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**Sallow Men & Shallow Graves**

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfilment  
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of  
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## **Abstract**

For almost 30 years, members of the 'Ludditious Faith of Our Heavenly Father, and the Foretellers of the Ongoing Apocalypse' have been living a peaceful life. Fleeing the impending Y2K disaster, these Luddites buried themselves deep in the neglected wilds of east Aotearoa, founding the settlement of New Eden. Here, they follow the strict tenets set out by their founder and prophet, Enoch, while avoiding the technological apocalypse that has plagued the outside world. From their perspective, Y2K came to pass as a gradual moral degradation brought on by the onset of rapidly evolving technologies, and the greed and vanity of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has only cemented these beliefs. However, Enoch's sacrifice protected the Valley of Eden; thus, the year 2000 (and the sin of the millennium) never reached it. But that doesn't mean New Eden is free of sin altogether.

*Sallow Men & Shallow Graves* follows Margaret "Peggy" Matheson, a private investigator who loathes her profession and is ready for a career change. After completing her 'final job', she is reigned back in when a woman from her bloody past comes calling. Peggy agrees to find the woman's daughter, but all she gets in terms of clues are rumours of an eccentric religious group living in the hills north of Gisbourne. To Peggy, it all sounds a little far-fetched. But when she finds evidence of other disappearances in the area, she can't help but wonder if this cult - the so-called 'Ludditious Faith' - is responsible.

While Peggy is our central protagonist, the novel briefly dips into the lives of those around her, such as Paisley (the main target of her investigation), William (the 'Druid' of the Ludditious Faith), and Tama (her guilt-ridden protégé). I explore the themes of guilt and deception and how they intersect with one's perception of reality, both in terms of personal relationships and the overarching narrative of the cult.

Throughout my writing process, I have endeavoured to avoid vilifying the cult as a whole. So often are fictional cults depicted as 'evil', but if you examine real communities like Jonestown or Centrepoint, what you find is a collection of ordinary people who lost their way in life, and a charismatic leader who can captivate an audience, and convince that audience that they are exactly where they need to be. Evil often begins and ends with one person, and everyone else - whether Luddite or citizen - is just trying to get by.

Every character in this story has secrets: lies they tell themselves and others. But one reality I have aimed to enforce is that sometimes in life, you don't get all the answers. Some, I offer freely. Others, I leave for the reader to decipher, interpret, or neglect. This story seeks your attention in some scenes and rewards it in others. It is a slow-burning narrative with a few small embers and flares along the way, but once it truly ignites, it doesn't stop until there is nothing left but cinders and ashes.

## Acknowledgments

I've been a self-doubting mess for as long as I can remember, and that's a tough hand for someone pursuing a career in creative arts. That's why at the start of this journey, and many times throughout, I told myself that no matter the ultimate quality of this manuscript, I would be proud of myself. It's a tremendous achievement to have come this far, and I can now say that I've done something the vast majority of people never will. This year has taught me that everything is a learning experience. There were plenty of moments when the inner fire for this project burnt out. At around the two-month mark, I realised that in my rush to get into this programme, I chose the wrong genre, and the wrong format, and the wrong everything. But I stuck with it. I took it as a challenge to do something outside my comfort zone, and to grow as a writer with skills in a variety of areas, firm in the belief that no matter what, I would be proud of myself.

With all that said, I am thrilled to have not only completed this manuscript, but to have created a quality piece of work that I want to share with others. Is it perfect? Of course not, but what is? Is it gonna get 5-star reviews? Maybe, I dunno! However, it is proof that I am a writer. I've been calling myself a writer for years now, because that's what I do. It may not be my 'job', but it is the trade I devote most of my time toward. It is where my heart lies and where my mind thrives. Before, I was writing short stories, essays, D&D campaigns, but now I can say that I've done 'the thing' that writers do. It is my first step to becoming a full-time author. I'm still a self-doubting mess, but I am also a writer.

I'd like to thank my supervisors Catherine and Tracey, particularly for squeezing me into the MPW programme at the last minute. It is because of you both that the quality of my writing

has soared this past year, and without your help, I'm sure I'd still be plodding along somewhere around Chapter 2. You kept me on task when my enthusiasm wavered, and I'll always appreciate the guidance you've given, both for this manuscript and the long road ahead. I look forward to the day I can officially call you my peers.

I'd also like to thank the student cohort that I've spent much of the last year in writing workshops with. Your varied perspectives and evolving feedback has kept me on my toes, and the story I've created would be a very different creature without all your inputs.

Laura deserves my most sincere gratitude. You saw something in me that I don't think even I was aware of, and it was only through your encouragement that I sought this programme so soon. I'd originally planned to put it off for a year, but your inspiring, insightful words have effectively fast-tracked my life. Thank you, Laura. Let me know your favourite wine and/or chocolate ASAP.

I of course need to thank the University of Waikato, in a broader community sense as well as a general academic one. It's been a long few years here but I'm happy to say I've emerged out the other side as a better, more competent individual, who at least has a slight idea of where they're heading next. In particular, I'd like to thank the university for their generosity in awarding me the Te Ara Hou scholarship in 2024. It was a significant contribution both financially and emotionally, and was definitely the push I needed to confirm my path forward. Similarly, I'd like to thank Dilworth School for bestowing the Ella Burford award upon me in the same year. The committee gave this award in part to support my journey while writing an entirely different novel. Naturally, that manuscript got put on pause when I began my MPW, but Dilworth will be happy to hear that as soon as I submit this thesis, I'll be getting right back to that first novel. Can't break a promise.

Finally, I've gotta thank my family. That's an all-inclusive thanks, because listing all of you and all the ways you've helped, inspired, challenged, or annoyed me over the years would be a full manuscript on its own. But there are a couple of standouts. Firstly, thanks Mum. Not only did you help by giving feedback on my first draft and just generally offering reassurance, but without you, I don't think I would have ever completed this specific programme. You may recall that I originally planned to study in Dunedin, but before I could even enrol, you and Kev made the move to Te Anau. And, driven by depression and my angsty teenage desire to be as disconnected from my parents as possible, I chose to enrol at Waikato instead. I'm sure I would have followed a similar path wherever I ended up attending — I hear the Masters of Creative Writing at Otago is pretty good — but it was only because I chose to study at Waikato that I met my beautiful wife, which leads me to my final acknowledgement.

Paige, you probably think you've seen every fold and facet of my heart my now, but I've kept one part hidden from you, down at the very bottom, just for this moment, and it is from this deepest of depths that I say: thank you. You've been my biggest supporter since day one. You supported my return to study both emotionally and financially. You've strived to give me feedback on all the work I do, even though you yourself admit that you're gonna love anything I write. You're my safe place and my shoulder to lean on, and my inspiration to always seek greater heights. With you by my side, I feel I can do anything, and I *will* do anything as long as you're by my side. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

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## Paisley

When you tell a child a story of make-believe, they latch onto it. When they run around the forest dressed as Peter Pan or Snow White, it informs who they are, and who they'll be — though chances are they won't transform into a magical immortal boy, or a soothesinging friend to animals and dwarves. It's the human qualities that matter. Kindness. Humility. Innocence. Children have an uncanny ability to distinguish between the magic and the reality of these stories. They know which parts of the story are pretend and which parts are impossible. Adults lack this talent, instead grasping at convenient lies.

*"I'll win the Lotto this week, and my life will turn around."*

*"I'm starting my diet tomorrow, so I can have an extra piece of cake today."*

*"If I do this thing, this one gross, putrid, shameful act, then he'll love me."*

Adults believe what they want to believe.

I wish I was still a child.

Every step forward was a step toward escape. I was running, frantically clutching at nearby branches with my tender, bleeding hands, pulling myself forward as my feet squished into the loamy earth of the swamp. Each step was a reminder of all the warnings I'd ignored. As my left foot caught on a tangled vine, I heard Mum's voice, pleading with me to stay home, with promises that we could work this out. As I tripped on a jagged stone, the sharp trill of Jas echoed, her wishes of good fortune stained by sarcasm. My arms uselessly cleaved through the brittle bones of a long dead tree as I tried to catch myself and, though I struck the ground harshly, my mind drifted to words of hope: *"I'll find you."* The only words I'd

caught during my call with Mum, made on the phone I had smuggled in. The call that had followed my teary confession to Joseph and preceded my punishment. It had been weeks if not months since then, since I'd heard her voice — her promise. Long enough for hope to die. Yet as my body shivered against the ground's motley surface — which was wet and squishy with jagged stones and loose brush — it was those fruitless words that came to mind.

I lay on the ground, listless, lacking the helping hand I'd so often taken for. I was broken, in mind, body, and spirit, and forced to rely on the little strength I had left to push myself back to my feet. According to the divine calendar of the Luddites, it was the 8817th of December, 1999. I'd arrived somewhere around the 8650-mark. Six months of abuse, anguish, fear, threats, all in God's name. Well screw God, and screw his 'chosen people'. They won't take me. I won't die here. I *have* to live.

The pain in my stomach coiled as I came to my feet. It had been three, maybe four days since I'd eaten, but the growls had stopped long ago, like they belonged to a baby who'd learned that its cries for attention were useless. But rather than ignore the pain as I had for many months, I focused on it. This pain was my tether to the real world, and it tugged me relentlessly, growing tauter with every stride. The Valley of Eden extended endlessly in every direction, but I would climb it, and I would reach the edge. I had to.

The aching distracted from the yells in the distance behind me, but after a few liminal moments I returned to reality. "We got a live one!" I heard a voice call.

"Get Roche on the water!" I heard from another. Joseph. He had a nasally southern drawl incomparable to anything I'd ever heard in my brief life. "The Aspirant-Infidels on the loose!" His voice was commanding, and amplified. They knew I was out, much sooner than

I'd hoped. I bet Abigail reported me. But I still had the jump on them. I let the tether pull me forward.

The ground slowly distorted into marsh, my soft treads squelching, then splashing in knee deep murky water. It only got deeper from here, and as I stepped deeper and deeper into the wet, my sense of balance began to suffer. I could hear the sputtering motor of Roche's boat in the distance. He was a creepy old man who had been with these people since the founding days. Among his roles was boatmaster, typically ferrying people and goods back and forth, in and out of New Eden on his rusted airboat. But he relished in the other responsibility that came with his position: hunting down escapees. Anytime a failed convert tried their luck, Roche got to try his. I'd taken to calling him 'the ferryman', but the name hadn't quite caught.

The moon was my only guide this night, which barely illuminated the fronds that marked the opposite side of the compound's marshy moat. The water, up to my chest now, had taken on a pale twinkle, which I would have admired at any other time, but I could feel the tremors of Roche's approach. I extended my strides, but the stirring mud was thickening the water at my feet. The thickened sludge clung at me, bonding with my skin and clothes as if trying to trap me, to appease its Luddite masters. It slurped up my left shoe as I lost my footing and fell prone, inhaling a sedimentary blend of liquid as I struck the water's surface, before sinking deeper into the muck.

I flailed mindlessly, failing to find purchase on the bed beneath, before swimming up and turning onto my side. Grainy silt gushed from my mouth and nose, but more still lined my throat, seeping into the crevices of my stomach and lungs and turning every breath into a heave. I tried to wipe my eyes, but the swamp gunk firmly clasped them, lathering my face. I could only move forward, hopeful that forward was the right direction.

Ripples thrummed across the water in all directions, signalling the approach of Roche. Through my mud-caked eyelids, I could see the white-hot beam of a spotlight coming from the sound's general direction. I heard a distinctive, long whistle, followed by two more, short and sharp. He was location signalling. I didn't understand the meaning of each whistle, but it didn't matter. They'd found me.

My singular boon at this moment was that Roche helmed the only boat. He would be alone, and whether the other Wardens went the long way around or followed me straight through the marsh, they would still be minutes behind. But without warning, an explosion rocked my eardrums as Roche fired his rifle. Wet splinters rained down as the shot connected with one of the many drowned trees that had succumbed to this poisoned land. I'd seen that rifle. It was an unwieldy thing that Roche could barely handle, and it only held a single shot.

And then the boat's fan started up again, aggressively, and the white-hot spotlight rushed me like a vengeful will-o'-wisp. I sank beneath the murk just in time to feel the wake of the boat pass over me, sending me spiralling. Desperate for a sense of direction, I forced my eyes open. The acrid water stung, and the murk of the bog blanketed everything. Roche's boat shone so intensely it could be mistaken for the sun down here. The light created dim silhouettes of the forest of underwater plants surrounding me. I tried pulling myself forward on a thick vine, but it uprooted easily, bringing a cloud of fresh debris with it. Roche's boat was still, but the spotlight flittered back and forth, searching for the girl that was running out of breath. The plants might cover me, if I surfaced, but was that a worthy gamble?

But I realised it wasn't a gamble at all. I had two options: I could drown, or I could survive. I broke the surface, my involuntary gasp immediately catching Roche's attention.

Another gunshot sounded, and pain flushed through my body as my left arm went limp. The agony was visceral and violent, distinct from the slow, gnawing hunger. Another long whistle came from Roche's mouth, while my wound spurted, mixing with the dark ichor of the marsh.

Warm blood oozed as I clutched my shoulder, futilely wiping at my eyes with my gunk-covered forearm. I flailed, kicking backward until I was lucky enough to find ground. Another gunshot rang, but didn't it didn't connect thanks to the fronds shielding me. Invigorated by desperation, I tossed my body onto shore, shuffling forward before deftly rising to my feet. My other shoe was gone too. The hell did it matter at this point? I ran, and I didn't stop. I didn't remember stopping. I didn't remember getting into bed. I didn't remember getting washed, or my shoulder being bandaged. But I remember the face of the woman looking down at me, smiling, claiming that everything — *everything* — would be okay.

I don't remember anything else.

## Chapter One: Arrival

‘And it is on this day that we await the true millennium, where God will invite us into his kingdom. It is on this day we accept that He cannot achieve this alone.’

*--Testament of Enoch, Chapter 1, Verses 19-20*

“I’m an educator with an interest in human development,” I said to the cloudy motel mirror for the sixteenth time, “and this is my aid, Elijah,” gesturing to the empty chair at my side. I shook my head. “They know you’re an educator, idiot, you don’t need to say that part. You need conviction! Not—” I stared at my reflection, at those panicked brown eyes. They weren’t the eyes of a friend, but the eyes of a stranger — of someone who doesn’t belong. “Not that,” I sighed, rubbing the chill from my face and sleep from my eyes. It was strange to be back in this routine — that of a nervous private investigator who told herself that every job would be her last (and was lying every time). “Thank you for receiving us,” I began again. “I’m Doctor Mary du Plessis, and this is—”

Four sharp knocks at the door shook me from my spiel, and I peeked at the room’s digital clock: 10:34. Fuck. “Shit, dammit, just a second, Tama!” I yelled through the door as my hands shot out in all directions, scooping my scattered belongings from the studio room that just barely fit the single bed I’d spent the night on. It was my favourite thing about shitty motel rooms: everything was always within arm’s reach. I tossed everything in the top of my open duffel on the floor, hiding the neat rolls of expensive thermals and thick socks. After a final survey of the room, I prepared for the usual morning wise crack from Tama, my cheeky protégé, and headed out. Colour me surprised when I found a spindly, pale girl, no older than 20, standing on the opposite side of the door. She was about to knock again, and

we both staggered back, equally surprised, when we unexpectedly met. She wore the same uniform as the old geezer who'd checked us in last night, and towed a laundry cart behind her.

"Sorry, I, hello. I'm turning down your, uh—" Her wan complexion turned a shade rosier with each stammer. Her nervousness seemed excessive, and it tickled that part of my brain that never goes quiet and always has a question to ask, but I didn't have time to indulge it. "I'm here to clean your room. The checkout time was 30 minutes ago."

Without ceremony, I pushed past the young woman, offering a mumbled apology after I'd already turned the corner toward Tama's room. I was fuming, ready to berate him for sleeping in, but I busted down the door to find the room empty. Empty of Tama. Empty of all his belongings. A shiver rippled down my spine as worst-case scenarios ran through my head, while that same part of my brain began working through a mental checklist. The bed was a mess. A dirty cup lay toppled on the ground. Signs of a struggle, or typical Tama? There were multiple sets of dirty footprints by the door. It was hard to tell how old they were. Fuck. Was this my fears come true? These people were as invisible as anyone could be in the information age. I knew I shouldn't have taken this job. I'd been careful, more than I probably should have been, but had a single, vital precaution escaped me? Was Tama to be added to my list?

I left the scene to question the girl who kicked me from my room, but as I rounded the bend, I caught a glimpse down into the motel courtyard, where a shorn mop of bushy black hair sat atop a face painted with a cheeky grin. Tama looked up at me with a greasy brown paper bag in one hand and a petrol station coffee cup in the other.

“Ay boss!” he proclaimed with enough gusto to wake up any other late checkouts. The corners of his mouth were perked to the max, nearly parallel with his ears that stuck out like the cups on an anemometer.

“Where the fuck have you been?” I questioned in a state of half-anger, half-hunger, wondering what type of pie he got me. I felt like a cartoon, floating down the stairs towards him, lured by the tangible scent of burnt pastry. “And stop calling me boss—”

He shrugged. “Got up early, went to fill up the truck. Dude at the counter messed my coffee up three times, half the fuel pumps were down, and they had no pies!” He passed me the bag as I came into arm’s reach. “Took a lot of sleuthing to track down your breakfast!”

“Oh what, a Google search?”

Tama shook his head. “Nah, couldn’t even get a signal.”

I opened the bag to find a semi-crushed pie with a pale ooze and some near-liquidised meat pouring out a break in the crust. Mince and cheese. My stomach smiled.

“Cheers. Didn’t realise how hungry I was ‘til now. But that reminds me — drop your phone at the motel office. We’ll pick it up on our way home.”

Tama sighed as he fished through his pockets. “So we really aren’t taking anything inside. No phones, no nothing? What if we get in the shit?”

“Like you said, there’s no reception out here anyway. And it’s their rules. We gotta play along, alright?”

“You’re guessing their rules,” he rebuked fairly. He was right. The Luddites hadn’t given us a strict charter, but from what I understood, modern tech was a big no-no for them.

“Getting in is more important than getting in with a phone,” I replied. Though displeased, he nodded, and made his way to the tiny reception office, taking a long scull of his coffee on the way.

I still wasn't sure about Tama. I wasn't a teacher, and he sure as shit wasn't a student. He was loud and disruptive, but he followed orders well, and I needed a second on this. Although our relationship had gotten off to a rocky start, he'd learned a lot. If he hadn't, I would have taken on this assignment alone.

He exited the motel office and aimed for the nearest trash can with his empty cup, missing by a full meter. My shameful stare was enough to make him to pick it up. That stare followed him all the way to the ute he'd parked out on the otherwise empty street. It was a wintry morning in the sleepy town, and it seemed we were the only ones foolish enough to brave it. I tossed my bags next to his in the tray, and with Tama in the driver's seat, we left the dull motel behind.

I found it strangely refreshing to follow written instructions instead of a digital map. These were the directions given to us by Joseph — our point of contact within the Luddites. The penmanship was neat, and the paper was patchy and starchy — probably homemade. Some instructions told us which road to veer onto; others told us to make a sharp right at the second large oak tree, among other legible but ambiguous descriptions. I fed the directions to Tama as best I could, and to my credit, we only had to backtrack once. After about an hour, we turned onto climbing rural road. It was windy, but according to the paper in my hand, our next turnoff wouldn't be for a dozen kilometres.

I folded the paper beneath my thigh and paused Tama's music before turning the rear-view mirror to face me. He wasn't using it. In terms of efficiency, Tama is the best driver I've met, but I'd be betting against him if he ever went to sit the test for his full licence. His wilful ignorance of speed limits, stop signs, and mirrors would have made the day of any passing cop, but these winding snake-like roads were too far out of the way to be patrolled. I spent the next twenty minutes staring in the rearview mirror, repeating the same monologue I'd rehearsed in the motel all morning. It wasn't long or complicated, but I needed to get it perfect. Tama wasn't thrilled. I'd broken the age-old rule that the driver gets to pick the music. Instead, he got me — a scratched CD that kept finding its way back to the start of the same crappy song.

Countless encores later, we turned off the bumpy back road and onto the private one described in the instructions. It was difficult to spot at first. We had to push through a tiny opening in a thick wall of roadside bush. Stray branches squealed as they scraped against the ute, before we emerged into a wide expanse of near-naked grassland, with a gravel trail ushering us on. An old Toyota Hilux was Tama's vehicle of choice, borrowed from a friend of a friend. Rust covered its roof and dried mud caked its fenders from years of farm work, but its engine purred as we drove up the craggy driveway, as if happy to be in familiar territory.

"Hey boss." I glared at him. "Sorry — Peggy. I know your opening is important, but you said we'd go over our covers again."

Of course — with how quickly he'd latched onto this line of work, it was easy to forget this was his first time. Tama had never been this up close and personal on an undercover assignment, and it was showing. Normally the picture of confidence, his skin

had become strangely pale. “Yeah, of course. I should’ve remembered, that’s my bad. Start with basics. What’s your name?”

“Elijah Paea. Eli for short.”

“You’re stiff. You’re not trying to trick them or deceive them. Well, you are, but they don’t know that. What’s your name?”

He took some deep breaths. “Elijah Paea, or Eli for short.”

“Better. Remember, real people don’t speak in pre-measured sentences. They let their words flow. Anyway, good to meet you Eli, why are you here?”

“I’m the, uh, assistant to Mary. Wait, sorry, let me start again.”

“No, continue.”

“Peggy, please.”

“There’ll be no restarts in there.”

“I know that. I screwed it up, alright? It’s just been days since we went over this last and I need a refresher.”

My tensed brow softened a little, and I nodded. “Sorry. I don’t mean to be *so* harsh. Just a little.” He smiled. “Go on.”

“I’m the assistant to Doctor du Pless-say.” He pronounced the foreign name phonetically. “I do all the driving and cooking and I carry all her gear.” He turned his head slightly and rolled his eyes, displeased with the bio I’d written for him.

The track levelled as we crested the grassy hill, continuing along a gently rising range that curled in, out, and around a series of small forest clusters. A great valley occupied most of our windshield, enclosed on the far-left side by a range of rocky peaks lightly dolloped with dark green patches of vegetation. We startled a grazing group of deer as we came up over a rise; they scattered like roaches caught by a flashlight.

We spent the rest of the trip revising Elijah's background, and making sure Tama knew enough about Mary to pass any basic interrogation. I wasn't trying to scare him when I brought up that possibility, but in truth, I had no idea what to expect. It's why I'd been so skittish at the motel. My communications with Aotearoa's most elusive religious cult had been cordial enough, but records of them were fragmented and incomplete. Most of the information I'd found had come from some old Facebook posts by a single faceless profile, some legal documents we'd happened by early on, and brief excerpts from the 'Testament of Enoch' — a doctrine written by the group's now-deceased founder. But despite the lack of evidence, we held one belief in high regard: this group was responsible for a slew of abductions in the area, going back as far as 15 years.

My initial lead had been a hand-written pamphlet on the tenets of the faith, accompanied by the urging of Persephone, the mother of one of these missing girls. Three months ago, she received a phone call from her daughter, Paisley. Though it lasted over two minutes, it was muffled and distorted. She'd only been able to make out a few words, among which were *'please help me'* and *'Eden'* and *'arsehole cult bastards'*. It was from these words than I began weaving a horrifically intricate web, which extended in every direction across the walls of my office. Its wide expanse caught everything that came too close. Before long, it had seized enough prey to keep me busy for weeks, much of it directly or tangentially related to missing persons in the area — mostly women — aged between 15 and 30. Paisley was 19.

I should clarify that my definitions of 'abduction' and 'missing person' differ from that of the police. We play different games. The police are concerned with statistics. I'm concerned with results. If the commissioner demands a reduction in crime on the night shift, he gets it. That doesn't mean his constables have upped their preventative measures, or

that his inspectors have adopted additional measures to predict repeat offenders. Instead, a couple of reports get altered so that offences which took place on the cusp of the shift change *actually* happened a few minutes later. It means the alleged rape of a woman with a criminal record might become unsubstantiated. It means statistics get shuffled. Because that's what a missing person is — a statistic. A statistic they want to keep as low as possible. The best part of being private means I rarely deal with the demands of people who believe themselves superior. I can follow trails wherever they take me without concern for the political machinations in the background. And I don't hide behind convenient falsehoods. So when the cops say runaway, or family breakdown, or anything other than the truth, I know.

I wasn't exactly keen to take on this case, or any case, really. Young girls go missing all the time, especially after a fight with their mother. I was also more of an urban investigator, typically. But that itchy part of my brain needed scratching. Part of me wished I'd ignored it. But when I saw the cold case files of all those other girls, I felt burdened. Guilty, almost. As if I was the one enabling these disappearances if I didn't go searching for this Paisley girl. I lied to myself, trying to find some justification for why it wasn't my responsibility: that I was no better than the police investigators who worked the cases, so what chance did I have? But then I turned over one more file and saw two amber eyes staring back at me.

Half the files were text only — descriptions of the missing person, details of their known locations, and the failings of the cops who worked the cases. Some had photos, but most were old, faded. This one, though, had a fresh mugshot pinned to the front. Matted brown hair drooped past the woman's shoulders. Her name was Jolene Mikkelson. Arrested at age 19 in 2014, it was another two years before she disappeared. Her face was older, weary, almost like it didn't belong to her. But beyond all that, she bore a striking

resemblance to Mikayla — my best and only friend — epitomised by those two amber eyes. Mikayla and I were born days apart in the same hospital, and had spent eight years living on the same street. Mikayla developed faster than I did, and my parents exploited this — until we began primary school, she had test-driven all my clothes. Jokes flew about that being the reason we were so similar, so joined at the hip. Those jokes petered out as we grew older and I grew more angsty, but despite our personality skews, we still shared nearly every free moment. Naturally, I was the one to find her body.

Mikayla was an only child, and the child that every parent wanted. Bright, beautiful, charming, studious. Easy. Nothing like me. Her parents knew they could leave her home alone without any worries of her getting into mischief. So many times, I'd asked her to throw a house party while her folks were away for a weekend, but she was too set in her ways, and happily so, it seemed.

When Mikayla was 17, her parents had gone away on a four-day boating trip with her father's boss, and they trusted her with looking after the house. But it was the dawn of social media, and for the week prior, she'd been chatting with a guy she'd met online. When he mentioned he'd be passing through our area while her parents were away, she didn't think twice about inviting him over. I've never understood where this outburst came from. Even in the years that followed, as I read and reread the transcripts of their messages, nothing struck me as incredibly appealing about the guy she was speaking with. Maybe she had simply grown fed up with always being the perfect little angel. Or maybe these desires had always been under the surface, waiting. The guy said his name was Donny Emmerich, and he was 21 years old. His name was in fact Bryce Johansen. He was 57, and he left Mikayla's bloody body sprawled across the Hello Kitty bed set she'd had since she was ten.

Jolene Mikkelson had been arrested for possession with intent to distribute. Mikayla volunteered to help at blood drives. Jolene dropped out of school at 14. Mikayla had never even been late to a class. Jolene had two children when she was arrested at 19, with a third on the way. Until the hours before her death, Mikayla had been a virgin. The two couldn't have been more opposite. So why had Jolene called to me?

Tama had been across the table from me that evening. He'd aimlessly perused the files I'd pushed to the side, the disgust staining his face amplified by the pale-yellow glow of my standing lamp. He'd later told me that was the night he felt as though he understood why I did what I did, and that he wanted to be a part of it.

That same expression had been coming and going from his face for the last half hour. As our destination approached, I told him he'd best have a smile ready for our receivers. He promptly shone his teeth at me, which were white enough to blind. "I've always got one in the chamber."

"What did you end up telling your parents?" I asked him. Tama was an independent young man, but he was quite close with his family, and went to church with them every Sunday.

"Camping trip with my favourite boss," he replied. "Team building and all that." He bit his lip. "They don't need to know the details. They'd just worry." I nodded. It was best to keep the people close to you in the dark.

We had just hit a downhill for the first time since we left the asphalt, and it was at the bottom that the open expanse closed off at a gravel car park. Nature had eaten away at a rotting wood-and-wire fence that encircled the far edge. It was doing its best to restrain a dense collection of dark green trees, which extended around the hill's base in a semi-circle. At the back of this wide embrace stood three male individuals. The two in the back seemed

tense, hiding from the winter chills behind heavy brown fur coats. They leaned against a rusty white ute while an older gentleman stood ahead of them. He wore tight white pants, and a tight white shirt with a black collar, like an inverted preacher. The cold didn't seem to bother him, and his eyes followed us, head unturning. One of the other men pointed to our right, directing us to a corner of the car park where we sidled up against an ATV, and two chunky Jeeps, all old as hell.

It was only as Tama silenced the engine that I realised the thump of my heartbeat pounding in my eardrums. I held two fingers to my wrist and realised my pulse was racing. A sudden sting in my eye brought attention to the sweat dripping from my forehead. I wiped it away with my sleeve, closed my eyes, and breathed in, slow, then out, slow. I couldn't slip, not here, not now.

"Hey, Peg."

With eyes still closed, I responded monotonously. "It's Mary. From here on we are Mary and Elijah. No restarts."

"Mary, then. You want a drink?" I turned my head and saw him holding two brown bottles. "Pop's brew. I brought a box, y'know, just in case."

I chuckled. It was barely midday, but that'd never stopped me. I took a bottle, knocking it back quickly as hints of hops and ginger scratched the back of my throat. We'd had a share of his dad's homebrew and knew there was little point in savouring it. The amber liquid, cooled by the winter air, slinked down my throat and began bubbling in my stomach. It brought a sense of calm, and we clinked empty bottles. Mum had always said 'every beer was a meal'. If I'd known then and there that nothing I ate in the next week would come close to being so satisfying, I might have knocked back another.

“Don’t forget my bags,” I reminded Tama snidely as I pulled myself out of the passenger’s seat and made for the preacher, who I assumed was Joseph. He seemed late 50s, maybe older. He had a clean-shaven face, with tiny scars and liver spots dotting his balding head. What little hair remained formed a stringy grey curtain around his ears and neck. His stare dug into me as I approached. Though quite tall and imposing, he was also gaunt. All three of them were, I realised, though it was most noticeable on him. Perhaps it was his threadbare clothing, which tightly hugged his frame, showing off his bony ribcage and hollow abdomen. As I came close, he held up a hand, ushering me to stop, before reaching between two buttons in his shirt and pulling out a pocket watch that was hanging around his neck. He glanced at it, then at me, then back at it, before returning the watch to his chest and once more focusing on me, expectantly.

“Hello. Good morning, or I suppose it’s afternoon now.” His gaze shifted over my shoulder. I followed it to see Tama struggling to latch both my duffel bag and his heavy pack over his shoulders. I turned back to face the men, taking a moment to focus on the dark eyes of the preacher, imagining them as my own in the motel mirror, staring back at me with conviction, and without fear.

“Thank you for receiving us. I’m Doctor Mary du Plessis, and that is my aid, Elijah.”

## Chapter Two: Eden

‘...we forgive the sins of the English language and celebrate its purified form. It is the only language you will speak in His presence.’

*--Testament of William, Chapter 3, Verse 4-5*

“It’s Marianne, correct?” the preacher asked, straightening out his shirt. His steady stare and accusatory tone made those beady eyes even more imposing. They bore into me, searching for something that would betray my intent.

“Oh, well, yes, Marianne is my given name. How did you know?” I framed my reply with naïve curiosity, though I knew his answer. He pulled a small leather binder from his back pocket. It contained many pieces of precisely folded paper. Most were that same patchy material, but I spied a few sheets of familiar A4. He briefly perused them before pulling one out, unfolding it.

“This letter of yours. You signed it ‘*Marianne du Pless-ee.*’” His inflection was as strange as Tama’s. A very subtle twang in his voice hinted at an origin in the southern United States, though there was definitely some Kiwi mixed in that he was trying to hide.

“Oh of course,” I replied, feigning recognition. “Forgive me, I rarely sign my full name. So then, that would make you Joseph? It is a pleasure to finally meet you.”

“Going forward you will make complete use of your given name. Perhaps the sinners of the *wilds* would permit such a bastardisation, but you are in the Valley of Eden now. In His presence, you will use your Christian name.” He spoke each word with calm authority, implying every statement was fact. “Likewise, you will use my correct title of *Sage* Joseph. That aside, I am likewise glad to meet you. My delight extends to thee as well,” he said to Tama as he arrived, who let out a huff as he dropped the bags at our feet.

“Kia ora, boss, I’m Eli.” Tama’s sweaty hand extended outward to shake our host’s. It hung in the air between them, soaking up the silence.

“I will reiterate what I said to your *superior*,” he said bitterly, ignoring the handshake. “You are in the land of Our Heavenly Father, where you will use the name that *He* bestowed upon you. You are Elijah. Not Eli. Not Jah. *Elijah*. You will likewise use His ordained language, and none other.” Joseph like Tama was a toddler who couldn’t quite grasp the rules.

“Wouldn’t that have been Roman?” Tama asked with a smirk. “Or like, what’s it called, Aramic?”

“If *Aramaic* was God’s chosen language, then it would be spoken the world over,” Joseph said before turning to his underlings, ending any debate before it had begun. “Stow their bags. Faithful Roche is waiting for us.” Tama gave me a little side-eye while Joseph’s back was to us, but I ignored it. He had to realise that the time for witty jokes and quick winks was over. Any detail that lent credit to the fact that we weren’t who we claimed to be was not a detail we could afford to let slip.

“Hand over your keys.” Joseph stated after turning back to us. “Your vehicle is a blight on the Valley and must be removed. It will be returned to you whence you depart.” He held his hand out expectantly. Tama was enjoying the reversal as much as I, but I nodded permission. Joseph handed the keys off to one of the younger men, who subsequently ran towards our ute.

“Does it need to be baptised?” Tama asked.

“Where are you taking it?” I interrupted, cloaking Tama’s joke.

“Your vehicle’s presence here is an affront to the Ludditious Faith, and I pray that God forgives me for not arranging your transport. I also require you both to change.” The

second young man now held a stack of mismatched clothing, a mix of discoloured browns and whites. “If privacy is of a matter to you, make your way behind the parked vehicles. We will wait.”

“What’s wrong with our clothes?” I made no attempt at masking my frustration, most of which was genuine. Kathmandu wasn’t cheap.

“They are tainted with the stench of the millennium.” Joseph replied. “These garments here will provide for you. It was my wish that your other garments would be refashioned. *For everything that was once of His plan can be returned to true form.*” His eyes shut as he finished that last sentence. I got the sense he was quoting scripture. “But Druid William has decreed otherwise.”

*The Ludditious Faith of Our Heavenly Father, and the Foretellers of the Ongoing Apocalypse* was how Joseph had signed each of his letters, and it was exactly the type of name that made you think ‘cult, not religion’. Their founder, Enoch, had taken the Y2K scare to the absolute extreme. He and his followers believed the turn of the century *was* the end of the world, and they considered anything from the last 24 years a perversion of God’s will. From what I’d pieced together, time still flowed inside their ‘Valley of Eden’ — except it was still 1999. By having Tama borrow his friend’s ute — a 2001 model, specifically — we got to see just how strict these beliefs were.

This wasn’t a battle worth fighting, so I accepted the clothing and took Tama behind the Jeeps, where I immediately started changing — there was no point procrastinating. His eyes ran wild, desperately figuring out where to look. After a few stunned moments, he turned around entirely. “Sorry, boss.” I didn’t respond. It didn’t matter to me. “So... Joseph’s kinda weird, right?”

“Get used to it. I don’t think we’ll be meeting anyone here who isn’t kinda weird.”

“And the kid that took our ride? He was like, my age. Younger, even.”

I hadn't paid attention to the one who drove off in our ute, but I trusted Tama's judgement. “How old are you again?”

“What year is it?”

“2024?”

“Then I'm 24. I'm a New Year's baby.”

Our new clothing was an odd transition, bordering between Amish and op-shop. The shirts were cotton, old and dirty, as were Tama's pants. They also provided thin leather belts. My pants looked like an art project, with the front half being dirty blue denim and the back half canvas.

Joseph was already in the passenger seat of their ute when we returned, while his second follower sat in the driver's seat. “Toss your other clothes in the tray,” said the driver. We did, stuffing them into our already-stowed bags, before hopping into the back seat of the tight cabin. As we shuffled in, the driver asked “Are we waiting for Aspirant Sa—”

“He'll be hours, Aspirant John,” Joseph interrupted. “We'll consider his journey a part of his advancement.”

“Does that mean he's soon to become Faithful?” John asked excitedly.

“If that is His will. Drive.” Joseph had a talent for ending conversations.

Beyond the carpark, the trail continued, narrowing as we pushed into the bush. The greenery hugged us tightly as daylight disappeared. As we drove deeper into unknown territory, the crunching of gravel beneath the tyres faded, and the track turned to dirt. The canopy was low and all encapsulating. Extended branches caressed the roof of the vehicle,

but the path was otherwise clear. Joseph's declaration that we had come from 'the wilds' seemed ironic, given the locale.

This ute wouldn't be passing a warrant of fitness anytime soon. The engine roared with the pain of inattention, and every symbol on the dashboard lit up. The clock was stuck at 3.16, but it was around twenty minutes after leaving the car park that the condensed trees became sparser, and then a dilapidated metal shack appeared through breaks in the bush. A murky river flowed just beyond it. It wasn't long 'til we'd parked up alongside the shack, and through its cracked walls I spied the next leg of our journey.

The engine let out a depleted gasp as John removed the key and went to grab our bags. I told Tama to lend a hand, but Joseph shook his head. "Chivalry may be dead out there, but here in God's lands, you will be treated as His guests." John gave me and Tama a dimpled smile, as if saying 'thanks anyway'. Our bags dwarfed his fragile form, and his whole body staggered as he traipsed towards us.

"Sage Joseph, these packs are sinful. Shall I discard them?" John asked, perking my ears. But rather than reply, Joseph addressed Tama and me directly.

"Marianne and Elijah." Joseph declared, responding to John's question through us. "We have bestowed two gifts upon you: the cloth that embraces you as tightly as the Almighty himself; and clemency, like that of His son to the penitent thief. Allowing two Newts to observe us, record us... it is unorthodox to say the least. However, Druid William has determined that the importance of your mission overcomes the means. The Druid spent the night just gone in arduous prayer, and through him, God has spoken: He allows the touch of sin to enter our home, content His divinity will protect our people from its menace. If you are to spread our good word to the wilds — to the realm of sin — then sin must be the vehicle, for it is the only language the tainted understand. That is to say, you may retain

your belongings for the time being. But your work cannot begin until you have conferred with Druid William.” As was his way, he posed no question, but I agreed anyway and prodded Tama to do the same. Assured in his words, he turned to enter the shack, where he began a conversation with someone inside.

“What’s a Newt?” Tama asked John, who had by now placed our packs against the shack, and was washing down the ute with a crusty sponge and a leaky bucket full of river water.

“You are.” he replied. “You’re of the new time, you’re a Newt.”

“And you called him Sage? What does that mean? And what were you again?”

John’s expression was slightly confused, yet riddled with eagerness and excitement, like that of a child’s when it gets to tell its parents everything it learned at school that day. Even so, he hesitated. “Sorry. Sage Joseph said you weren’t to do your work and such, yet, so I probably shouldn’t be telling you. I could lose my title, you see. Oh, which is Aspirant. That I can answer.”

“So what’s an Aspirant?”

“It means I’ve not been blessed by the holy waters.”

“You mean baptism?”

“Yes! Is there baptism in the wilds?”

Tama shot me a curious glance, but I had no guidance to offer. “Sure is.” Tama said. “I’m not sure if it’s the same as yours, though.”

“Well you might be lucky enough to see it. My friend, Samuel, the one who took your truck, we’re both Aspirants, but we’re bound to become Faithful soon!”

“So then what does Faithful mean?”

“It’s a—”

“Aspirant John!” Joseph’s commanding voice boomed from the shack, scaring the sponge and bucket from John’s hands. “You hear my instructions yet you divulge anyway! Do I dare deem you Infidel?”

John went scrambling to pick up the bucket, which was rolling towards the river. “No, Sage Joseph.” He answered weakly.

“I do not hear you.”

“No Sage Joseph!” John straightened his stance, standing at attention like a soldier being reprimanded. The bucket kept rolling. I cringed at the sploosh it made as it fell into the river. John cowered as Joseph advanced. Watching from behind the Sage was a squinting grizzly-faced man. Likely around 50, he wore a tattered brown fisherman’s coat over his spindly, lopsided body. His posture sagged to the right, and his face looked melted — a stroke victim, I assumed. An odd glee emanated from his one open eye as John’s frame shrunk further and further.

“The slightest exposure to the outside and you readily invite sin.” Joseph towered above John despite the two being of similar height. I stepped forward to defend the young man, but Joseph snapped his gaze in my direction, holding out a single finger. “You do *not* interfere.” He turned back to John with an aggressive, controlled disposition. “Retrieve the bucket. Return to the yard. Wait for Samuel, and *pray* for his return. You shall return via the crag trail.

“As for you two,” turning back to us now, “collect your things and take them to the boat. Roche is to take you upriver. I’ve matters to attend here, but he knows how you’re to be treated. Roche?”

“Yeayah?” replied the grizzly man in a husky accent.

“See them to Druid William, then return. I’ll be waiting.”

The dusky fumes of the boat's diesel engine were noxious, but they failed to mask the putrid stench of the river. The swampy scent of rotting vegetation and duck shit was overwhelming, but the engine knew this, and would start working overtime to pump a smoky haze into my lungs. Both scents battled constantly, meaning I never grew used to either. It reminded me of Mum puffing on cigarettes when I was little. She seemed to think having the driver's window down would funnel the smoke out of the car, but the clouds still gathered in the back seat. The open window just meant I got the occasional whiff of country air.

The boat itself was one of those swamp crafts with a giant fan attached to the back. I'd never seen one in-person, and this one was barely clinging to life. The sputtering engine was unprotected, lodged into a hole in the rippled, metallic deck. I had my computer repaired a couple years back, and the techie went off at me because my hard drive was dangling at a 45-degree angle. I imagined a mechanic would have similar sentiments about this engine. Someone had crammed it in at a precarious angle, and only its tight fit kept it from moving. The boat was so lopsided that Roche needed Tama and me to sit in very specific spots near the bow. "Gotta balance out thee weight o' it all, eright?"

Soldered metal offcuts decorated the deck and hull. A few of the patches on the inside of the boat were seeping swamp water: Roche had pointed out a couple of old soup cans we could use to scoop it out.

The roaring engine and the fan it powered reminded me of the noise of a small airplane when you're the lucky one seated right by the propellers. Roche kept trying to start conversations with us, but didn't seem to click that we couldn't hear a word he said. Tama

kept yelling back, “What?” and Roche would do the same. It went on like that for most of an hour. I found it easier to just pretend I hadn’t heard him.

Scenes of green repeated before us. Someone a *little* more paranoid and a little *less* detail oriented might’ve thought we were going in circles. But my itchy brain made meticulous mental notes, like how that fallen tree was at a slightly different angle than the one we’d seen eight-or-so minutes ago, and how the many riverside maimai we passed were all slightly different shapes, adorned with slightly different camouflage. It was enough to stop my mind from moving into the next stage of panic. What was not helping was the rifle. I’d seen it when boarding, hung up on the back of Roche’s seat. It looked like the type my ex-stepfather Rick had back when he still owned the farm. I couldn’t imagine someone as impaired as Roche using it effectively.

A group of seven or eight ducks were swimming upstream, two adults leading their children in the opposite direction. Their nervous little legs paddled faster as we came close, and they gave us a wide berth. *Did they have the right idea? Should I follow their lead?*

We bounded around an extended bend in the river when I noticed, ahead of us, signs of civilization. A steep incline on the left riverbank led up to an old wire fence, entangled with a mass of vines. Barely hidden behind it was a row of narrow, ramshackle buildings of metal and wood. Further downstream, a large stone bridge spanned the river, hiding a small wooden dock beneath. Someone was standing there, waiting. They didn’t wave. Roche maneuvered into the river siding like it was a car drifting into a parallel park. The dockhand — a boy, maybe 15 — had his arms out, expecting to catch something, but Roche shook his head as the heavy purr of the engine died down. The dock’s narrow platform ran the width of the bridge, while a single arm extended out over a third of the wide river’s width. It was obviously a recent addition; it was in much better condition than Roche’s boat, and its

sanded timber was spattered — though not yet stained — by swamp water. The two stood in stark contrast with one another. The young man on the dock was wearing a tattered yellow rain jacket that extended down to his knees. He seemed at a bit of a loss.

“This’ere’is Simon.” said Roche while the noise of the engine was still dying down. “Faithful Simon, I should say. ‘e’s too meek to ask ye ‘imself, but he’d real ‘ppreciate it if ye made yerself scarce. I gotta head back.”

“Once-Infidel.” Simon spoke, more to himself than any of us.

“Whatsat, boy?” Roche replied.

Simon cleared his throat. “Faithful Simon, Once-Infidel.”

Roche stopped for a moment, pondering. “Ah yes, that’s right, I can’ever keep track. Simon’s down’ere on the dock wit’ me ‘cause ‘e’s been a bad lad, ain’t that right, Si?” Simon didn’t respond. Roche grinned menacingly, taking no offense, and continued ushering us off his vessel. Without a counterweight, the boat returned to its skew. Roche’s broken body struggled against the bobbing vessel, and he had to use his rifle as a prop. Once on the dock, Roche flung the rifle up over his shoulder and turned to Tama and me. “Roight then, off ye go.”

“Excuse me, Faithful Roche?” Simon’s quiet voice was barely audible over the running water.

Roche huffed. “I told ye, don’t be callin’ me that. Well, what is it boy? Speak!”

“I was—” Simon choked on his words. “Forgive me, Faith-, uh, Roche. There has been a change of plans, you see. We suffered a loss overnight. A child. They have gone up above, a new cherub for His kingdom.”

Despite his rigidity, it seemed the death of a child was enough to rattle even him.

“That’ere’s truly unfortchnate. Ye’re te take these’ns te the precedens, then?” Simon

nodded. “Well, carry a pray’r fer me, won’t ye? I’ve yet to return upriver, pick up the Sage. I’ll let ‘im know of the loss.” Roche turned to Tama and me. “You two behave fer Simon now, won’t ye? I am awful sorry that ye have to face such things on ye first day ‘ere, and I hope it don’t hurt ye too much.”

The news struck me, not for its sadness, but out of concern for myself and Tama. I was hardly spiritual, but to hear of a child’s death mere moments after setting foot in what we believed to be a dangerous fanatical cult — it seemed like the king of bad omens. Tama was feeling it for both of us. It was as if all his ever-present smile lines had washed away. He looked soulless, and I didn’t like it.

Roche led us around the opposite side of the bridge where a narrow stone staircase led up the incline. With his left hand, he gestured us up. “Waste a time me takin’ ye up. Si will see ye to the Druid.”

“Didn’t Joseph say you were to introduce us to the Druid?” I asked.

“I don’t much care what ‘e thinks I should er shouldn’t do, in this regerd anyway. I got stuff to do ‘fore I head back to pick up Jo and a trip up there’ll gain me nothin’ in that.”

I wasn’t going to argue with him. Roche clearly had a plan, and he wasn’t shifting from it. “Oh. Welcome to New Eden,” Roche said as he waddled back toward the boat, while Simon led me and Tama up the stairs.

Tama quickly started lagging. “Two packs, too much?” I asked. He let out a breathless chuckle.

“Nothing I can’t handle, Marianne.” I smiled at him, commending his use of my ‘full name’. After a few dozen slanted steps, I turned the corner up onto the dusty roadway. It was an eerie scene. To the left was the bridge, and to the right was the community, but all I

could hear was rustling leaves and gurgling water. I walked towards a rusty shack across the road and peeked in the windows. There were no signs of life.

“That’s a private residence.” Simon said, only after I’d looked through every nook and crack I could find. I’d already forgotten he was there.

“Right. I shouldn’t have assumed.” The two of us stood in awkward silence, interrupted by the occasional grunt coming from the stairs. “So. The ‘proceedings’. That’s a funeral?”

Simon nodded. “Uhuh. I’ll take you there, as soon as your friend is up.” The conversation dried up again. Clearly, not everyone who lived here shared the love of their own voice like Joseph did. I wandered over to the bridge. It was the type you’d expect to see in rural England, not the secluded wilds of New Zealand. At first, I considered the possibility that early settlers had built it, but it appeared too fresh — or possibly just very well-maintained. Various-sized cobblestones made up the bulk of the structure, with some large stone bricks providing support along the arch. The bridge sat at something of a dip in a small valley between two large hills, and was the intersection between the wilderness across the river and New Eden behind me. Looking back that way, I could see misshapen rows of equally misshapen buildings. They extended up the slow-rising hill, adorning the semi-straight dirt roads like broken stairs. There was no uniformity to them. It was a suburban HOA’s nightmare. Some were well-made, clearly planned structures, with beautiful cobblestone bases and precise timber frames. But others, as if inspired by Frankenstein, had been stitched together from whatever parts were on hand.

The wide dirt road ran past the buildings and back across the bridge, narrowing on the other side as Mother Nature consumed it. Her trees extended all along the riverside,

creating walls-upon-walls. The road tried its best to wind between them, but eventually disappeared from my sight, either sneaking its way through, or getting lost.

A fine layer of dirt caked the surface of the bridge, filling in the gaps between the stones. The dirt showed countless footprints pointing across the river. They decorated the entire width of the bridge, often crossing over each other. A crowd had moved through here, recently. I was so focused on the details that I didn't notice Tama reach the top of the staircase and follow Simon across the bridge. "It's this way," Simon said.

Halfway across, Roche's boat started up below us. I jumped at the unexpected noise. I caught sight of it trailing back upriver, in the direction we'd come from. A small part of me wished I was on that boat, or swimming with the ducks: I told that part to shush.

Once the roaring of the engine faded, I turned to Simon. "Would you mind if I asked you something?"

"I—" he began. "We've been told not to—" He choked again. It seemed like a physiological response, like he had a shock collar tightened around his brain. "That is, I might not be allowed to tell you the answer."

"Oh. Well, that's alright. We were speaking with Aspirant John when we first arrived. Downriver, I mean. He sure told me a lot of stuff." I was trying to goad him into talking: surely if the older boys told me stuff, that meant he could too.

"He shouldn't have done that." Simon replied. "He's just an Aspirant."

"Is that lower than... what you are?" I asked.

"I'm a Faithful, Once-Infidel."

"And that's higher than Aspirant, is it?"

He paused, considering his answer. "Faithful is greater than Aspirant, yes."

“But you’re so young, aren’t you?” He seemed confused by the question. “You were born after John?”

“Well, yes, I suppose.

“So then why do you get to be Faithful, and he is only an Aspirant? How did you rise up the ranks so quickly?”

Simon shook his head. “That’s because I was born here, but John was born in the outside.” He paused to clarify his thoughts. “John was born outside of New Eden, which means he was not blessed at birth, which means he has to work harder to prove his worthiness before God.”

New Eden. It certainly had a nice ring to it, for a cult, and this talk of hierarchy and proving yourself before God only cemented my beliefs in that regard. This was more than some fringe religious community. It was an exercise in power.

“Right, that makes sense.” I agreed, eager to win his favour. “So what about the infidel part? I heard Joseph mention it earlier, and I heard Roche—”

“*Sage Joseph. Faithful Roche.* You need to show respect if you’re going to join New Eden.”

I wanted to cut him off, and make sure he knew I wasn’t *joining*-joining. But I didn’t want to break the rapport. “I’m sorry, *Faithful Simon.*”

“Once-Infidel.”

“Once-Infidel.” I corrected. “So, what does that mean?”

His answer was ready in advance. “My faith waned once. It won’t happen again. I bear my shame with honour.”

“What did you do, exactly?”

“I—” And then he choked once more. Perhaps he realized he was revealing too much, and retreated into the shell I'd cracked. His voice — which had been growing in confidence with every word — returned to that of a mouse: squeaky, barely audible, and trying to go unnoticed. I knew that desire, so I let him hide.

The road, which got narrower and steeper the further we trekked into the bush, eventually came up a short but sharp incline before revealing a wide, open meadow. It was only a ten-minute walk from the bridge, but it was like a whole new world, distinct from the putrid bog that lay just down the hill. The meadow was oval-shaped, with multicoloured clumps of flowers sprouting all over, and tower matai trees forming a perfect edge. However, the scene was spoiled by the crowd of 100-plus people on the far-right side. They were all dressed in simple browns and whites, except for the choir, who were cleaner than the rest, and had a flared red collar hanging over their shoulders. We caught the tail end of the song, which sounded slightly familiar, like one I'd heard as a child at one of Nana's Sunday church services. Sensory memories of burning church candles and the myrrh perfume Nana wore on those mornings flooded my mind as I lingered on the vague memory of that tune.

As we closed the gap, Simon warned us to be quiet — as if we'd never been to a funeral before — and led us forward with slow, hesitant steps. My eyes were darting through the faces of the choir. While most of the crowd had their backs to us, the choir was the exception. The choir, numbering two dozen, faced both the congregation and the makeshift pulpit. Nearly all were women, save for four men that bookended the two rows. They were all on the skinny side, though none so much as Joseph or Roche. The crowd itself was mixed in terms of age and gender, but there was a particularly monochromatic effect washing over it. People were crying. Some stood stoically silent. Others muttered quiet

prayers to themselves. For all intents and purposes, it seemed like a standard funeral procession.

Right as the choristers finished their piece, a man's voice emanated from somewhere near the front of the crowd. "I do regret that we are forced to congregate under such sorrowful circumstances." Though the accent was local, his voice was thick with molasses, with a long and slow resonance to every word. "Faithful Elizabeth and Faithful Noah are in mourning for the loss of their daughter." There was audible crying from a woman towards the front of the crowd. "They have lost the joy of parenthood: the joy of bringing a light into this world of darkness. But they will see their daughter again. Her tiny form flies above us now, rising to God's kingdom. The Eidolon will receive her, to prepare her for her true duties. When Faithful Elizabeth and Faithful Noah make the climb to Heaven themselves, they will be greeted by their daughter, and she will have so much to tell them. She will have so much to thank them for." His eyes had been surveying the crowd, as if he was trying for a moment of connection with every individual person. As his last sentence closed, his eyes caught mine, then Tama's, then back to mine. For a moment, his speech came to a standstill. Eventually, he simply nodded to us, knowingly, before asking everyone to bow their heads. As everyone's necks drooped, mine stayed upright. I watched the man as he gave a prayer for the dead child. He was an exception to all the rules. Unlike Joseph and Roche, he was not balding or patchy, not gaunt or emaciated or old or broken. His robes accented a body that was, if anything, was a little overweight. His sleeveless robes exposed his upper arms, while pale green sashes covered his forearms and hands. I judged him to be a little older than myself, though much taller, and with dark black hair had only just started receding. After a resounding 'amen', he offered a bright white smile to the congregation, again fixing his gaze on me. His smile was warm, much like that of Nana's chaplain. But his

eyes caught mine again. They weren't like Joseph's, which dug in, like they were searching for something. These eyes were wide, encapsulating, shifting. They didn't seek the fine details: they sought *every* detail. These were eyes that could not only discover my facade, but strip me of it.

“But this is not merely a day of sorrow, my children, for it would appear that our guests have arrived.”

## Chapter Three: Processions

‘To judge Him is not to blaspheme, for we are all of Him, and we all make mistakes.’

*--Second Testament of Enoch, Chapter 6, Verse 89*

The priest’s announcement turned every Luddite head. Though we were kitted in full Luddite-wear, we still wore our own shoes, and our luggage — specifically Tama’s intricate tramping pack — caught many eyes, bringing both disgust and wonder to many faces. But unlike me, the attention didn’t daunt Tama: he stepped in, offering a huge wave and a hearty “Hello!” that was hardly fitting for a funeral.

The priest was already driving his way through the crowd. His mere presence pushed every Luddite aside, as if he were a drop of oil in a cup of water. His steps were long and excited, like he couldn’t wait to see the new specimens up close.

“What a pleasure it is to meet you, Marianne du Plessis!” As he reached us, he dropped to one knee, holding out his palm for me to take. Feeling obligated, I placed my hand on his. He slowly, almost sensually brought it to his mouth, laying an uncomfortably damp kiss on my knuckles before he rose back to his feet with ease. My insides quivered, but my skin stayed still. “I am the Druid William, and it is my privilege to welcome you to New Eden.” He had a restless, animated face that contorted with every spoken word. His gaze was even more invasive up-close: although his soft, wide eyes stared directly into mine, it simultaneously felt as if they were peripherally surveying every part of me. I struggled to hide my discomfort.

“The pleasure is mine, William. Druid William, I mean.”

“Ah, indeed. The effort is appreciated.” His tone suddenly shifted from that of the warm priest to that of the calculating investment banker who bore a guise of friendliness, but didn’t know the word’s meaning. “But do not fret. The misuse of titles and misunderstandings of custom will be plentiful over the coming days. Consider yourself — and your second — exempt from these perceived oddities.” He finally acknowledged Tama, who was standing just over my shoulder. “I only request that you offer us the same lenience, regarding any customs of your own.”

“That all sounds perfectly reasonable.” I said, sheltering my uncertainty. It was a strange juxtaposition, Joseph and Simon both emphasising the importance of the titles, only for William to tell me they weren’t necessary. Just what kind of logic trap was this?

As I contemplated, I realised William’s eyes were not the only pair gazing this way. Every Luddite behind him stood still, silent, staring, though it was hard to say who their focus was on. Who did they find more enthralling: their prophetic leader, or the outsiders bearing packs of unknown treasures?

Realising he had to step in or step off, Tama introduced himself, offering a handshake to avoid an awkward wet kiss. “Hi, again. I’m Elijah, Marianne’s aid.” William accepted Tama’s clammy hand, showing no signs of squeamishness. I supposed he already lived in a bog — a little dampness wouldn’t put him off.

“It is a *genuine* delight, Elijah.” the Druid said. “Tell me, were you named for the prophet that shares your moniker?” William spared no time with the pleasantries when something grabbed his interest.

“Um... I don’t actually know.” Tama replied. “Mum was religious. I mean, she didn’t go to church on Sundays and pray at meals. But she had a bible by her bed and always had one of those gold crosses around her neck. She died before I could really question where

the name came from.” Already, Tama was talking too much. But in his babbling, he’d established a distinct lie: Elijah’s parents were dead, but Tama’s weren’t. Part of what makes a persona believable, and easier to keep consistent, are distinctions between your own life and theirs.

With a dramatic flair, William placed his right hand on Tama’s shoulder, and his left on the back of Tama’s head, cradling it like a small child. Many old, shallow gashes scarred the Druid’s knuckles, a stark contrast to his otherwise unblemished skin. William pulled Tama closer, whispering something inaudible in his ear before releasing him. “I will include you and your family in my prayers tonight.”

William spent a few minutes addressing and then dismissing the congregation, sending them back down the road Simon had led us up. The bulk of the congregation walked casually, a disorganised mass that squeezed through the forest’s fingers. But the choir, leading the way, maintained strict lines all the way through, walking in two lines with the four men at the top and tail. They stayed in formation as they crossed back over the bridge, and beyond, making greater haste than everyone else as they disappeared up the hill into the tangle of roads.

William brought up the rear of the group alongside me and Tama. Tama carried both our bags despite my offer to help. “It’s my job, Miss Marianne. I always do my job.” William offered praise for this sentiment. I couldn’t tell if he was being facetious or not. He’d been entertaining us with the story of the morning’s funeral procession and saying he was glad we could see part of it.

“It’s terrible to hear that a child died,” I said in an empty moment.

“Indeed.” William affirmed. “Though I trust God had His reasons. I trust she will serve Him better above than below.”

“How old was she?” Tama asked.

“God claimed her mere days after placing her here.”

And without warning, the care and pity I couldn't find earlier surfaced as a burning in my throat. Not a child, but a fucking baby. Jesus Christ. There's always a certain sadness when a child dies. One of the sad realities of life is that death comes for us all. For many people, it comes early. But features of New Eden I'd naively ignored on arrival were sticking out to me like a pot handle. Looking around at the rusty shacks and fractured roofs and the mouldy exteriors and nearly every damn run-down detail of this place, my only thought was that if that baby had been born in a hospital, a clean home, or even on a public street, it would probably be alive right now.

“I'm sure she would have loved the service,” I said through gritted teeth.

“Indeed. It was for her as much as it was for us. To lose a person before their expected time, even knowing you will see them again, is too much for the heart to bear alone.” I resisted the urge to shush him. I knew the pain of loss all too well. But to hear it come from the mouth of this hypocrite stirred me in all the wrong ways. It's easy to get tunnel vision in investigations like this, but I already had my conclusion for this case: fuck these cultists.

Ahead on the road, just over the bridge, stood two groups, who had stayed steadily ahead of us on the return trip. Aside from the choir, these groups were the only Luddites to walk in something resembling formation. The groups were equal in size, and split by gender. William stopped us as soon as we'd crossed the river. “In any case,” William continued, “I encourage you to mourn for our loss within your dormitories. Sorrow isn't confined. You may yet find novelty in sharing your emotions with others.” I just nodded, scared to say anything I might regret.

“So, where’s our room?” asked Tama. “I’ll take our packs there now.”

William peered down at Tama, confused, before figuring something out in his head.

“It would seem Sage Joseph did not wholly inform you of the arrangements. In short, we do not allow the mixing of untethered men and women in communal spaces, and seeing as you are not betrothed to one another—”

“You mean we don’t get to stay together?” I asked.

“Correct. You, Marianne, will be going with Matron-Faithful Esther to your sorority. Elijah, you were to be taken to your fraternity by Warden Mark, but I am intrigued by you and would like to extend our communion — our conversation. I will be your escort.”

I shook my head vehemently. “No, we’re partners! And he’s only my aid! I can’t trust him to perform his own research, and if he’s not nearby he can’t —”

William slammed his hand down on my shoulder and gripped tightly. “I am going to ask you to *lower* your voice, Marianne du Plessis, for it sprouts in the direction of blasphemy.” His harsh tone hushed once he’d reasserted control. The silent audience had gone stiff. “You are welcome to make your complaints and queries known, but you make them known to me, or to the Sage, *quietly*.” He paused briefly, searching for a response in my mannerisms, before pulling in even closer. “Though I may not hold the goals of your new-age research with regard, I had hoped you might see the potential in observing all aspects of New Eden as it *is* — not as you wish it to be. If these arrangements are averse to your likings, you may depart whence you came, but as I assume you will acquaint yourself to your distaste, perhaps we may continue?”

Here it was: the demeanour I’d originally expected of the Druid — or what I’d expect of any cult leader, really. Like politicians and police officers, his genuine desire was influence and control. Had I so easily revealed his true nature? For now, it was unimportant. I ignored

the dropping of my stomach and the sweat in my palms. I was without fear. I *had* to be, because by their decree, I was about to be separated from the only person I could trust — meaning I had to be able to trust myself.

Tama's interjection heaved me back to reality. "Please forgive us, Sir. Druid, I mean. I think we're just both surprised. We just assumed we'd bunk together, so we could share our, uh, findings and stuff, y'know?" Something I'd learned from Tama's messy separation was how willing he was to absorb blame. I'd had to scold him repeatedly for compromising on issues that were entirely his ex-fiancée's fault. But he'd still not shaken that habit, epitomised by his constant use of 'we' and 'us' when he was blameless. "The only thing is, our stuff is all mixed up in our bags. Could we just get a couple minutes to get that sorted?"

Tama was gambling here. William was already on edge, and I wasn't keen to see another outburst. But the Druid considered the request without anger, and I knew the worst he'd say was 'no'. That'd knock us back to square one, but we were hardly in square two. "I'll arrange for you the privacy to exchange your belongings before you disperse to your respective congregations." Tama and I exchanged looks, trading my surprise for his satisfaction, as William took a deep, meditative breath. "I can understand your dismay. Your purpose here derives from the exchange of knowledge, and here I am denying you that ability. A foolish error, I admit. By next day, an area of study will have been established for you for limited use." I couldn't hide my smile as William asked Warden Mark to escort us down the road.

Warden Mark was tall and lanky with an ordinary, slightly misshapen face. He spoke with the faintest of lisps but carried himself with the confidence of his station. "Wardens serve as protectors of New Eden," he told us as we walked, his hand caressing the knife on his belt the entire time.

“What does New Eden need protection from?” I asked.

Mark scoffed a little. “Sin, Newt Marianne. In whatever form that takes.” He eyed me up and down suspiciously, like I was a witch soon to be tried.

Mark ushered us into a ramshackle hut, with walls constructed of quartered logs bound by dried vines and flax. Corrugated iron sheets of many colours formed the roof, bolted in place. Much like Roche’s boat, there were plenty of patchwork repairs, though mostly over rusted sections. “This used to be a tailoring station. Not seen much use since Joseph consolidated everything by the windmill.” There were many wide tables inside with plenty of room for us to do our exchange — but we had nothing that needed exchanging. My bag was mine and Tama’s was his. Tama used the excuse to get us some privacy before they separated us, but Mark stood far too close to chance a whisper. He kept his back turned, though, “To avoid temptation,” nodding towards our bags as we entered, though there was something resembling curiosity hidden between Mark’s words.

After Tama wasted a little time trying to communicate through twisted socks and exaggerated facial expressions, I gave Tama a quiet hug, and we let our babysitter know we were ready. Back outside, we said our last goodbyes, but there really wasn’t much to say. I gave Tama a few words of interpretive guidance: “write down everything you see;” “keep your eyes peeled for anything of interest,” and most importantly; “follow their rules.” He hit me back with some similar assurances, namely that we’d get this all figured out, before William directed me to my guide for the rest of the afternoon, Matron-Faithful Esther.

Some names tell you all there is to know about a person. I had picked Esther from the crowd long before William introduced her. Like Joseph, she was on the border of elderly, her greying hair accentuated by stark white streaks. With a surprising spring in her step, she

took me by the hand and squeezed with bony fingers. “A pleasure to have you with us, deary.” She spoke with a strange, squashed inflection, as if her voice was too big for her mouth. It was like how I’d sounded the week after getting my wisdom teeth removed.

Five other women made up Esther’s group, all wearing a uniform set of white cotton dresses with wide leather belts binding their stomachs like corsets. Esther wore the same thing, except she also wore a pale blue sash, tightly affixed like a neckerchief. Everyone offered a slight smile and curt nod toward me — the type of greeting you offer strangers in the park. Awkward greetings transcended culture, it seemed. But what disturbed me was the silence. Even as we set off, following Esther’s lead, there was no talking. No gossip. No chatter. In some ways it was a welcome change from the normalities of life, but it made the stares of bystanders more intimidating — or maybe just more noticeable.

Like a vehicle in transit, our group stayed to the left-hand side of the flattened dirt road, which ascended a steady incline and was lined with structures in various states of disrepair. Despite the absence of traffic, cart tracks and various hoof prints marked the middle of the road. I realised then I could smell cow shit — or something like it — mixed in with the acrid bog scent. It hung over the roads like a persistent fog. Esther remained at the head of our group while the others — me included — followed behind in pairs. My plan from the get-go had been to sidle up next to her and pick her brain, but as I made my move, she held her arm out to stop me. “Sorry, deary, but you must follow. I will lead.” I knew there was no sense arguing, and returned to my place alongside my walking buddy, Aspirant Leah. She was a pale, frizzy redhead, with plenty of freckles to hide her sunken cheeks. She was a bit of a standout among the bland crowd of black-and-brown-haired young women. The only feature she shared with them was the emaciation. The smock-like dresses

conformed to all their bony frames, and the gaunt faces and lack of muscle on their arms were telltale.

The deeper Esther took us into New Eden, the more I grew concerned for Tama. Being separated like this invited danger. William's sudden interest in Tama was strange and concerning, but thinking about it brought no joy.

Maybe because it was a stark comparison to my first empty steps in New Eden, but I only noticed now just how bustling it was. This main road saw more traffic the further we travelled from the river, much of it funnelling in from the smaller adjoining roads. People on the opposite side of the road waved or nodded as we passed them by, addressing Esther, but not the rest of the group. Almost all the other women I saw dressed like my gang and were likewise in groups led by blue neckerchiefs, though some walked in pairs. Comparatively, the men were almost all solitary. A few wore priest-like garments like Joseph and William. Others wore rough-looking shirts of mishmashed leathers and burlap. There was a tranquillity in the air — the stillness that always follows a funeral — but everyone, regardless of age, sex, or rank, wore at least half a smile.

Most of the buildings that lined the main road lacked a visionary form. Some were well-constructed, while others seemed like they were barely holding together, bound by vines and frayed rope, and composed of whatever material had been on hand. They could have been homes, or the workshops where they made that starchy paper. But across the road, I spotted one with an obvious purpose. It had a large open yard at its front, contained by a waist-high picket fence that corralled the children inside. I could see a dozen or so, mostly boys, playing with a white parachute-like sheet. It went up and down and up and down as they sang an unfamiliar nursery rhyme.

*Up to Heaven we go,*

*Don't send us below!*

*Keep us safe, it's not too late,*

*Up to Heaven we go!*

*Floating down the stream,*

*Nothing but a dream!*

*The birds will sing, the bells will ring,*

*Up to Heaven we go!*

Two women in their late-teens watched over them, smiling and leading the singing — which is the only reason I could make out the words. “Is that a school?” I asked to no one in particular.

“It’s a care centre,” Leah replied.

“Is that *like* a school?”

“Knowledge is best found through experience. We learn through our trials, and our failings.”

“Amen,” said the other girls, *almost* in unison. Silence resumed. I resisted prying at what was clearly a nonsense, rehearsed answer.

Small gutter-like troughs ran down the sides of the road, with offshoots extending under some buildings like a form of rudimentary plumbing, directing trickles of water — and other things — back toward the river. No wonder those ducks were leaving. Much like the river, it became hard to distinguish each section of town from another: it was all equally worn down. I felt secure in that we’d been following a mostly straight road, but my unease stemmed from the scope of this place. I’d expected a small compound, with a few dozen buildings with a few dozen more people. But every step and every glimpse revealed this was no mere religious community — it was a settlement.

Despite the winter chills, fifteen minutes of steady walking brought on a sweat. I usually run to keep in shape, but I'd been indoors these last months, and this hill was killing me, but not long after the crest, we arrived at something of a town square. I looked back down the hill, wondering how high we were and how far we'd gone. The bridge had disappeared behind the wonky roads and the wonkier buildings.

Market stalls lined the edges of the square. Only a few people manned the stalls, and most displayed clothes or other crafted goods. Tacky artisan goods were always a win with Mum. I wondered if I'd be able to take any home. Across the square was a church, given away by the cross-shaped window that loomed over the square, and the higher level of construction compared to the rest of the buildings. But guarding the way forward, and dominating the central location, was a towering master craft of stonework. Esther continued to lead us around the square, but I stopped dead in my tracks, mesmerised by the construction before me. The woman behind promptly ran into me.

"Oh, I'm sorry." I turned around to help steady her, but she retracted from my touch like I was contagious. "I was just so taken by the statue." She stared at me with more than a little animosity. "Uh, who is it?"

Esther's voice stirred behind me. "This is a monument to Enoch, the first Druid, the Eidolon, the Guide of God. Isn't he marvellous?" She spoke as if everyone who saw the statue would be awestruck. And she may have been right in that assumption. Even as a statue, Enoch had an undeniable charisma. His monument stood at four times my size, with an enchanting smile, and warm eyes to match. Like the Mona Lisa's, they seemed to follow me wherever I went, but they didn't make me uneasy like the painting did. They made me feel seen, and safe. His vestments resembled William's, though a little more flowy, which I

thought was a commendable feat to achieve in stone. One hand was reaching down toward me, while the other clasped tightly around a cross-tipped staff.

“He is marvellous.” My words came out staggered, one at a time, and Esther seemed taken with my response. Esther, from that point, filled the silence with talk of Enoch and his greatness.

“I knew him, you see. Before the apocalypse began. He was the first Foreteller, and protected us when no one else would.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, I’m assuming this Enoch is dead?”

“Dead? No. Eidolon Enoch rose to God’s Kingdom to be our guide. He lives on in us all. We all feel his presence.”

“We do.” Leah confirmed, followed by the others behind us.

“Right, of course. Forgive my confusion. This is obviously very new to me.”

“Oh, ask not for forgiveness, deary.” Esther replied. “Forgiveness can’t be given by us — only Him.” She took pause and looked up to the sky. Grey clouds filled the view, with darker ones gathering on the southern edge. “You aren’t the first Newts to come to us, and you won’t be the last, either. But your purpose... it’s unique. Druid William has informed us all. But that doesn’t render you unworthy of His touch, His light.” She turned around, head facing toward me now, and clasped my hands. “I believe He sent you here to us, for a reason. I can’t know what that is, but I trust that He will show you the way.” Her eyes were locked into mine. All her tiny wrinkles were extensions of her wide, wet smile. She emanated pure elation, joy, ecstasy, simply from speaking of her prophet. Her Eidolon. To all of this, I didn’t know what to say, but she’d certainly destroyed the verbal track I’d been trying to follow.

Then I remembered this wasn't a courtroom. She wasn't a defence attorney, trying to keep certain words from escaping my mouth, and I wasn't a witness, restrained into abiding by her questions or answers. So many of the words I spoke in my professional life lived by these rules, and they were great guidelines for social interaction, too. But this wasn't a courtroom or an awkward brunch date with that guy from the library. I didn't need to care if these people liked me, or found my mannerisms strange, or thought I was pushy with my questions. They knew I was here to collect information.

"That's all very reassuring, thank you," I said with a smile. "How long has it been since Enoch... rose?"

She looked among the rest of the cohort, before focusing on my buddy. "Aspirant Leah? How long has it been since Eidolon Enoch ascended to His kingdom?"

Leah seemed surprised but quickly complied. Her eyes tilted up and lips quivered slightly before she spoke: "The Ongoing Apocalypse began eight thousand, nine hundred, and three days ago. The Eidolon ascended one day earlier." Esther nodded, and Leah smiled proudly.

Like a tour guide, Esther reasserted her yoke on us and continued our journey through the town square. "I know what you're thinking, deary. An oddly specific number, right?" And she was right: that is what I'd been thinking. But like Leah, I'd also been doing the math in my head. I didn't quite know my 365-times tables, but I could estimate.

"It's the number of days since the end of 1999, right? Before Y2K?"

"A common misconception from Newts, though one based in truth. For truth is a matter of perspective. Here, in the Valley of Eden, in God's sacred land, the Ongoing Apocalypse has not come to pass, for He protects us. That is our truth." Not far past the bounds of the square, just past the church I'd spotted, we came to another stop. Esther

turned before pointing her hand across the road at a set of cobalt blue barn doors fixed to a wide clapboard wall. Specks of fresh blue paint lingered on the ground nearby. “This is your sorority — Aspirant Leah will show you to your lodgings.”

“We’re bunkmates.” Leah confirmed, gently grabbing my hand. She muted her excitement, but it still visibly bubbled beneath the surface.

“As for the rest of you, we are to assist at the mill.” She made one final glance at me. “I return this evening to deliver Druid William’s word.”

I strangely felt abandoned as Esther and the four others turned the corner down the far end of the road. I didn’t particularly like the old woman, but she was a leaking font of information. Still, Leah seemed enthusiastic — she’d been grinning at me since Esther had left.

“So—” We both began at the same time. She snorted a little, clearly excited.

“You go.” I snuck in between the piggish noises. She’d clearly been restraining herself around Esther.

“We should head inside, is what I was going to say. I’ll show you around, and introduce you to everyone. Well, actually, it’s a bit early yet for anyone to be around. But I can still show you the place!” I was quickly realising my hunch was correct: I had a talker on my hands. I finally met her grin.

“Show me, then.”

## Chapter Four: Tenets

'It is here I confirm his new commandments, fit for the transition of the world.'

--*Second Testament of Enoch, Chapter One, Verse 6*

The air inside was different. Thicker, like a reflection of the surrounding sludgy swamplands. It may have been a little dank outside, but in here, it felt like I was inhaling through wet cheesecloth. I followed Leah, but couldn't resist the pull of a nearby stool. The seat was bumpy and the legs were uneven, but I welcomed the reprieve. My duffle bag slipped off my shoulder and hit the stone beneath.

Leah moved through the large open space inside with grace, accustomed to the stodgy air. She hummed as she pranced across the room, making it to the far side before realising she'd left me behind. She smiled quizzically before wandering back, the song that hid behind her lips amplifying. We were alone in this place, and I wondered if I was seeing the true Leah, free of scrutiny.

She grabbed me by the hands and pulled at me, wanting to show me around, but she was gentle, weak, and I was glued to that stool. Her smile dropped, but she nodded, instead pulling up a chair and pointing things out in the room, like one of those virtual tours. She called it the common space, shared by her and all the other aspirants that lived in this sorority. It was less clinical than I'd expected. I'd pictured cot-style beds, separated by threadbare curtains; cells for solitary confinement; a wandering Warden who might let them out for an hour of exercise. At Leah's bubbly descriptions, I had to remind myself: *you know nothing*. In truth, the space was homely. I could hardly see the walls with all the paintings and drawings plastered about. Almost all of them featured a golden, gleaming cross. *A little*

*on the nose*, I thought. Leah said they had art evenings on the nights of the new moon, and that only the best of the best got displayed. *I'd hate to see the worst of it.*

A wide recess in the floor's centre housed a low table surrounded by uncomfortable potato-sack couches. The table itself was home to what looked like an in-progress game of Monopoly. Leah seemed confused when I asked if they had any other board games. I supposed their ignorance was bliss: if you didn't know better games existed, then you couldn't feel dejected about only having the worst one. Old leaves, since removed, stained a skylight above the table with browns and greens, casting a hazy glow over the room.

A fireplace, unlit, sat against the farthest wall, and to its right, a set of stairs climbed the wall and up to a balcony that overlooked the common space. "The prayer room is up there," Leah said. "It has a massive window that faces the chapel, so that everyone can be closer to God!"

Wherever there was an empty space between bad art, there was a doorframe, but no door. Beyond each frame, a void, which the skylight offered tiny glimpses into. The corners of bed frames. A fallen pillow. These were the dorms, and Leah couldn't wait to show me hers. But first, we had to visit the shoe rack. In her excitement, she'd forgotten to take off her own shoes, and by extension, forgot to have me take mine off. "We shouldn't dirty God's house, after all."

Situated near the entrance, the shoe rack's design was interpretive but practical. Dozens of short wooden poles stuck out from the wall, running up and down, left to right, with chicken wire stapled across them horizontally. Leah took her shoes and placed them on a section of wire between two of the poles. Her name was written on an old piece of wood and nailed into the wall behind. There were a few dozen other names on the wall — an Abigail, a Ruth, and even another Mary — but no Marianne. Leah offered a free space on

the bottom right of the frame. I ended up needing two — my boots were way bigger than Leah's dainty shoes, and I had to lie mine on their sides to fit in the narrow spaces. Both my boots and Leah's shoes had a fresh coating of dirt along the bottom, but hers were much more worn, likely repaired countless times. Before I could ask if she'd fixed them herself, she disappeared back into the common space and around a corner to the left. I went to follow, but something I'd neglected on arrival caught my eyes. A golden plaque, about the size of my torso, hung upon the wall. It was semi-rectangular, expertly fashioned into the outline of an open book, with a stained, solid wood base. It bore the following words:

*The Seven Tenets of the Ludditious Faith of Our Heavenly Father, and the Foretellers of the Ongoing Apocalypse.*

1. *You shall abide by the means to which are now available, for indulging in the millennium is a sin, and is to cause waning faith.*
2. *You shall remain within New Eden until you ascend to Eden itself, for to indulge in the decaying Earth is a sin.*
3. *You are to chastise those who demonstrate a lack of faith, such as those who indulge in the millennium, but those who do so are still worth saving, but their sins must be known.*
4. *You are to speak English and English alone, the risen form of the Latin that crucified Christ, for it permeates the world before the turn and this is God's will.*
5. *You are to give to God before you give to yourself, and if there is none for God, there is none for you.*

6. *You are born of the turn and your Christian name is of before the turn, and as such, it is the name you shall have forever, unless the Druid dictates it being of the millennium.*

7. *You are to enforce all of your power to ensure New Eden is not tarnished by the decay of the millennium, and as such the time remains behind the turn.*

*These are the Seven Tenets, spoken by God, delivered by Enoch, obeyed by you.*

I read the tenets through twice, fighting a shiver with every word. I was already too deep to quit, but something about this explicit display made it all the more real. Some tenets affirmed my assumptions, while others left me with more questions. The last one, though. ‘...enforce all of your power...’ I’d been planning to pounce on Leah while we were still alone. Did I need to be more careful?

She reappeared in the corner of my eye halfway through my first reading, but said nothing as she waited for me to finish. She gave me a giddy, knowing nod, like a solicitor’s when you tell them you’ll think about buying their shitty product, just to get them to leave. In Leah’s eyes, the oh-so holy tenets had hooked me. Which wasn’t untrue. I just wasn’t hooked in the way she wanted.

“So this—”

“The Seven Tenets?”

“They’re what you all believe?”

“That and more! Those are just the core beliefs that Eidolon Enoch left for us. He spoke so many words of wisdom, too many for us Aspirants to remember all the time. But the Seven are with us always.” She gave her temple a few taps before leaving again. I turned back to read that seventh tenet once more when Leah called my name. “Marianne! Don’t

waste time — I have those in my dorm too!” I followed quickly, while *‘decay of the millennium’* echoed in my mind. *Was I considered decay?*

Around the corner, a small hallway led off the common space. From its edge, I could see more door frames on either side, and a potentially endless darkness ahead. I could hear movement. A drawer opening. Something being dropped on the ground. But I struggled to place their source. And the longer I stared into the darkness, the more compressing it felt. I felt it, edging closer, lapping at my feet, knees, my waist, yearning to swallow me, and make me disappear. *Where was Tama? Where was Leah? Where was the goddamned Druid?* I knew I could just turn around — that the room behind me was illuminated by the fading afternoon sun — but doubt was stirring inside. *What if the light has gone? What if you are alone here?*

And then with the scraping of a match and the soft glow of a candle emanating from the doorway on the left, I was shaken from the nervous spell. Leah’s freckled face appeared ghostly through the dark, the candlelight emphasising her emaciated silhouette. Her left hand held a metallic lantern with a flickering flame within. She extended her other hand to me. My knees wobbled a little as I stepped forward and took it. Her fingers were bony, and her grip was weak, but she led me into the dorm as much as I let her. I wasn't surprised by the confined space, which had barely enough room for both of us. There were two beds, both pushed against opposite walls. Leah sat down on hers, on the right, and gestured towards the other for me. Threadbare sheets, stained blankets, and a shapeless pillow sat neatly piled at one end of the unmade bed. The mattress seemed commercial, but old, thin, and musty. Both beds were flush with the surrounding walls, leaving just enough space to squeeze a bedside table between them, opposite the doorway.

Leah set the lantern on the dresser as I tossed my duffle to the far corner of my bed. Immediately, my flimsy mattress buckled like it was a half-inflated air mattress, and the pile of bedding toppled to the ground. I expected laughter from my roommate, but it was like she hadn't even noticed it. She didn't react when I leaned down to get it, or when I started making my bed. She just waited, and waited, until my job was done and I sat opposite her, when like a patient spider eyeing its prey, she sprung.

"How long will you be staying here?" Her voice was eager, and hopeful.

"As long as you'll have us. Research permitting, of course."

"Of course," she replied matter-of-factly, sitting on the edge of her mattress, head perked, hands on her knees, fingers fluttering, eagerly searching for more to talk about. "Did you want to read The Testaments?" she asked excitedly. The Testaments were the holy texts of the Luddites. They still followed the bible, but The Testaments were their own. I'd found so little evidence of them in the real world that I assumed they'd be kept under wraps. But Leah reached into her bedside table and pulled out a thin, leather-bound booklet. How could you expect your followers to believe in your message if they couldn't read it themselves?

"I'd love to." I finally replied, and I let Leah read me into the afternoon.

## Chapter Five: Amber

‘To advance through the church is to gain the confidence of God. To have God’s confidence is to prove one’s worth.’

*--Testament of Enoch, Chapter 5, Verses 4-5*

*The Testament of Enoch* was not long, but like a nine-year-old trying to impress their teacher, Leah enunciated every word and left enough room at the end of each sentence for a round of applause. She pleasantly surprised me with her reading ability — a part of me had assumed illiteracy would be common here. I was suspicious when she decreed she’d finished the Testament but was clearly only a fraction of the way through the book. She then revealed that there was not just one testament written by Enoch, but three — one of which was supposedly delivered from the Kingdom of Heaven, whatever that meant. There was also a *Testament of William*, the current Druid, and supplementary texts written by various Faithful. *This is my life now*, I thought as she began reading Enoch’s second testament. Then, answering my misery, the creaking of the front door sounded down our hallway, followed by light chatter and the clutter of shoes being put away. Leah looked up from her book with glee. “My Sisters are home! Come, I’ll introduce you.”

I quickly found out this sorority was mostly composed of Aspirants, which as far as I understood were unbaptised Luddites. All had returned from their daily stewardship duties, which included cleaning homes, tailoring, and watching over children who were too young for the care centre. I recognised a few faces from the funeral, and from Esther’s walking group.

A handful of Faithful — baptised Luddites — lived here too, up on the second level, as did Matron-Faithful Esther. But she and the Faithful weren’t due back until sunset, which

meant for the next few hours, I was stuck with the kids. Most of the Aspirants were in their teens or early twenties, but all shared a general wariness towards me. After all, according to the third tenet, I was to be chastised for my freedom. To them, I stunk of 21st century decay. But Leah broke the ice, reminding them of the unwritten eighth tenet, which supposedly went “‘The word of the Druid is the word of God.’ Druid William has invited her here, and so we should treat her as one of us. Did he not ordain this just one day past?” Her words weren’t an instant remedy, but the Aspirants didn’t seem scared to breathe the same air as me anymore.

As the haze of dusk hit us through the skylight, Esther arrived, leading the Faithful inside. They walked in during a game of Monopoly, which Leah seemed to be winning. I was barely observing, but it was obvious that the game’s rulebook had been lost or tossed — and the Luddites had some wacky home rules. The top hat, for instance, could knock another piece back to ‘GO’ if it landed on the same space as it. Chance cards were renamed prayer cards, and had evidently been rewritten entirely, some to a comical degree. “Ooh! Enoch has chosen me to lead today’s prayers!” “Oh no, I’ve been deemed Infidel. I must go to penance.” Esther and her posse walked by stoically, paying no attention to the sliver of fun. She nodded sharply as she passed, and I smiled, continuing to write notes in Marianne’s journal. The writings were *strictly* from the perspective of Marianne. I couldn’t write notes that were actually relevant. So instead, I wrote *everything*. No detail was too small to ignore — it was usually the minor details that mattered the most. Details like the two girls whispering to each other in the room’s corner, or the one sneaking paper money from the bank when no one was looking. I was constructing a story: a narrative I could follow to its eventual end, each detail compounding upon the last. It wouldn’t be until the climax when I

realised that ‘minor’ thing from back at the start was the key to it all. I couldn’t pick and choose what would be important. Every piece mattered.

Minutes after the Faithful had disappeared up the stairs, a loud bell sounded across New Eden. Its clangs were piercing, meaning the sound’s source wasn’t far — the church, probably. Esther and her lackeys returned shortly after and instructed the Aspirants to prepare for dinner. *It was about time.* Both the beer and the mince and cheese pie had left my stomach a while ago, and my stomach had been growling since the boat. But it was at least an hour of more off-brand Monopoly and an overabundance of evening prayer until there was a knock confirming that the meal was ready. Esther arranged us into two lines, with a similar formality as the choir leaving the funeral, before ushering us out of the building. Esther placed me at the back, and Leah eagerly joined me. She had quickly grown from the standoffish girl I’d met this afternoon into someone who seemed thrilled by my mere presence. Was she, like William, excited to have something new to play with?

The Faithful, with Esther at their head, had an obvious air of authority. They led us back into the square with Enoch’s statue, with plenty of calls for straightened postures and straightened lines along the way. All the stalls in the square had been stripped of their goods. A few blocks to the north and we came to what they called the forum. It was an open-air pavilion with a brick floor and staggered sections of wall outlining the edges. At the western edge was a connected, L-shaped structure with multi-hued brick walls and a slanted corrugated roof. In the inner corner of the L was a small, empty planter box. “That’s Druid William’s home,” said Leah. “The forum is a place of the community, and the Druid loves to be close to us all.”

In the forum’s centre, a large circular stone fire pit sat unlit. Large orange flood lights provided ambient light, and cast fleeting shadows all over the pavilion. I hadn’t noticed

during the walk, but there were similar, smaller lights lining the roads, staggered and flickering. Electricity was a welcome surprise, but the tremble of the beams told me the source must be unstable. An old generator, maybe, or a handful of early model solar panels hidden away on some roof. Or maybe the bulbs were dying. I asked Leah if the whole compound was powered, but she didn't understand. When I pointed directly to the floodlights, she just smiled. "One of His many gifts."

Speaking of His gifts, I was wondering exactly where dinner was. Two other sororities had joined us, similarly led by their own small selection of Faithful. Our groups exchanged smiles but were distinctly apart, each congregating in a different corner of the forum in their neat lines. Each, foodless. According to Leah, the Wardens, Matrons, and wedded ate first. Then the Faithful fraternity and sorority ate together, which was apparently as much a meal as it was a matchmaking event. Then the two Aspirant fraternities, and finally the three Aspirant sororities — which included us. When I asked when the Druid and Sage ate, she just leaned in and whispered: "They are God's chosen. They don't need to eat!"

The 'chosen' appeared before long. Joseph — returned from upriver — and William hoisted wide oven trays carrying contorted pyramids of tiny mismatched hard plastic plates. Each plate hosted a clean-cut quarter of a potato and some kind of dried meat. There were gasps of joy from the Aspirants, like they were witnessing a miracle.

"Blessed eve upon you all." William began. "In honour of our guest, Marianne du Plessis, God wishes to share with you His bounty! His morning harvest was overabundant in celebration of her arrival." He paused briefly, his hard eyes darting through the crowd. "Where is Marianne du Plessis?"

Without missing a beat, my crowded sorority parted like the Red Sea. Though the looming floodlight hadn't shifted, it felt like I was centre spotlight.

“But won’t you join us up here?” he asked innocently, as if I had a choice. I was sure to maintain a slight spring in my step as I treaded through the crowd. My skin was crawling, and my bones were rattling, but I had to appear as though I wanted to be here.

“Is there something you need from me, Druid William?” I asked as I approached. He went to speak, but was caught by my words, and took a moment to look into my eyes with genuine, gleaming pride in his.

“Despite being in our presence for a pittance of time, Marianne du Plessis... it pleases me to see you so indulgent in our ways. It pleases me to see you here in earnest, taking simple pleasure in the presence of your fellow human. It paints a picture, it truly does. Marianne du Plessis, it was my wish to once again celebrate your arrival by affirming in my heart that you are welcome among our flock — but it seems that I need not make the effort for you are making it yourself!” He turned to face the congregation. “My Aspirants; my Faithful: heed me now when I say that this woman has a purpose with us. God has willed it so, and through His guidance we can do no wrong. I sense much trepidation among you all — but have faith, as I do, in Him, His plan, and His ideals. Share this faith with me!”

His speech might have inspired a roar in another crowd, but all William received were blank stares attached to confused faces. My cheeks were warming under the heated silence when I heard a soft ‘amen’ from somewhere in the audience, quickly followed by another, and another. Eventually, the crowd *was* roaring, in their own way.

“I hope it pleases you to see the shifting tide here,” William whispered under the noise of the crowd. “I could see it in your face when you arrived. I could see it mere minutes ago. You were scared that your decision to come to our little backwater off-the-books community might have somehow set you down a path of damnation. Let me assure you, that by His word, we offer only salvation.”

“Thank you, Druid William. I... I certainly feel His salvation now.”

“Perhaps you would lead us in evening prayer, then?”

“Oh, no, I wouldn’t want to intrude. I’m only an observer, and—”

“Have we not just decreed that you are performing duties beyond mere observing?

It is still early days, I’ll admit, but you are thus far thriving within our community.” I’d been sitting in Leah’s dorm for most of the afternoon and being paraded from location to location for the rest of it. How exactly was I thriving?

That’s what I wanted to say, but I fell back on an old classic: “Oh, I would probably just mess it up.”

“Marianne du Plessis, Jesus died for our sins. He forgives murderers, adulterers, and all sorts of broken things. Stumbling over your words is hardly a sin.”

*And that’s how cults start.* All you need is a leader with a threshold for charisma, and followers who are unwilling to argue. For a moment, I felt cherished by William. For a moment, I’d fallen under his spell. It was a reminder that in this place, I was only a few wrong moves away from a fate like Paisley’s — and it was impossible to know what that move was until it happened. And so, I led a prayer.

The last time I prayed, I was eighteen years old. It was a moment of weakness brought on by grief, but I didn’t take it back. To take it back would be to give it meaning. Instead, I’d taken charge, and made my prayer a reality. I didn’t wait for God.

The time before that, I was eight. I wanted a new bike, but I got a new father instead. I decided then and there that God wasn’t listening to me. I was young, but old enough to realise I was on my own. When you’re on your own, you can’t blame anyone else for your decisions. Everything you do, and how those things affect the people around you — that’s on you. In a way, I envied Tama. He wasn’t here because he sought it out, but because

I brought him here. He had no agency in the matter, which meant he couldn't blame himself when things went wrong. But I guess in his own way, he also got here by being alone. I wondered if they made him lead a prayer, too.

To keep from shooting too high or low, I fished out Nana's prayer of thanks from one of the deep recesses of my mind. "Dear Lord. We thank you for the food we are about to receive. May we all be truly grateful and bless the hands that made it." I always found that last bit funny, considering Nana had usually made the food. "Amen."

"Amen," the Aspirants replied. William then handed me the oven tray he was carrying and asked if I'd serve my sorority while he retrieved the third tray. I caught a disgruntled look from Joseph out of the corner of my eye, but I ignored him and went on with my new job, astounded at the suddenly welcoming faces of my sorority. It seemed Leah was right about that 8th tenet — the Druid's word was the word above all else.

The meals were far from filling. The potato quarter was actually an eighth, and the leathery jerky was less than a mouthful. Everyone took their cold plate with a smile, and nibbled like mice at their morsels, savouring every bite. A nameless voice in the crowd uttered "His daily bread is sustaining!" which received several muddled 'amens' from chewing mouths. At first it was hard to keep track of who had and hadn't gotten their share, but Leah helped me out, and there was an honesty with these people. In any other locale, there would have been competition for second servings.

By the time we were done, three plates remained. Assuming the count was correct, two were for me and Leah, meaning one Aspirant hadn't received their dinner. But everyone's hands were full. Was this last one for God? No — Leah seemed as confused as I was, until in a moment of clarity, she asked "Has anyone seen Abigail?"

“I’m here!” said a voice from the opposite side of the forum as it merged with the sorority. “Forgive my tardiness. I was—”

“Aspirant Abigail!” Esther’s commanding tone silenced everyone while she beelined straight for the latecomer. “What possible excuse could you entertain us with? You were missing not only from count but from evening praye- Lord above, is that blood?” I couldn’t see Abigail just yet, and at the mention of blood, all three sororities pushed towards her, gasping, asking what had happened. What followed were resounding cries of joy.

“Warden Joshua’s child was born. I aided Faithful Rachel in delivering. It’s a boy!” The declaration elevated the energy of everyone in the forum far more than their evening meal had done. A child, born on the day of our arrival — and the same day as a child’s funeral. Some here would see that as a sign. Esther’s tone immediately shifted, congratulating Abigail, saying it was a blessed day, and it was the perfect opportunity for advancement — a term that had shown up in the *Testament of Enoch*. I had asked her then what it meant.

“It’s how we get closer to God. To advance is to prove that you are capable of growth, and growth proves you are capable of more responsibilities.”

“So, is that how you become a Faithful? Or a Warden?”

“Exactly. Though only the men can be Wardens. Obviously.”

“Right... So how long until you become Faithful?” She smiled and shook her head.

“Oh, no, that’s not for me. Not yet. I’m happy remaining an Aspirant. I love my life the way it is.” Fair enough, I thought. It wasn’t like it was some corporate job, where a promotion meant better pay. It just sounded like it was more work. “Maybe when I’m older,” she concluded.

I realised at that moment that I was still holding the tray with the three plates on it. My stomach had stopped churning at this point. Years of long stakeouts and endogenous depression meant I was fairly used to going periods without food. My body must have assumed it was one of those times. Still, I knew I ought to take what I could get, so I prodded Leah. “Should we take Abigail’s plate over to her?” Abigail was still surrounded by curious Aspirants, and it almost seemed rude to interrupt. But Leah nodded and led me around the edge of the crowd. Our disruption seemed to remind everyone we were at dinner, and they resumed picking at their plates and made way for us.

“Congratulations, Abigail.” Leah said as she closed the gap. “I know how badly you want to advance, and it seemed that God willed it so!”

Abigail chuckled. “Oh, well it’s no guarantee, of course. But Faithful Rachel did speak highly of me to her husband, and Matron-Faithful Esther seems so excited! Oh, I do hope I advance!”

“You will!” Leah replied. “It truly is a blessed day — we have three new souls among us.”

“Three? There were other live births?”

“No-no — the visitors, remember? They arrived earlier. Abigail, this is Marianne.”

As Leah stepped aside, drawing back the curtain on the previously hidden Abigail, I felt a sudden shift in my breathing, my lungs had shrivelling like sun-dried tomatoes. The beads of sweat on my brow were swelling, suffocating my skin in water and salt. I was lifting off the ground, as my toes, feet, legs, hands, and arms all grew lighter, and the blood within them rushed to my head, all on account of the bloodstained woman ahead of me, and the pair of amber eyes attached to her. And then I stopped floating, and my head hit the pavement.

I heard them before I saw them. Someone, watching me. I could hear their shallow breathing, and the irregular tapping of their foot. I kept my eyes shut.

I was on a bed. It was softer than mine. I felt warmer than before. I could hear voices, muffled. They had brought me inside.

The back of my head ached where it lay against the pillow. I could feel the pulsing of blood. It was like a drum. *A drum...* I'd passed out?

"I know you're awake, Marianne du Plessis. Would you like to talk?"

I debated ignoring the voice before I begrudgingly opened my eyes. My eyelashes were latched together like Velcro, blurring William, who sat on a stool to my right. Behind him, a stained, dark wood desk. I blinked a few times and took a cursory glance around the rest of the room. Floor-to-ceiling bookshelves lined the walls. An iron chandelier hung above, lighting up the place. It teetered on the border of cosy and cramped. All it needed was a kitchenette and a fireplace in the corner and he'd be able to charge \$800 a night on Airbnb.

William caught my attention with a canteen. It had a green fabric sleeve which, like almost everything here, had been restitched many times. I was immediately suspicious, and I clearly did a lousy job at hiding it. "It is safe to drink, Marianne du Plessis. Despite your presuppositions, hygiene is an important part of our livelihood. Without it, New Eden could not survive." I nodded, and realising I hadn't had a drink since the beer I'd shared with Tama, I took the flask and knocked it back. The water had a slight aftertaste, like farm tank water.

"Are you ill?"

*Mentally, maybe.* "I, uh, I must have passed out."

He huffed like a disappointed parent. “I am aware of that. I want to know why.” I took another swig, a long one, as I contemplated my next words. But William clearly had a knack for reading people like children’s books. “I am not going to berate you. There is much that an outsider might justly assume about New Eden. I am not going to punish you. I simply want to know if your presence here is going to have an ill effect, not only on my people, but on yourself. I am a champion of God, a champion of His people, and despite your proclivities for the modern world, you are one of those people.” He pulled his stool a little closer, shuffling towards me. “But my title of Druid does not make me dictator. I had to fight for your right to be here. The Wardens, my Sage, they would not have it, not at first. I had to make them see that your arrival, your research, and the dissemination of your work thereafter would be to a monumental benefit. My followers, for so long, have been so locked into the mindset of us-versus-them. New Eden against the world. It’s a difficult mentality to break. But we aren’t against the world — we want to save it. The greater our numbers, the more people we can save. The more of the **world** we can save. But for that idea to shine true, we needed a reliable disseminator of information. We need you. But if you aren’t capable — if you’re going to faint at the first sign of trouble — then we can send you and Elijah home. No harm done, no questions asked.” His spiel was fast-spoken and to the point, stirring my still brain. Were these false claims of altruism, aimed and getting me on side? I’d already seen his ability to captivate a crowd. He certainly *could* be lying, but why? How would he benefit from my being here, versus my being gone? It was a question I couldn’t answer right now. I didn’t have enough pieces of the puzzle. It was time to start collecting. “So, Marianne du Plessis — why did you faint?”

“I- I don’t know,” I responded meekly.

“Yes, you do. You’re a poor liar, Marianne du Plessis.” That’s right — Marianne was. And now that he knew that too, there wasn’t much I — Peggy — couldn’t get away with. I couldn’t tell him why I’d passed out. Not really. I couldn’t tell him that the sight of Jolene Mikkelson, now going by Abigail, had triggered a panic attack, or how her amber eyes were carbon copies of my dead best friend’s, or how her blood-soaked clothing had sent me back in time to the day I found Mikayla dead on her bed. I couldn’t tell him how every fibre of my being had fought for control and that my mind couldn’t take it. But I could lie.

“I was overwhelmed. There have been a few times in my life where I have... fallen away. It’s hard to describe. It’s been a long and — no offence — strange day. I could feel myself fading when you asked me to lead the prayer. I tried to hold on, but I couldn’t.” I took a fourth swig, emptying the canteen. “I was probably dehydrated as well.”

William nodded but showed no emotion besides understanding. “This isn’t a common occurrence, then?”

“No, not at all. It’s—”

“Don’t worry — I don’t judge. My older sister took Valium, way back when. I’ve seen how crippling these mental afflictions can be.” An earnest smile broke through the tension. “Another of God’s strange tests, reserved for only his strongest disciples. And I won’t tell. Now, you can keep that canteen while you stay. Clean water is delivered to the sorority every morning. Fill it up then and it should last you the day.”

“Oh, that’s okay. I have a water bottle. I just forgot to drink today.”

“Apologies, Marianne du Plessis, but the arrangements have changed. Warden Mark became privy to some of your property, and he reported this to Sage Joseph. Come morning, Matron-Faithful Esther will be cleansing your belongings.”

I was a little confused. “I don’t know what Mark saw, but all my gear is clean.”

“You misunderstand. Your belongings are to be sorted and confiscated appropriately, to be repurposed. I’m afraid my hands are tied.” He spoke with melancholy, telling me his words were somewhat earnest. “I pleaded your case, of course. I wish to see your project completed unabated, but we must find a balance between your needs and those of my people. Through consensus, we determined you may keep anything essential to your research, as well as your own clothing, if you wish.”

I was unsurprised that Joseph’s voice had a say in all this. He didn’t share William’s enthusiasm for Newts. But William gave me some warning, and with that came implicit trust. It was more than I could have asked for.

There was a knock at the door, and William immediately rose from his stool, hastily pulling it back to its position by the desk. “You’d best get up.” He said before rounding the bend of his L-shaped home to answer the door.

“Druid Joseph.” It was Esther’s voice. “The other sororities have left. We cannot keep waiting for *her*.”

“She has recollected her bearings, Matron-Faithful Esther. She will be out momentarily.” William deliberately shut the door before Esther could respond. I was still sitting on the bed. William shook his head and paced over, helping me to my feet. The water had helped, but I still felt spacey. “You need to be going, Marianne du Plessis. Tomorrow beckons.” He walked me to the door. The slow steps helped my circulation, my brain finally catching up with my body. He opened the door for me, revealing the crowd of waiting Aspirants. Esther stood at the helm, annoyed, and I started walking out, but William grabbed my shoulder — a bad habit of his. “Lastly, Marianne du Plessis. I would like to see you and Elijah here tomorrow at midday, after service. Aside from sororal activities, you

may spend the rest of your morning how you wish.” I nodded, forcing a smile, before departing. But then I stopped, again, turning back to William.

“Why do you call me by my full name? You don’t do the same for Elijah.”

“Ah, well.” He seemed a little flustered, which was a strange sight, before he began chuckling. “I could tell you that it is a customary carryover from some biblical tradition or something or rather. But the simple truth is that I simply like the way yours rolls off the tongue. Goodnight, Marianne du Plessis.”

## Chapter Six: Faith

‘And if my people are to remain while I make the arrangements above, I fear for their livelihood and their lives. I fear that they do not have the means to spread our faith nor the strength to tolerate the decay of His Earth by sinners, for sinners.’

*--Second Testament of Enoch, Chapter Six, Verses 23-24*

The streetlights sequentially shut down on the journey back to the sorority, each one going dark right as we approached them. Murmurs spread through the group. “If we hadn’t had to wait for *her*...” Fortunately, we had a beacon: faint yellow light squeezed through the cracks in the sorority walls, as if the structure was ready to burst. It was too bright for candles or lanterns. Almost as soon as we’d gotten inside, Matron Esther ushered us to our beds. Hers were the last words I heard before silence overtook the sorority, and the lightbulbs — which were hidden in small wall nooks — went out.

Leah’s shadow stripped down before me, quickly changing clothes and retreating beneath her covers. I sat on the edge of the bed as I changed into a set of thermals. I stuffed my Luddite uniform beneath my pillow for a little extra bulk before plodding down on the matted mattress. William’s was much softer.

I wasn’t ready to sleep. I’d just had a power nap, after all, and all the fatigue I’d been carrying had slipped off my shoulders. I got to work instead, revising the mental list of tomorrow’s goals. These first few days were entirely about establishing a norm. We couldn’t act brazenly, and we couldn’t go poking around in places we shouldn’t be. We were here as researchers, and it had to seem like research was what we were doing.

I thought back to those months of preparation, and my many failed attempts at making contact. Countless letters sent to addresses in the area that I'd thought *might* be the Luddite homebase. It wasn't like the Luddites were on social media. Three replies came back, each claiming to be unaffiliated, but I figured anyone who would bother replying was trying to dissuade further prying, so those three addresses became my targets. That was until Tama uncovered, largely through happenstance, a hand-written document from 1990 in which the then-Druid Enoch had applied to register the Ludditious Faith as a religion, using a lawyer as a go-between. The lawyer had passed away last year, but left behind dozens of document boxes for his children to deal with. They were a little ecstatic when we said we'd take them off their hands. It took a few weeks of sifting before we uncovered dozens of letters between the lawyer and a Joseph Collis, who seemed to represent the church in — from our perspective — the 21st century. That was our in.

The letters led to a PO Box in Gisborne; thus, while I continued my research at home, Tama spent a week in his car, subsisting on McDonald's and watching the post office for anyone using that box. On the Friday afternoon of an exhausting and fruitless week of research, he texted me the address to another lawyer: Baxter Cromwell.

I'd worked a couple of cases in Gisborne over the last decade, and had made nice with a couple of prosecutors. None held Cromwell in any regard. He was, by all accounts, a failing upstart who got lucky on one big case before leaving the Public Defense Service to go private. He'd since failed to make a splash in any courtroom local or otherwise, frequently attempting pre-emptive deals or misvaluing the evidence at hand. But it didn't matter how good or bad of a lawyer he was. Just like how we couldn't act abruptly here in New Eden, we had to play it safe with Cromwell. It took a month of gentle prodding and dozens of leading

questions to eventually convince him to introduce us to a representative. Still, this representative would only communicate through mail, and only through Cromwell. But something was better than nothing, and so I wrote my first letter to Joseph.

*“To whom it may concern*

*Firstly, thank you for agreeing to communicate with us. Mr. Cromwell has assured me that your consideration is not given lightly.*

*My name is Marianne du Plessis and I am a freelance sociology and psychology researcher with a particular interest in education and human development. My project for this year is a thesis on the positives of alternative cultures and upbringings in New Zealand. I was recently approached by a former member of your faith which prompted me to seek you out. I am so deeply interested in the potential for alternative flourishing and would be grateful to be permitted temporary entry to your group. I hope you will see how such an arrangement would be beneficial not only for my research, but for your faith as well.”*

The letter went on for nearly a page, spewing details about the specifics of Marianne’s research and assuring that the Luddites’ privacy would be protected. I reread and rewrote it probably seven times. Normally I’d try to curb the formality — it was a byproduct of all the civility and conventions I was often forced to use as a PI — but it suited the studious guise of Marianne perfectly.

Joseph’s initial response left much to be desired. In two pages of very small writing, he said little of consequence, mostly a mix of details I already knew and theological debate

with himself over God's potential wrath if he agreed to my proposal. The only pertinent detail of his first response was a single question: who was the leak? I spent two more missives convincing him the source was an anonymous letter — a lie, of course — but after I promised he could have the letter, his tone opened to the idea of visitors. I'd typed out this 'leak' just before we left, and it still sat in the bottom of my duffle bag.

Jolene — or 'Abigail' — wasn't with the sorority when we returned. She must have gone to wash away the blood. I had no doubt that it was her — the girl from my file, with those two amber eyes. I'd seen her for less than a second, but my brain made the connection before I had, confirmed by the overwhelming, senseless panic. My tiny excuse for a meal had tumbled across the stone of the forum with me. It was obvious now that malnutrition was the reason behind why everyone here was so damned skinny. It sounded like dinner was the only meal, and the portions were smaller than a child's entrée. How did they survive? With what Leah said about William and Joseph not needing to eat, I'd typically assume that they were hogging the food for themselves — except Joseph was a gaunt fucker, too. William wasn't exactly thin, but he wasn't Jabba either. It just didn't make sense. But I had to remember where we were. This wasn't civilization — this was a cult. People were being abducted, or brainwashed at the very least — Jolene was proof of that. Sense didn't live here. God did, and hardly the virtuous God that modern day Christians love, or even the wrathful Old Testament God that modern day Christians try to ignore. The God that lived here was something different. *"You are to give to God before you give to yourself, and if there is none for God, there is none for you,"* the tenet had read.

The God that lived here was selfish.

I tried to ignore the many cawing roosters and return to sleep, but Esther made her rounds shortly after, knocking at the door frames while merrily humming a vaguely familiar tune. Leah was already awake when the call came. She was sitting up in bed, struggling to read her testaments in the dim light. "Blessed morning." She said to me, chipper as ever. "How are you feeling?"

"Okay, thanks. Blessed morning to you too." I replied, flipping the covers off.

"What are you wearing?" Leah asked with awe. She'd only ever seen me in the Luddite garb. "Where are your night cloths?"

"I wasn't given any? William said I could wear my own."

Leah opened her mouth to say something but turned back to her book. I began stripping down to change. Leah didn't seem uncomfortable by my exhibitionism, but she still stopped me. "No! Don't change yet! We wear our night cloth until we are clean. From the bathhouse, they go to be laundered. Although, you don't have night cloth... I don't know..." She leapt to our doorway. "Matron-Faithful Esther?"

"Yes, Leah?" Esther called from down the hall.

"Marianne doesn't have night cloth. How does she bathe?"

"The same as everyone else, deary." Leah still seemed incredibly concerned.

"It's okay. I promise the Druid said it's okay." She nodded to herself, returning to her bed and resuming her reading. I could see something poking out from between some of the pages. It looked like a leaf. "What's that there?"

She saw where I was pointing and quickly went to hide it between the pages.

“Nothing! It’s nothing.” I didn’t press, but after a few seconds, she began muttering under her breath. “You’re supposed to wear night cloth at night...”

I spent the next ten minutes staring at the ceiling and ignoring Leah, until Esther called us all out into the common area, where she led the sorority in morning prayer. I made a point of staying out of it. I was an observer, and I wanted to assert that role. Off to the side, I kept getting glances from Jolene. *Abigail*, I reminded myself. I caught them, just to make sure she knew that I knew she was looking, at which point her eyes would dart away. Like all the girls, she was skinny as a stick, but she seemed healthier than she did in her arrest photos. Her skin was clearer and the dark circles from around her eyes had dissolved. She looked nothing like the heroin addict from the police report. She looked like a girl. A woman. *What Mikayla could have been.*

“You really should say ‘amen’, at least.” Leah whispered to me as we began our lined walk to the bathhouse, once again guarding the rear. One thing Esther wouldn’t budge on was that the sorority moved as a whole, and whether she liked it or not, I was technically a part of her sorority. Ironic, considering they’d forgotten about Abigail yesterday.

The bathhouse didn’t quite match its name. A single raised wooden platform, stained with mildew, hosted around twenty nude women sharing half that many shower heads, each of which dribbled pathetically. It was one of the other sororities from last night, and they didn’t seem to mind being on display for the many passing members of the community, for there were no walls or dividers to hide behind. Some pedestrians glanced up as they moved past, but there was no ogling and no staring.

Residual water dripped off the side of the platform like waterfalls at the end of summer, petering out just moments after all the showers simultaneously turned off. The other sorority filed off down the stairs on the far end, grabbing threadbare towels and expediently changing into their clothes for the day, eager for their skin to escape the brisk air. Like cattle on a factory farm, my sorority filed up the stairs on our end, placing their 'cloth' in a wooden crate monitored by Esther and her Faithful. I was debating whether to try and avoid this, but the look on Esther's face told me it wasn't a decision I'd be making.

Leah noticed my trepidation and grabbed my wrist. "Are you turning ill, again?"

"I was expecting a *little* privacy."

"Oh?" There was an innocence in her expression, and her entire personality, really.

"Communal showers aren't really a thing where I'm from. For most people, anyway. Most people hide behind a locked door." I smirked playfully, just to let her know I wasn't too upset about it all. I didn't really have a problem with being nude. It was the intimacy I struggled with. Our sorority was bigger than the last.

"You've nothing to hide." Leah replied, her grip tightening in reassurance. "God gave us flaws, but he doesn't see them that way. He made us in his image and his image is perfect. Why be ashamed?"

"I'm not shameful. It's..." I petered off, staring past her and out toward the swamp just south of us. The water from the showers was probably feeding it. Clusters of trees, alive and dead, sprouted from the banks. The water was slowly swallowing them, but they hadn't yet been consumed. They still grew, up and up. Maybe they were trying to escape. Maybe they were enduring the torment by doing the one thing they still could. I'd like to think their

odd beauty caught me out, but the truth is that I couldn't craft a response to Leah. I'd left society behind, yet it still felt wrong to be publicly naked, even somewhere it objectively wasn't. Embarrassment, guilt, and shame *were* what I was taught to feel. What was I, if not shameful?

"It's okay, Marianne." Leah replied. "Shame was never intended for us. It came about from the first sin, and to overcome it is His challenge."

Shame was not for us. I tried to keep that in mind as I stripped naked in front of Esther's posse, who wielded authority like a whip in hand. I kept it in mind as I shivered, uncomfortably competing with Leah and a teen named Anna for drips of cold water. And I kept it in mind when, having left my new clothes at the sorority (and being refused my old ones), I was forced to return wrapped in a towel. I'd always been quite petite, but the half-sized towel just barely came down past my waist, and I had to clinch it to keep it from falling. Not that anyone seemed to pay me much mind. The only looks I got were those of curiosity at the 'why' of it all, rather than the 'what'. The cold was the worst of it. The walk to the showers had been bearable, but now, with ice water licking my feet, every step feel like walking on Lego.

When I finally got back to the dorm, someone had laid out a set of Aspirant clothes like Leah's on my bed. A test, probably — but the whatever the payoff, it wasn't trading for the comfort and warmth I'd brought from home. I was just getting my socks when Esther's gravelly morning voice made another appearance. "Newt."

I turned my head. "That means someone new, right?"

She let out a phlegm-filled chortle. “It means someone out of place, usually in more ways than one.” Her words lingered as we stared at each other. Two of her Faithful waited like guard dogs in the hallway behind. “Aspirant Leah, give us the room. We need to perform a cleanse,” Esther said, eyeing my duffle bag. One of the Faithful went with Leah. The other stood guard across the hall. “Now, empty your sack, won’t you? Over the bed. And don’t try to hide anything.” I don’t know I’d done overnight to make Esther loathe me, but the friendly demeanour from yesterday’s walk had vanished.

Unfortunately for Esther, her instructions came half a day too late. Last night, once I could hear Leah’s sleepy purrs, I carefully rifled through my pack and grabbed anything I believed too valuable to lose. Hidden beneath my mattress were a few sheets of painkillers, a pen-shaped craft knife, a lighter, a Snaplock bag full of sunflower seeds, and one protein bar. The mattress was too thin to hide much else without creating lumps on the other side, and if my pack was nothing but Enoch-Approved, Esther would know I was hiding stuff. I had to let her find what she wanted. For the same reason, I gave up the pair of micro binoculars in my jacket pocket — but only to distract her from the lockpicks hiding beneath, discretely wrapped in a thin vinyl sheet.

“Ah yes, Warden Mark heard the *rustling* of packets!” she proclaimed, pulling out snack packs of Doritos, Grain Waves, and one big bag of marshmallows — brain food that had served me well on cases in the past. “Why do you damned folks endeavour so to consume this artificial rubbish?” She’d unfolded a cloth sheet onto the bed and tossed all my snacks in the middle, followed by my torch, sunglasses, water bottle, and even my lip balm. Then came my Swiss Army knife, and I cursed under my breath. I couldn’t find it in the dark, and I thought I must have left it at home. With each toss, she muttered beneath her

breath: “Sinful... Sinful... Sinful...” But then I heard the crinkle of paper as she pulled out the letter — the one I’d brought for Joseph from my ‘anonymous’ source.

“Oh, you can’t take that.”

Her neck snapped like a rat trap. “I am not *taking* anything. I am cleansing you of this filth.” She stared down at the envelope. Her lips were quivering — the way a child’s does when they try to read something — but she quickly gave up and began scrunching it up.

“It’s for Sage Joseph.”

She froze, staring at me with absence in her eyes, before frantically unfurling the letter, shifting to the bedside table to flatten it out. The address — a non-existent Hamilton PO Box — was becoming smudged under her sweaty palm.

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?” she cried furiously, on the verge of tears. I said nothing, and just enjoyed the moment. She kept her face hidden as she replaced the envelope neatly beside the pile of sins and kept sifting through my belongings. Once she’d gone through everything twice, she hoisted the sheet in one hand and the letter in the other. Her moist eyes looked at me scornfully. “I’ll deliver this to the Sage. Be grateful for the Druid’s blessing. Were it my choice...” She began to say something more, but stopped herself, promptly leaving the room.

Leah didn’t return for a few minutes, peering around the edge of the doorway like the mouse, unsure if the cat had seen it yet. In this instance, I had. Aside from my clothes, all that remained was a crushed packet of Doritos that had somehow avoided Esther’s excavation. I carefully hid it within a pair of spare socks. I hated the feeling of being watched, and after what felt like a lifetime of her quiet staring, I turned to say something —

but she beat me to the punch. “How do you feel?” she asked with that same child-like purity, and genuine concern for my wellbeing.

“Cleansed.” I replied, with a deadpan voice and probably equally dead eyes.

And she laughed.

A low, reverberating *bong* sounded three times as the morning bell rang, signalling the sororities and fraternities to head out for the day. Most Aspirants had predefined stewardship duties, but I was rudderless. William had told me I *could* indulge in sororal duties until we met at midday. Instead, I spent the early morning wandering around the square as the stalls were being set up for the day. Some quick chats revealed they were indeed stores, but they functioned wholly on bartering. The Faithful tended to trade goods-for-goods, while Aspirant customers primarily offered services. If an Aspirant wanted a new cotton blanket, they might clean the trader’s home, or repair some other commodity. The Faithful could afford to simply trade items because most of them had been here for so long that they’d amassed a good collection of gear they didn’t need anymore. And the higher up the ladder you were, the more your items were worth. A Warden, for example, could trade a rusted knife to a Faithful for a freshly smithed one. The Warden was more deserving, after all.

I took a private moment to examine Enoch’s statue again. I still couldn’t comprehend the level of detail and the chiselled perfection of it. But like everything here, it was a product of circumstance. It wasn’t a publicly funded art project headed by some inexperienced new-grad, and it wasn’t on display in a public garden to be gawked at by

indifferent pedestrians. It was a work of passion and of worship. The Luddites loved Enoch, and so the statue stood, as perfect as the day it was erected.

Though the year stood still — today's date was the 8935th of December — the Luddites still took note of the seasons, referring to a full set of four as a 'cycle'. I learned this when I stopped by the care centre my group had passed yesterday. Though I wasn't allowed inside, I spoke with Aspirant Anna — a different Anna from this morning — from over the fence while the children, sprawled out on a white sheet, played with dyed wooden blocks and handmade soft toys. I was shocked to learn the youngest child in the care centre had lived "five cycles." I wouldn't have pegged any of them for older than four. But peering into the sunken, yellowed eyes of Anna, I decided not to bring it up.

My walkabouts ate away at my time, so before long the second bell of the day rang, which according to Leah signalled the middle of the day, and the beginning of the daily church service. It would be my first time inside a church since I was a child, though I doubted it would bear much resemblance to Nana's Anglican church. Church was one of the few parts of life here where the Aspirants weren't bound by their sororities or fraternities. Leah said it was "where we embrace the familial bonds that we all share through God. The bonds that the outside world has left behind." I couldn't argue with the logic of that sentiment, at least on a personal level. I loved nothing more than unending days at home alone. If I could go the rest of my life without having to see another person, it wouldn't be long enough. On my off days, I took every effort to make that a reality. If I ordered a package, or takeaways, or groceries, the delivery instructions always read the same: 'LEAVE BY DOOR'.

And now, I was here, funnelled into the middle of a church pew, surrounded by Luddites howling their hymns on all sides (the service hadn't even begun), wishing I could go back to my cosy little couch in the far corner of my lounge and watch a crappy movie on Netflix. If nothing else, it was fantastic motivation to get this job done ASAP.

A single clang of the bell reverberated from above, and the people grew silent, bar a crying baby. William's American-tinged voice began emanating from the back end of the church. The interior seemed familiar, just less ornate. The pews were angled to face the lectern, which stood on a slight stage. William paraded down the aisle in the middle, seen by all as he sang something about the bread of God. About halfway down, he raised up his arms and everyone imitated him — except me, and the baby, presumably.

When William finally reached the lectern, with Joseph watching from his own special seat off to the Druid's side, he lowered down his hands to signal the end of the song, before bidding everyone bow their heads.

"Our Father in Heaven and our Eidolon above. We thank you for this blessed day and for the safe integration of our visitors, Marianne du Plessis and Elijah Paea." He pronounced Tama's fake last name '*Pa-ee-ah*'. "We know that you have shepherded them here for a reason and we trust both your judgement and theirs.

"We give thanks for the beautiful child bestowed upon us this day just gone. We give thanks for the safe delivery of said child, the safety of Faithful Rachel, and the steadfastness of Warden Joshua. We look forward to bestowing Your gift of baptism upon the child later in the service." Huh. Leah said that the only difference between Aspirants and Faithful was the baptism, yet here this baby was being baptised off the bat. What made them so special?

The prayers continued, giving thanks for the usual things like pleasant weather and good health — ironic, that last one, given the child’s funeral not 24 hours ago. Thanks was also given for more eccentric things, like the successful roofing of a new house and the cleanliness of New Eden. After the prayers, they sang a second song, then William gave a brief talk on the nature of sin and the purpose of baptism, before getting to the baptism itself. It was hard not to be cynical. My perspective was split in every direction, searching anything I could classify as wrong. But other than the weird entrance, weird prayers, and weird faith, the service seemed as normal as any. William proclaimed the child’s name — Ezekiel — and splashed his head with swamp water. “A new child of New Eden; a sire of Enoch’s; a crutch for our Lord.”

William prattled on for a little longer before Joseph rose to the lectern, asserting his yoke on the congregation. He opted to skip the preamble and dove right into his choice of topic, looking particularly assured of himself. “As our Druid William had stated, we have much to give thanks for on this day. Yes, thankful that our safety has not yet been tarnished by strangers. Many of you know, first hand, that the acclimation process can be a time of adjustment. The Lord willingly aids newcomers in their journey to Aspirant. The same cannot be said for individuals who enter our haven with intentions distinct from our own.” Joseph spent what must have been twenty minutes highlighting the issues of having strangers within New Eden, carefully skirting around anything that would specifically refer to Tama or myself. Every word he spoke was purely hypothetical, but that didn’t restrain his temperament. If anything, it worsened it, allowing him to create fantastical, biblical-adjacent scenarios with room for easily-insertable characters. He drew parallels to the devil’s attempts to tempt Jesus, or ruin good men like Job. He claimed God could only protect New Eden so much. I wondered if the people here considered his sermon fanatical,

or if it was just the standard for a man like him. I had nothing to contrast it to. His allusions to two tempters didn't seem to draw any attention my way, but I had noticed the girls at my sides slowly edging away from me.

"I cannot claim to have the ear of our Lord: that right is bestowed only upon our Druid. But that does not mean I am blind to what is to come. I see fire, storms, and lightning. I see the beginnings of a true rapture, brought on not by greed, or indulgence, or even the strength of God. This is a rapture of necessity. As spoken in the *Second Testament of Enoch*, Chapter Six, Verse 75, '*for God shall know when the time has come to recall his chosen, regardless of the state of the world*'. As spoken in the *Testament of the Eidolon*, Chapter One, Verses 18 and 19, '*Temptation is the work of Satan, and the enemy of faith. Those who have fallen into its clutches cannot be redeemed of our will, but only of their own.*' So we pray for the sinners, the tempters of this world, despite their reservations. And we pray that these reservations don't lead us to the fiery doom I foresee. For God will save us. God will save us all."

"Mary! Anne! Marianne!" Tama, lingering near the firepit in the centre of the forum, came running at me as I turned the corner.

"Hey, Elijah," I said, puffed. I clasped his arm familiarly and gave it a shake. "Sorry I'm late. Had to run back to the sorority to get my journal." He shook off the apology.

"Interesting service, huh?"

"My first in a while."

"Way different to Mum's church. More... lively."

“Which?” I asked. “Your mum’s, or this one?”

He laughed. “Well, I meant Mum’s, but I guess they’re both lively in different ways... We don’t get yelled at so much at Mum’s. And there are more songs, and they have the words up on the screen so we can singalong.”

“I wonder how many songs go through their rotation. Can’t be too many, right? Imagine memorising all the lines.”

Tama shook his head. “Nah, when you love something this hard, you learn. I could sing you most of the songs from Mum’s church. So could Dad.”

“I thought your dad wasn’t religious?” I shouldn’t have asked the question, I realised — Elijah’s parents were dead, but we were away from prying ears for the time.

“He’s not. But Mum loves his singing voice, and he loves Mum, so he does it. Anyway, I’m glad I caught you before Joseph got here. I’ve been doing some digging.” I looked at him incredulously. “That’s why we’re here, right?”

“Right. First off, how was your walk with William?”

“Oh, weird. He was just asking what I knew about the other Elijah, the prophet. He’s something of a big deal around here,” he said as he tucked his thumbs into his trousers, strutting. “Which makes me a big deal too.”

“Pfft. You’re a big something. But isn’t Enoch their prophet?”

Tama nodded. “Elijah is connected somehow. I didn’t get all the answers, alright. But he said that it was always God’s plan for me to come here.”

“Isn’t that God’s whole deal? Knows all, sees all?”

“I reckon their God is a bit more direct. But I did find out something else — there’s a hunting trip every week.”

“Makes sense. I haven’t seen any animal pens around.”

“Yeah neither. They say there’s wild pigs and sometimes deer out in the valley. The fraternity was kinda buzzing about it all. There’s a big celebration with extra food for everyone.” He trailed off sheepishly. “For a sec, I thought maybe they were hunting the missing people. Not for sport, but like, maybe they use ‘hunt’ as a secret code. But that’s crazy, right?”

It was cute to see him trying, but worrying he’d gone so far so quick. “I sure hope so, Elijah.” Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted William approaching from across the forum.

“Yeah. Yeah, of course...” Tama replied. “There’s a bone broth too. One of those perpetual soup things. They chuck in the bones from each hunt, serve it a little later in the week.”

“Must be enough to keep ‘em going. Otherwise I’m not the only one sneaking food. You doing alright in that regard?”

“Well, I’m ever so happy to see your reunion,” William yelled familiarly, still a fair distance from us. “As am I happy to see you remembered the request of our meeting.”

“I’ve been looking forward to it all morning,” I said when he got closer.

“Yeah, same.” Tama added. “And thanks for having us both here, y’know.”

William nodded. “I acknowledge that it was presumptuous of me to split you two up without any confirmation of forewarning, and for that I apologise. I thought that we could

simply... touch base. Go over any questions you might have regarding your research, and establish some ground rules away from *prying* eyes and ears.” He gazed through the gaps between the walls, each of which displayed passing church-goers. “This place ain’t particularly built for privacy. So please, let me invite you into my humble abode.”

The planter box between the two tips of his L-shaped home again caught my attention. Up close and in daylight, I could see evidence of failed attempts to grow. Dead, blackened vines hugged the inner walls, and dead, blackened leaves lay half-buried in the dry soil. “My failings epitomised,” said William, as he noticed me staring.

“I know the feeling. I can’t grow a tomato to save my life.”

He smiled. “Life — all life — is a gift from God. He doesn’t differentiate between a human and a vegetable. Sometimes life... fails to become. It cannot be helped.” I wondered if William was thinking about the dead baby, too. He reached down into the planter, running his hands through the dirt and grasping it in his hand. “And sometimes the life that comes is not worth sustaining.” He scattered his handful of dirt upon the stone. “Dust to dust.”

Without ceremony, he turned around to take us inside. Tama followed, then I, careful not to bring any soil with me.

“I really like your home.” Tama began. “It’s very, um—”

“Cosy?” William responded jovially. “Quaint? Cramped? You Newts always have the same things to say.”

“I was going to say rustic. But those all work too.”

“Well if you long for some *rustic* scenery, you are both welcome anytime.”

“Could we please get started?” I asked, sinking into the armchair by the door. “I was hoping to explore this place today.”

“Marianne du Plessis, I appreciate your directness. It should have been that this was a conversation we had yesterday, but circumstance forbade it. In any case, let us begin.” William sat across from me on his stool, while Tama sat on the floor in front of me, like a little boy waiting to be bewildered by Grandpa’s war stories.

William began by going over the tenets with us, as Tama’s keepers hadn’t explained them to him like Leah had to me. In particular, he noted the tenet which read *‘you shall abide by the means to which are now available’*, which translated to ‘you can’t have anything made after Y2K, unless it was made in New Eden, since it was still 1999 here. He was allowing an exception with our clothes, but Tama, wearing Luddite attire, said he wanted to experience every facet of this place — and that included the ‘cloths’.

“So you’re basically trying to revert to the old times, like Amish people,” said Tama.

“A reasonable thought,” William replied, “but it’s not so much about the ‘when’ as it is the ‘what’. Eidolon Enoch foresaw an evil future, where evil men did evil things. Here, that evil doesn’t exist: it never has, and it never will.” I resisted the urge to scoff. “Perhaps that is because we remain in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, or perhaps we are so far removed from the wilds that these evils can’t reach us. Whatever the case, it is His will, and his.”

“His and his?” asked Tama.

“God, and Eidolon Enoch.”

William also assured us that we were exempt from the chastisement that ‘indulgers of the millennium’ would typically expect to receive. He continued going over what would be

expected of us in terms of our behaviour, with the general rule being to follow what the others did and listen to the Matrons and Wardens.

The time finally came for questions, and of course, I had many. But it would be wasteful to ask questions that even teetered on suspicion. I fairly assumed that if I led with something like ‘what happens to people who run away?’ or ‘did you know that Abigail was reported missing years ago?’, our time in New Eden would end abruptly. Desperation wasn’t on the cards yet.

“I am curious about your hierarchy. And, what was it called... ascension?”

“Ascension?” William asked with a crooked smile. “Where’d you hear that?”

“It was in the book of Enoch. And when Abigail arrived at dinner after delivering that baby, Esther said—”

“Ah! You mean advancement! That... That is much more sensible. In either case, I prefer not to think of it so much as a hierarchy. No, though we have rank-defining honorifics, they aren’t for us so much as they are for God.”

*Of course they are, I thought. Who else would they be for?* “It’s just a little strange to me. I understand having a leader, like a chaplain or Druid in your case, but given how insular humans can be, isn’t there any concern about competition between the, um, levels of faith? I would have thought that the constant use of titles would have really—”

“Consider, for a moment,” he said, cutting me off and entering a performative trance, “the institutions of the decaying world. The police, for instance. At the top you’ve your captains, then at the bottom you have your officers. Do they not address each other by their official titles? And are there not rankings for each slight deviation of capability

between the captain and the officer? Colonels, generals, constables — do these titles create a department of conflict? I think not. So why would an institution with such propensity for violence be immune to such conflict, but we of the Ludditious Faith would not?”

Even ignoring his technical incorrectness, I struggled to understand his point. He was trying to claim that his counterfeit caste system was in place to ensure order and was using corporate ranking as his justification. He was trying to appeal to something in me, but what? What did he see in Marianne that I was missing?

But I also had no rebuttal. Besides the cliquey behaviours from the Faithful in my sorority, and an air of superiority that hung around Joseph like a cloud of flies, there was no sign of conflict between the ranks.

The talks went on for a few hours, and with every pause I wondered if now was the time to ask the one question I actually came prepared with. I was still too hesitant to dig too deep, but if I didn't ask *anything* important, then we'd never get anywhere. There were only so many leading questions I could pose, and only so many hidden nooks I could sneak glances into, before I would have to get a little dirty.

“I don't want to start something.” I began. “I don't want you to see me as problematic.”

“But?”

“But...” I froze, reconsidering my exact phrasing. “I can't help but notice there's a slight imbalance here.” He stared at me intently, a hint of red creeping into his blue eyes, a hint of red creeping into his blue eyes. “The women here don't have quite the same

entitlements.” I had quickly moved to justify myself and immediately realised it as a mistake. A bitter smirk slid into William’s face, and he slowly shook his head.

“Just as Sage Joseph predicted. You could only hide your truth so long, Marianne du Plessis.”

*As Joseph predicted?* “I only meant that from what I’ve seen, the women here are confined to monotonous roles, served meals last, and—”

“Your belligerent attempts at encroaching upon our home!” Again, he cut me off, and stood from his stool as his tirade began. “Letter after letter pleading for entry, all because you so adamantly believe that our teachings are harmful? Your farce of education is seen for what it is — lies! You do not want to teach! You yearn to condemn us to the same darkness that your brethren are stricken with! Marianne du Plessis, you and your familiar and no longer welcome here!” William towered over Tama, who sat uncomfortably between us. I had to fight the seizing of my throat. Lording over me like a certain leaning tower, he held the power, and as much as I wanted to fight it, I had to give him some sense of satisfaction. I had to quell this aggression — this mania.

“Druid William, I promise you, we aren’t here to cause trouble! Our intentions are pure.” He sniggered, shaking his head violently as he stepped back to gawk at us. “The Sage is right to doubt us: your community is precious. Far too precious to risk. But you brought us here to talk. I wanted to hear your wisdom, because mine pales in comparison. I would never act to change this place. I just want to learn. I want to understand. And I want to share that understanding, so that others like me don’t want to change it either.” His face softened. “Is that not what you want? To share your knowledge, your belief, with the rest of the world?”

When I was nine, I got conscripted as the narrator of our primary school production. The same week, Mum left Dad, and we left the home of my childhood. But this inner turmoil turned into, according to my teacher Mrs. Jones, the most powerful performance she had seen in her twenty years as an educator. She was embellishing, of course, but in this moment, I felt like that nine-year-old. Scared? Sure. Broken? A bit. But powerful? Assertive? In control? Fuck. Yes. And while I embraced the euphoria of my performance, William sunk, collapsing onto his stool.

“Forgive me.” He murmured solemnly after a long silence. “I am somewhat prone to outbursts. In truth, I had latched onto Sage Joseph’s prediction, and his words at today’s service only reminded me. I was searching for a reason to expel you. But that was foul of me. You were only speaking, starting a dialogue. I...” He trailed off, his gaze shifting to the corner of the room. “I should encourage that, not admonish it.”

“Correct.” I asserted, still riding my high. “So will you answer my question?”

He was ready at the trigger. “I am not so ignorant to see that Enoch’s original teachings were somewhat... What is the word?” It was strange to see William at a loss. “Chauvinistic. Thorough consideration of his second testament will reveal as much, and I encourage you to read it when you can. He believed everyone had a place in the world. That men were to stand before God, and women were to stand behind them.

“It is not something I can change,” he continued. “It would be to invert the forces of gravity, or to reverse the ravages of time. Through His grace, perhaps one day...” His voice trailed off at the end. “I... am weary.” Without another word, he stood from his stool and retired to his bed. I looked at Tama quizzically, but when the snoring began, we knew we had overstayed our welcome.

The next 24 hours were a blur. By the time we left William's home, the sun had once again disappeared over the treetops, and the invasive chill of the night was already seeping in. Lingering rays poked through the gaps, giving Tama and me one last chance to exchange hopeful looks before the bells rang to signal the approach of dinner. Tama ran back to his fraternity while I waltzed to my sorority, knowing I'd be waiting hours anyway. I'd once spent six days watching a house from the apartment across the road, waiting for the fellow-hermit of an occupant to come out. Even after 140 hours, when Charles Porter finally emerged from his front door to collect a pizza from his delivery driver, I wasn't hungry. But after 140 hours without sleep, something inside me broke, like I'd had a botched lobotomy. I booted up my laptop, emailed the photo of Porter to a cuckolded husband, and immediately fell asleep on that crappy folding camping chair. It was a dreamless sleep — the first sleep since Mikayla's death that her ghost didn't haunt me. And every sleep since has been the same.

Tonight's portions were even smaller than the night before, and I struggled to chew the leathery meat. I found myself eating alone, once again wondering how these people were surviving on so little. Maybe it was a show — an extreme version of the lengths they normally go to, to show Tama and me just how powerful their devotion was. The other sorority sisters huddled in their little groups, but all of them ignored me. I blamed Joseph and his hateful speech. It spoke to William's views on hierarchy, and proved that it didn't matter where you went: men loved pitting women against each other. Even Leah had given me the cold shoulder this afternoon, though she warmed up when I asked her to read the *Second Testament of Enoch* to me. By the next morning, she was back to her usual,

annoyingly chipper self, and her attitude seemed to affect the whole sorority, who'd returned to treating me with disinterest rather than disdain.

As promised, William finally gave Tama and me an area to reconvene, and we met immediately after the much milder midday service, which Joseph conspicuously missed. But despite the promise of privacy, two Wardens who stood outside monitored the tiny workspace. They faced away, but their ears twitched like dogs hearing the word 'park'. Tama tried to mouth me something, but his wide expressions were impossible to interpret.

I devoted the rest of the day to casual reconnaissance, conversing with anyone who would entertain me. The women tended to be more receptive, and it was a pity I couldn't ask them the real questions. I made rounds around the eastern side of town, stopping in on some Aspirants cleaning homes, and some Faithful making pottery. Then I headed up the road to the windmill, interested to see the 'consolidation' that Joseph had supposedly done. For some reason I was picturing a sweatshop, but of the dozen or so adjacent buildings, everyone seemed to be coming and going as they pleased. I didn't buy it. According to the passerby Warden Peter, the mill was used to grind up food, but mainly for the donkeys and chickens. Peter added that Joseph had been attempting to spin cotton in the windmills, with less-than-great results. "That took the wind outta Sage Joseph's plans, it did."

But the windmill's main use was to pump water from an underground river that flowed beneath the compound. I could only imagine the ramshackle series of rusted pipes that must connect it to the water below. *Would the shower pressure be better on a windy day?*

The bells eventually called to me and soon enough, I was watching the girls play Monopoly once again. There wasn't much else in terms of entertainment, unless I wanted

Leah to read more scripture. I wasn't opposed to that, in truth, but Leah had just rolled double sixes, and was close to buying up all the orange properties — there was no way I was dragging her out of this.

Across the room, Abigail seemed equally unenthused about the ongoing game. Since our encounter at dinner, I'd been debating whether to force a meeting between us. The questions I had for her were too specific to not create suspicion, and even if I could get her away somewhere private, who's to say she wouldn't tell? She seemed off tonight. Maybe the excitement about delivering a baby had faded. She reminded me a lot more of her mugshot now. Lifeless, and tired. Shattered. I wondered if she thought about her kids.

William enthusiastically awaited us in the forum. Joseph was meandering about the place in his apathetic way, but the Druid seemed about ready to burst. When our sorority was finally in place beside the other two, he began. "I wanted to tell you just how proud I am of all of you. I know that for those as *unenlightened* as yourselves," — he was referring to their Aspirant status, I assumed — "these daily rituals of fasting are challenging. But you are to be rewarded! Tomorrow, our Sage takes to the wilds with his band of chosen Aspirants, to retrieve a bounty fit to mark the coming cold. As a community, we shall feast, all in His name!"

Acclaim emanated from the forum, and for good reason: these poor souls were finally getting a proper meal. I couldn't say the idea didn't fill me with joy too. A fresh meal, for one, was something to be relished. But the idea of a hunt seemed incredibly cathartic, even with Joseph at the helm. After scoffing down my bite of potato, I ditched my plastic plate and beelined it to William. Across the courtyard, he was pointing up at the stars above to some of the younger girls. Their twinkles were barely visible, thanks to the overhead

lights, but the outline of the big dipper was unmistakable. The girls were wandering off as I approached, and he smiled when he saw me. “Blessed night, Marianne du Plessis. I was just showing Aspirants Hannah and Leah some of the sky’s divine bodies.” He looked back up and stared. “I believe they are the lingering lights of Heaven.” I went to say something when his gaze turned back to me. “I of course know they are stars, set deep within the solar system. But who is to say Heaven isn’t out there, light years away from this tarnished Earth.”

I smiled back at him as I considered the thought. “That’s not the worst interpretation I’ve ever heard. It’s... hopeful.” His expression told me he agreed. “But that isn’t Leah.” I quickly added on. “Leah is over there.”

“Two things can both be accurate, Marianne du Plessis. You seem astute enough to have noticed a particular trend regarding the names of New Eden, I presume?”

I nodded gently. “They’re biblical.”

“Everyone who joins our community forgoes the name of their past and adopts a new one. But there are only so many names within the bible, and so there are a few, uh, repeats. The Sage and I try our best to keep each fraternity and sorority free of duplicity, but the further you extend your sight, the easier it is to find one of the same.”

“Speaking of the bible, I wanted to talk to you about the books. There’s so many, and they provide much needed perspective, don’t you agree?”

He shook his head, but he couldn’t hide his smile. “What is it you want, Marianne du Plessis?” As I’d planned, he read me like a book.

“I would be *blessed* to join tomorrow’s hunting trip. As an observer, of course.”

His forehead scrunched up. “Those trips can be very dangerous. What exactly do you need to observe?”

“Everything that Sage Joseph or the other hunters might. How else can I spread New Eden’s truth? I need to see *everything*.” I hoped I hadn’t jumped too quickly. I felt like I was building a rapport with William, and trusted that our earlier discussion on gender roles within New Eden — and his muted desire to alter them — might grant me some leeway here. I could see on his face that he was thinking the same thing. He was wondering how he could frame it to Joseph, and to the wider faith, before realising he didn’t need to frame it any particular way. He was the Druid. His word was law.

“Marianne du Plessis, I believe it would be prudent for you to join Sage Joseph’s excursion tomorrow.”

“My Druid, would you care to repeat that?” Joseph — who had been passing by with a leaning tower of dirty dishes — stopped what he was doing and inserted himself between me and William, drawing the attention of the rest of the forum. “Not only is she an interloper of ill faith, but such is against Enoch’s law.”

“I was hoping to speak to you about this matter in private, Sage Joseph.”

“And why is that? So you could twist your words in through my ears and back out my mouth?” Mere seconds passed, but long enough for Joseph’s temperament to soar from its usual state of constant annoyance to a true apoplexy. He continued his tirade, but his hold on the straws he clutched at was growing weaker, and more desperate. “This woman is of the decaying world! She brings no benefit to our hunt! Her presence is an affront to New Eden and the Valley of Eden! God will not—”

“Silence, Sage!” William roared, with the same intensity he’d placed upon me the day before. “Despite her proclivities for the modern, Marianne du Plessis reminded me yesterday of her reason for being. It would be antithetical to prevent her from experiencing all that New Eden is.”

Joseph’s face was red as a peach, and he shook his head with vigour. “The boy Elijah is already coming with. He can make the report from his own perspective.”

“And how do you expect ‘the boy’ to effectively observe when he is leading your hunt? For your unholy demeanour in the face of your Druid, and therefore your Eidolon, I judge thee Infidel!”

Joseph staggered back, aghast at the revelation while gasps echoed off the stone floor. “Tomorrow, you serve the outsiders. Elijah will lead your hunt. Marianne du Plessis will join you. You will afford them every hospitality that still remains in your withered bones. And when you return, you will issue an apology to your Druid for questioning his decree. Then, and only then, will I consider revoking your new status, as a favour for all New Eden has to thank you for. You of all people should understand the weight of that privilege.” The forum was silent as the three sororities watched on. Some girls pretended not to see anything, but their ears were perked. “Nothing more to say, Sage Joseph, Once-Infidel?”

Joseph didn’t answer. He just walked away with a pile of dirty dishes.

## Chapter Seven: Hunters

‘A divine gift passed to me is this swathe of land, of bush, of forest, and lake. And it is here that we make our refuge from sin and seek our eventual ascent.’

*--Testament of Enoch, Chapter 1, Verses 17-18*

Because men couldn't enter the sorority, Esther had to wake me, and she seemed less than pleased to be up well before dawn. How she'd woken up without 'first light' or the call of the rooster that comes with it, I didn't know. Cult secret. She'd torn my blankets from my death grip, waking me from another dreamless sleep. She stood in the doorway with a candle in hand, her ghostly form sneering at me before departing. I could just barely see the glistening wet of Leah's eyes as the last of the light disappeared. She whispered wishes for a blessed day before retreating under the covers.

I bundled up tightly for another crisp morning. I had a layer of thermals underneath, followed by a pair of old jeans and my well-worn puffer jacket. But it wasn't enough, so I layered one of the Luddites' cotton shirts underneath my jacket. I then scooped some sunflower seeds from the pouch beneath my mattress and left the sorority through the barn doors.

The blue tint of early morning obscured everything, except for the hunting party just down the road. Two donkeys, hiding their faces in buckets of grain, were strung to a half-loaded wagon. The wagon itself was hardly bigger than the tray of our ute, and a small sled fastened to each side. Tama sat on the little wooden driver's perch, fully kitted out in uncomfortable-looking burlap. He offered his trademarked face splitting grin and gave a hearty wave. "Morning, Marianne!"

“Hush, Elijah!” Joseph hissed as he emerged from behind the wagon, with disdain scrawled across his face. Still, as I approached, I tried to be friendly.

“Good morning, Sage Joseph,” opting to ignore the ‘Once-Infidel’ addendum he’d unwillingly adopted last night. Despite the chill, he still wore his threadbare preacher’s garb and had a hunting rifle slung over his shoulder.

“Were you not told to meet us at the granary?” he asked with all the harshness of a blunt handsaw. I frowned. He was right, but seeing the wagon parked here made me think they’d decided to pick me up. He chortled, a fractured grin breaking through his permanent scowl. “Oh, you silly creature. That’s the problem with you Newts. You assume all is yours to take; that everything is for your benefit; that—”

“Sage Joseph.” Tama said, descending from the perch. “Once-Infidel,” he added confidently. “Druid William said I was leading this hunt, and I say that Marianne can join us now.”

Joseph scoffed pathetically. “And did he not assign me your advisor?”

“He did, and I’ve heard your advice. But I’m making a different decision.” Joseph had spent so long bowing down to only God, Enoch, and William, that he’d forgotten what it was like to be told ‘no’. He shivered, as if now fully aware of the cold.

“I’ll finish up inside, then. Still need to lock the vault.”

As he wandered back toward the church, Tama pulled me aside, near the donkeys.

“Hey. You good?”

“I’m good. What was that? Why are you here?”

“We had to stop by to grab the weapons from the church vault. They’ve got a good stockpile down there. You’d think they were prepping for the end of the world or

something.” He flashed a cheeky grin. “But I thought I’d use my *authority* to grab you too. Save ya the walk.”

“I appreciate it. How big’s the vault? And what sort of stuff?”

“Mostly weapons. Couple of rifles and shotguns. Heaps of knives. Some bows. Oh, and holy water,” he said pointing toward two other boys exiting the church with crates in hand. “Those are ammo boxes. Rounds and arrows. Joseph had to bless every single piece.”

“Sounds enthralling. How long did that take?”

“Maybe an hour? The anointing was quick, but we had to wait for them to dry while he prayed.” Poor Tama. I’d slept late by comparison.

“Let’s hope his prayers work — I could eat some meat. Anyway, how does it feel to be leader?”

Tama shook his head. “Yeah, weird aye. The Druid said I had potential. Gotta be a test, right?”

*Gotta be.* “Well anyway, thanks again for the lift.”

A narrow seat rimmed the wagon interior, but with the tarp, extra clothing, and many shoebox-sized crates of ammunition, there wasn’t much leg room. Tama returned to his perch while I snuggled into one of the front corners. Joseph sat at the back, holding the tailgate shut on account of the latch being busted. The two boys took the corner directly across from me. I gave them a smile, recognising them as the boys from our first meet and greet with Joseph back upriver, but I couldn’t remember their names.

Between the five of us, Joseph was the only one to have a gun. It was a big bastard of a rifle, way gnarlier than the slug gun I’d seen back on Roche’s boat. He handed me a blade — a hunting knife about the length of my forearm. Although Joseph assured me he had sharpened it recently, nicks and scratches covered the knife. He said it was only for

protection, since I was just observing. Everyone else, even Tama, had a wooden bow with a soft sling of arrows hung over their shoulders.

Though there were no formal roads beyond New Eden, the hunt was a weekly event: a trail of flattened grass paved the way forward. Other than the few tended fields — which were empty on account of the season — the terrain comprised nothing but wide plains, rolling hills, and tall grass painted with frost. It was open here. Freeing, unrestrained by the canopy of the forest, or the ramshackle walls of New Eden.

The trail took us through what would have once been paddocks, but all the fences had keeled over, as if flattened by a steamroller. The rumbling of the wheels did little to mask the growls of my stomach. I'd teased it with those sunflower seeds. We had to kill something today.

After an hour of riding in silence, dawn broke over the mountains; we could hear the roosters of New Eden crowing, even this far out. We had a panoramic view of the range that encapsulated the valley. The sunlight caught on the frosty fields, which sparkled like they'd been drenched in glitter. Sharp stoney peaks trapped us in like teeth; trees staunchly climbed the range, but none escaped the valley's clutches.

The low light had tricked me into thinking the plains went on all the way to the mountains, but we approached a rocky ridge as the sun shone through, and I realised the scenery ahead was not grass, but bush. Past the ridge, the terrain dropped down a nearly sheer slope and into the thicket. The top of it was almost level with us, stretching out like a thorny sea of dark green. Joseph let out a long, dry whistle. It hung in the air for a bit before he yelled out for Tama to stop.

Joseph was quick to jump from the cart and immediately ordered the two boys — Aspirants John and Samuel, he reminded me — to unload. They moved with purpose and a

clear understanding of their assignment. It evidently wasn't their first time. Meanwhile, Tama unhooked the donkeys and took them toward the lone tree that sat atop the crag. It was a wide, sturdy tree with a fat, bushy top. The donkeys were quick to start munching at the foliage that had dropped over autumn while Tama tied them up.

Joseph stood alone, gazing out over the bush much like a king would his subjects, so taken with this fantasy that he didn't notice me until I spoke up. "Sage Joseph? Do you have a moment?"

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" he responded after a few more seconds of ignorance. "The bounty He left for us. All I see is touched by His grace." Then he turned to me, and his expression soured like milk.

"I couldn't help but notice that a lot of the land we crossed to get here seemed like good farmland."

He huffed. "Did I not *just* comment on the beautiful lands He left for us? Pay attention, for His sake, and maybe you'll learn a thing or two worth taking back with you."

"What I meant was, why isn't it used? Why not trap some boar and breed them? Or expand your grain fields?" His pupils constricted as I spoke, and I could tell he was insulting me in his mind. "Your people go hungry, while all this is within your means? It all seems... aimless." He turned away, facing back out towards the bush, with his eyes closed, lips quivering, and his hands held together at his chest. It seemed he was praying. Was he seeking answers to my questions? Or asking for guidance on how to deal with an infidel like me?

With no answer coming, I returned to the cart. John and Samuel had unloaded some gear onto the sleds that had, each with a rope now harnessed to the front. Both sleds bore two ammunition crates, plus some rolled-up cloth and rope. Arrow-shaped etchings

decorated the tops of three crates. The other had a rifle-shaped etching instead. Over by the bushy-top tree, the Aspirants were setting up a bleeding station: thick ropes tossed over one a branch, with hog-sized lassos on the end. Rick, my ex-stepfather, had said bleeding out animals was pointless, but he also used to say that the government was diluting his petrol with water, so I didn't have faith in his hunting advice.

Tama was fiddling with his bow when I came up to him. It was simple, but as well-crafted as you'd find in any store. The only giveaway was the string. It didn't have the plasticky texture of a modern, processed bow. He was reattaching it when he whispered, "I thought you wanted to take this slow and steady?"

"Excuse me?"

"You and Joseph."

"How was that not slow and steady?" I asked with a neutral tone, trying to hide sounds of disagreement from the others. "I didn't ask anything that Mary wouldn't. I'm just doing my job. *Her* job."

"You're not worried you're coming off too aggressive?" he asked as he practiced loading an arrow.

"I think it'd be suspicious if I wasn't."

"Careful with that arrow, boy!" Joseph bellowed, now turned our way. "They're sharper than you'd expect. Now, Aspirants John and Samuel!" From beneath the tree, their conversation broke as they stood to attention. "Take the eastern perimeter. For His sake, I pray this is your final hunt as Aspirants. Return with something worthy of His grace and I will make my wish for your advancement known to the Druid. You would be baptised this eve." Both boys looked ecstatic, with smiles across their faces that would rival Tama's.

“We won’t let you down, Sage Joseph.” Samuel said. “Once-Infidels,” he quietly added.

“And we won’t let Him down.” John continued. “God. The saviour.”

“Yes, yes, very good.” Joseph said dismissively as he walked toward me and Tama. Again, contempt plastered his face. He looked between us, back and forth. It seemed he was contemplating who to address: the white woman, or the brown man. Both outsiders. I doubt he enjoyed either option. He eventually focused on Tama. “We’re heading into the thick of it. If we’re lucky, we’ll catch em while they’re out finding breakfast. If we’re not lucky, we’ll be breakfast.” My shock must have been apparent, going by Joseph’s crooked smile. “A joke.” he clarified. I wasn’t so sure.

Despite being the supposed leader, Tama ended up hauling our sled. It had a slight curve at the front of its tracks to prevent it from snagging on roots and underbrush. But erosion had spread across the ground here, so many roots were impossible to avert. The vegetation was varied, but one particular shrub that kept popping up, and their long stringy roots were a constant nuisance. I had to use my knife to free the sled from their grasp a few times, and the severed roots smelled like the briny jar of jalapeño slices in my fridge I’ve been meaning to throw out for months. Despite the winter frosts, the shrub themselves still bore their white flowers, likely shielded from the worst of the season by the dense canopy.

The thick, impenetrable bush demanded many detours through the darkness. The only evidence of the sun was in tiny specs of light, off in the far distance, peeking through like watching eyes.

“McDonalds.” said Joseph, unprompted.

“Huh?”

“McDonalds. The restaurant? Head on in, get yourself a juicy burger and potato fries and a milkshake? Walk on out, all bloated, engorged, unhappy with yourself?”

“Well,” — I considered teaching him about shrinkflation — “I suppose. Why?”

“Don’t it upset you? String bean that you are, see people wandering in, eatin’ beyond their means, ruining the gift that God gave ‘em?”

“Not particularly. Maybe God gave them their body, but He gave them free will too. They can do what they want with it.”

“Free will is a tool. One that went misused for over 2000 years, and is precisely why the people need shepherds like us to guide them out of the Ongoing Apocalypse. People need to see they ain’t confined by these modern proclivities. That the cage they live in is self-imposed. That the life they live is for God, and God alone!” A group of rooks fled a nearby tree at Joseph’s shout. He listened as the cawing of the birds faded into the distance, then continued, quietly. “You asked why we don’t tend the fields like the forefathers of this Earth. Why we don’t trap God’s beasts and breed ‘em for our use and amusement. The answer lies in all I have just said. To do so would invite indulgence, and it is indulgence that led to the Y2K catastrophe.”

“How is your way of life any less confining? I’ve seen prisoners fed better than your people.”

“You forget that unlike the Hell outside of our lands, we offer respite. But we have our rules, our way of life, all in service of our Lord above. We are trying to offset the imbalance of good and evil by strengthening Him. We give our grain, our meat, our lives, if we must. This is why our people go without, because they know what is right, and they do so without complaint.”

“What of the children then? Whether they were born here or brought by their parents, they had no choice.”

“Mary,” Tama interjected, “don’t you think you’re—”

“They are blessed for not knowing what awaits them outside.” Joseph asserted.

“They are blessed, for they will know no pain before the ascension is at hand.”

“The ascension?” I asked, only to be ignored as Joseph froze in place, holding his finger up. Had I caught Joseph saying something he shouldn’t have? No. I could see his expression, and it wasn’t that of a man ensnared, but of focus. I looked back at Tama, then at Joseph.

“Ya hear that?” the Sage asked raspily. I shut my eyes and listened. I heard the bush: wind flowing through, rustling the leaves and brush like swelling snare drums; breezing through the natural formations like a dissonant flute.

“I hear it.” Tama replied.

“Hear what?” I asked, but Joseph shushed me with his finger. It was in my face, and I had to fight the urge to try and snap it off.

Then, I heard a squeal. Faint, hidden by the underlying sounds of nature. But it was close. “Stay close,” whispered Joseph. “Leave the sled.”

There are those precious moments in life where every free-flowing coincidence of the world feeds into the same stream, creating a scene straight out of a children’s story. Some would call these miracles. I don’t know what I call them, but fate seemed an apt term for what we saw ahead of us.

We perched at the peak of an incline. A toppled tree marked the edge, acting as a barrier between us and our target. Beyond, down an extended corridor of nature's woven branches, in the centre of a single radiant beam of midmorning sunlight, was a barrel-shaped, brown-bristled boar. Its bottom half sagged along the ground, caked in dried mud. It was stretching its body out upon the smooth stone plinth that marked the focal point of this private grove. In this grove, it was alone. It had peace. It had no idea that if it looked up the hill to its left, it would see three faces intent on ending its life.

Joseph swiftly unhooked the hunting rifle from his shoulder and rested it on the trunk. It sunk slightly into the damp, soft wood as he manoeuvred it into position, peering down the sight with each slight shift. "You're not gonna report me for not having a licence, are ya Marianne?" he whispered slickly.

"Who exactly would I be reporting to?" I whispered back, when a sudden urge came over me, like the desire to jump when you're standing on the edge of a cliff. *Do it. Take the leap.* "But... you could always play it safe — let me take the shot."

Reflexive disgust clung to Joseph's face like crusty vomit at my blasphemous query, but surprisingly, it softened. Without a word, he shifted the rifle towards me. It was heavy, even resting on the trunk, and I realised then how much I was craving a plate of roasted pork.

Joseph offered me no guidance in working the unwieldy weapon, which was nearly the length of my body. He was predicting failure, expecting it even. It was an effortless shot. The line of sight was clear, and the boar had fallen onto its belly. Its four legs splayed, basking on the half-buried stone like a lizard. So I took my time, gripping the smooth wood beneath the barrel with my left hand, and caressing the trigger guard with my right. I sank

down to match the weapon's sight. I drew it over the beast. A final breath, in my nose, and out my mouth, my finger hugging the trigger as I exhaled.

It had been over a decade since I fired a gun. I had the stock buried deep into my shoulder, ready for the recoil, but I had forgotten the noise. I was still stiff from focus, and so my reaction to the explosive sound was sluggish. Joseph was even less reactive. But from Tama, I heard distorted cries as he dropped the crate of arrows he was holding and clutched at his ears. While the crescendo of the shot faded into the forest, I could hear muffled laughter coming from Joseph, who taunted Tama with a garbled mess of jeers that my mind couldn't stitch together. My attention was locked on the boar.

I had hit centre mass. I didn't know enough about boar anatomy to know where anything vital was, other than the brain, but I couldn't risk missing in front of Joseph. The boar collapsed onto its warm stone before rolling into the brush on its right. Briefly, it lost all its energy. But then almost immediately, a new vigour surged through the beast. It flailed madly, trying to keep turning, to reassert its footing, and after a staggered barrel roll, its belly was back on the ground. It began shifting forward, pushing itself off the ground with its trotters, unable to get good purchase on the tangled floor beneath it. Its squeal broke through the ringing in my ears. I was expecting desperate, anguished cries, but what I heard was much more guttural, and fierce. Had I pierced its lung, maybe? Were these the deep squeals of a beast gargling its own blood?

And then it fell supine while its feet continued to search for ground, like it was swimming through a dream. Each foot fluttered in the air, slowing down as the squeals grew softer, until they stopped and the bloodied boar lay stiff. It was a curious, horrible way to die. I had made it happen with the twitch of my finger.

Tama's squeals had also calmed. In the moments that had passed, he'd begun recollecting the scattered arrows that had spilled when he dropped the crate. The crate had collided awkwardly with the ground, splintering like wafery driftwood. Tama winced as he caught a jagged piece in one palm, and some arrow pricks as he continued scooping up the debris. I could hear him apologising to Joseph, but the Sage had already bound the barrier and begun his trek down the hill, with no acknowledgement of my shot. He didn't even take his rifle back.

"Wrap your wound, now." I said to Tama before following Joseph down the path. The slope was sharp, but there were bramble handholds to ease the way. Joseph was kneeling beside the body, his bony limbs nestled between gaps in the vines. I started speaking, but he interrupted me. I expected it at this point.

"Marianne du Plessis, this animal has died for us. Before anything else can occur, we must give thanks. Would you kneel with me?" I obliged the old man, sensing an honesty to his proposal that his other words lacked. He was bound by duty to honour the boar. I understood duty, and I wanted to understand him.

"Oh Enoch, Eidolon, great aid to God almighty, bless this beast that its spirit might meet you, and aid you in recovering the strength required for His final act. It was your divine light that led this beast, and your will that brought us to meet it. We thank you, now and forever, Amen."

"Amen." I replied. I took Leah's advice, saying it back even if I didn't mean it.

Joseph called out for Elijah to bring the sled down so we could get the boar strapped in. The beast was even thicker up close. It had basked in the sun like a king, and the tautness of its skin and circumference of its belly suggested it ate like one too. Blood had pooled on the surrounding ground, dripping from the bullet wound, its mouth, and even its eyes,

which had swelled so much I thought they might pop from their sockets. King or not, it was most definitely dead.

“Where is my weapon?” Joseph asked before rising.

“On the ridge. With Elijah.”

“Mm.” He seemed eerily calm.

“Do pigs usually do that?” I asked.

“Do what?”

“That. When you shoot a deer, its either dead, or it runs. Not... whatever that was.”

“So you’ve hunted before?”

“When I was younger, yeah.”

Joseph spent a few seconds staring into my eyes, squinting hard. It was much like when we first met — like he was sizing me up again.

“I let you take the shot because though it is often necessary, I do not like to kill. I didn’t expect you to actually hit. But you did. If that was God’s plan, I submit to His judgement.”

“So it was God who told you to give me the rifle?”

With glimmering eyes, he nodded. “Everything is a part of His divine plan. He guides us like He guided the pig. The same can be said for the children of New Eden. God willed them to us — that is the simple truth. They will never be thankful for this, because they won’t know any different. We can tell them about the outside, but to them, these are stories no different to Peter Pan or Snow White. Just as you never had to worry about the wicked queen and her poisoned apples, our children will never need to worry about the overwhelming sins of humanity. They are among His chosen, and they will foster further generations, all born with the same blessings, all born to serve and save Him.”

I shook my head. "What on Earth could God need saving from?"

"Us."

## Tama

“She’s cheating on you, no doubt about it,” Matheson announced with complete disregard for my feelings. She seemed bored, sliding the laptop across the table without making eye contact. Her mind was somewhere else. Not with me, the man who just had his months-long suspicions confirmed. But she didn’t need to speak: the picture told the story.

“If you click the right arrow,” she continued, “you’ll see they aren’t newly acquainted. These pics go back about two weeks, but I have some more from earlier on if you need.” She spoke every word without feeling or care, but the words didn’t matter, not anymore. I clicked to the next image and saw Tasha’s beautiful, awful face pushed up against her car’s back window. A shadowed figure enveloped her, kissing her neck, holding her breasts. I could almost hear her moans. Smearred across the image was an obnoxious watermark: “MARGARET MATHESON, PI, 2024”.

“You’ve got some fucking nerve.” I shoved the laptop back in her direction. “Do you even give a fuck about all this, ruining my life like this?”

“You pay me to get results. Not to care.” She was completely unfazed, like this was a conversation she’d had a hundred times. “And I didn’t ruin your life.” She slammed the laptop’s lid and gave it three forceful taps. “She did; he did; they did. I didn’t—”

“You didn’t what?” I pounced. I didn’t try to. I didn’t want to. It just happened. There was anger burning inside me, and it needed release. But before I could grab her, I’d struck the floor, my eyes, nose, and throat searing from a shot of pepper spray, and it all went black. I woke up some time later, on the same patch of ground where I’d collapsed, and a printed invoice taped to my aching chest. Matheson was gone.

Matheson sent four sets of debt collectors over two weeks before I mustered the courage to call her. Since her visit, my anger over Tasha had melted away, replaced with shame: shame at being manipulated for so long, and for my outburst. I never wanted to hurt Matheson, but it was as if something else, something evil, had taken control. I hated myself for thinking that, because it sounded a lot like the excuse Dad used to tell Mum on those many drunken nights. I wouldn't become that.

I called after breakfast, then again an hour later. No pickup. There was no answering message either: the ringing just continued until I hung up. I tried once more around midday, and the call ran for two minutes. I was about to hang up when a groggy voice came through the other side: "Peggy. Who is it?"

"Ms. Matheson?" I asked.

"Yep..."

"Oh, hi. This is Tama." All my neighbours were home this sunny Saturday afternoon. Kids were screaming from a nearby backyard, the local dogs were competing for loudest bark in the neighbourhood, and the beginnings of a party had started at Ronnie's place across the street. The silence of Matheson was louder than all of that. "Are you still there?" I asked after a good ten seconds of nothing. She took another few to respond.

"How are your eyes?"

"Uh, fine. Listen, that's actually why I'm calling." She mumbled a reply. Like during our last meeting, her tone lacked enthusiasm. "I, uh... I wanted to say I'm sorry for coming at you like that. I was going through it. Uh, that's not an excuse but, yeah, sorry."

"Mm. Thanks."

“Oh. Yeah, you’re welcome.” That same silence took over the call. “Because yeah, I’m not normally like that. Violent, y’know? Tash and Nick, that whole thing ruined me, I wasn’t myself. Uh, shit, again, not an excuse. I just feel bad and I felt I owed you an explanation.” Once more, silence.

“I’m not gonna say it’s okay, because it’s not. But I understand — there’s a reason I carried spray with me. So please stop apologising.” I barely caught myself as I went to say sorry for the excessive apologising. “I was very blunt with you that day. I shouldn’t have been.” I waited for her to continue. *Was that an apology?* I held my tongue. I was already neck-deep in shit with her — I couldn’t afford to slip further.

“That’s... okay. It’s your job, right?”

She snorted a little. “Heh, yeah. I’m no therapist, that’s for sure.”

I chuckled under my breath. “That’d probably work as a business model, though: stalk someone; find out all their deepest secrets; offer therapy.”

“That’s borderline extortion, unfortunately.” The banter stopped there, but I was smiling — I liked to think she was too. That’d slightly ease my conscience.

“Alright then,” she began again, “when can I expect your payment? Debt collectors aren’t cheap, especially when you keep dodging them.”

“Yeah, uh, sorry about that.” This was the part of the call I’d been dreading the most. “The, uh, the thing is—”

“—that you can’t pay.” She didn’t phrase it as a question.

To avoid confirming one way or another for as long as I could, I asked “Is there any other way I could maybe make up for it?”

“You could get a loan.” I cringed, thinking of my Afterpay statements.

“I was thinking more, like, employment or something.” I was fumbling my words a bit — I always did when I was nervous. “I thought if you needed help, like, someone to run errands around the office or somethi—”

“I don’t have an office.”

“Oh. Uh...”

“You’ve got no money, no means of getting money?” I didn’t reply immediately. Instead, I took the time to think, searching for the right mix of words that might get me out of this.

But I took too long. Matheson hung up.

I spent every waking hour from the end of that call trying to right my wrong. I knew when I hired Matheson that I wasn’t going to be able to pay her full fee, and I didn’t care. A smart person, maybe a worse person, would have emptied out the joint bank accounts they shared with their cheating fiancée. There was a night, about two weeks before Matheson confirmed everything, that I almost went through with it. Tasha was out, and I’d sunk half a bottle of Coruba, thinking that maybe if I was so far gone, I wouldn’t feel the guilt. I’d had my phone in hand, bank app open, with my finger hovering over the transfer button. But I couldn’t do it. The few sober dregs of honour inside me tossed the phone in a fit as I cried myself to sleep on her armchair. Tasha might have ruined me, but I couldn’t do the same. That isn’t me.

The day after Matheson gave me proof, I confronted Tash. The same day, that account was emptied, shy of the \$1750 needed to pay the next month of rent. Touching. The job hunt was slow, but after the call with Matheson, I amped it up a notch. My brother

James managed me a position at the commercial butchery he used to manage. The pay was scant, the hours were bad, and the commute was worse. But I went full send, always. After three hours of slicing, dicing, and mincing, I'd rinse off and hide in the bathrooms, scrolling through job listings, before the minute ticked over and I returned to work. I did that three times a day. Then I spent ninety minutes driving home to the sounds of angry traffic. I'd spend a couple more hours on my laptop applying to all the jobs I'd saved earlier in the day, then eight hours trying to sleep while the boy racers in their sputtering shitboxes tore up the asphalt nearby. After a month of this never-ending cycle, I'd put away less than \$400 for Matheson. I owed \$8000.

I strangely hadn't heard from her. There had been no more debt collectors. There had been no phone calls. Every knock at the door, I expected the police. I wasn't sure what the exact charge was for not paying your PI, but it seemed like theft to me — I was expecting jail time. Another two months passed without a word, and I had begun falling into the monotony of my new life. The savings for Matheson began to grow at a much slower rate as more of my wages went toward self-medication. Empty bottles of Speights began to stack up in boxes in my kitchen as finishing a couple 24s a week became the norm. Dad had just started brewing his own beer, and kept telling me he'd be around at some point to collect my bottles. But with every week that passed, the stacks grew, making me look like a way bigger alcoholic than I actually was.

My tenancy was set to expire in the coming weeks, and I was considering moving closer to work. As I was scrolling rentals one night, I heard a knock at my door. My landlord said he'd be popping around to discuss getting my bond back early. But when I opened the door, beer in hand, it wasn't Mr. McGill I found, but Ms. Matheson.

“Still looking for work?” In the dim driveway light, she was mostly shadow, but there was something different about her. I nodded, a little too eagerly, and invited her in.

“You wanna beer? I have—”

“Please. I’ll count it against your tab.”

“I have some of your money.” I stammered as I moved to the kitchen, while she took a seat on Tasha’s recliner. I grabbed a beer from the fridge and the envelope of cash on top, passing her both. She cracked the bottle and began counting, in silence, before passing it back to me.

“Consider that your first pay. If you’re interested, that is.”

“I am, I’m interested.” I said. “I’ll seriously do whatever I need to. I’ve been working to get your cash but times are hard right now.” She took a solid glance at my collection of empty bottles, but nodded.

“I don’t care about the money right now. And I’m not letting you accept until we’ve talked it through. This isn’t an assistant or errand boy role. I need a second, and I have no other debts I can call in. Believe me, if I had other options, more experienced options, I’d take them. For your sake, more than mine.”

I listened carefully. Her tone was still dull, but also desperate. She’d seen me at my absolute worst, in more ways than one, and she was still willing to give me a chance. There was a brightness — a fierceness, even — that had replaced the boredom in her eyes.

“Look. I owe you. In more ways than one. And I have literally been working nearly every day to get out of this hole that I’ve dug. I’m super thankful you’ve not been coming after me for it, so if you’re giving me an out, I’m taking it. And if in a month’s time we decide it’s not a good fit, then what’s changed?” She took me in, eyeing me, judging my words and everything else, and it was in that I realised what had changed about her: she cared.

Something had given her new life, a new reason. She nodded, very slowly, before downing half her beer in a few quick glugs and setting down on the coffee table.

“Have you ever heard the word luddite?”

Matheson’s work consumed me for the next six weeks, as she gauged my strengths, weaknesses, and limits. We had no agreement with my repayments. She gave me \$150 a week for personal expenses, and even let me stay in her backyard sleepout. When she sent me out fact-finding, she told me to take her car. We worked out of her dining room most days. She often ordered lunch, enough for the two of us, and she refused to let me pay. It didn’t feel sustainable: if every footlong sub was adding \$20 to my tab, then I’d happily buy my own lunch. But she assured me that if I was going to add to my bill, she’d run it by me first.

“So then, when do you see this arrangement ending?” I asked, chowing down on my steak melt. She was in the middle of typing, but her determined expression said she was nearly done, so I patiently waited. After a triumphant **smack** of the enter key, she looked up.

“That was an email to my friend Darlene. She’s a lawyer, and she handles all my contracts. Like the one you signed saying you’d pay me \$12,000 for services rendered.” Her words were venomous, but her tone was jovial. My eyes darted down anyway. “I’ve just asked her to write up an employment contract for you. The details can be shifted a bit but it’s currently posed for you to finish your term once this luddite investigation is complete, or the 1st of June 2025, whichever comes first. At that point, your debt will be repaid.”

“Oh, okay.”

She'd just taken a bite of her own sub — lamb and falafel — and with a full mouth she asked “Prohblehm?”

“No, no problem. That’s just sooner than I expected, I guess.” We’d just crossed into March.

She took another big bite of her sandwich before speaking again. “Y’know, I’ve told myself a lot of times I was gonna get out of this business. It’s a lot of stress, a lot of heartache. And after handling your case, I really meant it. I was gone. I was done chasing cheating spouses and runaway children. It wasn’t fulfilling, and it never worked out for anyone involved.” Another bite went in her mouth and down her throat. “But this case... I dunno. It feels like a lot of guesswork, a lot of clutching at straws, but if we can pull this off — find out what’s happened to this Paisley girl, and all the others — well, that feels like something I could get behind. So if the work suits you, if you like it, and if I like you, well, maybe we can see about extending your contract. Till you’re back on your feet, even if it’s just busywork.”

I wasn’t sure how I felt about this work yet. It was a lot of grunt stuff, and the research made my head hurt. But it was somehow still the best job I’d ever had, and it sure beat being an unemployed writer. “That would be really, really cool. Thank you, Ms. Matheson.”

“But stop calling me Ms. Matheson, or Matheson, or even Margaret. Makes me sound like an extra off Downton Abbey.”

“No problem, boss.”

## Chapter Eight: Offering

‘You are to give to God before you give to yourself, and if there is none for God, there is none for you.’

*--Second Testament of Enoch, Chapter One, Verse 16*

Tama was mumbling in his sleep as the rickety cart rolled through the countryside under the mid-afternoon sun. All day he'd been the picture of strength, but after half an hour of towing the boar, he'd grown sluggish. At first, I blamed it on the fact that the last good meal he'd had was a petrol station pie three days ago. But something else was up. He'd carried on in stubborn silence for over an hour, until he'd finally lugged the sled out of the bush. When he released the ropes, the broken tension sent him toppling. I had to help him up the hill while Joseph corralled the donkeys at the top, which he then used to hoist the sled up. I constructed a little nest for Tama in the corner of the cart out of loose furs and clean bits of rolled tarp. It was cramped, but his exhaustion didn't care — he passed out as soon as his head hit the rigid pillow. Since he'd broken their box, I had to tie up the arrows he'd dropped with some spare twine, hanging them on the side of the wagon so no one got pricked. The arrows smelt acidic, and I realised they must have been made of the same wood as the tree roots I cut through earlier. Or maybe that was just how swamp-adjacent wood smelt. Tama slept through the journey, tossing and turning and sweating up a storm. Joseph was pleased, reclaiming the leader position and reigns both, but I couldn't care less. I just worried for Tama.

In a twist of fate, Tama had a competitor for the prize of most miserable. On their own hunt, the Aspirants were caught off guard by a small but ferocious sow. All it took was a slight misstep and Samuel found himself slammed against a thicket of gorse, with the wild

pig trying to burrow itself under his ribs. Sam managed to stick the pig in the neck with the arrow he had in hand, and he must have pierced an artery, because the pig rapidly bled out all over his burlap overcoat, dyeing the cotton shirt beneath a deep red. His face was swollen and bloodied from the collision, and his breathing was staggered. At best he had a broken rib. At worst, a punctured lung. I offered to check, but he refused. "By Enoch's word... I can't allow... an untethered woman to... touch my bare body," he said theatrically between pained gasps. The boy was zealous, that was certain. That, or he somehow knew my First Aid certificate was well expired.

The Sage did not appreciate his unwavering faith. For the crime of being beaten by a beast, Joseph would not be recommending Sam for advancement. This was a prize reserved for John, the unmaimed, who was struggling to hide his excitement despite his friend's sorry state. It was cruel to see someone so committed to these Luddite ideals be so easily victimised by them.

"Does New Eden have an infirmary?" I asked John, since Joseph was occupied. He didn't seem to know the word. "A place for sick people?"

John caught himself before he spoke. He briefly glanced at Joseph, then leaned in close. "Not anymore. The Sage's cousin, she used to do that kind of stuff. She left the faith, though." I couldn't hide my surprise. Fervour didn't run in the genes, it seemed. John leaned back and spoke aloud, "God is our only shepherd through trying times."

The sun was swiftly sinking behind the peaks to the west. Trailing us like fraternal twin tails were the boars, bound to their sleds. Ours was the clear winner of the two, but after being drained of its blood, it looked like a deflating balloon. The return was a little slower than the morning's journey. We had extra weight, and the donkeys were tired and dehydrated. But a part of me appreciated the dallying, because for all the faults of these

Luddites, Enoch sure picked a nice place to settle. Were it not for the wild pigs and the missing women, it'd be exactly the type of place I'd love to get lost in. Just spend days exploring, finding all its wild and not-so wild secrets — the most curious of which was Joseph's missing cousin. Had she left of her own accord, or was she another lost statistic? Either way, she was added to my mental list.

A stone cabin sat atop a ridge between New Eden and the hunting grounds. It looked cosy, if a little decrepit. "Been there as long as I can remember," John told me when I asked. "There's a few old shacks like that around the place. From people that used to live here, I think."

"Not Luddites?"

"I don't think so, but I can't rightly say. Best to ask the Sage, I reckon." John said as Samuel spat blood and phlegm onto the tarp in front of him. "Or Druid William, seeing as you got his ear." I didn't know if I had William's ear as much as he had my tongue.

Though the settlement sat on the north edge of a large bog, it was obscured from inside the compound. From here I got the whole picture. The river we'd arrived on expanded to the east, with hundreds of tiny offshoots extending like veins — threads of thick murky water creating an illusion of solid ground. These veins were the lifeforce of the swamp, and by extension, the Luddites. The ground must have been firm enough at one point, for fallen wire fences were strewn across the bog like clotheslines, futilely attempting to dry their free hanging, rotted wooden beams. Some of the fences had collapsed completely, creating floating bridges for the blackbirds to rest on. The near-stagnant water made no attempt to dislodge these bridges. The swamp growths caught them long ago, and they wouldn't be moving anytime soon. Dozens of lifeless trees sprouted from beneath the water like decaying bones of the earth. Trees left to the devices of mother nature, yet in the

end, shared their fate with those decaying fence poles. The bog was where things went to die.

I couldn't help feeling I had wasted the last few days. I'd learned a lot, but aside from a very brief encounter with Abigail, I'd found no links between the Luddites and the disappearances that couldn't be explained away as coincidence. Not to mention that Abigail seemed happy to be here. This place was full of people like her, and Sam, and Leah: willing — or unknowing — participants in this God-forsaken experiment. But it was that sentiment that reminded me that I wasn't just here for the people in my files. I was here for all of them. They'd been fed promises of salvation, and all they could do was wait for it to come.

As New Eden's healthcare system was funded by thoughts and prayers, I was more than a little concerned for Tama. I couldn't even see him to his bed, thanks to the strict fraternity rules. But John, who was also watching after Samuel, assured me he'd look out for him. Joseph stopped outside their quarters and we all popped off the cart before the Sage rode deeper into New Eden, boars in tow.

Samuel draped his arm around John's neck as they headed inside. I held the doors open for them — the literal least I could do — and watched as Samuel winced with every step. Tama was around the corner, sitting on the sawn-in-half tree trunk, stewing in exhausted defeat. He was hiding in his hands, which were patched with blood. I remembered now that he'd cut himself on the broken crate. He'd gotten a few more nicks when picking up all the pieces, and an hour of tugging at coarse rope had spread them wide open. I'd planned to clean them when we got to the cart, but he'd fallen asleep on top of them.

“I feel like shit.”

“You look like it too.” I replied.

“Are we back?”

“We’re back. We’re outside your fraternity.”

“Oh...” There was a silence. I sensed disappointment in his voice.

“What is it?” I asked. Silence, again. “Hey. What’s wrong?”

“I wanna go home, Peg.”

The panic was instant, as my neck spun around with the speed of a startled cat. Two men were leading their bleating goats towards the mill. There was a child running in the opposite direction to the goat herders. A pair of young women were sitting across the throughway, reading from a shared book of testaments. Their eyes caught on mine, but they were too far to have heard Tama say my name. I wanted to slap him, but I leaned in close and hissed. “Fucking idiot. **Mary. Marianne.** You *can’t* slip like that, okay?”

“I feel slippery,” he responded, his voice faint and quivering. As if to emphasise his point, his right hand lost its place on his face and his whole body collapsed.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I asked, hoisting him back up. His face was pasted with both fresh and dried blood transferred from his hands. Tears were welling in the corners of his barely open eyes. He had dilated pupils, and his eyes' whites were yellowed and bloodshot.

“I’m so sorry.” He whimpered, desperately, very unlike himself. “I’m so fucking sorry. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what I’m doing here. Just let me die.”

I sat down next to him and raised my dirty sleeve to his face, wiping the blood and tears away. “You’re not dying, you dumb fuck. You’re sick. Malnourished, probably.”

Still a snivelling wreck, he beckoned me closer with his hand. As I leaned in, he whispered “Peggy?”

I resisted the urge to smack his head. “Yeah buddy?”

“When can we go home?” he asked as John reappeared, holding a large wooden jug in his hands, a sponge clinged between his neck and chest.

I clasped Tama’s hand and pulled him up to his feet, stabilising his wobbling body once he was up. His face went grey, and I saw something beyond the crying and the sickness: fear. The only other time he’d shown it was the night I hired him, when he thought I was back for Round 2. He knew something. Something dangerous, yet for some reason, he hadn’t told me. But I couldn’t ask now. All I could do was whisper “Soon,” which seemed to restore a bit of colour to his cheeks. “John’s here, and he’s going to help clean you up and get settled, and make sure you get enough water.” I was speaking to John as much as I was Tama.

I watched them as John scrubbed at all the blood and dirt I’d missed, until they disappeared inside. The goats and their herders had long gone, and the women reading the testaments had begun their way down the road. It felt so strange to be alone... but I was alone. No one was watching me, and I had no instructions. I could do whatever I wanted.

And what I wanted, for me and for Tama, was to get the fuck out of here.

There wasn’t a magic button I could press, or a perfect question I could ask, that would solve all my problems. I had to rationalise my process. I embraced the trope of the crazed researcher, with all my files strewn over a huge cork board, and different-coloured strings

connecting my wayward ideas like synapses. Now, I had to rely on my *actual* synapses to connect my floating thoughts. I only had myself, and that had to be enough.

I began by adding to my mental map of New Eden's roads, less to construct a road-by-road mental diagram of New Eden, and more to pinpoint dodgy parts of it. Buildings that seemed too big, or had had heavy locks on the doors. My fingers hungrily played with the lockpicks in my jacket pocket — I'd made the right decision in stowing them there. If there were bystanders, I would make a mental note and return later.

I was running on the assumption that the Luddites abducted my missing persons, but the purpose was still unclear. The easy answer was that they all came willingly, leaving their lives and families behind, and although I hadn't seen them, they were well integrated into the Luddites. But then where was Paisley? Between the funeral, church services, and aimless wandering, I had surely seen every face in New Eden by now. Not hers, though, or most of the others from my files.

Which leads to the hard answer. The one where these lost souls were hidden away, serving some purpose. I didn't want to entertain that until I had to. I kept telling myself my subjects were 'people', even though of the eleven I had files on, only two were men. Calling them missing people, not missing women, let me trick myself into believing the motive wasn't depraved. Thinking about them that way didn't help anybody.

I caught curious glances as I wandered. Everyone recognised me, and I drew their attention like a magnet. I wondered if there was an incentive to watch us. *'Report the misdoings of the Newts for an extra par-cooked potato!'* Their staring made it impossible to act natural. The only benefit of all these gawkers was a chance to check their faces, but I saw nothing that I wanted to.

And then, the bell rang. Its dull chime could be heard from all over New Eden, and it meant one thing: dinner. My stomach growled a Pavlovian response. Luddites filed out of their homes and workspaces with an uncomfortable sense of unity, like they were a hivemind. Hell, maybe they were. It sure would explain a lot, like how they share the same unbreakable views, and why the abducted blend in so well. If that were the case, then all I'd have to do is get rid of William and the collective would shatter. That'd be so much simpler.

Because of the hunt, it was a shared dinner tonight — the whole community would be eating together. All except Tama and Samuel. Maybe I could take them a couple of plates. With everyone at dinner, it'd be the perfect time to sneak into the fraternity. It'd be the perfect time to sneak into anywhere. Places where I could find some answers.

Annoyingly, the shared dinner meant I had to move with the crowds: heading any other way would be an instant red flag. That eliminated the windmill, though I still had my suspicions that Joseph was doing more than 'consolidating' there. We were heading in the church's direction, but Tama had already been down in the vault, and told me everything he saw. I'm sure there were other sites worth checking, but what? Where? There wasn't exactly a sign reading 'Abductees in Here!'. Other than the sororities, fraternities, and the care centre — which I didn't view as high-value options — there was only one place I could truly guarantee would be empty, because its only occupant would be busy presiding over the great banquet of wild boar. The Druid's home.

Most of the Luddites in this group were couples, with their hands gripped tightly around each other's. Some were stragglers, fresh from stewardship. One was walking by my side and didn't seem to realise he was staring. I turned and smiled. "Hungry?" I asked. "Boar tonight. I killed one of them." He nodded, pursing his lips together, and turned away.

The roads swelled as other groups funnelled in through the side streets, until we were in a crowd so large you might have thought New Eden was a real town. The settlement was decently big, but most of its people spent the day hidden away doing stewardship duties, homely pursuits, or religious worship. At the church services, everything was so uniform that the population didn't seem all that big. It was only now, as the population spilled out of the forum's walls that I got a true notion of just how many people lived here. I'd have to ask William for the actual numbers, but there had to be at least 200 residents. 200 lives in service of the Eidolon.

Smoke rolled steadily into the sky, streaming from the forum's central pyre. The sun disappeared behind the treeline, and the staggered streetlights were illuminating. The tangled scents of roasting pork and acrid burning swamp wood was an off-putting combination, but my stomach still growled in anticipation. Granted, spreading two boars amongst the entire population meant we'd be seeing tiny servings, but some was better than none.

I realised a single flaw with my plan: the single door to William's home faced the forum, and given the already-huge numbers, weaving through the dense crowd seemed impossible. I ended up scooting around the next block over, rejoining on the west side nearer to William's shack. I ditched the puffer jacket under a nearby bench, tying the arms to a leg. I had the standard Luddite cloth over my thermal, and with the thermal sleeves rolled up, blending in became a bit easier. Without the jacket's bulk, I could stick close to the edges of the crowd, ducking into gaps where possible. No one seemed to mind my gentle squirming, given how tightly packed it was already, and I reached William's door in just a few minutes. The Druid stood at the centre of the forum, tending the pyre, speaking proudly about the wonders of God and Enoch in phrases that my nutrient-deprived brain

couldn't handle. I stood with my back to the door, waiting for the right moment. It came sooner than I expected, right as one of William's proclamations caused a righteous uproar. The entire crowd seemed to shift, leaning just slightly in his direction, while I stepped backward, hiding the noise of the shifting door behind everyone's cheers. Smooth as silk.

William's home reminded me of my grandfather's old study. They shared the same pseudo-rustic motif. Dark stained bookshelves were built into the walls. The faintest bit of outside firelight squeezed through the gaps in the door, which made the closet shelves just barely visible. Aside from books, there were various knick-knacks lining the shelves — based on the rudimentary craftsmanship, they must have been arts and crafts projects from the school — the care centre. There were also photo frames on the shelves. Most were packed sideways like books, but some were displayed, with drawings, sketches and paintings that ranged from childish to genuine artistry. The one to catch my eye was a scene from the south-most point of New Eden, the artist's gaze westward, watching the hazy sun set over the swamp. Hints of life — wilted trees and patches of algae — broke through the water, which was painted a flattering blue rather than the putrid browns and greens that really made up the bog. The mountains of the valley were absent in this piece: the water extended endlessly, swallowing the sun beneath its depths. Mikayla would have loved this. She was the artsy one.

The L-shape of the home meant that the gentle glow faded away the further around the corner I went, but I knew an iron chandelier hung right above his bed. The switch was a metal rod hidden behind the desk rather than an ordinary plastic wall switch, so it took a few minutes to find. The bulbs flickered before properly waking up, and soon enough the room was illuminated.

I started with William's bed, lifting the mattress onto its side to check for anything hidden beneath, doing my best to keep the sheets and blankets from loosening. Discovering nothing, I dropped it back into place, smoothing the edges out. Then, I noticed semi-parallel scratches in the stone floor beneath me. They were light, but repetitive. Peeking beneath, I saw a few stray socks and a crumpled shirt hiding in the far reaches, but more notably, a small iron chest sat beneath the very centre of the bed. I had to lie on the floor to get a decent grip on it. It was a solid chest, about the size of my microwave. It looked almost like one solid piece, given away only by the lock, hinges, and the binding straps of metal. I reached for my lockpicks, only to remember they were in my jacket, which I'd so wisely discarded just a few minutes ago. Fuck. The wide-mouthed lock didn't look too difficult either.

I'd have to come back some other time, I decided. I pushed the chest aside and returned to the desk. It was nothing particularly grand. It had a similar dark stain to the shelves, but it was in dire need of a sanding. Other than a dried inkwell and quill in the top right corner, and a single booklet — The Testament of William, no less — the surface was bare. I sat on the wobbly wooden stool and opened the top drawer. It was packed to the brim. A few papers got caught along the top edge, scrunching on the way out. They were envelopes — about a dozen of them, and all opened. All addressed to a familiar PO Box in Gisborne, with two different names heading the address. Some were to the lawyer Enoch had used — the one who had died last year. The majority were directed to Baxter Cromwell — my go-between when I was communicating with Joseph earlier in the year — and I was their author.

Each letter had notes scribbled on them in what looked like disassembled pros-and-cons lists. It seemed that two parties debated whether to allow me entry to New Eden. The

cons were almost all belief-based, such as how bringing in a *'tainted fellow'* could irreparably damage the Ludditious Faith. I recognised Joseph's handwriting in the cons list. Comparatively, the pros were all rather grounded. The other writer — presumably William — seemed fixed on establishing the intentions of their faith publicly. *'How can we expect to save these wayward souls if the little they know of us is shrouded in darkness and deceit?'*

I skimmed the notes for any extra details, but other than addenda from Baxter Cromwell, there was nothing of note. Another letter seemed to be Baxter responding to William about the practicalities of establishing themselves as a known religion, noting Enoch's failure to do so in the past. Four other letters were of a similar, legislative nature, and quick scans revealed nothing of relevance. The letter at the bottom of the stack, however, looked fresh. Also from Baxter Cromwell, the letter was dated December 8932, 1999 — five days ago, according to the Luddite calendar.

*Joseph,*

*Bethany is in place. She understands her task.*

*I will deliver her report directly on the '34th.*

*In His name, and his,*

*Baxter Cromwell*

Then, scribbled beneath, in writing I could match to William's hand:

*I told him to leave them be*

I read through the letter again, then scanned through the entire stack once more, looking with a fresh perspective. But there was no discussion of anyone named Bethany, or any indication of what this task could be. I wasn't entirely sure what Joseph had done, but whatever it was, William was not in agreement. Who was Bethany? What was this task? And who was *'them'*? After spending so long feeling roadblocked, finding the letter was euphoric, even though I didn't know how or if it tied in. I couldn't slow down. Next drawer.

Two lightbulbs sat in a cushioned nook at the back, and were the only thing inside except a girthy brown envelope. It was unsealed, but thicker and heavier. A musty waft emanated as I tipped out the contents. It was a bunch of clippings — mostly newspaper, but some others too, like dissected photos and website printouts. I grabbed one at random. It was a wedding photo, printed with the date and time in yellow in the bottom right corner — March 8th, 2001, 5.03 PM. Someone had cropped the photo, removing the entire left side— including the groom—leaving only the bride and her party. I recognised no one from the photo. I grabbed the next clipping, and the next, until I'd cycled through maybe fifteen without any reward, before one finally caught my interest. It was a printout of someone's Facebook page. The date at the top read June 23rd, 2012. There was no profile picture and no posts, but I recognised the name. I confirmed my suspicions when I grabbed the next item in the stack: printed screenshots of the same profile posting nonsensical rants in the Facebook group 'Cult Stoppers' about escaping 'Ludishes' and the police's refusal to help him arrest them. I'd seen these posts back when I was first researching the Luddites, but I'd never been able to track down the actual person they belonged to.

There was nothing else to glean there, so I continued through the pile, finding similar social media printouts, most of which were unfamiliar. There were also a few scanned pages of a book titled *The Elusive East* reflecting on rumours of an unhinged religious movement in

the mountains north-west of Gisborne, though the details were few, and inaccurate. I was ready to bundle it all back into the drawer, when I saw a familiar headline at the head of a folded piece of newspaper poking out from the stack. ***Local Hero Found Dead in Home.***

I unfolded the paper and saw his face: Bryce Johanssen. From his bold smile and bright eyes — made all the brighter by those of the loving family surrounding him on both sides — you'd never guess he was the murderer of my best friend. The photo was from his 60th birthday, right after he'd blown out the candles. I know, because I was there. I was also the one to find his body, less than a fortnight later. It'd hung so stiffly from the interior balcony of his home. His eyes weren't so bright then.

I folded the paper back up and stuffed it into the envelope, along with all the rest, and dropped them into the open drawer. I couldn't bear the sight of that monster. The anger was coming back around, and I had to shut it out. I shoved the drawer shut, and went to-

*Wait... what was that?* From the drawer, when it closed — a clinking sound. Their handles weren't metal. They didn't have runners. The sound was too deep to have been the bulbs. I opened the drawer again. I pulled out the envelope, and then the light bulbs, and I saw it. A gap at the very back of the drawer's floor, barely the width of a fingertip. So *fucking cool*. I had to pull the entire drawer out to get any leverage, and lo-and-behold, beneath the thin wooden sheet was a metal key. Thank you, Bryce.

I spun around on the stool and placed the chest on the bed. The key slid in perfectly. It took a little finesse to line up the bits into the loose mechanism, but it was the most satisfying twisting of metal when it finally opened.

A narrow, wooden container ran the length of the interior. It was smooth, lockless, and the lid slipped easily off its grooves. Neatly filling up the inside were plastic cards.

Drivers' licenses, work IDs, student IDs, all bearing faces I had seen over the past few days. I cycled through quickly, spying Leah and a few of the other girls from the sorority, but for the most part, their names did not match. I knew Leah's face, but according to this licence, her name was Brooke Walker. I found Jolene Mikkelsen — not Abigail, as she'd claimed — hiding near the front, as well as just under half of the people on my list: Jasmine Andrews, Rachel Peterson, Raiha O'Regan, Michael Gillam, and Paisley Johannsen. She *was* here.

At the very back of the stack, I found a much younger Esther, Joseph, William, and even Enoch. Unlike Leah, their names matched their IDs. Enoch was older than his statue depicted, but he was handsome, with a cheeky charisma in his smirk that likely won many followers. There was another woman nestled in with them who looked remarkably similar to Joseph. Her face was kind but there was no mistaking those eyes. Audry was her name. Was she the cousin John had mentioned? The one who had abandoned the Luddites?

Beneath the trophy box lay an unorganised stack of at least two dozen brown paper sheets, each folded in half. The title, "The Testament of William, II," was written at the very top of the first page. Like Enoch before him, William was writing a second testament.

The paper was quite thin, so I perused them cautiously. This had to be hidden for a reason. I was certain that if this testament was public knowledge, Leah would have told me. The writing was tiny, smudged, and hardly legible in the dim light. I could only make out snippets. *"It is a new age for the Ludditous Faith ... I would see our foundations cleansed. I would see our discretions shift. I would see us into a world built on kindness, trust, and faith. For without these traits, we cannot hope to assert the change that the people need."* It seemed William truly desired change for his people.

I would have to come back to this. I didn't know when, but reading now was futile, and I couldn't exactly take them. Having neatly arranged and pinned down the sheets with

the ID case, I locked the chest, replaced the key, and secured the drawer and its contents. What a rush. For the first time in a long time, I felt accomplished. The box of IDs didn't necessarily prove that someone abducted these people, but it implied they couldn't leave, and that justified my actions. I had new evidence, and a newfound purpose. Tomorrow, I was finding these people. I turned out the light and strode out of the nook towards the door, ready to rejoin the crowd.

“Seek and ye shall find,” said a voice from the shadows, distinguishable by the apathy and vaguely-southern accent. Joseph. “And did you? Did you find what you were looking for?”

My shoulders dropped as I clutched my chest, assuming a vulnerable pose I often used when caught somewhere I wasn't meant to be. “Seek? I wasn't looking for anything.” My voice quivered at my command. “I just had to get away. The smoke — I have asthma. And William said I was welcome anytime.”

“He did? Surely, he meant when he was here to receive you, as he often is?” With the racket outside, I couldn't find his voice in the dark, but the room was only so big.

“He didn't make the distinction.” I replied, matching Joseph's demeanour.

“Shall we ask him, then?” His haggard silhouette rose from the armchair by the door, which his sallow body had sunken right into. The echoes of firelight from under the door lit him from below, inadvertently creating a fiendish rendition of himself. It was fitting, I thought. He may have been devout, but his values were hardly Christian.

“I think he's a little busy, don't you? But I'm happy to, after we've eaten.”

Joseph chuckled. “You seem flustered, Miss du Plessis... but you can rest easy. I am not in the mood to stir the beast inside the Druid tonight.”

“Stir the beast?”

“Oh yes, dear. Druid William can be a ferocious force. Dangerous, even. I certainly wouldn’t want to get on his bad side.” Too true: I’d seen that bad side first hand. “Even in our blessed valley,” Joseph continued, “people can change like the flow of the river in a storm. The holiest of us are not exempt from this law of nature. Remember what I told you before? What does God need saving from?”

I thought back to our earlier conversation — which Tama abruptly halted when he came barrelling down the hill with the sled. “‘Us’. Luddites? People? You weren’t particularly clear what you meant.”

He sniggered, apparently in a good mood. “I suppose I wasn’t. But you’re right on the nose. People — they are the biggest danger to God. That was one of Enoch’s core beliefs when he founded our church. He believed that for much of history, the sins of humanity outweighed the sacrifice that Jesus made on the cross. He believed that God could not account for the tenacity of humanity to thrive as it has, spreading throughout the world and carrying their sin with them. I may not agree with every piece of his dogma, but I was never able to disagree with his logic.”

“You’re saying humanity is so evil that we are a threat to God.”

“Isn’t it often the case with creator and creation?”

“Then why create us? I thought God sees everything that can happen. Wouldn’t he have expected this?”

“A question that I often ask myself, and philosophers have been asking for centuries. Enoch claimed that God foresaw an idealised future, where the millennium would come and all believers would be raised to His kingdom. But again, humans are tenacious, and if there is one thing they’ve strived for this last century, it is proving that God does not exist.”

I couldn't argue with that. I was a keen example, and my scepticism stemmed from apathy more than anything. There were others who were much more purposeful with their disbelief. "Okay, then why keep us around? Why not send another flood and be done with us?"

"What you speak of is rapture, and history tells that He has tried. The Black Plague, the Spanish Flu, this 'covid' — these all could have wiped out humanity. But humanity holds on, like a stubborn leech. They learn His game, and then they break it. And every time they do, God grows weaker. This is why He chose us, why He gave us our sanctuary, and why—"

The dinner bell rang again, banging on and on for about ten seconds. Joseph growled. "Well, another time, I suppose. It's time for the festivities to begin. Come, now. Walk with me. I'll get you a front row seat."

Druid William stood with his hands on Aspirant John's shoulders. Their eyes were locked like lover's, and I'd wager John's face would be aglow even without the roaring flames beside him. "To prove yourself in God's eyes is an impossible task, yet it is a necessary one. As your Druid, I aspire to dole this privilege with a steady, measured hand. John, by showing your devotion through continued service, you have shown yourself worthy of His love. God does not offer His opinion on the matter, but we can make judgements at His behest, and trust that if we are wrong, then you, John, will take the necessary steps towards continuous self-improvement, so that you may count yourself among the denizens of His kingdom when you ascend. I ask you, John, do you accept our judgement?"

“I accept your judgement, and pray I am worthy.” True to his word, Joseph had gotten us to a front-row view of the proceedings. John was shivering in anticipation.

“Then by the power invested in me by the Ludditious Faithful, I deem you among their ranks!” From the side, a Warden handed a pitcher to William. The Druid clasped both handles, lifted it high, and emptied it, soaking John in the visibly dirty bog water. John seemed far from upset. His open-mouth smile invited the water in. He did not complain of the foul taste or his newly rinsed clothes. Instead, he pulled the Druid in tightly for an embrace, and the crowd began to sing. William seemed taken off-guard by the hug, but he fell into it and smiled before joining in with the crowd. *With the Lord as my Guide / Eidolon Enoch to provide / a helping hand to thee / oh, how bless-ed are we!*

Joseph wasn't singing. He was watching William — who had started congregating with his people — smoothly dance to the melody of the hymn. Everyone was happy and lively, except Joseph. Not ten minutes ago he'd been playfully chiding me, but the scowl I was used to had returned. “What?” he barked when he noticed me staring. I shook my head and turned away. I could see the two pigs, both skinned and skewered across thick wooden rods. Flames lapped at them as groups on either side of the pyre slowly rotated them. The hunger pangs were stirring again.

I wondered what Tama was doing right now. Resting, hopefully. Maybe the wayward sounds of the forum would reach him in his dreams, and he could dance with the Luddites. He would be dancing, if he was here. It was strange, watching them act like, well, people. Take away the rustic clothes and most of the religious fervour, and this was a scene that could take place at any mild-mannered pub on a Friday night. One could almost forget her purpose here.

William's hand shaking my shoulder pulled me back from my dissociation.

“Marianne? Marianne du Plessis? Are you faring well?”

“Oh, William, sorry. I was just thinking about Elijah.”

“I was remiss to hear of his affliction, but I trust God will see him through it. Elijah is strong of heart, that much is certain. I will make a visit to him later this evening, but first, I wanted to speak with you.”

My heart twitched in my chest. He *couldn't* know I'd been in his home. Joseph had been at my side all night, so unless my hivemind theory had legs, the secret hadn't shifted lips. But there were hundreds of people here, and twice as many eyes. If even one had spotted me, I'd be outed. I kicked myself inside.

“I wanted to ask you,” he continued “if what you have observed these few days has been of use regarding your research endeavours.”

“Oh, yes!” I replied, masking a sigh of relief. “It's such a broad topic and there's so much I've yet to see, but I believe that when—”

“Stay your words, Miss du Plessis! Forgive me, for I suppose I implied as much, but I do not have the opportunity to speak with you at this moment. What I meant was to invite you to my home, following the ceremony, for a more formal meeting. Something more constructive manner than our last discussion.”

“Well... I wouldn't want to refuse the invitation of the Druid, would I?” He hit me with that killer grin. “So it would be just us?”

“Affirmative. I would extend the invitation to Elijah if circumstances were otherwise. If it were to make you more comfortable, I could invite the Sage Joseph along. It seems that your excursion did some good for your relationship, am I correct?”

Joseph, who had been silently observing until now, objected. “Forgive me, Druid William, but I’m preoccupied this evening with lay work. And I think Marianne has had enough of me today, haven’t ye?” For once, I wasn’t so sure. Joseph was a lot, but his earlier comments about William’s behaviour had me concerned.

“I don’t mind either way.” I finally confirmed, only partially lying.

“Outstanding. Well then, with that out of the way, let us begin the ceremony.”

William returned to the platform, while I turned back to Joseph.

“I thought we did the ceremony already?”

“John’s baptism?” Joseph asked. “Oh no, that was hardly a unique occurrence. The Druid’s planning something special tonight, in honour of you, in fact.” *In honour of me?*

Before I could ask Joseph what he meant, William began his address.

“My people! My Foretellers! It is time for us to give thanks!” He left a gap between each of his sentences, giving space for audience participation, and he got it every time in the form of the appropriate ‘yes!’ or ‘no!’ or ‘amen!’. It kept the energy consistently high and kept the congregation excited for what came next. “On their weekly wandering, our valiant party of hunters returned with two successful slays! Their bounty provided by His grace; their weapons guided by His hand! Sage Joseph, Once-Infidel, has consistently proved himself worthy of his title — his true title — on these hunts he conducts. Last eve, I made a decision — a shameful declaration — that he did not agree with, and I know many of you shared the same sentiment. The outsider, Marianne du Plessis, was to join him on their hunt.” For the first time, the crowd stayed silent. “But you would be pleased to learn that her efforts to participate were not in vain, for under Sage Joseph, Once-Infidel’s tutelage, she was the one to have slain the boar before you!” He gestured to the bigger of the two, and there were gasps through the crowd, particularly from the women. Eyes flicked

between me and the boar, full of doubt and ire. “I had indeed questioned my decision to send her forth. A part of me still does. But I know now that it is what God intended!”

William’s words re-energized the crowd, which roared like the fire before them.

“But! His purpose is not always clear, His intent not always true. It is my belief that I acted hastily in this decision, and for this I apologise to you all, but I especially apologise to Marianne du Plessis.” He faced me, wearing a mask of disappointment. “I should not have put you in that position, Marianne, and I do hope that you forgive me.” I was stunned. I thought I’d broken through the mould of the Luddites by demonstrating my freedom, but had I cemented myself even more? All I could do was nod as William pressed on.

“Moreover, I extend my apology to you, Sage-Joseph, Once-Infidel. Clearly you were acting in accordance with your faith in our Lord, and for that reason, and for the commitment you have shown today, I revoke your appointed status of Infidel. Sage Joseph, please accept my regret.”

Joseph, standing staunchly at my side, didn’t seem to react. They glared at each other, a thick air of discomfort and animosity holding everyone in place. That was, until William apparently decided that this pissing contest was not worth his time. “However, I still trust it was God’s intent to send Marianne du Plessis on the excursion. That much, I will not deny or rescind. Not for our benefit, you see, but for His. Through this hunt, we strengthen Him! Through this sacrifice, He will rise!” The air loosened as excited murmurs began conducting between Luddites. “We raise our hands to Him so that He may pull us into His embrace.” He turned to the pig twirlers. “My Faithful, you are released from your duty. Release our bounty!”

And without complaint — no, with genuine, ecstatic glee — they dropped the pigs that had been roasting for over an hour into the flames, and for the first time since my arrival, I

wanted to cry. The holy fire slowly consumed their bodies. The miracle of the golden rock — the pig-king of the forest — was diminishing to a smouldering inedible pile. And the people cheered. They rallied. This wasn't faith. It was lunacy. I turned to Joseph, who had been waiting for my reaction. His own was stoic and uncaring. "Don't worry," he affirmed emotionlessly. "Rations will be spread out. You won't go hungry."

Joseph left without waiting for my response, which is fine, because I couldn't respond. I stood in muted anguish, unreasonably emotional about the burning of the pigs, until the world began to move again. True to Joseph's word, Wardens had already begun dispensing food to their people, implying this whole charade was planned from the start. It was wilful punishment, not some sudden decree from God above. Cubes of dried meat made their way into my hands, and with a fog over my brain, I ate. I hardly chewed the plasticky cubes before gulping them down. They weren't satisfying, but they filled the hole in my stomach. Tomorrow wasn't going to be any easier, but I was done with today. I was ready to head back to the sorority and fall asleep to Leah's whispered prayers again.

And then the Druid's hand caught mine, pulling me out of my daze. How long had I been sitting here with my empty plate? His smiling face renewed my anger, and I did my best to conceal it. "I'm ready now, if you are," he said in a tone I couldn't help but hear as mockery. I wasn't ready, but I nodded, again, growing unfortunately used to my role within their world: a foreign object for their amusement, smiling and agreeing to whatever they said like a 1970s housewife.

My psyche had been flip-flopping all day. One moment I was prepared, energised for the challenge ahead, and the next, it was like I was caught in a tangled thread, restrained, with all the pieces of the puzzle in sight, but out of arm's reach. As William guided me to his

door, the strings grew tighter. As he ushered me inside, they shrunk around my neck. I couldn't breathe.

And then as he shut the door, they snapped, broken off from the reality outside this room, and something stirred within me: possibility. It was a new moment, a new opportunity. Something was going to happen tonight. I would make it.

## Chapter Nine: Confession

'Irrational is a word used by intellectuals as an easy escape from faith. But we relish in the irrational. If that is all they can say against us then they aren't saying anything.'

*--Second Testament of Enoch, Chapter Two, Verses 16-18*

William sat on the corner of his bed, facing me, while I sat on the stool in the middle of the L, one eye on him and one on the door. Each of us was waiting for the other to start, but I was done with the niceties of Marianne. Peggy thrived in awkward silences.

"You look a little cold." William said.

I shrugged. "It's Winter. It gets cold."

"No jacket today?"

I shrugged again. "Must be back at the sorority."

"It would be a pity if someone took it, wouldn't it."

"Oh, I'm not worried." I replied. "It's of the new millennium, after all. Your cronies wouldn't touch it, would they?"

He gritted his teeth at my remark. "I fear not everyone is as strong of will as you perceive. There are dozens of Infidels in our midst, who received their second title as punishment for lesser sins than picking up a jacket that someone carelessly left on a public seat." From the gap between his desk and the far wall, he yanked out my jacket and tossed it my way. It stank of dried pig's blood. "You're lucky it was discovered by one of our steadfast Wardens. But this is a warning to you. Your hedonistic relics lead only to temptation; temptation breaks faith; New Eden relies on faith. Without it, these lost souls that have been shepherded out of the dying world might become lost yet again."

I'd balled up my jacket, clutching it tightly while he ranted. "It won't happen again, Druid William. I must have forgotten where I'd left it. I'm quite *weary*, you see. Simply famished."

His face and tone softened, melting like wax. "I... forgive me. I forget that outsiders are unused to God's demands. Of all the Newts that arrive in New Eden, I tend to have very little to do with them. You, and your underling, are the first non-Faithful to step inside my home in a long time." He pulled a small pouch from a pocket inside his vest. I could already see the contents spilling from the neck: more of those tasteless, dry jerky cubes. "You can have my share this night, to see you through your adjustment period."

The pouch was a single piece of tanned hide, folded and sewn. It was mostly cleaned but still had many fine hairs poking out of it. "Leah told me you didn't eat," I said before stowing the pouch.

William chuckled inwardly. "Well, I'd be lying if I claimed not to perpetuate that myth. I don't eat in front of the congregation. It would be in poor taste, proclaiming the hunger of God but not making the greater of public sacrifices. It wasn't my intention, at first, but the rumours spread quickly — that I was sustained wholly through faith alone. I take my food in private now. Sometimes a little more than I need. But like God, my responsibilities are greater, and thus, my needs are greater. I'd love to be a wholly selfless leader, sacrificing everything for my people. But I'm not. I enjoy the little luxuries my life affords. It makes the title of Druid evermore sweeter."

"Doesn't the bible say something about saying one thing and doing another?"

"The bible also states that the sins of the father do not forsake the child, only for God to sacrifice his only son for his own mistakes when creating humanity. The bible is a contradictory piece of text, where interpretation is key. I'm not so ripe with ego like the

Americans Smith and Jones to believe that God speaks through me, or to claim I have the Lord's ear. Like everyone, I must search for signs. For centuries, people have picked and chosen the parts of the gospel they liked and disregarded the rest. I foster this tradition, as did Enoch. He believed himself a prophet — that God whispered in his ear. And maybe God did. Enoch made an idol of his identity and bent people to follow it. By law of the ten commandments, he was misleading his people. Yet he retained faith. The people retained faith in him."

"That's not the point. These people trust you. You talk of faith, but you fear that their faith in you will break if they see you for what you are: a flawed human being like everyone else."

"Because they *need* me to be better! They need someone *perfect* to be their conduit to God above. I can't be flawed. They won't let me." William's head drooped, as if saying it out loud finally made it real. It was my first time seeing him at a loss for words. He seemed exhausted.

"Tell me about Enoch." I said, trying to re-energise him. "Surely he was flawed?"

"He was perfect." William replied, his head still down, but his voice pure. "And yet he chose me to be Druid. To lead."

"You weren't the immediate successor?"

He shook his head solemnly. "Joseph assumed he would get it. He was Enoch's cousin, and had performed many foundational duties. But in the months before Enoch's passing, he named me Sage, and appointed me to become Druid at the turn of the millennium. He claimed my local roots would serve the Ludditious Faith. That an outsider like Joseph would only confirm in people's hearts what they already believed about some fringe religious cult in the wilds of Gisborne." His head rose somewhat, reinvigorated by

merely speaking about his idol. “Enoch wanted to publicise the Faith. Spread word far and wide about our mission to save humanity. That had always struck me as misguided. It had only been a few years since the collapse of Centrepoint, you see, and Jonestown had been only a decade or so before that. There was a spotlight on those places, and it led to their downfall.”

I was genuinely shocked. “Surely you don’t align yourself with places like those?”

“Heavens, no,” he eagerly clarified. “Forgive the insinuation. Those communities both deserve their place on the pyre. They were everything I didn’t want New Eden to become. Maintaining privacy seemed integral to that. But eventually, we hit a point of stagnation. Newts began drying up, and birth rates fell. We adopted where possible, but the word wasn’t circulating. Joseph and I had a shared desire to spread the word more obliquely. And then we got your letter.”

“My letter?”

“In a time where my hope for New Eden’s future was faltering, God sends you. I can string a story within these walls, but not without. We needed a neutral party: someone capable of delivering our word without judgement. You can free us from this purgatory, spread our good word for a new generation of Aspirants to heed, and help us fulfil Enoch’s vision. Your words, delivered unto the tarnished people, can save the world.”

I had always questioned why the Luddites seemed so enthusiastic for me to visit. I knew they wanted me to make my findings public, but I thought they just wanted some good publicity.

“You want me to be some kind of saviour?”

“No, you are but the deliverer. The recorder, much like the many recorders of Jesus’ deeds. No, someone else will save humanity, and stand beside Enoch as the second

gatekeeper. They will hold open the doors for humanity to follow... Have you been told *how* Enoch ascended? How he passed?"

"It was on my list of curiosities."

"On the morning of December 31st, after days of fasting, Enoch enacted his final will. By his own hands, he nailed his feet and his left hand to a cross. He was carried through the slim roads of New Eden, to the hill where the windmill now stands, and was planted like a sapling. And on the cusp of the millennium, as the solar bodies began their final circumference of the Earth, he died. He sacrificed himself, to ascend to God above before the world below was engulfed in unholy fire, to assist God in rapturing us from the forthcoming apocalypse. His final act prevented the decay of the millennium from entering this valley. Even now, he tends the Gates of Heaven, awaiting our arrival. He couldn't foresee that the apocalypse would cause unfathomable degradation; the great good of the Ludditious Faith could poorly compensate for the wrath of the evil world. He couldn't see that his sacrifice wasn't enough to outweigh the ever-growing sin of God's renounced children... He needs more help."

"That's why you burned the boars? Leah told me all about how by weakening yourselves, you strengthen God. It's all in Enoch's testament."

"Astute observation, but incorrect. That bounty you captured *was* for God, but instead, we strengthened another who was not in attendance. We strengthened Elijah."

"Elijah?"

"The boy is not well, in both body and soul. For what is to come."

My heart stuttered. "What are you talking about?"

"We *need* another ascendant — one who represents the outside world. Only then can the flaws of humanity be balanced."

“Stop mincing your words!” I dropped my jacket and stood, looming over the Druid. He didn’t shift a millimetre.

“Have you read the story of Elijah? He was an Israeli prophet through whom God performed many great deeds. He was one of the few to bear the great burden of ascending to heaven, before his time, of his own will. His spirit was reborn in John the Baptist, it was reborn in Enoch, and now, I believe it has been reborn in Elijah. We would see him ascend again one more time.”

Defiantly, I demanded clarification for the third and final time. “*What* are you going to do to him?”

“What he was *made* to do.”

The sudden urge to vomit overcame me, but with nothing to regurgitate, the bubbling acid stained my words instead. “You call yourselves Druids, Sages, like you’re one with nature, but you’re fucking barbaric! You’re no better than the boar I killed. You deserve the same fate.”

My threat bounced off his thin, rubbery skin. “The titles were Enoch’s idea — he loved tales of paganism. ‘They got a lot right’, he always said, ‘they just worshiped the wrong gods.’ He wanted this place to be a grove. A symbiotic civilization where humanity and nature could endure, survive, and thrive... Sage Joseph and I dissuaded him from this impractical idea.

“Look around. We are surrounded by wetlands. The water is barely consumable. The soil is inhospitable to life. That little planter outside was meant to be an exception — an ode to Enoch’s legacy, but I couldn’t sustain even that. What does that say about humanity — that even the best of us can’t bend the world to our wishes? I sometimes wonder if Enoch was too quick to blame them.

“Joseph believes the Black Death was God’s attempt at a second culling. He fears that humanity is beyond the need for God, and as such, they are of no consequence — unworthy of saving! But I disagree. I want to save them all. And through Elijah’s sacrifice, I can.”

“His name isn’t Elijah.” I’d been running out of options, and had played one of my last cards — the only one that could save Tama from his ordained fate. But William had a hidden ace of his own.

“I want to save *you*, Margaret.”

His words found my ears, but I didn’t hear them. My eyes saw his scowl, but my stomach didn’t drop. My spine rippled from base to tip, but the shiver didn’t come. And then everything hit, all at once, as he said my name again:

“Why did you have to deceive us, Margaret?” He pushed me back as he rose to stand. “I thought there might have been hope for you — purpose to your intrusion. But all you do is lie!” A huffed release from his mouth, flicks of spit pelting my cheeks. “I know Elijah is not his born name. But all those who enter New Eden leave their millennial names behind and adopt new ones to suit their personage. I would *never* see someone submitted to an uninformed fate for the crime of having a name bestowed upon them. But we did not bestow this name: God did, through your hand. That... is fate.”

I reached toward my back pocket, where I had quietly restowed the lockpicks from my jacket. They weren’t much for a weapon, but something was better than nothing. “How long have you known?”

“You think every Warden of the Ludditious Faith is curled up here in New Eden? We are *boundless*. We’ve been watching you from the moment you contacted Mr. Cromwell. Joseph made it very clear: Marianne du Plessis is not Marianne du Plessis.”

“So why bring me here, huh? You know you’re not getting a story out of me, so what? Gonna do to me what you did to all the rest?”

His expression shifted, oozing authority one moment, and the next, befuddlement.

“The rest? Who do you mean?”

“You tell them all they’ll be saviours too? What do you do with the women you abduct?”

The confusion on his face only grew with each word. “Abduct? What women?”

“Oh, fuck off. Jolene Mikkelsen. Had a family back home. Children that needed their mother.” I left out the part about her drug problem. “Now living as Faithful Abigail, deliverer of occult babies.”

“Faithful Abigail came to us in a time of crisis! We offered a new home, meaning distinct from the abusive life to which she had grown accustomed. Is it your understanding that we kidnap these women? Is this the *true* nature of your research?”

“My research?” *He knew my name wasn’t Marianne, but he was oblivious to all the rest?* “Never mind my fucking research. What about Paisley Johanssen? Where the hell is she?”

“Paisley...” He seemed more aware now, like her name was a trigger word. “I didn’t know about Paisley.”

“Didn’t know what?”

“If... if she had come to me, told me she wanted to leave, I would have helped her. But she ran. Joseph saw this as an affront to the faith.” He swallowed the lump in his throat. “He was not kind to her. So she ran again.”

“What happened to her?” He seemed about as confused as I was.

“She passed. We kept the matter... *discreet*. Joseph saw to her body. She’s up in the meadow now, with the rest.” He took a pause, like he was catching a mental breath. “I hope through God, she finds redemption.”

“She isn’t the one who needs it.” I was expecting some bullshit like that. “You, Joseph, your fucking Wardens and Matrons — if God is up there, He’s coming for you.”

He looked into my eyes again, having fallen back down onto his bed. Pain trickled out of them. “I often wonder of God’s true power. I do not blaspheme, mind you, but I wonder. He bestowed free will upon us, so that we may make our own decisions, have our own lively inputs, and ideally, praise Him as we see fit. But I would be lying if I said my faith has never wavered.” His voice was grating, but I fought every urge to interrupt. Every word he spoke was information.

“He is the almighty, the all-powerful. He can do all, know all, see all, regardless of how one tries to hide it. But if He knows what we do, what we will do, and how we will do it, are we truly free? Or are we predestined to follow the path He set for us? And if so, why do we pray to Him? What will it change? Do we pray only because He knew we would? Could He not change the outcome, if He so desired?

“Forgive my divulgence into rudimentary philosophy. It was Enoch’s strong suit, not mine. But since he passed, I’ve had nothing but time. Time to think. I still wonder why he chose me to succeed him. Perhaps he saw something that I’m still searching for. Perhaps I’ll never know, in this life at least.” With a final heaving sigh, right as I was about to lash out, he decreed: “Elijah won’t ascend.”

I choked on my breath. “Excuse me?”

“Joseph entertained the idea. I disregarded it. For it to be clean, Elijah would have to make the choice himself. He would have to embrace the Ludditious Faith as one of us. Until

then, he goes unharmed, you have my word. I merely wanted to gauge your reaction. And I got so much more than I bargained for.” He didn’t sound triumphant.

I had no words to voice my turmoil. I’d been wrung through the emotional wringer today, terminating in this evening of borderline horror, and he had the gall to say it was all a joke. “You’re a sick fuck,” I said plainly. “Fucking psychopath.”

I couldn’t tell if he was listening to me anymore. “I saw Paisley in her final hour... there aren’t words for what happened that day, but I knew then I couldn’t see other Newts subjected to the same treatment. Joseph believed he had a right to treat her inhumanely because she was human. He thinks we are more than. But my new testament forbids such brutality. Her fate was ruin, but it also inspired change.”

“Your new testament?” I asked, feigning ignorance while trying to come to terms with the fact that Paisley was dead. My purpose here was dead. A part of me wished for the same fate, just so I didn’t have to face her mother.

William opened his desk drawer, lifting the familiar false bottom beneath the envelope of clippings, and produced the key. He pulled the metal chest from beneath his bed, inserted the key, then paused. “Could He not give us free will, but also have the foresight to see what path we would take? Does that equate to determinism, or does it merely reflect the immeasurable power our Lord possesses? His methods are far beyond our understanding, and too divine to be defined. These are the questions that led to my revelation. I hope you see, Margaret, that I truly want the best for humanity — you included. I admit I’ve been misguided, but through this testament, you will understand, I have changed, as has the world, as it needs to again.” He twisted the key, unlocked the box, and opened it wide.

But the thin book was gone.

## William

“What test is this?” I asked, rendering my thoughts aloud. “Was my new gospel not to your favour? Well? Answer me, my Lord!” I bellowed with my attention skyward.

“William?” Margaret asked, her voice as docile and unvaried as usual. “What are you talking about?”

I sharply refocused my gaze on her. She spoke with such comfortability; such disregard for etiquette. It was almost admirable, if negligent. “I was not speaking to you, deceiver!” *Deceiver* — *what right did I have to bestow such a title?* “I was seeking answers! Answers from one capable of offering them — not from a mewling quim like you who seeks only disarray.”

“Fuck you, William.” An instant response. Her desire to degrade me had presented, albeit poorly. I just laughed, and laughed. It was an intentional farce, initially, but it manifested into an uncontrollable force that wouldn’t let go. Was this God, finally? Was He laughing with me? Or perhaps at me?

“And here I thought we were friends.” I uttered when He finally relinquished control.

“Friends? After the shit you just pulled?” Her negligible words faded to the ethereal the moment they escaped her lips. I was listening for something else — words from on high. But something she said broke through my communion: “What’s in the box, William?”

Somewhere in my daze, where time shifted like sand through sponge, I had arisen from my bed and arrived at the far wall, pacing incessantly. But Margaret’s yammering called me back. Perhaps I had simply missed the testament in the dim light. Perhaps it had fallen to the side.

I was right the first time. My ode to New Eden’s future, was gone.

“I would see our foundations cleansed. I would see our discretions shift. I would see us into a world built on kindness, trust, and faith. For without these traits, we cannot hope to assert the change that the people need.’ The *Second Testament of William*, Chapter 1, Verses 5 and 6. This is what *was* in the box, Margaret. You have seen what New Eden was. I was to show you what it will become. But my new gospel, it has disappeared.” I could see a curious consideration scrawled across her face — she was receiving my intent as well as my words.

“Did anyone else know about it?” she asked.

“Only myself, the Eidolon, and God.”

“Not Joseph?”

“No. It was not his prerogative. The Sage would find out in time, along with the rest of the Ludditious Faith.” Her studious face relentlessly observed me. She would find no falsehood, of course, other than that which she had predetermined. But there was conflict in her eyes. She was debating something in that mind of hers. “Spill your words.” I commanded. “You owe me as much.”

“I owe you nothing,” she responded, anger tarnishing her soft voice. “I owe Jolene. I owe Paisley. I owe almost everyone here, but not you, and not Joseph.”

“You keep returning to the topic of our Sage.” Her stoic expression was hiding something, barely beneath the surface of the skin, but a knock at the door prevented me from pressing further. “Answer it, would you?” I asked, her stormy grey eyes gripping mine relentlessly, before she rose from her seat and moved to the door.

“Marianne,” said the unmistakable voice of my Sage. “Forgive my intrusion, but I must speak with Druid William. Please, stay. It won’t take but a few minutes.” The orange glow from the burning pyre dissipated as the door drew closed, leaving only the amber

flicker of my scone above. Margaret returned to my sight, but stood to the side at the foot of my bed. Behind her, the soft clip-clop of Joseph's steel-toed boots. He hoisted the stool away and stood in its place. Another set of footsteps — of an odd gait — echoed from around the corner. "Don't mind Warden Roche." Joseph said, as if answering my question. "This concerns him too."

"Faithful Roche," I corrected. "He is no Warden, he was never even baptised."

Roche's titled was purely honorific.

"Why does he have a gun?" Margaret asked, her eyes darting from Joseph, to Roche around the corner, then to me. The faint light betrayed her. I couldn't ascertain whether it was fear she was trying to convey, or a warning. As if the two were mutually exclusive.

"You may leave us, Margaret."

"Ah!" Joseph latched onto my statement. "So all has been revealed, then? If that is so, then she simply must stay. It is all the more pertinent to her wellbeing." A subtle clacking came from around the corner as Roche raised his rickety gun.

"What is this concerning, Sage Joseph? Surely you have not seen to Faithful Roche's advancement in solitude?"

"Do not feign ignorance, Druid. You have said it yourself: we have interlopers in our midst. You cannot hide the truth from your people any longer!" From his belt, he produced a book in hand. A familiar book. My second testament. "You have said as much yourself: 'the interlopers will be the undoing of New Eden.'"

The words were alien, but he spoke as though quoting my writings. Faulty reconstructions of my truth I have presented. "I did not write those words, nor are my words up for interpretation! Just how could you misconstrue such falsehoods from the new love I proclaim."

“It is not an interpretation.” He flipped open the binding of those slim pages and held it open to me, his bony fingers indicating a particular passage:

*‘God above tells me, we require change, if we are going to see humanity through the Ongoing Apocalypse. It is His will that we no longer shun outsiders, but welcome them.’*

The text was confounding, utterly befuddling, for it followed the beliefs I proclaimed, but did not contain my words, nor my style of hand.

*‘Despite my own death, which I foresee at their hands. For that is God’s will. It is the necessary sacrifice. I will follow Enoch. I will raise you up.’*

“This... This is not my testament.”

“I know.” Joseph replied. “But they won’t. They’ll see you for what you are: a prophet! The second Eidolon! Is that not our ultimate aspiration? Ascension!” His face was brimming with maniacal joy. Margaret’s was oddly calm, patient. Her role was not here, not according to her will nor my own. But according to Joseph’s, it was hardly more perfect timing.

“There are homes nearby.” I claimed, barely gripping my composure. “Fraternities. The gunshot will be heard. They won’t believe Margaret was responsible.”

“You *were* correct. A day ago, no one would have believed that this woman capable of such a heinous act, regardless of her status. Yet today, she returned as the slayer of beasts. A murderer, in God’s eyes. It was a beautiful boar, until her fury was hefted upon it. I would have never defiled such a divine beast, personally. But she insisted.” His scrawny neck turned back toward Margaret. “I am sorry to involve you in this. It was meant to be the boy.”

“You poisoned the boy!” I interrupted, recalling Joseph’s cursory tale of the hunting trip.

“You what?” Margaret chimed in.

“He made his own fate! It was not my intention to have him injure himself, nor to inflict harm with intent. But it happened. We must accept it. Just as you must accept what is happening now. You, Marianne — ugh! *Margaret* — you are going to murder our Druid.”

“Fuck you, no I’m not.”

“And you, Druid William, are going to die.” He placed the false Testament onto the desk. Then, from his pocket, he produced a shiny red item, its colours and scratches getting caught in the warm light above. At one end was a small white cross. A Swiss Army Knife.

“Enoch chose his successor poorly. In life, you could not elevate the Ludditious Faith. Perhaps in death, you can.”

Joseph unfolded the blade from its crevice. The tiny click echoed through the whole room, like a drop of water colliding with the cave floor. Without hesitation, he leapt in my direction with agility that no man his age should have. He was hungry, and finally, he was going to get his fill — the fill he thought he deserved.

Margaret ran for the door, rightfully ignoring my plight, unknowing that her interference was likely the one thing that could save her. She assumed that a crippled man couldn’t stop her. I knew she’d be wrong. I heard the crack of the rifle against her face, and a gentle yelp emerging from her throat. Roche muttered something indiscernible, and I could smell the vile intent even from here. I briefly saw her shadowed body fall, crumpling in midair, and though I didn’t see the moment she hit the ground, I heard it. It coincided with the knife entering my chest.

I made no attempt to combat what was coming. Joseph had caught me, vulnerable, and no amount of defiance, disgust, or anger would change the outcome. All I could do was pray. I prayed his stroke would go wide, and the knife would become lodged in the wall. I

prayed Margaret would forgive my illusions, as I had forgiven hers. I prayed that the Ludditious Faith would become stronger in Joseph's hands, and that he would be relieved of his new position in due time. I prayed Enoch would invite me into God's Kingdom with open arms, in preparation for the rapture. And I prayed he would offer leeway in selecting who was worthy of rising, for there was one individual I would take glee in denying.

He withdrew the blade, and with it, my last breath escaped. My body went cold, yet it also filled with warmth as blood rushed to the open hole. I slid down the wall, splashing in the pool of red ichor that had already formed beneath me. Once again, time was formless, until I felt the second strike, this time across my throat, and everything sped up. Roche's broken body restrained a barely-conscious Margaret, while Joseph abandoned me, dropping the bloody blade at her side. He smeared a little blood on her with his boot, before kicking her in the side. She didn't yelp this time. "Don't make this hard on yourself," he whispered in that gnarled, hateful voice of his.

He turned on his feet and started pacing my way. I couldn't hear his words over the rapid, booming beat of my own heart, and I purposely shunned his gaze, staring down at my festering pile of gore. But he wouldn't have that. He grabbed me by the hair, titling my head up, and mouthed one final goodbye: "*Have a blessed ascension.*"

It was the last thing I heard.

## Chapter Ten: Run

‘Temptation is the work of Satan, and the enemy of faith. Those who have fallen into its clutches cannot be redeemed of our will, but only of their own.’

*--Testament of the Eidolon, Chapter One, Verses 18-19*

“Alert the Wardens. Marianne du Plessis is here under false intent. You — bring forth the boy, Elijah. He must answer for their shared sins. Assemble the Matrons as well. All must hear what has transpired this night.”

“Is that blood, Sage Joseph?”

“Unfortunately so.”

Half of Roche’s body sprawled over mine, writhing like sentient swamp vines. The other half was dead weight, pinning me down like a toppled tree. I tried to block out his pungent sewer stench and his incessant, marbled moaning, but his grapple was unrelenting, and uncomfortably intimate. He kept knocking my head back into the floor, and it was all I could do to avoid suffocating in the pool of blood that was spreading from my nose. The metallic scent mingled with Roche’s BO, an aroma of rotting iron. My face was flush with the floor, and the pool of blood, affording me just enough of a view to see William’s body leaned against the far wall. His pool was bigger than mine.

Time passed. Minutes, many minutes, but not hours. I wasn’t sure. The iron chandelier was flickering. I tried to count the flickers. It all went dark for a moment. Fuck, did I pass out? My arm was numb. Roche’s rifle was digging into it, with all his debilitated weight behind it.

“The Druid is in here, as is she.” Joseph led a few sets of footsteps inside, accompanied by theatrical gasps and shrieks as the group stepped into view of William’s bloodied remains. “We had entered mid-altercation. We were... too late.”

“Bullshit!” I yelled. It sounded loud in my head, but it was like I was speaking from behind glass.

“Let us hear nothing more from this sacrilegious butcher.” Joseph said. Roche stuffed a rag into my mouth. It was dry, but tasted like motor oil.

“How could you?!” I heard Esther cry, stomping her foot into my ankle from above. There was anger in those withered feet. “He gave you everything, and you wasted it! Infidel! Infidel!” She stomped again, and again, each one forcing out air I didn’t know I had, blowing ugly bubbles in my pond of blood, before Joseph — eventually — pulled her away.

“Now, now, we mustn’t harm her more than is necessary — that is God’s responsibility.”

Esther scoffed. “And how are we to receive His word if our Druid has passed?”

“As Sage, the responsibility falls to me. But I make no presumptions — it may be so that we must wait for His divine ordinance.” There was a lull in the room. I couldn’t see anyone’s faces, other than William’s, which was dead and still — though hardly peaceful. I was hopeful that at least one bystander would see through Joseph’s charade. “I must pray.” He said after ample consideration. “Assemble the Newt Infidels in the forum, but do them no harm. Not until I have returned.”

“Blessings upon you, Druid Joseph.” It was a male voice, unknown to me, but it sparked a chorus of matching sentiment from around the room. Esther spoke up last.

“I shall maintain vigil over the Druid — rather, the Eidolon — until you return.”

“I would trust no one more.” Joseph proclaimed, before he left the room. His heels clicked against the forum’s stone as he ambled off with newfound, treacherous purpose. I tried to scream, to give Joseph one last piece of my mind, but Roche just shoved the rag in deeper.

Murmurs surrounded William’s home. Confused voices; rumour-spreading voices; voices in denial. It was mostly women — the summoned Matrons — who were speaking of such things. The male voices were speaking of consequences. “The Infidels are going to suffer for this.” I only hoped that since I could hear the outside rabble, then someone might have heard the truth of what happened inside. But even if someone had, would they speak up?

“Forgive me, my Druid.” Esther mourned for her leader. “I should have seen the signs. She is negligent. She is cunning. She is sinful. And you, you are pure. Now you are purer, still. If you can hear me, offer my love to Eidolon Enoch. Hmm... Warden Zechariah, if William has become Eidolon, what has Enoch become? Warden Zechariah?”

“Apologies, Matron-Faithful.” It was the same voice from before — the one to first profess Joseph as Druid. He seemed distracted. “I am unsure. It would be a query best left for the Druid.”

“Of course. Only he can know such details.” She didn’t seem so sure.

“Were you aware that the Eidolon had written a second testament?” Zechariah asked.

“You’re asking if I have read one of the foundational texts of the Ludditious Faith? Are you soft in the skull, Warden?”

“No, not Eidolon Enoch. Eidolon William. Look.”

Esther gasped as she looked upon the item in question. Joseph's tampered testament was ostensibly on full display. I heard pages turning. *'It is His will that we no longer shun outsiders, but welcome them. Despite my own death, which I foresee at their hands.'* I couldn't tell if Esther was reading aloud, or if the verse was replaying in my stuttering mind.

"The Eidolon's foresight was uncanny. His edict, undeniable." As if she'd forgotten William's demise, Esther's voice seemed younger and reinvigorated. "We may find no truer words: no purer proclamation of her guilt. Warden Mark — retrieve Druid Joseph. Tell him his title is affirmed. We will heed his words." I wanted to yell, to berate them all for their stupidity, but I knew nothing would get through, and that they wouldn't listen regardless.

Two Wardens hoisted me to my feet. It happened too quickly. I might have passed out again. My legs weren't working — the right one throbbed where Esther had pummelled it — so they dragged me. The tips of my toes bounced on the courtyard's bumps as the embers of the pyre continued fading away. The skin of my knees cracked as the Wardens dropped my limp body in front of the smouldering offering. My blood-filled eyes filtered everything through a red haze; when Joseph emerged from behind the pyre, I only saw a crimson-skinned devil.

"Margaret. Matheson. You have broken one of the most sacred of commandments. You are a murderer." No one else spoke with such cold, obsessive authority as Joseph. "I fear what greater misdeeds you may have enacted had I not interfered. Was I next on your list? Another martyr for your collection? Tell us why you are truly here!"

"Druid Joseph." Esther interrupted. "I can indeed confirm you were next."

"How do you know this? You let the Infidel speak in my absence?" His voice was layered with faux shock.

“I quote directly from the *Second Testament of William*, Chapter 1, Verses 15-17.”

“What mockery is this?” Joseph asked, so defiantly it bordered on comical. “The Eidolon William released no second testament.”

“It was discovered after his death, my Druid. If I may: *‘For the great Sage Joseph will rise in my stead. Not a rise in title alone, but in ascension. He will follow me to the Kingdom of Heaven, following the same means of death.’* An earlier passage predicted Eidolon William’s own demise — it would appear he foresaw yours as well.”

Esther’s words confirmed what I already knew: Joseph had forged his own Testament of William. He must have known William was writing it, and he clearly knew about the lockbox under the bed. He snatched the testament from Esther’s hands, and grew quiet, perplexed, as if reading the words for the first time, and with deep consideration. “William was as much as prophet as Enoch, it seems.” Clasp the book in his left hand, he grabbed my chin with his right. His bony mitt contorted around my lower face like a spider wrapping up its prey. “It was your intent, then, to slay us both? Leave the Ludditious Faith upstream without a paddle?”

I realised the rag had been taken from my mouth, but the oily taste lingered. This performance was unnerving. Joseph spoke of my hideous plans, while his own design unfolded before him. I didn’t want to contribute. I said nothing, projected my bloodied eyes into his soul in a last-ditch attempt to inspire a shred of guilt. He abruptly slapped my face with the back of his hand, then the other side with his palm. “Silence will bring you no reward! But in truth, you might find redemption.”

“Speak your truth, then.” I muttered through bruised lips and swollen cheeks.

“It has already been spoken, by me and the Eidolon before me. This” — he held the testament up high — “is truth. Undeniable, unadulterated truth. It is the antithesis of the

drivel that spews from your mouth.” It was a rehearsed response that expected more of a reaction from me, but Joseph carried on anyway. “Though why would we expect anything else from a charlatan like yourself? I ought to throw you to the boars: a homage to the graceful beast you slaughtered without mercy. But no, that cannot be your fate. The Eidolon had a purpose for you, and I must discover what it was.”

“You know what it was, you fucking sycophant. He wanted the truth, the real truth, to get out. He wa—”

“Perhaps you are an example, then, of why that cannot happen.” I tried defiantly tried to speak over his interruption, but I tripped on every word, like the rag never left my mouth. “The tarnished, broken world out there cannot fathom Heavenly Father’s plan as we do. There is a reason my cousin, the Eidolon Enoch, founded New Eden in a place of unprovoked wilderness, for the further we are from civilization — humanity — the closer we were to God. You, Margaret Matheson, have broken our bridge to God, but I will rebuild it. Bring out the boy!”

I followed Joseph’s gaze over my shoulder and saw Tama being dragged along by two Wardens. His pale skin was almost luminous in the low light, with every bead of sweat catching wayward flickers of light. His face and body dropped like a dying houseplant, and he would have seemed lifeless if not for the visible shivering. I tried to stand, but Joseph forced me back down. A minute ago, I would have relented. But I kept trying to stand. I was squirming against the withered arms of the anointed, and I was winning. He told me to stop, to get down. “You’re only going to make this worse on yourself.”

“Those are the words of someone who’s afraid.” I replied. I hoped the words came out as coherently as I heard them. Joseph ordered the Wardens to hold me once again. They grabbed me by the arms and dragged me across the forum, bringing me face to face with

Tama, whose life I'd ruined. They held both of us just off the ground, our arms bundled behind our backs. Tama muttered my name, unable to bring his head high enough to look at me.

"I'm sorry," he whimpered.

"Fuck off. You have nothing to be sorry for."

"I told them, Boss. I didn't mean it, it just came out."

"Drop him." Joseph commanded. The Wardens obeyed, let Tama fall to his knees, then his hands, before he collapsed entirely. "Tama Wilson." He pronounced his first name 'tar-mar'. "You have confessed to willingly assisting Margaret Matheson in her subterfuge. This wily woman got her claws into you, and you felt there was no alternative but to go along with her plan. A forgivable offence. What you have not confessed is the extent to which you desired to please your mistress."

"He doesn't know what you're talking about!" I screamed. Another backhanded slap rocked my face.

"Your deceit has no power here!" Something had shifted in Joseph. With every impassioned word, the blood drained from his face, and his calm, controlling demeanour depleted. Pallid and luminous, he stood in frightening contrast to the surrounding darkness. The faintest, distant pyre light exposed those gaunt, ghoulish features, with vampiric eyes that stalked me through the mixture of mist and smoke that danced around the forum. He'd warned me about the beast inside William, distracting me from the monster — the fury — that was inside him. I felt it in his hand. I saw it in his face. "Only God has power here — and He will see you punished!" His long, gangly arms reached down toward Tama's curly locks. Tama shrieked as Joseph steadily lifted him to eye-level, demanding once more: "Tell me your sins! Confess! Confess!!" I shut my eyes, flinching at his incessant screeching.

I heard a thud, then a crunch, then a bellowing wail. I opened my eyes to see Joseph stumbling back in agony, a sound unlike any other ushering from his throat. Somewhere in the struggle, Tama had found his footing. He'd struck his head against Joseph's, and in their collision, Tama's famished mouth had found Joseph's nose. Red rushed down Joseph's face from a distinct break in the centre, gushing like a firehose, the holy forum painted in blood. The same blood dripped from Tama's mouth, as he spat a chunk of flesh and cartilage in Joseph's direction. My wide eyes tried to process everything that just happened. All the Wardens and Matrons seemed equally as stunned. I even heard a "*holy fuck!*" from somewhere in the back, as the grip on my arms loosened and my tender body to the ground.

I spent my entire time in New Eden failing to follow the thread. I had procedures, and guidelines, but all that changed the moment my knife entered William's chest. Suddenly, there were no boundaries. There was no thread. I had one protector against the monsters: William. But the monsters knocked him down. I couldn't hide anymore.

So when Tama shook me by the shoulders and said "Run," I ran. And I didn't stop.

Tama pushed me away, with his hands, with his words, and with unexpected strength. He tossed me toward a gap in the wall, and suddenly, I was in darkness. It felt like a betrayal to leave, but it wouldn't be forever. I *had* to get out. Then I could come back, with help. Police, or even AOS. I had a confirmed hostage situation on my hands — they could ignore a few circumstantial disappearances, but they couldn't ignore that.

The sky above, though patched by dark clouds, was littered with stars from end to end. I could see the vague glow of the moon hiding behind a brewing storm, providing

barely enough light to outline any buildings I passed. I wasn't thinking about direction, nor did I have much choice as the chase began, but this road led to the showers, which meant I was heading south: bog bound.

I regretted not putting my back jacket on, realizing I was destined for a night in the cold. It still sat in a ball on William's floor. I'd snatched the lockpicks at least, which sat in my back pocket. I didn't expect to be picking locks tonight, but there were worse shivs.

I had to ignore the sounds from behind: punches being thrown, and bodies hitting the floor, and Tama crying out in agony. "Run," he'd said. To turn back and help would be noble, but stupid. It's not selfish. I'm not selfish. I was doing what he wanted. Doing the only thing I could to survive this escalating nightmare.

My head still felt light: I was aware, but not present, not attentive, like I was sleepwalking. I knew I passed by the care centre, and then the showers, and I knew I could hear the bells ringing from the church, but I kept running, almost toppling downhill. The clumpy dirt beneath my feet warped to the angle of my boots. Newly lit candles appeared in nearby windows, reacting to the late-night alarm. New Eden was stirring, and I couldn't be here when it rose.

At the very southern edge of town was the boardwalk. "It rides around the whole swamp-side," Leah had said. "There's a lot of bugs when it's warm, but it's really pretty this time of year." I'd have to admire the glistening murky water another time, because all my concentration was devoted to not slipping on the wooden platform. It was a contrived shuffle, an anxious bounce, trying to avoid invisible patches of mildew and algae, trying to find an invisible destination. Maybe there was a rowboat somewhere along the boardwalk. I could paddle back upstream to that car park and drive back to town. Even if I had to walk, I'm sure I could backtrack. I'd make it work. I'd get out of here.

The first ray of light came from behind, striking the bog ahead of me. It was a bright orange, its beam too strong and focused for a lantern. The brightness lightly kissed me, accidentally, before returning with lust, eyes only for me. Then I heard a whistle — a long one, followed by an additional three, short and sharp. The beam's touch began to sting, and over my shoulder, I could see dozens more polluting the shadowy sky, bobbing up and down, getting closer, and closer, and closer.

But the beam didn't just light me up, but my surroundings too. Tree trunks, thick and thin, sprouted from the shallow water. There were small islands too: spongy, buoyant, and host to much shrubbery of their own. I swept my vision down the walkway, but unable to see any boats, I took the gamble, and leapt forward into the swamp, catching purchase on the closest island. A few more beams of light were flaring behind me, but I couldn't look back. Forward was the only direction that existed now, as far as I was concerned. I continued, leaping from island to island, catching myself on shrubbery and stiff branches, but with every stride forward, the squelching at my feet grew louder. My shoes grew heavier as I picked up more and more muck, until I heard a splash. The torchlight had faded slightly. It still pursued, but the vegetation acted like mesh, disrupting line of sight. There was yelling, and more whistling. It always started with a single long whistle, and then two to four short ones. Though most of the ruckus was indistinct, I heard one phrase plain as day: "Get Roche on the water!" It sounded amplified and reminded me that wet boots were the least of my concerns.

Each stride became shorter as the water and mud attempted to trap me, with every step forward simultaneously a step towards freedom, and capture. Every haggard lunge was an invitation to fall face first into the wet and accept my fate. But then Tama and I would

become statistics: just another two names added to the exponential list of missing persons in this hollow.

“There she is!” A lone beam focused on my position as the croaky voice of Joseph focused on me. Despite his injury — or perhaps in spite of it — he was heading the hunt. “Circle around!” he commanded. Dozens of fragmented voices replied, their essence wisping through the trees, desperate to find me. As more light drifted my way, I caught the sparkle of deeper water a dozen metres ahead. “Dead or alive!” Joseph’s voice beckoned once more. “If we cannot punish the Infidel, then God will do it for us!” Like I was some Wild West bandit, Joseph had called for my head. The Wardens carried knives, usually. Had Joseph given them bows, or was there no time? Then there was Roche: even though he only had a slug gun, if he got on the water before I got out of it, I was done.

There was a cascade of explosive force to my front-left as the arm of a rotting tree erupted, showering me in thousands of wood chips. A quick peek back offered a momentary glimpse of Joseph in the far distance. His torch was stuck out of his belt, illuminating his ghastly, noseless form, while a rifle was aimed directly toward me. His crooked smile told me that he thought he’d hit, and it shifted to a scowl when he saw my unmaimed face. I gave thanks to the vine that had latched around my toe, tripping me at the moment of impact. Without it, I’d bet my skull would have shattered in place of that peat-stained wood.

One thing I noticed in the heat of it all was that he had Roche’s slug. I briefly saw him struggling as he leant the weapon against the tree, his bony arms breaking it down to reload. If my tinted eyes weren’t deceiving me, he was still a fair distance back, opting to remain on solid ground where his aim would stay true, and his feet would stay dry. But I could see the flailing torch beams of his cronies in the sky, circling around my location. Their lack of firearms didn’t invalidate them.

The slurry wasn't high enough to swim, but it rapidly progressed. I grabbed onto whatever skeletal brush was within reach, yanking myself through muddy water until it began to thin out. It was still crowned by a layer of surface vegetation, which attached itself to me like glitter. I lost the green cloak when a few moments later I saw an approaching torch beam, and I dove beneath the water. I wasn't a good swimmer, but I wasn't being judged on form here. *Keep moving*. It was a mantra, playing on repeat as it had been for the last four days. It was peaceful down here, at least. I couldn't hear the yelling, or the whistling, or see my pursuers and their torches. A girl could die happy down here.

Then came the sputtering of a familiar, dying motor. Its sound travelled beneath the water and signalled the ferryman's approach. Joseph had sure put a lot of trust in Roche tonight. *Warden Roche*. Maybe his duties outside of transport included falsely incriminating outsiders and rounding them up when they fled. I could feel the approaching vibrations and knew it was no time for idle thoughts. But I was running out of air, and had to surface. There were no right moments, so I held out as long as I could, paddling along all the way, before emerging.

The torchlights were all focused in the same area off to the side, far from my location. But Roche's boat was in sight, with a bright white flood light adorning the front. It swept the area like a police boat, but was still focused closer to home. He was fairly on his own — he'd be unable to hear anyone over the sound of the motor — but his beam was much wider than those puny handheld torches. I gently swam to a nearby cluster of reeds and hid while I tore lingering vegetation from my skin and clothes. Roche's beam was spreading wider with each passing moment, with a much longer range. It was focusing on the far reaches that the Wardens' beams couldn't, sweeping those distant waters,

illuminating the water's edge in some places, which told me I couldn't be far off from reaching the other side.

But in a swift movement, the beam decisively shifted in my direction with focus. I surrendered to the water without a breath in my lungs, and the light seemed to linger over the thickets above. *Keep moving.*

Moments later I heard a boom, abruptly followed by a forceful rumbling on the water nearby. Then the sounds repeated, short and dull. Gunshots. The spread of birdshot scattering across the water. If that shit nicked me, out here, I was done. But with two empty lungs, I didn't have the luxury of choice — only hope. I rose out of the water, releasing a soft gasp, and opened my eyes to the face of Roche, a shortened shotgun in his healthy hand pointed in my direction. Though his voice was inaudible, I could read his lips: "Found ya."

Without thinking, I latched onto the metallic edge of the boat, using it as leverage to push myself back into the water. The edge was sharp, but duller than what would have been a shotgun blast to my face. I heard the boom again, then the rumbling, as the widespread shot rippled against the water's surface, muffled by mud and clogged ears. I knew this boat was my chance to escape. I could die hijacking it. I could die from the infection I'd get in the gashes in my palms. I could simply die from the cold. The options for death were limitless, but the options for survival were slimmer than Joseph's arms.

I flipped my legs upward, wrapping around the slimy hull, and started rocking the boat back and forth. Roche struck my hand with the gun, but it was a glancing blow: he was off balance. I took the opportunity, pulling myself onto the deck of the boat, and saw I was right — Roche had fallen onto one of the passenger seats, and was using the shotgun to prop himself back up. He was surprisingly deft for a semi-paralysed man. He maneuvered the gun up toward me, but his arm failed him, and he blasted another hole in the floor

instead. The shot rocked the boat, nearly sending me back over the side, but I over-corrected and fell onto Roche. After all that had happened, I still felt conflicted over dominating a crippled man. Then I reminded myself he'd just tried to kill me, at least four times. He offered little resistance once I planted my knee to his chest. He was without leverage and couldn't fight back as I wrested the shotgun from his hand. I held his toy up high and out of reach and took a moment to breathe. His face was the picture of disgust, with his drooping eye and mouth strangely more emotive than the other side. What was I meant to do with him? I could toss him overboard, but then I might as well shoot him right now. I wasn't a murderer, even if these people thought I was.

"I'm taking you to the other side." I yelled over the motor, hoping he could hear me. "And I'm taking your gun." *And that dark green army jacket*, I added mentally, thinking of tonight's chill.

But in my moment of triumph, my shoulder rocked with pain, an explosive tearing through flesh, and everything began moving in slow motion. From the distant shore, back towards the compound, I could just make out the silhouette of a lanky man and his rifle. I fell from my perch atop Roche, my left arm going limp, and my right being crushed under my own weight. I wailed out, eclipsing the sound of the roaring engine. Roche was cackling as he lifted himself to a seated position, before standing, splashing his feet in the water that was slowly filling the boat. He pulled a knife from his belt, then twisted it so the blade pointed down at me. He lunged, tumbling slightly, but the tip of the blade dug deep into my thigh, scratching against my femur as he used it to push himself back up. He withdrew it, unfazed by my screams, and steadied his feet, his hand higher for the second strike. But before he could pounce, I did. Swiftly, optimistically, I raised the shotgun up toward his chest, desperately hoping there was a fifth shot in the magazine. I was quick on the draw,

and it mattered. The blast struck Roche's stomach, launching his frail body up and over the side of the boat. He flailed through the air like a fish out of water, then vanished from sight. I heard him strike the surface, and then I heard nothing.

The back of my head splashed in the water that was filling the boat, reminding me that despite two new wounds, I couldn't stop. I was feeling woozy already, clambering over the deck to Roche's seat, whilst trying to hide from Joseph, who I assumed was still on the shore, ready to fire again. The large fan on the back gave a little cover. There was another shot from the shore. It struck the side, but I kept on, gingerly manipulating the boat into position and blasting off in the opposite direction, down the river and into the valley.

I skirted down the river for just a few minutes before the water I was onboarding started to become a problem. I stuck close to the water's edge, ready for a last-minute escape. I soon reached the place I'd spotted on the return from the hunt, where old wire fences were strung across the deluged mire that used to be farmland. I couldn't cross those, not with half the boat underwater. I slowed down, dimmed the searchlight, and progressively began searching for a suitable place to dock. The adrenaline was wearing off, and the true cold of this winter night was beginning to creep in. Oddly enough, the pains in my shoulder and leg were bearable. I'd taken a few minutes to tie off the wounds with a bit of rope I found onboard, and I couldn't help but laugh at my misery. A daring escape from batshit cultists, likely to die out in the wilds. How poignant.

There was no easy option for landing, so I rammed the boat into the part of the bank with the gentlest slope, grounding the bastard. I took a well-earned pause, stripping down to ring out my clothes as best I could. There was little else on board, other than some paddles and the empty shotgun. I debated whether I'd be safer taking shelter in the hull for the night, then making trails in the morning. But Joseph wouldn't cease his hunt, especially

now that I'd killed William *and* Roche — allegedly, of course. I couldn't let the Luddites get a head start. I redressed, scoffed down the jerky cubes that William had given me, then, using the shotgun like a hammer, smashed the end of one of the paddles to make a walking stick. I looked around, but the moonlight showed me little: water behind me, and who-knows-what ahead. So with the empty weapon in hand, I set off into the dark, unprepared, uncaring, unrelenting.

## Peggy

Mikayla's head dangled limply off the side of the mattress. It hardly seemed attached. A neck shouldn't bend that way.

There was blood everywhere. It stained the faded pink of her Hello Kitty bedspread. Too much blood. Far too much.

Her mouth was agape, with one of her socks jammed inside. Her eyes were open, too. Two amber eyes. Wherever I moved, they followed. They wouldn't leave me alone.

Bryce Johanssen was 57 years old then. He'd left her like that, broken, unable to move or cry out for help. He was 59 when I finally found him, and 60 when death came for him.

Mikayla's death sent widespread ripples through the west-Whangārei community. Shallow ripples. There were memorials, so many memorials, put on by people who pretended they knew her. People who *claimed* her friendship. Memorials at her family's church (which she didn't go to) and in the local paper (which she didn't read). They mourned her, for a week or two. There wasn't a day that went by where someone wasn't talking about it, until there was, and the collective local consciousness forgot her. I didn't forget though. Every time I sat alone at lunch, or walked home alone, or hid in the library alone, there were reminders. Stares sent my way. Barely hushed whispers bouncing off the cafeteria walls. *That's the dead girl's friend*, one would say. *That's so sad*, another would reply. *Her only friend is gone*. As if I somehow didn't know.

I would try to cause trouble. I'd refuse to do classwork. I'd tag the bathroom walls in plain view of the good girls. I just wanted someone to talk to me. At me. To tell me off. But no one dared. To them, I was a short-fused bomb waiting for an excuse to explode. Waiting for a spark.

I stopped going to school. At least if I was at home, Rick would yell at me. After Mum disappeared, he rarely needed a reason. Mikayla's parents took me in when he kicked me out. We'd grown apart since my family had moved to the farm, but the funeral had been a rekindling of sorts. They treated me like an adult, and they missed their daughter. I was a natural choice for a surrogate. They offered me her room: it'd been less than half a year, but they'd cleared the place out. The carpet had been redone, and the walls had been repainted. You'd never know the place was once spattered like a Pollock painting. Other than the air mattress they'd popped in for me, the room was empty. I was glad, though. Nothing good could come from lingering on the past. I was glad, for them.

Her parents worked long hours. Longer ones, since her death. I think they were avoiding each other. One day, I sat on the floor of their basement, going through boxes of Mikayla's clothes, trying on things I thought might fit. I was such a bitch. I wore her outfits right in front of them, still fishing for reactions. But they never confronted me. If anything, they seemed pleased I gave the clothes a second life. Some days later, in a box of Mikayla's old toys, I found her laptop. It was a near-new PowerBook. She'd been such a show-off when she got it that Mrs. Armisen had banned her from bringing it to school. But it was mine now, basically. Her parents didn't want it. They wouldn't even notice it was gone.

## CHAT TRANSCRIPT | 22 SEPTEMBER 2004

2:01 AM — *Donny Emmerich*: i kno i dont really kno u but i cant stop thinking about u

2:01 AM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: :))

2:01 AM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: i feel the same!

2:02 AM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: i feel lyk ive known u 4eva

2:02 AM — *Donny Emmerich*: im glad its not jst me :):):)

2:02 AM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: lyk

2:02 AM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: it jst feels so spesh

2:02 AM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: its soooo weird :3 but i luv it!

2:02 AM — *Donny Emmerich*: i luv it too

2:03 AM — *Donny Emmerich*: i think i might luv u

2:03 AM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: omg what

2:03 AM — *Donny Emmerich*: i want to be able to touch u and hold u and kiss u

2:03 AM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: ...

2:03 AM — *Donny Emmerich*: is that weird

2:03 AM — *Donny Emmerich*: is it??

2:04 AM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: ...no...

2:04 AM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: i lyk it :3

2:04 AM — *Donny Emmerich*: yeah?

2:04 AM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: yeah

2:04 AM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: i really want to see you :\* ;)

Cops had been to my house half a dozen times to question me about the days, weeks, and months leading up to Mikayla's murder. I'd seen them here, at her parents', probably twice as much. But I'd never heard the name Donny Emmerich, or any named suspect for that matter. There'd been no cops since before Christmas. 2005 had rolled around and suddenly the problems of before no longer mattered. Maybe that's why I kept Donny to myself. I couldn't trust the police with him, not when they'd abandoned Mikayla, her family, and me. As for why I didn't tell her parents about him, I don't know. It wasn't their job, I guess. It was mine. Mine alone.

The days blended as I spent every waking moment sleuthing for something — anything — about Donny Emmerich. In my slim hours of rest, I did nothing but dream of Mikayla. Sometimes it would be a memory of us as kids, eating ice-cream at the beach, or riding our bikes to school like we did most mornings. But the dream always ended the same way. Two amber eyes.

I only left her room for food, to use the bathroom, and to find research material once mine ran thin. I had stacks of phone books from across New Zealand, some decades old. When those ran out, I tried Google, and Facebook, even the fucking online obituaries. Even before I realised he wouldn't have used his real name, I knew the hunt for Donny Emmerich was futile. That didn't mean I would stop trying. I don't know how long it all went on, but Mikayla's parents eventually noticed. They called me downstairs one evening. The scolding I'd been seeking was finally coming, right when I didn't want it.

But it wasn't a scolding they offered: it was compassion. After days without washing, I'd finally slipped away for a shower that afternoon. That was when they'd peeked inside Mikayla's room, and they saw my obsession. *Everyone mourns in different ways*, said her mum, *but she wouldn't want this. She would want you to live your life, Peg.* That got me

more than I'd expected: only Mikayla had called me Peg. It was a sudden rush, a surging of emotions that caught me entirely off guard. I finally cried for my best friend.

The two consoled me, like good parents do. They let me grieve, and grieved with me. And when we were done, they handed over an envelope. Inside, I saw a cheque for \$80,000. About half of it, they said, was from Mikayla's savings. She'd worked part time since she was ten — babysitting, dog walking, dodgy back-of-house work at restaurants — and often put away any allowance she might get. The other half was from them, intended for Mikayla's now-defunct university fund. *Live for her*, they said. *Travel. Study. Experience life. Experience everything that she can't anymore. Do it for her.*

That was my last night in their home. I bought a cheap hatchback with enough room in the back for a small mattress, and I set out, travelling across the country. I studied too, just not at university like they'd implied: I studied Donny. He was my focus, and nothing the Wilcoxes told me could distract or dissuade me. Nothing else mattered.

CHAT TRANSCRIPT | 21 SEPTEMBER 2004

6.06 PM — *Donny Emmerich*: u r really funny you know

6.06 PM — *Donny Emmerich*: im having fun, are u?

6.07 PM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: yeh :3

6.07 PM — *Donny Emmerich*: good x

6.07 PM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: :3

6.07 PM — *Donny Emmerich*: its cold here

6.07 PM — *Donny Emmerich*: wish i had sum1 to cuddle

6.07 PM — *Donny Emmerich*: is it warm where u r

6.09 PM — *Donny Emmerich*: ??

6.12 PM — *Donny Emmerich*: helloo??

6.12 PM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: heyyy

6.12 PM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: sorry i had to help with making dinner

6.12 PM — *Donny Emmerich*: aw thats okay

6.12 PM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: :3

6.13 PM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: its starting to get warm again but its still wet all the tym

6.13 PM — *Donny Emmerich*: mmm i like the rain its good cuddle weather

6.13 PM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: haha

6.13 PM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: it would be nice but i have no one to cuddle

6.14 PM — *Donny Emmerich*: if only i were there...

6.14 PM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: :3 that would be nice

6.14 PM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: its not raining now. im watching the sunset

6.14 PM — *Donny Emmerich*: we could still cuddle

6.14 PM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: its very pretty

6.15 PM — *Donny Emmerich*: the sun has already set for me so i cant watch it with you :(

6.15 PM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: oh thats okay, maybe tomorrow

6.15 PM — *Donny Emmerich*: tomorrow ee cuddle?

6.15 PM — *Donny Emmerich*: we\*

6.15 PM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: haha

6.15 PM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: i meant watch the sunset together

6.15 PM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: but i would also be keen to cuddle :3

6.16 PM — *Donny Emmerich*: both would be great <3

It's easy to miss something when you don't know it's what you're looking for. That's how it was the first time I read the chats, and the second time, and the third time. Just over a year later, I scrutinised them, and the anger I'd managed to force down returned. I'd been listless on this journey of mine, travelling from town to town, city to city, aimlessly searching for anything that could bring me closer to Donny Emmerich, knowing deep down that I was wasting my time. I burned over \$10k on fast food and cheap thrills before realising how lost I was. Then one evening, I camped out in the hills near Kawhia, desperate for sleep, impatiently waiting for the sun to set. I'd always been a lousy sleeper, and since losing my eye mask somewhere down the coast, I'd found it impossible to conk out if there was any light whatsoever. I longed to get back to the east coast, where just a few weeks ago, the sunset had been noticeably earlier. And with that longing, came a moment of clarity: I was in Hamilton the next morning, and through some pedantic searching, tedious printing, and help from a patient librarian, I'd made myself some charts.

At 6.14 PM on the 21st of September, 2004, Mikayla told Donny she was watching the sunset. According to my charts — which would have made Jim Hickey proud — the sun had set at 6.18 PM in Whangārei that day. When Donny promptly responded, he claimed the sun had already set for him. I was reaching, grasping at invisible straws, but I preferred that to grasping at nothing.

At 6.07 PM, Donny said he was cold. Had the sunset brought on a sudden chill? Maybe he was outside when it disappeared over the horizon, or in an office with a west-facing window. Maybe that was his giveaway. If I assumed — as I had to — that Donny's messages were based in truth, then I felt confident that wherever in the country Donny lived, the sun had set for him between 6.03 and 6.08 that day, with room for error. That still

left a wide margin, but a manageable, focused one, that included everything east of Hastings.

There were many small towns in the eastern reaches of Aotearoa, and the slog of sifting through all their dirty laundry seemed a lot like digging without a shovel. After a day of asking irrelevant questions to irrelevant people, I knew I had to reassess. I needed help, and I wouldn't go to the police. I hired a PI.

It took me half a week to get an appointment with Lewis McPhail, which meant half a week of stewing in my failures. When Friday finally rolled around, I drove up to Napier to meet the man who would hopefully solve all my problems. He had a calming, no-nonsense demeanour, flatly telling me all I was doing wrong, and commending me for all I'd done right. But more than anything, he knew where my mind was at. He saw the desperate hunger. I wasn't hiding it, after all. And he was eager to feed it.

I told him from the start that this was something I had to do on my own, but that I needed guidance. *Wrong*, he said. *You need evidence. Concrete evidence that will confirm this man's identity when you finally stumble upon his garden party. You need a name.*

*But I had a name*, I thought, even though I knew 'Donny' was a dead end.

*Someone doing something so dastardly, so risky, would never leave breadcrumbs like that.* Lewis reminded me this wasn't some fantastical villain who wanted to be caught. His methods were brutal and to the point. They were a predator, deliberately luring their prey with a false mating call. Whoever Mikayla's murderer was, their name was not Donny Emmerich.

Lewis asked if he could make some copies of the printed transcripts, and I obliged. But when asked if he could have Mikayla's laptop, I simply told him it was gone. I didn't

want to tell him the story of how I'd left it in the rain after a long day of dark thoughts and dark liquor.

With the laptop being a dead end, Lewis offered me a short and exhaustive list of tactics to use when pursuing a target you knew nothing about. *Clients normally come to me with a more direct lead*, he'd said. *I just follow them up*. Still, it was nice to have some busywork. It numbed the guilt. To begin, Lewis had me compare this case to similar cases involving the brutalization of young women. I had a little luck there, finding five instances spread out across the North Island. None of them were remotely close to my search area, but that made sense. One of Rick's sayings came to mind: something about dogs shitting anywhere but their own yard.

Age aside, there were few links in the cases. I could have tried to contact the families for further information, but then the police might get involved. If that was how it had to go, so be it — but not yet. I wasn't letting those fuckers get their headline.

Lewis had been parsing through the chat logs in his spare time, and he picked out a few details to help narrow the search. Ironically, we had to put our trust in Donny. He'd boasted plenty in his chats with Mikayla about how lovely his life was. In those brags, he claimed to live in a two-story home with a view of the ocean, with tall sunflowers lining his driveway. He said he did 'government work' without further clarification. It could have all been lies — claims he'd made just to impress Mikayla. But why stop at sunflowers and a house with a view? Why not go further, brag about the sports car you don't have and the gold watch you've tried on but never bought? Whoever was behind Donny couldn't be all that different from their online persona.

Lewis affirmed that if I allowed my scope to be too broad, I would spread myself too thin and miss what was important. He insisted I make a list of criteria, attend to that list, and

if I failed, make a new list with new criteria. When I brought up that Donny's house could be by the sea, or up on a hill with a view, he told me to pick one. *I lived on a hill growing up, he said. That east coast wind was always battering my mother's garden. Sunflowers would never have survived up there.*

And so, with little else to go on, I spent the next nine months driving up, down, and around the east coast with a dozen collapsible maps, each tearing at the folds from overuse. I combed through suburbs, street by street, highlighting every two-story house with sunflowers I could find, thankful that summer was lingering this year. Every day was tedious and repetitive, quickly turning into weeks, then months. I was distracted, constantly teetering between passion and obsession. I was living, for her.

One cold morning, I felt the call of a pepper-steak pie. After days of sleeping in my car and living off beef jerky and energy drinks, I thought I deserved it. I was normally a 'to-go' girl, but my phone had been dead for a while, so when I spotted a free wall-socket in the bakery I decided I'd be dining in. It was warm inside too, which was a welcome reprieve from the biting winter. When my phone eventually powered on, I discovered six missed calls and 27 texts, all from Lewis. The earliest of those was two weeks prior. Shit, had it been that long?

The latest had come in this morning.

*Hope you're okay. Text me when you get this. I have a list for you.*

## CHAT TRANSCRIPT | 23 SEPTEMBER 2004

5:45 AM — *Donny Emmerich*: You're up early.

5:45 AM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: yeah, i have swim practice today

5:45 AM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: what's your excuse :p

5:45 AM — *Donny Emmerich*: Haha

5:45 AM — *Donny Emmerich*: Just waiting for you

5:46 AM — *Donny Emmerich*: :p

5:49 AM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: lol

5:49 AM — *Donny Emmerich*: wish i could see you in your swimsuit

5:50 AM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: haha

5:50 AM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: practice is so boring I dont wana gooooo

5:51 AM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: i was soi tired yesterday and i kno i will be today too

5:51 AM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: too much chatting with you

5:51 AM — *Donny Emmerich*: Do you want to stop

5:51 AM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: no i luv it

5:51 AM — *Donny Emmerich*: okay good

5:54 AM — *Donny Emmerich*: I have to go to work now darling I'll see you tonight

5:56 AM — *Donny Emmerich*: Bye darling!

6:01 AM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: okay bye!

6:01 AM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: have a good day!

I brought Lewis some Chinese food to apologise for going AWOL. We ate at his office, and after a time, he slid over a small stack of paper. He actually had two lists. One had men's names, and one had women's. *We are, of course, assuming that Donny is a man. But, I figured it was no skin off my back to print a few extra pages.* As I flicked through the sheets, careful not to stain them with orange sauce, I saw dozens and dozens of employee details, seemingly ripped right from the C.V.s. *Regional government employees,* Lewis responded to my unasked question, *with rostered hours beginning between 6 and 6.30 AM.* There were twenty or thirty pages in the men's stack, with each page having four-to-six names. *We can expand the starting hours, if need be, but this should be an excellent base.* Each name included a varied collection of details, including addresses, emails, and phone numbers. After I collected the maps from my car, cross-referenced each address with the thousands of houses I'd highlighted, and watched the morning sunrise over Napier, I was left with fifteen names. Fifteen potential murderers. It was like a giant game of 'Guess Who?'. I just had to hope I hadn't already flipped over the wrong person.

There were a few other names we could cross off the list in the early stages. Two suspects didn't have internet installed in their homes nor were they registered with a mobile company. We eliminated one candidate because he was wheelchair-bound, another because he needed dialysis every other day, and a third — a struggling middle manager — because he had worked every day for the past three years, excluding holidays. That left us with ten. Closer than I'd ever been, but it seemed so much more daunting that it had before. It had become real.

Bryce Johannsen was number six on my list. The ones that came before him had all pegged my interest a little. No one ever left the list, not even the five we had ruled out. I spent a day on some, weeks on others. Number four took me two months to push to the

side. But there was something about Bryce that drew my interest more than the others. Call it what you want — intuition, fate, luck — but somehow I knew that Bryce Johanssen had raped and killed my best friend. But I had to do my diligence, and it was too early on in what would become my career to feel comfortable relying on that instinct.

I stayed on Bryce for almost a month before continuing down the list. Lewis had warned me about tunnel vision: when you pick your target early on, and ignore everything that suggests guilt lies somewhere else. *Treat each subject with the same level of suspicion despite any preconceived ideas.* But in the back of my mind, another voice cried out, begging me to go back to Bryce, to finish it all. It sounded like Mikayla. And every day, it grew louder. So while I still spent the next six weeks checking out the final few on the list — and revisiting some of the earlier ones — I also spent a little time each day finding out everything I could about the man I **knew** stole Mikayla's life and innocence.

Bryce Johanssen was married, with five children. Four were in their late teens or early twenties, while the other was just a few years old. Only one had moved out of home, but they frequently returned for family dinners. His house was gorgeous — a modern slate-grey villa at the back end of a large suburban block. In the early summer, sunflowers lined the long, curving driveway. I'd seen him a few times on my drive-bys, often standing on the upstairs balcony, looking out towards the sea with a drink in his hand. Sometimes he was talking on the phone. Sometimes he had his laptop out. He smiled a lot. I hated it. I hated him. I hate him.

He'd appeared in his local newspaper seven times in the decade before he killed Mikayla. He'd acted as a voice for the community and a friend to the people, often travelling to the big cities on their behalf, making appeals to both government and private organisations for aid to help his small town see its way through the changes wrought by the

21st century. *Oh yes, he's all over the place*, an older lady at the local coffee shop said. *He was in Hamilton a few months ago, speaking to some big-wig family out there about farming solutions. It was Northland the year before, and Wellington before that. He's a pillar of the community.* According to Bryce's council contract, he was a liaison officer. That normally meant establishing and continuing communication with local organisations, but occasionally saw him travelling as far as Australia. It was on these trips that his guise of the perfect husband burst like the skin of a blanched tomato.

There was a house down the road from Bryce's, occupied by an elderly widow who needed some extra money, and was renting out a spare room. It was an upstairs bedroom, with an ensuite bathroom and space for a microwave and mini-fridge. It was perfect. Two large windows offered slightly different perspective on Bryce's home, while still being far enough away that no one would notice my incessant staring. With just over half of my \$80,000 remaining, I could afford to stay there for years. For the first time in his life, Bryce had become the prey.

Months passed before Janice — my landlady — told me I needed to get out of the house more. She spoke with blurred intent, trying to act encouraging when really, she was sick of my lingering. I didn't see the big deal — it's not like I was noisy — but I started taking her dog for walks, lending credit to my aimless wandering of the suburb. When I noticed the Johannsens had a dog too, I hatched what I thought was a dastardly scheme. Two days after posting flyers for my dog walking service, I was so overwhelmed by the wealthy neighbourhood's response that I had to turn some folks down. A few days later, I got a call from Persephone Johannsen requesting I walk her precious little terrier, Sir Lancelot. I'd gagged at the pretentiousness but swallowed my distaste and told her I'd stop by the next morning to pick him up. Bryce was already out by the time I arrived, but I got to take my first

steps inside their lavish home. Every surface was smooth. A wide, white marble staircase climbed up to a balcony that overlooked the large entry room. I spotted eight doors from where I waited in the foyer. A crystal chandelier hung in the centre, its lights brightened by the incredibly reflective room.

Lancelot came on walks with me three times a week. It was good money, for what it was. With around 10 dogs total, I was making a bit over \$2000 a month, tax-free. The money easily covered my rent and distracted me from Bryce's constant presence in my mind. Lewis hadn't made contact for a few months. He wasn't working the case, not officially. He just offered guidance, when he had the time. But after six months of walking dogs and watching my window instead of the TV, he called me in for a chat. I shamelessly yapped about my progress, and how I'd even convinced Persephone to let me do some work around the house for her. He seemed pleased, almost proud. But there was something he wasn't saying, caught between his teeth like a rotting fruit seed. He kept starting sentences and finding reasons to stop, and was uncharacteristically willing to let me talk over him. But when I finally asked him point blank what was eating at him, he revealed all, in a rehearsed, monotonous series of statements.

*I understand this case is very personal to you.*

*I understand you don't trust the law.*

*Please be sure of your actions before you act.*

*Guarantee Bryce Johannsen's guilt.*

It didn't take much to convince Persephone to hire me to wait tables at Bryce's 60th birthday party. I'd been walking Lancelot for over half a year now, and done plenty of other

odd jobs for her, from cleaning her kitchen to being her right hand in the garden, but her personality was grating on mine, and I left every conversation exhausted by her air of superiority. She didn't view me as a friend, but as 'the help'. That worked for me.

The celebration was a tedious event that stretched from lunch into the late evening. Throughout the day, over a hundred people came and went, with at least forty or fifty constantly occupying the downstairs areas, especially the outdoor patio, where we continually replenished the cocktail tables. I'd met all the Johannsen children before. They treated me with kindness, though like their mother, they thought of me as a servant. But it was my first time meeting Bryce in person. Every other time I'd been over, he'd either been upstairs, or at work. He was a bloated man, with a gut that spilled over his belt. Thankfully, he had tucked in his dress shirt, though the black didn't slim him as he probably hoped. He spoke with a confident arrogance that somehow made you like him, until you took a moment to realise the truth of what he'd said. He spoke in veiled insults and self-indulgent rants, regularly reestablishing the pecking order that he was already the head of. Around the side of the house, I overheard his two oldest kids passing complaints about him back and forth as easily as they passed their secret cigarette. But when they returned, they were nothing but smiles and love. How long do you have to pretend at happiness before it becomes real?

All the servers were told to use the upstairs bathroom. Upstairs had always been out-of-bounds for me, until now. Naturally, a part of me wanted to rush up at the first excuse, but patience had gotten me this far. I was cautious and calculating. I avoided the bathroom all day and made sure people saw me making my rounds regularly. I wanted people to think "Wow! Does she ever take a break?" — though I wasn't sure that'd get noticed in this demographic anyway. Shortly before 6 PM, Persephone let everyone know

toasts were about to begin out on the patio, followed by canapés. *I should probably use the restroom now*, I told the rest of the waitstaff while Persephone was still in earshot. *I haven't been all day, and I don't want to have to duck out during serving*. I quickly bounded the glossy steps and turned down the hall towards the bathroom. *First door on the left*, we'd been told. I strolled straight past it, sailing towards the farthest one instead.

Other than the wide, padded computer chair with a particularly deep impression on the seat, the office furniture was modern like the rest of the home. The desk was curved and thin. A bulky laptop rested upon a mess of documents that engulfed the desk's surface, while a pair of frosted glass doors invited one to step out onto the balcony. It was on that balcony that I'd caught my best glimpses of Bryce before today, mostly from my own bedroom windows. He had once silently watched from above as I brought Lancelot home, a bit later than usual. He didn't say a word to me, but his thoughts lay bare in his eyes. I didn't like them.

His office offered me little in the way of easy evidence. The papers on the desk all seemed work related, with the Hawkes Bay District Council printed along the top of most. His laptop, though open, was password protected, and none of the various sticky notes posted around the place gave any hints. I tried three different spellings of Persephone, replacing the 'e's with '3's on the last two, but knowing too many attempts would lock me out, I left it at that, and abandoned the room.

I immediately turned to the door across the hall. It was identical to the rest — walnut brown with grooves carved in symmetrical pointed shapes — but I noticed the handle was sticky. Without further thought, I opened it to find a young girl — the youngest Johannsen — sitting at a small red desk, adding life to what looked like the final page of her colouring book. I'd met her only in passing until now. She looked up at me, blankly, but the

allure of her eyes captured me, blue like a crystal lagoon. She quickly smiled in vague recognition and said *Hi*. I hadn't realised she wasn't downstairs until now. *Is the party over?* She was eager for the answer to be yes.

*It's not.*

She sulked. *Then what are you doing in here?*

*I'm sorry. I was looking for the bathroom.*

*It's that way.* She pointed through the wall.

*Thank you. What are you drawing?*

She held up her book to face me. *I just finished the dragon. Now I'm drawing the unicorn.*

*They're very good.* It was nice to see something with colour. Her room seemed to be the exception to the house's rule of grey, white, and brown. Her desk was red. Her walls were yellow, like daffodils. Her bed was pink too, bright pink. Her pillowcase was—  
was—

*Can I see your pillow?*

*Why?* She seemed confused more than protective, like no one had taken interest in her things before.

*It's cool. It looks cool, I mean.*

*Thanks. Daddy got it for me.* She stood up from her desk, gesturing to me to follow. We both stood at either side of the pillow. It was pink too, but just barely. Dotted flowers and love hearts decorated the edges, enveloping the central figure — a cosy, sleeping cat with a red bow in the corner of her face. A streaky, red-brown mark, dark at the edges, stained the pillow right where Hello Kitty's nightgown met her face.

*What happened to it?* I pointed at the stain.

*I scratched myself when I was sleeping.*

*Did you?*

*That's what Daddy said.*

Cornering Bryce during one of his excursions would have been safest, but I couldn't predict when one would occur, where it would lead him, or which young girl he would kill. It'd been almost a year since I'd arrived on this street, and the only nights he'd been missing from home were when he and Persephone left for a trip together. Maybe she was in on it, in which case she'd get her comeuppance as well, because if I couldn't get at Bryce on the road, then I would take him out in his own home. I would confront him in front of his seemingly perfect wife, and his apparently loving children. They would watch as I gutted their father without remorse; as the floors glistened with sinful blood; as I fell to my knees and accepted whatever punishment came. I had come to terms with the fact that I would go to prison for this. As I arrived at the Johanssen house, two and a half years after Mikayla's death, I realised that the surviving family might enact their own vengeance. I might never see the inside of a police car, let alone a jail cell.

And then I noticed there was only a single car in the driveway. That was strange. It was Friday night — family dinner night. That meant everyone should be home. I'd neglected to watch the house today. Instead, I'd gone knife shopping. The serrated blade seemed heavier with every step. My grip seemed looser with every breath.

The front door opened without complaint, and without Lancelot to greet me like usual. The lights in the foyer were out, but a faint glow emanated from the kitchen to my right. It was just enough to see the outline of a stiff, turgid corpse hanging from the balcony

railing by a thick rope noosed around his wide neck, swaying ever so gently. I could just barely see the reflection of his eyes. Like Mikayla's, they followed me everywhere I went.

**CHAT TRANSCRIPT | 24 SEPTEMBER 2004**

**6:22 PM — Donny Emmerich:** Heyyy

**6:22 PM — Mikayla Wilcox:** hey!

**6:23 PM — Donny Emmerich:** I hope this isnt weird but i have to come to Whangarei tomorrow for my cousin's birthfay

**6:23 PM — Mikayla Wilcox:** omg really?

**6:23 PM — Donny Emmerich:** birthday\*

**6:23 PM — Donny Emmerich:** Yeah!

**6:23 PM — Mikayla Wilcox:** oh wow!

**6:23 PM — Mikayla Wilcox:** i need to see you!

**6:23 PM — Donny Emmerich:** I need to see you too!

**6:23 PM — Donny Emmerich:** Im so glad you're keen

**6:24 PM — Mikayla Wilcox:** its just so soon

**6:24 PM — Mikayla Wilcox:** not in a bad way tho

**6:24 PM — Mikayla Wilcox:** just unexpected

**6:24 PM — Donny Emmerich:** yeah i kno

**6:24 PM — Donny Emmerich:** Where do you want to meet

**6:24 PM — Mikayla Wilcox:** oh well i dunno

**6:25 PM — Mikayla Wilcox:** my parents aren't home and they took the car

**6:25 PM — Mikayla Wilcox:** so i cant drive n e where

**6:25 PM — Mikayla Wilcox:** which is okay, it just means it has to be close

**6:25 PM — Mikayla Wilcox:** or i could get a ride from a friend

**6:25 PM — Donny Emmerich:** I could come to you?

**6:25 PM — Donny Emmerich:** i'll have my car

6:27 PM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: hmmmm

6:27 PM — *Donny Emmerich*: we could even just hang out at your house for a bit

6:28 PM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: i dunno

6:28 PM — *Donny Emmerich*: watch the sunset mayb ;)

6:28 PM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: ohhh

6:28 PM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: that would b nice

6:28 PM — *Donny Emmerich*: Its a date then <3

6:28 PM — *Mikayla Wilcox*: okay :3

## Chapter Eleven: Caged

'As do I assent your power to give the unworthy over to God, so he may strengthen off of that which would otherwise weaken. The bread of God for all, to replenish Him.

*--Second Testament of Enoch, Chapter Six, Verses 34-35*

Between dreaming and rousing, there's a liminal space that's hard to define: peaceful; stressful; wistful; grating. In dreams, events flow like water down rapids, the pace always changing, the end always uncertain. A false reality that few people have the skill to wake up from. In life, however fast you're going, you measure, determine, and deliberate each step, and, like in a dream, you never doubt your existence. You assume you're awake, and that what you're doing is real. Real enough. But in that place where you don't know you're awake, yet somehow you know you're no longer asleep — that is where the edges of your realities meet. The dream and the day collide, forcing you to choose one. It'd been over ten years since I'd last dreamed: ten years since my last visit to this place. I'd missed it, and I wanted nothing more right now than to stay hidden in my reverie. But the bites of the cold air and the wail of wind were too tangible for me to ignore.

I'd been on a bed. I think I had, anyway, but it had disappeared some time ago. Now, my legs lay stiff across cold hard ground. I was leaning against metal bars — cage bars — that dug into my upper back. My right hand tingled painfully, held aloft by a tight handcuff, which was invisible in the pitch black. I pulled at it hard, hearing the rattle of metal against metal without any give.

A bubble of pressure encompassed my left shoulder. It felt primed to burst, though I was unsure whether it would implode or explode. My left leg flared when I tried to shift it,

like millions of tiny volcanoes simultaneously erupting. These agonies were foreign and confusing, until I remembered my wounds. Joseph had shot me. Roche had stabbed me. And I'd killed Roche... *I'd killed Roche?*

I could hear rushing water nearby. Distant, reflective light outlined some nearby shadows, and the outlines of the bars. The faintest silhouette of thick bandages wrapped around my thigh, where the knife had scraped against my bone. I felt wet, and sticky. Dried sweat caked my skin, and fresh beads poured down my forehead. My body flashed: hot; then cold; hot; then cold; confused both physically and mentally.

A thin burlap cushion grated my bare arse, bringing the realisation that I sat in only underwear. The bars of my cell caged me in, and like a wild tiger transplanted to a foreign zoo, a fog of fear hazed everything I thought I knew. Wasn't I outside? I *was* running, running through the wilds. I'd shored the boat, made a crutch, and started off to find a way out. And then... What happened next? Where did I go? What happened to my time?

"You awake?" I gasped, wincing as my whole body shuddered from the surprise voice. Its source was invisible in the darkness, but then I noticed a shifting shadow, a hand sifting through the dark, hailing me from the far end of my cell.

"What is this?" My words came out conjoined, and mushy, as if my mouth was set to slow motion, but it hadn't told my brain.

"The first day of the rest of your life." The shadow replied dryly. "Enjoy it. It doesn't get any better."

Reality felt slick and slimy, nearly impossible to latch onto. The voice of the shadow in the corner for the exception. I knew the shadow was real, only because it kept asking me to repeat myself.

“Where are we?” I asked clearly after a few slurred attempts.

“Does it matter?” replied the shadow.

“Where?”

The voice sighed. It was a feminine voice, but it was gravelly and tired. “Somewhere underground. I don’t know.”

“Beneath New Eden?”

“I guess.”

I found that answer satisfactory, despite its implications. I’d known there’d be somewhere hidden like this, like a basement or a tunnel. Somewhere the worst of New Eden filtered down to. “What’s your name?”

“Maria,” she replied. “What’s yours?”

“Maria Dempsey?” The name — one from my files — emerged clearly from my mouth without warning or intent.

“How do you know me?” she stuttered.

“I’ve been trying to find you. I guess I succeeded.” I huffed out a stifled laugh. It felt a little inconsiderate, but what could I do but laugh? It was truly my fucking luck.

“How did you know I was here? I didn’t tell anyone.”

I dug through the folds of my brain, trying to excavate the correct information. “Your sister, I think. Julia? She reported you missing. There was a credit card charge to a hotel in Gisborne last year, but your trail went cold there.”

“But how did you know I was *here*?”

“You’re not the only girl to go missing in these parts. I found another trail.”

She didn’t respond immediately, and silence took the air again for a few minutes. I didn’t have the energy to keep the conversation going. “How many other girls?” she finally asked.

“Around ten. And two males. I found one of them. One of the girls, up above.”

“There’s five down here.”

“There’s more down here?”

“Yes. We all belong to Enoch.”

I wanted to laugh again. I thought I’d met a sane individual, someone with obvious disdain for New Eden and its principles. “You believe all that, huh?”

“There’s nothing to believe in when the truth is laid bare.” Her voice had become automated, empty of energy. “We are his.”

“Is that what you want?”

“It doesn’t matter what I want.”

I began hoping this shadow *was* a figment of my imagination. That would somehow feel safer than being stuck in here with this screwhead. *It’s not her fault*; I had to remind myself. Maria was one of the more normal individuals from my files. She’d had no history of drugs or violence or even parking tickets. Her family was well-off, and she’d completed a Bachelor’s degree in 2022 — it was a Bachelor of Arts, but still. Now, she was a darkened outline, without discernible details, barely distinct from the surrounding void. She would have no impact on the world, other than making it a little bit darker in a place where no one cared.

The sudden flash of the floodlights above abruptly proved that light, like darkness, can be blinding if neither is properly balanced. Pain surged through my body as I tried to

escape the bright, bright white, unwittingly squirming away from it like a cockroach when you discover its hiding place. Painfully hot globes danced in my clenched eyelids, bobbing, blurring. There was nothing but agony. Maria was right: it didn't get any better.

My arm fell limply as the handcuff was unlatched, making me realise just how little strength I had in my shoulder. The gunshot hadn't seemed so bad in the moment. Neither had the knife in my leg. But the adrenaline had worn off, and I couldn't resist screaming as a much stronger person pulled me to my feet, flexing my wounds in all the worst ways. I couldn't comprehend anything they said as they shoved me through the cage door. My head struck the side, knocking me deeper into the daze I was trying to climb out of. I kept blinking, slowly and deeply to adjust my eyes, as another figure grabbed me by the arms from behind, steering me down the rocky corridor. Unrefined stone, to my sides, above my head, below my feet. A stubbed toe, courtesy of small stalagmite, was a minor addition to my growing collection of woes. I turned back, blinking again, and saw the lean, muscular outline of the man who had raised me from the ground. He closed the cage door, locking Maria away, alone again.

Except she wasn't alone, not strictly. She sat up against a slanted stone with a dark brown blanket around her shoulders. Her long stringy black hair embellished the pale and spindly features that cemented her among the Luddite ranks. But distinctively, beneath her hips, there were no legs: there were two sutured stumps, cut mid-thigh, acting as props for her bulging pregnant belly, which was bare for all to see in this bright light.

I'd grown used to living under duress over the last week, but it peaked down here, in these caves lit by floodlights, and home to creatures like millipedes, spiders, and legless pregnant

women. I couldn't comprehend exactly what I had seen, and struggled to find a palpable explanation. It was a trick of the light, or some sort of visual illusion. It had to be, to alleviate the churning in my stomach, and the haunting in my heart.

The floodlights were present in each of the large chambers we passed through, strobing me relentlessly, smothering me in a new kind of purgatory that finally ended when they took me to a side chamber and forced down into a splintering seat, with my hand once again cuffed. Time kept escaping me, the seconds unwilling to be counted. *Was I still dreaming?* No: I could feel the cold floor against my feet; the unbalanced legs of the rough-hewn chair; the pain... It was all tangible. I clamped my eyes, hiding from the intolerable, hiding inside myself, hiding from the terror I'd awakened to. I heard a concussive drone as the floodlights were shut down, their searing burns finally waning. A much softer hue permeating the chamber. My eyelids flickered with trepidation, matching the candles lighting the room, which cast a soft orange glow against the dripping slate walls. I was cuffed to a rough pole lodged firmly in the centre of the room. Behind me, at the entrance of this chamber, was darkness, save for a single, slowly approaching flame. It traced a woman in clothing distinct from the standard Luddite array. She wore blue overalls with a long-sleeved brown undershirt; both were heavily stained. Her biceps were gripped by tight sleeves. Though lean, her face was full, and slightly familiar. She seemed so normal, and after a few days in New Eden, that seemed bizarre.

Her head perked and pace quickened as she realised I was watching, briskly circling to the room's far side where she placed her candlestick on top of a cabinet and opened the drawer beneath. She turned to me briefly. Her face was gentle like a golden retriever, and with shaggy blonde hair to boot. But her eyes were wolflike, bearing a cruelty that spoke volumes about the evil she'd seen and done. Her stare pierced me like a rusted blade, a

corrupting effect stressed by the syringe she pulled from the drawer, and the malicious intent she approached me with. I stammered something that neither of us could understand, and she looked at me quizzically, then with a strange sort of compassion.

“Hmm. The effects haven’t quite worn off, have they? Ye did get a higher dose, after all...” She spoke with a similar twang to Joseph, but without contamination — her accent was pure redneck.

“Dose? What dose? What are you talking about?” She put the syringe to the side, placing it on the pillow of a small hospital-style bed against the wall and then retrieved the candle she’d walked in with. She maneuvered the flame near my face. I tried to back away, but with my arm restrained and any movement causing pain, I relented quickly. With her thumb and index finger, she pried my eyelids open, inspecting them closely.

“We don’t really have a name for it. I wanted to call it ‘rapture’,” — she said the word with pizzazz — “but Cousin said that was too dramatic. ‘Too uncouth for the Ludditious Faith’, he said. But what’s uncouth about truth? I certainly felt raptured by it, first time I partook.”

I shook my head in disbelief, but it was like moving through treacle. “You drugged me? That’s how you brought me here?”

“Oh no, darling, not me.” She paused for a moment, considering. “Although, cause and effect... I suppose I had as much a hand in your elation as Cousin.”

“Cousin?” I knew where I recognised her from now. Not only did she look and speak like Joseph, but I had seen her ID in the box under William’s bed. It had to be her — the ‘healer’ who supposedly left the Luddites. I couldn’t place her name.

“Your country is truly beautiful. The final frontier for humanity; the untapped bounds of this world. Enoch’s decision to settle here was wise, in this valley, particularly. It is home

to so many unique and wonderful fauna, many of which have been hardly studied by your people, and have so many hidden uses. The root of the tea-tree, in this case. Potent stuff, when brewed under the right conditions.”

“Why did Joseph drug me?” I asked, determined. “How?” I had practiced the questions in my head a dozen times, intent on delivering them without slurring. She looked at me like I was an idiot.

“You were trying to escape, and he couldn’t have that. Not now, especially. You threatened to dismantle everything.” I tried to think back to that day. Had Joseph known I was going to run? He could have easily slipped something into my dinner on the sly. Or maybe it was on that rag Roche stuffed in my mouth? Some kind of anaesthetic, and most definitely hallucinogenic: the dreams, missing for over a decade, had resumed. I dreamt of Mikayla, Lewis, and the Johannsens.

My dissociation ceased when I felt a thick needle enter my arm. I hadn’t even noticed the tourniquet she’d tightened around my bicep. “Though the ongoing effects are obvious,” she clarified, “I still require a sample. Should tell us how long ‘til you’re useful, eh?”

“I don’t understand. I still don’t understand. Who are you, why am I here? What do you want with me?”

“Oh my, I- please forgive me. I introduced myself earlier, but I forgot — you weren’t quite present. Still aren’t, you ask me. My name is Audry, and I’ll be your Matron down ‘ere. Joseph has told me of your sins, but like the others, you can still have a purpose in serving those above.”

“May I appropriate this conversation?” Joseph asked from the entrance behind. “She might understand more completely, if the words come from a friend.”

“Of course, Cousin. I’ve all I need in any case. I’ll send the Wardens through shortly to return her to her quarters.”

“There is no need, Audry. Have them meet me at her cell. I’ll see her there myself.”

Audry nodded, handing him the handcuff keys, then cheerfully smiled at me as she left, like I was her buddy and not her lab rat. As she left, Joseph sidled around, pulling up a chair out of the darkness and sitting opposite me, keeping a wary distance. Strips of bandage, padded with crusty gauze, wrapped around his like an upside-down ‘Y’. Dried blood welded the wrapping to the hole in the centre of his face. “I prevail, in spite of my scars,” he said to me directly as I stared at his disfigurement.

“You were already an ugly fucker. No harm done.” I wanted to spit in his face, but my mouth was stale and dry.

“Always with the vitriol, Ms. Matheson. Have you not realised how little your behaviour accomplishes for you? Have you not learned from your mistakes?”

I scoffed, exhausted. “I think you’re confusing mistakes for misfortune.”

“Bah! You think it was bad luck that drove you into this pit? Oh, Margaret, will you not step up and take responsibility for your own actions? *You* sought us out. *You* cast us the fools, when the role belonged to you from the start. And what did your actions accomplish?” He stood now, his ego requiring extra room to strut. “In your world? Not a thing. At best, your name is added to a list that will be filed away at the turn of your false year. But in our world,” — he suddenly stopped his pace, turned and clasped my face with his gristly hands — “in the real world, you’ll be a saviour. And nobody will ever know.”

A haunting wail echoed down the twisting cavern; a fitting score for the horror movie unfolding around me. I was beyond degradation. My hands cuffed behind my back put

exorbitant strain on my wounded shoulder as I limped down the mangled corridor. Joseph prodded me on, with nothing but his wavering torchlight to guide me. The cold clawed at my exposed skin, my energy tapering. The crying grew louder with every stride forward. I realised it was not the extended, unending howl of wind against cavern walls, but succinct, repetitive, and human. Each wail gnawed at me with a sharpness distinct from the chilling winds. Joseph wasn't taking questions: "*Seeing is believing,*" he'd said.

There was no telling how far we'd travelled, or for how long. Keeping track in this labyrinthian network, which sprawled in dozens of disorderly directions, would have been challenging if I was in peak form. It was pointless to even try in my current state, though I could feel my subconscious vainly attempting. It was headache inducing, and so when we turned the corner and I set my sight on the source of the wailing, my empathy and sorrow were mingled with pain. Always more pain.

This siding of the cave had braced walls, with a cage face mounted into the stone. A semi-circular cavity made up the back-end of the trap, and small lights provided a dim, pale glow. Inside the cage, sitting on a rocking chair in dire need of upholstery, was another woman. I recognised her face from my files, but not her name. She stared absently, not noticing our arrival as the chair rocked back and forth, gently swinging the baby in her arms. It couldn't have been more than a few days old. She was unconsciously pushing the crying baby's mouth towards her exposed nipple, but it wasn't latching, as if it sensed the unenthusiasm of its parent. The woman — Lily was her name, I now remembered — had a dark green blanket over her lap, with a plush cushion for her elbows. The blanket came down to her mid-calf, but only her left foot poked out from under. I turned to Joseph apathetically, trying to mask my reaction, but his crooked smile told me I had failed. If

seeing *was* believing, what exactly did he want me to believe? Was abject horror his intent? Or was there a deeper meaning here, one that I was meant to understand but couldn't?

I knew these questions would receive no answers, so I didn't ask. I knew that to strike the hole in his face with my forehead would get me nowhere, so I didn't bother. He was unfortunately right about one thing: my actions got me here. Now, I understood their consequences, or rather, their senselessness. It wasn't crime and punishment; it was glee and whimsy orchestrated by a delusional sadist. I kept my mouth shut, knowing eventually he would open his. I felt like I was on a colonial museum tour, left without choice of which atrocity of man I would see next, and under immense social pressure to keep any comments to myself.

We didn't stop for long. We detoured down a side passage, narrower than the rest, and difficult to manoeuvre through with my injuries and bound arms. Joseph insisted he hold the chain that linked my cuffs. I was his pet, and he couldn't let me wander off.

The baby's cries petered out as we departed, to my relief, but relief wasn't worth much down here, for we quickly arrived at the next exhibit. Similarly to Lily's enclosure, iron bars enclosed a hollowed section of cave, but was much wider than Lily's 3-by-3 metre pen. There were also more occupants, and actual beds, as opposed to the burlap pads in mine. I concluded they had placed me in the naughty corner, and I started wondering what Maria had done to end up there with me. These thoughts came to me not because they were relevant, but because they were distracting. They meant that, even though I looked upon the four women in the chamber before me, or the four children that were with them, I didn't have to think about them. The women were aged between 18 and 40, and two of them were noticeably pregnant. It came as no surprise now that each of the four were missing limbs. All the children were girls, and they thankfully had all their appendages.

Three were toddlers, while the other was probably around five years old. He had long matted hair, and reminded me of the kid from that Brie Larson movie. There was no reaction from anyone when Joseph and I appeared, other than a little fear in the eyes of the children, who stayed close to the adults.

“Are you beginning to understand, Margaret?” Joseph asked as I met the empty stares of the prisoners who dared to look up. “They are part of His plan. It was *always* going to end here. Your coming only incentivised the inevitable. He truly looked favourably upon me, to ensure your correspondence reached my hands. I couldn’t believe His foresight, at first, and now that all is said and done, I still stand in disbelief. Margaret?” He snapped his fingers to summon my attention. “Margaret.”

I turned my head, so slightly, just to bring his eyes into view. “I didn’t do this.” I said defiantly. “And I don’t know what mental gymnastics you’re conducting to make you think I had any part in it. This is your sickness alone.”

He peered at me quizzically before reaching an ‘aha’ moment. “Oh, oh Margaret, of course this is not your doing,” he replied, never failing to condescend when the chance was available. “Call it a parable. I merely wished to reconfirm the futility of your cause. You wanted to find these girls, and return them to Satan’s clutches. You would steal them from the Valley of Eden, render them useless to God and revoke their entry into Heaven above. But they were never yours to find.”

“You knew.” I spoke, softly, unable to hide my shame. “You knew the whole time.” He shook his head like a disbelieving parent watching their child repeatedly making the same mistake.

“Bryce Johannsen’s departure from the Ludditious Faith was untoward. Blasphemy parted his lips. He was the first to be named Infidel. He wished to do horrendous things —

horrendous! He would have seen the women of the faith despoiled, repeatedly. He claimed righteous purpose, but I knew the only purpose he wanted to serve was his own sexual release! His expulsion was necessary. But despite their obliquely vile intent, something of his words rang true.

“When his daughter sought to follow in his footsteps, we were wary, but William permitted entry nonetheless. She was a disruptor of a different ilk. She brought shards of chaos to New Eden, much like her predecessor. The decision to monitor her family was validated when her mother sought you out.”

It clicked then: I was outside the lie now. There was no one left to convince. The man before me was all-knowing, stripping back the layers of deceit I had been stitching together for months.

“A private investigator! It was such a novel thought! My Wardens were bemused at the idea, believing you incapable. But like the Johannsens, you quickly proved... unruly. At first I had chastised Mr. Cromwell for neglecting to retrieve his predecessor’s belongings. Once he became aware of their misplacement, however, it took little deduction to discover who absconded with them. And then, when your *lackey* spent that week stalking Cromwell, it was us who delivered him unto you. It was a test of your intent, a test that — in my eyes — you passed with flying colours. I could not ignore the signs: He wanted you here, and finally you will achieve your purpose!” The performer inside Joseph had finally broken free. It had been cooped up inside, begging me to give it an excuse to escape. But it found escape on its own, and now that it was free, it danced and frolicked, aware that its time outside was limited. Like me, it knew where it was destined to return to, and it knew not how long its next incarceration would be. It had to make use of these fleeting moments.

“You’re breeding them.” I said, dejected, still without the strength to match his bravado. “They’re cattle.”

“They are God’s creatures!” Joseph rebuked vehemently. “He created women to further propagate life!”

I scoffed. “And you suppose you have the privilege of sticking your cock inside them?” The slap against my face was immediate. The caged women — emotional zombies — offered no response.

“I do not touch them! You compare my whims to Johanssen’s?” He sounded betrayed. He’d begun digging his fingers deep into my arms before shoving me away, where I was caught by a Warden who had been silently following in the shadows. “To the chantry! Now!”

As much as I tried to deny the dehumanisation process having already begun, I wasn’t objecting to being tossed around like a ragdoll, or herded like the pen animal I seemed destined to become, because what could I do? Fighting back would get me nowhere, and even if I won, where would I go?

The Warden held me much tighter than he needed, hoisting me slightly to put less weight on my injured leg, but straining my shoulder and stretching the wound. I realised then it had been sewn up, and each stitch threatened to pop with every erratic motion until we reached a chamber that was comparably refined to the rest of the cavern. It was a shallow cavity with dim lights strung up above. The floor was smooth, free from ridges and bumps, while the opposing corner hosted two perpendicular brick walls, each with a wooden door in the centre. The left door was plain, but the right one was stained dark like the furniture in William’s home, and delicately carved with an ornate cross in the centre. Joseph had the Warden thrust me in the direction of the second. His tirade had hardly

ceased since beginning, but with every declaration I could make less and less sense of it all. I'm sure my wearied mind was partly to blame, but I knew too that his statements were disjointed and irrelevant to each other. The man had lost his Druid, his nose, and now, it seemed his sanity was following.

I jolted in surprise as the carved door opened from the other side, causing the Warden to clutch me tighter still. A feminine figure emerged from the doorway, their head lowered in deference to the presence of Joseph, their bony body nude in the pale glow of the antechamber. "Forgive me, Druid Joseph," the decrepit form squeaked. "I wasn't aware—"

"Is he awake?" Joseph interrupted.

The girl nodded, not daring to raise her head. She retained all her limbs, but scars garnished the entirety of her body. Some were small, like the cuts of a craft knife. Others were long like the lashes of a whip, or intricate like the grooves on a clay pot about to go on the fire. Many bald spots marred her scalp, and her long black hair was torn in places. There was a slight inherent tremor to her, unrelated to the chill of the cave. Between the stringy curtains of her hair, a single eye stared forward, down toward the ground, but it abruptly twitched upward. It was a bright blue, like a crystal lagoon, but with whites the colour of a blood moon.

"Return to your cell, Infidel Paisley. You have performed your duty."

I had known, even before I had seen her gem-like eye, who this girl was. Call it a PI's intuition: this was the girl whose mother begged me for her safe return, and whose father killed my best friend. Was William lying when he said she had died?

Paisley Johannsen kept a wide berth from our entourage as she departed, moving with apparent freedom. Freedom that came at a cost. She had exited the chantry that

Joseph so desperately wanted me to see, and I knew I had just *barely* averted something horrid.

There are some images that never leave you: your best friend's face limply hanging from their bed; your best friend's killer gentling swinging with a rope around their neck; and then, this — Joseph's grotesque slice of New Eden. Its excellent assembly, distinct from the caves, made it seem as if it had been taken directly from a surface church. Cobblestone floors; white brick walls; a narrow green rug acted like a landing strip, guiding us towards the end of the long room, where a cross hung high in a recess on the far wall, backlit with a light so bright it illuminated the whole chamber. But arranged before the cross was an alien display, appearing somewhat like an archaic hospital room setup. A metallic bed frame held yellowed-white blankets which cocooned the bed's occupant. Even from here I could hear their haggard breaths, distorted by whatever phlegm was clogging their lungs. On a fat, old computer monitor was an array of vitals. An IV line hung on a pole on the opposite side of the bed, while Audry stood to the side, fiddling with a syringe and a series of vials. Joseph had me pushed forward, and forward some more, until I was standing at the foot of the bed. The binds on the arms, hands, and legs confirmed this man was not here of his free will. There was little consciousness in the man's face, but he wasn't catatonic: just dulled. There was something else there too, like we had met in passing. He must have been at least eighty, but despite his wrinkles and sunken jowls, there was a certain confident charisma in his resting half-smile. It was the moment before Joseph spoke his name that something registered inside. It was the eyes, I think. They appeared only between extended blinks, but there was a warmth in them: a sense of safety. It was a sense I'd only felt once recently, as the stone statue of Enoch welcomed me into New Eden. So when Joseph introduced me to the Eidolon, the astonishment had already come and gone.

“Death could not take him.” Joseph claimed. “And so he has found purpose here, serving God on Earth where he could not in Heaven above.” I spun my head to Joseph, ready to ask what purpose a man in his position could serve, when I again caught sight of Audry playing scientist with her vials. She was holding two side-by-side in comparison. In my distraction, Joseph resumed. “It is only by strengthening our holy presence on Earth that we can hope to counteract the damage that has been done. Druid Enoch was the holiest of all, and yet in life, he didn’t procreate. We are remedying that.”

“Remedying?” I asked curiously and confusedly, before recognising the implication of a naked Paisley in the chantry, and why Audry seemed so interested in the pale content of the vials, and why — or rather, how — the children of these caves came to be.

“You... sick fucks.” It was the only declaration I could stomach: to speak to specifics aloud would be to confirm them, and I was still in denial. “Why show me all this? Why show me any of this? Why not just kill you and be done with it?”

“Oh, no no no, I can’t kill you. That would be a sin, Margaret, and regardless, God would not approve. This — all this — is by His blessing.”

“But you killed William! You think God—” His palm met my face, knocking the words back inside. With the same hand, he grabbed me by the throat, somehow mustering the strength to lift me. The tips of my toes teased the ground, my unspoken words clogging my throat as his grip tightened.

“*You* killed the Druid! *You!* It is for your sin that you are here — you will bear witness to the fate to befall you. You are a parasite who dug its way into New Eden and infected us with your rancid disease — and now I must cleanse, for your mere presence has broken the Ludditious Faith beyond repair. We will begin anew, and you will be a vessel. Take heed of my words, Margaret, and God *might* see you through this.”

And then for the umpteenth time since arriving in New Eden, I passed out.

## Chapter Twelve: Escape

'For God shall know when the time has come to recall his chosen, regardless of the state of the world ... Here we lie in wait for the first resurrection, that of the just, and await the completion of the second, that of damnation.'

*--Second Testament of Enoch, Chapter Six, Verses 75 & 85*

*I'm begging you, Margaret. You owe me.*

"I don't owe you shit, Persephone. Bryce made his choices."

*And you would have killed him for them! If you had been an hour earlier-*

"But I wasn't. You guided him over that ledge. You found his evil all on your own."

*Evil that she shouldn't have to suffer for. She's gone chasing her father.*

"Her father is dead."

*She went to find what's left. Whatever that might be. Please, Margaret, find my Paisley.*

The voices in my faltering mind mingled with those outside. "The men are indisposed, and will be going forward. We need more sustenance."

"She's still tainted."

"So let them revel in the ecstasy of your concoction for a night!"

"The bread of God must be pure."

A soft moan came from my mouth, disrupting the conversation. "Hush now," one of the voices whispered. "You need to conserve your energy."

I was on the bed in Audry's study. The cuff on my wrist was loose, but binds around my biceps held me firm to the bed frame.

My eyes fluttered open, my vision was once again reduced to shadows. I was back on that bed: the one that existed in the bowels of my memory, and I had seen again in Audry's study. The silhouettes of Joseph and Audry peered down at their helpless captive. My mouth was dry, and once again stuffed with a rag, bound by a leather belt that fastened my head to the bed. Another moan weaselled through the gaps between my lips. "So eager to speak," Joseph responded, "yet you've no words worth hearing. Affirmations of your wickedness, they are.

"When I was a boy, I could tie a cherry stem with my tongue. My peers lauded me for such an insignificant ability. I grew tired of their meaningless praise, and so I neglected this 'skill'. Lo and behold, my tongue is no longer capable of such trivialities. Yet whether through innate happenstance or conscious development, your tongue weaves lies far better than I could weave the stem of that stone fruit. So I hope you understand why I cannot allow your words to fall upon my ears. I fear that here, outside of God's sight, even I may be unable to resist your heinous temptations." As he delivered his parable, he waltzed through the room, sometimes wandering completely out of sight, or getting so close that my face was doused with his hot breath. "I berated your inability to learn, failing to realise that your teacher was a target of your hatred. Of course you couldn't learn from William! How could a pupil consciously take lessons from a person whose life they intend to end?" *Had he truly convinced himself that I'd killed William?* "It is so painfully obvious to me now, and for that and that alone, I apologise. It could have been that I would be your teacher, but I've a greater calling now."

Audry smiled. “The ascension is at hand, young Infidel.” Joseph’s face aggressively cocked her way, but he nodded with a surly demeanour.

“Indeed. We many will follow the Eidolon’s example. Though of course, you now know the Eidolon’s truth! Though perhaps the title is unfitting, for Enoch, the first Druid, still walks among us.” *‘Walk’ was a curious term to use.* “I feared that his departure would irrecoverably imbalance the scales. He stapled himself upon a cross at the turn of the millennium, assured in his belief to become the bridge between the Ludditious Faith and Heaven above. And he may’ve been right. But Enoch’s divine grace — so mighty, it is — is the true counterweight. The only thing that keeps the Earth from being immolated by the boundless wrath of man. I could not let him leave: I could only let him inspire. Through his seeming example, our Wardens, Faithful, even our Aspirants are giving themselves to God: they have seen the signs of the end, thanks to you, *Marianne du Plessis.*” He said my false name with an insistent facetiousness. “It is as the Eidolon William professed in his second testament, and now *his* words will guide the next generation. Enoch’s generation.”

“Joseph,” Audry interrupted, “is it wise to divulge such details to her? To what end does it benefit?” She squealed as the back of Joseph’s hand struck her face. I couldn’t see her face, but betrayal was visible in all lights.

“The Infidel must understand! She has a purpose here — one best shown through practice — but as you refuse to tear the flesh from her vessel, I must use my words. Sinful as she is, she deserves knowledge of her fate.”

Audry’s response was weak. “You struck me. You’ve never—”

“You learned your place early.” Joseph replied. “Do not stray from it. Your responsibility rests in ensuring the Divine generation comes to heed. You may begin with this one.” He turned back to me now. “Her *womb* is not tainted, after all.” Joseph’s flat face

encroached on mine yet again. “Enoch will father a new generation, not of Faithfuls, but Divines. By birthright, they will inherit the Valley of Eden. Their blood will not be tainted by outsiders, or diluted over the generations. No, to assert the strength of the Ludditious Faith here on Earth, a cleansing is required. I will oversee the first; they will oversee the rest. Even now, children of Enoch walk New Eden. I claimed they were Newts — adopted outsiders — but now they can live their truth. They were the first of his kin. His blood courses through their veins. They will lead the people forward. The scales *will* be imbalanced: in *our* favour; in God’s favour.

“As I have told you, God made women to further propagate life. But He has no qualms about the specifics of that role.” His demeanour was calm but insistent, and incessant, each word tossed like a swift dagger. “If you’re behaved, you might foster life, rather than have it taken from you. But you will *propagate*. After all, the female form is immeasurably more tender, wouldn’t you agree?” I couldn’t avoid thinking back to the meals I’d shared with the sorority, and the puzzling taste and texture of the meat I had assumed to be pork.

Sufficiently bathed in my discomfort, Joseph turned on his heels and went to exit, but as he stepped through the cavern’s threshold, he looked back at me over his shoulder. The flickering candlelight caught every cranny of his sallow form. His noseless face and distended, gangly limbs, made him more monstrous than ever, as if he might suddenly leap up and start climbing on the walls. He held this stance, indulging in my disgust. “Typically, all that is lost is returned in Heaven. This fuels our willingness to forgo so much in our lives.” His hand reached up, gently caressing the spot his nose once sat. “Through His grace, in His Kingdom, I can be restored. The Infidels who have fed New Eden? Their limbs await above, as does their dignity. They have given so much that only God can repay. This is His promise,

to restore privileges to those who sacrifice... But I will ask Heavenly Father to make an exception for you. We may be the Foretellers of the Ongoing Apocalypse, but you are its emissary. There is no redemption for you.”

Audry — who had vanished to the margins since Joseph had smacked her — reappeared in my vision. “He can be overzealous... It can make his words confusing.” There was commiseration in her voice. Maybe the strike had recalibrated her brain. “Your body will be put to work. Like the others, you will bear the children of Enoch — the Divine generation. That is your purpose now.” She paused, seeing the wet sparkle in my eyes. “As necessary, your flesh will feed the people, for you are the bread of God, now. It is a privilege, really. They could have all been expelled, lost to the wilds. By permitting their stay within the Valley, they will ascend. They should be thankful. Yes. They should be thankful.” I think she was trying to convince herself as much as me. “As should you,” she concluded. “It may be the only salvation you have left.”

Her insubstantial words washed over me. If I was going to find salvation here, it would come when the pulpy remnants of my brain matter were scattered against the cave wall before it came from giving thanks for my predicament. I would make sure of that. Joseph’s self-righteousness was evidently ego-driven. His confidence was boundless, and uncertainty was unknown to him. But Joseph’s revelation of his true colours had shaken Audry; she wore the same expression William had. Audry had never before seen that side of Joseph, and now that image remained with her as he disappeared. She was trying to hold on to other memories of him, and not those she’d just experienced. These thoughts — wasteful

attempts at insights — were the only hope I had. If anything, *they* were my salvation. And salvation had to come soon, whatever the means.

Audry took a few minutes to collect herself, rubbing at her reddened cheek, before summoning the Wardens to return me to my cell. She kept muttering the same line: *“her tongue weaves lies... her tongue weaves lies...”* It was almost a mantra, and she repeated it every time I made any kind of noise. Perhaps it was in preparation, for she had to remove the belt in my mouth along with the other binds to release me. She quietly continued her chant as she led the Wardens — each holding one of my arms — back towards my new home.

Not far from Audry’s enclave, an even smaller nook hid to the side of our path. A curved table sat in the back end, layered with a varied collection of clothing and bedding: burlap jackets; blankets in neatly stacked piles; a few pillows; and — if I could believe my eyes — my own clothes. Someone had tucked them onto the side of the bench and slightly wedged them under a heavy blanket, as if placed there temporarily and forgotten.

The trail back to my cell approached this nook before turning to cross a natural stone bridge, which was barely wide enough for my escorts to walk across with me in their midst. They had cuffed me again, but my arms were in front, and with a good shove, I could send one of the Wardens toppling — maybe the other one too, if I timed it right. I’d push the first, the other would dive for me, and I would duck. They’d fall into the water below to be washed away, leaving only Audry to contend with. I could lure her. Trick her into the same fate. She’d trip on a jutting stone, and I would capitalise, sending her in a headfirst tumble down the rocky precipice. Her body would flail as it struck the river, and like the Wardens before her, it would be beaten and bruised by the rapids. She might even die—

I instantly recoiled from the plan, my thoughts infested with visions of violence: Roche, who died as I blasted his frail body into the swamps; Bryce, whose neck snapped as he jumped from his balcony with a rope around his neck. Both deserved more pain, and yet, I was grateful I hadn't been given the opportunity. It was a strange new feeling. It wasn't guilt. It was stronger. The more I reminisced, the worse it grew. And it *hurt*, crashing and banging in my chest like a heartache over a long-lost love. Is this what I would have felt, slaying the slayer? I would never know. What I did know is that I didn't want to add to that feeling. I wouldn't kill the Wardens. I couldn't.

My keepers slowed down as we crossed the slim bridge forced to travel in convoy. Then came a sharp, narrow turn against a slanted, rocky wall. The first Warden ducked a little to avoid the slope as he pulled me along. The other Warden tried to push me through the gap, but I pushed back. I rammed into him with full force, hearing an uncomfortable crack as his skull collided with the cave side. I stepped back as he stumbled, falling between me and the other Warden, breaking the grip both had on me as they toppled like dominos.

My run quickly became a hobble: without the support of the Wardens, my leg injury flared. Audry squawked at them, and the Wardens recovered quickly. Fast footsteps trailed me, but I didn't look back. Right as I had crossed back over, a shadow shifted through my peripheral. Surprisingly, it was the Warden I'd knocked against the stone. He'd leapt from the far side of the bridge and now blocked the path leading to Audry's chamber. Blood dripped down his damaged face, painting a vicious smile that assured me he was enjoying himself.

I looked over my shoulder to see the other Warden taking slow steps across the bridge, secure in the knowledge that I had nowhere to go. Cornered, I kept my eyes on both of them while slowly backing up into the nook. It was just a few steps before my arse

pressed against the wooden bench. That was when they came for me, leaping like great beasts, bipedal cave bears, hands spread wide like claws ready to grasp at my bare flesh. I turned as they came for me, clutching at the table with all my remaining strength, sending stray clothes and blankets flying at my opponents before my fingers wrapped around the far end of the bench. My wrists clamped down on my still-damp pile of clothes, as the Wardens wrapped their hands around my legs, and then my shoulders. I howled in pain, fighting their pull until I couldn't anymore. We all fell backwards as the tension broke, my clothes taking the tumble with us. The Wardens returned quickly, but even with their full weight holding me down, I kept scrambling, slithering toward my jeans, when I spied something glinting on the stone floor. Then, an angry Warden slammed my face to the ground. A rupturing crack echoed through my skull, but a broken tooth was a pittance compared to everything else. Blood pooled, quickly soaked up by the rag as my lips gripped desperately at the ground like a filter feeder, searching for the glint, until the Wardens yanked me by the hair and pulled me back to my feet. My vision was blurred and there was a buzzing in my ears. Audry barked at the Wardens and they hoisted me up from the ground, holding me arse-up between them like a stuck pig. The one at the front — the bloodied one — had an arm around my neck and the other clutching my hair, forcing my gaze forward.

Maria stirred as the lights around her cell switched on. She gasped as the Wardens tossed me back into my corner, before they firmly refixed my cuff to the bars of the cage — on a higher rung, this time. “Wallow in your misery, charlatan!” Audry yelled as she slammed the cage door. “Wallow now, else you never get the chance!” Her words held a finality, emphasised by the killing of the lights as she and the Wardens departed.

“You okay?” Maria asked when they were gone, with a tone that implied she knew the answer. With a pained groan, I leaned to my left and pushed three things out of my mouth: a bloodied rag; most of a broken tooth; and the tip of a snapped lockpick.

“Yeah. I’m okay.”

My blood and saliva had created the perfect coating for the dusty cave residue to adhere to the broken lockpick like batter. I would have preferred an unbroken pick. I’d felt them all there in the back pocket of my jeans — my thumbs had gone searching while my fingers clutched the bench — but I hadn’t been able to snatch them. It was pure luck that one had fallen out as we all hit the ground, and even greater luck that it was the snapped one: I doubted I’d be able to fit an intact one in my mouth. I’d clamped onto it with my lips while the Warden plastered my face on the stone. The pain of my broken tooth had been a great distraction from the sharp metal rod puncturing my gums. Now, we’d see how worthwhile my ruse had been. Maybe Joseph was right. Maybe deceit was in my DNA.

“What are you doing?” Maria asked after I’d spent a few pained minutes fiddling with the lock on my cuff. I was picking blind, squatting on a bung leg, with limited fine motor skills, with a pick that had no handle: it was effectively guesswork.

“I’m getting out of here.” I replied between failed attempts, not wanting to lose my positioning. My words came strangely, almost like I had a lisp. My gums had already started swelling. I could taste blood. Lots of blood.

“There’s no out, dummy.”

“There is.” I replied bluntly. “At least two.”

She seemed bewildered. “You’ve seen exits?”

“No. But there’s a river, and that has to lead somewhere.”

“You’re gonna swim down that? Are you crazy?”

“If it comes to that.” I replied. “But there must be a dry exit too. How else would they bring people in?”

“I was drugged too. When they caught me.”

I paused my work briefly. “You tried to escape from New Eden?”

She laughed a little. “Lotta good it did me. I didn’t get far.”

“Why’d you run?” I asked earnestly.

She laughed again, manically. “Why’d you?” I didn’t think our stories would compare, but I got her point. We were both fleeing evil.

“In any case, I’m not waiting around to *propagate*.” I said wryly, forgetting Maria’s current state. “Uh, sorry.”

“Not your fault,” she responded, matching my tone. “Can’t be helped, can it?”

“When... did they take your legs?” I asked, again thinking back to meals shared in the forum.

“Months, I guess. Before they put the baby inside me.” She gently slapped her protruding belly. “I suppose that’s one perk of it: they treat you better when you’re growing their next generation.” She sniffed loudly, wetly, before her teary voice whispered. “God, I hope it’s a boy.”

“Why a boy?”

“Boys get to go up. They get to see light. The girls are kept ‘til they’re useful. Most of ‘em don’t make it that far, though.”

It suddenly clicked why the kids at the care centre had been almost exclusively male.

“What about girls born above?”

“Joseph takes ‘em when he can. Keeps ‘em from their parents, then says they died.”

“There was a funeral for a baby when I arrived.”

She scoffed. “That wasn’t a funeral. Just thoughts and prayers, muttered over a shallow grave.”

The revelation hit me like an avalanche — a looming slab of ice and snow that, with all the pieces, seemed so obvious in hindsight. “Fucking bastards” was all I could muster. Her revelation brought fury, but also clarity, and whether through that focus or plain happenstance, the cuff’s lock came loose.

The mechanism on the cage door was a very different beast, one with a gaping maw that threatened to swallow my piddly pick at any moment. The lock was also on the opposite side of the door, so my hopes were low before I even began.

“No chance you take me with you, huh?” Maria asked from the corner. I looked in her direction, wanting to offer some kind of consolation in the dark, but I said nothing. She knew my answer.

With every passing minute, and every hand cramp that came with it, I grew more disheartened. I just couldn’t get a fix on the pins. A part of me was ready to wrap myself in my mattress and ram the gate, but I had another idea to try first: a time-consuming idea that wouldn’t echo through the caves. The hinges of the cages weren’t welded, meaning the bolts could be manually undone. Unfortunately the bolts were slightly recessed in the hinge, unreachable without some kind of socket tool. I was hoping the lockpick would suffice, and allow me to surgically unwind the bolts a fraction at a time by latching onto the hex-shaped edges.

I had to climb the cage rungs to reach the top bolt, but with two injured limbs I couldn’t hold the position very long. The bolt wasn’t rusted, but it was stiff, and I could

barely catch its edge before being forced to take a break. Maria chimed in with commentary every so often, which was a good distraction from the pain. She boasted they'd placed her here, away from everyone else, because she punched a Warden. Good. She still had some fight in her.

It might have been an hour, maybe two, before the bolt was within my finger's grip. Then it was just a few quick spins before it was on the ground, as was I.

Unfortunately I had no such luck with the other two bolts. The middle one must have been used and abused in the past, as the hexagonal edges were so worn that the head was almost circular. The bottom one was just plain stuck. It'd probably been rusted in place for years.

"God-fucking dammit!" I threw the pick at the ground in frustration, then immediately dropped down to find it again. I couldn't lose my only tool, no matter how shit it was.

"No luck?" Maria asked, more than a little sarcastically. I didn't respond. After a few fruitless minutes of searching, I said "fuck it," and moved toward my burlap mattress. It was about as thick as a slice of Vogel's. I gripped one edge with my right hand and wrapped it around that shoulder like a shield before finding the longest, straightest path to the gate. I didn't have the strength for this, but I had to try. I started with a test-hobble, making sure there was nothing in the way, and prodding the cage door a few times to search for weak points.

And just like that, the door creaked open. I heard it buckle a little due to the missing hinge. "What the fuck?"

"What?" Maria asked.

"It's open."

“You got it open?”

“No, I mean, it wasn’t locked.”

“No shit?”

“No shit.” I was a little annoyed. Not only hadn’t I noticed while trying to pick it, but I’d wasted hours on that top bolt. And as much as it would’ve wrecked my already broken body, I imagined ramming the gate would have been quite cathartic. “I’ll be leaving you sooner than I’d thought. You... You would have told me if they normally kept it unlocked, right?”

“They always lock it,” she replied. “Legs or no.”

“Maybe they were distracted. Sounds like Joseph’s got something big planned.”

“Audry doesn’t get distracted. Her head’s always in a thousand places at once.”

“Maybe I was the thousand-and-first,” I said as I dropped the mattress. “All the better for you.”

“How so?” she asked bluntly.

“The sooner I’m out, the sooner you all get out.”

“What? How?”

I felt around the edge of the room until I found Maria and knelt next to her, clutching her shoulder, hopeful I was looking into her eyes. “You — all of you — are the reasons I’m here. I have a responsibility. *I* chose it. Add in all the shit these fuckers have put *me* through — well, I’m extra motivated now.” I stood, not realising I was holding her hand. “I have one other responsibility, though. I left someone in New Eden, and I have to get him out. He’s here because of me. He didn’t choose any of this.”

“Neither did she.” Maria responded, pulling my hand down to her belly. “I know it’s a she. I just know.”

My head and my heart were pulling in two different directions. “I can’t get you out, not alone. Hell, I don’t even know if I’ll get out of this cave.”

She squeezed my hand before letting it go. “You will. You have to.” Ever the pessimist, I wanted to argue, but couldn’t find the words.

Backtracking through the black tunnels was like taking a trip down memory lane with memories that weren’t my own. It was a lagging journey brought on by my limp, my sightlessness, and my anxiety — for though I assumed there would be no Wardens wandering in the darkness, I couldn’t be certain when it came to Luddites. I also couldn’t scratch the itch that was the open cage door. I could accept it being left open as an accident. But what if it had been intentional? What if I was doing exactly what they wanted me to do by trying to escape?

Regardless, I crept as silently as I could, hugging the walls, grateful there were no major splits in the path before I reached the natural bridge where the Wardens and I had our standoff. A little light was shining through from high-beamed floods beyond Audry’s chamber. Long, silent lunges brought me over the bridge and to the nook, where I felt like I could breathe again. My clothes were gone, but the piles of Luddite garb remained, tidied since I’d sent them flying. I sifted through to find the warmest, lightweight set I could, settling for a cotton shirt, canvas pants, and a fur jumper that was much fluffier than it had any right to be. There were no weapons, but I held a bolt from the cage tightly in my right fist. It protruded from between my fingers, like my car keys do when I walk alone at night. I was under-prepared, and as prepared as I could be.

Audry was absent from her room, as were her Warden guards. The idea of searching the chamber was tempting, but I had my goals: stay hidden and find the exit. Hopefully

being dolled up in Luddite gear might make any spotters mistake me for one of their own, at least at a distance. My plan was to continue toward the light while sticking to the seams of the caves as best I could. The misshapen walls offered plenty of hiding spots away from the invasive light. But I didn't even need to use them: after checking three of the side caves, I hadn't spotted even one Warden. Though this section of the cave was lit, when I looked beyond — toward the other cages — I could see no light. I thought they were keeping Maria and I in the dark as punishment, but maybe they kept them all in that state. Either way, it was highly unlikely there were Wardens that way. I hardly knew that section, but it wasn't linear. If I took a wrong turn I might not come back. Then I remembered the candles in Audry's chamber, and I eagerly dashed back, almost forgetting my injuries.

Four unlit candles sat on rocky perches in the corners of the room. The nearby floodlight provided just enough ambient light to spot a similar, semi-hidden nook where an ancient box of Beehive matches sat. I wondered if they bulk-bought stuff like that before the millennium. In any case, I snagged the matches and two of the candles before spinning on my weathered heels. I let out an involuntary shriek at the silent, darkened figure standing in the threshold of the room, outlined by the single candle in her hands. Her long black hair hung over her eyes as it had before, and though I recognised Paisley immediately, her shattered form sent shivers through my spine.

“I know you.” Her voice was ethereal — stronger than before, when she'd been surprised by Joseph — but there was something about it that made it seem unreal. “How do I know you?”

I didn't know what to say. She seemed so distant. Age did that, of course, but not like this. It was like the bubbles inside her had all been popped. Long gone was the girl with my best friend's bloodstained Hello Kitty pillowcase. “Your mum sent me.”

“Is she good? She knows I’m sorry?” A lingering desperation in her voice grounded her, just a little. “They broke Dad. They broke—”

“I know. I know.” I didn’t want to hear about Bryce right now. “Do you know where Audry is?”

“Gone. Up the chute.”

“There’s a chute?” Talk to Paisley was a bit like talking with a child. I had to be as enthusiastic as possible.

“Oh yes! But we aren’t to leave.” She started clutching at her arm, right above her elbow joint.

“Could you show me, anyway?”

I stayed a few steps behind Paisley as she sauntered from Audry’s room. Her gait was strange, like she was trying to skip, but had only ever had skipping described to her. She flowed across the cold stone, her calloused bare feet invincible against the jutting rocks that I was desperately avoiding. She was clothed now, but she seemed so lost and vulnerable that she might as well have been naked.

“I’m glad you’re not...” I lost sight of my sentiment on the way to my words.

“But I am,” she replied astutely.

“What I meant was, I’m glad you’re whole.” She turned to me with a perplexed expression. It was nice to see. It meant there was still a degree of critical thinking up there.

“They haven’t taken any of you. The others, you know, they’re missing—”

“You must think I’m lucky,” she interrupted, melancholy conducting her words.

“No, no. I think... I don’t know what to think.”

She stopped in her tracks and focused on me, taking me in wholly. Again, I could see something behind those blue eyes of hers: spinning gears; bells and whistles. Her head cocked as she took a few more steps toward me, and reached her hand up to my face.

“You’re... not one of them. You’re not one of them!”

“What do you mean, Paisley?” I knew what she meant, but I had to be sure.

“Infidel Paisley!” she squealed. “I am Infidel, I am, I am. You can’t trick me!”

I reached out to grab her hand as she was pulling it away from my face. I clutched it between both of mine, ignoring the protests of my shoulder. “You’re Paisley Johanssen,” I assured her. “And you are not an Infidel. You’re a human being who is going to get out of this hellhole.”

She shook her head vigorously, muttering incomplete sentences. “I tried.” She finally declared. “I tried so hard. So hard. But I couldn’t do it. They shot me,” — she pulled down the collar of her cotton shirt, revealing an eerily similar wound on her left shoulder — “and I fell away, far away.”

“You fell?”

“I fell here. I fell in the water. No. I got out of the water. I ran! But I still fell. I landed on a bed. She was staring at me. Audry said everything would be okay. But I still. kept. falling.”

I wanted to pull her into a hug but I couldn’t know how she would respond. Her voice was emotive but her face was a blank palette. “It’s not your fault, Paisley. You were drugged. Joseph drugged the meat, I’m guessing.” Just thinking of that meat made me nauseous.

“No. It couldn’t be. I mean, I couldn’t have been. I didn’t eat. I wasn’t allowed.”

“You weren’t allowed to eat?”

“Before. Before I tried to run. I was locked away.”

“In New Eden? William allowed that?”

“Joseph did,” she replied flatly. “I was an example, he said. He... he did awful things to me, and made the others watch.”

I looked at her sternly and could feel my fury festering again. “What kind of things, Paisley?”

“He put me on a cross. He put nails through my hands.” I kept her gaze, but felt her hand in mine. There was a wide scar in the centre of her palm, with a lump on either side. “They beat me. They ate in front of me. They wouldn’t let me sleep. They put that stuff in me... They wouldn’t let me die.”

“How did you escape?”

“Someone took the nails out. I don’t know who, it was dark. They wrapped my hands up and told me I had to leave.”

“You have no idea who it was?”

“It was a girl, I think. She kept saying I had to run. Lot of good it did me. Out of one hell and into another.” There was a consistency to her voice that had been missing before. She seemed present.

“You’re doing okay here.”

“No, I’m not. It takes everything in me not to toss myself into the rockiest part of the river every day.”

“You’re not in a cage,” I said.

“Everything has a cost.” She was beginning to regress. I could tell her mind was going to a dark place, and I couldn’t let my curiosity lead her there.

“Well it’s time you stopped paying it. Where is this chute?”

Paisley didn't take me far, returning me to the second of the three side-caves I had checked out. It got dimmer towards the far end, with a faint whistling distinct from the ever-present whistle of the central cave. Paisley pointed up, and I saw a steel-framed, wooden hatch. A long wooden ladder was attached to one side, concealing part of the hatch. There was a rope tied around one of its upper rungs, which was then fed through the hatch itself, pulling the ladder almost flush with the ceiling. "They pull the ladder up when the Wardens leave." Paisley remarked. "And Audry."

"So there's no one else down here right now? Where do they go? How long are they usually gone for?" She shrugged, answering all three questions.

I had a few gut reactions. With the caves empty, it'd be the perfect time to free everyone, and get them equipped for the Wardens' return, but I doubted the malnourished, amputee prisoners would put up much of a fight. They'd be too concerned with protecting the children, anyway. It was also unlikely they Luddites would leave weapons about if Paisley had free reign of the place, which ruled out my second idea — to hide in the shadows and jump whoever next came down the ladder. Without a proper weapon, it was unlikely we could overpower a Warden, even if Paisley helped. There'd likely be more than one anyway, and who was to say how long we'd be waiting. I didn't have the luxury of time. I needed out now, and the span to the ladder was only a few meters...

"We need clothes," I said to Paisley. "Rags, cloth, lightweight stuff, whatever you can get. We're gonna get that ladder down."

She looked like she had questions but quickly caught onto my line of thinking. Her candle disappeared into the darkness as I found my way to the riverbank. The river was lined with many large stones, and I quickly found two that fit perfectly in my hand.

As I returned to the ladder, the floodlights flashed on, blinding me once again. I hid inside my shirt until my eyes adjusted. As I heard no voices, I had to hope that was Paisley's doing. She returned as I was shifting the last of the stones back to the ladder chamber, with a pile of neatly folded cotton sheets. "Will these work?"

"Those are perfect! Where'd you get them from?" I didn't ask her about the lights, figuring if she hadn't turned them on, she'd be a little more panicked.

"From the chantry storage. They're for Enoch's bed, but—"

"They're for us, now. C'mon."

We unfurled the sheets longways, and I had Paisley tie them together at the far corners, creating two long ropes. I'd seen them do this on an episode of *MythBusters* to climb out a high window. These sheets were thin and torn in places, but we wouldn't be climbing them.

The floodlights in the main cave provided just enough ambient light to outline our surroundings, and the secured ladder. While Paisley was finishing, I took my rocks and wrapped them in the ends of each sheet-rope before twisting and tying a knot to secure them. It was tough to do with only one working arm, but I managed.

"You good at throwing?" I asked Paisley, who was just finishing her final knots.

I didn't even need to ask. With a steady underarm hurl, she launched one end of the rope up and between the rungs of the ladder. It smoothly arced over and fell toward the cave floor, coming to an abrupt stop half a metre from the ground.

"Intermediate softball," she said under her breath. "I hated it, but two years of pitching doesn't just go away, I guess."

"Bet you never thought that'd come in handy, huh?"

"I'd prefer it never had to."

She threw the other rope in a similar fashion, but she got the wrong rung. Both sheets needed to hang from the same rung as the suspending rope. That way, when we pulled, we'd be pulling against the rope, not the ladder. She remedied it on the next throw. We grabbed the four ends of the sheets and wound them into two, twisting the sheets to strengthen them as much as possible, and began to steadily heave.

A breaking sound caused us to stop almost instantly. It sounded somewhat like tearing fabric, but the echo of the cave distorted it. We pulled again, very gingerly. The sound was deep, sounding more like cracking than tearing, and we realised it wasn't coming from the sheets, but the rung of the ladder. It made sense — the wood was probably as old as the Luddites. Without so much as a look, Paisley and I yanked hard, breaking through the weakened rung and sending the ladder swinging with haste. It buckled as it hit the ground, shearing a few millimetres off its feet, but thankfully held firm. The rope it was held by swayed in the faint draft of the caves.

Paisley stood stiffly at the ladder's base with her mouth wide open. When she didn't move, I tapped her shoulder gently. "Paisley?"

She shuddered at my touch and let out an involuntary shriek as she fell backwards, landing on her arse and letting out another shriek, this one rooted in pain. She steeped in it for a few moments before declaring "I'm okay."

"Are you?" I replied.

She nodded, using the ladder to pull herself to her feet. "I didn't think it was going to work."

"You didn't think you were going to get out, did you?"

"What if they come back and find me gone?"

"What if? What can they do to you that they haven't already done?"

She grabbed her arm subconsciously. “I’m the lucky one down here. They probably all hate me.” She was regressing, fading back to the trapped girl.

“No one hates you, Paisley.”

“Sarah always asks me to let her out, but I can’t. They’ll hurt her. And she hates me for protecting her.”

“Who’s Sarah?”

“She’s just a kid... a kid.” She must have been referring to the older child in the cells.

“Well maybe today’s the day.”

Paisley looked up at me. Her crystal eyes were leaking. “For what?”

“To get out. To get them all out. That’s why I’m here. I’m here for you and Lily and Sarah and Maria, and everyone else down here and in New Eden.”

She was doing everything she could to not seem scared, but she couldn’t mask it as well as me. “But what if —”

“There are no ‘ifs’ anymore, Paisley. There’s only what happens, and what happens can’t happen if we don’t try. And for that, I need your help.” I gestured to my injured shoulder and leg. “I can’t make it up this ladder alone.”

“And you’ll get us out? You promise?” she asked through quivering lips. I held her, embraced her, wishing she could go back to being that kid I once met, and hoping for the first time in so long there was a just God in the sky — purely so there was someone seeing to her father’s punishments.

“I’d already given up on you, you know? William told me you died. He said he saw you in your final hours. Why did he lie to me?”

She just shook her head. “He didn’t lie; he didn’t know. I... I remember him. He saw me on that cross. He touched my neck, said I was dead. I wasn’t, but I couldn’t speak. I could feel anything. He told Joseph to take me down, to bury me quietly. He... he cried for me.

“But then I got away, before Joseph could take me. For a little while, I felt alive again. I felt resurrected. I thought... It’s stupid, but I thought I’d been blessed by Jesus. I was gonna make it out. But I just kept falling... Joseph found me. He buried me. Just not how William thought.”

She was a tough one, alright. It was the only explanation for how she could have survived all this. “You could have laid down and died at any point, but you kept getting back up.” I clapped my hand familiarly on her shoulder. “That’s the thing about falling, Paisley. There’s nowhere to go but up.”

Paisley busted through the trapdoor with ease and waited while I slowly ascended, one rung at a time, before pulling me up and through. We came out into the corner of a small cobblestone cabin with a sunken and unlit firepit in the centre. Two dying torch scones barely illuminated the kitchenette against the far wall. There was a small nook with a withered armchair, and a thick slice of oak being used as a table. A neglected teacup sat next to a copy of *Jane Eyre* that, like the chair, had seen much better days. The room was quaint, homely, and cozy; an unfair contrast to the dungeons below where they treated women like living charcuterie boards. The only standout were the windows, which were caked with mould from top to bottom.

“This is nice,” Paisley said in a moment of quiet. She was quickly cut off by the sound of distant screaming. “What was—”

I was already moving to the doorway, expecting the clean dark of night, but when the door opened the screams grew louder, and the horizon was alight with fire. In the near distance, I could see New Eden and the surrounding swamp, illuminated by dozens of burning pillars, clouded by columns of black smoke. The screams were accompanied by endless, clanging bells.

“The ascension...” I uttered, making an informed guess. This had to be it. I still wasn’t sure what ‘it’ was, but it wasn’t something fit for humanity.

My eyes moved to the circular knife rack hanging above the kitchenette. Rust covered most of the knives, but one — a large rectangular butcher’s blade — appeared well cared for. I hesitated as I reached toward it, imagining it cleaving through the flesh of those below. A cursed blade, like from the stories. What would happen to me if I took it? Was I accepting that I would use it? Why else do you take a weapon? I so badly wanted to leave it. Roche’s death had been enough: I was done with all this violence — but I knew it wasn’t done with me. I stole the knife from its hook before checking all the drawers I could find, and quickly huge ring of keys. There were probably forty or fifty, and I handed them all to Paisley.

“I promise I will get you out. But there’s someone else I have to get out, too.”

“You’re leaving?”

“I will never leave, not without you.” I winced as I said the words, knowing I’d hate myself if I broke that vow. “In the meantime, get the others out. The ones that can walk, anyway. We’ll have to come back for the rest.”

I could see on her face she was trying not to say, ‘what if’. “Audry could come back.”

“Do what’s necessary to survive. Whatever that means for you. But no matter what, I’ll be back.” I gave her one last embrace, a twinge of hope swelling in my heart. It was like

history was giving me another chance. I couldn't save Mikayla, but I could save Paisley, I could save Tama, and in turn, I could save myself.

## Chapter Thirteen: Rescue

‘But Y2K was not the apocalypse we were told of ... It was the moment God knew his people would be beyond saving.’

*--Testament of William, Chapter Four, Verses 5 & 7*

I was on the north side of the river now, so there was no need to cross on my return, but the stone cabin sat like a monument at the top of quite a steep, craggy ridge, and I knew from just a glance that it was going to be slow moving on this leg of mine. There was a bootleg trail leading down a lesser incline, away from the cliff face, that made manoeuvring down a little easier, but it was still slow moving. The geography made me realise that'd been the same cabin I'd spotted when returning from the hunting trip, meaning I couldn't be far from the route we'd taken.

After descending the cliff, there was nothing to do but hobble and think, and the only thing on my mind was Tama. I had used him: his sorrow; his financial hardship; and his guilt. He felt he owed me, but he was no longer the person who had lashed out at me over his cheating fiancée. That person was born and died on the same day. It was profound, really: I'd been that person for years after Mikayla's death.

Observing Natasha — Tama's then-fiancée — play with his trust day in and day out had been hard to watch. It wasn't an original story. I had seen it dozens of times, and any evidence I found was always irrelevant: when someone suspects their partner of infidelity, the trust is destroyed. The relationship is already dead.

What I hated about Tama's case was how oblivious he was to it all. It's common for people to have blinders in their relationships, and they can be a good thing, but some people's blinders are narrower than others. Their friends and their partners can get away

with a lot of shit they probably shouldn't. But Tama's blinders weren't on his eyes: they were on his heart. He had hired me for an outsider's perspective, one that could prove to him that the things he saw, the things he heard, and the things he felt, were all false. He had reawakened my empathy and made me realise how predatory my job was. So after I took those photos to him, and after wetting him with a little homemade pepper spray, I swore I would never take a job like that again. Considering cheating spouses made up most of my work, it was slim pickings for a few months, while I lived vicariously through mediocre true-crime podcasts.

And then Persephone showed up. She was no longer the perky and beautiful modern housewife I'd known back in 2006, but she was desperately trying to hold on to it. She'd strangely kept in touch since her husband's suicide, for some reason thinking we'd been friends. I had occasionally — begrudgingly — replied to her emails, usually when I was feeling particularly repentant, or self-destructive. Her writings were listless until I became a licensed PI in late-2010. That piqued her interest. She was always asking questions about my work, and I'd pretend to not see them. Then she started asking hypothetical questions about Bryce's death, and I began wondering if she'd discerned why I'd been living on her street, and why I'd moved away soon after his death.

That speculation wasn't confirmed until she made an unannounced stop at my home office five months ago. She knew about Bryce's online chats, having discovered them back then, the same day I was cheated out of her husband's life. She didn't know what had followed those chats, and I spared her from that. She thought I was a jilted e-lover (I didn't correct her) and, though she never said the words out loud, she alluded to the idea that I forced Bryce to jump from their balcony. It was one of the many reasons she believed I had a moral duty to find her daughter; to save a life for the family I'd tried to take one from.

That wasn't why I'd agreed to take the job, though. I'd agreed because out of everyone in that house, the four-year-old Paisley was the only one who treated me like a human being.

Now, I'd left both Tama and Paisley behind. As far as I was concerned, they were my only responsibilities. I had to ignore the wayward screams that fell upon me as I approached the settlement. New Eden was a pyre in the making, and the longer I spent here, the more likely it became that I would become one with the ashes.

The windmill was on fire, fanning its own flames, surrounded by dozens of staggered, blazing pillars. Some had burned to a crisp and collapsed, while others were taking their sweet time. The westward wind brushed the flames away, revealing the true shape of these pillars: they were crosses. The wind swept through the roads of New Eden, hushing the screams that emanated from the blistering, squirming shapes stapled to each cross. There was nothing I could do for them. All I could do was wonder. Was this the ascension Joseph promised?

At a distance, I could see one group of Wardens nailing a protesting Luddite to a cross on the ground, before raising it and planting it like a tree. Brother turned against brother, for a promise of... what? I scampered past it all before the burning began. I didn't need to see that. I didn't *need* to see any of this, but guilt kept me going. Every road was congested with patrolling Wardens, ongoing crucifixions, or partially collapsed buildings that had been caught in nearby blazes. The commotion died down the closer I got to the sorority. Thankfully, that was my first destination. By sticking to the outskirts on the east, I evaded any wandering eyes and found myself back at those cobalt barn doors. Endless loops of thick twine were tied around the metal handles. The knots weren't intricate, but new was faster. I slid both doors open, lighting up the pitch-black interior with ambient firelight. It illuminated the shoe rack just inside the door, which was brimming. Beyond was the plaque of Enoch's

tenets. It had no right to be as pristine as it was. I began to call out but cut myself short. I couldn't make any guesses as to exactly who was inside, nor their state of mind. Their people were being burned alive, and that *should* have meant something to them, but I couldn't know. The common space was empty of people, but soft echoes of crying wafted from the dorms and filled the space on their behalf. I bounded the corner to reach mine.

Leah was praying, as I should have guessed. I couldn't see her, but I could hear her. There was a slight squeak from her mattress as her body rocked back and forth. Her speech was rapid and conjoined, as if trying to send as many prayers as she could as fast as possible. I'd kept silent in the doorway, but the squeaking stopped as I stepped inside. We both kept quiet, knowing our eyes were colliding in the dark, both unwilling to speak on it.

But before I could react, Leah had leapt from her bed and wrapped me in her arms, keeping my knife-arm at bay. "I prayed for your return, and you're here!" Her proclamation was excited, but hushed.

"I'm very injured, Leah." I croaked back. Her hug was tight, and pulled on every aching joint. She deflated and stepped back. "How did you know it was me?"

"I told you — I prayed for your return. Who else would it be?"

"There are a lot of people who could use your prayers more," I whispered as I felt my way toward my mattress. "You know what's going on out there?"

"Terrible things. Sage — I mean, Druid — Joseph, he — well, they, everyone — they said you killed Druid William... But I knew they were lying, right?"

I nodded, then rolled my eyes at myself in the dark room. "They were lying. It was Joseph. And Roche."

"Druid Joseph."

"Why call him that?"

“It is his title,” she replied meekly. “We’ve been over this. It’s in the *Testament of Enoch*.”

*The testament of a false prophet*, I wanted to tell her, but she was broken enough. “But why show him that respect if he didn’t earn it? Leah, he killed William—”

“Eidolon William.”

“Yes,” I relented, “Eidolon William. He was your rightful Druid.”

“But everything is a part of God’s plan. Including your return. He knew you were not guilty, just as He knows who is.” She paused, taking a moment to breathe, but I knew she wasn’t done. “You could be lying to me, you know? You could have killed Eidolon William, but I would not be wrong for welcoming you back. *All* have a place in His kingdom, through redemption, and He will punish those who do wrong by Him and His people. If Druid Joseph is to blame, then God will see to his punishment. But if he is not, then he is truly worthy of his status. I cannot know what God knows, but He knows I am trying my best, and that is all that matters.”

As she spoke, I had retrieved the items stowed beneath my mattress. I placed my pen knife and lighter on the bedside table as I popped a cocktail of painkillers in my mouth, swallowing them dry. “If your faith is what keeps you, Leah, then indulge it. But don’t burn yourself to keep others warm. You are as important — no, fuck that — you’re more important than those self-righteous assholes out there—”

“What’s an asshole?”

“—that are crucifying their friends and family. If there is a God up there, He would want you to live for more than that.” She remained silent in the darkness, so I grabbed the lighter and lit it. Her face had sunken even more since I’d last seen her, as if her cheeks were

hollow. “When did you last eat?” I asked as I noticed her lantern on the ground. I lit the wick inside and placed it on the table.

She shook her head. “After the ascension, Joseph said.”

*So this is the ascension.* “When did you *last* eat?” I repeated. She didn’t answer. With the room now lit, I noticed her book of testaments was open on her bed, but there was no visible text. Instead, she had decorated the pages with flattened leaves and flowers, and I could see evidence of other, similar pages. It brought a little warmth to my chilled heart. “Alright, well if everything is a part of God’s plan, and He brought me back here, He must’ve wanted me to give you these.” I tossed her my half-full Ziplock bag of sunflower seeds, before remembering something. I found my duffel bag beneath my bed, and fished out a crushed red plastic packet. “He would have wanted you to have these, too,” I said as I tossed the small bag of Doritos her way. “And, He would have wanted you to value your life.” Her expression told me the two gifts already overwhelmed her, but I placed a third in her hands — the pen knife. “This side is sharp. If anyone tries to hurt you, or take you, you stick them with this. *That* is God’s will. I’m making sense, right?” She nodded with uncertainty. It would have to do, because I had other places to be. I collected the last of my things, tossing my protein bar, lighter, and mini binoculars back in my duffel, which I strapped over my good shoulder. Finally, I picked up my meat cleaver and looked back at Leah. “Do you know where Tama is? My friend?”

“I haven’t seen him.” *Of course she hadn’t*, I realised.

“Well, pray for him. Please.” She smiled in agreement. It was warmer than it should have been. It didn’t convey happiness, but she seemed settled. “What about Esther?”

“The Wardens took her some time ago. I don’t know where.” I nodded, unconfident, but pleased I wouldn’t be running into her here. I heard a satisfying tear of a packet as I

stepped out, triggering a growl from my stomach. That protein bar might not last long. I barely got down the hall before I heard Leah's hushed calls for Marianne. I quickly returned, hearing urgency in her plea. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"These are really good!" she squeaked between open-mouthed crunches of stale Doritos.

I stalked through the dark corners of the central square without issue until I reached the forum — where I'd last seen Tama. I had no delusions that he might still be there, but following a trail was what I did. I approached carefully, assuming that the area around the church would be well-occupied. But as I passed, the church doors were wide open, and nothing lit up the dark interior. Beyond Enoch's statue, there was a curious absence of anything ascension related. Fire illuminated the streets to the north and the east, but darkness blanketed the rest of New Eden.

I had half-expected the forum to be in use for Joseph's proceedings, and I'd half expected it to be destroyed. It was William's, after all, and Joseph's hatred for his former leader was evident in the Druid's final moments. But the place was pristine, aside from a new bloodstain on the stone. The smell of burning pork still lingered in the air; I gagged when I realised it was likely the scent of a different burning meat.

I left that place behind and moved on to Tama's fraternity. When I arrived, I saw the doors weren't tied like those at the sorority. It was a pity, too: I was eager to slash something. The entrance was eerily similar to the sorority's, despite the buildings having different exterior designs. Their shoe rack was half empty, and the plaque of tenets lay just beyond, at the threshold to the next room. I had no idea where Tama's dorm was, but

following the same logic, I flicked my lighter and veered around the corner to find the dorm that would correspond to mine and Leah's. Empty. I checked the next one. Empty as well. Every dorm in this section was empty and the beds were freshly made. The lighter was beginning to sear my thumb, so I let it die momentarily, right before a hand tightly clamped my leg and yanked me prone with ease. "You won't take me!" a fragile voice screamed as a bony body clambered out from under the nearest bed and mounted me, knocking my lighter away and reaching for the cleaver in my hand. I shrieked as their knee dug into my leg wound. But my cry disoriented my attacker, and they halted their assault, releasing me. "Who are you?" the voice asked, calmer, slightly assured.

"I'm looking for Tama." I groaned. "Elijah, whatever you want to call him."

"Marianne?"

"It's Peggy, actually. Margaret. And no, I didn't kill the Druid."

"Of course you didn't," the voice asserted as it's owner pulled itself off me. His adrenaline dispersed as he staggered like an arthritic old man. "I thought you were, well—"

"I'm not a Luddite."

"—a man. A Warden. They took everyone."

"Yeah, I noticed." I said as I fumbled for my lighter, seeing a familiar, bruised face when it sparked.

"Sam, right?"

"Aspirant Samu—" He huffed, exhausted, as his tensed face relaxed. "Sam is fine."

He offered me a hand up, but I declined, knowing he was as mangled as I was, thanks to that pig. "Good effort, hiding. It's a shit show out there."

"I didn't hide at first," he admitted. "Joseph was rounding up Aspirants and Faithful. But he said I was damaged, unfit for God." He spat on the ground beside him. "But then I

heard the screaming, and I could see the blazing crosses from the door. I couldn't risk them finding me. This isn't even my dorm."

"So, why'd you grab me? I didn't know you were there."

"Didn't you? I thought... I don't know what I thought."

*Glad we cleared that up.* "Tama. Elijah. Do you know where he is?" His eyes went dark, and he could barely hold my gaze in the twinkling firelight. It felt like my heart was an expanding balloon, seconds from popping. "Where?" I repeated.

"Faithful John told me." He grimaced as he spoke the title. "They took him first, for crimes against the Druid." He looked at me expectantly. "The nose."

"Where."

"By the water. Joseph said..." He trailed off again.

"What did Joseph say?" I was trying not to come across as manic, but I could see myself in the reflection of Sam's eyes.

"Joseph said that he, that Tama, was to guard against your return. He said Tama was the Warden of the Water."

"So then Tama is—"

"-in the marsh."

## Tama

The sun had risen, and it had set, and I knew it wouldn't rise again. Not for me, anyway.

I didn't know what I had done to deserve this torment. It wasn't the pain. It was the waiting. The baking in the hot sun. The intense chill that followed sunset. The distant screams that quieted my own thoughts. The slow descent. The knowing that if I didn't die from heat, or cold, or blood loss, or infection, or exhaustion, then I would drown. Like Jesus before me, I was nailed to a cross, and every second that passed, it sunk a little bit more into the bog below. It was inspired. The muck had passed my tummy now. Something was down there, gently nibbling away at the open wounds on my feet. The swamp would be well fed this week. First Roche, and now me. I'm glad Peg got that bastard. I'm glad she got out. This wasn't how I'd wanted to pay my debt to her, but that's what was on offer. She came here because she wanted to help people. I came here because I was obligated. I was a loveless fuck-up who didn't have the balls to take money that was rightfully mine from my cheating fiancée. Jesus had embraced his time of the cross, embraced his death when it came. Would I?

In a few hours, the water would be up to my neck, and then my chin. I'd have to make a decision then. I could hold my head high, and let the sloshy water tease my lips for a few hours more.

Or, I could embrace the water. I could plunge my face into the water as soon as it reached my chin, and let it take me. Would that be so wrong? The result would be the same. The end would be just as horrific.

Mum had been by earlier, then Dad. It wasn't actually them, I knew that. Just parts of them. They sounded good, and it was nice to hear their voices. Nonna had come through

just after sunset. That's how I knew the end was near. Even William had made an appearance. He didn't say much. He didn't say anything, actually. It was more of an energy with him. He was sorry. He never wanted things to happen like this. He said Peggy didn't kill him, but I already knew that. She would have told me, right? I could ask her. Her voice had started coming through, but I couldn't see her. That made sense. She was hardly spiritual. Her words were intense as always, and they floated to me like butterflies on the wind. *Get those ropes! What ropes, Peg? I don't have any ropes. Tama? Yes, Peg? I'm here. I'm here, Peg.*

"Tama!" And there she was! Standing before me, come to say goodbye. It was so brave of her.

"Mhmm? Hey Peg, good to see you."

"Gonna get you out of there, alright?"

"Mm, probably not. I'm a little pinned down. Ha."

"Yep, you sure are. Fuck, those are big nails."

I nodded. "Need big nails to keep a big fulla like me down, eh?"

"Sure do, buddy. Sam, you ready? Go!"

There was a new pain, searing, across my arms and shoulders and chest, and I was moving. The water was gulping, and I was rising up, backwards, falling. There were ropes tied around me. When did those get there? Peggy. Peggy? She was lifting, she was screaming, oh my God, this was real, this was real.

"That's good!" She yelled as I fell, looking up at the stars and dark clouds above.

"Hammer?" she called out. "He's starting to sink, hurry!"

"Peg, boss, I'm so sorry."

"Shut up, you idiot. You've nothing to be sorry for."

“I’m an idiot. I told them, Peggy, I told them everything.”

“They already knew.”

“But what if they hadn’t?”

“That’s not the world we live in, okay? We’re in the same shitty situation either way.

They are no more ‘if’s. We are getting you off this thing, we are leaving this place, and we are getting some fucking pies, alright?”

“Alright, boss.”

## Chapter Fourteen: Martyr

'Marvel not at this: for the hour shall come, in the which all that are in the graves, shall hear his voice. And they shall come forth, that have done good, unto the resurrection of life: but they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of condemnation.'

--Book of John, Chapter Five, Verses 28-29

Eidolon...

Is this your call?

Is this your love?

Is this your forgiveness?

I have forgiven you. I forgive not what you did, but what you couldn't do.

Your faith is a shell. Pretty on the outside. Noise on the inside.

You wished us to follow in Enoch's example yet you would not assert your place beside him. You wished us to live as he would yet you allowed him to die in futility.

You *would* have allowed.

I knew better. I *am* better.

I have started what you could not.

I have grown what you could not.

I will *be* what you could not.

With the strike of this hammer, so it is true.

Tama's skin had made the rounds through every shade these past few days, but in the pale glow of the moonlight, he appeared ruined, ghostly, dying.

Watery muck caked Tama's lower half. Thick nails pinned his feet to the shaft of the cross, and his hands to the arms. While Sam was finding a hammer, I began hacking at the rope, which we'd tied to the cross to leverage it out with the donkey cart we'd stolen from some negligent Wardens. With the cut pieces, I began tying off Tama's arms and legs, creating rudimentary tourniquets for when we yanked the nails out. I spent the next few minutes tearing up a pair of thermals from my duffel bag, ready to wrap his wounds once he was free. While examining, I accidentally nudged one of the nails in his feet, but he didn't seem to wince at all. He just kept apologising, and I kept telling him to zip it.

Sam finally returned, but with pliers instead of a hammer, which would have to do. The nails looked homemade, with cubic tips and square shanks that dug deep into the wooden cross. Again, Tama took no notice as I touched them, or when I was forced to repeatedly lever them back and forth. "Can you flex your toes, Tama?" I asked at one point, which he did, struggling only a little. No paralysis then, but we still had to get to a hospital.

Sam wrapped up the slow-bleeding holes in Tama's feet before we moved to his hands. Unfortunately, they did have feeling, and Tama howled with every shift of the nail. We both had to straddle him to keep him steady enough to work on, and I realised too late I should have kept him tied to the cross. Tama knew what was happening. He was dazed and confused, but lucid enough, and there was only so much pain he could resist. When I yanked that final nail out, a unique cry escaped his mouth: one of utter relief. He actually smiled, seeming very much like his normal self, before his eyes fluttered shut.

"Shit, shit, hey Sam, get that hand wrapped. Hey, Tama? Don't go to sleep on me, buddy."

“Mm, it’s like when you have a lump in your pillow so you flip it over and then it’s gone and everything’s perfect. Except the lumps were nails in my flesh. Oh, ho ho, I am so tired.”

He was strangely lucid — maybe the pain was anchoring him — but he was drifting. I grabbed at his face and opened up his right eye. “You can’t sleep, okay?”

“Why not, Peg?”

“You can sleep *after* we get you on the cart. It’s just over there.”

His other eye opened now, and his head rose up to look at me, then Sam, then his arms and legs. “I dunno if I can do that.”

“Then I guess we’re carrying you.”

Guard me,

Guide my body and soul on the road to His kingdom.

It was your privilege in New Eden, and your duty up above.

Yes, you can cry. You can laugh! Laugh with me, please!

Embrace the anguish of the ascension,

For it is proof of the pleasure of your life until now,

It is proof of everything God gave you,

And everything he will give you again.

Hang with me.

Rise with me.

Burn for me.

Even malnourished and dehydrated, Tama was still a heavy bastard. It took all of mine and Sam's combined strength to hoist him up into the waiting cart. I immediately sat down next to him and took a bite of my protein bar, before offering a chunk to Sam, who declined, and then the rest to Tama, who tore into the thing, devouring it in almost one bite. He followed it with a hearty glug of water from Sam's canister. I grew a little worried. I had heard stories of holocaust survivors who became incredibly sick and even died from consuming too much too quickly after their liberation. But I realised that without urgent care, Tama was just as likely to die from *anything* else before he died from a bar of chocolate-mint whey protein.

"Alright, Sam — how are we getting out of here?"

"Huh? We?"

"Yes, we."

"You want me to come with you?" he asked in disbelief.

"You want to stay here?"

He lulled for a few moments, then fervently shook his head. "Well, we could take Roche's boat—"

"Not unless you've got some killer welding skills. Joseph shot the shit out of it. Then I kinda ran it aground."

"Then we will have to take the crag trail."

The name rang a bell. "You and John took that right? The day we arrived."

"Yes... Yes we did." His voice faltered.

"Did you... do you want to go and find John?" He shook his head again, solemnly. I think I understood. "Alright then, how do we get to the trail?"

"Do you remember where we went hunting? The crag trail is beyond, closer to the base of the nearest mount. It'll take us up to the vehicle station."

Good. That meant we could pick up Paisley on the way, along with any other able-bodied prisoners. We'd have to come back for the rest. "Then it's the crag trail. Let's get going."

"We should go to the church first. There's weapons down there, in the vault. Guns, bows, knives." He caught my curious glare. "We have to get past the Wardens, don't we? You said they were by the windmill."

Dammit. I'd completely forgotten about the Wardens. Alone, I could sneak past them, but in a slow-moving cart led by two animals who were always seconds away from braying, the chances got slimmer. "Let's say you have a bow." I said to Sam. "And a Warden comes at you with a knife. Are you going to be able to shoot him?" He said nothing, eyes empty, like he didn't quite understand what I was saying at first, so I clarified. "Are you willing to take a life?" Again, he stayed silent, contemplating.

"You didn't kill William," he finally responded. "But you killed Roche, right?" I nodded, still sickened by the thought. "And you're okay with that?"

"I don't know yet. I want to be. I've always thought I would be okay with it — with killing a bad person. It's eating at me, what I did to Roche, but I know if I was given another chance at that moment, I'd do it again, because I'd have to. And if someone came at me now with a knife or a gun, I would hope I'd have that same courage. But if we go and get those weapons, then we are *accepting* now, before we're in immediate danger, that we will kill someone tonight. And I can't make that decision for us."

Tama was murmuring from the cart as Sam considered what I'd said. Back in the caves, I'd had the opportunity to kill those Wardens, but I didn't. I couldn't commit to it. It wasn't even that distinction between premeditated murder and self-defence, at least not

entirely. To me, it reminded me of something Rick used to say: *'Fuck a sheep once, you fucked a sheep; fuck a sheep twice, you're a sheep-fucker.'*

"I would rather be prepared to kill someone than be killed." Sam responded. "When that boar got on top of me, I thought it was the end. I only survived because I was slow to load my bow: I still had my arrow in my hand, and I stuck it in that pig's neck." He chuckled to himself. "It's probably the only time being slow has helped anyone. But being slow won't help us here. We need to defend ourselves."

"The arrows..." Tama was murmuring again, then he started coughing. I held some water up for him.

"What's that, Tama?"

"The arrows," he repeated, his voice weary and weighted. "The bullets. Laced."

"The bullets?"

"Joseph — he said you wouldn't get far. The bullets are coated. The blessing. Holy water. Makes you fade away. The knives too. And the nails. I didn't know. Joseph cut me, kept me faded."

"Rapture..." Audry's name for her homemade concoction. "You know anything about that, Sam?"

"No, nothing." He disappeared into his thoughts for a few moments. "But, we aren't allowed to handle weapons if we're wounded. And we're always reminded not to touch the pointy ends, either."

Audry had said I'd gotten a higher dose, and I'd assumed that her rapture was in the meat. Then I remembered the acidic scent of the roots in that forest during the hunting trip, how it had matched the scent of the arrows that Tama had cut himself on, and Audry's claim

that rapture was made from a root. I'd assumed the smell had been the wood, but had it been something on the arrow tips?

“Holy shit. Tama, you weren't sick that day. You were drugged.” He murmured some kind of assertion. “Sam, if we get those weapons, we don't have to kill anyone. We just have to hurt 'em.”

The angels approach me now.

Through the breaks in the fire I see their light.

Come then, come! Carry me away!

Carry *us* away!

We are ready for you-

n-

*no!*

*The interlopers return!*

*Shun them, my Lord!*

*Devils and charlatans!*

*Rise, Wardens, rise from the flames! Protect your Druid!*

*You must. You are bound by duty!*

*The lamb is free*

*He must be returned to the water lest the bridge be broken*

*Do it! Take him now! Sink him in the shallows!*

*Let him ascend in life and bring fire down from the sky*

*Cleanse us!*

*Do not take him from me!*

Thirteen flaming crosses lit the insides of the church. Twelve were parallel, standing where the recently-wrecked pews once were, leaned against the stone walls or tentatively balanced in shallow, smashed holes. Upon each was one Warden, pierced by a nail in each foot or leg, and one in their left hand. Some held hammers in their right hand, waving them about gleefully. Some were singing together, but their efforts were ruined by poor timing and fire lapping at their flesh. One of the crosses was a smouldering pile, but the rest were taking their time. Many of their victims were limp, either already dead or unconscious. A lucky fate, really.

At the far end, on the largest of all the crosses, Joseph was held in the same position. Unlike the others, he was silent, until we drew close. He began to shriek as we appeared, like we were the garlic to his vampire. For a monster he was, up there in the flames, embodying the image of the devil I had seen in him time and time again. Wreathed in fire and cursing our names, his cries grew more and more frantic. It wasn't fear, though. No one — not Joseph, not the Wardens — were scared. Audry was nowhere to be seen, but I think I understood why she wasn't in the caves. The people in this room might not ascend, but they were *raptured*.

I looked back to Sam, who stood sheepishly by the entry to this preheating oven.

"Where's the vault?"

He pointed in Joseph's direction. "Behind him. Down the stairs. Be quick."

"I'll try," I replied, limping off towards the Druid. Bearing the biggest of the crosses, fire engulfed him, lapped at his skin, but it was not yet searing him. That was still to come. This was swamp wood, after all: it would likely take a while to burn.

My

Lord!

I did as you commanded!

I slew the false Druid-

-no, not I, twas the deceiver-

-she did it! She did it!

Kill her! Burn her!

Take that vile woman in my place!

Please, my Lord,

There is work yet to be done!

Where does she go?

Where are you taking her!

It was hard to ignore his frantic screaming as I passed, and harder still to ignore the scent. Both followed me down into the church's vault. It was a tidy collection of all that Tama and Sam had described, neatly arranged on shelves, as if they hadn't been touched in weeks. I didn't take my time. I wanted to be out of here ASAP. I climbed the stairs with a loaded rifle in my hands, and my duffel bag loaded with ammo and knives. I was very careful not to touch the blades.

As Joseph's screams grew louder, I reminisced on my earlier conversation with Sam. I told him I didn't think I had the guts to kill someone, not intentionally, not even if they were evil, and I found myself wondering, what was the noble thing here? Joseph's anguished cries harmonised with the culminating flames. Did he deserve the pain he was destined for? I could end it. I could take away his pain, and his hope, with just one pull of the trigger. But in doing that, I would become something else. Something I did not want to be. Would I be better off? Would Joseph? Would the world? Would God? It would be mercy, but I didn't know if mercy was for him.

The fires had spread since I'd descended. One of the Warden's crosses had toppled, crushing him, killing him if he was lucky. But I still took my time to look up at this evil, evil man. So obsessed with his divine ordinance, and his divine rank, that he sought to disrupt everything that New Eden stood for. This *was* a good place. It wanted to be, at least. William could have made it better. I believed, for a short time, that he would. But Joseph stole that chance, and stole many lives along with it. And it wasn't a sudden burst of evil — I could almost forgive something like that. Joseph's design was decades in the making. He stole his supposed Eidolon. He imprisoned and maimed women who wanted nothing more than a home. Was it him that turned Bryce Johannsen into a predator? I couldn't ask him now: his

yowling was nonsensical. With the rifle ready, listening for any hint of regret, but I could only make out one thing within his wallowing reprimand: “*du Plessis!*”

In the end, I did what I thought was right.

I left the chapel through the main doors, as I heard another of the crosses fall behind me. I couldn't do anything for those Wardens now. Physically, and mentally, there was no coming back from where they'd gone. Sam was out with the donkeys, keeping them calm as they patiently waited for us. Tama was sitting up, sipping on some more water. He looked at me wearily as I left the building. “We'll go home now?” he asked.

I looked around one last time at the remains of New Eden. I looked at the stalls in the market square. The knick-knacks and crafted goods I'd seen on my first arrival were unfortunately missing. I looked down the road, towards some of the smaller marital homes, and saw wives beginning to emerge. Some had their kids at their side, but none had their husbands. I wasn't yet sure if that was for the best.

I looked up at the looming stone statue of Enoch. From the doors of the church, his back was mostly to us, but I could still see the side of his face, and I saw something I hadn't noticed before: caught in the echoes of the firelight was the faintest, hairline fracture, right down the side of his perfect cheek. A single, hidden flaw.

“Yeah, let's fucking go.”

*to be continued in*

*Tall Tales & Tender Truths*