

Avant Garde



by Nick A. Jameson



© 2018-2022 Infinite of One Publishing

www.infiniteofone.com

publisher@infiniteofone.com

For my family, without whom this book wouldn't exist.
And for Kato, the lost pup who lent the protagonist his name.

May a neo-renaissance of ideas and literature spring forth, inspiring renewed intellectual, moral, social and spiritual exploration, enrichment, awareness and activism, so as to lift this diseased society out of the corruptive filth in which it is mired before, as its unsustainable virus, we're swallowed up in the abyss of this, our beautiful, beleaguered, uprising planet.

“A human being is like a good fisherman who casts his net into the sea. When he pulls it out, he finds a multitude of little fish. Among them there is one fine, large fish. Without hesitation, he keeps it and throws all the small fish back into the sea.”

- *The Gnostic Gospel of Thomas*

What is the Avant Garde?

Test readers suggest that a hint may be helpful.

It's an invisible army, yes.

It's technology unleashed without control, yes.

But it's more, and it wasn't made invisible on accident.

Prologue

How do you defend against an invisible enemy? An enemy so small that it may be embedded in every crack of the crumbling infrastructure that it stands to survive, yet so ubiquitously immense in effect that it threatens to swallow whole any scrambling source of life that has the audacity to reach for the light, the hope for a future?

Toward the end of what was being called ‘The Great Reset,’ those survivors keen on conserving their control of society retreated into their bases and safehouses and unleashed their last hope: the Avant Garde. It turns out that’s all they would need to successfully wage war against the Democratic Socialists. Not the armies of soldiers, tanks, guns and aircraft that demolished the nation and the planet; not the propaganda that broadcasted the ideological drums of war in the name of nationalism; not the legions of libertarians fooled into believing that the overlords ever had any intention of turning small, ‘don’t regulate me’ government into ‘don’t tread on me’ self-determinism; not even the nukes that came later, sealing the fate of the planet’s transformation into a wasteland, effectively turning the gradually erosive climate-changing catastrophes precipitating The Great Reset into a warm-up in the near annihilation of life on earth.

No, all they’d needed was to release the nanobots at the

outset of the hostilities, programmed to target anything that moves absent a protective identifier, then retreat to the confines of their respective fortresses, waiting for the near genocide to end so the country, then the world, could be reclaimed. Eventually, when the people are on their knees and waving the white flag, they'd hit the kill switch on the AG, restarting history's consolidation of power.

Only it didn't happen that way. Something went awry.

In the fallout of the global conflicts inevitably resulting from the violent rebuttals to the unsustainable transgressions of greed against the people and planet, the safe places to hide are rare. Ever sought, the fortunate few that find and protect such places remain ever fearful that the cold hand of technology may, at any time, fall upon and snatch away the little remaining life to which they cling.

1

Kato calls their deep nook in the river canyon once cutting through the heart of Oregon's Silver Falls State Park 'The Unguarded,' mocking the Avant Garde enemy. In fact, the right to count oneself amongst those that 'guard life' became a focal point of the ideological warfare accompanying The Great Reset.

On one side you have groups like The Evangelicals, The Apocalypsts, The Army of Christ and The Americans asserting that life on Earth is now in the hands of the Christian God. They believe that the current state of humanity represents a necessary, preordained cleansing of the evil on Earth and rescuing of the faithful to be delivered into the hands of the reborn Savior. The only way to spare yourself from being cleansed by the fire is to demonstrate your faith and exercising of 'American values.' On the other side you have groups like The Communists, Saved by Science and The Democratic Socialists, the latter of which would eventually subsume the entirety of 'the left' under their banner on the temporary agreement that 'the great postwar debate' over the 'new charter' and the inevitable territorial divides must come *after* the triumph over 'the right.'

The bones of most of them now litter the volatile, ravaged landscape, with Kato and his crew picking them up when found and,

grinding them down, feeding their phosphorous to their meager little garden clinging to the scarce supply of soil nutrients not washed or burned away in the violent swings between flood and searing heat.

Despite sporting some scarring from third degree burns across his face, hands and arms, some wrinkles beginning to set in and a lion's mane of mostly silver hair resembling more the fur of an aging forest dweller than the neatly oiled and combed coils of the white-collared professional that he once was, one might still consider Kato a good-looking man. Grizzled as can be and squatted near the fire pit at the mouth of the cave he now calls home, he and two of his small, trusted crew resemble an ancient tribe of troglodytes. Overcome with a sudden sense of self-awareness, he laughs out loud.

“What?,” Hunter asks in his characteristically flat, unflappable tone.

“We're a museum exhibit,” Kato snorts. “Cavemen.”

Counselor assesses their appearance. Laughing lightly, she says: “A retelling of old tales. The cycle renewed.”

“Indeed,” Kato agrees.

Staring up the precipitous rock walls enclosing their small camp, Kato recalls what Silver Creek's encompassing canyon once looked like; before the climate fell into its perpetual freeze-to-inferno yo-yo, decimating the flora and fauna of this once most

bountifully beautiful of ecospheres; before President Garcia was shot on Pennsylvania Avenue while attempting to pacify a particularly enraged band of ‘patriots’ protesting the job losses produced as a side-effect of the last-ditch Natural Preservation Act; *long* before the ownership class and the ‘non-deserting’ remnants of their military loyalists released what became the most successfully self-replicating virus in either biological or technological history, the Avant Garde.

This realm of waterfalls that now turned from deluge to dry in the blink of an eye, as brittle as the decomposing bone carpeting the ghosted cities above, was once one of the most biodiverse dreamlands north of Nicaragua, rivaling even the mightily-magnificent Olympic Peninsula guarding the gateway into Canada to the north. These now mostly barren rock walls once crawled with so much life that one could scarcely see the rock itself, the heart lifted with one’s gaze as it captured dozens of species of moss, fern and lichen climbing from the saturated floor to the skyline high above.

As a meditative exercise, Kato sometimes returns to his mid-thirties in his memory and, through his mind’s eye, traverses the seven mile Trail of Ten Falls, falling in love all over again with the potential of life unmitigated by the domination of dishonorable man. His neurons stimulated and sensory capacity heightened by pulse-quickenings, cerebral Sativa, he once consumed the park while it consumed him, only to blessedly regurgitate him as a man more revering of Great Mother than ever. ‘I fear that it’s too late to renew

you, Mother,' he thinks for the hundredth time. 'But if it's possible, we'll make sure they can't rape you all over again.' He plunges his firestick deep into the pit's glowing embers to punctuate his promise.

Counselor, one of five others in his battered tribe, gives him a playful shove. Losing his balance, he holds himself up with a hand in the dirt, then looks over and gives her a grin. They're family now.

"So often lost in thought with that absent, pensive look on your face," Counselor smiles. "What's troubling that brain now?"

"Oh, you know, I'm just wondering if it's too late. You know... for us, for the planet. I'm wondering if all of our efforts are just a tragic exercise in the extension of our inevitable annihilation."

"Well, it does look bleak," Counselor concedes. "But we have to at least *act* as if there's a chance, in case there is one, right?"

"I don't know... I mean, there was a *time* that I agreed with you, and obviously I'm committed to at least going through the motions, but, I don't know... the despair often overwhelms me."

"That's understandable... Speaking of going through the motions, when are you going to let go of this obstinate pure democracy idea of yours and just admit that you're our leader?"

"What do you mean?"

“Like last night, again, with that whole vote on whether or not to expand our searches and the scouting of outlying areas, and the risk entailed and whether it’s worth it and all that...”

“What about it?”

“We *always* end up siding with you, Kato. And yet we have to endure Jack and Druid always drawing out the debate with their inane, frankly immature, unfeasible ideas... I know you love those guys. We all do. But, c’mon. This is why democracy doesn’t work, right? Because the educated and rational have to lend too much concern, have to take account of the beliefs of the nonsensical, and those easily swayed by illogical arguments. Just take control!”

“No... You just said we have to act as if survival is possible; as if a future is possible. How can we do that if we’re just repaving the old paths leading to tyranny and oligarchy? What type of ideological standard will we be carrying forward? Unfortunately even the rationally-unsound have to have a voice, my dear friend.”

“I have to admit that I agree with Counselor, Kato,” the normally reticent Hunter offers. “It’s pointless. We need strong...”

The sound of rustling vegetation and breaking branches puts an abrupt end to the debate, and the threesome reflexively retreat into the cave, their spears held in front of them like Spartans ready to fend off some monstrous beast from the east. Releasing them from

their tense coil, Jackrabbit bursts through the brush and leaps across the creek's current trickle, landing on the ancient sandbar adjacent to the cave. The threesome sighs in relief, and emerges to greet him.

“It's Mana and Druid!,” Jackrabbit announces with a hushed sense of urgency, conditioned to minimize any chance of detection.

“What?!,” Kato inquires. “The Garde?!”

“No. People! I think Druid is dead...”

“Is Mana OK?!,” Counselor panics.

“I don't know. I think they took her,” Jackrabbit responds.

“Show us,” Kato demands.

2

Nature is an unparalleled ally. As Jackrabbit leads the foursome ever so cautiously upriver, the bird calls signal a peace that becomes less and less certain as they approach Mana and Druid's last known position, turning to near silence as they come within sight of the body. Jackrabbit points to the pool at the foot of the hundred-plus feet of drip remaining of the once spectacular waterfall.

Sprawled across a massive boulder that would be mostly underwater were Silver Creek near to flowing at full strength lies Druid's hulking, lifeless form. Having fallen upon the boulder face-first, he looks to be hugging the massive stone, as if honoring the Earth with his final act. Three arrows are lodged in his blood-soaked backside, one in his buttocks, one through his lower torso and one just left of center-mass, through his back and into his chest cavity.

'At least he likely died quickly,' Kato thinks, handing the binoculars to his comrades so they might lend their assessment.

"No signs of Mana or anyone else," Counselor worries while peering through the glasses.

"Can you track them, Hunter?," Kato asks.

Soon the foursome are ambling across the depleted riverbed and climbing the gradually crumbling staircase ascending to the top of the canyon. Continuing up the river, Hunter points to various signs of passage to the other three, including footprints, snapped twigs and trampled foliage, as they move furtively from sign to sign.

“There’s a lot of them,” he informs them.

Finally they reach the last branch of the stream and its crossing leading to the old road once reliably overrun with tourists half the year. Kato recalls the lush green lawn and maples that carpeted the area. Now but a few larger conifers dominate the scene, the scattered picnic tables falling to dust on the parched earth below.

Hunter freezes and drops to a knee, gesturing for the rest of the troop to get down as well. They squat, motionless, scanning the area. Soon Hunter halts his scan at a curious point halfway up one of the larger conifers. It appears unnatural to him, but he isn’t sure why until the arrow is fired. It strikes the ground ten feet in front of him before he has the chance to take cover, followed closely by a piercing whistle and the ringing-out of an unfamiliar voice.

“We have your woman, and we have you surrounded! Drop your weapons and put your hands up, or we’ll shoot!”

They all look to Kato, who nods his assent. The foursome drops their spears. Mana’s kidnappers soon emerge from cover,

having made impressive use of the limited smattering of surrounding trees and shrubs. All hold bows and are dressed in matching camouflage attire, as if all outfitted at the same Army surplus store.

“What have you done to Mana?!” Counselor demands.

“Who?,” asks the one drawing close to retrieve their spears.

“The woman that you captured. She better be okay!”

Their cadre of captors ignore Counselor’s repeated inquiries at first, forcing the foursome in the direction of the old campground. But, as she persists, they eventually assure her of Mana’s safety.

“She’s unharmed. She’s being interviewed by our leader,” says the tall, brawny man leading them into the campground.

In minutes they’re ushered through the scattered sites to one of several cabins once rented out by the park. Upon entering the cabin the brawny man removes a wedge-shaped wooden tool from his pocket and pries up a few loose floorboards, revealing a hole in the ground. Hearing a clamoring of voices and strange sounds below, they descend a ladder into what’s been christened ‘The Cavern.’

It’s beautiful. Candles set into nooks dug into the walls warmly illuminate the impressively open space, kept secure with hand carved timber beams stretching up to and across the ceiling ten feet above. The space is partitioned into various areas for dedicated

purposes; stations set up for completing specific tasks, from tool and weapon work to skinning, cleaning, quartering and preparing game for cooking, to drying and cooking plant foods, to a medicinal plant area, a textile zone where attire and blankets are currently under production, and even a brewing station. A separate sleeping area with personal belongings stacked beside its beds displays the varied personalities of the denizens, an exhibition also evident in the beds themselves, composed of assorted materials scavenged from nearby.

‘Twenty-two people,’ Kato counts in his head before noticing the space stretches farther back than he’d realized, into another area at the rear. Led in that direction by their brawny captor, they round a partition adorned with the symbols of the prevalent theologies of old, the Christian Cross, the Star of David, the Star and Crescent of Islam, the Sanskrit Om of Hinduism and the Dharmic Wheel of Buddhism, amongst others. On the other side a woman, appearing to be in her late thirties, sits cross-legged on a great raised platform bed covered by a woven carpet of animal furs. Two oversized red candles, much larger than those in the communal area, sit atop pedestals set on both sides of the bed. Writing in a red leather notebook, she looks up at them as they’re led into the room.

She’s stunning, and seems scarcely touched by the stresses ravaging most since the reset of history. Long, flowing, curly brown hair frames her bewitching hazel eyes. But it’s not just the color of her eyes, it’s also their shape. While she appears Caucasian, her eyes

have an almost exotic crescent shape, exuding an entrancing commingling of compassion, innocence, cunning and feral ferocity. They exert their own gravitational force. Unlike the others, she's clad in a black, lacey, see-through dress perfectly hugging her sultry shape, all set in stark, sensual contrast to her pearly-white skin.

Their eyes meet, and Kato immediately feels a flurry in his heart, knees weakening. Seeming to sense him down to his bones, she gives a slight, wry smile before turning her attention back to Mana, their squat, stolen medicine woman. Her wrists are tied, but otherwise she appears unharmed. Counselor attempts to force her way through their escort, and while the tall, muscley man blocks her at first, the beauty nods her approval, and she's allowed to approach.

“Is her being bound entirely necessary?” Counselor demands. “We're not going to attack you! You have us!”

The dazzling woman looks coolly at the group, gauging their intention and the level of risk. Then, grabbing a knife concealed under the bedding, she cuts the cord binding Mana's wrists together.

“Please, continue,” she requests of Mana. Mana looks to Kato, who looks at the woman, attempting to read her. Bedeviled as he is, he senses goodness in her eyes, and so nods his head ‘yes,’ granting his permission. Thus, Mana continues relating the tale of how the six, now the five of them, met and came to call the once known ‘Jewel of Oregon’ their home, starting with and aided by

occasional insights from the impetuous youth they call Jackrabbit.

3

Jackrabbit, formerly Jack Zalini, was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder at the age of six. He always found that school, and conventional employment, required too much ‘sit and focus,’ and that this inability to focus forced him off of the well-tread pathways leading to social acceptance and professional success. Thanks to the determination and support of his parents, however, he persevered academically and maintained their hopes that he’d someday find stability. Then came Junior College.

His first addiction to marijuana, ostensibly to ‘calm his nerves,’ soon gave way to a gambling habit and an often concurrent taste for alcohol, followed by cocaine. Schoolwork fast fell by the wayside, and he decided to discontinue his enrollment at the Junior College without informing his parents. Subsequently finding his habits too costly to keep, he began selling marijuana, then cocaine.

While his energy and natural predilection for hustling served him well for a time, it wasn’t long before he was spending far beyond his means. Exacerbating this spendthrift predilection, he soon fell prey to a penchant for gangster films and rap videos, snowballing into an ego-driven, insecure need to live up to the lifestyles of those he emulated, instilling in him the need to take ever

greater risks so as to someday fulfill his grandiose self-expectations.

Before long Jack moved from being a small time self-proprietor to taking a job with a local gang that, unbeknownst to him, was connected to a Mexican cartel. In spirited, approachable young Jack they saw a means to tap into more of the white, urban Los Angeles market, especially the rich college-aged kids, many of whom were giving up on school as the nation fell into its precipitous decline. A fun-loving party-goer, Jack was well suited to this role.

He was a valuable member of the operation for over a year, with his success such that his eventual captor was originally his guardian, tasked to keep an eye on him more for his protection and the safeguarding of the increasing quantity of product he was distributing than out of any sense of distrust. Eventually, however, he bit off more than he could chew. When a combination of partying too much and trusting a ‘friendly’ buyer turned into a debt that he couldn’t pay, and when pride kept him from pleading to his friends and parents for help, he found himself hog-tied and blind-folded in the back of a black Chevy Suburban before being bound to a radiator in a non-descript basement converted into a makeshift prison cell.

The fear was the worst part, as the torture and execution that were likely in order never came. The LA area was one of the first embattled zones, coming on the heels of a massive fire that claimed near half the metropolitan area, only extinguished thanks to a dust

storm rivaling those of the deserts of Arabia. When the first bombs hit Jack hadn't eaten for near a week, quenching his thirst from a leaking pipe climbing the basement wall. Having been abandoned by his captors, the blasts and accompanying tremors threatened for a day and night before one finally hit so close that it collapsed the house. And there he lay, a survivor of the strike but entombed beneath the rubble, doomed to die a claustrophobic nightmare. An ironic death for someone who struggled to sit still his entire life.

The irony made Jack wonder, as fittingly predestined as it seemed, if his particular demise was divine retribution for his sins. Having been raised by Catholic parents, a schoolteacher and sheriff, the guilt and fear of angering a petty, wrathful, narrowly-judgmental omnipotent overlord still clung to him like the feces embedded in the hide of a cub born in the confining, obfuscating darkness of its den.

While the weight of the collapsed home was far more than he could extricate himself from anyway, as he starved to death he was surprised by how easy it was to accept his fate. He deserved to die this way for failing his family, for stealing away his best friend's girlfriend and beating her up in an alcohol-and-drug-induced frenzy, for so polluting his God-given body and mind, all of which made his exhaustion from not having eaten for a week far easier to give into.

Withered and delirious, his body eating his muscle to preserve its organs, he was in the early throes of death's induced

hallucinations, caught in a memory of he and his sister Kathleen playing on their elementary school playground, when he heard the rubble move above him. Someone was stepping over the debris, likely looking for supplies. Thinking it his sister, he called out to her.

“It’ll be okay, I see you!,” came her response. But it didn’t sound like her. “I’ll get you out of there! Just hold on young man!”

It took hours to remove the concrete, lumber and drywall under which he was buried before Jack could be lifted up and carried to safety, to a camp set up at the base of a partially-deconstructed parking garage nearby. Nursing him back to health with the warmth of the fire and cans of scavenged soup, he slowly regained coherent thought and met his rescuer. Calling himself Journey, he was in his late fifties or early sixties, describing himself as a recent volunteer at a nonprofit radio station after retiring from a career in public transit.

Having heard it was a less contested region, the pair then trekked hundreds of miles north, stowing away on an Army supply train before hoofing it to the outskirts of the Salem, Oregon area. It seemed pure luck that they were able to avoid being detected by the bands of gunmen, circumvent the firefights, clear the minefields and avoid the mortar shells exploding in the near distance along the way. Jack wondered if he was being spared for a purpose. Perhaps to do penance; to pay his due recompense before his fate could be sealed.

In retrospect, he would reflect with a mix of humor and self-

disgust upon how much he was like a predictable, easy-to-bait moth to a flame. As they skirted the eastern, semi-rural border of the Salem area in the dead of night in order to avoid the increased risk entailed in attempting to traverse once populous, supply-rich areas in the light of day, they saw a blue light blinking from a mile away.

“Curiosity kills cats,” Journey forewarned. “But every feline must feed eventually. Maybe we’ll get lucky and lap up some milk.”

Approaching the one story farmhouse with its wraparound veranda, Journey commanded Jack to stay put while he investigated. The blue light appeared to be flashing from within the entryway of the home. Jack sensed that something was wrong, but said nothing, staying at the base of a nearby tree. He’d forever regret his silence.

It wasn’t until Journey had ascended the steps and made it halfway to the front door that the flashing blue light well enough illuminated and made visible the bloodstains splattered across the oddly hole-covered white deck. By then it was too late. Frozen in his tracks, a mechanical buzzing sound sent chills up Journey’s spine a split second before the six inch spikes blasted up through the deck. Easily piercing the heels of Journey’s well-worn boots, he screamed in agony before falling backward and being impaled by a dozen more. Forty yards away, Jack watched helplessly from the base of the battered elm as Journey groaned his final breaths and bled out.

Shocked and terrified, but also enraged, Jack debated

whether or not to flee, but decided to stay. A minute later he noticed the blinds nearest the front door briefly separating, and thought he saw someone peek out. Then he heard the howl. It sounded as he imagined a great alpha wolf might sound were it to call for its pack from a peak in the wilderness. This would prove close to the truth.

So loud and deep was the howl that it might be heard for miles in every direction, and it was coming from inside the house. Freezing-up, just as Journey had shortly before being impaled from the ground up, Jack braced himself, half expecting a pack of wolves to shoot out the front door. Instead, they came from behind.

Hearing a growl in the darkness, Jack's natural alacrity and athleticism saved his life, as he immediately shot up the tree, hearing the snap of a jaw inches from his heel. The alpha dog, a mixed-breed monstrosity, was at the foot of the tree, ferociously snarling and slobbering whilst attempting to scale the trunk, seeming to make its way higher with each successive attempt. The remainder of the ragtag pack of mostly larger canines ascended the deck just as the spikes retracted, and there began consuming Journey's carcass.

The body of Jack's companion was turned to mincemeat in minutes. As the alpha gave up on Jack and made his way up the deck to claim his portion of the prize, the front door opened. Jack gawked as out stepped a mountain of a man leveling a shotgun at his head.

4

“Thank you,” says the mystifying beauty after hearing Mana and Jack combine to tell a part of his tale, cutting Mana off from continuing to recount the history of their group. “But perhaps one of your compatriots would like to take over from there,” she adds while looking up captivatingly at Kato, her mesmerizing eyes casting the many a heart-conquering, masculinity-enslaving spell of the muse.

The camouflaged captain of their band of captors forces Kato forward with the butt of his bow, saying:

“He appears to be their leader.”

“Thank you Remus, but there’s no need for force.”

“As you wish,” he complies, removing the bow from Kato’s back, though remaining close enough to subdue him if necessary.

“They call me Persephone,” she says, beaming brightly as she rises to her feet, coming face-to-face with Kato. It takes everything in Remus’s power not to step between them. Sensing this, she turns to him and places a hand on his shoulder, accompanied by an appreciative, loving glance. With great effort, Remus backs off.

“My people gave me the name Persephone in allusion to the

Greek goddess of myth. Some of them say that I'm the hopeful symbol of bountiful future harvests that is fated to follow our current peril, while others whisper that I'm the Queen of the Sirens, able to pull men by their hearts and loins any way that I see fit, and am thereby destined to entice Hades himself into capturing me and pulling me down into his den of darkness, turning me into his Queen of Evil." She draws closer, maintaining her kryptonotic stare. "What do you sense? Am I to be Queen of the Underworld? Or may I escape this fate? Am I to signal the changing of the seasons with my descent during the dreary winter and rerise in the budding spring? Am I to symbolize humanity's potential for regrowing the Earth?"

Kato just stares at her, attempting to remain levelheaded and critical, despite her presence diminishing his defenses by the second. Reading Kato's eyes, she abruptly and unexpectedly embraces him in a warm, full hug. "I suppose I deserve to be tied to fertility because I'm what you might call 'sexually uninhibited,'" she adds with a suggestive smirk while running her hands down Kato's arms and off of his hands. Awestruck, he's reeling, struggling to remain rational, falling prey to Persephone's bewitchment. Persephone feels it. Her eyes speak the recognition of another successfully cast spell.

"Personally, I think one of the most archaic, backwards, ugly aspects of conservative 'individualistic values' is, or perhaps I should say *was*, the purposeful divide it built between people; the

controlling boundaries of divide and conquer precluding connection. The aristocracies could never afford too much connection, of course, for it breeds a sense of commonality and solidarity that leads to the populist cooperation that's mutually exclusive with greed. Empire's use of the Church to stain sex with sin is but one example of this. For me, sexuality is simply an extension of the desire for intimate connection; the desire to better understand and draw strength and pleasure from others. What better way to accomplish this than to cast aside the shame religion pressed upon the act of sexual expression? To quell the unnatural indoctrination of guilt used to control connection and families through the dictation of sexual propriety?"

Kato nods his head, implying agreement, wondering if she truly believes what she's saying or is so good at reading him that she's simply manipulating him by saying what he wants to hear.

"Ah, an enlightened being, thank the Spirit!," Persephone says enthusiastically upon receiving his implicit assent. "Please, sit with me," she adds, gesturing towards the bed. It's large enough to accommodate half her tribe. Glancing at Remus in time to detect the extent of his alert and suspicion, Kato hesitates, then complies.

"What do you call yourself?," she asks. "You must, like most of us, have been inspired to follow The Final Meme?"

The Final Meme was spawned in the final few days of the Internet, reputedly a result of a Saved by Science hack, though no one seems to know for sure. It was the only thing visible for days, no matter what website one attempted to access. It depicted the well-known image of legendary socialist freedom fighter Che Guevara accompanied by the quote: “We are the many rising to rescue the Earth, uniquely reborn as warriors fighting to assure a future for life, ready to expel the parasites of the planet-crushing past and usher in the evolution of humankind! Rebirth yourself in name and join us!”

This winning of the ‘Internet War’ by ‘the left,’ a long-waged-war fought for control of the communication and information, and the dissemination of propaganda through WW3, coupled with the collective act of empowerment derived from the inspired right to rename oneself for remaking the world, created a sense of solidarity that rallied the left and turned the tide of the war.

The idea of a socialist-leaning, culturally-transforming “avant garde,” literally meaning “vanguard” or “advance guard,” that belonged to the people as a whole, rather than to an exclusive ‘ahead of their time’ corps of the cutting edge, as it once referred to, became a central component in the propagandist ‘war for the hearts and minds’ that accompanied the physical war. The question as to whom best stood to advance the race became paramount, and motivated, amongst other things, the dwindling right to christen their last-ditch

nano-robotic army the “Avant Garde,” or ‘those guarding the front.’

“Kato,” he replies to Persephone’s inquiry. “It sounds funny to say it now, because I’ve been bereft of hope for so long now, but in those days, when I heard about The Final Meme during my wild forays with my friend here,” he gestures at Hunter, “I still held the naïve belief that there was hope. Anyway, the name means ‘pure,’ or ‘unsullied.’ It’s a reference to my spiritual belief in one incorruptibly pure guiding energy force of life, what is commonly considered ‘love,’ or ‘following the heart,’ or ‘instinct,’ but which I believe is learning to heed the pure, everlasting, indestructible essence of all existence; that which endows all existence with the spark of life; that which most call ‘God,’ eternally reborn through the heart.”

“A spiritual philosopher!,” Persephone gushes, reaching out and taking his hands in hers. “I think that you and I are going to get along splendidly! And don’t worry, I’ll cure you of that apparent doomsayer streak of yours.” Amazingly, despite years of perpetually heightened, on-guard survivalism, Kato feels perfectly calm, and doesn’t recoil from her touch. They look into one another’s eyes. He’s caught in an odd, serene haze, and wonders if some sort of tranquilizer is being circulated through the air of The Cavern. There’s something about this woman; her power is unquestionable.

Persephone turns to Remus: “Would you please see that our

guests are given the tour, fed and treated with love, my dear? And please encourage them to share their stories once they're sufficiently sated and settled in. Kato and I need to be left alone for a while."

"Persephone, please, I beg you..." Remus resists.

"It's okay. Please do as I ask. Kato won't hurt me. And we need some time to... connect.

5

“When was the last time you had some wine?,” Remus inquires of Hunter. The two newly acquainted men are gathered around The Cavern’s brew station, Hunter inspecting the process, satisfying his curiosity. Counselor, Jackrabbit and Mana are cautiously engaging other members of the ‘Spirit Army,’ as they’d learned some amongst them unofficially refer to themselves.

“It’s been quite a while, I must admit,” Hunter replies.

“Of course, this isn’t your traditional wine,” Remus informs him, turning a spigot on a wooden barrel, filling a hand-carved wooden cup and handing it to Hunter. “Not exactly a five-star chateau blend, if you know what I mean. Actually, it’s not even a grape wine. Even in those rare instances when we’ve made it into the valley we’ve been unable to find any surviving grapevines. The Oregon Grape and Juniper Pine, on the other hand, are hardy plants, like the other evergreens that’ve supplanted the deciduous trees. Their berries contain very little sugar compared to those traditionally used, the Merlot and Sauvignon and such, so it takes much more to produce anything close to the alcohol content, and the final product is a bit sour, but I’m not complaining. I’m happy to have anything to

drink. And we're always looking for more sugary foods to ferment.”

“Thanks. Cheers,” Hunter offers. The mention of producing alcohol from whatever’s available instantly brings to mind the ‘bush wine’ he and his cohorts created in their Eastern African hideouts.

Hunter, formerly Mark Taylor, could never understand how someone could see the photos and not be both outraged and compelled to take action. Cruelty toward one’s fellow human beings is one thing, for man has long demonstrated his despicability and, thus, is easy to detest, but to kill such a beautiful, blameless creature as a rhino, elephant or lion just for its horn, claws and hide, leaving the carcass to rot, was a drink far too sour and sickening to swallow.

Having been an Army Ranger during the invasions and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, and having survived The Great Reset, he’d seen more than his fair share of human suffering. But with our guile and malice, our cruelty and tribalism, it was always easier for him to witness, and even inflict, suffering and death upon human beings. The justification came easier, as no one seemed innocent, and the Army made certain he knew he was in the right before engaging ‘the enemy.’ But after his trip to Kenya upon his dishonorable discharge from active service, the enemy became the violation of inviolable principles. And the possession of certain principles requires special experience to fully acquire and assimilate.

Following a decade of growing doubt as to the moral correctness of his military ‘duties,’ Hunter acted to protect a ‘target’ in Iraq in contradiction of orders. Being booted for this good deed taught Hunter the indispensability of skepticism and critical thought.

If one failed to question authority and the true motives for their recruitment and deployment, then their agency in committing evil acts, their unconscionable assistance in the facilitation of foreign invasions paving the way for western corporations to tap the land and create more consumers, became an absolute certainty. He eventually realized that his ‘service’ had little to do with defense and mostly to do with stealing the land and resources of native peoples under false pretenses, like the need to confiscate nonexistent WMD’s, to rescue defenseless civilians from heartless dictators or to trumpet democracy whilst secretly fixing the election in favor of a dictator ready to do business with colluding western corporations.

To disobey the orders overlying the true motives was deemed ‘unpatriotic’ and a ‘dereliction of duty.’ Yet what is an honorable man’s duty, really?! Is it not to identify the true cause of evil and find the conviction and courage to correct it?! Is it not to refuse to support murder, occupation and political takeovers at gunpoint? And is it not to say: the killing of these innocent animals ends here?!

Following a day of traditional safari in Masai Mara, Kenya, Hunter was conversing with the guide after a few cocktails in their luxury lodge when the subject of poaching came up. The guide, Samuel, had pictures on his phone to help make his point and recruit supporters to defend against the evil. Typically, Samuel's success in such recruitment amounted to financial support. Hunter, however, was not the typical recruit. Already wrestling psychologically with his role in the bloody Middle Eastern transgressions and his fury over being discharged for doing the right thing, and falling headfirst into alcoholism to silence his demons, Hunter felt like he was going to explode, and needed a good place to focus the blast. Samuel hooked him up with an associate named Mugabe, who took him on an 'off the books' tour of the less-frequented fringes of the park.

Well-armed, Mugabe led Hunter through the bush in a region known to be plagued by poachers due to being relatively unprotected and containing more of the larger elephants and rhinos whose horns had higher 'free market values' than most other game. It was near dawn, after most poachers, who typically hunt using night scopes under cover of darkness, have vacated. They'd been tracking for less than an hour when they found the pool of blood seeping into the clay soil. Following elephant tracks and the trail of blood downhill, they came into a clearing offering river access, and there he was.

The immense bull elephant had three tranquilizer darts and

several bullet holes in him that they could see. He'd collapsed onto his belly with his face submerged in the river; at least, what was left of his face. Still breathing shallowly, the poachers had apparently run out of ammunition and resorted to their tranquilizer gun before sawing the front of the elephant's face off near the base of its trunk.

Awaking from its assault, the great, immeasurably suffering, sedated beast had sought water to quench an unquenchable thirst and ease its agony, only to find it impossible to drink. Outraged beyond anything he'd ever felt on duty, even beyond what he'd felt seeing the maimed, surviving children limp and crawl their way from the rubble of their 'collaterally-damaged' schoolhouse in Kirkuk, Hunter placed his hand on the dying giant's ribcage, feeling it exhale its last unbearable breath as Mugabe delivered the merciful coup de grace with a shot from his rifle. That was the inception of The Faceless.

6

Persephone and Kato sit facing one-another cross-legged on the animal-skin-carpeted bed, their knees touching. Leaning in, she places a hand over Kato's heart. Then, leaning further in, she brings his head towards hers with her other hand until they're touching foreheads. They sit in silent meditation for a time, harmonizing energies. Soon she places a hand on his cheek, and kisses him softly. He returns the affection briefly before gently pushing her away.

“Your people killed Druid,” Kato solemnly states. “I need to know why.”

Staring at him intently, Persephone scowls. Closing her eyes, she takes a deep breath, and responds: “As you may have gathered, Remus is our military captain; captain of ‘The Spirit Army,’ as some around here like to refer to one another. I trust him completely. He tells me that your man was killed because he was about to kill Neo.”

“Neo?”

“My son.”

“Your son?”

“Yes. But he’s more than that. He may, in fact, be the key to our survival. And I don’t just mean *us*, those here, in The Cavern, but mankind and maybe even life in general. He’s the only one we know of, the only survivor of the wars, with the inside knowledge and technical expertise required to take down the Avant Garde.”

“How so?,” Kato inquires, measuring his skepticism against the excitement imparted by such a possibility.

“Well...” Persephone pauses, uncertain how to proceed; uncertain whether or not Kato is entirely trustworthy. Her instinct, and the look in his eyes, says he is. Dismounting the bed, she begins pacing the cloisters of her inner sanctum, preparing to tell her tale:

“I’m sure that you have some sense of the fact that there was once this twisted, corrupting form of conventional wisdom in our now deceased western society that told girls from an early age that if they were sexy and persuasive enough, they didn’t need anything else. They didn’t need to generate power, wealth and material comfort *directly*. That’s what the successful *men* were for. Beguile a millionaire, or, better yet, a *billionaire*, and you’ll never undergo a stressful day in your life. I consider my former life proof that this is a falsity; one of a great many misleading’s of conventional wisdom.”

“You’re preaching to the choir there. Conventional wisdom is near oxymoronic; almost an inherent contradiction. Like ‘Christian Science,’” Kato offers.

“Yes, that’s my experience,” Persephone continues. “And recent human history seems to confirm that. But let me tell you how I was *personally* misled by this false wisdom...” She pauses in reflection for a moment, then continues: “I studied marketing at Portland State University. And I was good at it. I realized fairly quickly that marketing is inseparable from propaganda, politics, psychology, business, con-artistry, seduction... even religion. I believe that the heart of all of these disciplines is deceit; learning how to lie convincingly; to present deceptions as if they’re truths in order to trick your targets into giving you their power and money.”

“They all boil down to developing the capacity to manipulate the ignorance, desires and weaknesses of a target population so as to mislead them into willingly abdicating their self-control. It’s all about uncovering weak points, vulnerabilities in their armor, and determining how best to exploit them. These disciplines constitute the overlapping mental modes of conquering; conquering the mind, especially the ego and the psyche. Command people’s fidelity not at the end of a blade or a rifle, but by way of guile and the exploitation of ignorance, fear and other forms of disadvantage. That’s how

lifelong slaves were made in ‘post-slavery’ history.”

Kato grins at the recognition of the power of this insight. Yet he’s simultaneously pained by the knowledge that it required mankind to be threatened with extinction before any considerable portion of the population could see it. The brutal growing pains of history. ‘If we survive, those that rise to power will inevitably try to bury this extremely hard-won lesson beneath the ashes,’ he thinks.

Persephone continues: “So when Harvey Foster, Chairman and CEO of Foster Robotics, walked into the wine bar where I was working my junior year not far from the Portland State campus, *he* was the prey, *I* was the hunter, regardless of his wealth, age and my being the feeble female,” she says, grinning sardonically.

“Now, I’m trusting you not to divulge my tricks to my people,” she smiles. “We all have ways of asserting ourselves, yes?”

“Whatever you say,” Kato begrudges. Persephone giggles.

“On some level I was already resistant to the conventional wisdom I spoke of before, that the surest path to success for the beautiful, intelligent woman was to be achieved *through* the wealthy, powerful man. But my ego spurred me on. I needed to see if I could do it; to test the limits of my power. And I did. I stroked his ego. I

teased him and then backed off, refusing to ever call him. I challenged him just enough to intrigue him, not send him into egotistic self-defense mode. I touched him and gave him enough flirtation, enough sights of soft bare skin, enough suggestive looks, enough curvature and kissing to enchant and keep him on the hook. Effective seduction takes serious discipline. And I legitimately liked him at first, but refused to show it. I needed to become his muse, his fantasy, rooting and living and growing and taking on an obsessive life of its own before giving him what he wanted and committing to anything, and even then committing as if I wasn't entirely certain."

'Beautiful, intelligent women were made to rule the world,' Kato thinks to himself, listening to her. 'Or the end of it, at least.'

"I had Max when I was twenty, the boy we now call Neo. But even by then both Harvey and I knew the relationship wouldn't last. I was profoundly immersed in the 'careful what you wish for' phenomenon. I had no sense of purpose; no lasting satisfaction overseeing that garish palace of his. And I was reading voraciously along conflicting lines. Plato, Kant, Marx, Orwell, Zinn, Chomsky. I knew that my best path would take me far away from where I was."

"And Harvey was sleeping around, including with a couple of my friends. But, honestly, I wasn't all that angry about it. In fact, I ended up helping my friend Lisa take my place when I realized she

was my way out. By that time I was far more worried for Max than myself. A boy raised in such a realm, free of all pressure compelling growth, corrupted by the belief that a prince can purchase *anything*, even love; blind to the truth that all the greatest, most fulfilling rewards in life must be *earned*; that money may be used to better pave the path to earning such rewards, but can never procure them directly. How would I teach him such invaluable principles if forever separated from him, outcast from the Foster Empire?! So I tried to make the transition as seamless as possible, and it was for a while.”

“But, let me guess, you couldn’t save him from that world, right?,” Kato interjects. “More evidence that the power of love will always cave to the overpowering forces and temptations of Empire?”

Persephone snorts. “A clever one, aren’t you...? Well, I suppose that remains to be seen, wouldn’t you say? I mean, yes, in this case, and in most cases, that seems to be true. But my heart tells me that, as cliché as it may sound, love will prevail in the end.”

Kato shakes his head at this seemingly naïve truth. “A small part of me still believes in the cliché myself,” he admits.

“I can sense that. I wouldn’t be telling you all of this otherwise.” Persephone sits back down in front of him, takes his hands in hers, and continues: “I couldn’t save him, no. At least, I’ve

yet to save him. He thinks he hates me. He's a very bright kid, and despite being born into silk robes he did well in school. For a while, at least. He got into computer science like his father. But he struggled with some rather severe depression and anxiety as well, which, thanks to his limitless means and connections, led to a lot of 'self-medicating.' He's only seventeen, and yet it seems there's little he hasn't tried. Cocaine, ecstasy, methamphetamines, OxyContin. I suspect he may even have been selling it for a while, based upon what he had on him when our forces pulled him out of there..."

"Out of where? What do you mean by 'our forces?'"

Persephone tears up. Rising, she walks to the corner of the room and fills a wooden gourd from a large pitcher, sobbing softly. Something he hasn't felt in years takes hold of Kato. Instinctively, he walks over and puts his hands on her bare, freckled shoulders. She turns and embraces him. They hold the embrace for a moment before she leads him to the bed and beckons him to lay down. He complies, and she lays beside him, laying her head on his chest.

7

Her head rising and falling with Kato's breath, Persephone speaks softly, albeit with steadfast emotion:

“The only time I can honestly say that I've ever been in love was with Remus's older brother, a man I knew only as Romulus. He's the only man that took all need for game-playing away. He and his brother of course named themselves after the legendary founders of Rome, acknowledging the idealistic intentions of the founders of great groups and civilizations while also reminding themselves that all such leaders and groups garnering great power are invariably tested by the temptations of the dark side; by wealth and power. When this test is failed, when corruption consumes conviction, when socialistic purity is sacrificed to seduction, the downfall is certain.”

“Do you make all the decisions here, with your people, your Spirit Army?,” Kato interjects with a hint of ironic disbelief.

“Usually...” Persephone reluctantly admits.

“Then are you not walking down the same path of temptation? Are you certain you're so morally pure and incorruptible

as to trust yourself to the extent whereby you have all the authority? From what I can tell you're the monarch of this crew, are you not?"

"I see where you're going with this..."

"I mean, it's okay, we're all probably fucked anyway, but still... And don't get me wrong, I play a similar role with my rag-tag crew, but I do everything I can to assure they have a vote. Do you?"

"No... not always. But they trust me, and I trust myself, Kato," she offers, the slightest air of annoyance buried in her breath. 'The first fading of her pretense of unflappability,' Kato thinks.

"I'm sorry for interrupting," Kato says. "It's just that this subject is a common focus of discussion amongst my little sixsome; *fivesome*. We're always trying to trace the arc of human history as it descended into the abyss of darkness. We can talk about it later if you want. Please, continue. You were telling me about Romulus..."

"Yes... Romulus was a leader of the Central Oregon Chapter of the US Socialist Party prior to it being subsumed by the Democratic Socialists. This was, of course, before the planetary meltdown and the ideological and literal warfare that it precipitated. I remember reading something that he submitted to a newsletter in Bend, Oregon, about our being indoctrinated into a society that

teaches us from an impressionable young age to equate success with upwards mobility and accumulation; a mobility and ability to accumulate that had long become ever more out of reach for the vast majority, and which ultimately led to the disunity and destruction of community and planet, portending not only the continuity of class-based warfare and plutocratic, corporate control of society but, finally, worldwide upheaval and the downfall of the human race.”

“He was immensely bright and passionate, which I think goes hand-in-hand with a type of emotional instability, or precariousness, that is often over-simplistically characterized as moodiness. It’s hard to conceive of his level of fire and intelligence coinciding with a stoic level of emotional consistency. I feel like his borderline manic-depression was an almost necessary trade-off of his mental makeup.”

“Anyway... By the time it was clear that the right and its consolidating factions were being overpowered by the collective outrage and sheer determined might of the people united and, thus, becoming ever more dependent upon their control of technology to retain their power, Neo and his father, my ex, Harvey, had retreated into a reinforced safe room in the basement of his mansion where they apparently directed Foster Robotics’ contributions to the fight.”

“The billionaires of the world had become the popular targets for obvious reasons: as the personifications of the greedily

exploiting, extracting, consolidating ‘ownership class,’ as we came to consider them, they became the focal points for everyone looking to channel their outrage at the mass extinction of species and seemingly permanent state of planetary catastrophe we were all inundated by, but which only the ownership class seemed to have the resources to insulate themselves from. This was even truer of tech companies epitomizing the convergence of power, data-gathering and technological superiority. Not only this, but this class tended to possess knowledge and resources which had to be either overcome or confiscated if we were to survive. Harvey Foster was one of the first names on the resultant, generated list of ‘NW Region Targets.’”

“I was only on the periphery of the power cluster and decision-making process back then, so by the time I realized Romulus had volunteered to lead the group against Harvey as some sort of foolish, overly-emotional show of heroism for me... thinking he could rescue my son for me while simultaneously removing the threat that Harvey represented... it was too late for me to intervene.”

Persephone pauses, overcome with emotion. She takes a series of deep, intentional breaths, then continues: “What I was told later was that the entire home was leveled by a drone controlled by what was left of the US military when they learned of the assault on the home. Romulus was...,” her voice shakes, “blown to bits. Apparently they couldn’t risk the Democratic Socialists taking

control of Foster Robotics, so they decided to remove the chess piece from the board. Neo says that he was alone in the basement when the house was struck and collapsed on top of him. He says Harvey was looking for valuables somewhere else in the house, and that he only survived because Harvey had recently connected a concrete escape tunnel leading out from the basement that allowed him to escape.”

“Neo tried to run and was captured by what remained of Romulus’ brigade. He told me that they were preparing to execute him on the spot in revenge for the deaths of their crew, and that he was only able to convince them otherwise by informing him that he was my son, which the rest of them hadn’t known, and that he was one of the only ones able to upload an auto-destruct sequence into one of the few remaining servers connected to the Avant Garde.”

“And you honestly believe him, or are you only pretending to so your people won’t kill him?,” Kato inquires with clear incredulity.

Persephone sits up. Face red and teary-eyed, she replies: “I don’t know for sure what he knows and what he’s capable of. But I sense he knows something of great import. Something we *need*.”

“But he’s gone now... What good is that knowledge and ability?”

“He’s being tracked by the best,” Persephone confidently replies. “He won’t get far.”

8

As if on cue, Remus rushes into the room, a bit out of breath and pushing a pretty young woman ahead of him, Hunter, Counselor and Mana fast on his heels: “Hound found Neo’s trail and is following him north along the river,” Remus informs them. “He’s marking his way with pieces of his fatigues, providing a trail of breadcrumbs for us to follow. It looks like Neo went west towards Salem to find the river and is using it to guide him, likely towards the city and The Red Zone. Islam just got back and informed us.”

“Islam?,” Kato asks, his curiosity piqued.

“Our theocracy student,” Persephone replies. “Fast as hell. His speed comes in handy. And Daphne, why are you here?,” she asks, addressing the lovely young lady Remus is forcing forward.

“She just told Hunter and I something that you have to hear,” Remus aggressively responds.

Persephone approaches Remus and, smiling and placing a hand on his shoulder to calm him, she looks down at Daphne. “It’s okay, Remus, I’m sure that Daphne can tell us herself.”

Daphne, no more than sixteen, with sandy-blonde hair and bright, deer-in-the-headlights blue eyes, looks apprehensively about at Kato and his crew.

“It’s okay, dear,” Persephone reassures her. “Just tell me what you know.”

“Neo...” she squeaks, voice cracking. “He... he...”

“It’s okay, sweetie, just say it. You won’t get in trouble.”

“He told me something yesterday... He said that I should come with him; that he was going to reprogram The Garde himself. That he was going to make them... his *personal* guard. That he was going to... take over the world. And that I should be his... queen.”

The room fills with awkwardly-solemn silence as, head down, Persephone contemplates this bit of information.

“Well, obviously we have to go after him,” she finally says, “regardless of his intentions. We can change his mind. The question is,” she adds while scanning everyone’s faces, “who do we bring?”

Remus pulls Persephone aside for a discreet discussion. They

argue for a moment, ending with her declaration: “I’m going!”

Within the hour their gear is packed upon their backs, Kato and his accompanying foursome joining Remus, Islam, re-clad Persephone and four more amongst The Spirit Army. It took some convincing, especially of young Jack, but eventually Kato persuaded his crew that securing the young insider tech prodigy capable of killing off the ever looming Avant Garde is worth risking their lives, even if his true intention is to initiate a world-wide domination. For now, at least, he omits his blind spot of the seductress, hoping beyond hope that her son truly possesses such an ability and that they haven’t been recruited simply for the sake of motherly concern.

Moving through Sublimity on the way towards the Old Highway connecting Salem to the west to the Cascade Mountain pass pushing up to the high desert to the east, everyone is tense, ever on guard against the possibility of a sweep by the Garde. Seeing the threat coming is almost always an impossibility, the bots being invisible to the eye unless swarming to an extent they’d only heard stories of. Instead, one must be conditioned to recognize the telltale signs. Birds and other creatures of the earth instinctively take flight at the onset of the unnatural threat, that which kills and consumes entirely without regard, following a simplistic bottom-line-based programming: boil it all down to that which brings the Garde greater means, the reconstituted metallic parts, circuitry and sources of

power, and eliminate anything that moves absent a protective identifier, and which may constitute a threat to the masters.

One can actually see the metal dissolving as the bots gradually disintegrate and reconstitute it, emitting a strange odor as the white-hot construction materials, machinery and vehicles are remade into the invisible force indiscriminately assimilating anything that it can. But if you happen to be unfortunate enough to witness this firsthand, it's likely too late. You can only hope that you weren't within sensor range when you last moved, then hide and stop moving at all costs. Even the taking of a breath is a life-threatening risk, the nanobots able to sense the most micro of movements.

Thus, the dozen-member-party follow Hound's trail with the utmost caution, heads on a swivel, continually glancing in every direction, nervously scanning for any indication of impending doom. This has become their reality, the reality of the whole surviving human race, to the best of their knowledge; knowing that to be out of hiding means braving not only Mother Nature's raging attempts to reestablish equilibrium of her irresponsibly pounded and plundered domain, the violently unpredictable swings between parched and pouring, the flash floods and tornadoes, the every-other-month 'hundred year storms,' but also humankind's final insult to its holy-host-turned-self-defending Mother: the all-consuming Avant Garde.

And yet the Garde hasn't been seen for months, at least as far as they know; far longer than the typical interval between sightings. Kato presumes that this is due to resource scarcity. The sun can still sustain their solar cells, but the Garde is first and foremost driven to multiply, and to multiply it must consume. And little remains to consume here, cities picked clean of metal, the brick, wood and drywall discarded like the indigestible remains of the feeding frenzy of a great, globally-gorging beast recklessly plundering the planet.

Imbalance is now the rule of law, with survival dependent not upon sustainable practices which man refused to learn, and now could scarcely apply even if learned, but upon taking advantage of fleeting opportunities as they came, always aware that they may never come again. In this postmodern epoch in which humanity has reaped the rewards of 'advancement,' *everything* is a threat; the Earth, the Garde, the remaining tribal factions fighting for territory.

Now paralleling the Old Highway along a stretch of land more overgrown than most, littered with a mix of brush and scraggly Juniper Pines, Kato's heart rises into his throat as he suddenly senses danger, and realizes that they're standing in a swell; in a low point of elevation in the landscape wherein water naturally comes to rest, as unpredictable as that water has become, and as resistant as it now is to rest. The low elevation and collected waters sustains vegetation attractive to all of life, while the surrounding hills make for a trap,

permitting an advantageous, elevated position for would-be hunters to camp and wait for unsuspecting prey, animal and human alike.

Freezing, Kato and the rest of the party sense their vulnerability too late. Somewhere above them a familiar song is whistled, echoing off of the surrounding hillsides. Kato soon recognizes it: The Star Spangled Banner. Fuck! *The Americans*.

“You’re surrounded, out-positioned and outgunned! Drop your weapons and some of you may be granted a pardon for your trespasses! Resist and every last one of you pays with your life!”

Upon the ridges around them rifle-and-shotgun-bearing men and women materialize, each with the American flag draped over their shoulders like capes, the false robes of righteousness concealing all manner of evil. Little has changed, Kato thinks, except now the symbols of legitimacy and authority used to manipulate the ignorant, insecure, over-compensating supremacists are being used to help reconquer lands whose domination was once taken for granted. An age old, undying demonstration, this time mixed with the caped Superman ethos blending well with the bigoted, juvenile mindset. Today the flag-waving buffoonery is performed by one of the best proliferated, most populous tribes in North America which, if victorious, shall certainly reenact history.

Cursing, Kato and Persephone signal for their comrades to lay down their arms, after which The Americans spill down the hill, weapons at the ready. It's rare to see surviving firearms these days; guns that haven't been remade into the endless invisible legions of the Garde. One particularly large, bearded man, apparently their leader, continues to whistle one of the many tunes from the album of the American Supremacist as he descends, flanked by a pair of lieutenants and a blonde woman glued to his side. She's attractive, and yet exhibits some rather severe features. Her cold, piercing blue eyes and sharp nose lock into and remain fixed upon Persephone as if an extension of an innate targeting system. And she's pregnant, just showing through her confederate-flag-emblazoned tank top.

The large bearded leader proceeds towards Persephone as well for, not only is she stunning, but she'd been one of the two clearly signaling the group to lay down their arms, demonstrating authority. 'It'll take an act of divine intervention to survive this,' Kato thinks to himself. It's at this moment that he notices some of the clothing in which their accosters are clad, aware of the irony of having just appealed to God. One wears the decades-old "Make America Great Again" emblem of the disgraced Trump regime, a large gold Christian medallion around his neck. The shirt of another depicts Jesus firing an assault rifle from the steps of the White House. Both men are entirely oblivious of the inherent contradictions in their representation of the deified, wealth-renouncing pacifist.

One short, stocky man with a mohawk and handlebar mustache grins menacingly as he removes a large buck knife from a band on his belt, pointing the blade at his shirt as he draws near: “If my American flag offends you,” the shirt says, “call 1-800-Get-Out.” Seeing the contempt on Kato’s face as Kato reads his shirt, the mohawked man begins howling, then yells out: “That’s right you pussy-ass bitch, you should’ve gotten out when you got the chance! It’s our country now! And there’s no room for you treasonous sons a’ bitches! You fuckers’ll die for what you did to this country! And your women here will be our whores, making new generations of patriots whether they like it or not!,” he adds, pointing his knife at and moving close to Persephone. Standing inches from her face, he grins broadly and whispers: “But you’ll learn to like it, won’t you?”

Persephone knees him hard in the groin and he crumples to the turf, dropping his blade. Fast recovering, he scrambles for his knife and then leaps to his feet before plunging at Persephone, now protected by Remus. The blonde woman strikes Remus across the face with the butt of her rifle as the large man, in a demonstration of martial arts prowess, disarms Persephone’s attacker with ease, stopping his knife arm then yanking it into a helpless position behind him, twisting the knife free and kicking him back to the ground.

“Stay down Dirk, or we’ll be digging you a grave here,” he

warns with a deep, rumbling bass. Turning towards Persephone, he says: “My name is Nathaniel. Unlike you we Americans keep our God-given Christian names. You must be called, what, Daisy, or maybe Snowflake?,” he says mockingly, his insult triggering snickers of approval from his gang. “If you’re lucky you’ll come to call me Nate, or Father, as some of my flock call me. Maybe even, if you’re one of the lucky few, Daddy Bear.” More sounds of approval are echoed, from all but the blonde woman, who so intensely stares at Persephone that it seems she’ll bore holes straight through her.

“Don’t worry about Ivana here,” Nathaniel says, noticing. “She’s German, so she can’t help but be a humorless bitch. But she’s a good bitch, and she knows she has to share me. She knows the future of this country and the human race depends upon God-granted procreation, don’t you?,” he adds while slapping her ass. She doesn’t even flinch, just continues to bore holes through Persephone’s face.

“The question is,” Nathaniel continues, turning back towards Persephone, “can *you* learn to be a good bitch? I’ll warn you once, assault me and you’ll be butchered and fed to the dogs. They’re hungry beasts. It’s hard, appetite-building work guarding the camp.”

He approaches Persephone much as Dirk had, coming within inches of her face. His foul breath wreaks of a mixture of red meat and moonshine. His head is shaved, and his long red beard reaches

almost to the middle of his chest. About six-foot-five and three-hundred pounds, he wears camouflage commando gear with a ‘Semper Fidelis’ patch over one shoulder and a cross over the other. His protruding belly presses into Persephone as he leans in to kiss her. Persephone pulls away, and Nathaniel responds immediately.

“Bring him here,” he says, pointing at Islam. Ivana grabs him by the collar and shoves him towards Nathaniel. With impressive dexterity for his size Nathaniel crosses the six feet between he and Islam with rapid ease, removing a large blade from a scabbard tied to his immense left triceps and slicing through Islam’s neck with one swift, brutal motion, cutting so deep that Islam is almost decapitated and, falling backwards, blood spouting, is dead within seconds.

A few amongst The Spirit Army cry out and begin to resist, but are soon hammered into submission by Nathaniel’s minions. “Enough!” he roars. “He was going to die regardless,” Nathaniel assures Persephone, refocusing on her. “There’s no place for towel heads in this new nation. They can’t even be trusted to scrub our floors. We are Noah’s second ark, and they can’t come aboard!”

“HUA!” is sounded in unison by his gang.

“Now,” Nathaniel says, again coming within inches of Persephone’s face. “Kiss me back, and mean it.” He wraps his left

arm around her and pulls her flush against him, the blood of Islam dripping from the large serrated knife clasped in his paw of a right hand. Mustering the pretense of passion, Persephone kisses him long and hard, his tongue slobbering about as he gropes her ass with his free hand. Then, placing the knife back in its scabbard, he grabs her breasts with both hands in an upwards motion with such force he lifts her off her feet. Upon finally releasing his grip, he grabs her waist and forces her groin into his hip thrust, grunting with pleasure.

‘Beauty isn’t always a gift,’ Kato thinks while taking in the sickening scene, his fury fomenting. ‘Persephone has found Hades, and this may well evince that his demons now rule over humankind.’

“Yes, you’ll make a fine addition,” Nathaniel growls upon releasing her, satisfied for the moment. “Tie them up,” he commands his crew. “We’ll keep them alive, for now.”

Minutes later the bound-together-group is pushed west towards what remains of Salem. And it’s only now that Kato notices that there are only ten left in their group. Islam has fallen to the American supremacists, but someone else is missing... *Hunter*.

‘He must have slipped away somehow,’ Kato thinks. ‘Thank the Spirit! Yet again my life is in that man’s hands. But this is different... If he’s somehow to save us this time, it’ll take far more

than pulling me from the clutches of a crush's dangerous stalker.'

9

Immensely charming, with her freckled face, contagious laugh and the most beautiful smile that he'd ever seen, Holly was Kato's work crush. Also being headstrong and highly intelligent, her particular combination of attributes empowered her to command the respect and loyalty of others with ease, men and women alike. All the women wanted to be her friend, and all the men wanted to sleep with her. "Everyone has a crush on Holly," a coworker remarked.

Upon first entering the financial sector and meeting her, she was a good eight years Kato's senior and deeply involved with another man. She also worked in another department and rotated between company assignments at various locations in the Portland area. So while he rarely had the chance to interact with her, he always felt a flurry of excitement when the privilege afforded itself.

He badly wanted to impress her, and she seemed genuinely taken with him at first. Long having aspired to earn a living as a writer and feeling that he was a 'philosopher-poet' at heart, he'd found the path steep, rocky and replete with obstacles, forcing him onto a more lucrative, conventional course, working on his writing projects when time permitted. And Holly spoke of being an avid reader, always carrying a book or two in her bag to read during her

lunch breaks. So Kato decided to show her his website, a blogging platform that he was developing, and which he planned to use in the promotion of his works written across the full gamut of genres.

He'd often fondly recollect her coming to speak with him after he'd summoned the courage to enter his web address on her computer at work during her lunch break, then walked away, hoping for a reaction. Women tend to have a tell or two when they're interested in a man. With most it's subtle. Fixing their hair; smiling easily and more often; looking away when eye contact is made; readily becoming playful in his presence; seemingly innocent touches of the arm or shoulder. Hers was *far* more conspicuous.

When she walked towards his work station after finding his website pulled-up on her computer, her face was beet red, clearly visible from afar. Smiling broadly, they laughed and exchanged stories. Her excitement was intoxicating, and it was clear that she sensed his potential. He spoke of his work, and she agreed to act as a 'beta tester' of his writing projects, giving them a preliminary read.

But he should have remained cool, he would regretfully think in much recurring reflection. He tried too hard to impress her after that, speaking of his hopefulness for his work, showing her updates he'd made to his website, and talking about how well he was doing in the online MA in English program he was taking in his off hours.

Woman can always smell neediness, and it's a major turnoff;

perhaps the biggest. When you're trying to impress them, they can sense it, and they understand its implications. Thus, he'd realize, the best thing is *not* to try. That doesn't mean not to care, but that one must let any impressing come naturally from one's self and pursuits. Work on developing yourself and ensuring that your efforts bear fruit, and the attraction comes without effort. If you try to force it, on the other hand, then you're likely to lose them. Pull too hard on the line out of desperation to reel-in your catch and you'll yank the lure from their mouths. Let *them* bite. Let *their* pull keep them hooked.

Holly lost interest. Sure, she had a long-term boyfriend, but that can't stop natural attraction. Even if nothing physical came of it, he wished in retrospect that he could take back his pressing so as to at least maintain the fun of flirtation. He'd hold doors open for her and summon humor in the attempt to elicit a positive response, to no avail. As time went on she scarcely seemed to notice when he'd approach, barely taking her eyes off of her work to acknowledge his presence, let alone fully engage him. His efforts had backfired. He was a man sinking further into quicksand by struggling. The last time he asked her if she'd be interested in reading a first draft of the book he was writing, she gave him the line that he'd used himself when others would suggest reading: "My reading list is pretty full right now." It was a complete one-eighty from her previous position.

Soon thereafter she made a pair of remarks that, upon later reflection, always rankled him. Having a tendency towards

intellectual debate as one who naturally engages in philosophical modes of thought, she'd sometimes overhear him embroiled in what he'd think of as discussions with his coworkers; as pursuits of truth through the challenges and varied perspectives presented by others. Yet, though he himself navigated them with ease, he'd long known that he had to tread carefully upon such waters with others, as most are highly averse to such discourse, having low tolerances for that which he thought of as natural. He often believed that he belonged to another time and place in history; to a society that freely sat around the round table, challenging one another's presumptions about truth.

After hearing him engage in such a debate with a sensitive coworker, a coworker who took offense to his unconventional position on the nature of the U.S. political system, and who proceeded to report him to his uptight supervisor, Holly was drawn into the fallout to lend her witness statement. "Victor fancies himself a philosopher," she'd said, as if his philosophizing was a mere egotistic pretense; an affect entirely lacking in validity. "I don't understand why people can't just leave their beliefs at home and keep their personalities to themselves," she countered to his self-defensive assertion that 'some personalities simply don't mesh well.'

Her implication was that people can simply flip a switch and suddenly become functionary robots, entirely devoid of emotion and bias, and that his having and expressing a position at work was 'unprofessional.' He considered such a stance not only to be

unfeasible and supportive of a bleak, unnatural version of the workplace that he was against, but a not-so-subtle personal attack.

Still, when it was clear that the planetary meltdown and the political and military instability overseas was soon to cross the Atlantic and snowball with the western turmoil, and when she suddenly disappeared from work, he was compelled to take action. He needed to know that she was okay and, if not, regardless of his ‘neediness,’ and regardless of her demonstration of disrespect and lack of appreciation of him, he was determined to render her aid.

He’d long felt the weight of the world on his shoulders, and hostilities with Russia and China and the faltering markets and escalations in demonstrations of planetary and social instability had turned him gloomy, so her disappearance became a desperate call to honorable action. ‘If there’s soon to be nothing left of this life, if we’re all to sink into the engulfing abyss dug by rampant greed and unsustainable practices, I’m at least going to save *her*,’ he’d thought.

Having grown disillusioned with his profession and recently having completed a book of protest against what he saw as its parasitic MO and immoral impetus, it was time to move on anyway. Besides, the rumor mill reported that, with the economy and stock market being in disarray, the company was on the verge of collapse. So he used her disappearance as the push he needed to pull away.

He was friends with the Human Resources officer assigned to

his office and, through her, uncovered her address. She lived in the Gresham area just east of Portland proper. Driving out to her home on a particularly wet and windy day, the winds blowing with a ferocity once reserved for the tropical-storm-besieged southeast, he found her place of residence empty. Worse, the front door was wide open, swinging with every gust, and her belongings remained. Yet a soaking stack of mail spilling out of her mailbox into the gutter indicated that no one had been home in quite some time. One of the letters was from her mother, giving him his first clue to track. Using the letter's return address, he drove out to see her mom that day.

She was a mess. In hysterics, Holly's mother told Kato, then known as Victor, about a phone call she'd recently received. Holly had called her terrified, clearly in trouble. Her mother mentioned a name, Trevor, that Holly had shouted over the phone, apparently sounding as though she was running during the call. A report had been filed with the police, but the crime rate had been escalating for so long that law enforcement was overwhelmed and unable to respond to 'speculations.' Returning to Holly's home and once more sifting through the dissolving letters streaming towards the drain, he found it: a disturbing love letter from a Trevor Wright. "That which is meant to be shall be," it ended. "Whether or not it's wished to be, destiny wills reality." The return address simply said: "Clear Lake."

A rather common name for a lake, there are 'Clear Lakes' scattered across the United States. But there was only one nearby,

fed by snowmelt from the western slopes of the Cascade Mountains near the inception of the McKenzie River. *That's* where he'd search.

It was during the drive up into the Cascade Mountains that the severity of the economic situation in the country, and the inability of most people to respond to it level-headedly, was laid patently bare. In the tiny town of Rainbow paralleling the McKenzie Highway, Kato was forced to slow at a major stack-up. There was a run on the little local gas station, apparently it having been the last one at which gas was available for miles. A fight for the final spurts from the pumps pushed the crowd into the highway, stopping traffic. There was a panic, with brawls quickly giving way to gunshots.

Kato saw one family a few car lengths ahead being accosted by a man with a revolver. The driver refused to open his door and relinquish his ride, so the attacker shattered the glass of the driver's door with the butt of his gun. As the driver attempted to pull away, the assailant shot him multiple times through the shattered window. Screaming, his wife and child bolted out their passenger-side doors as the driver was pulled from the vehicle, left to bleed to death.

Circumstances suddenly dire, Kato saw a small gap to the left of the highway, along the shoulder, and made a desperate attempt to flee. Coming around a set of vehicles playing bumper cars, he was forced higher up on the adjacent embankment, his Subaru tilting severely but refusing to flip. Almost free of the calamity, he was

rounding the final set of cars set between him and daylight when he saw a man with a shotgun to his right bear down on him and fire several times at increasingly close range. The last of the shotgun blasts blew through his engine block. Smoke billowing, the front of the Subaru burst into flames as Kato gained some distance from his attacker. His car slowing, the engine sputtered, then exploded.

The fire badly burned his face, arms and hands, but he managed to break free of the flames, running from the wreckage and jumping into the wet brush beside the road before spilling down a steep decline. Rolling forward, his plummet was halted by a fallen tree, knocking him unconscious. Shivering himself awake after nightfall, he was numb to the bone, a crusted streak of blood having run down and sealed his left eye. But the worst part wasn't the blood or concussion, but the searing pain shooting across the flesh of his face, arms and hands. Yet, being so near to his destination, the moon having just waxed its way into illuminating fullness, and believing backtracking to be equally risky, he decided to keep on climbing.

Wary of encountering any more threats, he forced his way through the woods, paralleling the highway as it ascended past Belknap Springs, surreally pure, azure Blue Pool and, just prior to Clear Lake, the significantly diminished, once roaring Sahalie Falls.

At daybreak Kato entered the Clear Lake Resort area before

proceeding down a forest road at its southern border, creeping towards and perching himself above Coldwater Cove Campground. From his perch, he noted a group of RV's parked in a circle, one of which soon shown light through its back living quarter windows.

He didn't have to wait for long. And he'd guessed right, fortunately finding her right away. A few minutes after the lights were turned on, Holly was shoved from the RV by a man holding a pistol. Her wrists were bound, and she was bruised about the face. He led her a short distance from the RV into the woods, not far below Kato's post. Sneaking his way down the hill, Kato crept up behind them, seeing that Holly had been taken out to relieve herself.

"Please, Trevor," she pled, "let me pee in peace, without you watching me. If you want me to learn to love you, like you keep saying, then you've got to be a gentleman with me..."

"Fine," he relented, turning around, "but if you try to..."

His warning was immediately interrupted by a blow to the back of the head from a piece of chopped wood that she'd eyed as soon as they'd entered the area. The wallop knocked him to his knees, the pistol dropping from his hands. But he recovered quickly, and both he and Holly went for the gun. Just beating him, she turned to fire but was stopped by Trevor, who grabbed at the gun. Seeing

them tussling for control of the firearm, Kato sprinted down the hill to intervene, launching himself at Trevor an instant too late. The pistol went off just as he tackled him away from her.

Hearing her cough and gurgle on the ground behind him, Kato's surprise attack quickly got the best of Trevor. He punched him in the face several times before striking him in the head with a large stone sitting nearby, immobilizing him. Immediately turning around to render Holly aid, he knew immediately that the gunshot wound was fatal, blood gushing from just below her sternum. Eyes wide with terror, she said nothing, just stared at him as he pressed his hands over the wound, blood coursing through his fingers.

All Kato could manage was: "I'm so sorry." Then he heard the report of a rifle, and the sound of something fall behind him.

Turning around, Trevor lay dead in the needle-carpeted dirt, a gunshot wound through his chest, the large stone by his side. Puzzled, Kato scanned the horizon, seeking the source of the shot.

"You're lucky the elk are still coming to this lake," he heard. "I wasn't planning on hunting men, at least not today."

Honing in on the voice, Kato spotted Hunter for the first time. Holding a scoped rifle and dressed in custom-made

camouflaged attire that appeared to have been patched together from the natural materials at his disposal, he glided with soundless grace.

Turning back around, he witnessed Holly's final futile gasps for air and continued life. And as she sunk into oblivion, something horrible came over Kato. He hadn't had the opportunity to truly get to know her, but something about her untimely death, and the failure of his rescue mission, murdered all remaining hope and innocence in him. Overcome, he began to bawl and lose himself in his sudden sense of grief; grief not just at her loss, but at the seeming loss of everything. So consumed was he that he didn't care if his savior, the armed man moving up behind him, was himself a threat. He even used his last shred of hope on the thought of the man ending him too.

For some reason his mind went to poetry, as it had so long served as an outlet for his incalculable emotional pain and its connected psychological instability. One of Rumi's writings came:

*Your body shall fly from me
Yet a window shall stay open
Between my heart and yours.*

*From this window, like the moon
I'll keep secretly sending news.*

Hunter, too, would later admit that he'd felt a rare sense of being overcome by emotion while watching Kato sob, rock and grieve. He'd say that some powerful instinct rose up from deep within him, telling him that this unknown man must be protected.

So while Kato couldn't save Holly, he made a critical friend for life. A man who would teach him how to survive in an ever less survivable world, helping him feed and protect himself as they roamed the still relatively wet, resource-rich Western Cascades. At first Kato was so forlorn and bereft of the desire for life that he was entirely dependent upon Hunter, who would patiently keep him alive. They'd sometimes go a whole day without sharing a word. They survived that way for years, changing locations and rebuilding shelters in constant adaptation to fluctuating resource availability.

Occasionally they'd hear gunshots, artillery and explosives somewhere in the distance, and came across countless carcasses and charred camps while roaming the National Forest and what remained of the small towns on its fringes. Fortunately for them, they were only vaguely aware of the extent of the hostilities raging in the valley below, sometimes hearing stories from those they'd encounter and trade with. Eventually the storms, with their frequently accompanying rockslides and flashfloods, become too fierce to withstand in the mountains, and they were forced down into the valley, chasing the fantasy of a more secure, sustainable safe haven.

10

Having been at the rear of the group, allowing Remus and his crew to assume the vanguard, Hunter sensed the net closing just in time to wriggle out of it, but not in time to save the others. In a split-second decision he dove into a trench adjacent to the highway, listening as The Americans descended upon, surrounded and assaulted his comrades, praying to Spirit to spare them a grisly fate.

First allowing them to vacate the area so as to remain undetected, tracking so many plodding footsteps west could not have been easier, and reminded Hunter of how much easier tracking man is from tracking their prey. Man tends to move in much more predictable pathways packing weighty gear, if not dredging through the land aboard machinery, and almost always moving towards more men; towards massive, pollutive frenzies of unconscionable activity.

So when such men would tear apart an animal in the bush and incautiously retreat back to the false sense of safety represented by their ever less sustainable cities to celebrate their extractions, it didn't take an Army Ranger or lifelong hunter like Hunter to find them again, and to teach them how false their sense of safety is upon exiting the wild and reemerging with 'civilization.' After a while

Hunter began looking forward to seeing the horrific realization of this lesson cross the poachers' faces. 'The lions were the least of your worries,' he'd think while slitting their throats, delighting in the fulfillment of forcing the scales of justice back into balance.

Eventually Hunter and his growing Faceless herd decided that quick deaths were too good for those whom they stalked. Having long roamed the woods like the creatures they defended, camping in a new spot every night, taking only what was needed for survival and tracking various kill squads to and from their heartless kill sites, Hunter felt his savagery surge with each uncovered animal corpse. He was absorbing the poachers' wanton cruelty and disregard, determined to return it to them in kind. It wasn't long before he developed his calling card and fully fell from grace.

Tying his victims to trees or, when tracked back to their dens in the cities, to their own beds, he'd tear their teeth out one by one before cutting off their noses, then release them to live as grotesque symbols of their own barbarity. Before long he was making badges of belonging for he and his herd; necklaces of the extracted teeth for his fellow avengers who, when passed and recognized on the street, would salute one another by dropping a hand down their faces from their foreheads to their chins; salutations to a Faceless fellow.

When the gangs of poachers finally smartened-up and started

avoiding the areas patrolled by The Faceless, and following a few retaliatory firefights ending in mass bloodshed that significantly diminished their numbers, one of which Hunter was fortunate to escape alive, he was forced to evolve. For the mission to continue, a new strategy was needed. He recalled what a friend of his told him once; someone whom he'd considered a naïve idealist at the time:

“There’s a hidden, moral cost to and inseparable responsibility built into the demanding of any commodity. For, while it is easy to pretend not to be a part of the chain of causality, that’s *never* the case. To demand and purchase a commodity is to perpetuate its supply by supporting the continuity of its marketplace, especially in a ‘free market’ plutocracy wherein profiteers are effectively ‘free’ to supply *anything*. This is a certainty considering how poorly protected are the vulnerable people, places and resources in our low regulation, laissez-faire realm of globalized commerce. This ungodly, insatiable consumption will consume us all, and the world with us, especially if those of scrupulous disposition refuse to enact the ultimate economic truth: *end the demand, end the supply.*”

While he was unable to stop the demand for dead animal remnants, his reflection upon the words of his former friend, a moral man who'd tried to talk him out of joining the Army, citing the sordid history of the U.S. Military, led him to consider the links in the chain of supply. He taught himself the craft of the investigator,

tracing the supply lines to those most responsible for stoking that demand. He tortured resistant informants in order to move towards those most responsible for the fatally-maimed elephant collapsed in the river that had started him on his righteously unholy mission; a mission which had subsumed him. That mission was now his identity and life's work. There was no going back. He'd become the beast, cleansing humanity by feeding upon its degenerate flesh.

He sensed a great irony at work in his evolution as a hunter, going from targeting the typical prey on hunting trips with his father as an adolescent to someone hunting per the commands of the government as a young man to the defender of an innocent man that this same government sought to murder and, finally, to a trophy collector. Paralleling his enemies at each turn, he'd been drawn ever closer to the true source of evil: the wealthy and powerful most responsible for driving the irresponsible, unconscionable market, investing in the growth of demand and sowing the profitable supply, even as the demand finally fell off a cliff with the rest of the world. Yet he couldn't stop. He was entrenched in his duty, resigned to seek out and punish the perpetrators regardless of the devolving state of the world, and regardless of any increases in his personal risk.

It was during the latter stages of the global collapse that his time as the leader of The Faceless and, as far as he knew, the end of The Faceless itself, came to an abrupt end. The planet imploding,

governmental destabilization triggering panic and military coups, markets disintegrating, police forces disbanding and whole cities and nations overrun with every manner of unmet crime and gang warfare, he realized that his 'naïve' friend had been right. *Humanity was eating itself alive*. Triggered by a finally inhospitable home, the whole of humanity lost its footing and was slipping into oblivion. Yet he was too far gone to care, feeling he could fall no further.

Operating from a list that he'd pulled from a market middleman's computer, he paid a visit to the kingpins of the black market trade in illegal animal goods. He'd all too often find such trade to be but a fraction of their syndicated interests. Weapons, drugs, sex slaves; nothing was off-limits. His brand of justice intensified. And he laughed at himself for fancying himself an artist.

He'd carefully consider all the prey that he stalked, planning to kill them in a manner appropriate to their crimes. One he force-fed heroine until his heart stopped. Another man specialized in child sex trafficking. He took his time tearing his genitalia free before forcing it down his throat, suffocating him to death. But his favorite was his last, the man who, in another stroke of irony, saved his life with the very misbegotten means that had attracted Hunter to his doorstep.

An American expatriate living in Cape Town, he'd owned a major stake in one of the largest petroleum companies on the planet

and was a major supporter of conservative governments, hawkish politicians and business-friendly regimes worldwide, all while quietly controlling a major portion of the black market ivory trade. Hunter stalked him for weeks, unable to find a way through his security. It wasn't until the South African government was on the verge of collapse that the opportunity presented itself. Realizing that his target would soon be forced to flee the country, likely in an attempt to return to the US, he learned where he kept his private jet.

Breaking into and stowing himself away on the multimillion-dollar aircraft, his target had but two bodyguards with him after takeoff, both of whom he dispatched before they knew he was there. Soaked their blood, his target panicking and screaming at the lone pilot, Hunter saw the large elephant tusk mounted to the side of the cabin. Tearing it free from his mounting as the overlord screamed for mercy, he took his time lodging the tusk in his target's stomach cavity. Leaning upon it with his full weight as his target lay prone and dying on the floor of his aircraft bought-by-misery, he assured the pilot he was safe, and that he should continue on to The States.

When they landed on a small, nondescript airfield in Brazil to refuel, a location the pilot occasionally utilized for his narcotics trafficking runs, the night was still; pristine. The calm before the world-ending storm. A full moon illuminated the surrounding rainforest, where the birds, primates and insects played their primal

concert, completely unaware and uncaring that one species had brought the planet to its knees, and that the planet was soon to fight back, removing at least half of the life it was once willing to support. ‘Did I do it all for nothing?’ Hunter wondered at the time. No, time would keep the score one way or another. Even seemingly futile missions matter in the great, amassing causal chain we call ‘history.’

While in recollection of this eerie sense of peace he felt on that airfield, looking up at another luminous full moon signaling the calm before the storm, Hunter undertakes his situational assessment, completing his plans for an incursion of The Americans’ base.

11

The camp of The Americans is built around an old brick church from the turn of the twentieth century. Erected atop a hill near the eastern border of Old Salem, it's the dark heart of its denizens. Above the steeple flies an oversized American flag, the dishonored emblem of the empire so unequally and unsustainably enriched by the globalization of megacorporate commerce.

The same flag once served to enshroud such ugly, inconvenient truth, waving hypnotically in beguilement of the gullible masses, representing the false democratic façade of the land of the free to work and vote for the excluding few. Upon the failing of that façade, it was clearly revealed that the U.S. was amongst the most responsible for the planetary destruction triggering the Third World War, and for the consolidation of wealth and power maintained afterward, perpetuating violent resistance from those that refused to let the American custom continue. Tied to the steeple is an oversized banner reading simply: "Tradition." Some never learn.

Built around the church is the fledgling community of New America. It's evident that the original settlement, fixed in a circle around the church and composed of various stations suiting the tasks

of survival, toolmaking, tanning, building materials, meat drying, farming, cooking, sewing and general repair, is expanding concentrically, gradually taking on a disturbingly familiar form. Wooden structures are being raised in a ring, and the first signs of commerce are arising: shops claimed and over-lorded by the select few sell the surplus wares made and scavenged by the community's members. And while the most meager of dwellings dot the lowlands surrounding these stores, the higher grounds around the community have been claimed by the 'upper class,' their sprawling edifices in various stages of completion. From the ashes, the aristocracy reborn.

Plastered to the shops are more signs sounding the alarming anthems of old: "In God New America Trusts;" "We The Proud, Free Few;" "Survivors of The Purifying Flood;" "For Love of Country." "Those that don't learn from the past are doomed to repeat it," Hunter thinks, reflecting on the fact that every bloody conflict in history derived from a sense of one's tribe being superior to all others. Near the church are double-doors looking to lead down into a shelter, as if straight out of the tornado-imperiled Midwest. Such designs now serve as invaluable shields against all manner of threat, including tornadoes and that threat of all threats: the Avant Garde.

Marking his exact point of entry relative to the camp so as to be able to successfully egress later, Hunter circumvents the vicious pack of guard dogs, raised in the cruelty they'd pass on to would-be

trespassers, by setting up a fire a ways from the settlement and laying some dried squirrel meat atop a touching, heated stone. The olfactory prowess of the canines makes the misdirection irresistible.

Waiting for most of the settlers to obediently follow the ringing bell into the church, Hunter thinks of the film *The Time Machine*. More lambs lining up for the slaughter. Once certain that the whole community is ensconced within, he surreptitiously encroaches, darting between the dwellings ringing the town, quietly killing three watchmen in the process as quickly as possible, grasping their mouths and slitting their throats with his nine inch serrated blade before hurriedly dragging and concealing their bodies.

Creeping up to the church, he hears a thundering sound vibrating across the inner expanse. He positions himself beneath an open window with his back to the wall, and soon hears a deep voice resounding from within the conclave. Again, he's hearing Nathaniel:

“Now let us give thanks to God, whom, in His almighty mercy, has granted us the gift of survival, purifying the land of its heathenness sinners so that a righteous people may again walk His sacred Earth. Let us pledge our eternal allegiance...”

The full congregation rings out, startling Hunter: “I pledge allegiance, to the flag, of the resurrected United States of America.

And to the reborn republic, for which it stands. One renewed nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

“Except the commies!,” one man angrily shouts, his statement immediately met with feverish applause, cheering and whistling. ‘With liberty and justice for all, indeed,’ Hunter scoffs, recalling the endless inculcation in narrow-minded patriotism he endured over his decade-plus of serving in the Army. The furious cacophony takes near a minute to subside, then Nathaniel resumes:

“Indeed, my good fellow. Blasted from their godless burrows, righteously ground to dust in their dens of iniquity, most of the heathen have fallen!,” he shouts, his voice rising in force. “Yet Satan persists! These ten men and women, scoundrels and snakes, set upon us on our supply run today, meaning to murder us where we stood! Yet we, protected by our invisible cloaks of righteousness, prevailed, killing only one of them in self-defense, whereupon they realized the futility of attacking people of God. We spared the rest so that they might see the light of the Lord and be reborn here, in our sacred New American Church, the heart of the reborn Republic!”

More applause and whistling, then he carries on: “And yet I fear these former children of God to be beyond redemption, for their jezebel of a leader there tried to seduce me enroute to our holy land.”

Hunter hears a muffled yell coming from the other side of the wall. It's Persephone, gagged. "Even now, as you can see, she wants nothing less than to let loose with her slippery tongue, the very same demonic device which overtook Adam in the garden, ushering in the fall of mankind! Adam was tested then as your humble servant was tested today, and will continue to be tested, lured into entrapment by The Dark Lord through his possessed demons; his guileful, seducing witches and lustful, malicious male minions. Only by finding the inner strength to refuse him and his scourge, to cast out or judge and purify his soldiers of Hell, have we the chance to rebuild this once great nation, directed in our righteous cause by the one holy creed!"

To thundering applause Nathaniel's sermon continues. Hunter can feel the mounting rage of the mob with each evocation of angry, divinely-validated purpose and denunciation of 'the enemy:' the *other*. The naïve liberal; the satanic socialist; the treacherous terrorist; the arrogant, debauched atheist; the un-American immigrants who so taxed this once unwisely welcoming nation.

A master of demagoguery like many of his historical ilk, Nathaniel manipulates the fear, prejudice, ignorance and insecurity of his mob with ease. He writes a historical fiction from the pulpit, propagating a myth of socialistic legions, unable or unwilling to learn the lessons of their past failures and falls into Marxism, Stalinism, Nazism and 'every other brand of socialistic godlessness;'

of their attempts to kill the free market, democracy, individualism and God himself. He tells the tale of how, unable to accept their God-given defeat, they launched a series of desperate nuclear attacks upon this, the land of the free and brave men and women who banded together and won the Holy War, and have now been divinely tasked with cleaning up the ruin that the Devil left in his wake.

Listening to Nathaniel, Hunter thinks of something Kato once said whilst they gathered around a fire sharing a meal: “Those that know little history are like a blank canvas ready to be painted with a pseudo history that has nothing to do with truth; nothing to do with the actual cause and effect of history, and everything to do with the objective of the painter. One of the most common types of such paintings in this country has always been the type associating socialism with evil and the freedom-suppressing villains of the past, the Hitler’s, Mao’s, Stalin’s and Castro’s, misleading the painters’ patrons from the fact that it was not socialism, but *totalitarianism*, the absolute authority of the state through its dictator, which defined those regimes and times and places in history. It was common for these dictators to begin with socialistic beliefs before becoming so corrupted by power that they ultimately betrayed socialistic values. It is consolidation of wealth and power that brings evil. *That* is the true villain, as it was both for those countries and for *this* fallen nation.”

Nathaniel continues: “The valiant Phoenix rises, brothers and

sisters, and though the humiliated, scattered, demon-gripped enemy still lingers, looking for any weakness, for any opportunity to corrupt and strike us down, we shall not let them! We shall remain standing tall, proud, firm, vigilant... secure in the knowledge that God shall prevail... and that, though the night has been long and dark, He didn't sacrifice His one and only son in vain, for we are His dutiful servants, and we shall once again be fruitful and multiply across His Earth, the Earth that, by His will, has unleashed its fury upon the nonbelievers, upon the doubters, upon the faithless, cleansing His land of all obstacles to our divinely-sanctioned triumph!"

Following one last delirious applause, the mob breaks up and converses amongst itself before beginning to disperse. Hunter waits and listens, at one point hearing what sounds like a wooden gate open and close, accompanied by muffled screams and shuffling feet. 'I'll have to move quickly,' he thinks, knowing it won't be long before The Americans uncover the watchmen's bodies and rekindle their mob mentality, blood-lusting pitchforks in hand, determined to accelerate the witch trials alluded to by Nathaniel during his sermon.

Finally it falls silent inside. With one graceful movement, Hunter hurls himself through the open window and into the church.

12

Falling inaudibly upon the stone floor of the church in his buckskin moccasins, Hunter surveys his surroundings. The church is of average size, and typical of the Christian edifices of the era, with symmetrical rows of pews divided by a center aisle leading to the pulpit. Its once large stained glass windows have been shredded by the Garde to get to the metal melding them together. An immense mural of the American flag is painted on the wall behind the pulpit, with a massive, outstretched wooden cross centered upon it, likely a recent replacement of the once metallic cross now remade, like the glass, into countless members of the long overdue Avant Garde.

There's one other major departure from the churches that Hunter recalls from his youth, one which brings to mind the Christian missions which once 'pacified' and 'civilized' the 'savages' of all corners of the African continent: a long, narrow wooden cage is affixed to his side of the structure, enclosing nine of his remaining party. All but Persephone. Everyone is gagged and tied to the wall with cord strung across the wall on both sides.

Hunter attempts to open the cage, to no avail. The lock is solid, and pounding on it will only alert The Americans to his

presence, foiling his rescue attempt before it gets started. He's going to need the key. They're all likely to die if he can't procure it quickly. Using head movements, Kato, Remus and a few of the others direct Hunter to the back wall with the cross and mural. Near what appears to be a back exit, a separate door, partially ajar, is positioned directly behind the pulpit and beneath the cross. Staying low, quick and quiet, knife in hand, Hunter passes through the doorway and descends a short flight of stairs, entering the basement.

Following the muffled sound of voices from the far end of the basement hallway, he shoots by a large room to his right, almost the size of the great hall above. The cavernous room is replete with countless cots, likely connected to the shelter opening he saw coming in, providing refuge to The Americans during Mother Nature's wrath or an Avant Garde attack. Proceeding stealthily down the hallway, a string of portraits and paintings of the honored line the right wall, The American Hall of Fame: Saint John, Pope Benedict, Presidents HW Bush, Reagan and Trump, Mother Mary being suckled by the Savior and, just before the final door, a portrait of a far younger, trimmer Nathaniel Pike in his Marine fatigues. A big, beaming smile is glued to his face, an assault rifle in his hands.

Hunter places his ear to the door, listening...

"Unless you want your people purified in front of you one by

one, you'll do *exactly* what I say, when I say it," Nathaniel threatens. "And trust me when I say the purification process isn't nearly as pleasant as it sounds. Now, get undressed, bend over and put your face between her legs. Try to wipe that stern look off of her face."

Hunter waits a moment for the chance to catch Nathaniel in a sufficiently compromised position. Hearing a sudden groan of pain, he bursts through the unlocked door. Nathaniel, wearing only the top of his fatigues, has just entered Persephone from behind. She has her head between the legs of Ivana, the impregnated German woman that had been staring menacingly at her earlier. Though caught completely off guard, Nathaniel defends himself with amazing athleticism for his size, turning just in time to prevent Hunter's plunging blade from hitting anything vital, instead being partially lodged in his left trapezius, between his neck and collarbone.

The beast of a man winces while turning, grabbing and grappling with Hunter, knife still inserted near his neck. 'He's an ox,' Hunter thinks, soon succumbing to Nathaniel's raw power, who, despite bleeding heavily, wrestles him to the ground and puts him in an airtight chokehold at the base of the massive bed. As the lights begin to go out on Hunter he hears the women struggling behind him, followed in short succession by a thud, the feel of a blow and an odd, gasping gurgle from Nathaniel, who suddenly releases him.

As if his consciousness is on a dimmer switch, the lights gradually come back on. Coming to, Hunter regains awareness in time to see the two nude women tearing viciously at one another in the far corner of the room, Ivana having pinned Persephone between the walls. Nathaniel staggers to his feet, Hunter's nine inch blade now buried to the hilt in a diagonal position towards his throat, blood spurting from the wound as he lumbers towards the door in an unsteady attempt to flee the room. Luckily Persephone had escaped Ivana for long enough to kick down at the handle of Hunter's knife.

From the floor Hunter leaps at the great wounded creature, shoving him violently, his head and body slamming into the door frame, causing him to crumple against the wall. He slowly slips down to the floor, lying face-first in his own blood. Hunter pulls the knife from its penetrated flesh, and the wound gushes. 'He won't last long,' Hunter thinks before shooting across the room and thrusting his bloody blade through the back of Ivana's ribcage, into her heart.

Helping Persephone to her feet, she has some serious scratches to her arms and face, but otherwise seems unscathed. Seizing the knife from Hunter, she walks over to the dying gargantuan gasping for his fast-fleeting final breaths. "Flip him over," she commands Hunter. He obeys and, Nathaniel's half nude body now exposed, his left paw over the wound in an attempt to prevent exsanguination, Persephone grabs the ox's genitals and,

Hunter preventing Nathaniel from defending himself, she savagely removes them. He lets out a horrible, half-muffled, gurgling scream. Casting them aside as if unceremoniously discarding rubbish, she then plunges the blade just beneath his breastbone and slices all the way down his abdomen, through his missing manliness, spilling his intestines. Seconds later he's lifeless, the nasty giant dead in his den.

“We have to go,” Hunter urges, finding Nathaniel's pants and removing a ring of keys from a pocket. “They're probably looking for us already,” he adds, grabbing Persephone's clothes, streaked in blood from several passing angles as if a work of modern art. As he goes to hand Persephone her clothes, she adds the final touch to her masterpiece, carving a cross deep into Nathaniel's deflated chest.

Dressing as she goes, Persephone and Hunter flee, Persephone smashing Nathaniel's portrait with a blow from her elbow as they enter the hallway, running for the staircase. Back in the central hall of the church, they release their party from their cage and binds. Hunter directs them: “It's absolutely imperative that you all follow my path out of here *exactly!* It's a matter of life or death!”

They hear a ruckus coming from outside the church, then someone shout: “Someone get Nathaniel!” As they make a break for the back exit, Hunter leading the way, the main double doors fly open at the opposite end of the church. The intervening American

raises his rifle just as the last few panicked escapees cross over the threshold, spilling outside. The round narrowly misses its target, whistling through the doorway, disappearing into the moonlit night.

Making a run for it, Hunter leads the group on their flight for life, dashing through the tanning station and a row of diminutive dwellings under construction on their way to the outer ring of The Americans' settlement and the coniferous woods beyond. A hail of bullets and shotgun pellets mortally follows in their fleeing wake.

Within seconds two of Persephone's group fall. Yet everyone knows that to stop is to die. Crossing into the start of the woods, it having been hastily hacked away to build New America, the group begins climbing the hill, then hears a scream behind them. A pursuer is caught in one of Hunter's traps, set to safeguard their escape.

Adrenaline coursing through his veins, a strange calm washes over Hunter as, leading the climb up the hill, he hears another cry of agony behind him, another American having fallen prey to one of his traps. The mantra of Mugabe, the Kenyan naturalist and activist that brought him to the dying bull elephant and taught him how to survive in the African wilds, flashes into his mind: "The planet is my partner, not my prey. Enlist its help for passage, live another day."

Right as the remainder of the bolting group reaches the ridge,

Counselor takes a bullet to the back, wails and falls. Most of the group continues over the ridge as Kato and his crew drag Counselor over the top, barely avoiding being shot themselves. Persephone's people, still spilling down the other side of hill, make it halfway down before she turns and beckons Kato and his crew to continue. But Kato knows that Mana can never leave Counselor, so he freezes, uncertain what to do. As he attempts to determine a course of action, Jackrabbit yells: "Wait, I know where we are! Everyone follow me!"

Jackrabbit darts down the hill at an angle as Kato and Hunter prop Counselor up on their shoulders. Everyone else is locked in place, waiting for the executive decision. Kato yells "Go!," and they all follow Jackrabbit, including, after the briefest of hesitations and cursing exclamations, Persephone and the remainder of her group.

Their lives are now in the hands of the twenty-two-year-old former junkie and drug dealer.

13

From the top of the ridge, Jackrabbit realized that the house where he lived with Druid for almost a year was near to their current position. Now, leading everyone on a scramble for survival, he hopes to Spirit that he remembers the way there. It's farther away than he'd thought, but they manage the distance, and there it stands.

'Please let the battery still be there, and have some juice left,' he prays. Bullets slamming into the home's siding and blasting through what remains of the broken windows, Jackrabbit ascends onto the deck, bursts through the unlocked front door and drops down into the basement through a panel of false floorboards in a guestroom closet. The rest of the group is close on his heels, gasping their way into the house and slamming the door behind them. 'It's unlikely the dog pack is still around,' Jackrabbit thinks while, hope kindled, finds that the lifesaving battery bank still contains a quarter supply of juice. 'But that nut certainly had other tricks up his sleeve.'

He flips on the generator and hears Druid's adjacent mechanisms begin priming themselves, gears and springs whirring to life. Pressing a red button nearby, he grabs the machine's remote, Druid's shotgun and rifle and runs back upstairs, thinking: 'How

long have I been trying to get Kato to relocate us here, dammit?'

While much of the home has been stripped away by the scavenging Americans, enough remains to provide some shelter and defense. The rest of the group has managed to pry up a floorboard and used it to prop the front door closed. Jackrabbit directs them back downstairs so that each can secure armament from Druid's collection, and they soon head back up with various melee weapons; assorted sizes and shapes of axes, swords, maces and knives. Upon reaching the first floor once more, everyone takes refuge as best they can. There's a few tense seconds of silence as the group, under the guidance of vets Remus and Hunter, quietly reposition themselves.

"You're all fucked!," the shout soon comes from somewhere outside. "Come out and get on your knees and maybe we'll spare your women! You have ten seconds, then you all die!"

Staying low, Remus and Hunter take the shotgun and rifle from Jackrabbit. Looking at the remote clutched in his hands, they shoot him a couple quizzical looks, to which he replies: "We need to draw them all in close, up onto the deck. We'll only get one shot at this." Glancing at one another in conveyances of acknowledgment, Remus and Hunter take positions at opposing ends of the front line of windows. Jackrabbit positions himself towards the back of the great room where he can see anyone approaching the front of the

house. Moments later the first volley of bullets and shotgun blasts begin tearing away at what remains of the old home's failing façade, including a couple shots into the back of the hollowed-out home.

Remus stands as if he's going to fire back, but Jackrabbit yells "No!" at the top of his lungs, pointing at his remote. Remus hesitates, but ultimately lowers his weapon, deciding to trust the still mostly unknown young man. Then comes the charge. The form of a dozen-plus well-armed Americans bearing down on the front door is illuminated by eerie silvery-blue moonlight passing through sporadic streaks in the gathering storm clouds above. Chest pounding, Jackrabbit sees the point man prepare to throw something side-arm through a blown-out window, and pulls the trigger on the remote.

Bellows of agony ring-out all around the house, like a war zone immediately following the dropping of a bomb, dying men desperately railing against their suddenly tragic fate. Seconds later the explosion from the grenade carried across the deck by the leading American explodes near the other side of the wall, close to Remus, who falls backwards, stunned, the still defiantly standing front wall of the home saving his life. The explosion quiets the screams from the front before a few more rounds sail into the room, one narrowly missing Jackrabbit's head, who yells: "Fire back!" before bear-crawling over to grab the shotgun dropped by Remus.

He raises the pump action gun and, without looking, fires it out the missing window at nothing in particular. Hunter levels a focused aim out his window and fires a series of rounds from the lever-action rifle, one of which produces a wail from somewhere in the nearby brush, finding its mark. Moments later it's mostly silent, the groans from the surviving, impaled Americans the only sounds.

Persephone and Kato, having been sequestered in the back of the home with Counselor, Mana and what remains of Persephone's group, run low back into the front room to aid in the assessment.

Kato looks to Jackrabbit: "What now?!"

Jackrabbit says nothing, searching for his breath. Persephone attempts to tend to Remus. He's dazed, with trickles of blood streaming from both ears, but is otherwise okay. The five of them look at one another, disbelieving that the hushed peace shall prevail. The skies open up, and a deluge drops upon the beleaguered land.

14

The rain falls with a force that almost makes them forget that they were just in a fight for their lives, straining the sapped structure that just spared those lives. Matched by a ferociously wild wind, the already well-worn, partially picked-apart frame of the home creaks and groans in complaint, water dripping from the ceiling and spurting through holes in the homes' heavily pockmarked façade.

“Let’s go downstairs!,” Jackrabbit yells at the others and, supporting the still reeling Remus and critically-wounded Counsellor, they retreat down into Druid’s survivalist basement lair, Jackrabbit carefully replacing the false floorboards above the entry.

Derided by most, the doomsdayers were right. The world *had* been headed for an apocalypse. And while groups like The Americans interpreted the fall of mankind and the mass depopulation of the Earth through a religious frame of reference, The Great Reset was ultimately wrought by greed; by immorality, irresponsibility and an insatiable need to overpower the planet and its under-protected people and places. ‘This, too, is Satan,’ Nathaniel might’ve said had he been a little more honest with, and a little less manipulative of his people. And yet, when those condemning are just as much to blame

as the condemned and, in fact, often more so, when the demons being vilified are most densely-packed within your own den, and when the national supremacists are colluding with the imperialists, the Christians and the corporate conquerors that placed the planet in peril in the first place, who can help but smirk at the irony of those portending the apocalypse as being amongst those most responsible?

Daniel Draughtmore for one. Druid was what many would've called a 'survivalist nut.' Naturally astute in the art of mechanical engineering, yet unable to withstand the rigors of higher education, his concrete bunker of a basement is covered with contraptions and figurines of every order, many of them hailing from age-old myth and lore, especially from deep Irish and Scottish history before the conquests of the Germanic tribes, Franks, Norsemen and Romans.

The ancient druid soothsayers of the Celtic religion were of particular fascination to him. He'd believed that it had, in fact, been the druids that first prophesized the apocalypse, not the Mayans or Christians. His hiding place was a hodgepodge of his hobbies and interests; the intersection of 'Don't Tread on Me' libertarianism (a byproduct of his penchant for blaming an overbearing society and government for his troubles in life), folklore, mechanical engineering and video and boardgames. One might say his sacred space was a holdover of his 'refuse to grow up' days when his mother still lived in the house, before the world began falling apart around him and he

decided to use his inheritance to turn his basement base into a concrete box protected by surveillance and a modern-day version of an impaling device he'd read about in a book on the Middle Ages.

Below the row of boardgames spanning the length of a wall is Druid's weapon collection. Knives, swords, spears, axes, a mace and sets of throwing knives and stars, many of the same weapons used in the Dungeons and Dragons and other fantasy games set above them. Fantasy had spilled into and merged with his reality. Our reality is mostly of our own making, or so thinkers have said.

Despite his imposing frame, Druid was entirely unpracticed and ungainly in action, an awkward admirer of the martial arts who preferred to attack on the board or through his digital avatars. In the 'real world' he was rather twitchy and self-conscious. His nervous reaction to Neo's sudden presence on Silver Creek had, in fact, been his downfall. But before that he'd demonstrated valuable foresight in preparation. His overgrown alpha dog, Ragnar, had headed the pack that he'd fostered into his defense team, most now dispersed or deceased, a few adopted by the now severely diminished Americans.

"Look at this fucking place," Persephone marvels. "Why'd you guys ever leave this place? And why didn't we just hide down here in the first place, as soon as we came in?"

“Because those assholes saw us come in,” Jackrabbit replies, thinking of Druid and his fondness for Sun Tzu and what he called ‘battleground strategy.’ “When your position is cut off, never let them through your perimeter without a fight. They’d have known we were in here. Even with this fortified lair they would’ve won; just cut us off and waited us out. Even with Druid’s stockpile in there,” he adds, gesturing towards the canned food supply in the walk-in pantry beneath the stairs. “They’d have cut off our air or set fire to the house, and we’d have been forced to come out eventually.”

“He’s right,” Remus agrees. “It would’ve been a bad move.” He rubs his forehead, trying to recover from his concussed state.

“And yet that’s precisely the position we’re in now,” Kato contends, “especially if they’re still up there watching us. We all saw their community. Those that followed us down the hill likely make up but a fraction of their total numbers. They’ll find reinforcements, surround us and then smoke us out as soon as this storm subsides. We got this far, but it seems unlikely that we’ll escape in the end.”

“Fuck, Kato, c’mon. We need some positivity right now,” Persephone complains. “I need you to...” She walks over, leans down and whispers to him: “I need you to be the man I know you can be.” She places her hand on his face and caresses it, then leans in and kisses him on his scarred forehead, speaking in an intimate tone.

“The one who refuses to be defeated; who’s always looking for... that’s it... *the storm*...” Persephone trails off, staring up at the roof as if looking through it to the celestial heavens above. “The storm is what’s going to save us. Hopefully we killed or ran them all off and they’ll have to wait to resume their assault. We need to use this storm, *right now*. We need to creep out and escape while we can.”

Counselor lets out a whimper. “I’m not leaving her,” Mana says matter-of-factly. “No way.” She stares with heartfelt intensity at Kato. “You know I love you,” she continues, “and I’d be heartbroken if forced to part from you, Hunter and Jack. But I love her *more*,” she adds, holding Counselor’s head. “As soon as the storm lets up, which I think will be early in the morning, I’m going up there and gathering the medicine that I need to save her. It’s up there, I can feel it. Mother will protect me from those jackals.”

15

The line between unproven fact and unprovable fiction is sometimes so thin as to be imperceptible. Compounding this precarious perception of reality is the fact that what is true for one is often false for another, and that what stands within the spectrum of sanity is that which is most commonly accepted, which itself is highly influenced by what fits the status quo of cultural belief.

In cultures built around production, consumption and the conserved values of Church, State and Empire, there's little room for those that speak to nature; that hear more than the wind in the wind; that see more than random chaos in the movements of those creatures of the Earth made insignificant by the capitalist domination of all regions and beings of the planet unable to defend themselves.

Societal dysfunction and danger to oneself or others are the litmus tests of sanity. Yet how much of what nature intends is made to function in the artificial realm of gradual planetary destruction, and how much of what is deemed dangerous is based upon the fearful, ignorant, stigma-stained judgments of the conditioned masses, and the writers and enforcers of laws written for profit?

Kestrel, now Mana, always considered nature to be the

manifestation of God. And nothing of God can be separated from, much less be devoid of divinity. Her mother, a nature photographer, had named her after her favorite bird, and Kestrel took this as the ultimate bird sign. She was born to follow nature's flights, seeking truth and harmony by truly learning to listen. Taking this practice to an extreme from an early age, it wasn't long before she began exhibiting 'disturbing signs' and catching the wrong kind of attention from parents, teachers and her playground peers alike.

Parents would gently push their children toward safety in response to unanswerable questions like: "What's she doing, Mommy?!" as Mana would round a tree, petting its corrugated bark and attempting to discern its truth. 'This tree has been here for hundreds of years,' she'd think, 'and has too much to say *not* to listen to it.' She'd spend so much time on these 'deviant' wavelengths that her teachers and principals would suspect some sort of learning or social disorder, or that she was 'on the spectrum.' It wasn't until her teens, however, that her once internal dialogues with the flora, fauna, rivers, Earth and Spirit became audible, completing her movement from 'eccentric' to 'deviant' to 'insane.'

Suffering the cumulative stresses of her outcast status and the pressure to conform to societal norms pressed upon her by fearful school administrators and ignorant, protective parents, the breaking point came when she was sixteen and a sophomore in high school.

No one knows what happened, exactly, perhaps not even Mana herself. After having been missing for three days and nights, she was found by a state park ranger in the hollow of a massive rotted-out stump a mile from school. Half nude, she was shivering, sobbing, covered in a mass of ferns and mumbling unintelligibly. She had a major contusion on her head and ligature marks on her wrists. The attending physicians at the hospital determined that she'd suffered a serious sexual assault. Her parents removed her from school, deciding to homeschool her instead, at which point, despite seemingly overwhelming odds, she managed to make a friend.

Judith lived down the block. Quiet, patient and thoughtful beyond her years, Judith found Mana fascinating. Both pairs of parents cautiously allowed the friendship to blossom, with this blossom lasting a year, up until the second major incident, this one leading to her being committed and diagnosed with schizophrenia.

Judith's father Gerald had been an avid hunter and head of a local AA chapter when he was found by his wife in his study at three in the morning with his favorite hunting knife buried in his throat. Two partially filled glasses of whiskey were on his desk, the empty, bloodstained bottle having been tossed across the room. When the police arrived, young Mana was sitting on the ground nearby rocking back and forth, having a conversation with a taxidermized black

bear, what had been Gerald's most prized hunting trophy. While the circumstances were suspicious, Mana was eventually convicted of second-degree murder 'except for insanity' and sentenced to thirty-years-to-life under the Psychiatric Security Review Board.

Post-conviction, Mana's twenty years confined to the man-made unnatural world were unkind to her. She became ever more withdrawn and subject to a seemingly endless string of 'medication adjustments' and 'aggressive therapies' in the attempt to snap her out of what eventually became a state of near complete catatonia. She was the wilted, gradually dying flower. Then she met Anne.

16

Anne, now Counselor, became a national leader in the mission to address the ignorance and stigmatization surrounding mental illness and its woefully inaccurate popular perception. With a doctorate in clinical psychology and a wide-ranging background in the field of mental health, in her late twenties she became the third administrator of the soon to be highly regarded A World Apart Recovery Center, a thirty bed medium security facility situated on a well-wooded forty acre rural property near the McKenzie River, in the foothills of Central Oregon's Cascade Mountain Range.

To run such an institution at her age put her in rarefied air, and spoke to her immense ability, her impassioned pursuit of more efficacious mental health treatment and the belief of the small Board of Directors that the previous two administrators suffered from being suffused with archaic, misguided preconceptions matching their ages. Someone not just intelligent, but idealistic, open-minded and even adventurous was called for, and Anne was the Board's choice.

The mission statement of The Center revolved around concepts like 'holistic treatment methods,' 'partnering with patients' and 'nurturing internal motivation.' Soon The Center, under her

leadership, was derided as being ‘too new agey’ by the more established institutions and systems which it threatened with its success. With the help of her sociologist husband, The Center initiated its treatment by removing its patients from the pollutions and pressures of conventional urban life, repositioning them in a natural realm believed to be more conducive to the healing process.

From this naturally-revitalizing starting point protected from the constancy of undue duress endemic to most of modern life, a truly holistic set of treatment modalities was developed into The Center’s ‘Synergistic Natural Therapy System.’ In addition to more conventional treatment methods, The Center enriched, strengthened and ultimately hoped to heal its patients through a customized combination of beneficially-overlapping therapeutic practices specially suited to each patient, including the possible integration of art therapy, nature exploration therapy, garden cultivation therapy, aromatherapy, sound and music therapy, hydrotherapy, mindfulness therapy, animal companion therapy, exercise therapy, nutritional therapy and, to great uproar from the for-profit medical field, even the cautious incorporation of natural medicines in supplementation, and sometimes in exclusion, of typical pharmacological treatments.

So when Counselor heard of Mana’s case and began digging into her background and what had landed her in compulsory treatment, she felt like she was being offered the ideal subject;

someone made for A World Apart; someone perfectly suited to its therapy system. Though it took several meetings not just with Mana but members of the Psychiatric Security Review Board and officials of Crook County, as well as Mana's mother, Mana was eventually released into Counselor's care, and came to reside at A World Apart.

They took to one another immediately. Even before being transferred to A World Apart, Mana sensed that Counselor was sent by Spirit to save her. She would later tell Counselor how, when Counselor first entered her room to interview her, Mana felt a vitality that she hadn't felt in a decade, and that she smelled flowers and saw an aura surrounding Counselor that strobed as she spoke.

Within days of her intake at A World Apart, Mana was walking the grounds with Counselor, who stood patiently nearby as Mana touched the trees and plants, taking in their natural energies for the first time since she was a teenager and, through their transmitted energy, building the courage to speak in complete sentences, soon finding the necessary comfort and rediscovered desire to express emotions. The second week Counselor gifted her with the book *Pacific Northwest Medicinal Plants* by Scott Kloos, and soon she was identifying the flora surrounding The Center by name, describing their origin, folklore and medicinal benefits.

Seeing her patient come alive through this naturopathic

education in league with the other elements of A World Apart's holistic treatment methodology, as well as through a drastic displacement of her compelled pharmaceutical regimen with dried herbal encapsulations and infusions that improved mood and nervous system function while reducing stress and anxiety, Counselor continued to nurture Mana's improvement by providing her with the tools required to begin producing her own herbal medicines.

Mana blossomed, and within a month was as stable as most staff members. And while it went against the typical 'professional boundary' by which propriety is narrowly dictated and controlled in clinical relationships, Counselor soon realized that she loved Mana as a dear friend, and they began sharing their ideas and passions.

Counselor used Mana as a sounding board for a book she was writing called *Overflowing Cup: The Incapacity of Overcapacity*, a book examining the connected theories of mental illness' 'positive symptoms,' or 'added experiences,' such as delusions and hallucinations, and mental illness being both triggered and prolonged through various forms of stress, including the stresses imposed by such positive symptoms. Feeling, thinking and experiencing more than 'the sane person' is the common root of mental illness, with such overstimulation making it difficult to function in the already overstimulating, over-stressful modern world of that day, much less today's world wherein half of those encountered appear deranged or

otherwise mentally unstable. Counselor became convinced that these ‘positive symptoms’ were causally inseparable from what were regarded as ‘negative symptoms,’ or subtracted functionality.

The brain can only register so much. Increase registration via increased capacity and activity in one area and something gets displaced. It’s a trade-off. You can’t have one without the other. And yet, properly managed, certain types of capacity-overload lumped into the ‘unfortunate illness’ can be corralled and put to beneficial use. Historically this use, which she called ‘the lost opportunity of eccentric capacity’ in *Overflowing Cup*, was mostly poured down the drain with the fear, ignorance and need to sedate and control the ‘dangerously unstable and dysfunctional.’ In addition to this proposed paradigm shift in the understanding of certain mental illnesses, especially schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, she proposed a revision in the accepted understanding of depression.

Through a mix of personal and empirical evidence, Anne realized that the depression paradigm was incorrect. It’s not about a neurotransmitter ‘imbalance;’ at least, that’s not the *root* of the issue; rather, the root cause of the depressed brain is neurotransmitter *depletion and deficiency* related to internalized stress and anxiety. That is, stress and anxiety, of both extrinsic and intrinsic causation, require certain neurochemicals (especially serotonin) to mitigate their cascading, deleterious neurological effects. In this manner,

some neurochemicals act as shields against others. Through this mechanism the brain's neurotransmitter bank *becomes* imbalanced over time, owing to the body being unable to maintain sufficient production of the demanded neurochemicals. Thus, when stress is severe and chronic enough, and especially without the assistance of naturopathic and/or pharmacological intervention to extend the lifespan and/or production of said mitigating neurochemicals, the beleaguered neurology manifests a 'depressed' state of over-taxation. This is also, of course, why anxiety and depression are so closely linked as to be almost inextricable, and why stress-reduction techniques are simultaneously depression-staving techniques.

Mana's reignited purpose and passion correlated perfectly with Counselor's ideas, and Counselor happily became a guinea pig for some of Mana's herbal concoctions whilst listening with delight as Mana described what the plants, world and universe was telling her, never quite being certain where to place the line between delusion and invisible truth. So Counselor stopped trying to place it, accepting the fact that Mana was in touch with something beyond the typical human experience, even if that something sometimes drifted into the realm of fantasy indistinguishable from fiction. Regardless of its conventional unacceptance, it was *Mana's* reality.

About the time that Mana had fully settled into her routine, and her friendship with Counselor became firmly rooted, the

planetary destabilization and connected global political upheaval snowballed with tribalistic territorial squabbles and the dwindling means of survival. A World Apart became increasingly incapable of supporting its residents, especially when all supplemental streams of insurance and public financing dried up. As a result, the thirty bed facility was forced to cut staff and offload residents, many of whom were on their way out anyway, needing to see to familial troubles precipitated by ever more common catastrophes of every order.

Residency dropped from thirty to five in less than a year, with only Counselor, her husband and one devoted nurse staying on despite the inability to generate electricity, much less pay salaries. Concurrent with the healing joy that Mana experienced at being reunited with the natural world in a place as biodiverse as the McKenzie River Watershed, she experienced a near equal measure of heartbreak when the darkness descended and increasing desertification set-in, thinning plant life more and more such that only the most resilient, hearty species remained widespread. She and Counselor were thereby forced to venture further and further outside the property into the surrounding, now unmanaged National Wilderness in order to find viable samples for Mana's concoctions.

A week after Portland was hit by its nuclear missile, likely from a Russian submarine that had managed to penetrate US Pacific Naval defenses during the widespread chaos of that period, Mana

and Counselor set out from A World Apart in search of local medicinal flora for the final time. They were at least three miles from the property and were paralleling the now trickling McKenzie when Mana was suddenly instinctively drawn in one direction, sensing ‘an urgent invitation from Mother,’ as she’d later say. Like a dog suddenly accelerating towards the source of a scent, she took off at such a pace that Counselor had a hard time keeping up with her.

Leaping over logs and tearing through thickets, it wasn’t until Counselor noticed that Mana was falling through false footing that she tried to stop in her tracks, but her momentum carried her forward. The pair dropped into the deadfall that likely saved them.

The deadfall had been covered with an artificial moss and fern carpeting bound on two sides to fallen trees, made to open at the center before snapping back into position. Dropping fifteen feet, both suffered injuries, Counselor a badly twisted ankle and potentially broken arm, and Mana likely fracturing her left femur.

Unable to escape, they lay under their artificial green cover in near darkness for close to three days before hearing movement above. Counselor knew that they had to risk that whatever, or whomever, was passing by wouldn’t be hostile, so she cried out for help. That’s how they came to be rescued by Kato and Hunter.

Supplied with freshwater and rest for the night, Mana and Counselor rode upon their backs to A World Apart the next morning, where they would encounter a sight that would become tragically common from then on, demonstrative of the world post Great Reset.

The facility had been picked clean of all metallics and connected electronics, the bodies of the remaining residents, the nurse and Counselor's husband punched with almost imperceptibly tiny holes all over their bodies where the Avant Garde had bored into them. Eerily, the victims showed no sign of flight or self-defense, Counselor's husband having fallen forward at his desk seemingly in the middle of writing a sentence, the pen clutched in his hand.

The Garde had swept up the McKenzie River Valley from the west, likely climbing the Cascades on the way to Sisters, Bend and the rest of Central, and then Eastern Oregon. Kato and Hunter had happened to be concealed by a hunting hide when the swarm passed, and had come upon several bored carcasses of birds, deer, squirrel and a skunk while descending along the river, the once spellbinding Silver Falls State Park and its protective canyon calling-out to Kato.

17

Looking around the fortified bunker, the wind and rain still raging above him, the survivalist instinct long-learned to take precedence over all other concerns grips Hunter, and he has to ask:

“Why in the hell did you and Druid ever leave this place, Jack?! I remember you two talking about this little fortress of yours, but now that I’m in it I see that you weren’t exaggerating. With all that food and the water filtration system over there, and his built-in protections, you two had everything that you needed.”

Jackrabbit thinks about it for a moment before responding: “Well, not *everything*, it turns out... When it comes down to it, when actually faced with the need to survive, it turns out that it’s only a matter of time before more than food and water feel like necessities.”

“What other necessities are there?,” Persephone asks.

“Social satisfaction... Human affection... The possibility of love...” Jackrabbit replies. “Heidi reminded us that we need *people*.”

Nearing a year from when Druid decided to spare Jack’s life,

lowering his shotgun and commanding his dogs to let him down the tree, inviting him into his home and apologizing for Journey, his fallen comrade, a severe social itch started to set in. Only so many games can be played and discussions drawn out, especially between those of relatively minor mental compatibility, before the urge for greater social satisfactions begins to approach a sense of need. Heidi was their saving grace. Or so they thought.

Fortunately for her, she approached the house in the middle of the day when the pack was inside, Druid tending to their minor wounds from roaming and hunting in the surrounding hills, and giving them the affection that everything needs in order to maintain some semblance of sanity. It was Jack who saw her moving towards the front porch, screaming for her to stop just in time, as the impaling device was set to auto-trigger. Jack's scream terrified her to the point where she ran and took cover behind the very battered elm tree that had provided him with temporary shelter the year before.

It took some convincing, but eventually Heidi was induced to reveal herself. Being so starved for female attention, both men were captivated almost immediately. Even raggedy, disheveled and undernourished, Heidi was quite the comely creature. She was young, seventeen, they'd learn, with long legs, wavy blonde hair, bright blue eyes, rosy cheeks and ever less seen smooth skin, drawing one into her pleasing presence. Yet there was something *else* to her.

Jack sensed a darkness in her and, despite his attraction, distrusted her from the beginning. Druid, on the other hand, was incautiously eating out of her hand from the start; ironic considering his obsession with survivalism, something which he'd been cultivating even before The Great Reset switch was flipped.

Only too happy to tell her tale to the overly eager duo of unknown dudes, big hairy Druid practically chomping at the bit, young Heidi, wearing nothing but a towel after her first shower in weeks, spoke of her personal experience of the descent of darkness.

A junior in high school in Salem when the Federal Government was on the cusp of collapse, local law enforcement having been halved and crime rates having recently skyrocketed, her parents pulled her from school and permanently grounded her, “for my protection,” she added with air quotes and clear contempt.

“I was in love, but they didn't care. They had each other. Always kissing and hugging, reassuring one another that everything would be okay. What did I have?! A couple crusty old control freaks. Dictators telling me that my life was over because *they* were afraid. I knew that the Lord would protect me. I knew I was meant to be with Jared. But they couldn't see it. To them I was a prized possession.”

“I was a ‘daughter,’ too young and naïve to understand love or danger. That was *their* job. They were so damn condescending! So god-damn self-righteous! My mom kept trying to hold me and trick me into thinking that she and my Hitler father were all that I needed. ‘How can you two who have loved each other your whole lives deny me love?!,’ I screamed at them. ‘How can you tell me that going to see Jared isn’t worth the risk!’ Fucking hypocrites!”

“So what did you do?!,” Druid drooled, enrapt.

“They prevented me from escaping a couple of times, and turned me into a prisoner. But two days ago I finally got out,” Heidi added, an oddly nervous, twitching battle between a smile and scowl fighting across her countenance, her eyes momentarily misting.

“How’d you manage that?,” Jackrabbit inquired with poorly veiled suspicion.

“I did what I had to do. I broke free.” A heavy, awkward moment of silence passed between the three of them. Jackrabbit could see her wheels turn as they assessed one another. A knowing glance passed between her and Jack before her eyes settled on Druid.

“Do you have any clean clothes?,” she asked, placing her hand on his knee.

“It’s all going to be too big for you,” Druid eagerly replied.

“That’s okay, I’ll make it work,” she smiled.

‘Wow, that’s nice,’ Jack thinks watching her smile, wanting to drop his guard. ‘It’s been a long time since I’ve seen a beautiful young woman smile.’ Druid stood and moved to the back of the room where all the supplies were kept, during which Heidi shot Jack an intense, searching stare before standing and following Druid.

‘Something’s off with this girl,’ Jack thought. Turning around, he saw her combing through Druid’s wardrobe with him. Settling on some shorts and a T-shirt, she stepped a few paces away for the pretense of privacy, faced away from the two of them and let the towel fall. Druid immediately looked away, but Jack remained locked in. Yes, seeing the nude female form again was satisfying, and Druid may be a virgin, so his feeling forced to look away was killing him. But Jack’s radar was in overdrive. ‘This girl is a threat.’

The next couple of days passed slowly for Jack, who sensed an impending doom, watching how easily his buddy was beguiled by the young beauty. She spoke of love being the only motivation to keep living. Touching Druid gently as they interacted, she questioned the thirtysomething man about his past, particularly

honing in on his experiences of love. She showed great interest in his tales, laughing when he needed levity and furrowing her brow with shared frustration at his many unrequited romantic inclinations over the years. By this point Jack had been all but excluded, receiving only occasional consideration; just enough to remedy any sense of rudeness. His exclusion extended even to the life-altering decision:

“I’m going to help Heidi find Jared,” Druid announced to him one night. “I’ll pack tonight and we’ll leave in the morning.”

Jackrabbit, unsurprised, just shook his head.

“You can stay here if you want,” Druid continued. “The dogs consider you a protected part of the pack now. But I’m going... I have to help her.”

“You don’t *have* to,” Jack futilely protested.

“I do. I don’t expect you to understand.”

‘But I *do* understand, my friend,’ Jack thought, feeling anguished over the circumstances. ‘I’ve played this game before.’

But he didn’t say it. Instead, he brewed over what to do all night whilst Heidi was asexually held by dopey Druid, her head upon

his shoulder, claws firmly embedded. Eventually Jack decided that he couldn't leave his only friend unprotected.

“I'm going with you,” he announced in the morning while having what he feared would be his final breakfast. “You may need a third to watch your back.”

It was clear that both Druid and Heidi were disappointed by this news, especially Heidi, who was visibly crestfallen, seeming to confirm Jackrabbit's suspicions of devious design. Jared, it turned out, lived in Sublimity, the little town once known as 'The Gateway to Silver Falls.' Their quest required a near two day trek, during which little life was encountered, a solitary man literally running for the hills to escape the armed trio as they drew near to Sublimity.

Stopping less than a mile from Jared's house at nightfall, Druid convinced his new crush that it would be wise to wait for daybreak before closing the final distance. Heidi put up a brief protest, but eventually gave into her protector who, of course, was secretly hoping that Jared, who he'd learned so much about, had fled or perished, leaving the lovely young lady needing of his protection.

In the middle of the night Jackrabbit woke to a rustling. Druid softly snoring, Heidi was ever so carefully rising from his side. Grabbing the shotgun, she seemed to contemplate trying to

snatch Druid's pack of supplies as well, but decided against it, as Druid was practically hugging it, and she couldn't afford to wake him. Witnessing this, Jackrabbit decided to stay silent, closing his eyes and feigning sleep as Heidi shot him a glance. She crept off. Unable to sleep thereafter, Jack woke Druid at the first hint of dawn.

“Heidi, she's run off!” he half-shouted, faking concern.

Moments later they moved in the direction which she described the evening before, Jack possessing the confirming knowledge of watching her slink off in that direction during the night. It was just bright enough to see when they hit the home's likely vicinity. And while Jack urged caution, Druid lost control. He recklessly rushed towards the small farmhouse perched upon the hill of the ranch that'd been so accurately described by the young vixen.

Bursting through the front door, Druid carelessly called out for her, with no reply. Running towards the back of the home, only Jack noticed the unnaturally eerie silence foretelling death's dealings. Unnoticed by Druid as he ran by, Jared's father lay dead in the master suite. Jack was standing in the master doorway looking at the lifeless lump in the bed when Druid discovered her.

“No! No, no, no, no! No... Please no!” he implored God.

Jack walked the hallway leading to Jared's room. Druid was on his knees sobbing over Heidi's body lying just inside the doorway, drilled with the tiny telltale holes of the Avant Garde. Jared's body was crumpled up at the base of his desk chair, the plastic, stripped remains of his desktop computer, mouse and keyboard on his desk. 'How cruelly ironic,' Jack thought. 'She was so close to the embrace, killed within feet of her first lover.' His blood pressure spiked upon noticing the wall next to Jared's desk.

'Perhaps her having come so close is karma,' he'd thought when he'd realized what he was looking at. The wall was covered with pictures printed and tacked up for Jared's viewing pleasure. Most of them were of Heidi, some depicting them together, a few of them showing her nude. But a half-dozen of them, pinned atop and overlapping several others, appeared to be the latest in the collection.

They were of Heidi's parents. Murdered not by the Avant Garde, but at Heidi's hand. The father's throat had been slit. The mother's body still bore the kitchen knife installed in her chest. At the top of the collage read the point that the young couple was out to prove as the world fell on their heads: "Nothing can stop our love."

Well, almost nothing. Druid, now sobbing softly, cradled Heidi's corpse, lost in grief and crushed hopes. Jackrabbit stood behind him, briefly rubbing his back in an attempt to console him,

then began the survivalist ritual, scrounging for supplies.

In mid-afternoon while sitting at the kitchen table enjoying a cold can of chili from the cupboard, Jack noticed movement near the exit off the highway leading down the ranch's gravel road. Two men carrying two women upon their backs, headed towards Silver Falls.

18

Persephone scans the strange basement hideaway of the departed doomsdayer, assessing the state of the still-coalescing party. The guilt of her existence weighs heavily upon her. She wonders whether or not she deserves life, as meager as it now is.

Having seen so much death both before and after The Great Reset, and having assumed a position of leadership that, in such volatile times, requires making life and death decisions on an almost daily basis, why does she still live? She wants to believe that the decision to leave the relative security of The Cavern was a sensible, impersonal calculation, a decision to secure their future through the special skills and insider knowledge of her son, granting the chance to pull the plug on the Avant Garde. But in her heart she knows how personal the decision was, and fears that Neo is already dead.

Traveling into the Portland area has long been known to be akin to a suicide mission owing to its hotbed of Garde activity mixed with nuclear fallout toxicity and strange rumors of mutant creatures feeding upon anyone unlucky enough to survive the treacherous passage into the shredded former heart of the Pacific Northwest. But it's her son, for Spirit's sake! She should have recused herself from

her leadership responsibilities, else been forcibly relieved of her position. Yet her pride and love, and the undying fidelity of her so-called Spirit Army, prevailed over reason, and now three more had been lost. Only eight remain of their combined numbers, and they're now committed to what likely amounts to a fatal fool's errand.

Wrestling with her guilt and sense of better judgment, the internal fury of Persephone's feuding heart and mind is mirrored by the storm still raging outside. She becomes restless, suddenly overcome with the sense that every second that they stay permits The Americans further opportunity to surround them and seal their gruesome fate, like a noose slowly tightening around their collective neck. Looking over at handsomely-unkept Kato, she wonders if he feels the same sense of guilt, self-doubt and impending doom. They catch eyes, and Kato, standing from his position beside Mana and her comforting of Counselor, crosses the short space between them.

Drawing near, he crouches down next to her, where she sits rocking upon a blanket surrounded by her surviving crew, most of whom, excepting nervously-pacing Remus, are in some relative state of rest or slumber, still confident in her guardianship. Kato and Persephone stare deep into one-another's eyes, both exhausted yet emotionally heightened. Soon a profound sense of empathy passes between them. They know that their once divided paths are now one.

Taking her hand, Kato says: “Try to get some rest. I promise to wake you at first light.”

Persephone smiles uneasily, then kisses Kato on the hand and rolls over onto her side. With his hand on her shoulder, she soon capitulates to exhaustion and, within minutes, snores softly.

Standing, Kato walks over to a large bookshelf positioned at one side of the expansive room. He begins scanning the mix of items on display, including not just books but war memorabilia, mechanical devices, most of which appear alien to him, and some electronic toys, including remote control cars and a pair of drones.

These ‘UAV’s’ had gone from military surveillance craft to retail ubiquity in less than a generation. From sentinels and spies strictly reserved for federal government ‘defense’ to toys for overgrown boys to spies and sentinels for all, their spread into near omnipresence paralleled the planet and humankind’s chaotic plunge. They were universally deployed to bear witness to the burgeoning bedlam, as well as to alleviate or exacerbate paranoid fears over the neighbors and their ideological allegiances, all as the stresses placed upon the people and the planet gradually fractured humanity, forcing everyone to choose sides in a police state that would ultimately relinquish both the police and the state, leaving life to fend for itself.

Somehow both of Druid's drones retain a modicum of battery life. Beside them sits a box of gas masks and gas grenades circa World War II, part of their departed companion's collection of killing, gassing and monitoring apparatuses recounting man's devolution into increasingly effective killers of itself and its harboring terrestrial home. 'The Great Reset may be what the planet needs, and what we deserve,' Kato thinks for the thousandth time.

How humanity is so easily manipulated into its divisiveness and perpetually bloody and exploitative military and economic conflicts on behalf of its benefits-excluding, neoimperial corporate conquistadors, all without seeing the cost-benefit ratio, without realizing what's lost to misleadingly-narrow tribal identities, cutthroat competition and the consolidation of wealth and resources at the heart of its tragically wasteful, suffering history is a question he can't help but oft repeat to himself. The propaganda employed by the inbreeding Church, State and Aristocracy is powerful indeed.

He thinks of a line from Machiavelli: "Everyone is equipped to see who you appear to be, few are equipped to see who you truly are. And those few dare not speak up for fear of facing the authority and might of the state, backed by the many..." Or something to that effect. And Hitler: "Repeat the lie over and over again, and eventually it becomes the truth." Unsubstantiated, misleading lies transformed into specious, self-perpetuating 'truth' through trained,

popular belief propagating foolhardy conventional wisdom. He thinks of the Donald Trump presidency, and how a political statistics organization determined that he had the lowest percentage of valid, evidence-backed statements of any president in recorded history.

Kato temporarily shrugs away his sense of dismay and continues scanning the shelves, skimming past books on survivalism, famous prophecies, world-ending events, Celtic and Scottish lore and conservative dogma delivered by the likes of Coulter and Rand, whose morality was defined as successfully pursuing one's happiness regardless of what or whom is run over along the way.

He recalls reading the quote that, in his own mind, immediately condemned Rand to the rubbish heap of the morally-devoid individualists: "Achievement of your happiness is the only moral purpose of your life, and that happiness is the proof of your moral integrity, since it is the proof and the result of your loyalty to the achievement of your values." *That's* what stands for morality and great thinking in conservative culture?! Defining morality and values based purely upon one's own sense of fulfillment regardless of the state of anyone or anything else?! Regardless of the cause and effect endlessly rippling across humanity?! Regardless of the long growing disparity in quality and longevity of life underlying The Great Reset, or the fact that such a 'pursuit of happiness' ran so roughshod over the world that it now, cracked and crumbling, falls upon our heads?!

Talk about being blindly irresponsible and absent of all true moral development! Cursing to himself, he continues scanning, and that's when he sees it: the diminutive notebook encrusted in blood. Removing the small brown leather, strap-wrapped book from the shelf, one can still see how the blood fell upon and trickled down its cover before seeping into its pages. Opening it, the inscription reads:

“Notebook of Poly Trix, December 2019. For English 502: Contemporary Critical Theories.” Turning to the first page, Kato reads: “Mark Fisher’s *Capitalist Realism* makes me think of the game *Monopoly*. Created to warn the people of the inevitable results of capitalism, as a *cautionary*, it has, instead, been subsumed by the beast, becoming the most successful, remade, profitable board game of all time, ironically encouraging cutthroats to spur their unconscionable savagery through yet another example of a rebellious brand being bought and sold courtesy of the conquerors-become-capitalists who’ve *always* had hotels on Boardwalk and Park Place.”

Kato glances down the page: “From Fisher’s *Capitalist Realism*, page 4: Capitalism’s ‘system of equivalence’ assigns all cultural objects a monetary value... it is what is left when beliefs have collapsed at the level of ritual or symbolic elaboration, and all that is left is the consumer-spectator, trudging through the ruins and relics.” Below this Poly writes: “Oscar Wilde said: ‘They know the

price of everything, the value of nothing.’ He may have had another group of people in mind, but I believe it’s been the *capitalists* that have made this epigram most true. Everyone and everything is for sale, from the pen to the politician using it to pen legislation on behalf of those puppeting him for profits, burning away everything good, meaningful and lasting to produce a bottom line swept up by a few following the passing of the misdirecting party tricks, after the exhausted mob has disbursed, fattened, inebriated and ready to rest up for tomorrow’s plunge back into coerced corporate servitude.”

Kato laughs to himself. ‘A woman after my own heart,’ he thinks. He continues reading: “Fisher, page 6: Capitalism is like Carpenter’s *The Thing*: a monstrous, infinitely plastic entity, capable of metabolizing and absorbing anything with which it comes into conflict.” Grinning, he takes the notebook to his place beside Mana, and, peeling apart two more blood-fused pages, keeps reading:

“Fisher, page 16: Capitalist Realism... is like a pervasive *atmosphere*, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action.” Poly writes in the margin: “We’re in Plato’s cave, blind to the fact that our reality is staged, and that those that’ve always staged it guard the mouth of the cave, *not* to protect us against invaders, but, rather, to *bar escape*; to prevent anyone with the curiosity and intellect required to deliver

themselves from their invisible cage into a world of far richer, empowering realities from being able to do so. And if you should escape, know that you'll be labeled insane, else be killed outright should you try to return and tell your tales. For to see the stage for what it is is to become a threat to those that play the viewers!"

“*Capitalist Realism*, page 19: The ‘mental health plague’ in capitalist societies would suggest that, instead of being the only social system that works, capitalism is inherently dysfunctional, and that the cost of it appearing to work is very high.” Poly comments: “We remain divided, distracted, economically and politically at war, overstressed, unfulfilled, disconnected, socially and spiritually incomplete. So of course depression and anxiety are rampant. Thus the idealistic dream of defining the success of social systems based upon the relative state of mental health of the *total* population; upon the quality of life of *all* the lives added up, rather than upon adding up all the bank accounts without consideration of their massive and growing disparity of possession and control in application to total quality of life. Quality-of-life-utility matters most because life matters most! Money must pay homage to and serve life, not the other way around! We must flip the paradigm on its head!”

‘And there I was thinking that Quality of Life Utility Value was my own invention,’ Kato thinks, before continuing to read:

“*Capitalist Realism*, also page 19: ...capital’s need of a constantly expanding market, its ‘growth fetish,’ means that capitalism is by its very nature opposed to any notion of sustainability.” ‘Hence the planetary meltdown and The Great Reset,’ Kato thinks. Poly writes: “We stand idly by, hypnotized and obedient as the machine eats the planet and its inhabitants up bite by concealed bite, all while tricking us into believing that after it spits or defecates us out we’ll somehow be undigested, bigger and better!”

Kato reads until his eyelids waiver, finally fading away with Poly’s notebook upon his chest, its bloodstained pages symbolizing the sacrificing of all those heroes whom have fought and died for the belief that humankind can do better than the realist creed traced back to Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*: “The strong do what they can, the weak suffer what they must.” ‘How long shall the law of the jungle define our existence?,’ he thinks while drifting into oblivion. ‘If humanity survives, shall we simply return to the jungle we deludedly place on the illusory pedestal of ‘civilized life?!’

It feels as though sleep has only just begun its warm embrace when Mana jolts him awake with a determined shake of his shoulder. “Druid’s clock says 5 AM,” she states with alarm, “and the rain just stopped. It’s time to find medicine. Counselor won’t live without it.”

19

Where once a lush, well-rooted landscape would be busy lapping up the pooled remnants of the storm, desertification has cast the running water rapidly towards the fast rising Willamette River in the distance. Streaks of red, orange and yellow stand above the Hood Mountain horizon to the east as Mana leads Hunter and Remus, her protectors, into the surrounding scatterings of pine forest, beseeching Spirit to reveal its greatest healing agents so as to prevent the demise of the dearest friend she's ever had. She knows that she would surely be dead by now had it not been for her, for Counselor. And, if needed, she'd lay down her life without a second thought to save her.

The first of three natural medicines is easy to find and harvest, as Ponderosa Pine remains relatively abundant. Not more than fifty yards from the home Mana locates a fine specimen. Placing her hand upon its bark she lowers her head and quiets any conflicting thoughts, sending out her six senses and opening her hopeful heart. Sensing approval, she removes her special crafting blade from her satchel and carves a large piece of bark from the tree. "Helps heal wounds while protecting against infection," she says to herself, reciting Kloos, the author of the *Northwest Medicinal Plants* book Counselor purchased for her early in their relationship. Was it

an effect of karmic cause that the same book might now save the life of its benevolent purchaser and rescuer of the moribundly miserable?

Hunter and Remus observe the ritual with patience, doing their best not to hurry her along. They each hold rifles, having been removed from the fallen Americans sprinkled about the home's wraparound veranda. They'd hurriedly picked their bodies clean of weaponry and conveyed most of it to their hiding comrades in the basement bunker before setting off. Though he was inclined to let them suffer at first, Hunter was obliged to perform the coup de grace on a couple woefully-wailing men before leaving. Mana silently conducts her gratitude into the Ponderosa, and they move on.

The second and third medicinal plants are much harder to find, but Mana is determined, deflecting Remus' palpably nervous, uncertain energy, closing her eyes and following her inner compass. She locates Comfrey on an incline half a mile from the house, and digs up a sample. "Natural wound healer." The Feverfew proves the most difficult to locate, taking the trio nearly a mile from the home and prompting Remus, a bit less levelheaded and battle-tested than Hunter and highly attached to Persephone, to worry aloud:

"Please, we can't go further out!," he pleads.

Moments later Mana is rewarded for her persistence, seeing

the plant's telltale yellow flowers. The plant's name is eponymous:

“Fever reducer and anti-inflammatory,” she whispers.

Minutes later they hasten their return.

Spilling down the embankment where Mana had recently uprooted the Comfrey, they hear the first shots.

“Persephone!,” Remus shouts, breaking into a sprint.

“Wait!,” Hunter urges him. “We need to stay together!”

Arriving at the last ring of pines standing at the margins of the open space surrounding the home, Remus already has his rifle raised when Hunter catches up to him. ‘Thank Spirit he has the sense not to start shooting,’ Hunter thinks. He raises his own scoped rifle at the very moment a Molotov cocktail is hurled at the home, hitting the wall but a foot from an open window on the side of the home they’re facing. Luckily it’s still too wet outside to ignite, thanks to the high winds that accompanied the torrential downpour casting water under the eaves. Hunter senses that Remus is about to fold and begin firing, so he places a hand upon his arm, asking him to halt.

“One second,” Hunter urges, assessing the battlefield.

Americans abound, numbering around twenty. They’re encircling

the home. Hunter feels a few drawing close to their position, likely looking to take up sniper posts. He looks at Remus and says “Wait,” then looks at Mana and points up the tree. She understands instantly, and begins climbing to a safer position. Removing his serrated blade from its sheath, Hunter circles back around to his right. Remus cues in to the danger at the last moment, raising his rifle and spinning right as three Americans spill through the brush thirty yards away.

Remus fires one round at the exact moment that Hunter tears through the flanking brush and launches himself at the unsuspecting enemy, slicing through the three pseudo soldiers like warm butter, Remus’ round just missing him as he spins and dices, slitting two of their throats and penetrating the left pectoral of the last. Luckily the report of Remus’s rifle is lost amongst the clamor of breaking bottles and gun blasts that began raining around the area at the same time, and no other Americans are drawn to their position. ‘Thank Spirit for their lack of training,’ Hunter thinks as he runs back over to Remus.

“You shoot left, I’ll shoot right,” Hunter orders his recently acquired companion. “And shoot from the outside in. Try to get them to cluster together near the home. Ready?!” Remus nods, and they raise their weapons and begin firing. Four more Americans fall before they realize where the shots are coming from, then chaos ensues. Some of The Americans move toward the home, throwing large planks over the booby-trapped deck, while others turn and fire

on their position. Hunter hunkers down behind a decaying log as bullets blast into the bark and through the surrounding vegetation.

Remus remains in place, continuing to fire and shielding but a part of his body behind a large Ponderosa Pine as the first round of bullets rain upon him. One round hits home, striking him in his right breast just below the collarbone. From his shielded location Hunter watches him fall and scoot behind the tree, coughing blood and beginning to reload. To come to his aid would be too risky, so Hunter waits for the volley to subside, then raises his semiautomatic rifle atop the rotting wood and returns fire, focusing on those converging on their position. Three more Americans drop.

Cuing into the same lull, Remus turns around the trunk and unloads his clip at a set of men running towards the home, dropping one. He suddenly realizes that the roof has caught fire, and that a half dozen more men are soon to cross the planks and penetrate the dwelling. Terrified by the thought that they may've already entered the home from the other side, he panics and, pulling his pistol from his pants while discarding his rifle, runs at the house, firing wildly.

“Fuck!” Hunter yells, having just resumed his cover and, with his peripheral vision, seeing Remus break his own.

Remus's sprint takes the remaining Americans by surprise,

providing the confusion that Hunter needs, though not soon enough to save him. His wild running shots are mostly misses, wounding but one man, who slips off his plank and lands on the deck. The spikes are triggered and he's killed at the same time as five others spill into the house through the shattered window. Another handful of men turn and fire upon Remus from fixed, covered positions behind debris near the home, dropping Remus within seconds. Hunter uses Remus's foolishly brave act to his advantage, firing upon his assailants, dropping a pair of them. Three others remaining covered.

Again Hunter uses the decaying log as a shield, loading his last clip as a brief moment of silence descends upon them. Then he hears a familiar sound, though one he hasn't heard in years. Turning to look, two small drones whiz through the broken window and shoot into the sky, drawing the attention of the covered Americans who, reflexively firing upon them, momentarily forget about Hunter, who fires upon and kills two of the three. In the next moment another once familiar sound resounds, like a small explosion followed by a whooshing noise, and the home is soon filled with smoke that begins billowing out through the broken windows, followed shortly thereafter by coughing, choking and rapid gunfire. Then all is quiet. 'Yes! They used their resources!', Hunter thinks.

Seconds later the spikes recede just before two men holding rifles and wearing gas masks cautiously climb through one of the

window frames, sweeping their weapons in opposite directions, searching for any remaining threats. The last of The Americans immediately throws up his hands and begins pleading for his life.

“Have mercy on me, please! I was just following orders!”

Hearing this from his position a hundred yards away, Hunter calls out: “It’s me, Hunter!” He then breaks cover and marches straight at the house. Walking directly past Remus’s bullet-riddled body, he sees Kato and Jackrabbit remove their masks and force the final American to his feet.

“I have nothing against you,” the American says, attempting to pacify them. “I’ll gladly join your...” Approaching from behind, Hunter rips his knife across the man’s jugular with such ferocity that his victim can’t even manage a gurgle in response. Relieved by this action, Kato then watches in disbelief as Hunter pries the man’s clenched jaw open with his blade before extracting a tooth, placing the blood-soaked souvenir in his pocket just as Persephone and the remainder of the group emerge, the smoke having dissipated.

“Where’s Remus?!” she demands of Hunter, who solemnly shakes his head no. Her eyes widen in horror as she scans the surrounding terrain. When she sees him and his telltale camouflaged Spirit Army attire she releases a heartrending scream and, sprinting

at him, collapses upon his blood-soaked chest and begins wailing, pounding the ground around him in seething, heartbroken fury.

Having dismounted from her position in the tree, and carrying her medicine-stuffed satchel, Mana, tears in her eyes, slowly approaches. Kneeling down beside Persephone, she takes her clenched hand from the dirt and says: “He loved you. He refused to let them have you.”

Persephone turns to her, face flush and covered with tears spilling from swollen eyes, which suddenly harden into pure hatred. Lashing out, she strikes Mana hard with her open hand, knocking her onto her backside before yelling: “You fucking crazy, stupid bitch! I hope your precious Counselor was worth this man’s life! Do you have any idea what you’ve done, what you’ve cost me you cunt?!”

Kato and Jackrabbit sprint at them, hoping to stay the assault. Persephone stands over Mana, threatening to strike again. But Mana says nothing, and makes no attempt to shield herself or stem the blood flowing from her busted lip. She only looks up at Persephone, an odd mixture of serenity and sorrow pasted to her face, as if experiencing a tragic yet foregone conclusion. Persephone, wrestling with her emotions and perplexed by Mana’s calm, unflinching reaction to her, turns away just as Jackrabbit and Kato reach them.

They attempt to help Mana to her feet, but she resists, and watches as Persephone, sobbing, falls back upon Remus's body. Mana crawls over and sits at Remus's head as Persephone, at first coming close to lashing out again, soon accepts her presence and begins searching the corpse. Inside his jacket pocket she finds what she's searching for: a photo of Romulus and Remus as children. Sitting back up, she kisses the photo and, holding it to her breast, begins rocking, whispering "I'm so sorry" over and over again.

Mana, tears streaking her cheeks, rises to her knees and closes her eyes. She begins speaking, though inaudibly, her lips moving without making a sound. Kato and Jackrabbit stand behind Persephone, on either side of her, fearing to touch either her or Mana or in any other way intervene, unable to comprehend the strange spectacle. Soon they're joined by the final pair from Persephone's crew who, emerging from the house, also lack the ability to discern the significance of the scene. Alas, seeing Remus deceased, they kneel down on either side of his body and place a hand upon him.

Overwhelmed with emotion, Kato kneels down and places a hand upon the dead man as well, with Jackrabbit soon following suit. There the six of them sit, striking a strange star around Remus, silently honoring his sacrifice. All but Hunter who, clenching his teeth to abate his fury, skirts the perimeter of the home collecting weapons and supplies from the bodies of the fallen Americans.

Several minutes pass this way before Mana opens her eyes and looks up towards the heavens. The skies open back up, and the fleeting flames struggling to spread across the roof of the ravaged home are stifled. Rising, Mana picks up her satchel and heads inside.

20

It would be another two days before the group would be well enough to travel, with Persephone needing the recovery time as much as Counselor, whose wound continues to be painstakingly, affectionately nursed by Mana. The last members of Persephone's group slipped away the night of the firefight, storm notwithstanding.

"I don't blame them," Persephone laments. "I would've given up on this crusade long ago." Agonizing over Remus's death, it's clear how close they'd been. "We loved each other, and I led him to his death," she sobs, periodically overcome with grief, sometimes seeming lifeless. She lies against the wall next to Kato, curled up and helpless. 'She's breaking down,' Kato thinks. 'She's lost her rock.'

"The chances that Neo or Hound or both are dead, or that we simply won't be able to find Hound's trail, especially after the storms, makes this quest borderline insane at this point," she complains. Calling Mana over, she apologizes for striking her, again bursting into tears. Mana says nothing, just embraces her from her crouched position, pulling her into her bloodstained, tear-soaked shirt and rocking away as much of the pain as she can.

“You’re a part of our family now,” Kato assures her at one point. “You’ll be loved and protected. And we’ll find your son. Remus shall not have died in vain, you have my solemn vow.”

Persephone calming a bit, and the whole group encouraged by Counselor’s renewed signs of life at the tender, mystic care of Mana, Kato decides that they’d all benefit from focusing on something other than recent events, and reads from Poly Trix aloud:

“English 502 continued: *Normal Life*, by Dean Spade. From the final page of the preface: (This book) makes demands that exceed what can be won in a legal system that was formed by and exists to perpetuate capitalism, white supremacy, settler colonialism, and heteropatriarchy. It is rooted in a shared imagination of a world without imprisonment, colonialism, immigration enforcement, sexual violence, or wealth disparity. It is sustained by a social movement infrastructure that is democratic, nonhierarchical, and centered on healing.”

“It’s hard to conceive of such a world,” Poly comments below her notes. “As so long have we been inculcated in the misbelief that the legal system perpetuating western profiteering cited by Spade constitutes a basis for justice, and so easily is the majority convinced that Spade’s imagined social infrastructure is the equivalent of socialism, an ideology so misunderstood by the

western masses that they equate it with Stalinism, Maoism and Castroism; with systems that began with honorable intentions but failed *not* because socialism is inherently unjust, unfeasible and/or unsustainable, but because these regimes became totalitarian through the greed and egos of these leaders and their cronies who consolidated control over their states, much as the plutocrats consolidated control of The West and the globalized world. The West has essentially committed the same sin, except under a different banner, and through the consolidating constructs of oligarchic corporate imperialism rather than dictatorial cronyism.”

Poly continues: “The masses have been made to believe the opposite of the truth: that anyone fighting for mutualism, the best interests of the collective and in defense of the planet, and thereby being resistant to globalizing corporate dominion over humankind, are ‘evil.’ Most have thereby been conditioned to associate anyone opposing greed with ‘terrorism,’ ‘communism’ or asylum-bound ‘conspiracy quacks.’ Through such long-hammered-in, narrowly-misleading associations, all forms of socialism have been subsumed by dictatorship in the popular western mindset; a mindset remaining mostly ignorant of the successes of socialistic systems and policies during the reigns of liberal leaders throughout history, extending into parts of Europe and even periods of US history, and driving countless independent groups living in far greater harmony with their neighbors and the planet whom were often conquered for their

commitment to pacificism. Socialism's potential to blend with the virtues of capitalism in production of far more sustainable, merited social systems expanding opportunity and spreading a higher quality of life have been lost to the conditioned response; to the false belief in their mutual exclusivity and a blinding lack of imagination."

"The mistake is one of absolute, black-and-white, all-or-nothing thinking," she goes on; "the belief that it's either the uniformity, conformity and collectivism of communism or the individualism, lack of restriction and division of capitalism. The truth is *relative*. Justice is found in the *blending* of the virtues, and protection against the vices, of *both* sides of the spectrum; the *balancing* of individualism and collectivism potentiating a level of popular benefit that's unattainable at either ideological extreme."

"*Normal Life*, page 2: The patriotic narrative delivered at school tells us a few key lies about US law and politics: that the United States is a democracy in which law and policy are derived from what the majority of people think is best, that the United States used to be racist and sexist but is now fair and neutral thanks to changes in the law, and that if particular groups experience harm, they can appeal to the law for protection. Social movements have challenged this narrative, identifying the United States as a settler colony and a racial project, founded and built through genocide and enslavement. They have shown that the United States has always had

laws that arrange people through categories of indigeneity, race, gender, ability, and natural origin to produce populations with different levels of vulnerability to economic exploitation, violence and poverty.”

Poly comments: “And those controlling the state through embedded plutocratic mechanisms continue to adapt to progressive pressures by finding new ways to conceal and justify systemic controls that preserve inherently exploitative means to retain and expand upon the wealth and power of the aristocracy, now assured through indentured corporate servitude, the myth of democratic choice and the perpetuated division and distraction of the people.”

Normal Life, page 26: “(The) wide-ranging corporatization of punishment (has) produced a prison industrial complex, (and) the War on Terror has prompted a massive growth in immigration enforcement...”

Poly: “Both of which pair perfectly with the military-industrial complex and the Patriot Act granting readily-available permission to surveil the domestic population, and with the Citizens United ruling allowing for further ease of political control by the aristocracy. They have it all tied up nicely. Nothing’s off profiteering limits. The uninhibited ability to extract value from the people and the planet is the only moral code of conservatives, ironically carried

out with the suckered support of the mentally and economically disadvantaged that they most commonly and oppressively exploit.”

Normal Life, page 27: “(Under) the FBI’s Counter Intelligence Program and other governmentally orchestrated operations, conservatives regrouped (against the social justice movements of the sixties and seventies) using racist, sexist and xenophobic scapegoating. Movement organizing and social protest became ‘crime’ and increasingly ‘terrorism,’ justifying the imprisonment of political activists from effective organizations and the ongoing surveillance and criminalization of dissent...”

Normal Life, pages 28-29: “Affirmative action and school desegregation programs, as well as a doctrine of ‘antidiscrimination law’ that makes it almost impossible to prove discrimination... allow the United States to continue to espouse racial equality as the law of the land while blaming wealth inequalities on populations whose failure to thrive under these purportedly equal conditions must be their own fault... These methods mirror the general trend... of denying that unequal conditions exist, portraying any unequal conditions that do exist as natural or neutral, and suggesting that key access/resource issues are a matter of individual ‘freedom’ and ‘choice...’ Through these lenses, systemic inequality has become increasingly unspeakable and the long-term myth of meritocracy in the United States, coupled with the renewed rhetoric of ‘personal

responsibility,’ suggests that those benefiting from the upward distribution are doing so because of their moral fitness, and, respectively, that those on the losing end are blameworthy, lazy, and, of course, dangerous.”

“Damn, take it to ‘em Spade!,” Persephone musters, her head resting on Kato’s shoulder. “Too bad most were too busy going to *Marvel* movies to seek such moral and historical edification.”

“Seriously,” Counselor manages through a wince. “Who wants to think or take responsibility for fighting injustice when you can just blow shit up and gobble down the delusion that you were born into the best country on Earth, superior in every way?!”

Scoffing and shaking his head in agreement and disgust, Kato flips forward in the notebook to an earmarked page. It appears to depict the layout of a compound, with structures labeled as ‘tiny homes’ encircling a large ‘communal space’ in the center replete with community gardens, an immense social center, a cooperative store, a community workshop with an attached ‘shared artist exhibit,’ a park and playground, a large solar array and water reclamation system, and a few other unlabeled areas and edifices.

On the opposing page Poly writes: “The conservative nightmare: non-division, cooperation and true, integrated

community. Less waste and consumption. Much more efficient use and merited distribution of resources. Coming together for mutual protection, economic advantage and social and spiritual satisfaction. The unified pursuit of a higher quality of existence. Guarded against division, dependency, exploitation, exclusion and extraction. Oh no! Run for the hills ye godly people! It's the great evil! Socialism!"

21

“Maybe we should head back to The Americans’ base first. After all, we may have killed all of their men and confiscated all of their best weapons, leaving a whole harem of poor defenseless females in need of our protection,” Jackrabbit offers with a snorting smirk. His growing grin is immediately wiped away by the lasers shot from Persephone’s eyes, looking over her shoulder in disdain.

Having set out upon the clearing of the rain clouds, the band of six shoot straight west towards the suddenly surging Willamette. Having recently crossed over the old 99E Highway and turning due north at the river’s eastern bank, they look for some sign from Hound, the tracker who is now nearly a week ahead of them.

“Actually, the boy has a point,” Hunter chimes in. “Who knows what supplies they may have there, and what skills may be possessed by their remaining population. We could use all the help we can get if we’re to find this Neo.”

“We discussed this already,” Kato proclaims. “Thanks to our fallen companion Druid and those dead Americans we have all the supplies and weapons that we need for now, and we’re already too

far behind. The longer we wait, the greater the chance that Neo and his knowledge will be lost, and Hound as well.” Walking alongside Persephone just behind Hunter at the vanguard, Kato squeezes her hand reassuringly. His ruling remains good enough for the group.

“Not to mention the fact that their so-called ‘defenseless females’ are likely to be anything *but* considering what we saw. I wouldn’t be surprised if every one of them is a gun nut,” Persephone states. “We could all wind up dead due to your horniness,” she adds, again glancing back at Jackrabbit, this time with far less ferocity.

“There’s our scale,” Hunter announces, pointing his rifle at the ground. The group approaches the point of interest. What appears to be a broken-off freeway sign, singed around the edges, has been hammered into the ground near to a stone-encircled fire pit.

“Portland: 45 miles,” it reads.

“Assuming it was taken from nearby,” Hunter adds. “And, of course, assuming that’s where Neo is actually heading.”

“That sounds about right,” Persephone confirms, drawing on memories of driving to and from Portland State University a decade ago. She recalls how, after intercepting a communication predicting an imminent nuclear attack on the city, it had taken their division

four days to get from their base outside Portland to Silver Falls during the war-torn days. This exodus was not long after the drone strike that had killed Romulus and her ex, tech titan Harvey Foster, and mere days before the nuke struck. How Neo had managed to survive the leveling of the Foster mansion remained a mystery.

He'd been cagey about it ever since his capture, chalking it up to a mix of strong construction materials, sheer luck and the escape tunnel built by his father. The troops that survived the mission could only confirm that he'd been found running from the direction of the structure shortly after the strike. Division commanders later speculated that only an underground military installation could spare anyone from such a strike, something which Neo had refused to comment on. Only the presence of his mother spared him from enduring the most effective of 'extraction methods.'

The group grinds on in the now warm, cloudless, garishly bright day, their spirits lifted with the discovery of a torn piece of camouflaged fatigue tied around the branch of a tree near the riverbank. Persephone recognizes it immediately.

"Hound is alive!," she exclaims with glee. "Or at least he *was*. And he must've had reason to believe he was still on Neo's trail! Perhaps all is not lost after all!"

“We’re not here by accident,” Kato confidently contends.
“The religious don’t possess a monopoly on faith.”

“No they don’t,” Counselor grunts. Grimacing while she says this, she’s being supported by Mana, and requires periodic breaks.

“Still, if we know they’re headed to Portland this track would be far shorter were we to cut back east and follow the old I-5 Freeway,” Hunter advises. “If my memory serves me correctly the Willamette takes quite the circuitous route into the Portland area, whereas the I-5 is a straight north-by-northeast shot.”

“That’s true,” Persephone again confirms. “But we don’t know for sure that that’s where Neo’s headed. He seems to have had Portland in mind. But that’s a guess, not a certainty. We can’t afford to lose him, to lose *them*, between here and there.”

The group again looks to Kato, who nods his assent. Hunter lets out the slightest of huffs of annoyance, then turns and carries on. Moving at a cautious pace out of fear of missing signs from Hound, they manage to make the remnants of Wheatland the first night and Dayton the second, where they discover another torn article of hope-sustaining clothing around dusk, where the river makes an abrupt turn east. Here they take some time to fish before setting-up camp.

Using nothing but a broken, rusted old fishing pole that had been half buried in mud a few paces from the river bank, Hunter manages to pull three large trout from the currently rushing water within minutes, one of which measures near two feet in length, a near impossibility in the ‘civilized days’ prior to The Great Reset.

“It’s amazing how completely nature can recover its lost life and splendor when spared the reckless ravages of humankind for any considerable period of time, is it not?,” Kato comments while watching Hunter gut the immense rainbow-streaked catch in the final moments of the day’s fast-fleeting orangish-yellow light.

“Indeed,” Hunter agrees. “The hypocrisy of any man labeling any natural being or people living close to nature as ‘savage’ and ‘uncivilized’ was always bewildering to me, and was ludicrous even before our civilization tore itself and the rest of the world apart.”

Setting out at dawn the next morning, the clan sets a stronger pace than usual owing to increased confidence of being on the proper path, excitement at the possibility of actually finding Neo, and the improved health of Counselor who, in a demonstration of both her strength and the healing prowess of Mana, seems to gain in vigor with every passing mile despite not having come near to fully recovering from her gunshot wound. As the Willamette continues to bend east at the scorched earth once known as Dundee, a third strip

of camouflaged clothing is uncovered and Persephone, emboldened by ardent imaginings of reuniting with her son, urges them on:

“They’re close, I can feel it!” she cries, passing Hunter.

He objects: “Not so fast, or so loud!” he says with a hushed shout. “Remember Nathaniel!”

This stops Persephone in her tracks. Turning around to face Hunter, her face is beet red. Approaching, he thinks she may strike him as she’d struck Mana but, instead, a tearful embrace ensues.

“Thank you... so, so much... and you’re right,” she says softly. “But please, never mention that piece of shit again.” Hunter returns her embrace for a moment and nods then, saying nothing, resumes the lead position.

“What did he do to you?,” Kato asks with clear concern.

Persephone simply shakes her head and, taking Kato by the hand, they continue. Near nightfall they make camp on the outskirts of the small, surprisingly intact town of Butteville. Hunter wonders with concern why the town remains mostly standing, worried that it may mean that it’s occupied, or at least that it’s being protected. All but he and Jackrabbit are asleep around the fire when he hears a twig

snap nearby. He pulls his rifle to the ready, but it's too late.

“You move, you die,” Hunter hears, freezing as the rest of the group is stirred awake. “What's your business here?”

Peering at the intruder, his face barely visible in the firelight, Persephone goes from dread to jubilation in an instant: “Hound!”

22

“Persephone! Is that really you?!” She jumps to her feet as Hound lowers his pistol. They greet lovingly, Persephone kissing him about his face and on his lips before hugging him long and hard.

“Thank Spirit you’re alive!” she shouts.

“I’d almost lost hope of ever seeing you again,” he replies.
“It’s been a week!”

A short, stocky man in his mid-forties with keen bluish-gray eyes, a large rounded pug nose, long hair pulled back into a ponytail and a full dark brown beard streaked with gray, his appearance well-matches his moniker. His once long-sleeved camouflage jacket has been torn up near to the shoulders on both arms, signs of the breadcrumbs he’d left behind to lead them here. But what stands out most about him is the large red “A” patch sewn over his left breast.

“Please tell me you found Neo?!” she inquires, her voice trembling slightly.

Hound drops and shakes his head no, and Persephone’s heart

sinks. “I lost his trail almost four days ago now, with that first storm,” Hound informs them. “So I just kept following the river as he had, until I ran into... my new cohorts.”

“New cohorts?”

“Don’t get me wrong Persephone, I’ve no desire to leave you and the others,” Hound replies. “You’re family. But these people have welcomed me, for the most part, and I’ve become embroiled in their affairs. They’re developing quite the fascinating social system, though there are signs that it may not survive for long.”

“Who are they?,” Persephone asks.

“They call themselves ‘The A-Listers.’ Their compound is about ten miles from here, outside Wilsonville near the old I-5.”

“Why ‘The A-Listers?’” Persephone’s curiosity is piqued.

Hound smiles again, broadly this time. “Silhouette says it’s a triple entendre. First, they’re anarchists, which he says is the answer, and is the most misunderstood ideology that’s ever existed. Second, they’re mocking the aristocrats that controlled the world before pushing it into its current state; mocking those that thought they were better than everyone else, born to establish and expand their

ruling hierarchies, all while ironically proving that they were actually the F-Listers that failed humanity and all of life on Earth, and the Earth itself. Third, they possess and continue to cultivate a list of those that lived nearby that they consider the most responsible. They seek survivors from the list so they can teach them the error of their ways; the only way lessons can be instilled, through suffering.”

“Interesting,” Kato offers, rising to his feet.

“Hound, this is Kato and his... friends. He’s a good man, and I wouldn’t be alive if it weren’t for him and his people here. In fact, we lost many on the way here, including Remus,” she adds.

“I’m sorry,” Hound says, again dropping his head. “He was a great guy. And I know how close you two were.” After a few seconds of silence, Hound suggests: “Why don’t we camp out here the rest of the night and head to the base in the morning. You can meet Silhouette and the rest of them. And we’ll be moving towards Portland if you want to enter The Red Zone in search of Neo, though it’s not recommended. From what I hear it’s still very dangerous.”

Everyone looks at one another, attempting to discern the proper path. But no one speaks, so Hound continues: “I’m actually out here tonight on sentinel duty. I volunteered to cover the southern quadrant thinking that, if you *were* on my trail, it would be best that

it be *me* that encounter you, especially considering who's taken charge of A-Lister guard duties. Silhouette seems to trust me and advocate on my behalf. Hamilton, however, is another story. If you have the displeasure of meeting him, keep your guard up. Stick with Silhouette and you'll be fine, especially if the crowd is on his side."

"So this Silhouette you keep mentioning is the leader of this new group of yours, I assume?," Kato inquires.

Hound chuckles before replying: "Actually, he hates that word, 'leader.' He often reminds us that 'anarchy' is derived from the Greek 'anarkhia,' which literally means 'without a ruler,' or 'without a leader.' But that's essentially what he is... our leader. At least, that's what most seem to consider him most of the time. But he prefers words like 'guide,' or 'elder.' He's a fascinating fellow, to be sure. But I won't attempt to tell his tale or to describe him too much. I think that it would be better to meet him, and find out firsthand."

Leaving at first light the next morning, they arrive at the gates of the camp around midday, Hound moving in first to notify the guards and garner peaceful passage for the group. Despite the associations between anarchism and chaos, the base is similar in size, though tidier and better organized, than that of The Americans.

The compound is laid out like a wagon wheel, each spoke

extending outwards from a central gathering point appearing much like an outdoor stadium, about half the size of a football field, and with each spoke dedicated to different crafts and services. Simple wooden dwellings in various stages of completion surround the work areas connected to each spoke and, based upon the comings and goings, are occupied by those committed to each craft or service.

Having been compelled to leave their weapons at the gate before being given the tour by Hound, the newcomers draw some attention from the inhabitants, a few of whom come by and briefly introduce themselves before carrying on with their duties. The mood of most comes across as upbeat. Some, however, regard them with suspicion and whisper amongst themselves. And something foul hangs in the air. Kato and especially Mana detect it and, with a look of dread upon her face, Mana squeezes Kato's arm and gestures with her head and eyes towards the field in the center of the camp.

Careful not to betray his concern to the anarchists around him, Kato takes several furtive glances at the area in question. The large level, open field is encircled by wooden chairs distributed between tiny roughshod sheds and lean-to's, these crude structures numbering about thirty in total, most of which have thick ropes leading out of them tied to large wooden pillars pounded into the earth about a third of the way towards the center of the field.

While he can't be certain, Kato thinks he sees dark patches splattered across the field at uneven intervals. 'Is that blood?' he wonders. With the next glance he sees one of the ropes leading into a lean-to at the furthest end of the field begin to move. 'Guard dogs? Fight dogs? Are they betting on dogfights?!' Then he hears the cry. Slight and raspy at first, scarcely audible, the volume level rises with every word. 'Is that coming from the end of the rope?!'

"Jennifer...?! Jennifer... Is that you?!"

A head pokes out of the entrance to the lean-to, bald and scarred, caked with dried blood. Persephone, hearing the voice, freezes and turns around, then begins slowly creeping towards it.

"Jennifer!"

Twice as loud now, the voice of the emaciated man is followed by an awkward, limping sprint from the lean-to. Knocking over a chair as she moves into the field, Persephone attempts to discern the source of the voice... It's familiar, yet also alien.

"Jennifer, thank God!"

'His eyes, I know those eyes...' she thinks. 'But it can't be.'

Forgetting himself, Harvey Foster, the fragile former master of the universe, a line tied to a pillar on one end and locked to a dog collar around his neck at the other, hands bound behind him, passes the midway point in the field at the fullest speed that he can muster, at which point the line is pulled taught and he's snapped backwards off his feet. Choking and gasping for air, he rolls around in agony.

Half the weight he was when she last saw him, Persephone kneels down and attempts to comfort him. Clothes in tatters, his frail body in disrepair, she rises to her feet in sudden, unrestrained fury.

"Monsters!" she cries. "What kind of beasts would do such a thing?!" she shouts at no one in particular, looking around the space at scores of apathetic, gawking, gathering onlookers. Watching the horror unfold, Hunter again thinks of a scene from the original *The Time Machine* he'd seen as a child. The Eloi have no sense of anything being wrong, looking at the enraged outsider in confusion.

"*Indignant* beasts," comes a reply to Persephone's question. "Beasts of systematic burden that've long yearned for the scale of justice to tip in the other direction before coming into its inevitable balance. Beasts brazen enough to *force* the rebalancing, if required."

Turning around, they see a tall, slender older man approach. With long gray hair, a gray beard and a sharp, pointed nose framing

discerning brown eyes and a weathered face, he looks like a sorcerer.

“I see you found your friends,” he says, addressing Hound in a perfectly even, stoic voice.

“I have. Persephone, Kato... friends... This is Silhouette.”

23

“Why do they call you Silhouette?” Kato inquires. Having left the others with Hound and the gathering A-Listers, Silhouette asking that they be treated well and that their questions be answered, Silhouette identified Kato as the most likely ‘elder’ of the group and invited back him back to his home to talk. The simple dwelling is equal in size to most of the others. Sparsely appointed with little but a small selection of books and a few hand-carved wood figurines on display, the space suggests a learned ascetic; one content with little.

“Because, like your aristocratic friend back there, I’m but a shadow of what I once was. In fact, so long have I been reduced that little more than my essence remains. Suck everything out of us and we’re but the outline of what we thought that we were. For me, it’s the ultimate silver lining. Poverty, neglect, injustice... suffering. Suffering until it’s clear what’s true and what’s false; until all pretense fades away and evil stands in clear contrast with good.”

Silhouette motions for Kato to sit in one of the two simply carved wooden chairs on opposite sides of a small table, upon which a well-worn copy of Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States* sits open. Silhouette sees Kato looking at it, and asks:

“Have you read it?”

“Only bits and pieces of it,” Kato replies.

“Good, that’s good,” Silhouette answers, pleased. “It’s not the typical history book written by the conquerors that teachers were commanded to use in the past for the purposes of manipulating the youth with aristocratic misleading’s. Zinn was the rare progressive of a historian. He believed that the moral historian possesses the imperative to resist the prevailing conqueror’s retrospective, and is thereby resolved to tell the tales of the past from the perspective of the *conquered*. For that alone, even before his steadfast commitment to research, his meticulousness and his stellar writing capacity, he needs to be read. Likely now more than ever. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes, I believe I would,” Kato replies. “And your analysis of that history has led you to conclude the need for *anarchism*?”

“Yes. But not the feeble form of anarchism that you may be thinking of, and certainly not the chaotic free-for-all form of common association. Unlike before The Great Reset, when we were lumped in with all other libertarians and essentially used as pawns by the power brokers who knew that we’d never be handed any *true* power in that sham of a political system... that they could simply

decry big government and yell ‘Down with Big Brother!’ and provoke us to fight to weaken government, kill regulation and help assure the continuity of uninhibited profit. Unlike then we now have a chance to build a society based upon *authentic* anarchist values.”

“And you’re to be the leader of that society?”

“No, not the leader,” Silhouette quickly responds.

“Anarchism rejects all hierarchal structures and statist systems. It is precisely such things that created our current catastrophe.”

“What things?”

“The exclusivist leadership, aristocratic equity classes and the states, institutions and business entities that they created to consolidate their control and insulate themselves from responsibility, manipulating disadvantaged young men and women to uphold and expand upon that control in perpetual pursuit of insatiable, horrendously irresponsible greed. So we reject rulership in general, as well as its extensions, including class control mechanisms and identities and the formation of any other locus of coerced control.”

“We believe such controls to be inherently unjust and unsustainable,” Silhouette continues. “That said, my brothers and sisters here look to me for guidance, so I’ve become comfortable

playing the role of leader, but always with the understanding that such a role is informal and impermanent. For the anarchist leader isn't like the state leader or the corporate executive or even the patriarch or matriarch in that, as I would contend that all true, honorable leaders *must* be, he or she must be equally comfortable *following* when it's in the majority's best interest. If they're not, and assuming the full transparency also required of the true leader and *any* just system, it will become clear to the members of the anarchist community that such a person intends to dominate for personal gain imposed as a cost upon all, leading to corruption and cronyism and their needing to be outcast in order to preserve proper anarchy."

"Interesting," Kato musters after a moment of reflection. "So no classes... no leadership or hierarchy... no hoarding of wealth or resources. Do you then consider yourselves communists?"

"I consider us *communal*. Our economics are cooperative and voluntary, not compulsory or coerced. *We all* own the means of production, not any incipient sense of a 'state' or any overseers of economic activity. This is necessary to prevent the mistakes of the past whereby socialism begot fascism through the ruling apparatus. Similar to the unrestrained capitalism and the political systems that it owned, such states of the past became hierarchal systems of corrupt, consolidated control. The label that you affix to them may vary, but hierarchy and consolidated ownership and control is what they all

have in common. But we also do our best to maintain a meritocracy; to reward people relative to their work while preventing anyone from accumulating more than they can use. For it's really about *use*..."

"The way most of us see it," Silhouette continues, "no one really 'owns' anything, though they may justly retain the exclusive right to use land or other forms of property during their lifetimes in certain select cases. But they cannot be permitted to use that property to oppress others, such as by demanding the surplus value or work or patronage of anyone that may benefit from that property. The means of production is especially off-limits to exclusive ownership, for, as history teaches us," he taps Zinn's book as he says this, "*that* is the root of exploitation, oppression, division and disparity, and we'd be but inviting a repeat of the planet-destroying, life-oppressing cycle."

Kato grins, then shakes his head. "I agree with you about use and ownership. In fact, I see myself as a type of utilitarian and, thus, much like you, believe that, if humankind is granted the opportunity to learn from the past and rebuild, we must consider 'ownership' an anachronism; a lesson-teaching remnant of the disastrous past; a core catalyst of injustice. Instead, as you say, we must begin to think more in terms of 'use' and 'usefulness.' For my thinking dictates that the utility of the thing to life is what determines its *true* value; how ably it serves life relative to its capacity to do so; the extent to which its potential to increase *total*, popular quality of life is realized."

Kato continues: “The capitalists were so blinded by and beholden to their greed that they could never summon the strength to see that wealth beyond a certain point can only be of value to the overblown ego. Such a mere *semblance* of value is thereby false; it’s misleading and illusory, like the hot air inflating such a person’s ego to the point where they may seem big to some, but are actually hollow and bound to burst. The true purpose and value of resources is wasted when sitting in stockpiles or, as money, in unused interest-accruing accounts, or as neglected, appreciating property, for these have zero utility value, when that value *could* be immense. All resources are meant to serve life. When they aren’t, they’re wasted, and everyone and everything which worked to produce them is dishonored, including the planet from which everything originates.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Silhouette happily replies. “Unused and even underused resources represent a devaluation and desecration of life. My own life is a testament to this truth.”

“How so?”

Silhouette glances out one of his two front windows, watching a mob starting to gather around Persephone and company.

“I grew up outside of Antelope, in Eastern Oregon, not far

from where that Bhagwan Rajneesh character from India started that cult that galvanized half of the town, leading to a very xenophobic, insular, ‘stay out of our country’ attitude amongst many of the town’s occupants, including my parents. I was just a little guy when all the hatred and controversy began to spiral out of control. But the way I see it now my parents, and myself by extension, were victimized. We were victims of the fear of the unknown and the animosity and lashing out to which it tends to lead, coupled with, as it often is, financial hardship and a lack of economic opportunity.”

“We owned a small ranch that abutted the Rajneesh’s compound,” he continues, “and while they were investing in and expanding their... *social experiment*, my parents were on the verge of losing their land to the bank. My father was in Vietnam, and struggled with PTSD and depression and unspecified rage the rest of his life. He was always angry, and always certain that there was an enemy, but had not the intellect, education or mental stability to fix his rage upon any specific target for long. So, as with much of conservative history, he was manipulated by the Reagan’s and Bush’s to project his rage upon ‘un-American outsiders.’”

“By the time I was in sixth grade my parents had lost the ranch, which sat vacant on the market for years thereafter, not one with the necessary means wanting to invest in what was fast becoming a ghosted ‘cult town.’ It wasn’t long before my pridefully-

infuriated, trailer-dwelling father was a full-blown alcoholic with a couple of assaults on his record, including one against a Rajneesh follower. And my mom suffered from horrible, debilitating anxiety due to constantly absorbing every type of stress from my father.

We went to church for hope and solace, but that community only exacerbated my father's rage, giving him other angry, uneducated men to bounce his bellicosity off of. I was raised to believe that liberals and anyone outside of the Church and the Fox News community were the problem with the country due to letting in un-American heathens who fomented communist insurrection, destroyed our values and stole opportunities from 'real Americans.'"

"More and more my mom turned to pills to calm the stresses that she couldn't otherwise endure. The doctors turned her into a half-dead zombie often lacking the will to even get out of bed. And my dad had me on the shooting range by the days of Desert Storm, telling me how real men don't wait for others to defend them in their own country. In reflection, I think I always knew my dad's perpetual frustration and animosity were misdirected, but I was belt-whipped any time I expressed any opinion contradicting my father's. So, even though I did well in school despite coming home to such an unpredictable environment every night, I was essentially bullied and threatened into giving up on college and into joining the Army to 'keep those camel jockeys from invading our God-given country.'"

“I ended up serving two tours in Afghanistan and one in Iraq, accepting orders and trying to trick myself into believing that Al Qaeda was a true threat to America and that Iraq actually *did* have weapons of mass destruction. Neither were true. 9/11 was an anomaly, assuming you even accept that it was perpetrated entirely by Al Qaeda, which motive, means and opportunity, not to mention a great deal of officially ignored and suppressed evidence, suggest it wasn’t. We killed countless combatants over there who, as they saw it, were simply trying to defend their *own* God-given lands from foreign, imperial invaders and occupiers. If you have the intellect, imagination and true moral development to put their shoe on your own foot, so to speak, it becomes impossible *not* to see their point.”

“By the end of my time in Iraq I went from skeptical to disillusioned to heartbroken to, like my father before me, furious. My rage, however, was far more focused than his, and pointed in a very different direction. For I was fast realizing the fact that the enemy wasn’t the ‘foreign threat’ or those with faith in a ‘false God,’ but those controlling the US and its systems and those emulating us; those that had turned my father and I into sacrificial pawns in a global game of economic, theological and cultural hegemony. But there was a silver lining that almost made it all worth it: Elizabeth.”

Silhouette appears on the verge of tears for a few seconds.

Taking some time to collect himself, he continues: “She was a communications officer at Camp Victory in Baghdad. ‘Camp Victory,’ ha! What a telling confluence of delusion and propaganda! Anyway, like me Liz developed some serious doubts about the morality of our mission. We confided in one another, feeling like we could safely express our doubts and ideas to one another without fear of consequence, if to no one else. Through our burgeoning, mutual empathy and developing trust we fell in love, marrying soon after we both made it back to The States. By then my mother had committed suicide and my father was a belligerent mess, completely incapable of holding down a job or accepting responsibility for anything in his life, ever certain that he was the victim of one thing or another. So Liz and I decided to move to the Portland area to start a new life.”

“All was well for a while. She got a job at a cell phone store and I managed to acquire work with the city’s sanitation department. But then the nightmares started. And the flashbacks. Firefights, bombs, bodies blown to bits, my father yelling at me for abandoning him, my mother pleading with me to come home while downing a bottle of pills. It was on replay in my head; in my psyche. The nightmares started to seep into my waking hours and snowballed with my flashbacks, and I lost my self-control. My coworkers started calling me ‘Twitch.’ Every little thing triggered me. Police sirens. Horns. Car doors slamming. People standing too close to me in line. My coffee being too hot. Elizabeth asking me one too many

questions, even though it was out of love. I alienated our friends with my increasingly bizarre behavior. My mind was coming unhinged.”

“One morning this group of skateboarding kids was yelling and doing tricks near one of my stops, and I just snapped. I grabbed one kid’s board and was beating him so severely with it that I almost killed him before the police arrived and tackled me off of him.”

“The judge was a veteran who took pity on me, giving me the shortest possible sentence. But, having lost my job, and the bank refusing to grant us slack, we fell behind on our mortgage and other bills. And in contrast with the judge’s consideration, the VA refused to diagnose me with PTSD and increase my benefits, saying that such a late onset of symptoms was ‘inconsistent with the diagnosis,’ despite my advocate’s assertion that I was an atypical case because I’d learned to bury my trauma for longer than most. But not forever.”

“Everything fell apart after that. I was so stressed and unstable that, even though I never hurt her, it was clear that Liz had become fearful of me. It broke my heart. She tried to hang on, but I finally convinced her that, for her own good, she had to leave me.”

“*That’s* how I came to the end of myself. I lost everything, including all confidence in everything that we were raised to believe in in this country: family, doctors, the Church, the State, the military,

the whole of that toxic society that this planet's immune system eventually built up too many antibodies against for it to survive. It all failed me and, by ever believing in it and falling in line, I failed myself. I fell into homelessness and, like my father, alcoholism. The despair was constant. I even tried killing myself. Then I got lucky.”

“I fell in with a group that had established a sort of homeless commune, or camp. We supported one another. Ironically, it was they, the homeless, that taught me what it meant to be a part of a real community. I cleaned myself up and started taking refuge in books at the city library. In those books I rediscovered myself. I realized what I'd always believed, but had been unable to crystallize and express in words without the guidance of thinkers that came before me. Slowly, I began to renew a sense of potential I hadn't had since high school.”

“By the time the planet had destabilized to the point of constant climate-based calamity, I was spending most of my days in the library. Eventually the library was forced to close. But a group of us broke in. By the time the wars came, the police began to disband and the military deserted the city, it had become our home. In the midst of the riots many of us were recruited by the Democratic Socialists. By then I was in total agreement that the system to which I used to be subject, its hierarchy, exclusions, consolidations and waste perpetrated by its controlling parasitic class was at fault for most of what was happening. So I was an easy, willing recruit.”

“Our contingent was quickly forced to flee the chaos of the city in order to consolidate our forces and strategize in the Western Mount Hood area. That’s when the bomb hit. Then the fighting. Endless battles, sometimes with enemies we didn’t know at all. Nothing ideological, just territorial squabbles. I’m sure you know.”

“I actually avoided most of that,” Kato admits.

“You’re lucky. Anyway, as in The East, I lost friends,” Silhouette goes on. “Too many to count. Even worse than Iraq. After one particularly bloody encounter with The Army of Christ our contingent commander noticed a black Mercedes SUV fleeing the field as the intensity of the firefight mounted. He watched the vehicle through his scope climb this hill a mile or so from where we were fighting. Sounding the retreat, we circumvented the remainder of their combatants and mounted the hill, approaching one of the last standing structures in this mostly demolished area of formerly fine homes, the black SUV seen fleeing the field parked out front. We lost most of what was left of our contingent invading it, including our commander, but we took away a prize. Just before we executed their leader we confiscated a list: ‘Human Resources,’ it said.”

“Human Resources?,” Kato curiously inquires.

“Their leadership. The insiders. The surviving aristocrats of the region that had come together and were now pulling the strings.”

Silhouette grabs a clipboard mounted to the wall and hands it to Kato. Scanning the list of names running up to a hundred on several pages, most with matching companies and addresses, he realizes that he recognizes many of them. Up to a third of them, in fact, were at one point customers of the financial company he’d worked for. About a third of the names have been crossed out.

“Our demonstrators,” Silhouette adds.

“Demonstrators? Demonstrators of what?”

“Of the Stages of Subjugation,” Silhouette responds matter-of-factly. “Your arrival is fortuitous, my new friend. It’s Seventh Day, our day of togetherness. What used to be Sunday, the day of rest and passing of passive prayers for divine justice delivered upon deaf, if ever existing ears, is now a day of *proactive* justice. Community-guaranteed justice. We balance the scale ourselves.”

“How, exactly...?”

“Through Arbitration, Demonstration and Celebration.”

Silhouette opens the front door. He looks up at the sun, then out at the gradually growing group of raucous anarchists gathered near the center of the field. Many of them are arguing loudly. Some are aggressively encircling Persephone and Harvey who, quivering, looks around wide-eyed in fear. Silhouette extends his invitation:

“Come, Kato. Arbitration is soon to commence.”

24

It's difficult to believe that this pathetic bag of battered flesh and broken bones was once a billionaire tech tycoon possessing dozens of DARPA contracts and connections across the international power centers of industry and politics. Doing her best to comfort the grossly-diminished man whom she once cared for, then grew to hate, Persephone cradles Harvey Foster who, quaking, begs for mercy.

"This is hell," he manages in a wavering half-whisper. "I probably deserve it here. But I can't take it anymore. Please... Please Jennifer, take me with you, or have pity on me and kill me. I can't fight anymore... It's not worth it. It's not worth winning just to live like this. You're my last chance. You must... have been sent here by God to deliver me from this evil, one way or another."

Having once wanted nothing more than to see such a demonstration from Harvey, actually experiencing it proves to be more than she can bear. "Someone help him!" she screams, horrified by the apathy of the numerous onlookers taking in the spectacle. "Food! Water! Please! Have you no decency?!", she shouts at one of The A-Listers, who ignores her, moving on. "Where's your humanity?!", she demands of another, who laughs as he passes by.

“Humanity?! Decency?!” comes a shout from someone on the periphery. “What humanity did *he* have when he was watching us get slaughtered?! Was it *decent* of him to work with the other fascist pig owners to create and propagate the Avant Garde, that plague that has extinguished millions, maybe *billions* of lives, and which we all must now live in fear of, running and hiding every time anyone gets paranoid?! Stupid bitch! He deserves *far* worse! We should’ve tied him to a tree and peeled his skin off inch by inch!”

Harvey tears up, then, shaking, starts sobbing softly. His face is lined with trauma. Three fingers are noticeably broken. Behind cracked lips indicative of severe dehydration, several of his teeth are missing. His eyes are so red and swollen that they can scarcely summon tears. And he reeks, much as she imagines feral pigs must smell. The suffering of one she once knew so well sinks in, and Persephone, now with more sorrow than fury, again pleads for help:

“Please! Someone just get him some water!”

Moments later a large man approaches with a bucket full of water. He pauses for a moment a few feet from them, looking around to see who’s watching, as if wondering what to do next. Persephone manages a half-smile, then: “Please, sir...” The man interrupts her beseech by dousing her and Harvey with the bucket of water,

triggering a chorus of laughter from several onlookers. Hunter pulls a concealed blade from his sleeve, preparing to respond to the insult.

“You don’t want to do that, tough guy,” they hear. Standing nearby another man of tall, brawny build removes the shotgun from his shoulder and points it at Hunter and the group. Persephone reaches up and places her hand on Hunter’s arm who, eyes never moving from the man menacing the shotgun, freezes. Grinning, the man approaches Hunter with his hand held out, demanding the blade. Hunter hesitates, but is soon forced to relinquish it. The guard laughs haughtily, then places the blade in his belt and moves back to his previous position, maintaining his grin and eye contact with Hunter.

Time passes, with the crowd of circling anarchists growing and drawing in closer by the minute, mounting commensurate with the group’s worry. Kato, meanwhile, remains in Silhouette’s home.

“What the hell is he doing in there?!” Counselor wonders.

“Seriously,” Jackrabbit adds. “This is majorly fucked up! What the fuck are they gathering around us for?!”

“It’s Sev... Seventh Day,” Harvey half-mumbles. Mana has taken to dabbing his wounds with some mysterious paste she’s pulled from her satchel, which, following a thorough inspection,

she'd been permitted to retain. The medicinal paste is so malodorous that it stands out even above the stench of Harvey's neglected, rotting flesh. Dabbing the wounds up his arm, Mana raises his frayed, crusty right sleeve to reveal an "A" branded on his shoulder.

"They say it's the brand of the slaves," Harvey informs them. "The start of our re-education. The marking of exclusive ownership that began all injustice, tribalism, warfare... They gave it to me right after they captured me. I just... I just wanted some fresh air," he sobs. "Then they showed me their list, and forced me to help them find others." Some whooping and clapping erupts from the growing gathering of A-Listers. "They're readying for Arbitration," he manages, "then..." He suddenly attempts to stand, pulling at Persephone's clothing to facilitate the attempt. She grabs his arms and stops him, lowering herself back to the ground with him.

"Please, don't trouble yourself..." she urges.

"Still a sweetheart, even after all... *this*." Harvey's quivering voice is filled with melancholy. Persephone can scarcely believe that she's bearing witness to such a level of pain and vulnerability from him. He's nearly unrecognizable. "I never deserved you," he says. "I have to tell you this now, while I can. Max... he survived the war."

Persephone suddenly remembers herself, having been lost in

the ominous circumstances. Yes, how in the world *had* he survived?!

“He was with me,” Harvey continues. “I had a bunker built in our basement. We’d been... down there for days, maybe a week, when we were attacked. The house was looted, but they didn’t find us. Then there was what must have been a missile strike. The house collapsed. But the bunker... it remained intact. I made sure it was military grade. The escape tunnel too... it remained in place. But...” Harvey shakes his head, afraid to speak. “I was a coward. I thought that there might be more of them, so... I sent Max out ahead of me. He must’ve been captured, because he never returned. And I didn’t even look for him.” Lowering his head in shame, Harvey sobs anew.

“I know,” Persephone whispers.

“You know?!” Harvey looks up in shock. “Know what?!”

She attempts to suppress a sudden burst of pride: “It was *my* men who captured him, Harvey. Only...” She hesitates, uncertain whether or not to tell him everything. “Only they didn’t see a tunnel or a bunker, only a kid running through the woods covered in ash. If they *had* discovered the tunnel *you* would’ve been captured too. And I likely wouldn’t have been able to prevent your execution.”

Harvey’s eyes dart back and forth as he looks at her,

attempting to understand the ramifications, struggling with diminished mental capacity in his desperately depleted state. At this moment the crowd, larger and rowdier than ever, begins to stir as Silhouette and Kato reemerge. “In fact,” Persephone continues, forced to raise her voice, “*he’s* the reason we’re out here. He’s run away, towards Portland. And I know he knows what you were up to, Harvey! He knows how to stop The Garde, I’m sure of it!”

Harvey’s eyes grow wide. “The bunker!,” he shouts. “He’s going back to the bunker, he must be!”

The shotgun-wielding guard approaches, pushes Mana aside and pulls Harvey up by the arm, forcing him back towards his shed.

“The door! It’s hidden! And the password!,” Harvey shrieks as he’s being shoved back across the field.

Striking him in the head, the guard pushes him into his holding pen and slams the door behind him.

25

Standing beside Kato, Silhouette announces: “I’ve held sufficient discourse with our new friend here to determine that his heart and mind are in the right place, and that his beliefs are compatible with ours.” He stands at one side of the encircled field, now packed with his brethren, his hand upon Kato’s shoulder as he speaks, with Persephone and the rest of the group standing nearby.

“Therefore, unless we the people, as a whole, are opposed, I suggest that we allow them to stay and witness, and perhaps even participate, in Seventh Day.”

The reactions from the crowd are mixed, some grumbling in dissatisfaction, others nodding their assent, and many remaining silent, looking around the field for a sign as to which way to lean.

“All in favor raise your hands,” Silhouette demands, prompting a little under half to raise their hands in agreement with their unofficial leader, many rather reluctantly, glancing around in fear and uncertainty. “All in disagreement raise your hands.” About a quarter of the crowd raises their hands, far more emphatically.

“The I’s have it,” Silhouette announces, keeping his eyes fixed on the dissenters, who congregate mostly to his right and begin voicing their displeasure. “This is bullshit!” one of them shouts, pushing his way to the front of the crowd. “We don’t know anything about these people!” Turning around to face the crowd as he speaks, he attempts to rile them up and turn them towards his side. “Their woman there wants to save one of the assholes that almost destroyed humankind! How can we rebuild while allowing such influences?!”

“This is a free society, Hamilton, is it not?,” Silhouette answers. “If they get out of line we will, *as a whole*, rein them in or ask them to leave. Besides, people can change, can they not?!” Most of the I’s nod in agreement, several of them voicing their accord. “What type of new world will we be building if we immediately silence those voices that we fear might speak against us?!”

More grumbling ensues from the right, louder than before, with a couple arguments breaking out. Hamilton and a few of his cohorts break off from the crowd. “We’re going to check our borders while y’all play with our new *friends*,” he exclaims. Sarcastically addressing Silhouette, he adds: “Please excuse us, my liege!”

Many amongst the right chuckle at this remark. Kato notices the furled brow and clear concern crossing Silhouette’s countenance, who nevertheless carries on: “While we permit our public petitioners

some final minutes to prepare for Arbitration this fine afternoon, let us summon the anarchist spirit by citing some favorite passages from our forebears. Does anyone have anything they'd like to share first?"

After a brief chorus of whispers from amongst the crowd, a woman near the front speaks up: "The anarchist strives for the free unhindered unfolding of all the individual and social forces in life... For us... for us, freedom is not an abstract philosophical concept, but... the vital concrete possibility for every human being to bring to full development all the powers, capacities, and talents with which nature has endowed him or her, and... turn them to social account."

"Daniel Guerin," Silhouette announces. "From his work *Anarchism: From Theory to Practice*, I believe. Excellent. Thank you Roslyn. Anyone else...?"

"I've got one for you!," a voice announces from the back.

"Go ahead."

Reading from a tiny notebook pulled from his front shirt pocket, a tall, thin man with cracked spectacles projects his voice:

"The problem that is set for our time is that of freeing man from the curse of economic exploitation and political and social

enslavement, by reconstructing the economic life of the peoples from the ground up, and building it up in the spirit of socialism.”

“Rudolph Rocker, correct?” Silhouette ventures.

“Correct,” the spectacled man confirms.

Silhouette says: “Thank you. I think my favorite Rocker line is: The primary task of the creatures of our new future is that of freeing labor from all the fetters which economic exploitation has fastened on it, of freeing society from all the institutions and procedures of political power, and of opening the way to an alliance of free groups of men and women based on cooperative labor and a planned administration of things in the interests of the community.”

“Here here!” comes an enthusiastic shout of agreement from someone near center mass, followed by sporadic applause.

‘He didn’t even hesitate,’ Kato thinks. ‘Perfectly cited from heart. How much power may a person wield purely from the ability to memorize and perfectly recite passages of targeted persuasion?!’

“*Free...*” Silhouette continues, allowing pauses to dramatize and add force to his words. “*Unhindered...* The full development of powers, capacities and talents turned toward the advantage of the full

of society. We can never allow such words to become abstractions. They must remain the backbone by which we move through and improve collective life every day! With every breath! We impose no oppressive controls! We exploit no weaknesses! We come together to help one another find our fullest forms and, in cooperative, mutually-beneficial, symbiotic allegiance, we reject all modes of parasitism, the plague of the past, in order to bring about the grandest embodiment of community, honoring its sacred purpose!”

Again the crowd applauds in agreement, more uniformly and enthusiastically than before.

“Anyone else care to share before we move forward?”

A full ten seconds passes in near silence, no one summoning the courage to follow Silhouette.

“Okay. Then let us proceed to Arbitration.” Pulling a scrap of paper from his pants pocket, he reads aloud: “Che, would you please come forward and present your case to the community?”

A Latino man steps to the front of the crowd, occupying the ten feet of space between Silhouette and the beginning of the gatherers. He’s of medium build, with big, bright brown eyes, thick, curly black hair and a full mustache. Atop his head is a black beret.

Turning to address the crowd, Che confidently proclaims:

“Today, I would like to draw attention to growing concerns over the inequality brewing amongst many of our stations, especially within the hunter-butcher, builder and scavenger stations. It has become ever more clear that their crafts and services are in greater demand than the rest, and that the ever increasing value of the goods and services which they are requiring in return has led not only to many abandoning other needed positions and to rumors of many amongst this privileged set demanding unscrupulous receipt of coerced services in return for things of need, even sexual favors...”

A hiss of boos and heckles countered by shouts of outrage rain upon Che, and are hurled between the various guilds comprising the gatherers. Raising his voice, Che continues: “Not only this, but many of us have noticed that their camps have grown in both size and luxury compared to the rest of ours, to the point where they are fast becoming the upper class in our so-called classless society!”

This allusion to past injustices against which the anarchists must reflexively be repelled triggers myriad expressions of anger from and tossed between the factions of the fracturing crowd. A few threats ring out, paired with shoves. One ruddy, rotund man shouts:

“Maybe if the rest of you did something of actual value,

something other than try to teach our kids history and preach to us about the past, those that are actually good at what we do wouldn't feel pressured to turn the people away!"

"Of course the new merchant class is against history!," another man shouts. "You wouldn't want your kids realizing that you're soon to become the next oppressing aristocracy!"

"Why you son of a bitch!," the rotund man screams, beginning to push his way towards the challenger.

A loud whistle rings out, silencing and stopping everyone in their tracks. Removing the whistle from his lips, Silhouette shouts:

"Come now, brothers and sisters! Disagreements are a must! But we must also summon the strength and wisdom to resolve disagreements without resentment, and surely without violence, if we're to be successful in creating the best future for humankind!"

The argument continues for several minutes, with Silhouette just managing to keep the crowd from disintegrating. 'He's the glue,' Kato thinks with a mix of fear and admiration, scanning his environment and realizing how perilous their position might well become should the situation devolve to too great an extent.

A ‘temporary’ agreement pacifies the warring factions enough to keep them from ripping one another apart or leaving the gathering: the members of the hunter-butcher, builder and scavenger stations agree to bring disgruntled customers, those believing that they’re being overcharged, in front of an ‘Economic Justice Committee’ to be formed through equal participation of all the stations in the week between now and the next Seventh Day. And all acts of clear impropriety are not only prohibited by collective decree, but will be investigated by the Committee and, if judged to be valid, shall meet with harsh punishment for the perpetrators, up to and including lifetime banishment from The A-Listers community.

Arbitration proceeds, seeming only to be held together at its heights of collectively-escalating perturbation by the thinnest of strings: Silhouette’s pure force of will, conviction and persuasion.

A man calling himself Maximilian steps forward and, in Che’s spirit, addresses the family whose dwelling is situated next to his, members of the same Textile Station. He accuses them of steadily taking more and more of their adjoining ground. His primary opponent, the accused patriarch Girardin, counters by asserting that he and his larger family contribute *far* more to the station and the community at large and, thus, deserve more.

“Else why work harder?! Why be my best and demand my

family do and be the same?! This isn't communist Russia, is it?!"

"Maybe it should be," Maximilian retorts to a chorus of boos. "For you and your bratty little children don't even use the space and stuff you're taking over! Besides, am I to be forced to work all day when so many other endeavors and joys call for my attention in this free society of ours?! Am I to be compelled to grind myself down to a nub just because you have no imagination and therefore know nothing but work, all to keep my family's things from being stolen from us?! I mean, my God, my son can't even carve a play sword for himself without your dirty little offspring taking it away from him!"

Again escalation and division abounds, but this time Silhouette so deftly draws the divide back together that the opposing, menacing men not only come to a crowd-pleasing mutual apology and accord, but actually embrace one another in the end.

The next case calls for a collective vote to be rendered upon a member of the Scavenging Station by the majority of its own members, with special consideration for the voiced concerns and subsequent votes of its female members. A gorgeous young redhead known as Noctis is accused of an assortment of wrongdoings, including thievery, not working hard enough to deserve the goods and services that she's receiving in return for the station's gatherings and, inspiring particularly acrimonious outcries, having sex with too

many of the men, including those committed to other women.

“It’s true, I’m not a nerdy little bookworm or content to sit around my place weaving, sowing and cleaning all day like many of you,” she responds. “I’m tired of your tedious quests for higher truth... Your constant need to debate every damn thing! But even *I* know that there’s no Church or State anymore, and that, when there was, marriage was mostly a means of social control. So, sorry ladies, your men are free to do what, and *who*, they please! And so am I!”

Outraged shouts of insult ring out amongst many women, not just those from the Scavenging Station. “Whore!” is hurled at Noctis several times, to which she laughs, remaining defiantly unmoved.

“So I’m a whore because I enjoy sex and men actually *want* to have sex with me?! Am I to be punished for my beauty?! Maybe if you all knew how to give your men what they need they wouldn’t have to come crawling to me for satisfaction!”

This salacious brag brings forth not only more cries of outrage, but a stone hurled from somewhere amongst the crowd of seething women, striking Noctis above her left eye. Blood spurts from the gash, and she drops to her knees to mixed reactions from the crowd. As one amongst the Healer Station sees to her wound, Silhouette exercises still more considerable diplomatic skill in

convincing those surrounding the perpetrator to turn her in.

The brunette woman, whom Silhouette addresses as Chaste, older but good-looking herself, is ushered forth by a handsome gray-haired man. The punishment is quickly determined. Noctis, now bandaged, fully alert and demanding of justice, is issued the ‘Rule of Thumb Rod.’ It’s a thinly carved staff about the width of a large thumb, with a dyed red orb at the top of the handle. With it she’s permitted to strike at Chaste until a majority of the crowd raises their hands, conveying their vote that equal justice has been meted out.

Menacing her attacker with the rod, Noctis gives the gray-haired man a naughty, knowing smile, and he grins ever so slightly in reflexive response, prompting Chaste to scream “Bastard!” just before Noctis strikes her in the head. It’s a surprisingly powerful blow considering the slender being from which it came.

Chaste falls backwards and is unable to immediately get back up, dazed and potentially concussed. Grinning from ear to ear, Noctis launches herself forward to continue her assault as most of the crowd raises their hands, prompting Silhouette to cry “Stop!” just in time to prevent her from being able to claim being in mid-swing.

“Lucky,” Noctis says, drawing to within inches of Chaste’s face. Turning to give the gray-haired man a long look, who averts his

eyes this time, Noctis chuckles cruelly before walking away, her own crimes seemingly having been forgotten for the moment.

Several other cases are heard by Silhouette and the crowd, including one pertaining to the distribution of resources, a couple concerned with other exhibitions of privilege, and one which begins with a man being pulled from one of the shacks ringing the field.

An older, weathered man, he's accused of rape. Several women surround his apparent victim, showing support. Confessing, he's given the option of either participating in the forthcoming Demonstration, at the end of which he may remain, or else being branded and exiled for life. Tearful, and to cruel shouts from many, he chooses "The Demonstration," and is led back to his shed.

"To end Arbitration today," Silhouette announces, "we have our final case: the matter of our territorial limits and sometime discord with our neighbors, those some of you have taken to calling 'The Contaminated,' despite my admonitions that this callous label can only incite further disharmony and potential violence between us, dissolving what was an entirely peaceful pact for several years."

At this announcement from Silhouette, a young, fleet-footed man standing at the outermost right margin of the crowd, at the urging of an angry-looking woman, sprints away in the direction

Hamilton and his cohorts exited near the outset of Arbitration.

“We’ve now had two members of our Guard Station go missing,” Silhouette continues, “with mixed, conflicting reports as to the how and why. Some amongst The Guards, including its newest member,” he adds, looking at Hound, “contend that it’s due to over-aggression on our part... That it’s due to some of The Guards going beyond what our community has asked of them and insisting upon expanding the borders that we long ago agreed to with their leader, Kuato. So, at this point I’d like to invite anyone that has something to say on the matter to come forward and present their case.”

Only two move forward to take opposing positions across from one another, Hound and the red-faced woman called ‘Judniks.’

“That’s Hamilton’s whore,” Kato hears one woman standing next to him say softly to another as the two challengers move to take-up their opposing positions. “Like we’d be crazy enough to challenge that brute! A born guard dog, he is. Come into his territory and it’s submit or get bit. And that bitch of his... that Judniks. I think the two of them would go around neutering every man here if they could. They’re gradually twisting our anarchy into a dictatorship.”

“You hear about the submission ritual Hamilton forces on his Guard Station pack as a rite of membership?,” the other woman asks.

“No, what does he do to them?!”

“I hear he hangs the new recruits upside down from a tree, somewhere out there in the woods, then has each Guard member pretend to strike at them several times, stopping but inches from their body and face. And the recruit isn’t allowed to flinch, and has to keep his eyes open the entire time. Then, to end it all, Hamilton himself places his knife to the recruit’s throat and cuts across it, but shallow enough not to cut anything vital. I hear one of the rituals went wrong, and that’s the real reason for one of their losses... Look at their throats carefully when you’re close to them, you’ll see.”

“I can’t say I’m surprised,” says the other. “At least one former member of his crew is rumored to have been stabbed in the back for disagreeing with him. Likely the other missing guard.”

“I know I’m new to your community,” Hound opens, “but we can’t expect our neighbors *not* to defend themselves against territorial encroachment! Would we not do the same?!”

“You *are* new,” Judniks retorts, “and know nothing of our history with those... *people*. That deal that Silhouette’s referring to was made *long* before we reached our current numbers. We need more space! Besides, with their... health issues, they can’t have kids,

except through miracles, and they certainly aren't recruiting a great many to come into their contamination," she adds, raising her voice, spurring a salvo of approving shouts from many amongst her station.

"So they're to be punished for the evil perpetrated against them by the worst of the war?!" Hound demands. "For wrongs over which they have no control, and are entirely victimized by?! What kind of justice is that?! Besides, their land is likely still too toxic for us to occupy for long periods of time, as I've heard many of you say. We haven't developed their resistance to it. We can't even use it!"

"You ask what kind of justice?!" Judniks rhetorically asks. "*Divine* justice, my faithless young friend! The same justice delivered upon the pox-marked Egyptians for keeping the Israelites from realizing the destiny given to them by God! Surely you don't believe that they need, much less deserve, more than we do?! Those animals?! They won't survive another generation, yet they violently guard their enormous territory as if it's their God-given Holy Land!"

"They *do* deserve to have their accord with us honored, regardless of your prejudiced assessment of their needs!," Hound answers with passionate conviction. "It's where they live! What could be more holy than that land upon which any people build lives for themselves and their families?! And how can we claim ourselves paragons of progress and rightful builders of the new world in one

breath and attempt to justify unprovoked invasion with the next?!”

“Unprovoked invasion?!,” Judniks cries. “You fool! When people hate and envy everything about you, like they hate and envy the freedom we live with and the health that we enjoy, they try to destroy you. *That’s* the basis of our issues with them! If we dropped our defenses like *you* seem to want, they’d take everything from us!”

The debate carries on, Judniks continually glancing towards the outer right edge of the gathering in anticipation. Before long her anticipation is met with a stirring from the crowd. Hamilton and the three men that left with him return carrying their rifles. One of the three men has mud streaked across one side of his face and a tear in one of his long sleeves, under which a gash to his arm is visible.

“I’m confident that we’ve developed enough resistance to their plague by now,” Hamilton shouts as he enters the space, forcing his way to the front of the crowd while eyeing Hound with hostility. “Besides,” he continues, “what the outsider says isn’t true! It’s *they* that are the aggressors! Just look at Salini here,” he adds, pointing at his scuffed-up lackey. “We were just walking our border when this hideous creature yelling some wild, animalistic gibberish comes crashing out of the brush and shoves him down the hill. We should have shot the beast down, but we kept our composure!”

Eyeing Hamilton's group, Kato notices one of the two other men that just followed Hamilton into the proceedings fail to suppress a smile before turning his face away.

"Leave those poor people alone, you brutish bully!" comes a shout from the far left of the gathering, far from Hamilton's position. "Show some compassion! They've suffered enough already! They shouldn't be subject to your intrusions!" The voice is concealed in the crowd, the speaker unwilling to openly provoke Hamilton.

"Must we suffer because they have suffered?!" Hamilton continues. "I cannot abide it! For it is *they* who violate the agreement and, thus, it is *we* who must defend ourselves! Our borders must be reinforced right now! Boundaries, boundaries, boundaries people! What good is compassion if we lose control, leaving ourselves open and vulnerable to disorder and invasion?! And if they can't respect those boundaries, we'll be forced to retaliate, and to take away their ability to continually encroach upon our hard-earned territory!"

The A-Listers descend into uproarious discord, many on the verge of trading blows.

26

Silhouette again reaching for his whistle, half the crowd is suddenly silenced by Hamilton who, refusing to let Silhouette seize the moment, raises his hand, calling for quiet. As the furor begins to die down, Hamilton addresses The A-Listers:

“It’s good to see that so many of you share my convictions! It’s good to know that our efforts to defend this community haven’t gone unnoticed, and that you’re deserving of our sweat and bravery, our risk of life and limb! So now, tell me, how many of you will back your beliefs?! How many will support our effort for more men, and for finding and crafting new weapons to aid in our defense?!”

As many amongst the crowd, especially those on the right, begin to raise their hands in a show of support, Silhouette speaks up, addressing Hamilton: “What are you asking for, exactly? How many men? As the self-appointed captain of The Guard, you and your station can determine what to do with them, can you not? Whether dedicated to your so-called ‘defense’ or procuring and crafting more weapons, or whatever else it is you think that you need them for.”

Hamilton ponders the question for a moment, then responds,

glaring at Hound as he speaks: “Eleven new men should suffice for now. Ten new recruits, plus one more to replace that ungrateful little spy there,” he adds. “Besides, I’m sure now that your actual people are here you’ll want to join them again, will you not?”

“Seeing as how there appears to be no room in your fiefdom for those that think for themselves, only mindless, obedient followers, only sheep and fascists, I suppose I have no choice but to at least drop out of your petty little Guard Station,” Hound responds.

“Spoken like the weak and disrespectful man that you are,” Hamilton retorts. “One with no appreciation for those that have graciously opened their homes to you. You’re unworthy.”

Hound comes back: “So says the man happy to displace others from their homes, hiding his encroachments behind the pretense of defense like every other dishonorable hawk in history, always looking for excuses to expand their power and property!”

“You sniveling coward!,” Judniks screams, her face turning so red it seems smoke may billow from her ears. “We tried to befriend you! To treat you as one of us! But clearly we’re your betters! You’re a cup in which nothing fits because you fantasize that it’s already full! But it’s empty! You have no intelligence, only make it appear that you do with your verbal gymnastics! Your

abrasive arrogance, your trite, irrelevant words, your false superiority, your hateful disregard of those fighting for you proves that you're a loser unworthy of our efforts, and that we shouldn't have let you in! You've betrayed those fighting for your freedom!"

Her tirade tears on for some time, Hound simply shaking his head in disbelief at the filth exuded by the foul creature. In the end, Judniks is well-pleased with her empty words, thinking that proving oneself superior is based upon how insulting you can be, even while essentially saying nothing. Many on the right side of the crowd are equally pleased, laughing and applauding commensurate with the degree of disgusting sentiments spewed by one amongst their ilk. Thus, Hamilton gains his new recruits easily, with more than twenty amongst the crowd of a hundred-plus raising their hands. He relishes his moment of ascendance by further stealing Silhouette's thunder, announcing preparations for the opening of 'The Demonstrations.'

Stepping back to allow him his spotlight, Silhouette speaks to Kato: "Frightening, is it not? I was afraid this was coming... I'm all for others stepping up and assuming guiding roles, if they truly intend to bring what's best for the people. But Hamilton is only comfortable when we bend to his will, fully compliant. He won't be happy until he can impose boundaries on everyone and everything."

"As your brave friend there alluded to, his 'boundaries' are

code for control, disguised as ‘defense.’ Much as our ‘Department of Defense’ in this fallen land was a cover for imperialist aggression on behalf of corporate interests. The inability to see through the masquerade makes the victims. Everyone either accepts being under control or, in speaking their principled minds, face being bullied into submission, or worse. And when you and everything that you believe in is essentially geared towards tearing down the boundaries by which people are divided and oppressively kept in line, it’s especially offensive. We’re near opposites, in fact. He’s all about erecting and enforcing boundaries, while I’m obliged to tear them down and build the bridges that’ll always erode authoritarianism.”

“I’ve tried to get him to see reason, to consider other perspectives,” Silhouette continues. “But every time I’ve attempted to discuss any of these principles with him, anything the least bit theoretical, he becomes uncomfortable, almost frantic, and highly combative, apparently because such matters are outside his scope; outside of what falls into his narrow frame of focus. He says any such discourse is ‘weird,’” Silhouette adds with finger quotes. “He clearly can’t handle being challenged by anything outside his field of vision. My interactions with him are akin to walking on eggshells, and it takes all of my strength not to scream: *Fuck your boundaries!*”

“Perhaps it’s not *we* that should consider staying with you, but *you* that should consider coming with us,” Kato replies. “For it’s

clear to me that your ability to see through the mask endangers you.”

Silhouette considers Kato’s offer for a moment, then replies: “No. I appreciate your offer and vote of confidence, truly I do. But I can’t abandon these people to this tyrant-in-the-making. For they may well end up killing one-another if I relinquish my influence. Most of the others won’t stand up to him. So I’m obliged to do so.”

“*This* is your problem,” Kato contends while watching Hamilton rally and direct The A-Listers, many standing defiantly in place. “It’s the problem with anarchism and, perhaps, with too purified, unstructured of a democracy as well.” The crowd suddenly surges with excitement, sensing The Demonstrations drawing near.

“What’s that?,” Silhouette asks.

“The mob,” Kato replies. “The mob mentality. Its tendency to lead *not* to the wisest course of action which the collective can summon but, instead, to capitulate to the most convincing orators and demagogic manipulators of fear, ignorance, pride, insecurity and the like. It was the same in ancient Athens, just as with President Chump. The perilous entanglement of pride and greed pushing the immense, unrestrained beast that Socrates tried to warn the Athenians about, foretelling their downfall through their headlong plunge into the disastrous assault against Syracuse, from which they

never recovered. And with Trump, dooming the American people to an irrevocably despicable repute with the adults of the world, as well as further socioeconomic injustice and the easing of planetary ruin.”

“Let The Demonstrations begin!,” Hamilton roars in the background. “Bring out our contestants!”

Seeing mostly men, including Harvey, but also a few women, a girl and a couple of boys yet to begin growing facial hair, about twenty of them in all, being forcibly pulled from the surrounding shacks at gunpoint by Hamilton’s Guard, Persephone shoves her way through the crowd and, grabbing Silhouette by the arm, demands:

“What exactly is this ‘Demonstration?!’”

“A demonstration of the Stages of Subjugation by which the oppressed were kept in line and daily diminished by those like your friend,” Silhouette flatly responds. “A dramatized reenactment of the systematic abuses we were conditioned to accept as normal, as delivered upon us by the oppressors and their puppeted politicians.”

“What the fuck does that mean?!,” Persephone demands.

“It’s a rebalancing of the scales of justice, divided into seven stages. A little harsh, perhaps, but, as your astute elder here says,

there's a great degree of the mob mentality at play in our society, one which I can't completely control. So it seems necessary that they experience a sense of justice and a redress of historical grievances in order to keep them relatively glued together and preserve the peace. The Demonstration also serves to help us revisit and reflect upon what went wrong in the past, what led us to our current calamity, as a means of cathartic release and reinforcement of what's to be avoided as we progress into the future, with, of course, a role reversal, as severe as that reversal will no doubt seem to you. It also provides a sense of structure and continuity to the community..."

"Please!," Persephone pleads, face reddening. "Please release Harvey from this... spectacle! I... *we* need him! Both for my son, and to stop the Avant Garde! He may be the only one who can!"

"You seem sincere to me," Silhouette replies. "But in case you haven't noticed, I've lost control of the crowd for the moment. To attempt to assert control right now and have him released from the proceedings could be disastrous for all of us. Besides, the Avant Garde hasn't swept through the area in over a month now. We've been celebrating it here. It appears they've fled or been destroyed."

"But... Even if that's true, my son... I can't save him without Harvey!"

“*Your* son?!” Silhouette’s stoicism suddenly falters. “What about *our* loved ones?! Do you know how many sons and daughters, husbands, wives, lovers, friends and family have been lost to The Great Reset?! The people here understand the causal connection...”

“The unbroken chain link of cause-and-effect between the iron grip that the major corporate shareholders had on our balls and the planet and the environmental destabilization that came from it, carving up and consuming the people and the planet like the filet mignon on their plates! And the rivers of blood that flowed through the ensuing chaos, our fighting to take control as those leeches murdered more, retreated into their bases and released the greatest plague upon mankind that it’s ever known in their wicked last-ditch effort to retain control of what was left of humanity! We suspected that Foster was connected to that plague through his company’s technologies, but if he was as plugged in as you seem to be implying then he deserves his fate... He deserves to die many times over!”

“Stage One,” Hamilton announces. “The Servant! Will a representative from each family please come up and pick a bone from the bucket... And no peeking!”

“I’m sorry for your son, I really am,” Silhouette adds, softening. “But there’s nothing I can do.” Walking away to witness the event and mingle with some of the crowd, Persephone, Kato and

company turn their attention from Silhouette to the proceedings, watching as various individuals approach Hamilton and Judniks.

Judniks holds a large receptacle from which the anarchists, a hand over their eyes, pluck small bones. Every fourth bone or so is dyed red which, when removed from the bucket, is held proudly overhead, accompanied by applause from the crowd. To her horror Persephone, drawing closer to take a better look, realizes that the bones appear human. Running back to Kato, she implores him:

“Please help me! We have to do something! These people are animals! Spirit can’t be so cruel as to allow me to come this far just to see my son lost forever because these savages tear apart the only person who can help us save him!”

Surveying the situation, attempting to maintain a measure of composure so as to effectively find a solution, Kato’s contemplation is interrupted by Hound who, approaching from behind, speaks discreetly: “Don’t look now, because we’re being watched. But I retrieved your weapons for you. I put them in a bag and buried them by the large, scratched-up Juniper Pine near our northern boundary, in the direction my right foot is pointing,” he says, tapping the toes of his right foot. “Persephone, you and your friends need to leave as soon as possible. I don’t think Hamilton will let you live for long if you stay. I’ll create some sort of diversion... Be ready to move.”

“I’m not leaving without Harvey, I refuse!,” she whispers forcibly.

At center stage, all the red bones have been pulled from the bucket, and the winning families amongst The A-Listers are huddling to discuss their move. Unsure of the most prudent course of action, but sensing his time to take effective action fast dwindling, Kato suddenly shoves his way towards the center of the field to address Hamilton: “Please, sir!,” he shouts. “Please have mercy upon us for invading your space, and allow us to take that man there and leave this place!” He points at Harvey who, shaking so hard he looks like he’ll shatter, is on his knees with the other captives, an armed member of Hamilton’s Guard standing behind each of them.

“I’m sorry,” Hamilton replies after a moment of consideration, “but I can’t circumvent justice.”

“I’m mad at them too!,” Persephone shouts, moving forward. “But this isn’t the way! This isn’t justice!”

“*We* decide what’s just here, outsider!” Hamilton responds. “This is *our* domain, and our rules have been set. They aren’t subject to your judgment!”

Still standing beside Hamilton, Judniks places her hand upon his shoulder and, leaning in, whispers something into his ear. Thinking for a moment while staring at her, a slight smile upon her face, he lets slip a small smile of his own then, turning all the way around to face Persephone, yells: “Unless, of course, someone in your party is brave enough to demonstrate your forgiveness of this... *villain*... by taking his place in The Demonstration?!”

From their respective positions, Hound still standing beside Persephone, Hound and Hamilton lock and hold eyes as another devious grin grows across Hamilton’s lips, his intentions made clear. Persephone, sullen, looks from Hamilton to Hound, who maintains eye contact with Hamilton. “*I’ll* take his place!,” Hound announces.

“No, you don’t have to...” Persephone’s objection is cut short by Hound who, turning to her, embraces her firmly and warmly, in a fuller embrace than ever. Fervently, he whispers to her:

“Don’t worry. I’ll be fine. I’m stronger than him, then all of them. And it’s the least that I can do for all that you’ve done for us.”

“But...”

“This is the only way. Wait for the right moment, then make a break for the tree. I put some white strips of cloth in the bag with

your weapons... Wrap them around your head before you leave. Hamilton obviously doesn't know this, but I've already met with Kuato and The Keepers while on patrol. They're good people. The white is a sign of respectful non-aggression. They may stop you to speak with you, but unless one of you does something stupid, they'll let you pass. They may even offer to lend you some assistance."

Turning towards the crowd, Hound marches straight at Hamilton, Persephone trailing behind him, mumbling to herself: "Please Spirit, not another sacrifice. I can't take anymore..."

Entering the arena, Hound addresses Hamilton: "Assuming, of course, that I inherit his nine completed Demonstrations?!"

Scowling and glancing briefly at Judniks, Hamilton assents: "You do. Make it through the night, and you and... the tech king are free, as our tradition dictates."

"Then I'm in," Hound agrees, approaching the guard standing over Harvey, who hesitates, looking at Hamilton. Hamilton nods, and the guard frees Harvey of his binds before tying them around Hound's wrists. Stumbling from his place beside the other participants, Harvey's eyes dart about like those of a horrified hare surrounded by wolves, finally settling upon Persephone, who's pushing her way through the crowd, again seeking out Silhouette.

Locating him, she inquires with panic: “What’s that mean, nine completed Demonstrations?!”

“If ten Demonstrations are successfully completed the victor is released and permitted to join us,” Silhouette replies. “It’s only happened twice before. Your Harvey there is tougher than he looks, to make it through nine. Or maybe he’s just lucky or protected by God, who can say? They certainly learn with each competition, but they also grow physically weaker. We don’t exactly provide them with five star treatment here, about the opposite of what most of them were accustomed to before their fall from their gilded castles.”

Nearly falling over into Persephone, Harvey has to be supported to avoid toppling over. Shaking violently, knees buckling, he says: “Thank God for you, Jen. I wouldn’t have made it through another one, I know it. It’s a miracle that I survived the last two.”

“Stage One of The Demonstrations,” Hamilton announces. “The Servant. The rules are simple, demonstrators. Your aristocrats will give you three tasks to complete in a timely manner, then get together to decide the winner, who gets first choice at a teammate or a weapon for Stage Six, The Veteran.” Pausing, Hamilton looks to Judniks and whispers: “How does it go again...?” She thinks about it for a second, then shakes her head ‘no,’ indicating she can’t recall.

Leaving Persephone, Silhouette approaches Hamilton and, pulling a few sheets of paper from his breast pocket, hands them to him. Hamilton gives a slight, begrudging nod then, unfolding the first sheet, he reads aloud:

“These are your masters. By your misfortune you are destined to serve them, being born into debt to a low class family. Should you ever hope to free yourself from your shackles you must earn it, else, by your weakness and lack of approval amongst your superiors, by your inability to please those born above you, you’ll surely toil your way into an early grave! Aristocrats, command your servants as to how they may best serve you and your family today!”

Forced to their knees in front of the head of each winning family of the ‘Lottery of Bones,’ the demonstrators are dictated their tasks and, a guard at their heels, hustle off to obey.

“The Demonstrations are officially underway!,” Hamilton roars, flipping over a large hourglass hung from a nearby post, the crowd demonstrating their approval through thunderous applause.

27

Twenty-two participants fire out of the field in all directions, each accompanied by a dedicated armed guard and trailed by rowdy clapping, cheering and yelping from the crowd, many of whom are intoxicated, having jumped to the ‘Celebration’ phase ahead of time. Several of the participants enter the residences built in concentric rings around the field, with many more taking up positions at the surrounding stations spread about the complex, setting to work at various tasks, desperately seeking the approval of their ‘masters.’

From what Kato can see, the tasks appear tedious and repetitive, precisely what most would wish others to do in their stead. Clothes and quarters are cleaned, hides are tanned, stations are swept and organized, supplies are stacked and so forth. All harried participants, including several underage men and women and one terrified girl, commit to their work as if their lives depend upon it.

Twenty minutes or so pass in this manic labor mode before the final grain of sand slips from the top of the glass. Hamilton looks intensely at Silhouette, standing nearby, who compliantly pulls the whistle from his pocket and signals the end of Stage One. The heads of the lottery’s winning families inspect the work, signaling various

levels of satisfaction by way of their body language. Coming together, they shoot intermittent glances at the participants, most still huffing and puffing, before making their decision: the young, petrified, bug-eyed girl is chosen, perhaps out of pity.

“Scarlet,” a woman whispers to Persephone. “Her father was John Rasmussen, the infamous casino king of Washington State. She watched him bleed to death last week. Your friend there cut his arm clean off,” she adds, nodding towards Harvey, who now sits helplessly at Persephone’s feet, still shaking, facing away from the field. Judniks pins a “#1” to the girl’s shirt, and the events continue.

“Stage Two: The Blue Collar Worker. These are your bosses,” Hamilton reads. “By your misfortune progress has rescued you from servitude only to see your masters adapt, inventing corporations to shield them from taking personal responsibility for their crimes against humanity, still seeking every means to take advantage of your every disadvantage, including your inability to buy your way out of their exploitative system. You are a cost to be minimized on their balance sheets, and they pit you against one another to see who will work for the least. You don’t own the fruit of your labor, they do, and they grant you only what they must in order to prevent the total desperation triggering rebellion. Every business owner here needs fish to eat and wood to power their stations, plus a surplus to sell for profit. Catch, clean, chop and gather enough, and

they may even reward you with a drink and a bite of their fish!”

A brawny young man, stubble barely visible on his chin, is eventually awarded the “#2” pin for his unparalleled chopping, gathering and wheel-barreling of wood to the Scavenger Station.

“He’s a sexy young stud,” another woman standing nearby comments to a friend. They pass a flask back and forth between them. “I’d play with that peach fuzz of his! I bet I could make that peach tree grow!,” she adds with a self-satisfied snort. “Maybe I can convince Hamilton to tie him to my bed for the night, and make my useless wretch of a man watch!” Both women cackle with glee.

“Stage Three: The Faithful. The whole crowd is your flock. You and your forebears have long used the State’s show of prestige and your unsubstantiated claim to speak for God to arouse and direct the passion and fealty of the people for the growth and gratification of your coffers and egos. They look to you for answers, which you give them from your book, the one you convince them contains the only true words direct from God himself. Thus you clothe your naked villainy, as Shakespeare said, pretending sainthood when at most you play the devil! So play on! Trick them into suspending their disbelief, to renounce reason, dismiss science, and to take your word on blind faith alone, else be damned to an eternity of hellfire!”

Taking turns reading from a tattered old Bible, each participant attempts to deliver an impassioned sermon to the crowd, most of which are greeted with a combination of jeers, laughter and assorted shouts of ridicule. Some, especially the young participants, are so embarrassed that they can scarcely speak, their voices tremulous, tears in their eyes. A few stutter so badly that they're forced to shield themselves from a barrage of small stones and clods of dirt. Hound barely reads his lines, refusing to fully participate, and is rewarded with a rifle butt to the ribs, Persephone's angry shouts in response falling upon deaf ears. Those few participants who muster valiant attempts are greeted with the customary, mocking signal of approval: members of 'the flock,' the crowd, fall to their knees.

“Stage Four: The Constituent. These are your democratic representatives. Most of them were born within the aristocracy, having no sense of your struggle. Yet it falls to them to enact your will. You must all make your appeals. Yet be forewarned! Ask for too much and their system of checks and balances, and the perfectly equal opposition of their built-to-be-divided system shall obstruct you! The one that presents the most reasonable suggestion, the over-compromised proposal found agreeable even amongst adversaries, shall earn both pin number four and what you've requested for you and your peers. All hail the feeble pacifying pretense of democracy!”

Pushed back to the front of the crowd beside Hamilton and

Judniks, the participants make their entreaties, most doing their best to eloquently request as little as possible. Hound, however, calls for the tradition of Demonstration to be abolished, saying: “We are but repeating the mistakes of the past! This serves only to embolden anger and aggression! Let us instead show that we’ve already learned this lesson and jettison this ugly ritual here and now!”

Following a raining of rocks, he’s booed away, triggering a chorus of particularly intoxicated men to shout: “Never forget!” Then, mockingly, they repeat: “Four more years! Four more years!”

Kato believes that he recognizes the winner of Stage Four as what remains of a former manager of a prominent hedge fund with offices up and down the West Coast. A Middle Eastern man in his mid-forties, he requests that, if anyone should pull at least ten fish from the river on any of their frequent, compulsory fishing expeditions, said fishermen be entitled to eat the smallest of the fish his or her self, in addition to his or her current, meager rations.

“But you’ll be eating it raw!,” someone shouts to laughter and applause.

“We’re coming close to the end of The Demonstrations, my friends! Stage Five: The Patient. These are your doctors. As the western corporate-controlled plutocratic model prohibits keeping

anything from being used by the few to extract from the many, ‘medicine’ has been made into a means to conceal your ills, masking the devastation of your overstressed, underpaid, fast-poison-fed lives with chemical cocktails that mitigate your symptoms while offering nothing to cure the cause of your ills, and which create, in turn, ever more symptoms to be masked as ‘unfortunate side effects,’ per the business strategy. But *it’s not personal*, it’s just the business of forever seeking to euphemize and otherwise conceal any means to enslave, exploit and oppress as many *persons* as possible. For your doctors are the whores of pharmaceutical pimps, and you’re their disease-riddled johns! Open up, here comes your daily dose!”

One by one the participants are force-fed a rainbow-colored assortment of pharmaceuticals. Those that resist are berated and beaten until they comply. Ritualistically, a large contingent of the crowd repeatedly chants the advertising preface: “Ask your doctor!”

“What are they making them take?!” Persephone demands of Silhouette while vicariously absorbing the stress of Hound’s ordeal.

“Honestly, we don’t know most of the time. Whatever turns up during the scavenger hunts. It’s not equal, that’s for sure, and sometimes there are reactions that make the next stage near impossible to complete. But that’s the point: the more ill the patient, the more poison they were fed, the more gradually detrimental the

combined effect. This is, after all, a reenactment. And most people were on a handful of pills by The Great Reset. Big Pharma, and so-called ‘healthcare’ in general, was always shamefully profitable, with most failing to ask: By what means is that profit paid?! And what’s more tragic is how many of the disadvantaged died *before* developing obesity, heart disease, depression and diabetes.”

“Too many were spared the displeasure of ending up as dependents of Big Pharma, killed on the under-funded, opportunity-scarce streets in gang violence, narcotics overdoses and stress-induced heart attacks, or sacrificed in overseas fights to improve the profitable opportunities of plutocrats that didn’t give a shit about them. And all while these over-privileged assholes purchased every possible opportunity for their *own* pampered offspring, protecting them from ever having to face such perils either here or abroad.”

While being led away, the eighth participant sneakily lifts his shirt over his mouth. A few members of the crowd spot this and call him out. His assigned guard soon discovers the discarded pills, some stuck to his chest, some on the ground near his feet. This revelation appears to please Hamilton, who orders that he be struck ten times by one of his minions who, all too happy to carry out the assignment, beats the man unconscious. Many amongst the crowd fall silent while this punishment is carried out, perhaps thinking it too severe.

“Drag him to the center of the arena!” Hamilton commands.
“We have our first veteran!”

28

“Stage Six: The Veteran!” Hamilton resounds.

A weapons rack is dragged to one side of the field, and the winners of the stages are granted the chance to exercise their spoils:

“Pick a weapon, or pick a teammate!”

The rack is lined with a variety of weapons and tools: knives, hand and pick axes, a maul, a hammer, a set of swords and, for the less fortunate choosing later, shovels, spades and, to the delight of many amongst the crowd, a metal watering can falling to Hound.

Hound is left with the watering can due to having finished last, and yet he’s chosen first by the young girl whom, at this point, has visibly soiled herself and attempts to hide herself behind Hound.

The participants are divided into two groups by Judniks based upon those who’ve chosen their teammates and the perception of relative strength so as to create as evenly matched and entertaining a gladiatorial contest as possible. They’re encircled by the now fanatically riled-up mob, many submitting and taking bets.

“These are your beneficiaries!” Hamilton again reads, louder than ever, gesturing to the rowdy multitude of surrounding men and women. “They’re your plutocrats and their puppeted politicians, your multinational business owners, boards of corporate directors, kingpins and tycoons; the one percent that own and collude on the ever-expanding interests of ninety-nine percent of total global equity; the neo-imperial conniving of aristocrats and their purchased hawks in office forever insatiably seeking ever-greater consumer and natural resource markets to take as much advantage of as possible.”

“These are your enemies,” Hamilton continues, pointing to both sides of the field and the respective teams of forced soldiers. “They want to make up their own minds as to who should own and profit from their lands and resources, what should and shouldn’t be exposed to commercial interests, and what and whom their children should grow up believing and serving. They were born on the other side of the boundary line drawn-up by the forebears of the aristocrats around you following the last conquest; lines which your underclass predecessors died to enforce and advance after falling for songs and shows of bravery, freedom and patriotism designed to dupe the ignorant and foolish into believing they fight for more than greed.”

“Those on the other side of the boundary line believe something different than you do; something inferior to what you

believe; something you've been conditioned to call blasphemous and unpatriotic. They're communists, terrorists, mindless, heathen savages awaiting your delivery of divine justice from the one God!"

"Because you lack the means to buy your way out of the war which your betters started to serve their god of greed, because you're poor, uneducated and fell victim to their lies designed to manipulate your disadvantage and elicit your blind obedience, you will now fight to the death to enrich those that stoked the conflict and now stay safely at home, thousands of miles away, waiting for the smoke to clear and the blood to soak into the soil that they'll tap, mine and pave for profit, hiring your surviving children at the lowest possible hourly rate until such a day as those children too can be tricked into taking up arms like you, serving with blinding pride as the inheriting sacrificial pawns in a global game of military-industrial conquest!"

"Prepare to fight to the death for the right to come home with PTSD, be denied benefits, lose your family and friends and find yourself dumped on the cold, filthy streets, another shattered soul lost in the cracks of the cruel city, spit on by the privileged passersby that sent you to war and now treat you as insane, subhuman trash!"

Judniks, standing at midfield with a red flag raised overhead, eyes both sides of the parted arena. Dropping the flag, she runs from the field as the tension is finally released into a frenzy.

Some of the larger, more confident men fire forward immediately, launching the opening salvo, causing many amongst the cautious and fearful to backpedal in terror, including the young girl positioned behind Hound. Hound himself is immediately targeted by two of these would-be killers who've determined him to be the greatest threat to their own survival.

Already low to the ground owing to his short stature, the muscular, athletic Hound squats lower as the space between him and his attackers closes and, in three fluid motions, he dodges and trips the first of them, who lunges at Hound with his pitchfork, before parrying the attack of the second man's Civil War sword collectible, instantly slamming his metal watering can through the opening of his attackers' failed hack, crushing his nose and causing him to fall. Before this second attacker can regain his footing the crown of his head receives three rapid, brutal blows from the watering can and, to the mob's approval, he falls, cracked head and face first, dead.

Hound's first failed, tripped attacker is stabbed to death by one of Hound's teammates following his trip and fall. Hound discards the watering can and picks up the Civil War sword as the girl whom had sought his protection screams behind him, being chased by a woman wielding a wood-splitting maul. The girl runs toward the edge of the field, almost reaching the crowd before a

member of The Guard cuts her off, rifle raised and ready to shoot anyone trying to flee, many amongst the mob screaming: “Deserter!”

Running at full speed, Hound chases the woman down from behind, who holds her maul over her head as she runs. The girl turns around at the same moment that Hound thrusts forward with his sword, a split second too late. The woman’s wood-splitting tool falls crushingly upon the young girl’s clavicle, just missing her head at the very moment Hound’s sword cuts clean through her midsection.

As the woman whimpers and falls to the turf to die, the young girl’s cries of agony commingle with the cacophony of pain and distress echoing about the newly blood-soaked battlefield. Hound turns around to witness the end of the fleeting skirmish: three men from his team, closing in upon and surrounding a boy barely big enough to lift his foolishly-selected axe, watch as the boy, crying and begging for mercy, trips over backwards and falls on his ass.

Closing to within feet of the boy, the men drop their weapons, unable to do the deed, upon which the boy is shot from behind by the closest guard. One of the boy’s would-be attackers falls to his knees and begins to sob, unable to take his eyes off of the dead boy. Turning back around to face the young girl, Hound sees part of the girl’s collarbone protruding from her punctured skin. Removing his shirt, he does his best to set the break before tying his

shirt tightly around her to hold her arm and the setting in place.

Eight survivors remain, one bleeding badly, likely fatally, and another whom, ironically, is the man that had attempted to cheat during ‘The Patient,’ still lying unconscious near midfield. The A-Listers will need to undertake more ‘raiding of the F-Listed aristocrats’ if their Seventh Day tradition is to continue.

“Excellent demonstration of soldiering!” Hamilton shouts. “Some of you may yet be worthy of joining The Guard, assuming, of course, you have what it takes to complete ten Demonstrations!”

Dusk slowly drawing darkness down upon the dismal scene, like a welcomed curtain closing the enactment of some senseless tragedy, Hamilton announces: “Stage Seven, the final stage: The Homeless! You’ve survived the war! Welcome home!”

As he makes his announcement his Guard dramatically slams the doors closed on the empty, surrounding shacks before binding the survivors to the pillars near midfield. Forced to drag the badly wounded man to this position, who cradles his severely punctured belly with both arms, they then proceed to approach the girl, still wailing in agony. “Please, let me,” Hound requests. The two guards know him, and allow it. Hound picks her up and carries her to midfield, laying her down and examining his binding of her wound.

“Thank Spirit he survived,” Persephone half-whispers, now surrounded by Silhouette, Kato and his crew.

“God be praised,” Harvey manages, sitting at Persephone’s feet like a terrified little lapdog. “He shouldn’t die for saving me.”

Approaching Hamilton, Mana kowtows and, as deferentially as she can manage, asks: “Please, sir, may I attend to their wounds.”

Hamilton considers it for a moment, then gives his consent: “Sure, knock yourself out.”

Sprinting to midfield, Mana opens her satchel and begins rendering aid as best as she’s able, handing something to Hound and, while giving him directions, doing what she can to stem the bleeding of the gravely wounded man tumbling towards death’s doorstep.

“Should we go?!” Jackrabbit worries, fearing for his life.

“No, not without Hound,” Persephone insists.

Silhouette consoles her: “He made it to the final round. He now need only sit out in the cold until daybreak, and he’ll be freed.”

The crowd breaks up into smaller groups, moving to surrounding fire pits where the day's deer and wild pigs are being prepared for the roast, and where many A-Listers, mostly women, pour moonshine from large containers into the cups of the regrouping revelers. Hamilton's Guard, meanwhile, drags the dead bodies from Stage Six, along with some dismembered body parts, to a pit on the fringes of the compound. As the men walk away from the pit Judniks, fingers in her mouth, lets loose a whistle, whereupon a pack of emaciated dogs pours in from the surrounding wilds and ravenously goes to work stripping the flesh from the carcasses.

“Fucking monsters,” Kato bewails. “I can't believe you're okay with this,” he adds, addressing Silhouette.

Silhouette thinks for a few seconds, then responds: “I must admit, I've definitely started to lose my taste for it. I used to be much angrier, and over time I suppose I justified it more and more as a necessary evil... As a means to keep the ‘mob’ you referred to from falling into ungovernable chaos. I find that even anarchists need their traditions and... releases.”

“Perhaps, but *this*?!”

“You may be right... But I can't go against it now, at least not while Hamilton rises in influence, as I'm sure you'd agree. It

would only lead to a bloody, community-dissolving conflict.”

Speechless, the heavy-hearted group hangs their heads, as if honoring the fallen with a moment of silence, feeling the opposite as most of those surrounding them, and certainly in no mood to join in the festivities, however tempting the scent of roasting meat. Kato looks from the feeding dogs to the anarchists’ own feeding frenzy, drawing parallels between the two packs of barbarous beasts.

“Since you’re all here for the night anyway,” Silhouette says, breaking the mournful silence, “and since it’ll be devilishly difficult to make new friends out here in the meantime, perhaps you’d all like to join me for a drink, and then get some rest?”

“Fine. Whatever,” Persephone angrily replies.

Following Silhouette back to his quarters, working their way through the dispersing crowd, many of whom nod to Silhouette in a sign of enduring respect, many others of whom eye him and the group with a mixture of suspicion and malice, none amongst them says a word; not for long after the door is closed behind them.

29

Kato has always believed vulnerability to be beautiful, bestowing a truth often hidden beneath the hard, self-protective guise of invulnerability. Where once this guise served to prevent a broken heart, it was now more a matter of survival, for any sign of weakness invited the delivery of death by the unscrupulous. Remove such survivalist need, however, and vulnerability becomes revelatory.

Seeing what lies beneath a beautiful woman's well-developed defense mechanisms renders her in a purer, truer light, conveying a sense of understanding inseparable from the spiritual interconnection that most call 'love.' Thus, seeing Persephone gaze worrisomely out Silhouette's window, fully fixated on the welfare of Hound, yet another member of her party who's willingly put his life on the line for her, she appears more lovely to him than ever.

He reflects upon something a coworker once said to him long before the world went to shit. A much younger woman whom he'd developed a fond 'love-hate' rapport with, remarked: "I think you fall in love easily." She was no doubt reacting to the vulnerability he himself displayed, broadcasted from his eyes each time he looked into hers, for the eyes display a truth that cannot be concealed.

So she saw the truth of him. And he often wondered whether that truth, his propensity to fall in love easily, was reflective of a weakness, or a strength? The American brand of male machismo no doubt dictated it to be a weakness; a susceptibility to the influence of all those with the power to elicit romantic desire, of which there are an unlimited number. But is love not also a strength, granting a passionate power to protect and honor that which is most sacred, instilling an almost almighty, motivating force belonging to a long-lost, chivalrous era? And does it not take more strength to admit weakness than to pretend that it doesn't exist, as so many of those that delude themselves into thinking otherwise forever fail to grasp?

Kato concluded that his propensity for 'falling in love easily' demonstrated that strength is *based* upon vulnerability; that his vulnerability, his 'weakness,' was precisely what compelled him to fight for what, and whom, he loved. Weakness breeds strength.

Laughing to himself looking at Persephone peering nervously at her companion outside, he recalls the one time he'd been to Las Vegas and, capitulating to loneliness, splurged to engage the services of a high-end escort. She was once a model whom, as an eighteen-year-old, had dipped her toes into the porno industry, per her own admission. God she was gorgeous. Auburn hair, hazel eyes, alabaster skin generously sprinkled with fine freckles, a pristine body and the

most kissable lips that he'd ever had the privilege to kiss. And, despite her initial reluctance, she gave into and reciprocated the kissing, likely owing to his gentlemanliness. "You made me feel like a queen," she texted him after their rendezvous. He'd immediately felt something far beyond lust for her, compelling, out of 'weakness,' an urge to protect her from the risks of her vocation.

Yet she was compensated so handsomely for the time that she spent with the men calling upon her that, in the cruel, cutthroat, costly world that then stood upon its last, faltering legs, one was hard-pressed to persuasively argue against her choice of profession, especially if she was cautiously selective of her paying companions. But her loveliness was so overwhelming, so immense in its purest essence, that something deep within him revolted at the thought of it being tarnished by the dishonorable aggressors that tended to have the means to buy her time in a society that rewarded, above all else, what was now regarded as the villainy of 'successful businessmen.'

He would've been lying if he'd said his loins had not, too, led him to seek her out. But that was only the spark of the flame; his programmed sex drive seeking its matching aesthetics. In truth, that drive was a spark equally capable of setting the flames of the most fervent romance as it was the indiscriminately-consuming flames of covetousness and carnality. And somewhere in between their time in the whirlpool bath and their bedbound entanglement, between her

endearingly gushing over her weakness for everything from Disney to 50 Cent, he'd fallen in love with her, conventional connotations of weakness be damned. The same overpowering force had consumed him during his first intimate moments with Persephone, a beauty of heart, mind and body equal to Tiffany, the Aphrodite of Vegas, albeit hardened by the ravages of a species fighting to survive in the smoldering embers of its devastatingly-distressed planetary host.

Flipping through Poly's notebook by candlelight, Kato settles upon a page of poetry perfectly paralleling his present state of mind. Piercing the deathly silence, he begins to read aloud:

“Love of loves, never to pass away
Subject not to anything mankind may betray
Invulnerable to every force, withstanding every fray
True and everlasting, come any threat that may
Bones and body brittle, heart heed not decay
For what is true is ever true, forever here to stay”

“Wow, I like that. Who wrote that?,” Silhouette inquires.

“Someone calling herself Poly Trix,” Kato responds.

“No wonder she didn't survive, and her blood stains those pages,” Hunter exclaims while surveying the scene out the window,

coolly calculating their odds of survival. Like a good soldier, he accepts his imperiled position, and obeys the man he considers his commander; a man beholden to the woman who, turning to look at Kato, brightens a bit and offers a slight smile before returning her attention to her companion outside, sitting in the cold next to Mana.

Kato knows precisely what Hunter means: something so soft and sensitive could never have lasted long in the world as it now exists. ‘Is then such ardency, such romanticism, forever lost?’ he wonders, suddenly overcome with a sense of how incalculably immense such a tragedy would be. He, too, fears he’s slowly losing that deeper sense of himself, as though letting go of a luxury he can no longer afford, succumbing to the viciousness of humankind reverting to its bestial baseness, its potential devoured by the beast.

Fighting to keep the sorrow at bay, Kato turns the page and comes across another of Poly’s poems. Again he reads aloud:

“So heavy mine heart, heaping from steeping
Absorbing fake and foul of cultural keeping
Sweeping virulently out from contaminated core
Awash in sickening sellouts, honor no more

Enslaved, where but the truly free hath braved
Pounding evils from which the obedient caved

Saved, not by the official, conquering teachings
But by rebellious Gnostic's long-lost preachings

Fighting for a paradigm shift in what's considered success
Away from rewarding extractions rendering life less
Away from motivating dishonor, take all that you can
Until raising up *all* of life is the mark of a man

Convictions dismissed by the brainwashed: "Insane!"
Backed by those valiantly fighting for everyone's gain
Battling the corrupt and their puppets upon The Hill
The few finding the heart's power equal to their will

Upon which side of the line do you and yours fall?
Which of Sitting Bull's dogs do you feed more overall?
Words of prophets long written across the subway wall
There is no truth but that truth which empowers us all"

"Damn..." Silhouette remarks. "Sitting Bull's dogs... That's the one about feeding our evil side versus our good side, right?"

"Yes," Kato replies. "But I'd put it as feeding our corruptible side versus our incorruptible side. For what most consider 'inherent evil,' thanks largely to the historic manipulations of The Church that became firmly embedded in western culture, is actually the inherent

corruptibility of the body and mind which *potentiates*, but doesn't *necessitate*, evil. Hence the indispensability of moral development."

"Hmmm... an interesting distinction," Silhouette offers.
"Fruit born from the under-fertilized tree of philosophy, my friend."

"Yes," Kato replies. "Speaking of distinction, she uses the word 'Gnostic.' Isn't that a reference to the school of spiritual philosophy that challenged the prevailing Christian belief system? I think 'Gnosis' alludes to seeking spiritual knowledge in contrast to blind faith. But who's this 'rebellious Gnostic' that she refers to?"

"A reference to Jesus himself, I believe," Silhouette responds. "But, as you yourself alluded to, not the edited version as he appears in the official New Testament proliferated by the Eastern Roman Empire to consolidate their power. The very different, often contradicting, purer spiritual and moral philosopher espousing lessons antithetical to and thus incompatible with empire; the guide whose truer testaments exist as the 'Gnostic Gospels' they tried to eradicate, and which remain obscure. Many scholars believe that, ironically, the original, eponymous 'Christian' stood in stark contrast to the myths made of him long after he was murdered by the Romans for gaining a following that was undermining their authority."

"Another rebel killed for standing up to greed for wealth and

power. A story as old as humanity itself,” Kato proclaims.

“Indeed,” Silhouette affirms. “He was essentially the most famous philosopher that ever lived, his words germinating eternal truths lying dormant in most, and forever belonging to none.”

Standing, Persephone approaches the door. “I’m sorry, but I can’t take this right now,” she says. Kato feels his heart sink as she exits, positioning herself just outside, against the wall of the home.

“Would you mind staying with her?,” Kato asks Hunter. He nods his head yes, and follows Persephone outside.

The ruckus around them is frenzied. Revelers run wild throughout, most drunk off the moonshine passed liberally about Celebration. In some places the scene resembles an orgy, groups of anarchists slobbering and thrusting as if it’s their last day on earth. One woman rolls around in the dirt next to the largest fire, making a mini dust storm while passing herself between three men. They devour her with the same reckless abandon shown to the venison shanks many tear with their teeth. Occasional scraps are thrown mockingly into the center of the field, where the ‘homeless’ captives, most of them famished, satisfy the crowd’s cruelty by fighting for the meaty bits, the victors swallowing the scraps whole, dirt and all.

As Hunter continues his assessment of the situation, sensing the danger increase with every guzzle of moonshine consumed during the collective debauchery, Persephone suddenly stiffens. Eyes narrowing, she creeps towards the field. In the low visibility, she can just make out the shadow of a figure moving towards centerfield, menacing something in its hand. Panicking, she breaks into a sprint.

The little girl, still wrenching in pain and being cradled by Hound, suddenly struggles to free herself from Hound's weight, collapsed full upon her. As Mana, who'd been resting beside him, frantically tries to rouse Hound, the little girl lets out a bloodcurdling scream. Persephone bursts through the field's outer ring of armed defenders, one of whom draws down with a shotgun as if to fire before being tackled from behind and quickly subdued by Hunter.

Falling to her knees beside him, a large knife is lodged in the left side of Hound's back. He's dead, and his killer has fled without resistance from those guarding the arena, many of whom now converge upon Persephone, weapons at the ready, threatening to fire.

"Wait!" comes an authoritative cry. Silhouette, forcing his way onto the field, commands attention. "What evil is this?!" Looking at the gathering guards, who hesitate as The Celebration is suddenly put on pause, the crowd quieting and growing around them, he demands: "Who did this?! This man survived the six stages, and

has been guaranteed freedom upon passing the night. So, by all that for which we stand, tell me now: Who was the cowardly assassin?! Name him, so that he may pay for his crime at once!”

“That man there,” comes a cool reply. Everyone looks at Hamilton, who points a finger at one of the captives.

“Liar!” Persephone screams at the top of her lungs. “I saw the killer, he came from outside and stabbed him in the back!”

“Nonsense!” Hamilton retorts before looking imploringly at one of the guards who, fumbling for words, awkwardly proclaims: “The woman lies. It was, indeed, that demonstrator there. They were... arguing, and he pulled the knife from beneath his shirt.”

Jumping to her feet, Persephone is unable to restrain her fury: “You fucking repugnant, treacherous, sorry excuses for men! No one here even had a weapon!” She approaches Hamilton, crying: “*You* killed him!,” pointing at him as the crowd closes in. Letting loose a cacophony of clashing cries, the crowd argues amongst themselves.

“Me?!” Hamilton responds, affecting indignance. “How absurd, you brainless little witch! I was nowhere near him!”

“I think she means that you *ordered* him to be killed,”

Silhouette confidently interjects.

“It was the one they call Sydo, one of Hamilton’s sycophantic followers,” comes a call from somewhere in the gathering mob. A bright-faced young man with flowing golden locks of hair approaches Hamilton while speaking. “I saw her! She snuck up on him from behind. You all know her, she’s the one that always seems so sweetly concerned for everyone’s wellbeing, but clearly it’s a cover! And he was so kind to her; complimentary and helpful. He even told me that she was the one person amongst The Guard he had respect for. But clearly he misjudged her, and the level of danger that comes from trusting anyone beholden to fascists.”

“Look what happens when you turn your back on her,” the young man continues, “or anyone loyal to this bully! He encourages spies to hide in the shadows and loyalists to report back to him on anything that they know that he won’t agree with! Anything to maintain and expand your little coterie of control, right?! Hound is just your latest victim! I guess that’s why we always hear you say ‘cover your ass,’ huh Hamilton? You’re forewarning all of us to be wary of backstabbers, because it’s *you* that produces them!”

With a pitiless laugh, Hamilton defends himself: “That’s quite the accusation, Utu! And tell me, why would I have had Hound killed? He’s already been booted from The Guard.”

“You know very well why,” Silhouette responds. “Because he disagreed with you. Because he thought for himself and dared to speak his mind rather than being ruled by any fears of reprisal, the fears you use to control others. Because he stood against blindly following your orders and your narrow, prejudiced perspectives. Because it’s the code of every tyrant, from Caesar to Stalin to Trump to Hamilton, to make sure everyone knows you’re not to be crossed. So you had him permanently silenced for contradicting you earlier.”

“Bullshit!,” Hamilton counters.

“No, the only shit here is coming from you!,” comes another shout from somewhere in the ever more unruly, splintering crowd. Their discordant cries rapidly bubble-over into shoving, followed by the beginnings of a brawl. The factions begin making themselves plain, closing ranks around their leaders and brandishing weapons.

Hunter grabs Persephone by the arm, pulling her from her movement towards Hamilton and, in the attempt to divert her attention, whispers forcefully in her ear: “We need to leave! Now!”

Persephone quickly regains her composure and, fast focused, her eyes darting about, she follows Hunter’s pull as the group begins to back down and away from the fray, backpedaling as discreetly as

possible, slowly extricating themselves from the perilous scene.

“You’ve turned half of our camp into a band of thugs, you overbearing brute! We used to welcome discussion, to practice compassion, to celebrate doubt and the challenging of preconception! Now everyone’s afraid to speak their minds!”

“Oh, shut up you whiny little bitch! We’re finally strong, gaining ground, taking our destiny by the horns!”

“Gaining ground, ha! You’re blind as a bat! You’ve dug out the ground beneath our feet, and we’re about to fall into the abyss!”

Turning to run, Hunter fixes his focus upon the tree that Hound had directed them to earlier, burying their weapons and signaling strips of white cloth at its base. As the group falls into increasing stride behind Hunter, Judniks calls out behind them:

“It’s *their* fault! They brought this on us! We were fine until they came. They’re from The Contaminated! They’re spies and saboteurs sent to throw us into chaos, to weaken our ranks! Look! They’re going back towards them now! Don’t let them escape!”

In the ensuing disorder of verbal and violent conflict, several amongst the ranks of Hamilton begin to give chase as the group,

working from a head start, breaks into a sprint. Soon making their way to the large pine, they find a stick embedded into recently turned ground and begin their desperate dig. Gunshots ring out in the mob behind them as two men break free of the field and fly straight for them, the first wielding a machete, the second aiming a revolver.

As the first falls upon them the second fires a series of barely errant rounds, one just missing Mana's head before puncturing the trunk of the pine. Hunter leaps at the bearer of the machete, blocking his hack with a martial arts forearm maneuver before flipping him to the turf and cracking his neck with rapid ferocity. In the next instant Kato picks up the dropped machete and bears down upon the gunman who, just missing Kato with his final round, suddenly turns to run away as Kato swings at his head from behind, burying the large blade in the side of his face, eliciting a horrible scream that just manages to rise above the bedlam erupting in the background.

In the next moment the bag is freed from the loose dirt by the others and the group dashes away, a second set of pursuers close on their heels. Sprinting ahead, the group clears a hundred yards as Counselor falls behind, their attackers closing. The first to ready his weapon, Hunter turns around and fires, matched by a half-blind volley from their pursuers in the limited light of the waning moon. Their attackers gaining in number, Hunter falls back in line behind Counselor, the group plunging ahead through the biting brush.

Another hundred yards, and they dash past a tree with a large ‘X’ carved into its trunk, after which little but a few more errant bullets follow, excepting one particularly frenzied pursuer who, closing in with shotgun in hand, has the drop on the group, most of whom were unable to ready their weapons while running. He’s about to unload his shotgun when the air is unexpectedly filled with a flurry of whizzes and whistles, their attacker suddenly made a pincushion of arrows flung from the softly glowing semi-darkness.

Realizing what’s happening, Persephone quickly retrieves and ties a scrap of white cloth around her head before raising her arms. The rest of the group moves to do the same as rustles and scurries sound about them, seeming to come from all directions, even above.

“We mean you no harm!,” Persephone manages.

“Please, put your weapons in the bag,” comes a voice from the dark a moment later, moving towards them.

The group complies, though Hunter rather reluctantly, none too eager to relinquish his protection so soon after recovering it.

Suddenly there’s fire everywhere, spread all around them.

Holding a composite bow in one hand and a torch in the other, a young woman steps forward. Svelte, with efficient, athletic movements, her bleach-blonde hair is tied behind her head. She's quite lovely, and covered head to toe in animal skin, most of it deer.

“They call me Artemis,” she calmly declares, shouldering her bow and picking up the group's bag. “Please, good people, do us the honor of following us to the feast. Kuato is expecting you.”

30

Persephone, Kato, Hunter, Jackrabbit, Counselor, Mana and Harvey, exhausted from their travails, do their best to match the pace set by Artemis and the other nine amongst her impressively fleet-footed crew. All similarly naturalistically clad and bearing bows and quivers, their appearance harks back to a long-lost, prehistoric time forcibly revisited upon humankind. Seeming to move as one, clean and concerted as if telepathically fused, it's evident that they're very well trained and supremely comfortable in their collaboration.

For many miles they follow the formerly steadily strong, now capricious Willamette, drawing ever closer to the outskirts of the once vibrant Portland Metropolitan Area and the Columbia River beyond. Historically a canyon-carving confluence of forces descendant from ice ages and volcanic eruptions, flooding the valley underfoot with nutrients from the Cascade Range through which it cut, the Columbia and its tributaries, many of which now lay dormant most of the year, could now scarcely be depended upon to deliver freshwater throughout the twelve months, much less be counted upon to continually replenish these once lush alluvial lands.

Climbing cracked concrete up a steep slope into the remnants

of the once hip Hawthorne District, Kato suddenly freezes, surveying, slack-jawed, the urban skeleton set before him. Remembering it as leafy and teeming with activity, the district now resembles a beachfront town post-tsunami, its buildings torn and toppled, tellingly tilted away from the city center across the river. Its every metallic element has been ripped from its carcass, the previous splendor and hive of social activity supplanted by an eerie, hushed desolation. Only a smattering of conifers comfortable with parched landscapes now live to tell the tale of a violently remade ecosystem. But it's the moonlit view beyond the river that's most surreal.

Downtown Portland, formerly a celebration of everything wonderfully weird, has been all but wiped away, its weirdness now taking on a tragically nightmarish form. Dependent upon steel in the composition of its towers and bridges, it lays in absolute ruin, the Avant Garde having picked it clean apart. Nearly unrecognizable to Kato, who'd worked in its heart for a decade, it's now but a pockmarked pile of rubble, it's iconic bridges gone, nothing but hazy memories standing over half-dry chasms dividing east from west.

“You knew it from before, yes?,” Artemis inquires, having paused their progression, patiently waiting for him.

“Yes.”

“It must’ve been awesome.”

“It awed a great many, yes. Could they but see it now... I wonder how many would make the changes required to preserve it?”

“Kuato says it was inevitable,” Artemis states. “A predestined, indelible mark upon the roadmap of humankind, without which we would be incapable of finding our way.”

Something about this statement sinks deep and stirringly into Kato’s heart. “I must meet this Kuato,” he responds.

“You soon will. We’re nearly there. Please, follow me.”

Half a mile later and the silence gradually gives way to the welcomed scent of roasting meat and the sweet sounds of merriment.

“Welcome to Tarp City, home of The Keepers,” Artemis announces to the group as they enter the fringes of the camp.

The site is a well-managed hodgepodge of decrepit, busted-up buildings, tents and tarped enclosures. Fires burn all about the encampment, whose people, The Keepers, are similar in number to The A-Listers, yet could scarcely be more different in demeanor.

They take the group aback with their immediate exhibition of warmth and hospitality. Far from regarding them with the self-righteous contempt of The Americans or the suspicion and trepidation of The Anarchists, The Keepers eagerly rise to welcome their guests, entirely trusting in their pure intentions and the judgment of their leader, whom they're aware has recently foretold of their arrival, saying that they'd come in peace. Yet, despite their warmth and geniality, one of the first things that Kato notices whilst being led through the excited encampment is how few children there are relative to their numbers. And the few that he does see look sickly, with many exhibiting deformities, some seeming near death.

Then, behind the throng of greeters, they spot him. He stands uneasily from one of the fires, hunched over and supporting his weight with a staff of carved, gnarled wood that seems to symbolize the anguish of his own tortured, twisted physical form. Approaching ever so slowly, grunting with discomfort with every step, he waits for his people to finish their handshakes, hugs and other expressions of goodwill. As they disperse he stands before them in the firelight.

His head, ears and nose are overgrown, disproportionate to the size of his underdeveloped limbs and hands. He wears a simple tunic spun from hemp, interlaced with strands of green running up the sides. But what stands out most about him are his eyes. Bulging and burning with a bright golden-green, they seem about to pop out

of his skull, as if held in place by some mysterious alien force.

“Good evening, good... sirs and... ladies.” He speaks in a raspy, forced voice, each deliberately-expelled word echoing both pain and precision, requiring considerable effort. “I’m Kuato.”

31

“So, I have to ask...” Kato begins uneasily.

“Indeed,” Kuato interjects. The group sits in a ring around one of the fires, their various type, size and shape of seats pried from their formerly urban surroundings. They listen to the man whom many of The A-Listers refer to as ‘King of the Contaminated.’

“I am... named... after the character... from the film... *Total Recall*. My mother... she loved the film. How it... dealt with... fate and foresight... its existential angst. How we... can never be... entirely certain... whether we create... our destinies from scratch... or construct them from... their *only* materials... assigned at birth.”

He stops to wipe the drool from his mouth and take a deeper breath, then continues: “I never... saw it myself... most TVs and electricity... were already non-functioning or... consumed.”

Persephone: “Your mother, did she...”

“No. She died... long before the war.. when I was... young. Told me... I was the result... of genetic experimentation...”

eugenics... to make superhumans... says my father made... monsters... before me. Many died in her... womb... or were euthanized... soon thereafter. She believed... I had the gift... of precognition... ‘the sight...’ she called it. I remember... she said she saw me... act on things... before they happened... as a child. She kept me... hidden from the world... but gave me love. After... the war... I had a vision... that my people were... here... so I came.”

“We’ve read about what’s befallen us in surviving medical texts,” an older woman chimes in, one whom the others call Bona Dea. She lays her hand warmly upon Kuato’s arm as she speaks.

Bona Dea continues: “Miscarriages, stillbirths, congenital defects, most of the men being rendered infertile... we’ve been inundated by them all. The cruel cost of living in the path of the nuclear winds. The youngest of those around you are the children of parents exposed to substantial, yet sublethal, levels of irradiation.”

“I’m so, so sorry,” Persephone offers, feeling an upwelling of empathy while imagining being forced to deal with such extreme misfortune, suddenly feeling dispossessed of the right to self-pity.

“I know, my dear, I can see it in your eyes,” Bona Dea replies, putting her other hand on Persephone’s arm. “The worst part of it may be that we find it nearly impossible to procreate, at least

among those of us most severely affected by the irradiation. In fact, we here possess much the opposite problem as those that lived in the overpopulation and overconsumption precipitating The Great Reset.”

“Our numbers desperately dwindle,” she continues. “We battle susceptibilities to all manner of health ills, daily living with demons. If The Anarchists knew the extent of our decline, knew how difficult it’s been to keep up the pretense of strength, they’d likely be gunning us down at this very moment. We suffer from shortened lifespans compared to those born elsewhere, and, worse, about two-thirds of successful impregnations end up failing. A successful birth is a much celebrated affair around here. We haven’t had one for...”

“Almost... six months,” Kuato finishes her sentence.

“Yes,” Bona Dea agrees. “The truth is that we’re buoyed by passers-through like... well, like *you*. Some choose to stay, thank The Mother. They offer fresh DNA and clean wombs. The ‘ethnic cleansers,’ the white supremacists and anyone basing their beliefs on so-called ‘pure bloodlines,’ had it all wrong; not just ideologically, in terms of delusional self-importance and the scapegoating of others, but *biologically*. For supremacy is actually about cleansing and strengthening through genetic *diversification*, not limitation.”

Glancing around the fire pits, the surviving group of seven

detects the heavy sense of sorrow, despair and implication bound up in Bona Dea's words. Mana suddenly stands and, momentarily digging through her satchel, asks: "Do you have a healer here?"

"Many," Kuato responds. "In fact healing is a... societal study. A necessity... as I'm sure... you can understand. Many of us... are always in pain. So we possess a... constantly compelled... interest in the... healing arts. And many... including Merlin... fantasize about... finding permanent cures to what ail us. Heeding and harnessing... the innate wisdom and power of nature... is why we call ourselves... The Keepers. For we keep and... partner... with that which is most sacred... Mother Nature. That's our solemn vow."

"We take nothing that we aren't certain can be replenished," Bona Dea adds. "And we do everything we can to foster such mutualistic, reciprocal replenishment. For we know that the only proper path forward is the one in which we walk *alongside* nature, rather than trampling upon it. The only cure for the parasitism that produced the present is to live by the imperative of symbiosis."

"May I speak with some of your healers, please?," Mana earnestly asks. "Perhaps this person you call Merlin?"

"Of course, my dear," Bona Dea says, her words accompanied by more nods from Kuato. "I'm one such student.

Artemis, the one who brought you to us, may be our best. She's relatively inexperienced, but Merlin says she has a great natural instinct for it. But perhaps you should start with Merlin himself. Just to forewarn you, though, he can be hard to work with, as is typically true of his type. He's rather... *obsessive*; the most committed healer amongst us. His obsession is inseparable from his commitment." She smiles broadly before adding: "He dreams of brewing the panacea. He's one of us, but chooses to live apart, thinking the space is beneficial for the creation of his potions; for making his magic."

"Yes, she should... see him," Kuato concurs.

"Follow that old road leading down to the river. We helped him build a rather odd little dwelling down there. You can't miss it. Even if you should somehow fail to see it, you won't fail to *smell* it."

Kuato chortles oddly at this statement, again drooling and wiping his chin. As Mana sets out upon the directed path to locate the chief healer amongst The Keepers, Kuato speaks back up:

"We are... painfully aware of... the cost of... going against nature here. For we embody... unnaturality. But that... also means that... we know the value of life. We do not... cannot... take it for granted. Granted... it is not!" He startles the group by slamming his staff into the ground as he says this, enacting his exclamation.

“I can’t know it as you do, of course, but I can sense what you mean,” Kato offers.

“I know my... wise friend. That is why... you are here... is it not...? *Sense?!?*”

Wondering what exactly he means by this, Kato almost asks before Kuato continues: “Sixth sense... unspoken spiritual... communication... the eternal... invisibly tethered ties... of inseparable... space, time, energy... matter. Mother Nature... her terrestrial form... universally expanded... as Mother Matter. Forever giving birth... and rebirth to... finitely manifested... forms of... God’s infinite formlessness... forever distributed by... Father Spacetime... The... Holy Trinity. Source... Eternal Energy... into and out of... Mother Matter... seeded through... Father Spacetime. Forever seeking... equilibrium... harmonious balance. Imbalance produces... *us*. Makes *me*. We pay dearly for... our predecessors... unbalancing the... Divine Equation. Someone must always... pay.”

Kuato takes a deep, painful breath before continuing:

“Here, *now*... is Father’s... rebalancing act. Our Father who art... *right here*... *right now*. In us. As us. Through us. No... separation... only infinite... manifestation. Spiritual gravity...

drawing those... like you all... to their calling through... the Holy Trinity... whom we humbly beseech... to let us live... so that we may... honor our divinity here... by bringing it back... into balance. So as... to prevent... recurrent suffering. The Great... Lesson.”

Feeling Kuato’s words rise in his heart before they’re uttered, his mind having so long revolved around similar thoughts, Kato is warmed to the bone. Butterflies rise in his stomach and goosebumps spread across his flesh. He feels dizzy, and wonders if Persephone or any of the others are experiencing Kuato’s words the same way. The seer huffs, again attempting to calm his breath, besieged as he is by the exertion of articulations coming from an overburdened body.

“He sounds like you, Kato,” Counselor comments.

“Yes,” Kuato responds. “They may be... *his* words.”

To quizzical looks, Kuato adds: “Communication is not... limited to what we see... as limited as... most assume it... to be.”

“We’re spiritual agents,” Kato offers. “Those that best tune their ears to heed their heart become conduits of Spirit. Anyone that hears and speaks it hears and speaks with the one pure, incorruptible voice. The voice of the prophet alive in us all. We’re all within Spirit right now. Separation is an illusion. There’s no distance to cross.”

Kuato nods as Persephone, smiling and shaking her head slightly, says: “Shit. I don’t know if I can take two of you!”

Feeling as though he’s just met a brother, Kato is suddenly assaulted by a sense of worry for Kuato, and asks: “Many of The Anarchists want to wipe you all out, you know that, right?!”

“Yes,” Kuato replies. “The one... they call Hamilton... cannot see the... big picture... only the small... the territory... the domain... the illusion of... control. He keeps trying to... provoke us to... attack... to give him... the justification... for our... slaughter. But we shall not... give in... shall not... take the bait. We need not... for they are on... an eroding path... approaching the... void... one that has... run its course... nothing remains in front of it. Petty divisions... tribal identifications... seeing but the shell... the semblance... is the past. To cling to it is to... invite annihilation.”

“Yes,” Kato immediately agrees. “Imposing labels and categories as though they’re absolutes, rather than the relatives they always are and always will be, are the poisonous seeds from which all evil grows. They force an unnatural division in the field, its deluded tenders conditioned to see separation as though it’s natural. While there are types of boundaries that must be enforced in order to protect life, when those boundaries, their control and expansion, and

the labeling and placement of lives on one side or the other... when this becomes or remains the driving motivation, life invariably loses, for it cannot grow into its fullest form in such a cracked-earth, fractious field; a field in which the interconnectivity offering the greatest, most vibrant form of both the one and the all is precluded.”

To a broad smile from Kuato, Kato continues: “For, ultimately, division is control, is deprivation of self-determination, is disempowerment, is oppression. This is the core code of the conqueror forever revised to meet the progressive challengers, most recently by the capitalist, the plutocrat and the Trumpian fascist. This is why individualism and religion ruled in the epoch of evil, because collectivism, unification and pure spirituality recognizing no absolute distinction, only inseparable essence, tears down boundaries and brings solidarity and shared identity, the death of tyranny and exploitation. Knowing that all things are variations of the one thing, inseparable and always *relative* in their differences, is the saving truth of Spirit. Treat all as you’d treat yourself for, ultimately, all are versions of yourself. They *are* you, in their irreducible essence. This is the hidden heart of the Golden Rule. It is the *Spiritual Rule*.”

“Yes,” Kuato again agrees. “The revelations of... the spiritual philosopher. Hamilton, like his ilk and... their fabricated robotic disease... are destined to... consume themselves.”

“Wait,” Persephone suddenly becomes excited, “what do you mean by that?! The Avant Garde is consuming itself?!”

“You shall see... my... good-looking young friend. You are here... for the boy. Yes?”

“Neo, yes, you’ve seen him?!” Persephone asks. She jumps to her feet, her excitement skyrocketing, her heart shot into overdrive. Harvey, too, becomes animated at this news, torn from his torpor. But he finds himself too weak to stand, his legs giving out.

“Yes, my dear,” Bona Dea responds, taking her by the hand. “Artemis tracked him crossing the river into the city about a week ago. I believe she remains in contact with him. She tells us that he’s fine and poses no danger to us, and we trust her judgment.”

Kuato again nods his agreement.

“Where is he?!” Persephone demands.

“He’s on the other side of the river, in what remains of the forest fighting to renew itself,” Bona Dea replies. “Artemis!,” she yells towards a nearby firepit, where the young blonde sits brooding over the flames. “Would you come here please, my dear?”

With easy athletic grace, Artemis rises and approaches.

“Please tell them of the boy. Tell them your story.”

“About Max?!” Artemis asks.

“He told you his name?!” Persephone asks in surprise. “Why would he do that? He never told anyone his given name.”

“This is... his mother,” Kuato interjects.

Artemis becomes nervous. She stares at Persephone, seeing her in a new light. “Good to meet you,” she awkwardly manages.

“What story?!” Persephone demands. “Tell me, please!”

“He found his way around The Anarchist’s camp at night,” Artemis begins. “I left the others on duty to continue guarding our border and tracked him through the edges of our territory. I almost stopped him, but something told me not to. I sensed that he had some purpose that was more important than that compelling most; something I should permit; so I followed him. There was a raging storm that day. Visibility was poor, and I almost had to ditch my boat and jump in after him when he fell into the rushing river, but he washed up downstream on the opposite bank and didn’t see me.”

“I followed him all the way through the concrete ruins and craters to the place they once called Forest Park, where we often hunt. He entered a large crater site scattered with debris, then disappeared through some sort of concealed entryway. I found the door, but I couldn’t get it open. I waited for hours, but he didn’t come out. So I hid myself in some brush. Eventually I fell asleep.”

“Dawn was drawing near when the lightning storm jolted me awake,” she continues. “I could see that the door was still closed, so I rolled over to go back to sleep. That’s when I heard it. This... strange sound, unlike anything that I’d ever heard before. Something... unnatural. It reminded me of those old radios, the sound they make when they’re searching for a signal. It was faint and far off at first, but soon became louder and closer. It was just becoming bright enough outside for me to see when I spotted something in the sky coming from the direction of the sound.”

“It was this black, waving cloud, like a dense smoky wind in the air, coming right at me. It was like a flock of sparrows, but much... thicker; much more dense. The rainstorm was still brewing, accompanied by rapid strikes of lightning. And every time the lightning struck the strange flock changed course and seemed to chase it, only to give up and resume its course in the next moment.”

“Then more waves started coming in from other directions; from *all* directions. And suddenly the waves were everywhere, mixing together. There was so much of it that I could no longer tell that it was dawn. It was blackening the sky, condensing around every lightning strike, filling the air with that dreadful noise. It became so loud that I had to cover my ears, but the sound kept rising. It was so bad that I feared that my eardrums would burst. It was the Avant Garde, but far more of it than I’d thought could be possible. It was like it must have been before, when it ate the city.”

“The first wave slammed into Max’s hidden door, briefly slowing the swarm before it broke through and disappeared down that rabbit hole of his. Then there was silence. Seconds later the rest of the amassing Garde fell from the sky, mingling with the rain. Some of it fell on my skin, burning me. I just sat there in shock for a while, unable to move. I couldn’t believe what I’d just experienced.”

“Eventually I worked up the courage to approach the door that had blocked me before. It was gone. The frame was emanating heat. I entered into a long hallway covered with what looked like fine gray sand. That’s how it looked. Metallic sand. And it got thicker, stacked higher and higher as I went further in. I was wading through it. Then I had to crawl on it to keep from sinking into it. It was like crawling along the sand of the river bank on a red-hot day.”

“By the time I got to the room at the end of the hall the sand was almost halfway up the wall. I almost left, because I didn’t think anyone could survive that. Then I heard something. Rustling. Movement. That’s when I saw something pop open, and Max struggle his way out of a container that had been buried under the dead Garde. He was afraid of me at first, but soon we were talking.”

I remember he said: “It’s over. This was its last network.”

“I tried to get him to come with me. To meet Kuato and everyone. But he refused. He seemed... sad. Downtrodden. I’ve visited him a few times since then. Brought him food and water.”

“You have to take me to him!,” Persephone demands.

Artemis looks at Kuato, awaiting permission. Persephone looks from Artemis, to Kuato, to Harvey, who looks on the verge of collapsing into the fire, an oddly contemplative look upon his face.

“Or *you* do, Harvey!,” Persephone says, raising her voice. “After all, it’s *your* house she’s talking about!”

“I...” Harvey begins, unable to get it out.

“Artemis here will take you, my dear,” Bona Dea says. “But

please, not now. In the morning. It's late. You've all been through a horrible ordeal today, and you need food and rest. Besides, your son has been there for some time now. One more night won't hurt. And traveling into the city at night is too dangerous. Bands still move through there sometimes, seeking supplies and... to make mischief."

Persephone considers resisting for a moment, Kuato eyeing her intently. But soon she relents, huffing and sitting back down.

"Good," Bona Dea responds before rising to her feet and walking to another fire, whereupon she engages a group of women.

Not five minutes pass before three teenage girls approach, none older than eighteen. Two carry packed platters of food, while the other bears a large gourd containing a beverage of some sort. Walking straight up to Jackrabbit, they say nothing but, taking him by the arm, gesture for him to follow. Jackrabbit looks at Kato.

"Don't look at me," Kato replies with a knowing smile.

Jackrabbit is led away. Soon Hunter too is approached and led away. Then Kato, who looks to Persephone, but, like the smoke spewing from the crackling wood, her presence is unfixed, her mind drifting. Later, a series of handsome young men approach and attempt to proposition her and Counselor, but none are successful.

Persephone scarcely acknowledges their presence, while Counselor more politely waves them off, citing her wound and saying she's not up for it. Harvey, too, refuses company, a pampered prince now thoroughly diminished, refusing to leave Persephone's side. Kuato sits beside them, staring into the fire as if reading the future in flame.

32

“Four women in one night!” Jackrabbit gushes. “Talk about a silver lining to the end of the world!”

“Yes, we’re all very happy for you Jack, I’m sure,”
Counselor deadpans.

The group of seven is led by Artemis downhill towards the river and the immense scar of the great, ruined city beyond.

“Merlin’s dwelling is just up ahead,” Artemis informs them. “I assume your healer is still there, if you wish to bring her along.”

“She better be okay,” Counselor half-threatens. “I should’ve never let her wander off to meet some stranger alone.”

“She’ll be fine,” Artemis responds. “Merlin is a bit of an eccentric, to be sure, but he’s a good man.”

Unable to subdue his excitement, Jackrabbit speaks back up: “How many did you two have?,” he inquires of his two male companions. “Kato?! Hunter?! C’mon guys, speak up!”

Hunter, grinning ever so slightly, says nothing.

“Gentlemen don’t brag about such things,” Kato says. “As endangered a species as the gentleman is these days.”

“An endangered species even before The Great Reset, I’d say,” Counselor replies. “You and Hunter may be among the last.”

“You know I love you Jack,” Kato continues. “And you’re young, but I find that it’s mostly insecurity and inexperience that compels a person’s braggadocio in such cases. Some would even attach a degree of dishonor to the recounting of such experiences.”

“*Dishonor?! What does honor mean in times like these?!*,” Jackrabbit replies, indignantly incredulous.

“Everything,” Hunter contends, cool and flat.

“It’s the lack of honor which led to these times, my young friend,” Kato asserts. “And it’s a lack of honor, and the lack of conviction and resolve from the otherwise honorable, which threatens to perpetuate humankind’s current plight. It was once said that ‘all it takes for evil to prevail is for good people to do nothing.’ It’s the same with the poem by Polly that I read to you last night, in

The Anarchist camp, referencing Sitting Bull's two dogs."

"Be careful which one you feed. I fed the wrong one much of my previous life, being successfully indoctrinated into conventional society and its prevailing conservative values, and thereby equating success and class with wealth, power and possession. But I always knew in my heart that true class is inseparable from an honorable mandate that is typically mutually-exclusive with the ego-driven quest to quell insecurity at all costs, including the cost of upkeeping lies placed in the position of truth. Such a drive, in turn, tends to overlap with the covetousness, hoarding, unsustainable waste and divisiveness bound-up in conservative ideas of class and success."

"There's no heart, no love or spiritual truth, involved in satisfying the insatiability of that dog," Kato continues. "It's only when my mind met with my heart that I began to restore my honor. That, in fact, is what I believe honor means. It's your mind recognizing the wisdom and righteousness of the heart and thereby being compelled to act. Rather than being in conflict with it; rather than the heart being at war with the corrupted mind and its insecure ego. Comporting oneself honorably comes from an agreement and collaboration of heart and mind, of Spirit and consciousness, thereby directing one's actions; the cooperative alignment of heart, body and mind, the inseparable components of what I call The Trinity of Self. And it's only when thereby honor-bound that we can feel at peace."

“Well said,” Hunter agrees.

“It’s just sex, damn…” Jackrabbit retorts, deflated.

“Nothing is *just* anything, my friend. Everything connects to everything else, and our thoughts and ideas have great power in precipitating our actions and everything that we influence. But I don’t mean to rain on your parade. I’m glad you had a good time.”

“And Kuato and Bona Dea will be very glad if you were successful,” Artemis adds.

“I’m sure I was,” Jackrabbit grins.

“Here’s Merlin’s place,” Artemis informs them upon coming into a clearing, the river’s edge just in view near the base of the hill.

The modest, roughly-shod abode and its cultivated adjoining grounds stand out in the struggling terrain surrounding it. An assortment of flowers and herbs grow upon it, accompanied by miniature shrines composed of natural materials gathered from nearby, each seemingly dedicated to some mysterious force or deity. Vines climb the outer walls of the dwelling, as well as the brick of the opening of the well dug into one side of the plot. Centered upon

the roof is an open space with a removable cover, currently removed. Smoke rises through it, permeating the air with a sickly-sweet scent.

“Honestly,” Counselor says, “I don’t think I can imagine Mana setting up her own home any differently. I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s been transfixed by this Merlin already.”

On cue Mana exits the blood-red-dyed door. She has a broad smile on her face and, approaching them, gives each a warm hug.

“Good night?!” Kato wonders with a little laugh.

“It was quite... magical,” Mana snorts, slightly embarrassed.

“There’s a lot of that going around,” Counselor chuckles, pleased to see that her friend’s not only safe, but in good spirits.

“Now that everyone’s been sufficiently relieved of their stress, can we *please* see to my son?!” Persephone beseeches. “I’m sure his father is equally worried about him,” she adds sarcastically, looking at Harvey, who scowls and drops his head, saying nothing.

“Yes, you can all meet Merlin some other time,” Artemis assures them.

Soon they've retrieved a rowboat from its concealing shrubbery and are making their way across the Willamette, already fast receding after the recent rains. On the other side they climb the embankment and run face first into the decimation wrought by man and the rebelling planet, responding to one species' depredations and uninhibited endangerment as any organism would: as if to a virus.

What was called 'climate change' was but the built-in immune response of an immense, imperiled creature, compelled through its equal-and-opposite reaction to violently force a corrective rebalancing of its systems, thereby attempting to repel and starve the pathogen of its strength and numbers by destabilizing its environment and depleting the resources upon which it depended. And, as always, that pathogen reacted violently, clambering to corral and consolidate what remained of the assets of the decimated host within its own petty factions, further killing itself off in the conflict.

Entering the remains of Downtown Portland, Kato is overwhelmed. All of these stripped financial buildings seem so ironic considering how they'd once been the bases from which the wealthy plundered the planet, stripping families of their wealth and homes whenever the irresponsible risks of their rapaciousness and their plutocratically-purchased removal of popularly-protective regulation forced too much hot air into another too-big-to-burst bubble. The cycle of ballooning and bursting bubbles was endlessly

renewed, with those the least responsible always paying the highest price for the pop. Kato had once been among the *most* responsible.

The bubble burst twice more in the 2020s. And again there were bailouts paid for by the public, though more discreetly than before. And again there were justifications made and scapegoats strung up for the public to cast their wrathful stones at. It was always *individuals* that must be blamed, for anything *but* the systemic causes could be permitted correction. And all the while Kato was right in the middle of it all, working his way up the hierarchy in one of the largest, most profitable pillars of Portland's financial sector.

Internally, however, he'd long been troubled, beginning even before falling into finance. He'd been unable to subdue recurring questions, such as: What, exactly, is *in* a profit? What, exactly, is entailed in a company being successful in the stock market? Is the success of a company in the stock market an indication of its ability to successfully exploit weaknesses in the consumer, worker and natural resource markets? Who truly faces financial risk when the *vast* majority of irresponsibly-derived profits are handed to the select minority able to insulate themselves from such risk? He saw hard-working families stripped of their homes and savings, dreams dashed, forced to start over, all as his higher-ups glad-handed and hobnobbed over ever-increasing 'returns' at extravagant celebrations across Portland and the country's swankiest clubs, hotels and resorts.

It took years of gradually rising consciousness of his role in the evil effects caused by conservative ‘success,’ and of the mounting pains of suppressing his conscientious sense of honor, to awaken him to his convictions, and to the imperative of reversing the conserved course. Kato’s role in that reversal came to him on the heels of the most vivid dream he’d ever had, a dream that sat in the pit of his stomach long after, a somatic symptom of moral sickness.

In his dream he was like a ghost, moving about a world of his own making, unseen and absorbing the consequences. He descended upon a homeless family living in squalor on Portland’s filthy, dripping-wet streets. He felt their misery; their embarrassment at having to beg in order to survive. He felt the father’s shame; the mother’s humiliation and heartbreak at watching her ragged children survive on scraps. He saw their mortgage being signed, the mother and father placing it in their safe in the home in which they joyfully planned their future, imagining their kids happily married, well-educated and established in fruitful, fulfilling careers.

He saw the banker holding their promissory note. He saw thousands of these notes stacked one on top of the other, condensed into investment accounts. He saw the owners of those accounts betting upon the economy as cavalierly as a wealthy gambling addict bets on horses, safely ensconced within one of their many homes

high upon the hills, overlooking oceans, golf courses and The Vegas Strip. He saw the cash they pulled from the ATM, stepping over the homeless family while approaching the bank on the city sidewalk. He saw it all come together before being beamed into his computer, becoming a line on his LCD monitor: Just Business Incorporated.

And there he sat, at his desk, eyeing the line, calculating the odds in his five-thousand-dollar designer suit, hair neatly coiffed, obliviously unconcerned for the family lying in filth far below.

Waking up in a pool of sweat, he knew nothing would ever be the same. 'I'm finally awake,' he'd thought at the time. He almost quit that very day, but decided to stay and study his new adversary, the great beast he'd long been brainwashed to feed. Considering his position granted him insider knowledge, like a man suddenly waking up in the lion's den, he regarded his situation as an opportunity to learn from the enemy. That's when he started writing what one publisher would call his 'manifesto:' *Interwoven Oppression*.

He excluded nothing. The total chain of causality. The environmental and human costs. The legal bribery of the politicians who disable the popularly-protective regulation, bribed by way of campaign finance, lobbyist loopholes and post-political-career promises. He even developed a core concept he called 'quality-of-life utility value,' using it to illustrate how the global consolidation

of wealth, property and resources minimizes this value, an inherently dishonorable, disturbing fact rendered particularly unjustifiable by the greatly compounding fact that the ultra-wealthy gained very little, if any, increase in quality of life by continuing their consolidation unabated, all while that family on the street would see *massive* quality of life increases from the smallest fraction of what the ultra-wealthy shit away on unnoticed luxuries every day.

The book garnered some notice from left-leaning readers, adding, he'd hoped, a bit more fuel to the fiery rage rising from the more aware activists, with this rage soon spilling into the furor over increasing climate volatility. Very soon, however, the world would have more pressing concerns than the theoretical particulars of one thinker's 'idealistic naïveté,' as his work was sometimes derided. Yet he learned not to be rankled by such dismissals, gradually considering the 'idealist' to be the only one courageous enough to search and fight for the heights of humanity. But perhaps it would first have to fall to its depths. And here they were, passing through those depths, jumping over heaps of the great, buckled edifices of high finance, all sprinkled with the fine metallic sand of the last ditch effort of its former beneficiaries to retain control at all costs.

When finally they arrive at Forest Park's remade woods, Kato estimates that it now possesses but a third of the biodiversity to which it could once lay claim. Half a mile later they approach the

former tech magnet's deconstructed fortress. It's now but twisted, torched fragments scattered across a deep crater, the result of a missile fired from a drone sent to prevent the power locked in its depths from falling into enemy hands. Another reminder of the desperate attempt to retain control that almost ended all of life.

Artemis leading the way, calling out to Neo all the while with the familiarity of a friend, they proceed down the hall and enter the saferoom. Most of the gray dust has been swept to the sides and is now lining the walls, creating a clean path to the command center. And there he is: Neo, unconscious, lying beside an empty pill bottle.

33

“He’s overdosed!,” Persephone exclaims, falling to her son’s side and slapping him about the face in an attempt to revive him.

Rushing forward, Counselor checks for a pulse, then announces: “He’s alive, but his heartbeat is faint.” Picking up the pill bottle, she examines it: ‘OxyContin, 80 mg.’ “This is very strong stuff. Essentially the equivalent of encapsulating heroin.”

Reaching into her ever handy satchel of natural medicines, Mana reports: “I gathered this in Merlin’s garden just this morning, around dawn.” She pulls a large spike-shaped panicle of blue flowers from the satchel. Breaking off a sizeable piece of the flowered spike, she plugs her nose, stuffs it into her mouth and starts chewing on it, her mastication and saliva initiating the decomposition process, activating the plant’s compounds. She hands a similarly-sized wad to Counselor who, grimacing, complies, shoving it into her mouth and beginning to chew. Counselor coughs and gags, but holds the wad in.

“Get his head open, I need to spit this down his throat,” Mana manages through the mouthful. Persephone and Kato pry Neo’s mouth open. “And tilt his head back,” she adds, appearing on the

verge of puking, her face telegraphing nausea. In the next moment she leans over and spits a large batch of saliva and deconstructed plant particles down Neo's throat. He scrunches up his face and shakes his head slightly, but otherwise remains unresponsive.

Mana points at Counselor, then at Neo, beckoning her to do the same. She complies, and Neo again scrunches his face and shakes his head, this time more violently than before. Then, in one motion, he shoots up at the waist and simultaneously pukes out of his mouth and nose. On all fours, he coughs violently for a minute, clearing his throat, nose and stomach, Persephone patting his back.

“You're okay now baby, you're okay.”

“Blue Vervain,” Mana informs them. “It's emetic. Meaning that it induces vomiting,” she adds, spitting out the remainder of the masticated mix of herb and saliva at the same time as Counselor who, less practiced at experimenting with unpalatable medicinal plants, falls to her knees and, conceding the fight, expels everything. Gagging and attempting not to hurl herself, Mana says: “It's also great for stress, anxiety and the nervous system. But I think its taste accounts for much of its emetic action. It's foul to the tongue.”

“Most... definitely... foul,” Counselor concurs between spits.

“We need to get him to Merlin,” Mana urges. “He’ll be able to fully revive him and set him upon the healing path. I just met him, their healer, but I’m already convinced that he’s the real thing; a true wizard; genuinely connected to and empowered by nature.”

Ushering Neo back through the deconstructed, carved-up city proves an arduous undertaking, requiring the group to painstakingly plod around and over seemingly endless piles of rubble. Even with the guidance of Artemis, the difficulty of their egress far surpasses the ingress, as they’re forced to take wider paths and greater precautions while circumventing blind spots foreshadowing potential danger. Held up by Persephone and Kato, with Harvey’s hand on his back, Neo mutters incoherently, though Persephone swears she hears him repeatedly slur ‘Artemis.’ He collapses a few times, nearly to his knees, forcing his supporters to pull him back to his failing feet.

Harvey remains silently servile, even when berated by Persephone: “This better not be your fault! All that money, who knows what he was tempted by! Oh, I’m *sure* you allotted the time and concern necessary to keep him away from this shit,” she adds sarcastically. “No, you probably set him up with an amenable doctor, telling yourself: at least he’s not on the streets searching for his fix.”

Neo shakes his head ‘no’ as if following the conversation, yet

is unable to manage more than the occasional, indistinct mumble.

Little else is said during the slow, dragging journey back towards The Keepers. At one point Mana briefly breaks the silence, commenting on the land's reclamation: "Look," she says. "Look at nature taking back the land. Look at its resilience. It has dispelled the pestilence, and now invites back the deer, the birds, the pollen-distributing, propagating bees and butterflies. And all the while it's whispering to us: 'This didn't have to be, my children. And let it not happen again. For though other lifeforms shall survive, your own will end.'" Kato and company are surprised by this rare sharing of thoughts from Mana, who's known for her verbal parsimony.

By the late afternoon they've hauled Neo back to the river, Merlin's shack almost visible at the top of the rise on the other side. Persephone loses her grip on her son while attempting to pull him out of the boat, and he falls face first into the river. He barely reacts to the plunge, only coughs and continues to shake his head.

Spilling through Merlin's doorway, the wizard appears the part. Disheveled, he's covered in matted hair, including long hair hanging from his head to his shoulders and sometimes falling into and concealing his keen, nervously darting eyes. He displays an equally long, stark black beard streaked with grey. Standing over a makeshift cauldron emitting a curiously pungent odor, he stirs the

immense black pot with a carved limb near half his body length.

He's surrounded by containers foraged from the deconstructed urban setting, housing every manner of herb. Tables abound, each supporting numerous such containers plus assorted books, scribbled pages, pouches and packs. Dried plants hang from the rafters with such density that the hole in the roof is concealed.

He turns around wildly upon their invasion of his work of wizardry, looking like an absent-minded professor crossed with a mangy mutt that's been forced to bite, scrap and claw for survival.

"Poisoning!" Mana half shouts, her presence noticeably curbing Merlin's annoyance at the disturbance. "He's vomited several times, but doesn't seem able to fully come to."

Narrowing his eyes, Merlin surveys the rest of the group.

"These are my friends," Mana says, "the ones that I told you about. And this is the boy's mother."

"Please help him sir, I'll do anything!" Persephone pleads.

"Lay him on my bed over there." Merlin speaks excitedly, a nervous ball of energy. With surprising agility for his age and thin

build, he darts about the space, searching for something. “Dammit, dammit, dammit...” he repeats upon the disappointment of every container. “It’s here somewhere... ah, here it is!” he exclaims upon inhaling from and fingering one container. “I call it Revival Tea.”

“What’s in it?!” Mana curiously inquires.

“I don’t remember it all. Yarrow for one,” he replies.

Grabbing a handful of the curious concoction, he dumps it into a secondary pot nearby, water already simmering, set upon a rough wooden shelf holding the pot above low flames. As he begins stirring the pot with a smaller stick set beside it, Persephone, looking at her enfeebled, pale-skinned son shaking in bed, is unable to hold her maternal fury back any longer, and suddenly flies into a rage.

“Where the fuck did he get the drugs?!”

“There was nothing like that in the safe room, I swear Jen...”
Harvey mutters weakly.

“Then how the hell...?!”

“It’s my fault!,” Artemis cries, face reddening. Neo immediately begins shaking his head ‘no,’ but remains unable to

speak. “But I didn’t know it was poison, I swear,” she continues. “We don’t do drugs like this in our camp. I’ve heard others speak of the rampant pharmaceutical abuse and narcotic addiction once used to conceal the misery of the dead society, but I’ve never seen it. He convinced me to take him on a scavenging run through the ruins, and I saw him digging through a pile of bottles. He said it was medicine, that he needed it. I didn’t know... I *should’ve* known. I’m sorry.”

She appears on the verge of tears. Mana consoles her, rubbing her back. Persephone softens significantly, offering a quiet: “It’s okay, Artemis. I’m sure there’s no way you could’ve known.”

Still shaking his head, Neo fights for the strength to speak, becoming semi-intelligible: “No... Not her fault... It was me.”

“It’s okay sweetie... It’s okay,” Persephone whispers, placing her hand on his forehead. “He’s burning up!”

Dipping a large ladle into the pot, Merlin scoops up a portion of the potion and pours it into a ceramic cup before very carefully conveying it over to the bed, as if handling an unstable explosive. He begins blowing on it, gesturing for the others to sit Neo up in bed. Handing the cup to Persephone, she looks at him worriedly.

“It’s okay,” Merlin says reassuringly.

Neo fights it at first, but, as Persephone refuses to back down, he soon relents. He tries to spit it up, but Merlin commands: “Drink all of it! All of it!” His voice firm and confident, Neo is compelled to comply, gulping down the disagreeable drink. Merlin snatches the empty cup and goes to refill it as Neo immediately responds, becoming more animated, shaking his head more vigorously, his eyes rolling side to side, opening and closing.

“The infusion will increase circulation and induce perspiration,” Merlin says while refilling the cup. “It might be stressful for him, but he looks young and healthy enough. Assuming he harbors no cardiac defect, he should be able to take it. It will help him expel the contaminant and speed the recovery of his constitution,” he adds while handing Persephone the refill.

“Artemis,” Neo coughs, reaching out his hand. Persephone, surprised, stares at her. Artemis hesitates, then approaches and takes his hand. “I’m sorry I... did this,” he laments. “It was stupid. A moment of weakness. I won’t do it again, I swear.”

Artemis scowls, again appearing on the verge of tears.

“You two are... *together?*,” Persephone asks.

“I love her,” Neo states. Artemis just stares at him in solemn silence.

The room goes quiet for a time. Persephone continues her attempts to affectionately engage Neo, who resists, pulling Artemis ever closer, whispering emotionally to her. Before long Artemis lies beside and cradles him. Persephone, noticeably pained, backs away. Thanking Merlin, she walks over and takes Kato by the hand before laying her head on his shoulder, sobbing softly and seeking support.

“Please, make yourselves at home,” Merlin invites, moving back to the center cauldron. Resuming his stirring, he makes occasional dips and takes sips from his ladle, pondering the brew before scurrying around in search of other ingredients to throw in, sneaking furtive glances at Mana all the while.

Grinning, Mana whispers: “He’s kind of cute, isn’t he? His steadfast earnestness? He’s obsessed with creating the perfect concoction. It’s his version of the quest for the Holy Grail.”

Eyeing him with intrigue, and encouraged by her dear friends’ interest, Counselor asks him: “So then, what’s your story?”

34

A bright young chemistry student as an undergrad at the California Institute of Technology before moving on to the University of California at San Francisco to study pharmaceutical sciences, Antoine Virtutis, now Merlin, long believed in the power of medicine to heal. Yet, as a youngster following his celebrated surgeon mother around the hospitals of the Bay Area, this belief was tempered by his being perpetually perplexed as to how so many people could suffer so much in such an advanced world; a world of scientific progress teeming with technological wonder that somehow still couldn't rescue its people from the harrows of bodily betrayal.

He was very attached to his mother, seeing in her an angelic Mother Teresa figure, one who was constantly pained by her inability to overcome so many of the conditions with which she was beset on behalf of her patients. Unable to maintain the so-called 'professional distance' businesses impress upon their employees, mostly to minimize the legal costs entailed in doing otherwise, she became emotionally connected to many of them, and thereby absorbed their suffering. It whittled her away ever so gradually which, due to his immense love for her, distressed Antoine in turn.

He dreamed of attaining a level of ability which seemed beyond his mother's reach: that of a true healer with the power to eradicate disease, correct unnatural imbalances and prevent the suffering he saw *before* it reached the critical need for surgery. He fell in love with every myth involving the superhuman power to save others, from Superman to Apollo to *The Green Mile's* John Coffey.

Burgeoning young Merlin sensed that there was power in the world just waiting to be unearthed and employed in clearing the hospitals of their wretchedly ill, bent and broken. As an adolescent, he was particularly fond of the animated film *The Sword in the Stone*, and how, with the help of good-natured wizardry and its tapping into the undiscovered magic of the world, all things are possible, even for the meek, unassuming and seemingly feeble.

As a child sitting in the swirls and bubbling warmth of the bathtub, it fast became his favorite place to play. His mother once told him that he'd carry on and on to her while playing with his action figures in the tub, gibberishly narrating complex plots before he could speak. The animated narratives almost always involved someone being irrevocably sick or injured, seeking a miraculous cure. He'd then move around to the many bottles of soap, shampoo, conditioner and essential oils ringing the tub, mixing them in various proportions in a cup, then adding trickles of water from the spout until the brew began bubbling over. The elixirs healed the agonized

through ritualized dunking's of his fraught figurines into the cup, else by pouring the brew over their prostrate plastic forms, instantly reviving them. The real world, however, proved far more trying.

Extremely well-compensated as a developer of pharmaceutical 'medicines,' he soon found it impossible to shake the sense that what he was supporting and personally profiting from *was* the suffering, not its cessation. Everything that he and his colleagues concocted was a means to alleviate symptoms, not enact a cure.

Worse yet, this alleviation came at incalculable cost to its consumers, not just financially but in terms of side effects, dependency and gradual debilitation. These maladies snowballed with the patient's other health issues to create a business model that *was financially* sustainable for his company, but unsustainable for the company's patrons, all of whom were ever more on the leash, bound to their prescriptions whilst increasingly undermining their own health and their body's ability to heal itself. Their vitality eroded, they were robbed of the capacity to create and maintain the stable foundations required to build their highest-reaching lives. He eventually came to regard most primary practitioners as glorified, overpaid drug-dealers complicit in creating a nation of enfeebled addicts dependent, like himself, upon the concealment of their ills.

Suffering from a debilitating neurological condition which no

doctor or specialist could definitively diagnose, let alone successfully treat, he was forever subject to the resultant inability to feel comfortable in his own skin, giving way to constant anxiety and, finally, a crushing depression that saw him missing ever more work. He was on a series of nerve-sensation-inhibitors, anti-anxiety and anti-depression drugs, feeling his paltry existence, unceasing internal stress and lack of fulfillment pushing him towards an early grave.

He could barely stand to be out amongst people. His unnatural state of enervation was so bad that staying at home watching Netflix became his existence. Yet, like anyone both inquisitive and feeling like a perpetually-pounded nail, he was compelled to seek his own salvation. After watching most every health and nutrition documentary that he could find, he finally came to grips with the disturbing truth: *Greed destroys good health.*

The healthcare business model isn't about curing, but about forever tightening the leash. Prior to The Great Reset, three-quarters of the profits of the heinously profitable healthcare industry were based on lifestyle choices; on poor nutritional habits and overstressed, sedentary lives devoid of that which strengthens the body, mind and spirit. Conventional healthcare's answer was to conceal this fact behind pharmaceutical masks hiding and thereby preventing the sick from ever understanding and standing face-to-face with the true causes of their pain and dysfunction; an incitation

which must be faced by anyone who hopes to overcome their ills.

This insidious strategy of pharmacological obfuscation and dependency paired perfectly well with western society's forever distracting instant gratification culture, one which few overcame. Most westerners are born in a maze of pathways forever diverting them from the deeper, healing, empowering truths, instead being directed towards the easy, amplified sensations which only further inhibit their ability to create their greatest forms of self. Forever hide the symptoms, conceal the cause and keep the patients fat, ignorant and paying their way through beleaguered lives on their way towards early graves. *That* was the true nature and cost of making healthcare beholden to profit above people: sacrificing life on the altar of greed.

It soon began to infuriate him that *any* other pathway, including those laid-out by traditions based upon thousands of years of working *with* nature to actually resolve health issues, was deemed 'alternative.' And when he offered his ideas to his colleagues he was derided as 'cynical' and a 'conspiracy quack,' but, from the perspective of motive, means and opportunity, it all made perfect sense to him. And it wasn't just a modern-day phenomenon, but was inseparably tied to the historical pastime of preserving power.

Reading about the history of naturopathy, he discovered that 'witches' and 'wizards' only became associated with foulness and

the ‘dark, evil arts’ because the powers that they pulled from nature and used to heal the sick and empower the people threatened the Church’s authority. The Church had claimed a monopoly on the miraculous power to heal and fortify mind, body and spirit, paying no respect to and violently reacting out of an insecure defensiveness against powers innate to nature that belonged to no institution, but to life as a whole; powers *long*-preceding its falsely-assumed authority.

Modern herbal healers, nutritional therapists and anyone *not* tied to the owned-by-big-business FDA (which he’d find included the largely misinformed and misguided dietitian profession) became the modern day witches, their integrity impugned by official, greedy decree, reinforced through heavily financed propagandist smear campaigns. Yet Hippocrates knew better thousands of years before such imperious misdirection started to set shackles upon the people: “Let thy food be thy medicine, and thy medicine be thy food.”

Another quote from his documentary-consuming days repeated in Antoine’s head: “Give the body what it needs to heal, exclude all that which inhibits healing, and the body will heal itself.” But were the doctors saying this?! Of course not, for: “A patient cured is a customer lost.” The fast food pharmaceutical nation was *massively* profitable for the unscrupulous, corrupt profiteers dedicated to manipulating and exploiting human weakness, even as the cost to humanity paying for that unconscionable profit was

incalculably immense. *This* was the source of the suffering he'd seen so much of growing up, and which ground down his compassionate mother: *greed*. In this case, greed creating and perpetuating profitable unnaturality. And there was only one cure, a cure which would continually recur in his thinking thereafter: *return to nature*.

And return to nature he did. Having saved a small fortune from his short-lived, lucrative career as a pharmaceutical concealer, he vowed to become a nature-wielding healer. He sold his home in San Francisco and moved to the western foothills of Mount Hood outside Portland, purchasing a small home on twenty arable acres.

That's where he found himself, cultivating an abundance of nutritionally and medicinally valuable plants while uncovering the truth that had literally been under his feet and casting its cool shade upon him his entire life: *nature is the true healer*. Nature knows no false, artificially-imposed separation of nutrition and medicine.

Those deserving of the moniker 'healer' are but Mother Nature's reverent allies, learning how to harness her innate force. Running in parallel with much of the most empowering principles, the answer was to *partner* with nature; with biology, botany and the nutritional and evolutionary sciences, humbly coming to understand and appreciate its bounty and working *with* it, rather than forcing yourself upon it, seeking to subdue it for short-sighted financial gain.

He studied natural healing extensively, making frequent forays to Mountain Rose Herbs in Eugene, where he felt like a kid in a candy store. He gradually weaned himself off of his medications, realizing that they were only diminishing his body's ability to perform the same functions, and that his depression was a product of his unhealthy habits, stress, anxiety, unfulfilling life and failure to adequately support his body's innate vitalizing, fortifying functions.

He became ever more certain that most medications work *against* their consumers, pointing them away from the source of their suffering at incalculable financial and physiological cost. Amounting to exorbitant distraction and misdirection, they steered the patient away from seeking an actual cure while diminishing his or her health and creating a costly dependency that was only in the interests of the immoral health business. Armed with the resultant indignancy, he began making connections to other types of medications, such as those regulating cholesterol and blood sugar, and soon saw that a combination of his garden's own herbs, a whole food diet focusing on raw, creatively-mixed fruits and vegetables supplemented with wild seafood, regular physical activity, nature immersion, a fulfilling social and sex life and the use of various stress-reducing techniques were the way to the cure not just for himself, but for most of the addicts compelled to patronize doctor's offices and pharmacies.

He spent near a decade that way, lost in his art, tuning himself intellectually and spiritually to the truth that the wise see no boundary set between nourishment and medicine; that they sense divinity in the fact that plant medicines derived naturally and benevolently in co-evolution with human beings and all animals over millions of years, and that, rather than unwisely attempting to isolate and extract plant medicines in a lab so that they may be patented and irresponsibly profited off of as corporate property, that these godly gifts contain synergistic sets of medicinal constituents meant to work together in concert to support healing and superior health.

As the world came crashing down around him he hardly seemed to notice, at least until it became ever more difficult to keep his plants alive and prevent the wildfires from invading his plot, one of which consumed much of Mount Hood's drying, thinning tinderbox of a forest. But he survived it all, even the blasts. By the time Bona Dea found him in his hideaway and convinced him to join The Keepers, he was playing Merlin again as if back in the bathtub, the nursery games having taken an adult form fused with mysticism.

Requesting his own space for focused cultivation and medicinal experimentation, they pointed him to the plot near the river. He proved himself quickly, thereafter being honored with the unofficial 'head healer' title, regularly sent food and helping hands whenever requested. And he paid them back in turn, seeing to every

physical ailment endured by his new family, of which there were many, saying a silent prayer to his mother with each small success.

That's how he came to be content amongst The Keepers, pleased to be able to pursue his own form of nature worship whilst providing an invaluable service to the good people around him.

“I've been missing only two things,” he finishes. “Romantic love and a worthy apprentice. And I may have finally found them both,” he adds with a reddening face, nervously beaming at Mana.

35

An hour after relating the story of the extinction of the Avant Garde to Persephone, Kato, Merlin, Artemis and company in Merlin's home, Neo's recovered to the point where he's ready to tell Kuato and The Keepers. It's mid-evening, and the group meal is soon to be served, the fresh deer and trout roasting on a series of spits, the rosemary-seasoned potatoes boiling in many massive pots.

"They were doomed from the start," Neo begins. "They began eating away at the infrastructure that gave us command of them, and their programming wasn't specific enough as to what, and how much, could be consumed for energy and expansion without risking their continuity. We... *It was made in too great of haste.*"

"In desperation," Harvey quietly adds.

"I saw it coming back then, actually, the day of the missile strike," Neo continues. "I saw the need for revision; that the system was inevitably going to collapse in upon itself and implode. But then I lost the ability to connect to it..." He glances angrily at his mother.

"Why didn't you say anything to us?!", Persephone asks, half

out of anger, half out of hurt.

“Because I was on the other side, *mother!*”

Persephone’s eyes narrow, then begin to mist. “Side?! Other *side!* I’m your god-damn mother Max!”

Kuato, with a steely focus on the story and the interactions of the newcomers, absorbing all available information, interrupts:

“So then... what happened... that day? Why... the great swarm... reported by Artemis?”

Neo hesitates. Looking away and rubbing his forehead, he answers: “I had limited control there, at the house. Very little power remained in our energy reserves. So I... sent the AG on a suicide mission, to end it once and for all...” He looks around him at The Keepers, their numbers growing as they gather around to listen.

“It was out of control,” he continues, raising his voice. “It had become a threat to all of us; to all of life. So I programmed it to attack its last surviving mainframe... Now it’s gone forever!”

The Keepers murmur amongst themselves, most expressing a mix of fascination and excitement, some eyeing Neo with suspicion.

“A hero... then,” Kuato halfheartedly offers.

“Well... I don’t know about *that*,” Neo answers, feigning humility.

The meal turns into a celebration, the verification of the vanquished Garde too sweet not to savor. Persephone repeatedly attempts to engage Neo as he retells his tale and tries to ingratiate himself with The Keepers. Eventually she gives up, retreating to and standing beside her assigned shelter, watching her son from afar.

Kuato, appearing ill at ease, positions himself just outside the main hub of activity so as to grant himself the best possible vantage point from which to scrupulously survey the scene. As the crowd thins, many of the revelers returning to their respective abodes, he calls Artemis over for a discreet discussion. She appears offended at first, almost indignant, but soon begrudgingly nods her head.

Another hour passes, the collective energy receding. Most have set off to slumber, the members of the perimeter guard heading out to change shifts with their comrades. Neo sits with his father beside a fading fire, Harvey looking as forlorn as ever.

Speaking in a low voice, Neo says: “I lied to them, Dad.

Well, I didn't tell them the *whole* truth, at least. I *did* know the Avant Garde was due to destroy itself, but the reason it swarmed in that day was actually to protect itself from *me*. It's a self-defense mechanism. It was reacting to me like a virus or intruder, because I was downloading its code onto an external drive. I knew that at the rate it was collapsing I didn't have much time, so my download just accelerated the inevitable. But Dad... *I got it*. I did just like you said: If anything goes wrong, preserve the code at all costs, you said, because we can always reboot the system somewhere else..." Neo stares at his father, becoming frustrated. "Dad! You hearing me...?!"

Harvey lowers his head slightly and begins shaking it side to side, as if to say 'no.'

"It's okay Dad. I can fix it. Make it perfect. We'll take all of it back, and more. We'll have complete control. Over *everything!*"

Harvey remains silent, continuing to shake his head.

"Did you hear what I said Dad?! Say something... What's wrong with you?!"

Looking around to assure that they're alone, Neo pulls the miniature external hard drive from a zipped-up pocket concealed within the lining of his jacket. "Look Dad, it's alive!"

Harvey turns his head to look as, in the same instant, a figure leaps from the shadows like a surreptitiously stalking panther lethally launching itself at its prey. Artemis seizes Neo by the wrist holding the drive, twisting his arm behind his back and pinning him to the turf. She holds him down with a knee, prying the drive from his hand. Harvey falls backwards off the log in fright as Persephone sprints forward, having witnessed the proceedings from afar.

“What the fuck?!” Persephone screams. “Let him up now!”

Kuato and Bona Dea emerge and gradually approach, slinking in from the shadows. “I said let go of him,” Persephone demands again, now with a fierce determination, standing face-to-face with Artemis, fists clenched. Artemis complies. Neo wriggles free and jumps to his feet, making awkward attempts to retrieve the drive, which Artemis deflects with ease. Persephone backs down from her, turning her attention towards her son, trying to pacify him.

Artemis looks at Kuato, who nods his head. She throws the drive into the fire. “No!,” Neo screams. Pushing Persephone away, he desperately attempts to retrieve the external hard drive from the flames, but Artemis kicks him away, and he lands back in the dirt.

“No, no, no... What the fuck did you just do!,” Neo

agonizes, as if having just experienced the deepest depths of tragedy. “Do you have any idea what you just did?! You stupid, stupid...”

But he can't finish his sentence, and Kuato speaks up:

“She just saved... us all... my boy. Including... you.”

Persephone attempts to help Neo to his feet, but he shoves her away, screaming: “This is *your* fault! Why couldn't you just leave Dad and I alone?! We were fine! Before this war and all you damned hippies killing everyone to preserve your precious dying flowers and endangered birds and shit! Your weakness and jealousy have cost us everything! Your jealousy at real men like Dad! Look at him!” He points his finger at Harvey, who looks away. “He used to be a great man! A master of his own destiny! Now he can barely speak! And the last chance for us to control our fate is lost forever!”

Artemis, overcome with emotion, turns to walk away. Neo reaches for her arm, but she slaps his hand away and, turning briefly, says: “You're not who I thought you were.” Then she disappears.

Hanging his head, Neo starts to sob. Soon his head shoots up and, scanning his surroundings, many of The Keepers now standing witness, his sorrow flips into fury, and he screams: “Fuck this!” Turning, he runs off in the direction of the anarchist camp.

“No, Max!” Persephone screams, instantly running after him.

“Shit!” Kato mutters from his vantage point, sprinting after her, followed closely by Hunter. They disappear into the night.

36

Not a minute after the four's flight from sight, gunshots are sounded in the direction of their departure. The Keepers scramble for arms before taking up defensive positions, peering into the darkness.

“We have your people!,” comes a cry from beyond another minute later. “One of them is badly wounded! He won't last long without your attention! Give us Kuato and you can have them back! Otherwise, we'll kill them here and now! You have thirty seconds!”

The leaders of the camp, including Bona Dea and Artemis, come together behind their fortifications, debating as to the best course of action. “They're not even *our* people,” Bona Dea contends. “There's no way we're giving him up!”

“Wait!,” Artemis says, scanning her brethren. “Where *is* Kuato?!”

Everyone looks anxiously around for their leader, growing increasingly concerned at his absence. Suddenly Artemis announces:

“Wait, is that..?! *There* he is! What's he doing?!”

From the left flank Kuato, holding a torch in one hand and supporting himself with his staff in the other, ambles out, moving directly, yet ever so gradually, towards the threatening voice.

“Let them... go!,” he does his best to shout while walking. “And you can... have me!” He covers a considerable distance, then suddenly stops. From the fire of his torch the outlines of the others, all on their knees, one clutching his stomach, are barely visible. “I’ll... go no further... until you... let them go!”

Hamilton considers the situation for a moment, then says: “I’m a man of my word. Let them up.”

The four captives are permitted to rise from their knees. Kato, unable to stand on his own and bleeding badly from the stomach, is assisted to his feet by Hunter, a thin ribbon of blood trickling down his brow, and Persephone, who rises gingerly to her feet, half-hobbled. Neo stands and looks about uneasily, appearing both lost and terrified, uncertain what to do.

“Go!,” Hamilton commands them. “But slowly...”

The four begin moving back towards the camp and, in the same instant, Kuato continues shuffling forward, toward Hamilton

and his six men, who slowly begin to encircle him.

“No Kuato, don’t do it! Turn around now! We can’t let you do this!” Many amongst The Keepers call out in agonized fear, beginning to panic. Bona Dea gives the order to prepare to fire, but Kuato stops them, ceasing momentarily, turning and shouting:

“Yes you... can! It’s okay my... love! All of you... it’s okay! I’ve played my part! My role... ends! My suffering... over!”

As Hamilton’s men converge on Kuato, guns raised, Neo turns back around, as if refusing to reenter the camp. But Hunter will have none of it, snatching him violently by the arm and shoving him forward. As the howls of distress continue to rise from his people, Kuato is seized and pushed forcefully towards Hamilton who, smiling, menaces a machete. Kuato maintains his footing at first, but following a series of shoves from Hamilton’s men he falls forward, dropping his cane and torch to the delight of his antagonizers, who laugh sadistically. Barely able to rise back to his feet, he struggles to pick up the cane and torch, then continues clumsily forward.

“Oh my God!,” Merlin suddenly exclaims, coming to a realization while watching Kuato. “Is *that* what he wanted it for?!”

“The day of... your kind... is done!,” Kuato calls out in the

distance, the force of his words requiring his every last ounce of remaining strength. “The age of... the philosopher king... is upon us!” Hamilton’s men continue to cackle with glee. As they push him the final distance, Hamilton’s face suddenly switches from an expression of enthusiastic malice to the telegraphing of terror.

Reaching inside his cloak, Kuato pulls something out. His eyes wide, Hamilton lunges forward with his blade, but he’s too late. With his last breath Kuato cries: “Sic semper tyrannis!”

The explosion propels all eight of them off their feet. Kuato, Hamilton and four of his men are killed instantly, with the other two far enough away to be but knocked off their feet, left in a disoriented daze. They’re finished off by a salvo from The Keepers, their collective cries of anguish quieting the arrows’ piercing whistles.

Many a wail of dejection and fury fill the air, lingering for long after. The surviving foursome, far enough away not to have been harmed by the makeshift explosive concocted by the former chemist, are met with hostility by some, who immediately blame them for the loss of their beloved leader. But Bona Dea ultimately prevails, convincing the camp that Kuato had decided to make the sacrifice of his own free will, having seen the situation coming and requested the explosive ‘as an insurance policy’ days before.

Persephone and company carry Kato, bleeding badly from his abdomen, back to Merlin's dwelling. Neo acts as though he may flee again, but Artemis forces him forward, and this time Persephone doesn't resist his rough treatment. As they rush into Merlin's home to try to save Kato, Artemis slams the healer's door closed.

Suffused with sorrowful fury, she agonizes in wonderment:
'The war is over. The Garde is gone. Why'd he have to die?!'

Epilogue

The nature of self-destruction was built into the Avant Garde, assured through a chain reaction triggered by its primary programming. It was coded to sustain and grow itself at any and all cost, and, thus, to always increase its usefulness to its masters. This foremost function, in turn, demanded the destruction of anything daring to resist its reproduction. And with insufficient self-regulation built into its expanding network, it lacked the restraint required of its own continuity, or the continuity of the planet off of which it fed.

Requiring ever more to fulfill its mandate to multiply, it successfully met that mandate, unreflectively stripping the world bare. It expanded outwards from its epicenters within the densest human populations of the planet with the innate need to eliminate anyone and anything not clearly distinguishable as a protected place or partner, consuming oblivious of its dependency upon a steady supply of resources and consistent weather patterns which the planet was losing the ability to provide. With ever less available to it even as its needs multiplied exponentially, its virulence combined with that of its producers to create an inevitably inhospitable host.

Thereby catalyzing its own collapse, it then accelerated its self-destruction by swallowing-up the inadequately protected

infrastructure and preserving personnel upon which it also relied. Its communication compromised, it ultimately lost the ability to distinguish opponent from beneficiary. And by gradually removing its ability to receive corrective coding, such attempts came too late. It turned itself into an indiscriminate consumer of more than could be consumed, inviting its own demise while threatening extinction upon the entirety of life on Earth. In the end, it folded in upon itself on all sides, its remnants finally finding their way to Neo's door.

The day after Kuato's self-sacrifice, the anarchists loyal to Silhouette, including Silhouette himself, wear white strips of cloth across the border and make peace with The Keepers, apologizing profusely for the egregious trespasses of their wayward members, solemnly swearing to make amends by any means possible.

Neo remains under vigilant guard by Artemis and Persephone, who remains outside his good graces. Owing to their renewed, compelled proximity, Neo gradually begins to wear down Artemis's anger and disgust. Soon the camp learns that it's been long since Artemis has bled, Bona Dea determining that she's bound to have Neo's child. This announcement heartens his sorrowful mother.

Both Mana and Counselor have moved in with Merlin,

offering The Keepers a one stop shop for all that physically and mentally ails them. Thanks to their collective knowledge and determination, they save Kato from his gunshot wound.

Hunter has become a captain of the Perimeter Guard, sometimes accompanied by Jack, who prefers to remain close to base to “look after the ladies,” amongst whom, to his endless delight, he’s become a source of mostly friendly competition.

Harvey remains like a battered rescue dog, and has taken to sleeping outside Kato and Persephone’s abode at night, sheepishly following her as closely as she’ll permit. Occasionally she takes pity on him, briefly mitigating his misery by allowing him to come in and cuddle up to her while Kato tends to the fires, lost in contemplation.

A week after Kuato’s death, Kato sits at his gravesite shrine. His headstone includes an epitaph of something he often said: “The greatest truth is never spoken by the mind, but is whispered through the heart by Spirit. We must learn to listen without ears, translating its shared secrets and, in enacting its will, become its spiritual agents, fostering a symbiotic balance between all of its forms.”

The shrine sits just outside the main area of the camp, rapidly rising to become the new town square, especially after Silhouette and the other twenty-two anarchist survivors are subsumed by The

Keepers. After combining their two territories, they form what resembles an Ancient Greek symposium, sitting in a circle around a large fire engaged in a community-christening discourse in honor of their fallen leader, the two sides gradually blurring dividing lines.

Set upon a bench beside the grave, grimacing, Kato presses gently at his stomach, as if fearing that his guts may spill through the bandaging. Persephone sits beside him, her head on his shoulder, her arm draped lightly around him. They listen as, in the background, The Keepers and surviving A-Listers do their best to retain a sense of civility whilst arguing the merits of various theories and principles upon which their new, integrated society should be organized. Many amongst The Keepers assert that it's evident that *their* ways are superior, considering the self-destruction wrought by their anarchy. Most of The A-Listers seem willing to acquiesce to this, for now, considering that their violent breakdown resulted in Kuato's death.

Kato, resisting the urge to step forward and partake in the discussion, shakes his head slightly, thinking: 'All in good time.' Opening Poly's notebook, now encrusted with a blend of both her blood and his own, he turns to the final pair of opposing pages.

"No way," he whispers before reading aloud to Persephone:

"Thank you to *Interwoven Oppression* by Victor Populi for

helping me to crystalize my concepts.” He looks at Persephone, who smiles and hugs him gently before beckoning him to keep reading:

“People often ask, ‘what’s the point’ of this or that. My answers to the big questions point to precisely this, the ‘point:’

“The point of life is life itself, to pursue the maximization of the inherent value of the experience of existence for all existences individually and, in cooperative solidarity, in collective total. This, in turn, requires that human society be built upon a foundation framed by the following four mutually-reinforcing cornerstones:

One: The point of spirituality is to empower life through the knowledge of its eternal, indivisible essence, waking up all of its forms to the fact that everything which *must*, by both spiritual and scientific law, always be and have forever been, cannot be created or destroyed, can never have been nothing and cannot be separated from any fraction of itself. We’re all impermanent manifestations of permanent Spirit existing within Spirit. Our differences are always relative, and can never be greater or more important than our innate indivisibility as embodiments of the one absolute: Spirit. To protect this truth and its empowering, pacifying potential, spiritual agents must guard against all the specifications, divisions, idolatry, hierarchies and mind-controlling mechanisms antithetical to Spirit, which the corruption of spirituality, religion, has long used to permit

some to command and exploit others, typically through the State.

Two: The point of just, true democracy is to represent the will of the people as a whole as accurately as possible. This, in turn, requires that *direct* participation be possible, that *self*-representation remain an inalienable right, and that representation by others remain but an *option*, rather than a compulsory obligation through which the majority is thereby ultimately excluded from rightfully holding and exercising true political power in contradiction of democracy, the collective will of the people circumvented by a representative class whose power and fidelity has, in the history of democratic pretense, always been purchasable by the ownership class and their organizations, the composition and goals of these two groups tending to overlap to an extent whereby popular representation is precluded.

Three: The point of just economics is to maximize the quality of existence of all of its participants, society and life as a whole. This can only be accomplished by maximizing the quality of life return, or quality of life utility value, of its goods, services and properties, which entails the minimization of quality of life opportunity cost. Whenever something which may be used to increase the total quality of life of the people as a whole is hoarded or otherwise underutilized there is a total quality of life opportunity cost paid by the people. While it is impossible to eradicate this cost, morality demands striving for its minimization, as the heart of morality is servicing life.

This does *not* necessitate a communist abolition of private property and pursuits, but a better balancing of the virtues of capitalism and socialism, such that certain elements most critical for quality of life are retained for the purposes of the people free from profit, and that the benefits of all things of value better translate to quality of life.

Four: The point of just commerce, or business, is to build and safeguard a meritocratic system of acknowledging and rewarding all participants in commercial entities by making them all partners, or ‘owner-operators,’ which may be meritocratically accomplished through an equity-sharing system whereby compensation accurately appraises and reflects the contributions of all of its partners, thereby guarding against the exclusivity of equity and wealth consolidation which, as this wealth and equity and their granted powers, privileges and opportunities are consolidated without end, is mutually exclusive with the point of spirituality, democracy and economics.”

His heart fills as he finds himself face to face with his own words. *They made an impact, after all.* But now that humankind has decimated itself, can it chase these ideals? Can they still be applied? Perhaps Plato was right. Humankind isn’t ready for democracy. It needs the philosopher king to guide its preparations, leading it towards the point where the people’s voice may finally be heard. The point of the king is to prepare the way for the people, placing the power of the people in the hands of he or she who wishes, more than

anything, to return it to them in as lasting a manner as it may exist.

‘This is what Kuato died for. To give me, *us*, this chance.’

Kato stands, ready to join the debate.

About the Author, By the Author

Born in the Redwoods of coastal Northern California in the blue collar town of Fort Bragg, my early years were trouble-free times of active, youthful exuberance. I was very much a rural kid, playing with friends, catching lizards and snakes, exploring the forest, shooting bb guns, swimming in the river and ocean and eating blackberries off the bush until my hands were stained purplish-black and my stomach ached. At the age of six my father was transferred to the more urban setting of Santa Rosa, CA, in the heart of the Sonoma County Wine Country an hour north of San Francisco, and I gradually transformed into a video gamer with a strong creative streak. In my adolescence I would concoct elaborate games for friends that were engaging enough to capture their attention for hours on end, with some of these games centered around toys, and others, the more popular ones, put to paper, which I called “paper games.”

As I matured I came to the same conclusion that most young, observant people come to: money is the root of freedom, and I had to do everything possible to put myself in the position to have what I wanted, so that I could do and be who I wanted. This culturally-pervasive mindset continued through most of my collegiate days, during which I attended the University of California at Santa Barbara (UCSB) and studied Business Economics, and afterwards during my foray into the real estate business. I was very much motivated by the conventional ambitions inculcated into western youth through our aristocratically-hailing conservative culture and, through them, highly driven to pursue what most consider the hallmarks of ‘success:’ a lucrative career, the socioeconomic rank and all the trappings. This was before I realized the subjectivity of ‘success,’ and the fact that the greater form is that which Einstein alluded to: “Try not to become a person of success but, rather, try to become a person of value.”

Thus, I’d begun developing doubts during my last couple collegiate years and my time in real estate that following the traditional path was what I was meant to do; that it was the best use of my abilities and that, perhaps, it contributed to the suffering of the world. The more you’re said to ‘make,’ the more you’re likely to *take*. There is not a thing in this world

that materializes from nothing, and unregulated capitalism is about taking advantage of disadvantage as much or more as rewarding hard work.

My heart and conscience thereby began to coalesce around the greater concept of success: defining it in terms of the *creation* rather than the *extraction* of value. Later, as my spiritual awareness grew and I began to sense that 'listening to your heart' is more than mere fleeting emotion, but a tapping into a truer, fuller form of universal self, my earlier doubts began to crystalize along with my ideology and convictions, and everything changed for me. Though I continued to struggle with some serious neurological and associated psychological troubles at the time, much of which continues to plague me, on another level I came into myself and began to harness a deep sense of purpose, realizing that I am meant to translate the spiritual messages I receive which, combined with my intellectual inspection of the world, have led me to some profound conclusions about the nature of existence and the greedy heart of western culture compromising our greatest collective potential. My innate creativity found a grander outlet in conjunction with my naturally philosophical mode of thought, and I began to interpret the underlying nature of reality, formulate my core convictions and envision the type of societal systems that might someday steer mankind away from a 'greed is good' attitude that necessarily short-sells total quality of life on earth.

Access all books, papers and videos @ infiniteofone.com