as tall as her husband. She was buxom, but not in the unappealing sense of a gently expressed euphemism. Sarah had a wonderful shape, with a generous bosom and a slender waist that a man could nearly wrap both hands around. She knew how desirable she was. The baby hadn't even marred her body. She was ageless, caught in time. Her long brunette hair would ward off the graying of age. Her almond-shaped green eyes sparkled even when she was unhappy.

Sadness seemed to be a constant state now. Mark had bumbled out that he believed she was the sexiest woman alive, the first time he had spoken to her. Of

course, that was far from the first time she had heard that. If she didn't already know the impact she had on men, she would have been offended right then. Yet she was aware that when men were struck, they could think of little else to say. If she couldn't forgive them for something she obviously caused, she would have never held a conversation with the opposite sex.

When she met Mark, it was her turn to be dumbstruck. She held the same shallow, yet overpowering, attraction for him. When he approached, she became speechless. The man was gorgeous. His blond hair held the sun captive. Each strand glowed, spreading a halo around his handsome face. Mark's shoulders were so thick and wide, Sarah couldn't see around him if he stood close. This man would surround her in his embrace and she could never escape once she was seized in his long, strong arms. It took every bit of her demure dignity to stop herself from diving straight into him. Everything she had ever wanted was nothing compared to the desire for the man who stood before her on the college lawn between lecture halls that day.

The fantastic moment of their first encounter would remain in her memory forever. What followed a clumsy introduction was lost. The brightness of that glorious initial minute washed out everything immediately before and after. It wasn't long before she did find herself in his arms. A short time after that, they were in his bed. When they made love, she realized a lifetime of waiting. The hectic pace of school, family, and friends had masked it. Yet when he entered her, she knew her entire life up until then had been wasted time. Too much of it had already been lived without him. They were perfect for each other. The Mortal God would not dare forsake their meeting. He was bound to deliver Mark to her as a husband, the only husband she would take until death.

Mark was majored in journalism; he was going to be a reporter. An adolescent fascination with terrorist activity during his grandfather's life before the Wall was built, had persisted since he was a boy. By professional accounts, that morbid interest following Mark into adulthood was a dangerous sign of a festering psychosis. The fact that he was so enthralled as a child should have prompted a few sessions with a therapist; but it was his grandfather, the wealthy patriarch of the family, who exposed and encouraged the boy. If his grandson appreciated spending quality time with an old man, no amount of protest would have changed things. What he said was how it would be; no questions allowed.

Listening to Mark repeat the terrible stories of rape and torture that his

grandfather passed on to him, was torturous itself. When Mark and Sarah gathered with friends and family, there was inevitably some reason to tell the dozens of stories again and again. Sarah had heard them hundreds of times. She knew someone was always permanently disfigured or lost their lives in each story, but she could never remember the details. She didn't care to learn them. Her dreams would have remained docile and happy, if she had never heard of the past atrocities, whether they were real or imagined.

Eventually she learned to leave the room when signs of a story materialized. The conversation would turn into a spar of macho one-up-man-ship. That's when Mark would open his war chest. Sarah was always careful to solicit those whom she knew would be offended, to accompany her. Her mother and her closest girlfriend were typically a couple of those people. The small group of women huddled in the kitchen until the stories were finished. Sarah knew the length of the telling well enough to guess the timing of their conclusion. If she heard a gasp or revolted grunt along the way back to the room where Mark was holding audience, she turned back around. Her sensitive charges herded together into the kitchen once more. The coast would be clear a few minutes later.

Marrying a reporter was never a wise decision. The chances of gaining a genuine career, writing for military news, were slim to unrealistic. The pay was impossible to live on, and unreliable. Sarah was once interested in becoming a reporter, but decided against it when common sense and hindering pressure from her family prevailed. The fact that Mark pursued her own secret dream was another attraction that lured her. That life could still be lived vicariously through him. To continue with the financial assistance from her parents, Sarah settled on a practical skill. She finished her accounting courses with less than impressive, but still passing scores. If it was necessary, she could support Mark as he struggled to make a name for himself. There was nothing she wouldn't do to make a life together possible. She expected he would soon abandon the elusive calling and find something more rewarding to do with his life, their life. In the meantime, she would encourage him. The dream made them both happy.

As it turned out, Mark didn't need her help. His wealthy grandfather was extraordinarily generous. Years spent captivated by horrible stories had paid off. The old man's money was a godsend when Sarah became pregnant. Up until then, Mark had hidden his resources well. She supposed he was afraid of being taken advantage of, and his family probably warned him not to flaunt his wealth. In any case, no one would have guessed. One would have believed Mark got by

on his handsome looks alone, which would not have been an unreasonable assumption.

The baby revealed the truth. The pregnancy sealed Mark and Sarah's future together; the road ahead had been paved for their love. Mark could begin writing and Sarah would start their family while they were still young. The typical worry as to how both were possible, was lifted. There was no question. Money had solved the problem and Sarah felt as if she had been graced.

When Sarah glanced around her classes at school, she realized accounting was not for her. She didn't fit the part. Physically she was very different from her classmates. Everyone else was the sore thumb. Their pudgy bodies, and careless and unflattering choice of clothing, made her a mythical visage of perfection. Her classmates were so awed of her, that no one other than the instructor, spoke to her. She couldn't imagine being shackled to a desk, surrounded by these trollish and silent figures for the rest of her professional life. Sarah imagined herself better than this loutish breed. They could have all been UnChosen, as much as she cared. The feeling of superiority was uncomfortable. She didn't like the person whom these people had turned her into. Fate didn't need to offer her any more clues.

At the time, Sarah didn't know what else there was for her. Her general interest classes were generally uninteresting and she was merely mediocre in all of them. She chose accounting almost randomly. It was among the first of the classes listed in the coursework pamphlet; after that was art. Even if she had any talent in drawing, she had no wish to work in a factory where painters and sculptors churned out icons for the Church and trinkets for the religious. That kind of constant shift work didn't sound appealing. There was no freedom in it. For some inescapable reason, she didn't apply the same thinking when she continued signing up for the accounting classes that were required to finish her degree. Sarah remembered that every time she opened the pamphlet, she grew so exhausted after reviewing the first few pages, she just couldn't continue. The most time she ever spent flipping through its pages, was when she was hunting down the prerequisite classes. The contents of the last few pages were forever a mystery that she had no desire to discover.

In the happy ending, she didn't need to pursue certification. She never had to humble herself and beg her way into the crowded workforce of Capital, although Sarah didn't expect she would have had much difficulty. She was not without her

charms. As soon as she and Mark graduated, they were married. They would have married even sooner, if the pressures and preparations of senior year didn't take precedence. The circumstances of the marriage weren't exactly ideal, but it didn't matter. Regardless of the timing, she believed that they would have eventually been married and had children. That was to be Sarah's future and she wanted it with all her heart.

The happy ending had come and gone. The real happiness lasted only throughout the wedding day. After that ended, she found an eternity where she was powerless and heartache was infinite. Sarah once believed everything started to sour with the death of their child. That wasn't entirely true. There were signs of trouble with their relationship during her pregnancy. She was blind with expectations, hoping Mark would be as ecstatic as she was, when he learned of the pregnancy. Despite the impracticalities, their life together would work out. It always did for the Chosen. If that was not enough, there was prayer. The fact that Mark belonged to an upper class family was unknown at the time.

When Sarah told Mark that she was going to have his child, he didn't say anything. He went cold and pale, and asked what she wanted him to do, and if she had told her family. She said she had told her family about the child and that Mark was the father. Sarah wanted to marry and have the child. Mark said that was what they would do, if that was what she wanted.

For a long time, Sarah believed Mark was content with having done the right thing. It was amazing what she remembered later. She couldn't believe that she hadn't acknowledged his proposal back when he made it. On the anniversary of their child's death, she remembered Mark suggesting they abort the pregnancy - kill their baby! Their child had already lived and grown inside her for over two months. Some gnawing and undefined doubt had delayed her telling Mark until then. She didn't want to admit it to herself after the first month, but she couldn't hide the fact much longer. When she finally confirmed her suspicions, she embraced the news with joyfulness. Sarah naively believed Mark would feel the same. She convinced herself he did, but in truth, he hesitated. His grandfather had arranged the marriage and provided them with a house to raise a family. Mark's grandfather was happiest with the news; he wanted a grandchild and now he would have one.

Once the baby arrived, the poor little boy failed to take his first breath. Mark wept openly, but he didn't really want the child. He didn't care that the boy was

to bear the name of his grandfather. Mark simply didn't want children. That became devastatingly obvious in the long months following Sarah's recovery from childbirth. Sarah begged for another child. She promised she would be more careful and this one would live. As Mark's wife, she promised not to disappoint him.

All these things that Sarah told Mark, she really told herself. She cursed the Mortal God and doubled her prayers. Mark was so grief-stricken, he bought a sports car, a brand new Corbeta. He claimed it wouldn't be prudent to have a child when they were still paying for the vehicle. They had to start acting like responsible adults. The young couple couldn't continue relying on his grandfather's money, yet his grandfather provided the money for the down payment on the vehicle. In one of many ensuing arguments, it was revealed that the car was an incentive for Mark to stay married and try for another baby.

The anniversary of their child's death was suddenly upon them. Time moved slowly while putting distance from the tragedy, and days dragged by endlessly. Then one morning the dull pain stirred, and spun into a sharp point. Sarah didn't need to consult a calendar to realize the significance of the coming day. She wanted to visit the grave of their son; Mark didn't. Excuses chiefly revolved around the terrible traffic. To end a thorny discussion, Mark promised they'd go the Saturday after the date, but Mark disappeared for that entire weekend.

He returned just after curfew on the Sabbath with a new lambskin cover for his car. Mark explained that trying to find one had been nearly impossible. No matter what corner of Capital he had traveled to, he met with disappointment. He had spent the night before at the home of a friend, a sergeant in the military, so that they could hook up in the morning with someone the sergeant knew. Not a word was spoken about missing the visit to the grave, and no excuse was offered; there would not be an apology and there were no tears. Mark was jubilant about having bought something for a car.

Sarah couldn't take any more. She started to sob and couldn't stop. Her parents took her home with them, where her tears eventually dried. Sleepless nights plagued her. They grew numerous when she returned to her home with her husband. Despite the terrible way he treated her, she still loved him. Mark could do nothing to change that.

Sarah braved the indignation of her husband's adultery. She had never met one

of his mistresses, but she knew their spoor. Their smell was constantly on Mark's clothes, a vile combination of perfume, sweat, and sex. She found long and short strands of hair in his car. Most were black, as was the hair of most women of Capital, but there was the occasional bleached blond, and once a clownish red. The most infuriating were the phone calls.

It was a rare occasion to have her greeting answered. Most of the time, she'd hear hushed breathing or the caller would just hang up. Sarah thought she was being strong. She believed she was defending her home by being attentive, and confronting Mark with every discovered offense. In reality, she was just becoming weaker. She grew tired of hopelessly fighting, especially when Mark continued cheating so effortlessly. Sarah was outclassed.

Eventually she stopped becoming upset. Instead, Sarah sought to remain numb. She relied on small comforts. She loved her home and wanted to remain a housewife. She wanted children and Mark may yet provide her with them. Despite his philandering, he still had an occasional appetite for her. One night the timing would be right. Mark coming home every night was the thing she held on to most precious. At least when he was home, she could pretend, even if they only fought when they spoke to each other. Sarah could tell her family that Mark was home. He would eat the dinner she prepared. Her husband would sleep next to her in the bed they shared. Those common things were the vespers of her dream that remained.

Contrary to what she expected, Sarah did fall asleep. The sun was coming up, but she didn't know. The bedroom shut out all the light and she rarely used the single lamp on the dresser. Mark would always dress in the light that drifted in from the hall. Sarah preferred it that way. If she did manage to fall asleep during one of her many troubled nights, she didn't want to be awakened until she had her rest. She felt he owed her that much for her suffering. By some forgone grace, her husband wasn't home and she managed to fall asleep.

The dream itself was unclear and she forgot most of the details upon waking. Trying to recall them was like following the sleek, changing outline of a fish swimming out to sea. She knew it was there, beneath the shimmering surface, and could even guess its direction. As it swam further away, however, all hopes to catch it began to vanish. She wanted to say the dream was dark, like her bedroom. It was not about seeing, but rather about feeling and knowing. Light was not required for that, especially if it touched the heart. That's what Sarah

remembered. She was visited deep inside; the dream spoke to her inner essence. There was a promise of hope and deliverance.

If Sarah were to describe the vague experience, she would say in her dream, that she had never fallen asleep. She had just rolled the deep blue comforter to the foot of the bed and pulled the top sheet over her. Mark had then slipped into the room softly; yet she wasn't sure it was Mark. Sarah never opened her eyes. It could have been anyone, but she accepted the presence as her husband. Mark noiselessly crept in and bent over her. For the briefest moment, she felt his warm breath upon her cheek.

At first, the smell was rank like the humid, fermented odor of rotting fruit. He had probably been drinking and become sick. The smell almost shocked her awake, but before she could open her eyes, a strong hand gripped her arm and pressed her into the bed. Then he kissed her cheek. As the smell curdled in her nostrils, it became sweet and adopted the aroma of wine. She couldn't remember the last time her husband had provided an affectionate touch. Sarah wanted to turn around and wrap her arms around him, to pull him to her. She was instantly in the mood to make love.

Yet, Sarah still didn't open her eyes. She lay motionless except for a drifting smile. The firm hand pinned her to the bed. They might have made love. The pressure increased, pushing more of her against the mattress, as if a body slowly descended upon her. His weight was greater than she remembered it to be. Had it been so long since Mark had collapsed into her? The air was pushed from her lungs and she felt as if she was going to suffocate. Then gravity suddenly lost its hold and they floated. Her husband spoke to her. This was the part where she was convinced she was dreaming. She heard his voice from inside her head. He said he was waiting for her and he told her to look for him.

There was more, but Sarah woke. Everything but the pressure, the kiss, and his few words, were chased away. Her heart sank when she remembered it was a dream, yet it wasn't just her imagination. She could still feel his hand upon her arm, and her shoulder was cramped. The smell of his bitter, then sweet breath, conjured sharp recall. Dreams never left her with memories such as these. Wherever Mark had spent the night, he had called to her. He came home; in his heart, he knew he belonged with his wife. They shared a dream of togetherness. The power of the affirmation renewed her strength.

She hadn't fought for him hard enough; the dream revealed that. She hadn't given him the overflowing demonstration of love he deserved. Sarah had been selfish, accustomed to past lovers suffering in their romances for her affections. Mark was like her. That should have been evident from the beginning, as maybe yet another unacknowledged attraction. Mark was always going to be a challenge to keep by her side. Women would always be tempting him, doing whatever it took to gain his attention.

No man could resist a woman who decided she wanted him. The full spectrum of seduction was available to them, from trashy to mysterious. All a woman had to do was offer the latest flavor of fantasy. Sarah would combat that. Giving up was the worst thing she could have done. Arguing with her husband had to end. Mark couldn't be expected to repent one day and take all the blame. She would still be hopelessly waiting, if she continued to want that. She needed to fend off the other women. If Sarah would confront the threat, instead of retreat to her home, she could change everything. Sarah had to show her husband that she loved him, because they were the same inside. She was his true love. There would be no other for either of them.

Sarah went downstairs full of expectations. She thought the morning would have long passed, but many hours remained. She hoped the dream last night was not merely a dream and Mark would be sitting in the kitchen, drinking his coffee. He would greet her with another affectionate kiss - but he wasn't there. The kitchen was still in its preserved state, just in a different light. The room was softer and gentler. The morning glow was a rare sight for Sarah. She had forgotten how comforting it could be. It didn't matter that her husband wasn't home.

She knew what she needed to do. The one expectation she gave up right away was that things would change without her intervention. Life had stopped being so easy since marrying. She stopped wishing the terrible events of the past had never happened. Time couldn't be stopped and wound back. It was the moment for Sarah to take action.

The dream offered a direction. She would go searching for her husband. She thought about the trails and clues that he was so careless to leave behind. In the past, she would use them as evidence when she made accusations. Now they would serve a different purpose; they would lead her to where he was, and they would lead her to his latest Jezebel. The woman was the one who deserved her wrath, the one upon whom Sarah would wholly unleash it. This was Sarah's

home and her husband's home. She would preserve it. Her very life was in jeopardy. Woe would be visited upon any who threatened it; plenty had been saved for her foes. The only thing that would remain when Sarah was done, would be her unconditional love reserved for Mark, which would all be given to him.

The old practices came back naturally, well-exercised habits. Mark always emptied his pockets either into his jacket hanging on the rack by the front door or into the desk in the hall. The desk was locked, but Sarah had made an extra key when Mark had her run off on an errand to make a copy of his new car's key. That day Sarah had worked him into such a fury, he wasn't thinking.

The argument was about a woman he constantly talked to at military headquarters. He had tried to hide her under the pretense of being an asset to his work. However, the late phone calls and whispered conversations had gone far beyond business. Mark had become so distracted in his anger, he had tossed his full keychain at Sarah and banished her, so he could write. Although Sarah would normally rummage through his desk first, it had been awhile since she had confronted him. He would have become lazy; so she went to his jacket instead.

The brown canvas jacket had hung on its hook all summer. There had never been an occasion to need it, especially with the recent heat wave. Sarah checked the inside pockets and then the outside. She found coins, trash, and scraps of paper. Some had story notes scrawled on them, details of the crimes Mark was so enthused to report. So far everything looked related to his work and all in his handwriting - until she found the napkin. It looked older than it actually was, in part because it was crumpled.

Everything about it looked suspicious. When Sarah straightened it, she instantly knew she had found what she was looking for: an address, in a woman's handwriting. Sarah could spot these things; she knew the signs. This little piece of information was more than enough. Mark looked like he was slumming. The address wasn't in a very good part of Capital; many of the UnChosen lived there. Sarah felt ill that Mark would lower himself to see a woman of that status. She was disgusted thinking she touched him after he had been with a woman like that. Her first irrational instinct was to wash the bedding, but there would be time for that when she finished fending off this threat. Sarah would act immediately.

The low class of this hussy could be an advantage for Sarah. All her righteousness could be brought to bear. This woman would regret the day she seduced Mark. Someone of her inferior heritage had no right to threaten Sarah's life. She had no claim to Sarah's husband, her wonderful house, and her hope for a child. The woman may have thought she could better herself by sleeping with a Chosen, but there would be a price to pay. Sarah would put that woman into her place. She would remember what it was like to be scorned by the Mortal God.