

Pazuzu – Manifestation

Matthew Sawyer

THE WASTED REVISION

The first book in the Pazuzu Trilogy.

Pazuzu – Manifestation is the first book in the trilogy.

Pazuzu – Emergence is the second book.

Pazuzu – Abeyance is the final book in the trilogy.

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Dedicated to...

Mr. Binger

(What's in a name?)

Pazuzu – Manifestation

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Prelude

Rage makes the priest's corpulent hands quiver. Captain Ioannu is the victim of extortion, that or the lack of amphetamine makes him angry. Ioannu tugs his collarless white shirt and he finally removes his uniform's heavy black jacket. The UnChosen caste calls this priest's choice drug "Ape," the street name for the stuff that typically turns users into anxious, howling gorillas.

Such base consequence could never happen to a priest, a born member of the upper echelon of the Chosen caste and an officer in the Church. The pomp and dignity granted to Ioannu's position guards against that uncivil lunacy. No, the unquiet phases of the chemically grown monkey would not drive Josiah Ioannu into madness. The Church had promoted this middle-aged priest to captain because his genetically endowed discipline gives him immaculate willpower. After all, Captain Josiah Ioannu had been born a Chosen. Even without a rank, birthright grants him authority over his Mortal God.

Nonetheless, his responsibilities crush Ioannu under stones. "Those duties the Church presses upon a mid-grade priest drives me to use the damned drug. I'm old," rationalizes this wretched soul. He confesses to himself. "The problem with Ape isn't using the drug, but rather lacking any once addicted."

Sobriety-sharpened nails now press into his chest and head. Beneath his tormented rut, the priest tells himself "Being clean banishes the blessing of knowing exactly what to do in any situation... and making sense of other people. Nobody listens to me when I'm without Ape, they just babble and interrupt me when I speak." Sobriety truthfully compromises the man's ability to control his god – the Mortal God and all those forsaken UnChosen dwelling within his squalid quarter by the Wall.

Now he deals with a crime unprecedented within the walled city of Khetam. Very recently, there on the sands of the Chosen's Promised Land, Reverend Elmer's been murdered. The man had been the subordinate priest whom Ioannu had assigned the Saint Erasmus parish custodianship. Ioannu thinks "A sympathizer did it."

The Wall separating Khetam from the world of the Shur foremost protects the city from the ravages of heathen terrorists. "No full-blown heathen can get into this city," he mumbles. The man righteously believes no one passes through the Wall without the approval of the Church or its military. He tells everyone "The Chosen exercise exclusive entrance into Khetam."

All UnChosen once permitted behind the Wall now live in desolate parishes like Saint Erasmus. Ioannu thinks "A suitable batch of hovels for those spineless degenerates." Still, the caste and status of the murdered victim raises the severity of the crime to an act of terrorism. The Church and its military's censors had debated if news of the crime should be made public, but the single body had never made a decision.

One thing Ioannu was certain – the presence of pagan tablets on the altar inside Saint Erasmus will never be reported to the public. The Church had immediately confiscated and destroyed the sacrilegious objects. Whatever the dead Reverend Elmer had once planned with them was better undiscovered. The blasphemous controversy went with him into death. Withal, the late Reverend Elmer had brought the awful fate upon himself.

In the midst of Ioannu's coping with his lack of Ape – that and the murder of a priest that had been too curious with an archaic and forbidden religion – the phone in his office rings. The man on the other end of the telephone line calls him "Sir."

Reverend Benedict Gage calls, again. The Ape is a non-commissioned bastard from the

city of Gomorrah. Captain Ioannu had just hung-up on the irreverent extortionist.

"Why do you keep calling here?" Ioannu shouts into the phone inside his dark and private office at the Church. He tells the caller "Stop calling me."

"Captain – Ioannu," Reverend Gage stutters with the aggravated squall of an addict. "I know you don't know me from Adam, but you have something I want."

"A demotion?" threatens Ioannu. "How, in the name of the Mortal God, can you even dare speak to me with such lack of respect?"

The two priests share an addiction to Ape, with a difference. Ape causes Reverend Gage to lose respect for his superior officers, sending him out-of-the-way to a place like Gomorrah. The drug gives the non-commissioned priest arrogant hopes and ambitions – whereas Ioannu had already gladly achieved his own pinnacle.

Uncovering his hand, Gage says "Listen, I know you're related to Judah Ismael, the crime-lord in this city."

True yet hopefully, this blackmailer didn't know how complicated the relationship between Captain Ioannu and Judah Ismael had become. The captain is the crime-lord's connection with the Church. Although, in-law Judah's patience had grown thin with Josiah, resulting in Ape becoming difficult to find in Khetam and impossible to obtain. Like Ioannu, many of the priest's brethren in the Church had stopped coming to their offices at headquarters. Those nervous wretches who report this morning are useless and hide behind closed doors.

"That is a sad coincidence," Ioannu claims. He speaks of his relationship to the UnChosen crime-lord.

"I know you keep the military away from Gomorrah," Gage states. "And I know Ismael is your Ape connection."

"I know you are a dead man, Gage," Ioannu shouts over the phone. "How dare you call me with your crazy accusations."

"Listen," Gage shouts back. "Military patrols will come to this city, whether you like it or not. Ilu Yehowah is in this part of the Shur. Colonel Onesiphorus himself is coming here."

Colonel Onesiphorus's trip to Gomorrah presents a bigger problem, one Ioannu should have anticipated – he knows the colonel sweeps through the region annually. Captain Ioannu reports to the colonel, as would Gage when the bishop arrives at Gomorrah. Gage, the tattling Ape, may tell their superior officer anything.

Ioannu capitulates. "What do you want?"

"An assignment away from Gomorrah and heathens," Gage barbers. "This city will fall to terrorists next, Yehowah is here."

"Let me think," Ioannu replies. The solution comes to him with a staggered breath.

The situation seems to work itself out – a custodian position is recently open at Saint Erasmus and a priest materializes who will shut his mouth if he's invited into Khetam. Josiah does not think when he offers the position to Gage, and this wretched extortionist might one day twist Josiah's arm again. Nevertheless, the treacherous possibility fails to occur to him and does not stop Josiah from asking Gage a more crucial question. "Will you bring Ape into Khetam?"

"No, of course not," Gage denies with a strained snort.

"Please, there's none here. You won't find Ape behind the Wall."

Gage thinks he cannot trust Captain Ioannu with the truth. To his treacherous ear, his supervisor's plea sounds like a trap. "No," he squeaks.

"That's unfortunate," answers Ioannu before hanging up. Josiah had looked forward toward another batch of Ape for himself.

Chapter 1 The Wilderness

This morning, the colors of the sky possess weight. At the faraway horizon, where a wide, blue bruise is caught between dark and light, the hues are luminous gases – layers of yellow, orange and pink pressed together by the nothingness of the previous night. The rising sun pushes warm colors upward, burning them away, and bleeds sore purple from the sky. A

shirtless, stumbling man then falls into the morning.

He knows where he is, but the bare wraith cannot remember who he might be. Beneath caked dust, he appears overall red and covered with angry pustules. His torso resembles an antique table dusted by careless strokes. With each of his heavy steps, the dirt encrusted upon his chest and back drops off in flakes.

His own shoulders bear upon him with a foreign weight he wants to throw off. The extra fleshy padding around his waist only adds to his burden. The gain had crept upon the smoldering man with stealth, over years of denial and through moments of complacent acceptance. Growing fat once seemed a natural process of age. The extra weight had introduced itself as a hobo trespassing the rails, a sneaky hanger-on who refused to be shaken off.

The tired posture and swollen, blistered gut of the man makes him a forlorn caricature. His arms swing with the weight of pendulums knocked from their paths. And this broiled devil lumbers across a desolate, alien world – the only living thing exiled and cast into Hell. Desperate thirst comes without warning.

He feels his insides bake and he imagines his already bulging belly will bloat until the skin bursts and all his juices bubble out. The very last of his fluids will evaporate even before dripping to the ground. Such was not the death the empty man desired. He would not die sizzling in his own fluids. Instead, he preferred drying-up. He wants to disintegrate, to become part of the dust – red dust.

A clear, familiar voice speaks into his left ear. The voice sounds like his own. “You have certainly wandered enough.”

The disconnected specter speaks with finer clarity than the stumbler – absent of the muffled hesitation he struggles to overcome in ordinary conversation. This voice sounds rehearsed and confident, far from his own verbal fumbling. His voice, like a nasally monologue recorded on an answering machine, seems an amputation, separate from any concept he believes about himself; whatever that could be now.

The better voice resonates as if echoing inside an empty room. Just as abrupt, it vanishes and a second of stillness fills the void. Leaded footfalls on packed dirt and a muffled ring in the man’s head dispels the silence; much like listening to a radio station when an announcer misses his or her timing – until a burst of sound jolts the dead air. Yet the voice was not scratched with static heard on radios. Nothing disturbs its dismembered words. The voice and the man’s plod across the dry waste remain exclusive and opposite each other.

The wandering man does not bother looking around, because the sporadic company of the invisible voice is his only companion. It had joined him earlier that day, or maybe the day before. Time had passed as fleetingly as the voice. The sun had traveled only a quarter of its path through the sky when the day became unbearably hot and bright. The previous night had been sweltering, and the man had stumbled through the darkness, unsure when one day ended and another began. The endless expanse of dirt and suspended days disorient him. Yet he must walk and find his way or die.

From the road, the desert had never appeared so large. He would have easily spotted scant landmarks if he rode in a car or truck. Regardless, the man thinks he can recover his bearings. His sense of direction had always been amazing, or so he believed.

Though he could not recall why he found himself in the middle of nowhere, he suspects he had a destination when the dangerous trek began. The “when” was now long ago, hidden beneath hours and unending dunes of sand. If he had brought any water, it was now gone. He did not know what supplies he had packed for this journey, and he now lacks a pack and even a shirt. All he apparently owns are a pair of scuffed laced boots and crusted khaki pants with empty pockets.

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

The voice, barely noticeable beneath hot winds, teases like some subtle siren – hidden within whirlpools transformed into sand dunes. The thought of a gulp of water lights in the mind of the stumbling man, but he deliberately quashes it; none was to be found here and he would not torture himself. Entertaining pleasant fantasies seems more conducive to his survival.

The wanderer dreams he finds that siren and she takes this poor, baked fiend to her dune. They lay down and her bare skin is cool, like the ocean in which she was born. Her eyes, green as kelp, compete for admiration against lips that flirt and glisten with the sheen of pearls. Rescued and transformed, he tires of the colorless desert and travels back to her sea. He will never be thirsty again, and never care and recall how or why he discovered himself alone in the desert. Finding the bliss of love and the sea were the answers, and she was the reason for his journey.

Dehydration had set in a long time ago and stumbling on his feet was currently just a pretense; he was already lost and dead. Heat exhaustion was near, but still, the voice calls.

“Benedict,” it names him. This time the voice shuts out every thought. “Ben.”

Ben jerks leftward with such violence, he twists completely around, a marionette thrown into a clumsy pirouette by an amateur puppeteer. The momentum pulls him off his feet and he falls forward as if his strings are cut. His shoulders remain hunched while he lay face down in the sand.

With a huff and small cloud of dust, Ben flips himself over and sees the orange cauldron of the sun over his toes. He had stopped sweating, which wasn't a good sign, but he lacks any will to worry. His name will be forgotten, if ever really known. He recalls it now, because the voice had reminded him. His name is Ben.

Ben closes his eyes and pictures rippling waves drift upward from his body. He feels stuck to the ground, a part of it. This land might also be called Ben and he is merely a piece of desert, like the dust stirred by his steps. The particles will eventually settle back down and rejoin the suffering man; misplaced specks relocated from one part of the desert to another, but still part of the whole.

His breath becomes the hot breeze and he exhales a gust that singes the inside of his gaping mouth. When Ben opens his eyes, the sun hangs directly overhead as a white whirlpool in a smooth blue ocean. A mighty hand had polished away the waves and ripples; not God's hand. The Mortal God was gone. The voice tells him, although the man had already suspected.

“Ben, you're wasting the day, dreaming.”

Ben knows he's disoriented and he's hallucinating. The voice is clearly not his own, but it disguises itself and imitates an internal conversation; so that it might creep upon him unawares. Still, Ben responds to the reproach in the voice and rolls onto his right. He grunts with the exertion and feels choked.

He lies still and listens to the ringing in the back of his head. The high-pitched sound was constant, but does not demand attention. In addition to his internal ambiance, he hears his own thoughts and shallow breaths. Yet only the ringing reminds him he is awake and painfully alive. With his ear pressed against the ground, Ben also hears far off rumbling, not unlike an ocean wave slowly rolling over the shore then retreating. The rumble seems to come from a road. Ben continues listening, but the familiar sound of civilization again evades him. The ringing in his head recedes after a few minutes. By then, he avoids focusing on the noise entirely, unlike the voice when it decides to speak and demands its audience.

Ben spends a feeble hour pulling his knees to his chest. He lays in a fetal position a few more minutes, while flashes of the sea above taunts him. Fear of the voice scolding him for such fanciful ideas brings him back to the reality that he lay in the desert beneath an afternoon sun.

“You should put a little more effort into survival,” the voice tells him. Ben pants slowly, with hard breaths rising in crescendo. His respirations climax when he pushes himself onto his knees. Hoping the difficult part has passed, he is disappointed. All his exertion becomes even harder. Standing almost takes the last of his strength.

Ben drops back to his hands and knees, needing leverage so he might lift his leg from the ground. He plants a palm flat in the dirt and props himself into a runner's three-point stance, as if waiting for a starting gun to fire. After a few minutes of posing motionless, he considers standing.

Apparently, the starter and the other runners had gone home – the race called due to extreme weather; the temperature was much too hot to compete. Ben agrees there will be no running today.

He raises his other shaking leg and pushes himself backwards. When he attempts to stand, Ben digs shallow furrows in the sand with the toes of his boots. He grunts and pulls himself upright, with his feet spread wide. His head swims and he feels nauseous. If he had any gorge, it would have bubbled up his throat. Ben wobbles uncontrolled, but he stands on his feet. Where this reserve of energy came from seems unfathomable. A fluke of gravity holds him upright, much like setting an egg on its end during the vernal equinox.

The fossil of this creature would not be found here in the Shur desert, unless he falls back onto the ground and dries up alone. Ben determines he will be the last living thing ever to cross this particular piece of desolation. Although, he would rather have his bones found in a cool lake or inside an air-conditioned car. The stumbling man leans forward and lets momentum carry him. Each step catches him from falling on his face again. He asks himself “Where is that road?”

Behind him lies a temporary path carved by his shuffle that the wind already sandblasts away. A compass point seemed impossible to find because the sun shone directly overhead. Chances were that he had confused his direction long ago, even after noting the sun always rose in the east. Ben did not recall where or even when he became lost. The belief he possessed an acute internal sense of direction could have been merely delusional thinking. His misconception seemed a perfectly rational diagnosis, given he now heard voices, saw seas in the sky and possessed generally grandiose ideas about himself.

“Rationalization and losing one’s mind never fit together,” Ben thinks, then laughs aloud. The chuckle begins with a cough then cracks his harsh voice with a noise he had not made since the age of thirteen. The sound makes him laugh harder, deliriously. Ben stumbles and nearly falls, but his feet swing forward and faster, now. Wherever he was going, he would get there quickly.

He veers toward his left, because that side-ward leg became heavier than the right and dropped and dragged. His right foot crosses his left, as if he steps over the carcass of an animal that had stewed in the sun beyond recognition. The sidestep-dance continues another twenty or thirty meters, until Ben grows dimly aware a black line stretches in front of him. The line reaches from horizon to horizon and an invisible glass wall rises from the delineation. No matter how Ben tries stepping onto the line, he leans leftward. He walks parallel to a road, a road! The voice becomes more than a hallucination and hails from the direction he follows.

“You have certainly wandered around long enough.”

Ben does not raise his face from his discovery. The thin black line then stretches into a thick ribbon of cracked asphalt. Sand drifts over the surface in sheets. When he realizes the road lay flat instead vertical, Ben steers himself onto the asphalt. He deliberately continues walking toward his left.

“Now, here we are and all the worse for wear,” the voice says. Ben swears the quip was a thought hidden in his head. He snorts, then chokes with amusement.

“Who are you?” demands a nervous new voice. Ben stops walking. This voice could not be more real than the first.

The sound of the wind had not deadened when the new voice asked his identity. Other noises also fill the air – labored calls bark from a hoarse throat. Another voice comes from the direction of the distressed shouts.

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

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

Ben raises his eyes. Crust had nearly glued the lids shut, and now painfully tears away. Only his right eye opens enough for him to see more than white light and blocky, shadowy shapes. Two men cautiously shuffle toward him, their hands raised before the pair. One man comes from the rear of an old truck – really just a moving assemblage of scrapped parts, haphazardly painted pastel yellow. Scratches scar the crude brushwork already pitted by blown

sand. The mirrors and back window are missing and the bed of the truck is crumpled toward the cab. The yellow coat of paint appears to have been added after the apparent accident – the folds in the metal retains the color thickest and brightest, as if freshly coated. The truck stands parked in the middle of the road with its bald tires molded onto the pavement. The engine ticks while it cools, if that was possible in the daytime heat.

Another man sits in a white Bourdon sedan, a popular car in Church fleets. A couple years had passed since that particular model had appeared on the market. It looks dirty, but in good condition. Further behind the truck, the car sits on the shoulder of the road. The hoarse voice comes from inside. The approach of the two men obscures whomever had actually issued the warning.

The two men look alike, thin but not wiry, maybe brothers. They wear coarse denim work shirts and pants. The mismatched boots and cuffed pant legs on one man dispels the impression they wore military uniforms. The one with cuffed pant legs polishes a small, discolored bump in the middle of his forehead. Their deeply tanned and unshaven faces testify work and life outside had carved undeserved age into them. The men were accustomed to the heat and glare of the Shur and took no precaution, such as hats. They bare their necks with open collars. The smell of their musky sweat reaches Ben before these two unrecognized men.

The shrill voice sounds again. The man whom comes from the sedan, the one with the bump on his head, says something no one can understand. His lips curl back over short white nubs of teeth. Wrinkles curve over his nose and below his eyes when he looks closer at Ben.

“There can’t even be any blood left in him. You’re not doing all right,” says the smaller man on the road.

“Get him into the car,” the other man orders. Up close, Ben sees the other man has narrower eyes. His mouth is larger than that of the man with the bump, but his lips are thinner.

Ben staggers toward them as they approach. He ventures saying something and three words crackle out of his mouth like smoldering leaves, “Tall...glass...water.”

“Sure, man” the thin-lipped man replies. “Sure, yeah.”

Ben falls forward into the pair and their hands wrap around his arms. His skin feels scalded where the men touch him. He hisses in pain because his horrible burns from the sun. Still, Ben feels lighter born by these strangers. His head becomes a weight he can no longer bear and it lolls, tethered by a heavy invisible chain jerked from side to side by the sadistic puppeteer.

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

The man he calls Dil does not reply. The trip to the sedan is short. When they near the driver’s side, Ben peers through the partially open door. He sees a lap clad in black slacks on the reclined seat. A pink elbow rests on a rotund gut so large that Ben feels less concerned about his own, but only by a small degree. Panting comes from within the sedan and the hoarse yelling starts again when the three men approach.

“Get away, heathens. I will command the Mortal God down upon you all.”

A pale man, not much older than Ben, lies sprawled in the sedan. The man has a herald of gray hair. He buries his right hand into his left armpit. His other hand grips the stunted collar of his white shirt, pulling it from his neck. The outburst causes him to gasp and wince with pain. The man with the bump squeezes Ben’s arm emphatically.

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

“I’d rather die out here, by myself, than let you spiteful heathens cut-out my living guts,” the man spits. The meager spittle falls across his chin in long clear threads. More pain grips him. Speaking about Ben, Dil directs his smaller twin. “Take him around to the other side.”

Dil and the one with the bump carry Ben around the front of the Bourdon and toward the door on the passenger side. The windshield is covered in sand, except where wiper fluid has changed the dirt into bluish mud, which the rubber wiper blades had pushed aside and left caking. Through the glass and semi-circles of grime, Ben watches the panting man grow calm. The man closes his eyes and rests his head against the window at his side – the immediate threat has dissipated, temporarily.

The sick man is a priest, and consequently one of the Mortal God's Chosen. He was born of the elite caste – which accounts for his threats and recalcitrance. Only heathens wander the wastes of this desert – crazy, cannibal, suicidal heathens. That is what people believe in Khetam and other oases where the Chosen live.

The priest obviously did not have a rank because no insignia appears pinned on the short upright collar of his white shirt. At his age, people expected he would have gained some achievement in the Church. The lack of rank and his presence in the desert were connected.

"You're him, huh?" the man with the rolled pant cuffs asks Ben while they walk around the vehicle to the passenger side of the Bourdon. His voice stayed low and conspiratorial.

"Shut up, Hen," Dil warns with toothed sharpness.

Both the question and command float past Ben like a conversation drifting on the wind from far away. He does not respond to either before Dil reaches for the door handle. At the sound of the latch, the priest stirs from his brief respite. The incapacitated man makes a desperate lunge for the lock; but cannot lift himself from his seat. Anyway, the attempt comes too late – Dil swings the door wide open before the priest rolls up and fortifies his defense.

The clergyman scowls. "Damn each of you, I mean it."

He then falls against the driver's side door and hangs from the open vehicle. Only the seat belt saves the priest from spilling out entirely.

"Give me back my keys," the priest demands, pawing his neck. He sucks short, shallow draws of air through his mouth. An unseen weight immediately presses each breath back out. The hands of the priest return to his chest.

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

The two strangers ease Ben onto the passenger seat, within the blessed shade of the sedan. The brown leather upholstery burns like a griddle on Ben's bare and injured back, but he endures. Shelter from the direct glare of the sun is worth the pain and, mercifully, night falls early. Dil lets Hen lift Ben's feet into the car. The thin-lipped man then passes in front of the vehicle, back the way they had come.

"You're going to peel the skin from my living skull, terrorist." The priest emphasized the last word with another dry spat. "After you pull my insides out."

Hen reaches over Ben and toward the middle console on the dashboard. His shirt feels like sandpaper dragged over Ben's bare torso, but the burned wanderer is too weak for protest. The air conditioning bursts forth with a roar. "You know," Hen says. "We're UnChosen. We believe in the Mortal God."

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

Hen steps from of the car and straightens himself. He grimaces and looks at the truck and he puts idle hands on his hips. The glare makes him squint. He sees Dil rummage through the crooks of the folded bed and Hen shuts his mouth with another clack of teeth. Dil soon returns and hands him a clear plastic bottle of warm water.

"Give it to him," Dil says before disappearing around the back of the sedan. Hen holds the bottle at the bottom and carelessly dumps the contents into Ben's open mouth. The water streams down the broiled man's dirt-crusting chin and heat-radiating chest.

The air from the vents had instantly cooled the interior of the car, as well as the space just outside the open doors. The stream reaches toward Ben like a caress; the siren finally arrives. Her golden hair floats about her face as if she is underwater. Gleaming with the light of the sun above, her smile is the only thing Ben clearly sees beneath her hovering yellow tresses. The siren's hands raise goose flesh when she strokes his face and shoulders; her touch is the only sensation that did not burn. She straddles his lap and presses her cool, bare breasts against him. The touch of her skin makes him forget pain. He slowly surrenders to exhaustion and will soon follow his salvation into secret fathoms. When she leans forward, smiling through parted, shining lips, her hair drifts into his face. Once she kisses his open mouth, cold air flows into Ben. The cool caress fills his lungs with unbearable frost.

Ben chokes and the water Hen gave him sprays against the dash. It runs down the interior of the slanted windshield in short rivulets and evaporates before any pools. Hen fumbles.

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

The coughing and sputtering continue a few seconds more, but Ben does not move. Exhaustion plants him in his seat, as firmly as the priest had sunk into his own. Hen gives him another sip of water, now carefully. Ben drinks his siren a little at a time, lest she drown him. When the scorched stranger looks as if he can properly swallow the water, Hen gives him several more gulps.

The priest looks away and speaks softly. “I condemn you...” he exhales and grows rigid. His mouth falls open. The sound of the air conditioner covers whatever the priest says next, if any intelligible comment follows. He adds a long and low “...ooooooooo...” trailed by a longer, rattling exhalation.

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

Ben does not hear. His siren drifts away and he still thirsts – the weathered man’s cravings only slightly quenched. His need becomes worse. Hen’s rationing of the water taunts Ben, but he has no strength or presence to do more than suck the tiny portions as they’re offered. Ben remains unaware of the dead man laying next to him.

Suddenly, the voice returns and all other sounds vanished. “You’re filling up again,” it says. “You were empty, just the right place for something, later. You will remember, Benedict, but not now – soon.”

Ben disregards the cryptic statements. The water is gone – the only important news he cares about.

“You’ve learned some truth today. You will remember that later. We need your revelation kept in mind.”

The sound of the air conditioner wavers then abruptly quits, before roaring back solid. Within the pause, the voice adds another word.

“Transformed.”

“What happened to your clothes?” Hen wonders aloud, knowing Ben cannot answer.

“Hey!” Hen exclaims. “You look about the same size as that priest. He has a suitcase back here.” Hen stretches his neck and peers into the back seat. Just as the priest had passed, so did Hen’s fear. He sounds eager and already scavenges the vehicle.

Ben remains conscious long enough and watches Dil return. Dil carries a small gas canister in his right hand. The red plastic had faded to pink, especially at the seams. Light passes through the canister, making it appear glowing from within. The black spout looks gnawed.

Dil passes something to Hen. The object appears to be a small key ring adorned with a charm shaped like an elongated “X.” The shape is actually a cross, a shared emblem of the Chosen and UnChosen faiths, or rather castes. One silver key clearly belongs with the sedan. Ben closes his eyes and wants nothing. A dreamless sleep claims him completely.

Chapter 2 Samaritans

“Come on, Hen,” Dil shouts. Peeved impatience is his first display of real emotion since the Cortras brothers had spotted the Bourdon at the road’s shoulder. They had stopped and investigated. Dil had hoped the car was abandoned. Even more so, he hopes they might find something he and his brother could scavenge, especially fuel. When the Cortras brothers had gotten out of their battered, yellow pickup truck, Dil saw the priest slumped in the driver’s seat. He had paused and automatically assumed the man is dead. Nobody stops in the Shur. Heathens live in this waste.

“Get it off the road,” Dil now orders Hen. “And don’t get it stuck or you’ll dig it outta the sand yourself.”

Dil is the older of the two Cortras brothers, by three years. His younger brother, Hen, endlessly fail to impress him. Hen often oversteps his bounds and tries to protect his older

brother. The effort is always half-cock. His assumption of both roles as older and younger siblings frustrates Dil, because Hen accomplishes neither very well.

Hen is too excitable, so Dil usually feels burdened and remains level-headed and stoic. There were moments when Dil could relax, but strangely enough, only with his little brother. Relaxation consists of bossing Hen around and generally giving him a hard time.

Dil teases his little brother while they drive the dawn highway toward Khetam. He points at the purplish lump on the center of Hen's forehead. "How's that bump on your head, numbskull?"

"Better, why?" Hen squeaks, feeling cautious. Despite knowing the peril, he and Dil both love the rough interaction.

"Here, I got something that will help," Dil says with his fist extended before his brother. "Take it."

Hen plays along. "What is it?"

"Here, I'll put it on your head, just lean forward."

Hen does tilt forward and his brother knocks a knuckle against his skull. His laughter muffles the thud.

Hen laughs too. They are as close to each other as any family either had ever known. Ever since being thrown from their home when they were teenage delinquents, they have had only each other. They are family. Their expulsion was many years ago, and truthfully of no great loss. Their mother and her rotation of substitute stepfathers had never provided a childhood worth mentioning.

The Cortras brothers took their chances when they decided they would cross the Shur desert and go into Khetam, known as the Fort by outsiders.

"We won't make it, Dil," Hen says rubbing his swollen head. "We got no money and not enough gas."

"The lack of cash won't matter, because there's no place we can fill the tank – not all along the way through the Shur."

Hen shrugs.

"We gotta try," Dil said. He expects they will drive until the fuel is burned away or the old truck overheats and the engine is permanently seized.

Hen usually remains more hopeful than his older brother. When their trip began, he had recited Chosen dogma. "The Fort, Khetam, is the Promised Land; where the Mortal God once lived with the Chosen."

"Yeah," Dil said back.

Hen eventually wishes aloud. "A quest into the city where the Mortal God had once dwelt must be lucky."

Dil likes when Hen talks like that, although he would never let his little brother know the truth. Religion is a little too emotional for Dil's taste. Besides, both were born into the meek UnChosen caste.

The older Cortras had never told his brother a sad reality; patrols will probably find them broken down far from their destination, or they will be stopped and harassed by the same military. They then would be sent back to Gomorrah or escorted to the encampment outside the Fort and its Wall. Getting past the Wall was an entirely different problem; if the brothers actually reach the Fort. They have no means or purpose for entering the city. The encampment outside the Fort would probably be their final destination.

Hen tells his brother "The trip from Gomorrah to Khetam takes a whole day."

Dil says "I know. If we start early and drive west through the night, we'll reach the encampment the following sundown."

"I know," Hen says. "Summer is the wrong time for crossing the Shur. The days stretch too long, and everything on the landscape bakes real slow. The sand in the Shur hoards heat. It oozes out through its pores all night. We'll never get a break."

Dil tells him "As far as I'm concerned, we have no choice but leave Gomorrah immediately. We needed to leave."

Before their flight across an inhospitable domain, Dil and Hen had recently arrived in

Gomorrah. The Church of the Chosen did not have an interest in the area – because no real skill or resources were present for exploitation, just citizens eking out existence. The UnChosen were alone, administering their spiritual needs, all within Chosen doctrine, and policing themselves. In the absence of the Church or its appointees, local crime lords had assumed unbidden government of remote cities. The Ismael family had won that mantle in Gomorrah and runs the trade in Ape. The city has since disintegrated into a haven for amphetamine production and serves as a heathen induction outpost. With its frequent explosions, in labs hidden inside garages and crawlspace basements, only a miracle prevents the place from burning to the sands. Dil wishes fire had consumed Gomorrah long before the brothers had found themselves in the city.

In their beginning, a big city seemed the best place for earning some money, and maybe even save a little. Honest work was still available, if only day labor. If a man or boy did not attract attention, and remained secreted away from the streets at night, he might avoid shanghai into the heathen's holy war.

The head of the Ismael family revels in delusional righteousness, including himself and the countless members of his family. So when his nephew hit the Cortras brothers with a very special convertible, and was carried home unconscious and bleeding, Dil and Hen fled. Plenty of witnesses saw the young man barrel his uncle's prized automobile into the stalled blue truck. The young Ismael was plainly at fault but blame would not make a difference. Those witnesses to the Cortras' offense would have run too, if they were involved and not just convenient bystanders. True to the nature of the UnChosen caste, no one in Gomorrah would hesitate telling a story other than the truth they witnessed. Dil wouldn't have thought twice about lying, either. The game was a matter of self-preservation.

He knew the victim's uncle put a bounty on the Cortras brothers. The pair of them needed to flee Gomorrah before word spread. Dil had collected debts from strangers and made a few of his own, none of which he intended of ever repaying.

Lenders knew their loans were wasted because most people in the city had already heard the news. When this desperate man came banging on doors after dark, people tried chasing him away. That, too, was also self-preservation.

Without options, Dil had gathered all the money he might, yelling threats into alleys and smashing back windows. In the end, chasing the man away was often easier and safer than giving him anything that might be spared – which usually amounted to nothing anyway. Whether Dil was caught or got away, he would never be seen again. The faster this marked man vanished, the better.

Meanwhile, Hen draws a curious audience. Cautious gawkers peek through slightly parted drapes and cracked doors. Dil had instructed his brother "Look over the smashed truck, quickly, and fix anything that needs repair – if you can." The brothers had planned leaving before dawn and the vehicle must be ready.

Hen reasons the truck is fine, because they had driven away from the accident. In fact, the accident got the engine started again, because the younger Cortras had popped the clutch when the truck rolled.

Before his head had jerked forward in the collision and snapped off the rear view mirror, Hen had seen Ismael's convertible race up behind them, too fast and unaware. Hen had recognized the driver and was very much aware of the vehicle's owner. All he could do was brace himself for the impact. His older brother flew against the dash without injury. An even more dangerous aftermath followed the crash. Hen, himself, decided he would escape and take his rattled brother with him. As always, instinct was his counsel.

After the sudden flight, and once Dil was dropped at their squat, Hen had driven their bashed truck to an empty lot. He now pulls off the curbside road and into the field of overgrown scrub, parting and crushing dead bushes and short, frail trees along the way. Despite the sparse cover of skeletal branches and chaparral, every window and doorway facing the lot had an open view. Hen didn't care and steps outside. The younger Cortras then climbs the vehicle and balances upon the crumpled folds in the truck bed.

His attempts at stomping the buckles into their old shapes, because the truck had always

been crumpled, go unrewarded. The most he accomplishes is make the scrap and debris in the back of the truck jump, chime and tingle. Tired and defeated, Hen sweeps the cubes of glass from the truck bed with a ragged, short-handled broom he had brought with him. In the setting sun, the glass chunks sparkle like thick chunks of ice when they clink against each other on the ground.

Hen had also brought a couple liters of yellow house paint he had found discarded on a corner along the way to the lot. An idea had struck him when he spied the paint. Once most of the glass is gone out of the bed, he opens the paint using the long stem of a broken screwdriver. The handle of the tool is missing and the metal shaft shines hot and unblemished.

Hen dips the broom into the paint then brushes the muddied bristles across the molded metal of the truck. The paint goes on fast with thick, broad and textured strokes and the truck is soon colored a flat, pale yellow. Enough daylight remains and allows Hen an assessment of his work.

He sighs in exasperation at his crude camouflage. This was just the kind of half-ass effort that made Dil angry. Hen laughs aloud anyway; he couldn't wait and see his brother's face. Hen adds the empty paint cans and broom to the clutter of junk and chunks of glass discarded in the dry grass. He then backs the truck out of the lot along the path of squashed scrub, scratching the wet paint and leaving a trail of pastel twigs and branches.

The brothers meet again just after midnight, rendezvousing at a train yard they had once made a temporary home. Months ago, they slept in their truck until they found work and money. Compared against the strung-out homeless camping beneath sheet metal overhangs, the brothers lived in luxury. Their new plan entails a little sleep before starting the trip, but they both are restless. The Cortras brothers leave Gomorrah before dawn with the clothes on their backs and whatever had been left in the truck. Once the city is out of sight and the sun rises behind them, Dil turns the driving over to Hen.

When they were safe and out of the city, it was time to trade places. Hen gets out and runs around the back of the truck while Dil slides over. The older Cortras is vaguely aware something is different with the color of the vehicle, but feels too fatigued and couldn't comprehend even the obvious. He'd grown so tired that he had no choice but let Hen drive again. They wouldn't stop if it could be helped.

Driving with the windows down, as fast as the truck could bear, was the only way they would stay in any moderation of comfort. Anyway, the back window of their truck was missing. They had very recently lost the glass on that rare, fateful occasion when Dil had allowed Hen to drive. The broken window had occurred during the accident which had ultimately driven the brothers into the desert and gave Hen his bump.

The older Cortras scolds his brother before he dozes. "Stop grinding the gears, dammit. Don't."

Soon after, he suddenly awakes soaked with sweat. His back feels prickly and his shirt sticks against the vinyl seat; the day was going to be searing.

Hen listens for the radio while it makes soft noise. But the rush of the wind through the cab and the thrum of the engine makes the broadcast impossible to hear. Dil reaches across the dash and turns up the volume. His brother smiles.

"I'm fine. You can sleep some more. Go ahead," Hen merrily offers.

Dil replies "No."

The desert makes radio reception excellent. Only the couple of stations broadcasting seems a shame. But then, those two stations were the only choices available: one was reserved for the Church and the other for military news and propaganda. They are the same entity, the head and the arm. Both broadcast twenty-four hours a day, usually repeated recordings. The only music that ever plays is carefully crafted non-rhythmic chants. Hen listens to the news, because the other station makes his older brother mad. Dil never tolerates anyone preaching at him.

A woman's voice on the radio announces events from the other night. Her voice sounds artificial, like every other female announcer. All of the radio announcers could have easily been replaced with a machine that rearranged audio clips. News was just as generic; copies of

censored propaganda are fed into the airwaves and a mechanical voice reads the intoned message.

“... Military patrols from four desert sectors have joined to conduct the operation... The missing scout has been located. He had been disemboweled and murdered by heathens... Fourteen heathen fighters were killed. Military forces suffered no casualties.

“It is suspected a high-ranking leader in the terrorist network was present, but could not be accounted. The leader has been tentatively identified as Ilu Yehowah. It is assumed he's retreated into the desert outside Gomorrah. Patrols are alert and a search operation is underway.

“If Yehowah was at that raid, his appearance would be the third sighting in the area this month. He is wanted for heresy, murder, and crimes against the Church and its Chosen people. A substantial but undisclosed reward for information leading to his arrest or proof of death is offered from the Church and military.”

“We could really use that money, huh?” Hen says wistful to his woken brother. He half-expects the reward would actually be handed to them, if they had anything useful they could offer. Dil does not answer. That was blood money and only a loan. It would be paid back with the flesh of anyone stupid enough and succumbed to the temptation. Before Dil crafts an appropriate repose, a flash appears far up the road. He instantly fixes his eyes on the spot where he had glimpsed the bright reflection.

“Slow down,” Dil orders. Hen creases his brow and quickly glances at his brother.

“You see something?”

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

Dil turns down the radio while he squints into the distance. The flickering object is definitely a car and off the road. The truck slows and the wind stops whipping through the cab. Hen sighs. “There goes our air conditioning.”

“It wasn't working anyway,” Dil quips.

The brothers coast past a white Bourdon sedan. From their vantage point, the sedan looks abandoned. Hen stops the truck in the middle of the road. The engine clanks and quits a few seconds after he pulls the keys from the ignition. Out of habit, he hands the keyring to his brother.

Taking the keys, Dil steps onto the road. “Let's look.”

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

Hen had waited all morning anticipating this moment. His brother's jaw finally drops. Dil has four fillings and a missing back tooth; Hen was familiar with the landscape. The younger Cortras hoots the laugh he had saved for the occasion. “They haven't found us, have they?”

Dil shook his head and mumbles. “Not yet.”

When the brothers come near the sedan, they see a bloated body slumped deep in the seat on the driver's side. The driver's door is ajar and they drew closer with caution.

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

Dil opens the door further and discovers the inside the automobile is as hot as standing under the sun outside. Hen is right. Judging by the black clothes, the man is a priest. Dil stoops forward, hovering over the priest's mouth. A bitter-sweet chemical smell wafts from the skin of the unconscious man. Evidence suggests that speed, of the narcotic kind, had killed him. The Ape had probably come straight from Gomorrah. Still listening, Dil deftly snatches the keys from the man's lap. The priest resurrects that moment. He screams and kicks himself upright, tangling himself into the seat belt.

“Who?” cries the priest. “Heathens, get away from me.”

Dil yanks his head out of the car. He thinks he's heard himself yell in surprise, but that was Hen. A loud ring then numbs Dil's left ear.

The brothers stand paralyzed. The door swings against the girth of the priest, prevented

against latching shut. The priest continues screaming with his arms wrapped around his chest. His heart was succumbing to the hallucinogenic stimulant.

“What?” Hen finally asks.

Dil looks into the distance, side to side. His brother repeats the motion. The horizon is far away and empty, confirming the three men are completely alone.

“You stay with him.” Dil points at the groaning priest. He had seen this sort of masochistic death before in previous experiences with drug addicts and the clergy. The priest won't live long. Dil goes back to the truck. “I'm still gonna take the gas.”

“What am I going to do?” Hen pleads.

“Nothing,” Dil replies. “He won't let you, even if there was anything you could do.”

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

“Hey, who are you?” Hen asks the dying man.

The priest curses Hen and howls. Hen raises his arms in surrender then drops them to his sides with a disappointed thump. Friendly introductions are obviously out-of-the-question, but Hen had made his attempt.

Suddenly at the side of the road, a red apparition startles Dil. The older Cortras thought he had been careful and guaranteed their privacy. The figure looks like a chubby scarecrow, sewn together with the skin of some gruesome ripe fruit. Both Dil and this new figure remain staked on their posts. After a while, the apparition totters to its left as the priest yells at Hen again. The sound and motion bring Dil back to his senses.

When his brother calls to the stranger, Hen whips around. The younger Cortras had tried calming the priest, but quickly forgot the vain task. Hen may have said something aloud, but lost that too. He rushes over and joins Dil while the priest continues a garbled tirade.

“I think that's him,” Hen confides to his brother. “I think that's Yehowah.”

Dil thinks about the suspicion for a moment. “How did he get up here?”

He considers the thought further. “I don't think so.”

Dil stares at the apparition, uncertain. The Cortras brothers then stalk the still figure. Hen continues babbling, but Dil falls deep into concentration. He does the majority of his thinking while Hen yammers. Hen talks mostly to himself, anyway. Dil assumes his little brother vents stress through his constant racket. After a while, ignoring his gibberish became as natural as farting.

“Put the burned guy in the car with the priest,” Dil decides and tells his brother.

Broken words crackle in the dry throat of the stranger. “Tall...glass...water...”

Dil agrees the request is reasonable. If this is Yehowah, there may be some change of luck the Cortras can seize. The man collapses into the arms of the brothers and they carry him toward the sedan. Cooling him down becomes their top priority.

Hen begins and asks the stranger what both brothers suspect. “Were you at that raid?”

Dil puts an end to Hen's questions before they continue. “Shut up, Hen.”

The whole scenario requires careful thought. Tipping one's hand was unwise, even to a dying priest and living, sunburned and bloated mummy. Regardless, Dil leaves Hen to watch over the priest and stranger as the older Cortras attends to the task of his original plan.

He briefly returns and hands Hen a bottle of water he had fetched from the truck. Dil then purposefully approaches the trunk of the sedan. He uses the priest's keys, opens the trunk and looks inside. There is little to claim, especially because the emergency road kit is missing most of its essentials.

A flare and an empty aerosol can of flat tire repair remains. A beaten plastic gas canister had rolled onto its side against the back seat. Dil leans all the way into the trunk and retrieves the canister. He lies nearly flat before he rights the can with his fingertips and grasps its handle. It is empty, and Dil had expected as much. He crawls out and slams the trunk shut. Dil then searches through the junk in the crumpled bed of his truck.

A hose, or tube of sorts he might use for siphoning the gas tank, could not be found. Dil discovers the long stem of a screwdriver covered in yellow paint, the same new color as the truck. He shakes his head and reconsiders the situation. The sedan must be removed from sight before

taking the gas, an impossible scenario on a flat, featureless desert. Dil calculates that if he and his brother take the car far enough off the road, it might escape bleary eyes dulled by hours of travel. If the car had not appeared directly in their path, Dil would not have necessarily noticed it. He goes back to the passenger side of the sedan, toting the empty canister.

The priest is dead, for good or ill. Dil couldn't figure what to do with the man anyway. Having a corpse to work with, instead a drug-addled priest, fills him with morbid relief. Fewer opinions makes the situation less complicated. The priest would stay with the car.

"Hen, shut that door and give me a hand."

Once Dil holds the keys out to his brother, Hen caps the empty plastic bottle from which he rationed water to the stranger. The cross on the key chain flash in the light, but Dil does not worry. The sedan was not theirs and won't be.

He instructs Hen "Take it into the desert, straight out, until you see me waving."

"We're not taking it? Come on, Dil." Hen protests and slams the door.

Now that he shut the cool breeze from the air conditioner inside, the younger Cortras realizes how much he enjoyed the rare comfort. His fingers had become pleasantly numb. The luxury of cold air wasn't one he had hoped-for but he now added an air conditioner to his list of prayers. The muscles in the neck of his older brother contract.

"Think about it, Hen – us, in a dead man's car – a priest no less. He's probably got orders – some place he's gotta be. Patrols will look for him, and this car, if and when he doesn't show."

Dil sounds logical. A priest alone, out here in the middle of summer, makes no sense – not just to get Aped on speed. No priest would be in the Shur, unless he had an assignment somewhere, like Khetam.

Hen nods. In concession, he could enjoy the air conditioning a little longer. He pretends he sulks on his walk back to the driver's side. Hen now must touch the priest again, but there would be no protest from either man.

He pulls the driver's door open and hunches over the dead man. The smell of Aped people is bearable, but the priest had also soiled himself when he died. Hen holds his breath and draws closer so he might unbuckle the seat belt. The dead man had become snared in the belt when the clothe strap had crawled across the body of the corpse. The dead man looks like an over-sized, overstuffed rag doll, draped over a clothesline by its neck to dry. The stench hadn't replaced the chilled air inside the sedan, but the sight made Hen shiver.

He backs out and exhales. Hen then takes another breath and stretches forward, holding his face back. His small chin disappears into the wrinkles at his neck. Hen untangles the priest's head from the belt. When the strap snaps back, it snags Hen's arm and traps his hand against the priest's slimy forehead. Hen's fingers slip into the moist tangle of the dead man's hair. He frowns and squints at the meaty texture, this feel of still-warm flesh.

The interior of the sedan becomes considerably less appealing by the moment and less ginger action was required. Hen shoves the priest's head into the car. The upper body of the man follows the head inside. Hen frees his arm at the same time and the buckle whips back into its bracket with a sharp clank. The younger Cortras feels better until he realizes he had completed only the first step. He repeats his deep breath, his chest swells and remains inflated as he drives into the priest's body.

The front seat is a bench and inclined downward due to the position of the car on the shoulder of the road. The body of the priest crushes the unconscious stranger who had once been rooted on the passenger's side. Both bodies slide downward and the still-breathing man smashes against the opposite door.

The stranger remains oblivious to the dead man's weight. When Hen exhales this time, he makes a contented exclamation. "Wooh!"

He fishes the keys from his pocket but pauses before taking the priest's place behind the wheel. Hen frets over sitting in something embarrassing and disagreeable. When he checks, the seat and its back are streaked with a film of oily sweat, unpleasant, but a fact of life in this climate. Hen still pauses, watching the splotches shrink now that air and light touch them.

Dil yells at his brother. "Get moving, dammit."

Dil tenses with impatience, and Hen's delay drives the older Cortras mad. The frustration is evident in his voice, but Hen still takes a moment and rolls down the door's window before sitting inside. Once he sits down, he adjusts the vents and points them toward his face. This is the sensation to which he looked forward. Every muscle slackens and he moans with a pitch not dissimilar to his earlier shrill. Hen relishes sitting at the wheel of the chilled Bourdon with leather seats. Most decadent, getting out of the sun allowed escape from the desert for a few seconds. Hen didn't even notice the smell of priest and casually turns the ignition.

The instrument panel lights-up, but Hen can't hear the rumbling engine over the fast howl of the air conditioning. He does hear the screech of the starter and whips his hand off the key, then he shifts into drive and steps heavy on the accelerator. The car lurches forward and rocks over the uneven dirt. The younger Cortras takes his foot off the gas pedal entirely and lets the vehicle roll. The sedan doesn't go far. Hen needs practice before he got accustomed to the way the sedan drives. He pulls the steering wheel hard to his left and tries the accelerator again.

A great wall of dust rises when the car leaves the shoulder and hops into the emptiness. Despite the rough ride, entirely due to where Hen takes the sedan, he wishes they didn't abandon the vehicle. The Bourdon was the best thing he had ever possessed, even for a few brief minutes.

Dil performs a crazy dance in the rear-view mirror, waving his arms wildly over his head. Hen slows once his brother skips off the road, following the younger Cortras before the car stops. The walk takes longer than the distance Dil had wanted, but he would not be long before he reaches the sedan. Hen leaves the air running after shutting off the engine. He kicks the door open and assesses his passengers. Neither had moved much with the jostling, and neither seem in any condition to mind being disturbed. One guy would probably very much like an interruption from his death.

The soiled backside of the priest is turned toward Hen, who made an effort not to look, but he couldn't resist the wallet that had spilled out of the dead man's pants pocket. The billfold disappears without inspection into the same pocket from which Hen had originally pulled the sedan's keys. He then reaches over the seat and retrieves the suitcase lying in the back. The luggage is heavier than it looks. Hen hauls the suitcase outside and slaps it on the hood of the car. For a second, he feels a pang for having dented the metal, then he remembers it won't make a difference. The twin latches of the suitcase pop open the moment Dil arrives of the rear of the vehicle.

"What are you doing?" he asks, perturbed by the broiling walk. The distance really wasn't a problem and moving the car further from the road did make him feel more secure.

"I'm looking for some paper," Hen answers while he rummages. The case contains only clothing, priest clothes.

Dil has to ask. "Why?"

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

Dil was dumbfounded. Twenty-four hours had not passed since his brother started them on this exodus, painted the truck with crap then he comes up with an idea of a suicide note for a dead priest. The idea couldn't possibly be mistaken for a good one. Making matters worse, Hen tunelessly whistles. Dil stops his little brother before Hen went any further.

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

"The suitcase carries no pens, pencils or paper anyway – no drugs either," Hen conjectures. "The Ape might be on the priest or hidden in the car, if the dead guy hasn't smoked the drugs already."

Ape was not what Hen wanted. The Cortras brothers have enough everyday anxiety and that keeps them tossing all night, every night. Hen does find a folded manila envelope and crams it into his pocket as quickly as the wallet. There would be time later when the items he had poached can be sorted.

Dil continues chiding his brother. "What goes on in your head? Can you even tell me?"

He doesn't look for an answer, only rants. "It's best no one ever finds out about this. Let's not make any more problems than we have."

Dil goes down on his knees behind the back bumper. He claws the dirt with his hands. The older Cortras doesn't stop digging until he has dug a hole beneath the tank large enough for the bottom of the gas canister. It fits perfectly, with the opening of the can just below the bottom of the tank. Dil pulls the painted screwdriver shank from his pocket.

"Now we can make it to the Fort."

He drives the screwdriver into the tank with a blind and awkward thrust. The result is precise enough and isn't the first time he had stolen gasoline. He withdraws the shank slowly, with a long groan of metal. Hen winces at the noise. The complaint was the pain and cry of a living machine, stabbed in its belly. Gas flows into the can in a thin, constant stream until the container is filled and fuel spills over the sides.

"Stop it up and I'll put this in the truck." Dil yanks the can out of its ditch and replaces the nozzle. "We'll get as much as we can get."

"With what?" Hen asks, stalling Dil and pulling him back to the instructions he had given his little brother.

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

Hen was not sure his brother jokes with him. Meanwhile, the small trench fills with fuel.

"Go on! You're wasting it!" Dil shouts in anger.

Dil walks back to the road with the filled canister of gas and Hen does as he was told.

The ground sucks up the spilled gas now that the source was plugged. The process of draining the tank and filling the truck takes several trips before all possible fuel is transferred, although about a third as much goes squandered into the dirt. Meanwhile, Hen watches on his knees, bent over, with his finger in his version of a dike as Dil walks back and forth between the vehicles. The blast of the air conditioning grows weaker the whole time. All the life in Hen's grandest, luxurious moment would soon die away.

Hen watches his brother throw the can into their truck's rumpled bed. Dil is empty handed this last time he returns. He comes back and witnesses the last of the fuel drain into the ground. Both men are soaked in sweat and it was time to move on. In the back of Dil's mind, he hopes they would deal with the stranger the same way he had with the priest – let him pass away and they'll leave him behind, robbed and forgotten. Although, the poor man looks like he carries nothing.

However, there were larger matters to think about and the stranger was still alive. The brothers would take him with them, and expect his rescue would be a big debt he repaid. Dil makes the decision for both the Cortras brothers. Hen couldn't be trusted and might lose his guts.

If this sorry man was Yehowah, the brothers might gain some dissuasion against Ismael's wrath. If a military patrol stops them before they reach the Fort, the truth would naturally come out. This was a stranger from the desert who needs help, and the Cortras brothers simply did the right thing when they picked him up. After all, they weren't heathens.

The brothers pull the stranger out of the car. He was harder to carry this time, since all strength had left the man and his movement required energy from both of the Cortras brothers. Just as they started back to the truck, Hen stops and flings the stranger's arm from his shoulders. The unexpected weight almost pulls Dil to the ground.

"Wait a second," Hen yells and runs back to the driver's side.

He reaches into the sedan and grabs the body of the priest with both hands. Propping himself with one foot against the seat, he yanks the priest over and onto the driver's side then drops him over the steering wheel. Dil watches in discouraged resignation before turning away. If he could have carried the man himself, he would have dragged the stranger much closer toward the truck.

Hen grabs the suitcase from the hood once his brother stops paying attention. He then assumes his position again at the right side of the stranger. The brothers tow the sun-scorched stranger back to their truck more quickly than they thought possible. So far, grisly fate works in their favor.

The Cortras brothers place the stranger on the passenger side and the brothers go opposite directions around the truck. Hen enters the driver's side before Dil. He straddles the

stick shift on the floor and sits far back into the seat. Irritated, Dil reaches between his brother's knees and changes gears. The suitcase on Hen's lap certainly did not escape his notice, but he starts the truck and speeds down the road before he asks what now goes through his brother's head. Hen had obviously experienced too much time with nothing to do, other than corking a gas tank and huffing the fumes.

"Get rid of that suitcase, Hen. What are you doing with it, anyway?" Dil divides his attention between the suitcase and his driving. The straight, empty road does not demand much focus. Curiosity compels him and he wishes he had special vision and sees through the leather case.

"What's in it?" he asks immediately after directing Hen to lose the loot.

"Nothing, just clothes."

"Then throw it out the window," Dil repeats.

Hen smiles and nods toward the stranger. "He's going to need clothes, that's why I brought it along."

"Priest clothes? You have lost it," Dil diagnoses. "How do you think this guy will pull off being a priest?"

"He's fat," Hen answers.

"Yeah."

Hen had spent some time thinking through an idea and insists being heard. "Listen, Dil, he needs clothes, right? And we're not going to hand him over..."

"Unless we're stopped," Dil interjects. "We're not putting our necks out for him, even if we have a choice."

"Huh?"

Dil stares and frowns at his little brother. Hen continues, believing he makes an indisputable point.

"But if we're not stopped, he's going to need clothes, right? Cover. And a priest can get us into the Fort."

His last statement intrigues his older brother. Dil was sure Hen hadn't thought about their obstacle and how they would get past the Wall. His brother's plan may have been ill-conceived, but it also might be amusing. Dil scans ahead and glances over his shoulder twice, watching for patrols and more apparitions.

"Go on," he prompts Hen.

"This guy can wear the clothes we got. They'll fit, you'll see. He can go right up to the Wall and order the guards to let us pass." Hen raises his brow and speaks more quickly as he finishes his thought. "It's that easy."

But Dil knew it was not going to be easy. Priests don't just order soldiers around, despite being like officers in the chain of command. The status is more honorary and carries little power, especially among priests without rank. The dead man appeared non-commissioned.

Hen's ideas always had holes and they needed plugging, the kid lacks a broad perspective. Dil feels compelled and paints the complete picture for his brother. "It doesn't work that way. Those guys at the Wall aren't a local militia. The Fort is the most secure city of them all. It's the command center of the Church and military headquarters."

"And look at him." Dil gestures at the sleeping stranger with a hooked thumb. "He's burned to a crisp. How do you explain that?" Dejection fills Hen while his older brother continues. "Everyone needs a pass or a good reason to get into the Fort. Priests need orders."

Hen suddenly stabs his leg straight out and the younger Cortras retrieves the wallet and manila envelope he had taken from the dead priest. His foot tangles with the scuffed boots of the unconscious man. Hen then shuffles the two items in his hands and decides which he will thumb through first. Dil goes pale.

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

Any hurt Hen had felt with Dil's judgment was quickly forgotten once Hen opens the wallet. He discovers identification cards without photos and, more important, money.

“About two hundred.”

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

Hen divvies the cash and lets the wallet drop into his lap. The manila envelope remains unfolded, with its top seam split and frayed. It had already been opened properly with something like a letter opener. Hen draws out creased papers and finds photocopied orders in triplicate. Dil leans over and reads them with his brother.

“It says he’s assigned a place in the Fort,” Hen relays. “There’s a parish he’s taking over, Saint Erasmus.”

“Saint who? How can you rub out a name like that?”

“Dil, don’t even kid about things like that, ‘cuz, you know...”

The conversation ends and both brothers think about the challenges Dil had listed. An uncomfortable silence forms as skin on stagnant milk until Hen pokes a hole through the surface.

“He can have the orders, we could give him the IDs.”

Dil almost gasps and he feels sick. Apparently, they could implement Hen’s plan.

“He could get us into the Fort,” Hen adds. He says it aloud and convinces himself of the possibility, although his own guts flutter. The lack of verbal dissent from Dil implies affirmation. No other clues in his body language suggest disapproval, although Dil usually just remains stiff. The plan might not work. That would mean arrest and permanent detainment, which also meant something bad could, and probably would, happen in a detention camp. Then there was the stranger to consider, he may not go along with their idea. There was no reason he should, and trying to talk him into the suicidal scheme may be a waste of time. This man could be Yehowah, although that fact had not yet been established. The situation could change again, back into Dil’s hope they cash a favor owed them.

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

Hen plucks the wallet from his crotch. He verifies the name on the orders matches the IDs and grins triumphant.

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

Chapter 3 Trespass

Night finally arrives once the Cortras brothers crawl from the low desert. During their flight through the Shur, the day had been unending then suddenly faded away. In the emptiness, time had stretched long and thin but snaps back upon the first sign of civilization. They see fostered light amid the shadowed dunes of the desert. Now that the barren wilderness behind the brothers admits darkness, their trip instantly and substantially becomes cooler. Hen had slept a few hours after the Cortras brothers had rescued the bare-chested stranger from certain death, but he was awake and weary now.

The Cortras brothers call the stranger Ben. They try the name on him for size and it fits; the stranger looks like a Ben. The inherited suitcase full of clothes lies on the floor, underneath his knees. The military boots he wears work against his upcoming assumed identity. That is, if he accepts the scheme the Cortras brothers had hastily planned for entrance into the Fort.

Hen neglected taking the priest’s shoes, and rebukes himself for overlooking the small detail. The oversight was certainly not his first. In fact, missing the obvious was a vex the younger Cortras suffers. Nothing could be done about the mistake now, so he didn’t concern his brother with his sin. Hen mentally kicks himself enough for the both of them. The brothers were exhausted, so they didn’t need to fight over the stranger’s boots until later. They could first win their escape from worry and the lasting heat through sleep.

The trio reach the scarcely illuminated encampment after midnight. The drive through the desert had passed without event or company, as if they had been the only souls stranded on the blasted world. Dil had gotten what he hoped – no confrontation with suspicious patrols or more desert wanderers. As luck would go, the two brothers had appropriated enough fuel and covered the stretch, and more.

The Fort can't be entered before dawn. Everyone knows the fact. The Chosen military secures the gates through the Wall from sunset to sunrise, completely locking down entrance and exit to and from Khetam. The only task now for the Cortras brothers was staying hidden. During the ride, before Hen had fallen asleep, the Cortras brothers had assessed their plan between themselves. Their new friend, Ben, now needed briefing.

Dil finds a liquor store at the outskirts of the encampment and stops the truck before entering the squatter settlement. The place looks like it never closes. The owner had no choice but stay open – three battered tin walls and a canvas flap were all that stood between the merchandise and a world of unrepentant thieves. The twenty-four hour service ran continuously for its own security rather than convenience. A young man in a loose t-shirt and cut-off jeans sells Dil three tall plastic bottles of water. The travelers need hydration, especially Ben.

Dil returns to the truck with the water and pulls his half-dozing brother off Ben with his free hand. Despite the heat still radiating from the stranger, Hen had rolled on top of him during his sleep. The younger Cortras wakes after he is righted, but the young man stays drowsy.

"Where are we?" he slurs.

"The encampment," Dil tells him.

Hen had passed the first part of the trip dripping the last of their water into Ben's open mouth. The stranger appeared semi-conscious at the time, but neither Hen nor Dil could tell. Ben had swallowed and spit in reflex. He needs a constant supply of water before he's brought back to life, and he'd get it, awake or not.

Hen had told his brother "I heard from migrants about nursing badly dehydrated people who cross the desert on foot in the winter. The Shur is dry and inhospitable, no matter the season."

The brothers had plenty of opportunity and talked with migrants during their frequent rotation of day jobs. The only taboo subject was the Church and Chosen, of course, but nobody talked about heathens. Although, the brothers must have rubbed shoulders with more heathens and their sympathizers than they cared to know. Both Dil and Hen believe their willful ignorance keep them alive.

Hen slides over and dangles his legs out the open door on the driver's side. Dil hands his brother a bottle of water. The brothers open their bottles, drink, and quietly observe their surroundings while Hen also shakes off his haze of slumber.

The Cortras brothers can't see much at night. In the stead, they hear civilization and the wilderness. Coyotes yip their questions in the near distance. The yelps of the wild canines and hum from an electrical generator powering the liquor shack make the only sounds. The relative peace was a welcome change from the whistling wind the trio had endured while they sped all day through the white light of the desert.

"I'm hungry, Dil." The statement sounds as empty as Hen's belly.

"Yeah, they got nothing at the store. We can wait until the sun comes up."

Ben groans and the complaint makes the brothers jump. Hen twists in his seat while Dil slowly strolls around the truck toward the passenger side window. While the older Cortras moves, suspicious gazes lock him and the young store clerk together. They watch each other out of familiarity with the folks who meet at the edge of towns in the middle of the night; no malice, only caution. Dil breaks the duel and focuses on the waking stranger.

"Hey," Dil says. "Are you waking up?"

Ben's head hurts and his face is swollen. His nose is filled and pinched shut. He snorts, but the blockage doesn't clear. "Who?" he asks. His voice doesn't crackle this time, but his throat still feels dry.

Dil holds out the last bottle for the stranger. The older Cortras tries his best to sound friendly and tough at the same time. "I asked you first."

Ben takes the bottle. The container is heavy in his parched and weakened state, but he needs water – a lot of water. Ben strains breaking the seal of the plastic cap. Successful in the attempt, the snap eventually echoes into the stillness. Because his demanding thirst, Ben remembers where he had been. He forces himself to sip the water carefully before he finally

speaks.

“Ben.”

“Yeah,” Hen exclaims. The shout reverberates into the distance, bouncing off unseen walls. He smiles through his brother’s disapproving gaze.

“Okay, we need to talk about that,” Dil says, placing his hands against the door and leaning forward. Now that the moment arrives, he isn’t sure how he might proceed. He had hoped the stranger would take the initiative. He tells his brother “Hen, go ahead and give him the wallet.”

The younger Cortras brother wrangles the wallet from his front pocket, along with the envelope. He hands the items to Ben. The purple lump on Hen’s forehead momentarily distracts the rescued wanderer. The man’s bruise sharpens the wanderer’s suspicion.

“I’m Hen. My brother’s name is Dil.”

Ben accepts the wallet and the envelope, but neither look familiar. The empty wallet contains only ID cards. He pulls them out and tilts the cards into the dim light from the liquor shack. “A priest?”

Benedict Gage was his name and here it is, printed on foreign IDs. The identical names are maybe an odd coincidence, but Ben, in person, wasn’t a priest. He is...he can’t remember.

Scattered memories of the desert and a priest in a white sedan float in a sparse sea. Before the desert, mundane events such as shaving, shitting and an occasional shower had created more enduring memories. He recalls one childhood memory when he had caught pneumonia at five years old. His illness had gone untreated because his parents lacked money for a doctor. The boy wound up in intensive care after he stopped breathing then spent two weeks in a hospital on Church charity.

Yet Ben could not remember the years that had led him to whatever role he now plays. The lack of memories was as walking through the home in which he grew up and looking through known rooms, but a single one was missing. A phantasmal wall exists in his mind where once hung a door, with no evidence an entrance had ever existed.

Ben opens the folded envelope with more mystery stuffed inside. This Benedict Gage had been ordered to a parish in Khetam. Ben looks at the brothers, Dil and Hen. They had saved his life, although Ben still feels he will fall into the dirt. He probably could trust them. How did that belief go?

Various cultures mangled the saying but it went something like the Cortras brothers were now responsible for him, or Ben owed them some equal service. Either way, an implied bound did exist. The idea sat with bony knees and elbows in his throat. Ben remembers always being alone, and purposely so. Self-reliance may have led him into the desert in the first place, before events turned toward worse.

He may have also wanted that nothingness, Ben didn’t know. He maybe didn’t want to know, but could not know without his memory. Ben might have walked into oblivion under his free will. At the last moment, delirium might have driven him to the road – or the voice had pushed him.

The voice was gone now, and the ringing had vanished. Only thirst remains, but the bottle Ben drank from emptied too quickly. The brother named Dil offers no more.

Ben repeats Hen’s question. “Where are we?”

“The encampment,” Hen answers, feeling privileged for having been the very latest informed. “What do you think?”

“Think about what?”

Dil contributes “We thought you would take us into the Fort. More like, we would take you and you’d get us in.”

The older, cognizant Cortras wanted to tell the plan straight, before Hen twisted the idea with his lack of forethought.

“These will get me in.” Ben observes aloud. He could not think of a reason he would want inside Khetam, but he had no other place he might go and felt a strange compulsion to try the Fort – the Promised Land before the Wall. All the same, he wanted more information before he agreed with the decision.

Ben asks his questions. "What would we do if we get in? Why do we want to?"

These were genuine concerns. Dil crosses his arms and Hen shrugs his shoulders. Dil catches the obtuse gesture and shoots his brother a smoldering glance. Hen shrugs his shoulders again, this time raising his open palms skyward. Ben turns and see Dil disapprove.

Dil moves slowly because every rigid muscle aches. His brother assumes a neutral posture, hands on hips and face cast downward. He had played the same game with his brother since they were kids.

"We thought you might have a reason," Dil tells the stranger he and his brother call Ben.

Ben might, but still did not know. Getting through the Wall was a big risk and yet the IDs bore no picture or rank. This was as anonymous and hassle-free as someone could get with a false identity; a priest of no importance. Ben strings events together and deduces the IDs once belonged with the priest in the white car. Now that this Ben had these articles, things must not have gone well for the man. He recalls something about a heart attack, and he is curiously concerned by his own disregard. Pilfering IDs and sneaking past checkpoints seems ordinary, even comfortable.

"We can go to the parish," Hen says, his chime merely a matter of time.

Dil attempts to quiet his brother. "Hen."

"Why not? That's where he's supposed to be, ain't it? It's not like that other guy is going to come knocking on the door and want his stuff back."

"But his superiors might," Dil counters.

"Well, where else are we going to go? We've never been to the Fort before," Hen says then makes an obvious and valid point. "We also have to consider curfew."

The plan grew less viable with each step, which was the way the schemes of the younger Cortras brother usually went. Their myopic vision continually bound them for failure.

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

Ben looks down at his bare and raw chest. "My clothes."

"At your feet. Check it out," suggests the younger Cortras. Hen had not stopped smiling since giving Ben his name. The smile grew wider each time he said something. Ignoring the simple joy, Ben leans forward and sees a suitcase he also did not recognize. His body screams and pushes him back. All his muscles are still too tired and sore, so reaching for the case is out of the question. He would wait for morning then open the case, after some of the stiffness had receded. The Cortras brothers had put a lot of thought into the construction of their plan. Many of the pieces went into the right places, but Ben wouldn't decide. He was still exhausted and had a lot of missing pieces of his own he wanted found.

"I'll think about it," he says and closes his eyes.

The brothers finish their water. Hen then exclaims "Oh!" and points as if he notices the liquor shack his first time. Dil recognizes the thin disguise of spontaneity. Hen uses the tactic when he makes proposals but cannot find the appropriate time or words.

"How about we get something – to celebrate."

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

"Aw, Dil," Hen said grudgingly and hands his brother a few bills.

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

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

"You got money?" Dil calls. The stranger doesn't answer.

Dil returns with a cheap bottle of wine bearing the label "Yowling Cat." The wine is known all over the Shur for tasting like grape-flavored cat piss, straight from a feline with a yeast infection. Hen quotes the suicidal proof. "One hundred and thirty-three; the alcohol content makes up for the taste."

Dil says "It's inexpensive and totally lacks any essential vitamins and has only one mineral, rock."

He screws off the metal cap and offers the first swig to Ben, who shakes his head and refuses. Instead, Dil gives Ben another bottle of water. The burnt man opens one eye and receives his un-fermented resurrection. When Dil takes a long drink of Yowling Cat, the face of the older Cortras twists into a pucker. He then passes the bottle to his brother.

Ben gulps half his water immediately then caps the bottle. Swallowing feels like drinking marbles. He wants more, but saves the remainder until he feels the need to relieve himself. His organs need moisture and they must to soak up the water like a sponge in a bucket, only from the inside out. He knows fluids and his thoughts must flow again.

The Cortras brothers finish their wine within the hour, and had slowed their drinking only when their stomachs burned and the grape acid crept back up their throats. The alcohol did its work and had opposite affects on the pair. Hen had grown quiet, and Dil became more adventurous. They act the roles they play for each other. Hen shirks against the side of the truck. Bored, Dil attempts a conversation with the young man in the t-shirt at the convenience store.

"Nobody ever comes here and just skips away with this stuff?" Dil bluffs the blank teenager.

"People might just stuff booze in their socks and walk off," Dil says and raises the pant cuff on right leg. His boot is bound tight around his heel and his hairless flesh presses over the lip of the salvaged military gear. He wears no socks.

The clerk brushes aside the animated monologue about shoplifting with silence; his paid interaction entails only making sales, not friends. The young man had seen enough of the likes of the Cortras brothers and their friend when he worked late. Usually, trouble chases strangers as these to drink on the fringes of the shack's pathetic fluorescent glow. Trouble must have caught up with most, since he has never seen any passing a second time.

Dil is accustomed with the lack of banter. People never feel like talking when he does, or at least when he drinks. The older Cortras goes back to Ben. He retains discretion and avoids asking the stranger what he really wants to know. Instead, Dil speculates.

"You know, there was a heathen camp outside Gomorrah that got hit by the military. It wasn't long after that when we found you out there."

Dil makes a wide gesture with his arm. He isn't pointing out a specific location. The arc of his arm indicates a path toward nowhere. His little brother sits on the running board at the driver's side, holding the empty wine bottle. Hen hopes his brother was done drinking.

When Dil drinks, he can often piss-off people with his taunts and teasing. Typically, the older Cortras just turns mean. Hen had learned his lesson early and he usually sits quiet when the drinking begins. After a certain point of intoxication, he avoids Dil completely. The older Cortras likes the arrangement; no talking back, just listening, which is also fine with Ben.

"What were you doing out there without a pack?" Dil asks the desert wanderer, knowing he may reach for too much. Ben shakes his head.

The older Cortras ventures. "You know, when a man is generous, like saving somebody's life, favors are expected."

Dil realizes his excess. He pushes his luck. If this man is Yehowah, Dil best stop while his comments were broad and optionally unanswered, yet Ben nods. Dil thinks he understands the motion, they all were going into Khetam. A nag at the back of Ben's mind had motivated his decision. The wanderer feels no hope or expectation, only a foreign compulsion he follows automatically.

The remainder of the night passes in short time, none of the men sleep for more than a few minutes, including the young storekeeper. At dawn, a pink light bathes the slum, making the adobe look furry. The liquor shack stands closer to the encampment's jumble of ramshackle huts and adobe walls than the Cortras brothers had expected.

While scattered waking sounds puncture the quiet, much of the slum and Ben still sleeps. Car engines idle or sputter back to death. Loose and wild dogs bark at random and unseen attractions. Ben feels better when he awakes, soon after the Cortras brothers jostle him while rummaging through the cab of the poorly painted truck.

Hen apologizes. "Sorry."

The younger Cortras then explains himself and his brother. "We're looking at what we brought with us."

"And for contraband," Dil clarifies. "We'll get searched at the Wall. You don't have anything, do you?"

Ben pats his pockets, knowing he smuggles nothing inside them. He assumes Dil means weapons, drugs, or both.

"I already looked in the suitcase, Dil," Hen reports. "Nothing except clothes, like I said."

"Speaking of which, maybe you ought to put them on," Dil suggests to Ben.

Ben looks at the suitcase laying unlatched on the seat beside him. He feels sore, but the man can move. The clothing doesn't offer variety, just black slacks and white collarless shirts. These are the everyday attire of priests, but Ben still sorts through the case. He anticipates the younger Cortras brother has already confiscated any valuables.

Whether Hen Cortras shares his find with his brother or not was something Ben knows. He suspects Hen was the sort of fellow who wouldn't, at first, but the flittering UnChosen man would eventually show the prize to Dil. The two look and act as brothers. A lopsided complement of motion and thinking plays between the two.

Ben makes his selection, which is simple, considering the lack of choice; uniformity has that advantage. Ben debates with himself about pulling on the clothes while he sits in the truck, but then he spies a water spigot set in a flat pile of stones. Mud surrounds the mound like a newly drained moat. Ben thinks he can stand at the spigot and wash dirt off himself. Although, he liked more the idea of lying on the stones and letting the water shower over him.

Nevertheless, he would utilize what was available and do so quickly. A sense of urgency radiates from the brothers. Stepping out of the truck, Ben feels as if the joints in his legs will snap. He bends them and his knees pop aloud. He drops awkwardly to the ground and stretches his legs. The shirt and pants come with him, tucked under his arms.

Ben drains the remaining water from the plastic bottle given him last night and he still craves more. He thinks he will never satisfy the thirst and resigns himself. The named wanderer carries the empty bottle to the water pump. The only waking souls yet about are the Cortras brothers and presumably the storekeeper. The interior of the shack had become dark now that the sun has risen and the fluorescent light inside had been switched off.

The young man might hide just inside the blackness, lurking or snoozing. Ben catches himself scrutinizing shadows like these in the shack. He doesn't know what he watched for but he feels compelled and checks anyway.

At the pump, Ben relieves himself absentmindedly. He then pulls off his boots and bangs them together and knocks-off the coat of dirt. Ben places them on the ground and drops the loosely folded clothes on top. The stones around the spigot are slippery, and recognizing the hazard, he balances on the haphazard pavement carefully with bare feet and jerks the pump's handle. The movement rocks him back and forth on his perch and the water soon flows. Ben drinks until the stream slows and becomes a trickle then stops. The taste is coppery, but he levers the pump again and wants more.

Ben primes the pump half a dozen times before he finishes drinking and bathing. He splashes handful after handful of water over himself. Bathing has never felt good like this morning, even though the cold water makes him shiver a bit. The chill is glorious. When he's finished, he shakes the droplets from his feet before hopping over the mud moat and onto dry sand.

Still wet, but drying fast because the sheer lack of humidity, Ben pulls on the white button-up shirt. Pulling on the clothe feels like pushing through a patch of nettles. The polyester blend stings his damaged skin and makes him suck in his breath through clenched teeth. Minimally, the long sleeves protects his arms from further burning, and the shirt does hang loose, away from his body. Ben stretches out his hands; the redness and swelling make them resemble thick, bright gloves. He imagines the impression his face makes. If there had been pictures on the stolen IDs, his cooked visage disguises him well.

Ben peels off his soaked pants. For a moment, only the tail of his shirt leaves him

unexposed. His modesty remains un-threatened and he might have bathed naked with no one around who could object. However, dignity demands he quickly pull on the black slacks. Even with the shirt tucked, the waist still hangs loose, but the inseam length fits. This new Benedict Gage had lost a little weight and gotten an overcooked tan. Still, he would not recommend his spa.

He puts on his ragged boots and laces them up. The pant legs weren't cut for them, so Ben rolls the cuffs over the tops. He fills the plastic bottle, drinks its contents, and fills it again before he goes back to the truck. He gathers the excess waist of his pants in a bunch, and leaves his old khaki pants where he's dropped them. Ben remembers a belt with strained notches had been packed in the suitcase. He decides he will find that constraint.

Before engaging his superficial quest, a piece of graffiti on a tin wall of the liquor shack catches his attention. A cross had been spray painted on the building, a red lopsided "X." Two additional long lines run through the vertex, one vertical and the other horizontal. The Chosen call the mark the Star of Lucifer. They claim the hieroglyphic is a heathen symbol, but Ben knows the actual meaning.

The mark simply defiles and rejects Church icons. Pubescent vandals were more apt to scrawl the corrupted cross than heathens. Ben doesn't understand why the defacement catches his eye, because he has seen them hundreds of times in places just like these. He remembers frequenting many slums, although the extent of his travels was still unclear. The graffiti wasn't important, but the fact the Star of Lucifer shows so near Khetam strikes him as ironic. Then again, looking around, Ben thinks seeing the impudent graffiti here among the UnChosen is perfectly natural. "What better place?" he imagines.

The Cortras brothers wait in the truck and Dil thrums his fingers against the dash while Ben recovers and fastens his new belt then climbs inside. Dil then turns the engine. At first, nothing happens. After a few more attempts, accentuated with curses, the truck comes alive. Moving onward, the three enter the encampment proper.

There are no roads, only worn and changing paths weaving around makeshift dwellings and temporary walls. The city survives in this respect. Wherever a building is leveled, a road instantly continues; and when a denizen erects a shanty in the middle of the street, a new twist is added and the path continues or it simply comes to an end. Visitors and natives alike are forced and slowly peck their way through the sordidness onto wherever they went. No one guarantees a route taken any one day will still exist the next.

Exploration entails a lot of back-tracking. Few vehicles traverse the maze so early this morning, but that soon changes. Lack of traffic signs creates havoc. Already, the flow of traffic becomes crippled when someone parks where he or she happened to be at that moment.

Life in the encampment offers the experience of passive-aggressive dueling. Thankfully, at this early hour, the three men are spared battles over right-of-way. They avoid a riot that had begun with an episode with righteous parking. Doing so, Dil follows his nose. After a few turns into the dirty city, the smell of cooking meat and beans greet Cortras brothers and their disguised passenger. An open grill stands in the middle of their path. The cart rests on hard, cracked rubber wheels; a mobile business. An older couple works together preparing meat and eggs; she does the cutting and breaking eggs and he cooks.

"There, Dil," Hen points, though the cart presents an obvious obstacle ahead.

"I know, that's where we're going."

"You're hungry, right?" Hen asks Ben.

Ben nods. He wasn't, but he knew some food would do good. Dil lets the truck run while they all get out.

"Hen, get me something. I'll stay with the truck."

Dil could have shouted his order at the couple, but he didn't like the idea of turning his back while the engine runs and the streets fill. He is also afraid the engine won't restart once he turns the ignition. He doesn't tell his little brother, Hen knows. They couldn't risk stranding themselves if the truck refused starting again.

Hen agrees. "Yeah."

Ben and Hen approach the couple. There at the grill, the elderly man and woman stop cooking and stare at Ben. The younger Cortras forces a quizzical frown. He stares back at the couple, at Ben, and at the couple again. Hunger feeds his annoyance. "What's the matter?"

"Oh, sorry," the woman instantly replies.

"Sorry," the man reiterates.

"It's, we have never seen a priest in the encampment," the woman explains.

"What?" Hen states in disbelief. He doesn't accept the excuse for lack of prompt and compliant service. His attitude is beholden a Chosen. Regardless, the funded younger Cortras feels entitled.

"Plenty of patrols, just not priests," the man answers.

Hen tells him "Never mind that. What have you got here?"

The younger Cortras already peels money from the tight wad of bills he's pulled from his pocket. He believes cash gets everyone's attention, because it does.

"What you see and tortillas. No salsa, but we have spices."

The cook points at a metal rack hanging over the smoking grill. The assortment of seasonings includes ground peppers, salt, and other unlabeled shakers of colored dust. Hen can't tell what sleeps in the containers.

"Alright," he comments officially and prepares his order. Hen calls to Dil, "How about breakfast burritos?"

Dil curls his thumb and forefinger into a universal "OK."

Hen instructs the old couple preparing his order. "Put some beans and eggs into tortillas, five of them. Wait."

Hen shouts at Ben. "How many do you want?"

"One."

"Five," Hen says, holding up his splayed fingers. His thumb remains tucked into the palm of his hand.

The man pours broken eggs into a skillet and scrambles them. The woman speaks with Ben while the cook tends the grill. She notes the false priest's face and hands.

"Are you alright?"

Hen seizes the opportunity and practices their story. "We found him broke down in the Shur. He'd be dead if we didn't save him. We're taking him into the Fort."

"All right, Hen," Dil interrupts from afar.

The old man hands the burritos to Hen in nothing but their tortillas, then reaches for the money Hen offers. The old woman stops the transaction.

"They're free, they're for the priest," says the woman. The old man automatically drops his hand, smiling close-lipped, yet agreeable.

"Thanks!" Hen smiles back, bouncing. He turns toward his brother.

"Reverend, will you command the Mortal God for us?" the woman asks Ben. "Have him send us money and health. Oh, and a car."

Loathing stirs in his heart. These were the common prayers of the UnChosen. The Church of the Chosen encourages the selfish requests. Something feels fundamentally wrong and Ben cannot justify his revulsion. The idea of a wish-fulfilling god, in the flesh, killed by people whom had demanded preeminence, was warped. He then remembers that his new disguise promotes the horrid theology, so he only nods.

"Are we ready?" Dil insists.

Hen has already finished his first burrito and starts chewing his second. The other three form a pyramid in his free hand. Ben steps into the truck and takes his austere breakfast with him. Dil follows after his little brother. Both Cortras pick bits from their burritos while Dil drives again and hunts for the other side of the encampment and the Wall.

"We're all doing this, right?" the older Cortras garners among his passengers. He then asks twice more.

"Yeah," Hen answers then turns toward Ben. Dil actually directs the question solely to the stranger.

“Right?” Dil asks Ben.

“Yeah.”

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

Ben’s way was their way until more memory of the recent past returns. He thinks part of his brain must have fried in the desert during his transitory bout of insanity – with his hearing voices and having hallucinations. This was it – where madness and exposure has driven him. Past the northern edge of the encampment, behind curled rolls of razor wire fences, stood a sign.

‘You Now Approach Khetam,’ the notice reads. ‘Admittance through verification only. Identification must be presented at gate.’

Travelers are subject to the smaller print on the post the moment they pass the wire fence. Turning back at this point only attracts attention and a patrol would be dispatched, and all radial roads into Khetam were clearly visible from the Wall. An empty plain of sand slopes gently downward and away from the shining white monument for a mile. The Wall literally looks down upon all whom approach the less luxurious encampment.

The monument and barrier itself appears as a dam and performs the same function. The thick base tapers up toward a two-lane road on the top. The barrier incorporates the hills that had originally wrapped Khetam, though less completely. The hillsides facing from the Fort had been sheered away and the mined limestone used for the construction of the Wall. The Wall itself was circular though incomplete. No matter which gate was approached, that selected section of the barrier bowed outward. Yet an ocean in the West prevents the white monument from completely encircling Khetam.

Ben thinks he has never seen a body of water larger than a pond in an oasis. And he believes he’s never been out of the desert. People say the unnamed ocean is as large as the Shur and deeper than the sky. Because the tales, a strange agoraphobia frightens Ben from curiosity. This fear seems recently formed, and to him, the vastness of the desert still feels safest. The Shur is where he has lived all his life. The desert provides ground to stand upon.

A quarter way up the Wall, at about three or four stories, evenly spaced and narrow slats in the smooth surface conceal observation windows and machine gun nests. Ben and the Cortras brothers don’t need to see the weapons – everyone knows Chosen soldiers hide and wait behind the slats for anyone they might kill. A soldier undoubtedly trains a pair of binoculars on the lone, shoddy yellow truck rumbling at the fence. The direction the vehicle faced distinguishes the truck the Cortras drive from the motley tangle of the encampment. Being spied feels as a pricking burn. Dil tosses his second burrito out the window. The older Cortras doesn’t feel like eating any more.

“No turning back now,” he proclaims.

The Cortras brothers move into the perimeter, taking Ben with them. The packed dirt road rolls up onto pavement and the truck bumps over the transition. Shocks creak when the vehicle rocks. Just off the road, waist-high signs stand as sentinels. “Danger. Mines,” they repeat. Hen gazes across the plain. Seeing only leveled dirt, he still looks. The straight road across the featureless terrain echoes the trip through the desert, except in one respect – an uneasy feeling his identity is scrutinized replaces a comfortable sense of anonymity. The drive lasts shorter than Dil likes and arrival at the gate could not be postponed. As much as the older Cortras wants otherwise, he would not slow down and attract undue attention.

“Hey,” Hen says halfway toward the gate. “What if they know what the priest or Yehowah looks like?”

Dil had suppressed his nervousness reasonably well – leave it to his little brother, who would find a way and rattle him. Dil tells him “Hen, we can’t go back. Stick to the plan and shut your mouth.”

Ben recognizes the name Yehowah. He tilts unconsciously toward Hen when he hears it spoken. He wonders if these two think he is a heathen terrorist. Ben knows he is Ben Gage, just not the one ordered to Saint Erasmus inside Khetam. The brothers were truly desperate and playing games with someone they believed was Ilu Yehowah. Ben hopes the Cortras brothers did not entertain hidden agendas. He would have a horrible turn of luck if he was accused to be a

terrorist and exchanged for a reward. Ben would have fared just as well stranded in the desert. Wearing the clothes of a priest certainly would not help. Without choice, he holds the brothers at their word. The time for turning back had passed.

The Cortras brothers couldn't possibly think taking someone they thought was Yehowah straight to the gates of Khetam could work, even if they hoped to collect a handsome reward. They had to know that idea was suicide. If the military didn't shoot them all outright, the heathens would mark the brothers in vengeance for their martyr. Dil was correct on the one account; the near future was set. Waiting for the inevitable was a falling man holding onto hope until his moment before meeting the ground.

A solitary stop sign looms a few steps from a lowered gate; a long metal arm locked between two concrete columns. Dil stops his truck before the double yellow lines on the road. A single armed soldier comes out of the Wall and meets the petitioners. He isn't alone with his folding stock H830 automatic rifle. Within the tunnel from which the soldier springs, a number of similarly equipped shadows shift. Obvious gun nests are carved into the Wall near the gate. Soldiers in those nests on either side of the stop point barrels of monstrous guns in their direction. The design of the weapons made seeing if the nests were manned impossible, until the target was in sight of the gun's operator. Even more, the soldiers hiding in the tunnel would cut the truck into shrapnel with their assault rifles at any sign of trouble.

"Stop the vehicle and get out," the soldier instructs. He trains his rifle on Dil.

Dil takes the keys from the ignition and swings open his door. "We were taking..."

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

All three men slide out of the truck and follow the soldier's instructions. The soldier scans the inside of the cab. He looks at Ben and points his rifle at the suitcase. "Is that yours? What's in it?"

"Clothes," Ben tells him.

"Do you have anything else?"

Dil answers the soldier. "We aren't staying."

The rifle snaps into Dil's face, reaffirming the soldier did not ask him. The soldier twirls his hand in the air and three more armed men march forward. Like the first, they wear brown field uniforms with the requisite black and white name and rank patches. A stylized 'X' appeared burned onto the shoulders of each uniform. The boots of the soldiers are polished and in much better condition than Ben's own. When the soldiers move, telling them apart becomes difficult. Duty at the Wall must call for a strict physique, and cloned hair and eye color, which were actually common in the Shur.

Ben never attempts assigning soldiers personal identities. He didn't want to disappoint the military when the conscripted caste tried so gallantly to create an impression of uniformity. Two soldiers step forward and pat the travelers one-by-one. Ben brings the envelope with him, holding it in his hand. Once soldiers finish searching the Cortras brothers and turn toward him, one asks "Are those papers orders?"

"Yeah," Ben confirms, and feels his coffin's lid almost nailed shut. The soldier whom asked the question waves the others away.

"May I see them and ID?"

Ben hands the envelope to the instantly respectful soldier, then carefully reaches for the wallet in his back pocket. Carefully and slowly, he produces the IDs.

"Reverend Benedict Gage?" the soldier asks.

"Yes."

"Please wait here, sir." The soldier's demeanor immediately changes and the other soldiers lower their rifles. The one who had asked Ben questions disappears back into the tunnel with the orders and IDs.

The Cortras brothers continue holding their hands on their heads and Ben stands in place looking at them. The faux priest drops his arms. All the while, Hen Cortras chews his bottom lip. Ben can see bits of black beans stuck between the man's small teeth.

Another soldier, a sergeant, follows the one whom had asked questions. They come

back outside the tunnel. The large chevrons on the sleeves of the sergeant's uniform and a small gray mustache clearly distinguish him from the monotone others. The sergeant carries Ben's ill-gotten orders and IDs, and salutes him.

The sergeant does not wait for Ben's reaction before dropping his hand. The Chosen soldier tells Ben "Reverend Benedict Gage, I'm Sergeant Issa."

The sergeant then hands the documents back to the imposter. "We are surprised you're here, we found your automobile."

Hen visibly pales. Ben suspects the blood also rushes from his own face, but the burns will not betray him. If the military had found the sedan, they will have found the priest. Ben and the Cortras brothers should now have been faced down and dead in the dirt, executed on the spot. Whatever happens now, Ben plays along. The sergeant continues speaking to him.

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

"We found him," Hen exclaims. Prompted by the sudden excitement, the soldiers snap up their rifles again. The eyes of both Cortras brother open so wide they form perfect white orbs dotted by small black circles. Disdain for the pair hovers on the sergeant's face.

"Where are you coming from?" the sergeant asks Hen.

"The encampment," Dil answers, lunging for control.

"I didn't ask you."

The sergeant goes back to Hen. This soldier is shorter than the younger Cortras brother but tougher many times over. "Where are you taking the Reverend?"

Dil holds his breath. He prays his little brother will stick with their story and stay as brief as possible.

Hen says to the sergeant "To his parish. We found him in the desert when we came from Gomorrah."

The soldier considers the explanation and spits. "Why did you leave Gomorrah?"

Hen was alone with the question. Conjuring a back-story had been an oversight. The Cortras brothers could not say they ran because running people cause trouble. They certainly would not be allowed inside the Fort if the military knew the truth. Patrols would also flush troublesome refugees from the encampment if Hen communicated that was their destination. Newcomers were tolerated if they reasonably convince the military they had actually lived in the shifting squalor since the day they were born. The military respects the lie despite the unchecked growth of the encampment flying in the teeth of such claims. Dil redoubles his prayers.

"We were looking for Yehowah. We were going to collect the reward. We figured he'd be in bad shape after that raid we heard about on the radio."

Now Dil goes pale. He never expected Hen would concoct such detail. The older Cortras now mentally prepares for detainment. Eventually the truth will come out and they may even be sent back to Gomorrah, unless there was more to the story about the military finding the car belonging to that dead priest. Dil makes the same nervous connection as had Ben.

The sergeant howls with laughter. The baying spooks his two soldiers. The young, identical men hold their rifles steady. "You are either stupid or crazy."

The sergeant turns toward Ben. "We thought the heathens kidnapped you. What happened, car trouble?"

"Ran out of gas," Ben answers truthfully, after a fact.

"And these two rescued you?" The sergeant tosses his thumb at the brothers.

"Yes."

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

Whoever had taken the car parts also took the priest. Tales of cannibalism and obscene rituals practiced among heathens and migrants spooked the Chosen the UnChosen castes alike, but – like the Star of Lucifer – that was so much propaganda and urban legend. Still, the body of the dead priest had gone missing. Maybe the man wasn't dead and was only left stranded, or perhaps he had wandered off and met the fate Ben escaped. The two Bens had literally traded places.

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

The brothers are relieved, and Hen even smiles. For this pathetic man, "crazy" and "bastard" are terms of endearment. The soldiers copy the names from the IDs the two Cortras brothers had given them before returning plastic cards. The arm of the gate then tilts up from the West.

"You have a good day, sir," Issa wishes the priest.

The sergeant salutes Ben again and signals the three travelers through the gate. Dil feels even better when the truck starts right up. He wants to get away as fast as possible.

The trio drives into a passage through the Wall. The narrow tunnel, shaped like a tilted "Z", and its sharp corners make quick navigation impossible. The design of this architecture is simple yet effective. Shards from any exploded bomb smuggled inside the defensive obstacle would have negligible impact between the twists.

Safe, the Cortras brothers and Ben emerge from the Wall. Coming into the glare of sudden daylight, all three find themselves inside Khetam. The two-story, fresh and clean – a little sooty, new buildings are nothing the brothers have ever seen before. This city itself is a foreign land. The streets are wide and paved and packed with vehicles. Much like the sudden traffic, the brothers overflow with the excitement over the truth they have gained entrance – Hen whoops. His older brother then does too. Admittance into Khetam is perhaps the grandest scheme of their lives. Along for the ride and blank, Benedict Gage waits mute for what comes next.

Chapter 4 Promised Land

The world changes upon exiting the tunnel cut through the Wall. Until the Cortras brothers had come into Khetam, they had never seen a city larger than Gomorrah. Those rusty, single-storied factory-fabricated dwellings in the UnChosen city were only a grade above the handmade assemblages teetering within the encampment outside blessed Khetam. Gomorrah amounted to nothing more than a collection of kit shacks enforced by building codes. The Fort is a real city; millions of Chosen live inside its barricaded borders. This corner of the Shur desert truly was the Chosen's Promised Land.

Gutters spill through grates into functioning sewers. Freeways provide alternatives instead the crowded paved surface streets – although on both, traffic moved slowly if at all. The promise of opportunity beams from inside Khetam like the relentless sun. Meanwhile, thousands of UnChosen huddle outside the Wall, sensing possibilities hidden within the Promised Land. They worship the dominance of the Chosen and the subservience the caste demands of their shared ancestral, disemboweled and dead Mortal God.

The Cortras brothers were lucky, Ben was a lottery ticket they had just cashed. The brothers were now safe from Judah Ismael. His family may be the throat of the beast consuming Gomorrah, but even the crime lord had no entrance into the Fort. Law governed this place. Ismael would never suspect the Cortras brothers had stolen a way inside. Anyone would expect the likes of them might retreat no further than the encampment. The brothers welcomed Ismael to look all he might, but never behind the Wall. The brothers now hid in the province of the Chosen. Dil laughs aloud while he randomly inches upon its torpid streaming streets. Hen joins his brother and whoops a second time.

"I guess we find that parish," Dil says. "What do the orders say?"

Hen wiggles his fingers at Ben. The pretender-priest absently holds the paper and IDs in his lap. He hadn't returned the orders to the envelope and the younger Cortras now wants his part in their trespass. When Ben passes the orders to Hen, the younger brother plucks them from his moving hand.

"L99 and F66," Hen happily conveys.

The Fort, like most other cities in the Shur, had been plotted on a grid. Addresses were actually coordinates. The military had overseen planning and development of the city at the deference of the Church, assuming the role before the Chosen's historic, beatific Renovation last generation. Dil scans numbers on buildings. He turns east then west and gains insight. Specifically, the older Cortras finds where they are and assumes a bearing where they need to go. He first assumes the numbers on the streets must have started at the sea, because Dil drives past double digit letters like "UU."

The trio travel in an angular circle for almost a half hour before Dil finds the way. He insists driving on surface streets. The freeways intimidate him, but he will never admit his fear. Dil had never driven on any freeway within a city before. Freeways within civilization are skinny and crowded. The passageways make him feel claustrophobic – more than when he had passed through the zigzag tunnel in the Wall.

"Where are the bars, Dil?" Hen asks his brother, noting an absence of iron bars across doors and windows. Even the windows on parked cars are rolled down and the only military presence the Cortras brothers and Ben had observed remained posted at the Wall. The general feeling of security was completely foreign to Hen and his brother. Soldiers always patrolled cities, they both prevent and cause trouble. Here, the military apparently saw no need for their protection; not inside Khetam past the Wall.

Within the Wall, people move without looking over their shoulders. Few people walk outside because today is as blistering as the one past. Those who did travel the sidewalks on foot either bloomed and carry tawny umbrellas or wear no head protection at all. Paved sidewalks and colorful storefront awnings, mostly green, decorate the storefronts of Khetam. Like the well-dressed people outside, the buildings look the same after a dozen or so blocks.

"We're going in circles, Dil," Hen swears.

"Look at the numbers, idiot," Dil curses. "You never saw me turn a corner, did you? Should I?"

Hen shut his mouth and watches the addresses drop like a countdown the further the brothers and their ticket travel. The street runs parallel the Wall, standing plainly visible and ivory above rooftops. Throughout the drive, the younger Cortras sees people who had come outside today wait in automobiles on busy streets. He didn't pity any of these pampered and guarded Chosen. Granted, today was another hot day, but nothing like the heat of his recent week deeper in the desert.

A couple hours went waste while the Cortras brothers and Ben creep closer to their destination. The taller buildings, those with four stories, never get closer. The towers appear to move with the trio, away from them, mimicking the moon on a long evening drive.

The three men drive beneath an overpass resembling a parking lot. They all appreciate the momentary shade despite no relief from the heat. Hen is glad his older brother didn't want to practice driving on the freeway today; not doing so, they maintain some momentum. On the other side of the concrete bridge, residential buildings become indistinguishable from neighboring shops, except for additional stories and lacking name placards. Many buildings incorporate underground parking. Ramps roll up from dark caves from which an occasional large, metal groundhog pokes its nose and moves onto the toil of its day.

Despite the confidence the people living in the Fort presume, the Cortras brothers soon see some doors and garages bear gates. The further they continue into the Promised Land of the Chosen, they notice more, until all openings feature metal bars. The neighborhood they soon enter resembles Gomorrah. Fewer vehicles crowd the road in this part of the city and their trip accelerates.

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

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

The Cortras brothers and Ben travel northward on L99 and come to the Saint Erasmus parish. Dil slows down and says "I think this it."

A crew of men in white overalls pull blue and white striped canvas off a two-story, red

brick building. The logo on the back of the overalls of the crew and on the doors of their long flatbed truck advertises they are exterminators – actually fumigators. The words “Gas-M” float over a silhouette of an overturned spider. The letters and the expired arachnid are also blue. Judging the city upon this presence of pest control, the Fort appears to have its share of vermin.

Anticipation fills the younger Cortras. He asks his brother “You think we can get those jobs?”

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

The presumed church brags ornate ironwork over its windows. Although, the red brick and layered ornamental lattice of the flat church especially sets the place apart from other buildings on this street. Between the gray concrete-block warehouses, the building looks inflamed; possibly because the poisonous gas that had been trapped inside.

Once enough canvas has been pulled away, Hen spots the address over the pair of front doors. This uncovered box is Saint Erasmus. He tells his brother but Dil isn’t listening. The older Cortras and Ben find the placard simultaneously the younger Cortras. The three trespassers arrive at the church to which the priest, now Ben, has been appointed. Dil parks behind the exterminator’s truck. He spares the workers plenty of room so they can roll and fold the canvas before they pack it onto the bed. Ben and the two brothers get out of the truck and loiter while the exterminators finish their work.

“You guys hiring?” Hen asks a pair of sweating workers flattening the canvas.

“Do you have your apprenticeship?” one asks without raising his dripping head.

Accustomed to the reply, the young Cortras half-expects an answer. Hen says “What?”

“Real jobs,” Dil repeats.

Hen protests. “Nobody needs to learn how to kill bugs.”

The complaint goes unheard. The second worker walks over to Ben. He asks “Reverend, is this your church?”

Ben answers after some hesitation. “Yes...”

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

The false priest opens and closes his mouth with an assumed gesture of acknowledgment. The workman nods then climbs into the truck with a couple coworkers. The remaining others fill a nearby van bearing the same fumigator markings. Both vehicles then vanish down the street. Ben and the Cortras brothers stare at each other. If they had arrived a few minutes later, there would have been no trace Gas-M had ever been present at all, other than a tart smell.

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

The trio approaches the big wooden double doors at the top of a short flight of limestone stairs. The younger Cortras pulls the looped brass handles. The doors are locked. Hen shakes them, hoping they are merely stuck, but they hold fast. He stands on his toes and attempts peering through the small diamond-shaped windows on each door. They are red are opaque. Only the glow of sanguine light can be distinguished behind the ornate glass.

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

Hen leads the way around the west side of the building. A canyon between the church and the solid wall of a neighboring concrete-block warehouse presents an avenue. Only the church possesses windows and all are protected by vertical, iron bars.

A long stretch of dirt fills the thin breezeway; the first patch of ground not covered with concrete or asphalt the trio has seen everywhere since entering the Fort. Tall weeds had filled this patch of exposed earth then died and dried up. Their brown leaves curl against spiny stems. These stems crunch and turn to dust when the men trample them.

The back of the church hosts a meager yard of stones. A gray brick wall behind a rear courtyard joins the two buildings at either side of the church, creating a secluded sanctuary. Discreet and secret, the courtyard offers an abundance of unused privacy.

Dil was right; a back door does exist. A small rise of concrete stairs lead up to a whitewashed and flaking door. Hen surmounts the steps in one leap. He tries the handle and

finds this door is also locked.

"Wait here," Dil says. He disappears back the way they had come. Hen passes the time kicking up small clouds in the breezeway. Ben finds an angle of shade he leans into, yet his shirt becomes damp with sweat. He sweats again – a good sign. Ben had enough sun; no more sunbathing for him.

Dil returns with the shank of screwdriver he had previously pitched into the bed of his truck. He had scraped off the yellow paint the last time he used the tool, when he had punched a hole in the gas tank of that dead priest's sedan. Somewhere along his return, the older Cortras has found a suitable chunk of concrete. Bringing the improvised hammer with him, he strides toward the door. In three strokes, he hammers the shank into the jamb near the lock. The screwdriver juts a sharp angle from the frame.

Dil then steps back, throws all his weight behind him, and delivers a flat kick against the shank. At the beginning of his feat, the man looks as if he will run up the wall like some mean animated dog chasing a cartoon squirrel. Hen laughs, remembering he had seen cartoons – this cartoon – printed on a newspaper when he was a kid. Newspapers weren't printed anymore. In fact, the one he had found then was in a garbage dump just outside of the forgotten town where he and his brother had grown up.

Despite Hen's chuckle, the overwhelming damage to the door isn't very funny. Dil had released a great deal of suppressed rage when he delivered his violence and the door flew open, taking the jamb with it. The force of the kick sent the older Cortras stumbling partway into the rear of the church. It seemed to Ben, the man was practiced at the indelicate art of breaking and entering. Inside, the older Cortras retrieves the screwdriver that had skittered into fetid shadow. Hen follows his older brother. Once they vanish together through the doorway, Ben enters the church behind them.

The trio comes directly into a kitchen, where the only appliances are a stove and a refrigerator. The latter clatters like gravel rolling down a metal chute. The room appears to exist mainly for special functions, because nothing stocking the kitchen indicates daily use. No utensils lay in the empty sink, and common dishcloths, typically seen hanging on racks, are absent.

Late, a pungent, almond smell nearly overwhelms the three men, and all assume the odor is the gas the exterminator had warned Ben about. Ben opens the only window in the room. The view reveals a sliver of the breezeway they had come down. Hen pulls the collar of his shirt over his nose and holds it there while he explores the bare drawers and cupboards. Meanwhile, Dil surveys the damage he had inflicted upon the door and its jamb. The whole works needs replacement.

Hen opens the refrigerator. The electric bulb refuses to glow, but the younger Cortras spies plastic containers. Hen moves quickly. He lets go of his shirt and peels the cover off one container, and finds inside overgrown with black, hairy mold.

"Ugh," Hen exclaims. He tosses the container into the lidless and empty trashcan next the refrigerator. He tells the pair of other men "Looks like we need some food."

"You're not supposed to eat the stuff left in a house that's been fumigated anyway," Dil informs his brother.

While they explore, Ben runs water in the sink. His damnable thirst demands attention like a child throwing a tantrum. The pipe spits out rusty brown water, then clear. Once the water appears clean, the scorched and parched man leans into the sink and gulps directly from the faucet. No matter how much Ben drinks, he cannot satisfy his squealing brat. He lingers and draws the attention of the Cortras brothers. They stop exploring and watch their thirsty friend. When Ben eventually feels his gut will burst, he closes the faucet and turns around. He wipes water from his chin with the sleeve of his sweat-dampened shirt. No one says anything.

The Cortras brothers and Ben move together through the hallway running along the rear of the church. The tour leads past a closed office, closet and stairwell before the hall turns right. Everyone pauses before they go into the nave. Dil presses the door of the office. It is open, so none of his lock pick skills are required. The smell isn't so intense in the office, probably because the door had stayed closed while the fumigators worked. Ben still wants the window open. This

one in the office looks into the small, barren yard. Ben reaches for the sill over a compact metal desk. While he shoves the glass frame upward, Hen tries the drawers. Once the window is opened, Ben pushes away from the desk. The young Cortras then ferociously and uselessly rattles a locked drawer.

"You still got that screwdriver, Dil?" he asks after his failure.

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

Dil was right. Hen pulls open the next drawer and finds a keychain with keys of various sizes. He tries the blades that look to him like good matches for the lock, and picks the right one with his first try.

"Give those here," Dil commands. Hen tosses the keychain to his brother. Dil turns the keys over. The older Cortras sucks his cheeks. "I suppose these belong to you," he says and hands the chain to Ben. Ben holds the keys in his open palm a long time before dropping them into his deep pants pocket.

Dil watches his little brother. The older Cortras will certainly take his share of any found wealth. Under constant surveillance, Hen pulls out a sealed envelope. He reports "It looks like there's a check inside."

"Let me see it." Dil takes the envelope. "This looks like the fund from the Church for this parish. They get these every month, you know." Dil tears one side of the envelope open and indeed pulls out a check. Excited, he yells "It's almost a thousand dollars! We'll split it three ways."

"What do parishes get checks for?" Hen asks.

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

"In that case, lets say this one got lost and get another one," Hen suggests with eager presumption.

"Maybe, let's not push it. Anything else in there?"

Hen digs deeper into the drawer and finds another envelope. He opens this one himself and discovers tickets or coupons inside. "What are these?" he asks his older brother.

"I don't know. Lottery tickets, maybe, or for the merry-go-round."

Hen put the tickets into his pocket. The fact that somebody had saved them makes them important enough and he keeps them on his person. The three leave the room and follow the small hall into the church proper. Outside, light spills into the breezeways and through the long windows flanking the large room between them. Ben and the Cortras brothers hadn't noticed when they were outside, but the top thirds of the rectangular windows are composed of stained glass. Red dominates the other colors in the ornate glass. The tinted ornamentation throws broad swatches of color to the floor, and the splotches well like spilled wine.

The glass depicts battles the Chosen had allegedly waged during their claims for the Promised Land. Only the tops of the images are preserved. The bottom two-thirds of each scene had been replaced with clear glass, reminding everyone of those straight iron bars outside. Enough bits and pieces of the remaining scenes suggest the subject of the art. Everyone knows the mythology, and priests sometimes feel compelled and cite the story in sermons. The lessons are intended to convey what the Chosen were capable of doing and willing and wanting to do.

The affect of the artwork is unbalanced, more so with the missing details. Ben's mind struggles painting the absent parts. Spear tips, helmets of marching soldiers and the feet of a sacrificed god are the only clear images. A crucifixion and evisceration culminates a parade of victories against pagans, the devil, and the Mortal God. The lack of iconic statuary beside the windows puzzle him. The Cortras brothers don't notice nor care.

The usual pollution of paintings and statues of more recent, high-ranking Church officers are also missing, making the church look austere without the ever-changing pontiff and his bishops. Above the altar and against a solid white wall, hangs the expected wooden cross. The wood surface is painted with a greenish-brown patina, making the icon look moldy instead of intentionally aged. Nevertheless, it appears sturdy and maybe could bear the weight of a man and more.

Black feathers are everywhere. They had swirled and are stuck on the floor of the sanctuary with a muddy, crimson glue. Numerous little corpses, about the size of anyone's thumb, are also trapped in the mixture. The small corpses look like large flies with wiry legs curled above and below them. These dead flies are almost as plentiful as the feathers – the exterminators had done their job.

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

“Dead,” Dil answers.

“Uh-huh,” his little brother agrees. Hen points at the congealed liquid. “Is that what I think it is?”

“Blood,” Ben states with a flat tone.

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

“I bet that's why they need a new priest,” his older brother answers.

Dil takes over the task and opens windows. The three men habituate to the smell, but Dil thinks they all need fresh air. He turns around and spits into a pile of feathers.

“Dil,” Hen exclaims.

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

Hen objects. “Dil, we can't stay here.”

“How about you go find a place for the truck.” Dil tosses the keys at his brother. They fall on the floor next the younger Cortras. He tells Hen “Go get a tarp or something.”

Hen stands motionless. The stillness attracts Ben's attention, and he stops pacing between the plain wooden pews. Ben tags behind the Cortras brothers like a stray dog that has found a new pack. He watches and carefully considers any new and odd movement they each make.

Hen easily yields to queasy paralysis, but he forces himself to move. “Ah, shit.”

Reaching down, he picks up the keys with the tips of his thumb and forefinger. He handles them as if they've fallen into a cesspit. Hen even tries jiggling off unseen germs. Dil then follows his brother toward the front door. Hen turns the dead bolt between the doors and yanks both open. Immediately, all three men are shocked cold.

A big, balding priest stands on the steps outside. The doors slams against the inner walls and the middle-aged man twitches his hands up and in front of him.

“What in the name of the Mortal God?” the priest cries.

Hen immediately crosses his hand between alternating shoulders and hips. A pin with golden bars on the lapel of the priest's black jacket advertises the rank of captain. The day is too hot for a coat, but the garment fits the man well. He probably wears it for the impression his presentation creates. The captain is a plump, older man. Years had shrunken his spine and swelled his waist. He looks wan and agitated, but the sudden fright may have made him edgy.

“Who are you?” the captain demands from the younger Cortras. Hen's jaw hangs open uselessly.

Dil slips into the conversation before his brother answers. “We're, uh, cleaning that up.”

Dil sweeps his arm toward the mass of stuck feathers and flies. Hen raises his eyebrows, shocked at the prospect.

The priest seems satisfied and promptly dismisses both the brothers. “Oh, good.”

He has no further interest in them. He sees Ben and shouts “Reverend Gage, I presume. I'm happy you're showing some initiative. It's good when you start an assignment giving more than what is expected.”

Ben is not aware what to make of the comment. The welcome lacks sincerity and the clenched-teeth delivery implies hostility. The priest obviously confuses this Benedict Gage for the clergyman he's replaced. That was good, because the test could not have been better than if the dead priest's mother mistook Ben for her son. The captain stands glaring at him, waiting for something.

"Bow and thank the ancient Ape," instructs the desert companion voice from behind Ben's left ear. Ben does not turn, because he knows no one stands there. The knowledge makes his heart jump, yet he studies the priest for any reaction. Only Ben has heard the comment; then the voice says more. "He is just a pawn, an irritating step. Don't be shy, you have a friend in common."

Ben lowers his head and says to the bloated older priest "Thank you."

The priest rocks back on his heels dangerously near the edge of the steps. Ben feels an urge and wants to nudge the tottering captain. One jabbed finger would send the man toppling backwards into the oven of the day. He might even break his sizzling neck. The voice makes no recommendation, unless the urge itself was a suggestion.

"Sir," Ben adds.

The priest nods. "Hmf."

The sweating older man then stands rigid, staring at the Cortras brothers. "You two have work to do. If you're lucky, you'll be finished before curfew."

"Yes, sir," Dil says. The older Cortras turns and skulks toward the hallway at the rear of the sanctuary. Dil calls to his brother. "Come on." Hen follows without a word.

"Let's get out of this stink," the priest directs and pulls Ben by his sleeve into the sunlight. The captain then says "You look like you crawled out of hell on your hands and knees."

Animosity bubbles up inside Ben. The feeling must have been seeded in his forgotten years. What was the voice from the desert telling him? Ben wanted to know. The voice over his shoulder sounds as if it would lead him through this encounter with the priest.

"Behave yourself, Ben," the voice advises. "You'll never see this addict ever again."

Ben recalls the story the Cortras brothers had practiced. He tells the man "The car broke down."

The captain informs him "I know, I was notified when you reached the Wall. The Church gave you up for dead, not that your lose would have been a tragedy."

The voice offers no clue what the priest means.

The priest scans from side to side. The street is empty despite the roar of traffic close by. The captain then rises onto his toes and peeks over Ben's shoulder. No one stands inside the church, either. The older man says to him "Listen, you got your second chance, so forget what you think you know about me. Forget what you think you know about Gomorrah. You are a real cock to call me for favors like this, any favors. Who are you Benedict Gage? You look UnChosen."

The stranger whom had assumed the role of the priest that this captain seethed against enjoys the man's ire. Some arrangement had been made. The original Benedict must have finally taken his first step up the clergy's ladder. It was a shame he hadn't live and reaped his reward.

"As good as it will do you here," the captain adds.

"You got Ape?" he then asks spontaneous and Ben says nothing.

The priest wipes his receding forehead with the sleeve of his jacket. He soon suddenly loses his composure, as if he's been holding his breath as long as he can and now needs a deep swallow of air.

The priest points inside the church. "I don't know what went on in there, I don't care. The guy went crazy and he probably sliced himself to pieces, committed suicide. I don't care."

The priest shifts his weight from one foot onto his other. He sways as he speaks. "What you have to do is not cause trouble for me or yourself. Don't attract attention. You only have one thing to do here, placate the dregs. Let them know the Church is here in this parish, too, keeping an eye on them. Tell them that. Do that one thing. As far as I'm concerned, they should have built the Wall around this slum."

Ben looks around the neighborhood. He had passed through much worse places, and just recently – the encampment outside the Wall for instance. Even the best parts of Gomorrah weren't as clean and in as pristine condition as this street. Ben remembers he had visited Gomorrah not long ago. So the psychic voice seemed part of a package deal that included bits of recollection.

The higher-rank priest continues ranting. "If I never come down here or see you again, everything is fine. You'll get your check every month in the mail. You don't need to make reports, but you don't get special requests, either. I never want to hear from you or about you. No trouble. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Ben says. He feels no obligation to call the man "sir" again.

The priest drills into Ben with narrowed eyes. Standing outside in daylight is hot, but the captain generally sweats too much, anyway. Rivulets have formed on his round cheeks, and sour, stinking chemicals leak from his skin.

"Fine. That's fine enough for me. I wanted to see you first and be the only officer you see. It will be like you never left that shit-hole mission. The Church, not just me, never cared to hear from you then and certainly not now. You understand that?"

Ben nods. He feels less hostile. His alias appeared to have cornered this rat and poked the jittery thing with a stick. Ben enjoys the pleasure of vicarious responsibility.

"Then we're done. That's all," the captain sums.

The priest doesn't wait for a reply. He trots toward a white limousine parked behind the truck the Cortras brothers had brought into Khetam. No lowly fleet car for this captain. The priest looks over both shoulders at Ben as he goes. The alarm on the car chirps when the captain tries the handle. He rustles through his jacket pocket. Upon finding his keychain, the priest shuts off the alarm and unlocks the doors with a single button. He drops behind the wheel, starts the vehicle and slams the door.

The captain turns the front wheels from the curb much too slowly and Ben feels he is still watched, though he could only make-out a directionless rotund shape behind the car's tinted glass. The covert audience includes more than just the priest. The Cortras brothers at the back of the church count among the spectators, and the voice over Ben's left shoulder. Taking one spy away, the car accelerates with a screech, slows, accelerates again then speeds away.

"Everyone gets what they came for. You are a generous man, Benedict," the voice says as the car rolls through a stop sign, slowing only for the turn. Captain Ioannu and his limousine then disappear around the block.

The brothers emerge from hiding at the front of the sanctuary, near the altar.

"Who was that?" Hen asks.

Ben listens for the voice before answering. It does not offer more answers. He tells the Cortras brothers "I don't know."

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

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

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

"I don't like it, Dil."

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

His brother's perspective and stubborn stand does not appease Hen. Dil tells him "Tell you what, go get the tarp, like I told you. Pick up some Yowling Cat while you're out. We'll cash that check when you come back. I'll start on that."

Dil points at the curdled mess in the sanctuary. Hen reluctantly agrees. An errand away from the church and a few hundred dollars in his pocket were incentive enough for him, so he leaves Saint Erasmus and goes to the truck without protest.

Ben stands in the open doorway with his hands on his hips. The smell of the gas had diminished considerably, but he prefers the building wide open. He listens for the voice. Nothing. While Ben thinks about the entity haunting him, he convinces himself the voice is his own thought process. The experience in the desert must have fragmented him. A part of Ben observes from outside and he lends himself rational advice.

The calm within the church soon spreads onto the street and only encouraged his internal distraction. Ben had not noticed Dil leave and return until a snarling, scraping noise and the voice of the older Cortras breaks his peace. Dil drags the uncovered trashcan from the kitchen. A

broom, mop and dust pan knocks inside the can. If these are the only tools supplied, Hen will still have plenty of work when he returns.

"I don't know about you, Ben, but this place is growing on me," Dil says as he scoops the first pile of feathers, insects and goop with the dustpan. A mauve glop slides off and into the trashcan like molasses, leaving brown smears.

Ben turns around and watches Dil begin work. The older Cortras had never seemed more inspired. Ben would not be surprised to hear the man whistle.

"I feel like we're supposed to be here." Dil quips. Another panful of gore then plops into the can. He tells Ben "You know, the place talks to me."

Chapter 5 The Assailed Rock

The other day....

Madelyn Sebash must meet her deadline, otherwise she will be forever relegated to the status of an irresponsible hack. None of the dozens of stories she's written ever have made their way onto military radio without heavy editing. Consequently, most everything she submits becomes tragically delayed by the censorship process. In fact, few of her stories are ever selected at all. Luckily, she makes her living doing transcription work, but that part-time job has no future. Madelyn certainly had not spent so much time and money in school just so she might "get-by."

Every Sunday afternoon, Madelyn sees her friends, alumni from the Journalism university inside Khetam, and they will empty their liquor rations. During their gatherings, she and her friends rehash old and tedious complaints and whine about their lack of work, and the lowly commissions for those stories that are approved for broadcast. Still, their focus remains solely on the climate and nature of the reporting business.

They especially avoid criticism of the Church itself, which will end a fledgling career. Madelyn and her friends console themselves with the fact they are still young, only a few years out of school, and all had hard luck earning livings in their chosen field. The expression "misery loves company" suites them especially. And they are certainly a miserable bunch.

Khetam was different two or three generations ago. Madelyn's grandmother had told Madelyn stories about the past. The Wall was under construction when her grandmother was still a little girl. The Church had called the period the "Great Social Renovation" when Church-financed construction projects fed and clothed families of the Chosen and UnChosen castes alike. The projects were mainly defensive measures, such as the Wall. There are no longer airfields. Those were lost first while heathens continued their crusades against the Chosen. Train rails came second, after terrorists could no longer burn the Promised Land.

Madelyn's grandmother told her "Long ago, heathen terrorists escalated their attacks. They waged suicide bombings and kidnapped highly ranked priests straight out of Khetam." The old woman told her granddaughter "I saw a heathen bomb, I'll tell you that. The terrorist are impossible to stop because their desperation and daring. And the love ripping out the inside of people. They eat our guts."

Her grandmother frequently concludes many of her stories about heathens "A barrier between the Promised Land and the uncivilized world was the only solution."

Once the Wall was complete, the Chosen lived within the barricaded city, while most of the UnChosen found their families rooted in the despicable slum outside called the encampment. Madelyn knew this information – it was common knowledge. The encampment was originally a temporary home for migrant construction workers during the "Renovation." The squalor was once a flat stretch of sand covered with tents huddled around a naturally fed cistern. The ghetto grew larger when more UnChosen came for work.

People still arrive today, despite the end of construction years ago and avaricious reins on Church money. The encampment had become a waypoint for the destitute and UnChosen pilgrims seeking entrance into Khetam. Few were admitted in those past times and none are

permitted into the Promised Land today, so like a weed, the encampment sends runners outside the gates of Khetam. It's poverty and squalor cries with stark contrast against the wealth of the Chosen's city – the Promised Land and where the holy and righteous tribes had gutted their Mortal God.

Whenever the encampment expands and its runners crawl too near, the Chosen's military push it from the Wall. The military justify the action with concerns for security around Khetam. In reality, there are aesthetics and considerations for propaganda. The approach toward Khetam and its great white Wall must convey reverence and awe and cannot be marred by poverty.

Corrugated steel sheet buildings and hastily erected networks of phone and power lines cannot be allowed to creep up the Wall's pristine face, so the northern section of the encampment had come down. With the last generous coins from the Church, UnChosen workers bulldozed their own shacks and strung barbed wire fences between their desperate homes and a barren minefield before the Wall. That minefield still exists and, like most everyone alive inside Khetam today, Madelyn grew up opposite the other side of an unassailable barrier.

The mile-wide space between Khetam and the encampment had become a restricted zone. Only travelers with reasonable business during daylight are allowed to approach the gates, and even then, they had better keep moving. The Wall had, to date, fulfilled its promise and keeps heathens outside. The glowing limestone face is the pride of both the military and the Church.

Madelyn's grandmother had spoken about things other than the Wall. The stories the old woman had revealed about the past particularly interested Madelyn. Her grandmother had said "Magazines, newspapers, and books were once found in people's homes. They were once for sale in legitimate shops and people could buy them – even UnChosen, if they could read. All that non-propaganda stuff did not always cower inside cardboard boxes, and wasn't always kept hidden and secret from neighbors."

The scrutiny of the military, that functional arm of the Church, once did not constrain writing. At one time, libraries held more than technical manuals, carefully worded textbooks, and archived recordings of sermons and military news. That liberty vanished before Madelyn learned to read. All printed materials that had not been scrutinized were then deemed by the Church as potentially subversive and systematically collected through books-for-cash programs. Later, all had been taken by outright confiscation and indefinite detainment was inflicted upon violators.

Even bibles and hymnals printed before an exaggerated prehistoric date had not survived. The clergy had become the only authority on the Mortal God. Still, the fact that independent publications had ever existed inspired Madelyn to write. The freedom sounded ideal. When the practical side of life later conflicted with the naivety of youth, the debt for her higher education smothered the young woman and there seemed no turning back on her career path, not yet.

Madelyn once dreamed of the possibilities opened by the re-introduction of the written word. For her, those possibilities were primarily additional opportunities for selling stories. All grown, she still suffers fantasies. A free newspaper means a level of restriction on information dissemination was lifted, which means opinion and commentary may even be possible; no more walking a tightrope for the grace and pleasure of the Church.

Sadly, her creativity is confined. The trick with writing for the radio today requires an intuitive understanding of the balance between public perception and Church propaganda. The Church and military did not use the term propaganda; everyone else did, but covertly. The classes Madelyn took in journalism defined juggling facts and Church agenda on a hard line of discretion. The practice helps avoid unrest and uprising among fringe elements influenced by heathens and other malcontents, namely covert heathen sympathizers. Information control is paramount for public safety.

The undeniable truth is that the Chosen live behind a wall because terrible hatred and fear. Free speech was never entirely revoked. People can still express themselves and voice dissatisfaction. An age-old forum provides the outlet. The Church calls that communion a

sacrament of penance. Confession vaccinates against civil disturbance.

Fear and censorship aren't the only reasons her stories are rejected by military radio. Madelyn knows the exposition in her stories – her thoughts beyond unimaginative bullet points – causes problems. She was too creative and she used quotes. She never solicits permission because she writes for military news.

If eyewitnesses told the truth, people shouldn't be afraid their names are read over the air. Madelyn sincerely believes people would never lie if everyone just heard the words of the witness, and not fabrications prepared by military censors. She thinks those witnesses should be grateful for recognition. Regrettably, copying rambling UnChosen often backfires once the story arrives at the fact-checkers for the military news.

Military censors lack tact and are often intimidating, even in mundane matters. If and when the military calls and verifies a source, frightened witnesses typically deny anything had ever been said. No one wanted his or her name finding its way onto a list. Anonymity reigned as a valued trait among Khetam residents.

If UnChosen are quoted, censors automatically strike the citation from stories. The Church, military and generally everyone considers their comments uninformed and unreliable. Everyone except her. Madelyn never accepted the censors are prejudiced, like everyone else in Khetam. Chosen and UnChosen share the same beliefs. The only details separating the two castes are a matter of birth and a parable about the Mortal God playing favorites.

Of course, Madelyn was a Chosen. Her presence in Khetam and her degree are testaments to the fact. UnChosen with college educations lived in Khetam, but they are so few. Exceptions always exist among millions of people crammed together in any small place.

Story investigation requires clearance from military and the Church, or its military assigns sensitive and high profile stories directly to experienced reporters. Meeting the deadline for those stories guarantee a steady stream of work. Rookies and hacks handle ordinary current events and fight over these stories like scraps thrown to scrawny dogs. Madelyn needs a break from this pit and her mire. So the woman hopes she will find an angle with recurrent activists always petitioning to open the Wall for transit. The story resurfaces every few months with new proposals from aspiring community leaders.

The Wall serves more purpose than a barricade against heathen terrorists. A four-lane road rests on top and gated ramps rise up the white monument from myriad points within Khetam. Public use of the roads would alleviate traffic congestion dramatically and the inner-city highways do sorely need relief.

Urgent expediency excused the lack of foresight when the military had built the monument, but the planners failed to anticipate growing families would swell the population. The military had left no room for an airport, either – the security of oil refineries had taken precedence. Between heathens and the desert, the fields outside the Wall had become unmaintainable and lost. Unlike the cistern in the encampment, the military budget also frequently runs dry and there hasn't been money for aircraft or anything else more effective in generations.

The Church supports the military's desire to maintain possession of the road between the crenelations. Although, the military remains steadfast with any commission or authority granted them. The military complex has always successfully resisted tampering with their designs. Their own refusal to build an airport inside the protection of the Wall was a case.

On a few occasions, the Church had used the issue for weeding potential threats against their complete sovereignty. Whenever a particularly vocal local leader gathers inordinate support, the Church reveals an embroiling scandal. The outrage always convoluted facts, burying the new leader in controversy; who then languishes in everlasting obscurity, but evermore lacked precious anonymity.

For Madelyn and her friends, truth had never been the goal of reporting, because sensational stories paid lots of bills. Innocence and truth are subjective anyway, depending how information was presented and if the public got blood. Butchery was the one interest the Chosen and heathens share, although their specific tastes were extreme each other.

At this time, Madelyn currently covers another story – an official story assigned to her

from the military. She had been repulsed in the beginning, but the story was quick work. A fellow reporter, an old friend from school, had tipped her about the story's availability with a phone call.

"Your story, Mark?" Madelyn asked her friend when he called. She remembers the conversation exactly because she is a reporter. "Why would you give me your story?"

"I'm just sick of tales about murder and suicide," he claimed. "I don't want it."

Madelyn was not convinced. "Stories like this one have paid your bills the past year."

"Oh, I'll come back and do them," Mark said. "But for now, I'm on sabbatical. I want to clear my head."

Madelyn was grateful, at first. "Well, thanks," she exhaled then learned details.

"A priest was murdered in his parish; probably a botched robbery," Mark told her.

"Where?"

"The Saint Erasmus parish. It's the ghetto of Khetam."

"I know what it is." Madelyn knew the parish as where the most fortunate UnChosen within this city live. She tells her friend "So a priest gets killed, that's a big deal – but not special in a parish like Erasmus."

Mark then delivered his special condition. "The military wants to use the event for a very specific broadcast, or nothing at all about the incident will be reported."

"Sounds hairy," Madelyn worried. "An assignment like that will kill me if I screw up."

"The military has an outline for you, Madelyn," Mark promised. "All you have to do is make up the details, make it sound truthful."

"Thank you again, Mark. This is a big favor," Madelyn recognized. "You should come over on Sunday, I think you know a couple of my friends."

"I can't, Madelyn, I'm married. Merriam, remember?"

"I wish I forgot," Madelyn said, merely echoing her friend's complaint about his wife. He laughed then rushed the conversation so he could leave for wherever he went.

Later at military headquarters and earlier in the day, Madelyn followed the steps her friend dictated and navigated the typical bureaucratic maze. She stood in lines, presented credentials, and provided a request form and retrieved the crime summary and photos.

After the normal protracted delay, a mute and sexless clerk provided an additional cover sheet, flagging the case for censorship – also typical. Instructions had been included, stating the murder was to be linked with heathen sympathizers who committed an opportunistic attack upon an isolated member of the Church.

"The morbid curiosity of the public will be satisfied," Madelyn told the silent, immovable clerk. "And patriotism infused."

Only the preliminary writing remained.

The information she had collected listed the priest had been killed the night before, making the story a day old. The summary was brief, which again, Madelyn expected from the military. Details are the realm of reporters and censors, and solving the crime came secondary in the military's intentions. If the real perpetrator was caught, he or she will be pinned the sympathizer invented for the story. A death sentence will ensue and "justice" served, no matter what the circumstances.

The summary state the victim was Reverend Coty Elmer, age forty-three. The priest didn't have a rank. Given the location of the Saint Erasmus church, a non-commissioned priest monitoring the parish did not surprise Madelyn. The summary described his death was a result of fatal lacerations. The incident occurred in the church sometime after sunset. The name and address of the person who had reported the crime to the military had also been included, which was rare. Anonymous calls usually come from pay phones; another common tactic used to avoid becoming an addition to a list.

Apart from the bullet points on the summary and the additional instructions, the story appeared hodgepodge. Madelyn supposed she could sew it together with embellished and transparent stitches, but habit took hold of her. She planned a visit with the caller, Mrs. Jillie Ikraam, and would gather a few quotes. Saint Erasmus was on the other side of Khetam, which meant traffic would be gridlocked in the usual places and thick everywhere else. Madelyn

anticipated wasting the remainder of the morning getting to the parish. She ran back to her car in the immense parking lot at military headquarters and started on her way; and how she wished the roads on the Wall were open.

Gazing up at the top of the Wall while she was stuck in her red compact economy car and going nowhere was painful. Daydreams played through her head; likely the same dreams other drivers nursed inside their wedged vehicles, all compacted like bricks. On the Wall, people could speed away on those empty roads above the smog. Trips would last minutes, instead hours. Rather than looking and dreaming today, Madelyn determined she should use her time trapped in traffic. She could write the draft and even peek at the crime photos, but she preferred to delay reviewing the images.

Madelyn was not disappointed in her expectation – the freeway was jammed. She completes her draft between short jogs, leaving a few blank lines where she might insert quotes. She had already scripted Mrs. Ikraam's comments, but formality insists that the UnChosen woman actually say them. That would not be a problem, because Madelyn imagines herself a crafty reporter. Ahead, traffic comes to a complete stop near the address of the parish because a delivery truck had overheated and died in the center lane.

The summer had been unusually hot and strained engines often quit after idling in traffic and running air conditioners. Long, frustrating minutes pass before drivers establish a flow around either side of the stricken vehicle – a large stone dropped into the middle of a stream. Water parts and merges again behind the sudden obstacle. Unfortunately, human behavior was less fluid and drivers spar and inch in front of each other. Great metal jabs and feints produce only scratched and dented fenders.

Horns blare as if to wake the truck from death's slumber. In the meantime, the folder with the crime scene photos waits, but Madelyn had hoped she might escape looking at them. In her head, she essentially completes the story and doesn't need to review the photos. That had been her plan from the beginning. However, she currently has nothing else she can do. A modicum of integrity creeps in with boredom.

The photos sleep in a pale green folder stamped with the heavy red words "Evidence," "Authorized" and "Authorization granted." Madelyn's name appears handwritten on the line following "Authorized." The name stamped in smeared black ink on the line below was presumably the clerk's superior. Madelyn opens the folder with one eye squeezed shut. The photos are actually black and white photocopies. She knew they would be, but knowing doesn't desensitize her enough. Even before looking, she knows solicitations for other violent stories will come few and far between. She reserves coverage of them during tough times, for her and the victims.

Oddly enough, she feels disappointed by the few photos included; even then, they are dark and unfocused. A body at the dais of a nondescript sanctuary might be surmised, and appears slashed numerous times. The quality of the copies make judging the severity of the attack impossible, but so many cuts imply the crime is a typical third degree murder. This attack appears a true hate crime. There may be truth in the angle that the military hopes to portray, or the attacker was some crazed or Apeid intruder, or likely both. Ape decimates this city, especially the clergy. No one says anything.

The lacerations had likely resulted when the priest fought without proper defense. A blade must have ribboned his face, then his arms and the clothing of the unarmed clergyman. The crime summary did not indicate the military found a weapon, but a lot of blood appeared to cover the floor. In the photo, the black ink representing blood flows together with shadows cast from the altar and pews, blurring the line where shadow ends and blood begins. In that regard, Madelyn is glad the photos are gray and blurry.

Something else in the photos puzzles her. Oblong black shapes spin outward in a rough circle around the body. The scattered shapes might be a tasteless inlaid design for the floor, but the assumption still does not feel right. Traffic abruptly starts moving again; the stone had been removed from the stream.

Madelyn hurries and replaces the photos, stacks the folder, summary and draft, and

secrets the untethered bundle beneath the passenger's seat. She will ask Mrs. Ikraam about the shapes. She can also look for herself, if she works up fortitude and personally investigates the crime scene. The old woman lives across the street from the Saint Erasmus church, there at L99 and F66.

After traffic flows again, and upon an immediate release from the freeway, Madelyn travels the surface streets into the Saint Erasmus parish. Two-story, concrete block warehouses line the streets. Squat apartment houses sprout sporadically between the warehouses, like weeds from cracks in sidewalks. Madelyn did not see the church in which the priest had been murdered. She decides she will park her car and find the woman who had reported the crime. Madelyn the reporter soon knocks on the door to the apartment of Jillie Ikraam well past noon. While she waits in the sun outside, she scratches the prickly stubble in her armpits.

The old woman the reporter had come to interview lives in a tenement house. The door of her apartment faces the street. An open, crooked hallway and stairwell link other apartments in the building to the old woman's barred entrance. The asymmetric construction looks like units are added when the old ones readied to burst. Stucco covers the conjoined dwellings in some misguided attempt toward unity, but the overall appearance is that of a tumorous mass covered with face powder.

An excited yelp comes from inside the woman's apartment. Madelyn's knock had probably startled a small dog, yet the thundering toward the door is not from an animal that belonged in an apartment. The door then swings open inward and the bars stand in place before the opening. A short, thin teenage boy bounces inside. He wears a rumpled blue t-shirt and yellow shorts. The shirt bears a decal of a fuzzy pink cartoon pig.

"Lazy the pig," recalls Madelyn. The only movie she had ever seen was about this animated cartoon animal. The Chosen once used the cartoon in propaganda against the heathens before print and film had been banned across the Shur. In the film, the pig's name was Lazarus, but a cartoon farmer gives him the nickname "Lazy." He then sacrifices the pig. Like the Living God of the heathens, Lazy returns to life with no guts.

The cartoon pig resembles the boy. The boy has a flat nose and tiny ears. His squinting eyes are set a little too far apart and lopsided, like the cartoon character. A minute pass while the boy and Madelyn stare at each other. Madelyn offers a tentative smile and the boy's mouth drops open.

"Mama," he cries. "Mama, a pretty lady's here. It's a pretty lady."

The boy disappears into the impenetrable shade of the apartment. Humidity in the heat that comes from inside the dwelling feels worst than the hot, dry air outside. Madelyn feels content standing beneath the broiling sun. The boy repeats himself, changing the announcement into a song. Madelyn hears hushing from within the apartment and the singing stops. An old woman then appears and greets her.

"You're right," the old lady says to Davey. "It is a pretty woman. She looks just like a mermaid. She's all wet, like she's been swimming."

Hawing laughter rises behind the old woman. Madelyn blushes and holds the smile begun with her reaction to the boy. The old woman stands her visitor's height, a little shorter than average. Her gray hair had once been the same hue of blond as Madelyn's, only the old woman's hair color was natural. When she steps into daylight, nasty wheals covering the old woman's face and hands startle the reporter. Jillie Ikraam's skin glistens with an oily salve, but the old woman doesn't appear to mind her appearance.

"Hello, can I help you?" the woman asks. The old lady sounds as if she has worked her whole life behind a counter and takes polite servitude to heart and practice.

"Hello," Madelyn answers. "I'm Madelyn Sebash..."

"I'm Jillie Ikraam," the old woman cheerfully volunteers. "And the little boy who ran away is my son Davey."

Laughter rises again. Mrs. Ikraam turns around and sends a warm "shh" to her child. Madelyn thought the boy was a grandson or even a foster child; the latter were taken-in for extra money, or "Church charity." Mrs. Ikraam looks too old to have a teenage son. The disbelief must

show on Madelyn's face, or the woman had grown accustomed immediately providing an explanation about herself and her situation. Jillie blurts her confession.

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

Madelyn nods and begins again. "I'm Madelyn Sebash. I'm a reporter..."

"And you heard about Reverend Elmer," the old woman interrupts again. Jillie Ikraam was trying her patience, so Madelyn goes straight to her point.

"Yes, I want some details. You found the body of the priest, is that right?"

The old woman nods and waves for Madelyn to step back. Jillie turns and looks into her dark hovel. "Baby, stay inside and don't lock your mother out. I'm going to talk to our friend."

The bars swing out and make a slow creak. Madelyn sighs. The hottest part of the afternoon has crept upon them, so if the old woman wanted privacy, she will get it. On wilting days like these, people stay shut inside their shadowed apartments. The street had emptied except for an occasional car coasting by with its windows up and air conditioner blowing. Afternoon commuters in this part of Khetam wandered lost, hunting only for shortcuts around busy main routes.

"Would you like to sit in my car?" Madelyn asks the old woman. "I have air conditioning."

Jillie answers with her requisite. "I can't go far without someone looking after my baby. He gets into trouble if he's not watched."

The news busts Madelyn's idea. Her little red compact, nicknamed 'Mariposa' after the beautiful and extinct Mariposa Lily, waits wanted up the block. The old woman graciously declines when Madelyn points the direction.

Mrs. Ikraam brings a scarf and drapes it over her head. The floral-patterned cloth partially covers her eyes, although she still uses her hand and shields her face against blistering light. The afternoon is too bright, and even Madelyn wears her sunglasses. The pair take a short walk toward the curb.

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

The old woman "tsks" her hands as she holds them out before her and rotates her wrists. She says to Madelyn "I'll tell you, it happened when I found Reverend Elmer."

A second minor mystery now pended; the objects or marks on the floor and now the bites. None of these miscellaneous facts will find their way into the story for military news. These details were superfluous and outside the bounds of the censors – therefore automatically anonymously struck from any submission and never received. This story had already been written, but Madelyn grows curious and wants to know more herself. She prompts the old woman.

"Yeah?" she nudges.

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

Madelyn intervenes. "Mrs. Ikraam, it's warm out here."

The old woman takes the interruption in stride. She may not have even heard Madelyn's complaint. Jillie makes the young reporter's poke a convenient spot in which she pauses and inhales. "Well, it was after curfew and I had to sneak back home. The church is on my way to our place. I thought I would stop there and catch my breath and wait for the patrol to pass before I came home to Davey. Sometimes they can be so mean to an old woman – even before curfew. My neighbors will watch Davey sometimes, if I fix us all dinner."

A smile spreads across the old woman's face. She enjoys living in this neighborhood, but Madelyn only wants back to Mariposa, fearing her escape-car had been stolen – as much so for the cool air. Still, questions must be asked. This time Madelyn does rudely interrupt the old woman, interjecting her query amidst Jillie's blathering about kind neighbors. Those people are extinct, too, and the old woman sounds like another deluded UnChosen. "Simpleminded," Madelyn thinks.

She asks Jillie "Where is the church? I thought you lived close."

"Oh, it's right there." The old woman points across the street. A tent, or rather a tented

building, sits erect between two large though low concrete warehouses. The building underneath the plastic covering appears two stories tall. Thick, vertical blue and white stripes on the canvas make judging accuracy difficult. Beneath the distortion, Saint Erasmus is a flat, rectangular box. There aren't steeples or buttresses as Madelyn was accustomed seeing on the mediocre churches where she lives and had gone to school.

The old woman tells her "They covered Saint Erasmus when the fumigators started work. They had to kill the flies."

Madelyn's curiosity twists into confusion. She opens her mouth but gets her answer before asking the question.

"They came out of nowhere after Reverend Elmer died. They were nasty and biting, and big. I've never seen flies like them. They must live in the desert with the heathens and eat carrion. They probably share their dinners."

"Poop," Davey yells from behind a closed window. Only Jillie notices the muffled boy and she waves him away.

"Please, start at the beginning," Madelyn insists. She feels a timeline must be established or the story will quickly become convoluted.

"I was coming home from work when I stopped at the church. The doors stay open late into the night after curfew. Reverend Elmer was a night owl. Bless him, although he never welcomed company for long. He screamed before I reached the stoop. I thought someone tortured him – the way he screamed."

The old woman's face pales, making the angry blemishes glow as neon in the shadow of her scarf. "It was horrible. When I opened the door, blood was everywhere. They stripped Reverend Elmer to the bone."

Madelyn knew the last part wasn't true, she had seen the photos. The incident was already embellished and on its way to becoming a ghost story for scaring children back into their homes at sunset. Mrs. Ikraam may even practice the story with her son, Davey. All the same, Madelyn would not contradict the old woman. For the sake of expedience, she avoided bickering over inevitably censored details.

"And feathers, like a whirlwind."

"Feathers? Those are the shapes in the photos?"

Madelyn almost asks Mrs. Ikraam if she knows what they mean, but Jillie volunteers her idea before the reporter asks.

"I think it was the devil," the old woman gushes.

Mrs. Ikraam's comment dissuades Madelyn against asking about the feathers, and apparently she can't get into the building for a look. A tour of the crime scene wasn't necessary. Besides, Madelyn realizes the blood will still be there with the feathers. That stomach-turning vision and the resulting sleepless nights can be happily avoided.

"Please, go on," Madelyn asks Jillie.

"I wanted to run home, but I used the phone in the church. Then I went outside and called for help. The patrol was right there. A little while after that, an ambulance came, then the flies."

The old woman takes a breath and moves her hand from her shoulder to hip. She acts very orthodox. "They were big, and black and white, like bees, but the stripes went the wrong way."

Mrs. Ikraam motions up and down with the hand she used when she crossed herself. "They came for the blood. I swear, I heard them lap it up."

The description makes Madelyn ill. She battles against conjuring the sound. Her imagination can disquiet her at times. The hot weather proves an adequate distraction. Madelyn dabs at perspiration on her face with a tissue pulled from her purse. While she dries herself, the old woman describes her encounter.

"The little monsters bit me and the photographer, as if the blood on the floor wasn't fresh enough for them. They wanted living blood, right from the vein."

"Mrs. Ikraam, please."

"I'm sorry, honey, but that's what happened. Well, the men from the ambulance put on

their coats and wrapped up their faces. They pulled out the remains of Reverend Elmer and stuck him into a bag right outside. Then they left. I told the patrol what I saw and they let me go home. I told them I was coming home from work. I'm not as quick as I was when I was your age. That's why I was out after dark."

Madelyn had enough. She will omit the quotes and submit the story as written in the summary. The report will be accepted, since it already reads exactly as the military wanted.

"Thank you, Mrs. Ikraam. I need to get back to military headquarters."

"You do believe me," the old woman states. "About the devil. I won't set foot into that church until the new priest arrives. Reverend Elmer was a good man. He prayed to the Mortal God. He commanded miracles to make Davey normal. That's why the devil killed him, because jealousy. That's in the Chosen's bible."

Madelyn nods. She considers herself religious, but at the same time educated and rational. The belief that miracles are produced upon command, and the existence of a malevolent force, envious of man's authority over God, are pedestrian Church fables for children and the despondent. The second case likely applies to Jillie Ikraam. Madelyn withholds judgment. Although she notes, not so deep inside, the old woman's superstition separates the castes. Madelyn was Chosen and Mrs. Ikraam was UnChosen. Madelyn tells herself a matter of privilege and education makes the difference. Still, she is glad to have both and be Chosen.

"Thank you," Madelyn repeats. "I have to go. Goodbye."

"Yes, take care. Goodbye."

Madelyn returns to her car, starts the engine and cranks the air. The instant cool breeze feels wonderful. She sits back, relishes the air and flaps the collar of her blouse. After a moment, Madelyn pulls Mariposa from its spot on the asphalt. When she turns from the curb, she looks back and sees Mrs. Ikraam try the handle of her door and rap on a window. The old woman had been locked out despite her instructions for Davey. Madelyn is certain the retarded boy thinks the trick was the funniest thing since the last time he had locked his mother outside.

Enough time in the day remains in which Madelyn can type the story, return to military headquarters and make its submission. Reporting for the military is much like transcription work, reporters translate the handwritten scribbles of summaries into typed pages later read on the radio. Censors require the assigned summary and any photos returned to the military. Madelyn was too familiar with the procedure.

The material is to be in the same condition it had been when by the military had presented the assignment – that or the submitted story faces rejection. If a reporter fails at that small task, he or she will become the subject of a prying investigation. The military will then look into one's personal affairs, followed by an extensive audit of previously submitted stories. The whole process cripples reporters and must not happen to Madelyn again. Telling her version of truth and justice had just gotten her career mired immediately after graduation after she tried writing her first news story for military radio.

Putting aside the old woman's assumption the devil had murdered the priest, the culprit was still unknown and at large. The summary reported nothing had been taken and Madelyn expects the meager donations and ornamentation inside typical churches were untouched – unless the fumigators had taken anything. Evidently, no proclamation or threat associated with heathen sympathizers had been found at the scene; the military would have noted something yet there were those feathers.

Madelyn thinks "This may be some crazy killer with an unconventional calling card."

If a serial killer had committed the murder, someone who hates priests and not an opportunist who had stolen through an open door looking for valuables, this story means real opportunity. Here was an article that might identify and help catch a genuine heathen sympathizer. Madelyn believes she was the ideal candidate for the story assignment. She stakes her claim being on the scene first. She must only identify a trend and play by the rules. The young reporter grows so excited, she plans skipping her pile of transcription work despite the typed forms due tomorrow morning. Missing their deadline would make trouble, so serious thought needs to go into her hopeful plan.

Chapter 6 Uncovered Nakedness

This day ...

An uneventful forty-eight hours pass after Madelyn had visited the parish where a priest had been killed. In that time, she redoubles her effort to meet her weekly transcription work quota, and get paid and make rent. The military news is notoriously slow writing checks and issues them on a strict bimonthly basis. Madelyn could not count receiving payment before the first of next month.

Still, a pending check excites her. She was very appreciative of her friend, Mark. He didn't hang-out on Sundays with her other friends because he had married soon after graduation and adopted "grown-up" responsibilities. The recognition of his situation makes Madelyn a little sad. At times, she and Mark had seemed like friends since grade school, despite meeting at a college party when, at the time, the only thing they had in common were their Journalism majors. One circumstance or another had always prevented the pair from getting closer than infrequent phone calls.

In the present, the telephone in Madelyn's single-bedroom apartment rings immediately after military radio airs her story. She turns off the radio and answers the call. Mark is on the line, the friend who had tipped her the murder.

"Congratulations, old college buddy," he sings to his pal.

"You heard the story, right?"

"Poetry," Mark says. "Or it would be if they read your work."

"It's what they told me to write."

"I know, and you did swell. Can I take this lucky reporter to dinner?"

Madelyn jumps at the reward. She had grown elated after listening to her story on the radio, even if the voice of the woman announcer had sounded monotone. Madelyn feels celebratory, that and the transcription had her working hermit-like around the clock. She needs a break and food.

"Mmm, pasta salad with feta sounds good."

Mark suggests a place they might go. "You know that modest little trattoria close to my house?"

"Yeah, but there's a problem – I don't have money."

"I got it."

"No, Mark. I shouldn't, can't."

"You can't eat?"

"Alright," Madelyn relents. Her tenacious craving for pasta swells and comes down hard on her. "You know, I still haven't seen your home."

Mark dejects the idea immediately. "Merriam."

"Yep."

"How about we meet at the restaurant?"

"That's good too, Mark. We haven't seen each other in the flesh in years. I'm looking forward to seeing you."

"Me, too."

Despite the passed time, they instantly recognize each other at the trattoria. When Madelyn sees Mark again, she remembers why she is so fond of this perfect man. He is tall and naturally blond, a rare sight in any city. Madelyn soaks her hair in peroxide, like many of the women in Khetam. Mark looks taller, as if exercise and weight lifting makes him grow.

Most reporters Madelyn know possess thin arms and a permanent slouch, including herself and her other friends. She pushes the mutilating thoughts away. This conversation was

not starting with complaints about finding oneself fat and flabby, then losing will and interest to do anything about the slow entropy. Madelyn hears enough whining on Sundays.

Mark smiles wide when he sees his friend seated at a table outside the restaurant he had suggested. The late afternoon sun hovers over the rooftops, and Madelyn sits in the shadow cast from the building on the opposite side of the street. A hissing swamp cooler helps less against the heat than the shade. Regardless, his friend catches whatever afflicts him and returns a perspiring, exaggerated grin.

“Madelyn?” Mark asks with feigned surprise. “You haven’t changed a bit.”

She blushes. “And you get more handsome every time I see you.”

She then adds a sheepish groan. Madelyn knows for a fact that her butt has grown bigger, but she still likes to be reminded of the time when she was trim and full of energy. Nowadays, life was not wasting time decomposing her body.

“Maybe you just forget how good I look to begin with,” Mark brags.

Humility was not a weakness he suffered. Most of the time, Madelyn had difficulty figuring out if her old friend was truly arrogant or just enjoyed acting so. She realizes his looks and flattery helps overcome just how annoying someone can be when that person enjoys flaunting his own laurels.

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

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

“No, they read the story verbatim,” Madelyn replies knowingly. Many reporters fool themselves when they repeat the conversation. “The censors flagged the story for censorship of course, so I just followed the outline. There really wasn’t much to it.”

Mark pulls a chair from the table and sits down. “Still, it put you on the air. More exposure means more writing. You earn the trust of the military and the Church.”

“One and the same, I know.”

Madelyn passes a menu to her friend – she had asked for two when she arrived. Despite having read every word waiting for Mark, she now peruses the selections again. She clears her throat. “I should buy you dinner, but my check hasn’t even been cut yet and I’m short of cash, always short of cash.”

“I wouldn’t let you. I’ve been in your shoes.”

Madelyn chuckles and shakes her head. “No, not really.”

“It’s just a pleasure to see you, Madelyn. Time has really flown.”

“It has,” Madelyn sighs. “Well, thank you, and thank you again.”

Mark waves her off. He glances at the menu. Once a waitress attends their table, he sets the laminated paper down again. The waitress serving him and Madelyn is young and resembles the thin man who periodically peeks from the doorway into the kitchen. Madelyn watches the curious fellow through the plate glass window at the front of the trattoria. The waitress is probably his daughter. The girl’s etiquette cinches the suspicion.

“What d’ya want?”

Mark looks amused and points at Madelyn. Madelyn blinks and draws a tolerant breath. Civil outrage will only come off as envy for the girl’s youth.

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

“Nah.” The teenage waitress shakes her head. Her partially braided hair drags over each shoulder when she turns. “We just have pasta.”

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

The waitress bounces while she writes the whole order. She had not bothered learning item numbers or short hand, and seems oblivious to the awkward wait her lack of skills causes. She scrawls on. Judging the way the waitress twists her face, Madelyn assumes the girl has trouble spelling; most likely the word “fettuccine.” The waitress checks the menu and confirms the suspicion.

The girl then turns toward Mark and he winks. His acknowledgment visibly pops the girl’s

tongue between her teeth and she gently bites. Madelyn notes her male friend's talent for inspiring immediate giddiness in women. Since she was older now and able to reign herself with some efficiency, Madelyn remains composed and observant. Today, she remembers Mark's charm didn't affect only her. The man was indeed smooth.

"An ice tea, please, sweetie," he tells the girl. Mark winks at the young waitress and she trots back toward the kitchen inside.

Madelyn asks him "Aren't you having dinner?"

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

"Nonsense. A man is expected to have a little paunch. It's how a woman knows he's taking care of his loved ones and not thinking only about himself." Madelyn lies. She finds Mark much more attractive with bulging muscles and a straight frame. She had always found him attractive. She changes the subject before losing herself in a familiar daydream she has held captive since school. "How is your wife?"

"Oh, let's not talk about her." Mark suddenly becomes flustered.

"We never do."

"And that's why I like talking to you."

His smile returns and he lays his hands upon his friend's. Surprised, Madelyn doesn't want to pull away – so she doesn't. She feels she deserves a little untoward flirtation.

Not wholly distracted, she tells Mark "All right, then it's really good to see you, too."

"Thank you."

The girl returns with the ice tea and Madelyn asks her to also bring water. The waitress turns with a frown and goes back the way she's come. The sound of her stomps are as if she wears combat boots instead her ankle-strap sandals.

"I am curious," Mark says. "What do you think happened in that church? Is there any truth to the story that heathen sympathizers are involved?"

"To tell you the truth, I don't really know. It was a murder, maybe by a maniac."

"What do you mean, maniac?"

"There were feathers all around the body."

Madelyn sits back and folds her hands into her lap. "Are we going to talk about the details of a murder? I am about to have dinner."

"Madelyn, no." Mark consoles her. "I just wonder if there is any real connection between the murder and the heathens. Was there anything at the scene like a star, a big asterisk? You said feathers."

Madelyn sighs again, this time exaggerated and frustrated. "I didn't actually go inside Saint Erasmus. I saw the feathers in the crime photos. The military didn't take very many because the flies."

"You didn't go into the church?" Mark sounds incredulous. "Flies?"

Madelyn relives the conversation she had shared with the old woman, Jillie Ikraam, the day Madelyn investigated the death of the priest at Saint Erasmus. Having been in the flurry of confusion before, she knows how she might stop tumbling down this spiral.

"After the priest was killed, his blood must have attracted flies, biting flies. When the ambulance arrived and the patrol took photos, the flies attacked everybody. The attack was so bad, the military just carted the priest away and fumigated Saint Erasmus. That's why I didn't go into the church. I don't think I would have, either. The scene sounded too gruesome."

Mark drains half his glass of ice tea while Madelyn speaks. Fortunately, the young waitress brings a couple more glasses filled with water. The conversation between Mark and Madelyn lulls while the girl lingers, waiting for Mark to notice her again. For good or ill, the phone inside the restaurant rings and the girl's father calls her.

The girl's name sounds like Sadie, or Sally. Her father has the twang of a northern accent, like a foreigner. He must have married a Chosen with family in Khetam. Such unions are rare, but happen in places outside the desert. The marriage elevates the man above the caste of UnChosen, but forever outside the bloodline. His daughter will be viewed more kindly, but she remains tainted. That was one more thing Madelyn had over this girl teasing her friend.

Mark resumes. "What about the feathers?"

"I don't know. I have no clue where they came from or what they mean. That's why I think some crazy killer murdered the priest." Madelyn sips her water. "Do feathers mean something to heathens?"

"No, nothing I've ever heard."

Madelyn becomes suspicious. "Mark, you covered enough murders pinned on heathen sympathizers, real or not. Why are you so interested in this one?"

Mark shifts in his chair and thrums the water glass with his fingers. In a low voice, he tells his friend "Time for confession. It doesn't sound like the tactics of heathens, even though I'm sure they wouldn't be upset over the death of a priest. But, I'm connecting all the dots."

"What are you talking about?"

"The military conducted a raid outside Gomorrah three or four days ago, prompted by a missing scout and reports about Ilu Yehowah in the area."

"I heard about that."

"Yeah. Missing scouts and Yehowah resurfacing go hand in hand. He's a sadist and a cold-blooded killer, you know. He probably became a heathen so he can hide his crime under a cause."

"He thinks he's a heathen," Madelyn states.

Mark tells her "Not now. Heathens would disband if he was only a sympathizer."

Madelyn jumps toward a grandiose conclusion. "So what makes you think Yehowah is connected to the priest's murder?"

"I don't, but there are rumors he's in Khetam."

Madelyn shivers. Tales from before the Wall are among the stories her grandmother had repeated. One day, her grandmother had shopped across the street from a cafe no bigger than the restaurant Madelyn now sits outside. As Madelyn recalls the story, a driver raced down the street, which was possible decades ago, before the constant tangle of automobiles. There were far fewer people and automobiles back when Khetam opened wholly onto the Shur. That was a time when the Promised Land was so large it once encompassed the encampment.

Her grandmother had said "The driver just veered into the cafe. He smashed through the front window. The whole car disappeared inside. I then saw people thrown into the air by the impact – they came out of the smashed window. There must have been a bomb in the car. Before people hit the ground, that smashed-open cave filled with flame."

The image terrified Madelyn when she was a little girl and still made her ill today. The crash and the whoosh of fire were instantaneous, but her grandmother recalled the terrorist attack clearly, as if each frame slowly played out before her on film. The old woman repeated descriptions of each scene with an obsession that had died with her.

Madelyn looks around. No reckless drivers today, and the restaurant had so few patrons that the place couldn't possibly be a feasible target. The Church and military had built the Wall as a shield against such frightful paranoia. Madelyn feels sudden ire, not toward heathens but at Mark. She pulls her clenched fists to her sides.

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

Mark shuffles his feet and Madelyn spots the uncomfortable squirm through the glass tabletop. "I'm not doing that at all," he says. "The whole Yehowah thing is just a rumor, babble on the airways. You know heathens say those things just to rattle the military. There is probably no relation."

Suspicious, Madelyn asks her sneaky friend "Why did you really ask me to dinner?"

Mark shuffles again. His hands remain on the table where Madelyn had left them. He locks his fingers together. "I wanted to see you, that's all. I wanted to see if you still look sexy when you get angry."

Madelyn's anger dissipates like the failing resonance of a bell. Yet her flushed face refuels with hot blood. Mark acts especially bold this afternoon.

"Shut up," is the only reply his female friend manages.

He relaxes and leans back. Mark gazes content at Madelyn's face a little too long. The stare sustains her blush. During the enchantment, the salad arrives, as does a refill for Mark's ice tea. After Madelyn's first nibble, she feels compelled to start another conversation.

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

Mark sighs. He wonders if his charms are lost on older women. He's melted the waitress easily enough, but Madelyn resists. The trouble can be that the two had known each other too long, or Madelyn remembers he's married. Still, he can see she wants to succumb. He had known as much since school. She had always been with someone else. Mark had been too, but that had never and doesn't him having fun. Back then, he was in school and commitment came later in life. His wife was now his excuse.

Unlucky for him, those marital shackles came immediately after graduation with the only woman who had ever stirred guilt in his heart, and an unplanned pregnancy; but the child died at birth. Of course Mark had felt sad, and also relieved. Still, his wife will not let him go, despite his resisting her pleas for another child.

The resumption of his flagrant philandering has no impact on their marriage. Mark just cannot make Merriam leave him. He would have walked away a long time ago, but did not want to look bad. His wealthy family warned him against his callous behavior toward his wife.

This time, now, an old friend from school turns up. She comes accompanied with the realization of an unfulfilled love affair. Madelyn was the genuine love of his life, for that matter. Who can scoff at such a romantic destiny, where the alternative was an endless, hopeless marriage?

Despite growing from the seed of a missed conquest, the story of true love held some truth. Madelyn requires work, but maybe it was about time someone challenged him. Mark can always use new tools, although he suspects age only enhances his appearance. For now, he sets aside his game of peek-a-boo with Madelyn so he can rethink his strategy.

"We're iconoclasts," he answers his friends question. She wants affirmation why heathens hate Chosen. "They think one day a messiah will come and wipe the Church and all its graven images from the face of the earth."

"But we don't worship the cross."

"They know that. Still, heathens keep strict, literal interpretations of their scriptures. They don't accept that human beings have overcome the Mortal god, or god serves man. They think it's the other way around."

"Honestly?" Madelyn had eaten enough of her salad and pushes the unfinished portion aside.

"That's what heathens don't like about us, the Chosen and the Church," Mark ventures. "I think it's politics. They want a theocracy of their own. Ours isn't good enough."

"And Yehowah will be a dictator?"

"He's only a captain in a heathen militia of tribes. I don't think he has ambitions other than murder and mayhem. But, he is their lion. In fact, heathens talk a lot about lions and tigers. If you didn't know better, you'd think they worship a cat god."

"Well, there is that story about the prophet in the den," Madelyn shares.

"That pit is now Khetam, if you believe heathens have infiltrated the Promised Land."

"And if they have, you want to discover their plots and land the assignment from military news."

"Well, sure I do." Mark leans forward again and shares his idea. "And so do you. But neither of us have a lead, do we?"

"Besides feathers in a church that have nothing to do with Yehowah and the heathens."

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

Mark has a valid point. Even if she did find a lead or break a story, chances are the assignment will go to a trusted, more experienced reporter. That wouldn't be Mark either. They

run the same race, although he had a couple laps on her. They need some angle and to make themselves indispensable – a unique thought or an invisible source. Making themselves essential reporters requires far-fetched thinking and luck.

“And?” Madelyn asks, trying her best to sound unconvinced.

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

Mark returns to flirting and winks. Madelyn likes the attention. This time she puts her hands over his. “That sounds a lot more fair than letting you steal my story.” Madelyn had emphasized the possessive aspect of her comment.

“Great. Then we have a partnership.”

“So tell me, what will Merriam think about you working – what can be long days – with an old school flame?” Madelyn reads Mark’s mind or has some thoughts of her own.

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

Madelyn doubts there was ever a time Mark’s wife didn’t have a reason to be upset.

“The last thing we need is her getting the wrong idea.” Mark continues, “I should always call you. And if you ever call me, hang up if my wife answers.”

The idea of a clandestine adventure tempts Madelyn. The secrecy absorbs her but she is shaken from her fantasy. The plate of fettuccine drops onto the table with a clank that almost cracks the glass surface. Apparently, Mark can also inspire jealousy in women he’s just met.

“Thank you,” Madelyn tells the waitress and smirks. Madelyn gloats over the attention she receives in preference over the young waitress. The teenager snubs Madelyn with a sour wince and an abrupt twirl.

“Well, we wouldn’t want to give your wife any ideas,” Madelyn says. She now holds the long gaze and Mark’s eyes grow wild.

She tastes the fettuccine, but the pasta has already grown cold. No doubt, the lukewarm dish is the deliberate fault of the waitress. Madelyn still offers Mark a sample.

“Oh, this isn’t very good. I still owe you a dinner,” he critiques. Despite the taste, Madelyn and Mark finish the chalky noodles together and talk more about where they will look for clues.

“Give me the address of the church, Saint Erasmus, right?” he instructs. “I’ll take a look if I get a chance.”

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

“Maybe it isn’t. The place is in the ghetto, right? The Church will have a tough time ordering a new assignment on short notice. I don’t think anyone would volunteer for that kind of work, especially if what happened already made the circuit of small talk. No priest means the facility is absent a caretaker.”

“I can go,” Madelyn announces.

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

Madelyn acquiesces. Chances either of them visiting the parish in the coming days are slim, especially for Madelyn. She retrieves a pen from her purse and writes the address of Saint Erasmus on the paper napkin that had come with the ice tea. Thinking of the service, the waitress had provided only one napkin – his.

After finishing their early dinner, Mark leaves an undeserved and overly generous tip on the table. The old friends, and new partners, hug. Mark leans over Madelyn and strokes downward until his hand rests in the small of her back. His grip lifts his friend onto her toes. She swoons in the strength of his arms and the solid feel of his abdomen. This man is bold and smooth, and Madelyn has always known.

Chapter 7 Leviathan

The older Cortras brother works-up a sweat, as well as an appetite, once the partially eaten burrito turns to vapor and steam. Dil Cortras had gone straight to the task of scrapping

gelatinous blood and feathers from the floor of Saint Erasmus. Ben joins Dil in the grisly task and helps clean the sanctuary. The two men find a rake in the breezeway opposite the one they had followed upon arrival at the church.

With the sun so low, only the top portions of the stained glass on the west side of the red box-like church allows light to splay into the nave. Shades of Fall dabble room. Dil rakes feathers as if they are leaves on a lawn and he does yard work at the end of a warm autumn afternoon. Ben crouches when he pushes the plastic dustpan through the red jelly, rolling dead insects into a mound resembling fruit suspended in an opaque desert.

The scrape of the pan and rake against the wooden floor bit painfully, as if an angry spider skitters through Dil's left ear. Undaunted, he rubs his head and continues work. Scratches and stains damage the floor while the work progresses. Between the blackened smears, the carved furrows in the wood resemble scars.

Hen is late. The sun threatens to set before the younger Cortras finally returns through the front doors. He's found pizza and more 'Yowling Cat,' the alcoholic cough syrup the Cortras brothers call wine.

"Those weren't lottery tickets, they're rations," Hen reports, waving a string of paper tickets in his free hand. Two boxes of pizza balance on his opposite fist. With this favored hand, he also chokes a plastic bag filled with bottles of liquor. He tells the other two trespassers "You can only buy as much liquor as you have tickets."

"I suppose it's better than nothing at all," Dil says, unsurprised by his little brother. "There was talk about prohibition in the Fort before our time. I guess they came to a compromise."

"Uh, yeah."

Hen notices something different. He expects his brother will be mad about his tardiness, leaving Dil alone with the unpleasant work. Instead, his brother acts oddly cheerful. Hen prefers him angry. An animated Dil is unsettling. Perhaps the older Cortras had found and drained a bottle of liquor while his little brother was absent – and not likely. Whatever Dil had found wasn't Ape, the man was too relaxed.

Hen entertains using the altar for a dinner table, but quietly decides the act constitutes some sacrilege. He scouts the pews before the image of blood and feathers turns his stomach. He asks the other two men "Hey, ah, can we eat this in the kitchen?"

Dil and Ben eagerly put aside their work. They both plainly require a change of scenery if they are to enjoy a meal.

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

"Uh, thanks?"

His brother's work delegation and Dil's instruction sounds a little better to Hen, and he sees Ben and Dil had made admirable progress. Tackling the remaining work wouldn't fill a morning, even if Hen worked by himself, although he secretly hoped the work will have been finished before he returned. Dil leads his brother and Ben down the back hall and into the kitchen.

"What are you doing with the feathers?" Hen asks. His voice echoes in the hallway. The smell of fumigation gas had faded but a rotten scent lingers, resembling a ripe dead rat recently removed from a trap. Hen leans over the pizza boxes and breathes in deep. The aroma of cheese and tomato sauce fill his nose and masks the other, offensive, odor.

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

Hen's skin crawls. He had never heard his brother talk this way. Ben doesn't say anything. Come to think of it, the stranger never really did speak. Hen hopes Ben had caused Dil's transformation. The change was okay, but only if it lasted temporarily. He silently wonders what his brother and Ben had talked about, if anything at all.

"Did you get a tarp?" Dil asks him. The older Cortras slides a couple chairs from the table, the back of one in each balled hand.

Hen opens the pizza boxes. Sausage and mushrooms top both pies, heavy with sauce and stingy with cheese. Meanwhile, Ben washes his bloodied hands in the sink. He lathers with a crusted bottle of dish soap he's found in the cupboard below. He lets the water run and prepares himself for another long drink without the copper flavor. While waiting, he shakes his hands but

they remain wet.

Dil doesn't bother washing. He wipes his hands on his clothes, staining his denim shirt and the crotch of his jeans. The sweat from his arms had liquefied the jellied blood again and long, red pin stripes have been drawn down the front of his shirt. Hen doesn't notice. The younger Cortras busies himself making selections among irregular pizza slices.

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

Dil shoves half a slice into his mouth and his eyes roll back. The Cortras brothers had gone without pizza for a long time, but Hen couldn't imagine the pie tasted as good as Dil radiated. His older brother was never much of a connoisseur of anything, and not more than a deadpan critic.

The smell of pizza drives home Hen's hunger more than the promise of a fine culinary experience. Ben also eats greedily, so creating dinner conversation falls to the younger Cortras alone. The burden could not be more light. Hen always feels compelled to talk.

"I know where those bugs came from, I heard it on the radio." Hen's audience continues eating, but does not protest his attempt at discourse. He tells them "There were some prehistoric squids washed up on the beach. But they weren't really squids; they had the arms, but their bodies were like snakes."

"You said you knew where the bugs came from," Dil mumbles. A huge, mushy wad of pizza muffles his speech.

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

"So military news talks about events other than heathens and body counts. This must be their golden age of radio."

"Dil? Are you on something?" Hen asks. "Cuz I wouldn't mind..."

Dil laughs with his mouth wide open. Chewed crust spills out and bounces off the edge of the table on a trajectory toward the floor.

"Ben, have I told you that my brother is a crack-up?" Dil spits crumbs when he speaks. He reaches for a bottle of wine. "Where did the flies come from, Hen? My money is on the ass of Beelzebub. Any wager, Ben?"

Hen doesn't know what his brother talked about and Ben didn't care. The false priest sat eating, preoccupied with nothing. The sun-broiled stranger the Cortras brothers had found in the desert betrays no interest in Dil's rhetorical gamble.

"They were on the dead squids, swarms of them. The flies started biting people on the beach and the military brought flame throwers and fried 'em out of the sky."

Dil takes a big gulp of wine straight from the bottle. The next moment, he bows over the table and juts out his tongue. His arms spread wide – one fist gripping the bottle. The other hand wields a folded slice of pizza. Dil was going to retch. Hen rescues the uneaten portions of pizza, but the food was never in real danger. The older Cortras recovers.

"Damn," Dil exclaims.

"Plague," Ben said backing away from the table.

"Damn, right," Dil adds. "And fire in the sky."

Hen sits cemented to his seat and his goose flesh grows cold. Something more seemed different about his brother, as if somebody else had slipped into his skin. The other Dil takes a couple long swigs of wine. This time, he swallows hard and clenches his teeth.

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

"What?" Hen already forgot the dinner conversation.

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

"I suppose so."

Dil twists around and bends, intending to recover the chair that had skidded back, when he abruptly stands. Hen leans toward Ben.

"Hey, Ben," the younger Cortras says in a low voice, impossible to hide from anyone around the table. "What did you guys do when I was gone?"

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

Silence swells within the kitchen, except the constant prattle of the refrigerator. Neither Dil nor Ben notice. Ben eats and Dil drinks. The older Cortras claims one bottle of wine for himself alone and quickly drains half its contents.

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

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

"We need some more."

"There's a curfew, Dil. That's why I came back early. The shop is closed, too."

"Early, my ass," Dil scowls then grins. "Not tonight, my good friend, tomorrow."

Hen thinks twice about telling Dil anything about the wine. Even though his brother will suffer in the morning, Hen knows better than to attempt curbing his drinking. A younger sibling had no place telling an elder what to do; a lesson once reinforced with a drunken brawl. Hen can never get the better of his brother in any condition.

Pent-up viciousness claws Dil on his inside and Hen avoids tapping into it. Exposing that anger was easy when Dil was drunk, especially if obviously rude attempts were made ignoring him. Though Hen also enjoyed emptying the bottle, he usually encouraged his older brother to stay sober. Hen could have lied about the tickets, but he had already spoiled his chance. That was how his ideas came, just in time, or a little too late. Hen hopes the impending hangover will dissuade Dil from drinking again for a while.

Dil puts down his squashed pizza and favors the wine. "Ben, I think we're going to be great friends. You, me, and him."

The drunken older Cortras thrusts the neck of a bottle toward Hen. Ben couldn't but notice Dil acted as if he had recently met his younger brother. All the same, Ben didn't know much about either of them and could not say the behavior was out of the ordinary. Last night, he noticed drinking transformed Dil Cortras. The change was obvious, even in Ben's debilitated state. More alcohol must let loose more of that alternate personality.

The distraction was timely and Ben appreciated nobody asked more questions about his identity or where he had come from. He already personally focused on those mysteries with as much diligence he could summon. The effort he made toward recall caused his head to throb. He knew his memories were almost within sight.

Looking at those images now was staring at a blank piece of paper with words printed on the opposite side. The backward ghosts of letters were perceptible but still illegible. Eventually, focus drifted through the white portions of the paper, but attention on the blankness also promoted meditation. Ben had droned away at his immediate task and avoided pangs of thought. Mindlessly scraping congealed blood from the floor in the nave had passed a few hours of that afternoon in peace.

During the work, Ben partly listened to Dil's light-hearted comments and morbid quips. The older Cortras said earlier, "Ben, I bet the whole bird is here. We can stick him together, glue his feathers together with Reverend Elmer – here, all over the floor."

Though he wasn't listening, the talk reminded Ben somewhat of the voice haunting him. He could not conclude Dil and the voice were the same, but Ben realizes he sought an external source for the phantom. He remembers the uninvited guest had arrived before the Cortras brothers had come along. Ben mapped the order of events on his recent timeline. The encounter with the dead priest, whose identity Ben had assumed or shares, was also pinned into that shadowy history.

Ben and the Cortras brothers now hide inside Khetam. They had appropriated an innocuous parish church without oversight, and the place defaults to having become their base of operations. Everything happens thus far according to a plan. "Whose plan?" he had whispered hours ago and still wondered.

The brothers had thought things out only as far as getting past the Wall and finding a place they might stay. They are hiding. Ben picked that up instinctively. He doesn't care what they're hiding from, and he didn't believe he had his own plan quietly unfolding in his subconscious. A large gap in his memory simply needed filling. The blankness was bigger than

his amnesia. There was a reason Ben had come to Saint Erasmus, more solid than some metaphysical destiny.

A large chunk of pizza grows soggy and tasteless in his mouth, chiefly because a good chunk of time had passed between his taking the bite and beginning to chew. Ben eventually becomes aware of the unsavory fact. Thinking spoils his dinner.

"Here we are in a church," Dil announces, spinning his free hand in a grand circle. "What better place to make a difference, do some great things." The older Cortras laughs loud and hard. Being the only reveler, the lack of participation cannot escape his notice. "Oh, come now. Here we are, together. Let's make a pact. We have plenty of blood for us and we can sign our names."

"What are you talking about?" Ben asks. Although he didn't actually now Dil Cortras, the man's speech had surely changed. Pacts had never been part of this man's repertoire.

Hen was glad Ben was brave and curious. His petrified state had returned. He prays Dil merely drank too fast. The younger Cortras was grateful Ben picked this moment and shook off his mute daze.

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

Darkness fills the room. No one's noticed the light dim and grow orange while the three men ate. Now that the sun has dipped below the Wall, all illumination retreats. Hen stands, stiff with momentary paralysis. He finds a switch near the refrigerator and flips it up. A bare bulb over the sink casts soft light and fuzzy shadows into the room. Dil's seat is turned from the light. His face hovers in complete shadow except for the beads of sweat clinging to his cheeks. They glisten with the light of diamonds embedded in his skin.

"Do you think the Living God wants any part of this place – constantly nagged and bullied?"

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

"That has nothing to do with it," Dil shouts. He rises from his seat, then sits back down with a thud. The legs of his chair creak in complaint. "There is not going to be a messiah, either. God is gone, my friend. He took a vacation and decided he likes the other side of the galaxy, or wherever he built his summer place. A little birdie tells me."

"You know we're not heathens, right, Ben?" Hen asks the stranger. His high-pitched voice trembles. Ben remembers the younger Cortras had mentioned that fact to the dying priest. Hen believes the clarification is important. And inside Khetam, it very much is.

"It doesn't make any difference," Ben replies. He doesn't care either way. He decides he will stay unconvinced if not completely unconcerned about the existence of a god – Mortal, Living or something other.

"But we can," Dil pronounces happily. He smiles again and stands up wavering. "That's what I'm saying. How about we start a new religion? How about a cult? Virgins and drugs and not-so-virgins." Dil's chuckle echoes hollow in the bottle when he raises the wine to his lips. One more mouthful will finish the meager amount of liquor. Dil takes the gulp after an exhalation in which he pretends he breathes fire.

Hen begs they change the subject. "Let's not talk about this anymore. We're in a church, Dil. We believe in the Mortal God."

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

"What do you say, Ben?" Dil staggers. He still holds the empty bottle in his fist. "We need our own miracle, get ourselves a flock."

Dil's audience wholly dismisses his drunken rambling. Ben avoids being struck by the bottle when Dil sways and stands. The stranger establishes a safe distance between the unstable Cortras and himself.

"I think I need some sleep," Ben said.

"Yeah," Hen eagerly agrees. He welcomes any suggestion that retreat from the current topic. The younger Cortras darts behind Ben. "Let's go to sleep."

"I was just playing around, don't get upset," this new Dil begs. "We can talk about

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

Dil pitches forward into the open boxes of pizza crust and partially eaten slices. This time, his brother has no chance to save the leftovers. The table slides forward with the momentum of Dil's fall. Its tubular metal legs creak and screech as they strain against the unexpected weight and motion.

The older Cortras passes out – his body draped over the table, with his knees bent, and his arms dangling off the sides. The bottle slips from his grip and lands with a cavernous thud. The empty bottle then rolls leisurely toward the splintered doorway. Hen watches as it bumps and rests against the wooden door that can never be fully closed.

"That hit him pretty fast," Ben notes.

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

Ben shakes his head, but Hen does not see.

"Those things he said," the younger Cortras starts, "You know he didn't mean it. He never talks like that."

Ben disregards the disclaimer. He still holds a sliver of crust he now casually chews away. "Are you leaving him there?"

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

Ben nods again, and Hen still isn't watching. He busies himself exploring ways he might handle Dil. Apparently, he is unaccustomed with touching his older brother.

After swallowing the dry bread, Ben slips his hand under the man's armpit. He hoists the unconscious Dil up. For leverage, Ben pulls the wrist of the snoring Cortras brother. Hen follows the example and the pair string Dil's arms around their necks. Ben couldn't help think he's come full circle. One good deed was now repaid with the same.

Dil is dead weight. He snores and snorts when he sleeps, and his breath smells like rotting oranges and rubbing alcohol.

"Stop, Ben," Hen tells the false priest. He lifts his brother's head, worried Dil might suddenly stop breathing. They then move again.

Moving into the hall goes easily enough, but Hen and Ben both stumble on the steep, narrow stairs. They navigate up the steps at an angle, and Ben moves ahead. A dusty glow at the top of the stairwell provides insignificant light. The illumination floats through second-story windows barely above the walls at either side of the church.

While ascending, Hen trips and falls on Dil's limp form. The fall nearly drags Ben backwards. Feeling the uncontrolled tug, he lets go entirely. He will not tumble backwards into a monkey pile of grown men. Ben steadies himself and considers the man he's let drop. The older Cortras will surely wake and find mysterious bruises the following morning or early afternoon. Once Hen pushes upright, the young Cortras and Ben go back to their chore without a word. They drag the unwieldy Dil by his arms up the remainder of the flight upstairs.

Big rooms and a large bathroom partition the second floor. Upstairs includes a kitchenette with a hotplate, but no other appliance or sink. The layout resembles more a hostel than a church. The building had been designed for purposes other a house of worship. This place being a way station for military patrols in times of unrest was not such a long stretch of imagination. Ben wonders if a stash of riot gear or other provisions were hidden inside somewhere.

He and Hen thread Dil's arms over their shoulders again and they steer toward the nearest bedroom. Their selection contains a half dozen bare cots set in a row. More cots lean upright and folded against the far wall. Hen wants something cozier. He heads for the second room and Dil becomes tugged between the two men. Ben yields. This game of tug-of-war was also out of the question.

The room Hen chooses contains a pair of naked twin beds and projected closets blocking the room into an irregular shape, casting thick angular shadows. The arrangement forms a nook with a table and chairs and provides a simple outdoor view out a barred window of a flat roof's lip.

Once the three men reach the nearest bed, Ben dumps Dil gracelessly. Hen doesn't let go and almost falls again. He catches himself on the narrow bed. The hard mattress bounces

once before settling. Hen lifts Dil's feet. He did not bother taking off his brother's shoes. Ben pushes Dil's shoulder beneath him, so that the man lay on his side.

"I guess this will be our room," Hen says. "Are you staying?"

"In here with you?" Ben asks.

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

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know. We got lots of money now, more than I've ever seen all at once. If we get jobs, we can stay in the Fort – If we can't get jobs, we got enough and we can live in the encampment for a while, a long while."

Ben couldn't shake the feeling he was meant to be at Saint Erasmus. Dil made obvious he also feels welcome. Only Hen voices aversion, and his reaction is perfectly natural. The eyes of the Church may be turned away, but the trio stays here on borrowed time. Then there were the blood and feathers, indicating something terrible had happened to the previous priest, Reverend Elmer – a name Ben had heard before.

Signs did not bode well. Even if Ben was an impostor, that did not guarantee he wouldn't become the next victim. Yet he had gained entrance to the Fort and specifically came to Saint Erasmus for something, great things, not merely for celebration or honor. Summoned, Ben came with a job. The big, blank spot in his memory might not have anything to do with the inexplicable feeling. However, he assumes the nothingness hid some truth.

"Let's see what happens tomorrow," Ben said, knowing already he will stay. The Cortras brothers will too. Hen will not leave Dil. Poor Hen was like a man who wouldn't unlace a comfortable boot caught in the tracks of a train barreling down on him. In a strange way, Ben feels better to know the character of the younger Cortras brother. He knows what he might expect from the man. Hen Cortras was a typical, meek UnChosen.

Dil was a different matter. The older brother feigns his stoic and contemplative expression. The man is shortsighted – Ben knew that immediately. That personality of Dil's had started to change even before the man drank. Hen saw the transition, too, and there was no better judge than a brother.

Ben leaves them and goes into the furthest front room upstairs. A latticed window overlooks the street. This must have been the original priest's room. A large bed, armoire, armchair and table lend the space a lived-in appearance. Their shapes and colors are not exact in the low light.

There, the imposter realizes he really is tired. He pulls off his boots and lay down, otherwise fully clothed. The soft ringing in the back of his head returns and the steady whistle lulls him to sleep and into dreams. He cannot describe any of the frozen, intangible images, but he notes the absence of sound. His dreams are still and deaf.

Chapter 8 Wantonness

Scrubbing and running water wakes Ben. The latter sound reignites his thirst, but he ignores the craving for now. Drowsiness makes the whimper soft, so Ben allows himself to drift back into sleep. The combination of scrubbing and water flow together into a rhythm. The music of activity could have sung to Ben while he slumbered, except daylight becomes a rude guest. At first, the glow was soft and feathery – just a little brighter than the streetlight that had shone into his room throughout the night. Within minutes, the glare pounds through his closed eyelids and his face aches.

Ben realizes he squeezes his eyes shut more tightly when the intensity of the morning light grows. The struggle causes his pain. His fight against daybreak is clearly a battle he will not win. He must wake and plan his next step. The Cortras brothers might leave today, if Hen had talked his brother Dil into the idea. The moment Ben decides he will start his morning, the running water stops then seeps alive again and becomes a steady drip.

He bears the intruding light when he finally opens his eyes. The slow introduction of

daylight and steady, increased intensity had adjusted his vision even while he fought against waking. The ache at the front of his head vanishes instantly. He still feels lethargic, but now that he's given-up going back to sleep, the thirst will take precedence and will soon need satisfaction.

At the present, Ben explores his bedroom. The armoire and table he had spotted last night are made from pine and both are stained dark chocolate. A chair, upholstered in faux brown leather, sits next a bare table. The arms and back of the chair are worn and expose a thick string mesh. Only the strands hold back the bulging stuffing.

The armoire is shut, but does not have a lock. Ben pulls open the doors using their thin brass rings. The closet contains an identical wardrobe he had found in the suitcase brought to Saint Erasmus – more white collarless shirts and black slacks. Ben pulls out one of each. The shirt and pants are too big, even larger than the wrinkled clothes he presently wears.

The armoire also offers a pair of black polished shoes that will fit if he wore a couple pairs of the socks. Ben decides he will do that, eventually. He dreads the idea of putting on his beaten boots again. Once he had removed them and his soggy socks, he's enjoyed the air on his feet too much and resists smothering them again.

Ben looks at his stark white feet. His toes look bony and shriveled. During his walk through the Shur, all the color had been worn off. The difference between them and his still swollen red hands have him muse he looks as if he's been stitched together from two different people. Ben assesses his wardrobe options again. He determines he will continue living out of the suitcase, because the fit of those clothes are less conspicuous.

He tries to remember where someone's placed the suitcase. Within a quick scan of the room, Ben solves his quandary and spots the suitcase just inside his bedroom door. He begins opening the case on the floor then instead tosses it onto the rumpled bed. Without reason for any formal preparation, he makes up his mind to wear the same clothing he had worn the day before. He ignores the crisscross wrinkles in his shirt and pants and walks barefoot into the hall.

The scrubbing noise intrigues him and he investigates the source. Dil Cortras is still in the room where Ben and Hen had left him last night. The older Cortras brother holds an oval-shaped toilet brush. The bristles have splayed from abuse. Armed with the brush, Dil is bent over a bare mattress and rubs spirals into a large soapy circle.

"To hell with this," he evokes and tosses the tool. While the dripping bristles sail through the air, and when the brush strikes the floor, white suds splatter the wall besides the bed. The plaster sucks up the moisture, leaving small stained rings. Dil grabs the mattress and flips it up. He loses his grip and it slips to the floor on the other side of the metal frame. The mattress leans upright. Dil reaches over and grabs hold again. He jerks it back up then over; wet side down.

Once the mattress is turned over and back on the frame, Dil stands erect. Dry, yellow vomit coats the front of his blue denim shirt. Ben then becomes aware of a rank smell, or perhaps the sight of puke triggers some hidden olfactory memory. In either case, he moves on. Neither man acknowledge each other and each continue their mornings as if they had not seen one another.

Ben follows the dripping sound, which leads him into the large bathroom on the second floor. Doubles of every fixture, including sinks, toilets, and showers, fill the tiled bath. The drip echoes from the nearest shower stall where a soapy puddle obscures the tiles and slowly drain through an unguarded opening in the floor. From the bath, Ben hears Dil lumber downstairs. The wooden steps ache aloud under his steps.

Toward the bottom of the stairs, just when Ben expects he will hear nothing more than a footfall, Dil curses and hammers the floor once. The older Cortras must have missed the last step just where the path became darkest in the expiring morning. Ben listens a little longer for conversation. He knows Hen, the younger Cortras brother, well enough and expects some greeting for Dil. Nothing. Hen must be gone. Ben hopes the meek man hunts breakfast. The dinner of pizza last night had tricked Ben's stomach into expecting regular meals again, but first, he will get his long drink of water.

He runs water in one of the sinks. While the water runs, he fills his cupped hand and brings the contents to his lips. He captures a painfully small amount of water this way and

realizes slurping repeatedly from his hands was never going to be enough. His head is too large and will not fit in the basin under the faucet. Ben still tries because need drives him. Frustrated, he turns toward the second shower stall and starts the flow of water.

He almost forgets to turn off the water in the sink and the basin fills. Shutting it off, Ben considers some plunging may be required if he and the Cortras brothers stay at Saint Erasmus very long. He then strips off his clothes and piles them into the dry sink. Looking down, he discovers where his two halves are sewn together; he is joined at his waist. The work appears masterful – not a sign of a stitch. He resembles a living peppermint candy cane, eaten down to the last colored band.

Ben steps into the shower. The water isn't as cold as yesterday from the pump at the edge of the encampment, but cool enough. His skin is immediately soothed again. The wide shower head disgorges a torrent of cool mercy. An instant ago, Ben had felt gritty from his work yesterday afternoon and his skin stung because his extensive sunburn. All his pressing problems are then solved with this shower.

He had nearly grown accustomed to the pain. Most of the blisters on his arms and shoulders had burst during the night, leaving raw flesh beneath. The open wounds were not any more painful than the rest of the top half of his body. He hurt evenly all over.

Ben had just stepped into the flow of water when he turns his open mouth upward. He stands on his toes and catches as much of the rain as possible and drinks with restrained swallows. He imagines his insides as the bed of a stream. Every living thing within him depends on water and its motion. Ben needs to keep the fluid running down his throat and throughout his body. The water must fill the grotto of his belly then overflow, and bring back life, and banish the emptiness of memory and the past. When his legs grow tired, he takes hold of the spigot and holds himself up, locking his fingers together over the copper pipe.

He drinks until his hands slip. Only then does he take a few minutes and bathe the rest of his body. He looks for soap but cannot find any. The water alone suffices. Ben steps out of the stall and dresses. He doesn't bother drying because there is no towel in the bath. Shaking his limbs don't help much, but he enjoys staying wet. He retrieves the shoes with two pairs of black socks before going downstairs. Ben changes his plan again and thinks he'll stay barefoot even longer.

Dil stands in the kitchen, wringing his shirt in the sink. His back is pale, but not as white as Ben's lower half. The back of Dil's neck is red, but again, not like Ben's. Dil's red band is thick and permanent, like a leather collar that never comes off. The older Cortras holds up his shirt and light from the window streams through the coarse fabric. The laundering seems satisfactory and he puts the shirt back on, sopping wet, but did not button it up. The wet fabric drips from the shirttail and loose cuffs. Most important, the spoiled and fermented fruit smell has finally left the shirt and Ben's nose. Dil turns around and pretends he sees Ben for the first time that morning.

"If the sun weren't shining, people would think the two of us got caught in a downpour," Dil smirks. Something was different about him, but only at times. Contrary to Hen's suspicion, drugs did not change his brother's behavior. Between Hen and Ben, Dil was rarely alone. Besides, the man did not have that chemical smell. His personality change came and went like the voice that had followed Ben from the desert.

Ben waits for Dil to say more. He might then guess which personality prevailed this morning. If the man today was the original Dil, the older Cortras will not say anything else and Ben would have to continue the conversation.

Dil says nothing more. He walks past Ben and into the hall. Ben follows him and notices the trash can they had used yesterday is back in the kitchen. Bloody stains and streaks cover the surface, despite the can having been rinsed. Fingerprints implicating both Dil and Ben are clearly pressed on the metal like polka dots. Empty pizza boxes are tossed on top – they won't quite fit inside the can. The boxes had been tilted up on their sides, forming diamonds.

"Are you finished with the mess?" Ben asks the present Cortras.

Dil glances over his shoulder. He does not answer until he turns back around. Watching his shuffling feet, he tells Ben "Yes, sir."

The tone sounds far from subservient. Grumpiness soaks his voice wet as either Dil or Ben. The two men nearly reach the nave before Dil says more. "Hen finished this morning. He got up early. He had nothing good to say about his chores, last night and this place."

Dil looks at Ben again. Ben assumes the older Cortras tries reading his mind, yet the burnt stranger is still the blank paper he had been since his rescue from the desert. Ben suspects he knows what Dil wants; to hear Ben outraged at the gall of leaving Saint Erasmus. The older Cortras brother looks for a majority vote, if he was to use a semblance of democracy and convince Hen against instinct. Dil didn't really need consensus for his little brother, but the pretense quiets Hen more quickly and gently than the effort normally requires. Ben does not have a particular inclination to stay or go, so he abstains. The dispute must work itself out between the related pair.

Ben was merely meant to stay here at the moment. He didn't object to company, but if the brothers are to go, he would not leave with them. The vague feeling he had some purpose in Khetam he must fulfill nags him. It isn't as strong as Dil's odd enlightenment with having found a place he's called home, but the feeling was not wise to dismiss. All Ben currently had was his own instinct. Dil turns away.

"Yeah," he says. "I sent him to cash that check."

The two men survey Hen's handiwork in the nave. No more bugs, clots, or feathers litter the damp floor. A good deal of water had recently been dumped over the wood. Hen must have filled the trash can and poured out the water in here. The wood was now dyed maroon. The deep scratches and gouges from yesterday's work hint at the original color of the grain. Even then, the wash had carried a diluted stain into most of the scars and darkened them.

"You don't look too bad, considering last night," Ben observes.

"Now you're a doctor, priest?"

Ben had heard Dil talk to his little brother with the same sarcastic scorn. Either Dil had gotten comfortable with Ben or a hang-over made the man irritable. Ben takes the meaning and makes no further comments about the man's condition.

Instead, Ben takes a prolonged look at each window; all are still open. With morning light reflecting behind them, the iron bars outside appear black and two-dimensional. The barrier makes Ben restless. "I don't like the bars," he said.

"So cut them off," Dil offers.

After Dil has dropped those words, his mood instantly lifts. The hint for making improvements to this place cheers him. An investment of energy means a longer stay. The plan really hinged on Ben's continued masquerade. Hen can be cowed and distracted, but Ben was the key. Without a priest, what business would a couple of UnChosen transients have in a church, alone, even one in the ghetto of the Fort?

"Whatever makes you happy," Dil said acknowledging the Cortras brothers need Ben.

The pretense exists they repair the floor while they stay at Saint Erasmus. Certainly the amount of damage requires a long time to fix. Dil makes an uneducated guess, but to any average eye, replacing the floor looks like a lot of work. In the meantime, the brothers can even learn something about fixing floors. When that was done, there will be something else, like the back door. Excuses can run indefinitely if the Cortras brothers stay clever.

"I'll even help you," Dil volunteers.

Dil would take the task all by himself if the effort made a difference to Ben's decision. The older Cortras wants to stay. Other than money and a safe place he might hide from whoever looks for the brothers, there seemed another, hidden reason. Ben and Dil share a wish, and the feeling of belonging haunts them. They should probably talk about their perceptions. Dil possesses a more complete picture of events that had led him to this point and place in time. Dil and Ben arriving at the same destiny might mean their pasts may not be so different.

"What did you mean last night?" Ben queries the older Cortras.

Dil blanches at the question. He scuffs the stained floor with the toe of his boot. Restoring the wood will require a little more friction than generated by the leather of a sole.

"I don't remember what I said," Dil replies. "Hen said I talked about some crazy stuff."

Nonsense. It was the desert.”

“And the wine.” Ben hands the excuse to him. Dil scowls.

“I wasn’t drunk. I got a handle on it.”

Ben nods. The subject is obviously a sore spot. He had no qualms about letting it go.

“You were out there,” Dil adds. “No water. Sun and heat. Then this slaughter house.”

“You talked at dinner yesterday. I meant, the things you think we can do,” Ben changes the subject. “Why do you think we’re here?”

Dil looks astonished and answers regardless. “I had a dream about that last night. I didn’t think I told anybody. I didn’t even think I talked about it at all.”

“You didn’t tell me exactly. The statement was vague and you made it before you passed out.”

“You might think I’m crazy. I don’t believe much in dreams. I don’t talk about them, if I remember any. But this was different.” Dil takes the time and buttons his shirt. He starts at the bottom. The very wet cloth sticks to his shoulders as a second skin. He doesn’t speak again until he finishes the third button from the collar.

“I never had much expectation. You always get disappointed if you wish too much. But the dream I had last night, everything I’ve ever told myself I can live without was mine. I didn’t even ask for it. I mean everything. I even had the stuff I wanted when I was a kid.”

Ben had hoped for more revelation. “That was all it was about?”

“Yeah. The dream was a promise. I only had to stay here at the church.”

“What’s going to happen if you stay?”

“I don’t know, I don’t expect anything. It was just a dream. It just made me feel, uh, hope.”

While Dil had spoken, he’s drifted toward the middle of the stain, near the altar on the dais. Ben follows. Looking down, the imposter sees he stands barefoot on the discoloration. The wood feels soft and cool. Realizing where he stands, he feels the sensation turn clammy. He hops into a clear patch off the low dais. Someone, probably Hen, had pushed back the nearest pew, but Ben doesn’t bother correcting its position before sitting down. He puts on the socks and shoes he’s carried with him. Dil looks disappointed, like a storyteller whose just lost his audience.

“You feel it too, don’t ‘ya?” he observes.

“Me?” Ben asks, uncertain if evasiveness is in order, but expressing his feelings was difficult. He did feel hopeful, but also like someone or something else controlled his situation. The suspicion makes him uncomfortable. Maybe the voice dictates their fate, but that idea sounds crazy, pathetic.

Dil becomes uncharacteristically curious again, this time without alcohol. The older Cortras is eager and he wants to stay at Saint Erasmus. “C’mon, Ben. You have to be here for a reason. I know you’re not Yehowah.”

“I never said I was.”

“Why would you?” Dil asks.

Ben pulls on the second pair of socks. Though he’s enjoyed stretching his toes, he surveys a poisonous red field stretched before him. Shoes are his only protection.

Impatient, Dil confesses “I gotta be honest. It’s hard to believe there is a Mortal God. He’s gone. You heard that, right?”

In place of revealing his belief and what the voice from the desert has said, Ben’s chin drops to his collarbone. The older Cortras continues nonetheless. “But something brought us here. Brought you out of the desert, even. You should be dead.”

This was true. Madness and luck had saved Ben. He had brought one of those elements to the Cortras brothers and one went with the other. Together, the chaos spread like a virus. A soft rap interrupts their conversation then the leftward front door slowly swings open. The sound and motion make Ben jump and he leaves his shoes untied.

“Hen?” Dil calls. Ben takes a deep breath and exhales his sudden rush of adrenaline.

The visitor is not Hen. Instead, a timid old woman and a teenage boy step inside Saint Erasmus. Both wear t-shirts and cotton shorts. The woman blinks while she struggles adjusting to the dim shadow inside the church. The boy hops from side to side before the woman clears the

passage. She moves too slow for him. He pushes open the other door and dances in front of the old lady. Ben imagines the pair must be a couple lambs from the flock in the Saint Erasmus parish.

He and Dil had foolishly expected the absence of Church supervision also meant a lack of parishioners. Even outside the Wall, their plan had not included prayers, sermons and confessions. Those tasks seemed trivial based on the impracticality of ever arriving inside the Fort, yet duties and expectations do come with the assumed priesthood.

Ben isn't comfortable with the idea. He wears the trappings, but refuses to perpetuate the spurious religion of the Chosen. He now knows the corruption is not his religion, if it ever had been. Ben resolves there he must chase away the woman.

"Don't worry, I've got no other place I can go," Ben whispers to the older Cortras. Dil hears and nods. The presence of guests spoils his content expression.

"I'll be in the back," Dil quietly announces. "What are you going to tell her?"

"We're closed."

The older Cortras disappears down the hall at the back of the church, an escape route from unexpected visitors. Ben stands ready for his performance and the boy trots up the center aisle. The old woman shuffles faster and catches him. The exertion makes her breathe heavy.

"Davey, don't go there," the woman implores when the boy approaches the outer perimeter of the stained floor. "It's dirty. Stay with your mother."

The woman is short and grayed. Her face and hands bear the temporary blemish of healing bug bites. Ben automatically concludes a connection between the dead flies in the church and the woman.

She greets the priestly adorned stranger. "Hello, are you the new reverend? You must be."

"Hi, hello," Davey laughs.

"I'm Jillie Ikraam," she says when she introduces herself. "This is my son, Davey."

The boy repeats his manic salutation. Davey is retarded. His round face looks pig-like – an odd coupling with the boy's thin frame. Ben withholds reply. He doesn't get a chance to say anything because the woman continues talking.

"I saw a workman come into the church last night, and I saw lights. Thank the Mortal God you came so quickly. This needs to be a good place again."

"You're red," Davey interjects. His finger shoots within a hair of Ben's nose. Ben feels a breeze chase the quick hand and reflex pulls back his head.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Jillie says. "Davey, put your hand down. Be a good boy. Sit down over there." The woman points toward the middle pews. Davey lowers his hand but does not go away. He stands at his mother's side, twisting his fingers into his ears. Jillie returns to Ben. "You are badly sunburned. Does it hurt?"

"Yes, it does," Ben replies. He thinks "Obviously," but the burn should have hurt more. The faux priest imagines the bulk of his agony had vanished with the voice he had heard.

The old woman rolls her head on her thin, wrinkled neck when she surveys the floor. "Oh, and you cleaned everything up."

"There is still a lot to do," Ben chances. "The church will be closed awhile."

"But you're here. That's the important thing."

"Yes, but I have work to do."

"Reverend, what is your name?"

"I'm Davey!" The boy raises his arms over his head. His mouth falls open and his tongue protrudes. He stares at the stained floor. "Uhk."

"Shh, Davey," His mother said.

The priest answers his imposing visitor. "Ben."

Jillie smiles. "I like that you're not so formal. That means you're friendly, just like Reverend Elmer."

"Who?" the new priest asks. Davey echoes him. Ben takes a clue from Jillie and ignores the boy.

"They didn't tell you? Reverend Elmer was the priest here before you. Did they tell you what happened to him?"

"No," Ben replies. He already expects an explanation. If the old woman's son didn't constantly distract her, she may answer her own questions. Jillie leans close. She gently nudges her son's head away when he attempts to join the huddle.

"He was murdered," she whispers. The boy's howl of protest almost drowns her statement. The old woman might have planned the commotion. She had practiced her timing and volume. Still, Davey was determined and would push himself into the conversation. Missing secrets made him assertive. The boy didn't have wits to know better and he throws his head against his mother's, accidentally. The result is a thud of skulls.

"Ow," Jillie cries. She rubs the bludgeoned side of her head and stomps her foot. "Oh, Davey. You're bad. I told you to sit down. Please, listen to your mother."

Davey rubs his head furiously. The motion is empathetic. He wasn't injured in the least. He sticks out his bottom lip. The boy then sheepishly apologizes to his mother. "Sorry."

"I know, baby. Just sit down. Over there."

Davey does as he is told. First, weaving between the pews, going from one end to the other of each row, until he reaches the spot his mother yet points at. Meanwhile, Jillie speaks to Ben, keeping her voice low.

"There are black feathers and big flies. I know you saw them."

"Yes, and the blood. Why was the priest killed?"

"I don't know." Jillie crosses herself. "I think because what he did for Davey."

"What did he do?"

"I asked Reverend Elmer if he would command a miracle from the Mortal God. I want Davey to be a normal boy."

Ben feels disappointed, but realizes he is too hopeful and once expected a substantial answer from this UnChosen woman.

"So you didn't see the murder?"

"No, but I heard Reverend Elmer die. It was so terrible. You can ask the reporter. I told her everything I heard and saw. The story was even on the radio."

"A reporter came here?" The news worries Ben. He doesn't like the idea more people are coming and asking questions. The Cortras brothers will agree, although Dil will not want Hen to know. Hen needs no more reasons before he flees.

"Yes. She was very pretty and young. Her name was Madelyn Sebash."

"Is she coming back?"

"Oh, I don't know. She might want to see the church. It was being gassed when she visited – because the flies." Jillie shows Ben her bitten hands. They are smooth and dry, mottled with fading purple circles. "But you were so quick to clean up, there's really nothing to see."

There was truthfully nothing more to see, except an impostor priest and a couple squatters hiding in a bloodstained church. The sergeant at the Wall and an addict captain in the Church were enough trial for Ben. He did not want to tell lies to someone specializing in asking questions. Still, a visit by a reporter was only a possibility. Ben thought he'd try and learn from this woman why reporters had an interest in this parish – obviously a murdered priest. "What did they say about Saint Erasmus on the radio?"

"They said heathen sympathizers killed Reverend Elmer. The reverend was just unlucky and was in the wrong place at the wrong time. I don't know about that. I think the devil killed him."

Ben would not argue the woman's beliefs. He feels satisfied the reporter had dispensed the standard propaganda, nothing but a hacked story for a paycheck. He did not anticipate seeing any other reporters, or military patrols for that matter.

"All right, Mrs....?"

"Ikraam. Please, call me Jillie, Ben."

"Mrs...." Ben pauses. "Jillie. You should go now. The church isn't ready." He opens his hand toward the doors. They still stand partly open after Jillie and her son had entered.

"Ben." She grasps his forearm. Her touch is light, but he still winces because the sudden

pressure on his damaged skin. Jillie squeezes even harder. "Since Reverend Elmer is gone, can you pray for Davey? Please, make him normal."

Here it was again, another demand upon an eviscerated god – one who loved his creation and subjected himself to crucifixion and an everlasting life of servitude. This was the same god now gone. The selfish desires of an overgrown and merciless species of lemur had driven away this deity.

Ben would not abash himself and pray for worldly comforts. Those comforts had never been afforded him and he never asks. Besides, prayer is for naught – no one listens. He chooses and believes as the heathens. In the principle of nomadic terrorists, this woman had been visited with hardship. Like most, and she must cope or perish. His resolution was so strong, Ben fears the woman sensed his disapproval.

"Please, I know I am a low UnChosen. I know I was irresponsible and had a child when I was too old. Davey is just a baby. He is innocent. He shouldn't pay for my indulgence. Let me die and make Davey normal."

That sort of miracle, like innocence, did not exist. This world is godless. Chance resembles miracles and luck substitutes for divine intervention. Given this criteria and his survival, Ben guesses he had been blessed the past couple days. Jillie continues her pleas for intervention but she and the false priest are interrupted.

"I couldn't cash that check," Hen informs nobody in particular. A booted toe taps the front doors all the way open so that the younger Cortras will not need to squeeze through. Light follows him inside. He carries a couple full, brown paper bags in his arms.

Hen now plainly sees the old woman and boy. He freezes, dumbstruck. "Sorry," he says and glanced from side to side. His meandering steps mirror his disarray.

"Put those in the kitchen," Ben said in obvious rescue.

"Uh, yeah," Hen agrees and immediately follows the direction and strides up the center aisle. The younger Cortras fixates on the teenage boy and Davey returns the stare. They behave as two young dogs eager to make friends, but still uncertain of each other. The restrained impulse to run over and sniff each other bursts. Hen strides closer, but Davey lunges first.

"I'm Davey," shouts the boy.

Hen grins. Every one of his small teeth is visible and shines. "I'm Hen."

The boy let loose a rollicking laugh. "You're a chicken."

The comment takes Hen off-guard. Hen is his nickname; Dil had christened him when they were kids. Hen remembers his older brother teased with the name. His victim liked the ribbing a lot, so the name stuck. The sight of Davey summons back Hen's too-soon-relinquished boyhood. "Hey, you're funny."

The boy grows soundly sober. "No, I'm Davey."

"And you're funny."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are."

"No!"

Hen laughs with a shrill, like his panicked voice in the desert, but his joy lacks the chafed helplessness. The young Cortras looks at Ben.

"This kid is great." Hen then turns back toward Davey. "Brawk!"

Davey roars back in laughter and Hen joins him. Ben allows the younger Cortras his fun. The old woman is engaged in the scene, and the subject of prayers and an explanation for Hen's presence are forgotten.

Hen uses his knee for help finding a new grip on the groceries. "I love kids," he declares. "Davey, I'm glad to meet you. I gotta put this stuff down."

Davey continues giggling, even after Hen vanishes down the hall.

"I need to go with him," Ben tells the woman.

Jillie nods and smiles. "OK, Ben. I'll come back. Please, think about what I said."

Ben bites his bottom lip and looks at the bars on the windows. They're coming off.

"Let's go, baby." Jillie retrieves Davey, and the boy leads the way out of Saint Erasmus.

Her hand rests on his shoulder while they go.

"Hen is my friend," Davey sings, skipping out of his mother's reach. Jillie speaks at her son, not to the boy, but moves too far away for Ben to overhear. The doors remain open after the pair exit. As much as Ben wants the entrance open, he closes and locks doors, then goes into the kitchen. He expects he will find the Cortras brothers together, but only sees Hen.

"Where's Dil?" Hen asks. "Is he still sick in bed?"

"No. I thought he would be in here with you."

Hen had bought an assortment of canned foods and a can opener, along with bread, jelly, peanut butter and canned juice. He spreads the items over the table.

"Hey, if we're gonna cash that check, you have to do it. I'm not going back to the bank."

"What happened?" Ben asks disinterested.

"I just got a bad feeling," Hen confesses. "I mean, I thought about it. This is a check from the Church, right? Shouldn't a priest have it?"

"You're right." Ben becomes aware the Cortras brothers live on a balance of caution and risk. Their gut reactions are their guides.

"Anyway, after that, we're going to leave."

"Is that what Dil said?" Ben is puzzled. He thought Dil was determined and will stay. Then again, he could not know what the brothers had said earlier this morning.

"Yeah." Hen nods. "He said we can go when the church is in shape and you're set up. I don't think coming to the Fort was so good."

Ben doesn't tell Hen the older Cortras brother had more in mind than mopping a floor and grocery shopping. Dil stalls, and he had probably wanted to get Hen out of his hair while he recovered from last night. If the older Cortras was here now, Hen's hopes would have already been crushed. Ben looks out the broken doorway for the older brother. The gruesome pile of feathers are strewn partly across the stone yard. The mound attracts flies of the normal variety. Dil is not there, outside. Indistinct knocks then float through the kitchen. Ben first mistakes the sound for the cans Hen stacks on the table, but the young Cortras stood frozen.

"Who is it now?" Hen asks. "You see? That's why we gotta go."

Neither man moves and the knocking at the front of the church continues.

"How about I go look from the side of the church?" Hen asks, staring at the back door.

Ben expects his real motive is escape. If the younger Cortras brother didn't like what he sees, he'd be outside Saint Erasmus already. He will simply slip onto the street when backs are turned. If that was the case, Ben was fine with the cowardice. No real alternative exists except throwing the doors open wide and accepting whatever lies on the doorstep.

"All right."

Hen skips out the back doorway without waiting another second. He checks his pockets while he goes. The action reinforces Ben's suspicions. He wonders if the old woman had the same affect on Dil.

Hen steals up the breezeway, dragging his back against the red-brick wall of the church. His head juts out. He sees only a sliver of an empty street. The fact Hen sees nothing comforts him. He holds his breath until he reaches the end of the breezeway. Stooping, he slips one side of his face around the corner. The old woman and her son, Davey, stand on the stairs before closed doors. Hen pulls himself back into hiding. He doesn't think to go and tell Ben. Instead, he casually strolls around the corner and toward the curb.

"Hey," Hen calls.

Davey jumps about. "Hen," cries the boy.

The old woman turns. "Hello. Where is Reverend Ben? He was just here. Why is the door locked?"

"Don't worry about that," Hen says. "He's around. We're just doing some work, you know, on the floor."

“Oh.” The old woman looks anxious. “Can you find Ben for me? I need to ask him something.”

“Um, I can ask him.”

“I suppose that will be fine.” The old woman settles. “I really need to leave. I’m late, but I can’t find someone who will look after Davey. I wonder if I can leave him here at the church.”

Hen lights up. “You mean babysit?”

“Yes, only a few hours. I dust shops at the strip mall. I can’t leave Davey alone, he gets into trouble.”

Hen thinks about an afternoon with the boy and looks about. Dil is nowhere seen. A few hours with Davey before leaving the church and the Fort might be something Hen needs for his own mental health. A long time has passed since he’s relaxed. Playing with a kid would be a welcome change, instead stressing about all his recent reservation and fright.

“Sure,” Hen says. “That will be fine.”

“Ben won’t mind?”

“Not at all. I’ll look after Davey.”

“Don’t you have work to do?” The old woman sounds confused. Davey cheers for Hen and must be hushed by his mother.

“I mean, I’ll take him to Ben,” Hen tells her.

The old woman lights-up, thrilled. “Good, thank you. You don’t know how much I appreciate this. You’re so nice, just like Ben. It’s too bad you’re like me – UnChosen, I mean.”

“No problem,” Hen says and smiles. Both of the Cortras brothers are accustomed to commiserating with fellow low caste people. “We’ll have fun, won’t we, Davey?”

Davey squeals his affirmation.

“I’ll be back soon. Thank you.” Jillie Ikraam hurries down the street toward some unseen strip mall.

Hen leads Davey down the breezeway and into the kitchen. Ben stares speechless when he sees the boy enter the back door after the younger Cortras.

“I’m gonna babysit Davey,” Hen brags. He and the boy laugh. Caution and risk evidently took a back seat today to impulsiveness and luck.

Chapter 9 Pride

Recently, outside the Wall ...

Jimmy Ismael has lived a very short life. At nearly seventeen, he had gotten everything he wanted when he wanted it. Youthful whim had driven most of his desires, which were typically forgotten once appeased. The red, newly-antique convertible, “Arroyo,” was not one of those passing impulsive urges. Jimmy had dreamed of the automobile since he was thirteen. The vehicle once belonged to his uncle Judah.

Glossy white leather slicked the interior, and a liberal amount of chrome had been applied inside and out. The family consensus agreed the car appeared tacky, but Jimmy and his uncle knew Arroyo was a fine example of mechanical sculpture. They sensed the power. Arroyo was a real work of art. Jimmy thought it was a shame the car sat beneath a cloth cover in his mother’s garage. This jewel was meant for parades around town – a symbol of wealth and class.

The Church and Chosen caste did not intimidate the Ismaels. Money buys respect. Wealth was the very reason the Chosen call Khetam the Promised Land. Despite Uncle Judah inheriting the family’s fortune from his UnChosen father. Arroyo once symbolized the blessing demanded of the Mortal God. The automobile had been a symbol - Arroyo, too, was gone.

Standards have always been dismally low in Gomorrah, and the car had surpassed any token peasants presented. Shiny leather shoes, gold watches and even a swimming pool in the back yard were mere trinkets compared against this marvelous machine. Everything on the automobile was original with not so much as a scratch in the paint, except the few tiny blemishes Jimmy had made and hoped no one noticed.

Sometimes when his mother left him home alone, the boy would sneak into the garage and remove the thick cotton cover. He often spent the good part of an hour gazing at the beautiful monster. Part of his ritual included slipping off his sneakers and stuffing his rings into a pocket; the very jewelry that had caused those first, barely perceptible marks. Jimmy would sit behind the steering wheel and he bet his uncle experienced his same childish thrill the first time the man had mounted the driver's seat.

In Jimmy's imagination, the wooden garage doors of his mother's house would melt away and he'd instantly transport onto an empty desert road. With the white vinyl top folded down and Jimmy's foot heavy on the accelerator, there was not so much a shudder whenever the automobile rocketed through imaginary sunlight and pretend solitude.

The boy never dared lower the top while Arroyo was inside the garage. He never touched the dials and buttons on the console either. The scratches had once been the only evidence Jimmy dare leave, and if he could have done something other than hide them, he would. Yet that accident was in the past.

At fifteen, Jimmy had found the keys. His uncle wanted to see the car one afternoon, as he occasionally would. That day, he had come then went away again. Jimmy's mother left the keys on the kitchen table instead immediately secreting them back into her purse for safekeeping. When she had gone for "lunch" with Uncle Judah, her only boy couldn't resist waking the convertible.

Jimmy nearly panicked when exhaust fumes fill the small space of his mother's garage. Terrified, he restores the cover and keys. He throws open the sliding door and waves an old blanket through the air for twenty minutes and helps dissipate the fumes. Luckily like those accidental abrasions, his little adventure had gone undiscovered.

Eventually, the car was to become a gift to the boy, if Jimmy finished school and actually attended the university in Khetam, to which his large family bought admission. Going to the university was still a year away, but Jimmy's uncle had decided the boy will major in business and graduate. That was never a question.

In truth, Jimmy believed he didn't need his family paving his entrance into school or landing a job. The diluted Chosen blood in his veins made him an intelligent and ambitious kid, smart enough to know life handed him a free ride. Jimmy would not turn his back on fortune or luck. Despite the technicality that he was an UnChosen, riches put him and his family above most Chosen and Jimmy dreamed of crafting his own destiny.

The vices of common people make the Ismael family rich. The plentiful buyers and sellers in the family business smooths the sketchy morality of drug use. Even though the production, distribution and the sale of methamphetamine is illegal, as are a few other choice drugs for which the family is less known, demand persists. Ape had become especially popular. Rumors that heathens had engineered the formula for addiction only stimulates craving. And who are the Ismaels to tell people how they live their lives? They certainly were not responsible if customers got hooked.

If people wanted to shorten and spend less fortunate existences Aped, the Ismael family happily provide the goods. Why not? Jimmy has seen and knows what Gomorrah offers the less privileged. If he was not an Ismael, he too would probably have been an addict.

The boy had merits, but without money, temptation to escape ordinary drudgery would have been insurmountable, especially when relief was so readily available. Besides, if his family didn't provide the wants of the population, somebody else would. And that someone might be less interested in the longevity of customers and the safety of this city. The good Ismael family provided a service and holds civic responsibility in high esteem. Caretaking in Gomorrah was a good, rewarding business.

The Ismaels are not bad people; Jimmy had always believed his own rationalization. He had never heard otherwise, until he recently speaks with his cousin, Nate. Jimmy and Nate are related, but many times removed and the boys rarely see each other. Nate belongs squarely in the UnChosen caste. Still, the boys are kin.

The Ismael hold the solidarity of their family a core value. Union keeps the operation of

their business tight. Nate was older than Jimmy and wiser by a few years, although his wisdom did need more time to cure. Not a year after Jimmy had fumigated his mother's garage, the skinny, UnChosen-looking Nate so foolishly outlines the history of the Ismael family for the plump teenager. The boys speak in Nate's bedroom inside his family's ornate tract home.

"Your granddad got the business from your great-granddad and that's how we're related," Nate tells the boy.

Jimmy had always known and scolds his cousin. "I know, and Uncle Judah is my father's brother. You only need to list everybody once, we're all on the same tree."

"I'm saying, your dad should be where your uncle is today."

"Instead, he's dead?"

Nate crosses his arms. "I'm not talking about him. You remember that schism with our family after your granddad died, right?"

"I heard about it. I wasn't even one-year old yet."

"Yeah, cancer killed your granddad, and Judah took over the business, but your dad should have it, he was older."

"My dad died in a car accident. Some Aped loser smashed into him. Besides, he shamed the family name because he didn't marry my mom before I was born. You know that, too."

"But he didn't," Nate insists. "Your grandfather was thrilled he was getting a grandchild."

"I thought he hated my mom."

"Only Judah says that. She's one-quarter Chosen, Jim. The Ismael family welcomed a new gold leaf to the family tree, or two in your case, because you were born."

"That's good to know, Nate," Jimmy dismisses.

"That didn't sit too good with Judah. He got greedy."

"I won't tell Uncle Judah."

Nate frowns. "Jimmy, you know Judah and your dad would compete when they were growing up, right? Their father preached guarding against apathy. The business goes to hungry sons."

"Yeah?"

"Well, Judah was hungry, all right."

"What are you saying?"

"Jimmy, addicts commit suicide for a fix all the time. People say Judah found a way and cheated."

Nate wouldn't shut up. "Jim, Judah always said he landed in second place, solely because his happenstance order of birth. He didn't think it was fair."

Jimmy tries to comprehend the idea through difficult feelings of loyalty and revenge.

Uncle Judah had always been kind and generous to Jimmy. He'd even occasionally speak well of Jimmy's dead father. Most of what Jimmy knew about his paternal father and his grandfather had come from Uncle Judah.

Yet a subtle tension exists between his mother and uncle. She never talks about her misgivings, but Jimmy had gotten an impression she wants distance between her son and the Ismaels. They visit relatives only when Uncle Judah shows up and drags them to holiday affairs or other special occasions.

Uncle Judah is the only extended family who visits, and typically arrives unannounced. Jimmy has never witnessed Uncle Judah say or do anything to coerce his mother, but she always looks reluctant and pressured. Maybe his mother avoids the memory of her dead husband, but life would have been very different without the support of Uncle Judah and the rest of the family. The tailor shop she owns would have failed miserably a long time ago. Jimmy would not have the money for his university after passing entrance exams, and he wouldn't have received the plentiful gifts and cash throughout his childhood.

In addition to Jimmy's attendance at school and earning a degree, he is also the only true heir of the family business, his uncle had said so much. Uncle Judah had never married and fathered no children of his own. Once Jimmy graduates from college, a good five or six years from now, he undoubtedly will come back to Gomorrah. His uncle will then teach him how

business works in the real world.

With that knowledge, and whatever Jimmy picks up in school, everyone expects the boy will do wonderful things with the family name, and maybe bring some legitimacy from outside the ragged borders of Gomorrah. His mother never disagrees, but she does insist Jimmy express his desire for a future that belongs to him and was his alone. Jimmy did.

However, Nate's revelation has a bellyache of truth. Nate has no reason to spin lies and other circumstances already cast Uncle Judah in suspicion. Judah had fostered an uncomfortable relationship with heathens around the time of his brother's death. The family still disapproves of the interaction and have harassed Judah ever since.

And the personal relationship between Judah and his brother, the interim head of the family, had grown complicated before the death of Jimmy's father. Sitting soundless and openmouthed upon his cousin's unmade bed, Jimmy remembers Nate once said "Disagreements wouldn't exist if Judah made all the decisions for every Ismael."

The deals with heathens began with lines of demarcation. Both sides benefit while their activities remain separate. Trouble in one camp never touches the other. Then the arrangement became tit for tat – not a genuine partnership, but to this day, favors are still exchanged. This was the kind of activity that could not stay hidden from a family the size of the Ismaels.

Answering mute anger, Nate reminds Jimmy "Judah implicated himself. That's when your father demanded all connections with heathens come to an end. He issued an ultimatum tantamount to excommunication. All the while, Judah was committed to the path he had taken. He built deeper ties with those barbaric nomads."

Nate speculates "Judah might have gone too far and owed too much. He couldn't back out, or he shared dark desire with heathens. He might have eaten human flesh."

In any case, Jimmy convinces himself Uncle Judah had seen his brother become an obstacle that must be removed. The family had insisted upon the immediate cremation of his father because the body of the fledgling Ismael heir had been so horribly mangled in a fatal accident. Appearances are important to the Ismaels. No one owns loose pants in this family.

Nate might look skinny, but he has money. After his cousin implied Uncle Judah killed his father, Jimmy wanted to hear no more. He runs straight home.

"Keep your mouth shut," Nate calls after him. "Don't tell anybody."

Jimmy doesn't know what to do, though he thinks about having been mercilessly stripped of a father. The loss is the only thing in his head all the way home. A whole other life had been denied him. Jimmy did not know how he will deal with that, either. He had grown up without a real father, although Uncle Judah attempts the role every once in a while. His uncle insists he is involved and usually imposes upon the boy's mother.

"I called you Jimmy first," Uncle Judah said to him one day. "I gave you your given name."

Whether the claim was true or not, the comment began a terrible argument between Jimmy's mother and Uncle Judah. The fight had left his mother crying and bruised. Jimmy pushes his recollection of that day beneath more pleasant memories. When bad memories bubble up to his consciousness, he usually distracts himself. The convertible in the garage always provides the best distraction.

His mother's beating was a long time ago, but Nate's story had dusted and polished the unpleasant memory. The small trauma glares under a new light Jimmy could not ignore. He grasps a desperate idea for making himself feel better, to help him forget and restore his oblivious happiness of just a few hours ago. Jimmy will drive Arroyo.

The timing could not have been more convenient. His mother is absent, probably not far, and her purse sits in its usual place on the vanity in her bedroom. As usual and after a short lunch with Uncle Judah, she must be showering, but that was far away enough. Jimmy snatches the key for Arroyo. Once he slips it off the keyring, he backs out of mother's room, subconsciously retracing his steps. Sneaking away, he does hear rain in her private bath and the water never stops.

In the garage, he deftly removes the convertible's cover and tosses it into the broad back

seat. Jimmy unfastens the white vinyl top's latches, climbs inside and starts the car. There the boy lowers the top the first time ever, today. A wonderful exhilaration makes his heart beat faster. His rage toward Uncle Judah fades into mere bitterness.

The transformation of Arroyo is like watching a flower bloom or a bride lift her veil. Jimmy sits dumb and amazed while metal struts fold back the top. When she stretches her mechanical arms after a long hibernation, the convertible awakens. She evolves into what this automobile was meant to be, open to the sky – but not quite yet. In his haste, Jimmy had forgotten he should first open the garage. After a couple rumbling minutes, he hops out of the car and dashes to the door, coughing out fumes while he goes.

The garage door rises with loud twangs of un-worked springs and fear grips the boy. He almost expects he will see his Uncle Judah standing in the driveway or on the corner at the end of the block. Jimmy scouts the area in three long-legged paces. The street looks empty in the middle of this hot day. People are either at work or busy finding shade. Jimmy listens to the growling engine of the convertible. She wants to go. He feels thirst from the machine, and that was all the convincing he needs. Jimmy jumps back into Arroyo and rolls the vehicle from its cramped cell.

The sun glistens in the red paint like a bead of molten glass. The reflection flows across the hood while the car tentatively creeps forward. Jimmy wants nothing more than to drive away, fast and far, but he restrains himself, gets out and lowers the garage door again. When done, he returns to the idling vehicle, shifts into "Drive" once more and gently drops his foot onto the accelerator. The tires screech upon his slightest touch of the gas pedal, and so Jimmy races the car down the street a moment later. Everything Nate had said now flies away and becomes the furthest thoughts from Jimmy's mind.

The feel for the car comes naturally to the boy. Jimmy believes he is a good driver, despite lack of experience. People race out of his path, anyway. He assumes because everyone recognizes him. Being the only nephew of the most powerful man in Gomorrah automatically grants Jimmy Ismael fame, status and deference.

No doubt, news of Jimmy's adventure will soon reach his mother and uncle – the drawback of fame, but Jimmy doesn't care. On long empty streets, he builds speed and the wind whistles past his ears. Between the flow and the thundering engine, Jimmy can't hear himself laugh and yell. His shaggy black hair dances and whirls as greasy strands whip across his vision. The twirling locks smear away tears the wind blows from his eyes.

The speed, sun and feel of the wheel in his hands stoke Jimmy's daring. He turns the knob on the radio, which never has anything worth listening-to. Sermons from the Church and military news are not catered to teenaged boys. Both channels drone and bore Jimmy. Playing with the radio is really just a matter of exploration. He wants to hear sound from the dashboard speaker. Jimmy wants to blast the radio over the noise of the wind and the car. The biggest risk in the first place was taking the convertible. What more did little things like twisting knobs matter compared to that offense?

The day had arrived when Jimmy did what he had wanted to do for years. Taking Arroyo was the only thing he was forbidden, the only thing not given him the moment he asked. Having Arroyo now, after wanting the convertible so long, tastes sweeter than any fulfilled desire he's ever had. The fact he simply takes his heirloom makes his chest swell. The feeling makes him more bold.

His foot presses more heavily on the accelerator as he forgets to watch where he goes. Jimmy also catches himself minding the radio rather than tending the road. A little orange sliver floats behind white numbers, moving rightward while the boy continues twisting the knob. And the radio still does not cackle. The other knob does nothing at all. At the last moment, Jimmy tugs the steering wheel toward his left and avoids sideswiping a parked car. Passing the stationary obstacle, Jimmy tells himself "I didn't even come close." The perspective and sudden upward glance had tricked him. He snickers at his momentary loss of confidence.

Jimmy returns to discovering how he might operate the radio. He grasps the first knob between his thumb and forefinger. He feels the dial give a little and he pulls harder, hoping the

silence will change into a shower of voices or static, depending if he falls upon a station during his random knob-twisting. Neither happen. Instead, the knob pops off its metal stem and slips between his fingers. Jimmy watches it flip through the air in front of him. It bounces off the steering column then rolls on the carpeted floor between the gas pedal and brake.

Sudden fear grips the boy. The sight of the displaced chunk of cast metal furiously rushes back his anxiety about breaking something on his uncle's car. Still, Jimmy might easily fit the dial back into place. He instinctively and immediately reaches down and retrieves the knob. When he does, the boy seals his doom. No more thoughts or desire, only oblivion.

The convertible folds as an empty soda can, as does the bed of the stalled pick-up truck Jimmy smashes from its rear end. His blood falls in thick drops across the white interior and shattered glass as if they are big pearls of rain at the beginning of a summer storm. The truck rolls forward while the crumpled Arroyo skids an impossibly short distance – given the vehicle's momentum before hitting a barrier. The freshly deformed truck then pulls away as if nothing's happened.

The concussive collision draws witnesses after the fact. Everyone knows Jimmy Ismael lays in the crushed convertible. A few people even recognize the truck belongs to the migrant Cortras brothers, even though the vehicle is relatively new to Gomorrah. Before nightfall, a dozen people look for the squashed truck because the Ismaels offer a reward for the machine's owners. Jimmy still lives, technically. Gurgling comes from his throat, but the boy never recovers.

Someone who works for Judah, as does half of Gomorrah directly or indirectly, whether they know or not, wraps Jimmy's limp form in a blanket and rushes him to Judah Ismael's house. Within fifteen minutes after being placed on a leather sofa in the home of Gomorrah's crime lord, Jimmy drowns in a lungful of blood. Five minutes after expiration, the summoned doctor pronounces the boy dead.

"I'm sorry, Judah," the summoned doctor tells the stunned and silent family. Judah explodes and he beats the unsuspecting man.

Loud cracks accentuate Judah's flourish of curses until both men lie on the floor. The doctor suffers fractures all over his face because the deluge of knock-out blows. His nose and jaw press unevenly toward the right side of his face.

Judah sobs and raises the fractured fingers on his right hand before his face. He orders everyone "Find the unlucky bastards who killed my son" and he emphasized the word "son."

He commands "Bring the murderers here, make them see what they've done."

That was before the cowards had fled. Still, Judah promises himself they will make amends with tears and their lives. However, the guilty party is not found. The Cortras brothers escape Gomorrah. No matter – Judah knows who is responsible. Vengeance merely pends.

The following morning, Jimmy's mother, Annette, is awakened by an early phone call. She had spent the night worrying where the boy had gone, especially because last night was the first time Jimmy had not been home in the evening. She failed to notice the missing convertible because she had not even bothered looking. Months often pass without her entering the garage. As far as Annette is concerned, that part of her home doesn't belong to her. Judah had taken over the territory for his brassy automobile.

"Annette," a random relative said when she picked up the phone. The voice sounds urgent and edgy. He or she says "Jimmy's dead."

The news strikes Annette dumb and unthinking. She doesn't know who spoke on the phone. Her focus had immediately narrowed on her child and she lost recognition of all else. Regardless, the woman caller conveys details. "He's at Judah's. He was taken there yesterday after the accident."

"What?" Annette manages after breathless seconds.

"He was driving Judah's car and had an accident."

"Who?" Annette asks mindlessly. She doesn't recognize her automatic questions.

“The other driver ran away with somebody else. People say the Cortras brothers killed Jimmy. Don’t worry, Annette. Judah will find them. They’ll see what they’ve done and Judah will make them answer.”

When Annette finally understands the convertible had become the instrument of her son’s death, her bitterness toward Judah, all she had long harbored in her bosom, bursts and inflames her. She leaves the caller hanging and rushes to Judah’s home so she might see her dead son and take proper care of him. The body of her child will not be treated like muck in which his vile uncle might rub the noses of offending dogs.

“Bring him home, Judah,” Annette screams at her brother-in-law when they meet at his front door. The crime-lord’s fingers are bandaged and she spies her advantage.

“Annette, our boy will stay here. I’ll take care of this,” Judah promises, but the selfish assertion isn’t good enough for the grieving mother.

“Let me see my baby. I want to bring him home.”

“Not yet, Annette.”

Today was an infrequent occasion when her will dominates the arrogance of Judah. Annette snatches his bandaged hand before an argument ensues and bends his broken fingers. She had not forgotten her lesson how effective violence is toward winning.

Judah and Annette hold visitation a couple days after Jimmy’s death. By then, Judah has successfully demanded the viewing take place at his home. He argued a valid point about space, and shock made Annette too tired for dispute; there were way too many details to wrangle over. Judah took care of everything, just as he always had before. Likewise, Annette refuses to be grateful.

In their deal, she demands Jimmy be taken back home and he’ll spend one more night with his mother before his funeral. As inconvenient and unorthodox as the request sounds, especially because the body of the boy will senselessly shuttle between houses, Judah grants the wish. With a grudge, he allows the mother her quirks in her grief. His broken and aching fingers play no part in his decision.

Gathering the Ismael family together was a simple matter. Though there were many members to contact, all live in Gomorrah and word quickly spread. All learn the name “Cortras” before the end of their invitations. The ceremony passes quietly, for the most part. Judah and Jimmy’s mother sit furthest from each other at opposite ends of a burgundy casket.

The coffin was originally going to be red, like the demolished convertible, but the time and poor taste were too great of obstacles for Judah to overcome. Since the boy’s face had been pulped in his fatal accident, the lid remains closed during visitation. No amount of creativity on the part of the mortician could restore Jimmy’s cheeks to the same shape they had held in life. An open casket would have been cruel toward his mother, even though Judah did demand everyone individually to see what lowly migrant UnChosen had done to a member of his family.

Witnesses to the work of cowards volunteer and Judah gets his way. Whenever Annette steps out of the room, Judah opens the coffin and shows Jimmy’s battered death mask to whomever passes nearest. Jimmy was no longer a human being, and certainly did not look like one anymore.

“They’re gonna look like this when I’m done,” Judah often said and laughs. He is the only person who laughs the whole day.

That evening, the immediate members of the family follow the coffin and gather inside Annette’s home. The black dresses worn by women reflect the sorrowful mood. The dull, ordinary suits of men increase the somber tone. And all the lights in the house fail to banish the shadows.

Judah invites himself. He feels justified, more than obligated. Though he avoids using his drugs on professional principle, Ape helps ease the pain of his hand. A bottle of foul wine called Yowling Cat – Judah thinks – further eases his heartache.

Despite his tenuous relationship with Jimmy’s mother, he sees so much of the boy’s

features in her face, and he misses seeing that beauty now. The boy had shared the same almond-shaped brown eyes and high cheeks as Annette. Both mother and child possessed sharp chins and noses and clear, pink skin – or Jimmy had. Both have the weight of Chosen in their blood – what of it that hadn't poured out from the boy's nose. Judah remembers the beauty of Jimmy's mother, Annette, when she was younger. She had captivated Judah so many years ago, the day he discovered his deceased older brother had met this lovely girl.

Annette eventually could not decide between the loves of two brothers. Ultimately she chose the elder and rational brother, the one who didn't scare her. As consolation, Judah once felt he regained from Jimmy the passion he lost with Annette. Now, he conjured only the mauled image of the boy.

Looking away, Judah finally sees Annette again, and after such tragedy. He recognizes what he loved in Jimmy and realizes he has loved Annette all along. The booze or the pills and not the Ape Judah has consumed throughout the day plays no part in his insight. He and Annette had made Jimmy into the boy he was.

Annette might see the affection in Judah now. He was the only friend she had. He decides their game, in which they had avoided each other for the past day and a half, comes to an end tonight. The time for renewal had arrived; an affirmation of life and a new beginning. This happens when Annette lingers near the coffin and Judah crosses the room. That corner of the room clears when the two meet. He stands squarely before Annette and the family prepares for confrontation.

"Annette," he said. His voice carries the inflection of reverence it had not offered in years. Judah surprises himself. The sound of his own words take him back to youth and rekindles the excitement he had felt the first time he made love with his brother's girlfriend. He regresses into those weeks of tumbling romance when he fought another man for Annette's heart – tragically, in vain.

"There is so much I want to go back and change."

Annette glares at Judah with venomous eyes. She feels the muscles in her neck and shoulders tighten as if she coils, but Judah refuses the warning. He foolishly swims in rediscovered memories of moot love and lust.

"This is not what I wanted for us. We have wasted so much time."

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

Judah reels. He didn't expect accusations against him tonight. He thought Annette's suspicion about the death of his brother, her husband, had been buried ages ago. The subject had not come up since the argument over Jimmy's real father, the day Judah had staked his claim. The renewed charge was unfair and, given the circumstances, flatly inappropriate. Judah stands speechless, but a matchstick had been struck in his chest. He tastes the sulfurous smoke curling from his open mouth.

"What is it, Judah? Did Jimmy remind you too much of Paul? Did you think he came back for revenge? He's got it coming, you idiot."

That was enough. Annette grew louder even while her voice shook. The topic was off limits and this woman drags this bag of bones in front of the family at the very worst time.

"Jimmy is my boy," Judah yells. The family still in the room each attempt an inconspicuous retreat. Judah catches the motion in the corner of his eye and waits. When the last back turns, he grabs Annette's arm.

"Let me go. You don't know what you're talking about," she screams. "Jimmy is Paul's son. Sleeping with you was the stupidest thing I ever did. It's the most stupid thing I do. You are so stupid."

"Marrying the wrong man was the stupidest thing you ever did. You think you fucked money, but he's dead. He's been dead for a long time. I don't understand why you're not mine now."

Annette slaps Judah. He raises his bandaged hand in threat. Despite instinct, he thinks better than striking the woman. Injury has taught him restraint. Instead, Judah yanks Annette off

balance and pulls her stumbling toward the coffin. This instance, the reminiscent affection for the woman burns away like the past and Jimmy. Judah again goes for the latch on the coffin's lid.

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

"Judah, please," Annette pleads. She rights herself and firmly plants her feet. Judah still pulls her along and she skids on the raised heels of her shoes. "Please, I don't want to see my baby. I don't want to see my baby like this."

"Bitch."

Judah fumbles with the latch and the broken and bandaged fingers on his free hand make the task difficult. Annette tugs her captured arm. Every movement in her struggle constricts Judah's grip automatically. Her fingertips tingle and turn purple while his knuckles turn white.

Annette sobs in protest. "No."

"What will happen to you now?" Judah asks and works the latch. "You will have nothing without me. You will be nothing without me. I'll make sure of that. I'll take it all away."

A dilemma arose; Judah couldn't possibly unlock the casket with his bandaged hand. If he lets go of Annette, she will undoubtedly bolt. And he was not a man who gives up easily.

Even in rage, he times his next motion. Once he lets go, he plans he will lunge forward and deliver a backhand at Annette's face – an eye for an eye was his motto. He personalized the saying and made his retribution hurt much more. Judah reaches the final seconds of his silent countdown when a mourning guest disturbs him.

It is Truman, Judah's uncle on his mother's side. Neither Judah nor Annette had heard the man clear his throat when he had attempted their attention. He was nobody of consequence, but closer to the center of power than Judah preferred. Too many "hanger-ons" and charity cases drop from that branch of the family. Judah often feels lucky the fire in his father's blood overcomes the meekness and beggary that cursed his mother's side.

Judah's mother was fortunate and preserved her natural beauty well into middle age. For too long, her looks had certainly earned her a grand share of undeserved favors for her rodent-like siblings. She must have been a changeling, kidnapped at birth by a pack of half-rat creatures. What other than a mythical explanation sufficed?

"Judah?" Truman asks. He resembles a plump rat, just like his brothers and sisters, all thanks given Judah's money. Truman would be the only person so obtuse and not realize his master desires privacy. Mired still, he could not understand a clue given from everyone else.

Judah says nothing and waits for Truman to go away. When the man obviously was not going, Judah lets Annette go. She runs past Truman, stunned and wobbling.

"Bitch," Judah mutters again. He calls after the fleeing woman. "Think about what you do next, Annette. Think about how good you had things."

As Judah watches her go, he can't believe he's allowed her escape. Annette slips away again. The flight makes Judah more angry. His fire still burns when Judah shouts at his uncle. "What is it?"

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

"He wants to express his sympathies."

"To me?" Judah is incredulous. "What does your Apeid brother really want?" For a moment, Judah would not take the call, but then he remembers his prey has escaped him. He stands alone in the room with his unpalatable in-law and dead nephew. Judah needs something else and was at an immediate loss for anything. He stomps across the floor, grateful Truman steps toward one side and clears the doorway. Judah never liked touching the man.

He muses about finding an oasis and creating some kind of leper colony for his mother's side of the family; Truman and Josiah will instantly become residents, and Annette will follow out of principle. The far-fetched solution seems the only practical one. Killing family was much too complicated and perilous. Judah had learned that lesson when he was young and more rash.

Once, Josiah Ioannu had shown potential. The Ismaels were introduced to him when Annette and Judah's brother, Paul, were married. Josiah, a Chosen priest, had performed the

ceremony. Judah's father had said a connection inside the Church was unfortunate, but Judah disagreed. He claimed that not only was Josiah a priest, but he had also been assigned a position inside Khetam. The connection would prove useful.

If Judah was more ingenious, he could have played both sides – the Church and heathens could have been unwitting tools. Nonetheless, the manipulation was out of his scope. He didn't have the vision or temperament. Judah behaves more like a rolled-shirtsleeve overlord and was always getting his hands dirty.

Despite the Ismaels' money paving Josiah's improbable rise through the ranks of the Church, the investment amounts to pearls for swine. The priest had experimented with the family's product and liked it. His addiction had become a liability. The Ismaels waste too many resources keeping secrets. Bribes and payoffs that had once bought position and promises, became maintaining status quo. Losses had to be cut and Judah decided no more money or drugs will go to Josiah.

Judah goes to the kitchen where the phone hangs on the wall. Most of the family had already left Annette's house. Those few who remain sneak back into the room with Jimmy's casket. Judah continues insisting privacy and his glare makes his attitude evident. Meanwhile, Annette stays from his sight.

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

The caller pauses then replies with a keen inhalation. "Hello, Judah." Another pause punctuates the insincere greeting. "I want to say I'm sorry about James."

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

"No, Judah, I did."

"You know I cut you off. Your fake sympathy isn't changing that."

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

Judah makes a concession. "All right, why did you call?"

"I need a favor"

"I knew it. What is the matter with you? You're a captain now, right? I'm supposed to ask you for favors, and I get none."

"It's that priest. He's here."

Judah remembers. Another pay-off, but that time, Judah had refused Josiah's request. The day had come when Josiah handles his own problems. That is exactly what Judah thought Josiah had done about this other non-commissioned priest, another addict. The Church had so many addicts, their epidemic of Apers was obvious.

Yet once a Chosen initiate became ordained, there was no thing as a pink slip. The Church shuffles addicts from one low profile assignment into another. This other priest got his Ape from the gutters of Gomorrah. The man was a regular, so he knew everything everyone knew – all the players, dealers and other buyers. This knowledge is what the upstart priest had on Josiah.

Josiah had gotten stupid, and was spotted blindly wandering the streets of Gomorrah looking for a deal. That a captain in the Church had sunk so low looks bad. As it was with word on the street, everyone knew why Captain Josiah Ioannu crawled the alleys in Gomorrah. Josiah had fallen out of favor with the Ismaels. This other priest took advantage of the pathetic discovery. The extortion was not the first time someone had blackmailed Josiah. The fact the compromising position will happen again seemed inevitable, even if Josiah did kick his drug habit – an impossible challenge with Ape.

Without resources from the Ismaels, Josiah had pulled frayed strings and got lucky. An opening arose at a parish inside the Fort. Josiah had genuinely impressed Judah when brought an outsider into Khetam. The accomplishment made him wonder if, all these years, his stepped in-law had held out against his obligations toward the Ismael family.

"Yeah," Judah replies. "I think that's what you wanted. You handled it. It's done, right?"

"He can't stay here."

Judah knew it, a catch in Josiah's temporary solution. Now the priest wants his mess cleaned-up for him all over again. Judah will not bail out this sorry excuse for a man. "So what are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know. He's got to go."

"You better not ask me for anything. You know that."

"What am I supposed to do?" Josiah implores. The desperation makes Judah ill. In the least, his pitiful in-law distracts him from Jimmy and the dead boy's mother.

"Handle it yourself. That's what you do."

"This isn't just my problem," blames Josiah. "What if the Church finds out the Ismael family have their fingers in the affairs of the Church? This priest can tell them that. He can walk straight into the Church complex here at Khetam."

This was an old threat. Judah refused to fall for the empty menace again. Nothing will happen to the Ismael family. Gomorrah was of no consequence to the Church. What will happen is that a particular finger in Khetam, the gangrenous Josiah, will be sliced off – the best for every one, actually. Judah finishes this detour in his tumultuous evening. He has bigger concerns, and they need perspective.

He calls Josiah's bluff. The priest had always been a terrible gambler. "Let me remind you, Joe, what has happened here. Jimmy is dead. His fucking brain came out his nose. I don't have time for your shit. I'm looking for the cunts that killed him. You handle your problem, yourself."

Nothing more could be said, but Josiah still needs help. "You're right Judah. I don't know what to do. I wish this guy was dead."

That was the simple solution. The hard part was figuring out how Judah might kill him and get-away with the deed. Judah says nothing, but he doesn't hang up the phone.

"I wish you would just tell me what to do," begs Josiah.

"Pray," Judah taunts. He snorts next, wholly unintentionally.

"Please, you know what to say and you just won't say it."

There are professionals in this field. In the Ismael family business, Judah had become familiar with a few. Heathens had brought them within arm's reach. And the resources were more often a necessity.

"So you want him dead?" Judah asked his legal relative. Josiah grows hopeful, Judah knows because the man breathes heavier. "You got money?"

"I can get it. Can I send it to you after you're through?"

Judah had provided an avenue and Josiah already steers the wrong direction. "I didn't say I was gonna do anything. There is someone in the Fort you can talk to. You better have the money up front."

"But..."

"Shut up." Judah snubs Josiah. "Or you might as well fuck it up yourself. All you get from me is a phone number. When you call, don't ask him his name. He won't tell you, and asking sounds amateur."

"Thank you, Judah."

The conversation ends with a number and more thanks from Josiah. Judah goes home without talking with anyone else. He takes vicarious solace in the fact someone will die, but the death served only as an appetizer. Judah wants the Cortras brothers – on a spit. He's made calls and offers a bounty. No place is safe, not even the Fort.

Chapter 10 Assassin

Robber's finished the part of the job for which he was best suited. More opportunities will undoubtedly abound while plans progress. For now, he had played his part. In the meantime, he'll wait for his money and sniff out the other offer, from a Chosen priest no less. Robber earns his money like a reporter – per assignment. Instead writing stories, however, for the most part, he creates them. Robber murders. That was another exception of his job; his stories are undeniable

facts of death, with no room to spin propaganda or bury fact. Robber delivers messages with death and accomplishes the art with a craftsman's skill. He imagines himself an artist, and possesses just enough talent that he realizes he can improve. With lots of practice, one day his signature will be recognized.

Just like a reporter, Robber supplements his sporadic income. Regarding his position on heathen payrolls, money comes with the same regular delay as paychecks does for soldiers in the Chosen's military – so Robber freelances. Crime lords in Church-forsaken cities often need his specialized services. The Ismael family in Gomorrah proves a reliable and secure source of work.

The other offer arrives through a referral from the family, specifically, Judah Ismael. The particularly strong ties Judah shares with heathens means offers come directly to Robber and he did not panhandle. Judah respects Robber's need for continued anonymity. Remaining faceless and nameless is always an imperative, a heritage. Robber's current engagement with the heathens has brought him into Khetam. A low profile was advisable, but Robber must eat. Rent requires payment, as does his 'secretary.'

His secretary – this young man whom Robber had brought into his apartment – at once became his unwitting accomplice and alias. An ingenious scheme, if Robber said so himself, driven by paranoid dreams. Delusions create his secretary's role. Sleep is a rough sea and insomnia was a notorious hazard in Robber's business. Any improvised tool for smoothing nights was not beyond experimentation.

Robber's secretary had found a route into the Fort, but he had no place he might hide. The young man was an atypically brown-haired UnChosen, probably a pilgrim, who hadn't thought what to do or where to go once inside the Wall. The faith the population of Khetam placed in their military, and its ability of keep out smart and lucky immigrants and heathens, had always proved laughable. The Wall serves little more purpose than a facade. Hidden breaches constantly break open and pilgrims crawl through. The only traits actually required for success are need and desperation.

Unfortunately for his secretary, a military patrol would have quickly found the hopeless man after curfew. The risk remains the bane of interlopers. A stranger without a place in the Fort was as good as caught come nightfall. The military had a purpose when they planned the layout for Khetam. They have already pinpointed and patrol every obvious and documented hiding place inside the Promised Land.

Luckily, Robber finds his secretary before the patrols. But, luck never had much say in the matter. Robber had marked his target and followed the young man. Robber then simply waited until twilight inspired panic. Darkness acted as a net inside Khetam. When night falls, the trapped can do little else than wait for a patrol. The threat makes an already desperate person more compliant. Robber's secretary had quickly reached this poor state. Robber then offered his deal. The terms were simple.

"All you gotta do is answer the phone," Robber tells the fellow. "I'm never home and you don't know who you are."

The questionably saved man asks "Then what?"

"Take a message for me. You'll share the room with me and get a little cash."

"And I can't leave the apartment?"

"Nope, except when I let you... for necessities and such." Robber leaves no room for negotiation. The deal had already been made and his secretary was trapped. "And give me your ID cards, I'll give you mine."

"What?"

Robber gazes at the picture on the card he removes from his wallet. He tells the former Robert Klopas "Looks like you are now Joss Rasheed. Here."

The new Joss Rasheed takes the card from this new incarnation of himself and reluctantly gives away his name and ID. He supposed they weren't of use anyway. No matter the name used, cards or no cards, trespassers were detained by the military. He says to the new Robert "This is crazy."

Robber grins. "You ain't a doctor. Anyway, under the circumstances, you get the best outcome that might occur."

The situation favors Robber's proposal – no time for thinking and nothing to lose in the face of losing everything, including life and limb. Robber studies his new identity on the card he's given. He looks nothing like the man in the picture, but neither did he, nor does the new Joss, resemble the headshot on that other card.

"Robert Klopas," Robber reads aloud. "Did you prefer Rob or Bob?"

"Robber was fine," mourns new Joss. Childhood friends had teased him with the nickname when he was growing up.

"Its fine with me too. I can't remember who you are. The name might have belonged to somebody who is gone now."

Robber expects he will forget the inconsequential name minutes later. He only provides one so he might solicit a disarming degree of faith. The point of the exercise was so he weaves a twisted tapestry of false identities and untraceable pasts. Robber laughs after the pair exchange names. He amazes himself that he's gotten so far with the mad plan. The scheme must fall apart sooner or later.

The new Joss nervously joins Robber at his cramped, one-bedroom apartment. It's there and when Robber employs Joss under the official capacity of secretary – the Living God's truth. Of course, in Khetam, the truth belongs with the Mortal God. On one hand or the other, the entities are the same.

"If anyone asks how you make money," Robber tells his abducted roommate, "Tell them you're my secretary."

"There won't be any sneaking out," warns Robber. "I don't plan on coming here often, but I'll know if you betray me."

Robber means his warning. If the military didn't find and detain an absent Joss, Robber will and he'll kill the disloyal young man. "We'll stay in contact and I'll retrieve messages. When you answer calls, tell whoever calls I'm not here even if I am. I'm never here. Say I'm busy and I'll call back."

"I suppose you want the caller's name and phone number."

"Yeah, at next contact," says Robber. "Oh, you officially live alone and never entertain guests."

Robber presents the cloistered lifestyle as a directive. "If the military comes knocking, get your ass out of the apartment and run the other direction as fast and far as humanly possible. That advice is best for both of us, I assure you. If either of us get ourselves excised to a detention camp, well, that's only in the interest of the military and Church."

"What happens if I quit?" Robber's secretary asks.

"I'll honor your wishes and let you go," Robber promises. "Then I'll promptly pass your ID to the military and tell them they should look for a heathen sympathizer."

Robber amuses himself every time he remembers the color running from his secretary's face – as if he's cut the man's throat. The look was unmistakable. Robber professed himself an expert, after all. His secretary's lips had even turned blue.

Robber has no intention of reporting his secretary to the military. The threat had merely been funny and convenient. Still, his secretary got a good deal, the best someone in his predicament could ever find. Robber assured the young man.

"Everything will work out for the best in the end."

The vague comment carries no authority, and the lack of empathy is distressingly obvious. His secretary had escaped one net but then became ensnared in this other. The alternative was detainment by military patrols. A long detention was inevitable – if the young man escaped being made an example or pinned with a crime he did not commit. There was that priest in the Saint Erasmus parish who had been cut into pieces. An opening for a scapegoat in that piece of propaganda was still available.

Robber remains generally aware of heathen activity in the Fort and takes part in their plans. Heathens were not involved with the murder of the priest, although Robber wished knocking off random priests was on his agenda. He would even throw in a couple heretics for free – there were also those two recently murdered soldiers. The military will consider them “killed” as soon as someone figures they aren’t ever coming back.

Then again, the military would not waste pinning that incident on his secretary. The magnitude of the crime shines too bright and too big to frame a transient. The military will look for someone like Robber. The bodies of the dead soldiers bear his mark, after all, although Robber is embarrassed to admit the fact.

He had botched that job and had no one to blame but himself. His admission sets him apart from true artists. The harsh personal critique was not just a reflection of humility. He must remember and bide his time. The whole scene had required a case before he made his move.

Most men his age were married. Those guys maybe had kids and a little something to show for their careers. At Robber’s age, he should have learned already. An equivalent achievement for him should be reputation. Robber falls behind in that respect.

If he failed to improve, he will either be caught or killed. Either case would lead to an anonymous death. Then again, practicing murder every day was not practical or even possible. Robber confines his exercise inside lustful fantasies of infamous acts.

After his spoiled job, he resolves more devotion toward painstaking attention to detail. Being so careful taxes his manic personality. His real challenge had begun before leaving the shipyard. His black clothes were bloodied and dripping. Putting on a clean shirt and pair of pants required hurdling a fence and locating his locked car, blocks away from the scene. Darting into the shadows whenever patrols passed was difficult enough; he dared not risk leaving a trail of red splatters anywhere along his escape route. Other than that bloody aftermath, the job last night had been easy.

Last night, two guards worked the docks after curfew and Robber had been contracted to kill both. The soldiers apparently had no problem taking bribes and looking the other way when cargo disappeared from parked and locked trucks. They weren’t even concerned when cargo mysteriously switched between carriers.

They didn’t finally get uptight until they learned heathens were part of the action; the two had become downright sanctimonious. Robber’s clients did not appreciate their disdain and lack of cooperation. Normally, he wouldn’t know or care about this information, but this was a heathen initiative. He had been motivated and generally interested in the details for professional and ideological reasons.

Pressure from secret sympathizers had failed to affect the two soldiers and change their attitudes. They grew bold and stubborn instead, and had even delivered vague threats. They dropped hints about patrols stumbling across the nighttime activity of smugglers. The angry reaction was not unexpected from Chosen. Arrogance flourishes when lowly heathens are involved; even money does not overcome the righteous prejudice of the Chosen caste. Ape works, but these two were clean.

Many UnChosen are in the Chosen military, and a uniform helps them pretend they ascend and become something more than the meek betrayers they are born. Strange, the bigoted intolerance festering in this echelon above the lowest caste makes corrupting its ranks impossible. Those two soldiers were probably UnChosen. And the time had arrived when the two zealots paid for pretension. They once believed birth had graced them. In death, they became pawns. Robber fondly remembers the retribution delivered by his hands, blade and garrote.

He might narrate the tale for his secretary and tell the man he enters the shipyard at night, after waiting near his car and following a patrol. While watching the streets, the one thing he repeatedly notes is how slow and lazy the military has become inside the Wall. The second shift in the shipyard had come to an end, but guard duty was the kind of job for which no one shows up early. The marked soldiers, Robber’s targets, were alone without backup awhile longer. Their assassin scales the fence at a dark spot between vaporous circles cast by streetlights.

Robber then hustles straight toward the docks.

Closer the water, the air feels more cool yet the ground is warmer. The hot summer continues unabated and the blacktop of the yard hoards the heat with miserly tightness. Nonetheless, it bleeds out at night. Before smugglers had been evicted from the docks, they've reported either soldier lingers near the ocean and on the docks most of the night. That is precisely where Robber finds both. One soldier is already present when the assassin comes to the water. The guard appears alone, so Robber unwinds his leather garrote.

He prefers bludgeoning, then strangling his victims. He typically knocks his target down and traps air from their windpipes. His sad victims lie there splayed, dazed and helpless until they lose strength and can no longer fight. By the time they realize what happens, they've already grown too weak and clumsy from lack of oxygen.

Robber has heard that strangled people are graced with a lightheaded euphoria – death arrives ushered by colorful hallucinations. Robber actually enjoys allowing his victims the fleeting experience, if that is what happens. However, from his perspective, the end comes with the poor souls clawing at the strap embedded in and constricting around their necks. Their arms then twirl from their sides like a kid imitating an airplane.

Unseen most of the time, Robber watches life pass from behind. He feels as a voyeur spying himself. The exertion and pain in his hands, arms, and shoulders are forgotten when he floats above his body. If a departing spirit truly goes heavenward, he's never seen a soul from his elevated vantage point. The victim simply falls limp and heavy. When Robber returns to his flesh, he still feels light.

He needs to catch his breath as if he's held his own in synchronization with his strangled victim. At the moment of death, Robber never allows himself much thought about the sympathetic reflex. Everything becomes rushed after that point and a racing mind needs calm. The unpleasant task of cleaning-up always requires quick completion.

Here on the docks and before Robber reaches his first target, the other soldier suddenly comes into view. Dropping his garrote, the assassin draws and unfolds his custom lock-back knife. Robber muffles the locking snap of the long blade with the palm of his hand. Yet he acts too late and can't find a hiding place. Someone then calls the guard whom Robber has slipped behind. The soldier turns around and meets his assassin face-to-face.

The moment the soldier turns, Robber's blade flies across the throat of the surprised man. For a brief second, no blood spurts and no other indication reveals Robber's strike. The guard then drops the rifle off his shoulder and finds he can not take his next breath. A wide gash pulls his neck apart. The wound rips its own corners further and blood sprays in rapid jets, covering Robber. All the killer can think to do is kick the dying man away, so Robber throws his foot into the soldier's crotch. When the guard doubles over, the rifle slips off his shoulder, dangles by its strap from the bleeding soldier's thumb then drops into the water. Blood showers the oiled wooden planks beneath the dying man.

There is no time for chastening himself. Robber darts behind cover the moment the second soldier runs over. The second guard had witnessed two men scuffle and recognized the shape of his partner. He readied his rifle when he watched one figure drop and the other run. Robber had spied so much.

The guard pauses a moment and verifies his partner has fallen. He utters an empathetic curse, but does nothing more for the dying man. The second guard rightly believes nothing can help his fellow soldier. That, and the killer is still somewhere within reach and he chases the phantom. The pause and distracted curse provides their assassin all the time he needs.

Robber whirls and double-backs when the second soldier bolts in his direction. The soldier has no chance of even raising his rifle's barrel toward his attacker. Out of darkness, Robber jabs at the man's face with his knife. The shocked soldier recoils. Jerking his head away from the shining blade throws him off-balance. His back arches and Robber drives a left hook into his solar plexus, forcing air from the man's lungs. Momentum carries the soldier backwards despite his reflex to fold upon himself.

The mad assassin immediately squats over his supine target. He would have used his

garrote if he had not dropped the weapon, and more importantly, if Robber had not lost track of the rifle the second soldier brings. For his own safety, he slits this one's throat, too. He sees the rifle is missing from the soldier's hands only when the man reaches and grasped his fiercely bleeding neck. His prey tries in vain to stop his life from completely pulsing out. Robber had learned this trick well and knows slashing just isn't a clean way to get a job like this done.

Nothing can prevent this man from dying like the first, but there was no room for delay. Robber grabs the dying man's wrists and pins him against the ground. The soldier bucks and gurgles. The spasms and sounds soon grow weak and he falls unconscious, never to wake again.

Riding on the dying man had given Robber an idea. His thoughts had been more whims while he waited for the man's death throes to finish. Nevertheless, he would not censor himself. Once the ride was done, Robber uses his knife and carves a deep X into the dead man's face.

The cross goes from one side of the man's pale mask to the other; from his temples to the opposite jaw on each side of his skull. The cuts reach all the way to bone. Robber then slices the middle of the man's face – from his scalp, down the bridge of his nose and over his chin. He then makes a perpendicular incision across the dead man's brow. The last line was cut too high and the glyph did not represent an accurate Star of Lucifer. The cut should have gone over the cheeks. Once Robber finishes, he regrets his idea. This sort of poor graffiti was for children.

The carving made Robber look like an amateur and it was not the sort of work for which he wanted to be known by a fearful public. And it was why he needed to dump the bodies. Despite instructions that he leave the soldiers in the open for discovery, Robber feels embarrassed by his handiwork. These murders chinked his pride.

As dumping bodies was also not planned, Robber improvises – he was familiar with hoisting dead weight. He drags each the short distance to the edge of the dock. There, he props one body upright then the other, with their backs toward the water and heads hung in their laps. Blood still drips from gaping wounds.

The detail doesn't distract their killer. Robber grabs the ankles of the soldier he's slain first. They look alike but Robber had marked them with the wounds he had inflicted. It seemed only fair this first soldier would not wait a turn before going into his impromptu resting place.

Robber tosses the dead man's feet over his drooping head. The legs drop over the side of the dock, pulling the rest of the body with them. The distance from dock and into the water allows the body to tumble almost all the way over. Robber dumps the second soldier into the water the same way. The splash echoes through the thick pylons below. Good riddance to the self-righteous grunts. They are but refuse now. Robber jinxes them "Garbage has no claim toward being better than anything else in this world."

Robber has never seen the ocean before, nor a real river or lake for that matter. Although, he has seen washes drain dry in the Spring and once surveyed an aqueduct. This killer has spent most of his life in the confines of desert cities and didn't know what he missed until he now stood at the edge of the sea. The expanse of water is beautiful, even in the dark of night. The moon and city lights reflect moving distortions on the surface of a deep world. Robber promises himself a trip within the next few days – to the beach during daylight.

He had never learned how to swim and an urge to learn comes over him. He is curious if anyone goes into the water off the Fort. When he looks over the edge of the dock, he spots the corpses of the soldiers he's killed. They float just beneath the surface. Realizing he should have tied something heavy onto the dead men, Robber grows anxious and shuffles about, looking for something he might throw on top of the bobbing bodies. He gives up in vain and hopes the tide will take the soldiers away. At this time in the evening, all his effort toward hiding evidence accomplishes nothing.

Blood pools and had already become smeared across the killing ground. This job was now another situation in which Robber should have assessed the outcome before making his move. He decides one big areas of his improvement was to not let one slip lead into another. Once something had been made a mess, there was always a better chance more will go wrong and little hope for graceful recovery. This night had become a lesson for him. And the time had

come when he must leave.

Before he turns from the ocean, he peers across the water again. Robber watches flashing lights cross the harbor – the patrol boats. The way the crafts zigzag make their pilots appear to joyride. Racing over the open sea looks fun. Once Robber learns to swim, he will venture into deeper waters on a boat. The ocean was a whole new world he might explore, one so very different from the gully of the tall buildings where he had grown up. While he watches the boats, something else draws his attention. A dark shape much closer the dock rises up and breaks the water.

A large snake-like shape rides the waves. As the shape surfaces, long curved spines fan out and up. Moonlight shines through the veined membrane stretched between bony spires. The spines limp toward one side. They fall with a fluid grace resembling a string of dancers collapsing in a wave. More dark tubes roll across the surface of the water. These shapes appear attached to a single creature – tentacles, for lack of a better description, that are all smaller and spineless.

At first, Robber thinks the thing is some kind of huge fish, maybe an eel with babies schooling all around. The creature then sinks and the water grows still. Robber didn't really know what he'd witnessed. To him, this fish was a genuine sea monster. He had never seen the ocean until tonight and there were all endless mysteries he must uncover.

He looks toward the bodies. One drifts further from the dock and the other is missing, possibly washed underneath. At his vantage point, Robber could not say which dead man was which. The identical soldiers had gone into the water face down and wore the same wet uniform. Robber concludes he isn't concerned. He needs to leave with no further delay.

He rushes back the way he had come but stops in the growth of tall grass leading up toward the fence. A patrol will make a round soon. Robber hopes the soldiers will come and go before the graveyard shift reports for work. While waiting, he convinces himself he had left thick red footprints across the planks and blacktop of the dock. He's also brushed blood from his clothes across the grass. A trail traces his path from the scene of the murders all the way up to the fence, apparent for anyone to see.

The oversight did not matter. His entrance was a random location. Robber could have entered the yard anywhere. He was more concerned about being tracked once he climbed to the other side of the fence.

Crouched in the grass, he attempts ringing blood from his clothes. Twisting the front of his jacket and pant legs produces little effect. The thick juice squishes in his fists and oozes between fingers. Scraping the slurry-like blood works and removes the wrung-out excess, but his clothes stay wet, thick and are getting sticky. Robber shakes muck off his hands.

He removes his shoes and hops onto a cleaner patch of grass. He then rolls his pant legs to his knees and takes off his jacket. He finds a dry spot on the back and wipes his face and hands before turning the garment inside out. Robber wraps his soiled shoes inside, then knots his jacket into a tight bundle. His skin remains smudged and pants are stained, but his tidying-up is the best he might manage until he gets to his car and the clean clothes he keeps inside.

The patrol arrives and Robber drops to his belly and flattens in the grass. He sees the beam from the jeep's mounted spotlight crawl over the yard, casting a long infinite triangle dimming as grows wide. The light is powerful and surely would catch anything that did not belong between the fence and the sea.

The patrol lingers too long, so long that Robber wants to stand and see what attracts them. The soldiers aren't looking in his direction or along the trail he's left behind. He hopes smugglers haven't returned unannounced. Opportunists may have anticipated the sudden demise of the soldiers and seize an opportunity in which they might finish incomplete business.

Robber hopes heathens exerted better control of operatives than allow such an untimely snafu. If the military was called, he was not certain he would get out of the yard. The smugglers will be caught, too, but the most obvious and condemning trail will lead straight to Robber's hiding place.

His booming heart grows unbearable. Its beat amplifies when he holds his breath and neither the idling jeep nor slosh of ocean waves drown out the noise. He curses his suspected

incompetence before the spotlight finally switches off. For a moment, everything is solid black – as if the streetlights and the moon are snuffed out. The patrol moves on and the assassin rises onto his knees as his vision returns. He watches the shrinking tail lights disappear around the block. He then looks the other direction. The dock is finally deserted.

Robber tosses his package of shoes over the fence in a high arch. He hooks his fingers and toes into the chain link and easily clears the fence. Robber then retrieves his jacket and shoes and scans the ground for footprints or other marks. His jacket has left a smudge where it landed. The force of the fall had squished blood through the dark fabric. He wasn't happy, but as long as the trail ended here, Robber feels heartened. He creeps back to his car while nobody spies his movement.

Daybreak was still many hours away and with curfew in effect, driving isn't safe before then. Robber knows he should not wait inside his vehicle. A lone car always attracts attention. Patrols make a habit of peering through windows. Robber knows hiding in the car is unwise, and he has yet to change clothes.

The last thing Robber wants is to be caught unawares, hunkered down in his vehicle, literally with his pants off. He carefully opens the car and gathers his belongings. Robber makes certain he takes everything he needs then checks for marks. The car stays clean. He locks the doors and carries both bundles of fresh and soiled clothes into shadows. He hopes the empty vehicle remains outside suspicion until he returns in daylight. He depends on his car waiting for him, especially while he was in the Fort.

Robber spends the remainder of the night crouched and running. He waits for redundant patrols to pass then scampers into the nooks already investigated. The assassin has played this game of hide and seek since being a kid. Moving had long ago become a key in his life; a good tactic even when he had no reason to hiding. Like a shark, Robber needs to move to live.

He chooses a shark as the creature he will become in another life, even though crazy ideas about reincarnation belong with cults that parody the extinct pagans far away from Chosen cities. Besides, Robber had yet to discover he enjoyed swimming. If he truly wished to be reborn, he will quietly beseech the Living God, the omnipotent god of heathens.

Robber would not dare make demands of his Lord or even ask a favor. Such mortal weakness and failing was a false belief of the Chosen. Their selfish pleas lead to wrath and oblivion. Robber can only wish, with all his heart, and hope he earns some reward for all his good work beneath the heavens. Yet, he knows the Living God offers no reward.

His skill to hide was a reason Robber had believed he wouldn't be shoddy at his surreptitious work. His hatred of the Church and everything the theocracy stood for was another factor. His detest aside, he was better at concealment than killing, but there was no glory in hiding. Recognition for remaining undetected seems ironically incongruous, but Robber was indeed masterful. Residential areas always needed avoiding. Night owls, insomniacs who continually sit at their windows and gaze into the dark, are guaranteed to react in haste and call the military.

Robber moves well away from the shipyard, but he hears a number of vehicles at the gate. The cool and salty ocean breeze carries distorted voices sounding like foreign tongues. Floodlights soon fill the yard, making the glow visible from blocks away. Under this artificial day, Robber expects the military will be occupied with puzzles the next few minutes. In the lull and despite hours before sunrise, he decides he will change his clothes.

The dark clothes are completely bloodied and have grown stiff as they've dried. Robber had also gotten sick of their putrid smell. The clean clothes, on the other hand, are thin and light colored – a better camouflage under bright sunshine. The hue makes hiding in the night more difficult, but Robber takes his chances. Interrupted, he moves away from his car once the military widens their search beyond the yard.

While changing his clothes and creeping along, Robber anticipates the military's coverage will span too wide. He plans he will then slip back to his car. Preparing himself, all the dark clothes he's worn go into the bundle held within his inside-out jacket.

He goes barefoot, even if unshod feet does hamper his flight. The military had given

Robber every small advantage. He thinks they will, so he's evened the odds a little and removed his shoes. For as long as he remembers, Robber has evaded opening-spiral search patterns like the one the military runs this evening. He's beat his pursuers even before their hunt's begun.

The trail to the fence enlivens the Chosen soldiers and a rabid pursuit in the middle of the night was the best tonic for caged dogs. Once the trail leads over the fence, clueless monotony subdues the animals. When the circle grows so wide and one patrol involved in the hunt meets another, a hole opens. The inside of the perimeter was now the safest place that prey can hide. The searched territory has become another nook in which soldiers have already peeked.

Upon the very first ray of daylight, Robber returns to his scanned and forgotten vehicle. The blocks around the docks are peppered with lonesome cars and trucks. Nothing inside his car suggests anything other than an ordinary automobile. His vehicle blends with all the others.

In most cases, car and truck owners had grown sick of fighting traffic and looking for a place they might park in the crowded surrounding neighborhoods. They had elected to waste an extra hour or so and just walk home. One could do worse than stroll in a summer sunset near the sea, especially if the alternative was imprisonment come curfew for the offense of idling inside an automobile stuck on the overloaded streets of the Fort.

Robber would now blend with commuters making their way back to their own automobiles. The rush of traffic will overwhelm attempts by scattered patrols keeping the area secure. Once morning dawned, the manhunt had unofficially ended.

Robber must intrude on his secretary a few hours because he sorely needs a shower and a safe nap. Then he will go and attend the meeting for the other offer, another murder. He had yet to learn details, but he guesses what the request entails. This afternoon, he is only listening to a prospective employer.

Depending on the stomach of clients for such desperate acts, the voice of new clients either tremble or become stoic – barely held together or detached. Strange enough, face-to-face meetings provide nervous clients some comfort. Besides caution, that is why Robber never asks for concise information when he returns phone messages. If the job sounds acceptable and the money is real, he arranges an in-person rendezvous. That meeting provides everything he'll need, including half his fee.

This was a special job, almost a favor. A priest asks for help. Meeting a member of the Church, other than the final kind of encounter, seems a mad idea. This priest, however, has no real vestment in the Church. This Captain Ioannu was still as bigoted and deluded as the rest of the blasted theocracy, but the man was somehow related to Judah Ismael, Robber's preferred benefactor.

The priest had waved Judah's name like a flag of truce when he called. Captain Ioannu could not know who Robber was, but the man had come with hands raised. Despite the captain's kin, the priest's attitude reminded Robber they stand opposite lines of faith and justice. As the assassin had thought before, he wouldn't mind knocking off a random priest for the heathens. Based on rumors he's heard throughout his years working with the Ismael family, the untimely demise of this one would actually pay Judah and all society a large favor.

Chapter 11 Gnashing Teeth

Robber's feet grows chilly once the concrete has lost all the heat absorbed the previous day. His feet are so cold, the assassin stops a moment and puts on his shoes again. In the spreading light of dawn, he spots the blood on his fingers he still needs to clean. He finds dry areas on the soiled bundle he carries under his arm and scrubs gore from his hands.

After tying his shoes, Robber stands and faces a passerby, presumably on his way to work now that curfew is lifted. The man wears pale-blue overalls and military boots. He looks like a dockhand.

Robber smiles and says "Good morning."

The leathery, clean shaven dockhand nods as he passes the friendly stranger. Robber turns around and calls after him.

"You're going to work late this morning."

The dockhand pauses and asks "Huh?"

"There was an incident last night," reports Robber with a grin. "The military and a reporter or two might get in the way, scratching around the yard."

"How do you know that?"

Robber answers nonchalant but truthful. "I just came from the docks. I'm going back to my car now."

The dockhand shrugs and turns around. He walks a couple blocks with Robber. He never asks the stranger why he's left the docks or about the bundle of dark, bloody clothes tucked under the friendly assassin's arm. They don't say much to each other at all.

"I thought I was late. For that matter, I wondered if there was any work at all this morning," the man conveys. The assassin smiles and ignores the small-talk.

The two men part when Robber turns south toward his car and the worker goes the opposite direction, away from the dock's main gate.

"Thanks for the notice," the dockhand said to Robber, in deferral of a verbal goodbye.

Robber and the man bid pleasant farewells with smiles and waves. In that moment, a jeep with three soldiers slowly cruises past. Robber waves at the patrol too. They don't return the salute. These unfriendly soldiers continue down the street. From the perspective of the patrol, the two men they've driven past appear old acquaintances off to work and oblivious to the murders last night.

After a long slog through rush hour traffic, Robber enters his compact apartment. As he expects, his secretary lurks inside. The single-room apartment appears even more cramped with these two grown men living in the space. An off-color wallpaper bubbles from the drywall. The paper looks new, but this summer's been hot. The heat inside this little oven melts glue from the walls. Robber's secretary reads a book, once a paperback. The missing cover exposes yellow pages spoiling into rusty orange at their edges. The black ink remains solid and clear despite the wear and age of the pages. Robber becomes instantly wary.

"Where did you get that?" he demands. "Books are banned, especially in Khetam."

"I brought it with me," his secretary answers. He refuses to look at the man whose taken his name. He flips a page then another, skipping over a thick, continuous paragraph of text. "It's a good thing. I've been going crazy, stuck in here."

Robber grunts. He peeks through the window out of habit and draws the fading blue drapes. The room goes dark, too dark for comfortable reading.

"Hey," his secretary objects. "I can't see the pages."

The man gets up and wobbles on long, thin legs. They had grown stiff while he sat in one position since the start of the day. He steps across the room so he might open the drapes.

"Hey." Robber holds his secretary in a stern stare. The man freezes as if turned to stone by the twisted face of the assassin. "Only a crack."

His secretary pulls the drapes open and allows a sliver of light to fall upon the spot where he had been sitting. He peeks out the window at nothing to see; just a barren courtyard surrounded by blind windows and locked doors. All neighbors in the apartment building have disappeared to work. The new Robber always picks isolated times when he visits. He pays the rent, so he comes and goes as he pleases.

"No more complaints from you," he forbids his secretary. "Or I'll snap your bones – so we understand each other."

Robber tosses his bundle of soiled clothes into the chair in which his secretary had been sitting. Only a few places had offered room for dirty clothes, other than the floor. Everywhere else is already scattered with clothes and strewn with trash. This mess is the only debris. No dust had yet gathered in the small apartment; its tenants had recently arrived.

Robber asks about the book when his secretary turns back around. "What's it about?"

The man doesn't look eager to read anymore, but the drape remains slightly open, lighting a room mostly drenched in shadow. A dark brown crust covers one of Robber's hands. When he rubs his fingers over the scab, the gunk flakes off and sprinkles an empty spot of gray carpeting, blending with small chunks of dried mud, sand and dropped crumbs.

Robber's secretary steps from the window. He uses the side of his ragged book and pushes empty bottles, boxes and cans around a small table. He clears enough space for the volume, though the pages still hang over the edge when set on the acrylic surface. The bottles and cans perch close to toppling off the other side; a gentle jolt is all it would take to start an avalanche.

"Nothing, really, short stories. There's a story about a cat out for vengeance. I almost know it by heart."

"Yeah, I like cats." Robber only listens for keywords. He's heard "a book about cats" and assumes his secretary wants to be a veterinarian. Good luck to him. Chances are pretty slim he will find a school within Khetam that trains poor, illegal migrant UnChosen.

"Why don't you go out for a couple hours?" Robber suggests. "Go get breakfast or lunch, brunch. I don't have liquor rations, so no luck there."

"I don't have any money. You haven't paid me."

Robber reaches into his front pocket and pulls out a loose roll of bills. He hands a few to his secretary.

"It's on me. I need the place for a while. I wanna clean up. Take the keys. I won't be here when you get back. Don't take the book with you."

"I'm getting sick of this arrangement," confesses his secretary. "What if I don't come back? How about I leave for the encampment? I think the military doesn't bother people leaving."

"You'll be back." Robber grins. "The money is good. That's why you came to the Fort. Don't test me, you don't want to. Besides, I got your book."

"You can keep it."

"Go, get out of here. I'll see you later."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

"We really ought to be friendly with each other. I like you, kid." Robber almost called his secretary by his alias, but he's forgotten the name he'd given the man. He continues being the only Robber in the room. "If you cleaned up around here, you'd have a nice little place to live. It can help you save money for school."

"What?"

"I'll see you later."

The secretary scans the floor, finds a pastel, button-up shirt and shakes it out. Crumbs, among other motes, fly off. He turns his head and keeps debris from his eyes. His torso is pale compared against the deep tan of his face and arms. He is as skinny as a post. So many ribs are visible that Robber lost count after he had glanced.

"People probably think you're a heathen all the time," Robber tells the man. The new version of Joss Rasheed pulls his undershirt off over his head and does not reply.

"I'm going to soak those," Robber says, pointing at the bundle of clothes he had tossed into the chair. "I can throw in a couple of your shirts if they need it."

His secretary looks outraged at his host. "Darks don't go with whites. There's blood on your clothes, anyway."

Robber nods. "Yes, there is. Otherwise, I wouldn't clean them."

His secretary walks across the room, moving faster nearer the door with each step. He practically sprints into the empty courtyard. Robber watches through the cracked window shades and hopes his secretary won't get himself run-over in his hasty escape.

The skinny kid doesn't have anyone who will take care of him, if he lived through an accident. For better or worse, his secretary will become an anonymous corpse when he dies. His medical report might just as well record the unidentified man was an orphan, an only-child. His parents hadn't been around long enough to give him a proper name.

That last thought strikes close to the facts of Robber's own life, but he isn't thinking of

himself. His secretary needs to blow-off steam. The man had stayed cooped-up too long. Once his secretary has fled out-of-sight, Robber shuts and locks the door.

He goes into the kitchen and clears cans and plastic utensils from the sink. Neither Robber nor his secretary own proper plates or glasses. They eat directly from boxes, cans or take-out containers. They don't even have a place for their trash, which accounts for the garbage piled on the counter and table. The pair rinses the plastic utensils they acquire and find second uses for everything. Robber thinks the lifestyle is a pinnacle of domestic bachelor-living and better than sleeping in the sands of the Shur.

The reality of this place is that this is not Robber's home. He doesn't have one, he never has. Robber rents the place for use as a makeshift safe house. He needs to stay moving and only comes here today so he can wash.

Once he empties the sink, he stops the drain and runs cold water into the basin. While the sink fills, he collects his bundle of bloodstained clothes from the chair. The chair had come with the apartment; the place was partially furnished. Furniture wasn't part of his criteria when Robber selected the accommodation. He had grabbed the first anonymous, low rent dive he found. Inheriting the table, chairs, and sofa came as a happy surprise.

He considers classy any place in which he didn't sleep on the floor or sit in corners. The sofa invites him and Robber still has time before his meeting with the priest. Once he finishes cleaning-up, he thinks he'll afford himself a short nap – after his own shower.

The assassin drops his bundle of clothes on the black and white checkered linoleum of the kitchen floor and reaches for the bottle of bleach beneath the sink – the only cleaner in the apartment. In the right amounts, bleach is the ultimate general purpose cleaner. The stuff works for anything.

A big bottle of bleach and a wardrobe of clean and properly colored clothes are indispensable in his business. The cleaner does the job well, but also eats fabric. And if Robber avoided messy hits, the bleach would become less important. Using less noxious stuff in turn means he would not continue ruining the clothes he owns.

He measures four overflowing capfuls into the filling sink. The quantity is arbitrary, but had become part of Robber's wash ritual. The running water mixes with the chemical and the whole apartment soon fills with a sharp, stinging perfume that makes his eyes water. Robber likes the smell better than the unidentified, undertone odors in the closed apartment.

The bad smell must come off his secretary, he believes. After any complaint, the sorry man had been figuratively bricked into this small space during these past, blistering summer days. The windows have stayed shuts; having them open makes the place vulnerable. Once he draws the open drape closed, Robber turns off the faucet.

The clothes sink into the water, raising the level and nearly overflowing the basin. Robber skips rolling his sleeves. He pokes at the clothes with his fingers until they submerge. When stirred, pink water splashes out and soaks the front of his shirt and flows over the counter. A small, empty cardboard box skims across the overflow. Robber pulls out his hands and mumbles a quiet curse for wetting his clean clothes. While removing his shirt, he watches the water turn red.

The color begins as tendrils, reaching toward the surface and to the bottom of the enameled white sink. The flimsy arms then dissolve in the swirling water. The water first turns pink and darkens evenly. Before Robber leaves, he will drain the sink and soak the clothes again in a cleaner wash. That's his plan.

He wishes his secretary willing did laundry. Even if the illegal migrant helped Robber, the assistance may not feel right. Help probably violates his own ideology. Robber is responsible for his own mess – it's what heathens believe. Ideally, he wouldn't create any and eventually, he will become a maestro. For now, he remains attentive and covers his imperfections.

Robber strips off his clothes and lets them drop to the floor atop others belonging to him and his secretary. The slovenly habits the two men share make their chance meeting peculiar. Then again, coincidence may not have anything to do with the encounter. All men may live as they do, Robber assumes. He doesn't have a lot of experience with roommates and had earned

limited insights.

He lays his favorite lockback knife on his secretary's book then picks it up again. He opens the blade. It looks clean, and so does the pin, catch, and antler handle. His cuts last night had been fast and accurate, confirmed by the lack of immediate blood. Robber keeps the blade itself sharp enough for shaving, which he's done on a few occasions. This morning will be another, so he takes the knife with him into the shower.

Shaving seems about all Robber accomplishes in the bath because the water heats only lukewarm. Though the temperature is adequate, he prefers bathing in scalding temperatures. The shower must become a sauna. The humid air relaxes him, but not today. After rinsing, he lays on the sofa naked and naps while waiting to dry. His wet skin feels cool in the stagnant warmth of the apartment. Robber may have fallen asleep, or he's sucked into an intense daydream.

Whichever occurs, dream or daydream, the vision appears vivid and rooted in the present world.

Someone lurks outside the door to the apartment. The anonymous spy creeps along, trying to be silent. Robber has not truly heard the intruder, but a prickly aura presses into him. He rises, still nude. The locked door is suddenly off its hinges and lies against the wall at one side of the opening that no longer goes into the courtyard. The cracked door itself doesn't look familiar. It appears as if it comes from another apartment. Its deadbolt lock had been broken out and the doorknob twists outward sideways.

Outdoors had been replaced with what looks like the inside of a covered garden in which overgrown plants wilt black. The space resembles a big birdcage – like one at a zoo, an aviary, except there are no birds – no sounds at all either, not even a peep. The cage appears dark, though Robber knows the sun outside climbs a clear sky. The cage sheds dense shadows, and their solid shapes build a maze in which every turn ends with an absence of light.

Robber remains lucid and realizes he wears no clothes and had not left his apartment. When he turns and looks for pants, a figure appears. The figure had not come forward from shadows. Instead, the dark recedes as a wave falling back and revealing beached jetsam. The figure is a short man, wearing matching blue pants and a long-sleeve shirt, a workman's outfit. His skin is leathery, as if he spends his life under the desert sun. Nobody like him belongs inside Khetam, nor inside a creepy oversized birdcage.

Why this ordinary man was in Robber's dream is curious. This guy may have been a past victim – maybe a ghost who seeks revenge or come to reclaim a lost name. Robber does not ask and doesn't care, yet the apparition outside transfixes him. The figure mangles a smile that may have well been a grimace. The stranger raises a blade to his own outstretched neck. The knife belongs to Robber; the horn handle and gently curved blade are unmistakable.

The assassin remembers leaving the knife on the bathroom sink. And he promptly becomes inflamed with instinct and wants to run and recover his stolen property, but does not. The stranger twists the knife back and forth, not quite touching the side of his throat. Robber wishes the stranger would just drive in the blade and finish himself in penalty for its theft. If Robber wanted, he would kill the man himself in an instant. However, he stands naked and only stares. He feels no compulsion to move, not even to recover his clothes. Robber completely lacks motivation and his neck aches.

A wet trickle rolls off his shoulder and down his chest. The liquid feels warmer than his shower but he mistakes the sensation for water dripping off wet hair, yet the flow is steady. He dabs at the hot and sticky dampness on his neck. Looking at his fingers, Robber sees them covered with blood. He then turns around, looking for where the gore had come from. The source is nowhere seen, yet blood still streams down his body.

Panic takes him and he slaps his wet hand to his neck, splattering blood. There was no plausible way he had been cut – Robber feels nothing, and no one had even come close. Fearful, he glances back at the entrance. Before his open eyes, the figure in the courtyard vanishes and Robber's panic builds.

Blood oozes through his fingers and flows as water draining from a hole in the bottom of a bucket. He wants the leak stopped. Robber reaches up with his other hand, but feels his knife now lies in his open palm. The blade is folded back into its sheath. When he glances down, he

watches bright red blood branch into veins outside his skin. The lines travel down his legs and between his toes. All the while, the floor stays dry beneath his feet.

He realizes the inconsistency of events and the physics becomes too absurd. His quick rage had snared him into the nightmare, but he now knows he's asleep. Robber does not stare through an open doorway and he is not bleeding. Allowing this surreal ridiculousness is stupid. He knows he dreams and takes control. Upon this realization, he awakes.

The first thing Robber sees when he opens his eyes is his knife. It sits on his secretary's old book, just where Robber had left it – before shaving in the shower. He wonders how long he had slept and how much he had actually dreamed. He still lies naked and damp, especially on his right side – the one on which he'd lain. Robber feels his chin; he has indeed shaved. Leaving the knife in the bathroom was probably only a memory from his dream.

The exact steps he's taken between leaving the shower and lying down seems unusually fuzzy. Like the dream, remembering his path was unimportant. The apartment has grown muggy and its low odor increases with humidity. He tells himself he must leave before the smell sours into stench. The assassin has an appointment before noon and he might as well be earlier than usual. Death always arrives early.

He rolls off the sofa and dresses. The assassin throws on the same light-colored clothes he had just taken off. He then checks them again and again for bloodstains, and determines they pass inspection each time. The clothing is suitable for a daytime meeting. He finds his wallet and the knife before slipping them into opposite back pockets. He twists the garrote into a front.

Before leaving, Robber scans the apartment. The clothes in the sink soak forgotten. He feels he takes something with him, something he doesn't need or want. A brief skim of the room confirms everything remains in its cluttered place. Secure, he believes he knows the reason for his anxious feeling – he does not want the dream following him.

The thought itself becomes a bothersome feeling, and tenacious. Shaking it off was not as simple as waking up. Regardless, Robber slips outside with a quick sidestep and pulls the door shut. He hopes the threat stays locked inside, especially so it will not follow; let his secretary deal with angry ghosts.

True to habit, Robber arrives across the street from his meeting well ahead schedule. He attributes the practice to be common sense in his business, although his motivation is actually paranoia. Sometimes, and depending on his impression of a client, Robber shows-up hours before a meeting. A shaky voice over the phone always dictates he arrives sooner.

Someone who can't stay level-headed wanders off the cautious course. Robber considers watching-out for himself as a service he performs for his nervous clients. Minding his own back means he keeps a client an arm's length from prying eyes and military stings. He feels easy about the meeting today with Josiah Ioannu. The priest had been a referral from a trusted and regular employer. Still, the fact this new client is a captain in the Church raises his hackles. Although, Robber knows the man uses Ape. For this meeting, the assassin guarantees himself an early arrival. And, thanks to an unsettling dream, even earlier.

He parks his car his standard couple blocks away. His work involves quite a bit of walking. Robber considers the exercise is a benefit. Besides getting to his real business, long walks are the most activity he gets. His car always remains concealed and points the opposite direction. Such is another little detail for which the assassin takes pride.

Along his uncanny timing, he considers his obsession a skill, if not uncommon sense. His ability to navigate Khetam at times when roads are least dense involves proficiency. Most people with regular jobs lack the luxury of avoiding the rush. Those bees stay busy and away from the roads the most serene parts of the day.

Robber calculates when the hive will let out and swarm about during long lunches, and when those few who cut their workday short become a wave of buzzing traffic hazards. He successfully avoids commuters. The immodest killer congratulates himself for his admirable

accomplishment, especially after having punched-out from his shift butchering at the docks, followed by his shower, a shave and a regrettable nap.

Something about last night should soon be on the radio. He had listened to military news on his way to his apartment and again traveling toward his rendezvous. So far, not a word about his crime has been mentioned on the radio or he's missed the story. The latter thought disappoints him because this killer enjoys hearing about himself, even if by way of his anonymous work.

Once shame of his sloppy evening have passed, he hopes the bodies are found and the murders reported. Forensics will prove the killer had wielded the blade as a master. The buckets of blood had been merely a consequence of opened arteries. If juggling a portable radio wasn't such a distraction or obstruction, Robber would listen for his story all day.

Instead, he silently leans between storefronts and watches for a priest's arrival at the unpretentious bistro across the street. Compact tables stand arranged outside. Robber reasonably assumes a lone priest awaiting a guest will be seated somewhere among them.

When the fat priest does show-up on time and not before, Robber makes the arrogant Ape wait a little longer and he measures the man's movements. The priest may inadvertently watch for someone other than whom he comes to meet. Robber always walks away if he doesn't trust the look of his prospect. The same condition applies to Captain Ioannu, no matter who referred the man. The two men will have never met, but the advantage will go to Robber for making the call early and canceling the whole affair before it launched.

The assassin wishes for a better place he can scope the restaurant other than standing squarely in the open. Loitering is too conspicuous inside Khetam. He paces the block and masks his lurk. He occasionally peeks inside stores under the pretense of window shopping, but actually searches reflections for anyone who may mark him. No one pays special attention to anything happening outside today, which Robber appreciates.

Boredom creeps in after a long, uncomfortable wait in the heat of late morning. Robber wishes he had brought his secretary's book about cats. Then again, he avoids scrutiny. He was in the last place he should break bans. Leaning against a public building in broad daylight with his nose in contraband begs for trouble.

The idea entertains him. He thinks a little longer about the stares and the ensuing problem with the military. They would nab a smuggler in name only, thanks to his confiscated ID cards. The distraction stops being amusing at the point the story will really end. Whomever takes the fall will disappear to a detention camp. Being a creature of cities, Robber imagines the camps are literally hell-on-earth, flat and smoldering patches somewhere lost in unmapped regions of the Shur – the edge of the world.

When he was a kid, Robber had heard the sun never sets in the wastes. He supposes that is why the camps are built out there. He had never seen a camp, but he had crossed the desert at night a handful of times. An amazing sky of stars exists over the waste, barely visible above city lights. Every time he sees the night sky in the desert, his awe is the same he's felt gazing upon the nameless ocean his first time.

A few times at night when he had looked up from nowhere, he had seen stars connected with threads of light. These were worlds captured in a web. He's experienced stupid reverie each instance following the shining network of lines, and intangible fear. Even in rapture, he had wanted nothing more than to run back into the throngs of civilization.

In the city now, the arrival of his client amazingly coincides when a parking space opens, one large enough for the priest's white limousine. The priest parks right outside the bistro. Robber kicks off the corner he leans against and takes a short walk, watching what happens next.

The bistro hostess escorts the clergyman to the anticipated outdoor table. This priest appears average in most respects. Thick Captain Ioannu wears the uniform black slacks and a white collarless shirt. The priest also wears a suit coat. Not really unusual, but a hot spell had simmered all summer long. The man did not seem to suffer other than his cheeks appearing flushed. And the extra weight he lugs may have reddened in his face. The clumsy manner he drops into the chair suggests his stuffed girth causes the blush.

Robber hopes the man did not plan to eat lunch at this meeting. Taking a meal now not only demonstrates disrespect, but implies casualness – a respect the assassin grudgingly affords only to well-paying clients. Robber has an angry quirk about seeing fat, old men eat. The image typifies a lifetime of gluttony available to the least deserving. He waits and sees if the priest requests a menu. If he does, Robber will leave.

When the waitress arrives, the priest orders a drink and nothing more. Business will be conducted today. Robber strolls up the street again, so when he approaches he comes behind Captain Ioannu. Only parked and passing cars screen him from the eyes of the priest. Ioannu could easily spot the assassin if he bothered and looks around, but he does not. The priest occupies himself watching women at the bistro and counting cash meant for murder.

The two are related activities; while the priest holds the big wad of bills, he might try and impress some working girls. Amidst the visual lechery, the drink Ioannu had ordered arrives in a tall glass with more ice than tea. The priest fails to produce a ration ticket, so the tea is obviously non-alcoholic.

Ioannu flashes his cash and makes a coarse innuendo to the waitress. Robber couldn't hear what the priest had said, but watches the woman recoil. The priest calls her back with a wave and curt apology. Robber hears "Forgive me" and steps onto the bistro's patio.

"He doesn't want anymore," he tells the waitress. "Me neither."

The waitress relaxes her tiny, sloped shoulders and retreats inside. Robber sits opposite the priest.

"You're Ioannu, right?" Robber asks. He already knows he has the right client.

"Reverend," the man remarks, aghast. He puts the money back into his jacket.

"You're not my daddy," Robber snaps.

Josiah realizes the person with whom he speaks floats in a sea beyond law-abiding society, but he still expects the respect his position and rank demand. A long time had passed since Ioannu put-up with lack of grace, other than from his nephew Judah and that bastard, Gage. Josiah retorts with information related to the core of their meeting.

"I am the one paying you," he utters with mustered snobbishness.

Robber's stomach burns and the inside of his mouth tastes bitter. He wants to spit, but sucks back the acidic juice. He refuses the priest even that much of himself. "I didn't say I will do anything for you."

"Listen," Robber then says. "You probably think you know who you're dealing with, but you better think again. I don't have a rank pinned on my shirt. I'm not like you in so many ways. I don't play by your rules."

"All right," Josiah states. He does not agree, only forces room for his reply. "All I meant was you're looking for a job and I'm the one who's paying."

This meeting could never possibly go smoothly; Robber knew as much when he had arranged the encounter. This meeting may even end with a dead priest – an outcome Robber prefers. He would merrily kill the fat man in front of witnesses there at the bistro and expect an ovation. Oddly enough, Josiah Ioannu hopes for a dead priest, too. He just didn't know the assassin currently sits across his own target.

Robber leans over the table and drops his voice. His close face and low tone looks and sounds deliberately menacing. "Get this straight, priest, I'm not a migrant. I don't beg for work. I like what I do and I'd do it for charity. I do it for fun – not for you."

Robber sits back when the priest huffs and swallows an ice cube with a nervous gulp of tea. Ioannu swallows again and encourages the frozen chunk down his throat. The cold hurts his mouth and makes his temples ache. He squints and pushes back the pain and Robber feels satisfied he's disturbed the priest's comfort. The captain's arrogance needs a few bites taken out.

"Let's try this again," Robber eventually relents. "Tell me what I need to know. If I have other questions, I'll ask you. If you open your mouth with anything other than answers for my questions, there is a good chance you'll say something I won't like. I won't stand for sermons or lectures about moral responsibilities. Where will that get us? Your religion won't get the job done."

Ioannu sits mute and appalled. He carefully measures his response.

"Do you think I'll tell you this is part of some crusade? What are you talking about?" spouts the priest.

"Hey, I said I'd ask for what I need to know. It won't be the only crusade I wage. Anyway, the price is already negotiated. I see you got the down payment." Robber indicates the cash the priest had flashed earlier.

Josiah reaches for the wad and instantly forgets the affronts and everything else Robber's told him. The killer's thinking sounds distorted. The man is probably insane, thinks Captain Ioannu. He imagines doing the things this man does for money must distort his mind. He must be a regular psychopath. In any case, the end of Josiah's desperation was now within reach. Excitement makes him giddy.

"Does that mean you're going to do it?"

The priest feels grounded again when Robber waves him to put away the money. Josiah hopes he might ask for something else. If this piece of business was concluded, he's planned they talk a little more. Ioannu has emergency money available. Currently not in his possession, he plans he'll skim petty expenses from the money he'll receive conducting a funeral for which he will soon be responsible. Josiah slouches.

"Who is this priest, Benedict Gage?" Robber asks. "The name sounds familiar."

"You want to know how I know him?"

"No, I want to know who he is. I recognize the name. If I didn't, I wouldn't care less."

"He's from Gomorrah, but he's never lasted long at any parish. He's just a leech, a real cock."

"That is quite an animal when you put those two together. I bet he fits in at that zoo of yours," quips Robber. "He's alone?"

"Yes, at his parish in the slum."

"Where? Be specific."

"Saint Erasmus, L99 and F66. It's an old barrack, a warehouse made of red brick."

Robber softly chants the address aloud. He asks the priest to confirm before committing it to memory. The address is all he needs.

"That's not too far from here, right?" Robber queries.

"Regrettably so, too close for comfort."

"What about the neighborhood? Don't people visit and tithe like good little lambs?"

A long silence swells between the question and Josiah's reply. The priest is not quite sure how he should respond. The lowbrow sarcasm is difficult to forgive. Josiah ignores the part he doesn't like.

"No, the church needs refurbishing. Another priest was murdered inside."

"After this one, people will think the clergy drops like flies. You aren't establishing a pattern, are you?" Robber hints with more sarcasm.

"I didn't have anything to do with the first one. If we weren't inside the Wall, I'd blame heathens."

"I bet you would, as if they didn't have bigger plans."

"What are you saying?" Josiah asks. The captain knows he isn't making friends. Neither man wants any sort of relationship, but Josiah feels he is allowed rules of his own – for the sake of civility. If Ioannu was to tolerate disparages about the Church, he wanted to be clear on his position.

"You think I know something?" Robber stares at the priest, studying the man's face for suspicion. Talk of murder makes discerning the nature of the question impossible "Why don't you ask the military?"

Josiah refuses bickering over something he assumes was a misunderstanding. "I just want my own problem solved."

"And that is the only reason we're here, two men with business," Robber suggests. "Not a priest. Not a, what you might call an independent contractor – just a deal."

"If you say so. I think that's a good way to put it."

Robber's thinking slants and the priest's garb perturbs him. If Ioannu pulls out one of

those tacky key chains with a cross, the assassin feels he might jump on the table and finish the priest for the sake of heathens and good taste. The assassin reaches for a mechanism of control and falls back on the concept of business.

"Give me the money," he says. "If you talk to Judah, tell him I was right by you. Downright civil."

Josiah pulls the wad from his jacket pocket. His red cheeks flare like beacons and he coos as if he's an idiot. The sound makes Robber mad. He reaches over the table. When he takes the money, he slaps the priest on his wrinkled forehead. Just then, Robber glimpses a blue blur across the street. The color flashes in front of the storefronts he had leaned between a few minutes ago. Cash brushes against his aimless palm and brings his attention back to the transaction.

The priest sits dumbfounded, waving a stack of bills. Robber's flagrant and physical disrespect has stunned the captain helpless. Robber takes the cash and deftly fills his only empty pants pocket. So he might stash the money, he rocks back and stretches his leg from beneath the table. As he does, he spots the blue again.

A workman comes out of a shop. His skin is as thick and dark as oiled leather. The workman is a small man, the same from Robber's dream. For a second, the assassin thinks he's hallucinated, but the apparition really appears across the street, and is shopping.

A paper bag knocks against the man's blue slacks as he strolls away. For a moment, Robber fails to react. The situation is too unreal. Still, the gall this stranger has – threatening Robber in dreams before tripping into the real world and buying a new suit – infuriates him. Robber gets up and intends he will catch the punk. The priest snatches Robber's forearm and stops him before the killer walks away.

"Wait," Josiah begs, rubbing his stung head with his other hand. He expects scoring Ape so badly, Josiah fails to realize he'd been struck. "I hope there is something else you can do for me."

Robber tears his wrist from the weak grip of the priest. His fierce reaction is simply reflex and he shakes off vermin. The touch feels like a rodent scrambling up his arm. When Robber realizes the priest has touched him, he grinds his teeth and scowls. He looks down on Josiah while the man from his dream fades away.

"I don't have anyone here. I can't go back to Gomorrah," the priest rushes. "I wonder if you have any Ape you can sell me."

Robber falls stone silent. At first, he's astonished the priest has asked for drugs. The captain's assumption is desperate and depraved. Robber's hand drifts into the pocket with his garrote.

"Or if you know somebody."

That somebody whom Robber knows is Judah Ismael, but the priest knows him too and better than most. Robber didn't mingle with pushers or users other than take work from Judah. Those people weren't in his class. Scavenging and desperation disgusts him. And it's why he doesn't live in the desert with like-minded heathens.

Addicts are the worst; real two-legged leeches. They latch onto the closest, unsuspecting warm body and steal life. No art or skill is practiced in any part of lechery. Those people are lazy thieves and opportunists. Family is often the first and easiest mark. Suddenly the reason behind the priest's request becomes evident. Ioannu's flushed cheeks and the jacket betrays his addiction – if one knows what to observe.

The Ismael family live in Gomorrah. They control the city. If anyone allows the coming and going of people, Judah performs that role. What Robber had heard was true after all. The crime family would not tolerate a member of their clan using their product.

Even if the supply of Ape was unlimited, an addict in the Ismael family looks catastrophic to people involved in underground and legitimate dealings alike. This priest was lucky the Ismaels had not already disowned him. His practical use in the Church may be his salvation, but that will not help him today.

"Don't touch me," Robber growls. He brushes the sleeve of his shirt. He still feels the

touch of the priest's hand clamped around his wrist and imagines he contracts a fast rotting disease gnawing his skin.

"I don't deal trash and I don't deal with it," Robber proclaims. Time wastes and he needs composure so that he might successfully trail the workman. "That's why you want the priest dead, isn't it? Things aren't going your way? Bad deal? Are all you priests Ape'd every day, except the Sabbath? Probably especially the Sabbath."

Josiah sits shaking with his mouth open. His hands quiver. He had listened to this same revolt from Judah and still hadn't manufactured a reply. Ioannu just wants past this piece of dirty work with Gage done, and put off the agonizing days when he quits Ape. Eventually, the pain will come. The loss of chemical joy, ruin or an exploded heart all pose final ends.

Until then, Josiah wants security. If he couldn't have any from Judah, he'd just turn deeper to devotion in the Church. He only wants to stave off that day until he feels ready and goes without withdrawal symptoms.

Distraction from his chase angers Robber. If this meeting is not now finished, he will lose the dream interloper. He had already lost sight of the man, and no obvious shops of interest appear along the workman's path. Robber thinks the stranger has passed them all, but the workman does pop into places he doesn't belong. Robber steps away from the priest before he remembers an important item of business.

"You better have the rest of my money."

"Oh, I do." Josiah unfolds the paper napkin that had arrived with the tea and drags it over his face. The fat priest feels relieved offering assurance instead empty excuses and justification for his addiction. He may not get drugs today, but a problem they've brought will go away. "Are we meeting again? I'll bring it then."

"I'll be in touch when I'm ready to collect. Don't be so eager. You won't see me until I'm done. Before then, you'll get the news. Listen to the radio. You heard about the docks, right?"

Josiah shakes his head before Robber glances the opposite direction he had last seen the workman. He rules out the minute possibility the man has escaped. The only place the workman could have gone is forward. Robber walks that way without another word to his miserable client.

Disbelieving the meeting had even occurred drifts into his thoughts, but the bulge of cash in his pocket anchors the fact in reality. For the sake of business, he considers the deal is a truce. Living in this world requires allowances. Beliefs and principles still apply, they only shift given circumstances. Regardless, a priest will die.

The pace of Robber's walk quickens once he leaves the bistro. He follows the workman's steps and soon reaches the place the man had once stood, the spot where Robber had gotten distracted and lost the slippery interloper. The assassin cups his hands against the shop window and looks long inside.

He feels ashamed with his overt ogle into a woman's clothing store, especially when clerks and customers stop shopping and gaze back. The store is the last place pursuit would reasonably lead, so he's felt this shop should be the first place he checks. The workman is not inside. Robber raises his hand in apology to the ladies.

He jogs and sidesteps down the block, spending just enough time at the windows of each shop so that he confirms the absence of his prey. He then moves to the next block.

When Robber finds the stranger, he doesn't know exactly what he will do. If the dream was a sign, he will find the meaning then and there. He's never liked puzzles, but never dismisses omens. If the future offers clues about what lies ahead, he'll happily accept the message – especially one so personal as his dream. The irony does not escape him. When Robber had left his apartment, he had too willingly forgot the vision. Now he chases a blue apparition down the block and peeks through windows as he goes.

The streets fill when the lunch hour scramble comes late. People now rush and recover lost time; the bees are loose and buzzing. Robber assumes his hunt is now hindered and gives-up without luck.

Tracking across the concrete paths of a city is typically impossible and scouting had

never been Robber's forte. He's merely tailed prey he's pursued in any metropolis. And his targets easily disappear for good if his line of sight is broken. Today looks like that case.

Robber stops at the intersection at the end of the block. He peers in all four directions. Tall trucks obstruct his vision. The menacing workman has vanished.

The man had become a phantom, or he might always have been no more solid than the apparition in the assassin's dream. Robber did have that instinct the first instant he had spotted the man across the street. The apparition might also have materialized in waking life.

When the phantom had appeared, the addition of a tout bag was a subconscious addition that helped the figment stick in the physical world. As visions go, chasing the dream was futile. Like smoke, the vision becomes diffuse, and more diffuse when the air is stirred. The phantom workman will soon vanish entirely.

Robber wonders what the message can mean – maybe a warning? Bleeding profusely from one's neck carries definite interpretations. Robber exercises the grim fate upon others and had done so very recently, so the image is a firm fixture in his visual library. No matter how deeply he studies his memory of the vision, the message communicates an abrupt and messy death.

More troubling, he entertains predictions of his own undoing. The apparition had warned about retribution for something done or something Robber will do. He thinks "A message arriving after the fact is unlikely and futile." Regardless, whatever will come lies in the future.

Robber can spend the rest of the day fruitlessly searching for a living, breathing stranger or he can wade through traffic back to his apartment. Back at his camp, he can collect his thoughts and weigh the murder he undertakes for a priest. Granted, the man he'd seen across the street did bear a striking resemblance to the figure in his dream, right down to the common blue work clothes.

Ignoring the power of that happenstance was impossible and unwise. All along this street this afternoon, plenty of open doors exist through which anyone can duck. If Robber continues his hunt, he must resume immediately. He picks the direction he believes the most logical in which somebody might easily slip away.

Chapter 12 Wild Beasts

Just after dawn, Mark knocks incessantly on the front door of Madelyn's apartment. His hammer jars her awake. He shouts through the closed entrance.

"Madelyn, get dressed and hurry outside."

The sudden rouse from slumber disorients her. She does not recall Mark leaving this morning. The last thing she remembers is she had fallen asleep in her bed, wrapped in his arms. That was at dusk, after curfew. People had been rushing to their destinations in the fading illumination and choked the roads – no one wanted to be stopped by a patrol a block or two from their home. After a hard day at work, and a longer day in traffic, detainment would have been an inconvenience. The last thing anyone needed after drawn-out hours of inane busywork were stupid questions with obvious answers.

"Where are you going?"

"Home."

"Why are you out after dark?"

"Traffic."

The questions were the extent of the pleasant part of an interrogation. After that, soldiers became sadistic. They knew the frustration they caused and took their autocratic jolly.

Last night, Madelyn had drifted into sleep, feeling an iniquitous pleasure with the fact she had trapped Mark with her that evening. She hadn't expected he'd stay after they made love, but he did. He had a wife waiting at home, but a lost sense of time and the setting sun had restricted his departure. And the uncomfortable moment in which Madelyn watched him draw up his pants and leave had never arrived. She had been happy for that until she discovers he had snuck away.

He now stands barricaded outside and knocks – the door had automatically locked when

he pulled it shut behind him. Madelyn wonders when he had escaped. She hopes he had left at sunrise. But there seemed no doubt he had snuck out right after she had fallen asleep. Obviously, he had taken his chances getting home. So – what – he avoided another confrontation with his wife, Merriam?

Jealously was ridiculous. Madelyn knows Mark Adino is married. She's known for years – a lifetime – and before she slept with her old flame. She accepted the consequences of her decision with maturity. A fleeting moment had not prompted a rash or desperate act. Mark had never seduced her with promises. Although yesterday afternoon, his flirts and advances had been especially tempting. In the end, Madelyn could not say who had kissed whom first. Remembering when they had undressed, she likes to believe the attraction was mutual, but she probably had knowingly stepped over a hazy line. Madelyn had made the first move. She had guided his hand to her breast once the warmth of his lips spread through her. She had unbuckled his belt and pushed his trousers off his waist.

Madelyn refuses to feel guilty. Before they had sex, she was well aware of Mark's infidelities. At one point last evening, she stopped him from reciting names of women he had known. The big creep had made a list. His numerical trip down lover's lane had sounded tawdry right from the start. The roll call would have only squelched her libido. And their encounter had waited too long, she would not have the moment spoiled.

Damage was already done to the relationship with his wife, Merriam. Mark wages a guerrilla war and tries to shatter their marriage, but his wife holds on. Merriam has entrenched herself upon a barren hill and resists his every humiliating siege. Mark can always leave the woman, but he couldn't marry again until the marriage with his current wife was annulled. The Church refuses divorce unless both partners wish separation. Merriam fights against her husband's desires and generally plays unfair – Madelyn had known him first.

Mark and Madelyn, old school friends, had shared a smoldering interest in each other that has lasted years. Their desire for each other had drifted upon and survived a river of time. Last night, Madelyn didn't know what would happen; she wasn't thinking of marriage or even a relationship beyond what they currently share. She had only known she did not want a complicated affair. Today, she possibly feels different.

The desire they've eventually shared with each other had come naturally. Circumstance could not sink their need when it had finally surfaced. When the moment had arrived, Madelyn seized hold. A long time had passed since she had been with anyone and she fretted and worried she had irretrievably squandering her youth before ever having sex again. Yet making love with Mark had renewed her. Youth had returned like a flower. Mark had brought her to life.

This morning, she feels only tired. The afterglow has faded away. Having been jolted awake and finding Mark missing brings the weight of age back upon her and she wonders what being thirty feels like. If existence was worse than how she feels now, she could not bear growing old – not the way things are now. Something must change in her life. Maybe she needs a child; an infusion of hormones might be the answer. Her doldrums of adulthood may be that she ignores her biological clock.

Once Madelyn sits upright, she dismisses the idea of kids. She doesn't believe in cultural timetables and the predestination of nature. She needs only more sleep and a cup of coffee. This man she had brought to her bed last night now denies her those tiny luxuries.

She groans and gropes for her robe. Madelyn wasn't prepared to open her eyes. Though her small bedroom is dark, she refuses to see the clock. She still might send Mark on his way and catch him later with whatever he now sounds excited about. She has a strong feeling his enthusiasm wasn't over her. The moment she might have been awakened peacefully – by gushing proclamations of unfurled love or a romantic soliloquy – had passed. If Mark went away now, after disturbing her, she might doze back to sleep for another hour or maybe two.

She pads the surface of her bed with her eyes closed. The thin satin robe is missing from the foot. She usually tosses the garment on the bed before sliding between sheets. She hadn't practiced probing her bed blind, so no choice remains except to open her eyes.

The robe has fallen on the floor with most of the comforter – its royal blue shade beams

against the ivory bedding. Madelyn slips the robe on, over her t-shirt and panties. A half-dozen steps separate her bedroom from the front door of her apartment. She doubles the walk and takes half steps, because she wants extra time before showing her haggard face. Madelyn rakes fingers through her hair and ties back a ponytail. She knots her robe shut while standing behind the door. Her impatient visitor raps and shouts the entire time.

“C’mon, Madelyn, open the door. Your neighbors will complain.”

She hopes they will. She wants a mob who will confront Mark for his outrageous wake-up call. She might have forgiven him if he woke her with a soft kiss and a strong embrace. In fact, that was her dream last night, but he's spoiled the fantasy and deserves any grief she imagines. Madelyn stands on her toes and steadies herself against the frame of the door then peeks through the peephole. Mark has changed clothes and his freshly shaved face proves he has not simply returned from a forgotten but urgent errand.

“I hope you brought breakfast,” Madelyn warns, watching him through the peephole. He shoves his hands into the pockets of his brown leather jacket, striking a frustrated pose.

“Flowers would be nice, too, but I'd love a croissant and some cheese.”

“This is important, Madelyn. I'll get you something on the way. I promise. Please, let's go.”

Curiosity tells Madelyn she should disregard staying hurt with the indignity inflicted upon her by his stealthy departure. Whatever brings him back to her door this morning must be important. He must have left his house the instant the curfew was lifted, or a little before, because he's arrived back at her apartment so soon. Whatever he shares must be just as important as going home last night and making Merriam happy. Madelyn unlocks and opens her door with a single twist of the knob.

“Should I get you a key?” she queries. Mark ignores the remark and the sarcasm is lost.

“You're not dressed,” he observes. “What took you so long?”

Madelyn wants to punch him. She doubts she has the reach to hit his cute, slightly dimpled chin and make the blow count. He probably wouldn't notice and would just brush off the pathetic strike. She lets the impulse fade.

“Let's go, Madelyn.” Mark guides her back into her apartment. He presses his solid hands against her shoulder and the small of her back. She tries bracing against his shove, but he's already moving and too massive to resist.

“Wait,” Madelyn helplessly protests. She lifts her feet and hopes her dead weight is difficult to manage so that Mark won't carry her. “What is this about?”

“We'll get you dressed.”

“I'm a grown woman. I can dress myself, when I'm ready.”

Once they enter the bedroom, Mark becomes clueless. He is married and has lived with a woman for years, but he's never watched how one goes about dressing. He jerks a half-smile when he realizes he practices just the opposite, getting women out of their clothes. In that respect, he remains quite successful. Mark tears himself from his thoughts – which is not an easy task. He secretly continues numbering his conquests since he had started his list last night. Madelyn had stopped him before he had gotten his conquests organized, but he couldn't stop thinking about his exploits. She should be thankful, he thinks, because his reminisces had added gasoline to an already blazing fire.

After leaving last night, Mark hadn't been concerned in the least about patrols and checkpoints. He had occupied himself completing his mental list of adulteresses. Mark enjoyed starting over numerous times when his concentration became broken or he put a wrong name against a naked phantom's face. In fact, he enjoys the whole exercise and the memories make him hard. Remembering his exploits was like savoring a particularly luscious aftertaste.

Madelyn is his most recent affair, but she's on the top of the list, in most cases depending how Mark shuffles his criteria. He needs a little reflection and distance behind their coupling before he can truly be objective. Last evening had generated feelings too emotional for him.

He nearly let himself be carried away in a current of deferred desire and fulfilled wishes. Expressing feelings of overpowering affection was foreign to him. Mark feels talking about

emotions is only an insincere attempt toward making sex more than the basic need it is, and he behaves himself accordingly. He had fended off falling asleep and only left Madelyn when his unnoticed departure had become feasible – another trick he had learned amidst countless affairs.

“Mark, tell me what’s going on or I’m not moving.”

“We are losing time, Madelyn.” Mark glances downward into her eyes, striking a pose reminiscent of a giraffe stretching down its neck for a drink from a stream. “We need the assignment. It’s a first-in basis.”

Madelyn understands now that Mark talks about a story from the military. He keeps secret how he gets his leads. She naively believes his experience had earned her friend and lover some privilege. In reality, he probably had a source inside military headquarters – most likely a woman. Madelyn wonders if he allows his contact to call his house, but the scenario was most likely the same as her own. She imagines Merriam spends a great deal of time answering the phone and often hears dead air and abrupt clicks when callers hang-up. On that point alone, Madelyn will not call Mark unless communication is imperative.

He’s probably gotten a lead and something concrete has happened since last night. In the past, Mark and Madelyn have independently waited in queues for assignments and wasted days because traffic. Each was unable to cross town and follow-up investigations. Other times, like last night, events in life distracted their attention. After the evening with Mark, the parish in which the priest had been murdered drifted from sight.

The news Mark carries today had probably merited a call to his home. Madelyn guesses he got a lot of them from the military. His name goes to the top of a list of reporters for one reason or another. Regardless how he gets his work, he’s come back for Madelyn this morning before he’s gone and investigated a story. His gesture is respectable. Neither can afford wasting an opportunity stuck in Khetam’s traffic.

“Does it have anything to do with the fertilizer and the man transporting it?” Madelyn inquires.

In spite his admirable performance in her bed last night, if the reason Mark has so rudely come back this morning is not connected to the most plausible terrorist incident, Madelyn will throw him out. She suspects something brews with heathens. Rumors of infiltration carry more merit than anyone outside the military gives them. That alone should be enough for the military and they should assume a terrorist attack is imminent.

“Maybe,” Mark answers.

“You heard that story, right? Explosives were intercepted traveling from the encampment to the only local seaport outside the Wall. It was going the wrong direction – huh?”

“Madelyn, please.”

She persists. “Little mistakes unravel elaborate plans.”

“Let’s go, Madelyn.”

“Reporters surmise the fertilizer was being smuggled into Khetam through its ports. Everyone knows the seaport is the least secure section of Khetam.”

Mark has had enough. “I’ll take the story myself. Our whole military is in the Shur taking care of that business.”

Madelyn clears her throat and crosses her arms. She faces him. “You could have gone without me all along.”

“After last night, I would have never heard the end of it,” Mark claims. He recognizes where her attitude comes from – last night. This morning was not the first time he had witnessed spite fester, but now was the only time he will deal with her jealousy. Thankfully, she was mad and not crying. His old friend seems incapable of disappointing him.

He even feels pangs of guilt for behaving so badly, but Madelyn must understand his situation cannot be helped. He is unhappily married and prefers not to make his life at home any more unbearable. Mark silently tortures his wife. He sees no reason he should suffer outright confrontation.

“Are you going to tell me what happened?” Madelyn asks. She drops her arms and walks into her bedroom. Mark follows.

"About the story? I'll tell you on the way."

"No." Madelyn frowns. "About you, last night." She clears her throat again and grasps the bedroom door. "Excuse me, I have to dress."

Mark is vexed. "I've already seen you naked. You're making me leave? After last night?"

"Yes, especially after last night." Madelyn pushes him from the room. She would not have been able if he didn't accommodate her shove. She then shuts the door. "Besides, I can always have my modesty. Tell me why you left."

"You know, Madelyn," Mark answers. He walks into the kitchenette; a nook appended to the only other room of the apartment besides the bedroom. He instantly marvels the fact the appliances are scaled half-size the real things, custom built for the tiny spaces they occupy. He spots the automatic coffee maker and searches the cupboard for coffee and filters.

"Merriam would have made my life hell. You, of all people, know that." Mark gives up looking for coffee. He doubts Madelyn has any. There was no place she can keep it that he hadn't searched in the minute he spent looking. He shouts so his friend hears him through her closed bedroom door. "Besides, it's a good thing I went home, I heard a story about missing soldiers down at the docks. They had permanent assignments and had been down there almost three years."

Madelyn's interest peaks and she hurries dressing herself. If Mark plans to go where she thinks, they had no time they might spare. She shouts through her bedroom door. "The volume of ships and cargo coming and going makes contraband enforcement tough. Trucks don't fit in the gates through the Wall."

"No airfields inside Khetam, either," Mark adds to the second conversation Madelyn conducts. "But heathens don't have boats."

Madelyn thinks the clothes she wore yesterday are a good combination – a gray knee length skirt and peach long-sleeved blouse. What she knows about fashion, she expects she will clash with Mark's tan slacks and brilliant blue short-sleeved shirt. Still, coordinating a new outfit will take too much time. Madelyn does her best and shakes out the wrinkles. Antiperspirant and a little perfume top this morning's preparation. She leaves her hair tied back in a single ponytail.

"And?" she prompts her guest and examines her pimples.

"So I called military headquarters this morning when I knew a real person would answer the phone."

"And?" Madelyn opens the bedroom door and Mark gives her a sidelong look. She knows his disapproval is because her recycled outfit. "Listen, mister, I would have liked time for a shower, too. Maybe if you had called ahead, I could have looked more to your taste. Just tell me what happened when you talked to your girl at headquarters."

Mark raises his hands in surrender. "Okay, I'm sorry."

"C'mon, Mark." Now Madelyn rushes. She pulls the cushions from her love seat and expects she will find her purse. It typically slips behind them.

"Well, I asked if there were any developments on the missing soldiers. There was."

Once Madelyn finds her purse, her flighty lover opens the front door.

"Ooo," she randomly remembers. "That truck with fertilizer was registered to an owner in Gomorrah, deceased many years ago. The military will probably dead-end in the preliminary part of the investigation."

Mark smiles and gestures into the warm, dry air outside.

"Let's go," Madelyn says. "Tell me more."

The pair hustle out the front of Madelyn's apartment building toward Mark's silver coupe. Buying the Corbeta was the first thing he had done after the tragic birth of his stillborn child. He made the purchase in either defiance of added responsibility or he had celebrated preserving a degree of freedom.

Madelyn remembers when he bought the car, and that it caused a great deal of controversy between his and his wife's families – especially when Mark had gotten more emotional about a fitted car cover than the approaching anniversary of his child's death. He had completely ignored his wife's bout of crippling depression and Merriam then stayed with her

parents for a month. Sadly, she came back to her husband. Madelyn's never learned why.

A solid wall of parked vehicles partitions both sides of the street. More automobiles sail down the road and all move in one direction, toward the freeway. Mark had parked in front of a fire hydrant, a common practice. He's merely taken advantage of the available opening and parking zones that aren't enforced this early in the morning.

Right now, the chief concern for the military was keeping traffic moving on the freeway. Headquarters dedicates resources exclusively for that purpose. The Church was politically motivated and in response, their authorities mandated traffic control. Concessions such as this for the will of the populace, instead dictates, were rare.

Despite the predictable routine in Khetam, lack of more crime amazes everyone in the city. This morning, Mark's left his car unlocked and the windows rolled down. He usually ascribes nothing stolen from his automobile to be some miracle because the hereditary decency of the Chosen people. Still, the clothe top stays up most of the time and today is no exception.

While they stroll from her apartment, Mark relays the details of his story to Madelyn. He tells her "The missing guards were reprimanded on numerous occasions."

He opens the passenger door of Corbeta for his special friend.

"That's no surprise," she quips.

Mark gets into his convertible and slips his gaudy sports car into the traffic of the surface street. His slick car dances between moving vehicles. Corbeta handles so easily, Mark continues filling Madelyn with information.

"Details are unavailable and probably not relevant," he says then recites his opinion.

"Typical causes of reprimand include drunkenness, tardiness, insubordination – or a combination of any or all of the ills that plague working soldiers."

In this extreme case, Mark safely implies the stagnant soldiers no longer fit the military's mold. The records of the two men will only exemplify their unnamed violations. His conclusions impress Madelyn. For the sake of learning professional tricks, she questions her fellow reporter's assumption.

"How do you know that, if you don't know details?"

"Frequent short-term assignments in diverse locations and guard duty, drawn out over years, indicate a troubled soldier." The same applies for priests, but nobody discusses faults of the clergy. Mark continues speaking while he joins the flow of automobiles onto the freeway.

"These two particular soldiers had been assigned guard duty and watched cargo stacked on the docks. The pair worked the second shift when dockhands had secured the area for the night and were dismissed. Their job entailed marching vacuous circles inside fenced loading zones, and checking laden and locked trucks that couldn't leave the yard before curfew."

"Why are guards needed during curfew? Nobody lives near the docks."

"The military oversees shipments and perform searches before goods come off boats. They also monitor cargo in waiting trucks, twenty-four hours a day. These two steps hold the highest potential for discovery of contraband or evidence of sabotage."

Madelyn nods her head and continues listening.

"The missing soldiers weren't responsible for those critical areas. Their job only guaranteed everything stayed put. Boring but not difficult, especially after the yard empties. Those soldiers were the only two souls around, besides random patrols in the harbor and on the streets outside a chain link fence separating the dockyard and seashore from Khetam."

"When did the two guards go missing?"

"When the third shift arrived. Alpha, military jargon for the station designated for the change-of-guard, was abandoned. The replacements waited a half-hour before they began their scheduled patrol. The relief then notified a superior officer. And the original two guards never return, and weren't found during a subsequent search."

"That isn't exact." Madelyn complains.

"No one knows precisely when the soldiers disappeared. The rounds checklist is also missing. That and the sheet wouldn't have been any help. Lazy soldiers tick off the list at the beginning or the end of shifts. Paperwork these days is, in most cases, an optional formality. The

only certain thing is both of them were unaccounted-for at the end of their shift.”

“And they showed up in the first place?”

“Earlier, the missing soldiers had arrived at the yard, received a status report from the shift they relieved and waved goodbye to a few acquaintances. The gates were then locked and all areas stayed secure. Facts point toward a couple of malcontents absent without leave.”

“How did you find all of this?” Madelyn asks. She suspects her friend had charmed a clerk. She convinces herself it's how he gets his early leads. However, this amount of detail suggests he had made a connection higher up the rank and file.

Mark didn't bother wading up to his waist in traffic. He stomps the accelerator and jumps ahead an elderly gentleman who tries driving defensively, but he reacts too slowly. Mark waits for the bellow of honking horns to end before he answers Madelyn.

“Experience,” he gloats. The answer is an unsatisfying morsel. “After a while, you learn who you talk to and what to ask. You write the story even before you start an investigation, if censors don't do it for you.”

“Well, writing the story is not hard to do if it's flagged for censorship.” Experience had taught Madelyn that much. “Anyway, about the missing soldiers. What happened?”

“They found one.”

“What did he say?” Madelyn realizes the question is presumptive when she asks. She waves her hands and means to erase the premature query.

“Nothing, he's dead. They found him floating in the middle of the harbor. The tide must have carried his body out, if the soldier wasn't dumped there intentionally. I don't think heathens can swim, but maybe sympathizers do.”

“That would have been foolish to take a boat out at night. Patrols can easily spot a lone craft on the water.”

“Smart,” Mark said. The praise sounds condescending. Madelyn forgives the tone in light of her earlier question.

“How do they know one didn't kill the other?” she asks. The unfortunate scenario happens a lot.

Mark hesitates. “Chosen don't kill each other.”

He isn't entirely convinced by the false belief. Chosen lie and cheat each other, but murder and theft are supposedly different sins all together. Those are degenerative. Thinking one Chosen will kill another is preposterous. Mark thinks his friend's question reflects her novice outlook on the world. She will soon learn herself and accept the way things are.

“His throat was cut.” Mark states flat. “And the killer carved a Star of Lucifer on his face.”

“Sounds like heathens, they might be upset they lost their manure.”

Madelyn focuses on other questions. She doesn't give time for a mental image of a grisly mutilation to form in her mind. “What do you think? Are heathens really in Khetam? Might this have anything to do with Yehowah?”

“Thinking Yehowah is involved might go too far, but I do think heathens are here. That's what we'll see ourselves, once we propose an assignment. I imagine the military dredges the harbor for the other soldier.”

“We got this story?” Madelyn asks. She finds their luck unbelievable. A mangled and murdered soldier in a secure area sounds like a high profile assignment, much higher than the murder of an un-ranked priest in the ghetto. The story will surely go directly to a trusted reporter.

“Yeah, we got it. Well, we'll claim it when the primary doesn't get to headquarters on time. The military assigned the story to Ralph Menton. Remember him?”

“Sure,” Madelyn said. “He handled all the stories about Yehowah for months at a time.”

“Well, he can't be contacted. So it's fair game for anyone on the list behind him.”

The story assignment sounds too good to believe. Madelyn hates to see the opportunity dangled in front of her nose and have it yanked away. If she was going to be disappointed, she wanted to know which way to look and see the letdown coming. “How do you know Ralph won't turn up once we get to headquarters?”

“Ralph's a drunk,” Mark sneers. “We got this one, Madelyn. I'm on the list and we know

which story we want; we just pick it up before some rube gets lucky.”

The traffic slows while drivers wait turns at a blinking red light at the freeway on-ramp. During their conversation’s intermission, Madelyn realizes the significance of her inclusion. Mark did not need to stop and pick her up. He didn’t even have to tell her of the development. She half-expects if something of this magnitude had come up, she’d never even hear about it. Mark could simply have gone incommunicado despite their proposed joint effort and last night. Reporters live in that kind of world – them and everyone else alive on the Shur.

She had even taken a class at school called “Strategy and Tactics in Journalism.” She thought the subject went over-the-top when the instructor lectured that once a doughboy like Madelyn graduated and started her career, she needed to think like a soldier dropped behind enemy lines. She must consider everyone hostile – fellow reporters, the military, the Church, everybody. Mark breaks the rules for her.

“Mark,” she begins sincere. “I want to thank you for this. I know you could have kept the assignment for yourself. You have every right.”

He had sustained his sneer since commenting about Ralph Menton’s drunkenness. His grin changes into a genuine and adorably smug smile. “We have a deal, remember?”

“Still, this is a big deal. I can almost forgive you for last night.”

“Madelyn, I told you I couldn’t stay, but thank you just the same.”

“I did say almost. I mean it, Mark.”

“Hey, before you get uptight again – and I must say you are stunning when you’re angry – we’re sharing a byline. I think that’s worth a full pardon.”

Mark rolls up his window and points for Madelyn to do the same. They both know the fumes on the freeway will soon grow thick. Despite the roads becoming clear in the still of every night, and a loose breeze from the sea, a permanent, invisible cloud of pitchy vapor forms in the evening. It clings in cracks and crevices of overpasses; its transparent tentacles wrap around signposts, leaving greasy black soot. Acidic gases scratch when the stuff creeps into nasal passages and make throats raw – and an open window is an invitation for an intangible monster wanting nothing more than to seed cancer in a living lung.

“All right. You get this one; but because the number of times you’ve pulled that stunt on other women, don’t think this means you have a clean slate.”

“Nobody does,” Mark mumbles. Madelyn misses the comment hidden in the air conditioning of his sport car. Her friend, co-writer and lover claims “That makes me just about even.”

Chapter 13 Sabbath Eve

The trip downtown to military headquarters the other day would have frustrated Mark and Madelyn. They were fortunate this time – early morning accidents strains the flow of traffic on the freeway and the military converts the emergency lane into an additional traffic route. Motorists move again, until sharp debris eventually punctures holes into tires.

Drivers take chances circumventing the usual flow of automobiles. Luck blesses Mark and Madelyn. Only the vehicles following his silver convertible are smitten with the predictable flat tires. The pair of reporters pass through the unblocked passage unwounded before it seals shuts.

When accidents occur in Khetam, wrecker crews brush the resulting shrapnel toward the shoulders of the road. An occasional sweeper and winter rain eventually carries the debris to the gutter and down the ramps, where the piles are easier and safer to remove. In the meantime, these colorful, misshapen and malicious ornaments decorate the gutters of the freeway.

The debris glitters and threatens passing motorists. Most hazardous are small metal caltrops caught in tire treads. They twist and push through the rubber skin of tires. After inflicting their damage, the sharp debris, often just a screw, flies off and lands back on the road, and waits to bite again.

As foretold, when another wheel blows, its spinning steel rim shreds the tire into flat scraps and throws the predacious debris back onto the road and the trap is reset. That one screw

claims victim after victim, strewing scraps of tires. The shreds curl upon themselves and resemble flattened animals racked in a pain following the poor creatures into death.

The remains are big chunks of rubber flesh, torn from carcasses by claws disinterested in the meat. The lost fat and paws become sacrifices to the sadistic freeway – so much man-made road kill. Mark is wise and abandons the emergency lane. He tolerates the frequent starts and stops rather than chance his turn with a flat tire during rush hour. The slow moving official lanes were usually safest.

Once the two reporters arrive in the wide and perpetually congested front parking lot of military headquarters, Mark asks Madelyn “Stay in the car?”

She doesn’t need to ask why. She has already convinced herself Mark goes and sees his contact and other lover. His walking into military headquarters with another woman might complicate the situation, even if he did properly introduce Madelyn as his colleague.

A friendly exchange between strangers might actually damage trust and cooperation. No matter how brief or casual the introduction, intuition exposes unspoken realities. Insinuating verbal slips and guarded postures are dangerously unmanageable. Although unspoken, Madelyn agrees with Mark and skirts awkward suspicion. Professionalism requires reservation.

“I’ll wait,” she tells him.

Mark does whatever is necessary for success. He possesses the assets for the job, and his looks and personality disarms every woman he assails. What bothers Madelyn is the fact he obviously enjoys manipulating them, privilege comes so easily to the man. His advantage had never mattered so much before she slept with him. Prior to last night, she had felt merely and generally envy and a gender-based distaste for his chauvinism.

This morning, her position changed. Madelyn must get over her growing jealousy. She constantly reminds herself Mark is married, yet a swinger at his core. He is not the kind of man with whom a romantic relationship is ever possible. He best offers a fickle friendship and some risqué fun.

Now Madelyn wishes she had gone into the military headquarters with him. He takes too long and She thinks she should have accompanied her partner. For appearances, she might even have waited a minute or so after the door had closed behind him before sauntering inside.

Anxious, Madelyn contemplates going inside headquarters now. She could lie and say she looks for another story, anything that would help keep her near her “old” friend. If he knew she was in the building, he might be inclined to rush his illicit business. If he knew she watched him, Madelyn might also make any rendezvous too difficult.

Janitor closets all over military headquarters offer myriad spots for speedy romps with his contacts. Madelyn considers going into headquarters now and standing in lines. Anything would have been better than sitting outside, alone with time and her thoughts, her expectations, misgivings and envy.

She believes she must act more like Mark – the man never seems pained by regret or worry. He lives life without fear of repercussion. His flaunting and risk-taking pays-off. The way he behaves and his success makes her wonder if he exercises any level of judgment at all, good or poor. She wonders how much of herself she would lose if she adopted his lifestyle.

After more endless minutes, Madelyn spots the gorgeous man emerge from the pair of reinforced glass doors at the front of a long, single-story cinder block building – the entrance into military headquarters. “Just in time,” she mumbles – she was going to look for him. Damn appearances, the momentum of her mind makes her anxious. If she had just gone inside and flirted with the idea of making trouble, she would have released her useless pent-up energy.

Thankfully, Mark doesn’t appear ruffled. Madelyn couldn’t handle his pandering in the state she had worked herself into. Instead, he happily carries a pale green folder and a steaming floral patterned paper cup. Madelyn recognizes a summary gathered inside the thick folder. They had gained the assignment! Her excitement drowns all other thoughts and emotions, even relief when her sour rumination ends. She leans over and opens the driver-side door for her partner.

Madelyn must ask before she believes. She refuses settling for a lower profile, substitute story. “That’s what I think it is, right?”

"You bet," Mark confirms and hands the floral cup to Madelyn. An oily curl floats atop a surface of black coffee.

"It's hot," he cautions. He then explains the assignment. "Our story, the big one."

His thoughtfulness impresses Madelyn. Lack of caffeine had not started driving needles through her forehead before Mark saves her, so she thanks him. "You're so sweet."

She then prods the man to start his sports car. "What are you waiting for? Let's go."

He had the keys already in the ignition and Mark smirks at Madelyn. "Not so long ago, I couldn't get you out of bed, now you're pushing me around."

He starts his car and drives from the large, packed parking lot outside military headquarters.

"You took me to bed, remember?"

Madelyn thinks about her remark after she's let it loose. She either implies something or she had simply let out a puff of steam. She still boils a little over the fabricated details of a meeting Mark may have had with an anonymous contact. Madelyn stops right there – paranoia sabotages good intentions. Mark takes her comment in a context of his own.

"How can I forget? It was magical," he patronized.

"Shut up." Madelyn punches his thick bicep. The blow bounces off harmlessly.

Mark only raises his brow.

Madelyn now smirks. "Let me see the summary."

He hands her the folder. Besides being thick, stamped, and signed, the front cover displays additional stamps. The words "Priority" and "Assigned" appear below Mark's name. Actually, his name is written twice – once after the standard "Authorized" stamp and again next to the new "Assigned." Madelyn pauses, thinking about the two signatures. She wonders if someone like a proxy can sign-out stories for assignees. That step would eliminate quite a bit of wasted running around. The list of perks an established reporter apparently enjoys continues to grow. She will ask Mark about the stamps later.

A second summary sheet, recycled from a story last night, appends the latest. The top sheet lists the names and ranks of the two missing soldiers. The sheet fails to provide an estimated time of their disappearance. The following shift had arrived and found nobody to relieve.

The premise sounds like foul play, especially given the vast amount of blood cited on the docks. Nothing Mark had told Madelyn about the soldiers appears in the folder. She supposes the information did not belong in the story, but frugal sentences amplify the depth of the unreported background. Her friend's contact at headquarters seems someone privy to secrets and minutia. This contact probably has an office. The woman Madelyn's conjured and Mark would not need a closet; a twist of blinds provides instant privacy.

The second summary sheet stapled beneath the first reports one of the soldiers has been found in the water not far from the dock. A slit throat and ensuing copious blood lost are listed as the cause of death. The report includes evisceration and facial mutilation. This information is more than Mark had conveyed. Madelyn thinks he's withheld details she did not care to hear first thing in the morning. She appreciates his consideration to an extent, but this story is important. She needs all the facts.

"Mark, did you know the organs of a soldier were removed?"

"You mean his guts were cut out?"

"Grossly."

"No, I did not."

"Sounds like your connection at headquarters doesn't know everything after all." Madelyn hopes for a reaction. With luck, Mark might betray details about his other lover.

"It's in the summary, isn't it?"

"Well, yes."

"Then we got what we need and a little more."

Mark waits in the chain climbing the nearest freeway ramp. He and Madelyn go toward the docks so that they might view the crime scene and gather those minor details that entail good

journalism. The docks lay on the far side of Khetam. Typical of any travel in the city, the trip involves a great deal of patience.

"Tell me more," Mark entreats Madelyn. "What else is there?"

She assumes he doesn't play her game. Madelyn thumbs between the two sheets in the story assignment. She scans them top to bottom, and back up again, looking for difficult keywords. The military must provide a special course for writing summaries – how writers can precisely execute spelling mistakes, sentence fragments, and generally bad grammar.

Censors refine each skill and create confusing and cryptic propaganda-centered templates. The source material pasted into these formats is ripe with double meaning and missing details, and reporters are given plenty of gaps for imagination. Her job is to make the fiction comprehensive and believable, an identical process as her transcription work.

"I have always hated these things," she complains. The first page contains nothing of use. She chews her bottom lip and folds back the sheet again. She wishes she had heard the original, embellished news story on the radio. She might have then got some entertainment before becoming acquainted personally with the grim case. Madelyn tells her partner "The only thing you probably didn't know is the condition of the body, and I already told you what's here."

"Anything on the second soldier? If they found him, it should be noted there. That would be great. The rest of the story is ours."

"No. There are the photos in the envelope." Madelyn closes the folder. She needs more time before looking at gore. She has the whole trip from headquarters in which she might prepare herself for black and white photos of a scarred, dead countenance. Given the listed condition of the corpse, the face was probably the safest image in the stack.

"Give them to me," Mark says. "I forgot you don't like at that kind of thing. I can screen them for you."

"But you're driving."

The protest is naïve because they crawl along. Madelyn had written whole stories slowly drifting in busy traffic like today's. She's even eaten lunch at the same time.

Mark grins and extends his hand. "We're a team."

Madelyn only hopes she avoids an accidental glance at the photos. Mark rests his wrists on top of the steering wheel and points out the windshield with strained fingers, displaying his best mockery of indignation.

She relents. "Oh, all right."

Madelyn opens the folder again and pulls out the envelope. She peeks inside just enough and finds which side of the photos face up. She flips the envelope and pulls out the pictures faced down.

Mark waits with his hand extended. Once she taps the photocopied images into a neat pile, he takes the paper. They fan in his careless grip. Madelyn gasps, turns away and watches other motorists.

"You're safe," Mark promises his friend. "Drink your coffee."

The coffee he had given her has lost just enough heat that drinking the greasy fuel becomes bearable. The taste is less so, but Madelyn needs caffeine. At the moment, she takes any source available.

Riding as a passenger, she sees Khetam as would a tourist. Any time she finds herself stuck in traffic, she does sightseeing – but she never actually looks. No other driver scans the exterior of their automobile, either.

Everyone focuses attention on opportunity. Focus helps an ambitious traveler jump into a lane moving faster or close a sudden gap before someone else steals ahead. Losing a tailgated vehicle usually results in sacrificing a hard-fought-and-won position in the rolling parking lot.

A choice showroom of makes and models surrounds Mark and Madelyn this late morning. Madelyn swears she counts back all the years of her life just noting model years in which the other automobiles are built. Some truly handsome and beautiful vehicles drag themselves along the freeway, like Mark's Corbeta.

No single model holds special appeal. Cars and trucks have generally never interested

Madelyn. Her mindset was geared toward function and affordability. She didn't even know the names of most cars. Still, seeing a good-looking automobile in the wild plants impulsive seeds.

Both molded curves and acute angles fascinate her. If Madelyn achieves success, she will buy a beautiful car. Style didn't matter, but color did. The new automobile will be red, like her current and economical Mariposa. The hot hue appeals to her. She likes how the sun reflects in the gloss. Driving a red car was divining with fire.

Of course, beaten boxes on wheels also crowd the roads. In fact, more dented and scarred antiques appear and break down in Khetam every year. Beautiful and ugly cars share those common scratches and dents. Her enthusiasm for a new automobile sinks when she realizes only a matter of days, or even mere hours, will pass before her prize is marred. Everything nice is hard to come-by and more difficult to keep.

Madelyn turns toward the faces of drivers. Everyone stares, unmoving, dead ahead. They probably see no further than the inside of their skulls. Madelyn doubts any can repeat the license plate on the car in front of oneself. Oddly, every person behind a wheel looks as if they've lost something. The vision suggests people who have searched a long time then given up. Maybe they've forgotten they've stopped looking and each day blends into the next. Small tasks and diversions hold their dejection at bay. Then one day, they had simply forgotten they once pursued a misplaced "something."

The hopeless no longer bother looking. They unknowingly abandon lifelong quests. For a chilling moment, Madelyn thinks she recognizes what these people have lost, what everyone in the world discovers missing. They have lost their souls and now sit upright in coffins. She stops thinking such morbid thoughts. One moment, she had daydreamed of a new car and the next, she fills herself with depressing philosophy. She shivers despite the hot coffee.

"The guy is an amateur. He's sloppy," Mark states, thankfully.

"Who?" Madelyn turns. She makes a concerted effort and looks Mark directly in his wonderful amber eyes.

His voice brings her back to the present, but she doesn't want to freak herself out again. "Wait, don't show me."

Mark deftly places the pictures in his lap. He keeps the image right-side down. He then says "The cut on the soldier's face, it's all wrong."

"It's not a star?"

"Well, a bad one. It looks like something from a kindergarten class."

"I really doubt that," Madelyn replies absentminded. "I would hate to raise your kids."

"Yeah." Mark frowns and his friend doesn't notice.

Madelyn hardens herself. Equally unpleasant conversations and images will certainly fill the rest of the day. She wants to be a reporter. Of all kinds of work she has tried, she's come furthest, professionally, in this career. A test now accompanies this opportunity for her big break. She accepts the gauntlet. Missing breakfast this morning had actually resulted in a good turn of events. She makes a bold conclusion "What does it matter? I expect the murderer was in a hurry and it was dark."

"Yeah. Good points."

Mark hands the pictures back to Madelyn. She quickly stacks and slips them back into the envelope. All the while, she stares straight ahead, in case the photos curl over and the sight petrifies her. She stops averting her gaze once she hides the photos and puts the envelope into the green folder. The folder then disappears under her seat.

"Hey, that's a smart place for that." Mark looks pleased he's learned a new trick. "I should have thought of that a long time ago. It's a pain taking the package wherever you go."

"Mm-hmm," Madelyn agrees. "It's like a badge. When people see you coming with a green folder, they suddenly don't want to talk."

Impressed, Mark nods. He learns another new thing and his lack of tricks surprises Madelyn. He seems so successful yet he hasn't discovered these little habits of the trade. Him as an example, the only requirements for success apparently are good looks and a personality.

"I don't think heathens committed the murders," Mark declares. "I think it was personal,

maybe a vendetta.”

“Really? You can tell that by looking at those lousy photos? I don’t think the military wants that story.”

“We’ll give them what they want, that’s not a problem. I’m just afraid we might head into another dead end.”

“Mark, I wish you wouldn’t say that. I really need this.”

“I know you do. Believe me, I can use a good story, too.”

“What about the organs? That sounds like something a heathen would do, doesn’t it?”

Madelyn asks. “Sympathizers do lot of that.”

“Or a crazy guy with a grudge,” Mark casually replies. “The soldier might just have been cut up really bad and his guts could have fallen out in the water. His intestines might still be on the bottom of the bay, feeding crabs and whatnots.”

“I would appreciate less colorful conjecture, please.”

Madelyn recalls the story she had written about a priest’s murder at Saint Erasmus. “Do you think the same person who killed that priest committed these murders? The murderer might just be some random guy with a knife, looking for open doors and anyone alone after curfew.”

“Could be.” Mark licks his lips.

A small miracle blesses both him and Madelyn when the road suddenly opens – an accident has cleared and they are first at the gate. Mark kicks Corbeta forward. He talks all the while.

“Except, he killed two soldiers behind a fence. Both carried rifles. That random murderer would be a stupid and really lucky psychopath.”

“So is killing a priest – insane,” Madelyn explains. “Good sense and insanity are rarely roommates.”

Mark praises his friend. “You write the best tag lines about losing one’s mind, Madelyn.”

She grins and nods her head.

“You can be right,” Mark says and stirs her haze. “We’ll check it out. Let’s spin the idea to the military and see if the murders on the dock match your story.”

“Sounds like as good a plan as any,” Madelyn chirps. She likes being a team, especially when her ideas are praised.

The pair reach the docks after a couple hours of wrangling other stuck drivers. The gates at the docks have recently opened, late, and workers file into the yard. The military is checking ID cards at the fence though most dockhands wave greetings and call soldiers by name. Those unscripted men then go straight inside.

Mark drives past the yard, scouting a place he might pull over his car. Signs restrict parking on the streets outside the docks. Because the military keeps the docks secure, violations are not tolerated on the street outside. Although, the military is flexible. Horrendous tickets and fines are often dismissed in lieu of immediate detainment. Mark parks blocks away and the reporters walk from a residential area.

“I think everyone who lives in this neighborhood all work on the docks,” Mark says in idle conversation. His subject disguises a complaint. “They drive the short distance and fill every nearby parking spot – just so they punish visitors who live in better parts of Khetam.”

“Or just to keep them out,” Madelyn agrees. If not for her own inconvenience, she might have readily dismissed Mark’s flippant cynicism. She feels hot again even near the ocean and thanks Mark for generously running his air conditioning while they drove.

Madelyn pours the remainder of her bitter coffee on the ground and stands the floral cup over the evaporating puddle. Mark waits the extra moment and they go toward the gate together. She grabs and holds his hand until they are spied. When the reporters arrive at the dockyard gate, Mark speaks with the two guards watching them.

“We’re freelance reporters for military radio,” Mark explains. “We’re assigned a story about two dead guards. Is anyone able to provide details?”

Neither guard answers.

Mark persists. “You guys know Sergeant John Issa at the Wall, right? I drink with him.”

"Gimme your ID," one guard demands.

The reporter's credentials gain Mark and Madelyn admission into the dockyard. The soldier says nothing more. His swayed rifle barrel hastens the reporters past the entrance. The motion isn't threatening, the soldier swings his rifle because it's his habit.

"I guess we should go to the dock," Mark decides. "The summary said the murder was on the waterfront. An officer should be there, somewhere. We can talk to him."

Mark and Madelyn saunter toward the sea. A wide and straight stretch of blacktop points the way. The yard bustles despite and because of the military's investigation. Trucks are unloaded, inspected and loaded again. Piled and scattered cargo fills every open space.

If a system exists that separates loads, Madelyn can't see any. The dockyard has been plunged into chaos. Because the military oversees the operation, every truck is watched by an armed soldier. The operation then makes sense. Military personnel are experienced in rushing nonsensical, disorganized tasks.

"What's going on?" Madelyn asks Mark. "Those trucks the dockhands unloaded looked ready to go."

"There was a breach," her friend answers. "I imagine dead and missing soldiers are cause enough to believe anything might have been smuggled in or out."

"Maybe we should cover the story from that angle," Madelyn wonders aloud. She really doesn't want to see the crime scene. Now that she was close, she prefers not to see any carnage or trace. The fumigation at Saint Erasmus had saved her the first time she thought she was ready.

"That's not our story." Mark's tone becomes patronizing. "Madelyn, I have to tell you... breaking news is not going to make us friends at military headquarters. Those folks like writing the story. The Church mandates them."

Madelyn's mouth drops open. She had heard the same from friends and fellow reporters, but ignored their scary stories. They were all as inexperienced as Madelyn and didn't know any better than her. Now the same discouragement comes from someone successful and she respects, honestly. Before she can refute his claim, someone interrupts the reporters.

"Mark Adino," calls a gruff voice filled with excitement and surprise. "Mark, over here."

A short, older soldier behind a row of crates jumps up and down. The patch on his arm identifies him as a sergeant. Madelyn points at the man, for Mark's benefit, before the sergeant climbs the crates.

"Sergeant Issa," Mark exclaims.

"I thought you might know him," Madelyn said.

"I know why you're here," the sergeant shouts. "Come over here, I'll show you around."

"We just got luckier," Mark grins and whispers to Madelyn.

"Why? Who is that?"

"Sergeant Issa. He sometimes leads squads deployed at crime scenes. We go back to days when I started reporting, I owe him a lot. I think he adopted me. I'm his son and drinking buddy. There's nothing like knowing a sergeant who will help you skirt curfew and find free booze."

Mark takes Madelyn by the elbow and hustles her across the blacktop and around the crates. The rumbling sound of the sea rises above the ruckus of trucks and dockhands. Thundering, rolling and crashing waves hint the proximity of the shore. Nearby gulls chuckle and chastise each other.

The sergeant meets the pair halfway. The broad, small man grabs hold and the sergeant squeezes Mark's arm while they shake hands. Madelyn sees Mark wince. She is impressed. The sergeant stands a full head and shoulders shorter than Mark, but appears forged of folded steel.

"Lots of confiscation today," Mark said knowingly.

"Yep, every time we surprise 'em with a raid. All this stuff goes and makes somebody rich," the sergeant discloses.

"It's good to see you, too, John." Mark shakes his fingers once the sergeant releases his grip. "After you went to the Wall, I thought you finally gave it up and retired."

“Retire?” The sergeant sounds outraged. Madelyn can't tell if he plays with the young reporter. “That's why I'm here. I had some overdue leave. My commander told me to take it or lose it. I said lose it. He said fifteen years without a vacation is too long – damn them. Thank the Mortal God the military needed a hand on the docks, I was going out of my mind.”

“You didn't have that hairbrush under your nose the last time I saw you.”

“What, the mustache? I'm not trying to look pretty for you, boy. What do you think ma'am? I appreciate the opinion of a woman, not a pantywaist punk like this one.”

Mark interjects. “He doesn't get any more charming with a couple beers in him.”

“Shut your mouth a minute, will you? I'm making an acquaintance.” The sergeant turns back toward Madelyn. “I'm John Issa.”

“Hello, I'm Madelyn Sebash. The mustache is very distinctive.”

“Damned to the Shur! Now I know I'm getting old.” The sergeant brushes his whiskers. “Well, so much for stealing your girlfriend.”

“Madelyn and I are working together.”

“Sure. You're here about those soldiers, right?”

“You got us,” Mark says. “Can you help us out?”

“I'd head the other direction if any reporter but you came down here. Sure, but no quotes, you understand me?”

“Never, John. You ought to know me better than that.”

“Nothing personal. But you can't trust a reporter as far as you can throw one, although I can toss your scrawny butt halfway across this yard.”

“I've put on a few pounds, John. I don't want you to hurt your back.”

“I know how it is, censors can make life harder than it needs to be.”

Sergeant Issa ushers the visitors on a short walk. The docks are very close, behind a second row of crates. The trio move past the rows and walk parallel the water.

“I like being down by the sea,” the sergeant says. “Especially since it's been so flaming hot. This job would have been a slice of heaven during the heat wave.”

“It's still hot,” Madelyn clarifies. Sergeant Issa ignores her comment and continues talking.

“I was at the beach when those giant squids washed up. Did you hear about that? What a way to start a vacation – those things stunk worse than any dead heathen I ever smelled. As far as I'm concerned, the military should have burned the monsters along with those weird flies.”

Mark and Madelyn both recall tidbits in recent news about prehistoric squids and swarms of biting flies. The dead animals had made quite an impression on people at the beach. Madelyn bet the flies were the very same as those at Saint Erasmus. The insects had bit Jillie Ikraam and left ugly purple welts.

Events on the shore had become the biggest story of the week, chiefly because the news was uniquely different than the ordinary barrage from the Church and its military propaganda. Neither Madelyn or Mark had paid much attention. Bugs and monsters were not part of their myopic picture of current events.

Nevertheless, the sergeant tries his fable. “Those squids were huge and they looked strange, more like snakes. Tentacles ran up and down the body. I couldn't count how many each of the things had in that tangled mess.”

Madelyn squirms and covers her ears. Sergeant Issa grows animated, inspired that he freaks the woman reporter.

“I didn't want to hang around long and sort it out,” he giggles. “What got me was the teeth. They might have been spines, but they looked like shark teeth to me – no jaws. The teeth were all on one side, row after row of them. I couldn't tell if they came out the top or the bottom of the, their, uh, heads, I suppose.”

Madelyn sighs with a grunt and Mark feels empathy for his friend. Frustrated with the sergeant's distraction, he clears his throat. Issa gets his hint.

“Hey, if your story won't include heathens, you should squeeze those things in. Now that would be something worth listening-to. You can say our guys were yanked off the dock by sea

monsters and eaten alive. What do you think about that?"

"I think we better stick to the heathen angle," Mark says. "I don't think big fish bother carving stars on their dinner. Your idea is a tough sell."

"I'm serious, leave that mutilation part out, nobody cares anyway. This heathen crap in the Fort has run its course. I, for one, can tell you nothing will get past the Wall."

"I do what I'm told," Mark replies. "I just work for the military."

"Don't we all? And the Church." Sergeant Issa stops. He presses his knuckles against his hips and hooks his thumbs over a black nylon belt. "Here we are. This is the spot."

They stand in a large, open area on the dock near the water's edge. The clearing feels unnatural given the high stacks of crates at either side. The perimeter is wet, as if recently hosed down. The rank stench of bleach replaces the ubiquitous diesel and salty smells from the sea. Madelyn stops herself against laughing aloud.

Spared again, she finds her relief difficult to hide. Her career may yet survive. For the sake of her nerves, she must only accept life as handed to her. She wastes energy going back and forth investigating crime scenes, and now with Mark. She just needs faith.

"Dock hands have already washed down the perimeter. I'm sure you saw the photos." Sergeant Issa steps into the middle of the soaked boardwalk. Every boot-step echoes against the water below the planks when he strolls alone upon the maroon stain. He points toward the fence across the yard. "A blood trail runs straight through the scrub."

"Sergeant," Madelyn states. "I heard the victims had problems. Do you think they were involved with smuggling or bribes?"

The sergeant shoots Madelyn a hard look. "I don't know what you think you might do with that kind of information and I'm not going to answer."

Madelyn glances and sees the same face drawn on Mark. The point is obvious, but she does not appreciate the disapproval from her friend as well.

"How about I show you around?" the sergeant adds.

"Thanks, John," Mark says. "We appreciate that. Where was the body found?"

"Not far from the dock, just out there." The sergeant points opposite the path toward the fence. He says "As luck would have it, the body bobbed like a cork when someone was there and saw it. A soldier spotted the body. He had been assigned oversight of cargo once it was cleared off the dock. I don't know what he was thinking, looking across water instead paying attention to duty."

Madelyn complains about Sergeant Issa to the same man. "Does anybody get lucky with you?"

"He got lucky something stirred the corpse from the bottom. We fished out most of the soldier before he could sink again."

"Most?" Madelyn's missed the implication.

"No guts," the sergeant reminds her. "The dead soldier was doing his impression of the Mortal God. The poor fool isn't going to heaven now."

"Any news on the second soldier?" deflects Mark.

"Nope. We had a couple divers in this area. A trawler is now in the harbor. You can see it out there with patrol boats."

"So that's pretty much it, then. The soldiers had their throats cut." Mark summarizes how the story will read, and included both soldiers. "Let's say the guards were outnumbered, two to one, then left dead for the next shift. They were carved and guts cut out."

He hopes the military finds the other body before he and Madelyn leave. If both soldiers were found, the story can then simply be riveted together with fabricated facts. Everyone's job would be easier if new discoveries were not continually appended to the original story. Good reporters also make censors happy when contradictions are already flattened out. Reporters are appreciated for that creative foresight.

"A little dry, but it will work," the sergeant states. "The sea monster story is better radio."

"In a perfect world," Madelyn comments with sincerity.

"So what happened last night after the second shift informed their superior?" Mark asks

Sergeant Issa.

"Well, the search of the yard turned up that trail I pointed-out. That's where the killer jumped the fence. He probably came in that way. Looks like patrols missed his entrance and exit. The guy must have come from somewhere close. Anyway, once inside, he had free reign. I'm surprised those two idiots had even left the guardhouse. They might still be alive if they had skipped doing their jobs entirely instead half-ass. That last part is off the record."

Mark nods and the sergeant continues his candid exposition.

"The search was expanded outside the yard. I suspect the killer got in and out a lot quicker than reported, he left no trace."

"Or he slipped into the home of a sympathizer," Madelyn suggests.

"Now that's thinking," the sergeant smiles. His lips stay hidden beneath the gray mustache, but his whiskers point askew. Soft wrinkles fold his cheeks. "Go with this lady's ideas, Mark. They'll liven up those radio stories."

"Yeah, that's good, Madelyn," Mark said. "We should use that."

She smiles, happy her earlier question had not banned her from the conversation. She ventures another.

"Are there any civilian witnesses, someone who had seen anything or smelled something fishy?"

"Nope, not a single civilian came forward. That's typical, but curfew was in effect. Officially, nobody knew anything before patrols knocked on doors and woke everybody up."

Mark asks the sergeant "Any thoughts about where the killer went after he jumped the fence?"

"The patrol circuit usually runs northward, but sometimes soldiers shake up the pattern – so the route doesn't get predictable and boring. The best guess is the killer followed a patrol on foot and went north."

"What's north?" Madelyn inquires.

"Private warehouses and indigo mills. They were secured on the first pass. A break and entry would have given away the killer's hiding place. We know he has enough sense and avoided that trick."

"How's the search going in the harbor? Do you think the military will find the other soldier this morning?"

The hair on Sergeant Issa's head stays pointed after he lifts his hand away. He scratches through the sharp bristles of his crew cut. "Nope. If the trawler hasn't found him by now, the body is gone. I believe it's still out there, but we won't find it."

Madelyn abruptly changes her questions. "Do you remember that murdered priest at Saint Erasmus? That happened not long ago."

"I sure do," Sergeant Issa answers enthusiastic. "It's funny you bring that up. I was on duty at the Wall when his replacement arrived from Gomorrah. That new priest, Reverend Gage, was in bad shape. After a patrol located his abandoned vehicle in the Shur, the Church gave him up for dead. They thought heathens had taken him into the desert. Wrote him off, but he only had car trouble."

"That's a death sentence in the waste," Mark comments. Sergeant Issa nods and continues his explanation.

"Turns out, a couple UnChosen brothers find him. They gave Gage a ride into Khetam, probably expecting reward. Those boys were a goofy pair. They said they were looking for Yehowah. Can you believe that? They wanna collect that bounty."

"That is strange," Mark agrees and looks at Madelyn.

"It's not right-minded," Issa judges.

Madelyn returns a question for Sergeant Issa. "Do you think the person who committed the murders here is the same who killed that old priest?"

"I don't know about that, anything is possible. Does the Church want the two incidents linked together?"

"Not right now, but there can be a connection. If the Church does put the crimes together,

we have the jump on the story.” Madelyn stands at attention, looking proud.

“Well, aren’t you ambitious,” the sergeant states. “Mark, you can learn something about hard work from this one.”

Madelyn beams.

“I can’t help you, Miss,” Sergeant Issa apologizes. “I didn’t follow the Saint Erasmus story further than the radio broadcast.”

Madelyn refrains from announcing she had written the story. Mark recognizes she itches and wants to brag. He doesn’t help her.

“Then, that will do,” he says. “I think we have all we need, Madelyn. Let’s write the draft and get the story back to headquarters.”

“Sounds fine,” she replies deflated a fraction.

Mark wants the conversation to end on a note less business-like. The sergeant deserves the consideration – they are friends. He asks Sergeant Issa a personal question. “After this, are you going back to the Wall?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Sergeant, when do you think the military will open that road on the top?” Madelyn asks, genuinely curious and hungry for attention.

“That’s up to the Church, Miss. Personally, I’d like to see it stay pristine. If the public gets access, it will be overrun just like the freeways. A lot of blood went into that Wall. Chosen and UnChosen alike lost lives in accidents and to heathen terrorists. Do you know how many workers died?”

“I’ve heard the stories,” Mark replies, and hopes the conversation will not meander into gratuitous detail.

“Dozens,” Sergeant Issa volunteers.

“Thirty-two,” Madelyn exacts.

The sergeant surrenders. “Close enough, one for every year the Mortal God lived in the Shur. Heathens claim the deaths are a small measure of His vengeance. Can you believe that shit? Pardon me, ma’am.”

“They’re coming up short. He lived longer than that,” Madelyn submits. She can’t help but smile at the sergeant’s profane slip and subsequent blush and still does.

“I believe you are right, but then, who’s to really say?” the sergeant theorizes.

An idle silence signals the awkward time for friendly goodbyes had arrived.

“Hey Mark, it was good to see you again,” Sergeant Issa says warmly. The wrinkles in his curved cheeks come again. “If you got the time, you should come over to my place. You should come, too, Madelyn. We’ll show you what life is like after curfew. You’ll have a blast.”

“I don’t doubt it,” she exaggerated.

Madelyn clenches her teeth and shakes the sergeant’s hand, expecting every bone in her own will snap in his grasps. But – he is very gentle. The only hard parts of his clasp are the thick calluses on his palm and the shanks of his fingers. Madelyn determines she likes the man. This sort of friend makes Mark fortunate in countless ways.

After saying their farewells, Mark and Madelyn return the way they had come. Happily for her, he didn’t feel exploring the bloody trail was necessary. Military investigators will have already scoured away all evidence. Madelyn agrees for her own selfish reasons.

During their walk to the silver convertible, the reporters discuss the details of their story. By the time they are back in the car, Mark plans they adhere to the outline he had provided to Sergeant Issa. The more experienced reporter was probably right – giving the military only what they expect was always a safe and sure road. He surprises Madelyn when he pulls from the curb and cuts a tight u-turn.

“You’re right about a connection. We should have gone back to Saint Erasmus. When we turn our story in, I’ll talk to some people at headquarters. I’ll tell them what you think and if they bite, we’ll go to the front of the line. I think the murderer is a serial killer. The pieces fit.”

Madelyn blushes. The warmth had begun in her bosom and spread upward until it radiates from her cheeks. “See what you get when you listen to your wiser friends?”

"I don't think wise is a word I would use for Sergeant John Issa. After all, he's stuck on spreading stories about monsters."

"Just the same, I like him." Madelyn can't stop herself smiling. Her warm sensation makes her bold. She asks something else from her friend. "Mark, stay with me tonight."

He clicks his tongue and squints. Another night spent with Madelyn will make his wife furious. Yet he's always said he wanted just that.

Madelyn was in a voraciously amorous mood. That fact is obvious just looking at her. Mark wants to sleep with her again too, and another tryst seems feasible. Tomorrow is the Sabbath – no work was possible – none for the Chosen. This chance meeting with John Issa had also offered a handy accomplice who might call his wife and support whatever fiction Mark spins. His wife has always blindly accepted the sergeant's lies.

Mark remembers Madelyn's weekly gatherings. He didn't want to get caught in her bed when her old school buddies visit. He may even know one or two and staying coy was essential for his image. "When are your friends coming over?"

"I can cancel. They can meet somewhere else."

"Hmm."

"Is that a yes?"

Mark's face relaxes. A devilish grin spreads, uncovering perfect teeth. "That's a yes."

Madelyn squeals and tries jumping into his lap. The center console bars her way. The jolt bruises her hip, but does not damage her enthusiasm. She leans over and kisses him hard on his lips. He swerves the vehicle and recovers. He daydreams and believes they will definitely have fun tonight.

Chapter 14 Wastrel Son

Davey Ikraam informs Hen Cortras "Spiders have eight legs and bugs have six legs."

Hen can't disagree with the fact. The problem is that neither he nor Davey are bugologists, whether amateurs or with degrees. There isn't much difference between the knowledge of either the boy or the younger Cortras compared across the great gulf separating the two from specialists. However, an expert didn't need to say Davey and Hen observe something unnatural.

Davey had found a huge fly, like those swept from the floor of Saint Erasmus. This one, like those, has black and white stripes running the length of the insect's elongated abdomen. Little carcasses hide everywhere in overlooked cracks and corners. Their eternal resting places remains hidden while the bugs dry into dust, unless some adventurous or bored explorer discovers the small dead. Davey has.

The boy had crawled under pews entertaining himself. There is where Davey had found the expired insect and now shows Hen Cortras. Hen just can't keep-up with Davey any longer. He watches and rests. More so, the young Cortras worries. Stress over his missing brother saps his energy.

The mother of the retarded teenager had left Davey with Hen all day yesterday. Jillie had believed the boy was under Reverend Ben Gage's care at Saint Erasmus, but that was never the truth. Hen had usurped the sitter role and monopolized the boy's attention. Davey and Hen had disappeared into the hot afternoon for hours. The pair returned with ice cream and playing cards.

The arrangement made Ben happy. He had not agreed to play guardian, but thankfully Hen's found something productive and enjoyable and passes time with the boy. His single-minded focus to abandon the church had gotten old and vain.

Ben uses the peace and meditates and thinks what he should do. He knows he can't continue drifting indefinitely. The Cortras brothers will move on or something will eventually happen that makes Saint Erasmus unsafe. Ben must prepare himself. He needs a plan – and more important, he must remember what he was doing back a week ago. The gap in his memory has faded and he now finds his current circumstance familiar.

Already too late, Jillie Ikraam finally returns, and too close to curfew. The woman gushes.

"I am so sorry, Reverend Ben. I apologize. I couldn't get across the streets and I was waiting for my cash."

Jillie had claimed herself blameless after a couple other delays. And her excuses sound selected from well-thumbed note cards. She explains "I found more work than I expected. During hot days in Khetam, the dust in the shops I clean piles-up like ash."

Ben ignores the woman while she speaks and gazes about the nave of the church. Inside Saint Erasmus, specks of dust float as veils in sunbeams angling strange through half-shaded windows. Ben wonders about the odd light inside the church, but his thoughts wander beneath Jillie's drone. Outside, the dust thickens into a brown haze across the skyline. The cloud clinging upon the surface of Khetam isn't just dust, but full of plenty of other noxious stuff, all manufactured by its masochistic inhabitants in their daily lives.

"I'm usually not able to leave home, due to problems finding anyone who will watch my busy son," Jillie tells Ben. "The dirt waits for me."

She's joyful when she earns her money all at once, Ben obviously sees that. She tells him. "Even though I never get much cash, having a pocketbook of bills makes me feel rich for a little while. The day-to-day worry over money wears on my aging heart. Even one day of respite is an answered prayer. Please, Ben, pray for Davey and me. So much work still awaits this tired old woman. Age slows me down. A younger person can accomplish more in an afternoon than what takes me two full days. I hate moving so slow, especially because I can't charge by the hour for my services."

Jillie goes home after her rant of lonely inanity, leaving Ben who falls back into his own. He feels even more thankful for the quiet. She brings Davey back to the church the next morning with more apologies. Ben suspects the woman hadn't even tried asking her neighbors before coming straight to Saint Erasmus. The old woman had already found a willing gull in Hen Cortras.

"I'll watch Davey, Ben," Hen says before Ben let the boy wander inside the church after his mother. "Dil isn't back, is he?"

Fortunately, Davey and Hen had immediately become steadfast buddies. They play all the while Jillie is gone. They explore the church, repeat their games and tease each other in every room. Ben bets Davey talks and sings about Hen all night – Ben and Hen had discovered the boy often lapses into a singsong voice. Where his singing was not unpleasant, the lack of rhyme and his mediocrity make the songs grating. To the boy's credit, he whispers his words when asked.

Hen might have been Jillie's only resource. If Davey was left with anyone else but his new friend, the boy's laughter would probably have turned into tears and an overgrown temper tantrum. She knows Davey's fit might grow into a turbulence his mother can no longer weather.

The boy is scrawny, but he was still a teenager. His slow mind and growing body can potentially badly damage his old mother and her control over him has likely waned over years. At her age, Jillie could eventually do no more than relent to the perpetually childish demands of her son.

"Dil's not back yet, huh?" Hen asks Ben once Davey and his mother leave Saint Erasmus once more. The innocent question begins a brooding that lasts all night.

When Jillie and Davey show-up at the doors yet again calling for Hen, Ben is glad. He had spent the night coping with the indecision of the younger Cortras. Hen had debated lapsing into a nervous breakdown. The older Cortras had never appeared last night and his brother worried a patrol had caught his brother. At minimum, Davey now keeps the pining man busy. Ben only hopes Saint Erasmus was not becoming a daycare.

His hesitance is minor compared against his growing concern with the absence of Dil Cortras. He joins Hen's worry. If a patrol had captured Dil, an interrogation might reveal Ben is an impostor.

Last night, after Jillie had come and took Davey home, curfew began and the streets

emptied. Hen risked military patrols and ran into the twilight. Despite holding the keys, he verified his covered vehicle remained parked the few blocks away. He did dozens of times. Wherever Dil had gone, the man went on foot. Given that, the fact the military had detained the foolish man certainly seems possible and very likely.

Hen had immediately suspected soldiers were sent specifically for the Cortras brothers. "They plucked Dil on orders from that Sergeant Issa at the Wall. I'm next. He said me and my brother are under surveillance. The military's got our names on a list."

Ben seriously doubts Hen's conclusion, but he never tells the younger Cortras. Even crossing the street at the wrong spot in daylight might lead to detainment. Ben doesn't say that to Hen, either. He knows the man teeters. Ben attempts only to restore peace. The faux priest points at the flaws in the scrambled thinking of the younger Cortras.

"The military won't expend resources to find two UnChosen migrant brothers." Ben assures the younger Cortras. "The extra effort in a city the size of Khetam just isn't practical. Khetam is a big place with larger problems."

Hen shrugs and rocks on his heels.

"You think the sergeant at the Wall threatens strangers upon entrance, like a custom?" he asks Ben.

Ben doesn't answer. No one's come to Saint Erasmus looking for the Cortras brothers. That alone should be proof enough for Hen. If the military was ever coming, the first logical step was to search their stated destination.

"I haven't seen a single patrol the whole day," he tells Hen. His assurance is half-true.

After curfew last night, squads had rushed past the church on way to matters more urgent than usual rounds. The sighting had amounted to the totality of military presence in the parish. No word of the unaccounted Cortras brothers airs over the radio Hen and Davey have found upstairs. The two had switched it on and let it play.

Certainly no wanted posters for the brothers have appeared outside the door of the church. Apparently, Dil and Hen Cortras had been forgotten the moment they passed through the Wall. Hen jumps to his next conclusion. "Dil did something stupid. Dil has a problem with his temper. Most of the time, his meanness just simmers, but it comes up if you aren't watching."

Ben rationalizes aloud, regardless Hen's benefit. "If he got drunk, he might have flown into a rage. If something like that happened, once again, the military would come for you at Saint Erasmus, and they haven't, huh?"

The hypothesis sounds shaky, but one Hen accepts.

Ben conjectures. "Dil lost track of the time. Curfew fell and your brother found a safe place for the night. He'll be back."

"Can you find an occupied military station and make inquiries?" Hen asks Ben. "If Dil doesn't come back – you're a priest, or pass for one. There won't be anything unusual about a priest talking to the military. You can say you're looking for a stray workman."

Ben doesn't like the idea. Hunting for a trespassing UnChosen didn't make a lot of sense and would attract attention. Desperation drives Hen's request, which Ben expects from the younger Cortras.

"Alright."

Ben agrees to Hen's request only so the man calms, but he adds disclaimers. "A visit to the military isn't necessary. Everything will be fine in the morning."

The tepid promise offers enough hope and sends Hen to bed. Ben thinks that without his older brother, Hen is lost, nearly paralyzed. Safely getting himself out of Khetam would be impossible after such tragedy. Hen might never leave ominous Saint Erasmus.

The young man might sink into helpless despair and conclude nothing matters – and he'd tell the truth. At this moment, if Hen Cortras was in peril from the military, he wouldn't bother to escape out the back of the church. Hen will surrender without flight or resistance. The pathos disgusts Ben. The catatonia was not conducive to the long-honored instinct for survival.

Ben will also not guard him. The only reason he's joined the Cortras brothers was his own lack of direction. Losing that ride, Ben knows he fares better alone. He refuses the burden of

dead weight while he gathers pieces of his past. Becoming a surrogate brother had never entered the picture he's conjured of his future. He's already repaid both Cortras any debt his rescue had incurred. Once he had brought the brothers into Khetam, they were square. The three men merely now coincidentally share accommodations and any spoils they stumble upon. Their squat together at Saint Erasmus was a matter of convenience.

The rising sun wakes Hen Cortras and he behaves as if Easter morning has dawned – a magical day when prayers are answered and gifts are stripped of patterned bandages. Presents are disemboweled in recognition of the Mortal God's crucifixion. Hen wastes no time before he wakes Ben and implores him to hurry downstairs.

Ben ignores holidays; the province of the Chosen and the Church. He finds Easter, the most prolific holiday of Chosen and heathens alike, pitiful. The two faiths honor celebration of a resurrection, or lack thereof, differently, inverted. The Chosen beliefs are especially debauch. The ransom of the living corpse of a mutilated deity in exchange for immortality strikes Ben as pathological. The theology of the Chosen was wrought with abominations such as this.

The idea he once subscribed to these beliefs makes his stomach churn. Heathens treat the day with more reverence. Rebirth testifies to the immortality and omnipotence of the aloof Living God. Everlasting life is not a birthright for the Chosen to take for granted, but an earned grace.

Yet Ben knows the truth; both beliefs are obsolete. In the absence of god, Mortal or Living, only oblivion is genuine. This day is also not a holiday. Easter had passed two seasons ago. A long, dry stretch of uneventful days now fill summer in the Shur.

The next holiday was not until the end of the season – the Chosen's parade of saints; otherwise meaningless – Church and military bureaucracies simply shutter offices for a long weekend. The heretics sometimes flaunt obscure and sadistic graven images on the streets. That was not this day. Despite this ordinary day, Hen insists Ben is awake.

The pair go downstairs to presents awaiting them. A small hacksaw lays on the kitchen table. An unopened bottle of Yowling Cat, to replace the wine consumed last night, accompanies the tool. Unmistakably, Dil has left the gifts. Ben guesses searching for the saw had somehow delayed the older Cortras. Dil and Ben had talked about cutting bars from windows in the nave the other day. The older Cortras appears willing to do anything Ben wants to make Saint Erasmus their home.

"Where is Dil?" Ben asks sleepy.

"He's not here, but now I know my brother is alive," Hen chirps.

Dil must have gone on this errand when Jillie Ikraam paid her first visit. Ben has no clue where he's vanished now. Dil had taken the open and unfinished bottle of wine with him. Unlucky for Ben, the younger Cortras feels unburdened for only a few short minutes.

"I'm gonna see if the truck is still there," Hen says and rushes outside Saint Erasmus and to the vehicle. He runs back within minutes.

"No luck," Hen reports. "The truck's still there. Didn't you hear anything this morning before you woke up?"

Jillie delivers Davey just in time and stems an anxious bout of senseless, unanswered questions. Ben opens the front door when she knocks.

"I am so sorry, Reverend Ben," she repeats herself before saying hello. "Thank you so much for yesterday, but I need help again. I'm so sorry."

Before Ben agrees he will watch Davey, the boy sniffs Hen inside Saint Erasmus. The younger Cortras hovers near the dais, looking above Ben's head and through the open doors. Outside, the top of the Wall is visible over rooftops and the sun has already grown bright and broiling.

"Hen," Davey screeches and pushes past Ben and into the church. The excited cry makes Hen smile despite himself.

Jillie arrives at her job before Ben, Hen, and Davey fix breakfast together. The two men had gathered their own meals until the boy insists he helps them both. Ben coordinates the effort and keeps Davey in sight and out of his way.

"Ooo – I wanna light the fire," Davey squeals when Hen discovers a box of stick matches on the shelf above the gas stove.

"Okay," Hen happily relents then tosses the rattling box to the boy. The younger Cortras then produces a match between his fingers from nowhere, and Davey misses the sleight-of-hand. Hen strikes the match alight between his front teeth and spits out the sulfurous bit.

Davey witnesses the second trick and gapes in awe. His attention remains fixed on the flame Hen holds before his grinning face. The boy doesn't say a word until the fire vanishes into a thin column of smoke.

"I'm gonna try," Davey shouts and opens the matchbox.

Ben redirects the boy. "Light the stove, first."

"Yeah, I will," Davey promises before imitating his grown friend. The bit of the match becomes soaked with the spittle in the gap between the boy's front teeth.

Davey announces his failure. "Yuck."

"Don't make Dil mad, light the burner, Davey," Hen cautions his friend. He then corrects himself. "Er, Ben, the priest."

Davey does as he is told and strikes a match against the rough side of the box. Hen twists the knob stopping the front, stove-top burner and points at the hiss. After Davey alights the gas cloud in a "woof," he continues playing with the matches.

Hen giggles "Don't waste them all."

"I won't," Davey promised.

At first, the boy seems normal in respect to his typical adolescent fascination with fire, but the matches are merely a treat. A more intense fire distracts him once Ben turns up the flame on the stove. The orange flash and burning blue circle keeps the boy content until Ben finishes cooking.

"I'm gonna burn down Khetam," Davey sings looking into the fire.

Hen tells him "Not if you're careful with those matches."

Once the preparation is complete and the flame is extinguished, the trio gather a bland mix of rice, canned tomatoes and refried beans onto the kitchen table. Hen stirs the tomatoes into the rice.

"I feel like I got new brothers," He merrily comments. He had especially praised and played with Davey throughout the fixings. The younger Cortras would have liked Dil in the kitchen, but making breakfast with the stranger and boy this morning had felt right, normal.

"I hope Dil comes along soon," Hen still wishes.

After dishing the rice and beans onto everyone's plates, the three mix their own servings. Nobody grumbles. Ben is the only person who won't sit still throughout the meal. He continuously returns to the sink and refills his glass with water.

"You're gonna pee your pants," Davey teases the false priest.

"No, he breathes water," Hen tells the boy. Ben ignores the comments. The younger Cortras adds "He's a fish."

Davey puckers his lips and whistles air through his curled tongue when he inhales. The slurping noise makes Hen laugh.

"Hey, what noise does a fish make?" Hen asks his retarded, teenage friend. Davey repeats the sucking sound and they both rock in their chairs.

Ben's thirst isn't as intense as yesterday and he feels grateful, but he has spent most of his waking day already drinking and pissing. He ignores the boy and drinks until he is content.

"Someone's gotta wash the dishes," Hen says once he finishes his plate.

"Not me," Davey protests.

Ben doesn't say anything and continues swallowing water.

Hen takes responsibility. "I will."

Davey then gladly helps. "Me too."

The boy volunteers for every chore Hen accepts or invents, including making repetitive trips around the block when they check the simmering yellow truck. Its coat of house paint has already cracked and peels and that is all. Eventually, Hen and Davey finish the morning staked on the corner, keeping an eye on the vehicle covered with blue canvas and watching for Dil.

Ben uses the time alone and resumes his thoughts from yesterday. No more pieces of his puzzle had uncovered and the grandiosity of his purpose and the destiny encompassing Saint Erasmus in Khetam now diminishes. Any importance and imminence has simply gone away – as had the voice. Ben may have tried listening too hard. The same probably applies to his attempt toward rationalizing a necessity for its presence there and then.

Both the voice and a sense of destiny seem new notions of faith. Ben's acceptance had been delivered blind and immediately. But once the voice had stopped speaking over his shoulder, his belief became suspect. Alone, he's been given time to think. And when a hard look at either was warranted, both had become insubstantial; not even so much as shadows fleeting from the corner of his eye.

Yesterday, Ben had only concluded he had restored his sanity. That was enough for one day, but today was brand new. Today, he needed that plan in case his situation at Saint Erasmus went wrong.

Hen's doubt and general bad feeling had grown contagious and Ben was spooked. Nonetheless, that feeling he belongs in Khetam still lingered. His suspicion was just not the shining revelation that it may have been intended. He convinces himself his entrance into the Fort was the condition of some mission. The idea supports a feeling he plays a role in someone else's agenda. He thinks he must have been coming to Khetam when something had happened in the wastes of the Shur.

He might have hit his head, although any fear of a concussion seems groundless. He did not suffer symptoms, except the ringing he heard, and that might have been evidence of heat stroke. No lump rose on his scalp. The voice had also come and went, and has been gone awhile.

If Ben acted in some scheme, his next questions include what is his mission and how he had knocked years of memory from his head. If not for an urgent sense for caution, he might believe he had legitimate business inside the Promised Land. He feels no particular affiliation with the Church or heathens.

He might act in the interest of a crime-lord of one of the poor cities, like Gomorrah. If so, consequences will come because some failure of his or he missed an essential contact. That might apply to whomever Ben worked for, if he did work.

Time skips an hour while he sits in the kitchen thinking and staring at the blank wall outside the window. His right leg goes to sleep and the numbness spreads all the way up one side of his buttocks. When he stands, an electric jolt stabs through the sole of his foot and up his calf.

Ben freezes, hoping his calf will not cramp. While he stands in place, he turns the hacksaw over. The best thing he and Hen can do at the moment is keep busy, instead share the limbo in which Ben lingers. Metaphysically, even if everyone at Saint Erasmus had checked into different rooms, this church is still the same motel.

Hen and Davey merely distract him. So Ben ignores them and decides he will cut bars from windows in the nave. He will open one or two windows and see if the subtraction makes any difference to the odd claustrophobia nagging him in the large room. The window nearest the back hall was the ideal candidate because it came first in line.

He kneels so he might reach the sill in comfort. The bars are set so close to each other that Ben improvises and takes the blade from the bow. The miniature wing nuts on the tool easily spin loose.

He looks at a straight metal beam of vicious looking perpendicular triangles. The short,

toothed row of teeth belonged in the jaw of a piranha. A single swipe might even razor off a finger. Ben holds one end the blade carefully between his thumb and forefinger. He props his elbows against the windowsill and saws the center beam.

Within minutes, he realizes his approach is impossible. The blade only scratches the iron while he delicately files the metal as would a jeweler. Frustration forces him to abandon his attempt. Before serious work is accomplished, Ben stops worrying about injury and attacks the bar. He grips the blade in his fist. The sharp points bite, but do not break his skin.

When Ben begins again, the reward comes immediately. A cut a few millimeters deep appears in no time. He blows the scattered metal shavings out the window and runs his finger over the incision. The only problem with the undertaking exists in his head, so he goes to work.

The chore affects him with the same feeling he's experienced with Dil a couple days past when they had scraped gore from the floor. The repetitive work numbs his mind. He can't imagine he will generate ideas or recover memories if he continues work. Yet the emptiness is addictive and the task feels safe and certainly serene.

Ben looks at the palm of the hand that held the blade. The flesh had turned as red as the burned topside. A black line also presses into his skin. Small, evenly-spaced, deep pits form an indentation across the meaty part of his palm beneath his thumb. The points perfectly match the teeth on the blade. The scar is really just an impression, but the marks break every major crease in his palm. Ben mulls the significance.

Any pagan palm reader might say the slice is temporary and artificial. Then again, fortune telling is nothing more than an arrogant farce. What does anyone know of fate?

Mystic practitioners are all charlatans – dead pagans, who offer nothing more than entertainment. No one knows the future. Ben rubs the artificial slice with his thumb, but the indent remains, and so did the discoloration from the blade.

The day of the week had fallen into mystery. Ben realizes the fact after he returns to cutting the bar. In the measured present, any morning the imposter priest might wake to a slew of pious sheep eager for a sermon. The wretched UnChosen of this slum inside the Fort will come and make wishes and toss whatever coins they have pinched into a collection plate – voluntary taxes paid to the Church.

Although Dil may be right, Saint Erasmus might just be a way station for the military. The idea makes Ben feel secure, but that odd feeling troubles him. He takes assurance in the fact not many people have visited these past days. Guests have included the priest whom presumes to be Ben's superior, and the old woman and her son. No soldiers or other neighbors even slow and look whenever they pass.

Enough conspicuous comings and goings definitely have indicated Saint Erasmus is occupied again. Ben wonders why the congregation waits. He definitely won't issue a newsletter. He also will not knock door-to-door. Most of all, Ben must not allow himself to get comfortable with his alias.

Protracted repairs still keep the public out. Namely, the floor, but the back door also needs replacement. Though Ben needs the bars removed from the windows in the nave, he wants the entrances locked, front and back. Ben and the Cortras brothers must keep out the idle curious. The pile of sticky feathers in the back might raise enough uncomfortable questions.

Ben stops sawing and sees he has cut through the base of two bars before making the realization. He can finish cutting them completely if he goes outside and saws the bars at their tops, or he can cut them from inside, at the furthest point he's able to reach up.

The latter would be more difficult – the bars will wobble with every stroke. Ben decides he will move his work outdoors. The side of the building with his window will remain in shade a while longer. He thinks he needs something he can stand on; and a pew turned on its end outside and leaned against the church would work. Ben turns around.

Hen sits in the pews near the front doors. Ben had not heard him come into the nave. The face of the young Cortras is long and his gaze remains fixed beyond the cross over the altar. He looks like a man who wants a favor, but knows he has none coming. The pews in front of him suddenly bumps up and slides askew. Davey's shriek sounds from beneath the crooked row.

Everything then becomes familiar for Ben and he remembers this day.

The boy jumps up, trots around the pews then prances toward Hen. Davey shows something to the younger Cortras and Hen flickers back to the present. The pair begin a playful argument. "Count them again, Davey," Hen says and pokes into the boy's open palm.

Ben needs a break. His shirt is wet with sweat and he smells his own musk, and he reminds himself he will change his clothes tonight. He is thirsty again, but this time he has a reason. Before going into the kitchen, he checks Hen. The younger Cortras looks sick. Ben knows the man feels depressed because his absent brother, but he wants to be certain Hen does not dream some inept scheme. The false priest licks his dry lips with a sticky tongue also lacking moisture. He sucks the inside of his cheeks, starts saliva flowing and tries again. He absolutely needs water.

Davey holds a dead fly in his hand. It lays on its back, with its numerous legs curled. The bug is just one of hundreds that had succumbed to gas. It appears huge. Isolation from the dead swarm and clean of gelled blood did not shrink the insect. Lying there in the thin hand of the boy makes the evil thing look sharp and dangerous, even in death. A chill creeps over Ben's shoulders and the back of his neck. The shiver makes his sweat feel like melting ice.

"Eight legs," Davey declares once more after he finishes counting.

"You're sure?" Hen asks, counting again himself. The bent legs make the process difficult. Hen comes up with the same number, but thinks he's mistaken a pair of antennae for legs, although the insect does not appear to possess feelers. The head consists of a bunch of big, red, grape-like, faceted eyes glittering gold in the light. More distressing are the long mandibles resembling pincers that better matched those of a beetle. This thing was a bunch of different bugs bred together into a single blood-sucking monstrosity.

"I can count," Davey claims. He softly lays the insect down beside Hen, fearing he might shatter the bug. Hen slides away with a jerk. Davey then raises his fists near his tiny, high-set ears and blinks and concentrates. The preparation is for the sake of his performance. Both Ben and Hen have seen Davey count quietly before without using his fingers, when the boy didn't know he had an audience.

While Davey counts, he raises a finger for each vocalized number. When he reaches ten, both hands open with fingers splayed. The boy pauses and blinks again. His mouth freezes into an open smile, ready for number eleven. Before he continues, Davey struggles and remembers which hand he's used. His routine has grown rusty, but he recovers. The hand that had begun the procession closes back into a fist. Davey reaches fifteen and closes his other hand.

"Hey Davey, how high can you count?" Hen asks. He sees the boy is determined to continue. If Hen could interrupt and explain the boy didn't need to prove anything, he will try. Besides, Hen's patience for the show was not as keen as he believed his new friend deserves.

Davey ignores his big friend and continues counting aloud. A very earnest look monopolizes the boy's face. He snaps one hand shut when the other begins shooting fingers up one at a time. Davey looks like a mechanical traffic sign. He keeps going until he reaches one hundred. The boy then drops his hands and waits.

Hen glances at Ben. The young Cortras has missed the boy's finish and looks for clues from the second member of the audience. Ben digs his thumb into the sawtooth-impressed palm of his hand, distracted and thinking again about the windows. Without help, Hen turns again toward Davey.

"Well that's fine," He tells the boy. Davey patiently waits for more praise. The kid looks disappointed. Hen quickly corrects his faux pas. "That's real good!"

Davey laughs and snatches up the discovered bug. He cups his fingers and forms a cage of flesh. The insect rolls around inside like the muffled clapper of a bell. Davey unfolds his hand in front of his grinning face. The dead fly balances upright on its curled legs. Translucent wings points upward as if the thing is about to take flight. Hen tricks himself and he almost sees the thing revive before his eyes.

"I guess this spider has wings," He says standing up.

Davey squints one eye. His shoulders stick against his jaw after a jammed shrug. The

boy contemplates the idea his new friend's proposed. He isn't sure about Hen's observation and knows how many legs insects are supposed to have.

"How 'bout you throw it out the window?" Hen implores. His squeamishness has built to a level he can no longer contain. At the mention of a window, Ben turns back around.

"It bit my mama," Davey rattles. His grin goes away and white light flashes in his eyes. "I'm gonna eat it."

Hen curls back his lips. "No, Davey, don't."

"Don't do that, kid," Ben orders. Besides commands at breakfast, the warning composes the first words he's spoken to Davey since saying goodbye last night. Ben would not have even given that if the boy had not demanded a farewell from everyone. Davey makes goodbyes a condition for going home.

"Why?" the defiant kid asks.

"Because they're poisonous," Ben says repeating a fact.

"Oh, that's right." Hen jumps into the air. His hands jerk to his sides and he acts as a gunslinger. If Davey made a move toward his mouth, Hen stood ready and will slap the tiny hand aside. The younger Cortras tells the boy "They killed 'em with gas. If you eat one, you'll get sick."

"I don't care, it bit mama."

Hen ups the ante. "You can die."

Davey pauses and he grows serious. His revenge is stymied. He cups his hand again, and his tendons tighten as he resists clenching his fist. The carcass inside appears about to pop and crunch.

"Go on and throw it out the window," Hen suggests again.

Davey raises his arm above his head and whips his hand down. The insect bounces against the floor once and rolls onto its wings. It remains intact. Davey follows the fall and stomps hard on the fly. The church echoes the flat boom. Ben and Hen jump at the unexpected hammer.

"Oh, Davey," Hen says. "We just cleaned the floor."

Davey grinds his foot. The little pieces of chitin crunch like an eggshell. The boy laughs as if possessed. He drags the bottom of his foot backwards across the floor. Thankfully, a smudge fails to trace a path, only a trail of tiny carapace shards appear and not a smear. Hen is relieved he doesn't hear a squish.

"Davey, that wasn't good," Hen solemnly states. "We're in the house of the Mortal God. If it gets dirty, who will bless it?"

Davey shoots his finger at Ben. "Him."

"You're out of luck, kid," Ben answers.

The false priest hoists a pew onto his shoulder. The bench is heavier than he's expected and Ben stumbles backward then forward, trying to find his balance. His skin has grown accustomed to the weight of his clothing and the burns, or rather the one comprehensive burn, was healing well. But when the hard wood presses against his shoulder, Ben is rudely reminded of his injury. The pressure from the pew feels as if a hot skillet brands his shoulder.

He throws off the pew as if he fights a mountain lion. The bench knocks into others, raising a racket humbling Davey's stomp. Ben reaches inside his shirt. When he had shrugged off the pew, a swath of skin felt ripped from his shoulder. Once he pats his flesh, he finds he is still whole and only hurt. He holds the fabric of his shirt away from his shoulder. The area has grown incredibly intolerant again. Davey and Hen rush over.

"Are you okay?" Hen asks. "What are you doing? We can help."

"We'll help," Davey repeats.

"Take it outside," Ben directs, stunted and abrupt, and he points stiff at the thrown pew. "Put it outside that window."

He gestures more fluidly toward the window where he had sawed bars. He then dares rub his shoulder, but stops when he discovers the motion fails to offer any relief. "I'm getting some water."

"You cracked it," Davey tells everyone.

A long split runs from one end of the pew to the other. When Hen lifts the end, the wood

twists and slightly parts like opened lips. The pew appears solid enough to sit on and Ben decides it can still support his weight. Simultaneous the decision, Hen instructs Davey.

“Don’t mind the damage. Help me carry it outside. We need chairs out there.”

“Yeah,” Davey shouts and helps. Ben walks mute down the hall and into the kitchen while Hen Cortras and that kid carry the broken piece of furniture out through the front doors.

Chapter 15 Blind Wanderer

Ben fails to notice the light outside grow dim while the afternoon fades away. Sawing bars from the windows inside the nave of Saint Erasmus had fully engrossed his attention. The bars from two adjacent windows now lay where they had fallen in the breezeway. Having proved solid enough, Ben leaves the cracked pew outside. The seat had split once again when he shimmied up the leaning bench, but it had held. Because he had made progress on a third window, he again needed the bench for elevation.

Once Ben rests and admires the unobstructed view of a plain block wall, he feels affirmed his finished work pleases him. The view was not the inspiring part, but rather the unguarded exit. A man can climb out those openings without contorting sideways through an impossible angle. The lack of bars make Ben feel secure. He commits himself to finishing the monotonous task. When done, all the windows will become peacefully unhindered.

A gentle knock on the front doors interrupts him, but he ignores the summons. Ben only wants to finish cutting bars. The soft rap rises and thunders inside the serene nave. He has an idea who waits outside the locked doors; Jillie Ikraam has come for her son.

“Hen,” Ben calls with a low voice that still reverberates through the church. No one answers.

Besides the rattling refrigerator in the kitchen and unrelenting knock, Saint Erasmus sounds vacant. Ben had lost track where the young Cortras and Davey had gone. So he reluctantly puts down the saw blade and goes toward the doors. Once he unlatches the lock, Jillie Ikraam pushes the doors open and strolls inside. She wears an olive-colored apron missing from her outfit this morning.

“Hello, Ben. Thank you. My shops closed early tonight because the Sabbath is tomorrow. But you know that, of course.”

“Hen,” Ben shouts again. This summons cracks sharp like a whip. He hopes Hen and Davey have not slipped away altogether again, leaving Jillie here with Ben.

“Everybody is racing home,” she continues. “I was almost killed crossing the street, three times this afternoon. Oh, I still cannot dust that shelf at the liquor market. You know that place, right? It’s right around the corner”

Ben nods and searches for the serrated blade he had set down. Jillie follows and rushes through a list other mundane details of her day, from discourteous drivers to other shelves she will never touch.

“Hen,” Ben bellows. “The kid’s mother is in a hurry.”

A pair of bowling balls pounds down the stairwell coming from the second floor. Despite the intense volume, a single person answers Ben’s boomed summons – Davey appears alone. Long black feathers jut from behind both his round, tiny ears. Jillie gasps.

“Oh, Davey, not those feathers.”

His mother yanks them out as soon as her son steps within reach. They sink straight to the floor as if pulled by magnets. The old lady turns her son’s face left then right when she checks behind his ears. She then examines her own hands. They appear clean besides fading pink welts.

The old woman checks her son for blood, but Ben imagines vile, invisible contamination distresses the woman. Jillie fears her son has been exposed to the same malevolent germs hiding on those dusty, unreachable top shelves. Davey whines the whole time, but submits without struggle.

“You can get into so much trouble,” scolds his mother.

"Where's Hen?" Ben asks the boy.

"In bed. He's not sleeping. He's just tired, like mama gets." Davey still jumps and is full of energy. He jogs in place while he speaks with his mother. "I'm hungry. We ate beans."

"Is that all?" Jillie asks Ben and her son. She looks disappointed.

Ben shrugs. He doesn't recall anything they had eaten that day. He doesn't care about remembering and he isn't hungry. Unimportant details simply slip his mind. What he eats later, if he feels like eating, won't matter either.

"I had a tuna sandwich and a green salad for lunch," Jillie comments. "That's a proper meal."

"Do you want what your mother eats?" Ben asks Davey.

"Yeah," exclaims the boy. Davey jumps up and down in place, amplifying his affirmation.

"Go home and feed him," Ben grumbles at Jillie. He picks up the saw blade and finds the unfinished bar.

Davey's head rocks back and forth as if shaken. Though the hint is obvious, and plainly rude, Jillie misses Ben's mutter. She escorts Davey home only because curfew pends. Retrieving her son was the lone task she had come to do and is her last errand of a typical tiring day.

"Let's eat a big supper, Davey," Jillie demands. He little boy cheers.

"Thank you, Ben. I can bring canned soup tomorrow." Jillie volunteers before saying good night to the masquerading priest.

Vibration from the saw fills his ears. He doesn't hear the woman or the voice from the desert. Jillie rushes home and he feels spared her insipid parade of small talk – he seeks nothingness.

When Jillie and Davey are gone, the rhythm of the saw fills the nave with a numb hum. However much time passes, Ben is interrupted again. This time the disruption is a real voice that has been missing the past day and a half.

"If you're staging a prison escape, you should check the front door, first. It's wide open."

Ben sets the saw blade on the windowsill and turns around. Dil stands in the entryway. One of the double doors is swung open. Jillie had not shut it behind her so the older Cortras had apparently strolled inside. Ben blames only himself for not returning and throwing the latch shut.

Dil leans unsteady against the closed door. He wears new clothes, replacing his old denim outfit. This altogether new ensemble consists of black slacks and a white long sleeve shirt – one that bears a collar, unlike Ben's priest uniform. Dil's new shoes are leather and keep a factory black polish. The older Cortras raises his arms outward and balances himself as long as he holds still.

"I like your look, so I got new rags myself."

This was Dil's shape, but the voice is the one from the desert. Ben stands his ground. Hearing it again discourages him.

"Where have you been?" he asks the hitchhiker.

Dil smiles and taps his forehead with a stiff middle finger, and makes himself stumble backward. Ben almost hears the thumps against the man's skull. Changing direction, Dil staggers toward him.

"Sightseeing," says the voice inside Dil. "Visiting some people we really don't want to know. I'm busted. I need more money. Did you cash that check?"

Dil stumbles forward. Before coming close, Ben smells the grape and alcohol signature of the cheap wine the Cortras brothers like. Dil's exhalation is potent, almost poisonous. The older Cortras stops and strikes a lopsided pose. Before anything more is said, beaten stairs reverberate again from back the nave.

When Hen's heard his older brother downstairs, the weariness of the younger Cortras is miraculously shaken off. He comes breathing heavy into the entrance of the hallway beside the altar.

Upon recognizing his older brother is drunk, Hen loses enthusiasm for their reunion. Still, seeing his brother relieves his worry. Besides the voice inside Dil's shape, Ben feels normalcy restored. Whatever comes next, the Cortras brothers have each other, and a guest. Ben is left

alone with his own devices and he wants it that way.

"I'm happy to see ya', Dil," Hen says during his nervous shuffle. "I like your clothes."

"Thank you. It's about time we become metropolitan. I think we look the part, more Chosen. It must be all that food. Why don't you go and find yourself a new image? Get something that will do your thinking for you."

"Yeah, sure," Hen agrees. He doesn't know what his brother means. He likes the simple clothes he wears. The rolled cuffs of his pants creates his own, personal style. Dil sounds like himself, though, and that makes his brother glad.

"You have any more money?" Dil, or the voice, asks Hen.

The younger Cortras tells him "Ben didn't cash the check. I guess we waited for you."

"No concern. We all have something we do tomorrow as a family." Dil points at Hen and winks then burps. "I believe I need to sit down. I have been on my feet since yesterday."

The pew in which he collapses rocks and nearly topples backwards. The motion escapes Dil's notice. He only cares about resting his exhausted and inebriated body.

"What have you been doing, Dil?" Hen asks cautious. He sits in the pew in front of his brother, just out of arm's reach. Ben joins the pair, standing. He has knelt and squatted all day and didn't feel comfortable sitting at the moment.

"I brought the saw and refreshments. I see you have been busy with one. I will be disappointed if you two haven't used the other. That is some incredible wine."

Hen answers with reservation. "If you say so."

"I do."

Ben challenges the voice. "That trip is only a few blocks. You said you visited people."

"But we don't know anyone in the Fort." Hen intends his comment to defend his brother.

"That's right," Dil replies. "The exception is our neighbors. What have you been doing, Hen? Have you been playing with that boy?"

"Davey?" Hen asks, not expecting an answer. "That's his name. His mother asked Ben to watch him. So I did, while you were gone."

"It looks like you made a close friend. Do you think that's a good idea?"

"Davey's a good kid. I like him. And he likes me too. He's harmless. I tried to teach him how to play cards today and he kept showing me his hand. He's not very good."

Dil laughs. The sound rumbles from deep inside his belly, not from the usual place in his throat. "Because he's retarded."

Hen vehemently retorts. "No, he's not. He's just a kid and a little slow. You know what he said today? He said rich people should marry poor people, tall people should marry short people, and fat people should marry skinny people. That shows he thinks."

"That's just inane," Dil judges. "Keep him around if he makes you happy. Pretend Chosen marry heathens, it makes no difference. Just, watch him and his mother. Keep them out of the church."

Dil groans and closes his eyes. "Let's say we make a point and have no more unexpected visitors. Nobody comes into the church."

Ben has heard enough. Something of the older Cortras brother still exists in his speech. The two personalities inside Dil Cortras must have agreed and share the same head simultaneously. Ben wonders if alcohol enables the phenomenon, but he doesn't think so. He had witnessed Dil drink when the voice had still lingered over his own left shoulder.

He didn't care where it went, as long as it wasn't following him around, disembodied and testing his sanity. Whatever the arrangement the voice had made with the older Cortras, it had taken Dil somewhere. The new clothes and wine suggested the trip had entailed some corporeal hedonism.

However, the voice claimed to meet someone with whom the Cortras brothers were not acquainted. Not that Ben needed to be told, but the specter now issued a warning. The feeling was mutual. He hurries and locks the front doors. The streets outside fill with long shadows while the orange orb of the sun drops behind buildings in the west.

Unusual, overcast skies glow rich pink in the sunset. Night comes early for this summer

day, until the streetlights flicker on, one at a time. Ben loses track of time while he works, and consequently meditates, but even his intense, mindless focus failed to explain the compressed afternoon.

After he locks the doors, he turns around and sees he's missed the thick darkness filling the nave. He had faced an open window during hours shadows crept inside behind him. Neither had he seen Dil come back. The inattentiveness disturbs Ben, despite craving nothing.

Hen still sits in the pew he had selected and gazes where his brother lies. A prolonged snore vibrates windows and sounds too exaggerated to be genuine. Dil has strewn himself across the pew, tipped over and now slumbers where he has fallen.

"Let's take him upstairs," Hen suggests.

"No," Ben flatly rejects. He refuses enduring the ordeal again. The pew was fine tonight.

Hen reaches over the back of the bench in front of Dil and hooks his brother's pants legs with his fingers. With a grunt, he hoists his legs up so Dil lays flat. Hen feels glad his sibling has come back and the younger Cortras resolves he won't lose him again. So that he can watch his older brother, Hen sleeps in the pew next the one in which the possessed man snores. There will be no wandering without Hen knowing.

Chapter 16 Sorrowful Birth

Merriam Adino passes a long evening in desperation. Sunset and curfew had arrived earlier than she wishes and she knows her husband will not come home again tonight. Merriam still watches the clock in the kitchen of the big house she shares with Mark. Sharing that home, or anything at all with the man she had married was questionable.

Last night, she had re-enacted every minute of the night before. She sat on the same hard metal chair and folded her hands into her lap and crossed her ankles beneath her – exactly as her rigid posture had been twenty-four hours ago. Anyone who had spied her pose before and visited again would swear nothing had changed, not a muscle had moved and each hair stayed in place. Every wrinkle of her sheer pink robe and silken nightgown beneath was undisturbed. Merriam had changed herself into a bereft, living statue.

Even the scene around her had froze still. The napkins on the table are folded and slipped into machined, wooden holders. The woven reed place mats lie carefully arranged, parallel and close to the edge of the table – and an artifice only. Merriam refines the arrangement on the table dozens of times and guarantees everything perfectly fits in its customary place. When she satisfies herself, she returns to her frozen state. Her churned emotions and confusion returns, too. She then rearranges and restores the tabletop yet again, back into the way everything had been two days ago.

Merriam wants to spill torrents of her shame and disgrace, but the jilted woman cannot find relief. She had sealed all those overused passages long ago. In childhood, heartache had never stopped and the disgraced girl she was had inevitably isolated herself in suspended animation. Merriam was like that again and felt small. Through these haggled years of her brutal marriage, she had fought endless battles and built a timeless wall, defended the barrier and fixed ruptures. Now she urgently wanted to cry for the sake of her own sanity and cannot.

The same hour, long after curfew and nearer dawn and the night before, Mark had returned home. This night, the hour itself came again and passed. He hadn't even used a telephone to leave his faithful wife a message saying he will be late – Mark never did. Merriam was not concerned for his safety. Only one reason prevents him from coming home and he survives infidelity unscathed.

Mark no longer makes excuses. His lies have become too frequent and ridiculous. He now only wields silence against his wife. Suffering that, the most terrible days of her life have returned. Those unforgotten days of girlhood embody fear and lament.

She supposes they have never really vanished, and merely awaited for a moment when their devastation would be most severe. Timing could have been worse, those lingering demon-days might have sprung on her when she or someone in her family had fallen physically ill.

Merriam always expects misfortune, especially when she needed the semblance of a man in her life, but her demons were impatient. They could not resist tormenting the sad woman again. And when the torture arrives, that very hour is the worst imaginable. Demons beset her with horrible, imagined possibilities.

Luck graces her with a rare two-story, two-bath home on a small lot in Khetam, the Promised Land. Only the wealthy or privileged owned actual houses in Khetam, such as officers in the Church or military. Merriam wasn't wealthy before marriage, but Mark was affluent. Jealous demons now paint her marriage falling apart and the loss of her handsome husband.

Merriam loses her wonderful home only in her nightmares but she already agonizes. She mourns her home and her husband, but most of all, she grieves never having a child. She's wanted a little boy, most dear in life. The Mortal God must grant her a child and grow the tribes of Chosen. Fewer Chosen children are born in Khetam every year. The city now fills with thin, unfamiliar UnChosen faces.

"So what," Mark once said when Merriam told him no new souls are being born in the Promised Land. He said "Khetam is overcrowded. Where will they go, into the Shur with the heathens? As a people, we now make babies only to feed our enemies."

Merriam refuses these imagined anguishes, otherwise they would cripple her. In all practical senses, her marriage to Mark and their beautiful home remains. And the future might still bring a baby, but hope seems distant. Mrs. Adino feels alone. This early morning before dawn, Merriam resigns herself into the perpetual darkness of her bedroom.

At the same time, malign thoughts rob her will. Merriam will collapse if she didn't lie down. Her brooding would then continue relentlessly upon the spot she falls. Having lain on the floor before, she prefers her big, empty bed.

Her sullen mood continues there in that bed without distraction. She's never expected sleep. Much like a good cry denied – she merely wants escape. A restless mind refuses her. She had suffered these endless nights before. Torment suspends her days and nights and creates an eternal hell. Unable to sleep and feeling weak, she is a desperate smoke alarm in which the battery clings to a feeble and an impossibly long charge.

Grief is not the future she intended – the reality simply cannot be. Merriam had planned so much more than barren unfaithfulness. She had demanded a good life from the Mortal God and everything had once fallen into place. The Mortal God had delivered Mark, salvation, bliss and happiness. The life Merriam wanted had begun the day she graduated from school with him; that much had been exacted and destined. As a Chosen, such was her birthright.

This day, she still possesses all the beauty she had idealized back when she had fallen in love with Mark. She was and is tall, nearly his height, and she keeps her wonderful shape. She boasts a generous bosom and a waist so slender a man might wrap both hands completely around her. The baby had not marred her body. This beautiful woman is ageless, caught in time. Her long brunette hair wards away all gray. Her almond-shaped, green eyes sparkle, even in unhappiness, and sadness remains her constant state. And yet the Mortal God had granted respite only once.

"I believe you're the sexiest woman alive," Mark bumbled when Merriam had first met her husband. Those were the first words he had ever spoken to her, but it wasn't the first time she's heard the same praise.

"I'd be offended if I didn't know my impact on men," she bragged. "They can say little else when struck by my grace."

Mark hums his reply. "Huh – heh?"

"If I can't forgive men the idiocy I obviously cause, I'd never have a conversation with the opposite sex."

Actually, upon meeting Mark, Merriam had taken her turn and was dumbstruck. She had become smitten by the same shallow yet overpowering attraction. When the gorgeous man approached, she was first speechless. His blond hair had held the sun and her captive. Each strand had glowed, spreading a halo around his boyishly handsome face. Everything Merriam had ever wanted amounted to nothing compared against the godling standing before her on that

dead college lawn between lecture halls.

"I wanted to be a Journalist, too," Merriam remembers telling Mark when they were in school and talking about themselves.

"A reporter for military radio," he specified. "I'm interested in heathen terrorists. You know, they eviscerate Chosen. My granddad has stories about stuff like that from before the Wall."

"Annoying," Merriam had critiqued. "Adolescent."

"Yeah, my childhood psychologist said I border on festering a psychosis."

Marriages with a reporter typically degrade into conclusions about poor decisions, but because Mark pursued her secret dream, he had lured Merriam. She thought of becoming a reporter, but had decided against the career when commonsense prevailed. Chances of writing for the military were slim to unrealistic. Even so, a single person often finds military pay unreliable and inadequate.

"I settled for a practical skill, accounting," Merriam told Mark and changed the subject. "I only picked the class because it was on the first page in the curriculum. I'm getting unimpressive but passing scores. I don't know. I don't fit."

"What about Art?" Mark had volunteered.

"I can't draw. Anyway, who wants to work in a factory with painters and sculptors? Churning out icons for the Church and religious trinkets is as tedious as accounting and pays even less. That's a job for UnChosen."

Merriam felt so comfortable with the idiot psychopath she continued her confession. "Whenever I look around my classes, I know I can never be an accountant, physically. I'm so different from all my classmates. Everyone else is the proverbial sore thumb. Their pudgy bodies and careless, unflattering clothes make me the mythical visage of perfection."

Mark merely gazed at Merriam and nodded.

"They're so in awe, nobody but the teacher speaks to me. I can't imagine being shackled to a desk and surrounded by these mute trolls the rest of my professional life. I'm better than that loutish breed. They might all be UnChosen, as much as I care. I hate what they make me."

Merriam expected Mark would abandon the elusive calling and find something more rewarding for his life, their lives. In the meantime, she encouraged her husband and lived vicariously through his writing. The dream once made them both happy, so she thinks.

As things happen, Mark never needed help – because his extraordinarily generous grandfather. Up until he had gotten Merriam pregnant, Mark Adino hid his resources.

"I can't stay at my job, Mark," she remembers telling him after their marriage and before their baby was born. "I think he's making me sick."

"All right, I'll talk with my granddad," Mark said.

Merriam talks about their baby. When she found herself pregnant, those years Mark had spent captivated by horrible stories then paid-off and the old man's money became godsend. Merriam supposed her husband's family warned him not to flaunt his wealth. They are a paranoid clan, those Adinos. In any case, no one in school had guessed his assets. His handsome looks alone paves his life, and such was not an unreasonable assumption.

A baby revealed the truth after the pregnancy had sealed Mark and Merriam's future together – love paved their road ahead and she felt graced. The money from his grandfather had lifted mundane worry and both dreams had become possible. No question, wealth solves problems. Mark began his career and they started a family while they both were still young.

Merriam assumes they would have married sooner, if the pressures and preparations of their senior year hadn't taken precedence. The circumstance of her marriage was not exactly ideal, but that never really mattered. Regardless of timing, Merriam believed she would eventually marry Mark and have his children. She had craved marriage and motherhood with all her heart.

The happy ending came and went. The real happiness only lasted through the wedding day. After that bliss ended, Merriam found an eternity of powerless and infinite heartache. She once believed everything had soured with the death of their child, but that was not entirely true. Signs of her troubled relationship with Mark had plagued her pregnancy.

Expectations had blinded her. She once hoped her loving husband had felt as ecstatic with their child as she was learning of her pregnancy. Despite the impracticalities, she once believed their life together would work-out. The Chosen were blessed. And if that was not enough, there was prayer – the Mortal God had provided Mark. At that time, Merriam still didn't know he came from a rich family.

When she told him she was having his child, he said nothing. He went cold and pale.

"What do you want me to do?" Mark eventually asked her. "Have you told your family?"

Merriam lied. "I told my mother you're the father."

She desperately wanted to marry and have the child. Merriam asked him "Will you marry me?"

"All right," he said. "We'll do that, if that's what you want."

For a long time, she believed he was content doing the right thing. She amazes herself with the warnings she later remembers she had ignored. She couldn't believe she had forgotten his proposal for their baby.

On the anniversary of their child's death, she recalled Mark suggested they abort the pregnancy – kill their child. His baby had lived and grown inside her for two months before Merriam told him and this was how he felt.

Some gnawing and undefined doubt had delayed her telling Mark until then. She refused to admit the pregnancy to herself after the first month, but she soon could no longer deny the fact. When Merriam finally confirmed her suspicion, she had embraced the joyful news. She naively believed Mark would feel the same.

She convinced herself Mark was happy, but in truth, he hesitated. His grandfather had arranged the marriage and provided a house for their new family. Mark's grandfather was truly happiest with the news. The gory old man wanted a great-grandchild and would have one.

When the baby arrived, the poor little boy failed his first breath. Mark wept openly, but he never really wanted the child. He even ignored the fact the baby bore the name of his granddad. Mark simply did not want children. That became devastatingly obvious in the long months Merriam recovered from childbirth.

"Please, Mark I want another child," she begged and does this day. "I promise I'll take more care and this one will live. As your wife, I promise I won't disappoint you."

All these things she's vowed him, she really promised herself. Merriam faithfully cursed the Mortal God and doubled her prayers.

"No," Mark said and refused to make love.

Apparently, her husband was so grief-stricken after the death of their first and only child, he bought a silver sports car – his brand new Corbeta.

"We can't have a kid now," Mark said after placing a down payment on the automobile. "It's not prudent, we're still paying for the car. The time has come when we act like responsible adults. We can't always rely on my grandfather's money."

Yet Mark's grandfather made the down payment on the vehicle.

"It was a bribe," Mark tells Merriam in one of many ensuing arguments. "The car was incentive so I stayed married to you and try for another baby."

"You want another baby?" Merriam asked hearing nothing else. She does not recall his answer.

Endless days drag while time moves from the tragedy, but every one grows more numb. One ordinary morning, the dull pain had stirred and spun into a sharp point. Merriam didn't need to see a calendar, she sensed and felt ill when a very significant date arrived.

"I want to visit our son's grave," she told her husband. Mark did not.

"The traffic is horrible today," he said again. All his excuses then and now revolve around terrible traffic. "We'll go on Saturday, after the date."

Mark then disappeared that entire weekend. He returned just after curfew on the Sabbath with a new lambskin cover for his car. He explained "Finding the upholstery was almost impossible."

"No matter what corner of Khetam I went, I was disappointed. Oh, I stayed with John, that

sergeant you like. He knows somebody and we saw his friend this morning.”

Neither Mark nor Merriam speak about missing the visit to their son's grave. Her husband offered no excuse, and certainly no apology. At that moment, Merriam knew she had already emptied and offered no more tears for their dead son.

“Lingerie for you sports car,” Merriam said. She feels crushed that Mark rather spoil his automobile than grieve his child.

Merriam took no more. She then sobbed for herself and would and could not stop. Her parents took her with them, where her tears eventually dried. Sleepless nights still plague her and they had grown numerous when she finally came home to her husband. Despite the terrible way Mark treats her, Merriam still loves him. He can do nothing to change that; the unhappy couple are destined for each other.

Merriam braves the indignation her husband's adultery inflicts. She never meets any of his strays, but she knows their spoor. Their smell constantly fouls his clothes, a vile combination of perfume, sweat, and sex. In the past, Merriam has found long and short strands of hair in his car. Most locks are black, as is the hair on the heads of most women of the Shur. Their threads still appear today. Occasionally she finds a strand bleached blond, and once, a clownish red. Yet the phone calls infuriate her most.

On rare occasion, she hears her greeting returned. Most of the time, a hushed voice waits on the phone and the unknown caller then hangs up. Merriam wants to be strong. She believes she defends her home with her vigilance and confronts Mark with every discovered offense. In reality, she only grows weaker and tired. She tires of the hopeless fight, especially when he continues cheating so effortlessly. Her own husband outclasses her.

Eventually Merriam stopped getting so upset because her volition had burned away. She now seeks to remain numb and wants to shelter herself in comfort. She loves her home and wants to stay a housewife. She wants children and hopes beautiful Mark may yet provide them.

Despite his philandering, he still has an occasional appetite for his wife. One night, the timing will be right. Of course, he must come home every night. Merriam holds onto his return as her most precious wish. The sorry woman worships her husband.

When he is home, she might pretend they still love each other, even if only fights arise whenever they speak. She wants to tell her family Mark comes home to her, eats the dinner she prepares and sleeps next to his wife in the bed they share. Those common things are vespers of her dead dream, but they're all she has left.

Contrary what Merriam expects when she goes to bed this morning, she falls asleep. The sun comes up, but she has no clue. The bedroom shuts out all light and she rarely uses the single lamp on the dresser. Mark always dresses in the light drifting from the hall and Merriam prefers darkness.

Whenever she managed to fall asleep during one of many troubled nights, she didn't want to wake until rested completely, at least fourteen hours. She feels her husband owes her that much for all the suffering he inflicts. Regardless the forgone grace this morning, manifested in his absence, Merriam sleeps and dreams.

She forgets most of the details of the vague vision upon waking, and recalling the experience is like chasing the sleek, shifting outlines of fish swimming out to sea. She knows something shimmers beneath the surface and can even guess its direction. However, because wakefulness chases the dream further away, hope for catching any detail also fades.

Merriam thinks her dream lacked light, like her bedroom. But the vision was not about seeing, but rather feeling and knowing. Light was not required for thought and sensation, especially because spirits of comfort and love had visited the poor woman and consoled her aching heart. Merriam remembered feeling graced by the emotions. The dream itself spoke to her essence and had promised hope and deliverance.

In this vague dream, she had never fallen asleep. Merriam had simply rolled the deep blue comforter toward the foot of the bed. She then pulled the top satin sheet over her. Mark then quietly slipped into the room. She feels him. Merriam had never opened her eyes, so she can't be certain her husband did return. Anyone might have slipped into the room, her dream. Still,

Merriam expected the man she had married and accepted the presence to be her husband.

He crept in and bent over his wife. For the briefest moment, she felt his warm breath upon her cheek. He smelled rank – like humid, rotted and fermented fruit. The stench had almost shocked her awake but she stayed with her husband. She now assumes he had been sick after drinking. Her memory flashes upon an image of John Issa and his bushy mustache and Merriam smiles.

Before she opened her eyes, strong hands had gripped her arms. They turned her over onto her belly and pressed her into the bed. Mark then kissed his wife on her cheek. Foulness had curdled in her nostrils, but the odor turned sweet and smelled like fine table wine, just uncorked. Merriam can't remember the last time her husband had touched her with any affection. Asleep, she had wanted to turn around and wrap her arms around him, to pull him into her, but he held her pinned. Her mood to make love instantly overwhelmed her.

Merriam still did not open her eyes. She lay motionless except her drifting smile. The firm hands of her husband nailed her onto the bed and a body pressed down upon Merriam, pushing her further into the mattress. Mark and Merriam may have made love. His weight felt greater than she remembers. Had so much time passed since he had last collapsed into her?

The weight of her husband had pressed the air from her lungs. Merriam felt as if she suffocated. Gravity then suddenly lost hold and they floated. Her husband spoke to her.

“Mark,” he says inside her head. His words convince her she dreamed.

Mark said he waits his wife. “Look for me,” he told her.

He said and did more, but Merriam woke and forgot. Everything but the pressure, the kiss and his few words fled away. Her heart sinks when she remembers her husband's loving touch was only a dream, but the despair seemed unreal. For her sanity, the visit must have not been her imagination.

She still feels her husband's hands on her arms; her shoulders had even cramped. The smell of his bitter then sweet breath yet lingers and conjures memory and clearer emotion. Dreams have never before left Merriam with such certainty.

Wherever Mark had spent the night, he now calls for his loving wife. In his heart, he had come home. He knew he belongs with Merriam and they had shared a dream. She loves the fact he might be a young god and maybe he now manifests.

“I love you, Merriam,” Mark told his wife. “I desire you.”

His affirmation has renewed her strength. Merriam now recognizes her fault. The dream reveals she had failed fighting hard enough for her marriage. She failed Mark the overflowing love he deserves. Merriam was selfish, accustomed to the suffering her past lovers had endured, wasting romance in pursuit of her keen affections.

Mark was just like her. That observation should have been evident at the very beginning of their relationship. The similarity may have attracted them to each other. Keeping her husband by her side will remain a challenge. Women will always tempt him, doing whatever necessary for his attention.

No man can resist a woman whom desires him. A full spectrum of seduction spreads open for the female sex, from trashy to mysterious. The successful seductress simply offers the latest flavor of fantasy. Merriam now resolves she will combat her rival's advances and fend temptation. She's finally learned giving up allows the worst to happen. Once she confronts the threat, instead of retreating behind her wall, everything will change.

Any argument she harbors against her husband ends today. She can never expect Mark will atone and take any blame. Expectation for his repentance was hopeless. Selfless, Merriam will show her husband she loves him. They are the same inside and she is his true love. There can be no other for either of them.

Merriam goes downstairs full of expectation. She assumes the morning had long passed, but hours remain. She hopes the dream last night was real and Mark sits in the kitchen drinking coffee.

She fantasizes her husband bids her good-morning with another affectionate kiss – but he is not home. The kitchen preserves its rigid state from the night before, but now softens within

a gentle tangerine-morning aura. The glow is a rare sight for Merriam. She's forgotten how comforting the beginning of a new day can look. The little hope gives her strength, and the fact her husband had never come home makes little difference.

Merriam knows what to do. She immediately gives up expecting things will change without her intervention. Life had stopped being easy when she married Mark. She now stops wishing the terrible past had never happened. Time cannot be stopped and wound back. This was the moment she takes action.

The dream offers direction and because the vision, Merriam will search for Mark. She remembers the careless trails and clues her husband leaves behind. In the past, she's used the evidence whenever she made accusations. They now serve a new purpose and will lead her and help find her love. They will also expose the latest Jezebel tempting her husband.

The slut deserves righteous, wholly-unleashed wrath. Merriam fights for the preservation of her marriage and home. She fights to preserve love. Her very life is in jeopardy. She will visit woe upon all who threaten her, and Merriam has saved plenty for her foes. Once she's finished, the only thing remaining will be unconditional love, reserved only for Mark.

The old, well-exercised habits Merriam had used when she tracked his unfaithfulness comes back naturally. Mark always empties his pants pockets into the jacket hung on a rack near the front door. If not in the jacket – napkins, matchbook covers or other clues, all scrawled with numbers and addresses – are deliberately forgotten on the desk in the front hall.

His brown canvas jacket hangs on its hook all summer. Mark never uses it in summer, especially this year during the long heat wave. All the same, Merriam checks the inside pockets then those outside. She finds coins, trash, and scraps of paper. Some scraps carry story notes for military news; details of crimes Mark had been enthused to write. Every note appears related to his work and all are written in his looping handwriting – until Merriam finds the one napkin. The wadded tissue appears old and stale, but still suspicious.

When the jealous investigator straightens the napkin, she instantly knows she's found what she hunts – an address in a woman's handwriting. Merriam can spot these things, she knows the signs. This small piece of information gives her everything she needs.

The address belongs in a bad part of Khetam. Many UnChosen live in the Saint Erasmus parish and the location makes Merriam assume the worst. Mark is slumming. She feels ill her husband lowers himself and sleeps with a lower caste woman.

The thought Merriam has touched her husband after he's spent a night with an UnChosen woman disgusts her. Her first irrational instinct demands she wash the bedding, but the chore must wait until she's fended off the skank. Merriam acts immediately and finds her car keys.

She will use the caste of this hussy for her advantage. All her righteousness will ruthlessly bear down upon her rival. This woman will regret the day she's seduced Mark. Someone of her inferior heritage has no right to threaten a Chosen woman's life. She has no claim to Merriam's husband, her wonderful house, and her hope for a child. There is a price this woman must pay because she has slept with a Chosen man. Merriam will put this UnChosen woman in place and the whore will remember the scorn of the Mortal God.