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“Deep in that gaping canyon is where it was said he still resided. During those last bitter days when the sky was putrid with exhaust from the jets screeching from one continent to the other. For a century one side had poked the other. Then the other would spread a nasty rumor about the other. It slowly boiled, barely a rumbling, as all the misdirected animosity found a place to simmer amongst the hungry and hopeless of one country and the upwardly mobile and fiercely loyal of the other.

“Why do they have so much and we so little?” the starving citizens grumbled. They watched these new citizens of means and order work well paying jobs. Playing in their parks as large machines drained smog and carbon from the sky leaving nothing but stark azure skies.

“Why don’t they join us? Can’t they see what we have is so much better?” questioned the prosperous people. They had watched the other country buy their many wares and enjoy them only, forgetting their food, their social clubs, their God, and anything but the warmth brought by the best items ever contrived.

All the while, on both sides, each wanted to wring the others' throats. But for all their differences, they had commerce and profits to consider. Many of them made their money from the other so instead they whispered terrible things about each other. They tossed each others citizens in jail on trumped up charges just to show off the spies they had found in their news and media.

Everything seemed to be coming to a close; The End of History. Wars between smaller countries raged as the larger two watched on unblinking. People starved while warehouses overflowed with food. Water became acidic as what was left was bottled and stuck in storage. The rich and powerful fled their cities and positions of prestige to their quiet palatial estates, awaiting the common folk to snuff themselves out so that they could emerge triumphant from the rubble, finally alone. If it wasn’t for one man, things certainly would have been over and done with.

Felatus Cole was brought into this world to save it. By the time he could say his first few words he had learned several coding languages and created his own. By the time he could walk, he was using AI to map his movements in order to reach optimal length, stride, stance, and balance. By the time he was old enough to attend kindergarten he had graduated his PHD program of engineering, letting his Siliclone teach his classes, attend lectures, and defend his thesis with none the wiser, while he went on to create technologies that would revolutionize the world.

For a time, in that old world, there was hope things could get better. Our Father Cole with his superior intellect and incredible mind had many convinced he would save us all from what horrors were predicted. Many flocked to his cause while a smaller but devoted following came to his home and together helped him in his assembly of his miracle machines. Strange and utterly unimaginable these devices were. The only thing mankind had to compare them to was their

science fiction stories that they were told would never come true. But Our Father proved to not only be an articulate thinker, strong leader, and an inventor thousands if not a million years ahead of his time; he was a Savior. A miracle worker that could turn spare parts into anything his mind could conjure. His inventions seemed unbound by scientific law or theory and as such went on to do the inconceivable—”

“Inconceivable!” called out the hooded figures who had sat in rapturous silence up until that moment, almost on cue. The narrator of the tale grinned widely at this and parroted himself loudly.

“Inconceivable indeed! It’s those same machines that when our Father returns he will repair and return to their former glory that will lift us out of this dead world and into the next one.”

The man with the shaved head lowered it as he finished his story looking into the fire they all huddled around. Staring into the swaying flames as the wind breathed heavily and the fire swelled with portent before resuming its more humble size. The iron slot in his head with a port the size of a flash drive gleamed in the crackling light. He was solemn and his movements deliberate. His fellows who all held a similar demeanor and appearance nodded with approval at their brothers dictation.

“That was a perfect recounting, Brother.” said the hooded figure sitting across the fire.

“Kill the body, Free The Mind.”

“Kill the body, Free The Mind.” repeated back the trio in unison.

Across from them sat two strangers. The hooded figure removed their cloak. A woman with a similar shaved head and slot in the center. Her simple attire was non-descript and her complexion soft if not slightly crusted by the apparent amount of time spent out in the sun. Though her garb was plain, her head was tattooed with a rendering of Felatius Cole. His face was stretched and distorted considerably to the contours of her skull, but anyone who had seen an image of the man could not deny who it was supposed to be, his knowing grin and defiant eyes looking directly at whoever happened to be staring at the back of her head.

Next to her sat a man; dark straight hair, a narrow nose, and a thin, sparse, beard; wiry and inconsistent in the way that it barely covered his shrewd face. He wore simple pants, a work shirt, and over it some sort of coat, stitched together from the remains of a dozen other clothing items. Every naturally appearing color had found some space, though black, brown, and denim held a large portion of the mishmash of colors. He ate with gusto at the food that had been presented to him a few minutes prior. Either bored or uninterested, he chewed loudly and at times hummed small repeated bars to himself.

Coughing into his shoulder something that sounded like “hokum” he reached over the fire and roughly tore off another portion of the hare skewered to the spit.

“You eat a great deal with people you take for fools, Brother.”

The man with the hare’s limp leg half way to his mouth put it to his lips, took a large bite, chewed it slowly, and then spoke:

“A fool tends to be more generous with his food than most. If this is the price of admission to your buffet, throw another hare on the spit and tell me all about how Feliatius Cole destroyed the world with all those gifts he was supposed to have given us.”

Instead of looks of shock and outrage at his slander, the brothers smiled and even began to laugh looking at the woman.

“You’re right, Sister Ellen. He truly does not believe!”

She beamed at them and looked almost lovingly at the grizzled men gnawing his way down to the rabbit’s femur.

“Such a novelty in these times. Is he not, Brothers? Like taking an atheist to gaze at the Face of God and they claim they cannot see. Come, Brother Tomas, share with us your darkest doubts so that we might extinguish them in the light of Father Cole’s generous wisdom.”

Tomas, wiping grease and bits of rabbit from his lips, tossed the bone into the pot that hung beneath the rabbit on the spit. Catching their juices and adding to the roiling water that was viscous with grease, the searing water tumbled bones and inedible bits of the creature about, rendering them to nothing. He looked up at the four pairs of eager eyes staring at him. So innocent, lacking any bit of those feelings that he held tight to and used like weapons to keep the outside world away.

“You claim Cole made these perfect machines to save us all from the end of this world. To bring us to the next one he created. But I’m still here. You all, with your commitment and your devices drilled into your foreheads, his most faithful proponents, remain tethered to this hellish place. And where is he? Why didn’t he save us? At the very least, why didn’t he save all of you?”

He groaned inwardly as he saw them each give a knowing smile to one another. They all looked to Ellen and she looked at him with a warmth that he found both soothing yet somehow infuriating all at the same time.

“Felatius loved all of us, Brother Thomas. Even though he never met you in this life, his algorithm predicted your birth from your very first breath to the precise way and moment you would leave to join him in his Cloud.

But the terrible leaders of those countries in the olden times loathed him. They hated his intelligence, his giving nature, his ease at which he could wipe away their problems they had spent generations unsuccessfully trying to solve. Most importantly, they hated how much we, the people, loved him. How in a second we would have flooded their streets, breached the walls of their capitals, and driven them from their false halls of power and installed him as our benevolent Father and King forever. Those fools and their false prophets. Slaves to their comforts and the tentative stability they had created for a couple centuries at best. And then while the planet collapsed, they did nothing. All the while, Our Father made plans to protect us all.”

“Your Father.” said Tomas.

“Our Father, Brother Tomas. Much as you might disown him, cast him out, he is still here.” as she extended a gentle pointer finger outward, pressing it into his forehead.

“I don’t have one of your hard drives. He can’t access my mind.”

“Just because a son of Christ didn’t wear a cross or proclaim his name to all he met didn’t mean he wasn’t one of the flock. Father Cole loves you all the more as you spit on his name. He just wants to bring you home.”

“Well we’re here,” said Tomas.

“Yes and he’s waiting for us.” Sister Ellen replied.

He looked out into the wastes of the countryside. He tried to imagine what this place had looked like as Felatius Cole had fled into his bunker. There were many different accounts of what this place had once been. Some believed it to have simply been Cole’s home where his immense wealth had bought him the most extravagant and beautiful things both natural and synthetic in order to make a comfortable space for him to invent and create.

Some went beyond that. Stating Cole had plants and animals restored in his labs that had been extinct for hundreds of thousands if not millions of years and released into his climate controlled paradise. It was said with what little time he had when not saving the world was spent wrangling carrier pigeons. He would tame them and then send them out to his closest friends and confidants coded messages about what he had planned.

Others who believed this also hypothesized it was one of the ancient beasts Cole had resurrected that had broken out of its confinement and set off a chain reaction that ultimately led to the explosion that had killed Cole, destroyed the lab, and turned the five mile radius around it uninhabitable for a generation. That was a long time any proof to whether this was true or not was underneath them.

Fossilized bits of the plant life and animals that had once lived in what Cole had called his personal Eden might have been found here at one time if he had the mind and resources to excavate. But the scavengers had stripped this place bare. Once the smoke and radiation cleared, the only living things that remained here could be counted on one hand: The cactus, the hares, the buzzards, the flies, and themselves. The explosion and the intense heat that followed had scorched everything else.

These Brothers and a few other groups like them worked the surrounding area in a rotation. With just enough hare and cactus juice to sustain them, they too circled this dead place, picking at the bones. He sighed heavily, thinking of what tomorrow would bring the two of them and what they might find, if they could even enter Felatius Cole’s sanctum. Tomas’s eyes refocused on the three men who talked with great enthusiasm of what they might accomplish. He looked into the earnest eyes of Sister Ellen:

“Will Our Father greet us at the door or will we have to break into his house?”

{2}

As the two of them rose in the early inky darkness that comes right before sunrise, they kicked sand and grit over the last remaining embers of the dying fire. The three brothers laid out on their sleeping packs, fast asleep. They stirred and twitched, caught in a deep sleep that none of

them had yet to awaken from. But two unfamiliar bags of supplies had been made up sometime in the night and now Thomas and Sister Ellen strapped them to their backs. A long copper rod laid beside the packs as well. It appeared to be some sort of leathery substance made from cactus that had been dried and cut to strips now looked to be held against the road simply by being wrapped tightly against the metal. Thomas looked at it curiously:

“Is this for me?”

“I would assume so. None of Our Brothers would need this.”

“Why not?”

“They’ve walked these hills and valleys many times. I would hazard to make a guess that there isn’t one step of this region they don’t know as well or better than their own hands and feet.”

Thomas reached down and picked up the rod, the plant-like material made it easy to grip the rod that he could already feel retained some heat from the day before.

“If they have no use for it, how did they come by it?”

“They must have known I was bringing you here and wanted to assist you.”

“How could they have known?”

“I think you know my answer to that, Brother Thomas. Since I assume you will refute it and rail on about how ridiculous it all is, I suggest you accept the gesture and we can start our day.”

Thomas grimaced at her remark but took the rod in his hand and stuck it firmly into the sand. It did feel good to have something to steady himself with. They took one last glance over the men.

“Rest easy, Brothers. There’s not too much longer now, soon we will be free.” she whispered.

Together, they walked down the sloping cliffside they had camped out on the night before. Long curving spined cactus grew in large clumps on the ground, their needles sharpe and matte black. Though they contained potable liquid, it was trapped behind a tough exterior. Thomas drew his walking stick, fixed to its end was a long stiff point that was sharp as a needle. Nodding to Sister Ellen he readied his stick as she gently angled the cactus downward, placing a wooden container underneath it. With a sharply assured jab, the needle-like instrument punctured the cactus.

A warm viscous fluid began to pour forth. The smell it gave off was sickly sweet and left them both with a headyness as they plant slowly filled the wooden canister with its nectar.

“Have you ever drank this stuff before, Sister?”

“I have, in certain situations.”

Thomas blunk, bemused.

“You have?”

She looked back smiling.

“A couple of times, when there was nothing else to drink.”

“I thought the Brothers and Sisters of Cole couldn’t imbibe intoxicants. I thought you’d rather subside on your own urine before dirtying your mind.”

“We’re allowed to drink whatever we like. It’s only advised that we don’t over indulge as it weakens our connection to ourselves and our Father.”

“Well, I can’t speak to that. But as someone whose had his share of over indulgence, with enough it certainly fucks you up...”

They sat and watched, the cactus slowly deflated, its taut leathery exterior quickly losing its shape and definition as the liquid that gave it both drained quicker and quicker, the puncture mark and gravity pulled in tandem every last drop out.

Finally, the plant wilted over, looking harrowed and defeated from its earlier plump figure and sheen. The next gust of wind would send away what remained of its sharp husk out into the desert.

“I guess we better get moving if we want to make it out of there before night sets in.” said Thomas, unscrewing the metal tool from his walking stick and screwing it back into the holder that sat in the side of his belt.

Sister Ellen placed the container of cactus juice in her pack and nodded, lifting the pack onto her back and squaring her shoulders.

“It’ll get much hotter soon, if we move quickly we can get there before noon.”

Without another word the two made their way further down the hills. As they hiked, reminders of the past were scattered along the cliffs. Remnants of old adobe houses could be found lining the edge of the jutting outcrops that had withstood the blast. The rest had collapsed, shattering like pots, their jagged pieces dulled by the wind and sandstorms that eroded everything that couldn’t seek shelter.

As the edges of the sun peered over the horizon their path became clearer as they continued down hill. The shadows that had hung over everything around them receded and pulled further back until they were simply a fringe around all they could see. Thomas stumbled and relied heavily on the walking stick the Brothers had left out for him. Sister Ellen led the way self assuredly. Each step taken without thought. This was not her first pilgrimage to Cole’s bunker.

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When they had met some months ago, she had just returned from a trek out to the site. At the small cantina, she had been at a table leading them all in prayer after safely returning. Descending into the old brewery cellar, it had the familiar musty smell of every other cantina around here. So many basements, bunkers, and the like had been repurposed in a similar fashion. There was a small bar where bar flies were served cactus juice with just a splash of mezcal, the combination made a semi potent cocktail that was commonplace in these cantinas, cheap to produce with an abundance of agave, refreshing, and impossible to fuck up. Only a few other

bottles sat behind the bar. Dusty and rarely touched, most couldn't afford anything else. The smell of grilling meat was rich in the air. People packed the cantinas at this time of the day, the midday light so intense it could kill in thirty minutes from direct and prolonged exposure. Those who did not have permanent housing would often stumble down into cantinas like this that had become oases in the region.

As Thomas entered he spotted them in an instant. Bald shining heads in their loose fitting robes, all hunkered around a table in quiet, reverent discussion. Watching them he couldn't help but feel disdain despite their own sense of innocence and genuine kindness. These were the people responsible for the world they lived in now. The ones that had egged on the madness. Encouraged the instability and destruction that came with it. Reveled in what they thought would come next now that they had set the world right. And now they took trips to the Mecca of their madness as a way to honor the man that had brought them all to where they were now. As if they needed protection from what was left behind.

It was true, in the early years after the smoke had cleared and the corrosive waste would no longer kill you, many did travel to travel into the lands surrounding the bunker. But though you were safe from illness or deformity, those that came quickly found other dangers. The most valuable artifacts still intact on the planet could be found here. So many desperate people had converged on that one spot. It didn't matter who you were or where you had come from, many came, many fought, and many died in the process of trying to recover whatever else had been lost here so many years ago.

People tearing each other to pieces to get at what was left to salvage. The main factions had taken as much as they could load into their carts and left very little else. Once the larger and more heavily armed crews had left, smaller groups and individuals came to claim what very little else there was. Occasionally nowadays, a scavenger or a small crew might come by hunting and searching, scaring off any would be treasure hunters as they looked in vain to find something of value. More likely than not, bones old and new were all that remained, bleached and brittle in the constant glare of the sun.

But still these freaks, these fanatics, they still traveled with their own security detail. Scruffy and stringy looking Wasters. Those that looked like they had to be living on the road to get by the way their skin retained a reddish tint from the time spent exposed to the vicious sun. Most of them's skin peeled and ran like candle wax and no amount of scratching or ointment would settle it. They didn't care though. Most people forgoed personal hygiene down to the bare essentials to sustain themselves these days. No one looked twice at a bald headed zealot, an angry red Waster, or curly haired basement dweller like himself. One couldn't afford to be too choosy about the company they kept these days. Those who tried to be hard asses usually got their asses kicked. Lone wolves were even rarer, most people traveled at minimum with two or three other people just to feel safe.

Though law was a loose and idealistic term nowadays, just about everyone respected that if you entered a cantina, you were safe to drink, eat, and rest in peace. Didn't matter who you were or what you did, it was much too hot to eject or take something outside when you'd both

probably fry to a crisp if your altercation went too long. A tentative peace lasted in all communal areas nowadays, if there was no trust in the public spaces where provisions and information were traded fiercely, what was left of this world would collapse in days. It was when you left town to wherever you chose to squat nowadays that you had to worry.

Sitting down at the bar, Tomas signaled to the bar keep, she, a dark haired woman with beauty marks on either side of her eye said plainly:

“What’ll you have?”

“Some Caljuice and whatever you’re cooking on the grill oughta be fine.”

“What do you have in exchange?”

Tomas reached into his belt, pulling open the pack that slung on his hip, he slid a few metal bits across the bar.

“I noticed your door’s lock mechanism and the latch that houses the hinges were hanging a little loose. If you got something to screw them in with, they should tighten it up for you, keep your door in one piece and in order a good while longer.”

Looking satisfied, she picked them up and pocketed them.

“That’ll get you a few drinks, a meal for right now, and a couple meals for the road. Does that sound reasonable?”

Tomas looked over at the Cole Family sitting around the table and eyed the woman who appeared to be holding council over the rest of them.

“Throw in some info on that lady there and we’ll call it square.”

The barkeep looked over his shoulder at the group and smiled.

“What, you feeling lonely? Like you don’t have a purpose? That maybe there really is a Cloud in the sky to go to when you die if only you join up with them?”

“Not so much.” he replied “More so, I wonder what you could tell me about that woman who seems to be leading them over there. I don’t think I recognize her. I’m around here enough I think I would know her.”

Reaching under the bar, the barkeep pulled up a glass, with great intention, she measured out a single shot of mezcal before plunking it down into the bottom of the glass.

“She’s new in town. Sister Ellen's her name. I think her and those two Wasters over there go from town to town offering their services to whatever members of The Family they run into. I don’t know what their angle is for doing it besides the obvious...”

“You don’t think she's grifting them?”

The barkeep poured from a pitcher cactus juice until it was just under the brim, looking up she said:

“Nah, from what I can tell she seems to be one of the few earnest ones. I get enough of the snake oil salesmen in here to recognize a true believer when I see one.”

“Huh. Well, more power to her I guess. Must be nice to have something to look forward to.”

He tossed back the drink in one long gulp, the buzz of the two liquids combined deliciously as he smacked his lips.

“Could you gimme another while I wait for my dinner?”

The barkeep arched an eyebrow expectantly at him. For a moment he stared back unthinking before what she was waiting for struck him.

“Please.”

She nodded and concocted another cocktail, handing it to him.

“I’ll go check on your food. Back in a second.”

The barkeep walked through the curved archway into the back. Orders placed by the barkeep to the chef in Spanish were in rapid and almost incomprehensible to Tomas. The clattering of silverware and chattering of people filled the room and was a pleasing ambiance. You spent enough time out in the Wastes, and you really began to miss the company of others. If you were surrounded by people out there, you probably weren’t leaving their company alive. But in the cantinas where it was understood everyone was safe as long as they were inside and minding their own business, even total strangers could enjoy one another’s company and for a little while imagine how things used to be generations ago.

All the while, Tomas nursed his second drinking, watching the Cole Family members. They appeared to be ending their meal. One by one, they would get up from their seat, go around the table putting their forehead to the person they were addressing. They would repeat something in unison and then the standing person would complete the ritual, before finally reaching Sister Ellen.

With her they would stay the longest. She seemed completely happy to be speaking to each one. With each she would take time and diligence nodding and engaging thoughtfully until they ran out of things to say. Then they would match foreheads, the phrase would be said, and the person would pull up their cloak and leave the cantina.

This happened over the course of an hour. The barkeep returned with Tomas’s meal, a hunk of some unrecognizable rodent’s torso seared to a crisp over the grill and a small side of potatoes spiced with something that made his eyes water from the spice, diced haphazardly. Tomas ate methodically, enjoying each bite as he finished off his second drink. Glancing over his shoulder on occasion, he saw the Cole family members had trickled down to just Sister Ellen and the two Wasters on either side of her. They were huddled together, talking in hushed tones but appeared to be engrossed in what they said. The only time they paused was to look up at him.

Turning back around hurriedly, Tomas ate what was left of his meal mulling over what he could have done to draw their attention. The bald freaks were used to people gawking at them. His curiosity couldn’t have garnered their attention. Running through every last paranoid thought and ideation he housed in his head, the only thing he could come to was maybe this Sister Ellen had seen him talking to the barkeep and wanted to make sure nothing had been said or done that would be displeasing to her or her cause. He fixated on this as he ate, driving himself mad with fear of what they might do, given the opportunity. So transfixed by these thoughts he didn’t notice the Waster coming up behind him before it was too late.

“ ‘Scuse me, Sir.”

Tomas turned. He was eye to eye with the female Waster. Her face chipped and raw, her skin with a beet colored tone to it, she nodded over to the table she had just left.

“Sister Ellen would be honored if you’d sit with her. She has something she’d like to ask you.”

“Well I’m kind of in the middle of a meal right now, if you hadn’t noticed. I don’t really feel like sitting with you all and subjecting myself to your questioning.”

The Waster frowned, her brow furrowed.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Sir. Sister Ellen would need just a moment and could certainly make it worth your while.”

“Oh yeah? What’s she offering?”

“A chance at salvation, Sir.”

He groaned aloud and began to turn around.

“Or a handsome, earthly reward if you are unconcerned with your status when your mortal life ends and your eternal life begins.”

“My life started somewhere far away from here and I reckon it’ll end somewhere nearby here, any day now.”

Tomas slowly got up from the stool and turned to face the Waster.

“I don’t think there’ll be too much to worry about after that.”

“Who’s to say, Brother? All I know is Sister Ellen is being incredibly generous with you. I told her you looked like any other basement dwelling barfly.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, I said, when you’re not down here trading your scraps for swill, you’re probably either yanking on yourself or waiting for your miserable hide to keel over and die from lack of nutrition.”

“What’s your name?”

“Antonia.”

“Well, Antonia, I appreciate your honesty. It shows me you Family Members aren’t all either full of shit or have your head shoved up in your Cloud. I’m Tomas. I’ll meet your Sister over there.”

Tomas passed by her and walked over to the table, sitting down across from the Sister and her other Waster companion.

“Hi there, Sister. My name is Tomas. Your friend over there mentioned you wanted to offer me something?”

Sister Ellen pulled back her hood and smiled softly at him.

“Why yes, I saw you trading some parts for drinks with the bar keep. Are you a tradesman by chance?”

“I’m a carpenter, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Sister Ellen’s smile grew wider, if somewhat incredulous.

“You say you’re a carpenter? I can’t imagine there’s much work for you to do out here. Hardly any suitable wood to work with in any direction for at least a hundred miles I would think?”

“Well I didn’t always used to live here. I come from way up North.”

“How far North? I’m not from here originally either.”

“So far North we still get a freak snow storm every now and again. Compared to the snowfall they got back in the Golden Age based on the old almanacs I could find, what we got was a pittance. Compared to the rest of the world though, we were one of the few places you might still get snow to start the new year.

“I was up in the South East, near the Ocean. We definitely had some water, but never any snow. Only trees that were left that I ever saw were mangroves. You’d be scarce to find those. Most of them were ripped out by their roots and drug out to sea well before I came along.”

“I was just north of Saint David, there-”

“Were you near the shore or further inland?”

He grew very quiet at this question, she could sense his apprehension. Cautiously, she said:

“It’s okay if you don’t trust me. I don’t need to know your exact location. I was just curious.”

He grinned slightly at that:

“I’m not used to people just asking out of genuine interest. Let’s just say no matter which direction you went, where I was from there was plenty of wood to use.”

“And up there is where you learned?”

“I started as a carpenter, but learned how to be a locksmith and work with some metal and machines out of necessity. It’s not my forte, but I pick things up pretty fast and I’m not half bad at it.”

“Pardon me for my disbelief, Brother Tomas. I’m usually inclined to be honest and trust others are being honest in turn. However, enough time on the road will cause anyone to doubt people and the stories they’ll tell to get something out of you.”

“No need to apologize, Sister. Think of this as a job interview; you’re simply checking to make sure I’m qualified for the role. I would do the same thing in your position.”

“Well thank you, I promise there’ll only be a couple more questions.”

“By all means, but before you go on, mind telling me what it is you want me to do for you? And what exactly you’ll be paying me if I may be so bold? Not to blaspheme your deity, but I don’t have much need for knowing my place is secure in the afterlife. I’m more inclined on figuring out what I’ll be eating and where I’ll be sleeping tomorrow evening.”

She glanced around the cantina slowly, apparently looking to see if anyone might be listening in, and then leaned across the table toward him, he followed her movement until they were ear to ear:

“I had to be sure you were at least halfway honest before I started divulging my faith's most important secrets. If you would be comfortable meeting someplace else, Brother, I'd be happy to give you as much information as we can. I like you and my friends here

She indicated to the two Wasters who had yet to identify themselves. Instead sitting quietly and seemingly not to have registered who this person was, their employer was speaking too. Once they had picked up he wasn't threatening her life, they seemed as checked out as everyone else at the bar.

{4}

Entering the canyon the heat rose off the sand in waves. Even with just a bit of sun exposure this area that had once been lush with life would fry in an instant. They picked up their pace. Overhead the distant call of buzzards could be heard and their shadows passed over them again and again, looping in a seemingly endless vigil.

“You're certain we can get in there?” asked Thomas, watching over them at the shadowy halo that seemed to encircle them.

“I believe we can.” Sister Ellen replied.

“Believe?”

“Yes, I know Father Cole wants us to be there.”

“You keep saying you know and that he wants. Ellen, he's been dead for a couple centuries at least now. We're not with your Brothers now. If you can't admit it to them. Can you at least be honest with me? You know he's not in there waiting for us right?”

She stopped in her tracks and turned to him.

“Brother Thomas, I have been extremely patient with you, wouldn't you admit?”

“What?”

“I've ignored your jabs at my faith? Answered your questions and doubts as best I could?”

“Well, yes.”

“I've been open to your thoughts on my practice and tenets, acknowledged yours and its merits, and always treated you with dignity?”

A bit flustered, Tomas blushed.

“Yes, of course!”

“Do you concede that I was raised in this faith? Sworn into it to view the world in a certain way and continue as such even when my beliefs are put into question and I have my moments of doubt.”

“What are you getting at, Ellen?”

Sister Ellen glared at him.

“Answer me, Brother. Is all what I said true?”

“Yes! Yes! Fine!”

“Then can you simply accept that someone who does all of this, even when it is against her interest in many situations to act otherwise, but continues to do so because something inside her tells her she must? I don't know anything, Brother Thomas. Who but Our Father really can? But I can accept those limitations and love my Father and allow myself to be led without knowing where it leads.”

“I admire you for that, Ellen.”

“My name is Sister Ellen, Brother Thomas. You should refer to me as such.”

Taken aback, Thomas swallowed and simply said:

“I admire you for that, Sister Ellen. I wish I had what you have.”

She looked at him sadly, with nothing but pity in her eyes.

“You do have it, Brother Thomas. You're just scared of what it may bring and so you continue to run as Our Father promises you salvation.”

They continued toward the cavern's opening, a fissure in the rockwall that looked wide enough three people across could walk side by side comfortably. Cracked pavement worn down to the point where the ground it had gone over could be seen. The wind whistled through the dark path and spaces where it could be caught and briefly contained before wailing off further into the heart of the desert. He smelt the acidic tinge of batteries in the air, mixed with burnt hair. The heavy metals still were a part of the Earth but if one didn't dig too deep into the ground,, they didn't have much to worry about.

After sometime walking they found the compound, a significant portion sat in the middle of the cavern. A nondescript building, black in appearance and boxy. Each section of the building had another cube that either stacked or sat in flux with each other. The cubes appeared to be framed by steel, while each panel that made up its six sides was some sort of tinted glass. Dark enough that anyone from a distance outside could not make out what was in each section. The steel and dark colors conducted heat and one could assume would burn anyone who got too close to it.

On the roof large panels could be seen, they appeared to be intact even after all these years with only minor scuff marks and signs of wear and tear. Each panel appeared to be anchored to a large hinge, allowing the panel to follow the sun's light from the moment it broke over the horizon to the last rays that could be captured before it had set behind the sandy hills. On the corners of each cube a small device outcropped, projecting out into the canyon with a small pinwheel facing into the direction of the wind. As the wind blew through the canyon they all in unison spun wildly.

“This is incredible.” said Thomas, stopping to sip at his canteen.

“Isn't it?” replied Sister Ellen “Totally self-sufficient. Between the solar panels, miniature windmills, and the thermal energy gathered by the glass, this building is still generating its own power and will continue to do so until the end of time.”

“Well only if Cole managed to automate his grid.”

“What?”

“Well with how much power this place is capturing, it has to go somewhere. Most likely into a battery bank of some kind. But even the batteries he could buy or manufacture could only last for a dozen years or so before they would need to be replaced.”

“Why wouldn’t Cole use his Siliclones for that purpose?”

“He probably would have had some sort of protocol in place, so it’s definitely possible.”

Sister Ellen was silent for a second. Then said:

“But you think he might not have been able to initiate that in time. Especially if something unexpected had occurred.”

“It seems likely he would have built in that contingency beforehand. Who can say that for sure though.”

Tomas looked at Sister Ellen, something close to fear flickered across her face for the first time. He felt a pang in his stomach.

“I’m sure he was prepared for anything.”

She looked at him and smiled.

“What makes you say that?”

“Well, I’m sure he... I don’t know! He’s your God after all! Shouldn’t you be the one reassuring me?!”

“I’m ready for whatever may come. I know Our Father has a plan for us even if we ourselves do not understand it. But I must admit. It was awful nice to see you show something that at least appeared to be remorse for the first time since we met.”

Shocked, Thomas looked at Sister Ellen. She grinned mischievously back at him.

“That was you acting?!”

“I’ve had to learn to do many things to survive to ensure I see Our Fathers return, Brother. You truly believe I’ve been nothing but earnest and sincere this whole time?”

“I don’t know what to believe anymore!”

She laughed aloud at this.

“People are fickle. And we’re not always easy to understand. It’s better to put your faith in someone greater than ourselves.”

“Well, Sister Ellen. For how you’ve surprised me and subverted my expectations, you’ve never shown me anything less but your best self. I don’t know if I believe in Felatius Cole. I do believe in you. Until you show me otherwise, I’ll believe in you.”

She looked surprised and then pleased, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“You are softening up on me, Brother Tomas. It only took us nearly dying together a couple of times.”

“Funny how that works out.” he replied, grinning ruefully.

“Well, I’m glad we’re ending this journey together having gained a new respect for one another.”

“Lead the way, Sister Ellen. Let’s see what your Father has been up to.

{5}

Entering the small courtyard that sat directly outside the entrance, they stopped to take it in. Despite the many windows, the matte black absorbed all the light, so that no harsh light was reflected on them. One large yucca tree sat in the center, surrounded by different types of cacti in various stages of bloom. Small elegant and large bombastic flowers of every color exploded out of them. They seemed to be at the zenith of their growth, although the bright sun that beat down seemed to be ending that quickly. Even now at the peak of their growth edges of petals appeared crisped and the flowers overall looked a bit wilted. It was miraculous to see any kind of flower at all. For a while both of them drank in the tapestry the garden painted; splashes of color on a dusk red background, as though a dozen different sunsets all were harmoniously occurring as one across the sand.

They made their way through the small garden to the entrance where they found the door to be locked. All around it, single marks appeared on the cobblestone. The same shape seemingly branded into it: a human outline. They both gasped, quickly jumping back and looking for some sort of explanation to what they saw. Tomas scanned the area and looking around finally said:

“Look up there.”

As Sister Ellen did, following his pointed finger, she saw what he was referring to. A large scanner pointed down at them its lens the size of a clenched fist caught the light of the rising sun. A compact device of some sort attached underneath it. Though it did not appear to respond to them in the moment, they both hesitated.

“I’ve heard stories about these. I never saw one in person, but Father Cole seems to have built all sorts of security measures..”

“With enough money, I guess Cole could make anything real. It’s strange to see it in person, it looks so primitive.”

Tomas had heard that Cole had made devices the size of a thimble. Security systems that were wireless and whose modules one could transport from place to place without even thinking twice about it for how light and sleek it was. This device looked like something he could have made with the right amount of time.

“Do you know what it does?” she asked with trepidation.

“If I had to guess, it’s probably some sort of scanner. Cole was famously suspicious and wanted no one but his most loyal allies to enter the premises. I suspect you’ll be fine, as I’m sure its main criteria was to detect his chips placed inside the minds of those who believed in his work. As for the rest of us...”

“You think it could hurt you in some way.”

“I think Cole would have taken every protective measure he could conceive of to keep him and his work safe.”

“What do you propose we do?”

“Let’s experiment and test a theory I have before we do anything too rash. Help me bring over some rocks.”

Together they returned to the succulent garden. Finding medium sized stones with good heft they each picked up a small pile. They found that the stones were warm to the touch and pleasant to hold in the last crisp moments of morning. Returning to the entrance, they dumped the pile at their feet. Tomas picked one up and aimed it at the scanner. Throwing it, the rock missed the scanner by a couple feet to the right, clanking against the window.

“What’re you trying to accomplish?”

“I want to see how it reacts to being hit.”

“Really? That’s it?”

“No, that’s not all. But I’ve really never interacted with such stringent security at a door before. This is Felatius Cole’s work. Some of it had a reputation of not being too nice. I want to try and understand before I walk right into it’s line of sight.”

Sister Ellen picked up a stone of her own and hefted it toward the device. This one went under it by a foot.

“Nice throwing! You almost had it there.”

“Let me have one more try before you go again, Brother Tomas.”

He laughed and stepped back, as Sister Ellen picked up another stone. She squinted her eyes and lifted the rock above her head. Slowly pulling back her arm, he watched her shoulders rise and fall as a breath blew out. Then she let the rock loose.

Crack!

The rock connected with the scanner and immediately it fell from its perch. Crashing to the ground the device lay still and nothing more happened. Slowly they approached, both with rocks ready in their hands. But the device did not respond. Tomas knelt to examine it closer as Sister Ellen watched from over his shoulder.

“What is it?”

“We were right, it appears to be for assessing people before they enter. At least this top part is.”

Tomas gently pulled the smaller device from the larger one, with minimal effort, it broke from the cord that had held them together. A thin black plate made of plastic, it has the stylized “FCI” logo stamped across it.

“Well, at least we know it’s Cole’s, definitely wanted people to know that much. But I have no idea what it does or did.”

The interior of the device was held with just two simple screws, in a minute, they had the device open, going through it they quickly realized:

“Nothing, it’s empty.”

“Is it possible the parts eroded over time? It’s been at least a century or two since it was installed there.”

“I guess it’s possible, but there’s no debris, no remains, not so much as even joints that might have held a power source or a transmitter to connect this device to whatever it would have been getting its information from.”

“I take it then it’s safe to approach?”

Tomas looked up again, scanning the archway for any other security. Anything that might hurt or impede them.

“I think so.”

“Then let me go first, Brother Tomas. With my chip, I should be safe to approach it without as much potential for danger as you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of Course. You’re the only one that can get us in there. At this point, I’m both more dispensable but also less likely to dispatch whatever Our Father put in place to prevent the average bandit from getting in.”

She took one step forward. Nothing. The second step she jumped onto the threshold. Still there was nothing. The third, fourth, and fifth, she leapt from one foot to the other like hopscotch. A resounding nothing.

Tomas barked with dry laughter that had more to do with relief than the desert air coating his throat.

“Thank Christ you were right on that one, Sister.”

She turned and broke out into a huge smile.

{6}

The next morning they left the Cantina just as the sun was rising over the sand. The wasters carried the majority of their goods; he and Sister Ellen trudged behind them in the shadows. For a while all they did was walk through the small town seeing what little was left but soon after that, they made their way out into the desert. After sometime they stopped for water.

“How far is this place from here anyway?” asked Tomas.

“About a week north of here. It’s right in the heart of the Delnado Cavern.”

“That’s a five mile crack in the ground stretching across some of the most barren wastes in the whole region. Care to be a bit more specific?”

“I’m used to being vague about where all of this is. We try to keep our Father’s location secret for his privacy.”

Tomas stopped drinking and looked at her skeptically,

“You wanted to protect his privacy... this coming from the guy who wanted to track the entire planet’s population via microchip? What made him so special that he was above the practices he wanted to implement on the rest of the world.”

Sister Ellen calmly replied:

“That’s all a lie. Nothing but fabrications told by people too stuck in their old ways to understand what Father Cole intended to do.”

‘And how would you know that?’

“Because he told me.”

Tomas stopped in his tracks.

“So you’ve actually met Felatius Cole in person?”

“No.”

“So then you’ve heard him inside your head?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re sure you’re not crazy?”

“I’m not mad.”

“But you’ve heard him proclaiming his true purpose and reasons for doing what he did, all coming from that chip you’ve got drilled in your head?”

“Hmm.... Yes, I suppose I have. But it’s difficult to explain.”

“Cole’s dead, how could he be broadcasting to you on your chip? I thought you family members were all about evidence and concrete solutions? This just seems like more of the same from the people who put us in this mess in the first place.”

“I told you it’s not easy to say. I just know in times of trouble or tribulation, when I’ve had my doubts or moments of worry, I sit and I think of him. And I will hear his voice. He says things to give me comfort and hope. He reminds me not to rely too heavily on him as he’s working on his great inventions that will one day save us all. Then he reminds me to keep searching for someone who could assist him in his work.”

“Wouldn’t you say giving other followers of him guided tours isn’t really fulfilling that purpose?”

“Though ostensibly my work is leading pilgrimages to Our Father’s home, I’m always looking out for someone with the right skill set to help him. And it was because I returned to the right cantina at the right time of day that I met you.”

Sister Ellen looked at him for a long time, hungrily staring into the very pits of his eyes as if looking for something. Seeming to have found what she was looking for, she took his hand. Tomas flinched but she held it gently, the warmth cracked palms of her enveloping his own rough ones.

“I have immense faith that you are the key to all of this, Brother Tomas. I look into your eyes and I just know it.”

{7}

The knob did not even jiggle as they tried to enter the compound. A small steel arm that would not be contested by any human arm in this particular match. Tomas reached into his belt. Finding the large heavy pouch, he pulled it open and began to sort through it. He removed from it a steel tool the same length and width of a pencil alongside a large hammer. Kneeling before the large door of the compound, Tomas squinted and placed one end of the steel tool top end up, the sharp point digging into the hinge.

“Sister Ellen, would you be so kind as to hold that in place for me? I will do my absolute best to assure you won’t lose any fingers in the process.”

Sister Ellen knelt beside him placing her hands where his had been. Applying the same pressure to hold the steel tool in place, she looked to him as he slowly rose, standing behind and to the left of her. She could see his shadow as it first stodied itself drawing the hammer back in an arc almost as if he were to bowl with it.

“Ready, Sister?”

“As I’ll ever be, Brother.”

“Hang on tight.”

She watched as the shadowy figure in one fluid motion drove the head of the hammer directly into the back end of the tool, her hands vibrating terribly as a heavy clang shot through the tool and shot the hinge piece flying out of its holder. The door lurched an inch but with the lock mechanism still in place and the other intact, it held firm within the frame of the door without any further motion.

“How’re your hands?” Tomas asked, watching as Sister Ellen dug the sharp end of the steel tool into the second hinge holding the door.

“It was a bit of a shock.” she admitted to him, staring down at the black oily marks the tool shooting through her clenched palms had left.

“But I’ll be okay.”

“This time, without and hinges holding it in place, the doors’ gonna fall. It might not collapse on you and crush you, the lock in theory will still keep it connected to the other wall, the other half though will certainly come down hard. As soon as you feel that vibration from before, let go and get out of the way.”

She nodded and braced herself, squatting like a frog, her hardened legs from endless miles walking in the name of Her Father, were tensed, anticipating, and ready to leap away from his threshold. Sister Ellen clung to the tool like her life depended on it. She watched again as the shadow behind her held its pose, breathed deep, and then swung with all its might. As soon as the vibrations rung her hands, she dropped the tool and leapt backwards, watching the steel door tumble from its frame.

Tomas leapt back too as the door fell and with a heavy metallic thunk fell and hit the ground hard. The top of the door sat in the sand at an angle, the rest of it, like a ramp sat at that angle, the lock managing to hold it upward, but without the hinges to keep it in place, it was easy enough to move around to enter.

The two of them crept to the entrance. Listening quietly for sounds of life, they heard nothing whatsoever. It wasn’t just the natural quiet found in an empty stretch of land or on a dark lonely night. It was the total absence of sound. As they strained to hear anything, the entrance felt evermore like a tomb.

Tomas looked at Sister Ellen, saying cautiously:

“You’re sure you want to go in there?”

“Why wouldn’t I, Brother Thomas. This is what I’ve waited my whole life for! You’re my key to the Cloud. Thank You so much.” she replied, resting a hand on his shoulder and squeezing it.

“Uh....You’re welcome” he said, clearly uncomfortable with the hand on him but unsure what to do about it “but we really don’t know what’s going on around here. I don’t know how good I feel about us going down there.”

She began to shift herself around the door to get into the doorway.

“Well, Brother Tomas, I’m sorry to hear that. You’ve been a wonderful companion this far and I’ll truly miss your company and intellect. However, there’s no way I can stop here. I have to keep going. I’ve spent my entire life getting to this moment. I don’t think you realize just how impossible what it is you’re asking me to do would be.”

Tomas looked at her pleadingly as he said”

“Try and make me understand.”

She sat and thought about it for a long time.

“Imagine knowing everything you ever wanted was behind that door. Everything you’d ever dreamed for since the moment you knew you were capable of hoping for something, was behind a door. And you spent your entire life up to that point knowing you could get to it if the right person came along and opened it for you. That’s what you’ve done for me today, Brother Tomas. And now that it’s open you’re asking me to give that up, when you left it wide open for me to just walk through.”

He looked at her defeated.

“I knew that was the case, I guess I had to hear you say it though before I could commit myself to this too.”

“What?”

“I’m going with you.”

“Brother Tomas, I can’t ask you to do that for me. Getting us through that door was your last obstacle. I’ll pay you what I owe you, send you on your way, and then I can handle the rest from here on my own.”

She reached into her shirt, produced a small bronze key from her chest and passed it across to him.

“This will get you into Our Family’s Lockbox back in Jericho. Take as much or as little as you’d like from our stores and treasured items. Just make sure to lock up after yourself and leave the key with the barkeep at the cantina. She’s held onto it for me before in exchange for some rations and other little trinkets. She’ll do it again and keep whatever you leave in there safe for the other members. I suspect after this trip I’ll have no reason to come back for it. Best to save it for those passing through on their way here.”

He gaped at what she said, holding the bronze key in his hand. Warm from where it had sat on her chest, absorbing the heat of the sun, he couldn’t believe something so small held the answer to all The Family Cole’s wealth outside this estate. It took him a minute of gaping at it to register the gravity of the situation. Looking back up at Sister Ellen, her eyes misty, he asked her without thinking.

“You’re really not coming back?”

“One way or another this is where my journey on this plane ends. Whatever comes after that is in the hands of Felatius Cole. Brother Tomas, I cannot thank you enough for all you’ve done for me.”

Sister Ellen pulled him into a hug. She held him tight to her, squeezing his arms in hers as they stood at the threshold. For a long while Tomas did not move. He couldn’t remember the last

time someone had held him like this. In those moments they stood there, even the fear of what lay ahead for him or her could not penetrate this little space they had forged together in each other's arms. Then when she finally released him it all came flooding in. Everything that could happen to her if he let her go in without anyone else.

“I can’t let you do this alone, Sister Ellen” he said looking into her misty eyes, his too starting to fill with tears.

“T-Tomas...” she croaked, looking back at him seeing the tears in his eyes.

He reached down and squeezed her hands, holding onto them he smiled determinedly at her and said simply

“It’s Brother Tomas, Sister Ellen. Don’t you forget it. Whatever comes next, we’ll be here for each other.”

{8}

The settlement was barely hanging on, to put it charitably. As the four of them entered, they saw maybe six buildings in total that still held enough shape and intact walls to even be called that. Several of them were hovels, with large tarps and sheets hung for privacy and protection from the highwinds that blew through the empty streets. The rest were rubble that might have been modern art pieces; a deconstructed home. Or more accurately put, ruins of a developed civilization that many could not even imagine had once existed.

An amber building coated in a fine dusting of dirt and sand had the name “Empolvado” chiseled deep into it’s wall facing the street. Each letter had many lifetimes worth of grit and grime impacted deep into the engraving. It looked as though someone had tried to clean it out with mild success. But the piles of debris beneath indicated it was a losing battle.

As the four of them entered they lowered their hoods. Another non descript cantina, another town none of them could have placed, if it weren’t for the patrons. Wasters filled nearly every available table. The bar was lined with distinct shades ranging from a baby pink all the way to the deepest shades of maroon. These were the offspring of those that had survived Father Cole’s explosive demise. The closest settlement that hadn’t been wiped off the map. Though those that had survived it probably wished otherwise. Their burnt and singed skin wasn’t the only thing they’d passed onto their children. Extra limbs were proudly displayed by many, shame had been abandoned long ago and replaced with pride. Eye colors ranged from milky white, to harsh burnt oranges, to washed out purples, and shades that had never existed, let alone given names. Marked by Father Cole as he had left this world, The Wasters were believed to be his Chosen People. Many held them in great regard or at least left them to their own affairs. The rest though they didn’t believe in their cult still gave them their space. They knew what happened to those who crossed them.

Jaull and Kwen took them by the arm each and led them through the room. Removing their hoods, their bald, red, and rippling heads gleamed even in the dull light of the cantina. Some Wasters glanced at them in passing, while others didn’t even seem to notice as they took

long sips from their drinks. They found an empty table stashed in the corner of the cantina and the four of them huddled around it. Kwen deposited her things on the chair and then looking at them all said:

“Shall I order us some food and drink?”

The three of them nodded.

“Right, back in a moment.”

The three of them sat in silence for awhile, watching the cantina. Tomas turned to Jaull

“Can I ask you a question?”

Jaull looked to him

“About?”

“About Wasters. I don’t want to sound ignorant but where I come from I’ve only seen a couple in my life. I never knew or spent enough time to ask them what I wanted to know. I don’t mean to be rude or pry-”

“Just say what you’re going to say, Tomas.”

“Wasters don’t only come from this place do they?”

“Wasters come from a lot of place. But most of them look like this place. Nearly every Waster I ever knew was born in one of the dozen towns that were just outside the circumference of the blast.”

“And the ones that weren’t?”

“Well, a few of them came from other parts of the world. Seems whatever explosive force Felatius Cole set off, it might of triggered some other detonations in other countries, which may have led to similar mutations and changes to peoples appearances.”

“Did the ones you meet really look all that different from anyone else you had met in your travels out here?”

“Of the few I’ve seen they were mostly the same. Though one gal was something like I’d never seen before... her ancestors must have had hardy genes or been damn lucky to have survived being so close to the radius of the blast.”

“What did she look like?”

“I wouldn’t even know where to begin describe her.”

“Just try, this is incredible to hear.”

At that moment, Kwen returned with drinks, distributing them out one by one they all clanked their mugs, drank deeply, and let the sickly sweet intoxicant take root in their minds and ease their worries. For awhile none of them spoke. Each lost in their own thoughts, enjoying the ambiance of chattering people enjoying one anothers company

“Did you ever read one of those old descriptions of angels from The Bible?”

Tomas turned to Jaull.

“I can’t say I have, all The Bibles I came across were ones that had been printed after the blast.”

“Well they don’t look like the little fairies with golden hair and sparkling haloes like you’d see on a Sympathy card or a Christmas tree. They were somethin gloriously terrible. If you

can recall that Satan himself was one of God's Fallen Angels, then you might begin to start to understand what she looked like."

"She was terrifying?"

"In the most beautiful way imaginable. You wanted to look away but also wanted to stare right at her as if she was the last thing you'd ever see again. Her skin was so white you'd almost think she was made of light, not flesh and bone."

"You're kidding."

"No, she most certainly glowed. Her entire eyes were white too. You had to really pay attention to see her gaze shift or to watch her blink. Everything blended into one dazzling form. She was incredibly kind and didn't mind me asking questions about her. But when she grew tired, she just simply walked into the night. You could see her for a mile the way she radiated like a beacon."

They all sat in silence as the bartender brought over four plates, each with a heaping pile of desert plants fried on some stove, each with a small portion of hare, just big enough to make two mouthfuls of. The bartender lowered a plate with each of his arms and then bowed, before making his way back to his post, two arms reaching over people's shoulders to grasp empty mugs and plates and his lower arms knocking people out of the way as he moved through the crowd. As they dug into their meager vittles, Tomas paused with the fork in his hand, turning to Jaull he asked:

"What was her name?"

"Holly. Holly Oxon"

"Was that her given name?"

"No, she said Cole had given it to her in a dream. Told her she was to be a light to awaken others from their darkness and bring them to his aura that was even more spectacular than what she had achieved."

"Is that why you believe now?"

Jaull seemed lost in thought, working his teeth through the tough meat on his plate, Tomas saw his jaw work at it ferociously. Tomas watched his eyes. Though his face seemed to have gone slack and ignored what he had asked, the eyes told him everything. They stared laser focused into the table, seemingly incapable of looking up at the man who had asked the question he had been meaning to ask for a long time. Finally, Jaull was able to lift his head and look at Tomas.

"I don't know what I believe. The most miraculous thing I've ever seen in my life claimed Cole gave her that gift. I was never a smart man. That combined with my cynicism led to a rather depressed individual. All I know is, the thought of something or someone more fantastic than I've ever known making something as otherworldly as her made me want to pursue this further. See how much truth there was to Felatius Cole and his cause."

Tomas poked at his greens, taking a bite, he mulled over this. When he swallowed he said to Jaull:

"What have you learned since?"

“I’m nowhere closer to learning the truth about Cole as I did when I started this journey.”

“Oh..”

“But I’ve met some wonderful people in the process.”

He looked over at Kwen and Sister Ellen, they both were lost in their conversation, laughing casually and snorting into their food as they went back and forth with each other, the other two able to catch snippets that were incomprehensible between their laughter. Jaull’s face cracked into a harsh grimace.

“I don’t really know if Cole is all he said he is.”

“Or said he was, even now you’re still speaking as though he’s here with us all and keeping us together.”

“You’re right, Tomas. He may very well be dead. Or might’ve been a fraud who tricked a lot of people to believe a bunch of bullshit about himself. For such a long time I would’ve been right there with you. For so long, feeling like I was right and knew something that all these Wasters and Family members didn’t know was what made me feel special and got me through the day.”

He sighed and his harsh grimace became a soft smile, as again he looked over at the two women sharing a joke together.

“But Savior or Snake Oil Salesmen, this idea of who this guy was, made two of the kindest, most courageous, and devoted sisters. I finally have family. And a purpose that doesn’t force me to sneer at others to get by. Whatever Cole was in his life, he gave these good people something in the here and now.”

“He caused all of this! You three could of been happy in a world that was full of life and happiness.”

Jaull looked at Tomas and for the first time, he reached over and put a hand on his shoulder.

“You’re right, Tomas. But that world isn’t real anymore. I never knew it. All I know is what this world is. I’m just trying to make the most of it.”

Tomas felt Jaull squeeze and felt the warmth of his red radiating skin through his own. He hadn’t know warmth like this before.

“You don’t need to believe in him to believe in what’s right here with us now. Enjoy these moments while we have them.”

Jaull wiped his mouth with his sleeve, picking up his pack, he stood from the table.

“I think I saw a communal barrack just a little ways down. I’m going to get some rest. I’ll see you all there later.”

Jaul waved to the ladies across the table, they waved and returned to their stories, raucous with glee. Tomas sat there and worked at his small plate. Listening to the story he had missed most of, he drank in every word.

Upon entering the threshold, they walked into a sterile white room. The many windows while tinted from the outside let in sheets of white light that covered everything in the room in soft natural presentation. Small pieces of furniture one would have to believe were modern and chic at sometime were precisely placed throughout. A pair of recliners that would sit it's patron at the most ridiculous angles that one would have to believe it was quite uncomfortable to use. A small sofa that appeared stiff from a distance and was the fraction of the size of any decent mattress one would stretch out and lounge on. All the tables had glass countertops with a thin film of dust over their surfaces. Stools that sat high surrounded them, their garishly long legs would have given the person in them quite a stature when sitting straight. But anyone trying to enjoy a meal would have to hunch horribly to get to their food.

"They called those pieces of furniture "love seats ", said Tomas, pointing to the tiny sofa as they surveyed the room.

"Seems like a silly name, doesn't look as though it could hardly fit one person, let alone two. They'd practically have to be sitting on each other to make it work."

"I believe that was the point." Tomas smiled.

Sister Ellen took a minute to register, but then she burst out laughing.

"Are you serious?!"

"Well, humans now I think would just come right out and say what their intentions. But I think more primitive humans had a harder time expressing their more... base desires. They had to let their furniture do a lot of their heavy lifting for them. That way it wasn't their fault if someone had to sit in their lap. The damn furniture maker made the sofa too small. That lousy carpenter didn't sanded the floors too finely and we're sliding all over the place. We had to put down the bear skin rug!"

Sister Ellen laughed even harder at this.

"I've even heard about that one."

She shook her head looking around the room, scanning every corner as she slowly made her way further in.

"Hard to believe people used to really live like this."

"Too good to be true?"

"No, I mean, I get it. If I had the same kind of wealth as Felatius Cole and his followers, I think I probably would have spent it on similar things too."

"No one is immune to the comforts of a simple, pleasurable life. Who doesn't like a clean space full of lovely things? My work was mostly out of utility, but people like me used to make all sorts of wealth building homes for these people who had even more wealth. Once you get a taste of it..."

"You can't stop yourself."

"If all you've known is abundance, why would you ever stop living like this if you thought that's all there was?"

The three of them crawled out of the dusty basement and made their way down the street. Full of cactus juice, they laughed and stumbled along. Making their way to the hovel that would be the quarters for the evening, they entered the small room that one might have called a lobby though it was nothing more than a desk with a man sitting behind it. As they approached his desk he looked up from his things and smiled:

“How can I help you?”

“We were hoping to stay for the evening, our friend came by earlier this evening to get us a room?”

“That must of been the Waster man.”

“Precisely.”

The man stood up from his desk and extended his hand to the right down the hallway.

“Follow the hall all the way till you reach the end, its the very last door on the left. You can’t miss it. My names Bruo, if you need anything while you’re staying, I’ll be here behind this desk to assist you. Just give a shout from your door and if I don’t respond feel free to come down and shake me. I’m here all night but I’m known to fall asleep at my post on these quiet nights.”

Tomas nodded as the ladies made their way down the hall.

“Thanks, Bruno.”

“My pleasure, Sir. Sleep Well.”

They made their way to the end of the hall and upon entering it found Jaull in a deep sleep, gently snoring on one of the cots that had been put on and made for them. His arms folded over his chest and with his shoes still on, he was still a soldier even when fast asleep, awaiting whatever might jump him in the night. Sister Ellen went to his side and removed the Waster’s boots, the feet within them now were redder and more swollen then Tomas could have imagined.

“Rest easy, Jaull.” Sister Ellen said soothingly as she placed the boots at the foot of his cot. “You deserve it.”

The other two quietly closed the door behind them and Tomas reached into his pack to find his homemade door lock. Wrapping a taught bit of twine around the handle he looped it around Jaull’s cot until there wasn’t a single bit of slack left to be found in the lengths of rope. Tugging on it to ensure there wasn’t any possible way for it to snap back he tried it again and again, testing it twenty times or more before he was satisfied they would be safe at least through the night.

Kwen slid into her cot silently, stripping off her boots and pants without another thought as she seemed to lose consciousness as soon as her head had hit the pillow. Sister Ellen sat at the end of her cot, closing her eyes, she spoke quietly to herself.

“What’re you doing?” said Tomas, kneeling beside his bed, undoing his shoes and dusting them off before setting them off to the side.

“Give me a minute, then I’ll explain.”

“Alright...”

Tomas continued with his routine. Folding his clothes and putting them beside his boots he laid on the cot and pulled the thin blanket over himself. For awhile all he could hear was the gentle snoring of Jaull and the mutterings of Sister Ellen. When was the last time he had been surrounded by people as he was drifting off to sleep? Probably when he was back in the North. Him and his six siblings had shared a room and would often tell each other stories as they dozed off. But since then? He furrowed his brow and tried to recall another time after that. Nothing came to him as he lay there in the dark.

“I was doing my nightly meditations.”

His mind snapped back to that moment as he turned to look at Sister Ellen, who had also pulled her thin blanket over her and was laying on her side, looking at him.

“Do they help you sleep?”

“They do help in that regard. I’ve found as I’ve gotten older that they do tend to ease my mind when my worried thoughts compound on themselves. But I use them for more than sleep aids.”

“What do you mainly use them for?”

“To instill gratitude. To thank My Father for all that he’s given me. As well as a reminder of what my mission is and why I am here.”

“That sounds nice. I do something similar.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, although I don’t know what I would call what I do.”

“Maybe if you tell me what it is that you do we could come up with a name for it? Would naming it ruin it?”

Tomas thought for a moment.

“No, I don’t think it would.”

“Please share it with me then!”

Tomas laughed as he wracked his brain, desperately trying to put into words what he’d been doing without thinking for his whole life.

“Well... I start by saying “There is one of me.” Then I think of something that there’s a lot of like...”

“Vultures.”

“Sure, Vultures. So then I say “There are many vultures.” But then I will try to recall a time that I had an interaction with that thing that was special.”

“What’s a special interaction you’ve had with a vulture?”

“None come to mind.” laughed Tomas “That might not have been the best example you could’ve given me.”

“Well, a vulture I met stood out to me. That’s what made me think of it.”

“Oh really, What was it?”

“I don’t know how much meaning it’ll have for you, Tomas. It was special to me.”

“Let me hear it at least before you prejudge me.”

She looked at him sternly, running her eyes over him to see his sincerity. Tomas tried his best to look trustworthy and open, even though he would've thought he was grimacing from how painful earnestly felt on his face. Whatever she saw seemed to satisfy her. She sat up, crossing her legs on the cot and began:

"I'd been helping guide family members into the desert to come to Father Cole's sanctum for a couple years at that point. I hadn't met Jaull or Kwen yet. I was still growing as a sister in the faith. Luckily I had my brother Jon with me. He was a strong man in his spirit. The poor fellow could barely carry his pack on his back. I worried for him at times, the way I could see the tremors in his body. The strain of the heat and all his supplies would weigh on him. I'd always walk alongside him, prepared to step in and take his load if necessary. The longer we spent out there however, the less I felt the need to mother him. My anxiety about him and what would happen to him left me."

"What stopped it?"

"His conviction. Even when I knew he could hardly manage another step, he would press on. Anyone who offered to help him he would calmly, kindly shut down. He wasn't one to use force or rhetoric to get someone to stop or to do what he told them to. And his way of doing things didn't always lead to the results he desired. I saw him lose as many battles as he won. He never saw that discourage him though. He always seemed to appreciate when others could prove him wrong or at least show them why they believed what they did. I asked him why these moments when he knew he was right but couldn't convince people otherwise didn't bother him. Didn't knock him over or keep him from getting back up. Know what he said?"

"What?"

"At least they believe in something."

"That's kind of a stupid thing to say."

Sister Ellen stopped mid breath. As if the words to form the next part of her story was knocked out of her mouth. He registered anger flash on her face for a moment, then it was gone. What he said caused her to scrunch her brow then reply slowly:

"I guess it's a matter of perspective."

"Not really. People believe in all sorts of stupid things. People believe they should be allowed to go to the bathroom up river from a settlement. People believe they should give names to an animal when an animal doesn't care what it's name is because it doesn't know what a name is. People believe Felatius Cole was an angel sent to Earth to save us all from extinction and look how well placed that faith was."

"Please let me finish my story, you can rant about how my faith is a load of crap after I'm done."

Tomas stopped himself from saying something else. Looking at Sister Ellen and the way she looked at him, he breathed in and paused.

"I'm sorry, go on."

"Even though Jon wasn't physically strong he did have an immense inner strength. The way he talked about Father Cole drew people to him. The stories of what he had done for us all

before gave people comfort on those nights we were out in the elements, getting torn about by whipping winds and sand being flung about. And prophesying about what was to come gave each of them hope. It was strange to see people who had looked upon him with so much pity completely transform right before me. Becoming as wide eyed as I was whenever he sat and talked with me.”

“It sounds like Jon had a way with people.”

She smiled warmly at this. Lost in thought he sat there with her. For a time nothing was said.

“Yes, he did. He was a true brother in Cole. Always trying to make things easier for others. Seeing their potential. He saw something in me, at least, he said he did.”

“So... Then what happened to Brother Jon?”

Resting her head in her hands, she sighed. Rubbing her eyes with her palms she looked up at Tomas.

“A few years into our pilgrimages something changed. We’d bring our brothers and sisters to Father Cole’s resting site and we started to find bodies outside the entrance leading inside. At first we were worried it was persecution. Maybe someone or a group of people that hated the family came out here and waited for someone to arrive. Then they could overwhelm them. Alone out here, it’d be very easy. The trek out here is long and hot. If a group of people really wanted to dispose of family members it’d take no time at all. Kill them quickly and leave their bodies here as an example. They could be long gone before any witnesses would arrive to identify them”

“I never heard anything about that. Acolytes of Cole being murdered at his doorstep? Someone would have shared or said something if your family members were getting murdered en masse.”

“They weren’t being murdered. But we didn’t realize it right away. The first couple of incidents we carried the bodies out and hid off in the distance. Far enough away we could bury the dead and watch to see who had been doing this. But no culprit ever showed up. Finally, after weeks of this, Brother Jon asked me to take the rest of the family members we’d brought back. He would stay behind and figure out what was going on.”

“And you let him do that?”

“I certainly didn’t do it willingly.”

She stopped again, pressing her palms into her eyes, brushing back tears as she braced herself.

“I fought him over it the whole night. Even well into the early hours of the morning I begged him to reconsider. But he wouldn’t hear anything else. He believed he had to be there and figure out what was being done. I realized short of me carrying him over my back, he would not go with us willingly. So we left him there.”

“And when you came back?”

“I rushed us all home and as soon as I could I returned to where I’d left him. He wasn’t there. I checked the surrounding area and there wasn’t a trace. Looking up to the sky though I did

spot a pair of vultures circling the spot right above the site. With a lump in my throat I dashed to the site... and there he was. Lying face down, another family member beside him. And a third vulture sitting there simply staring at them. It hadn't tried to eat them. Wasn't scavenging over them. Simply standing there beside them. And as soon as I arrived, it looked me in the eyes, then took off into the air with its fellows circling above."

"What happened to them?"

"I carefully turned over their bodies and examined them. They both were a light shade of red. Even after having been dead for a couple days, all that sun exposure left them burnt and warm to the touch. But I couldn't find any visible markings, no wounds, no signs they'd been poisoned, beaten, strangled; nothing. After examining their bodies I checked their personal belongings. All I found was this."

She reached into her coat pocket and removed a well worn and dry looking piece of paper.

"He wrote me this before he..."

Unfolding it until it was open, she passed it to Tomas. In the semi darkness of the room Tomas squinted his eyes and read:

Dear Sister,

In my attempts to discover the culprit of these crimes I've instead found salvation! This is no grisly murder scene, but the site of a new beginning for all of us family members who have led good and virtuous lives as our Father would have us do!

After you left with the other family members, I hid amongst the hills and waited. For a day or two nothing happened. But on the third day I saw a figure making their way over the horizon. I watched their progress for hours as slowly they passed by me (I went unnoticed) and made their way into the canyon. Cautiously, I followed them down. For another hour or two I tracked the figure until they made their way to the site of Father Cole. Upon reaching the place, the figure threw back their hood and revealed themselves to be a member of the Family!

I rushed from my cover quickly and quietly to warn them of the danger they found themselves in. But they simply smiled as I approached and introduced themselves as Sibling Lazlo. They said they had heard Father Cole calling for them. They thought this site was a good place to start and when they arrived had heard their name even louder and clearer. They now intended to join Father Cole. I asked him where he was. Sibling Lazlo pointed toward the entrance. Right above the archway of the door, a small metal device was perched. It was so well hidden that only its lens catching the midday sun made it visible to me at that moment.

I asked if Father Cole could see us right then. Sibling Lazlo nodded. They asked me to sit with them and listen. See if I could hear Father Cole as well. Them and I sat together for quite sometime. Hand in hand we meditated, listening for Our Father's presence. Then I heard my name. As gentle as if Our Father had rested his hand on my shoulder and leaned in my ear to whisper: "Jon Wilkins."

I stood up in shock and Sibling Lazlo smiled up at me. They knew I believed them now. I'm writing this to you now quickly before I leave my body behind. I couldn't leave you not knowing. But my hands shake with nervous, joyful energy. I won't be gone long before you and the rest of our siblings join me here. We needn't be afraid any longer. Leave this world to it's machinations and join me soon in a world that with Our Father we shall live in abundance and grown infinite in our wisdom through his guiding hand. Until we meet again...

Your Brother in Cole,

Jon

Tomas refolded the letter and handed it back to Sister Ellen. He could not register what he had read.

"Father Cole spoke to them? He's alive?"

"That is what Brother Jon believed."

"And he was so certain of that..."

"He abandoned this body for wherever Father Cole is now? Yes, I believe that's what happened. Unless you can think of a more reasonable explanation?"

"Someone could have forced them to write that letter before they killed them."

"Why would someone do that?"

"Maybe they thought you'd seek them out and try to get revenge? A quick way to get you off their trail is to believe your Family members are willingly deciding to do this. Rather than some freak out in the desert preying on your siblings, ransacking their corpses, and then running off into the wilderness without worrying your Family will be after them."

"It seems like a lot of trouble to go to so they could murder and rob our Family members, Tomas. Everyone knows our Family is non-violent and we don't normally carry weapons. Why wouldn't this killer simply try and pick us off one by one as we trek out here? Or gather a couple of willing participants to ambush us once we were deep in the canyon and far away from anyone who could see what was going on and try to help?"

Tomas tried to think of any sort of logic that would make sense. But as he wracked his brain Sister Ellen spoke back calmly:

"What's happening Tomas is that your strident non-belief is colliding with damning proof that what I've been saying is true. Father Cole is alive."

"So what, Sister Ellen, we're all bringing you all the way out there just so you can dump your body like the rest of your Family?"

"No, you misunderstand me. Now that I know he's alive somewhere in there, I need to meet him. And you're going to help me break in."

{12}

The sterile room was cool and still. Despite the bleaching rays of the midday sun that tried to penetrate the tinted windows, Tomas and Sister Ellen remained comfortable. Usually either sick from heat or frigid in the emptiness of the desert at night, neither had known this sensation. No bodies slick with sweat. Nor skin coated with goose bumps. They laid out on the stone flooring of the house, relishing the pleasure of a happy medium. Tomas rolled over to look at Sister Ellen. Her head wrap was laid to the side, her face planted firmly into a cushion they'd taken off the love seat. Felatius Cole's visage stared back at him and he held eye contact with it until she flipped onto her back, releasing a heavy sigh.

"Did you even know the air could be this comfortable?" she looked up at him, a smile of pure pleasure loosely hanging on her lips.

"The closest I ever got was back up North. The cold there was a whole lot harsher. But there was sometimes a week or two between summer and winter when things were almost pleasant. If it wasn't for the floods."

She arched her brow.

"Floods? I thought those were only in The Bible."

He rolled on his back as well, laughing aloud at that as he rested his head on the cushion, looking up into the dark rafters.

"Well, maybe there hasn't been floods since biblical times down here. But back where I grew up there was snow, floods, and then humidity."

"Is that really all there is up there?"

"Well... no. With all that precipitation we never ran out of fresh water to drink. And there were birds besides vultures. Not too many others mind you. Most of them died off or permanently migrated way further South. But the ones that were there, a couple at least, were song birds. On the odd quiet day, you might hear them sing."

"What did they sound like?"

Tomas pursed his lips and let out a high quick whistle followed by a few more at lower and lower pitches.

"That's what a chickadee sounds like."

"A chickadee?"

"Yeah, they're tiny little things. You could fit one comfortably in the palm of your hand. I found an old bird book once. People used to go to spots where they knew they nested. Then they'd put seed in their hands and if they waited, the chickadees would land in their hands and eat right-"

Sister Ellen smacked Tomas on the shoulder. Tomas stopped mid sentence looking at her in shock.

"What was that for?!"

“Stop lying to me Brother Tomas! I know you think I’m some gullible idiot who's been taken in by a cult, but I won’t be told such bold lies right to my face! Song birds and floods, have you no shame?”

“I swear to Cole, everything I’ve said is true!”